

# Bringing Back the Dads

Today more American children are growing up without their biological father in the home than at any point in our nation's history. Trends such as divorce and remarriage, as well as more women having children outside of marriage, result in a weakening of the role of fathers in the lives of their children.

Responsible father involvement becomes an even greater challenge for those children in the child welfare system, especially those who have been removed from their homes and placed in stranger (non-relative) care.

Reunifying children with their birth families as quickly as possible, without jeopardizing safety, is the first priority. However, identifying family resources, especially paternal relatives and non-resident fathers, has been challenging for the child welfare system.

According to the Adoption Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) data, on Sept. 30, 2005, there were 513,000 children placed in foster care within the United States. Research indicates that most foster children are not living with their fathers at the time they are removed from their homes. In considering the potential benefits and subsequent challenges when engaging fathers who have children placed in substitute care, it is imperative that attention be given to this issue.



## National Quality Improvement Center Project Background and Focus

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families has been studying the efforts to identify, locate, and involve non-resident fathers and paternal relatives in the child welfare system.

These efforts were influenced by the Federal Child and Family Services Reviews, which indicated very little meaningful engagement was occurring between the child welfare system and fathers. This issue is being studied as a possible way to improve on states' attainment of child welfare goals.

In the fall of 2006, the Children's Bureau awarded the American Humane Association, American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law and National Fatherhood Initiative federal funding over a 5-year period to sponsor research and develop a National Quality Improvement Center (QIC) that will focus on non-resident fathers (NRF) and the child welfare system.

**The focus of the QIC-NRF 5-year project is to offer evidence on how the involvement of non-resident fathers involved in the public child welfare system impacts child safety, permanence, and well-being.**

Phase One focus is the identification of subthemes, knowledge gaps, service gaps, research priorities, and experimental design.

Phase Two focus is the identification of research design in 6-8 sites located nationally, and continued dissemination of the knowledge gained.

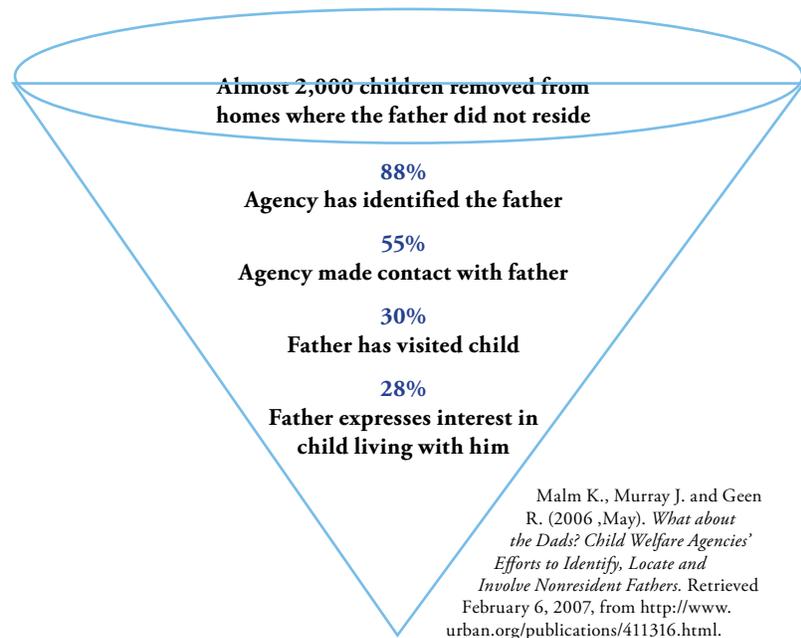
The “What About the Dads?”<sup>1</sup> study included 1,958 children who were removed from the home where the father did not reside. Telephone interviews with 1,222 caseworkers indicated;

- Eighty-eight percent of the non-resident fathers were identified.
- Slightly over half (55 percent) had fathers who had been contacted by the caseworker.
- Thirty percent of the fathers visited their child.
- Twenty-eight percent of the fathers expressed interest in their children living with them.<sup>1</sup>

The benefits and challenges engaging non-resident fathers involved in the child welfare system are reflected through studies such as the “What About the Dads?” report. Most children are not living with their fathers at the time they are removed from their homes. Once in foster care, these children may experience less contact with their non-resident fathers.

Engaging the fathers of children in foster care is important not only for the potential benefit of the child-father relationship (when there are no safety and well-being concerns) but also for making placement and permanency decisions and gaining access to resources for the child.

The goal of the QIC-NRF is to provide research that can answer the question, “How is overall child well-being impacted as a result of increased father and paternal relative involvement within the context of the public child welfare system?”



*Children whose biological fathers are absent, are on average 2-3 times more likely to be poor, to use drugs, to experience educational, health, emotional and behavioral problems, to be victims of child abuse, and to engage in criminal behavior than their peers who live with their married, biological (or adoptive) parents. (Horn & Sylvester, 2002, p.15<sup>2</sup>)*

*Children with involved, loving fathers are significantly more likely to do well in school, have healthy self-esteem, exhibit empathy and pro-social behavior, and avoid high risk behaviors such as drug use, truancy, and criminal activity compared to children who have uninvolved fathers. (Horn & Sylvester, 2002, p.15<sup>2</sup>)*



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<sup>1</sup> Malm K., Murray J. and Geen R. (2006, May). *What about the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate and Involve Nonresident Fathers*. Retrieved February 6, 2007, from <http://www.urban.org/publications/411316.html>

<sup>2</sup> Horn, W., & Sylvester, T. (2002). *Father Facts* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Gaithersburg, MD: National Fatherhood Initiative