
Building a Provincial Positive
Fatherhood Involvement Strategy:
Results from the Nov 21, 2013
Consultation in Red Deer, Alberta



Authors

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Acknowledgements

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About this Report

This report summarizes the information gathered from a consultation session conducted on Thursday, November 21st, 2013, in Red Deer, Alberta. Participants included academics whose research areas include involved fathering, as well as service providers, and leaders in the community who work with fathers in a variety of capacities. Prior to the consultation, the report *“Promoting Positive Father Involvement: A Strategy to Prevent Intimate Partner Violence in the Next Generation”* was sent to each participant. This research paper focuses on positive father involvement as an Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) prevention strategy, that is, a strategy to prevent IPV before those behaviors develop in the next generation. The report provides a rationale for new investments in positive father involvement strategies including specific recommendations in the areas of research, policy, and programming. This report is situated within a broader research agenda designed to build a comprehensive strategy to engage men and boys in violence prevention.

The goal of this full day session was to disseminate knowledge about new research and trends in positive father involvement strategies in Alberta, as well as to explore recommendations and next steps in the areas of research, policy, and programming in Alberta.

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“To achieve the goal of having fathers engage with their children, we need good fathers to be out in the forefront, because we’ve got good fathers and they need to be the expectation.” – Participant

1.0 Session Structure and Organization

The consultation session was cohosted by Lana Wells, the Brenda Strafford Chair in the Prevention of Domestic Violence at the University of Calgary, and Patrick Dillon, the Provincial Co-ordinator for the Alberta Father Involvement Initiative. The session was divided into two segments, the first of which was dedicated to disseminating information from Alberta scholars and service providers whose work focuses on the area of fatherhood. The aims of the presentations were to ground the session participants in key research findings and current trends in this subject area. The presenters included:

- Dr. David Long, Department of Sociology, King’s University College.
- Dr. David Este, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary.
- Patrick Dillon, Provincial Co-ordinator, The Alberta Father Involvement Initiative.
- Laurie Fagan, Program Director, Norwood Child and Family Resource Centre, Edmonton.
- Lana Wells, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary.

The latter part of the day was dedicated to large and small group discussions. During the large group discussion, presenters answered questions from participants. The discussion focused on the impressions of the participants, the implications of the material presented, as well as any gaps in the research or evidence-based strategies detailed in the presentations.

The small group discussions provided for more intimate knowledge sharing and discussion between all of the session participants and presenters. These discussions focused on developing recommendations for policy makers, practitioners and researchers. Participants discussed the following questions: Which strategies hold the greatest likelihood of creating the greatest impact? What challenges and barriers need to be overcome in order to promote positive fatherhood in Alberta? What existing opportunities are available in terms of readiness, programs, social infrastructure, etc. to be built upon? Finally, what are the implications for the recommendations that we want to advance as a community to government, community, and academics? The information garnered from these discussions is what makes up the substantive material for sections 3.0 and 4.0 of this report.

2.0 Current Research Information

To begin our understanding of fatherhood we need to reflect upon how we come to perceive of fatherhood, which is to say, where do our ideas about fathering come from? Preconceived notions of fathers ultimately colour our expectations of involved fathers, and are not necessarily universal. Research suggests that we need to evaluate conventional notions of fatherhood based on the degree to which they enhance or constrain healthy childhood development, healthy family relationships, and adaptive cultural norms.

Notions of “fathering” and what it means to be a father or parent are contextualized within different communities. Often times our ideas of fatherhood are couched in a North American, Caucasian, heterosexual context, which often includes a nuclear family. To move an agenda of positive involved fatherhood forward we first need to be cognizant of what our understandings of fatherhood are, and how those differ across time and place, and groups of people. Research on fathering has traditionally focused on answering the questions: Where have fathers gone? What do fathers do? What does fatherhood mean? These lines of thinking have resulted in some of the current research themes on fathering.

2.1 Ecological Embeddedness

Every man’s relationship with his child is informed by personal, interpersonal, cultural and structural elements. That is to say that no two fathers are necessarily alike, nor is their relationship with their child(ren) the same. There are, however, personal and familial interactions, organizational contexts, and policy and institutional arrangements that impact how dads see themselves. This speaks to the complexity of the relationship networks, both social and institutional, which exert influences on men and their conceptions of fatherhood. To advance an agenda of fatherhood involvement, we need to be aware that there are multiple forces influencing men’s lives.

2.2 Diversity and Social Inclusion

“Every family that comes in the door is different. If we try and move ahead policy without considering that every person is different, that every person is a human being, then we are missing the complexity of the issue.” – Participant

Men and fathers have a diverse range of experiences and opportunities that reflect a spectrum of characteristics and circumstances. There is no one profile of a father. Fathers come from a diverse range of backgrounds, and vary in terms of their marital status, sexual orientation, ethnic or racial identity, socio-economic status, career obligations, geographic differences, and so on. This diversity in fathers can prove to be challenging as it limits the feasibility and applicability of generalized approaches. There

is, however, some merit to approaches that investigate and focus on those characteristics that are shared by fathers.

2.3 Reconciling Personal and Professional Life

“85% of men experience work/family conflicts.” – Participant

A significant proportion of dads experience challenges balancing their work and family commitments. Higher demands for income to maintain a standard quality of life have drawn on the “man as the breadwinner” narrative, placing greater expectations on fathers to serve outside the home. This has direct impacts on the ability for fathers to be involved with their children. The amount of time fathers are able to spend with their children is contingent on the type and number of jobs that fathers have. Fathers are not necessarily working from 9 to 5. Therefore employment can potentially create challenges for increased fatherhood involvement.

2.4 Visibility, Outreach and Engagement

The number of researchers who are engaging with policy makers and program developers is growing. As a result, research is increasingly moving away from academic discourse to applied research and program implementation. However, there are challenges that remain in getting dads to participate, in encouraging help-seeking behaviour in fathers, and in the range of father/male friendly programs and services that are delivered. This has demonstrated that there is a gap between academia and service provision.

2.5 Father Involvement and Reconceptualising Masculinities

“I remember being in the maternity ward and there was one poster on the wall for men, there was all kinds of stuff for women, and there was one for men and all it said was ‘don’t shake the baby’, as if that’s all men need to know.” – Participant

There is a shifting (albeit slowly) relationship between identities and fathering experiences. Changes in family relations, roles, and responsibilities have resulted in new conceptions of what fathering entails. While stereotypical and essentialist narratives and images of what it means to “be a man” are still prominent, there is an increasingly diverse plurality of masculinities. The research on the subject is divided. A significant body of literature continues to blame men for not asking for help, but still fails to acknowledge the presence of cultural expectations that teach men not to ask for help. Men are not encouraged to share their stories, nor are they enabled to do so. The continuing shift in masculinities raises the questions: What does it mean to be a man in our society/community/family?

3.0 Gaps Identified

3.1 Sustainable Funding

The lack of sustainable funding for programs was identified by a number of participants as being an obstacle to moving forward. Currently, most funding for fatherhood initiatives comes from private foundations, with little funding coming from governments. Currently, agencies have to develop relationships with private organizations for financial support, and funding is often for one-off projects, rather than for ongoing development and implementation. This funding model is viewed as tenuous and unsustainable. Start-up initiatives collapse when funding ceases, or the initiatives borrow funding from other projects and are subsequently the first to be cut when funding gets reduced. Communities and agencies would like to work with funders to develop a more sustainable approach to investments in this area.

3.2 Communication Gaps

Participants identified a need to bridge gaps in communication between current service providers, community organizations, faith-based organizations, business leaders, and community leagues. They felt that increased communication would assist in building healthier, whole communities by better enabling these (and other) parties to identify what services are currently being offered and what practices are most effective. Participants stated that increased communication would allow their organizations to take advantage of community initiatives that are already being undertaken, allowing them to tap into and build on existing momentum. They also felt that service providers need to move beyond creating new programs for dads and consider “what’s already happening in the community, and how can we include that in helping dads?” Habitat for Humanity was cited as an example of a current initiative that could be tapped into to incorporate father/child involvement.

3.3 Curriculum Gaps

The sessions also identified the lack of information about involved fathering in current curricula. Participants felt that when teaching both youth and young adults about relationships there needs to be a more inclusive and specific emphasis on fathering, particularly at the post-secondary level, in the training of educators, health professionals, and social workers. This was cited as one way of reducing the burden on community organizations having to provide this education.

“In terms of our curriculum, both information and skill based, I would give us an F. Not just in terms of fathers, but also in terms of men.” - Participant

3.4 Men-centred

“We need to make sure women aren’t determining what works for men, and that men are deciding for themselves”. – Participant

The participants felt men must be more involved in determining what works for them. This can be challenging in a sector that is predominantly female driven. However, services must be designed by and for men, and build upon existing learning by engaging men and keeping them engaged. Some of the participants felt that the larger obstacle in accomplishing this feat is the actual engagement process, maintaining that once men are engaged they are more likely to stay engaged but initially getting them “in the door” can be a challenge.

3.5 Definitions of Fatherhood

“There is no monolithic principle of what family is, of what fatherhood is. All these different people and these different organizations think about it differently. Service providers need to be aware and sensitive to that.” - Participant

Various organizations have different visions of what father involvement means; there is an array of perspectives of what parenting is, or how relationships between dads and children should be. This plurality of definitions of fatherhood is further reflected in different communities. There is a need to target men from different cultural backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, sexual orientations, etc. to assist them in better conceptualizing and understanding what it means to be an involved father in a contemporary context. Similarly, there is a need for a more unified working definition of involved fathering among service providers.

4.0 Recommendations

4.1 Go Where the Men Are

“Healthy men are connecting with each other more informally... A number of men who are healthy fathers connect with each other in a social capacity.” - Participant

There is a sense that men learn about parenting more informally than women, but that men are learning about parenting in isolation from other men. It is therefore important to target social contexts where men do connect with each other, including workplaces, gyms, and recreational facilities (e.g., during children’s extracurricular activities). Taking advantage of these environments and exchanges, which are already a part of men’s routines, is one possible avenue to provide fathers with learning opportunities or increase social support. Also, these social exchanges are opportunities to use a snowball effect and establish a community network that utilizes word of mouth referrals.

4.2 Improving Father Engagement

“I had a phone call from a service provider, she said: ‘I need more dads for my mom and tots program’... let’s talk about language.” – Participant

A gap has been identified in engaging men both initially and for continued involvement. Initially attracting fathers requires more targeted approaches. For example, advertising directly to “dads” and not “parents” is more likely to be successful as fathers often associate “parent” with “mom”. Also, holding events that are specifically targeted to men and focus on male interests are advantageous. Other methods to attract dads include:

- asking them what they want,
- reducing expectations for men to display vulnerability and emotional openness,
- having mothers and children supporting the fathers’ involvement,
- creating environments that are conducive to male involvement,
- providing food,
- using men in advertising, and
- scheduling programs and events that occur when men’s schedules permit them to participate.

Organizations that have invited dads to facilitate peer-based models of knowledge delivery have demonstrated some success in engaging fathers in an ongoing way. The agencies get the men started; provide resources, such as meeting spaces and food; and educate the dads so that they can facilitate themselves, thus reducing overall demands for resources. It is felt that the natural networks of support are valuable yet inexpensive to tap into. Peer mentoring programs should give consideration to the ages of the participants, as well as their community backgrounds (in the case of immigrant fathers). Concentrated efforts should be made to engage men to volunteer or give back to the organization, and take advantage of the many opportunities for the men to be more purposefully involved. Men are more inclined to continue participation if they feel they are developing skills, and/or if they feel they are making some sort of tangible contribution. Finally, engaging employers about the importance of issues pertaining to fathers (e.g., paternity leave) has the potential to reduce professional/personal life conflicts that can be prohibitive to father involvement.

As service providers and academics, we need to understand the difference between violence and father engagement. Though the topics are intimately linked, programs focusing on violence prevention, and programs focusing on father involvement do not necessarily target the same thing. Violence needs to be addressed before father engagement can be undertaken. Also, a better understanding of how different service providers perceive “prevention” has been identified as a need.

4.3 Improved Communication

“I think it would be helpful to have some mechanism whereby we can talk to one another and share evidence, where that information can then come to academics and be built into evidence-based practice” - Participant

Mechanisms to support better communication between service providers are needed, as are avenues to deliver that information to academics so that they can tailor their research to “on the ground” needs and requirements. This will better enable academics to assist in developing best practices and support evidence-based practice. Further, improved communication will ensure that organizations have the information available to them to identify where to redirect families with problems that cannot be adequately dealt with by the point of contact service provider. Participants suggested that social media could play a role in further developing intra-agency communication, as well as in disseminating information to fathers.

Messaging around families needs to be more specific and recognize that “family” means different things in different communities. In messaging about families we are often talking about nuclear families and this can alienate families that do not fit this mold. Many diverse ethnic or immigrant family structures do not reflect the traditional North American model of family, and may include multiple generations.

4.4 Changing the “Culture of Fatherhood”

“In order to create good fathers we need to create a larger cultural environment that supports positive masculinities.” – Participant

Societal notions of what it means to be a “man” and a “father” often conflict with narratives of what it means to be an “involved father”. We need to change the culture to give men permission to be vulnerable and expressive so that we can encourage people to have difficult conversations and communicate their own difficult experiences. The Centre to End All Sexual Exploitation’s (CEASE) “Men of Honour” awards are cited as an example of celebrating men whose virtues transcend traditional narratives of manliness. Increased visibility of men and boys practicing healthy relationships in schools, careers, sports, faith-based organizations, and other social spheres need to be recognized.

In line with this, staff at service organizations need to be educated so that they better understand the male experience and what it means to be a dad. This should include information about: engaging fathers in expressive communication; understanding the constraints on men’s time and lifestyle; recognizing the significance of balancing work and family life, and addressing the conflicts and pressures that are associated with that balance.

5.0 Conclusion

There are a number of successful initiatives in the province that are helping to promote positive fatherhood involvement. However, there are significant gaps in funding, service provision, and other obstacles that need to be addressed in order to move an agenda of positive involved fatherhood forward. Further discussion and commitment to advancing this agenda is needed in order to promote the capacity of academics, policy makers, service providers, community groups and funders to assist fathers in increasing their involvement with their children and building healthy relationships. Further work is necessary to continue developing substantive recommendations that can adequately address all of the gaps that have been identified. In the future, consideration should be given to broadening the partners involved in fatherhood consultations and ensuring that there is a good representation of stakeholders who deal with the area from across Alberta.

Next Steps will include further consultation in the Spring of 2015 in order to continue the conversation and start to build a strategy specific to the Alberta context.

Appendix A: List of Participants

1. Candice Henderson, Manager of Early Childhood Services, Family Services of Central Alberta
2. Carmen Werstiuk, Manager for the Provincial Family Violence Treatment Program
3. Carolyn Goard, Director Member Programs and Services, Alberta Council of Women's Shelters
4. Corinna Totino, Business Development Manager, Families Matter, Calgary
5. David Este, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary
6. David Long, professor of Sociology, Kings University
7. Dean McKellar, Social Worker, City of Edmonton
8. Debbie Clark, Executive Director, Today Family Violence Help Centre
9. Diane Altwasser, United Way of Calgary and Area
10. Jacqueline Aitken, Executive Director of PACE, Grand Prairie
11. John Masters, Board Member, United Way of Calgary and Area
12. John McMahon, Senior Facilitator, Be A Great Dad Program; Families Matter Society of Calgary
13. Judy Scott, Manager of children and youth services with Family Services of Central Alberta
14. Kim Ah-Sue, Program Officer, Norlien Foundation
15. Lana Wells, Chair, Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary
16. Laurie Fagan, Program Director, Norwood Child and Family Resource Centre, Edmonton
17. Lindsay Whittaker, Manager, Special Projects, Family Violence Prevention and Homelessness Support Division, Human Services
18. Margaret Jev, Strategy Lead at UpStart United Way of Calgary and Area
19. Michael Hoyt, Social Worker, City of Edmonton
20. Patrick Dillon, Provincial Coordinator, Alberta Father Involvement Initiative
21. Trina Homeniuk, Provincial Family Violence and Community Treatment Programs, Alberta Health Services

Facilitators/staff:

22. Elizabeth Dozois, Facilitator
23. Brian Hansen, Research Assistant, Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence



SHIFT TO STOP
VIOLENCE
BEFORE IT STARTS