

# FATHER FACTORS

WHAT SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCH  
TELLS US ABOUT FATHERS AND HOW TO WORK  
WITH THEM

by John Hoffman

Peterborough  
2011

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In memory of my father, Bill Hoffman

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Page 40: Sunny McKechnie

Page 46: Brian Russell

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# Introduction

I started writing about fathers in 1988. Back then it was hard to find any Canadian experts or specialists in the field of fatherhood. By the mid-1990s that started to change, and the pace of academic and professional activity and interest in fathers increases year by year.

Fathers' programs have popped up all over the country. Regional father-involvement initiatives and networks have hosted conferences and training sessions to help organizations learn how to include fathers in programs and services for families.

On the research front, the Father Involvement Research Alliance (FIRA) completed the most extensive fatherhood research project Canada has ever seen and hosted a major international conference, which attracted academics and professionals from all over the world. And the number of individual academics and researchers focusing on fatherhood — both in Canada and throughout the world — is expanding so quickly it's hard to keep up with new research.

Accompanying this explosion of activity and knowledge is a steady murmur of public and academic discourse about fathers and the roles they should be playing in families. Much of the discussion has centered on three main themes:

- Are fathers doing enough?
- How does fathering differ from mothering?
- Is father involvement uniquely beneficial, even necessary, for healthy child development?

A number of articles and reports have summarized empirical evidence on the effects of father involvement on children's development. This work has opened up much-needed dialogues about the importance of fathers in children's lives and how society needs to do more to support men in their role as parents.

My purpose is to nudge the public conversation about fathers in new directions by focusing on some areas of research that have received less attention. Thus, this report is not about the benefits of responsible, involved fathering or male

parenting. It takes the value of fathering as a given. Instead I have pulled together findings from a wide body of research that can help us develop a deeper understanding of:

- the factors that have an impact on the ways in which men undertake their parenting roles and responsibilities;
- how mothers and fathers influence each other;
- father-child relationships and how they are built; and
- how community supports and services can address the diverse needs and aspirations of Canadian fathers.

Although I focus primarily on research-based knowledge, this document includes some lessons from the field as well. It is intended to be more of a discussion paper than a scholarly research summary. I will not only present findings, but also propose what they mean in terms of how we should think about and work with fathers. This report is written primarily for practitioners — professionals of various kinds who work with families — although some academics and perhaps even some parents may find it useful.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge that Canadian fathering is richly diverse. Our reality includes everything from stay-home, primary-caregiver dads to men who seldom or never see their children. Along with married and common-law fathers, it includes stepfathers and single dads, men who share parenting responsibilities with both a partner and an ex-partner, gay fathers parenting with a male partner or co-parenting with a lesbian couple, and families where grandparents are highly involved in child rearing. It also includes men whose life experiences and marginalization in society have made it difficult for them to take on the roles and responsibilities expected of fathers today.

Let us all bear that diversity in mind as we discuss and think about how to improve our understanding and support of fathers in the roles they play in families, and as we grapple with questions like, "What is a good father?"

*John Hoffman*

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## CHAPTER 1

# EXTERNAL INFLUENCES ON THE FATHERHOOD ROLE: ENGAGED FATHERING SOMETIMES REQUIRES MORE THAN MOTIVATION

In the past 15 years, many Canadian academics and practitioners have come to recognize the importance of paying more attention to fathers. That is partly because these observers increasingly see the need for, and the need to support, increased father involvement in today's families. It is also because numerous good quality studies have been published showing that when fathers become positively engaged in parenting, it is good for children<sup>1,2</sup> and families, and for fathers themselves.<sup>3</sup>

However, to comprehensively support fathers — to fully “harness” father involvement as an asset for family well-being — we need more than societal and professional buy-in that dads are important. We need to understand the factors that support or interfere with men's ability to effectively assume the evolving role of father.

### **The ecological sensitivity of the fatherhood role**

A considerable body of research shows that numerous factors affect men as they construct their roles as parents, build relationships with children, and work out how to share parenting responsibilities with their partners.

And here is what this research points to, simply put: Connected, engaged fathering is less of a sure thing than connected, engaged mothering. That is because, as this chapter will show, external, contextual factors are more likely to negatively, or — and here is where great

potential lies — positively impact the fathering role than the mothering role.

This vulnerability of the fathering role was, in fact, the principal conclusion of a 1998 review of father-related research by William Doherty, Edward Kouneski and Martha Erickson of the University of Minnesota. “Fathering can be conceptualized as more contextually sensitive than mothering,” they wrote.<sup>4</sup>

And we are not just talking about how external factors affect the quality of a man's parenting. Clearly, influences such as stress, fatigue and lack of support or knowledge can interfere with a mother's parenting capacity. With a father the issue is more elemental: External factors can affect his engagement and investment in the role of parent, and in some cases, even whether or not he remains present in the family.

Doherty and his colleagues argued that, “the cultural norms are stricter on the centrality and endurance of the mother-child dyad, regardless of what is happening outside that relationship. Father-child relations, on the other hand, are culturally defined as less dyadic and more multilateral, requiring a threshold of support from inside the family and from the larger environment. Undermining from the mother or from a social institution or system may induce many fathers to retreat from responsible fathering unless their own individual level of commitment to fathering is quite strong.”<sup>5</sup>

In other words, while external influences and pressures affect both mothers and fathers, they

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are less likely to make mothers retreat from the parenting role.

This puts a huge weight on mothers' shoulders. Society has recognized this and supports maternal health and well-being through research, programs, services and policies. These initiatives may not always be adequate, but the well-being of mothers, particularly as it relates to their role in child development, is writ large in public dialogue around child and family health.

The sensitivities and potential vulnerabilities of the fathering role are less well understood and less recognized in family-related policies, programs and services.<sup>6</sup> Coming to grips with these factors is central to improving our understanding of fathering and how to support it.

### **The transition to fatherhood**

Some key influences on the fathering role are most significant during the transition to fatherhood. Fathers come to parenting with less psychological, social and emotional preparation than mothers. As sociologist Andrea Doucet of Carleton University pointed out in an interview published in *Today's Parent* magazine, thinking and planning about reproduction and child-bearing become very real for girls at a much earlier age than they do for boys. "When girls start their periods, they have to start planning around their child-bearing capacities: 'When do I have to bring tampons to school? Where do I put them?' As young women, they are thinking, 'When am I going to have children? How many will I have?' Young men don't think about those things nearly as much."<sup>7</sup>

Even when today's more egalitarian men strive to share parental responsibilities with their spouses, Doucet points out that their behaviour, developing identity and sense of responsibility as parents are not as strongly reinforced in a social context. "Women have networks to support their parenting: new-mother groups where they share birthing stories, play groups, mommy blogs and parenting forums where they share

parenting concerns and advice. Fathers are beginning to develop networks via fathers' programs and daddy blogs, both of which are on the increase. But comparatively speaking, social networks and peer supports for fathers, especially those with infants and preschoolers, are much less well-developed and available."<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, fathers enter parenthood without the biological and experiential head start provided by pregnancy, child bearing, breastfeeding and maternity leave. They also come to fatherhood with less practical experience and knowledge of children than most women. One empirical window on this difference between fathers and mothers was provided by a recent study at the University of Regina. Doctoral student Phillip Sevigny found that mothers' ratings of their parenting competence (parenting self-efficacy) were correlated with their ratings of their general competence, but men's self-rated general competence was unrelated to their feelings of competence as fathers.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that women, who have the socially-embedded knowledge that all sorts of women before them mastered the skills of mothering, assume that their general competencies will stand them in good stead in their mothering. Men look at their general competencies and do not see the same connection.

It all points to a steeper learning curve for fathers, even though all parents must learn on the job. This helps explain concerns and frustrations documented in qualitative research with new fathers. In a meta-analysis of ten qualitative studies on the experiences of new fathers, Janice Goodman of Massachusetts General Institute of Health Professions found that while most men approached parenthood wanting to be positively involved, there was often a substantial disconnect between men's hopes and expectations and the realities of new parenthood. Bonding with infants was often harder and took longer than men expected. They often felt inadequate if their wives were

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breastfeeding, and the adjustment to fatherhood often proved to be “disruptive, disappointing, and frustrating. Men realized they lacked the skills, experience, support, time and recognition they needed for fathering.”<sup>10</sup>

In spite of such challenges, we know that many men become highly engaged and effective new parents. However, the lesson is that while practitioners often think of the transition to fatherhood as an ideal time for men to become engaged and invested in their new role — which it is — new parenthood is also a sensitive period when fathers may need the most support.

Another key idea coming out of Goodman’s article is that fathers have to make a more conscious choice than mothers to become involved parents. As Goodman wrote, “The uncomfortable reality of the early weeks with a newborn led fathers to make a conscious decision to work at becoming the kind of fathers they wanted to be.”<sup>11</sup> Although mothers usually find the responsibilities and demands of early parenthood to be overwhelming — often harder than they expected — few of us would think of new mothers as having to *decide* to become involved in parenting.

### **Do fathers get enough support?**

Anyone who works with families knows how parents can flourish with high levels of support, and struggle in its absence. A major survey of Canadian parents suggests that fathers feel less supported as parents than mothers do.

In 2006, Invest in Kids, a Canadian charity focused on early childhood development, surveyed over 2,500 Canadian partnered parents. Almost 900 respondents were fathers, which makes this one of the larger surveys of Canadian fathers ever to be undertaken. The main purpose of the survey was to assess how much support Canadian fathers and mothers felt in their role as parents. Results revealed that fathers perceive that society is more supportive of mothers than fathers. Only 27% of fathers agreed strongly with

the statement, “I think Canada values the role of fathers,” whereas 51% agreed strongly that Canada values the role of mothers.

Other data showed that men depend primarily on their partners for support, while mothers were more likely to draw support from multiple sources. Significantly fewer fathers than mothers reported feeling highly supported by their own parents (46% of fathers vs. 55% of mothers). And only one-third of fathers reported receiving high levels of support from extended family and friends, compared to half of mothers.

What difference does support make? Fathers reporting high levels of support from their partners were twice as likely to report optimal levels of positive parenting behaviour (as defined by Invest In Kids). Fathers reporting high levels of support from their own parents were 40% more likely to report optimal levels of positive parenting behaviour and 70% more likely to express confidence in their parenting than fathers with lower levels of support.<sup>12</sup>

### **Support in the workplace**

Since most fathers are employed full-time (94% in 2006)<sup>13</sup>, the workplace is another area where social support, or lack thereof, can have a substantial impact on fathers’ parenting, particularly the amount of time and energy men have to attend to parenting responsibilities. Although fathers’ use of parental and personal leave (for family responsibilities) continues to increase (see Chapter 2), evidence suggests that there is considerable variation in how well men’s parental responsibilities are supported in various workplaces. The authors of a major review of Canadian policies and policy areas affecting father involvement noted: “Many organizations that do have ‘family-friendly’ policies and practices actually remain gendered in their expectation that such programs are mostly for mothers.”<sup>14</sup>

## Providing is important to dads

Here is an interesting paradox: Fathers tend to work longer hours than mothers (even when both parents work full-time), which reduces the time they are available to be with children. However, research — some of it going back as far as the Great Depression — has consistently found that lack of labour market success tends to have a more negative impact on fathering than mothering. Doherty and his colleagues noted, “It is clear that the quality of fathers’ interactions with their children is tied to the father’s success, real or perceived, as a breadwinner.”<sup>18</sup>

In a longitudinal study of 40 Canadian heterosexual new parent couples, long work hours were not found to deter fathers’ involvement in child care and parenting. However, anxiety about work and financial stress did have a negative impact on how involved fathers were with their children.<sup>19</sup>

In a Canadian study of Russian immigrant and Sudanese refugee fathers, one finding was that disruption to the provider role (a common experience in immigrant families) often interfered with men’s capacity to fulfill their roles as fathers. Study author David Este, a professor of social work at the University of Calgary, explains: “Not only is it difficult for these fathers to meet their children’s material needs, which they see as a very important part of their role; they also worry about being the right kind of role model for their children... that their children

might get the message that working hard and getting a good education, which these men did in their home countries, does not translate into good employment opportunities.”<sup>20</sup>

Other Canadian research shows that the link between employment and parenting identity is particularly potent for young fathers. One study found that young fathers’ confidence as parents was very closely linked to their success in the job market, yet the jobs available to these men were “generally precarious and unstable.”<sup>21</sup>

## Risks to father-child relationships

Parents of either gender can experience damage to or even the loss of relationships with their children. For fathers, however, the risk is higher, largely because so many fathers live apart from, and have considerably reduced contact with, their children after divorce and separation.

Canadian data on the living arrangements of separated/divorced fathers and children has been hard to find, largely because the Canadian census can only identify parents who live with their children, rendering non-resident fathers invisible.<sup>22</sup> However, two studies based on data from other surveys shed some light on the living arrangements of divorced fathers. One analysis of data pertaining to separated and divorced parents who had written or

verbal arrangements for spending time with children (including court decisions) found that

### Unique challenges for fathers in certain communities

In two different studies, newcomer Sudanese<sup>15</sup> and Ethiopian<sup>16</sup> fathers referred to the difficulties of raising children in Canada. They spoke of having to assume a more active role in child care than is expected of men in their home countries, and also said that they and their partners were raising children with considerably less informal family and community support than they would have had in their countries of origin. The fathers identified this as a major parenting challenge.

In a study of Canadian gay, bisexual and queer fathers and prospective fathers, men reported feelings that go beyond lack of support. These fathers felt isolated — effectively invisible in a culture where heterosexual mother/father families are the monolithic norm.<sup>17</sup>



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about 70% of fathers lived primarily or entirely apart from their children.<sup>23</sup> An analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) yielded similar results. Among children whose parents had separated in 1998/99 and not reunited two years later, 72% lived primarily apart from their fathers.<sup>24</sup>

Divorce does not always have a negative impact on father-child relationships. In fact, in Constance Ahrons' 20-year study of 173 children whose parents had divorced, about half of her subjects said that their relationship with their father actually improved after divorce.<sup>25</sup> Data from Canada's NLSCY indicates that about 40% of children of divorced or separated parents actually increased contact with their fathers between 1994-95 and 1996-97. However, the majority of children (60%) decreased contact with their fathers over that two-year period, and overall, close to half of the children were seeing their fathers either sporadically (22%) or not at all (23%) by the 1996-97 cycle of data collection.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, an American study found that the average divorced father saw his children four times a month and that 20% did not see their children at all.<sup>27</sup> So clearly, a substantial minority of fathers experience a disruption in their relationships with their children after separation or divorce.

Evidence suggests that this risk is heightened for fathers with daughters. In the Virginia Longitudinal Study of Divorce, which followed children into young adulthood, 70% of youth from divorced families reported feeling close to their mothers, while only one-quarter of girls and just under one-third of boys reported feeling close to their fathers.<sup>28</sup> In Ahrons' study, almost three-quarters of children who reported poor post-divorce relationships with their fathers were female.<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that both of these studies were launched at a time when joint custody and shared parenting were less common than they are now.

## **Do role models matter?**

It seems self-evident that lack of a hands-on father role model from their own experience would present a challenge for men who are called upon to share child care and parenting responsibility more equally with women. However, research on the impact of role models is mixed, showing that some men use their own fathers' lack of involvement as a motivator to fuel their commitment to a more engaged parenting role, while for others, lack of an involved father model is an impediment.<sup>30</sup>

Some Indigenous fathers face an additional barrier — essentially, not having had the experience of being parented at all. In Canada's first-ever study of Indigenous fathers, led by Jessica Ball and Ron George of the University of Victoria, 86% of the 90 participants referred in some way to "disrupted intergenerational transmission of fathering" due primarily to the negative influence of residential schools and similar "colonial interventions," which caused huge disruptions in Aboriginal families when these men were growing up. As a result, some fathers in this study acknowledged that when their first child was born they were not ready to assume responsibility for children. Not surprisingly, about half of the subjects reported little or no contact with their first-born children. Some said participation in treatment programs for substance abuse or anger management helped prepare them to take on a positively involved role with subsequent children, in some cases years after they first became parents.<sup>31</sup>

## **Fathers' attitudes make a difference**

Research shows that men with attitudes that support gender equality and who have personality traits such as openness, sociability, and extroversion, tend to engage in a wider range of activities and take more responsibility for the care of their children.<sup>32</sup> These personal factors would influence mothers as well. However,



according to the authors of a review of studies on factors affecting fathers' levels of involvement in their families, personal attitudes and traits appear to be a more important influence on fathering than on mothering. "Because women have been socialized to assume primary responsibility for children, the level and quality of their commitment to children is less likely to be influenced by their attitudes, beliefs and personality traits."<sup>33</sup>

**Take it home: Lessons from this chapter**  
Although both mothering and fathering are influenced by contextual factors, such factors are more likely to have a negative impact on the fathering role. It is not that any single challenge — unemployment, insufficient social support, lack of a role model or living apart from children after separation — will prevent a man from taking on the kind of fathering role his family needs. However, a father may be severely challenged if negative contextual influences

cluster together or combine with other social factors, not discussed here, but known to negatively affect parenting capacity — factors such as poverty, lack of education, addiction, mental illness or racism.

Doherty and his colleagues argued that initiatives that focus only on fathers themselves — their parenting skills, knowledge of child development, or valuing of the fathering role, will primarily benefit men who already have supportive social and economic environments. “Fathers whose context is less supportive — for example, fathers who do not live with their children, who have strained relationships with the mother or who are experiencing economic stress — will need more extensive and multilateral efforts to support their fathering.”<sup>34</sup>

**The transition to parenthood is a critical period in fathers’ development.** Modern fathers continue to adjust to new role expectations with less societal support than mothers and without the ideological support of a socio-political movement such as feminism. Moreover, outside of the traditional realms of providing and protection, which many fathers still regard as important parts of their identity, the continually evolving role of father is less clearly socially prescribed and embedded in societal consciousness than the role of mother. The transition to parenthood is an opportune time to engage fathers but also a time to be very sensitive to their needs and uncertainties.

**In order to support and enhance fathering, practitioners should be prepared to address the contextual factors as well as parenting skills.** If a father is struggling under the weight of challenges and negative influences, trying to motivate him or train him to be more sensitive and responsible towards his children may be a waste of time and resources. The most effective and comprehensive efforts to support fathers, whether at the level of policy or local program and practice, must include, or be linked to, concrete efforts to assess and address the systemic barriers and individual challenges facing fathers and potential fathers.

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## CHAPTER 2

### THE MOTHER OF ALL INFLUENCES: HOW DADS ARE SHAPED BY MOMS

The evidence for the influence of mothers on father involvement is so substantial and multi-faceted that it merits a separate chapter. That influence begins with something simple: whether or not mothers work outside the home.

#### **When moms have jobs, dads parent more**

A key factor driving the increased involvement of fathers in the care of young children has been the increased number of mothers of young children who work outside the home.

Consider the following statistics, which show how fathers' participation in various aspects of child care has grown in lockstep with mothers' increased participation in the labour force.

These statistical trends confirm what other studies have shown. Simply put: Fathers tend to be more involved with children when their partners are employed<sup>1</sup> and/or work non-standard hours,<sup>2</sup> and when the mother earns more than the father.<sup>3</sup>

Table 1. Changes in fathers' caregiving and mothers' workforce participation

|  | Then          | Now           |
|--|---------------|---------------|
| Percentage of Canadian parent couples where the father was the sole earner <sup>4</sup>              | 30% (1986)    | 17% (2008)    |
| Number of fathers who worked part-time while their spouses worked full-time <sup>5</sup>             | 16,555 (1984) | 50,315 (2009) |
| Percentage of women in two-income families who earn more than their partner <sup>6</sup>             | 18% (1982)    | 29% (2003)    |
| Hours of direct child care per day by fathers of preschoolers <sup>7</sup>                           | 1.0 (1986)    | 1.6 (2005)    |
| Percentage of fathers with preschoolers who reported daily participation* in child care <sup>8</sup> | 57% (1986)    | 73% (2005)    |
| Proportion of stay-home parents who are fathers <sup>9</sup>   | 4% (1986)     | 12% (2009)    |

\*Statistics Canada's General Social Survey asks respondents to report participation in paid work, child care, and housework based solely on their activity on the day prior to filling out the survey. This means that some respondents may report not having done an activity that they normally do on many days. 90% of mothers reported participation in child care in both 1986 and 2005.

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## A new look at maternal “gatekeeping”

One of the more frequently discussed aspects of mothers’ influence on fathering is “maternal gatekeeping,” which Sarah Allen and Alan Hawkins defined as mothers’ beliefs and behaviours that inhibit greater father involvement in families.<sup>10</sup> Studies have found that when mothers are less supportive of fathers’ involvement in child care, fathers are less likely to be involved. For example, a 2005 study found that mothers’ views on how large a role fathers should play in parenting were a bigger influence on father involvement than fathers’ own views of their commitment to the parenting role. Brent McBride of the University of Illinois concluded: “A father’s perception of himself as a parent is only positively related to accessibility [to his child] when the mother believes that fathers should be involved parents.”<sup>11</sup>

Most of the research and discussion about gatekeeping has focused on the things mothers do to discourage or restrict their partners’ involvement. However, one 2008 study, which included in-home observations of mothers and fathers interacting with their babies, found that maternal encouragement was the factor most strongly associated with greater involvement of fathers in baby care. Men were somewhat less likely to be involved when their partners were critical of their parenting, but the positive impact of encouragement was larger than the negative impact of criticism.<sup>12</sup>

Discussion about maternal gatekeeping is often couched in terms of mothers’ interference with father involvement or their reluctance to share parenting territory. However, another view is that some maternal behaviour which is labelled “gatekeeping” is not about territorialism in the parenting realm, but about mothers trying to manage their deeply felt primary responsibility for their children’s well-being by ensuring that their children’s needs are met as efficiently as possible. When faced with a choice between allowing her husband time and space to develop

his ability to comfort their squalling baby, and taking over to do it in a way she knows will work quickly, a mother may choose the latter because she sees the baby’s well-being as her prime directive.

## The flip side of gatekeeping

In a longitudinal qualitative study of 40 heterosexual new parent couples, sociologist Bonnie Fox of the University of Toronto<sup>13</sup> documented the acute sense of responsibility felt by new mothers. Some mothers said they tried to do “everything” at first because they saw the baby as primarily their responsibility. Mothers also felt they had to develop their skills quickly because they knew they would be spending a lot of time caring for the baby on their own.

One of Fox’s conclusions was that some of the behaviour labelled “gatekeeping” actually consists of mothers protecting fathers. Almost two-thirds of the mothers in her study protected their partners in various ways from the disruption of living with an infant, Fox reported. Some sacrificed their own sleep needs so their husbands, who had to go to work in the morning, could get a good night’s sleep. Others protected their partners from the work of caregiving to help them to enjoy new parenthood and bond with the baby. “These women routinely urged their partners to play with the baby when they were home, while the women did housework.”<sup>14</sup>

In one sense, Fox’s findings flip the idea of gatekeeping on its head. However, on a practical level, protecting had a similar impact to gatekeeping. Fox wrote, “The more the women protected their partners, the less the men were involved in the nitty-gritty of infant care — or even aware of the women’s need for support.”<sup>15</sup>

Fox also found that many women actively worked to draw their partners into their baby’s world, often by saving one task that could become dad’s domain or by simply pushing them to become involved.

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This finding is echoed in other research. In one small study, 18 of 23 mothers reported engaging in various efforts to enhance father-child relationships. The mothers suggested activities for dad and child to do together, praised fathers for their involvement, and even mediated when father and child were upset with each other.<sup>16</sup>

Fathers, however, don't necessarily experience mothers' facilitation as helpful. In a study of 205 francophone fathers conducted by Geneviève Bouchard and Catherine Lee of the University of Ottawa, men reported that their wives did try to help them but that they often found their partners' assistance to be discouraging rather than helpful.<sup>17</sup>

### **How mothers' influence affects new dads**

Gatekeeping, helping, hindering, encouraging, protecting — call it what you will. It all points to the idea that early parenting is, as sociologist Andrea Doucet calls it, a “mother-led dance.” Mothers tend to play a leadership role in early parenting, which can often affect the way fathers construct their roles and involvement, even in a situation of role-reversal where the mother is the chief earner and the father is home with the children. In her study of primary caregiver fathers, Doucet documented that even stay-home fathers “give greater symbolic and practical significance to the role mothers play with children.” As one father in her study put it, “As a stay-home father you can never replace the mother. Don't even think about it.”<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Bouchard and Lee found that fathers' sense of their own competence as parents was most strongly influenced by the extent to which they received the message that their partners thought they were competent. That is significant because, in this study, men's sense of their own competence was the biggest driver of their motivation to be involved in parenting.<sup>19</sup> Men also influence their own competence through the efforts they make to develop child care skills, but mothers' influence remains a key factor that must be taken into account in our understanding of how the fathering role develops.

Psychologist Ruth Feldman, of the Brain Research Center at Bar-Ilan University in Israel, was actually able to measure maternal impact on fathers' ability to relate socially with their infants. In a study designed to compare parents of full-term and pre-term babies on their ability to relate socially to their infants, the quality of a mother's bonding behaviour (including mother-infant gaze, expressions of emotion and affectionate touch) was found to have a direct impact on her

### **Mom's support crucial for young or divorced dads**

The work of Annie Devault, of l'Université du Québec en Outaouais, documented how mother-father relations can be particularly crucial for young fathers. In two different studies she found that the level of support young fathers received from their child's mother and the quality of their relationship with her had a substantial impact on their level of involvement.<sup>20, 21</sup> In the Father Involvement Research Alliance's New Fathers study, more than half of the young men lived apart from the child's mother and, in general, they perceived “that the contact they have with their child is shaped by the mother's choices.” One-third did not see their child at all, and the non-resident fathers who did see their child generally reported a good relationship with the child's mother.<sup>22</sup>

The influence the mother-father relationship can have on fathers' involvement continues after separation or divorce. Conflict between ex-partners tends to reduce the involvement of non-resident fathers.<sup>23</sup> A review of research on non-resident fathers found that fathers' levels of contact, feelings of closeness and even their ability to parent authoritatively were consistently related to the quality of the man's relationship with the child's mother.<sup>24</sup>





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partner's bonding behaviour. In other words, when mothers were less adept at bonding behaviour, their partners tended to be less adept as well. But fathers' bonding behaviour did not seem to affect the mothers' bonding.<sup>25</sup>

### **The impact of the spousal relationship**

Numerous studies have shown that the quality of the spousal relationship has a major influence on father involvement. Clearly, this relationship affects both mothers and fathers. In fact, one of the early findings in a 30-year program of research about interventions to help couples navigate the stresses of early parenthood, was that helping couples address postpartum relationship issues tended to lead to more effective parenting, particularly for fathers.<sup>26</sup>

In his recent examination of differences and similarities between mothers and fathers, psychologist Ross Parke of the University of California at Riverside, who has been researching fatherhood since the 1970s, concluded: "The evidence suggests that the father-child relationship is altered more than the mother-child relationship by the quality of the marriage."<sup>27</sup> He attributes this in part to the greater socially defined clarity of the motherhood role (mentioned in Chapter 1): "Because the paternal role is less well-articulated and defined than the maternal role, spousal support may serve to help crystallize the boundaries of appropriate role behavior."<sup>28</sup>

### **Benefits and challenges of coparenting**

Mothers and fathers have always influenced each other's parenting in various ways. However, mothers' influence on fathers is likely heightened in today's parenting ethos, where fathers are expected to take on more child care and other domestic duties formerly (and, to some extent, still) seen as women's work.

The increasing involvement of fathers in day-to-day parenting spawned the new domain of coparenting research in the 1990s. In this

research, coparenting refers to the ways in which married and cohabiting parent couples are able to parent together in a coordinated and mutually supportive way. This does not necessarily imply equal sharing of responsibilities and tasks, but rather how parents work as a team (or not) as they raise their children. This body of research has yielded four important lessons:

**Ineffective coparenting is associated with behaviour problems and poorer self-regulation in preschoolers.** In James McHale's Families Through Time Study, children of parents who struggled with coparenting were found to have poorer social and emotional skills along with less well-developed ability to control their impulses and attention.<sup>29</sup> Another study found that supportive coparenting contributed to young children's ability to exhibit effortful control (the ability to suppress a dominant impulse when required).<sup>30</sup>

**Coparenting difficulties emerge early and tend to persist.** McHale showed that coparenting problems could be predicted during pregnancy. If, for example, an expectant father had a pessimistic outlook on the impact of the baby on his life, or if his partner was worried about their divergent views on child-rearing, the couple tended to have more difficulty with parenting teamwork. McHale also found that parents who had coparenting difficulties three months into parenthood also tended to have them 27 months later.<sup>31</sup> This tendency for coparenting problems to persist was confirmed in research by Sarah Schoppe-Sullivan, of Ohio State University.<sup>32</sup>

**The quality of coparenting can have a measurable impact on fathers' parenting.** In another of Feldman's studies, her team videotaped fathers' and mothers' behaviour as they interacted with their five-month-old infants at home. They found that the infants paid equal attention to both parents and that mothers' and fathers' behaviour towards the infant was generally comparable. But here is the kicker: Fathers displayed more positive parenting behaviour when their partner's behaviour was

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supportive of the father's involvement. "Mothers, on the other hand, did not require their partners' coparenting mutuality to increase positive behavior."<sup>33</sup>

Another study, which looked at associations between supportive coparenting and mothers' and fathers' attachment to their one-year-old babies, found that fathers and infant sons were more likely to be securely attached in families where parents reported supportive coparenting. Mother-child attachment was unaffected by the presence or absence of supportive coparenting.<sup>34</sup>

**Harmonious coparenting is not easy.** Another Ohio State University study found that coparenting was more supportive and less undermining in couples where father-child interaction consisted primarily of play. When fathers were highly involved in caregiving, coparenting tended to be less supportive and more competitive.<sup>35</sup> Another study found that mothers who rated their husbands to be competent caregivers tended to give themselves lower competence ratings than mothers who reported having less competent partners.<sup>36</sup>

These two findings seem to suggest that fathers' involvement in caregiving is disruptive to mothers in some way. Does this mean fathers should avoid caregiving to achieve coparenting harmony? Probably not. Numerous studies have shown that dissatisfaction with the division of caregiving labour and housework — likely to occur when a father's domestic involvement consists primarily of play — is a common source of discord for parents of young children.<sup>37</sup> In fact, in the study that suggested that competent fathers somehow erode mothers' feelings of competence, the mothers with competent fathers for partners were happier with their marriages than mothers with less competent fathers.<sup>38</sup>

It is more likely that these findings are an indication that sharing parenting responsibilities and caregiving territory is not easy. In fact, it can be quite challenging. Father-child play takes place in a domain of parenting traditionally seen by both mothers and fathers as male, or at least

shared, territory. However, when a father becomes highly involved in caregiving, he has moved into what has traditionally been the mother's domain. The issue here is not just how possessive the mother feels about her territory. It is also about the impact the father's involvement in caregiving has on the strategies and systems the mother has developed for ensuring that her children are well cared for, along with her ways of managing and coping with these responsibilities. Research shows that even in egalitarian families, mothers still feel the moment-to-moment responsibilities of parenting more intensely than fathers do.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, learning to share any complex responsibility is challenging, particularly so during the learning curve of new parenthood.

The potential positive impact of the father's involvement in caregiving is that it can reduce the mother's workload, provide social support and increase the family's overall parenting capacity (see Chapter 4). But, there is evidence that fathers and mothers often interpret those responsibilities (and 'what counts' in terms of fulfilling them) differently. In a national survey of Canadian parents, 69% of fathers said they shared the responsibility of parenting equally with their partner. Only 43% of mothers agreed.<sup>40</sup> And, as noted previously, it is also possible that, on some levels, the father's participation in caregiving is a disruption. It may create more work for the mother, including monitoring the father's caregiving, redoing certain tasks if she feels they weren't done properly, negotiating with him about how, when and by whom specific tasks will be done, and, at times, dealing with the stress of disagreements.

Therefore, a crucial part of developing an optimal coparenting system involves not only the mother's ability to make room for her partner in her world of daily responsibility, but also the father's sensitivity in understanding his partner's experience and sense of responsibility so that he can participate in a supportive, non-disruptive way. Moreover, regardless of how egalitarian any given couple may or may not be, it appears to be

important for parents to come to a coparenting arrangement that works for both of them. A Canadian study of fathers and mothers of children with chronic health conditions found that couples were able to find equilibrium with a variety of levels of shared parenting responsibilities, depending on factors unique to each family. But regardless of the division of labour, coparenting seemed to work best when the arrangement was characterized by a sense of fairness and also a shared sense that the arrangement worked for the parents both as a couple and as individuals. This study also found that the way roles and responsibilities were shared often shifted as family circumstances changed.<sup>41</sup>



### **Gay/bi/queer fathers: The exception to the rule?**

Men who come to parenthood in the context of a same-sex relationship (some gay men become parents in heterosexual relationships) face numerous challenges and barriers, from homophobia to the simple fact that so much parenting discourse (this chapter, for instance) looks at parenting through the lens of mother-father families. However, gay fathers tend not to be subject to the level of maternal influence discussed in this chapter. In fact, there is evidence that gay (and lesbian) parent couples tend to share roles more equitably than heterosexual couples<sup>42</sup> and also that they see themselves as working towards a new ideal of genderless parenting, which they feel may eventually help heterosexual parents evolve towards less gender division in parenting.

In one qualitative study of men who were openly gay when they became parents, participants noted that they did not have the option of falling into a stereotypically male parenting role and that they felt free to take on the parenting roles and tasks that suited them rather than roles prescribed by gendered expectations.<sup>43</sup>

However, this study also showed that gay fathers are not completely freed from the strictures of gender. Like heterosexual fathers, gay fathers often must endure questions like, “Where’s Mom today?” or other social pressures arising from society’s continuing perception that caring for children is a female activity and that men caring for children are substituting for mothers.

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## **Take it home: Lessons from this chapter**

**The fact that mothers have a substantial influence on fathering does not mean that mothers are responsible for father involvement, nor that men have no control over their development as fathers.** In fact, as noted in Chapter 1, men's attitudes, beliefs, personalities and behaviours are strong influences on their development as fathers. Men who are highly motivated to be engaged parents are less subject to the maternal influences discussed here.

**Parent educators and family support workers should start thinking of ways to incorporate material about mothers' impact on fathers into educational curricula and materials for expectant and new parents.** If both mothers and fathers understand maternal influences on the fathering role, they may find it easier to negotiate role sharing and coparenting in early parenthood, and it may help men understand some of their partner's behaviour that affects their involvement as fathers. However, it is absolutely crucial that discussion of maternal influence not be framed as yet another responsibility to dump on new mothers. Fathers also need to understand the importance of their motivation and their need to take conscious steps to become hands-on parents.

**Interventions that enhance the spousal relationship are likely to increase father involvement and improve fathers' parenting.** Phillip and Carolyn Cowan's research (with partners, Kyle Pruett and Marsha Kline Pruett), shows this quite impressively — across different cultures, socio-economic groups and regardless of whether or not parents are married or cohabiting. Supporting the spousal relationship tends to positively influence father involvement.<sup>44</sup> However, relatively few current fathering and parenting programs directly address the spousal relationship in any detail (see Appendix 2).

**Parent education, particularly at the prenatal level, should include material on coparenting.** Although it is clear that effective coparenting is an asset for children and parents in Western nuclear families, it is equally clear that some parents will

need help to do it well. Developing effective coparenting patterns can be very challenging especially during the early years of parenthood. Increased attention to coparenting should also enhance clinicians' efforts to address child behaviour problems. As James McHale stated in an online interview: "If people are working with families where the kids are struggling early on, and they are not paying attention to coparenting problems such as dissonant views or parenting practices between the adults, then they are missing out on a hugely important piece of what's important for the children's ability to develop inner regulation and to internalize the rules and norms of appropriate behaviour."<sup>45</sup>

Educational programs or other interventions designed to enhance father involvement should include material to help fathers understand mothers, and at least some father-related interventions and programs should include mothers. In the conclusion to their 2007 study, Bouchard and Lee wrote: "It is clear that interventions to enhance fathers' involvement with their children must focus not only on fathers, but also on their partners as active participants who affect the father's definition of his role within the family."<sup>46</sup> In the Cowans' project cited above several program models were tested. The version that involved couples did a better job of improving fathers' parenting than an almost identical program that involved fathers alone.<sup>47</sup>

**Providing information to mothers to pass on to fathers may be an effective way of recruiting fathers into programs and services.** Mothers tend to take the parenting lead in most families and mothers are also more likely than fathers to be involved in programs and services for families. Thus, giving mothers information about fathers' programs (to give to their partners) should be an effective way of recruiting fathers. In an online survey of Canadian fathering programs undertaken during the preparation of this report, 42% of respondents said that giving mothers information to give to fathers was one of the most successful recruitment strategies (see Chapter 6).

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## CHAPTER 3

# ATTACHMENT RESEARCH AND FATHERS: JUST GETTING ACQUAINTED

Effective parenting is founded on good parent-child relationships. Attachment theory, the dominant academic framework for assessing parent-child relationships, holds that warm, secure, responsive attachments, developed through patterns of early parent-child interaction, provide a secure base from which a child can explore the world, yet return for comfort in times of distress.

Although most research on attachment has focused on mothers, studies have begun to shed light on father-child relationships as well, confirming — if anyone needed proof — that children do form attachments with their fathers and that the quality of these attachments is linked to positive outcomes for children.<sup>1</sup> Hardly surprising.

Of more interest is work showing that although there are areas of commonality between father-child and mother-child relationships, there seem to be some areas of difference. Specifically some evidence suggests that:

- The methods used to assess mother-child attachment don't translate perfectly to father-child relationships.
- Play appears to be a more central part of attachment for fathers than for mothers.
- Physical contact and involvement in caregiving are also key platforms for the building of father-child relationships.

### **Assessing father-child attachment**

Parents' ability to be warmly responsive to young children's cues while caring for and interacting with them — often referred to as sensitivity — has been the parenting skill most often assessed in attachment studies. However, some evidence suggests that sensitivity, as measured in studies of mother-child attachment, may not be the best indicator for fathers' attachment to children. In an introduction to a 2007 article, psychologist Geoffrey L. Brown of the University of Illinois characterized empirical findings on the relationship between paternal sensitivity and children's attachment security as less conclusive than the findings on the relationship between maternal sensitivity and attachment. "Some studies have, in fact, found no significant associations between fathering sensitivity and father-child attachment security... [however], other studies do report associations between high paternal sensitivity and father-child attachment security."<sup>2</sup> Another article, which reviewed eight attachment studies, reported that six found no connection between fathers' sensitivity (measured in differing contexts) and their attachment to their children. The authors concluded that, on balance, evidence suggests there is a connection between paternal sensitivity and attachment, but it is weaker than the connection between maternal sensitivity and attachment.<sup>3</sup>

This does not mean that sensitivity is irrelevant to father-child attachment. But it does suggest that paternal sensitivity should be viewed through a different lens than maternal sensitivity.

In fact, one of the arguments in Andrea Doucet's book, *Do Men Mother?*, is that although fathers' ways of caring for children are, at times, similar to those of mothers, at other times they are quite different — but still valid. Fathers are more likely to encourage independence and risk-taking than mothers. And while mothers tend to be oriented towards helping upset children feel better, a father's response is often to fix the problem. "While all these dimensions of caring are not normally part of what we consider nurturing behaviour, my argument is that all these elements are important aspects of the emotional responsibility for children."<sup>4</sup>

Other researchers have observed differences in mothers' and fathers' interactions with babies and toddlers. One study, for example, found that even fathers who were primary caregivers, presumably with the most experience in reading children's cues, were less likely than mothers to vocalize, touch, hold and display affection towards their babies.<sup>5</sup> A Canadian study found



that in teaching interactions, such as teaching a baby to shake a rattle, fathers were more goal-oriented and tried harder than mothers to keep the baby on task.<sup>6</sup>

Israeli psychologist Ruth Feldman observed that father-baby interactions were often highly stimulating and less predictable than mother-child interactions. "Father-infant interactions are characterized by frequent, intense bursts of positive arousal and contain quick buildups and declines from peaks of emotional excitement. Father-child play has also been described as less predictable, possibly as these exciting peaks do not follow the same regulated cyclic pattern typical of mother-child interactions."<sup>7</sup>

### Fathers' sensitivity during play

One of the earlier studies which compared fathers' and mothers' attachment-promoting behaviours found that fathers who played positively and sensitively with their infants at age three months tended to have more secure attachments with the baby at age 12 months.<sup>8</sup>

Ten years later, Karin and Klaus Grossmann's longitudinal study, which followed 49 German children through the age of 16, showed that play sensitivity when the children were toddlers was the paternal factor that most strongly predicted healthy attachments at age ten and 16. In contrast, a more general caregiving sensitivity during the first year of the child's life was the maternal factor most strongly related to healthy attachment in older children.<sup>9</sup> The Grossmanns define play sensitivity as the ability to gently challenge the child, while also providing emotional support.

Two other findings from the Grossmanns' study are noteworthy. One is that fathers' play sensitivity did not correlate with secure attachment when measured via the Strange Situation.\* This suggests that the Strange Situation, the classic research test

\* The Strange Situation is a laboratory procedure that assesses attachment style based on a baby or toddler's behaviour upon reunion with the parent (in the original studies, almost always the mother) after having been left alone briefly with a stranger.



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of early attachment, may be an imprecise way of assessing father-child attachment. The other interesting finding is that fathers' scores on the Grossmanns' caregiving index (sensitivity and the quality of caregiving during the child's first year) appeared to have no impact on children's development of healthy attachments; however, they did predict fathers' play sensitivity a few years later. This suggests that fathers' experience in caregiving helps them tune in to their children in a way that increases their sensitivity and responsiveness during play.

It also suggests that fathers' ways of being sensitive to children may be more highly developed and observable in play settings than in caregiving settings, where sensitivity tends to be judged in terms of mothers' ways of responding. This may be partly due to the fact that play tends to account for a larger proportion of father-child interaction than mother-child interaction.<sup>10</sup>

It seems possible that some of the aforementioned differences in mother and father attachment dynamics may be less evident in families where a mother is not present — for example, when a single father or two gay men are parenting without the involvement of a mother or mother figure, although this has not yet been confirmed in research.

### **Connecting and learning through play**

Psychologist Daniel Paquette of the Université de Montréal has argued that these differences in father-child interaction, particularly the centrality of vigorous, exciting play, warrant a new attachment model which he calls the "father-child activation relationship." While mothers' relationships with young children tend to be oriented towards calming and comforting children in times of stress, Paquette says: "Men seem to have a tendency to excite, surprise, and momentarily destabilize children; they also tend to encourage children to take risks, while at the same time ensuring the latter's safety and

security." This dynamic, which sometimes plays out in the context of rough-and-tumble play, Paquette says, "can only be effective in the context of an emotional bond between father and child."<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, there may be a simpler explanation for the connection between fathers, play and attachment. Children love to play, and men tend to be both comfortable with play and good at it, so play often becomes a preferred mode of interaction. One study, in which researchers observed parents interacting with their one-year-old babies in both a teaching task and a free play session, found that children showed more positive emotions and fewer negative emotions while playing with fathers than with mothers. Conversely, they expressed negative emotion more often during physical play with mothers.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that not all fathers play with children in exactly the way described by Paquette (or Feldman earlier in this chapter), nor is there evidence that any particular style of stereotypically dad play is essential for father-child relationships. What matters is that play seems to be an attachment asset for many fathers and children.

Recent research also reveals that for some fathers, play can be an important mechanism by which they learn about children and develop parenting skills. In Jessica Ball's study of Indigenous fathers, which included many men negatively impacted by family trauma caused by the residential school experience, some men reported that one of the ways they learned to parent was through the experience of playing with their children. "Their descriptions of play as a pathway both to engage as fathers and to heal themselves illustrates the dynamic interaction of factors that can increase positive father involvement."<sup>13</sup>

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## Caregiving strengthens the bond

The importance of play sensitivity notwithstanding, other research underscores the importance of not viewing father-child attachment solely as a product of play. There is strong evidence that fathers' caregiving has an impact on their ability to relate to and form relationships with children. Two studies confirm the Grossmanns' finding that father involvement in caregiving does enhance father-child relationships.

One, which assessed father involvement and attachment via questionnaires, found that the infants of fathers who engaged in more caregiving activity such as feeding, dressing and diaper-changing described their relationships with their babies as more positive and secure.<sup>14</sup>

Another of Feldman's studies found that fathers who assumed responsibility for child care developed more emotionally involved relationships with their children and greater sensitivity during father-infant interaction.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, a Canadian study found that fathers who were involved in caregiving were more likely to interact with their toddlers in ways that fostered cognitive growth, even though, yet again, their sensitivity ratings were lower than those of mothers.<sup>16</sup>

There is also evidence that experience caring for babies leads to hormonal changes in men. Psychologist Alison Fleming of the University of Toronto found that, compared to childless men, fathers with experience in infant care had lower levels of testosterone and bigger surges of prolactin — a hormone associated with nurturing behaviour — in response to hearing a tape recording of a baby crying.<sup>17</sup>

It makes perfect sense that caring for children would be an important platform for building father-child relationships. Being involved in daily care increases fathers' opportunities to interact with and get to know their children, and also to develop parenting skills. Parenting skills are important, not only for children's

direct well-being, but also for fathers' identity and confidence in the parenting role. As mentioned in Chapter 1, a father's perception of his own competence is an important motivator for his involvement.<sup>18</sup>

## The road to attachment is longer for dads

Given mothers' biological and social head-start in parenting (see Chapter 2), we might predict that father-child relationships would take longer to develop and solidify than mother-child relationships. This prediction is supported in research. In one qualitative study, Canadian fathers said they felt excluded from the mother-baby world at times and that, compared to their partners, their relationship with their babies was slower to develop.<sup>19</sup>

A study that assessed mutually responsive orientation (MRO) — the ability of parents and babies to communicate, read signals back and forth, and share positive feelings — found that father-baby pairs tended to display less MRO than mother-baby pairs when the babies were seven months old. But over the next eight months, mother-baby MRO stayed about the same while father-baby MRO essentially caught up.<sup>20</sup> That might have been because the fathers' level of experience started to catch up as well, or because babies over the age of seven months are easier to play with.

## The role of physical contact

Most attachment research has focused on parental responsiveness. However, it is clear that touch is a primary mechanism of attachment, for parents and children alike.<sup>21</sup> Brain pathways related to the senses, including touch, are the first brain pathways to develop in infants; thus touch provides one of the key mechanisms by which babies and caregivers exchange signals.<sup>22</sup> These exchanges are important for early brain development, but they also help parents and babies form attachments.

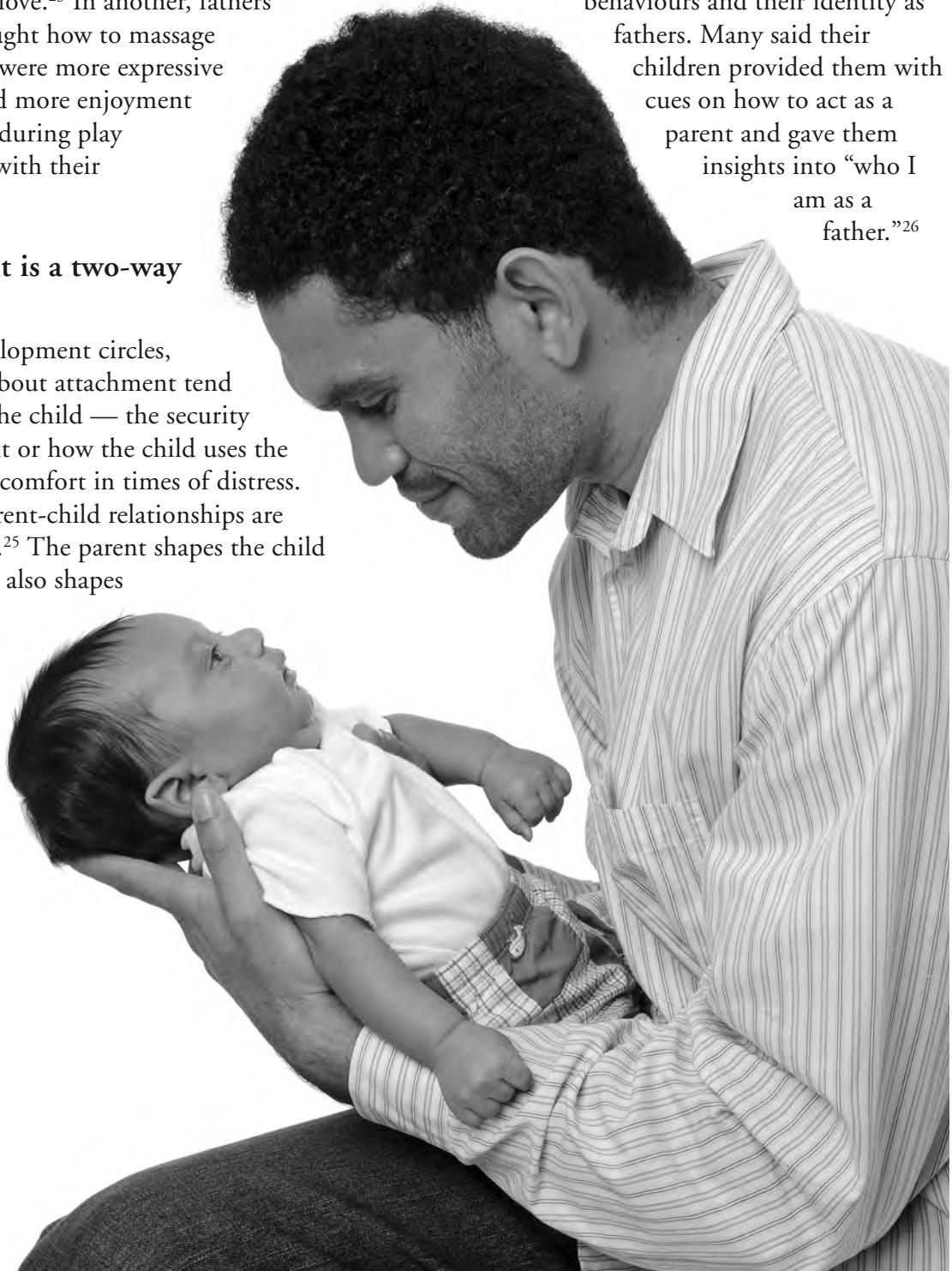
Since men do not breastfeed and tend to be less involved in infant care, fathers have fewer

early opportunities for physical contact with their babies. But when those opportunities do arise, they help fathers bond with and feel close to their babies. In one study, fathers of preterm infants reported that the more they held their babies, the sooner they reported feelings of warmth and love.<sup>23</sup> In another, fathers who were taught how to massage their infants were more expressive and displayed more enjoyment and warmth during play interactions with their infants.<sup>24</sup>

### **Attachment is a two-way street**

In child development circles, discussions about attachment tend to focus on the child — the security of attachment or how the child uses the caregiver for comfort in times of distress. However, parent-child relationships are bidirectional.<sup>25</sup> The parent shapes the child but the child also shapes the parent.

A study of 215 Canadian fathers from diverse backgrounds provides a window on fathers' awareness of having been shaped by their children. In interviews, many men talked about how involvement with their child helped them develop both their parenting behaviours and their identity as fathers. Many said their children provided them with cues on how to act as a parent and gave them insights into "who I am as a father."<sup>26</sup>



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### Take it home: Lessons from this chapter

Professionals should continue to increase their attention on efforts to foster and support father-child relationships. A meta-analysis of studies on attachment interventions designed to enhance positive parenting behaviours found that those that included fathers were, on average, more effective than those that involved mothers only.<sup>27</sup> Including fathers in such interventions will be more effective if the unique trajectories of father-child relationships are well understood and taken into account. Training for practitioners should include material specific to father-child attachment and relationships. However, it is important to focus not only on areas of difference between mothers and fathers but also on areas of commonality.

Prenatal and early parenting educational curricula and materials should cover father-child relationships. Both mothers and fathers need to understand that father-child attachment is important, that it may develop more slowly than mother-child attachment and that fathers (with the support of mothers) will likely need to make conscious efforts to hold and interact with their babies. While it makes sense to honour and support the role of play in father-child attachment, it may be a mistake to overemphasize the fathering role of “playmate.” For one thing, evidence suggests playing with children is already something many fathers do very well. Secondly, families and fathers are very diverse, and play may be more central for some fathers than others. It is also important to educate mothers and fathers about the role that holding and caring for babies plays in father-child attachment.



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**Interventions that promote physical contact or help fathers learn to understand their babies' cues are likely to promote father-child attachment.** As noted earlier, fathers tend to have fewer interactions with young children. While they often begin to catch up to mothers when babies are a little older, some fathers may need extra support to interact with their children in ways that support secure relationships. Interventions that enable fathers to develop caregiving skills may have the “side effect” of facilitating early father-child attachment.

**Interventions that promote and support sensitive father-child play will most likely enhance or protect father-child attachment.** Many Canadian programs for fathers are activity-based, Daddy and Me-type informal drop-in programs that take place in a resource centre play area. That may seem like “soft” intervention to people eager to improve fathers' parenting skills. However, based on the research presented here, any program that enables enjoyable father-child interaction in a supportive environment is likely to be beneficial to father-child relationships and fathers' interaction skills. Although play is not the only mechanism involved in father-child relationships, fathers do tend to spend proportionately more time than mothers playing with children. Play also tends to be something that fathers are comfortable with and good at, and children usually love to play with their fathers. In other words, the unique kind of responsiveness to fathers that children develop through father-child play is an asset to work with in programs and interventions designed to promote father-child relationships.

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## CHAPTER 4

### IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A MOM: DAD IS A MORE IMPORTANT VILLAGER THESE DAYS

Throughout history, societies have recognized the need to support mothers who have recently given birth. The strategies cultures developed to care for new mothers were part of a set of evolutionary adaptations that ensure what anthropologists refer to as reproductive success. When basic survival of the clan was the issue, supporting the new mother consisted not only of providing protection and food (often the fathers' role) but also of having other females care for her baby at times so that she could conserve energy. This helped the mother stay healthy so she would be able to feed, care for and otherwise ensure her baby's survival and be ready to reproduce again as soon as possible.<sup>1</sup>

As societies became more prosperous, people began to focus on the mother's comfort and well-being along with her health. This was often accomplished through the help of female relatives, neighbours, or hired women who did housework, prepared food, and looked after older children or the baby, allowing the mother to recover from giving birth. Although these helpers were probably less inclined to think in terms of mere survival, research shows that adequate care of mothers continued to reduce infant mortality.<sup>2</sup>

One way or another, the strategies used to ensure reproductive success by supporting mothers (and babies) have always been based on specific challenges, stressors and social resources in any given society.<sup>3</sup>

While in most primitive cultures the father's role focused primarily on providing food and protection for females and young, there were

times when fathers' care of children was important in an evolutionary sense. In a 2010 article, anthropologist Lee Gettler of Northwestern University argued that throughout history, the direct male care of young children has, under certain conditions, been one of the strategies for reproductive success. For example, in cultures in which fathers and mothers did a lot of work together — usually hunter-gatherer cultures — fathers would carry babies and toddlers as a means of helping the mothers conserve energy.<sup>4</sup>

Other findings from anthropological work reveal that, historically, fathers became more involved in the direct care of children when other women were less available to help and when mothers contributed more directly to providing.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, both of these conditions exist today in most Western nations. Thus fathers' participation in early baby care and care of the mother is, in an evolutionary sense, one of contemporary society's assets, which can be employed to ensure the well-being of mothers and babies.

#### **Dad's role in today's reproductive success**

One challenge facing today's families is the erosion of the informal female networks that supported mothers up until the 1970s. Today's grandmothers, sisters and female friends are often unavailable because they work outside the home or live far away. This shift puts fathers on the front lines of postpartum maternal support.

Clearly, there is great variation in the postpartum support available to Canadian families. Some mothers still get quite a bit of support from their own mothers and other family members.<sup>6</sup> Some can afford doulas. Some mothers have a female partner, or no partner. And families can have varying cultural attitudes about fathers' postpartum roles. But the bottom line is that one way or another, mothers need social, emotional and practical help, and in many of today's Canadian families the father may be the main person available to provide that support.

### How fathers' support affects mothers

In Bonnie Fox's longitudinal study of Toronto-area new-parent couples, women with lower levels of support from their families were less likely to be positive about motherhood and more likely to feel overwhelmed by responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> Other research reveals that lack of social support and the stress associated with infant care are risk factors for postpartum depression,<sup>8</sup> and also that mothers are much less likely to breastfeed successfully if their partners are not supportive of breastfeeding.<sup>9,10</sup>

Fox's research shows that modern moms seem to understand the importance of their partners' support. One of her striking findings was that although mothers valued support from any source, the person they most wanted it from was their partner: "Support from close family and friends was important, but it was their partner's support that women saw as essential."<sup>11</sup>

Numerous findings provide windows on the ways in which fathers' support is beneficial to mothers. Some studies show that fathers' help even seems to improve mothering.

- In one of the earliest studies of mothers' and fathers' effect on each other's parenting, psychologist Frank Pederson showed that mothers with supportive partners and good marital relationships were better able to pace feedings and read their babies' cues.<sup>12</sup>

- In two separate studies, Israeli psychologist Ruth Feldman found that:
  - a) supportive father involvement in the first year of a baby's life increased maternal sensitivity during play and other social interactions with the infant,<sup>13</sup> and
  - b) when the father was involved in a range of child-care activities, mothers tended to be more sensitive with their infants.<sup>14</sup>
- A Japanese study found that mothers of securely attached infants reported greater levels of spousal support than did mothers of insecurely attached infants.<sup>15</sup>
- In a study of 60 families who had children with special needs, mothers' satisfaction with the amount of help they got from their spouses was associated with greater overall family well-being. Significantly, the mothers' *satisfaction* with the help was a stronger predictor than the *actual extent* of the father's contribution.<sup>16</sup>

Clearly, then, in mother-father families, optimal support from the father can have a substantially positive impact on the mother's capacity for optimal caregiving and interaction with her baby. Much of the dialogue about the importance of fathers has been focused on the benefits of a father's direct involvement with the child. Here we have evidence that fathers can also enhance child development by supporting mothers.

### The impact of postpartum depression

Postpartum depression (PPD) — estimated to affect approximately 13% of mothers<sup>17</sup> — can be devastating to families. Fathers in these families are significantly affected through dealing with the impact of their partners' depression, trying to offer support or, sometimes, by developing symptoms themselves. (A recent meta-analysis of 43 studies estimated that about one in ten men has symptoms of PPD, and that maternal and paternal depressions are sometimes correlated.)<sup>18</sup>

Evidence from several countries suggests that partner-related issues can be a factor in PPD. Poor relationship quality, partner conflict, and



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not feeling close to a partner have been identified as risk factors for PPD.<sup>19</sup> But there is a chicken-and-egg question here. Does the partner relationship problem cause PPD, or does the PPD cause the relationship problem? For example, in a study of almost 400 Canadian mothers, women with PPD had significantly lower perceptions of parenting support from their partners and reported higher levels of conflict.<sup>20</sup> However, lead author Cindy-Lee Dennis acknowledged that depressed women are likely to evaluate their relationships more negatively than are non-depressed women. It is also possible that PPD could contribute to conflict and relationship problems.

What is clear is that partners of women with PPD need information and support. Nicole Letourneau of the University of New Brunswick is engaged in an ongoing qualitative study of men affected by their partners' experience of PPD. The pilot phase of her study offered two findings that shed light on the difficulties fathers face in trying to support a partner with PPD. One might think that fathers are ideally placed to spot problems and help their partners get help quickly. However, five of the 11 men in the pilot study said that although they had considered that their partner might need professional help, they did not fully clue in that something was "wrong" until after the partner had returned to normal. Secondly, all of the fathers said that they did not have enough information about PPD, and most said they did not know where to find it.<sup>21</sup>

Another Canadian study provides evidence that including fathers in PPD programs may be beneficial. The study tested two models of psychoeducation for mothers with postpartum depression: one for women only and one in which mothers attended the group with their partners. Women who attended with their partners had a greater reduction in depressive symptoms than those who attended the group on their own.<sup>22</sup>

Thus, emerging research tells us that paying more attention to how fathers are affected by

PPD, combined with efforts to help fathers support their partners, may lead to benefits for families dealing with postpartum mood disorders.

### **Fathers' support is vital for breastfeeding**

There is strong evidence that a father's support, or lack of support, has a significant impact on breastfeeding. In one study of expectant parents, only 13% of men who said they did not want their partner to breastfeed reported that their partner planned to do so, while 90% of men who wanted their partner to breastfeed had partners who were planning to do so.<sup>23</sup>

More evidence comes from a Canadian study of over 300 breastfeeding families. This research found that fathers' beliefs about breastfeeding, as assessed during the prenatal period, had an impact on how long their partners breastfed, over and above the mother's own breastfeeding intentions. Most fathers in this study were strongly supportive of breastfeeding to four months. Fewer expressed strong support for breastfeeding beyond four months. The researchers found that mothers, even those who said they planned to breastfeed to six months or beyond, were less likely to do so if their husbands' prenatal attitude did not support continued breastfeeding.<sup>24</sup> These findings are particularly relevant given Canada's public health goal of having mothers breastfeed exclusively for six months.

### **Breastfeeding education for fathers**

Other evidence shows that including fathers in breastfeeding education seems to increase breastfeeding duration by enhancing mothers' ability to manage breastfeeding problems. In a Brazilian study, which evaluated a one-time breastfeeding education session (lecture, video, discussion) for mothers and fathers, the babies of fathers who attended the session were about twice as likely as children of fathers who did not attend the session to still be breastfed at age three months.<sup>25</sup>

Table 2. Impact of father training on breastfeeding outcomes

| Mothers' outcomes   | Dads with training | Dads with no training |
|---|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Full (exclusive or predominant) breastfeeding at 6 months | 25%                | 15%                   |
| Still breastfeeding at 12 months                          | 19%                | 11%                   |
| Perception of not enough milk                             | 9%                 | 27%                   |
| Perception of breastfeeding support from partner          | 91%                | 69%                   |
| Rate of breastfeeding problems                            | 64%                | 69%                   |
| Stopped early due to difficulties                         | 5%                 | 24%                   |

The findings of an Italian study are particularly compelling. In a sample of 280 couples involved in a prenatal parent education program, half of the fathers were given training in breastfeeding management, while the other half were not. As Table 2 shows, women whose partners received the training were substantially more likely to be breastfeeding at both six months and one year. But here is the “wow factor”: the partners of men who received breastfeeding training reported almost as many problems as mothers in the control group, but the women with untrained partners were almost five times more likely to stop breastfeeding as a result. Mothers whose partners did not get the training were also three times more likely to perceive that they did not have enough milk.<sup>26</sup> This finding is important because not having enough milk is the most common reason that Canadian women give for stopping breastfeeding and introducing bottles early on.<sup>27</sup> Breastfeeding training for fathers seems to have the potential for reducing the impact of this very common cause of early breastfeeding cessation.

It is difficult to know the exact mechanism by which fathers' enhanced breastfeeding knowledge helps mothers nurse successfully. It seems unlikely that many fathers would actually be assessing and managing breast milk supply

problems. However, it is notable that 91% of the fathers who received breastfeeding education were rated as supportive by their partners, compared to 69% of the men who received no education about managing breastfeeding problems. It is possible that fathers who believe strongly in the value of their partner's breastfeeding and also have some understanding about the challenges of breastfeeding give mothers not only more emotional support and encouragement, but also more skillful help.

### Take it home: Lessons from this chapter

**Prenatal and new parent curricula and educational materials should include information about mothers' postpartum needs and the important role fathers can play in caring for and supporting new mothers.** The point here is not to suggest that one man can replace networks of women, nor to suggest that there is a one-size-fits-all level of father support that we should promote for all families. Families have varying levels of familial and other social supports available to them. And men's capacity to support their partners will vary by factors such as work hours, the amount of travel a job requires, cultural or ideological beliefs about gender roles and other contextual influences. But at the very

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least, fathers should be encouraged to become alert and attuned to their partners' postpartum needs. If a father cannot provide support, he can be encouraged to help organize it.

**Practitioners and parenting media should promote and normalize the idea that a father should try to take at least two weeks' parental leave around the time of his baby's birth.**

According to a 2006 Statistics Canada study, the percentage of fathers who took time off (including vacation time and unpaid leave) after the birth or adoption of a child rose from 38% in 2001 to 55% in 2006.<sup>28</sup> In other words, almost half of the men took no time off. There could be many explanations for this — including the availability of other family members and the requirements of some fathers' jobs. Still, these numbers raise the concern that some fathers may be underestimating their partners' need for support. Prenatal and parent support programs can play a role in further raising fathers' awareness of their partners' postpartum support needs.

**Making “daddy days” available in provinces outside Québec might improve early postpartum support for mothers.** The contrast between Québec, which has “daddy days” — five weeks of parental leave available only to fathers — and the rest of Canada is striking. In Québec, 82% of eligible fathers took paid paternity leave in 2008, compared to 12% in provinces with no daddy days. A new Canadian qualitative study shows that, although either parent can take parental leave, both women and men see it almost universally as the mother's property.<sup>29</sup> This might help explain why the fathers outside of Québec who do take paternity leave seldom take it at the same time as their partners.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the practice of setting aside two weeks of parental leave for fathers (i.e., which they cannot “give” to the mothers) is likely to increase the number of fathers who are at home and thus available to care for their partner after the birth or adoption of a baby.

**Practitioners should heighten efforts to educate fathers about breastfeeding and, in particular, the important role they can play in their partners' breastfeeding success.** Educating fathers about breastfeeding — particularly about issues related to milk supply, the normalcy of frequent nursing in the first weeks, and the importance of seeking help with problems — has potential to help mothers breastfeed for as long as they want to. Moreover, it also has the potential to heighten fathers' sense that they have a role in an activity from which many of them feel excluded.

However, it is important that any intervention designed to teach fathers about breastfeeding must stress that the father's role is a supportive one rather than a directive one.

**Stakeholders should develop information for fathers/partners about the nature of PPD, how to support a partner with a postpartum mood disorder, and how to help a woman seek help.** In addition to ongoing efforts to provide information and support to mothers about PPD, some materials should be aimed at fathers. These efforts should be undertaken carefully, because supporting a partner through PPD is difficult, and at present there is not a great deal of expertise with respect to defining optimal partner support for a PPD-affected mother. It is possible that a father's efforts to help could sometimes be experienced by the mother as intrusive. Efforts to develop father-oriented materials should include substantive input from both fathers and mothers who have been affected by PPD.

**Professionals should be on the lookout for symptoms of depression in partners of women with PPD.** Postnatal depression in men is more common than previously thought. Clinicians and practitioners should be alert for possible signs of PPD in fathers as well as mothers, particularly when the mother has PPD.

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## CHAPTER 5

### ON THE MARGINS: HOW RESEARCH CAN INFORM THINKING ABOUT VULNERABLE FATHERS

Professionals working to support father involvement in families face another important challenge: How to include vulnerable (socially or economically disadvantaged) and marginalized fathers?

The ideal of the modern involved dad who combines successful breadwinning with nurturing is embedded in much of the public and academic discourse about the benefits of father involvement for children. Some observers argue that this is primarily a middle-class Euro-Western model that does not reflect the social and cultural realities of some Canadian fathers, and which essentially excludes men with different conceptions of fatherhood and family and/or those for whom the current idealized role of the new involved father might be inaccessible due to social disadvantages.<sup>1,2</sup>

At the same time, the reality is that initiatives to support healthy child development are founded on a set of ideas, many of them research-based, about the kinds of early life experiences that are best (or harmful) for children. Although there is growing understanding that children can flourish in a wide variety of family structures, including single-parent, blended, and non-heterosexual families, there is fairly strong consensus that some approaches to parenting are better than others. At the very least, child development experts agree that authoritative, responsive parenting based on secure parent-child

relationships is superior to harsh, unresponsive, permissive, or neglectful parenting.

Virtually all programs and policies aimed at supporting families and building parents' skills, including those designed for vulnerable families, are framed by these assumptions about what constitutes good parenting. But we need to consider how those assumptions might influence the ways in which marginalized fathers interact with services for families. We already know that fathers often find it hard to seek help and support in a field that they see as female-dominated.<sup>3</sup> And in the field of child welfare, fathers from certain families tend to be regarded as absent, dangerous, or marginal.<sup>4</sup> If fathers from families who come to the attention of child protection agencies believe that the system sees them as deficient, it becomes even less likely that they will engage with services and programs that might be able to help them. But even though they may be hard to reach and challenging to work with, as Leslie Brown of the University of Victoria and her colleagues point out, "These men exist in the lives of women and children."<sup>5</sup> If we do not take marginalized fathers into account, we ignore both the "potential risks and benefits for women and children."<sup>6</sup>

This chapter discusses three important themes from Canadian research on vulnerable and marginalized fathers.

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## Vulnerable dads care about their kids more than we might think

One striking and consistent finding from research on young fathers, Indigenous fathers, and fathers involved with child welfare authorities — in other words, the most marginalized sub-populations of fathers in this country — is that some of them care about and



take pride in their children more than they are often given credit for. Authors of a qualitative study of fathers involved with the child welfare system due to violence and substance abuse reported that all of the fathers they interviewed, including those without custody, were, in one way or another, trying to be involved in their children's lives in positive ways. These fathers also wanted their positive contributions and potential to be acknowledged.<sup>7</sup>

Annie Devault of the Université du Québec en Outaouais reported that about half of the young fathers in one of her studies expressed a strong sense of personal investment in the physical, emotional, and financial care of their children. For some, the child's birth gave them a greater sense of purpose in life. Some said it provided motivation to take control of their lives in order to assume their responsibilities and achieve their own potential.<sup>8</sup>

Some Aboriginal fathers say that having a child can be a transformative experience that makes them want to become better men. In Jessica Ball's study on Indigenous fathers, she found that almost half of the men interviewed expressed in some way that learning to father had helped them to become a man.<sup>9</sup>

Analysis of interview data from the young fathers included in the six-year multi-university study of the Father Involvement Research Alliance (FIRA) revealed that some young fathers displayed what social scientists refer to as generative thinking.<sup>10</sup> Generativity refers to a stage in human development (usually thought of as the time of approaching middle age) in which people become more conscious of and concerned about the well-being of the next generation and society in general (as opposed to being concerned only about the well-being of their own social group). FIRA's study is one of the first to document generative thinking in young fathers. This finding is in striking contrast to the dominant image which characterizes young fathers as irresponsible and self-centred.

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At the same time, we need to recognize that vulnerable fathers who volunteer to participate in research studies are probably more motivated and better connected with services than their peers are. They might also want to present themselves in a positive light when responding to questions, which is a potential bias in many kinds of qualitative research. However, the testimony of the participants in the FIRA study gains some credibility given that these marginalized fathers were also willing to acknowledge their problems and shortcomings as parents at certain points in their lives.<sup>11, 12</sup>

If nothing else, this research reminds us that, along with the problems of vulnerable fathers — which are not hard to see — there may also be a potential that is often invisible or simply ignored. As Susan Strega of the University of Victoria and her colleagues stated, “The fathers we interviewed did not want child welfare to ignore the risks they represented, but to engage directly with them about these matters and support them in being the best fathers they could be.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Attitudes can further marginalize vulnerable fathers**

Research by the Fathering Within Child Welfare Group, a multi-year Canadian research partnership led by Leslie Brown of the University of Victoria, showed that Canadian child welfare policies and practices have a deeply entrenched tradition of engaging only with mothers, and that many child welfare policies and practices foster the invisibility of fathers. This research team reviewed 282 randomly sampled Canadian child welfare cases and found that fathers were considered irrelevant to both the mothers and children in 50% of cases. Even when a father was regarded as an *asset* to the children’s mother, social workers did not contact him half the time. Despite policy that explicitly instructs them to interview alleged abusers, workers contacted

fathers considered to be a threat to the child only 40% of the time.<sup>14</sup> One social worker said that she would not open up the “Pandora’s box” of the father because she had no resources to offer anyway. Another noted that contacting fathers would double her caseload<sup>15</sup> — a caseload that was, quite likely, already very full. The invisibility of fathers is also exacerbated when, as often happens, mothers and fathers conceal the father’s relationship with the mother and children in order to maximize the financial benefits received by the mother.<sup>16</sup>

Brown and her colleagues argued that this approach not only fails to hold fathers accountable for their behaviour and their role as fathers — mothers tend to be blamed and held responsible for fathers’ behaviour — but also ignores fathers’ potential as either risks or assets to mothers and children.<sup>17</sup>

Interestingly, research has documented that teen mothers are aware of and concerned about the exclusion of fathers from services. Devault’s study for FIRA’s New Fathers Cluster included interviews with the mothers of young fathers’ children. Although the mothers often had negative views about the young fathers’ contributions to their children’s welfare, they were also concerned about the lack of support for young fathers: “Mothers think there should be services for young fathers equal to those provided to young mothers.”<sup>18</sup> Similarly, a British study found that young mothers were critical of the exclusion of young fathers from services and supports.<sup>19</sup>

These findings strongly suggest that ignoring vulnerable fathers not only represents a lost opportunity in terms of managing risk and supporting a potential asset for children and mothers; it also pushes the men even further away from programs and services that could hold them accountable and/or help them be the best fathers they can be.

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## Helping men with life problems can enhance their parenting

Contextual and environmental factors can have a major impact on the fathering role (see Chapter 1). There is little doubt that negative influences will have the most adverse impacts on the parenting capacity of vulnerable fathers.

Separated and divorced fathers cannot all be categorized as vulnerable, but some, especially non-resident fathers experiencing access or visitation problems and high levels conflict, can suffer from depression, high levels of stress and similar mental health issues.

In 2007, Statistics Canada reported that rates of depression following the loss of a spousal relationship are higher for men than for women.<sup>20</sup> Other evidence suggests that men mourn divorce differently than women: Women appear to mourn relationship loss before the separation, while men tend to do their mourning afterwards.<sup>21</sup> Men tend to mourn the loss of their children, while women tend to mourn the loss of the spousal relationship.<sup>22</sup> And, while women experience their highest levels of stress prior to separation, men encounter their highest levels of stress post-separation.<sup>23</sup>

High levels of conflict, which affect a minority of separated and divorced couples, are damaging to parent-child relationships and can contribute to the deterioration of father-child relationships after divorce.<sup>24</sup> A study that looked at the impact of post-divorce mediation between parents found that mediation resulted in reduced conflict and distress and better parent-child relationships. The authors reported that the greatest benefits were seen in father-child relationships.<sup>25</sup> Finally, separated or divorced fathers with low levels of social support have been found to experience more role overload and higher conflict with ex-spouses and to use more coercive parenting techniques than fathers with higher levels of social support.<sup>26</sup>

Indigenous fathers and young fathers constitute the two most marginalized sub-

populations of fathers in Canadian society. In Jessica Ball's study of 80 Aboriginal and Métis fathers, many of whom were living apart from at least some of their children, numerous men were struggling with low wages or unemployment, inadequate housing, substance abuse and the harmful influence of family disruptions caused by Canada's residential school system.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, young fathers often face barriers such as low levels of education, lack of maturity, unstable employment and unsupportive family relationships, which make it even more difficult to assume parental responsibilities in the ways expected of today's fathers.<sup>28</sup> In the video *Believe in Me*, produced by FIRA's Young Fathers Cluster, one young father talks about how he must appear to those who might judge his fitness to be a father. "I won't be able to get anywhere with visitation and being a role model in my daughter's life [while I'm] going to an adult high school, living in a rooming house, working a seven-dollar-an-hour job. It's difficult, it's emotionally frustrating, it's messed up. I can't even get around it at this point in my life."<sup>29</sup>

Ball's research provides further evidence of the degree to which vulnerable fathers understand the importance of addressing their personal issues in order to enable themselves to assume responsibility for children. Ball states: "Fathers who were successfully involved with their children traced a personal journey of healing and coming to terms with their negative experiences... and saw healing from these experiences as a first step on their journey to becoming involved fathers."<sup>30</sup>

The views of these fathers are in accordance with one of the conclusions of a 2001 review of Canadian fathers' programs, which was that vulnerable fathers need intensive interventions that support them at multiple levels, including supports around employment, education and partner relationships, in addition to efforts to support the fathers' parenting and understanding of children.<sup>31</sup>



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The research, then, suggests that attempts to support and enhance the parenting capacity of vulnerable fathers will be more effective when they are combined with services to help fathers deal with the life challenges they are facing.

### **Take it home: Lessons from this chapter**

**Some vulnerable and marginalized fathers want to contribute to their children's well-being to a greater extent than we realize.** The qualitative research cited in this chapter includes numerous examples of vulnerable fathers who exhibited a desire to be a positive influence in their child's life, even though personal challenges often made it difficult for them to follow through on that motivation.

**Efforts to enhance the parenting capacity of vulnerable fathers will be more effective when they are combined with services to help the fathers deal with the life challenges and barriers they are facing.** In some cases, addressing the barriers and challenges may be more important than parenting education. The samples of both Ball and Devault included men who — though it often took time — were able to address their personal problems and eventually assume roles as responsible, connected fathers.<sup>32, 33</sup>

**Ignoring vulnerable fathers, in effect, means ignoring both their potential benefits as parents and the potential risks they may pose to mothers and children.** In working with vulnerable families it is important to make an effort to contact and work with the father when possible, according to Susan Strega of the University of Victoria. "Workers [in child welfare] must assess and engage with all the significant men in a child's life, understanding that some may pose risks, some may be assets, and some may incorporate aspects of both. And when workers engage these men, the fathers in our study urge child welfare to work with them, not at them."<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, violence, when it is an issue, should not be ignored. Some observers argue that abusive violence must be

actively and directly, yet supportively, confronted. Violence doesn't eliminate men from being fathers, but it must be taken up.<sup>35</sup>

**Education and training may be required in order to improve practitioners' capacity to work with vulnerable fathers.** Strega also noted that nothing about law or policy prevents child welfare workers from working with fathers, however, "lack of attention to fathers in social work education, coupled with gendered occupational discourses and practices, make such a practice shift challenging."<sup>36</sup>



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## CHAPTER 6

### PROGRAMMING FOR FATHERS: EXISTING PROGRAMS AND BEST PRACTICES

Programs for fathers are expanding so rapidly in Canada that it is hard to keep pace with developments. Three surveys<sup>1, 2, 3</sup> of Canadian fathers' programs have been conducted in the past 12 years, but all were done prior to 2005. Therefore another survey was undertaken in January and February 2011, in an attempt to capture a snapshot of the current state of Canadian programming for fathers.

#### **2011 Canadian Fathers' Program Survey**

A short online survey (hereinafter referred to as the 2011 survey) was publicized through father involvement networks known to the author, generating 70 responses: 32 from Ontario, 14 from Alberta, 21 from British Columbia and one each from New Brunswick, Manitoba and Saskatchewan.<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately there were no responses from Québec due to the author's lack of program contacts in that province. However, previous research has shown that Québec has been a leader in fathers' programming since the 1990s. More than half of the 61 father-focused programs identified in a 2001 survey of CAPC-CPNP (Community Action Program for Children - Canada Prenatal Nutrition Program) programs were in Québec.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, the results of this survey are not a representative audit of programs for fathers in Canada. However, the data provide some useful

insights into the variety of programming approaches being used in three provinces. Highlights are presented below.<sup>6</sup>

**Programs for fathers are continually being developed.** Survey results confirm that programming for fathers is a growing field in Canada. Almost two-thirds of respondents reported that their programs had been in place for five years or less. Almost most one-third had been in place for two years or less.

Even though many programs are relatively new, the fact that one-third had been in place for at least five years suggests some emerging stability in Canadian fathers' programming. Several programs have been in place for more than ten years. Better Fathers Inc., in Winnipeg, has been running since 1997, and programs for young fathers in both Ottawa and Abbotsford, B.C., have been operating since the mid 1990s.

**A variety of programs are offered, but father-child activity programs are most popular.** The most common programs, offered by 41% of respondents, were activity-based programs oriented around father-child interaction in a supportive environment. These "Dad and Me" type programs often run on Saturday mornings and give men the opportunity to play with their children as well as meet and interact with other fathers. Some respondents reported combining unstructured play with structured activities such

as circle time, games, and occasional guest speakers or presentations on specific parenting topics. The next most common categories of programs were parenting skills programs, peer support groups and groups focused on post-separation and divorce issues.

Some service providers are offering a combination of program components. Here are three interesting examples.

Toronto's The 519 Church Community Centre offers five different programs for gay, bisexual, queer or transgendered fathers, including an activity program for fathers and their children (Daddies and Papas) and groups for non-heterosexual men considering parenthood.

Programming at the Terrace Child Development Centre (TCDC) in Terrace, B.C., originally focused primarily on mothers. In recent years the centre has gradually added father-oriented components, to the point where

about half of its parent program elements are father-focused and about one-third of participants are men. TCDC's programming mix includes a dad-child activity program, the Nobody's Perfect parenting course, a support group for men suffering from postnatal depression, and a father-inclusive home visiting program staffed partly by male outreach workers whose training includes the Lamaze Childbirth Teaching Skills course, the Jack Newman Breastfeeding Course for Healthcare Providers and infant massage. Outreach workers also assist fathers (and mothers) with various life issues including, at times, helping fathers find employment.

One unique peer support program for fathers is More Than a Haircut, which now operates in four locations in Toronto, specifically in barbershops. Men from Toronto's Caribbean community have often used barbershops as gathering places. Staff from Toronto's Macaulay



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Child Development Centre worked with members of the Black community to develop a fathering program based on that social tradition. Afro-Caribbean fathers get together in barbershops on Saturdays for conversations, video clips and even spoken word performances and skits related to fathering.

**Transferable program models are emerging.** Another sign of progress is that several respondents are using fatherhood program models or curricula which are now available for use by multiple organizations. Four of these are Canadian: The Parenting Partnership, a pre- and postnatal couples program; Caring Dads, an intervention for fathers from families involved in the child protection system; and two more general fathering courses, Father Involvement — Building Our Children’s Character, and Be a Great Dad. Another respondent is using Supporting Father Involvement, a program developed in California.

Supporting Father Involvement is unique among fathers’ programs in that it focuses almost entirely on the couple relationship rather than fathers’ parenting or interaction skills. The 16-week course was developed as part of a 30-year research program in California. This research has shown that a parenting program which focuses primarily on supporting the couple relationship not only reduces marital stress, it increases father involvement, improves parenting by both mothers and fathers and is associated with improved cognitive and social outcomes for children.<sup>7</sup> Supporting Father Involvement is now being piloted in three Alberta centres.

Further information on these five programs can be found in Appendix 2.

**Funding appears to be stabilizing for some programs.** In the *On Fathers’ Ground* study, published in 2001, two-thirds of respondents to a survey of Canadian fathers’ programs reported that their funding was secure for one year or less<sup>8</sup>, which suggests that most programs were operating based on time-limited project funding rather than an organization’s annual budget. In

the 2011 survey, 60% of respondents reported that their program was funded out of their organization’s annual budget. Almost 40% indicated that the facilitator was a full-time staff person with their organization. This suggests that programming for fathers is increasingly seen as a core part of an organization’s work rather than a special add-on program.

**Most programs are open to all fathers.** Most respondents (70%) reported serving a general population of fathers. Given the relative “invisibility” of fathers in child protection work reported in Chapter 5, it is interesting that just over one in four respondents (27%) reported that their clients included fathers referred by child welfare agencies. A similar number reported young fathers (25%), new fathers (24%) and separated and divorced fathers (21%) as participants in their programs.

**Agency and “mom” referrals are the most common recruitment strategies.** One of the big challenges in fathers’ programs has always been recruitment. Of the varied promotional and recruitment strategies employed by respondents, three stood out as the most common and successful. Referrals from other agencies were received by 93% of respondents; of these, 60% rated the strategy as successful.

The next most popular (and successful) recruitment strategy was giving information to mothers to pass on to their partners, used by 78% of respondents and rated successful by 42% of those who used it. A variety of other strategies were used with mixed success, including posters, newsletters, and television coverage. Interestingly, while over 40% of respondents reported using media ads and newspaper articles for recruitment, only about one in seven who used this method deemed it successful. Some respondents reported success with advertising by word of mouth, websites and Facebook.

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Complete findings from the 2011 Canadian Fathers’ Program Survey can be found in Appendix 1.

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## Programs for separated and divorced fathers

Much of the public dialogue about the problems of divorced fathers and many of the support groups and networks for this population focuses on issues related to custody/access and child support payments, issues which are beyond the scope of most programs and services for families.

However, as noted in the previous chapter, some separated and divorced fathers are dealing with high levels of stress and conflict, which can contribute to parenting challenges or mental health problems. Work by the Father Involvement Research Alliance suggests that there is a sub-population of divorced and separated fathers whose needs are not well recognized and who, as a result, may be underserved in programming for families.

At the Father Involvement 2008 conference in Toronto, FIRA members presented a conceptual framework for gearing services to separated and divorced fathers. In addition to improved supports around legal issues, this framework proposed three domains of service which could support father-child relationships, fathers' parenting and cooperation between fathers and their ex-partners during and after divorce and separation. The three domains are as follows:<sup>9</sup>

- meeting fathers' psycho-social needs: support with issues related to stress, grief, emotional and mental health;
- helping fathers move through de-coupling to post-separation coparenting: mediation, alternative dispute resolution, educational groups, and assistance with parenting plans; and
- parenting support: parenting-after-separation groups, fathers-only support groups, activity programs which offer opportunities for father-child interaction and also provide child-friendly play spaces for fathers who may not yet have adequate play spaces in their new residences.

Some services for families, particularly family resource and CAPC-CPNP programs, may not be staffed or mandated to offer programs that address all of the aforementioned needs.

However, many communities have professionals and organizations — often family service or family counselling associations — with expertise in post-separation counselling, mediation, parenting coordination, anger management, and post-divorce parenting issues. These services are often designed for separated and divorced parents in general, as opposed to fathers specifically, but some services do have father-specific groups, and the groups designed for both mothers and fathers can be beneficial to fathers as well. Practitioners may be able to provide information and referral services to fathers who could benefit from these programs. There may also be opportunities to develop partnerships with agencies or individual professionals with experience in supporting divorced and separated parents.

Appendix 3 provides some examples of organizations with well-developed programs and services for separated and divorced fathers and mothers.

## Programming for Indigenous fathers

The work of FIRA's Indigenous Fathers Cluster brought to light the diverse and complex issues facing First Nations fathers. One key finding of this study is that Indigenous fathers articulated the need for community-based agencies as well as political bodies to get involved in supporting healing programs, reducing negative stereotypes of Aboriginal fathers and families, and actively reaching out to support fathers in their journey of learning fatherhood.<sup>10</sup>

At a conference on Aboriginal father involvement, which took place in Ottawa in February 2011, both well established and emerging programs for Aboriginal fathers were showcased. One of the longer-running programs is the Neah Kee Papa (I Am Your Father) parenting enhancement program offered by the

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Manitoba Métis Federation since 1999. Neah Kee Papa includes a flexibly structured eight-session program, which covers topics such as the father's role, effective communication, anger management, understanding rights as single parents and in custody relationships, and also life skills. The program also provides fathers with access to counselling, peer resource groups and guest speakers.

### **A case study: Baby massage for fathers**

In a review of studies that assessed the effectiveness of 12 different interventions designed for fathers with babies and toddlers, a team led by Joyce Magill-Evans, professor of occupational therapy at the University of Alberta, concluded that the most promising interventions were those that involved fathers' active participation with and observation of their child.<sup>11</sup> The authors singled out baby massage classes as particularly promising. Not only does baby massage engage the father's observation of and interaction with his child, it is also relatively easy and inexpensive to implement. Infant massage is already popular and being taught in many communities (primarily to mothers). If fathers can be attracted to infant massage classes, it seems like a simple way to provide men with a concrete skill which has the potential to increase their:

- sense of competence and ability to read their babies' cues (baby massage classes typically include teaching parents to watch for and read babies' engagement and disengagement cues<sup>12</sup>); and
- expressiveness, warmth and acceptance of their babies.<sup>13</sup>

Other studies have found that babies whose fathers had taken baby massage classes greet their fathers more positively,<sup>14</sup> and that fathers who participated in baby massage classes reported decreased parenting stress.<sup>15</sup>

Interestingly, fathers in the latter study did not appear to see the value of baby massage for

themselves or their babies. However, they said they enjoyed the classes and the chance to meet other dads and babies in an activity that was "theirs" (i.e. not for mothers). This may provide a clue as to one value of fathers-only groups. When men can get together and learn a practical skill in a male environment, they may feel less self-conscious about learning and they benefit from the social support provided by meeting other fathers with babies.

It is not clear how many fathers will find baby massage classes appealing (the Canadian study found recruitment of fathers difficult). However, as noted by Magill-Evans, these classes are relatively inexpensive and easy to implement, and for the fathers who like them, they have proven benefits. Other programs that promote specific father-child interaction skills and provide the opportunity to meet other dads may be beneficial in similar ways.

### **Best practices in fathers' programs**

Although there is limited evidence about the effectiveness of programming for fathers, organizations and research groups in different countries have developed principles of effective programming and father-inclusive practice based both on professional experience, program evaluations and available research. The best practices described below for effective father-focused and father-inclusive programs are based on common ideas in the following documents:

- *On Fathers' Ground*, a survey and assessment of Canadian fathers' programs published in 2001;
- *The Father Toolkit*, a resource developed by My Daddy Matters Because..., a national fathering project which ran from 2002 to 2005;
- *The Principles of Father-Inclusive Practices*, developed by Australia's Engaging Fathers Project;
- *Ten Top Tips for Father-inclusive Practice*, from the Fatherhood Institute in the UK;

- *What Works in Fatherhood Programs?* Ten lessons from evidence-based practices, published by Child Trends, a not-for-profit child development research centre in Washington, D.C.;
- The successful training approaches developed by the Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network (FII-ON), an ongoing Ontario-based initiative to mobilize service-providers and communities around working with fathers;
- ProsPère, a 10-year research and father-focused community development project in Québec.

**It takes time and effort for organizations to learn how to work with fathers.** For years, programs and services for families of young children have been mother-centric: staffed primarily by women, serving a predominantly mother-child client base. Some qualitative research has found that fathers are aware of this and do not feel completely comfortable in what they see as a female environment, even when service providers view their own facility as child-focused rather than mother-focused. In a British study which interviewed both fathers and female staff in family centres, the researchers concluded that men who wanted to engage fully with these programs often had to be prepared to participate on women's terms. "Indeed, it sometimes seemed that men were welcome in family centres as fathers, but not as men in their own right, whereas women were welcomed as mothers and women both. Thus, few centres offered or encouraged the development of any activities of interest or appeal to men that did not revolve directly around child-care. Men were rarely given the opportunity of participating in what they defined as 'men's activities', as opposed to 'children's activities' or 'women's activities'." Unless this changed, family centres would be likely to remain female-dominated and women-focused, the authors concluded.<sup>16</sup>

Having made similar observations, FII-ON developed a training and community capacity-building approach based partly on the understanding that organizations would need to

educate themselves about fathers and re-examine some of their attitudes and practices in order to become more father-inclusive, specifically:

- developing a greater awareness and understanding of the role of fathers and how fathers contribute to child development;
- considering how organizations can become more father-friendly;
- working with community partners to support and enhance father involvement; and
- promoting and championing father involvement in their organizations and in their communities.<sup>17</sup>

Since 1997, FII-ON has conducted awareness-raising and training in communities throughout Ontario leading to the development of many father-inclusive practices and programs in that province. ProsPère and the Father Involvement Network of B.C. have developed and delivered similar approaches to organizational and practitioner training in Québec and British Columbia respectively.<sup>18, 19</sup>

**Raise community and societal awareness about the importance of fathers.** It is not enough to just offer programs. It is also important to create the conditions under which fathers are likely to participate. The ProsPère project was a ten-year program of development, implementation and evaluation of father-focused projects in two low-income communities in Québec. In both communities, project partners chose awareness raising as an initial strategy. They felt it was necessary to shift communities' thinking about fathers before they would be able to mobilize the community and fathers towards their ultimate goal of increasing positive involvement of fathers. ProsPère's research showed that promoting the role of fathers over several years — by various means including a media campaign and a children's art project — increased support among community leaders, created more openness to working with fathers among practitioners and increased fathers' participation in programs and social activities.<sup>20</sup>





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This conclusion was confirmed by findings from Invest in Kids' 2006 survey of parents of young children, which showed that the factor most strongly associated with fathers' willingness to participate in programs was feeling supported by their neighbourhood community.<sup>21</sup>

**Assess your organization's "father friendliness."** Becoming father-inclusive requires a careful examination of various aspects of organizational practices and policies including:

- organizational mandate and use of language (for example, including the word father or dad in at least some policies and program descriptions);
- adjusting hours of operation so that some programs run at times when fathers are available;
- assessing the number of male staff, volunteers and board members; and
- establishing father involvement as a standing item in organizational planning.

The My Daddy Matters' *Father Toolkit*, which is available online, ([www.mydad.ca/tool-kit.php](http://www.mydad.ca/tool-kit.php)) includes excellent materials for helping organizations become more father-friendly.<sup>22</sup>

It is also important for organizations to assess their parenting materials (brochures, articles etc.) through the lens of fathers, and not to assume that materials designed for mothers will be appropriate for fathers. During the development of the Parenting Partnership, Invest in Kids examined a large volume of existing content for possible use in the program. They found that much of it was out-of-date, unappealing and not father-friendly.<sup>23</sup>

FII-ON has developed a number of father-oriented educational and social marketing materials including six educational booklets and a number of posters (including a First Nations fathers poster series) which are available in both English and French. The BC Council for Families has developed a series of seven educational brochures for fathers. My Daddy Matters created a set of downloadable television, radio and print media public service

announcements designed to promote the importance of father involvement to the wider community. A full listing of Canadian-developed educational and social marketing materials is available on the website of the Father Involvement Research Alliance (URL listed in footnotes).<sup>24</sup>

**Include fathers meaningfully in planning and delivery of services.** Two of the more successful family-oriented programs developed in the past 30 years — childbirth education and parent-child resource centres — grew out of an understanding of the needs and aspirations of mothers. These movements involved mothers at both the professional and the volunteer level in the early stages of program development. Organizations are advised to take a similar approach in improving their work with fathers. The On Fathers' Ground team reported that successful projects tended to consult with fathers during the developmental phase; in some cases fathers were included on project teams.<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the Father Toolkit advises practitioners to do focus groups with fathers during the development stages of father involvement activities.<sup>26</sup>

**Adapt your organization's strategies and services to the realities of fathers.** This advice appears in both On Fathers' Ground and Child Trends' *What Works in Fathers' Programs*. Child Trends stresses the importance of using teaching methods and materials that are culturally appropriate to the fathers being served.<sup>27</sup> Three Canadian programs which have done this very well are the Young Fathers programs in Ottawa and Abbotsford, B.C., and Focus on Fathers, developed by Catholic Community Services of York Region in Richmond Hill, Ontario.

The two programs for young fathers build on young men's enjoyment of sports to draw in their clients. Both programs started out as sports nights where young dads get together to play basketball or another sport, share a meal and then eventually get around to discussing parenting issues informally.

Focus on Fathers, a program developed in an ethnically and culturally diverse region just north of Toronto, presents its eight-week educational program in six different languages. Another key to the success of Focus on Fathers has been the organizers' ability to find leaders and guest speakers from each of the cultural communities they serve, and, in some cases, holding their programs in facilities associated with specific cultural groups.

**Work from fathers' strengths.** All of the organizations that promote father-inclusive practices mention this as an essential principle. This is partly based on the documented reluctance of some men to engage with services that seem oriented primarily towards mothers. It also arose in response to the deficit model of fatherhood, which often portrays fathers as not doing their fair share, not being sensitive enough to children or, in some cases, as potentially dangerous to women and children. If fathers perceive that they are regarded as deficient or that their strengths and positive contributions are not

recognized, they are unlikely to participate in programs. Perhaps the most important messages for service providers are: judge fathers on their own terms; don't expect them to be mothers and don't assume that program approaches designed for mothers will necessarily work for fathers.

**Build partnerships with other service providers.** *On Fathers' Ground* reported that the more successful fathers' projects tended to have multiple community partners. "A closer look at all the projects reveals that the more partners there are, the more activities they offer. Partnerships help projects respond better to a wider range of needs of a greater number of fathers because they foster the sharing of intervention skills."<sup>28</sup> Other advantages of partnerships include increased community visibility, sharing of resources, enhanced capacity to apply for grants and having broader networks to use when recruiting participants. In the 2011 survey, referral of clients from other agencies was the recruitment strategy most often identified as successful by respondents.



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## CONCLUSION

In closing I just have a few more thoughts.

I can't emphasize enough how we have to keep reminding ourselves about the diversity of families and fathers. And I don't just mean diversity in terms of culture, religion, race, socio-economic status and sexual orientation. I mean diversity within groups as well as between groups. Frankly, I feel uncomfortable at times when I refer to what I have called sub-populations — Indigenous fathers, immigrant fathers or young, socially disadvantaged fathers etc. The very terminology conveys an implication that the individuals within these groups are all the same, and that they are all different from “the rest of us” (whoever that might be), neither of which is necessarily true.

There are myriad ways to parent, and to father. And while we have a pretty good consensus about the kinds of parenting (or fathering) that are optimal for children, there are many different ways to give children what they need. Further, while I strongly believe in greater gender equity in child-rearing (and society) and relatively equal coparenting in families, every set of partnered parents has to figure out what parenting teamwork and role sharing means to them and how it will work given their values, backgrounds, involvement in the labour force, and who else might be available to help them raise their children.

Speaking of children...

As noted in my introduction, I have steered clear of the discussion of the value of father involvement for children's development.

However, anyone who reads this report has only to connect a few dots to see that better understanding and supporting of fathers holds potential benefits for children. And to be sure, my interest in the well-being of children underscores all of my work.

But honestly? I never got into this business to improve children's outcomes. All I ever wanted to do was help fathers enjoy their kids, and work effectively with their partners. I am not out to persuade men to become more involved with their children out of a sense of duty to improve their child's future. I want them to get involved because it is a worthwhile thing to do right now — fascinating, fun, fulfilling and important. The future lens is a valid one, particularly in terms of public policy, but I think that if we can help fathers connect with and enjoy their children in the here and now the future will tend to sort itself out.

I look forward to future endeavours in the field of fatherhood and I hope to be part of an increasingly sophisticated public discussion about the roles fathers play in families.

*John Hoffman, March 2011*

## APPENDIX 1

### FINDINGS FROM THE 2011 CANADIAN FATHERS' PROGRAM SURVEY<sup>1</sup>

Number of Respondents: 70

Geographical location of programs

|          |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|----------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| Province | BC | AB | SK | MB | ON | NB |
| Number   | 21 | 14 | 1  | 1  | 32 | 1  |

What is the primary focus of your program?

|                         |                  |                         |                        |             |          |
|-------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|-------------|----------|
| Father/child activities | Parenting skills | Peer support/discussion | Post-separation issues | Home visits | Literacy |
| 41%                     | 31%              | 17%                     | 8%                     | 1%          | 1%       |

How does your program run?

|                        |                                  |  |
|------------------------|----------------------------------|--|
| Ongoing weekly/monthly | Finite number of weekly sessions | Other (outreach, one-on-one support, one-time workshops or activities) |
| 50%                    | 37%                              | 13%  |

What key areas would you say your program addresses?

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Father-child relationships                                    | 87% |
| Father-child interaction skills                               | 66% |
| Parenting skills/strategies                                   | 59% |
| Peer support  | 54% |
| Informal play with child and opportunities to meet other dads | 52% |
| Improving the spousal relationship                            | 34% |
| Parenting teamwork  | 32% |
| Teaching specific caregiving skills                           | 21% |
| Teaching fathers how to support their partners                | 21% |

How long has your program been running?

| 1 year | 2 years | 3 years | 4 years | 5 years | 6 or more years |
|--------|---------|---------|---------|---------|-----------------|
| 14     | 17      | 9       | 17      | 8       | 36              |

(includes data from 11 programs that have ceased operations)

Why did your program cease operations?

| Reason | Loss of funding | Lack of participants | Inability to find a facilitator |
|--------|-----------------|----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Number | 6               | 5                    | 1                               |

What types of fathers do you serve?

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| General population of fathers             | 62% |
| Referrals from child protection           | 27% |
| Young fathers                             | 25% |
| New fathers                               | 24% |
| Separated/divorced fathers                | 21% |
| Expectant fathers                         | 17% |
| Fathers of children with special needs    | 13% |
| Indigenous fathers                        | 11% |
| Specific cultural or religious group      | 10% |
| Immigrant fathers                         | 10% |
| Gay, bisexual, queer or trans fathers/men | 7%  |
| Adoptive or foster fathers                | 6%  |

How many participants attend a typical meeting?

| 1-6 | 7 -10 | 11-20 | 20 or more |
|-----|-------|-------|------------|
| 34% | 45%   | 12%   | 10%        |

Who facilitates your fathers' program?

|                                     |     |
|-------------------------------------|-----|
| Full-time staff person              | 37% |
| Part-time staff person              | 21% |
| Outside paid facilitator            | 28% |
| Staff person from partnering agency | 5%  |
| Volunteer                           | 10% |

What is the gender of your facilitator?

| Male | Female | Male/Female team | Male or female at different times |
|------|--------|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 65%  | 16%    | 9%               | 10%                               |

What is the best way to describe the way your program is funded?

|                              |     |
|------------------------------|-----|
| Organization's annual budget | 60% |
| Special time-limited funding | 32% |
| Ongoing special funding      | 21% |
| Funded partially by fees     | 6%  |
| Funded wholly by fees        | 3%  |
| Minimal or no funding        | 11% |

About how many individual fathers does your program serve annually?

| 1-10 | 11-20 | 21- 30 | 31-50 | 50-75 | 75-100 | 100+ |
|------|-------|--------|-------|-------|--------|------|
| 9%   | 22%   | 17%    | 22%   | 10%   | 6%     | 14%  |

What recruitment methods have you used and how successful were they?

| Strategy   | % of organizations who used this strategy | % of organizations who used this strategy and rated it successful | % of organizations who use this strategy and rated it moderately successful |
|--|---|---|---|
| Referral from other agencies                               | 93%                                       | 60%   | 21%   |
| Giving information to mothers to pass on to their partners | 78%                                       | 42%   | 20%   |
| Posters in facility  | 87%                                       | 37%   | 26%   |
| Agency newsletter  | 68%                                       | 19%   | 23%   |
| Articles in local newspapers                               | 44%                                       | 15%   | 15%   |
| News media ads or public service announcements             | 43%                                       | 16%   | 16%   |
| Television coverage  | 20%                                       | 6%  | 10%   |

Do mothers participate in your fathering program?

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| No  | 80% |
| Program is for mothers and fathers together | 10% |
| Moms are invited to specific sessions       | 3%  |
| Program is for dads, but moms can attend    | 6%  |

Do you provide a meal to participants?

|     |     |
|-----|-----|
| Yes | 54% |
| No  | 46% |

Approximately what percentage of participants in your general parenting programs (if you have them) are fathers?

| 1% - 5% | 10% - 20% | 25% - 30% | 40% - 50% | 50% or more |
|---------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| 36%     | 25%       | 22%       | 15%       | 2%          |



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## APPENDIX 2

### TRANSFERABLE FATHERS' PROGRAMS

#### **Made-in-Canada programs**

Several respondents to the 2011 Canadian Fathers' Program Survey were reporting from recently developed Canadian programs which are now offered in multiple sites and available to other organizations via training or purchase of course manuals or materials.

**The Parenting Partnership™** is a couples' program developed by Invest in Kids and now administered by the Phoenix Centre for Children and Families, in Pembroke, Ont. The Parenting Partnership begins in the prenatal period and continues on a flexible schedule until the child is approximately 14 months old, using a combination of 20 semi-structured group meetings, 73 weekly web-based sessions and electronic communication between parents and facilitators. Participants are also given access to over 1,200 online articles. The program was piloted in 20 Ontario centres over a three-year period. For more information: [www.theparentingpartnership.ca](http://www.theparentingpartnership.ca)

**Father Involvement - Building Our Children's Character™ (FI-BOCC)** is an eight-week, 16-hour course for fathers developed by Brian Russell (Provincial Coordinator, Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network) and Barbara Mackenzie (Synergy Inc.). The curriculum is drawn from a combination of current knowledge about father involvement and concepts developed by The Virtues Project, an educational initiative designed to inspire the practice of virtues in everyday life. To date, over

100 FI-BOCC facilitators have been trained, and the program has been offered in several communities, primarily in Ontario. For more information: [www.thefibocccprogram.ca](http://www.thefibocccprogram.ca)

**Be a Great Dad** is a five-week general fathering program developed by counsellor/life coach Warren Redman for Families Matter, a Calgary organization with a wide range of services for parents. Be a Great Dad is now being offered in Calgary, Edmonton and Moncton. A 107-page manual is available to enable facilitators to train themselves in how to set up and deliver the course. The manual is available by mail order for \$100 plus shipping. For more information: [www.familiesmatter.ca](http://www.familiesmatter.ca)

**Caring Dads** is a 17-week intervention program designed for fathers who have highly problematic relationships with their children due to child abuse or family violence. The program was developed by a multi-disciplinary team led by psychologist Katreena Scott of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, and piloted over a five-year period. Caring Dads has been offered in Thunder Bay, Ont., Brantford, Ont., and Toronto. Program and training materials are now available. For more information: [www.caringdadsprogram.com](http://www.caringdadsprogram.com)

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## American fathers' programs now being used in Canada

**Supporting Father Involvement** is a 16-week course developed and tested as part of a 30-year research program initiated by Phillip Cowan and Carolyn Pape Cowan at the University of California at Berkeley in partnership with Marsha Kline Pruett of Smith College and Kyle Pruett of Yale University. Originally conceived as a way to help parents navigate the relationship stresses of new parenthood, the program is structured around group meetings which focus on problem-solving, goal-setting and conflict-resolution for couples. Also discussed are partners' wishes to carry over or modify traditions from their families of origin, parenting dilemmas, work stress and other risk or protective factors that affect couple relationships.

Early in the developmental phase of the program, which was originally named *Becoming a Family*, the researchers observed that parents who took the program started using more effective parenting strategies, even in the absence of any attempts to address their parenting skills. Particular benefits were seen for fathers' involvement, which led to the program eventually being renamed *Supporting Father Involvement*.

This program model has been tested in controlled trials across different ethnic and income groups (including families referred by child welfare authorities) in five California counties. In one of the more recent studies, parents were assigned to one of three interventions: a 16-week program for father/mother couples as described above, a 16-week fathers-only program with the same content, or a low-dose three-hour information session focused on fathers' importance to their children's well-being. Participation in either of the 16-week groups was associated with greater father engagement in child-rearing, more sharing of parenting tasks and stable levels of child's misbehaviour. However, families who

participated in the couples' program also showed declines in parenting distress and stable levels of marital quality and satisfaction. Relationship quality declined and parenting distress increased in both the low-dose and fathers-only groups.

The researchers also tracked the developmental progress of children whose parents had participated in the program and found that children of participants displayed better cognitive and social skills than children of non-participants.<sup>2</sup>

At press time, the program was being piloted in three sites in Alberta. To read more about the *Supporting Father Involvement* project and the research behind it:

<http://www.supportingfatherinvolvement.org>

**Boot Camp for New Dads** is a three-hour workshop in which expectant fathers get together with "veteran" dads (course "graduates") who bring their babies in to demonstrate basic baby care techniques like comforting, swaddling and diaper changing, and talk about what it is like to be a new dad. Other topics covered include parenting teamwork, safety, preventing child abuse and how to deal with crying babies. Developed in the mid-1990s, the workshop is now offered in 43 U.S. states and has been introduced in the U.K. and Australia. In 2010, *Boot Camp for New Dads* was launched in the Memberton First Nations community in Nova Scotia. For more information: [www.bootcampfornewdads.org](http://www.bootcampfornewdads.org)

**24/7 Dad** was developed by the U.S.-based National Fatherhood Initiative. The program comes in two formats: a basic fathering program (*24/7 Dad A.M.*) and a more in-depth program (*24/7 Dad P.M.*), each consisting of 12 two-hour sessions. Either can be implemented in a group setting or in a one-on-one home-based setting. Currently in use by 500 American organizations, *24/7 Dad* is now offered at the Brant Pregnancy and Resource Centre in Brantford, Ont. For more information:

[www.fatherhood.org/247dadsecondedition](http://www.fatherhood.org/247dadsecondedition)

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## APPENDIX 3

### EXAMPLES OF SERVICE MODELS AND PROGRAMS FOR SEPARATED AND DIVORCED FATHERS

Conducting a comprehensive Canada-wide audit of services and programs for separated and divorced fathers was beyond the capacity and time-frame of this report and was also hindered by the relative lack of research in this area. However, the listings provided below show that programs which address the non-legal problems faced by some separated and divorced fathers are available, often through the auspices of family service or similar organizations. Practitioners may wish to learn what programs for divorced fathers are available in their communities and provide information and referrals when appropriate.

**Families in Transition**, a cluster of services for separating, divorcing and remarrying families, operated by the Family Service Association of Toronto since 1977, offers support groups for non-residential fathers, parenting skills groups for divorced parents, individual and family counselling, mediation of parenting plans, and educational seminars on a range of topics related to child adjustment and parenting after divorce and separation. Families in Transition was cited as an exemplar in a 2005 report on innovative divorce-related programs prepared by the American Association of Family and Conciliation Courts.<sup>3</sup> For more information:  
[www.fsatoronto.com/programs/families.html](http://www.fsatoronto.com/programs/families.html)

**Effective Co-Parenting: Putting Kids First** is a six-week course for separated and divorced parents developed in Calgary by family therapist/mediator Elaine Buckman and certified family educator Sandy Shuler. Topics covered include: communication with an ex-spouse, the grief cycle, and children's developmental needs as they relate to divorce. Buckman and Schuler have conducted training in various communities and have created manuals to assist practitioners who wish to offer Effective Co-Parenting: Putting Kids First in their own communities. Materials have also been developed to help practitioners incorporate some of the course strategies into their existing programs and services. Currently, the program is being offered in five sites in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Training has also been provided in British Columbia and Ontario. For more information:

[www.familylifeworks.ca/Resources.html](http://www.familylifeworks.ca/Resources.html)

**Toronto's Jewish Family and Child Services** offers six different programs for divorcing parents, including groups specifically geared to parents in high-conflict divorces, a coparenting program and a group for parents dealing with feelings of loss, grief, guilt and loneliness related to separation or divorce. Although these programs are geared for both mothers and fathers, they address issues some separated and divorced fathers are dealing with.

[www.jfandcs.com/](http://www.jfandcs.com/)

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**Family Service Ottawa** offers Parenting Through Separation and Divorce (for mothers and fathers) and Just for Dads, a course specially designed for single, divorced and separated fathers.

For more information:

[www.familyservicesottawa.org/english/parenting.html](http://www.familyservicesottawa.org/english/parenting.html)

**The Nanaimo Men's Centre**, in Nanaimo B.C., offers legal and social support for fathers experiencing problems with custody and access, and also one-on-one counselling, anger management and father-oriented parenting programs. For more information:

[www.nanaimomen.com](http://www.nanaimomen.com)

**It's My Child Too** is a curriculum developed specifically for young non-custodial fathers by Purdue University's Centre for Families. The course is designed to help young fathers learn how to contribute to the healthy development of their children. It's My Child Too is currently offered by Ottawa's Young Fathers Program and Family Services Saint John.

For more information:

<https://mdc.itap.purdue.edu/item.asp?itemID=7>  
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## Acknowledgements

An expert panel of academics and practitioners reviewed and provided valuable feedback on chapters of this report.

Lead Expert Advisor: Stuart Shanker, Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Psychology, Director, Milton and Ethel Harris Research Initiative, York University

Jessica Ball, Professor, School of Child and Youth Care, Research Team Leader, Early Childhood Developmental Intercultural Partnerships, University of Victoria

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Thanks also to:

Kerry Daly, Linda Hawkins and Carolyn Pletsch, of FIRA, for supporting my early work on this project.

The academics from across Canada and the world whose work contributed to this report.

The Centre for Families Work and Well-being at the University of Guelph for continued support of my work for FIRA.

Aisling Discoveries, Scarborough Ontario, for administrative support.

Sobia Ali, Public Health Agency of Canada

Special thanks to Fernand Lozier for his support of various Canadian father involvement initiatives over many years.

And thanks to the Public Health Agency of Canada for its long-standing support of father involvement research, programs and publications.

Heartfelt thanks to Holly Bennett, my editor, idea consultant, wife of 29 years and the coparent of our three boys, without whose support and advice I would never have come to the point where I could undertake a piece of work such as this.

And, of course, hugs to my three grown boys, Riley, Jesse and Aaron, and my late father Bill Hoffman, all of whom taught me the most important things about fatherhood.

Production of the report was made possible by a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada.

The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the official policy of the Public Health Agency of Canada.