



A Seat at the Table: Piloting Continuous Learning to Engage Fathers and Parental Relatives in Child Welfare

Executive Summary to the Final Report

May 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Research continues to link a father's positive involvement in the family to outcomes that reflect children's well-being (see, for example, Cabrera, Volling, and Barr 2018; Lamb 2004). When the fathers have been identified in child welfare cases, children spend fewer days in foster care and are more likely to be reunified with parents (Burrus et al. 2012). Relatively few studies have addressed the specific benefits of involving paternal relatives, but support from extended family in general is linked to children's well-being (for example, Erola et al. 2018) and to protective factors among child welfare involved families (for example, Corwin et al. 2020).

Even though involving fathers in child welfare services can have a positive impact on their children's well-being, and there is a deepening focus on parent engagement in child welfare, data from Child and Family Service Reviews (CFSRs) reveal that fathers are not well engaged in services. Although the CFSRs highlight practice concerns involving both mothers and fathers, research indicates that fathers are not as engaged as mothers are (JBS International 2019). This work suggests that fathers receive fewer direct contacts from workers than mothers do; they are less likely to receive accurate needs assessments and appropriate services than mothers are; and they are not as involved in case planning as they could be.

Designed to create a culture in the child welfare system that prioritizes engaging fathers and paternal relatives, the Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare (FCL) project is testing the use of the methodology known as the Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC) to improve placement stability and permanency outcomes for children. It will accomplish this by strengthening the engagement of fathers and paternal relatives and adding to the evidence base on engagement strategies for fathers and paternal relatives. The pilot study described in this report: (1) documents the implementation of a BSC to achieve the broader goal of improving placement stability and permanency outcomes, and (2) documents how designated Improvement Teams worked with system partners to plan, test, and adjust engagement strategies. The project is sponsored by the Office of Family Assistance and administered by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in partnership with the Children's Bureau, all within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. FCL is conducted by Mathematica and the University of Denver (referred to as the Mathematica/DU team).

A BSC is a continuous learning methodology developed by the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (IHI) that is used to test and spread promising practices to help organizations improve in a focused topic area (IHI 2003). The five key elements of a BSC are: (1) the Collaborative Change Framework (CCF); (2) inclusive multilevel teams; (3) the Shared Learning Environment; (4) expert faculty; and (5) the Model for Improvement. Throughout this BSC, each team used Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles to identify, implement, and study a unique group of strategies to engage fathers and paternal relatives. During the pilot study, Improvement Teams developed processes to collect, organize, and report data to gauge whether the engagement strategies were producing improvements on specified metrics. Based on their learning over time, Improvement Teams adjusted their father and paternal relative engagement strategies and planned to continue promising strategies.

The pilot study methods used both qualitative and quantitative analyses. Data included interviews and focus groups, observational notes, and structured assessments. Because of constraints in project time and budget and the COVID-19 public health emergency, some adaptations from the original IHI BSC model

were implemented. These adaptations included changes to the timeline of the BSC and the use of virtual learning sessions.

Context of the FCL sites and characteristics of the Improvement Teams

Six Improvement Teams from five sites, representing five state or county public child welfare agencies, were recruited to participate in the BSC. These agencies were the Denver County (Colorado) Department of Human Services (DHS), the Hartford region of the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF), the Los Angeles County (California) Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) [two teams], the Prowers County (Colorado) Department of Human Services (DHS), and the Wake County (North Carolina) Department of Human Services (DHS).

Improvement Team members were primarily selected by the local leaders based on the team members' current work with fathers or interest in working with fathers. Teams included agency staff and community partners, and—wherever possible—fathers or paternal relatives. Improvement Teams were able to leverage their backgrounds with engaging fathers and their experience with the BSC methodology or continuous quality improvement to produce quick wins.

Improvement Teams' reflections on implementing the BSC

Each of the five elements of the BSC, and the way each element was implemented by the Improvement Teams, played an important role in advancing father and paternal relative engagement. Improvement Teams highlighted the contributions of each element as well as opportunities for improving it:

1. The CCF provided the overarching framework to organize and ground each Improvement Team's approach to engaging fathers and paternal relatives, and it helped them produce quick wins early and find areas to improve as time went on.
2. Improvement Teams valued members who empowered staff to engage fathers and paternal relatives and served as natural leaders for the site. Members who played diverse roles inside and outside the agency helped teams develop and test engagement strategies.
3. Shared learning opportunities, particularly the learning sessions, gave Improvement Teams dedicated time to focus on engaging fathers and paternal relatives and to learn from other teams. Participants wanted longer learning sessions and more time for small-group activities in particular—for example, breakout sessions and opportunities to work with their own Improvement Teams.
4. Faculty Coaches lent valuable expertise, but Improvement Teams wished they had more focused opportunities to work with them.
5. The Model for Improvement, including PDSAs or small tests of change, helped Improvement Teams break father and paternal engagement strategies down into manageable steps. However, it was a challenge for them to collect data and conduct analyses on the established metrics. Over time, teams worked to improve their data collection efforts.

Changes in the engagement of fathers and paternal relatives

Over the course of the pilot study, Improvement Team members began to feel more knowledgeable about how to engage fathers and paternal relatives. They also identified shifts in their behavior and perspective on engaging fathers and paternal relatives, and they described similar changes among their colleagues. Agency leaders, supervisors, child welfare colleagues, and system partners supported engagement. In

particular, change was fueled by protecting dedicated time and effort toward the BSC and pairing that dedicated time with a commitment to engaging fathers and paternal relatives.

Resources needed to participate in the BSC

Improvement Team members reported that the BSC could be strengthened even more by increasing protected time away from the competing demands of daily work to focus on the BSC and father and paternal relative engagement strategies. These efforts required meeting time, time to track data, outreach to and collaboration with community partners, and other activities that had to be balanced with regular work requirements. The Improvement Team members also wanted stronger guidance from the BSC team about which stakeholders to include on the Improvement Team and what the data-related requirements for the BSC were. Teams also said that the BSC's effectiveness would be boosted by promoting buy-in among staff who implemented engagement strategies, but did not participate on the Improvement Team.

Continuing the BSC

All Improvement Teams intended to continue using elements of the BSC after it formally concluded; specifically, each site planned to continue elements of the Model for Improvement. They also described their ongoing commitment to engaging fathers and paternal relatives and their intent to continue successful engagement strategies developed during the BSC. Work on father and paternal relative engagement will continue by drawing on the BSC experience, building successful engagement strategies identified through the process, offering continued leadership, and realizing the beginnings of a cultural shift.

Conclusion

The pilot study findings suggest that child welfare agencies can implement a BSC to potentially strengthen the engagement of fathers and paternal relatives with their children who are involved in child welfare. Careful selection of the members of an Improvement Team, additional data supports, more time in shared learning, and clear guidance from the BSC team about, for example, the metrics they were expected to collect for the BSC can further the success of a BSC. Over time, the strategies the Improvement Teams implemented and the continued effect of the BSC may influence the practices used to engage fathers and paternal relatives and support improved placement stability and permanency outcomes for children. The subsequent FCL descriptive evaluation will further explore the promise of implementing the BSC. It will focus on organizational changes and network supports for father and paternal relative engagement; changes in staff attitudes and skills for engaging fathers and paternal relatives; and father and paternal relative engagement outcomes in child welfare settings that were interested in improving father and paternal relative engagement and have prior experience with a continuous quality improvement process.

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GLOSSARY

Breakthrough Series Collaborative (BSC). The BSC is a continuous learning collaborative methodology used to test and spread promising practices to help organizations improve in a focused topic area. It has five key elements: (1) the Collaborative Change Framework; (2) inclusive multi-level teams; (3) the Shared Learning Environment; (4) expert faculty; and (5) the Model for Improvement. Each plays a critical role and works with the other elements in interrelated ways. Each BSC has a topic area of focus. Improvement Teams are continuously identifying, collecting, and reviewing data on the topic to gauge their organization's progress toward specific outcomes.

BSC team. The FCL BSC was conducted by the Mathematica/DU team with a consultant who had expertise in the BSC. This team was responsible for identifying models of continuous learning for the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), developing the CCF, identifying and recruiting sites, identifying and preparing Faculty Coaches, and facilitating all BSC activities.

Collaborative Change Framework (CCF). The CCF is used to guide the work of the Improvement Teams, and creates a common language for BSC participants. For the Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare (FCL) project, it comprised five domains that collectively depict a child welfare agency that performs optimally to engage fathers and paternal relatives. Each domain is broken down into goals, and then into strategies (also called change concepts) that Improvement Teams can test.

Faculty Coaches. Expert faculty share their expertise with Improvement Teams and facilitate shared learning across teams. For FCL, ACF and the Mathematica/DU team selected a group of six experts to support Improvement Teams and provide practice expertise related to the five domains of the CCF. Faculty Coaches led affinity group calls and contributed to learning sessions and the content of all-team calls. Faculty Coaches were selected to ensure that diverse perspectives and identities were represented.

Fathers and Continuous Learning in Child Welfare (FCL). The FCL project is designed to test the use of the Breakthrough Series Collaborative methodology. For this project, the methodology was used to improve placement stability and permanency outcomes by strengthening the engagement of fathers and paternal relatives with children involved in child welfare, and to add to the evidence base on engagement strategies for fathers and paternal relatives. FCL is funded by the Office of Family Assistance and directed by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in partnership with the Children's Bureau, all within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Improvement Team. A group of 7 to 14 people were selected by each site to lead the BSC work at each agency. For FCL, Improvement Teams included a mix of administrators, managers, supervisors, child welfare caseworkers, community partners, and fathers and paternal relatives, although the composition of the teams varied from one site to another.

Metrics. Metrics were designed to help the Improvement Teams develop indicators of how successfully fathers and paternal relatives were being engaged and to build their capacity to track this and to document how much improvement they were achieving toward outcomes over time. Improvement Teams were given a broad framework within which to develop team-specific data and metrics, and each team approached measurement of metrics with a different array of available data.

Model for Improvement. A collection of strategies Improvement Teams use to translate the CCF into testable strategies to reinforce continuous learning. In FCL, this includes both Plan-Do-Study-Act cycles and small tests of change focused on the CCF domains. Teams designed strategies, tested them, and tracked outcomes using data.

Shared Learning Environment. Shared learning is emphasized throughout the BSC, as Improvement Teams test different strategies and share successes and challenges with each other. The combination of learning sessions, all-team calls, affinity group calls facilitated by Faculty Coaches, and the use of an online learning community like Microsoft SharePoint contributed to a collaborative environment that supported and enhanced learning.

Sites. Five sites participated in FCL, representing five state or county public child welfare agencies. There were a total of six Improvement Teams.

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