

**Separated and Divorced Fathers Cluster Executive Summary  
Father Involvement Community Research Forum Spring 2006**

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**Separated and Divorced Fathers' Perceptions of Their Children's Needs and  
Corresponding Paternal Responsibilities: Preliminary Results and Potential Implications**

A total of 82 separated and divorced fathers were interviewed as part of a study utilizing narrative analysis to examine fathers' stories about their divorces, particularly in regard to their relationship with their children. A grounded theory analysis was conducted to uncover core themes related to fathers' perceptions of their children's needs during the divorce transition, and their paternal responsibilities vis-à-vis these needs. Fathers were recruited via divorced father associations and word of mouth, after attempts at recruitment via professional service organizations failed. Over 150 fathers from southwestern British Columbia, mainly Greater Vancouver and South Vancouver Island, volunteered to participate in the project. For many, this was their first opportunity to tell their story, despite lengthy histories of involvement with the legal system, and to reflect on their experiences.

The data are rich and the themes that have emerged from the analysis are extremely varied, yet certain core constructs are common to almost all fathers. In particular, both the concepts of *paternal rights* and *paternal responsibilities* are important to fathers, and for the majority, each has been violated within the present legal or *adversarial structure* of child custody determination in Canada. The *divorce industry* as a whole is regarded as a system that oppresses men as fathers, in addition to oppressing women as mothers, extended family members, and most importantly, children from separated and divorced families whose parents cannot agree on parenting arrangements and the court has become involved in determining what these shall be. Specifically, two central issues stand out for fathers: the need to replace *legal sole custody* with *legal shared parenting*; and the need for *access enforcement*. Although fathers are divided with respect to the salience of each of the latter two concepts, the great majority consider both as critical issues affecting separated and divorced fathers in Canada today.

**Preliminary Results and Potential Implications****Summary**

Both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered in this study. Potential implications are also discussed below.

**Quantitative data**

Results show a sharp discontinuity between pre- and post-divorce parent-child living arrangements, more marked than reported in earlier studies, in the direction of equal or shared parenting shifting to primary maternal custody. Whereas 38 of 82 fathers reported shared parenting arrangements before divorce (defined as the point of physical parental separation), only 10 of 82 reported shared parenting arrangements after divorce. Whereas 20 of 82 fathers reported primary maternal care arrangements before divorce, 62 of 82 reported primary maternal care arrangements after divorce. Second, inasmuch as it addresses the core needs of children, the most salutary post-divorce living arrangement for children, according to 69 of the 82 fathers, is equal or shared parenting. Only four fathers identified primary paternal care, and four primary maternal care, in this regard. Third, insofar as it addresses the core needs of children, fathers believe that the most responsible legal approach to child custody determination is that of shared parenting as a presumption, rebuttable in cases of established family violence or child abuse. Sixty-four of 82 fathers identified the need for such a presumption, while only 4 identified the approximation standard (as endorsed by the American Law Institute) and 2 a maternal caregiver presumption. Sixty-nine of 82 fathers were in favour of some form of mandatory family mediation. Finally, divorced fathers are quite diverse in regard to their attitudes and opinions about fathering. For some a shared parenting presumption is the priority; for others, access enforcement. Some see one dominant unfulfilled need in their children resulting from father absence; others see many. Some are focused on fathers' rights; others simply on being supported to fulfill their parental responsibilities. On certain key points, however, fathers agree:

- i. both rights and responsibilities are important, and must be in balance,
- ii. both shared parenting and access enforcement are important and related issues, and most important
- iii. the "best interests of the child" is equivalent to the child's needs, and certain needs stick out—and crucially require father involvement for need fulfillment.

The participants were a diverse and representative group demographically, ranging in age from their 20's to 70's, with most in their 40's and 50's, most working full-time and parenting their kids full-time (or working to restore their parenting). Although joint custody fathers may have been under-represented in our sample and non-custodial fathers over-represented, the 82 participants spanned a broad range. There were 58 de facto non-custodial fathers, 11 in joint custody (shared parenting) arrangements, 5 with sole custody, and 8 in some form of mixed arrangement (with 4 of these 8 having shifted from being non-custodial dads in the earlier post-divorce period to being joint custodians of their children at interview—a small but encouraging sign).

A significant number of fathers had little or no contact with their children, even despite the granting of legal "joint custody," a largely meaningless legal term for fathers, as it is not equivalent to shared parental responsibility (40-60% of time with kids) in the majority of cases. Further, fathers experience challenges restoring a ruptured relationship even after the child becomes an adult. Yet more than anything else, fathers value their relationship with their children, and as such, access denial is regarded as a form of parent abuse, and for some fathers, a gendered form of systemic *father* abuse, although most fathers recognize that non-custodial mothers experience the same kind of grief resulting from their estrangement from their children. Some fathers felt that access denial may also be a form of *child* abuse.

## Qualitative data

Results reveal one key finding previously unreported in the father involvement literature: fathers define the “best interests” of their children in terms of their children’s needs, and these needs can be roughly divided into physical and “metaphysical” needs. Both are important, as in some cases physical needs prevail, and in others emotional, psychological, social, moral and spiritual needs are of paramount importance. What children most need, say fathers, is a stable *parental* (not “access” or visiting) relationship with both their fathers and their mothers (“*children need both parents*”). They need to be loved, and in no way felt to blame for their parents’ divorce. They need a sense of security, safety and protection in often traumatizing situations, and they need food, shelter, clothing and financial provision. Parental cooperation and respect were also core themes discussed by fathers as were the needs for order; autonomy; equality; truth and justice; play and physical affection; encouragement, respect and understanding; physical health and development; and education. Interestingly, a number of fathers identified the *need for roots* as central, reflecting the view that this need of children is most under threat in modern Western society. As far as paternal responsibilities are concerned, most fathers cited the responsibility to *be there for your kids*, in some form of loving parental capacity. This was followed closely by the notion that fathers basically have only one responsibility: respect for their children’s needs, as “for every need there is a corresponding obligation; for every obligation a corresponding need”. The responsibilities of social institutions, as predicted, focused on the responsibility to support fathers in the fulfillment of their parenting responsibilities, by means of equality and fairness in court-determined post-divorce parenting arrangements, with fathers recognized as having equal rights to mothers vis-à-vis their children.

In sum, fathers identified a wide variety of core issues, focused mainly on child contact and access, equality in parenting, and being valued and supported as fathers and parents by social institutions. They also stressed the financial costs of divorce and unfair child support regulations, in the context of a significantly lower standard of living than they and their children could have. The findings are extensive, and this summary captures only a fraction of the many themes explicated by the men themselves.

## Potential implications

Having immersed myself in the data over the past few months, three questions stand out, which will have important implications for post-divorce father involvement:

1. How do we frame with the social problem of parental alienation in a way that meets the core needs of children after divorce and allows fathers (and mothers) to fulfill their parental responsibilities in a way that addresses those needs?
2. How do we garner public and political attention and support to effectively deal with the social problem of parental alienation and promote responsible post-divorce father involvement?
3. What legal framework is needed to encourage the responsible and effective use of family mediation and conflict resolution in cases where parents cannot agree on the post-divorce parenting arrangements for their children?

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## Father Involvement Research Alliance\* CURA

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

### 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.

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