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Father Involvement Research Alliance

New Fathers Cluster

New Fathers Cluster Executive Summary **Father Involvement Community Research Forum Spring 2006** *Ed Bader and Andrea Doucet*

THE NEW FATHERS CLUSTER AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING WITH MEN'S TRANSITIONS INTO FATHERING

The New Fathers Cluster has focused its research on the time period from pregnancy through the first eighteen months of a child's life and the degree of support afforded fathers during this critical period of parenting. Working with university researchers and community organizations through three distinct phases of work, this cluster has aimed to increase community, practitioner, and academic understandings of the experiences of new fathers in Canada. To date, our work has produced one policy report (published in French and English) one grant proposal, over a dozen conference or course presentations, and multiple media appearances of our cluster members. Currently involved in the project are six graduate students, four family physicians, five community managers or experts in parenting programs. The on-going community and academic work has cross-fertilized with on-going research, community work, and academic writing for fathers or on fathering for both Ed Bader and Andrea Doucet. Throughout the course of our community work and research and especially through our close affiliation with the Focus on Fathers program, the New Fathers cluster is guided by three key principles.

The first is the necessity of adapting existing programs to the needs of multicultural communities through courses and materials in the mother tongue of the participants. Second is the importance of working with national and regional partnerships with a focus on fathering. These partnerships include municipal organizations, Early Years Centers, family physicians and pediatricians, public health departments, as well as school boards. The third is to draw on up-to-date national and international research on fathering and mothering.

The work and research plan of the New Fathers Cluster is set out in three phases. These research phases have moved successively from macro to micro-levels of exploring and understanding new fathering. Working first at a national level, we implemented a nation-wide survey of community organizations to ascertain the levels of support and services offered to new fathers. In the second phase of our research, ten focus groups with diverse groups of fathers across Canada were conducted with the aim of gaining an understanding of their perspectives on appropriate and desired services for new fathers (pre-natal, during the birth, and post-natal) and what programs and resources assist the most and the least in the transition to becoming new fathers. Our third phase of research is an in-depth qualitative research component that is focused on collecting narratives of fathering. Drawing on national and international research on fathering as well as innovative methodological work on narrative analysis, this phase of our work focuses on multi-layered understandings of fathers' social, personal, institutional, and family transitions that are woven together when a new child comes into the family.

WORK & RESEARCH CONDUCTED TO DATE BY THE NEW FATHERS CLUSTER

Academic research

The three phases of the work and research plan of the New Fathers Cluster have moved successively from the macro to the micro-levels of exploring and understanding new fathering. Working first at a national and macro level in Phase 1, we surveyed community organizations to ascertain the levels of support and services offered to new fathers. The New Fathers questionnaire explored what programs are available to fathers before, during, and after the birth of their children and inquired into which programs were most successful in supporting fathers during the transition to parenthood. With a 73% response rate (166 /277 organizations responding), the resulting report, published in both English and French is entitled *Canadian Community Organizations and New Fathers* (Bader and Doucet, 2005). This report concludes that the majority of organizations recognize the need for some degree of father-focused programming during the transition to parenthood. Organizations identified key factors in the creation of father-friendly approaches through the use of male facilitators, more resources, some programming for fathers only, and the scheduling of programs to meet fathers' working schedules.

In our second phase of our research, we drew on extensive contacts gleaned through national and regional partnerships to carry out ten focus groups with diverse groups of fathers across Canada. We sought to hear their perspectives on appropriate and desired services for new fathers (pre-natal, during the birth, and post-natal) and what programs and resources assist the most and the least in the transition to new fatherhood. The findings of this qualitative focus group data as well as the quantitative data collected with the same fathers (approximately 60 fathers) are still being analyzed. Our early analyses point to the difficulties fathers face in transitioning into parenting; the gender differentiated experiences of pre-natal, birth and post-natal periods with fathers viewing their role during the first two periods as primarily one of supporting the mother; the high stress levels in the first year both in terms of individual and couple adjustments; and the need for greater assistance in communicating these life changes with one's partner and significant others. This phase of the project was carried out with diverse community organizations as well as with the participation of one PhD student from Wilfred Laurier University, one honours student and one MA student from Carleton, and several undergraduate students from the University of New Brunswick.

Our third phase of research is focused on collecting narratives of new fathering. Here we are focusing on multi-layered understandings of fathers' social, personal, institutional, and family transitions. Interviews with 20 fathers as well as with several case study couples are being conducted in the spring and summer of 2006. Drawing on national and international research on fathering, we are exploring a number of key issues for fathers, including: social supports for new fathers; relationships between men and their partners, their baby, their other children, their own father and mother, kin, friends and work colleagues; work-family balance issues; masculinities; personal and social identities; family responsibilities, gender divisions of labor, and maternal gatekeeping. This phase of the project is being carried out with the training and collaboration of two PhD students from Carleton University. Innovative methodological work around narrative analysis will be employed and the two students will be involved in writing up this material for academic journals.

Community partnerships

In addition to our three phases of research, the New Fathers cluster has been very successful in working closely with community organizations, particularly in Phases 1 and 2. In Phase 1, for example, we built on Health Canada's national project on Fathering (2003): "My Daddy Matters Because..." and their national survey which was sent to 1015 agencies in Canada and completed by 382 organizations. A finding that was important in setting the rationale for a focus on the new father was that while most responding agencies indicated that they reach all fathers, they also made it clear that the *new father* is the most important client group. The New Fathers cluster then followed up on this finding and focused a survey as well as focus groups on the needs and perceptions of new fathers. It was also due to our contacts with community organizations across the country that we were able to conduct a series of national focus groups for Phase 2 of our work. These groups were taped or videotaped and contained both qualitative and quantitative data components.

Developing new resources and programs through community partnerships

For the last two years, the New Fathers cluster has also worked very closely with the Focus on Fathers program in York Region, north of Toronto. Aimed at fathers of children from birth to six years of age, the first Focus on Fathers programs were established in 1999 with the aim of assisting fathers to develop their parenting skills. Two courses were offered that year and 25 fathers attended. In 2005, 22 courses were offered to 200 fathers, and a full half of these courses were offered to multicultural groups in languages other than English or French (e.g. Spanish, Korean, Farsi, Russian, Chinese, and Tami). These new parenting programs are especially aimed at fathers from recently arrived immigrant communities, are facilitated by members of each community, employ materials that are translated into the community's mother tongue, provide food which is familiar to that community, and are also open to attendance by mothers, grandmothers and grandfathers. In 2004, Focus on Fathers added a new program entitled "Preparing New Parents" for couples who are pregnant or whose youngest child is less than eighteen months. Held at medical centers and Early Years Centers across York Region, this course helps couples in making the transition from 'partner-hood to parenthood' by focusing on changes in the couple's relationship, postpartum depression, attachment to the baby, dealing with stress, and time management.

The New Fathers cluster has also collaborated with the Working With Families Institute at the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Toronto. Overall, the linking of community and academic partners has meant that the Focus on Fathers project will continue to expand programs for fathers, mothers and grandparents, with special emphasis on developing programs for new parents in English and other languages of the Greater Toronto Area. The written materials will continue to be adapted as findings emerge from the research being done in the New Fathers cluster, especially from the focus groups and the in-depth interviews with fathers and couples.

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Immigrant Fathers Cluster

Focus: The challenges faced by immigrant men (Russian and Sudanese) as they parent in Canada including role reversals of parents and children due to children's rapid acculturation; racism and its impact on immigrant fathering; family and neighbourhood isolation and the impact of un/under-employment on fathering. Based in Calgary with links to Toronto and Montreal and led by Dr. David Este, University of Calgary.

Gay Fathers Cluster

Focus: The effects of homophobia on gay fathering; social, legal, and cultural barriers to fathering for gay men; access to services for gay fathers and what can be learned about parenting from men operating outside of traditional gender dynamics. Based in Toronto and led by Rachel Epstein, coordinator LGBT Parenting Network/David Kelly Services, Family Service Association of Toronto (FSAT).

Separated and Divorced Fathers Cluster

Focus: The salient legal, emotional, and financial issues faced by separated and divorced fathers; the strengths they bring to their family relationships; identification of patterns that sustain and interfere with positive father involvement; identification of needs and evidence based solutions. Based in Vancouver and Vancouver Island and led by Dr. Edward Kruk, School of Social Work and Family Studies, University of British Columbia.

Young Fathers Cluster

Focus: The multiple dimensions for young fathers that need support (work, school, housing, relationships); challenging the negative perceptions of young fathers as expressed through social services and the courts; identification of programming needs for young fathers. Based in the Ottawa/Hull Region and led by Dr. Annie Devault, Université du Québec en Outaouais.

Indigenous Fathers Cluster

Focus: The unique issues affecting Indigenous fathers' caring for young children (0-6) enrolled in centre-based child care; improving community outreach to Indigenous fathers; creating meaningful roles for Indigenous fathers involved with their children in child care and development programs; and to alter program structures, program materials, and program activities in order to better serve fathers. Based in Victoria, Vancouver and northern British Columbia and led by Dr. Jessica Ball, University of Victoria.

New Fathers Cluster

Focus: The support services provided to fathers through the first eighteen months of the child's life, including pre-natal period; the impact of becoming a dad on the father's physical and mental health and on the father's personal development; and examination of the degree of support afforded to fathers by the health care system. Based in London, York Region, and Toronto and led by Ed Bader, Co-Chair FIRA (Community): Catholic Community Services of York Region.

Fathers of Children with Special Needs Cluster

Focus: The challenges of fathering a special needs child and determining the factors that limit or facilitate involvement; improving the practice of "family-centred" care with fathers of children who experience a chronic health condition and/or a physical disability. Based in Toronto and London and led by Dr. Ted McNeill, Director of Social Work, The Hospital for Sick Children.

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