



Minnesota Department of **Human Services**

Working with Fathers: *A Program Improvement Resource*



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Introduction

The Minnesota Child and Family Service Reviews (MnCF SR) evaluate agency efforts to actively involve fathers in the lives of their children. When these efforts are inadequate, several MnCF SR outcomes and performance items are rated as needing improvement. Results of MnCF SRs have revealed inconsistent practice in this area, resulting in low performance ratings.

The following “Fathers Practice Tips” were developed to help county and tribal child welfare agencies improve their practice when working with fathers. The Fathers Practice Tips are intended as a resource to help county supervisors and caseworkers re-examine their day-to-day work with resident and non-resident fathers, with the ultimate goal of improving outcomes for children. Fathers Practice Tips are organized around the following five basic child welfare casework functions:

Engagement: Develop and maintain a mutually beneficial partnership that will sustain the interest and commitment to positive change.

Assessment: Gather and analyze information that supports sound decision making and effective service delivery.

Case planning and implementation: Develop individualized, strength-based, family-centered case plans that meet the unique needs of children and their families.

Monitoring and evaluation: Ensure that family case plans maintain their relevance, integrity, and appropriateness to promote improved client outcomes.



Case closing: Ending services when the presenting and underlying child safety and risk issues are significantly reduced, and the family believes they no longer need services.

Clearly, child welfare practice is complex, and sorting through the nuances related to involving fathers does not lend itself to a simple check list. For example, agency responsibility to involve fathers is more clearly established in cases where the court is involved than with voluntary service cases. However, in both cases, children benefit if a constructive relationship with their father is maintained and/or promoted. Children are well-served when agencies demonstrate the capacity to engage, assess, and when indicated, include fathers in case planning and implementation.

Engagement

When making decisions on engaging fathers:

- Examine personal thoughts and attitudes about working with fathers.
- Identify agency expectations for involving fathers.
- Assess whether the agency environment is father-friendly.
- Invite, support and encourage father involvement by:
 - Identifying fathers early in the life of the case.
 - Acknowledging the importance of fathers in their children's lives.
 - Scheduling meetings when fathers are available.
 - Giving adequate notice of upcoming meetings.
 - Offering the necessary support to positively participate in the case plan.
- Consult with supervisors when developing strategies to engage fathers, and when engagement strategies are not successful.
- Make diligent efforts to address barriers to father involvement. Barriers can include:
 - Unclear agency expectations regarding engaging fathers.
 - Estranged mother/father relationships.

- Difficulty locating fathers – may live outside the county or state, or may be incarcerated.
- Prior involvement of fathers with their children has been minimal or non-existent.
- Personal discomfort or fear about working with fathers.
- Consult with supervisors before deciding that reasonable efforts to engage fathers have occurred and may be discontinued. In court cases, consult with the county attorney as to whether a request to the court for an order relieving the agency of further reasonable efforts to contact the father is appropriate.



Document in Social Services Information System (SSIS) Case Notes:

- Strategies for engaging fathers – include attempted and completed contacts.
- Results of consultation with supervisor, and reasons for discontinuing agency efforts to engage fathers.

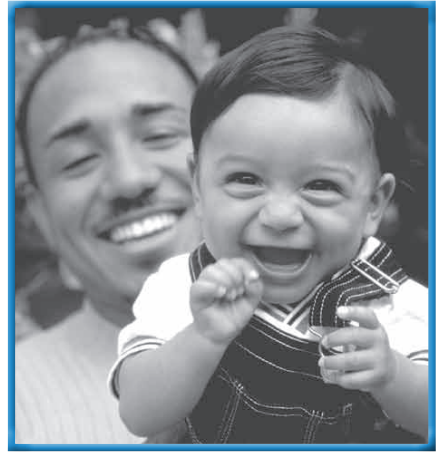
Assessment

When conducting an assessment, best practice includes:

- Identify a father for every child in an open child welfare case.
- Collaborate with other county departments (e.g., child support) and check all available information sources to locate fathers whose whereabouts are unknown.
- Complete a genogram in the early stages of the assessment process as a tool for identifying, locating and assessing fathers.
- Discuss with mothers the value or concern of involving non-resident fathers in case planning. Unless there are clear concerns for child safety, the mother's decision about father involvement is respected.
- Contact fathers in all cases where children are ordered into out-of-home care or who are receiving court ordered services, unless to do so jeopardizes a child's safety.
- Assess non-resident parents and their relatives as placement and permanency resources, and other alternatives to non-relative foster care.
- Ensure that all formal and informal assessments of fathers are culturally sensitive and relevant.
- Identify, with input from fathers, what supports they need to meet the safety, permanency and well-being needs of their children. Supports include, when appropriate, assistance in establishing paternity.



- Consult with supervisors before deciding that:
 - Efforts to locate non-resident fathers have been exhausted and should be discontinued.
 - Non-resident fathers will be excluded from voluntary services cases at the mother's request.
 - Non-resident fathers will be excluded from involvement due to specific safety concerns.



Document the following in SSIS Case Notes:

- Consideration of fathers when completing Structured Decision Making (SDM) Safety and Risk Assessments.
- Efforts to locate absent fathers, and if located, efforts to include them in case planning and service delivery.
- Reasons for determining a non-resident father was not included in the case.

Case Planning and Implementation

When developing case plans, the following factors should be considered when working with fathers:

- Develop individualized case plans with fathers that build on their protective factors and address presenting safety and risk factors.
- Involve fathers in case planning discussions, including:
 - Review safety concerns that necessitated child welfare involvement.
 - Discuss what it will take to safely close the case.
 - Identify what each parent considers as family strengths and needs.
 - Determine what services parents believe would help in successfully addressing safety and risk concerns.

- Explore preferences for father-specific services/male service providers when appropriate and possible.
- Prioritize frequent, quality caseworker visits with fathers and mothers.
- Discuss differences in maternal and paternal parenting styles and how both support healthy child development.
- Involve fathers in permanency planning discussions, including:
 - Support children staying with non-resident fathers when necessary and when fathers are able to meet children's safety needs.
 - Review permanency timelines, and identify the role of fathers in supporting primary permanency goal.
 - Assess non-resident fathers as the first permanency option if reunification with mothers is not viable.
- Involve fathers in developing visitation plans that promote relationships with their children, including:
 - Conduct initial assessments of child safety considerations, and ongoing assessments of the need for supervision of visits.
 - Offer other forms of contact for fathers that promote positive child/parent relationships (i.e., phone calls, school and medical meetings).
 - Ask fathers what they need to support visits and enhance relationships with their children.
- Support fathers in meeting the needs of their children, including:
 - Link fathers to services that enhance their ability to meet stated case plan goals.



- Assist fathers in scheduling required appointments, and attending educational meetings and medical appointments.
- Provide transportation, if necessary.
- Contact fathers after visits or appointments to review and address any concerns.

Document the following in SSIS Case Notes:

- Signed case plans.
- Case planning or Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) meetings.
- Caseworker efforts to engage fathers, mothers and children in development and implementation of case plans.
- Consideration of fathers when completing SDM Reunification and Strengths and Needs Assessment.
- Legal status of non-resident fathers.

Support, Monitor and Evaluate

The following practices should be utilized when working with fathers:

- Obtain fathers' signature on all case plans, or document why case plan was not signed.
- Conduct frequent worker visits with fathers and maintain an ongoing dialogue about progress on case plan goals.
- Review the case plan, visitation plan, permanency timelines, appropriateness of permanency goal, and services provided at all visits with fathers.
- Discuss if/how services have enhanced the father's capacity to care for his child(ren). Agree on adjustments or changes to the case plan, and make a list of next steps to accomplish before the next worker visit.
- Initiate meetings with fathers who withdraw or do not actively participate in services. Re-examine barriers, provide additional encouragement, and emphasize the importance of their involvement.
- Review permanency status with supervisor and determine appropriate actions to support achieving timely and lasting permanency.

Document the following in SSIS Case Notes:

- Progress and/or barriers to meeting case plan goals.
- Any changes or modifications in permanency plan and/or service delivery.
- Important issues and concerns raised by fathers.

Case Closing

Consider the following activities prior to closing a case:

- Ensure that initial and underlying safety and risk factors were addressed.
- Discuss with fathers their ongoing role with their children, and when appropriate, broader family involvement.
- Review community resources for ongoing support for both parents and their children after closing a case.
- Develop a safety plan with parents for accessing agency and other community resources in the future, if needed.
- Consult with supervisor and/or observe other agency case closing protocols.

Document the following in SSIS Case Notes:

- Reasons for case closing, specifically identify how presenting and underlying safety and risk issues were satisfactorily addressed.
- Consider fathers when completing SDM Risk Re-assessment Tool.



Acknowledgements:

A number of resources assisted the development of *Working with Fathers: A Program Improvement Resource*:

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. *Rethinking Child Welfare Practice Under the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997: A Resource Guide*. Washington D.C., U.S. Government Printing Office.
- Selected sources from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, *Improving Outcomes for Children and Families. PIP Tips: Involving Fathers*. Issued June 2005.
- *Best Practice Next Practice*. National Child Welfare Resource Center for Family-Centered Practice. Summer 2002.
- FRIENDS National Resource Center. *Fatherhood Programs Self-Assessment Tool*.
- National Family Preservation Network. *An Assessment of Child Welfare Practices Regarding Fathers*. March 2001. *Position Paper on Fatherhood in the Child Welfare System*. January 2001.



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