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Child Well-Being in Minnesota:

Father Engagement in Child Welfare

Using policy to positively engage fathers in their child welfare-involved children's lives.

Center for Advanced Studies
in **Child Welfare**

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

What is the Field of Child Welfare?

WHEN AN ABUSED OR
NEGLECTED CHILD HAS A
FATHER OR FATHER FIGURE
WHO CAN BE A POSITIVE
PRESENCE, IT'S OUR DUTY
(and the child's birthright)
TO SUPPORT THAT
FATHER-CHILD
RELATIONSHIP.

—A. Paul Masiarchin
& Melissa Froehle¹

The child welfare field includes human services in the areas of child protection, foster care, and adoption. This work is carried out in a state supervised, county administered system by government as well as non-profit agencies, and is supported by research and evaluation from government, academic institutions, and non-profit organizations. The collective goal of child welfare is to promote the safety, permanency, and well-being of children, youth, and families.

Fathers & Child Welfare

Father involvement has been shown to increase child cognitive abilities, empathy, self-esteem levels, and impulse control, while reducing the risk of negative behaviors and outcomes, such as contact with the criminal justice system and substance abuse².

When child protection workers engage non-custodial fathers, outcomes for children improve. Child protection workers not only learn more about the child's history, strengths, and needs, but they also gain access to paternal extended family members, increasing the child's social connections, potential kinship placement and permanency options, and likelihood of reunification while reducing the risk of repeat maltreatment.³ Further, children whose non-custodial fathers are engaged by child welfare workers tend to spend less time in foster care than those children whose non-custodial fathers are not engaged.⁴

Spotlight on Minnesota

The importance of father involvement has been emphasized at the federal level in the last few years⁵; however, Minnesota's federal Children and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) from 2007 showed a need for "[g]reater consistency in promoting relationships between fathers and their children in foster care and more fully engaging fathers in case planning and service delivery process."⁶ For example, in several cases there were

Father Involvement at the Federal Level

The importance of father involvement has been emphasized at the federal level in the last few years.

- 2009: National Conversation on Responsible Fatherhood and Strong Communities, which included collaborations between the White House and eleven federal departments to promote organizations and activities that support fatherhood on the local level
- 2010: The President's Fatherhood and Mentoring Initiative, a nationwide effort to support organizations that foster responsible fatherhood and assist fathers in reengaging in the lives of their children
- 2011: Strong Fathers, Strong Families initiative, designed with the intention of creating simple opportunities for dads and kids to connect through activities and events
- 2012: "Promoting Responsible Fatherhood" published; 2012 Fatherhood Buzz Barber Shop Tour launched, which is designed to reach out to fathers with positive fatherhood information through their barbershops

no efforts made to locate fathers.⁷ Additionally, agencies were more likely to meet the mothers' needs, and fathers tended to be excluded from case planning even when their locations were known.⁸

The Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) Child and Family Service Reviews (MnCFSRs), from 2005–2007 (Table 1) and 2008–2009 (Table 2), also indicate a lack of father engagement. Both reviews showed that workers tended to engage mothers at a significantly higher rate than fathers. The most recent MnCFSR shows monthly visits with fathers actually decreasing from 36 percent to 31 percent, with 20 percent of fathers receiving no caseworker visit (compared to just 1 percent of mothers).⁹

Despite the state's efforts to engage fathers (which include a guide for working with fathers for workers¹², a course on engaging fathers within the state's training system, and a focus on engaging fathers and non-custodial parents for the state's Quarterly Supervisor Forums in 2005, 2009, and 2012¹³), the practice remains inconsistent.

Table 1: MnCFSR Findings from 2005–2007¹⁰

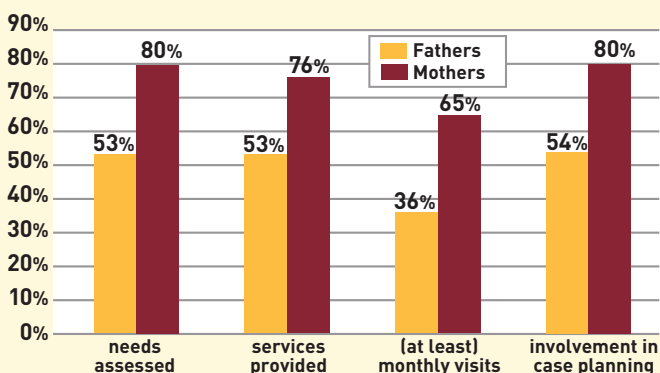
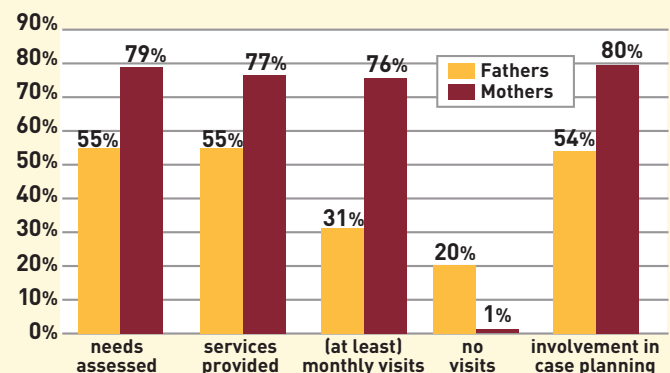


Table 2: MnCFSR Findings from 2008–2009¹¹



Bringing Consistency to Practice

Policy Issue: Many (if not all) Minnesota counties have differing practices, expectations, and requirements regarding contacting non-custodial fathers, particularly for those cases which open voluntarily or do not open at all.

In fact, 36 percent of 136 county workers surveyed by CASCW in 2012 stated that they are often unsure about procedures for contacting non-custodial parents. Barriers to contacting non-custodial parents were listed as unclear expectations by the county (25 percent), unclear state policy on what is allowed (31 percent), and data practice rules (49 percent).

Even after locating non-custodial fathers, child welfare workers continue to struggle with how to meet their needs and engage them in services, as evidenced in the CFSRs and the recent CASCW survey. Additionally, the CASCW survey revealed that only a small percentage of workers have attended the DHS training on father engagement.

Policy Solution: Child protection workers need clear statutory and departmental guidance on contacting non-custodial parents and notifying non-custodial parents throughout the course of a family assessment, traditional investigation, or a child protection case management case, from intake to case closure. Minnesota's new Jacob's Law partially addresses this by requiring parents to notify one another if their child is the victim of an alleged crime, but statutory language still remains unclear for both parent and worker regarding child welfare-specific cases.

Department-level policy solutions include adding the DHS father engagement curriculum to the mandatory DHS New Worker Foundations Training for all new child protection workers, and to require counties to train existing workers on how to effectively engage non-custodial fathers in services.

Coordination with Child Support

Policy Issue: There is a lack of coordination and supporting infrastructure between child protection and child support units.

Minnesota Statute §13.46 Subd. 2 (30) permits child support data to be disclosed to child welfare agencies for the purpose of establishing parentage or for determining who may have parental rights, but there is not a uniform method of acquiring this information and workers have reported having difficulty obtaining needed data. Additionally, 31 percent of the 136 respondents in the CASCW survey said they did not have a collaborative process in place to locate non-custodial parents, or were unsure if one existed.

Policy Solution: Through education to both child support workers and child protection workers, the rights and limits to access of information could be clarified. Another avenue would be to allow child protection workers access to the data system used by child support, so that they could access the information directly without burdening child support workers with data requests.

Overcoming Legal Barriers to Involvement

Policy Issue: Fathers who have legal barriers to engagement with their child(ren) do not have statutory rights to overcoming such barriers.

Incarcerated fathers, detained immigrant fathers, and fathers charged with domestic violence all have legal barriers to involvement with their child welfare-involved children's lives as a result of the father's situation.¹⁴ Though there is a mentoring program in place for children of incarcerated parents in Minnesota¹⁵ and the federal Government Accountability Office recommends incarcerated parents become involved in child welfare case planning¹⁶, the statute governing the mentoring program does not include recommendations for child-incarcerated parent contact, let alone child welfare case planning, and other Minnesota statutes automatically suspend parenting rights after conviction of certain crimes.

Policy Solution: The mentoring program for children of incarcerated parents could be expanded to include supporting contact between children involved in child welfare and their incarcerated parents, such as through virtual visitation or transportation services. Statutes governing the 'best interests of the child' in parenting laws could have stronger language stating that maintenance of the relationship between child and father should be considered in the child's best interest despite legal barriers, unless there is a clear safety risk. Finally, child welfare statutes could include alternative methods such as scheduled conference calls and virtual conferencing in order to engage family members, including detained fathers, in case planning.

Promising Practices

Family Group Decision Making (FGDM)

This process allows both extended family and other supportive individuals to participate in a family-driven plan to address the problems that led to child protection involvement. FGDM is endorsed by DHS¹⁷ and listed as an appropriate form of authorized alternative dispute resolution in Minnesota child protection statutes.

Virtual Visitation¹⁸

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommended virtual visitation as a means for parents separated from their children by distance or other barriers, such as incarceration, to become more involved in their child(ren)'s lives. New York, California, and Pennsylvania utilize video conferencing in child welfare as a way for incarcerated parents to participate in court hearings and/or develop the family service plan.

Child Support & Child Welfare Collaboration¹⁹

Some counties in Minnesota are going beyond simply sharing data between child support and child welfare to locate non-custodial fathers: they are providing more services and supports for these fathers to break through barriers to financially supporting their children. Overcoming these obstacles has resulted in higher levels of non-custodial father involvement in their child welfare-involved children's lives.

For more in-depth information on this topic

- ¹ Minnesota Fathers and Families Network. (2011). Linking fathers: Child welfare sector analysis. Retrieved from <http://www.mnfathers.org/Resources/Documents/LinkingFathersChildWelfare.pdf>
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- ⁵ The White House. (n.d.). Promoting responsible fatherhood and strong communities. Retrieved from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/obnpp/policy/fatherhood>
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- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Minnesota DHS. (2009, November 12). The role of the supervisor in supporting fathers' involvement in child welfare cases [PowerPoint slides]. Minnesota Quarterly Supervisor's Forum. Retrieved from http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/groups/county_access/documents/pub/dhs16_147199.pdf
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Minnesota DHS. (2009, April). *Working with fathers: A program improvement resource*. (Publication No. DHS-5575A-ENG). Retrieved from <https://edocs.dhs.state.mn.us/lfsilver/Legacy/DHS-5575A-ENG>
- ¹³ Minnesota DHS. (2012). Quarterly Supervisors' Forums. Retrieved October 23, 2012 from http://www.dhs.state.mn.us/main/idcplg?IdcService=GET_DYNAMIC_CONVERSION&RevisionSelectionMethod=LatestReleased&dDocName=id_038367.
- ¹⁴ Minn. Stat. §631.52; Minn. Stat. §518B.01; Minn. Stat. §518.179; Minn. Stat. §518.1705; McFarland, M., & Spangler, E. M. (2008). A parent's undocumented immigration status should not be considered under the best interest of the child standard. *William Mitchell Law Review*, 35, 1, 247-282
- ¹⁵ Minn. Stat. §241.86
- ¹⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2011, September). *Child welfare: More information and collaboration could promote ties between foster care children and their incarcerated parents*. (Publication No. GAO-11-863). Retrieved from <http://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-11-863>
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- ¹⁹ For more information, contact CASCW at cascw@umn.edu or 612-624-4321

Resources for further information and continued education

View CASCW's new "Engaging Fathers in Child Welfare" webpage: <http://www.cehd.umn.edu/ssw/cascw/PracResources/EngagingFathers.html>

For papers and reports generated by CASCW-supported affiliates, follow this link: <http://z.umn.edu/cwpubs>

To keep current on topics important to the field, visit the Child Welfare Information Gateway at: <http://www.childwelfare.gov>



More Policy Briefs Coming Soon

CASCW will continue to publish policy briefs to share research and evidence-based policy solutions on pressing issues for Minnesota's children and families. Look for new policy briefs coming soon.

Not finding what you need? Contact CASCW directly for information, research & analysis on child welfare at 612-625-8121 or cascw@umn.edu.

The Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare (CASCW) is a nonpartisan research and training center at the University of Minnesota's School of Social Work. CASCW's mission is to improve the well-being of children and families who are involved in the child welfare system by: educating human service professionals, fostering collaboration across systems and disciplines, informing policymakers and the public, and expanding the child welfare knowledge base. CASCW does not take partisan positions nor do we advocate for or against specific bills. Instead, CASCW offers background data, theory, and evidence-based practices that may be helpful to you as you consider these issues. <http://z.umn.edu/cascw>

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