



Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare: Change Framework for the Breakthrough Series Collaborative

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GLOBAL AIM

The Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) is a unique opportunity to bring together the expertise of key child welfare stakeholders using an established implementation and quality improvement methodology to test, spread, and sustain practice improvements. The specific focus of this BSC is to identify and engage fathers and paternal relatives to improve placement stability and permanency outcomes for children in care.

PURPOSE OF COLLABORATIVE CHANGE FRAMEWORK

The first phase in the BSC approach is to develop a collaborative change framework (CCF). The framework is developed from the existing evidence base and the experience of stakeholders at different levels of the system. The CCF depicts a vision of a child welfare agency that effectively engages fathers and paternal relatives along five key domains. Therefore, it is a visionary model for what the BSC activities work towards. During the BSC, the CCF will serve as a guide for understanding how complicated goals can be broken down into manageable strategies that can be tested and adapted in short periods of time. The CCF describes the key areas in which sites will make changes and serves as a conceptual map for conducting small tests of change and tracking progress over time.

The BSC approach emphasizes knowledge and skill building, and supports collaborative, multi-level teams (child welfare researchers, administrators, frontline staff, and service users) to test ideas using implementation science and improvement processes. “All teach, all learn” is phrase used in the BSC to demonstrate group learning processes. In the spirit of “all teach, all learn”, BSC teams will share information about uptake of activities to engage fathers and paternal relatives at their respective sites, and use the CCF to guide their actions. Group learning in the BSC helps enhance information sharing and support in order to make sustainable changes. Information learned through the BSC process will provide important lessons learned to the larger community of child welfare systems aiming to improve engagement of fathers and paternal relatives.

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

Fathers and paternal relatives are important sources of support for youth involved in the child welfare system (Bellamy 2009; Coakley 2013). Research suggests that high quality father involvement is beneficial to children’s well-being and development (Lamb 2004), and helps protect against child maltreatment (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Gaudin and Dubowitz 1997). Research also suggests that involvement of nonresident fathers has important benefits for children, including improving their cognitive ability and educational achievement, psychological well-being and social behavior, and financial security (Adamsons 2018; Amato and Gilbreth 1999; Carlson 2006). Although families in the child welfare system often experience a range of issues that impact their ability to care for children, evidence is mounting that father involvement can improve children’s case outcomes. For example, father involvement provides additional permanency options for children, and reduces length of stay for children in care (Burrus et al.

2012; Coakley 2013). Additionally, when fathers are not able to reunify with their children, paternal relatives serve as important legal and emotional permanency options (Kinney and Jenkins 2010).

Nonetheless, findings from Child and Family Services Reviews (CFSRs) reveal that child welfare agencies struggle to engage fathers and paternal relatives (JBS International 2016). Research from 2007–2010 revealed that no state agency had met federal standards related to father assessment, engagement, visitation, or service provision (Primus 2017). The reviews showed that agencies were less likely to make concerted efforts to involve fathers in case planning than they were to involve mothers (52 versus 67 percent). Similarly, mothers were more likely than fathers to receive encouragement to participate in their children’s school activities, medical appointments, and after-school programs (45 versus 19 percent). Agencies were also less likely to engage paternal relatives than maternal relatives. For instance, cases were more likely to be in compliance regarding efforts to identify, locate, inform, and evaluate maternal relatives versus paternal relatives (57 versus 48 percent).

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) contracted with Mathematica and the University of Denver (DU) to conduct this project. The project aims to achieve three goals: (1) learn more about how the BSC approach works in the child welfare setting, (2) test whether using the BSC approach strengthens engagement of fathers and paternal relatives, and (3) build the knowledge base for strategies to engage fathers and paternal relatives.

For the purposes of this BSC, fathers are defined as males who may be biological fathers, putative fathers, or stepfathers. Fathers can either live with the child or be non-residential. Paternal relatives are defined as individuals whose connection to the child is through the father. They may be biological, legal, or fictive kin.

Additionally, we define engagement as a continuous process that involves valuing and actively seeking father and paternal relative input and perspective into planning for involvement in their children’s lives. Within the child welfare context, engagement can include actively identifying and locating fathers; evaluating both maternal and paternal relatives as placement options; and assessing family needs. Additionally, it includes ensuring frequent and quality contact between children and their fathers, supporting positive relationships between children and their fathers and paternal relatives, and including fathers and paternal relatives in case planning and all decision making about their children’s lives (Administration for Children and Families 2018). Finally, this project’s definition of engagement includes developing an organizational culture in which fathers and paternal relatives are prioritized to the same extent as mothers. Cultivating racial equity and actively valuing the role of fathers and paternal relatives in children’s lives is necessary to engagement.

THE CHALLENGE

Child welfare agencies may struggle to engage fathers and paternal relatives in service planning and as permanency options for several reasons, ranging from family dynamics, child welfare structural barriers, implicit bias, and fathers’ own struggles that impact their ability to be

involved. From the very beginning of a family’s involvement with the child welfare system, initial contact with mothers can affect practice with fathers. For example, staff tend to rely on information about the father from the mother or child, but mothers are sometimes reluctant to provide such information (Malm et al. 2006; O’Donnell et al. 2005). In particular, mothers could be reluctant to divulge information to caseworkers because they might fear losing their children, they might wish to exclude fathers when there is a history of abuse or conflict between the parents, or they might be unwilling to involve fathers in what they perceive to be “their territory” (parenting) (Ferguson and Hogan 2004).

Staff also face structural barriers to engaging fathers and paternal relatives, such as a lack of standards and guidelines for engaging fathers and paternal relatives. They may also have large caseloads that can limit the time available to caseworkers to guide and instruct fathers and paternal relatives—even when the agency has clear guidelines for engaging nonresident fathers (Malm et al. 2006; Smithgall et al. 2009). Additionally, some research suggests that staff might have limiting beliefs about whether fathers want to be involved with their children and might have preferences for working with mothers (Best Practice Next Practice 2002). Historically, parenting has been considered the domain of mothers, and limiting attitudes and biases about fathers might remain as child welfare systems attempt to improve parenting.

For fathers of color, barriers to engagement are reflective of both gender and racial disparities. Children and families of color are overrepresented in the child welfare system and shoulder an unequal burden—including higher rates of reports, investigations, and placement in care; longer lengths of stay in care; and reduced exits to permanence (Martin and Connelly 2015). Although there are multiple reasons for disproportionate representation and the disparities in outcomes, studies over the past decade have identified systemic bias as a key factor (Estefan 2012; Jonson-Reid et al. 2009; Minoff 2018). There is growing recognition in the child welfare field that a commitment to addressing these disparities requires a focus on and commitment to racial equity (Miller and Esenstad 2015).¹

Furthermore, fathers whose children are brought into care often face their own barriers to involvement. Economic instability, poor mental health and substance abuse, and limited transportation can prevent fathers from being involved with their children to the degree that they desire. In some cases, fathers may want to avoid contact with the child welfare system. For example, fathers might fear that involvement with the child welfare system will exacerbate their problems with the criminal justice system. According to a study conducted by the National Family Preservation Network (NFPN; 2010), caseworkers suggested that fathers might be hesitant to establish paternity, fearing the imposition of child support obligations that they might

¹ Racial Equity Tools (<https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary#racial-equity>) defines racial equity as “The condition that would be achieved if one’s racial identity no longer predicted, in a statistical sense, how one fares.” It states, “When we use the term, we are thinking about racial equity as one part of racial justice, and thus we also include work to address root causes of inequities, not just their manifestation. This includes elimination of policies, practices, attitudes and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race or fail to eliminate them.” Racial Equity Tools defines racial justice as “the proactive reinforcement of policies, practices, attitudes and actions that produce equitable power, access, opportunities, treatment, impacts and outcomes for all.”

not be able to fulfill. Other fathers may be reluctant to participate in court proceedings regarding visitation when they cannot pay child support (NFPN 2010).

In response to these barriers, agencies have implemented strategies that include caseworker training in engaging fathers and paternal relatives, targeted collaborative practice with parents, and links to community resources (Kendall and Pilnik 2007). For example, some agencies have implemented engagement programs for incarcerated fathers in child welfare-involved families that focus on developing relationships between fathers and children after prison (Kendall and Pilnik 2007). Other agencies have attempted to engage extended family members, including paternal relatives, by implementing family group decision making (FGDM). FGDM is a promising practice for bringing immediate and extended family together to make decisions about how to care for their children and develop a plan for services. It has taken various forms and names (for example, family team meetings, family group conferences), but it aims to promote family involvement in child welfare decision-making processes. Agencies have also implemented other evidence-informed engagement strategies including motivational interviewing and solution-based casework. Agencies have used motivational interviewing to counsel families and inspire lifestyle change (Hohman 2012). Other agencies used solution-based casework to support families through challenges and safety concerns. Caseworkers implementing solution-based casework help families develop plans to gain the skills necessary to address challenges (van Zyl et al. 2014).

Despite efforts to improve caseworkers' engagement of fathers and paternal relatives, uptake of these practices has been slow. Evidence suggests that caseworkers' time constraints limit the time they spend engaging fathers and paternal relatives (Malm et al. 2006; Smithgall et al. 2009). Moreover, when fathers and paternal relatives are identified and located, neither parents nor caseworkers describe service plans as documents created collaboratively or reflecting mutual influence (Smith 2008). For these reasons, child welfare agencies still struggle to engage fathers and paternal relatives. Even today, relatively little is known about what works to engage fathers and paternal relatives that can guide child welfare. Thus, the need to identify and test practices that help improve father engagement is critical (Campbell et al. 2015).

THE OPPORTUNITY

The BSC provides a unique opportunity to bring together research evidence with the expertise of child welfare stakeholders through an established implementation and quality improvement methodology to address the current challenges in engaging fathers and paternal relatives. The BSC quality improvement and implementation method (Institute for Healthcare Improvement 2003) has been used to implement and spread promising and evidence-based practices in child welfare (Casey Family Programs 2009, 2011; Conradi et al. 2011).

The BSC provides coaching and support to encourage learning and information sharing across teams (Agosti et al. 2013). Given that states are likely already making some efforts toward improving father and paternal relative engagement, the BSC aims to build upon existing efforts and best practices, and create community and system partnerships to move toward a system-wide change in practice. The BSC approach strives to complement and align with other priorities and

efforts, recognizing that integration and alignment are essential for sustainable development. The specific focus on father engagement will help make child welfare practice more inclusive of the needs of the whole family, offering the potential to achieve better outcomes for children and families.

Collaborative Change Framework

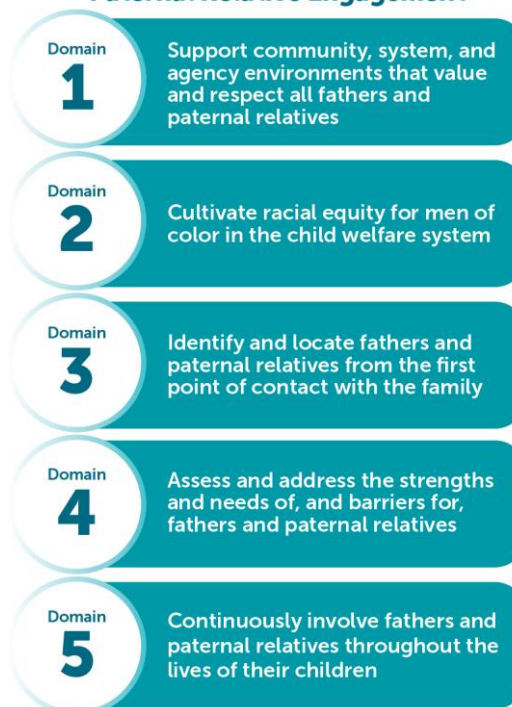
The CCF was developed through a group process. Scientific and gray literature were used to determine key themes for engaging fathers and paternal relatives in child welfare. Input from researchers with child welfare knowledge was also included in an original version of the CCF. The CCF was then shared with a group of experts working in child welfare and other related communities who were working with fathers and paternal relatives to promote their involvement in child welfare services. The group spent a day refining the change framework in order to develop the final framework included in this document.

The CCF comprises five domains. Although these domains are inter-related, they are described as distinct conceptual areas for the purpose of the BSC in order to organize implementation teams' efforts toward practice changes. Taken together, the five domains describe what is needed to create a system that fully engages fathers and paternal relatives in every aspect of child welfare service delivery that can impact permanency and placement stability. The work that teams complete will address all five domains, and will do so in ways that model and uphold the mission and values embedded in the framework. Each team will engage in a data collection planning process to determine how they will collect data at their sites to monitor progress over time, with the goals of the CCF as targets for practice improvement. These metrics reflect the domain and change concepts listed in the change framework.

As shown in the Change Framework Table below, each domain has targeted goals, which are broken down by more detailed change concepts. Teams will come up with specific strategies to address the change concept. A strategy may address multiple domains, although some strategies will relate to only one domain. Additionally, change will occur in incremental steps and will likely occur over time, eventually affecting all five domains.

The strategies that teams ultimately test, implement, and sustain will be the concrete strategies derived from these overarching goals. For every change concept, teams should ask themselves: what changes can we make in this area that will increase father and paternal relative engagement?

Domains for Improving Father and Paternal Relative Engagement



Change Framework for Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare	
Domain 1. Support community, system, and agency environments that value and respect all fathers and paternal relatives	
Goal	Change concept
1. Create an organizational environment and climate that places strong emphasis on the value of fathers and paternal relatives in children’s lives.	<p>Support a physical office environment that feels welcoming to fathers and paternal relatives</p> <p>Demonstrate the value of actively engaging fathers and paternal relatives in placement and reunification decisions and activities by clearly articulating the agency’s mission, policies, and materials</p> <p>Provide ongoing education to staff about the value of engaging fathers and paternal relatives in children’s lives</p> <p>Provide ongoing supervision to staff to enhance their ability to effectively engage fathers and paternal relatives</p>
2. Develop an atmosphere where the voice and active engagement of fathers and paternal relatives influences an inclusive environment.	<p>Offer peer mentorship and support to fathers and paternal relatives</p> <p>Solicit, respect, and affirm the varied perspectives of fathers and paternal relatives</p> <p>Invite fathers and paternal relatives to provide feedback to the agency to guide system improvement</p> <p>Develop and foster leadership and advocacy programs for fathers and paternal relatives</p>
3. Actively promote and integrate inclusive practice and value of fathers and paternal relatives within the community.	<p>Provide education and coaching to system partners that promotes the values of father and paternal relative involvement in children’s lives</p> <p>Partner with other agencies and providers to promote and support father involvement</p>
Domain 2. Cultivate racial equity for men of color in the child welfare system	
Goal	Change concept
1. Promote personal awareness among staff to acknowledge implicit bias and implement practices that improve father and family outcomes.	<p>Engage staff in regular conversations, education, and coaching about implicit bias and cultural humility</p> <p>Provide opportunities for staff to discuss issues related to cultural differences during group and individual supervision to address bias in case decision making</p>
2. Acknowledge the impacts of historical, institutional, cultural, and structural racism on policy, practice, and decision making.	<p>Engage staff in regular conversations, education, and coaching about historical, institutional, cultural, and structural racism</p> <p>Demonstrate the understanding of the impact of historical, institutional, cultural, and structural racism and trauma on how fathers are engaged through clearly articulating the agency’s mission, policies, and materials</p> <p>Provide opportunities for staff to discuss issues related to racial equity in group and individual supervision</p>
3. Identify and nurture the cultural beliefs, values, and practices of fathers and paternal relatives, communities, and tribes to drive child welfare decision-making processes.	<p>Establish an organizational environment and climate that is humble and responsive to the communities being served</p> <p>Recognize and honor the strengths inherent in the different cultures being served</p> <p>Use culturally appropriate assessments, decision-making practices, and anti-racist tools to capitalize on the strengths and needs of fathers and paternal relatives at every decision point in the child welfare service continuum</p>

Change Framework for Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare

Domain 2. Cultivate racial equity for men of color in the child welfare system

Goal

Change concept

4. Collaborate with related systems to identify, address, and change institutionally racist policies and practices.

Provide conversations, education, and coaching to system and community partners about institutionally racist policies and practices, including how to identify them and the impact they have on fathers and paternal relatives

Partner with experts conducting racial equity work in child welfare and in other related fields to receive guidance on how to address and change these policies and practices

Actively include fathers and paternal relatives of color in identifying, addressing, and changing these policies and practices

Domain 3. Identify and locate fathers and paternal relatives from the first point of contact with the family

Goal

Change concept

1. Identify fathers and paternal relatives.

Encourage and engage mothers, children, and other relatives to identify fathers and paternal relatives from the first point of contact with the family

Educate community members and other agencies on the importance of identifying fathers and paternal relatives

Partner with community members and other agencies to identify fathers and paternal relatives on an ongoing basis

Develop and use available technology to facilitate the identification of fathers and paternal relatives

2. Actively locate fathers and paternal relatives.

Develop information-sharing agreements with community partners and agencies that allow for data sharing while honoring family confidentiality issues

Collaborate with other agencies to locate fathers and paternal relatives

Develop and use available technology to facilitate the location of fathers and paternal relatives

Domain 4. Assess and address the strengths and needs of, and barriers for, fathers and paternal relatives

Goal

Change concept

1. Assess fathers and paternal relatives' strengths and needs.

Ensure staff understand the unique strengths and needs of fathers and paternal relatives and use assessment to build upon strengths

Explicitly include strengths, needs, and supports in the initial and ongoing assessment of fathers and paternal relatives

Integrate the assessment of fathers and paternal relatives' strengths and needs into the overall and continuous assessment of the child and family

2. Identify and address barriers to engaging fathers and paternal relatives.

Ensure staff understand and can appropriately respond to the various situations fathers and paternal relatives may present or experience

Identify and address multi-system involvement for fathers and paternal relatives

Collaborate with community partners and other agencies to address barriers to engaging fathers and paternal relatives

Change Framework for Engaging Fathers and Paternal Relatives in Child Welfare

Domain 4. Assess and address the strengths and needs of, and barriers for, fathers and paternal relatives

Goal	Change concept
3. Provide specialized plans that meet unique needs of families and include fathers and paternal relatives.	<p>Identify and continuously revisit the various roles fathers and paternal relatives may play in the lives of their children</p> <p>Ensure that family plans reflect the various strengths, needs, and roles of fathers and paternal relatives</p> <p>Include fathers and paternal relatives' own language and goals in the individualized plans for their children</p>

Domain 5. Continuously involve fathers and paternal relatives throughout the lives of their children

Goal	Change concept
1. Facilitate fathers and paternal relatives' preparation for attending and participating in meetings, activities, and decisions	<p>Use team-meeting practices, such as family group conferences or family group decision making</p> <p>Engage fathers and paternal relatives in permanency planning meetings and decisions</p> <p>Prepare for fathers and paternal relatives to ensure they can be active participants in meetings, activities, and decisions related to their children</p>
2. Engage and continuously assess fathers and paternal relatives as placement options	<p>Assess fathers and paternal relatives as viable placement options as soon as placement is a consideration</p> <p>Be transparent with fathers and paternal relatives about why they are or are not viable placement options</p> <p>Reconsider fathers and paternal relatives as placement options periodically</p>
3. Support healthy and productive relationships with fathers and other caregivers	<p>Facilitate ongoing communication between fathers and paternal relatives, foster families, and other alternate caregivers</p> <p>Support various roles that fathers and paternal relatives may play in partnership with alternate caregivers while the children are in out-of-home care</p>
4. Support relationships between fathers and paternal relatives and their children by maximizing the types and opportunities for involvement.	<p>Use supportive visitation practices that nurture relationships between fathers, paternal relatives, and children</p> <p>Ensure visits occur in settings that are comfortable for fathers and paternal relatives</p> <p>Create and nurture opportunities for fathers and paternal relatives to connect with children outside of agency visitation</p> <p>Communicate regularly with fathers and paternal relatives about case progress and how their children are doing. Provide updates to fathers and paternal relatives and continuously ask for their input about parenting decisions whenever possible.</p>

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