

## Father Engagement in Child Welfare Practice

Andre Dukes ([00:06](#)):

Good afternoon. My name is Andre Dukes. I am the Vice President of Family and Community Engagement at the North Side Achievement Zone, and I'm also an alumni of the University of Minnesota Infant Mental Health Master's Program there. I am so delighted today to have a very important conversation around the child welfare system and how it impacts fathers. And I'm happy to be joined today by Gil Domally, who is at Hennepin County, and he is a senior administrative manager in human services and oversees equity work, community engagement, and staffing management and payroll, as well as information sharing framework. And I'm going to be interviewing Gil today around this subject. But prior to that, I would like to just provide a little bit of context for this conversation this afternoon. Evidence is clear that the development of young children is heavily impacted by their family and community environments.

[\(01:25\)](#):

As parental roles and family structures have evolved with socioeconomic conditions and developmental research, family systems perspectives have informed our understanding of the changing contributions of fathers in child development. We are now gaining greater insight into the wellbeing of mother and child being a shared responsibility of the mother, father, and other caregivers upon conception. Research suggests that in terms of dual responsibility, both mothers and fathers are capable of providing basic caregiving that infants and young children need for survival and healthy development. There is also evidence that multiple caregivers make independent contributions to children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, and that mothers and fathers differ in tight degree and quality of parenting interactions and experiences related to young children. What we know is that outcomes for children are statistically better when a child has both a mother and father contributing equally to their wellbeing. Child welfare systems are designed to make decisions that are in the best interest of the child.

[\(02:50\)](#):

Yet the overwhelming focus of child welfare policy, practice and research, is mothers. Too often fathers are at a disadvantage as it relates to their contributions and interests, which can have an adverse effect on the family systems, and in some cases, the developmental wellbeing of children. There is a perception that marital status and income are weaponized to marginalized fathers in cases of child custody. And there are great disparities in how rulings are applied across race and class. Fathers often report feeling powerless and invisible, and lack representation that adequately advocates for their needs. Some studies have shown that most social workers in child welfare are women and view the father as a risk or irrelevant to the mother and child. All of these dynamics play a role in a father's level of involvement in the life of their child. And the bottom line is that most fathers want to be involved and can be undeniable resource to both mother and child throughout development.

[\(04:09\)](#):

There is a need to move child welfare systems from the focus on surveillance to support overall. But this is particularly important for fathers who are viewed as a financial resource without regard for the biological, emotional and developmental contributions they make. There is also a need for social workers to be more inclusive of fathers in case planning and more resources are needed that are directed at the father and promote more equitable solutions to child wellbeing. And so, with that context, I am happy to be joined again by Gil Domally, who is doing this work with fathers and has had such an extensive background in working with families in multiple disciplines. But I want to give Gil just a moment to introduce himself and tell us about a little bit about himself personally, but a little bit about his professional background as well.

Gil Domally ([05:17](#)):

Andre, thank you so much for that, um, wonderful introduction and setting the context for our,, time together today. So, again, my name is Gil Domally. A little bit about me personally as I step into this space. You know, I am a husband and father of six children. Three boys, three girls. My youngest is 18, my oldest will be 30 in November. I'm a grandfather of four, two boys and two girls. My youngest granddaughter will be here in August. I'm so excited about that. But in addition to those things, you know, I didn't grow up with my biological father. I had my mother's husband that raised me. He's the only father that I knew growing up. I did meet my biological father in adulthood, and I've had other father figures as well. I was a teen father.

([06:25](#)):

I entered into parenting at 16, and I had you know, three children by the time I was 19. I had, you know, I entered into fatherhood and parenting at an off time. Married at 22, and really kind of went through, I grew up with my kids, probably is a better way to say that. And from a professional standpoint, I started my work in the late nineties as a youth counselor working with children that were in a detention center, separated from their families and community, and noticed then oftentimes that I would be working with young people and families where the father was absent. I then moved from there into working as a case aid and child protection, noticing the same themes, but even more starkly as I'm in, was involved with different cases, supporting the social worker at the time, and really wondering, what are we doing to engage the fathers here, you know, and it was really kind of, it depended on the worker a lot of times.

([07:36](#)):

From there, I did some I was a program coordinator for a father's program that I helped to build out. I was a correctional worker with the Bureau of Prisons, again, working with fathers and families in the context of incarceration. Along with that, I've done child welfare case management for Project Hope that was really geared towards working with African-American families to keep them from moving into the child protection system. It was really kind of early intervention type of work with African American families. I've done child protection, social work working with families. I've been a child protection supervisor, program manager, and currently serve in the space of Human, Services, Senior Administrative Manager within Hennepin County. So that was, felt like a mouthful. I could say more, but I think that's probably gonna be help most helpful for folks at this time.

Andre Dukes ([08:47](#)):

Wow, Gil. I mean, you have such a rich background in, you know, social work and counseling, community work, and then your personal story is just so compelling. Um, and we share a similar upbringing in that I too did not grow up with my biological father, but had a father who taught me what it meant to be a man, and really gave me an example of fatherhood. And when my wife and I got married, my oldest son was 12 years old, and so I tried to parent him the same way that I was parented, which didn't work so well. But, really had to put myself in the shoes of a learner and allow my youngest son to teach me how to be a father. And so we just learn through experience. There's no manual on how to be a parent, and there's no supplemental resources for a father <laugh>, but we learn through experience. And so I want to just pose this question to you. Why is it, from your perspective, why is it important to think about fathers when supporting children from a systems' perspective, and what unique roles do fathers play?

Gil Domally ([10:12](#)):

Thank you, Andre. Wonderful question. You know, it's, it's a rich question because, you know, fathers have so much to offer and that, you know, when we think about fathers and, and defining that role a little bit, it's more, some, it's more than just the biological aspect of it. It, it's so much more than that. It's yes, you know, it's social, you know, engaging, you know, teaching kids how to interact with our world very much. It's by their example. And it's by certainly teaching. But I think, you know, I have a father figure in my life. I'm also an ordained minister, and my father in the gospel from my community, is a great father, great father, and he's, he often says, I remember hearing him say more is caught than taught. Yes. And so fathers just by, by virtue of their presence in their children's lives, they're teaching kids, kids are learning, watching. And so there's so much there to be gleaned from fathers, and for fathers to share. And fathers have a great desire to invest in their children. It's not just about wearing the title, but fathers are interested in investing in their kids and investing in the society, investing in the future. Absolutely. Through the vehicle of fatherhood. And, you know not only that, you know, I think about the wellbeing of the mothers of children are impacted when fathers are involved in positive ways, regardless of the structure.

Andre Dukes ([12:08](#)):

Yes.

Gil Domally ([12:08](#)):

You know, and so when fathers are engaged and involved, and from a system perspective, it really enhances the wellbeing of the family system, if you will. You know, I think uniquely to your question about the what fathers contribute, you know, I think about the social emotional development. I think about the cognitive development, physical development as fathers tend to be a little bit more hands-on and, you know, throw 'em up in the air and

Andre Dukes ([12:43](#)):

Tumble,

Gil Domally ([12:43](#)):

<laugh>, tickling, and, you know, playing with toys differently. Giving kids space to, you know, it's okay to run out in the yard and I don't have to follow right behind you. I'm here. Kids learn that security, that you can go a distance and come back and I'm gonna be here. And that's such a powerful thing for kids to know that whole issue of attachment, having some security. I know for as much as this world is big and and scary at times, there's parts of it that are predictable for me, and fathers can contribute to that sense of predictability. I can go out and try things and do things and be safe.

Andre Dukes ([13:29](#)):

Yes. And it's so important for children to be able to take risks, and fathers usually allow that space for children to go out and explore their environment, but also be that secure base and be responsive when a child needs that connection. And that's so important for development that, you know, children both have an opportunity to feel safe and secure, but also explore their environment. And I think that that is such a powerful way that, you know, fathers just naturally engage with their children. But then there are also, I think the biological mechanisms around health histories and just yes, what we bring in terms of the health of our children and having a full context around, you know, what they're predisposed to and those kinds of things. And so we often don't talk about that aspect, but I think those are equally important in terms of, you know, the role of the father and what the father brings to the life of the child.

[\(14:35\)](#):

But then, you know, also being that support to the mother and making sure that, you know, she has the support that she needs and that she has a partner. One of the, the greatest experiences I've had is to do an infant observation with a new mom and a new dad, and just to see how they interacted and kind of developed this partnership around their parenting. And it was just so beautiful to see how they were so in tuned with each other and could feed off of each other. And guess who benefited the most from that, the child <laugh>. And so I just think that's so important. But then there's also certain barriers though, that prevent fathers from being engaged with their children. And so, when working with fathers, what do you see as the biggest challenges or barriers they have in terms of parenting?

Gil Domally [\(15:29\)](#):

Wow. So, yeah. So when I think about those, you know, barriers to father's involvement, particularly in the context of the child welfare system, you know, I think some of the problems or the barriers are some of its agencies, and workers' perspectives of fathers you know fathers are at times overlooked. Specifically nonresident fathers or incarcerated fathers. At times, you know, and I don't think it's always intentional, but I think the engagement of fathers can be viewed as kind of a burden or extra. Right. You know, particularly when, it's a family structure where the mother and the father, they're not together. It can be challenging, that can be a barrier. But I think there's also some very real personal barriers. In some instances, I think it's real that there's a lack of, realistic role models at times.

[\(16:57\)](#):

For some fathers, it just, like you said, there's no manual. Right. And depending on, you know, the holding environment they came out of, you know, there might not be, how do I do this? And our culture, though I think some great strides are being made, doesn't always respond kindly to fathers in particular really saying, I don't know. I want to do this. I have some innate desires, but I don't know how to do this really. Right. You know, so there's that piece of it. They're the, you know, some of the other, the ills of our day substance use and abuse, relationship challenges, you know, involvement with the system, economics, you know, things of that nature. Those are different things that tend to be barriers that I, that I've seen in my work with fathers and with families that all kind of coalesce into what can be from a father's perspective, just an insurmountable barrier. I, you know, even I've heard it said some, you know, in some instances where fathers have, they themselves have articulated. My child is better off without me. And that's really from a place of hopelessness, not necessarily I don't wanna be. But I can't, all of these hurdles, I'm not gonna be able to do it.

Andre Dukes [\(18:37\)](#):

Right. Right. And there's that lack of confidence and belief that they can, it's like, on one hand, I really want to engage, but then I doubt myself. Right. And in some ways, I don't want a parent in the way that I was parented, and so how do I parent differently? And so we're holding all of these perspectives that impact, you know, our ability to engage with our children meaningfully. But then when you think about just the father child dyad, that relationship is influenced by the relationship I have with the mother of my child. And then that relationship is influenced by the family dynamic. And then that relationship is influenced by the systems and by the community. And you have all of these influences that are really ultimately impacting how fathers and to what degree they are able to interact with their child and develop a meaningful bond with them. And so these, you know, are all layers <laugh>, right. That yes. That fathers often have to work through just to maintain that consistent engagement and influence in the life of their children.

Gil Domally ([19:58](#)):

Absolutely. And you raised something for me as you were speaking, Andre, which is who comes alongside fathers

Andre Dukes ([20:09](#)):

Hmm.

Gil Domally ([20:10](#)):

To say overtly you are important.

Andre Dukes ([20:16](#)):

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, yes.

Gil Domally ([20:18](#)):

It's regardless of what your, what educational attainment you've acquired what your employment status is, how you grew up, or whatever life has happened in such a way for you that you've been gifted the opportunity to be a father, and you are important. You are needed. Who comes along and gives fathers that message. Cause one of the things I've seen as being a part of the system at times, and from the society at large, there's a judgment. If you come into this father role and you're well off, you're educated and some of those kinds of things, you've got resources. The engagement has a tendency to look a little different. Right. But if you come in and you have a little bit of a history. You know what I mean by that, a little bit of history, you've, you've had some, some troubles along the way.

([21:16](#)):

And you've backed into fathering. Right. You know, there's a different set of, there's a different interaction. But what I've learned over time is the orientation of the case worker of the agency. They're postured towards fathering. I came from kind of a background where I was fortunate to understand that fathers are important, period. We, it's our job as the agency, to figure out, given the context, doing our assessment work to figure out how can we come alongside to pull out the strengths. Right. Or in some instance, even help the father see, like, you have strengths, even if you're incarcerated, there's something we can do to help facilitate your positive involvement. Even if in the context of there's some relational challenges, some co-parenting challenges. There's probably a way that we can work. Is it easy work? No, it isn't. Right. But in communicating with the family and the father, there's ways that we can help. We can't always you don't, we don't fix people, but there's ways that we can support. Yes. That father's involvement if we're committed to that, and we have that willingness to be open in our thinking about what that can look like.

Andre Dukes ([22:46](#)):

Yes. And I like how you, you started off by saying that fathers matter, right. That they are important, and who is really sending that message? Because what I hear a lot is fathers not feeling as though they have agency, not feeling as though they are validated in their role in the baby's life or the child's life, and oftentimes feeling invisible when they are going to systems and not, you know, really being asked questions about what's happening with the child and really being taken for granted for, you know, in terms of their knowledge of what's happening. And so I think it's just so important that fathers are validated that, you know, our systems really, you know, acknowledge the role and the contributions that

fathers make. And I think that, you know we have all of these stereotypes that, you know, tend to come up around fathers like deadbeat fathers.

[\(23:55\)](#):

And, you know, it really doesn't get at the root of why fathers are unable to be present in some cases. And sometimes we have to acknowledge that is by their own will. But too often there are these barriers. They are these systems. They are these negative perceptions that prevent fathers from feeling as though they can be active and engaged in the life of their children. So have you seen any stereotypes or misconceptions regarding fathers by people who work in social services or child welfare? So, you know, we have the whole thing that's happening at home, but then when, you know, the child welfare system is involved. What are some of these misconceptions and stereotypes, and how do these perceptions of fathers change the support that they do or don't get?

Gil Domally [\(24:52\)](#):

Yes. So that's a big question, Andre. That's a very good question. And I want to be careful, you know, to not diminish, you know individuals that are coming to this work with fathers, you know, with goodwill and wanting to do the right thing. By the families and fathers. But I can say that I have seen that institutional, or structural racism has played a part in how, in particular some of our African-American, Latino and Native fathers are engaged. Cause we know that they're more likely to experience, have more negative outcomes out of the gate. Because the access to, whether it be finances, employment, education, healthcare, all those factors that contribute to being able to engage the task of fathering in a productive way.

[\(26:08\)](#):

And I have seen where there's been a struggle to engage fathers coming from some of these communities in particular. So I have seen that, and, and again, as I stated a little bit earlier, I think within the child welfare system sometimes, you know, and I think it's true, you know, I think it's true in that it's, this is extra work and what if the father by choice doesn't want to be involved, but I'm obligated to extend and develop a case plan and to reach out. Is it gonna be worth the effort if the father's gonna be in and out of jail, or if they're still in the, involved with illegal activities, maybe there's a history of domestic violence and things of that nature. And I think there's an assumption when you start looking at some of these things that this child is safer or better by not engaging.

[\(27:19\)](#):

But one of the things that I have learned, and, and it's, you know, it can be a little controversial, is having those factors don't necessarily negate the possibility of a father participating in a positive way. Right. And as a worker in the system, the onus is on us to have the curiosity about how, have there ever been times when. Because, you know, mother and father, you know, they may not be getting along that that may be a real thing. Um, but if we ask the question, have there been times where dad has participated in a positive way Mom, when you felt safe, or what has happened? Because sometimes it's the larger family system getting involved. When I take Johnny to my father's mother, so their grandmother's house and dad's is there, he's a different person right there for some reason.

[\(28:35\)](#):

And he's engaged differently. We can't together do this, but when we engage his side of the family, there's some positive members there that help him, you know, engage the task of fathering. But that takes some curiosity, that takes some openness, that takes some real conversations. With dad sometimes, sometimes some scary conversations because it's, we all come into relationships with one another with our own set of biases. Everyone has 'em. There's, you know, it would be not true to deny.

We do. We do, we do. You have this rap sheet on Dad or whatever, or the story that you've received from mom, and you're coming into that interaction with some judgements already. But we have to work to, I'm gonna table those. I have that information, I'm informed, but I'm gonna intentionally assume a not knowing posture, to give dad this opportunity.

Andre Dukes (29:40):

I love that. Not knowing posture and just taking a step back and saying, there's a lot that I don't know here. Right. And I'm not gonna make assumption, but I'm going to take time and I'm going to be intentional in my decision making to make sure that I'm being inclusive of the needs of the father. Wow. Isn't that amazing? If we could all just take that posture and it brings in, this is a little off script, but it brings up another question that I have for you, and that is, do you feel that our child welfare system is inclusive enough of the needs of fathers?

Gil Domally (30:23):

No, absolutely not. I think we made some strides. I want to, you know, acknowledge that. I mean, we're not where we were in the late eighties and early nineties. I think we have moved ahead, but I don't think we've moved ahead enough. It's not within the child welfare system, and I don't have the data in front of me necessarily, but I know that there are a number of states that are yet on, you know, involved in, what's called PIPs, where they're trying to make improvement. Performance improvement, you know, and it's still not automatic that when a child comes into the child welfare system that fathers are reached out to in meaningful ways, we're not talking about just sending out a letter to the last known address. Right. But pulling the family, sitting down with, you know, whoever's available to really, who is this, who is dad?

(31:28):

What's his family system like? As much as we know. If we can't find dad, do we know any relatives that we can reach out to? That's still not a foregone conclusion in our practice. Uh, it still requires, a great deal of supervision within the child welfare system to ensure fathers are, and not only fathers, but their family. That we're engaged in engaging the father and doing the family, finding work that would lead us to a greater likelihood of the father being involved. We've got a ways to go yet there.

Andre Dukes (32:14):

Yes. And even understanding what the implications are when there's a separation. One of the things that we often don't really consider in developing case plans is how the child is going to be impacted when there is a separation, especially when they have already developed a bond. And so, from a developmental lens, we know that, you know, children anticipate relationships. And when those relationships are broken, there is a psychological effect that can be long term for the children. And so here's another reason why we really have to be sensitive, to you know, where the father is, how we can, you know, bring the positive aspects of what the father has brought to the child's development and continue that. And I use, you know, for instance, you know, incarceration, you know, that is something, certainly there may be some feelings of not wanting to child to go to visit the father, and that is understandable.

(33:18):

But are there ways through letters or through FaceTime that, you know, that father's presence can still be there for the child? In terms of just how we plan out when, you know, fathers are not engaged. And so I think that you bring up so many good points in terms of just things that we, you know, can be

considering to be more inclusive of the father as it relates to just the wellbeing of the child overall. And you've kind of alluded to some of this, but is there any more that you wanna say about what you wish the child welfare workers were aware of when working with fathers?

Gil Domally [\(34:03\)](#):

Yes. I think one of the things that I really would be, I would want, and you know, I've endeavored to, I don't know that I've done it perfectly, but I've endeavored to, understand that, you know, it's period. fathers are important. They're worth the, the extra time, the extra energy. And, you know, it's really about potentially the next generation we're talking about if we are able, yes. Maybe we can't control what has happened in that father's life, in that family system's life before our involvement. We can't control that, you know, but upon entry, humble entry into that family's life, into that child's life, that father's life, coming into that with the understanding that this father is important. Right. Regardless of the context, there's much here. Even if the father, let's say, in some of the worst case scenarios, if you will.

[\(35:12\)](#):

The father's deciding that at this juncture stage in his life that he's not able to participate. There's still a new, you talked about this a little bit earlier. There's still a wealth of information. Because it may not be just what the father can do with his physical presence, but what about his family, the family system That he's a part of that this child is also a part of, or is, has the potential to be a part of in terms of shaping that child's identity. In terms of learning. Where do I come from? I know my mom, I, but when I'm going to school, I see other kids being picked up and they have a dad. Where's my dad? Who am I? Where did I come from? You know, who, who am who am I connected to? You know, in terms of, you know, the whole issue of, of safety and belonging, you know, those kinds of things. And oftentimes the father is a key connection to answering some of those questions. And as, and my hope is that workers would come in with a stubborn commitment to this father is important. And I need to understand his, the context in which he's fathering and what his best hopes and dreams are for his child. Even if he's not able to participate actively, that doesn't preclude that he doesn't have hopes and dreams for his child.

Andre Dukes [\(36:47\)](#):

Exactly. And even for the benefit and welfare well being of the child, when the father can't be present, it doesn't negate the fact that the father's person history, experience does not contribute to the child. So really understanding from a holistic perspective, how the father contributes to the wellbeing of the child overall is equally important, whether they're present or not. Right. And so, I just, you know, that whole idea that fathers are important, if we could just, you know, tagline that, right. Fathers are important and there's so many reasons why, and it's not just about presence. Right? Yes. It's not just about presence, but presence is very important as well.

Gil Domally [\(37:38\)](#):

Can I add one other thing too, I think you just made, you triggered it for me, is in saying that fathers are important. We're not minimizing, we're not saying that mothers are less important. You know, we're not saying that, or that we're not saying fathers are more important. We're not saying that at all. It's not meant to you know, in any way minimize, the value of the mother's role, or, minimize in any way the mother's experience with Father prior to their involvement, or maybe even as a result of their involvement with the system. We're not in any way minimizing that. And, you know, I think it's also in saying that we're also, you know, not saying to, you know, not take into consideration, you know, very real safety concerns. Very real feelings that a mother might have that, or trauma that may be present



within the family system that the father contributed to. Were not saying that, you know, this in, in fact, in what I'm saying, it's, it's, it's messy and it's complex but it's worth the work. It's important.

Andre Dukes (39:04):

Right. Right. Yes. And so yes, it is messy. And I'm glad you, you went there because that requires for the worker then to unpack some things. Right. And so, in terms of strategy, are there strategies that you have, employed that have worked to keep the child at the center, maintain, you know, mutual, consideration of both the needs of the mother and the father and has brought about positive outcomes for the family unit?

Gil Domally (39:44):

Yes. So Andre, I, as a, as my, through my formation as a human services worker and professional, I was trained up on, a consult, the consultation and information sharing framework that you referenced in my introduction. It's called Safe and Connected. And I learned that early on in my career. And what that framework provides is an opportunity to look at why did the family come involved with our system? What are the risks we're concerned about? If nothing changes, what are the complicating factors? What are the protective factors, the strengths that exists, as well as taking the time to look at what are the gray area. And the most important aspects of that framework is spending a time to do a robust genogram with the parents, with the caregivers. And what that does is it gives, you know, I having that framework, I mean, I used to facilitate discussions when I was a supervisor using that framework, and I grew up on it as a worker and things of that nature.

(41:00):

But it's in so ingrained in my mind that one of the first things in terms of a strategy that I would do as a worker and I expected of those that I supervised and managed, was to really sit down and not just jump into the problems, but who are you as a family, who are the members of your family? Not just for the purpose of, you know, certainly we, you know, especially in the context of child protection, we're thinking about reunification and all those things. Right. But more or less humanizing the relationship between the system and the family. Hey, I'm not, Yes, I do have power or whatever you want to call that. I am a representative of the system. Yes, I get that. But I wanna see you as a person. Yes. Mom, dad, I wanna understand who you are, not just in the context of the problem, but the relationships that you have.

(42:00):

I wanna understand, you know, your perspective of, you know, uh, your strengths, you know, protective factors that exist within your family. What's making life hard for you? What do you see as, you know the road to what you desire for your children? What is that? Let's put that in the words. What do you want dad, mom or mom, even, what do you think dad wants? For the child, really getting the family's perspective is kind of like ground zero. That's where we start, right. As, as a strategy. I think that has been powerful in that, I think what it has done is in many instances, it's really brought down the shoulders of the moms to really be able to step back and think, step back out of the immediate, to look to think broadly and to frame the, the context. In a bigger, in a bigger way, more so than this immediate kind of tertiary circumstance.

Andre Dukes (43:17):

Exactly. Yes. And what I hear you saying in all of that is that relationships matter as well. Yes. And really focusing on the relationship dynamic within the family system is so important to making informed

decisions about what's in the best interest of the child. <laugh>, and, you know, we can't, you know, take for granted certain relationships and overstep other relationships, but we, it all is a part of the context, right? And that's the work is really understanding those relationships and how they contribute to where the child is right now, and what the child needs in order to feel safe, in order to thrive, in order to be successful de developmentally. And so taking time like yes, <laugh>, you know, not rushing to judgment, not making assumptions, all of these things are important to hold, um, for workers and for anyone that is, you know, helping in a helping relationship with families is to really, you know, take that time and understand the relationships.

[\(44:36\)](#):

And even that requires the worker to understand the relationship that they are developing to the family, right? <laugh>. Yes. And so this is, you know, where reflective practice becomes such a helpful modality in really understanding how am I being impacted as a worker? What are my biases? What's coming up for me? And then what does that mean for this family? What does that mean for the outcomes? That, you know, or the recommendations that I'm making and what did it ultimately mean for the child? Because that's why we're all here <laugh>. We're all here for the benefit of the child, right? And I'm a part of that equation, an important part, and I'm bringing a lot to the table, right? As a worker, right. And so that's so important. So I got one last question, and I'm gonna give you the last word on this because this has been such a powerful conversation. But as you think about everything discussed today, what are your top takeaways for child welfare workers? And what are some recommendations that you think are important for workers in particular to walk away with?

Gil Domally [\(45:53\)](#):

Wow. So thank you, Andre, for that question. I'm gonna try to be succinct cause I have a lot firing.

Andre Dukes [\(46:00\)](#):

<laugh> Alright It's so good. We need another hour.

Gil Domally [\(46:03\)](#):

Yes. Yes. A lot firing right now. But I think, you know, as I think about those takeaways is one, this is messy father engagement in the context of our society today and where we're at as a culture, you know, family structures are changing and, you know, look, just, you know, it's not, you know, just always mother, father, kid, you know, sometimes it's mother, father, this relationship, you know, fathers are part of multiple different sys family systems, right? And it's not always easy. And there are, you know the realities of, you know, systemic issues and barriers and all of those things are very real. This is messy work. It's not just it's not simple. And so that's okay, that's real. We can acknowledge that, right? But with that, understand that fathers are so important to the lives of children that it's worth wading through, you know, all of the, the, the fog of those barriers and challenges to, to the possibility of a future where a child is receiving all that a father has to offer.

[\(47:35\)](#):

It's worth the hard work, the extra of that. It, it's worth it. So that would be one thing. You know the second thing is, and you just hit on it just a little bit ago, that reflective practice to really think through, you know, for workers, how do I feel about fatherhood fathers in general? What's been my experience? And yes. What am I bringing to this relationship? You know, that, so that would be another piece. And I think, you know for workers, in particular, fathers often need advocacy. There has to be work done to help connect, first of all, to understand what fathers are saying they need, not what we as an agency or

whatever might think, but what are they saying that they need? Do that assessment work. You know, do that assessment work.

[\(48:39\)](#):

And as you, as we are doing that assessment work, help the fathers make those connections, sometimes it is making a phone call to that agency on behalf of that father and handing the father the phone and being there to help coach through some of those conversations. Sometimes it's meeting the father there to make that warm handoff. It might be very difficult to go talk to a therapist. I've never talked to a therapist before or within my community. That's not usually accepted. Do that extra, do that extra work, you know? And then, you know, bigger little bit bigger picture when we think about the community impact of fathers, don't shy away from building out programming with fathers. You know, one of the things I'm most proud of as I think about, my work with fathers and with families in particular, was the building out of the Rochester Area Fatherhood Network.

[\(49:47\)](#):

It started out with a collaboration between professionals in the child and family services, corrections, child support, and some fathers with lived experiences. And the last time I checked, it's run primarily now by fathers in the community. You know, maintaining that mindset that, you know, fathers have strengths and less create an environment for those strengths to come forward regardless of how they might look to you know, really keep in mind that if the possibilities, if fathers have that space, if they know, if it's being communicated to them that they're important and we're investing resources in allowing them to come forward and share their strengths within their families, we're gonna be better as a community. And have that really be overt. I think we'd be positioned to do some pretty amazing things and address some serious negative outcomes that we're currently facing as a society broadly.

Andre Dukes [\(50:58\)](#):

Yes. Drop the mic. <laugh>. I think that is a good place to end when we look at some of the challenges. We do certainly know that we can do something about it, right? And it does start with relationships. Gil, you are a gift. You're a gift to fatherhood. You are a gift to our community, and you are a gift to the field of social work. And I just appreciate having an opportunity to have this discussion with you today. And you know, I just hope that we have more opportunities to do greater work together in the future. But, thank you. Just thank you for all that you do every day and just for the heart that you bring to the work in just the thoughtfulness of your ideas and the way you articulate the needs of fathers and families is so, so impressive. And so thank you so much for this time and I really, really enjoyed, um, having this discussion today.

Gil Domally [\(52:08\)](#):

Thank you, Andre. It's been just a wonderful time. I just am so honored and I'm so glad that we were able to connect and do this. And I too look forward to us connecting together and seeing how we can support one another and advancing, you know fathers and their involvement in families in a positive way.

Andre Dukes [\(52:28\)](#):

Thank you. And thank you all for joining in today. And we hope that you are walking away with some healthy nuggets on how you can improve your systems around father engagement and make more for a more inclusive environment for fathers, and recognize that fathers are important. Fathers matter. Thank you so much.

Speaker 3 ([52:58](#)):

Thank you for listening to the Early Development and Child Welfare podcast series. This podcast was supported in part by the Minnesota Department of Human Service, Children and Family Services Division.