

Engaging Fathers Part 1

Presenters: Female Narrator; Tom Oates, Child Welfare Information Gateway; Pat Littlejohn, South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families; Carl Chadband, Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action; Joel Austin, Daddy University

[00:00:00]: [MUSIC]

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:00:03]: This is the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast, a place for those who care about strengthening families and protecting children. You'll hear about the innovations, emerging trends, and success stories across child welfare direct from those striving to make a difference. This is your place for new ideas and information to support your work to improve the lives of children, youth, and families.

TOM OATES [00:00:33]: Hey, everyone, and welcome to the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. We have an important topic to talk about, so important that we're breaking it up into a series. I'm talking about how child welfare agencies can effectively engage fathers and work with fatherhood organizations in their communities. So this is part one of a three-part series. I'm Tom Oates with Child Welfare Information Gateway, and I'm so glad you could join us for this conversation.

It's clear how important the involvement of fathers and paternal family members are to a child's development and growth, but historically child welfare agencies have not been as effective as they'd like to be in involving fathers in the work that they perform to ensure the permanency, safety, and wellbeing for the children they serve.

So what we're doing here is bringing you the perspective from leaders of fatherhood organizations who work to support fathers: providing job skills, education, and parental training for fathers and family members, but these groups also advocate for their community to provide an additional perspective for child welfare professionals at all levels on engaging fathers with their casework. So we got together Pat Littlejohn, the executive director of the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families, along with Carl Chadband. He's the chief operations officer for KISRA, the Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action out of West Virginia, along with Joel Austin, the CEO of Daddy University, a male parenting education company based in Philadelphia.

We talked about how to partner with fatherhood organizations, how to support a more father-friendly approach to child welfare from the policy level down to the service level, the value of fathers within a child's life, and how to locate and engage fathers, which is a question that many agencies find themselves asking. Now, there's a lot of passion here and opinion as well coming from the perspective and challenges that these groups and the fathers that they work with face.

You'll also hear the commitment to working as partners with child welfare agencies. And of course these are their opinions and they don't necessarily reflect those of all organizations, child welfare agencies, or the Children's Bureau. So, get ready for part one, and when we wrap it all up, we'll talk about what's ahead in parts two and three, along with some additional resources to help social workers connect to fathers and paternal families. So let's get to it.

TOM OATES [00:02:53]: Pat, I'll throw the question out to you first. When you're communicating with that child welfare worker and those agencies and really throughout the community, talk to me about the value, kind of that "return of engagement" or "return on investment" rather for fatherhood engagement and bringing in the father's side of the family.

PAT LITTLEJOHN [00:03:13]: Well, I think first of all, you know, I think every child welfare worker has the best interests of the child at heart. And oftentimes they're diligently working with the mother and the mother's side of the family. But when you begin to reach out and to engage the father and the father's side of the family, you just doubled the resources that are there for that child. You doubled the aunts and uncles, you doubled the grandparents, and most importantly you bring that father in there. And so it's about doubling everything that the child might need.

TOM OATES [00:03:54]: So on that point, Carl, as well when you're talking about like the return on investment, there is all aspects that talk about bringing in that father into the family and even having that connection. For the child welfare workers this actually helps their overall objective, you know, as Pat talked about all the various resources that they're involved. This actually leads to better outcomes, doesn't it?

CARL CHADBAND [00:04:17]: It does. There's a ton of research out there -- I think some of the links you may include for the podcast on the Billion Dollar Man -- that speak to indicators such as children not having early sexual debut, being less likely to commit suicide, being less likely to be involved in drugs, less likely to commit a crime, and, you know, the list goes on and on.

But I think for child welfare workers and for nonprofit practitioners and whoever the other stakeholders are at the table, we have to do a better job of talking to each other. A lot of times the barriers that we experience are a matter of language. So I could be saying totally the right things as it relates to my manual or how I've been trained, but am I talking in a way that's edifying?

So I could be justified but not doing something that's edifying. It's not building up the other stakeholder that's at the table. So a lot of times I think if we could have a little bit more sugar in our conversation instead of vinegar, I think we would see more outcomes to where children are the beneficiary of us coming together and try and partner in the community.

TOM OATES [00:05:37]: Let me pull on that a little bit and ask that, you know, what is the better way or different approach that you're seeing that's effective in agencies addressing fathers, bringing the situation to the table so to speak and where are you seeing that that's worked in a positive manner? What are those tips and tools that you would give to get that to a positive level?

CARL CHADBAND [00:06:01]: Right. A lot of times you're seeing people and if you have a credible agency like Pat's agency and she comes into your office, one of the first things she's going to do is she's going to offer you an olive branch, and she's going to say something like, "How can I help you?" And a lot of times we operate in silos where we don't really want to accept help. You know, we've got this caseload of 60 to 100 or 300 depending on where you are in the nation, and a lot of times our angle at KISRA, we're simply trying to say how is it that we can help you with the outcomes that you have for your job.

And once you look at it as here's a partner not trying to add to my caseload but he or she is here to try and lessen my caseload or provide support services, that is a little bit different take than this is one more hoop that I have to jump through in order to collaborate with someone else in the community.

TOM OATES [00:06:57]: So, Pat, when Carl refers to help, what kind of help are you able to provide? What are you offering?

PAT LITTLEJOHN [00:07:03]: Well, I think a couple of things. One is being the person that can reach out and engage the father. I think helping to recruit and engage the father is a huge resource because typically fathers are mistrusting of agencies, and certainly they're going to be mistrusting of an agency such as a welfare worker might be involved in.

And so that engage of the father is a huge help to the child welfare worker. So that would be number one, the assistance in recruiting and engaging. One of the other pieces is to participate in the family group conferencing if that is something that the agency does because I think that also when you have that additional staff person, that staff person might have some additional skills. So for example, we have on our team all trained mediators. So they might be someone who can help get the conversation neutralized enough so that the parents can begin talking and trying to help mediate their conversation a little bit so that they can dial back any kind of anger or any other kinds of issues they're bringing to the table so that they can get that out of the way so they can start focusing in on the child and what the child needs. So I think the skillset that the fatherhood staff might bring in addition to what the child welfare worker might bring is another resource.

TOM OATES [00:08:46]: And, Joel Austin, I want to bring you also into the conversation about where agencies like yours can become a partner. And from what we've seen or what we heard from Pat and Carl, what are those assets that maybe those child welfare workers, those CPS workers don't realize that an agency like yours, like Carl's, like Pat's can actually help them in actually improving those outcomes?

JOEL AUSTIN [00:09:08]: Off the top of my head, I'd have to say I have to talk from where I am, which is Philadelphia, and probably just not Philadelphia but almost all child welfare agencies don't have a really good stereotype and don't have a really good image. A lot of times we work with them because we do have a good brand and a good image. And the people that will not answer their letters will answer ours. We almost bridge the relationship between parents involved in child welfare and the actual CPS or child welfare worker. We are the matchmakers and the people that help understand. We do understand child welfare laws. We do understand the fears and angst of parents as well so that we thrive to be that middle person to bring solace to what's best for the child.

On top of that we advocate on behalf of parents and then we also help parents understand the laws like how to -- it's kind of hard because the system is so entangled right now but how to set themselves up for the best success possible. They are allowed to complain, they're allowed to cry, they're allowed to fight, but at the end of the day there are some steps that need to be taken so that you child can hopefully focus on reunification.

My main thing is that child welfare sometimes believes that agencies and providers are kind of beneath them and don't understand them when in actuality we do understand it, we do know the child welfare laws, and we understand family law. So to utilize us, kind of like Pat said before, to help close these cases, to help reunite families and help get these things done in a quicker timeframe because these children shouldn't be left out on a limb so long.

TOM OATES [00:11:12]: So if you got that kind of connection -- you mentioned they may not answer every message or letter, but they'd answer yours. What is it that you would recommend to updating or improving the approach towards fathers and the families of fathers to involve them a little bit more? What would be, Joel, that you'd say would be something key to help those workers improve that kind of outreach that they're trying to do?

JOEL AUSTIN [00:11:39]: My first, overall, would be the education, the re-education of the important role that fathers play in children's lives. Currently males in the child welfare system, the image of them and the stereotype of them are pedophilia. So it was very hard for you to try to take the image of a pedophile and fight for him to have custody for a child.

That is one of the other images that finance and being able to care for families. Whereas, we don't engage mothers to be able to be financially independent, but we do engage fathers to have to have a job or something. What they really have to do is to re-educate themselves on what role that they really do play, and they really do play a positive, significantly positive role, and they can play that role with the exact same resources that we already have prepared for foster care workers and for foster families to be able to add those things onto fathers.

It's a top-down approach and a bottom-up approach about re-education. The other thing they can do is just partner more frequently as an agency, as a provider, as a vendor, or whatever it needs to be to partner more frequently to help get the job done. But we really all have to be on the same page. My page is reunification. And every CPS is not focused on reunification. Some are just straight foster care.

TOM OATES [00:13:18]: Well, as you get to that point, it looks like we're pulling a little bit, Pat and Carl, on policy changes that you'd like to see. Pat, if you would implement, you know, when you take a look at an agency and you look at the policy that they are operating under, where would you like to see a little bit of influence of the father family within that? Where can we see policy changes that you would suggest to maybe improve that ability to either connect or relate or, you know, bridge that reunification like Joel was talking about?

PAT LITTLEJOHN [00:13:50]: Well, I think number one is to adhere to their policy of a diligent search. We've laughed a lot of times at diligent search might start with asking the mother do you know where the father is, and when she says no, that's the end of the diligent search. And that's not, that is not a diligent search.

And too often times we've heard dads say that when they have heard that the child has been removed from the noncustodial mother's care or that an agency's involved in their child, that when they call and they ask I've heard, you know, what's happened to my child and then workers will say well, you're not a party to this and so we can't give you any information. Well, how is he supposed to be a party to this until you can begin to get him more involved right from the very beginning and not dismiss him when he's actually really trying to figure out what's going on and is there something that he can do? And first of all, he's calling because he's concerned that something's happened to his child. I mean he wants to know is my child okay, has something happened to my child.

And so I think that being that if there's one thing that we could communicate that would be very helpful for child welfare workers is to respect the fathers and to not be judging of them when they call, that these guys aren't -- they're calling with one thing, and they want to know what's going on with my child.

And I think that if we immediately dismiss them, you know, you have not adhered to what you are required to do in terms of a diligent search, and so I think that's the first start. And I understand that resources of being able to locate fathers are very limited and it's intensive and it may take a lot of work, but that's where partnerships are really important because truth be told, that father might already be engaged in that local program. Maybe he already kind of thought something was going on and so he might already be engaged in that local program and just reaching out to your local fatherhood partner saying hey, have you ever, you know, know this guy, you know where he might be, you know, we really want to engage him in helping us to bring some help to his child and engage him in helping us with this child.

TOM OATES [00:16:35]: So with that and, Carl, let me pose this to you, you know, Pat talks about what is a real diligent search. And so the questions we always kind of hear under the myth of well, it's tough to track down fathers. Help somebody out. How do you find the fathers? It sounds like they're in the community, but maybe the searches could be done differently. I know we've talked about this off the air earlier that there is just as many ways to engage the father, but are they being executed in a manner that's actually going to be effective?

CARL CHADBAND [00:17:10]: So, fathers are everywhere. You know, fathers are in barber shops. We know that fathers are actively participating in Pop Warner football and AAU basketball and softball. We know that fathers are proud of their kids academically. So it's a fallacy to think that oh, there are just a bunch of men running around that have kids and no one knows who they are. So, you know, we can destroy that myth, but there's not proper outreach. And again it was mentioned earlier I think by Pat where she mentioned about engagement, that's where a lot of guys that they claim or some may claim are hard to find, our agencies are able to go out and easily find those individuals.

But I did want to speak to a couple of points previously, one about what it is that child welfare may want to do and some things that they are allowed to give pushback as if they don't feel as though agencies have the capacity or the understanding of what their job entails or what are the regulations for policy, things like that. So that's why KISRA, we actually send all of our staff through a child support 101 or a CPS 101 course, also a DHS or a DHHR 101. So whatever resources that a family is gaining access to, we want them to know exactly what the policy is for their state and not just go off of the myths that may be out there.

Also from a policy standpoint, as Pat alluded to earlier, we'd like to see more equal access for fathers of course pursuing the paternal side of the family and not just maintaining that if you have a mother, God forbid that has been abusive or is on drugs, that you keep that child on her side of the family. Well, the child may have a father that's right there and capable, you know, but it seems like it stays on the maternal side and it never gets over to the paternal side. The last couple points that I'll make is some states have dad by default, and that's simply because a guy didn't respond to a letter stating you need to take a DNA test and I would really like to see that investigated in judicial states like West Virginia. And then possibly doing a myth busters where you can actually say what is the policy instead of what are the stereotypes that exist. We see a lot of guys who continuously go back to family courts and they're looking for help from somebody where they're financial, they can't visit their child, and the person, you know, the other parent is in contempt of court.

So, somehow, someday the overall system needs to become more father friendly. That's what a lot of the practitioners we talk to around the nation say is that from the time you come in contact with a lot of their services, they are just not father friendly.

TOM OATES [00:20:25]: What do you mean by that? Give me an example of what father friendly could be or where you don't see father friendly offices or what have you.

JOEL AUSTIN [00:20:34]: Actually –

TOM OATES [00:20:34]: Joel, go ahead. Yeah.

JOEL AUSTIN [00:20:35]: Well, first I wanted to jump back to something that Pat said. She talked about just a role and that they are there and she also talked about what do they call a diligent search. If you asked me about policies that I would like to see, one of the policies I would like to see is that that diligent search has something to do with your evaluation process on whether you get to keep your job or lose your job.

Every single one of us has some type of evaluation process, especially child care workers as well, but there's actually no strong regulation on how that affects your job, how diligent search affects your job, how there has to be a piece, a policy piece in there that adds an addendum to the evaluation process of a worker that says you have to have done these X, Y, and Z things that have maintained some type of family foundation with the father, with the paternal side as well. And there is no check-off, grade-wise, for that for a worker currently, and I only speak for my state in Pennsylvania. It is something to ask and something that they would like to have, but unfortunately it's not forced as a part of your job to make sure that you do a great job of attachment to the paternal side and the maternal side. Until you have that policy written that it's part of your job, it's never going to get better.

PAT LITTLEJOHN [00:22:12]: Well, and I'd like to jump in and just add too in that if there is such a policy that says this is a part of your personnel evaluation, then it's left up to management to help put good tools and partnerships in place that would enable that because just to say more diligent search through more letter writing really isn't going to, you know, it really isn't going to be effective.

And so I think that that's where management needs to come in to help build these bridges that allow other partner agencies to assist in locating fathers but also sometimes there are very restrictive policies in the workplace like well, you can't leave the office to go and build some relationships like Carl was talking about earlier at barber shops, places like that because everybody's like well, "they're just out goofing off and they're not doing their job."

But, you know, because sometimes policies can be so restrictive that you have this mandate to do a diligent search but yet you're confined to only one, two, or three things to do that we all know from behind a desk with a letter or an email is just not going to work. And, you know, to be creative in how do you maybe use some other ways like social media or outreach, but I think the number one thing is partnerships and having these kinds of partnerships where people see this as an additional resource to help them do their job, not to get in the way of doing their job or put more mandates on them for caseworkers who already got heavy, heavy caseloads.

TOM OATES [00:24:09]: So, who is it - you know, guys, what is effective outreach? What does that look like? What does it really look like? What does it sound like? What is that to where it is truly a partnership as opposed to just kind of what people may assume or make the assumption of that it's just somebody trying to be an extra burden on the caseload or a restriction on a caseworker? How do you make that

outreach more effective, part of the day-to-day work, and something that can maybe ease the burden of maybe like Pat said, if this was a mandate, how do you make that more effective in terms of outreach?

CARL CHADBAND [00:24:46]: Well, I think -- [crosstalk] I'm sorry. I just think that one of the things that I would suggest is the ability for agencies to stop being so rigid and allow their employees to flex their time. So it's a common sense solution. A lot of their employees go to churches. Is there separation of church and state? Yes, but if a person can go to a church and give a quick presentation during a service, they should be able to flex their time and then collect applications at that same church.

I mean you have this great resource with these employees that work very hard with child welfare and CPS, and they see a lot of terrible things and they hope for a lot of the best things in society, but we have to get them out of their cubicles for those people who like to do that. Some people are just introverts; they want to stay in the office, and that's fine, but there are some folks that would excel as a part of an outreach team in order to re-engage disconnected fathers.

TOM OATES [00:25:50]: Joel, go ahead.

JOEL AUSTIN [00:25:52]: On top of that, which is I think is incredible information, you say outreach to me, the first thing I think about is relationship. So you start to gather a relationship with other people. Are fathers available? Yes, they are. There is a small percentage that are unavailable that you may not find, but I believe that you can easily find 80 to 85 percent of them with due diligence but also with building relationship. One of the issues that, once again, from my state is that they're not allowed to come out to where fathers are and to find these focus groups, find these fathers' clubs, find these fathers' classes, all these fathers' initiatives. They don't go into them as partners and say can you help. We're talking about building relationships, understanding the father.

The other part is one of the reasons why I find a lot of social workers here don't do that is because they feel as though they're going to fail with the father anyway. And one reason why they feel is they're going to fail by reattaching the father is because there's a lack of resources and services that they can get help from to help them with the father. So if you have a child that's taken away from mother, let's say from a mother that -- in Philadelphia there's at least a hundred different resources that you can attach the mother to to help her get to where she can take care of her child. On the other side there's only five or six on the male side. So the social worker has a better chance with the mom than he or she does with the dad. And a lot of times those -- and we already talked about this -- those [inaud.] all they need to do is maybe change their name from WIC, which is Women, Infants, and Children, to PIC, which is Parent, Infant, and Children, and you'll be able to service both even though they already service both, but [inaud.] they just need to collect [unint.] too. A lot of these people are already giving away food and cribs. They just need to be able to put the father's name on there too. There's so many resources that we already have that they need to attach the need for a father to do as well. If you have more resources and tools to be able to close a case with the father, then it will help you with that relationship and go out there and say once I find this dad, I'm going to get him an X, Y, and Z, and this should be successful.

The third part of that has to do with how he's looked at in court and how he's looked at to the child advocates. But those aren't the people doing the outreach specifically to dads. Once you bring dad in, you have to form a relationship, which means I'm bringing you in to talk to you about a child you didn't even know about, but I have these resources here because I know this may sound like a burden to you, but I have all of these resources here for you for your help, assistance with your family, apartment, water bill, and things of that nature. And that's when you start to have this bond of almost people

calling you up saying yes, I'm a father and these are the things I could use if you want me to have this child.

TOM OATES [00:29:06]: Are you finding, Joel and also for Pat and Carl, are you finding that those services are limited because of awareness or they're limited because of policy?

JOEL AUSTIN [00:29:17]: So, in Pennsylvania there is state grants, city grant, federal grant that I'm absolutely saying is policy. And then if it's not, then I would say it's absolutely awareness because anyone granted anything specifically in Pennsylvania should have addendums saying that you will have to serve not just mothers and not just fathers, but you'll actually have to serve all parents. And that's a policy for you to receive monies from certain agencies and certain people, you should be able to serve parents. In Pennsylvania you can't have any type of establishment where you can even eat without making sure that it's handicapped ready. Those are policy things. You have to have a ramp. You have to have a certain bathroom, and those are the same kind of inclusions that policies have when it comes to serving parents.

And when I say parents, I mean all, even caregivers. As far as people that are not getting subsidized in any way, then those are awareness issues that they are just not aware that there are other people that have these strong needs too. So that would be my answer to that.

TOM OATES [00:30:25]: Sure. So, Pat, let me ask you this, in terms of these policies that we'd like to see improved to kind of open up the father and the father's family, what are you seeing that could be an opportunity to engage fathers a little bit more into the child's life?

PAT LITTLEJOHN [00:30:43]: Well, a couple of things. And sometimes, you know, there is a fine line between policy and practice. And that's one of the key things that we've made more inroads on is more around practice than policy. So a couple of things. Number one, we've been able to partner with our Department of Social Services here in South Carolina. That is the organization for child protective services. And we've been able to go and do father-friendly training in virtually every child welfare office in the state of South Carolina and to really talk about what are barriers to father engagement. How do you work with fathers? How do you overcome those barriers? And then how can by connecting to a fatherhood program you can bring more resources not only to you as a worker to accomplish what your goals and objectives are, but you're bringing those resources to a child.

The second thing is that we've had our -- in some of our child protective services offices they've had a very open policy of our staff being a part of family group conferencing. And then they will refer, especially if there's a couple that's in there together, that they will refer that couple to our fatherhood program to do the parenting classes at the fatherhood program.

So then we can pick up that father and then work with him on whatever issues he might have and get him the supports to strengthen him like employment or maybe some work around overcoming other kinds of barriers to employment. But then that way then the mother can access resources through other agencies. And so but then sometimes too we also have them refer fathers if there's, you know, they are able to locate the father, they'll send the father the referral over, and we'll actually help with the engagement of that father and provide those parenting classes for the father and then provide all the kinds of services that he might need to help him be in a better position to take on the responsibility of that child full time, whether that's getting him stable housing, reliable transportation, and then obviously employment.

So, I think that it's the relation - and I think that it has to be top-down as well as bottom-up. I think that the management of the child protective services office, the management can set the tone for acceptance and that recognition that fathers have value in this process and that fathers are a part of the family. No matter how fragile that family or broken it might be, he is a part of that family and that there is an expectation that we're going to do everything that we can in order to make sure that this child is safe and well cared for and loved and nurtured. We're going to do everything we can to locate and engage that father and to create an environment that's open to that. And that's not policy. That's just good common sense practice. By putting those, you know, creating from a management standpoint creating the kind of partnerships in the community that can help your staff meet these kinds of expectations.

TOM OATES [00:34:30]: So that's part one of our Engaging Fathers Podcast, and if there's one thing I gathered from that part of our much longer conversation was their opinions and perspective on including the father or paternal families at all levels such as policy to support or offer services to the paternal side of a child's family and opening up engagement to fathers, including their desire to empower agencies and social workers to seek out and connect with either fatherhood organizations or other community groups as Carl mentioned where fathers can be easily located. Now in part two we'll talk about the ways agencies and fatherhood organizations can partner together and the elements needed to create and sustain a strong working relationship that supports the child. And in part three we'll hear much more about an example of a strong partnership between a state agency and a local fatherhood organization happening in Spartanburg, South Carolina.

We'll talk about the structure, the benefits, and the programs that the relationship has been able to implement during the past few years. So if you head to childwelfare.gov and search podcasts, you can find further information with this podcast, including the report that Carl mentioned at the beginning of our conversation, the One Hundred Billion Dollar Man, which talks about the economic impact that fathers have when involved in their children's lives.

We'll also connect you to the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, some lesson learned from a Children's Bureau funded grant on engaging fathers, along with the information gateway web section on engaging fathers and paternal family members, which has reports, state examples, and other resources to help you out. As always, hey, check out Child Welfare Information Gateway at childwelfare.gov.

You can connect with us with any questions on information you are looking for at info@childwelfare.gov. We've got more podcasts coming your way. Now, besides our three-part series here on engaging fathers, hey, check out our other podcasts on topics such as developing a parent partner program, engaging youth in foster care, and working with the correctional system to connect and help incarcerated parents.

So hey, thank you so much for listening in. We know your time is valuable and there's never enough of it. So we really, really appreciate you spending that time with us here on the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. My name's Tom Oates and thanks so much for listening.

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:36:51]: Thanks for joining us for this edition of the Child Welfare Information Gateway podcast. Child Welfare Information Gateway is available at childwelfare.gov and is a service of the Children's Bureau, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families. The views and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect those of Information Gateway or the Children's Bureau.