

Understanding Key Barriers to Fathers' Involvement in Their Children's Lives

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Abstract:

Fathers who are uninvolved or play minimal roles in their children's lives may unwittingly have adverse effects on their psychosocial development. In 2003, only 54% of nearly a half million children in foster care in the United States had contact with their fathers, compared to 72% of children from the general population. There are multiple, complex personal, familial, societal, and agency barriers that limit fathers' involvement with their children. We provide recommendations for child welfare agencies to modify their policies to be equitable and financially helpful to fathers, and engage fathers in case planning about their children's safety, well-being and permanency.

Keywords: case planning barriers | child welfare | father engagement | father involvement

Article:

One of the most critical problems of the child welfare system is fathers who have little involvement with their children or are altogether absent from their children's lives. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 24 million children grow up without their biological fathers (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). The rates of fatherlessness are highest among Hispanic/Latino and African American children—41% and 66%, respectively (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011). Fathers who are absent or uninvolved in their children's lives may unwittingly have adverse effects on their children's psychosocial development (Flouri, 2005). Numerous studies suggest that older children and adolescents with absent fathers are more likely to live in poverty, drop out of school, and engage in risky behaviors such as using alcohol, tobacco, and illicit drugs (Nock & Einolf, 2008; Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). Additionally, they are more likely to enter the juvenile justice system and more likely to be incarcerated later in life (Flouri, 2005; Nock & Einolf, 2008). Studies also suggest that a father's absence early in a child's life has negative effects on a young child's cognitive and emotional development and self-regulation (Cabrera, Shannon, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2007; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009; Pruett, 2000; Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006).

Conversely, father involvement contributes positively to numerous psychosocial and developmental outcomes for children such as their cognitive ability, social behavior, (Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, & Roggman, 2007; Palkovitz, 2010; Pruett, 2000) psychological well-being (Cryer & Washington, 2011; Lamb, 2010), gender socialization (Leavell, Tamis-LeMonda, Ruble, Zosuls, & Cabrera, 2012), and educational achievement (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). However, a substantial number of children in the foster care system do not have contact with their fathers or do not receive adequate support from them.

In 2003, only 54% of nearly a half million children in foster care in the United States had contact with their fathers in the span of a year, compared to 72% of children in the general population (Malm, 2003). The lack of father involvement in the lives of children is thus more pronounced when children are involved in the foster care system. However, little is known about child welfare agencies' efforts to identify and include fathers in case plans or about the barriers fathers might face in becoming involved in the process—particularly, their participation in the decision-making process to ensure children's safety, well-being, and permanency of placement when they exit the foster care system. Noninvolvement may be mistaken as the father's noncompliance or a lack of interest in participating in the lives of his children, which may suggest that the father's home is an unsuitable permanent placement option, which may in turn jeopardize parental rights. This could lead agencies to overlook a valuable resource in ensuring safety or finding a permanent placement for the child.

The purpose of this article is to look at key barriers to child welfare-involved fathers' ability to participate in the case planning process and maintain involvement in their children's lives. This article is not intended to serve as a systematic review of previous studies' methodologies. Given the scarcity of articles on the topic, we draw from literature on the general population of fathers to address gaps in research on child welfare-involved fathers as it pertains to issues such as fatherhood roles, residency status, child support, and substance abuse. Implications for child welfare practice, policy, and research are also discussed, and recommendations are provided to engage fathers.

BACKGROUND

Father involvement entails specific contributions such as fathers' visitation with their children and their financial or nonfinancial support to their children (Malm et al., 2008). Fathers must visit and provide support in order to meet child welfare agency expectations regarding their readiness to promote their children's development and overall well-being while parenting them in a safe, stable, and permanent family. There are ramifications for the child welfare agency-involved families through fathers' visits with their children and their support. Research indicates that the likelihood of reunification is more than three times greater for fathers who provide financial and/or nonfinancial support than fathers who provide no support, controlling for other factors (Malm et al., 2008).

Father involvement is an integral part of the family system that is strongly affected by emotional issues and conflicts as family members interact with one another and with their environment (Bowen, 1978). This infers that when the father is not involved, the family has to adjust—

sometimes with negative consequences. When the father is absent and then returns to a family that is not intact, a different adjustment needs to occur. Child welfare agency services and supports can be a crucial turning point for many families' healthy adjustment. However, optimal agency efforts hinge on the agency's ability to recognize fathers' strengths as well as barriers to case planning involvement that they can and cannot control. Furthermore, this might require those who might normally only work with women and children to also understand the complexities of uninvolved fathers and be knowledgeable about therapeutic techniques and skills needed to engage men.

LITERATURE SEARCH AND SELECTION

A broad search for relevant literature was conducted by the first author using the electronic search engines, *ProQuest Direct* and *EBSCO Complete Databases*. Keywords used in the search included father involvement, father engagement, fatherhood, permanency planning, case planning, and barriers. *Google* searches also were conducted to ensure that recent work was not missed. Often, references can be identified via this search engine, where non-academics post and access pertinent information such as reports or papers presented at professional conferences. The articles that were generated from the search received a practical screening by all authors to ensure that they were applicable to the research questions:

1. What are the barriers for fathers to become engaged in case planning for their children's safety and permanence?
2. What are the barriers for child welfare-involved fathers to maintain involvement in their children's lives?

Studies with significant findings on the dealings between the child welfare agency and fathers and studies that documented major challenges fathers faced in staying involved with their children were considered for inclusion, as were studies that brought new insight and depth to the present issue of involvement. For instance, qualitative interviews with fathers who provided their perspectives about working with the child welfare agency were included (e.g., Behnke et al., 2008). The search also yielded one substantial review that explored barriers to fathers' child welfare agency involvement (Gordon et al., 2012). However, that review organized the discussion around various factors and strategies along a continuum for father engagement through intent to enroll, enrollment, and retention in child and family services; whereas the present review focused mainly on matters that occur during children's stay in foster care.

Those studies related to child welfare services to support mothers only, were excluded, as we are interested in factors that hinder fathers' capacity to ensure that their children will have safe, permanent homes once they exit foster care. Based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria, the full text was retrieved and reviewed for studies which specifically addressed child welfare-involved fathers, and 13 of those were selected for inclusion. Because of the scarcity of literature on our area of study, the authors agreed on additional articles that were not necessarily related to child welfare, but dealt with similar issues as the child welfare-involved fathers (as mentioned above), in order to portray a holistic view of barriers that fathers encounter.

CASE PLANNING

A permanent placement plan must be made in a timely fashion for each child who enters the foster care system to ensure that arrangements are made for children to reunite with their parents within 12 months. In cases where reunification is not safe or possible, the plan ensures that children will be permanently placed with another relative or non-relative without unnecessarily prolonging their stay in foster care (Adoption and Safe Families Act, 1997). In the United States, the planning process involves the input of a team that in many, but not all cases includes parents (though agencies have not always been successful in including fathers in this process; Malm et al., 2006), family members, family supporters, child welfare agency personnel, Guardians Ad Litem, therapists, and others (N.C. Department of Health and Human Services [NCDHHS], 2009). Often, both primary and secondary plans for permanence are developed in the event the primary plan is not possible (NCDHHS, 2009).

When a recommendation is made to reunite children with their birth parents, the child welfare agency must then work with the parents to develop a case plan. The case plan is an agreement between the child welfare agency and parents to facilitate the safe placement of children with their families. It addresses the reasons why the children entered the child welfare system and stipulates goals that must be accomplished by the parents to rectify the issues in order for the children to be reunited with them (NCDHHS, 2009). For fathers whose children are in foster care, the case plan typically requires their involvement in certain activities, such as attending agency meetings, attending parenting classes, maintaining employment, obtaining adequate family housing, addressing substance abuse issues, making child support payments, and staying connected with their children through supervised or unsupervised visits (NCDHHS, 2009). A father's personal progress and compliance with the case plan will influence the placement decision made by the permanency planning team and enforced by the court.

BARRIERS TO INVOLVEMENT

Though the reasons for uninvolved or absent fathers—whose children are involved in the child welfare system—are multiple and complex, we have classified these into four categories: (1) societal factors, (2) fathers' personal factors, (3) family factors, and (4) child welfare agency factors. Figure 1 represents our conceptualization of these factors' relatedness to case planning and children's permanency based on the literature.

Societal Factors

Multiple underlying societal factors in the United States affect fathers' involvement with their children, and many of these are beyond their control. Poverty, race and ethnicity, nationality, and culture are just some of the factors that may prevent fathers from fully participating in their children's lives. For instance, societal racism and discrimination have profound effects on numerous facets of African American and Hispanic and Latino fathers' lives (Gordon et al., 2012). These men are more likely than non-Hispanic whites to experience (a) poor education (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), (b) poor health (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2012), (c) substandard and unhealthy housing (CDC, 2013), (d) incarceration (Carson, Sabol, & U.S. Department of Justice, 2012), (e) unemployment (U.S.

Department of Labor, 2013), and (f) poverty (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, Smith, & U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Racism and discrimination also are at the root of many fathers' emotional and psychological problems. Indeed, any of these issues to which men of color are disparately exposed can adversely affect their ability to function competently as parents (Gordon et al.).

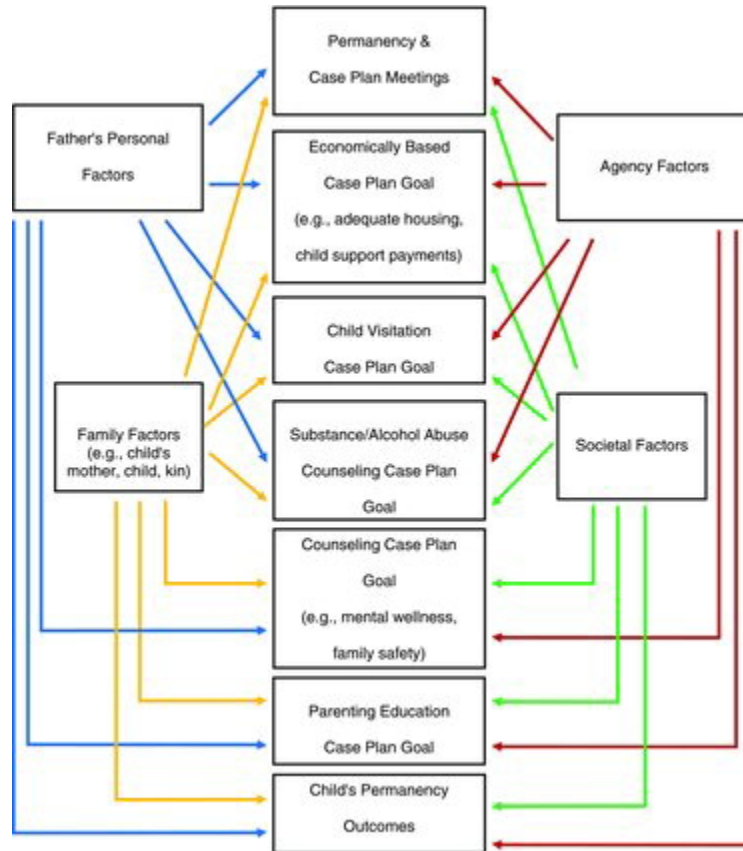


Figure 1. Influence of barriers on case planning and child's permanency.

Personal Factors

The lack of father involvement in the case planning process can result from fathers' personal problems. For instance, many fathers whose children are involved in foster care struggle with illicit substance and alcohol abuse, mental illness, poor parenting skills, domestic violence, and criminal activity (Gordon et al., 2012; Jaffee, Caspit, Moffitt, Taylor, & Dickson, 2001; Waller & Swisher, 2006; Wilson & Brooks-Gunn, 2001). Further, unmarried fathers who do not live with their children (i.e., non-resident fathers) are more likely to engage in problem and illegal behaviors than married fathers who live in the same home as their children (i.e., resident fathers) (Jaffee et al., 2001; Wilson & Brooks-Gunn, 2001). Fathers' personal issues may also contribute to familial problems such as shared parenting disagreements and domestic violence (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; McLanahan & Beck, 2010).

A common problem in the U.S. child welfare system is that parents who do not meet substance abuse treatment case plan goals risk losing their parental rights. For case-plan compliance, fathers must agree to receive treatment and then follow through with treatment. To gain a better

understanding of reasons fathers do not enter or complete mandated drug and alcohol treatment so that they can be reunited with their children, Rockhill, Green, and Newton-Curtis (2008) conducted an 18-month study of 15 families that included 22 child welfare agency-involved parents. They found that on average, it took the men ($n = 6$) longer than the women ($n = 15$) to enter a treatment program (99 days; $SD = 79$ vs. 71 days; $SD = 71$). Moreover, research indicates that men were less likely than women to enter treatment (Fiorentine, Anglin, Gil-Rivas, & Taylor, 1997; Pelissier, 2004). Rockhill et al. report that the primary reason for the delay among men was their reluctance to acknowledge that drug use was a problem. Additionally, men who were unaware that they had a drug problem were less likely to enter treatment (Pelissier, 2004). Moreover, there is clinical evidence that indicates a greater likelihood that men will experience denial of their drug problem (Nelson-Zlupko, Kauffman, & Dore, 1995; Zankowski, 1987).

Additional problems were related to fathers' perception that "treatment wasn't worth the effort" (Rockhill et al., 2008); they did not feel the child welfare agency would return their children to them if they had to enter a long-term treatment program. Research has shown that men who had plans to live with minor children after their treatment in a facility were more likely to enter treatment (Pelissier, 2004).

Little research has focused on child welfare-involved fathers' mental illness. Though there is an abundance of research on its devastating effects on parenting (Secret, 2012), family relationships, child development, living situations, and employment (Darlington, Feeney, & Rickson, 2005; Hosman, van Doesum, & van Santvoort, 2009; Huntsman, 2008; Kaplan, Kottsieper, Scott, Salzer, & Solomon, 2009; Smith, 2004; Woodward, Taylor, & Chatters, 2011). Parents with mental health problems are regularly referred to outpatient treatment and counseling services. However, those needing long-term treatment face the same dilemma as parents with substance use issues: If the problem cannot be successfully addressed in the prescribed 12-month period, it could thwart the family reunification plan (Risley-Curtiss, Stromwall, Hunt, & Teska, 2004).

Another barrier to father involvement may be created by caseworkers, who often view fathers' parenting skills as inadequate (see O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005). Case plans often specify the need for fathers to attend classes to improve their parenting skills in order to ensure children's safety and well-being during visitation and post-foster care. Typical parent education classes cover important caretaking techniques, stages of child development, nurturing, positive parent-child interaction, promoting the child's cognitive and social skills, setting limits and rules, and discipline and managing children's problem behaviors (CDC, 2009). However, many of these classes are not focused on how men parent. There are few evidence-based fathering curricula that address the parenting needs of fathers such as their attitudes towards fathering, fathering knowledge, and fathering skills (e.g., 24/7 Dad® and InsideOut Dad®; Fatherhood.org, 2013).

Finally, fathers' legal problems can seriously hinder their involvement with their children, especially in cases of incarceration. Evidence shows that the majority of incarcerated fathers do not maintain contact with their children while incarcerated (Waller & Swisher, 2006). Certainly, there are those convicted of a crime of a serious nature and should not have contact with their

children. However, there are some incarcerated fathers who are nonviolent and do not pose a threat to children; their children could benefit from having their fathers in their lives. Secret (2012) conducted a study of 196 nonviolent offender fathers who were incarcerated in a minimum-security facility. She found that these fathers continued to embrace their fatherhood role even while imprisoned. The fathers however reported that they were depressed and were experiencing psychological and adjustment problems. Her findings suggested that although fathers possessed knowledge about effective parenting, their psychological distress limited their desire to properly perform those duties.

Family Factors

Co-Parenting

Research indicates that the positive way in which parents work together to raise their children (i.e., co-parenting) enhances the quality and quantity of father involvement with their children, positively influencing children's developmental outcomes (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011; Gable et al., 1994; McLanahan & Beck, 2010). In a study that compared mother and father reports on father involvement, there was higher agreement about father involvement between resident fathers and mothers than nonresident fathers and mothers (Coley & Morris, 2002). Nonresident fathers were also reportedly less involved than fathers who resided with their children (Nelson, 2004). The status and quality of unmarried parents' relationships seem to be key predictors of paternal involvement (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011; Feinberg, 2002; McLanahan & Beck, 2010). However, mothers' may be unwilling to work with the fathers of their children and gatekeeping may play a role. This might be a result of several factors (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011; McLanahan & Beck, 2010; Sano, Richards, & Zvonkovic, 2008; Waller & Swisher, 2006). For example, the gatekeeping role of the mother may be the result of a severed romantic relationship. Gatekeeping can be considered as either warranted or unwarranted.

Fathers' visitation privileges with their children may be denied because of their poor psychological functioning (McLanahan & Beck, 2010), which prevents respectful communication between parents. Disagreement on parenting principles or practices also can affect father-child visitation, because mothers believe those differences might disturb the continuity of care for their children. Additionally, mothers might feel they have to protect their children when the father is prone to violence or if his behavior is not appropriate (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Sano et al., 2008; Waller & Swisher, 2006).

Mothers may also regulate father-child visitation because they are not satisfied with the amount of child support or financial support they receive from fathers (King & Heard, 1999). In a review of father involvement literature, King and Heard (1999) found that mothers with low incomes were more likely to refuse visitation if they did not receive financial support from the fathers. Previous research has found that in cases of divorce, the strongest determinants of noncustodial fathers' visitation and child support had to do with the amount of control they felt they had over parenting their children and over the divorce settlement (Nelson, 2004).

Other Family Factors

A lack of support from kin—primarily grandparents—during crises can also affect fathers' ability to properly care for or interact with their children. Grandparents can help parents maintain involvement with their children by providing child care, residency to the birth parents and, in many cases, long-term child-rearing (Fuller-Thomson, Minkler, & Driver, 1997). In one study (O'Donnell, 1999) fathers whose children were placed with paternal kin were involved significantly more both with their children and with the case-planning process, than children placed with maternal kin. If grandparents are not invited to assist with rearing their sons' or daughters' children, fathers may need to seek other paid or nonpaid means of assistance or risk losing child visitation rights or custody.

There also is some evidence that children's problem behaviors affect father involvement. Researchers have concluded that nonresident fathers', resident fathers', and stepfathers' level of involvement with their adolescent children decreased when the adolescents demonstrated problem behaviors. However, fathers maintained close attachments to adolescents who were well-adjusted (Anderson, Greene, Hetherington, & Clingempeel, 1999; Hawkins, Amato, & King, 2007; Sheeber, Hops, Andrews, Alpert, & Davis, 1998). In their analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (i.e., Add Health Study), Hawkins, Amato, and King (2007) examined associations between nonresident father involvement and the behavior problems and academic achievement of 3,394 adolescents. Their findings suggest that nonresident fathers' increase in involvement was affected by their adolescents' positive moods, satisfactory academic performance, and fewer behavioral problems. The findings suggest that adolescents' positive moods, satisfactory academic performance, and lack of behavioral difficulties increased father involvement.

Agency Factors

Identifying, Locating, and Engaging Fathers

Child welfare agencies' efforts to identify, locate, and engage fathers in permanency planning could more efficiently facilitate child safety, family reunification and permanent homes for children (Malm et al., 2008). There is an ongoing problem for child welfare agencies across the country regarding case record data that are incomplete or totally unknown for many fathers in some cases, fathers are listed as unknown (Coakley, 2008, 2013a; Malm et al., 2006; Malm et al., 2008). Malm et al. (2006) found that social workers had a difficult time establishing who the true birth fathers were and could not locate them based on information from birth mothers or family members.

Reasons why fathers are listed as unknown in case records or on children's birth certificates can only be speculated, since scientific evidence does not exist. It is possible that some fathers do not know that they have fathered children, or the mothers are not certain who the true fathers are, or the mothers will not identify the fathers because of personal reasons. Understanding the underlying issues regarding the father's status on the birth certificate—thus, the father-child relationship—prior their involvement with the child welfare system is of critical importance. Putnam-Hornstein, Wood, Fluke, Yoshioka-Maxwell, and Berger (2013) found that a significant number of children entering the child welfare system did not have their father's name listed on

their birth certificate. Moreover, the researchers' examination of multiple studies concerning risk factors for later child welfare involvement indicated that listing the father as unknown on the birth certificate was significantly associated with the incidence of severe child maltreatment and child fatality.

Social workers have an enormous responsibility to conduct "diligent efforts" to identify and locate fathers in order to ensure children's safety and permanence. However, we surmise the age-old method of relying primarily on the mother's account of the father's identity and whereabouts has not been effective. Obtaining information about the father from the mother's extended family as well as the paternal family (when known) would most likely yield better results. Heretofore, it has been difficult to ensure that social workers conduct a thorough investigation to track down fathers in order to provide families with supportive services. But, new advances in technology that have the potential to assist child welfare agencies to improve their ability to identify and locate fathers so that they can be invited to work with the agency as early as possible. In particular, the Internet and social networking sites can provide social workers with more reliable, quicker methods to verify information that they receive from families to locate fathers and initiate and maintain contact with them (Malm et al., 2006).

Additionally, the Federal Parent Locator Service, an assembly of systems operated by the Office of Child Support Enforcement, allows child welfare agencies to locate noncustodial parents for the establishment of parentage, child support, and enforcement of orders for custody, support, and visitation (Malm et al., 2006). Also, various public records such as law enforcement records, bankruptcy records, and sharing between other social services departments can be accessed electronically for more efficient searches (Malm et al., 2006). Similarly, in order to better understand the factors that lead to children's maltreatment and entry into the child welfare system, Putnam-Hornstein et al. (2013) employed an examination of multiple sources such as official child maltreatment data, emergency department and hospitalization data, death certificates, and/or data from child death review teams. They recommend such an integrative approach to allow child welfare agencies to conduct surveillance of pertinent data related to maltreatment and facilitate enhanced decision-making regarding needed supports for vulnerable families.

Several studies have begun to examine the importance of participation in child welfare processes by fathers with children in the foster care system. Agency readiness to communicate with and engage fathers is instrumental. Nonetheless, many agencies are not set up to include fathers properly during intake, assessment, and case-planning phases (O'Donnell, 1999). For example, caseworkers may not regularly meet fathers in person or make follow-up telephone calls to them. Indeed, a significant number of fathers have never participated in case-plan activities or even had a discussion with a social worker about obtaining custody of their children (O'Donnell, 2001). Such gaps in communication may be partially explained by common misperceptions of fathers by the very professionals tasked to reunite them with their children. Some caseworkers may perceive fathers as irrelevant to their children and the children's mothers, or consider them a risk to the children (Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2009).

Appropriate caseworker training in identifying, locating, and engaging fathers may help improve outcomes for children in foster care. Although caseworkers have varying degrees of training in these skills areas, less than a third have received training on how to refer cases to Child Support Enforcement Services, which offers assistance in locating fathers (Malm et al., 2006).

Caseworkers who receive father engagement training are significantly more likely to share case plans with fathers, consider fathers as part of the reunification plan, and work closely with fathers who express interest in being reunited with their children (Malm et al., 2006). There is some evidence to suggest that children of fathers who are identified and contacted by child welfare agencies have slightly shorter lengths of stay in the foster system than those whose nonresident fathers are unknown or have been identified but not contacted (Malm et al., 2008). In addition, children of fathers who were highly involved in the process—by providing financial support and participating in visitation—have been found to have shorter stays in foster care than children whose fathers were less involved (Malm et al., 2008). A similar conclusion has been reached by another researcher's secondary analysis of foster care placement data for 60 children (Coakley, 2013a). Her findings showed that children whose fathers complied with case plans had significantly shorter lengths of stay in foster care than children whose fathers did not comply.

Residence factors also have an impact on length of stay in foster care; children whose fathers resided with them at the time when they were placed in foster care have been found to spend less time in the foster system than children whose fathers were not living with them at the time (Coakley, 2013a). Fathers of Caucasian children were more likely to reside with their children at the time of foster placement than fathers of children with minority racial or ethnic backgrounds (Coakley, 2013a).

Cultural Barriers

There are additional cultural barriers for Latino fathers that limit their engagement in case planning. With the steady increase in the number of Latino families immigrating legally and illegally to the United States, Mexican immigrants have become the largest and fastest-growing immigrant group in the United States (Behnke et al., 2008; Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). The barriers that Hispanic and Latino fathers face in dealing with child welfare agencies and other governmental agencies can have serious repercussions for their children (Child Stats, 2011).

For example, in a qualitative study of 11 child welfare-involved Latino fathers' parenting experiences, Earner (2007) found that because English often was not their primary language, foreign-born immigrants did not fully comprehend the permanent planning process or what the case plan expectations were for them when their children were placed in foster care (Earner, 2007). There also were cultural differences in regard to appropriate discipline techniques. For instance, incidents that were considered abuse by child welfare agencies were not seen as problematic by any of the Latino parents in the study. The study's findings showed that Latino fathers believed that slapping, paddling, and hitting their children with a belt were all acceptable cultural practices that they themselves had experienced as children (Earner, 2007). Additionally, they felt their immigration status affected their ability to receive various services

which, in turn, impeded their compliance with case plans, made them feel powerless, and delayed reunification (Earner, 2007).

Cultural barriers to involvement also were identified in a qualitative study of 19 Mexican fathers who shared their parenting experiences in focus groups (Behnke et al., 2008). Behnke et al. found that fathers felt they could not physically punish their children in the manner in which they were raised in their Mexican culture because they feared losing custody of their children. Similar to the Earner (2007) findings, Behnke et al. reported that living as an illegal immigrant contributed to fathers' psychological, social, and economic challenges, which hindered their ability to fully and openly participate in various aspects of their children's lives (Behnke et al.).

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, POLICY, AND RESEARCH

The above personal, family, cultural, agency, and other barriers that child welfare-involved fathers experience greatly impact how they will engage in case planning to ensure their children's safety and permanence, and maintain involvement in their children's lives. The below discusses the implications for social work and offers recommendations.

Child Support Enforcement

Poor, unemployed men are consistently viewed as failures as fathers (Brown et al., 2009). Empirical research on fathers suggests that they felt being a good parent means being a source of support for their children; one important aspect of that support is being a provider for the children (Coakley, 2013a, 2013b). Controlling for education and income, the idea of being a provider for their children is consistently reported by fathers (Pruett, 2000; Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). That is, whatever their economic status, most fathers feel the need to provide, and those with low-income may feel even more pressure to do so for their children. This might in part account for fathers missing from the case records. For instance, we speculate that fathers might not want their whereabouts known when they do not have a steady income or have difficulty paying the child support specified by a court order. Additional challenges concerning multi-parent fertility (i.e., fathers who have children by multiple women) could also lead to inadequate financial support (Carlson & Furstenberg, 2004; Magnuson, 2006). In a qualitative study of welfare recipients' child support of their noncustodial children, Magnuson (2006) found that fathers with children by multiple women were less likely to pay child support than those with children by one woman. Researchers assert that low-income fathers who have children by multiple women might not support their children financially because they feel that their contributions are insignificant when distributed to each child or they might focus mainly on financially supporting their newest born or children with whom they live in order to demonstrate their family commitment (Magnuson, 2006; Nepomnyaschy & Garfinkel, 2010).

To our knowledge, the literature does not specifically address the prevalence of child welfare-involved fathers' parenting or support of their children by multiple women. Nevertheless, fathers who struggle to meet child support obligations face harsh repercussions. Research has shown that although fathers with lower incomes provide in-kind support such as babysitting or other contributions (Nelson, 2004), those who do not fully or regularly pay child support are likely to be jailed (Waller & Swisher, 2006). Child welfare agencies can improve their practices with

fathers who are struggling financially by waiving their obligation to pay child support payments for a period of time when they are working with the agency or participating in an intervention to improve their lives. This would be a welcome alternative to creating a criminal record for fathers that leads to further barriers to employment, and inability to pay child support. Fathers who fear going deeper in the arrears with child support, facing jail time, or having wages garnished by Child Support Enforcement Services might instead choose to relinquish their parental rights or passively allow their rights to be terminated by the court.

Termination of Parental Rights

Child welfare agencies should also reconsider their policies concerning relinquishment or termination of fathers' rights when they cannot meet case plan goals that are influenced by their lack of finances. Instead, agencies should base their decisions on the nature of non-compliance. Most importantly, there should be some flexibility, on a case-by-case basis, regarding terminating fathers' rights, especially when fathers have not posed a danger to their children and where the main barrier is economic. Mandates can still be achieved in those types of cases, and also in cases where substance abuse is an issue, by placing children with their mothers or maternal or paternal relatives while the fathers retain their parental rights during recovery. Several child welfare agencies in Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, and New Hampshire have explored Title IV-E waivers that allow them to postpone child support payments and delay decisions regarding termination of parental rights in order to implement better methods for serving children and their families (Ryan, Marsh, Testa, & Louderman, 2006, p. 97).

One issue that has not received attention is the emotional effects that lack of involvement or termination of parental rights can have on fathers. This is important because there are a considerable number of fathers who are not involved or have lost their parental rights. Child welfare agencies must expect that fathers will need to find a way to cope with grief and loss from losing custody, losing parental rights, or missing an opportunity to raise their children. There might be an even greater emotional toll on those whose rights have been terminated after they committed to working to help their children but were not able to meet the case plan goals. In addition, research suggests that incarcerated fathers have pre-existing mental health problems that result from abrupt separation from their families, being isolated in prison, and from the stigma of being in prison (Secret, 2012). These issues further increase the difficulties in helping fathers. Child welfare agencies should anticipate fathers' need for referrals to counseling or support groups to ensure their well-being as they transition to a life without their children.

The literature does not address the issues that influence fathers' decision to relinquish their rights or particular issues influence fathers who remain unknown in the case records. Under the current system of practice, child welfare agencies are likely to exclude fathers from the case planning process before they know anything about them or whether they could positively change their children's lives. Additionally, agencies' inability to address barriers to father involvement means that more children will be raised without their fathers, which puts them at higher risk for neglect, child maltreatment, and other negative psychological, social, academic, and developmental outcomes (DePanfillis, 2006).

Services and Supports for Nonresident Fathers

The literature suggests that nonresident fathers who are not in a romantic relationship with their children's mother are most likely to experience barriers to engagement (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011). Therefore, child welfare agencies efforts should focus on effective co-parenting strategies for this group that are associated with higher levels of father engagement (Fagan & Palkovitz). Non-resident fathers can have healthy bonds with their children and make significant contributions to their children's development (Bellamy, 2009). However, they may need more assistance than those fathers who are living with their children at the time they are placed in foster care. Fathers who do not have an established relationship with their children and fathers with limited contact could benefit from wrap-around, intensive services and counseling to gradually strengthen the father–child relationship. Additionally, fathers who do not have legal custody of their children could benefit from advocacy services that help them to understand their legal rights as fathers and custodial issues, in addition to other services, such as parenting education and family counseling to strengthen their parenting abilities and family functioning.

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act of 2008 provides a basis for child welfare agencies to explore a more family-focused and strength-based approach, tapping into positive contributions from both maternal and paternal kin. This collaborative team approach could be incorporated to empower families and engage nonresident fathers in important support other than financial contributions. It would be beneficial for agencies as well as fathers, mothers, and other kin to discuss the possibility of involving fathers who are not considered a safety risk in meaningful ways throughout their children's lives. A team of child welfare agency personnel and kin could determine whether ongoing contact would be beneficial and how it could be facilitated so as not to disrupt the continuity of care from the primary and legal parent of the children. Involvement could range from information-sharing about family history to sharing pictures and positive electronic or written messages; eventually leading to visitation. A mediator could help to ensure that discussions between parents stay respectful and focused on the children's needs. Referrals for individual counseling also could be made to increase effective communication and enhance parents' psychosocial functioning.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

A variety of research methodologies have been used to help researchers build the knowledge base of this relatively new area of study on child welfare-involved father involvement. The existing research focuses mainly on agency practices to identify, contact and engage fathers to participate in the case planning process. The use of different sampling groups such as, fathers, caseworkers, and administrators, gives a realistic, yet disconcerting view of father involvement and agency practices with fathers. The studies consisted of surveys that inquired about a ranged of 74 to 1,222 fathers (e.g., Malm et al., 2006; O'Donnell, 1999), as well as analyses of case record data on 60 to 1,898 fathers (e.g., Brown et al., 2009; Coakley, 2013a; Malm et al., 2008; O'Donnell, 1999). In addition, Bellamy's (2009) study of child welfare-involved males entailed a secondary data analysis of 3,978 families from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being data set. These sample sizes were adequate for researchers to determine whether the associations between variables were significant. Collectively (and with caution towards

generalizations), the research findings show that child welfare agencies were not set up to include fathers properly during the intake, assessment, and case planning phases (O'Donnell, 1999), there was a lack of contact between the social workers and fathers (Brown et al., 2009; Malm et al., 2006; O'Donnell, 2001), and that when fathers were involved in case planning their children had shorter lengths of stay in foster care (Coakley, 2013a; Malm, et al. 2008). Additionally, qualitative studies provide valuable insight into fathers' perceptions of their negative experiences and limited support services at child welfare agencies (Behnke, 2008; Coakley, 2013b; Earner, 2007). However, there are gaps in the father involvement literature that limit us from fully examining the effectiveness of child welfare agency efforts to assess and alleviate the barriers that hinder fathers' participation in decision-making regarding their children's safety and permanence. For instance, studies that employ random sampling strategies with secondary data provide important information about agency practices. However, caution is warranted because of the lack of documentation on fathers in the studied case records compared to mothers, as well as documentation of fathers' "unknown" status that present problems with understanding fathers' characteristics and the extent to which fathers are involved (Coakley, 2013a; Malm et al., 2008).

FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research is needed to help us understand the relationship between various barriers and fathers' involvement. Additionally, it is imperative for future research to examine the association between fathers' legal status (e.g., biological, alleged or putative fathers) and the father-child relationship and fathers' availability to be involved, even if they are not currently involved. The lack of research on these factors is of concern because that knowledge could assist child welfare agencies in their ability to target the most appropriate intervention to assure children's safety and permanence.

CONCLUSION

Child welfare agencies have made great strides in implementing policies that keep children safe and help them stay connected to kin to improve their outcomes. However, currently there is minimal value placed on the role of the father and his parenting contributions. As a result, child welfare practices are not structured to engage fathers properly in case planning or handle their multifaceted, complex issues in order to improve their own life circumstances and become more involved parents. Child welfare agencies can enhance their efforts with fathers by integrating kinship and inter-agency collaborative efforts along with implementing new practices and policies that help fathers nurture and support their children throughout their lives.

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