

Study outlines factors that help engage nonresident fathers in child welfare efforts

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Credit: Brett Jordan

A recent study outlines a number of things that social service providers should be aware of if they want to engage nonresident fathers in efforts aimed at supporting the well-being of their children. The study also highlights the need for more formal training to help service providers work more effectively with nonresident dads.

Nonresident fathers are fathers who do not reside with their child's primary [caregiver](#).

"We know that nonresident father engagement is positively associated with the emotional well-being, mental health and academic success of children—and the well-being of the fathers themselves," says Qiana Cryer-Coupet, corresponding author of the study and an associate professor of social work at North Carolina State University. "However, while teaching a graduate-level social work course with students who were doing fieldwork, it became clear the students would benefit from additional training in how to engage nonresident fathers on issues related to child care, child-rearing and child well-being."

As a step toward developing that training, Cryer-Coupet and her collaborators recruited a cohort of 20 [social service](#) providers with experience and expertise on engaging fathers. Fourteen of the study participants were men.

"We knew that nonresident fathers were more likely to feel engaged if they were working with male social workers," Cryer-Coupet says. "So we deliberately sought out male social workers to see what they're doing and how they're approaching their efforts to engage with fathers in their casework."

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with the study participants aimed at better understanding what practitioners felt prepared them to engage fathers effectively on issues related to their children.

"We found a number of key points that came up time and again, allowing us to identify values, characteristics and mindsets that could facilitate engaging fathers," Cryer-Coupet says.

Four of those key points were:

- Interrogate your own biases. Engage in self-examination to determine how and whether beliefs based on your lived experiences may affect your ability to establish a meaningful rapport with nonresident fathers.
- Self-disclosure. Shared experiences with the father can help establish a rapport. In addition, openly discussing issues that a social worker or father have concerns about can help to alleviate those concerns and establish clear lines of communication.
- Respect. Fathers need to feel respected, and their role as the child's father should also be recognized as important, even though he does not reside in the child's household.
- Shared decision-making. Social workers may already know about family goals from the mother, the guardian or the court system. But it's important to know what the father's goals are in terms of both the child's well-being and the father's relationship with the child and caregiver.

The study, "Engaging Nonresident Fathers: Exploring Collaborative Competencies in Support of Family-Centered Practice," is published in the journal *Research on Social Work Practice*. The paper was co-authored by McKenzie Stokes, a recent Ph.D. graduate of NC State; Brianna Lemmons, an assistant professor of social work at Baylor University; and Marquitta Dorsey, an assistant professor of social work at Loyola University Chicago.

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More information: Qiana R. Cryer-Coupet et al, Engaging Nonresident Fathers: Exploring Collaborative Competencies in Support

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