



Dads and Paternal Relatives:

Using Family Finding Tools and Family Group Decision Making to Refocus the Child Welfare System on the Entire Family Constellation

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Father involvement is undeniably important to children. Children with involved fathers display better cognitive outcomes, higher self-esteem and less depression as teenagers, greater academic achievement, lower levels of substance use and higher levels of pro-social behaviors (National Fatherhood Initiative, 2007). Furthermore, father involvement has been noted to contribute to positive child development, even in the case of non-resident fathers (Schmid, 2006). Children with involved fathers are more likely to be reunified and less likely to be adopted than children whose fathers are not involved (Malm, Zielewski, & Chen, 2008). Also, high levels of adoption for children with unknown or uninvolved fathers may indicate that many fathers are contacted simply to expedite permanency planning or to terminate parental rights (American Humane, American Bar Association Center for Children and the Law, & National Fatherhood Initiative, 2007). In addition, well-being outcomes were improved for children who had fathers that had provided financial support and non-financial support (such as purchasing some household supplies or food), and had visited their child at least once (Malm et al., 2008).

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act (“Fostering Connections”) highlights four activities that can bring fathers and their paternal kin together for the benefit of their children: kinship navigator programs, intensive family finding efforts,

family group decision making meetings and residential family treatment programs. Family Connections Grants were made available and have been awarded to 20 public and private entities across the nation willing to develop or expand their current programs in one of these four areas. Although all of these activities have relevance for involving fathers in their children’s lives, this article focuses on family finding and family group decision making.

Identifying and locating non-resident fathers is the first step to involving them in their children’s lives. Some child welfare agencies have begun to use publicly available search tools to locate non-resident fathers, such as Family Finding, a set of people-locating tools and strategies that offers methods to locate and engage relatives of children living in out-of-home care. The goal of Family Finding is to provide each child with lifelong family connections and to “reconstruct a child’s relationships over time” (Casey Family Services, 2009; Center for Family Finding and Youth Connectedness, 2009). Intensive family finding efforts and programs use search technology to locate biological family members and/or other central adult connections (including fathers and paternal relatives) for children in the child welfare system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families, 2009). This process also includes working with family members (and other adults) to explore placement options, and to restore permanent connections and relationships.

Even if family members are not suitable caregivers or placement candidates, they may still be able to provide much-needed support and guidance in the lives of their related children; these important connections should be fostered whenever possible. In order to be effective, family finding programs must include the following elements: information gathering, documentation, search, identification, contact, assessment, engagement and permanent family placement/relationships (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration of Children and Families, 2009). Federal support and funding for these efforts is very encouraging and will hopefully translate into greater father involvement and connection in children's lives.

Once a non-resident father and his extended family are identified and located, family group decision making (FGDM) can further engage them in case planning and decision-making processes. FGDM is a promising child welfare practice being implemented throughout the United States and in 22 other countries. The values and philosophy of FGDM support the engagement of fathers and paternal relatives in numerous ways — breaking down the maternal focus of the child welfare system and beginning a broader systemic change in how families are engaged in the child welfare process. Extended family participation in making decisions about children's safety and well-being is a cornerstone of FGDM philosophy. Excluding fathers and paternal kin could limit “the range of informal supports” (Schmid, 2006, p. 23); including them, on the other hand, will “widen the circle” of support and empower fathers and paternal relatives to make meaningful investments and commitments in the lives of their children (Pennell & Burford, 1994). A Washington study revealed that family group conferences¹ may be more effective in involving paternal relatives in case planning than other “family-centered family preservation services”; an average of three paternal relatives attended conferences in the study, whereas “very few fathers” were involved in other case planning procedures² (Gunderson, Cahn, & Wirth, 2003, p. 44).

More research is needed on the engagement of fathers in processes such as FGDM, but it is clear that children benefit from having fathers and paternal relatives involved in their lives. Family finding efforts can help facilitate, re-establish, and foster the connections between fathers/paternal relatives and children.

Likewise, involving fathers, paternal kin and male relatives in family engagement approaches will benefit children and families by increasing resources and enhancing supportive relationships in their lives.

Identifying and locating non-resident fathers are the first steps to involving them in their children's lives. Once fathers are located, they need to be contacted directly, actively engaged in the case management process, and assorted agencies must collaborate across permeable boundaries. Family Finding and FGDM are powerful tools for refocusing the child welfare system on the extended family constellation. For more information on family group decision making, please visit www.fgdm.org. For more information on engaging fathers, please visit www.fatherhoodqic.org.

References

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¹ FDGM incorporates the family group conference model along with the family unity model for a broader description of the process and dynamic.

² “Other case planning procedures” usually include discussions between the family and caseworker that result in a document created and signed by caseworkers and families to identify goals for the family.