



1.5 Fathers within Systems of Care Activity

In this activity, you will read four case studies that explore various challenges and nuances of father engagement work. It will be helpful to jot down notes or questions as you read. After each case study, there are a list of reflection questions for you to answer.

The goal of the activity is to demonstrate what unfolds for children when our systems and programs deem the contributions of fathers or father figures as less important or do not take them into account at all. How do systems 'prioritize' or 'emphasize' mothers sometimes? Why does language matter? These are a few of the questions we will explore.

Case Study #1

An early career psychologist, Marta, is conducting an intake session as part of an interdisciplinary evaluation with the family of twin, 29-month old boys named Romair and Rian in a Head Start Center in Baltimore, Maryland. Romair and Rian are playing happily with toys provided by Marta, and chatting in an animated way in a form of "twin-speak." The twins were born premature and have experienced a history of developmental delays. Classroom teachers have reported the kids are "delightful" but have some concerns about their language development and motor functioning, even correcting for the fact that the boys were born prematurely. Notes on Romair and Rian's file from a Head Start social worker indicate the family has experienced housing instability, community violence, and the three young children in this family have witnessed intimate partner violence. The mother of the twins, Shayna, also has a 4-year old girl, Renee. Shayna is 21 years old and currently lives with her children and partner, James, in transitional housing. James appears to be many years older than Shayna, and is not the biological father of Shayna's children, though clearly seems to Marta to be in a fathering role. There is no information about James in the twins' case file, but there are notes about Romair, Rian, and Renee's biological father being incarcerated after a history of intimate partner violence and substance misuse. While Marta is directing her questions to Shayna, she notes that James is keeping the twins busy by playing peekaboo and rolling a small ball back

and forth on the table between them. James refers to the twins as “little gentlemen,” and asks them to bring him different objects from around the room, “go get that red duck, on your marks, get set, go!” When Romair stumbles while running, James immediately approaches the small child, but allows Romair to stand up independently. “That’s right, just dust yourself off. Now go get that teddy bear over there.” As the child stands up and looks around, James gently squeezes Romair’s shoulder, saying encouragingly, “C’m on, what did I just ask you to get for me?” Marta is appreciative of James’ responsive approach, as well as the kind of developmental information he is eliciting from the twins. Marta comments, “Wow, Mr. James, you really know how to work with these kids!” He looks up and modestly inclines his head, saying, “I have kids of my own...and grandkids.” Shayna seems a little hurt and defensive by the spotlight on James. “You don’t know them that well,” she says curtly, “just wait until they start to fuss.” James laughs and replies, “Oh, you just have to treat them like the little gentlemen they are.” Shayna rolls her eyes, and mutters, “You just haven’t been around long enough to even know us.” Shayna glances down at her smart phone with a very resolute expression as James continues to work quietly with the children, seemingly ignoring Shayna’s comments.

Marta pauses while thinking through how to respond in a way that is respectful of both parents’ needs and contributions. Her inclination is to support Shayna in this moment, and figure out something nice to say about Shayna’s parenting and approach. Marta reflects on the fact that she has really centered women in her clinical work, and has clearly defined goals about supporting young women of color from underserved communities. Marta knows her approach is informed by her own background being raised by a super smart single mom whose education was disrupted by early motherhood and immigration. Marta’s mother never had the chance to complete her education while working as an aide in a hospital and raising a family on her own. Marta grew up hearing her mom talk about how she was head of her class in school until she got pregnant; how she always wanted to be a doctor in her country of origin; how Marta’s father left after learning of the pregnancy. Marta remembers how proud her mom was of her completing her doctorate, and how much support she received from her mom throughout her many years of education. Marta has always been wary of the opportunities she had that her mom and so many other women who paved the way for her did not have access to. For all of these reasons, Marta has worked hard to encourage moms who are parenting teens to develop their parenting skills while still working on broader educational and professional goals. Marta takes some pride in having already helped several young women access subsidized child care and other supports that in part facilitated their graduation from high school, and one of her clients just started community college. Yet, watching the way James is supporting Shayna and her children in just this brief interaction, Marta wonders whether she needs to re-think her approach to working with families. Marta begins to ponder whether it was right to think primarily of moms as the “parents” and “family” of her young clients.

Reflection Questions:

1. *How does this kind of alignment with family members based on role and/or gender come up in your work?*

For question 1, you are invited to submit your perspective to our collective pool of answers from all practitioners on our Mentimeter link [here](#).

2. *What are some strengths of Marta's approach?*
3. *What are some strengths of James' approach to parenting?*
4. *How do you think Marta could better include James or engage him in the intake and assessment process?*
5. *What are positive ways to manage the interaction and dynamics between Shayna and James?*
6. *What are some follow-up questions you would ask this family in preparation for learning more about Rian and Romair's development, home environment, and family situation?*
7. *What are some steps Marta can take to work on her tendencies to align with mothers or people in mothering roles in family-focused work?*

Case Study #2

Jason is a newly licensed LCSW working in a local public school's early childhood preschool program as a social worker and early childhood mental health consultant. Jason is really excited about his new work and is looking forward to using his postgraduate internship in early childhood. As an African-American man, Jason often thinks about how his race and gender might impact his work positively and negatively. Through his training and life experiences, Jason has found that he really enjoys working with men and fathering issues. Consequently, Jason is looking forward to meeting Paige, Joey, and their three year-old twins, Isabella and Raffie. Paige is African-American and Raffie Dominican. Paige and Joey met in college and have been married for five years. Paige just started her first job as a registered nurse and Joey works as a phlebotomist while still going to school. He is majoring in biology with plans for attending medical school.

The couple is seeking help after a parent/teacher conference in which the twin's teacher mentioned a concern about aggressive behavior by Raffie on the playground. Paige has asked for the meeting because she feels that Joey's parenting with the children is contributing to the aggressive behaviors of Raffie.

As the family enters Jason's office for their session Joey has Raffie on his shoulders and is bouncing him up and down. He lifts him up and tosses him in the air, nearly hitting Raffie's head on the door jam. Raffie is enjoying himself and Isabella is enjoying watching her dad and brother while she nestles her face in the lap of her mother.

“Joey, you are always too rough!” Paige admonishes as they enter. Joey smiles and gives Raffie a hug as they sit. Raffie is clearly enjoying the rough play with his dad. The two continue with their back and forth giggling.

As everyone sits down, Paige sits down with Isabella and she comments, “this is a perfect example of why we are here today. You are too rough with Raffie and now we are here because he can’t sit still in school!”

Joey smiles and responds to Jason, “He’s a boy! You are either a leader or a follower and it’s my job to make sure he is both tough and a leader, Right!”

Reflection Questions:

Sometimes the passion and energy that parents bring is evident as they enter their first session.

1. *Would your first words be to Paige or Joey? How would you navigate the pressure to ‘pick sides’ between the parents?*
2. *What would you do to ensure that Joey is engaged and his parenting strengths are acknowledged?*

For questions 1-2, you are invited to submit your perspectives to our collective pool of answers from all practitioners on our Mentimeter link [here](#).

3. *Reflect for a few minutes about where you would start your session with this family. Come up with at least three possibilities. Now choose the one you think would be the most beneficial, and explain why you think it would be a positive start.*
4. *What are some parenting strengths that you would strive to acknowledge for this family?*
5. *What observations about the twins might you share with the family?*
6. *Is there anything in this vignette that you would find personally challenging?*

Case Study #3

You are in a lead school psychologist role in a school. The school is located in a historically African-American neighborhood that is experiencing gentrification and gradually becoming less Black. You, along with the majority of the administrative staff, are white. You are in your office when you hear the voice of a father, Jamal, who is loud and clearly upset with a teacher and the office staff. Jamal is a tall African-American father who has just found out that his daughter cut her own hair while the class was learning how to work with scissors. You have a working relationship with Jamal. He is usually the parent who picks up his daughter, Rachel, from school. The reception staff attending to Jamal is clearly stressed by his tone. One of the issues Jamal is concerned about is explaining it to his wife because Rachel always has her hair well cared for when she arrives each day.

Reflection Questions

1. *Reflect for a few minutes about this situation. Now consider how you might first engage with Jamal. What are a few ways you would work to engage with him?*
2. *What emotions do you think Jamal is experiencing? How are his emotional needs showing up for him? What does his concern about what his wife will think say about his views of himself, his role, and his relationship with parenting?*

For questions 1-2, you are invited to submit your perspectives to our collective pool of answers from all practitioners on our Mentimeter link [here](#).

3. *Thinking about this vignette, what might you do after to engage staff and help them learn through this experience?*

Case Study #4

It is the end of the day and most of the children have gone home. Every now and then, Majid's father comes to pick him up. He is often later than most parents. Mr. Ali is a quiet man who wears a pagri, is always polite, but often appears focused on collecting his child. On this particular day, Majid is excited about a class project and drags his dad to see it. Mr. Ali engages with Majid and is really good at showing interest and asking questions. As they are leaving you mention to Mr. Ali that a parenting group is starting and you would like for him to join. He smiles and replies, "Oh, that sounds great. I'll let my wife know. She might want to join!"

Reflection Question

- *How is Mr. Ali's response indicative of a broader trend in systems and our culture?*
- *How might you respond to Mr. Ali to encourage him to join the group?*

Resources for Further Exploration

- [Learning from an Early Childhood Nonprofit that Serves Fathers \(Podcast\)](#)
- [Video: A Conversation about Engaging Young Fathers in Human Services](#)
- [Video: A Conversation about Engaging Fathers in Home Visiting Programs](#)
- [Approaches for Engaging Fathers in Child Support Programs](#)
- [Keep Fathers Engaged Report](#)