

Understanding and Supporting Indigenous Fathers' Journeys

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"Fathers may well be the greatest untapped resource in the lives of Aboriginal children today. If we could understand and support them to get involved and stay connected with their children, that would be a big protective factor for these youngsters as they grow up."

Ed John, Grand Chief of British Columbia First Nations Summit, Aboriginal Early Childhood Development Leaders Forum

Understand

How are Indigenous men doing in terms of the conditions that are known to affect sustained, positive father involvement?

- Indigenous men may be the most socially excluded population.
- Compared to the general population in Canada, census and health surveys show that Indigenous men experience:
 - Earlier school leaving
 - More unemployment
 - More injuries
 - Three times more living in poverty
 - Three times more suicide
 - Nine times more incarceration
- Indigenous fathers are much more likely to be teenagers when their first child is born.

Mixed media artwork by Norm Coyne

What do Indigenous fathers say about their experience of fatherhood?

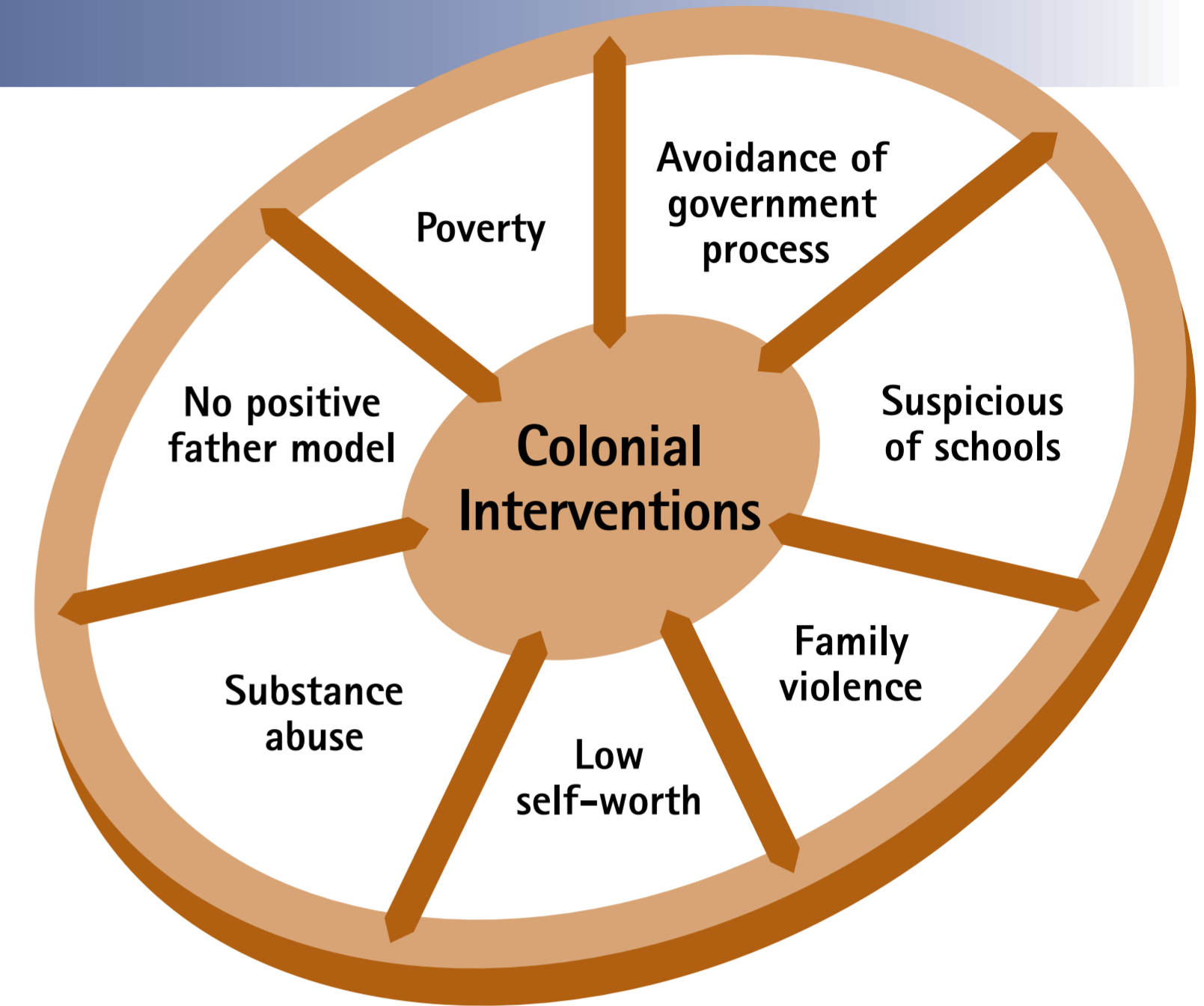
Research*: 80 First Nations and Métis fathers contributed accounts of their experiences to the first study of Indigenous fathers in Canada.

Fathers expressed a strong desire to:

- be positively involved with their children
- "learn fatherhood"
- stay connected even when their circumstances change.

They identified many personal and social challenges, which most explained with reference to the colonial history of disrupting Indigenous family life and communities. For many, experiences of being guided by a caring father figure and learning what it means to be a father were lost.

We expect men to become responsible, involved fathers, and to do what a whole clan used to do.



We call upon men to step into father roles, including lone fathering and caring for children alone on their custody days, without many internal guides or external resources, while nearly all support programs for parents are tailored to mothers.

Hope

"We could be the 'turn-around generation'"

Leroy Joe, Lil'wat Nation

"Being a father to these boys is part of a healing journey – for me, for my extended family, for us as a people, reconnecting us to our ancestors and the care they showed to our children. It's part of who we are, and becoming a father re-awakens that spirit."

Al Iverson, Prince George, B.C.

Healing: Many Indigenous men are embarked on healing journeys, learning relationships skills, and re-joining circles of shared care for children.

Change: New circumstances, especially urban living, are bringing new thinking about the roles of fathers, mothers, and other family members, and the different supports they need.

Cultural re-connections: Families and communities are mobilizing renewed interest in traditional circles of care for children, reinstating teaching and nurturing roles for fathers, uncles, and grandfathers as part of extended family care for children.

Recognition: There is increasing acknowledgement that positive father involvement can have many benefits for children, as shown in many studies, summarized at right.



Support

What do Indigenous men say they need to learn to be positively involved fathers and sustain connections with their children?

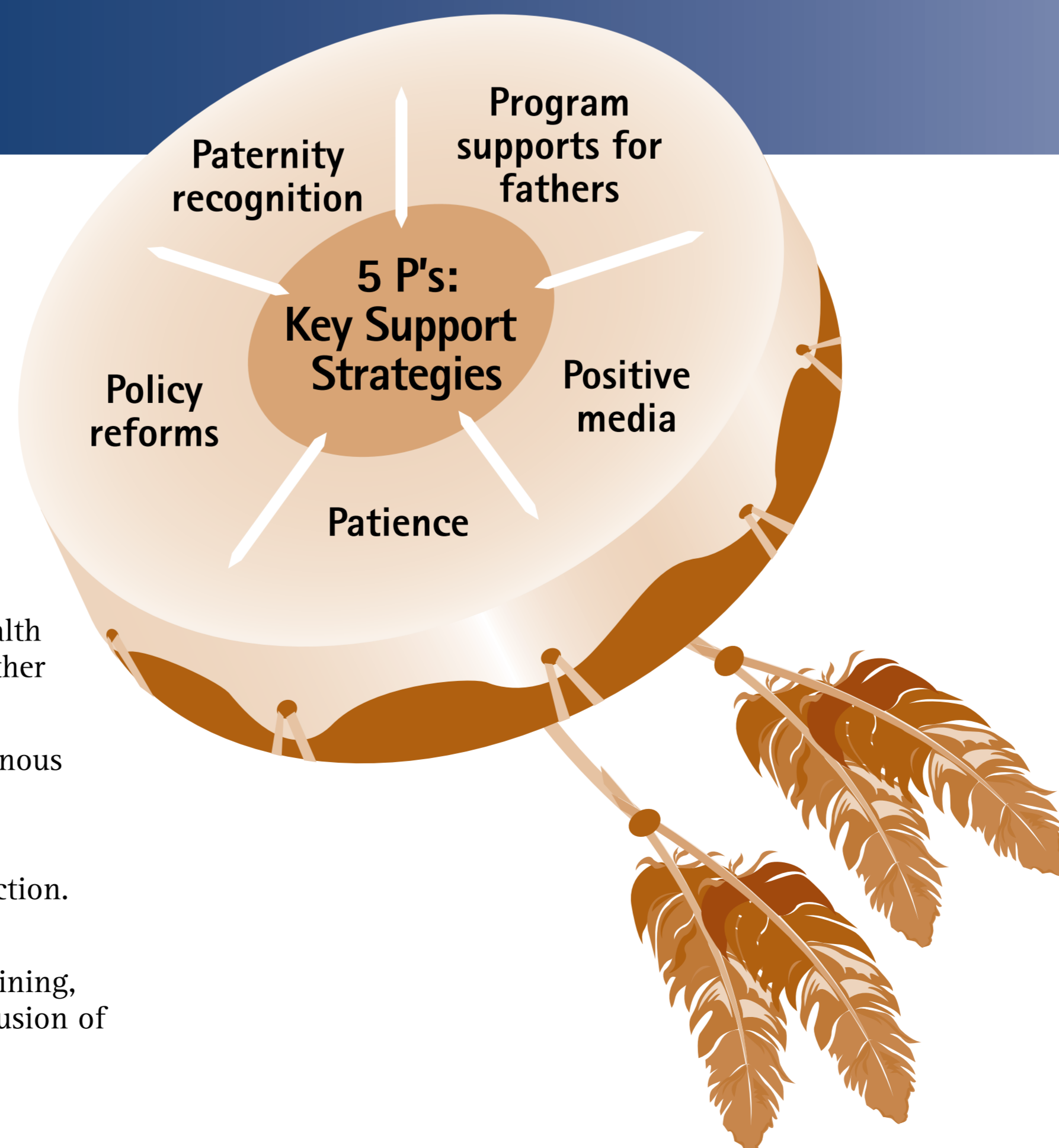
Paternity recognition: Encourage fathers and institutions to record father's name on child records: birth, health, child welfare, child care, and school.

Program supports for fathers: Move beyond mother-centrism in content, timing and staffing of programs: prenatal, infant home visiting, parent-tot play groups, child health and development clinics, early literacy, and parent education. Staff programs with father support workers.

Positive media: Produce and promote positive images, stories and news about Indigenous fathers, creating a culture of positive expectations and appreciation.

Patience: Support the journey of learning fatherhood with realistic expectations and long-term support. Change takes time and may occur in cycles of more or less connection.

Policy reforms and programs that create equitable conditions for positive father involvement: Work towards federal and provincial policies that improve housing, training, employment, resources for family recreation, and overall opportunities for social inclusion of Indigenous men.



* Support for research with Indigenous fathers has been provided by:
Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada – CURA Program B.C. Ministry for Children and Family Development through the Human Early Learning Partnership at the University of Victoria (HELP: UVic-REACH)

For information and updates:
www.ecdip.org

To learn more:

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