

ENGAGING FATHERS IN CHILD PROTECTION CASES BY UNDERSTANDING MALE HELP-SEEKING AND LEARNING STYLES

JUDICIAL BENCH CARD¹

Judicial officers can help better engage fathers by understanding how men seek help and learn differently from women. They can also encourage the child welfare agency to work with fathers as often as mothers, offer services geared toward men's learning styles, and work as hard to find and engage fathers as mothers.

Support positive impressions about fathers.

- Give fathers the benefit of the doubt. If they fail to attend a hearing or attend inconsistently, ask why and if the court can help overcome any barriers.
- Ask the father's counsel or caseworker whether the father has been properly notified of hearings and meetings and/or why he has been unable to attend.
- Address barriers to participation, which may include work schedules, transportation, incarceration or misunderstandings about the court process.
- Be open-minded about the father: his desire to play a role in his child's life can lead to a positive outcome.

Encourage the child welfare agency to offer the father services that respond to male learning styles.

- Ensure required services are appropriate and meet "reasonable efforts" requirements to reunify (or unify) the child with the father.
- Require the agency to develop a case plan for the father with his input in its development.
- Require the agency to provide the same level of service and outreach for fathers as it gives mothers.
- Request services that encourage cooperative relationships and meaningful communication between mother and father.
- Encourage the agency to engage fathers in services tailored to men's learning styles. They should:
 - Be informational and provide concrete practical guidance.
 - Not dwell on emotional disclosures or how the father is feeling.

- Focus on planning for the future and resolving problems.
- Keep discussions action-oriented.

Focus on strengths.

- Get a complete and accurate picture of the father's ability to parent and his strengths. Gather information from the caseworker, the father and any of the father's relatives who participate in proceedings.
- Reaffirm the importance of fatherhood to the fathers and mothers who come before the court.
- Use the strengths of "traditional" masculinity but address self-defeating beliefs about getting help (e.g., "With all of the hard work you did at your last job, I'm sure the vocational center will be able to help you find a new job.")
- Tell the father how his absence affects a child's life and the positive impact when he is present and involved.
- Ask the father how he thinks he can benefit his child, and take into account efforts or progress he is making, from large accomplishments to smaller involvement.

¹ Some information in this bench card is adapted from Kiselica, M. (2009). Understanding male help-seeking behaviors. In *Advocating for nonresident fathers in child welfare court cases*. Washington, DC: ABA Center on Children and the Law.

HOW MEN LEARN AND SEEK HELP

Men and women interact, learn and seek help differently from one another. These differences should not cloud your objective assessment of the father's interests and capacity to parent, or the child's best interests. Remember this when assessing (or considering reports from others about) visits, the father's actions, appropriate services for the father or his compliance with services. Men are often:

- Action-oriented
- Future-focused
- Less likely to seek help
- Unlikely to dwell on emotions
- More likely to engage in physical play with children
- Sensitive to power and respect issues

How and when fathers want help: What the research says

Little research focuses on how and when fathers involved with the child welfare system seek help. However, research shows that adolescent and young adult fathers — a distinct group that overlaps with fathers in the child welfare system — want help and would use it if offered in a male-friendly manner. Young fathers' most frequently requested services include:

- Job referrals
- Vocational education
- Job readiness
- Parenting education
- GED classes
- Legal advice about paternity establishment and child support orders
- Medical treatment
- Mental health counseling
- Relationship counseling
- Child care assistance

Adapted from information by Mark Kiselica, in Pilnik, L., & Kendall, J., *Engaging noncustodial fathers in child welfare cases: A guide for children's attorneys and lawyer guardians ad litem*. Available at http://www.abanet.org/child/fathers/children_atty_gal_brief_final.pdf. Please see original document for citation information.