

Why can it be so hard to engage non-resident dads?

(Tips gathered from [The National Quality Improvement Center on Non-Resident Fathers and the Child Welfare System](#) (QIC-NRF) [Social Worker Training Curriculum: Engaging the Non-Resident Father](#) url link: <https://bit.ly/3gCB7Hx>)

Definition of non-resident dad = **A father who does not live in the same house as his child.**

Barriers to involving dads in case planning include custody issues, unemployment, child support payment and collection, domestic violence, and incarceration. Heavy caseloads also make it harder to track down a non-resident dad – it is often seen as easier to manage the ongoing interactions over the course of the case by working with just one parent, usually the mom, and the children. While it takes extra effort to involve a non-resident dad, it is usually in the child’s best interest to do so.

TIPS TO REMEMBER WHEN REACHING OUT TO FATHERS NOT IN THE HOME

- **Start from the assumption that the non-resident dad wants to be involved.** This strategy is useful when:
 - The dad has been absent for a period of time but demonstrates interest in the child’s well-being.
 - The dad has not returned your calls. (Consider that there may be some underlying reasons that you are unaware of.)
 - The mom or someone from her family tells you that the dad doesn’t want to be involved and you, or someone else on staff, has not confirmed his desire to not be involved.

- **Facilitate the restoration of the dad in the life of the child by co-creating goals based on the dad’s strengths, not his deficits.** This strategy is useful when:
 - The dad feels as though he doesn’t have anything to offer his child.
 - The dad has been absent for a period of time and doesn’t know how to re-engage in a relationship with his child.

- The dad is struggling with multiple demands, such as joblessness, financial issues, and care for a new family.
- **Treat each case on an individual basis, not based on experiences with other dads.** This strategy is useful when:
 - You have your own personal struggles with dads or “father figures” in your life.
 - You have multiple cases in which dads are absent and refusing to engage. When this true, it is important to take a step back and examine how other cases are influencing your decisions in the current case.
- **Suspend judgments and listen to all sides. There are two sides to every story. Give the non-resident dad an opportunity to give his side.** This strategy is useful when:
 - You have heard a lot of negative things about the dad from the mom, maternal family members, or even other workers the case was assigned to.
 - You have your own personal struggles with dads or “father figures” in your life.
 - Allegations about the dad have been made but not substantiated...weigh out all of the information.
 - The dad had been absent from the child’s life.
- **Make room for expressions of anger. Men are socialized to see expressing anger as “acceptable.” It may be one of the few emotions a non-resident dad is comfortable expressing.** This strategy is useful when:
 - You detect hostility from the dad; acknowledging it may help defuse it.
 - The dad has not been kept informed about his child by the mom or others.
 - Anger is the only emotion the dad feels secure expressing, as it keeps him from feeling vulnerable to others.
- **Be clear and transparent about the reasons for our program’s involvement, the dad’s role throughout the process, and program expectations. A dad’s suspicion may be present about the organization and he may think he is being sought only to obtain child support or other reasons.** This strategy is useful when:

- The dad doesn't trust the system or those who represent the system.
 - The dad's experience has suggested that he is only needed for the money he can provide.
 - The dad fears he is unable to pay child support because of his financial challenges.
 - The dad feels shame for his inability to financially provide for his child.
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- **Remind the dad of how important he is in the life of his child, how there are some things only he can provide and that his child will carry what he does with them forever.** This strategy is useful when:
 - It is important for the dad to hear specifics about how he can positively impact his child's life; it is not enough to talk in general terms; the dad needs to hear how his presence can benefit the child.
 - The dad needs to consider how he would like his child to remember him 10 to 15 years from now.

The more you learn about the dads you serve, the better equipped you will be to identify which of these strategies will work best in pulling the dads out of the shadows and into closer relationships with their children.