

Executive Summary: Understanding the Experiences and Needs of Nonresident Fathers with Children in Kinship Care

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Background

Kinship care is characterized by a close relative or fictive kin rearing a child when the biological parents are unable or unwilling to provide primary oversight. Scholars and practitioners have identified two types of kinship care: formal (children under the care of the state child welfare agency) and informal (children not in state care). The current study utilized qualitative methods to examine paternal engagement in kinship care from the perspective of fathers, relative caregivers, and social service providers.

Methods

Cross-sectional, semi-structured, qualitative interviews were conducted with 25 self-identified fathers of children in kinship care. Ten kinship caregivers were also interviewed to broaden our understanding of factors that impact paternal engagement in kinship care. To inform best practices for service engagement and delivery with fathers of children in kinship care, 20 social service practitioners were also interviewed. All data were analyzed using deductive and inductive thematic analysis.

Findings

Fathers. Fathers identified several challenges in their efforts to be engaged with their children in kinship care. These challenges included issues related to social and economic instability and uncertainty within the

coparenting relationship with relative caregivers. Fathers also identified supports, which included successful coparenting relationships characterized by shared decision making and mutual respect. In order to improve their parenting outcomes, fathers noted the role of compassionate and unbiased, father-centered, service delivery.

Caregivers. Caregivers identified causes for child entry into kinship care such as parental substance abuse, parental incarceration, and maternal suicide. They also highlighted factors that support successful coparenting in kinship care, including a clear delineation of roles, consistency in paternal support and involvement, and access to material and financial resources to support the child in care. Caregivers noted the absence of these factors as issues that hinder successful coparenting and the desire to engage with the nonresident father.

Practitioners. Practitioners explained personal and professional factors that assist with the engagement of nonresident fathers. These factors included the use of self-disclosure, prioritizing mutual respect and shared decision making, and formal and informal education related to father engagement. Further, they expressed reasons for not providing differential services to traditional nonresident fathers and those with children in kinship care. These included factors related to time constraints, budgets, and training. Lastly, practitioners noted the need for additional training regarding the needs of fathers with children in kinship care, coparenting within kinship care, and family dynamics between the kinship triad.

Discussion

The current study adds to our understanding of the experiences and needs of fathers with children in kinship care. The triangulated approach presented in this study supports the need to explore family dynamics in kinship care from the perspective of biological parents, caregivers, and service providers. Future research should also consider the perspectives of children and adolescents in relative care.

