



Serving Young Fathers in Care an Interview with Dr. Justin Harty: Transcript of Episode 1

Dr. Robin LaSota

Welcome to the Translating Child Welfare Research Podcast.

Tapping into the strengths of young fathers impacted by the child welfare system may be key to empowering them as fathers. Our guest today is Doctor Justin Harty, who will talk to us about empowering and serving young fathers in care.

I'm Dr. Robin LaSota and I'm your host for this episode of the Translating Child Welfare Research Podcast. Today, we're exploring the resource theory of fathering, a strengths-based and culturally affirming approach to engaging young fathers in care. This month, we invite Doctor Justin Harty, Assistant Professor at Arizona State University, to talk about the resource theory of fathering and how this theory shifts the paradigm we use in serving young fathers in care. Welcome! It's a pleasure to talk with you today. Let's start with you providing a brief overview of your research.

Dr. Justin Harty

Yes, thank you for the invitation. My research focuses on young fathers that are in the foster care system. As a worker, I recognize that much of the services and programming for fathers focused on fathers that have had their children removed from their care and placed in foster care. There wasn't a lot around young fathers that either – entered the child welfare system as a young father or became a father while they're in the foster care system. Most of the programming and services for expectant and parenting foster youth focused on mothers. It focuses on mothers in the prenatal stage. Services tend to focus on things like breastfeeding and childbearing, so there's a lack of services and programming for young fathers that are in the foster care system. My work centers on uncovering what the lived experience is for young black fathers in foster care.

Dr. Robin LaSota

First, thank you for sharing your lived experience with us and why studying young fatherhood is so important to you. Please tell us about the resource theory of fathering. Why is it important to us, working in child welfare services?

Dr. Justin Harty

What we have is this framework called responsible fathering. The framework focuses on the responsibilities of what we identify as responsible fathers. Responsible fathers wait to have a child until they're financially and emotionally prepared. Responsible Fathering states that a father should contribute to the financial needs of the child and the emotional needs of the child and support the mother in co-parenting. It's very limiting in that it only focuses on what we say a responsible father should do. And, it's very value-based. Ultimately, what we say is -- that if a father doesn't do these things -- then he is irresponsible. That framework was developed for older fathers. They're at a developmental stage where they can make those kind of executive decisions. They're older fathers who have completed school or entered the labor force. They have those resources to be what we would call responsible fathers. It was very clear that for young fathers, they struggled to meet those expectations.

I was looking for a theory of fathering that was more responsive to the full lived experience of fathers, but it was also responsive to the needs of young fathers who are actively still meeting their own development and emotional needs. Still working on education... beginning to enter the labor force. They're at an earlier stage of fathering. The resource theory of fathering steps back and says, OK, given that you are a new father, "What resources do you need to be the father that

you want to be?" Instead of having some prescribed definition of what a responsible father is. The resource theory of fathering is a great theory to use in child welfare systems and foster care systems that serve young fathers in care. Because it looks at what can child welfare systems do to enhance the resources that are available to fathers, in turn, make the father child interactions more positive.

Dr. Robin LaSota

I can see what you mean about the limitations of the Responsible Fathering framework, and how that mindset can be discouraging to young fathers in care. What led you to this line of research?

Dr. Justin Harty

I spent a portion of my childhood in the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services care, due to maltreatment by my father. Fatherhood for me was always on the forefront of our family dynamics. While I was in there, Janet Ahern was my family's attorney. After we left care, we maintained contact with Janet Ahern. I always was kind of pulled towards child welfare when I returned to school and entered my MSW program. And I wanted to work in the Department of Children Family Services because I felt like I had a valuable experience that I wanted as a worker to help families like mine. And so, after I graduated from MSW program, I interned with Illinois DCFS and again met with Janet. Her wonderful insight was, "What do you want to get out of the out of this internship experience?" She guided me into my passions. And for me, it's always been fatherhood in the child welfare system when I graduated from MSW and I started working for Lawrence Hall, she implored me to look at challenges that you see as a worker and find ways to fix them. I met with a couple of folks at the University of Chicago, Waldo Johnson and Mark Courtney, who really developed my passion and my research. This was also around the time of severe racial political climate. I really wanted to focus on the fathers that, in my opinion, had the most need. That led me to my research around young black fathers in the foster care system.

Dr. Robin LaSota

We challenged you today to highlight one key finding your research on resources and strategies to improve support for these young fathers that you talked about. You chose to highlight the strengths-based resource theory of fathering and how this theory can guide equitable child welfare practices that empower young fathers in care. Please tell us what you learned and how it's important for our child welfare listeners.

Dr. Justin Harty

Fathers in my study shared that when they found out that they were going to be fathers, that there's often a lot of excitement. There is often a lot of fear. A lot of concern about what would happen and when they would tell their child welfare caseworkers -- that their workers would often say things like, "OK, now you've got to step up. Now you've got a little one to look after."

They went right into responsible fathering, what they had to do to be a responsible father. You have to make sure that you're providing financial support, that you're helping Mom. What went from fathers that were really excited it turned into "Ohh man. Like, what did I get myself into." For fathers that were already worried about that, it just made it a little bit worse. What the fathers in my study shared with me is that they would then go to people and their family. What we know about Black families is that we leverage deep traditions of self-help and mutual aid. That's largely what I saw in my study. Fathers shared things like I learned how to be a father by what my father didn't do. I learned how to be a father by just learning on the go and figuring it out. Or I learned how to be a father by observing my aunts or my uncles or people in their families. Or they would directly go to someone in their family. A family certainly is one resource, but there's a whole bunch of other resources that fathers can be leveraging, that at least in my study, they weren't. Fathers sometimes, they would talk about caseworkers that were helpful or supportive, but that help and support was largely through tangible goods. Caseworkers that gave them diapers or gave them holiday gifts for their kids. The resource theory of fathering, for me, was really salient because it already looks like what we are doing for transition-age foster youth.

But then, if we have a young father that -- we're looking at those very same services and say, how can we lightly adapt these services that are already focused on this young father? How can we lightly tailor it to also help them in the transition to adulthood? For example, in the resource theory of fathering - it lists things like interpersonal skills, education, employment. We're already working on those things. For example, if we're focusing on education, how can we also tailor educational services? How can we also pitch those to fathers as "An education is a great way to gain resources that will help you as a father after you leave care." Same thing with employment. How can you talk to young fathers about the importance of gaining entry into the labor force to help them live independently, but also to help their children?

[Dr. Robin LaSota](#)

Customizing our approach to existing services to support young fathers will undoubtedly help us connect better with them. Thinking about the resources the Illinois child welfare system currently provides young fathers, what are some pitfalls that you see?

[Dr. Justin Harty](#)

We tend to focus on things like education and employment. Although those are important, there's also other factors that we have to take into account. Things like what the co-parental relationship is like. When young fathers are in foster care, they are experiencing obstacles and barriers that their peers that are not in foster care don't experience. For example, if a young father wants to take his kids out of town, youth in foster care have to get permission from the State if they want to leave placement to spend time with the kids and their placement doesn't allow the flexibility to do that. That's certainly a problem. Another obstacle that we face is a lot of the placements that young fathers are in aren't always the best environments to have children. If you think of fathers that are in group homes -- like a group home perhaps isn't the best place for a child to be interacting in. When we think about these obstacles and barriers, we have to think outside of our services as usual for foster youth. The core thing that we are thinking about as child welfare workers is that we're not just preparing our young father to exit the foster care system. We also have to look at our responsibility to provide resources to fathers to stop intergenerational child maltreatment. And this aligns great with the Family First policy. We're at this pivotal time, where we have a policy to support prevention services. And now I think in theory that if we look at these resources and apply them in a comprehensive manner that we really have the ability to meet the needs of young fathers that are in our care but also make concurrent efforts to stop this intergenerational transmission of maltreatment.

[Dr. Robin LaSota](#)

That is such a great point. Stepping into the shoes of a caseworker in supporting young fathers in care to... navigate their own needs, manage their own transition to adulthood, as well as care for that young child, how would you recommend a worker help a young father navigate all of those transitional needs?

[Dr. Justin Harty](#)

It's important to highlight that education and employment are pivotal resources that young fathers need as they transition out of the foster care system into early adulthood...into young fatherhood. Now there are new, somewhat competing things in their life that they will have to manage and that a worker will have to help them navigate. Now, not only are they focused on employment, education for themselves and for their own needs, now they've got new needs, new resources that they will have to acquire, cultivate, and leverage -- given that they are now fathers. Now you've got education. You've got employment. Now, you also have to manage a co-parental relationship. Now you have to think about the ever-changing developmental needs of their children. And I think as a worker -- understanding what services are in place that will support the father across education and employment and of course, meeting their own developmental needs. Now, what services do we need to provide and help a father boost around managing day-to-day childhood responsibilities with the child's mother, providing them with resources around knowing the developmental needs of their children, especially around critical developmental periods in a child's life. Talking to fathers about managing stress around their children's developmental needs -- understanding that as a child welfare system, some of

these services we will provide. We also have to leverage community-based resources and resources within the family -- so resources that fathers can go to -- once that child welfare system is no longer there to provide those services.

Dr. Robin LaSota

It's so helpful to have some concrete approaches that staff can use to better connect with young fathers in State care. When supporting Black fathers, what do we need to consider?

Dr. Justin Harty

We have to do a better job of understanding contextual factors that are outside of the purview of the child welfare system but will certainly affect a father's ability to parent their children in the way that they would like to. For example, fathers in my study share things like police violence was a constant fear that they had. And how, even if they were not doing anything wrong, just them being Black, worried them that they could be falsely imprisoned or that they could be hyper-surveilled. And that really anytime that they walked out of the door, that they risked arrest or being detained, that would pull them away from their kids. They also talked about the communities in which they live in make it difficult for them to meet the needs of their children. Some fathers shared that, "yeah, being an extended foster care, we receive all these services around education and employment. But when I go back home or when I moved back by my child or back by my relatives, there are no jobs there. I'm getting services around education and employment. They are important, but they're not there. They're there's nothing to match that in the community. I think the thing that we need to learn about racially and ethnically diverse fathers is -- one, they have different needs than white fathers. Two, these are fathers that also have to protect their children from the same things that they worry about. I had fathers in my study, talk about how they viewed being a father of color as a transmission of racial identity to their children. One father shared, he was in the car with his son. He had been pulled over by the police and that he in that moment had to talk to his kid about, like, "Don't make any sudden movements. Don't talk back." I asked them, "Where did you get those messages from?" Those are messages that they got from their family, and not so much from the child welfare system.

Dr. Robin LaSota

Thank you for that; it is certainly helpful to be grounded in how structural and societal racism affects young fathers in care. It's challenging for workers to provide the services needed in the face of these structural inequalities. What strategies would you suggest caseworkers use in light of these inequities?

Dr. Justin Harty

I think cultural competence is a great tool to have to understand how the lived experience of Black fathers is centered on histories of enslavement and histories of systemic racism and inequality. When we prepare Black fathers, we have to prepare them for fatherhood in a racialized society. It has implications on the fathers' lived experience. It has implications for the resources that are available to fathers after they leave the foster care system. And it also has implications for the children as well. And I think as a case worker, we should really know that when we have racially and ethnically diverse fathers, that we understand the cultural complexity of that. My focus is on Black fathers, right. If we have an indigenous young father, that's a whole other set of concerns and obstacles and cultural competence that we have to address. We can go down the list of racially and ethnically diverse fathers, but it's important to understand that a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing the needs of fathers hasn't worked. We have to also address the cultural and racial components of fatherhood.

Dr. Robin LaSota

Would you share a couple of examples on how to tailor culturally relevant support for young Black fathers?

Dr. Justin Harty

When supporting young Black fathers, it's crucial to start by challenging deficit beliefs that often stereotype them as being emotionally or financially disengaged. I think they were that we really need to flip the scripts and recognize the vital roles that these young fathers play in their children's lives. For example, they contribute significantly to their child's

health, well-being, psychological and emotional development, and particularly in shaping positive racial black identity. I also think it's about adopting a positive mindset and really seeing these fathers as active, caring contributors to their families. And, I think that this approach really helps them counter long-standing stereotypes that play Black fathers as uninvolved or even harmful. It's a shift towards acknowledging and appreciation. Of the roles and efforts that these young Black fathers play in their families and child's lives. Additionally, I don't think that we can ignore the unique stressors of Black fathers face, often stemming from racial discrimination and economic challenges linked to things like systemic racism. I think that these pressures can weigh heavily on these young Black fathers' mental health. Yet there's notable stigma around seeking mental health support in many Black communities. I think to address this, we need to offer culturally sensitive mental health resources, and I think that this aspect is key. And I think that these supports not only benefits fathers but also positively impacts their children. I think it's fundamentally about providing a holistic support system that acknowledges and uplifts the unique experiences and strengths of young Black fathers.

Dr. Robin LaSota

Listening to you talk about this new approach is inspiring, I can really hear your passion for this topic. What's next for you? What are you hoping to learn in your future research?

Dr. Justin Harty

I am doing a review of policies for expectant and parenting youth. I look at language that we use in these policies. And these policies tend to say things like "pregnant" or "parenting" or "moms." One question that I have is: "How does the language that we use in our policies guide the practice that we do and is it inclusive of young fathers?" I also want to look at: "How can we better track these young fathers?" I want to find better ways that we track their needs. The resource theory of fathering -- I think it's a great way to do that. Because we can tangibly track a list of resources that workers can provide the father. There's very specific resources that we can track and see if they're receiving them, if they change over time, things like that. I want to know more about the lived experience of other racially and ethnically diverse fathers. I want to know more about fathers fathering on the margins.

Dr. Robin LaSota

You spoke of the limitation of our terminology in relating well to young fathers. What terminology do you recommend?

Dr. Justin Harty

I recommend more inclusive language. Traditionally we have used the word "pregnant" to indicate a youth that is expecting the birth of the child, but that doesn't map well to fathers. For me, expectant is a more appropriate term where these young fathers are awaiting the birth of the child. And I think that when we use the word expectant instead of pregnancy, that flags us to consider is the work that we're doing, not only focused on pregnant mothers, but also expectant fathers.

Dr. Robin LaSota

What strategies do you recommend to workers to build trust with young fathers, so that they feel comfortable sharing that they're expecting?" is louder than the other question audio - is there a way to reduce the volume to align with Dr. Harty or my other question volume level? I added a retake on this, just in case it's helpful.

Dr. Justin Harty

That is certainly complex among populations of people who have historically been harmed or historically have a fear of engaging with the child welfare system. A lot of fathers in my study talked about they were reluctant to notify the child welfare system of their child. They thought that because they were in foster care, that their children also had to be in foster care. Having a relationship between a worker and a young father is vital. It's also vital because we are mandated reporters, and being honest with what mandated reporting means. It's also important when we do learn that they're fathers, they feel confident that, "OK, my worker in the past has always connected me with resources that I needed, has been always been able to help me with this stuff. And so now that I've got a baby, I feel confident that they'll also be able

to do that with my child.” With caseworkers, I just think that that part is pivotal. Being there to listen about their concerns and sometimes those concerns may border what we would consider to be a hotline call.

Talking to fathers about the importance of sharing their thoughts, their concerns about fatherhood, and doing so with honesty. Anyone that has a child can attest to the fact that it's hard, challenging work. I've got three young daughters. I feel like I'm seasoned with fatherhood, but there are times when they frustrate me. But, there are times when I get really mad. I get really angry. And I get aggressive. I knew that was something that I had to watch out for. I had a conversation with another dad who was like, “Hey, like, yeah, this is hard. It's challenging.” And there are times when you have to put the child in the crib, walk away, and you both calm down. And I think that young fathers think that when they share information like that, that they're going to open themselves up to being more surveilled for maltreatment that hasn't actually occurred.

The greatest resource is just being able to listen. Hear what the father's concerns are, and then connecting them with resources to help address those needs, knowing that their families can be supports. That there's great supports in the community among Black fathers. Rich traditions of self-help and mutual aid are available to them. And really knowing how to leverage those. And with this resource theory of fathering, my intention is to create an actual like that workers can look at and say, “OK, I've got a father on my case, I don't know what to do.” They can look at this sheet and say “OK, now I'm starting to get that there are these five buckets of resources, we're already leveraging these through independent living services and programming.” Here are some that aren't covered that this father needs and then connecting them with those.

Dr. Robin LaSota

The stories of these young Black fathers make it clear how important this topic is to our child welfare audience. What final thoughts would you like to share with us?

Dr. Justin Harty

I want to acknowledge the great community of folks that helped me on this journey. First, my mom, who for me was where I learned how to be a father from. Janet Ahern, she's been my muse. My dissertation committee – Dr. Waldo Johnson, Dr. Mark Courtney, both at the University of Chicago, Dr. Jennifer Bellamy at the University of Denver. Also, Stephanie Franklin and Anita Miles at the Teen Parenting Service Network here in Illinois. And Kevin Walsh and Amy Dworsky, who have helped me on the Illinois Department of Children Family Services kind of bureaucracy side of like getting this from an idea that I had, and then translated it into real meaningful guidance for the child welfare system. I just want to thank all those folks. I couldn't have done any of this, without all of them.

Dr. Robin LaSota

To recap, we have been talking with Dr. Justin Harty about using the resource theory of fathering to support young fathers in care. Thank you, Dr. Harty, for sharing your research with us today. We look forward to learning more from your research in the future.

Dr. Heather Fox

Our thanks go out to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign School of Social Work for its support of this podcast series. To our listeners, do you have feedback on the podcast, a topic you'd like to learn more about, or research you'd like to share with our audience? Contact us at DCFS.ORCW@illinois.gov. And thank you for listening to the Translating Child Welfare Research podcast!

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