

Introduction:

The Child and Family Services Review (CFSR), a federal initiative consisting of statewide assessments and onsite reviews of child and family service outcomes and program systems, found that there is little meaningful engagement between fathers and the child welfare system. In an overall review of 22 CFSRs from 2001-2004, it was noted that there was a lack of father and paternal involvement in the child welfare case, including case planning and contact by the caseworker. This has been taken as an indication that child welfare agencies across the country have historically disregarded children's fathers and focused their efforts on the mothers. Current practice does not effectively involve fathers in child welfare case planning or seek to include fathers' extended family in the child's life.

A multistate study on father involvement and child welfare case outcomes found that children with a higher degree of father involvement:

- had a higher likelihood of reunification and a lower likelihood of adoption,
- were discharged from foster care more quickly than those with less or no paternal involvement, and
- had substantially lower likelihood of subsequent maltreatment allegations.

Additionally, when fathers are involved with their children's lives, it is linked to children's:

- improved physical and mental health,
- improved self esteem,
- responsible sexuality, and
- greater financial security.

The importance of engaging fathers in the child welfare process has become increasingly clear but the question of how to do this most effectively remains.

Executive Summary:

The Fatherhood Roundtable was a joint initiative between the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services and the Children's Justice Act Program. The Roundtable was hosted by Kenneth Thompson, Fatherhood Program Specialist at DFPS and included participants from multiple agencies working to improve child welfare, including the judicial system, CPS and CASA. Of greatest significance, the roundtable featured eight fathers who shared their personal experiences from within the case process. They offered their opinions on how to better engage fathers across systems and increase father involvement in their children's lives.

The roundtable began with a brief introduction by Dan Capouch of DFPS. He gave an overview of the CFSR, its findings related to fathers, and the overarching question guiding the roundtable – how do we improve all the systems so that fathers are engaged and fully acknowledged in the CPS process.

Moderator, Kenneth Thompson, structured the roundtable discussion by posing a series of questions to the fathers related to their experiences with the child welfare system. These questions included topics such as how to engage absentee fathers in the CPS process, accountability, services and resources, experiences with the judicial system, and lessons learned.

The ensuing discussion included a wealth of information and varying opinions. However there were some broad areas of agreement. In general, participants felt that:

- There are gender biases within the system. Nonresident fathers were not aggressively sought out by caseworkers and were viewed, in the best of circumstances, as merely back-up placement options if reunification with the mother failed. More than likely, fathers felt they were not even viewed as a placement option.
- Many non-resident fathers want to engage and be involved with their child's case but face personal challenges that prevent participation. Fathers also felt that they were not provided with the resources necessary to facilitate their full participation.
- Fathers often need to be educated about their role in the child welfare process and their rights as fathers.
- Court procedures and supportive programs offered through child welfare agencies are often tailored to the needs of the mother but not the father. In many cases, there are no specialized services available for males raising children.

At the end of the meeting, participants expressed their appreciation for the forum and were eager to put forward recommendations based on the conversations that morning.

Roundtable Results

How do we engage absentee fathers in the CPS process?

FATHERS

- Understand that fathers are accessible even when incarcerated. If the Attorney General's Office can locate an incarcerated father for child support, CPS should also be able to locate and engage father regarding the best interest of his children.
- The relationship with the mother impacts the father's relationship with the children. It's difficult for a father to keep contact with children if the relationship with the mother is not good. The father may not know of the

children's current situation because he does not have communication with mother. He may not find out there is a problem until the court is already involved. Even though the relationship with the mother may be broken, the relationship with the children is not.

Why not make an attempt to see children?

FATHERS

- Unknowledgeable of rights as a father and some fathers don't step up to find out.
- Issues related to ego and lack of knowledge of how and whom to ask for help.
- Unaware of legal rights of father to have contact with kids.
- Unsure how to enforce legal rights to children.
- Culturally ignorant of duties as father and husband. Absenteeism amongst fathers is so common that it's not recognized as an issue. Fathers need to be educated about their duties.
- Children hidden away from father in a domestic violence shelter. The mother and grandmother helped to keep children away. Fit the description of "dead-beat dad," but not by choice. CPS engaged father with an attitude of contempt, made derogatory comments to him, and made it clear they expected him to fail. All resources were directed at the mother. Father believed in mother's exclusive right to custody of the children. Resources ultimately brought about change, but it was difficult to get them.
- Started out with custody of his children- the mother was gone. He contacted CPS for help and was just questioned on the whereabouts of the mother and her lack of involvement. Rather than addressing his needs, CPS focused solely on the lack of involvement of the mother and treated the father with suspicion. The mom fabricated stories, gained custody and filed for a protective order. CPS didn't engage him after that, no one explained the protective order, offered him resources, etc.
- Men are failing at being good caregivers because they are not taught how to be parents. Men grow up learning that mom is the one who raises the children – need to be re-taught that dads can raise children and be the parent.

OTHER PERSPECTIVES

- Both fathers and the child protection system need a paradigm shift. The system marginalizes fathers, as well as their families, and focuses exclusively on mothers. The CPS movement towards kinship placement increases the need to look at fathers. Fathers should not be viewed as second rate parents. Judges should ask questions from the bench and use

resources to find and involve fathers. Fathers also need to do a better job of stepping up and participating in the process.

What were the resources that brought change?

FATHERS

- A safe place away from drugs.
- Parenting classes. Learning what constitutes abuse.
- Support groups.
- Substance abuse treatment services.
- Cooperative parenting classes help to get parents out of “war mode” and focus on well being of child.
- Parent education could be incorporated as part of sex education to middle school students to reach future parents early enough and provide education about paternal rights, child support, and other parenting resources.
- Very little resources for fathers. Single fathers turned away from organizations designed to serve single mothers.
- Fathers need access to the same resources as mothers. Fathers should also be held equally accountable for being a parent but, in turn, CPS should diligently pursue both mother and father as viable options for child placement.

OTHER PERSPECTIVES

- Educators must be part of the process. Life skills classes must be offered in middle school. Teen pregnancy is a huge problem.
- The Office of the Attorney General’s (OAG) No Kidding project trains and equips young parents to deliver this four-part paternity and parental responsibility curriculum to students in middle and high schools in Austin and El Paso. No Kidding educators receive extensive training on paternity, child support, and parental responsibility. No Kidding Interns emphasize the challenges of parenting as a teen, explain the real costs of raising a child, highlight the legal issues parents face, and stress the value of both parents being involved in a child’s life. The program is implemented through local collaborations of community based organizations, school districts, and the OAG.
- OAG’s Parenting and Paternity Awareness (p.a.p.a.) program is an evidence-based, educational curriculum designed for secondary school students and young adults that teaches the rights, responsibilities, and realities of parenting and stresses the benefits of sequencing parenthood after a person has completed his/her education, started a career, and is in a stable, committed relationship. Key themes in the curriculum focus on the importance of responsible fatherhood, the value of paternity establishment, the legal realities of child support, the financial and

emotional challenges of single parenting, the benefits of both parents being involved in a child's life, healthy relationship skills, and relationship violence prevention. OAG provides the 14-session curriculum and training at no charge to teachers, school counselors, school nurses, teen parent program staff, and parent educators in community-based programs. The p.a.p.a. curriculum is the method by which school districts comply with state law passed by the 80th Legislature requiring high school health to include a parenting and paternity awareness curriculum. Health is no longer a graduation requirement, so program is not reaching all students. This program may be beneficial at the middle school level. There is some interest in making health an 8th grade requirement.

- Attorney General's Office has stopped using term "absentee fathers," and realizes involved fathers may have legitimate reasons for wanting to stay off the state radar screen. OAG's child support program addresses visitation and access to children as part of the child support order.
- CPS is offering a statewide Parent Collaboration Group training in June to help parents have their voices heard.
- CPS marginalizes fathers, scares mothers, and sets up an adversarial process for all of the parties involved. Service plans may require parents who are together to split up.
- Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) is a move away from the adversarial process.
- Consistent with the paradigm shift, rights to children should be coupled with responsibility. Fathers have a tremendous responsibility when they create a child.
- Representatives from OAG should present on p.a.p.a program to regional advisory committees on disproportionality. Committees include school board representatives.
- There are programs in El Paso area making progress on engaging fathers – Riverside High School offers program that addresses conservatorship, custody, and child support. Region 19 DADS program works to enhance fathers' role in child's life. YMCA offers Indian Princess program for fathers and daughters, and the Communities in Schools (CIS) program is a dropout prevention program that provides school-based social services. There needs to be a greater awareness that these program exist.
- As part of the required paradigm shift, men need to break away from cultural traditions, i.e. "machismo."
- The word "adversary" appears just once in the Texas Family Code, and it's in reference to the CPS hearing. Judges need to engage in therapeutic jurisprudence and collaboration.

What about situations where fathers are not aware they are a father?

OTHER PERSPECTIVES

- Paternity registry system is not effective.

Were you notified of court hearings, did you participate, and what was your court experience?

FATHERS

- Father was notified of court hearing by mail while in prison. He was transported 700 miles to attend hearing. He was initially angry and, before he took an anger management course, he responded to the process in ways that were not helpful. He doesn't advise that kind of confrontational style. The father felt that as time went on, he earned the judge's respect. The process ultimately validated him as a man and a father. He realized CPS really was there to help his family.
- Father was notified of CPS case by a friend who happened to be in the court room and recognized the mother's name. By that time, the children were already in foster care. He had a family friend who was an attorney and was able to explain what was going on and advised him to attend the next hearing. His CPS experience was "hell." He was told by judge and CPS he would fail. He was called an addict and told something must be wrong with him because "his type" usually would not pursue custody of his children. He paid out of pocket for legal costs and had to hire his own private investigator to prove mother was still using drugs. The entire process lasted two years. Once he completed his service plan, he was given custody with a warning that if he slipped up, he would lose his kids.
- Father initiated custody process. Judge told father he would fail, but he completed all of the services. CPS doubted his intentions for pursuing custody. In the end the system worked, but it was a long process and large investment of financial resources for the father.
- Father received notice from CPS of court hearing two weeks before court date. The judge appointed the father an attorney to help him through the process, though this was not a common experience. Several participating fathers used all of their financial resources paying for legal expenses.
- Father received notice regarding child support from Attorney General's office while incarcerated. He did legal research in prison law library so that he could meet the required standards in his reply to the court. A default judgment was made against him as if he never responded. He came out of prison with a \$10,000 of debt with compounding interest. He now has custody of children, but is still paying out child support. The entire family is hurting from a system that was designed to help them. Often fathers coming to the court room are grown men but still in need of fathering. They need mentors.

- Fathers need education on child support. Fathers are afraid of going to prison and flee their child support responsibility.

OTHER PERSPECTIVES

- Judges need a lot of education and training so they know how to better reach out to fathers and give recognition and support. Judges often set tone in the court room and it is, therefore, especially important that judges are approaching this issue in the right frame of mind.

When you were informed that CPS was involved with your children, how active were you in your children's lives?

FATHERS

- Involved with custody.
- Involved with resources.
- Not involved. Involved with alcohol and drugs.
- Wanted to be involved but couldn't.
- Involved but incarcerated.
- Present, but lack of parenting skills meant that parenting was sub-par.
- Tried to be involved, but mother moved often with children.

Were you treated with respect by CPS staff?

FATHERS

- No – Father initially felt attacked, defensive, and powerless. He was not allowed to see kids and didn't receive any services until after the children came home with him.
- No - Father was blatantly disrespected through actions and comments.
- No – Father was engaged after children were abandoned by their mother. He was taken into judge's chambers and lectured and accused. He was not given fair opportunity to establish healthy rapport. He felt it was a battle with them until he learned his own responsibilities.
- No – Non-offending father felt he was treated very unfairly. Judge set the initial tone. It was until he learned more about how CPS worked that it got better.
- Yes – Father had to be extremely proactive navigating the system, and though he found the system intimidating, he felt it was helpful that he took the initiative and learned to work within the system. Family members helped by offering support and holding him accountable for completing his service plan.
- Fathers are not treated like a parent and are not considered first for placement. CPS will ask mom, the offending caregiver, where to put the child. Father felt as if he won custody by default.
- Non-offending father was not taken seriously as far as being capable of becoming a good parent.

How do you think CPS/courts do holding fathers accountable?

FATHERS

- Drug testing and surprise visits do not necessarily hold fathers accountable for becoming a good parent.
- Father was given service plan with 33 points to complete. Wife had already failed to complete the same plan. CPS had looked at all other family members as a possible placement. He was told he would fail and when he did relapse, he was sent to prison for drug treatment. Prison was the only place for him to get drug treatment services. The mother went to a non-prison treatment facility.
- Judge set tone of accountability. Father had to prove fitness. He felt like he was tested regarding accountability and passed the test.
- Father's first experience with CPS, there was limited accountability and he relapsed. No services were offered at the close of the first case and no supervision, even though CASA had advocated for extended drug testing. Father felt he needed additional support to have successfully stayed clean.
- Father's family, friends, and employer held him accountable. His children also held him accountable for completing his service plan.

OTHER PERSPECTIVES

- There is not enough accountability and responsibility. Parents should be able to do whatever is asked of them to get their children back.

How was your experience with CASA?

FATHERS

- All fathers had positive experience with CASA volunteers.

How have you changed as a result of your experience?

FATHERS

- Father now shows affection with children and feels he is a better - healthier parent.
- Father was raised "old school" and had very traditional ideas about gender roles. He has now been a single dad for 17 years and his perspective has changed. He is everything to his children. He has become a better person, man, dad, provider. He can speak freely about his experiences, has added new values and is committed to making a difference in the lives of his sons.
- Father has more information and resources and that has opened up doors. Children have more respect for him, and he knows how to be a better parent. He has more self esteem and feels he is a benefit to his children and the community.

- Father loves his life. He has become a productive member of the community, positive example of what a man can be and what a man should do for his son and daughters. He is a better partner and friend and has acquired more tools now.
- Father is open about past with children. Fathers who successfully navigated the system are not exceptional, but were given the opportunities to succeed. If others going through system are given similar opportunities, they can succeed, too.

OTHER PERSPECTIVES

- CPS needs to learn that the fathers speaking today are representative of every father's potential.
- A powerful dialogue is taking place. There is a need for the fathers' voices to be elevated so CPS, courts, communities, and schools can hear.
- Parent Collaboration Group video has footage of parents so their voices can be heard.
- CPS also needs to be held accountable and should set an example of treating parents with dignity and respect and holding themselves accountable.
- CPS's Family Focus Division emphasizes respect, but there may still be opportunities for growth within CPS.

What services should we provide?

FATHERS

- Financial aid for education and housing options for single fathers.
- Substance abuse treatment - there are specialized treatment centers and subsidies available for single mothers but nothing comparable for single fathers.
- Fathers need a safe place to go with children. There are not shelters for men with their children. Father had to rely on special permission.
- Parenting classes, anger management, job readiness, budgeting and other life skills classes.
- There are not a lot of men in parenting classes.
- Service plans need to be gender-neutral.
- CPS need to train staff on addiction and the process of recovery to prevent CPS from pushing addicts when then are not ready – push them back to substance abuse as their only coping mechanism.
- If not on probation, it can be difficult to access treatment without a caseworker. It may take 3 months to get into treatment, and you are up against an 18 month timeline.
- Partnering with faith-based community regarding the CPS fatherhood initiative and how to serve fathers. Use community volunteers to fill in gaps within system.

- Father called CPS for resources and was brushed off or asked about the mother. He was not given information. When his mother and grandmother called, CPS responded to them but the father could not get CPS to respond to the same request.

OTHER PERSPECTIVES

- CPS should not require parents to complete services that are not available in their area. Resources need to be available in the communities where the parents live. Many service providers exclude fathers and/or CPS-involved families. Parents need more time and more options when completing their service plans.

What lessons can be passed on to help with engaging fathers?

FATHERS

- Fathers need to take the responsibility to educate themselves about how the system works. Fathers should pass on good experiences to other fathers – there needs to be father to father mentoring. There needs to be a way to increase family member involvement in cooperative ways.
- Parent Collaboration Group is great for distributing information, dispelling panic, and giving support. Fathers involved with CPS feel shame, guilt, and a sense of failure and the Parent Collaboration Group can help with those feelings and be an important resource for fathers.
- Talk to younger fathers on their level and in ways that get their attention. Fathers should be direct and share what they know with younger generations.
- Offer forgiveness. Remove restraints and allow fathers to be involved in recovery. Provide an opportunity to feel invited into a system of support and not continuously being punished for past mistakes.
- Fathers who have been through the system need to advise other fathers not “to fight the cavalry.” CPS is there to help.
- Get fathers involved with Parent Collaboration Group as early as possible.

Did any fathers experience Family Group Decision Making?

FATHERS

- –Yes – but felt the process was not engaging. It felt like more of a checklist than a discussion. It did add accountability to father, such as requiring him to set up his own psychological. It helped get father involved in completing his services.
- FGDM expanded support network and brought in extended family as a resource.
- CASA worker helped father find support and helped him complete services. CASA worker helped him see his extended family as a resource.

- Engaging the fathers' families will hold fathers accountable. "You can't b.s. your family."

OTHER PERSPECTIVES

- Family Group Decision Making brings in extra family and the family helps to hold the father accountability. Ultimately, this drives home the message that it's all about relationships.