Bringing Back the Dads: Effective Practice for Engaging Non-Resident (Non-Custodial) Fathers in the Child Welfare System

17th National Conference on Child Abuse & Neglect

Presenters:
Leslie Wilmot, MSSW
Paul Frankel, PhD
Lauren Morley, MSW, LSW
Stefanie Vincent, MPP

American Humane, Children’s Division
American Humane Association

- Protecting children and animals for more than 130 years.

- What does American Humane’s Children’s Division do?
  - Increase child safety, permanency, and child and family well-being by advancing child welfare practices, standards and policies that help children and strengthen vulnerable families.
  - Improve and enhance the abilities of child welfare systems and communities to respond to child abuse and neglect by offering information, training, technical assistance and research/evaluation.
  - Work to prevent child maltreatment through increased community awareness and responsiveness to at-risk children and families.
American Humane’s Key Program Areas

- National Center on Family-Group Decision Making
- Differential/alternative response (QIC-DR & state initiatives)
- Non-resident fathers and the child welfare system (QIC-NRF)
- Disproportionality in child welfare
- Risk and safety assessment (Breakthrough Series Collaborative)
- Workload initiatives
- Decision-making in child welfare
- Migration and child welfare
- Restorative justice
- Chronic neglect
- Program evaluation and research
- Child welfare training and technical assistance
Quality Improvement Centers (QICs)

- Children’s Bureau’s Quality Improvement Centers (QICs)
  - Better understand targeted issues in child welfare
  - Stimulate new, research-based responses to those issues

- QICs are awarded funds for a planning phase and an implementation phase
QIC on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System (QIC-NRF)

- QIC-NRF established because very little meaningful engagement occurs between the child welfare system and non-resident fathers

- The QIC-NRF is operated by:
  - American Humane Association
  - American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law
  - National Fatherhood Initiative
QIC-NRF Desired Goals and Outcomes

- To promote innovation, evidence-based practice improvements, and advancement of knowledge
- To develop and disseminate knowledge to states, counties and other appropriate organizations
- To build evidence and knowledge that answers the question: “Is there a difference in child and family outcomes based on non-resident father involvement?”
Self-Reflection Activity on Fathers
Value of NRF Engagement/Involvement for Social Workers

- Broadens circle of family support by including fathers and potentially his family/friends
- Increases informal supports and resources
- Promotes family and cultural connection
- More “eyes” to survey the well-being of the child
Value of NRF Engagement/Involvement for Social Workers

- Helps meet the expectations of the CFSR (permanency, safety, well-being and family involvement)
- Facilitates concurrent planning – more than one goal
- Supports required reasonable or diligent efforts
- Engages paternal relatives as possible permanency options
Value of NRF Engagement/Involvement for Children

- **What the research says. . .**
  - Children with involved, loving fathers are significantly more likely to do well in school, have healthy self-esteem and exhibit empathy *(National Fatherhood Initiative 2008)*
  - Children with involved fathers are more likely to avoid high risk behaviors such as drug use, truancy and criminal activity *(Horn & Sylvester, 2002)*
Value of NRF Engagement/Involvement for Children

- Fathers provide unique support
  - Emotional
  - Financial
  - Physical

- Involvement of Paternal Kin
  - Expanded cultural & family ties
  - Knowledge of family medical history
Value of NRF Engagement/Involvement for Families

- More support to meet the needs of children (financially, emotionally and physically)
- Benefits of extended paternal family
- Co-parenting can send more consistent messages to children
- Overall wellbeing of children
Effective Father Engagement Strategies

Check your attitude at the door!

- Address your personal biases about men and fathers
- Resist stereotyping non-resident fathers
- What’s the value of fathers?
- Is the child welfare system sensitive to fathers?
Communicating with Fathers

How do fathers learn best?

- Help fathers feel at ease through:
  - Physical environment
  - First contact
  - Overcoming barriers
  - Avoiding “system” language
Male Help-Seeking Behavior

- What does “HELP!” look like for fathers?
  - Fathers (men) are less likely to seek help
  - Strongly influenced by gender roles:
    - The Big Wheel
    - Sturdy Oak
    - No Sissy Stuff
    - Give ‘em Hell
  - Don’t dwell on emotions
  - Normalize their experiences
  - Action-oriented
Best Practices to Engage Non-Resident Fathers

- **Effective approaches:**
  - Fathers are sensitive to power, respect and control
  - Do not over-promise and under-deliver
  - Look Forward – Do not dwell on father’s past
  - Recognize the culture of child welfare and validate father’s experience
  - Recognize multiple demands on fathers
  - Identify assets and strengths
  - Externalize family problems
  - What does it mean to be a good father?
Working with Mothers to Work with Fathers
Framing the Issue: The Mother’s Perspective

- Mother as “gatekeeper”
- Relationship between the mother and the father
- The child’s best interests
Framing the Issue:
The Worker’s Perspective

- Learn and understand the different aspects of the situation:
  - Mother’s choices as primary caregiver
  - Past and current relationship between the mother and the father
  - Type of contact with father and/or paternal kin
  - History of support by father and/or paternal kin

- Consider the child’s best interests
Strategies for Effectively Engaging Mothers to Effectively Engage Fathers

- Recognize the influence of gender on worker-mother relationship
- Take time to partner with the mother to learn her perspective
- Provide education to the mother about the:
  - Value of the paternal-child relationship to a child’s overall development and well-being
  - Extended resources and support that paternal kin can provide
- Learn mother’s hopes and dreams for her child & partner with her to identify how to engage *all* member’s of the child’s family in helping her child achieve those dreams
- Unite with mother by keeping the focus on the child’s best interests
Presenters:

Paul Frankel  paulf@americanhumane.org
Lauren Morley  laurenm@americanhumane.org
Leslie Wilmot  lesliew@americanhumane.org
Stefanie Vincent  stefaniev@americanhumane.org