

## **Summary from National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System Webinar:**

### *Source documents:*

- *American Humane Family Group Decision Making in Brief – Dads and Paternal Relatives: Using FGDM to Refocus the Child Welfare System on the Entire Family Constellation, November 2009*
- *Non-Resident Fathers and Family Group Decision Making Power point Slides: This webinar was focused on discussing the importance of fathers in the lives of their children, addressing barriers to engaging fathers into services and describing the use of Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) with families involved in the child welfare system.*

### ***Importance of Father Involvement:***

The research clearly shows that children whose fathers are engaged and involved in their lives, regardless of the location of their residence, have more positive life outcomes including greater academic achievement, more pro-social behaviors, less substance use and higher self-esteem and less depression as teenagers. In contrast, children with absent fathers have a higher likelihood of: living in poverty, having academic difficulties, using drugs, engaging in high risk behavior and being abused and neglected. Additionally, it is important to note that even if a father cannot be directly involved in his child's life; his family may be a positive resource for the child.

### ***Finding and Working with Dads:***

Currently, it appears that many caseworkers have received training related to engaging fathers and that these workers are more likely to report that they located the fathers. However, there are still indications that workers do not always exhaust all options that will help them to identify, locate and engage the non-resident fathers (NRF). The findings from the 2001 Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) indicated that: mothers were more likely than fathers to receive services and have visitation with their child(ren), the fathers' needs were inconsistently assessed and met, and workers were inconsistent in involving fathers in case planning.

### ***Barriers to Father Involvement:***

The culture of an agency can significantly impact the likelihood that fathers will be involved in the lives of their children involved in the child welfare system. The CFSR findings revealed that caseworkers can be ambivalent about finding fathers due to: negative experience with fathers, beliefs that involving the fathers is more work and expense for the agency, and the fear that involving the fathers will increase the conflict between the parents. Mothers of the children in the child welfare system also may create barriers to involving the fathers for numerous reasons including a history of previous violent or unhealthy experiences with the father, fearfulness that the father will take custody and the desire to protect the father from further court involvement.

### ***Strategies for Engaging Fathers:***

- workers need to examine and address their own bias against fathers,
- be action-oriented, provide concrete tasks and actions for fathers to do rather than dwelling on emotions or on the father's past difficulties,
- be realistic about the family's involvement in the child welfare system and what it will take to reunify the family,
- recognize the culture of child welfare and validate the father's experience in it,
- be creative in attempts to involve fathers including through the use of conference calls and letters.

### ***Family Group Decision Making:***

FGDM is a promising practice that values the engagement of fathers and paternal relatives in the lives of their children and supports the need to expand the focus of the child welfare system to be more inclusive of fathers as this will provide more options for establishing permanency for the child(ren). This practice is done in phases: preparation phase, the conference phase, and the conference follow-up phase. Ongoing engagement of the father is critical in every phase.

The coordinator of the process is independent of the case and focuses on conscious efforts to connect with fathers, paternal family members and male relatives. When there is a history of violence or current strained relationship between the parents, the coordinator works with the female caregiver around the father's participation and pays careful attention to the details of the plan including ensuring the ongoing safety and well-being of the mother and child during and after the conference. FGDM also ensures that all caregivers' viewpoints and experiences warrant consideration and respect during the planning process. For more information on the FGDM process and on involving fathers, please see [www.americanhumane.org](http://www.americanhumane.org).