



ISSUE BRIEF

STRONG FAMILIES

Why should child protection agencies **engage and involve all fathers?**

Fathers play a critical role in children's physical, emotional, and social development. Father-inclusive practices in child welfare are essential to child safety and well-being, and can minimize the amount of time children are separated from their family.

In 2018, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families [strongly encouraged](#) all human service agencies — including child welfare agencies, courts, offices of child support enforcement, offices of public assistance, offices of child care, Head Start programs, and family and youth services programs — “to work together across governments to jointly create and maintain an environment that prioritizes father engagement as a critical factor in strengthening families and adopt approaches to enhance paternal involvement in all family support and child welfare related programs.”

Efforts that support paternal engagement in prevention also align with the [Family First Prevention Services Act](#), which aims to reduce and prevent entry into foster care by providing up-front services to help children remain safely with family members. If removal from the home is necessary, engaging fathers and paternal relatives in case planning increases the likelihood the child can remain with kin.

Despite efforts to increase father engagement, many services remain tailored to the needs of mothers as primary caregivers, thereby excluding fathers. Additionally, biased perceptions about fathers, specifically men of color and men with adverse



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life experiences (such as homelessness, incarceration, substance use disorders), often influence how child protection agencies approach and support fathers' meaningful involvement in their child's well-being.

This brief highlights the benefits of establishing and maintaining inclusive practices to ensure fathers are involved in children's safety, permanency, and well-being, and offers strategies to resolve the barriers that sometimes inhibit their engagement.¹

The essential role of fathers

Child welfare systems too often focus on payment of child support as a father's primary parenting responsibility and connection to his child. Although financial support is important, research shows that outcomes for children improve when they have [high-quality relationships and safe and healthy interactions](#) with their fathers. Men who assume a positive and supportive fathering role in a child's life through quality physical, emotional, and financial interaction can:^{2,3}

- Affirm and demonstrate love for the child.
- Represent a positive male role model.
- Improve a child's socio-emotional and behavioral development.
- Enhance a child's cognitive skills and academic performance.
- Increase the likelihood of a child's academic success.
- Decrease the likelihood of juvenile delinquency.

Involved fathers can be married or unmarried, co-parents or single fathers, custodial or non-custodial, biological, fictive kin, or a father through adoption or

foster care. Fathering also can occur in the home with the child or from a distance, for example by military fathers on active duty or [fathers who are incarcerated](#).

Involving fathers who do not live with their children

Studies have highlighted myriad benefits to child safety and well-being as a result of father involvement, including fathers who do not currently live with their children. The involvement of non-resident fathers is associated with:^{4,5,6,7}

- Possibly ameliorating the circumstances that led to maltreatment.
- A higher likelihood of family reunification and a lower likelihood of adoption.
- Less time that children are separated from their family.
- A substantially lower likelihood of subsequent maltreatment allegations for children reunited with a parent, typically the mother.

Despite well-documented benefits to child development, safety, permanency associated with father engagement, child protection agencies often discount the value of fathers who do not live with their children, specifically men of color. Research indicates that some agencies are less likely to identify and locate Black, Latino, and multiracial nonresidential fathers compared to white fathers.⁸ This is particularly problematic considering [over half of the children in out-of-home care are children of color](#), with Black/African American and American Indian/Alaska Native children overrepresented at every decision point along the child welfare system continuum.

Some caseworkers view white fathers who turn their lives around as viable caretaker options, but fathers of color with similar criminal backgrounds are not always extended the same grace.

— SHARON ROCHELLE,

KINSHIP CAREGIVER AND LIVED EXPERIENCE ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

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The [Indian Child Welfare Act \(ICWA\)](#) requires caseworkers to identify, locate, and engage American Indian/Alaska Native fathers early in child welfare involvement, resulting in more American Indian/Alaska Native fathers being engaged than Black/African American fathers.⁹ The principles of ICWA represent a [gold standard](#) of child welfare practice that can be applied to all families to ensure children remain connected to their entire family, community, and culture.

Removing barriers to involvement

Engaging fathers and connecting them with the right kinds of supports can directly impact the way they contribute to their child's development. Several barriers can influence a father's ability and willingness to have a meaningful and consistent relationship with his children. Being aware of these barriers is a critical first step for child protection agencies to strategize how best to remove them.

Rethink child support enforcement

Child support policies that aim to identify fathers with the primary intent of [collecting financial support](#) for children can have the unintended consequence of limiting father-child interaction. To access certain forms of public assistance (such as TANF, SNAP, WIC), mothers are required to disclose information about the noncustodial father. Identified fathers who are delinquent in child support payments often are penalized (such as through driver's license suspension or incarceration), which can impede a father's ability to connect with his children even further.¹⁰ In June 2022, the Children's Bureau recommended that states [no longer initiate or enforce child support orders](#) against parents when children are in foster care, based on research that doing so can [prolong time to reunification](#)

and is not cost effective. It is important for agency leaders and caseworkers to fully understand child support policies and their impact on the families they serve. Child support enforcement policies disproportionately affect [Black non-custodial fathers who have low incomes](#).

Use inclusive language and programming

Programs and services that are mother-focused may negatively influence fathers' perceptions about child welfare and their own willingness to engage in services. Some family supports — like Women, Infant and Children (commonly known as WIC) — exclude fathers in name, leading them to perceive erroneously that certain resources are exclusively for women and, as a result, they do not seek the assistance. Agencies should evaluate if and how fatherhood is communicated through their organizational values, culture, practices, and policies, and where necessary, implement family-focused approaches that reinforce the vital role fathers play in a child's life.

[One study](#) indicated that some home visiting programs successfully engage fathers by offering family-focused resources and activities that include father-specific materials, separate visits and services for fathers, and general parenting strategies that promote equal parenting. To create a welcoming, father-friendly environment, the Connecticut Department of Children and Families in Hartford [installed a large mural](#) of a father of color playing with his daughters as a physical reminder of the important role of fathers.

Address bias

Caseworkers' biased perceptions of fathers and limited training influence engagement decisions. Research

It is important to invest efforts early on into engaging fathers in child welfare services and to make it abundantly clear to everyone involved that the father is an equal partner in parenting.

— MATTHEW DARNALL,

ADOPTIVE AND RESOURCE PARENT LIVED EXPERIENCE ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

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suggests that caseworkers' levels of experience and training, and their race have a significant effect on fathers' engagement.¹¹ Black child welfare caseworkers tend to have a more positive view of fathers than white caseworkers, and individuals who were trained in identifying and locating fathers were more likely to engage fathers. Considering the [social work profession is mostly comprised of white women](#), Sharon Rochelle, a kinship caregiver, suggests agency leaders and caseworkers should receive training in diversity, equity, and inclusion to better “engage fathers with a racial equity lens.”

The Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services, Palmdale and Vermont Corridor offices, engaged in antiracism training to confront perceptions that suggest fathers, specifically men of color and those with criminal records, were not capable of parenting appropriately. Staff participated in [Eliminating Racial Disproportionality and Disparity](#) meetings that included [cultural brokers](#) (community partners within the Black community) who helped staff develop cultural competencies to best support Black families. Increasing trainings and discussion on racial disparities in child welfare creates opportunities for caseworkers to confront and reframe personal biases about working with fathers and enhance their ability to equitably engage racially and culturally diverse families in child services.

Understand maternal gatekeeping

Maternal gatekeeping — situations in which mothers choose to conceal the father's identity or request that child welfare workers exclude fathers from services — also can hinder the engagement of fathers. Mothers may make these gatekeeping decisions for various reasons, including estrangement, a lack

OPPORTUNITIES FOR FEDERAL SUPPORT

Over the years, social perceptions associated with the role of fathers have evolved beyond merely a paternal contribution of financial support to having an essential role in a child's development and well-being. See the [National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse](#) for more information about an increasing number of federally funded, father-focused programs.

of financial support from the father, or an unhealthy relationship or unresolved issues with him. Mothers and maternal family members also may discourage father engagement in circumstances where the mother or child's safety is of concern (for example, when intimate partner violence is an issue). Since various factors can influence a mother's decision to discourage father involvement, it is important for caseworkers to gather enough information about both parents to fully understand the motivation behind any perceived maternal gatekeeping behavior. Caseworkers should not solely rely on a mother's opinion regarding the father's role in parenting or assume a father's absence is indicative of his lack of interest in the child's well-being. When possible, caseworkers should reiterate the positive impact fathers have on a child's development, and consider ways to include fathers, even if separate engagement is necessary.

Allow for flexibility

Individual life challenges can make fathers who do not live near or with their children less physically

Yes, I have a history of drug abuse and alcoholism, but I'm no longer that guy. That's a part of my yesterday. I have a daughter now. Today, I choose to make all the changes needed to be that dad.

— LEROY PASCUBILLO,
FATHER AND LIVED EXPERIENCE ADVISORY BOARD MEMBER

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accessible or unable to play an active role in their children's lives.^{12,13,14} Physical separation due to military enlistment, incarceration, or [treatment for substance use disorders can](#) limit fathers' face-to-face interactions with their children. Caseworkers may find it difficult to locate these fathers, and if they do, distance — or restrictions and rules around the timing and location of visits for fathers in a correctional or treatment facility — can serve as an added barrier. Other challenges such as housing instability and economic hardship may

cause fathers to limit contact due to their inability to financially provide for children's basic needs.

Despite insurmountable circumstances, many fathers remain invested in being responsible and are willing to cultivate a relationship with their children. To effectively engage fathers, child welfare professionals must be flexible yet intentional, and develop policies and practices that take into account the value that fathers have in children's lives.

To learn more, visit [Questions from the field](#) at [Casey.org](#).

- 1 Content of this brief was informed through ongoing consultation with members of the Knowledge Management Lived Experience Advisory Board. This team includes youth, parents, kinship caregivers, and foster parents with lived experience of the child welfare system who serve as strategic partners with Family Voices United, a collaboration between FosterClub, Generations United, the Children's Trust Fund Alliance, and Casey Family Programs. Members who contributed to this brief include: Robert Brown; Matthew Darnall; Lisa Myles; Leroy Pascubillo; and Sharon Rochelle.
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