

Empowering Families to Reduce Child Welfare Disparities

The Power of Family Team Decision Making

Executive Summary

Family Team Decision Making can reduce racial disparities in child welfare both because of its general effectiveness for the entire child welfare population, where African-American children are overrepresented, and because the model particularly fits the needs of African-American families and communities.

Introduction

Significant racial disparities exist in child welfare. African-American children are removed from their homes more frequently, even after considering socio-economic differences and despite studies showing no higher rate of actual abuse or neglect. Once removed, African-American children remain in out-of-home placements for longer periods of time and are less likely to be adopted.¹ This issue brief examines Family Team Decision Making as a tool for reducing these racial gaps.

Family Team Decision Making

Family Team Decision Making is a family involvement intervention that immediately engages family members with child welfare staff, once children are determined to be at-risk for maltreatment. Families, as well as their extended family members and friends, are invited to attend a team decision making meeting. At this meeting, family members collaboratively develop a plan to maintain the safety and well-being of their children in conjunction with child welfare staff and other professionals.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Family Team Decision Making has resulted in reduced out-of-home placements and reduced lengths-of-stay for all child welfare children. In Indiana, jurisdictions using FTDM have quickly seen a 16 percent drop in out-of-home placements, while other jurisdictions have seen a 14 percent increase during the same period. This practice has also worked in Alabama and Utah.²

¹ Citizen's Review Board for Children, "Racial Disparity Data in Maryland" (presentation to the 2007 Convention of the Maryland Children's Action Network).

² Casey Strategic Consulting Group, *Maryland Child Welfare Assessment* (Dec. 21, 2007).

Since African-American children are overrepresented in the child welfare population, this means that FTDM has a particularly positive impact on African-American children. In San Francisco, for example, use of FTDM resulted in a drop in new entries of African American children into out-of-home care.³

Moreover, by its very nature Family Team Decision Making has a significant potential to address racial disparities in child welfare. It was adopted from New Zealand's indigenous Maori community and is based on the belief that families have strengths and that children can be protected in their kinship network.

This approach is very compatible with traditions in the African-American community, particularly with regard to the importance of the extended family in taking care of children.⁴ FTDM fully explores the possibility that someone in the extended family may provide a home for a child, rather than having the child enter foster care. FTDM also expands a family's ability to reach out to important institutions in the African-American community, like churches and other neighborhood organizations. Without FTDM, a caseworker might not know about these possibilities or how to help a family take advantage of them.⁵

National experts believe that FTDM is a critical means to address racial disparities. For example, a Michigan task force recommended its expansion as a key strategy.⁶ Various states are using FTDM to address biases in child welfare decision making.⁷

Conclusion

Family Team Decision Making is not only a good reform for all children in the child welfare system, but also an effective strategy to address racial disparities.

³ Center for Community Partnerships in Child Welfare, *Places to Watch: Promising Practices to Address Racial Disproportionality in Child Welfare* (2006).

⁴ Crystal Mills & Debra Porchia Usher, "An Africentric Paradigm for Child Welfare Practice" in Sandra Chipungu, et al., *Revisiting Child Welfare from an Africentric Perspective* (2004).

⁵ Annie E. Casey Foundation, *2007 National KIDS COUNT Factbook* (essay on permanency).

⁶ Michigan Advisory Committee on the Overrepresentation of Children of Color in Child Welfare, *Equity: Moving Towards Better Outcomes for All of Michigan's Children*

⁷ GAO, *African American Children in Foster Care* (2007).

