

Why are fathers reluctant to engage in child welfare services?

From the social workers' perspective, fathers are hard to involve in the child protection services. This is not only to the fact they are hard to reach, for instance in cases when mothers act as gatekeepers and do not want to reveal father's identity to the caseworker (Chiamulera, 2010, 7), but also because – once fathers are found – according to social workers, they are reluctant to participate in child welfare programs. For instance, social workers describe fathers as 1. not attending services, as 2. not actively participating in programs and as 3. appearing reluctant to develop a bond with a practitioner (Tehan and McDonald, 2010, 2). This short paper gives an overview of several major reasons why fathers might be reluctant or unable to participate in child-welfare services.

1. Child and family services = female environment.

Child and family services are often seen as places devoted primarily to supporting women and their children, as “female environments”. In this vein, family centres and family support services tend to be perceived by fathers as mothers' places where women sit and chat. Moreover, it has been argued that services often see mothers as main nurtures and caregivers and are often biased towards the role of men in childrearing. This can be best seen in the existence of “parenting programs” that end up being focused on mothers only. Moreover, social workers themselves do not insist on locating “non-resident” fathers, seeing them as figures irrelevant for the child wellbeing or due to fears that father could be violent (Chiamulera, 2010, 7; Scourfield, 2013, 13). As a result, men don't feel comfortable being a part of an environment that is often biased towards them and hence do not feel welcomed at these places.

2. Substance abuse/ Criminal history. A criminal history or a history of substance abuse might prove an incentive for fathers to evade social services. Fathers who have had a criminal history are afraid of becoming involved with the courts again because they fear that their involvement with the child welfare system will create or increase their problems with the criminal justice system (Chiamulera, 2010, 7).

3. Lack of self-confidence in parenting. Fathers might not feel comfortable, self-confident or competent about their parenting skills and they might fear that they cannot be good fathers for their children (Scourfield, 2013, 13). The feelings of incompetence are often rooted in the prevalent discourses that frame mothers as relevant and competent parents, erasing the importance of fathers' involvement in the lives of children. Moreover, men might not feel competent to be fathers due to their problematic relationship (or the lack of a relationship) to their own fathers.

According to a recent study (Blanchman, 2009), a significant number of fathers who were not involved in the lives of their children were coming from dysfunctional families with abusive fathers and have either been victims of physical abuse or they have witnessed it.

Other obstacles to accessing services:

4. Poverty/ low literacy. In the case of non-resident fathers, poverty and hence the lack of transportation might be an obstacle for fathers in accessing services (Tehan and McDonald, 2010, 5-6; Martinez, 2013, 19). At the same time, due to the unstable economic situation, these men oftentimes change jobs and housing, which results in not having a fixed phone number or address. In these cases, it might prove quite difficult for social workers to locate fathers. Therefore, these fathers are in no position to access child services, since they do not get the relevant information in the first place. Furthermore, some fathers do not even understand notices sent to them by the agency or court and even in cases when fathers are literate, the unfamiliar legal terms in letters or documents can make them feel intimidated and therefore reluctant to access the services offered (Chiamulera, 2010, 7).

5. Incarceration. Fathers might be serving time in jail and therefore be unable to access child and family services (Chiamulera, 2010, 10). However, incarceration does not mean that fathers are not willing to be a part of child and family services or, for that matter, that they cannot be good fathers to their children (Martinez et al., 2013). Therefore, social workers are encouraged to involve fathers who are serving time in jail too, for example by inviting fathers to participate in the meetings, as well as through motivational interviews and parenting classes.

References:

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