

Best Practice for Father–Child Visits in the Child Welfare System

Introduction

A recent focus on policies and practice related to parent/child visits in the child welfare system has increased the knowledge of the field with regard to the importance of visits, frequency of visits, planning for visits, worker skills needed for effective visits, and outcomes of visits. Most child welfare families are headed by single mothers, so visiting policies and practice have largely been targeted to mothers and their children. In the past decade, however, there has been a movement nationwide towards more father involvement in the lives of children. As a result, the child welfare system is also developing strategies for father involvement.

The National Quality Improvement Center for Non-Resident Fathers (QIC NRF) was created by the federal Children’s Bureau in 2006 to promote meaningful engagement between the child welfare system and non-resident fathers. The QIC NRF believes that fathers should have the same opportunities as mothers to develop and maintain healthy relationships with their children. When families are involved in the child welfare system, best practice means that workers are inclusive of non-resident fathers by considering the father and his family as a potential placement resource, offering fathers services linked directly to their needs, inviting fathers to participate in the case plan, and allowing fathers frequent visits with their child(ren). Children benefit by having both parents involved in their lives to the greatest extent possible. This paper was funded through a generous contribution from the QIC NRF.

Research

Reunifying abused and neglected children with their families is a relatively new concept. Up until the 1960s, children were maintained in long-term foster care or institutions (Hartman, 1993). As researchers began to study the long-term effects of out-of-home care on children, they found that children were “drifting” from placement to placement with no permanency. Most of the children had never been visited by their parents (Maas and Engler, 1959). A renewed interest in family ties led to a permanency planning movement that culminated with the passage of Public Law 96-272 in 1980. The use of visits increased with the passage of the federal law (Hess, 2005) and subsequent research on parent/child visits and father–child visits found:

- The likelihood of mothers reunifying with their children increased ten-fold with mother/child visits (Davis et al, 1996).
- The first round (2000–2004) of the federal Child and Family Services Reviews showed a close association between parent/child visits and achieving permanency.
- The Child and Family Services Reviews indicated that the more caseworkers included mothers, the more likely they were to include fathers in assessment, services, case planning, and visits.
- A survey of caseworkers in the child welfare system showed that 30% of nonresident fathers visited their children with about 13% doing so on a regular basis (Malm, Murray, and Geen, 2006).

- A demonstration project emphasizing father-friendly practice and training for caseworkers to engage fathers showed father–child visits peaked at six months with one-third of the fathers complying with the plan for visiting (English, Brummel, and Martens, 2009).

Differences Between Fathers and Mothers that Inform Father–Child Visits

What are some differences between males and females/fathers and mothers in communication and in parenting styles that may affect father–child visits?

- Men are more task oriented, less likely to ask for help, have more difficulty in expressing feelings, are more apt to shout when angry, and less likely to talk about relationships than are women.
- Fathers use a stern voice and fewer words when correcting children.
- Fathers engage in more active and rougher play with children than do mothers.
- Fathers allow children more freedom and opportunity to explore than mothers.
- Fathers place more maturity and autonomy demands on sons than on daughters. (National Family Preservation Network, *Advanced Fatherhood Training Curriculum*)

What are the implications of these differences in communication and parenting styles related to father–child visits in the child welfare system? Could differences in male/female styles of communication be exacerbated in tense situations? If so, then a mostly-female child welfare system workforce interacting with confused, angry fathers whose children have been removed presents a potential barrier to a good working relationship. The QIC NRF recommends that a male worker have the first contact with the father. Since that is generally not feasible, female workers need to be trained on how to approach fathers and how to respond to male methods of communication including hostility, anger, and difficulty with expressing feelings and concerns. The more that workers understand fathers’ methods of communicating and parenting, the faster they will establish a working relationship with the father to facilitate case planning and father–child visits.

Based on the parenting style of fathers, visits between fathers and children will emphasize the following:

- Fathers should spend considerable time with their children playing and having fun. Fathers teach children how to explore the world while also helping children learn how to keep aggressive impulses in check.
- Fathers should maintain the active, physical style of fathering even as their children age. Active pursuits such as hiking are far more valuable than spending time in passive activities such as watching television.
- Physical activities can be combined with productive activities such as household repairs, raking the back yard, or washing the car. These shared activities promote a sense of responsibility and significance in children that is, in turn, linked to greater self-esteem, academic and occupational achievement, psychological well-being, and civic engagement later in life.

- Fathers' involvement in educational activities such as reading to their children or meeting with the teacher have a greater effect on children's academic success than mothers' involvement.
- Fathers' involvement with sons is critical in the transition from boyhood to manhood. (Rosenberg and Wilcox, 2006)

What Fathers Say That Informs Father–Child Visits

In 2004 researchers in Kentucky sent out a survey to all fathers involved in the child welfare system. Over 300 fathers responded with a slight majority expressing satisfaction with their contact with the caseworker, invitation to attend meetings regarding their children, perception of being treated politely and professionally by staff, and a conclusion that their children were helped by the agency. A majority of fathers responded negatively to questions about services offered to their family, referring others to the agency for assistance, seeking help in the future from the agency, and receiving services that helped them become better fathers. Earlier comparison surveys involving mostly mothers found satisfaction rates of 80% suggesting that there is a lot of room for improvement in working with fathers.

Fathers also reported on referrals to services and receiving those services. While over 80% of fathers were referred for visits with the child, only 42% actually had visits. About 40% of fathers would have liked a referral to a father support group but only 9% of the fathers were referred to a group (6% attended). Researchers noted that mailing addresses were available for only 16% of fathers and that barriers to receiving services resulted in low follow-through rates for fathers.

The researchers made a number of recommendations that resulted in changes for fathers involved in the Kentucky child welfare system, and these changes included a state information Web site, an annual fatherhood conference, training on father involvement, increased efforts to locate fathers, efforts to improve father parenting, and efforts to involve paternal relatives in placement decisions (Huebner et al, 2008).

Best Practice in Father–Child Visits

Best practice begins from the top down. Agency administrators must:

- Conduct a father-friendly assessment of the child welfare agency to determine current policies, practice, and perceptions regarding fathers.
- Take steps to make the agency father-friendly: provide male-oriented decorations and reading material, hire male staff, and establish flexible working hours for staff to in order to accommodate fathers' work schedules.
- Provide training to child welfare workers on different styles of communication and parenting of fathers and mothers; the importance of father involvement, including visits, in the child's life; and skill-building in working with fathers.
- Establish policies that treat mothers and fathers equally in all areas including case planning, services, visits, and placement.
- Require that fathers be identified, located, and contacted when the case is opened. Locator services need to be available for workers to use as a resource, and supervisors need to ensure that case records reflect the same contact information for fathers as for mothers.

- Provide male staff to make the initial contact with fathers.
- Set standards for father–child visits that include a written plan, frequency, location, and planned activities.
- Coordinate with other agencies, including courts, advocates, service providers, and visiting centers to ensure that fathers are included in case planning and visits.
- Work with local fatherhood support groups on a referral process that effectively connects fathers to support groups.

Summary

Best practice for father–child visits is in its infancy. However, there is well-established best practice for parent/child visits that provides a solid foundation for father–child visits. Workers need training on the different styles of communication and parenting of fathers and of mothers and need training for skill-building in working with fathers. It's critical that workers identify, locate, and contact fathers as quickly as possible and provide fathers with the same opportunities as mothers in case planning and visits with children. Fathers' visits with children should incorporate learning activities with physical activities. Fathers should be referred to support groups and provided with appropriate services that overcome barriers to developing a healthy relationship with their children.

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