

Engaging Fathers Part 2

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 [00:00:35]: In this episode of the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast we continue our three-part series on engaging fathers. I'm Tom Oates with Information Gateway, and this is part two. Now part two continues a conversation with three folks who lead fatherhood support organizations, community-based groups that provide parenting job skills or education training. They connect and advocate on behalf of men and fathers and routinely interact and many times partner with child welfare agencies.

Now we're seeing across child welfare that some agencies are having difficulty engaging fathers or paternal families, and there are many reasons for this. So we wanted to give social workers and agency leaders the opportunity to get the perspective from those who work directly with fathers and paternal families to support them. You're going to hear the point of view on how agencies can use these local fatherhood organizations as resources to engage, support, and train both fathers and their own staffs to enhance the relationship between child welfare and noncustodial fathers.

So we're picking up the chat with Pat Littlejohn, executive director of the South Carolina Center for Fathers and Families; Carl Chadband, the chief operations officer for KISRA, the Kanawha Institute for Social Research and Action out of West Virginia; and Joel Austin, the CEO of Daddy University, a male parenting education company based in Philadelphia. Now in part one we addressed some of the barriers to father engagement both at the grassroots level and at the policy level along with how to successfully locate fathers.

Here in part two we talk about what a good father looks like along with the perspective and messages fathers would want to communicate out to child welfare. But we pick up part two with a question to Carl Chadband about what are the components and elements needed for a strong relationship between fatherhood organizations and child welfare agencies.

CARL CHADBAND [00:02:28]: I'd have to simply think one of the first steps would be how to have a conversation with the parent. There are serious issues around literacy and fluency. For example, you could take the most confident reader and tell them to start reading a document from the IRS, and they're going to stumble because it's not something they see often.

The same is true for the paperwork that we have with a lot of child welfare, CPS workers. It's just downright confusing for a lot of parents. And the ability to have kind of a middle bridge or middle school -- not middle school but having a person that can act as a mediator between a confusing

document or possibly a confusing conversation and really break down what it means is absolutely crucial to these parents.

For example, if you - from a policy standpoint put out a document and it's already confusing and you say all right, we're going to make it ethnically appropriate by putting in Spanish, all you did was just put a confusing document in Spanish. You still need to be able to have a conversation with someone to say okay, I know we may have gone through a lot, but this is actually what it means. So, just a simple thing as far as when you engage someone -- and it's fine to go ahead and apologize and say I don't want to seem too basic or overstate this, but I want to make sure that you understand it. The second part I would do is have each agency embedded in the other's office. So it would be great for Sisters of Catholic Charities or Joel's group in Philly to be in your welfare office or to have an agent from welfare embedded in their agency's office. Easy access and you remove some of these barriers of all of the -- a lot of times we meet with clients and they have to go to 10 different places to get services instead of bringing things under one roof where they can get multiple effective services under one roof.

TOM OATES [00:04:50]: So, Pat, for you what have you seen in terms of a successful relationship between your organization and the agencies in your community?

PAT LITTLEJOHN [00:04:59]: Well, let me say this, I think that, you know, we all know that success breeds success and so sometimes in bridging these relationships and partnerships it's great to start small and then grow from that. And we've had the opportunity to do that with one of our county offices in Spartanburg. And so the director of the agency there, you know, by first of all engaging our staff in the family group conferencing was one key step there, establishing a good referral and two-way conversation because what we want to know is that you sent us the referral, we provided the parenting classes, we may have done the other things, but we like to know what's the outcome of that case.

Did that father get his child back or what was, you know, are there more sources? So it becomes almost like team case management where you're communicating with how they're doing and how they're progressing and you're not throwing a parent over the wall at each other, but you're able to have more of a conversation about how it's going. And I think also sometimes if you start small -- so for example, if you know you've got a child welfare worker who is willing and able and eager to try this, maybe just start with one or two caseworkers and see how it goes and try and test it and refine that a little bit more before it goes into a blanket practice or a policy throughout the agency because then that way you can kind of work out the kinks and you don't have a bunch of staff people going "oh, I knew this would never work, you know, from the very beginning." And you've had the chance to try it a couple of times and to get the kinks worked out before you take it more to a large scale in what you're doing.

TOM OATES [00:07:13]: Sure. Joel, for you in Philly what are you seeing that's working between just the partnership as we've all been talking about between Daddy University, your agency, and those within the state of Pennsylvania?

JOEL AUSTIN [00:07:26]: So, in Philadelphia the Department of Human Services has been cut up into COA agencies. These are Community Umbrella Agencies. There's 10 of them throughout the city by police-district zip codes. So underneath of DHS you now have 10 sub-agencies that serve children in their community.

For example, if a child is in the West Philadelphia 22nd district area, he or she gets to stay in that area, continues to go to school in that area, and you look for foster parents in that area and that child gets to

be in that area. That's how it works. So, the CUA Agencies have a little bit more flexibility because there's demands on the CUA agencies to get the job done and the case closed.

So they have people that are hired, kind of like Pat said, just to do outreach. So 10 separate agencies have 10 separate grants or 10 separate providers from DHS. Instead of these 10 agencies looking for best interest, a lot of times because of money they compete against one another. So now you have one agency that would really like to have two or three and another agency that would like to have four sections, would like to have four sections so sometimes they hide information. And that's the down side of it. The good side of it is that you have people that are just to connect with the community, connect with resources and services to [inaud.] people to try to close cases. Or services to bridge the gap, bridge the barriers and also training and retrain on importance. I really do believe that they don't know the importance.

We have social workers right out of college. We also have a lot of social workers that we've been dealing with that we're trying to get some type of policy because in their own lives they're not dealing with their children and their children's father on a good level. And we have reports called D23s. They're contempt reports. And some of them, a good portion of social workers have contempt reports that have been filed against the father of their children. But sometimes it's hard to build a family unit and work at building a family unit when your family unit -- you're not comfortable building your own family unit with paternal and maternal. And those are the trainings and workshops and the seminars that need to be taking place over and over and over and over. It has to do with training and actually bringing two together. It has [inaud.].

PAT LITTLEJOHN [00:10:07]: And, Tom, can I add to that because I think that the point that Joel is making is an excellent point in that we do have to offer when we can a lot of training around the importance of engaging fathers. It's not just about engaging fathers to make the dad happy. It's really to benefit the child. There is a true benefit to that child for that dad to be involved.

So that's number one. Then I think the other thing that I have found that works as well as anything is if you have had a really positive experience with a father that you reached out to and you engaged and he got involved in that child's life and that child is far better off being with him and in that stable environment that he's able to provide with the help of his family than in a foster care. And then to be able to have fathers tell that testimony and hear that directly from them about where they were, what their fears were, what their frustrations were, what worked at engaging them, what didn't work at engaging them, and what did they feel like was most helpful to them to be where they needed to be and to hear that directly from a father, it does so much more to reach that child protective service worker than hearing me go on and on about it because somewhat to understand that this really does work in that to hear that directly from the fathers.

And we had a situation where we had been piloting this program and we engaged several fathers who had been in a successful situation and then those child protective services workers where we had not been able to pilot this project but we were trying to get it more inclusive in their arena to bring them in and hear this panel of fathers talk about it, it just makes the connection much more intimate and much more personal and much more believable coming from the father.

And to Joel's point too to really break down these stereotypes about fathers that they don't care and that they don't have the skills to be a good dad when that's the farthest thing from the truth.

TOM OATES [00:12:43]: So we've been talking a lot about where organizations like yours, where fatherhood organizations can come into play to be partners with the child welfare workers in connecting with the fathers, connecting with the father families. And so we've been talking a lot about what you've been able to see from your vantage point. I want to flip this around a little bit and say what would you guys need to effectively help the child welfare workers form the child welfare workers? What are you looking for that they can help you with? What's information or tools that they have that can help you guys do your job, which I guess in turn helps them with theirs?

CARL CHADBAND [00:13:21]: If there is some kind of training that we could go through as practitioners that would give them a level of comfort that we understand or meet the security standards for shared participants where we could have access to their database. For example, this is something that we pilot in the Department of Corrections that whatever kind of case notes that they have for the institutional side that are put into the system, we have access to those notes. And then we can kind of share notes as well. The same thing we're able to talk freely because of a release of information with child support enforcement when we have shared clients. That way there's no runaround. If we already have a person there in our class, they've been talking to us intimately about their case, we're able to speak freely about their case on their behalf instead of saying oh, we can't talk to you because of, you know, confidentiality or things.

But just simply trying to make the process work. Some people don't want the process to work, but there are a lot of folks in child welfare who actually do want it to work, and those are just a couple suggestions that we can do, start sharing information more freely when possible and when it isn't a breach of policy.

TOM OATES [00:14:45]: So, Joel, let me ask you that same question about what is it from the child welfare workers that they have that can support you in your work which then of course turns around and helps them?

JOEL AUSTIN [00:14:56]: How much time do we have? First, we have to build a strong relationship, which means that when I walk into the room, I need you to respect me for what I know and what I am able to do, and then I need to respect you for what you know and what your job is. We need to have a shared goal, which is the best interest of the child, and we need to realize what that means to me versus what that means to you.

I would like to have a regulation, some type of form, some type of checklist from them to know what does make up a strong father figure because right now it keeps changing. And agencies like mine and others that are on this phone, we can make that, but sometimes when we make it, you change it and you add some more and some more. So I would love to be able to removed some of these barriers and sit down and once again we train each other on how to get to these common goals. There has to be some strong conversation first on your definition of an apple versus my definition of an apple, and I think sometimes that's what's happening. You don't realize that when I say best interest of the child, I really do mean best interest of the child, but I'm willing to go deep into the paternal side to find that.

In Philadelphia we've been failing fatherhood involving engagement as an agency for a very, very long time. We found paternal side aunts that don't have children but sleeping in a three-bedroom all by themselves versus keeping the kids on the maternal side stuck in a one-bedroom with eight children in a bed. And we still haven't figured out why except for the fact that we don't agree what's on the best interest of the child. So it would have to be a sit-down. Let's introduce. Let's talk. Let's collaborate. Let

me find out what their needs are. A lot of times it's trying to find children. Let me tell you not only how I do it, but you will have to make some changes.

TOM OATES [00:17:05]: So, Pat, let me toss that to you about what makes, you know, from the child welfare side of the picture, what is it that they've got that they may be able to then in terms share with you or the tools that they could present to make your job a little easier?

PAT LITTLEJOHN [00:17:21]: Well, first of all, one of the mistakes that we made early on was that they wanted us to help locate fathers. And we were getting horrible contact information. And so first of all, you know, we can't be their diligent search provider, but just starting out with simple good contact information that we can follow up with a father once he's been identified. So I mean that doesn't sound like a lot, but that's huge. I mean you can't reach out to someone that you don't have good contact information, number one. And then going back to something that Carl said, just that two-way communication and being able to open those channels of communication. And, three, reducing unnecessary hoops and boxes and, you know, that the fathers have to go through I think is an important step as well.

So I would say that those would be the couple of things that I think from what we need from a child welfare worker. And then the other thing is the acknowledgement that I think everybody acknowledges this, don't send us your -- we found sometimes that we get the cases nobody wants and nobody wants to work with and everybody's exhausted with.

CARL CHADBAND [00:18:51]: Yeah.

PAT LITTLEJOHN [00:18:52]: And there's only so much we can do too, that there are some individuals who have severe substance abuse problems or have severe mental disabilities that unfortunately as much as we want to be able to help those, that we have limits too. And so understanding and respecting our limits and knowing -- and us sharing with folks what that is is really important because there are just some folks that we will never be able to help no matter how much we want to do.

CARL CHADBAND [00:19:27]: If I could just add to that, one thing we were able to do creatively with our child support enforcement group, they were able to send out fliers about our program or one-pagers about our program to all the folks that they had on their mailing list. And then instantly we received a bunch of calls and it just said simply if you need help getting a job, if you need help with this service, that service, feel free to give the KISRA fatherhood program a call.

Opening up your mailing list, there's a little bit of trickiness to it to where they shouldn't give it to me or they may not feel comfortable giving it to an agency, but I should be able to give my materials to them and have them mail it out on behalf of my agency. Another quick thing that we can do is make sure as agencies we're looking at a person holistically not just for one area of service. If you're dealing with a person, yeah, they needed a job, but they also need a place to stay as well, and they also need food to eat. So, sometimes we are I guess myopic to the point where we're only interested in the one thing that we can do instead of linking them holistically to services that benefit them and their family.

TOM OATES [00:20:48]: Guys, I'm going to give you the one opportunity here, and we've talked a lot about policy or we've talked about engaging in agencies and what we're looking for, but you represent fathers and you represent those, you know, who are trying to make a connection with their children. So, and the last question here, give me the perspective of your clients. Give me the one thing that you

think those fathers would want to communicate across to the child welfare agencies. And, Pat, if it's okay, I'll ask you to start.

PAT LITTLEJOHN [00:21:20]: Well, first of all is just give me a chance. Hear what I have to say. Listen to what I feel about the situation and believe that I'm not trying to pull something over on you. I think that would be the one thing they would say is, you know, and treat me with respect and know that at the end of the day I care a whole lot more for my child than you do.

Even though you think you care for my child, at the end of the day, this is my God-given child, and this is my flesh and blood. And believe that in his heart of hearts, which I believe that every father does feel this way, is that he really does want to be the kind of father he was called to be, and he's just asking please hear me, give me a chance, and know that maybe I may have messed up in the past, but that doesn't necessarily mean that my future is going to be just a continuation, a repeat of the past. And I can do this. I can change, but I -- and with the right kind of support and help I can be as good a father as this child needs me to be.

TOM OATES [00:22:41]: Joel, what's the one thing your dads would want to get across?

JOEL AUSTIN [00:22:45]: They would want everything Pat just said. It just has to be I'm better than you think I am. I'm much more positive than you think I am, and then I'm ready to prove it to you. And if you could not have so many barriers and not count me out before the fight even starts. So, I'm in Philadelphia and my dads are "Rocky's" so we just all go off of this diehard they can get it done without so many barriers, without so many [unint.] so much pushback, and that's about it.

TOM OATES [00:23:31]: Carl, for you in West Virginia.

CARL CHADBAND [00:23:34]: All for what Pat and Joel said I echo it. Ditto. I would simply say if my fathers were talking to you, they would say I'm not [inaud.]. I'm not someone who will never care about my child. I care very much so for my child. Right now you just caught me and I'm a dead-broke dad. I don't have the means to go out and provide for my children. I feel less than whole as a man. You think that I like not being able to buy my child birthday presents or not being able to get them clothes for school. It's not a condition that I like or I enjoy or I am gaming the system.

I need help and I'm coming to you today for help. I'm lacking skills, I'm lacking knowledge, I'm lacking information, but if you just give me a chance as my two practitioners have said, if you just give me a chance, I guarantee you I will go beyond your expectations of what you thought before this interview started.

TOM OATES [00:24:51]: Carl Chadband, Joel Austin, Pat Littlejohn, thank you guys so much for your time. Thank you for your perspectives, and thank you for your passion.

So you can see the entire situation around attempting to increase father and paternal family engagement is pretty complicated. From policies, programs, training, and individual perspectives there are some barriers both fatherhood organizations and child welfare agencies need to work to overcome. Now, coming up in part three we're going to hear about what's being done in Spartanburg, South Carolina between a local agency and the Upstate Fatherhood Coalition, how they developed their relationship, and how the groups are partnering together to provide training and services.

I really want to thank Pat Littlejohn, Carl Chadband, and Joel Austin for all of their input and time. So if you head over to the webpage on childwelfare.gov for this podcast -- just go to the webpage childwelfare.gov and search podcasts and you can find us there -- we've got a number of resources loaded up for you, including specific web sections and tools from Information Gateway on engaging fathers, paternal family members, and our family engagement inventory. There are also a few other resources, including some work from Dr. Ronald Mincy, who spent a lot of time researching and reporting on the role and impact of fatherhood. Just go to childwelfare.gov and search podcasts. I also encourage you to check out part three when it launches and also visit childwelfare.gov or connect with us at info@childwelfare.gov with any questions about information you may be seeking to improve the work you and your cohorts are doing to protect children and strengthen families.

I'll also put in a plug to look for Information Gateway at any child welfare-related conferences that you may be going to. We bring a number of our publications, and our staff is available to help you with your resource needs. So interact with us. We love hearing from you, and we love connecting with you. Also, check out the national foster care and adoption directory mobile app. It's a free full database of adoption and foster care agencies along with support groups as well, and it's right there on your device searchable by zip code or state, complete with geo locating functions so you can find those organizations within your neighborhood, within your county, within your state, or across the country.

So as always, you know, we're interested in your feedback. So please let us know if there's a topic you'd like to hear more about or a group doing innovative work that the rest of the nation should know about and could learn from. Just connect with us at info@childwelfare.gov. So thanks again for checking out the Child Welfare Information Gateway Podcast. I'm Tom Oates and we'll talk to you next time.

FEMALE NARRATOR [00:27:34]: 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.