



How Can Child Support Be a Catalyst to Help Families

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Why listen to me?



- Because I'm not a IV-D insider.
- Because I've been listening to mothers and fathers.
40 years of representing parents
Illinois Child Support Public Awareness Project
- Because I want parents to support their children (but support is a lot more than money).
- And because I hope I may be part of the reason why child support is changing.

A note on “path dependence”



- “Path dependence” refers to the notion that “something that seems normal or inevitable today began with a choice that made sense at a particular time in the past but survived despite the eclipse of the justification for that choice.”
- Example: the qwerty keyboard
- David Brooks 3/29/11 column in the *New York Times*, “Tools for Thinking,” A 29
- Keep the likelihood of path dependence in mind as you think about changing child support

Illinois Child Support Public Awareness Project



- Focus groups with non IV-D parents and family law lawyers.
- What people knew about the child support program.
- What people thought about the child support program.
- What people wanted in a child support program.
- Where people got information about child support.

Eight Suggestions for Action



- Reframe your mission to appeal to parents' better sides and their longing to help raise their children.
- Understand why parents avoid the IV-D program.
- Tailor outreach to subgroups—but don't say contradictory things.
- Enroll parents earlier rather than later.
- Avoid and deal with arrearages.
- Protect your reputation.
- Become a clearinghouse for referrals to services for families and for parenting wisdom.
- Review your policies for fairness.

But first make sure you did your homework



- Get the statistics on California children and their parents
 - Numbers
 - Ages
 - Residential status, including stepparents and quasi-stepparents
 - Income and employment
 - Immigration status
 - Other relevant data

#1 Reframe the Mission



- Don't talk about "welfare cost recovery."
- Don't talk about enforcement.
- Never, ever use the word "deadbeat." It's insulting to all fathers.
- Do talk about helping parents be good parents and that includes all parents, married or unmarried.
- Use "support" as a verb that includes a lot more than money, that is, love, attention, discipline, time, etc.
- Aim to help parents get on track and stay on track paying a fair amount of financial support.
- Talk about the IV-D services as like "preventive care" for parent-parent and parent-child relationships

#2 Understand Why Parents Avoid IV-D

- It's a welfare/poor people's program. "Stigma."
- It's for people who have "problems."
- Enrolling will insult the other parent, suggest lack of trust, or otherwise "rock the boat."
- Enrolling and dealing with IV-D is too complicated, time consuming, frustrating, or unproductive.
- Friends, family, and even their lawyers told them IV-D is worthless.
- It offers no benefit to non-custodial parents.

#3 Tailor and Target Outreach



- The lesson of the Illinois child support pamphlet—it overwhelmed and turned off parents.
- Too much info, too much attention to welfare clients, “cooperation” sounded coercive, scary to people supposed to pay support.
- Better—shorter pamphlets or enrollment invitations for people in different circumstances—newly separated or divorced; new parents; parents owed substantial support; parents behind in support.
- Offer hope to parents with arrearages—they are scared, really scared.

#4 Enroll Parents Sooner Rather Than Later



- Market the IV-D Program as useful to parents at stage 1 of their separated parenting lives—"preventive care."
- Set child support in a fair amount that both parents understand.
- Explain and explain again how things work— withholding orders, the SDU, the timeframes , and who to contact with questions.
- Explain and explain again the need to ask for a modification if income or living arrangements change.
- Explain and explain again what financial child support is and what it's used for and that children need and deserve more kinds of support from both parents.

#5 Avoid and Deal with Arrearages



- Arrearages are like tooth aches—people are afraid to get help.
- Arrearages drive parents away from their children.
- Reach out to people with arrearages with credible invitations to discuss the situation.
- Develop realistic payment plans.
- Readily modify the plans.
- Hold off on enforcement while people are in compliance.
- Recruit people who dealt with their arrearages as spokespeople.

#6 Protect Your Reputation



- Parents hear about IV-D from family, friends, and sometimes from their lawyers or social workers.
- Every dissatisfied IV-D customer will discourage others from enrolling.
- Every satisfied IV-D customer will encourage others to enroll.
- Same for lawyers and social workers.
- So respect and follow through are crucial.
- Be cautious and thoughtful in your press releases—talk about your mission first and the numbers last and include information on services to non-custodial parents, too.

#7 Become a Clearinghouse



- Why? Because child support services touch more children than any other public institution except the school system.
- How?
- Make your website a source of information for all parents about things important to parents—social services, health services, and, by age range, information about child development and parenting. (Maybe OCSE would produce ???)
- Train child support staff on referrals.

#8 Discard Unfair Policies



- All parents think anything less than 100% pass through is unfair and disrespectful of parents efforts.
- Most parents think each child should get an equal slice of the financial support pie.
- Most parents think that the needs of the children living with a parent should be taken into account in setting support for other children.
- The public is surprised that that child support arrearages cannot be reduced retroactively and thinks this is unfair.
- Stepparents??
- Stop jailing people.

A Note on Quadrennial Review



- Use it as an opportunity for a thorough review of your guidelines and related policies.
- Use it as an opportunity to get consensus, buy-in from parents and their advocates.

Contact Information



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