



# Father Support Important in Permanency Outcomes for Children

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In 2006, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) published *What About the Dads?* Its findings, from a survey of over 1,200 caseworkers in four states, provided a description of the extent to which child welfare agencies identify, locate and involve non-resident fathers in casework. Two years later, HHS funded a follow-up component to examine whether non-resident father involvement was associated with different permanency outcomes for a sample of 2,000 foster children whose fathers did not reside in the home from which the child was removed.

Foster children in the sample whose non-resident fathers provided financial and non-financial support were more likely to be reunified than children whose fathers did not provide support. While the study was unable to determine with certainty whether the reunification was with the birth mother or non-resident father, permanency goals led the researchers to believe that in the vast majority of cases, the child was returned to the mother. Even when controlling for a wide range of factors that prior research has shown to impact reunification, children whose non-resident fathers provided either financial or non-financial support (e.g., diapers, child care) or both types of support were more than twice as likely to be reunified than children whose fathers did not provide support.

While the findings show an association between father support and reunification, the findings do not allow us to understand why reunification is associated with father support. Perhaps there are tangible reasons. Even small amounts of monetary support may be enough to assist the mother's household and make reunification more possible. Yet, even in cases in which the non-resident father provided only non-financial support, the child was more likely to be reunified than in cases in which the father did not provide this type of support.

We often think that it's the support that somehow influences the reunification outcome. However, it could

be that cases in which the mother is more amenable to or appropriate for reunification may be the cases in which non-resident fathers are more likely to provide support. These mothers may be easier to engage for both caseworkers and fathers. For example, a mother who is making strides toward reunification by seeking substance abuse treatment may make a father feel more assured that his resources are not supporting a drug habit — and therefore, the father may be more willing to provide resources.

Other reasons may also be relevant. Upon hearing that a child's father is supportive, it's possible that the caseworker, or judge, reacts differently toward the mother, perhaps becoming more of an advocate for reunification. Caseworkers may be more persistent in reunification efforts if they recognize that terminating parental rights and moving to a goal of adoption is unlikely given a supportive father. Non-resident fathers' marital status may also be important. Fathers who were married to the child's mother at some point since the child's birth were far more likely to provide support. Likewise, a marriage may in some way influence caseworker or judicial actions and decisions related to reunification.

Finally, we cannot determine the extent to which a child's relationship with his or her non-resident father affects casework decisions. Fathers who provide support are likely to have some sort of ongoing relationship with their children. Children with relationships with their fathers may discuss their fathers with caseworkers and judges, and these conversations may, in turn, influence casework. Qualitative research is needed to better understand the nature of non-resident father support, and the quantity and quality of interactions among mothers, non-resident fathers and their children. Most important, practitioners and researchers need to determine what facilitates and motivates non-resident fathers to provide support and stay involved in the lives of their children.