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THE PROJECT TO END
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

**Engaging Men Through
Fatherhood to Prevent
Violence and Advance Gender
Equality: Rapid Evidence
Review**

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
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Authors

Brian Hansen
Laura Pascoe
Lana Wells

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**The views of the authors do not necessarily represent the views of
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Contact

Lana Wells, Brenda Strafford Chair in the Prevention of Domestic Violence
Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary
2500 University Drive NW, Calgary, AB, Canada T2N 1N4
Phone: 403-220-6484 Email: lmwells@ucalgary.ca

Table of Contents

Authors' Note..... 2

Executive Summary 3

1.0 Introduction..... 6

 1.1 A note on language7

 1.2 Why engage men through fatherhood?7

2.0 Methods 8

 2.1 Search strategy9

 2.2 Screening and data synthesis 10

 2.3 Figure 1: Summary of publications reviewed..... 11

3.0 Findings 13

 3.1 Engaging men through fatherhood improves outcomes for children and families..... 13

 3.1.1 Better outcomes for children..... 13

 3.1.2 Better outcomes for families 14

 3.1.3 Contributes to healthy masculinity norms and gender equality 14

 3.2 Best and promising programs, practices, and policies for engaging involved fathers 15

 3.2.1 Programs 15

 3.2.2 Programmatic practices 16

 3.2.3 Going beyond programs: Catholic Family Service case study 19

 3.2.4 Policies are critical to supporting positive father involvement 20

 3.2.5 Non-programmatic practices 22

 3.3 Key strengths, challenges, gaps, and lessons learned from engaging fathers..... 23

 3.3.1 Strengths and lessons learned 23

 3.3.2 Challenges and gaps..... 23

 3.4 Recommendations 25

References 28

Authors' Note

We, the authors, would like to take this opportunity to situate ourselves in relation to this research and flag some of the tensions that we continue to navigate as feminists working to advance gender and social justice. First, we are white settlers, trained in the Western scientific tradition, with extensive experience working with feminist issues from an intersectional perspective. Each of us has over a decade of experience working directly with men in the areas of violence prevention and gender equality. Based on our experience, we firmly believe that gender and social inequality is inextricably linked with rates of male violence against all genders and our interventions must focus on all forms of violence to stop violence before it starts.

We are also white feminists committed to advancing racial justice and are on an ongoing journey to understand and learn more about where and how we can be most useful in this work. At Shift, we have been integrating approaches that aim to call *in* rather than *out*, while also reflecting on our own practices and building creative and innovative skills, so that we can maximize our capacity to hold people accountable in ways that generate healing, recovery, repair, and prosocial change. We believe it is imperative to ask hard questions and think strategically about what is and is not working in efforts to achieve social change across anti-violence, gender equality, and justice, diversity, and inclusion fields so that we can build momentum for bigger and more impactful movements.

In completing this review, our methods and analysis used an intersectional approach which allowed us to clearly see the dearth of research on strategies to engage and mobilize men at the intersections of gender equality, violence prevention, and advancing equity, diversity, justice, and inclusion. However, it is important to note that while we included search terms related to racism, colonialism, diversity, justice, and inclusion in order to identify any research in these areas, we were unable to identify any literature on these areas, and our analysis focused on fatherhood primarily as an entry point for gender equality and violence prevention. We worked diligently to name and map the ways in which research on fatherhood needs to be more inclusive of a broader scope of male-identified folks in care work, as well do more to understand the experiences of single fathers, but we recognize there is much more work to do to examine how fatherhood could be used as an entry point to engage men around issues such as racial equality. We welcome those who want to call us *in* so that we may continue to make our work stronger, more relevant, and more impactful across a wider audience.

In solidarity,
Brian, Laura, and Lana

Executive Summary

CallinMen: Mobilizing More Men for Violence Prevention and Gender Equality in Canada is a knowledge synthesis research project led by Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence, a primary research hub with the goal to stop violence before it starts. Shift is based out of the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary (Shift/UCalgary). As part of the *CallinMen* project, nine rapid evidence reviews were conducted on evidence-informed *primary prevention* approaches to engage and mobilize men to prevent and disrupt violence and inequalities, with the goal to share these findings with those funding and working with men and male-identified people to prevent violence and advance equity. To support and advance work to engage and mobilize men, both well-known and emergent approaches that show promise in engaging and mobilizing men were identified for review. This review focuses on engaging men through the key entry point of fatherhood.

Definitions:

Entry point: Shift defines entry points in relation to engaging men as areas of opportunity or engagement where men and boys can become involved in learning, reflection, and action that will increase their potential to be involved in healthy, gender-equitable relationships, and decrease the likelihood that they will be abusive. Fatherhood is one of the top and most influential entry points for engaging and transforming men.

Father/dad: Includes all males in caregiving roles—biological and adoptive parents, stepparents, transgender fathers, father figures, and any other males serving a parenting function.²

Positive father involvement: Fatherhood as a key entry point encompasses all programs and initiatives that seek to increase positive father involvement, defined as promoting their child’s well-being and security by taking an active role in caring for their child’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical health, and by having a respectful, equitable relationship with the child’s mother or co-parent.³

What does the evidence say?

The evidence is overwhelmingly clear that promoting positive fatherhood is a key primary prevention strategy, including preventing child maltreatment and domestic violence and advancing gender equality. Engaging men through fatherhood has distinct positive impacts that ripple across the social ecology, including:

- Children with engaged fathers have higher emotional, cognitive, and social well-being, as well as reduced behavioural problems, such as:
 - More resilience; better problem-solving and adaptive skills; greater emotional regulation and social competence; and lower levels of anxiety and depression.
 - Better educational outcomes.
 - Boys are more likely to exhibit nurturing, gender-equitable behaviours if/when they themselves become fathers and are also less likely to use violence against female partners in adulthood; girls have more flexible perspectives of gender and equal relationships.
- Father’s contributions to parenting, and home and family maintenance also fosters greater

maternal satisfaction.

- Societies where men carry a more equal portion of unpaid care work have less violence, improvements in mental health and well-being, and women’s greater economic equality through increased labour force participation and occupation of leadership roles.

This review was primarily based on research and advocacy Shift undertook on fatherhood up until 2016 and was then complemented by four academic studies published since 2016, as well as Promundo’s 2021 “State of the World’s Fathers” report.⁴

Best practices for fatherhood programming

- Father-focused programming. Programs that tailor their content to be more individualized and contextually relevant for fathers demonstrate better outcomes.⁵
- Engage fathers early. Fatherhood involvement that starts earlier in a child’s life is more likely to be sustained.⁶
- Develop a compelling “why” story. Fathers are more likely to engage in programs and services if they understand the importance and impact of their participation, particularly as it relates to positively benefiting their children, independently of mothers.⁷
- Meet men where they are at. Take advantage of where men naturally congregate (e.g., work, gym, children’s sporting events), which provides opportunities to engage men and leverage existing social networks of men.^{8,9}
- Build trust and relationships. Programs for fathers are more successful when they make fathers feel safe and establish trust between the program providers and participants.^{10,11}
- Ensure programs are geographically, physically, and psychologically accessible to fathers. This means that the venue location is accessible, schedule is convenient, the building accommodating of different physical abilities, and the service delivery environment is welcoming, creating social and cultural perceptions of accessibility.¹²
- Encourage mothers to support fathers in their participation. Studies show that mothers can be a barrier to father involvement by gatekeeping how fathers engage in their children’s lives.¹³ Leveraging the influence of mothers can help encourage fathers to participate in programs.¹⁴

Insights from research on fatherhood

Despite a wealth of research highlighting the wide ranging positive impacts of engaging men through fatherhood, resistance to this approach and limited government buy-in remains. There is urgent need to reorient gender norms so that our conceptions of healthy masculinity specifically include an acceptance of care work. We must shift the default around fatherhood from opt-out to opt-in, which requires creating more pathways for fathers to positively contribute to—and role model—care work and to feel a sense of ownership over their role as fathers that goes beyond economic contributions. Here are seven steps to do this:

1. Collect gender-disaggregated data on unpaid care work to monitor progress.
2. Expand evidence-based father-focused and father-inclusive programs at the community level. This includes facilitating and fostering informal support networks for fathers.

3. Engage fathers through the public health system during pregnancy and continue to leverage places where fathers naturally congregate/have potential to be involved—children’s school and sporting clubs and events, as well as where men work, play, worship, and socialize.
4. For service providers of child and family services, conduct father-friendly organizational assessments of organizations’ readiness to provide services to fathers and father figures.
5. Identify and facilitate pathways for men to train and work in paid care work such as early childhood education as part of efforts of normalizing men in care roles.
6. Legislate fully paid, non-transferable paternity leave. There is still a stigma in men prioritizing their family over work, and this is a moment when taking the choice out helps to ensure the path to engaged fatherhood is more equitably open and available to all fathers. Ideally at least some of the paternity leave is also mandated to further encourage men to take it.
7. Reexamine investment in parenting programs: Notice any patterns in proportion of funding that goes to programs that are father-inclusive (as opposed to mother-focused), and also how much goes to secondary prevention (e.g., fathers who have already perpetrated domestic violence) as opposed to primary prevention (engaging non-violent men in fatherhood). Funding for promoting positive fatherhood among non-violent men should be expanded as a key primary prevention strategy.

1.0 Introduction

In 2020, Shift/UCalgary was awarded a research grant from Women and Gender Equality Canada (WAGE) for a knowledge synthesis research project entitled *CallinMen: Mobilizing More Men for Violence Prevention and Gender Equality in Canada*. Little knowledge synthesis work has been done to date to increase understanding of what strategies and approaches meaningfully engage and mobilize men to prevent violence and advance gender equality, diversity, justice, and inclusion in Canada; this research fills that gap. Specifically, CallinMen advances the state of knowledge by identifying and reviewing the evidence base for key strategies and approaches that show promise in engaging and mobilizing men to prevent violence and advance gender equality, diversity, justice, and inclusion in Canada, and develops an evidence-informed “behaviour change toolbox” that consolidates these strategies and approaches.

Therefore, to identify and review promising approaches to engaging and mobilizing men to prevent violence and advance gender equality, diversity, justice, and inclusion, nine rapid evidence reviewsⁱ of the academic and grey literature were conductedⁱⁱ in 2021 with the goal to share these findings with those funding and working with men and male-identified people to prevent violence and advance equity. This document reports on the findings for how engaging men through fatherhood is a strategy to engage and mobilize men to prevent violence and advance gender equality, diversity, justice, and inclusion.

Shift defines positive fatherhood involvement as fathers who are actively and directly engaged in childrearing and whose parenting style is consistent with authoritative parents,¹⁵ balancing encouragement of independence and a sense of identity in their children along with consistent expectations about behaviour and compliance with authority.¹⁶

Between 2014- 2016, Shift conducted extensive research on engaging men through fatherhood. This involved primary and secondary research on the subject, including extensive consultation with community groups, non-government organizations and policy makers who support fathers, government departments, and men who are fathers. While this work resulted in clear and compelling summaries of *how* to engage men through fatherhood and *why* it is important, as well as providing direction on developing comprehensive government-funded recommendations to advance the area, it is unclear the extent to which action in this area has been taken up. This review aims to build upon Shift’s existing research by synthesizing past work and examining progress in the field to date. Specifically, this rapid review aims to address the following research questions:

ⁱ A rapid evidence reviews is a process that synthesizes knowledge through the steps of a systematic review, but components of the process are simplified or excluded in order to shorten the length of time required to complete the review. The process includes identifying specific research questions, searching for, accessing the most applicable and relevant sources of evidence, and synthesizing the evidence.

ⁱⁱ Rapid evidence reviews were conducted on: bystander approach, social norms approach, nudge approach, virtual reality, gamification, data science, fatherhood, calling in, and community justice.

1. What are the best and promising practices, policies, and programs for engaging and mobilizing men through the key entry pointⁱⁱⁱ of fatherhood to prevent violence and/or advance gender equality and/or diversity, justice, and/or inclusion?
2. How does engaging men through fatherhood impact behaviours, social norms, culture, organizations, and/or systems?
3. What are the key strengths, challenges, gaps, and lessons learned from engaging fathers, and how can this inform efforts to engage and mobilize men through fatherhood for the purposes of violence prevention and to advance gender equality, justice, diversity, and inclusion?

1.1 A note on language

Social constructions of “family” are evolving. In line with this, much of the traditional language of parenting (e.g., “mothers” and “fathers”) is increasingly being recognized as exclusionary, leaving some family structures (e.g., same gender parents) out of discourses on parenting. In this document, definitions of “fathers” are intended to be broader and “include a range of males” (or people who identify as male) who might function in a caregiver role. In addition to biological fathers, this includes adoptive fathers, foster fathers, stepfathers, father figures, transgender fathers, and relatives or friends who serve as father or male identified surrogates.”¹⁷ The fact does remain, however, that much of the existing research and interventions focused on parenting continues to adhere to the gendered language and traditional concepts of motherhood and fatherhood and this is reflected throughout this document. We use more inclusive terms (e.g., “caregiver” or “parent”) where possible; however, for research that specifically looked at differences and/or relationships between mothers and fathers, we mirror their language to ensure we accurately represent the available evidence. Later in this review, we discuss some of the additional implications that this use of language has for advancing gender equality.

1.2 Why engage men through fatherhood?

There were more than 8.6 million fathers in Canada in 2011, including biological, adoptive, and stepfathers, of which 3.8 million had children under 18 living with them.¹⁸ Increasingly, fathers are taking a more involved role in childrearing than in the past. 49% of fathers provided help and care for their children in 2015, up from 33% in 1986.¹⁹ By 2015, the proportion of families with fathers as the stay-home parent reached 1 in 10, up from 1 in 70 in 1976.²⁰ More lone parent families are also headed by men, with 20.1% of children aged 24 and under living with a lone-parent living with a man in 2011 (up from 15.5% of children in 1996).²¹

Even though fathers make up half of the parenting dyad in most families, most of the parenting

ⁱⁱⁱ **Entry point:** Defined by Shift as areas of opportunity or engagement where men and boys can become involved in learning, reflection, and action that will increase their potential to be involved in healthy, gender-equitable relationships, and decrease the likelihood that they will be abusive. Fatherhood has been identified in the literature as one of the top and most influential entry points for engaging and transforming men.

research and interventions focus on mother-child relationships and what does focus on fathers is more likely to be limited to exploring fathers' economic and other contributions to family stability, and to supporting mothers' ability to parent well.²² Increasingly, however, research is demonstrating the distinct and important role that fathers play in child development.²³ The research on positive fatherhood involvement clearly and consistently points to positive outcomes for children when they have fathers who are involved in their upbringing.²⁴

Conversely, children with fathers who are less involved are more likely to have poor outcomes.²⁵ For better or worse, fathers influence their children independently from mothers.²⁶ The longer-term impacts of parenting behaviour are also of critical importance. For example, children raised by parents with poor parenting skills are themselves less likely to become supportive, nurturing parents.²⁷ In extreme cases, children who are maltreated by a parent or exposed to violence in the household are more likely to be abusive to their own children and in their own relationships later in life.²⁸ For this reason, research is increasingly pointing to the importance—and effectiveness—of using fatherhood as an entry point to prevent child maltreatment and domestic violence, to disrupt the intergenerational cycle of violence, and to advance gender equality.²⁹

Despite the importance of engaging men in caregiving for children, the reality remains that much of the work of parenting continues to fall on women. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this abundantly clear, with women suffering the brunt of hardships. In the early days of the pandemic, women faced greater job losses than men with women's employment declining by 7% compared to 4% for men.³⁰ This has been attributed to women's over-representation in part-time work that is often undertaken to balance their household responsibilities, and which was particularly vulnerable to employment loss caused by COVID-19.³¹ Reduced childcare capacity during the pandemic has also meant that women's return to work has been slower to rebound than men's.³² In addition, the move to homeschooling during the pandemic also revealed discrepancies in the distribution of caregiving responsibilities between women and men. In June 2020, 64% of women reported that they were the parent primarily responsible for homeschooling children compared to 19% of men.³³ The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the urgent need to increase men's engagement through fatherhood to help address gender inequality.

2.0 Methods

A rapid evidence synthesis/review (RES) was conducted in November 2021. RES is "a form of knowledge synthesis that follows the systematic review process, but components of the process are simplified or omitted to produce information in a timely manner."³⁴ The process includes identifying specific research questions, searching for, and accessing most applicable and relevant sources of evidence, and synthesizing the evidence. This RES built upon extensive research previously conducted by Shift in the field of key entry points for engaging men, as well as the entry point of fatherhood, specifically. As such, this review focuses on synthesizing existing reviews, supplemented by other relevant documents identified by the authors, as well as an academic literature search for additional literature reviews/systematic reviews on father engagement for 2016-2021.

2.1 Search strategy

Supplementary literature was identified using a systematic search strategy that was performed using a combination of keywords:

Set 1 (in Title): father or dad or paternal male or male parent or couple or parent

AND (Set 2 – in abstract): men or males or man or male or masculinity

AND (Set 3): “gender-based violence” or “gender based violence” or GBV or “family violence” or “domestic violence” or “domestic abuse” or “intimate partner violence” or IPV or “violence against women” or VAW or rape or “sexual assault” or “sexual violence” or “sexual abuse” or “sexual harassment” or “sexual misconduct” or “consent” or “gender equality” or “gender equity” or “gender justice” or “gender transformative” or bullying or discrimination or bias or prejudice or justice or diversity or equity or inclusion or racism* or “anti-racism*” or antiracism* or Indigenous or “First Nations” or Inuit or Métis

AND (Set 4): Prevent* or “chang*” or impact* or advanc* or address* or evaluat* or promot* or build* or structure* or system* organization* or “organization* or enabl* or intervention or initiative or program* or norms or culture

AND (Set 5): review of literature or literature review or meta-analysis or systematic review or rapid review or scoping review or knowledge synthesis

Inclusion Criteria

Time frame: 2010-2021

Publication language: English.

Availability: Full text option only.

Literature had to meet the following criteria:

- Literature review, review of the literature, meta-analysis, systematic review, scoping review, rapid review, or knowledge synthesis.
- Provide synthesis of evidence on father engagement approaches for violence prevention and advancing gender equality, diversity, inclusion, and/or justice with men aged 18 and over.
- Include discussion of gaps in the literature relating to father engagement approaches and/or recommendations for scaling up father involvement.
- Literature may come from anywhere in the world; however, priority was to locate literature focused on Canada or in other countries with similar economic, social, and cultural similarities to Canada (such as the United States, Australia, New Zealand, England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, Republic of Northern Ireland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland).
- Articles that *did not* meet the criteria but seemed relevant/valuable were included in discussion/recommendations or where appropriate.

Literature that focused on only one intervention or was already discussed in Promundo’s recent

“State of the World’s Fathers Report” (2021) was not included in this review. Additionally, literature that did not discuss fatherhood engagement for the purposes of violence prevention and advancing gender equality, diversity, inclusion, and/or justice, primarily focused on fathers under the age of 18, or focused on rehabilitation/fathering “after violence” was not included in this review. (Only primary prevention programs included here).

2.2 Screening and data synthesis

The search produced 18 results that were screened based on the inclusion criteria described above. This resulted in four additional publications being included in this review. When combined with existing reviews previously completed by Shift, as well as other relevant reviews identified by the authors, this review includes a synthesis of 12 publications. A table summarizing these publications is provided on the following page (Table 1).

All included publications were reviewed in full, and the findings/conclusions of each document were coded for content relevant to this project’s research questions. This cycle of coding served to reduce the documents down to key narrative areas that could subsequently be synthesized into coherent themes that are representative of the body of evidence included in this work. This narrative review approach enables the discussion and integration of findings from various studies and diverse methodologies, thematically drawing together knowledge on a subject.³⁵ A summary of these themes makes up the findings in this report.

2.3 Figure 1: Summary of publications reviewed

	Name of publication	Author(s)	Year	Purpose/Aim	# of included studies	Results
1	Half the Equation: Why fathers are just as important as mothers in preventing domestic violence in the next generation	Wells, L. Cooper, M. Dozois, E. Kozley, L.	2014	Highlights the role of fathers in lives of children; demonstrates how positive involvement can prevent domestic violence; demonstrates need for programs and policies that support positive father involvement.	4	Seven entry points are identified: build and promote positive fatherhood, support men's health and mental wellbeing, leverage sports and recreation settings to influence positive norms and behaviours, engage men in the workplace to build parenting and healthy relationship skills, support healthy male peer relationships and networks, engage men as allies in violence prevention, support aboriginal leadership and healing.
2	No men left behind: How and why to include fathers in government-funded parenting strategies	Dozois, E. Wells, L. Exner-Cortens, D. Esina, E.	2016	Demonstrates the importance of supporting positive fatherhood involvement and outline ways that the Government of Alberta can enhance related programming and policy in the Alberta context.	6	Research shows fathers play a vital and distinct role in supporting children's health and development; Children raised by engaged fathers are more likely to maintain healthy relationships free of violence as adults; Positive father involvement contributes to gender equality and healthy beliefs, attitudes, and norms around masculinity; The majority of parenting policies and interventions focus on mothers and marginalize fathers; Few evidence-based fathering programs and supports are available.
3	A snapshot of positive fatherhood programs with evidence of effectiveness	Exner-Cortens, D. Syeda, M. Sadhvani, H.	2016	Conducts a review of evidence-based fatherhood and/or parenting programs aimed at preventing family violence.	31	28 programs were reviewed, with all but two focused on children 12 and under. 41.9% focused on prenatal/infant/newborn children. One program focused on adolescents. 71% of programs were evaluated using randomized controlled trials. Fathers sampled ranged from 38-100%. Outcomes fell into six categories: positive discipline; positive father involvement; father-child interactions; parenting knowledge, attitude, and skills; co-parenting relationships; family violence.
4	Promoting positive father involvement: A strategy to prevent intimate partner violence in the next generation	Cooper, M. Wells, L. Dozois, E.	2016	Informing and changing policy and practices with the goal of primary violence prevention.	172	Results include 15 recommendations directed towards governments.
5	International review or promising and best practices: preventing intimate partner violence perpetrated by men/boys against women/girls	Wells, L. Cooper, M. Dozois, E.	2016	Investigates the effectiveness of male-engagement initiatives in intimate partner violence prevention.	105	Engaging men and boys is important to prevent IPV. It is more important in lower- and middle-income countries than in higher-income countries, and more important to engage men as bystanders and participants in violence prevention programming through entry points than it is to engage them as activities and allies.
6	Research review: Engaging men – a multi-level model to support father engagement	Pfitzer, N. Humphreys, C. Hegarty, K.	2017	Explores father engagement frameworks used in child and family services to develop a fatherhood engagement model.	30	Results in a multi-level model of father engagement discussed in relation to five dimensions of influence: practical, relational, cultural and contextual, strategic, and structural.
7	Are interventions supporting separated parents father inclusive? Insights and challenges from a review of program implementation and impact.	Philip, G. O'Brien, M.	2017	Reviews divorce-related parenting programs and the extent to which fathers are included, and whether father inclusion influences outcomes.	13	Modest evidence of reduced couple-conflict, improved coparenting, and some evidence of improved child outcomes.

8	Zero to Three: Taking a global view on Infants, Toddlers, and their Families	Barker, G. Levtov, R. Heilman, B.	2018	Overview of evidence on the importance of fathers in early childhood development and recommendations for achieving equality in care work.	17	Fathers make unique contributions to child development, many of which are the result of men's own gendered socialization. Men encounter barriers to doing more caregiving, including social norms, economic and workplace realities, and laws and policies. Recommendations are put forward for policy and programmatic changes to achieve more father involvement.
9	Future directions in father inclusion, engagement, retention, and positive outcomes in child and adolescent research	Fabiano, G.A. Caserta, A.	2018	Studies the role and impact of fathers on child development and in the development of interventions and approaches that are effective for fathers.	64	Studies aimed at improving parenting have included fathers but there are fewer studies targeting coparenting outcomes. Fathers can be engaged in efforts to improve parenting.
10	Tomorrow's men today: Canadian men's insights on engaging men and boys in creating a more gender equal future	Fotheringham, S. Wells, L.	2019	Studies 33 pro-feminist men engaged in leading gender equality work with men and boys across Canada to understand motivations and experiences of men leading gender equality work, and how to mobilize other men to advance gender equality in Canada.	Primary research	Men who become involved in leading gender quality work often have sensitizing experiences to gender inequality and gender-based violence. Resource limitations and a lack of legitimization presents barriers to men engaged in this work. Men's socialization restricts men and discourages them from gender equality work. Engaging men requires building narratives that invites men and boys to participate in gender equality. Men who participate in such work experience fulfillment and improved relationships.
11	Fathers of youth with Autism Spectrum Disorder: A systematic review of the impact of fathers' involvement on youth, families, and intervention.	Rankin, J.A. Paisley, C.A. Tomeny, T.S. Eldred, S.W.	2019	To understand how often/how commonly research on children with Autism Spectrum Disorder investigates the father's role within the family, fathers' involvement in intervention efforts, and the impact of increased involvement.	28	Fathers of children with Autism Spectrum Disorder are seldom included in research on children with ASD, including in their general involvement or in their inclusion in interventions. While overlooked, fathers make important contributions to children with ASD.
12	State of the World's Fathers 2021	Barker, G. Garg, A. Hellman, B. Van der Gaag, N. Mehaffery, R.	2021	Examines what men's involvement in care looks like presently and if equality is achieved. Assess the impact of COVID-19 on unpaid care work. Identify actions to promote equitable care.	141	Seven action pathways to achieving care equality, including: national care policies, universal parental leave, changes in social protection programs, health sector institutional changes, norm change to achieve a male ethic of care, workplace support for care equality, and political support for care equality.

3.0 Findings

3.1 Engaging men through fatherhood improves outcomes for children and families

Engaging men through fatherhood has positive impacts across the social ecology, resulting in better outcomes for children and families, and the potential for broader societal shifts towards healthier masculinity norms and gender equality. Multiple studies have noted that engaging men as fathers shows promise in preventing child maltreatment and other acts of domestic violence.³⁶ When men's equitable participation in unpaid care work increases so too do the measurable benefits for women, children, societies, and men themselves.³⁷

3.1.1 Better outcomes for children

There is consistent, clear evidence that positive father involvement supports multiple domains of child development.³⁸ Children with engaged fathers have higher emotional, cognitive, and social well-being, as well as reduced behavioural problems.³⁹ Numerous studies that have followed groups of fathers over time have demonstrated that positive fatherhood involvement has a protective and positive effect on children from infancy well into adulthood.⁴⁰ The following summary reflects the findings in Shift's No Man Left Behind report.⁴¹

Emotional well-being

Emotional well-being refers to an individual's ability to understand and regulate their emotions, which supports positive moods and self-esteem.⁴² Studies have shown multiple pathways through which positive fatherhood involvement affects children's emotional well-being. For example, fathers who are engaged in caring for their young infants and toddlers help nurture children's secure attachment.⁴³ This in turn helps promote better emotional well-being and the formation and maintenance of healthy relationships across the lifespan.⁴⁴

Some studies suggest that physical play between fathers and children supports children's confidence exploring and interacting with their social and physical environments.⁴⁵ This has been shown to be linked with both children's cognitive capacity and emotional well-being.⁴⁶ Father availability and reliability also strengthens emotional well-being in childhood.⁴⁷ Children who have engaged fathers demonstrate more resilience; better problem-solving and adaptive skills; greater emotional regulation and social competence; and lower levels of anxiety, depression, impulsivity, and psychological distress.⁴⁸ Children with positive father involvement also have increased odds of developing a positive concept of themselves and have higher rates of self-esteem.⁴⁹ Further to this, life satisfaction as adults is greater among those who have higher quality father-child relationships in adolescence.⁵⁰

Cognitive well-being

Cognitive well-being is associated with how information is processed and judgements are made and it is important for acquiring knowledge and having positive experiences of learning.⁵¹ Children with involved fathers are more cognitively competent at six-months and are better problem-solvers as toddlers.⁵² Positive fathering is also associated with better performance in school-age children, with

an increased likelihood of positive attitudes towards school, and better math and verbal skills, as well as a reduced likelihood of attendance or behavioural issues that may result in suspension or expulsion.⁵³ In general, both boys and girls with engaged fathers have better educational outcomes.⁵⁴

Social well-being

A person's social well-being includes the degree to which they function well in their social world, as well as the attitudes and perceptions they carry towards the whole society.⁵⁵ Positive fatherhood involvement is associated with children's social competence, initiative, maturity, and capacity to relate to others.⁵⁶ These children are more likely to have positive relationships with their peers and exhibit lower levels of aggression and conflict, higher levels of reciprocity, and greater empathy, generosity, and peer acceptance.⁵⁷ In adulthood, children of involved fathers are more likely to demonstrate tolerance and understanding, have supportive social networks that include long-term friendships with whom they are close, have more satisfying and successful intimate relationships,⁵⁸ and better inter-personal functioning.⁵⁹ In general, those with involved fathers relate better to others throughout childhood and into adulthood.

Reduced behavioural problems

Positive fatherhood involvement can have a protective effect and help reduce a range of maladaptive behaviours, including criminal behaviour, violence and aggression, truancy, and substance use.⁶⁰ Strong father-child relationships have been shown to prevent delinquency among boys in adolescence,⁶¹ and buffer the effects of negative peers on conduct problems among adolescent girls.⁶²

3.1.2 Better outcomes for families

Encouraging fathers to be more involved in care work benefits fathers as well as their co-parents. Father's contributions to parenting,⁶³ and home and family maintenance foster greater maternal satisfaction.⁶⁴ Having an involved father can also buffer against the effects of a less supportive mother (e.g., a mother managing depression).⁶⁵ Dads who spend more time involved in caring for their children also have better well-being,⁶⁶ and are better at expressing emotions and experiencing empathy.⁶⁷ Households with parents who have a positive relationship produce a more harmonious home environment, and this fosters children's positive development.⁶⁸ Having less parental conflict within a household benefits co-parents and contributes to key benefits for children, such as improved wellbeing and adjustment, and reduced internalizing problems such as sadness and low affect.⁶⁹ Children raised in non-violent households and in families where the parents role model greater gender equality are more likely to reproduce patterns of non-violence and gender equality themselves as adults.⁷⁰

3.1.3 Contributes to healthy masculinity norms and gender equality

Many of the positive emotional, cognitive, and social outcomes that are associated with positive fatherhood involvement are supportive of healthier masculinity development and, by extension, more pro-equitable attitudes, and behaviours. For example, boys who have engaged fathers are

more likely to exhibit nurturing, gender-equitable behaviours if/when they themselves become fathers and are also less likely to use violence against female partners in adulthood.⁷¹ Girls who have fathers who are positive role models also have more flexible perspectives of gender and equal relationships.⁷²

Normalizing the role of men in childcare destabilizes traditional definitions of masculinity, replacing them with a broader vision for the role of men in family life and society in general.⁷³ Societies where men carry a more equal portion of unpaid care work have less violence, improvements in mental health and well-being, and women's greater economic equality through increased labour force participation and occupation of leadership roles.⁷⁴ Studies have consistently shown that using fatherhood to engage men in promoting gender equality is a primary prevention practice for preventing violence.⁷⁵

3.2 Best and promising programs, practices, and policies for engaging involved fathers

Effective approaches to engaging involved fathers include addressing social constructions of gender and gender norms that have traditionally defined fatherhood. One study of pro-feminist men involved in promoting gender equality found that the transition into fatherhood is an opportune period to promote pro-equitable attitudes and behaviours in men because the experience of becoming a father has a sensitizing effect on men whereby they become more cognizant of the impacts of inequality on their children.⁷⁶ As such, programs, practices, and policies that aim to engage men through fatherhood provide promising approaches to advance gender equality and this, in turn, functions to help prevent violence.

3.2.1 Programs

A 2016 analysis of systematic reviews and meta-analyses published on positive fatherhood and/or parenting programs⁴ identified 28 distinct programs that adhered to several programmatic trends.⁷⁷ First, most programs focused on children aged 12 and under and almost half (41.9%) focused on the prenatal, newborn and/or infant period; only one program focused on adolescents over 12 years of age.⁷⁸ Program evaluations studied a range of targeted outcomes, but father-child interaction (58.1%) and positive father involvement (38.7%) were most common. Most programs also targeted subpopulations of fathers, such as at-risk fathers (n=11), first-time fathers (n=8), fathers of children experiencing behavioural difficulties (n=3), and fathers who are incarcerated (n=2).⁷⁹ Only four programs were universal, targeting fathers more generally.⁸⁰ This is consistent with the conclusions of other studies that suggests that programs targeting specific groups of fathers are more effective.⁸¹

⁴ For additional details, see: Exner-Cortens, D., Syeda, M., & Sadhwani, H. (2016). A snapshot of positive fatherhood programs with evidence of effectiveness. In L. Wells & D. Exner-Cortens (Eds.). (2016). *Fatherhood involvement reference report* (pp. 43-82). Calgary, AB: The University of Calgary, Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence.

Another review of 13 programs targeting parents going through divorce found that programs can have a positive effect on reducing conflict between parents and improving co-parenting, as well as some evidence for improved child outcomes.⁸² Only one program targeted fathers specifically, however, and only four of the remaining programs included independent measures for fathers and mothers.⁸³ This raises the issue of study designs that fail to accommodate analysis by gender of parent (i.e., evaluating impacts of programs on mothers and fathers independently). A more recent review of 10 parenting interventions for children with autism spectrum disorder arrived at similar conclusions, noting that fathers of children with disabilities are often overlooked in research on their general involvement as parents or their inclusion in parenting interventions.⁸⁴ This echoes a repeated theme, whereby “parent” focused programming—and studies of that programming—seldomly includes fathers, leading to the absence of fathers from studies of parenting program effectiveness.

In general, all the included reviews arrived at a common conclusion that parenting programs, including those that target and/or involve fathers, suffer from a lack of rigorous evaluation. Most studies, including those that utilize randomized controlled trials, have characteristically small sample sizes, and many assess outcomes using post-tests immediately following the conclusion of the program. This limits the extent to which the programs’ effects can be accurately attributed and it also fails to describe the extent to which those effects may persist over an extended period of time.

3.2.2 Programmatic practices

The reviews of evidence-based fatherhood programs identified several programmatic practices that are associated with effective programs. These practices are in addition to those that are commonly associated with effective programming (e.g., theory-based, train staff and provide ongoing coaching, deliver services in engaging and interactive ways, maintain curriculum fidelity).

Father-focused

Studies have concluded that father-focused programs that tailor their content to be more individualized and contextually relevant for fathers demonstrate better outcomes.⁸⁵ In some cases, “parent-centric” practices may be biased towards mothers and serve to filter men’s access to family services.⁸⁶ Similarly, program content that is mother-centric may not resonate with fathers and result in a service environment that discourages father engagement.⁸⁷

There is some research to suggest, however, that programs should not focus solely on fathers alone. A growing body of evidence indicates that programs that engage children’s co-parents may be more effective than those that engage one parent independently.⁸⁸ The rationale for this is that involved parenting practices are less likely to be sustained if they are exhibited only by one parent. In addition, studies suggest that mothers significantly influence their partner’s role as fathers,⁸⁹ and that mothers may be a barrier to fathers’ participation in programming.⁹⁰ Programs that focus on a co-parenting approach aimed at reducing inter-parental conflict are especially important for programs targeting divorced fathers.⁹¹ Overall, research suggests that programs strike a balance between father-focused content designed to engage fathers as individuals and incorporating

content directed towards fathers' co-parents.

Culturally aware

Cultural awareness and sensitivity are critical components of service delivery and have a well-documented body of evidence that demonstrates its importance in recruitment and retention of program participants.⁹² Some research suggests that programming for men from diverse cultural backgrounds may have added complexity due to the nuances of different cultural constructions of masculinity and the gendered role of fathers.⁹³ One review concluded that it is important that programs are tailored to different populations to ensure that they are culturally appropriate.⁹⁴ Another review similarly suggests that programs are more effective when they incorporate teaching methods and materials that are appropriate for the cultures of the populations served.⁹⁵

Establish rapport

What is common across the literature is that programs for fathers are more successful when they make fathers feel safe and establish trust between the program providers and participants.⁹⁶ Not surprisingly, studies have demonstrated that participants in parenting programs are more motivated when they have trusting and respectful relationships with staff established.⁹⁷ Specific recommendations to include practices focused on rapport building with clients were mentioned in several studies.

Program delivery style

Several reviews of parenting programs to promote fatherhood involvement have concluded that how the program is delivered affects participant retention and outcomes. For example, effective fathering programs include those that personalize the program's information and employ a variety of teaching methods designed to focus on fathers as individuals.⁹⁸ Research suggests that using a strength-based approach that recognizes and builds upon parents' own expertise as parents is more effective at engaging men in positive roles and in primary prevention.⁹⁹ In other words, programs that work *with* fathers and not *on* fathers are more successful.

Most of the programs included in the reviews utilized a group format that brings together groups of individual parents or groups of parent couples. There is some evidence to support these group-based approaches to program delivery, suggesting that the social aspect of group programs helps attract and retain parent participants.¹⁰⁰ Some researchers have suggested, however, that vulnerable parents may feel overly exposed within group settings and that this may inhibit participation.¹⁰¹ It has been suggested that this may be buffered by building groups with similar demographic backgrounds (e.g., similar socio-economic status).¹⁰²

One review of programs for fathers of children with disabilities found that half of included interventions utilized an in-home training program for fathers.¹⁰³ These programs involved program facilitators teaching fathers some skill and then observing fathers applying those skills with their children and providing them with feedback.

Dosage

A review of 13 programs targeting divorced parents found substantial variability in terms of the

total duration of programs, ranging from 2.5 hours over a single session to 16 hours spread across six sessions over eight weeks. Another review suggests that effective fatherhood programs include multiple doses that involve 90-minute sessions at least once a week, for a minimum of five to ten weeks.¹⁰⁴ In a third review, programs that lasted at least two months had greater effectiveness whereas programs that lasted only a few hours had little-to-no effect.¹⁰⁵ One study concluded, however, that parents prefer shorter programs (that last 5 weeks or less), with some program facilitators viewing longer programs as an inhibitor to parent engagement.¹⁰⁶ Thus it may appear that effective programs strike a balance between providing sufficient dosage to achieve outcomes, but do so succinctly enough to maintain low levels of participant attrition.

Recruitment and engagement

Studies on engaging fathers in parenting interventions often report low levels of participation by fathers in the programs and their evaluations.¹⁰⁷ Studies have often documented that program providers encounter difficulties in engaging men in their programming.¹⁰⁸ Some of the barriers to participation include a lack of awareness about programs or the value of parenting programs; work commitments; programs that are oriented towards mothers; service providers' biases towards mothers or lack of attention on fathers and their preferred engagement styles; fathers' resistance to instruction or direction on parenting behaviours; fathers' feelings of parenting inadequacy; and, for some fathers, concerns that their literacy skills will inhibit their participation in programming.¹⁰⁹ Other research suggests that service providers may encounter challenges engaging men because they do not have men as staff and hold the perception that clients who are men prefer programs delivered by men.¹¹⁰

The literature on supporting father involvement identifies some practices to help address these challenges. Many of these were previously listed in Shift's No Man Left Behind report,¹¹¹ including:

- Engage fathers early. Fatherhood involvement that starts earlier in a child's life is more likely to be sustained.¹¹²
- Develop a compelling 'why' story. Fathers are more likely to engage in programs and services if they understand the importance and impact of their participation, particularly as it relates to positively benefiting their children, independently of mothers.¹¹³
- Programs that intend to engage fathers do better when they are based on a clear theory of change that includes recruitment and why parents would want to spend their time participating in a program.¹¹⁴
- Literally meet men where they are at. Research suggests that taking advantage of where men naturally congregate (e.g., work, gym, children's sporting events) provides opportunities to engage men and leverage existing natural networks of men.¹¹⁵
- Use "word of mouth" as a primary strategy for promoting programming. Evidence consistently supports the notion that parents are more likely to enroll in a program if it is recommended by a trusted source of information.¹¹⁶
- Ensure programs are geographically, physically, and psychologically accessible to fathers. This means that the venue location is accessible, the building accommodating of different physical abilities, and the service delivery environment is welcoming, creating social and cultural perceptions of accessibility.¹¹⁷

- Schedule programs when they are convenient for fathers. Multiple studies have found attrition in programming is lowest when it is scheduled during weekday evenings that accommodate work schedules and other daytime/weekend commitments.¹¹⁸
- Provide extrinsic incentives for participation, such as childcare, refreshments, reimbursements for transportation costs, gift certificates, or money.¹¹⁹
- Encourage mothers to support fathers in their participation. Studies show that mothers can be a barrier to father involvement by gatekeeping how fathers engage in their children's lives.¹²⁰ Leveraging the influence of mothers can help encourage fathers to participate in programs.¹²¹

3.2.3 Going beyond programs: Catholic Family Service case study

Catholic Family Service (CFS) of Calgary, Alberta, Canada launched the Fathers Moving Forward (FMF) program in September 2015. FMF targets biological fathers-to-be between the ages of 16-26 years of infants born to teenagers participating in existing programming offered by CFS. The FMF program utilizes a group format that sees participants complete 12 sessions, with topics that include: support skills (2 sessions), stress management and reduction (2 sessions), de-escalating conflict (2 sessions), problem solving (1 session), acceptance skills (2 sessions), and family planning (1 session). Sessions use a combination of individual tailoring and group psychoeducation, coupled with experiential learning and skill building. Through the program, CFS aims to help improve young fathers' emotional and physical well-being, involvement with their infants, individual parenting skills, ability to co-parent, father-mother relationships, and economic self-sufficiency.

Importantly, FMF is a part of a larger organizational shift at CFS, which recognized that action was required to become a more "father-friendly" organization to better serve men and, in turn, better support their clients who are women. In addition to developing and piloting new innovative programming, CFS also identified and addressed organizational structural and cultural contributing factors to limited father engagement. This included enhancing the physical environment at their organization by making fathers more apparent in the imagery, décor, and language used at the organization. Communications were reviewed to ensure that advertising and other materials specifically names "dads" and not just "parents" and work was done with staff to reflect on potential biases towards mothers, and how those biases show up within an organizational context. Evaluation strategies were revised to develop outcomes and indicators specific to fathers, allowing subgroup analysis to see how these changes are affecting dads.

In addition, CFS undertook a policy review to ensure that they themselves were supporting fathers and deployed an organizational readiness assessment that resulted in additional education for staff and board members about the importance of highlighting and serving fathers. One critical outcome, the first male staff member was hired.

The case of CFS and the FMF program demonstrates how engaging fathers to become more involved can have positive benefits, but that it often may require more than programming alone—it requires a broader shift towards more gender equal, supportive facilitators and environments.

3.2.4 Policies are critical to supporting positive father involvement

Traditional gender norms, which include commonly held beliefs about the role of women and men, can present a barrier to fathers' full involvement as parents. As noted in the State of the World's Fathers report, "globally, women do three to ten times more unpaid care and domestic work than men."¹²² Policy interventions provide a mechanism to destabilize the highly gendered nature of this work by providing increased opportunity for, and emphasis on, men taking a more involved role in parenting. For example, in Sweden, equitable gender norms and legislation promoting fatherhood involvement have evolved together.¹²³ In Sweden today, "to qualify for hegemonic masculinity, it is no longer enough to be rational, goal-means oriented, career-oriented, and disciplined. Today, men must also show their readiness to engage in childcare, their child orientation, and their willingness to live up to the ideal of gender equality."¹²⁴

Paid parental leave

Paid parental leave policy is one of the most promising ways to engage fathers early and foster their sustained involvement in childcare. As argued in one of Shift's other reports, "extending paid parental leave following the birth of a child increases the likelihood that fathers will take advantage of this opportunity."¹²⁵ Generous parental leave leads to a greater investment of time that fathers spend with their children, and more involvement with children generally.¹²⁶ For example, the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan, which was introduced in 2006, includes parental leave that applies exclusively to fathers (i.e., is non-transferable). Since its introduction, the proportion of fathers who claimed or intended to claim parental benefits increased by 58% (from 27.8% in 2005 to 85.8% in 2015).¹²⁷ Examples in other countries, such as Norway and Sweden, reveal similarly consistent patterns whereby more extensive parental or parental leave benefits results in more fathers taking paternity leave.¹²⁸ Fathers who have more access to extended time off of work to spend with their children have increased comfort and competency as parents.¹²⁹ Paternity leave policies also establish patterns of shared parenting work that persists after the parental leave period.¹³⁰ Longitudinal data from nine countries show that changes to parental leave policies that incentivize fatherhood involvement are associated with improved attitudes towards gender equality.¹³¹ Parental leave policies should¹³²:

- Be available for all parents, regardless of full- or part-time status or employment through the informal or "gig economy"
- Be fully paid at the rate of the individual taking the leave to incentivize fathers who often earn more than their female partners
- Be guaranteed through legislation
- Offer job protection on return to work
- Offer paternity leave in addition to, not in exchange for, maternity leave
- Be equal for women and men, but include specific non-transferable days for men to take
- Be a minimum of 16 weeks long
- Include diverse family structures, including same-gender parents, adoptive parents, single parents, and parents who are unmarried
- Be combined with access to other parental support initiatives, such as early childhood education, flexible work arrangements, childcare
- Be monitored to ensure that fathers are taking the leave they are entitled to

- Be framed as gender-neutral.¹³³

Social protection policies

When labour conditions are precarious, men are less likely to take parental leave or participate in parenting activities that may be perceived as a threat to their job security.¹³⁴ Social policies that protect workers' employment facilitate more involved parenting. For example, during COVID-19 some countries have allowed parents to reduce working hours or perform work duties from home or remotely, which facilitates men's increased participation in parenting work,¹³⁵ and supports a greater balance to men and women's paid work and caregiving.¹³⁶ However, many existing social protection policies (e.g., Employment Insurance) do not include provisions that provide cash transfers, subsidies, or other financial supports to individuals who step away from the workforce due to parenting responsibilities, and many such policies do not apply to informal workers who are disproportionately racialized and/or lower income.¹³⁷ Incorporating a focus on care into social protection policies can facilitate increased involvement of fathers in unpaid care work.

Work-life balance policies

Workplace cultures that provide more generous personal and/or vacation leave, flexibility in the scheduling of work hours, on-site childcare, or that otherwise support fathers' efforts to prioritize parenting help support increased fatherhood involvement.¹³⁸ Rather than being voluntary and workplace dependent, however, national policy can make work-life balance a priority. Iceland's Gender Equality Act, for example, makes it an employer's obligation to allow parents, irrespective of gender, to coordinate work and family responsibilities, emphasizing work flexibility (in terms of hours and how work is organized) and making it a right for employees to take leave when faced with urgent family circumstances.¹³⁹ In France and Italy, employees have the right to disconnect from work-related communications that might interfere with family time.¹⁴⁰

Gender-wage parity policies

Inequality between women's and men's wages is intimately linked with parenting responsibilities, whereby the unequal responsibility for childcare is one of the major contributors to women's lower incomes and reduced economic participation.¹⁴¹ This produces and reproduces a context that incentivizes women to serve as the primary parent and men to act as the primary income earner. In essence, gendered pay inequality places a hidden "tax" on fatherhood that is realized through a disproportionately greater loss of income for families where the father is the primary parent. Some countries have implemented wage subsidies for caregivers to cover the salary of parents providing caregiving responsibilities, removing the economic penalty that all parents—including fathers—experience when parenting responsibilities are at odds with paid work, thereby facilitating greater parent involvement.¹⁴²

Affordable and accessible childcare policies

Publicly funded, universal childcare policies have been one of the most widely implemented and effective policies for supporting increased economic participation by women worldwide.¹⁴³ The extent to which affordable, high-quality childcare is available in Canada is under provincial jurisdiction and varies by province.¹⁴⁴ Publicly funded childcare removes the unequal responsibility for childcare that falls predominantly on women and provides greater opportunity for women to

earn income. In turn, this helps level the field of income disparity between mothers and fathers that disincentivizes fathers from being more actively involved in childcare.¹⁴⁵

3.2.5 Non-programmatic practices

In addition to program and policy interventions that are aimed at promoting positive fatherhood involvement—either by engaging men individually in programs or by creating supportive environments that facilitate men’s involvement in childrearing—several publications detailed non-programmatic practices to promoting fatherhood involvement. In the main, these practices leverage broader social systems (e.g., education system, health system) as sites to shift gender norms and affect the gendered nature of parenting and care work.

Incorporate care work within education curricula

Boys who are encouraged to undertake care work in the home as children, and those who have fathers who role model such behaviours are more likely to be involved in caregiving as adults.¹⁴⁶ Much like efforts to support girls’ enrollment in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) professions, education systems can look at efforts to embed learning and experience requirements that focus on providing gender-transformative care opportunities for boys.¹⁴⁷ Roots of Empathy is a Canadian example of a school-based initiative where children aged 5 to 13 interact with infants in an effort to promote empathy, social skills, and the practice of nurturing.¹⁴⁸ Building a care ethic among boys can translate into a greater involvement of men involved in paid care work (e.g., health care, education, childcare, care professions).¹⁴⁹ Raising boys to see themselves as caregivers will support a shift towards greater gender equality and catalyze a cycle whereby boys grow into fathers who see—and role model— caregiving as an integral part of their socialization.

Engage fathers through the health system

Men are generally less likely than women to seek primary healthcare; however, during their partner’s pregnancy men are likely to interact with the health system.¹⁵⁰ This positions the health sector as an opportune site to engage men in promoting positive fatherhood involvement, and encourage men to take a more engaged role in the management and maintenance of their children’s health. Efforts to involve fathers early on, including before a child’s birth, help sustain involved fatherhood throughout the child’s lifespan.¹⁵¹ The prenatal period has also been identified as an excellent time to intervene to prevent intimate partner violence,¹⁵² which often begins or escalates during pregnancy.¹⁵³ Healthcare settings that are welcoming to men, while protecting the autonomy of birth givers, helps ensure that opportunities to engage fathers early have a greater likelihood of success. This could include strategies to engage men that are integrated into pregnancy care, establishing cross-departmental actions to support men’s involvement in care,¹⁵⁴ reducing barriers to men being involved,¹⁵⁵ and training staff and establishing supportive environments that are responsive to the context of fatherhood.

Gender norms change campaigns

Many policies and non-programmatic approaches focus on disrupting patterns of gender inequality that show up across different social spaces, systems, and institutions and contribute to fewer fathers being involved in parenting. As such, implementing complimentary public campaigns that

include positive messaging about the importance of fathers in children’s development can help support the transition towards more equal gender norms. In the Republic of Georgia, for example, a national campaign that included public and private partnerships to promote men’s involvement in caregiving contributed to a substantial decline in the proportion of men and women who agreed that care work is the sole responsibility of mothers.¹⁵⁶ Each of the programs, policies, and practices that are outlined above stand to benefit from complementary campaigns that aim to reorient gender norms and men’s attitudes towards caregiving.

3.3 Key strengths, challenges, gaps, and lessons learned from engaging fathers

3.3.1 Strengths and lessons learned

As noted in Shift’s No Man Left Behind report, research confidently and consistently shows that fathers play an important and distinct role in supporting children’s health, development, and overall wellbeing. Positive fatherhood involvement is associated with a range of emotional, cognitive, and social outcomes that supports children in forming healthy peer and intimate partner relationships from youth into adulthood. Children who are raised by engaged fathers are more likely to grow into tolerant and understanding adults and maintain violence-free relationships.

At a familial-level, households that have more involved fathers have less conflict between parents. Mothers in these households also experience a more equal distribution of the responsibilities for caregiving, which in turn positively benefits the mothers’ well-being.

Positive father involvement also contributes to important societal outcomes, including greater gender equality and healthy beliefs, attitudes, and norms around healthy masculinity and what it means to be a non-violent man. By normalizing the role of men in childcare and household tasks, traditional definitions of masculinity are expanded and role-modelled for children, resulting in intergenerational normative change.

Studies point to the transition to fatherhood as an opportune time to engage men in gender-transformative work. This has been attributed by some to the increased awareness that men achieve when reflecting on how inequality will impact their own children. The transition to fatherhood also marks a time where men may become more available for interventions delivered through public systems, like the health sector.

Much of the evidence on effective programming suggests that it is important, however, to engage fathers *as fathers* and utilize their parent identity—as opposed to their gender alone—as an entry point. Constructions of fatherhood and constructions of masculinity are intimately linked, though, and thus approaches to engage fathers may be most effective when they are targeted at, and responsive to subgroups of fathers and their unique contexts. In essence, effective fatherhood engagement requires recognition that “fathers” are not one homogenous group.

3.3.2 Challenges and gaps

There is ample research that explains why and how fathers should be engaged; however, there is

little to demonstrate that these practices have been taken up at scale. Father engagement is multidimensional and there are many sociostructural barriers that may make it challenging for some fathers, particularly those who are more disadvantaged, to become more involved with their children. As a result, a combination of strategies is necessary.

Existing reviews of evidence-based interventions to promote positive fatherhood involvement provide a solid foundation for understanding program designs, as well as the outcomes those programs intend to achieve. What is absent, however, are detailed descriptions of the content addressed within programs, and the activities utilized to communicate that content to participating parents. This makes it difficult to assess the extent to which parenting programs directly—versus indirectly—aim to prevent violence and advance gender equality, diversity, justice, and inclusion. Future reviews focused on synthesizing curricula themes across programs could help address this gap and inform future program development.

One content theme worth further exploration, in particular, is the extent to which programs targeting fathers include reflexive practices that encourage men to reflect on their own relationships with their fathers. There are multiple examples in the literature that highlight the impact that positive role-modeling has on children, and the effects of disengaged parenting on children is well documented, but there were no examples of initiatives that help men critically appraise their own childhood and experiences of having parenting role-modeled.

Despite the highlighted importance of responding to diversity among fathers, many fathers are poorly represented in the research evidence and/or the programmatic and policy interventions aimed at promoting increased fatherhood involvement. There was limited representation of single fathers in the synthesized literature, and what was included focused on fathers who are separated or divorced from their co-parent. Single fathers who choose to parent were entirely omitted, as were fathers who became single parents following the death of a partner. Indigenous, newcomer, and immigrant fathers were also absent from the publications that were reviewed, as were fathers with disabilities. Instead, much of the research literature focuses on young, new, or “vulnerable” or “at-risk” fathers, who are typically characterized by their lower socio-economic status.

While several studies acknowledged these gaps, they do stand in contrast to promising practices that emphasize both cultural awareness and targeted approaches. This suggests that many interventions may not be addressing the added complexities that some fathers experience as parents, and/or as men with intersectional identities.

Another group of fathers who are largely absent in the synthesized research are gender and sexually diverse fathers. Most of the research and programs—and the language used to describe them—focuses on fathers within a heterosexual co-parenting relationship. The absence of these groups also reaffirms the highly gendered and heteronormative discourses on parenting, which largely discusses “mothers” and “fathers” in lieu of more gender inclusive terminology (e.g., “parents”), and which inadequately addresses family structures that do not resemble the mother and father co-parenting dyad.

Gendered discourses on parenting are, themselves, a challenge to promoting positive fatherhood involvement. This is evidenced in existing policies that encourage parent involvement but that are targeted towards women (e.g., maternity leave as opposed to parental leave). This has consequences for all genders, as these policies simultaneously enable and reinforce the notion of women as the primary caregivers for children while removing women from the labour force and affecting their economic participation as a result. Conversely, men's economic participation benefits from women occupying this primary caregiver role but it also makes it costly for many couples to have men exit the labour force and assume a more involved parenting role. Several proposed policy solutions identified in the research literature and summarized within this document require a substantial reorientation to how we structure our workforces and workplaces.

We must address the social valuation of parenting in tandem with restructuring work cultures to facilitate fathers becoming more involved with their children. The relegation and devaluation of caregiving and its treatment as “women's work” further disincentivizes fathers to take a more involved parenting role, even in settings that have addressed some of the structural barriers (e.g., flexible work arrangements, generous parental leave) that keep fathers out of the home. Furthermore, the comparatively lower financial benefit that many social protection policies (e.g., parental leave) offer to parents reaffirms the relatively lower value that society places on caregiving/parenting. Promoting father involvement requires reconsidering the social and financial value that we place on parenting. In line with this, many policy proposals in this document call for new or increased financial benefits to better compensate parents who serve as primary caregivers; however, such policies require substantial financial investments.

Ultimately, for fathers to become more involved in parenting we must shift the sociocultural context and norms of parenting in such a way that simultaneously removes the barriers to fathers becoming more involved parents and incentivizes them to do so.

3.4 Recommendations

Despite a wealth of research highlighting the wide-ranging positive impacts of engaging men through fatherhood, resistance to this approach and limited government funding and policy remains. There is urgent need to reorient gender norms so that our conceptions of healthy masculinity specifically include an acceptance of care work. We must shift the default around fatherhood from opt-out to opt-in, which requires creating more pathways for fathers to positively contribute to—and role model—care work and to feel a sense of ownership over their role as fathers that goes beyond economic contributions. The following recommendations, many of which reiterate recommendations itemized in other Shift fatherhood reports, outline the path to get there.

Fund more fatherhood programs

- Increase the availability of effective programs for fathers by investing in evidence-based fatherhood programs, including testing adaptations of existing evidence-based interventions to target diverse groups of fathers who are underrepresented in the current intervention landscape. Commit to robust evaluations to determine effective programs and contribute to

the scientific evidence on “what works” for promoting involved fathers. Identify opportunities to scale and spread existing evidence-based interventions to increase their reach.¹⁵⁷

- Looking to emerging evidence around what is most effective at sustainably shifting behaviours and norms, design and test new interventions to engage fathers.¹⁵⁸
- Integrate concrete skills and strategies into programs for men to be advocates for change at a larger scale, such as encouraging peers to be more involved fathers, or choosing a family-friendly workplace policy to advocate for.
- Invest in the evaluation of fatherhood programs, and stipulate that all government-funded parenting programs be evaluated in ways that include a gender-based analysis.¹⁵⁹
- Develop and disseminate a toolkit and training for all funded agencies to become more father-friendly. This includes a father-friendly organizational self-assessment and planning tool, which can help organizations assess readiness to provide services to fathers and father figures.¹⁶⁰

Utilize social marketing campaigns

- Invest in and implement social marketing campaigns aimed at shifting gendered norms around parenting, normalizing the active participation of men in care work, and promoting the importance of fatherhood involvement in children’s development.¹⁶¹
- Role model campaigns—similar to Alberta’s [#MomentsMatter](#) campaign, which provide opportunity for leaders to share how they balance work-family life, including both male leaders and their stories, and female leaders and how their partner’s contributions to care work has supported them.

Invest in community and peer support networks

- Establish community networks of fatherhood initiatives/programs that can support word-of-mouth referrals to promote greater engagement of fathers in parenting programs.¹⁶²
- Support young fathers and/or single fathers with networks, employment and education.¹⁶³

Flip the script by encouraging boys/men to select careers in social and health services

- Degree/diploma/certificate programs in social and health services need to include in the practicum, curriculum, or internships the importance of positive parenting by both mothers and fathers.¹⁶⁴
- Identify and remove key barriers to men’s involvement in paid care work, such as early childhood education, as part of efforts to normalize men in care roles.
- Develop a more unified working definition of involved fathering among service providers that establishes a standard of desired knowledge, attitudinal, and behavioural characteristics for fathers.¹⁶⁵

Organizations and workplaces need to invest in policies and culture change initiatives

- Undertake a review to identify innovative workplace practices that support enhanced work life balance and workplace cultures that prioritize parents. Identify opportunities to embed

such practices in government policy and legislation to ensure that the benefits are shared across the population. This includes encouraging and incentivizing fully paid non-transferrable paternity leave.¹⁶⁶

- Develop organizational nudges, such as information-sharing (e.g., how many men vs. women in one's organization take parental leave) and precommitment strategies (e.g., committing in advance to a particular goal, such as by what date an organization will complete a father-friendly assessment and take action on the top five recommendations) that organizations identify and sign on to themselves to help encourage and incentivize adoption of the gender equality polices.

Develop a suite of policy and legislation that support and reinforce positive fatherhood involvement

- Incorporate a gendered lens to parental policy development that recognizes both mothers and fathers as critical to children's success in life, while also ensuring these policies are inclusive of fathers and gender and sexually diverse parents.¹⁶⁷
- Develop a comprehensive fatherhood action plan that includes father friendly policies and investments across the prevention continuum, including generous parental leave both in terms of time and monetary transfers, and publicly funded childcare.¹⁶⁸
- Expand existing social protection policies (e.g., Employment Insurance) to include parenting-related reasons within the eligibility criteria for parents to qualify for benefits.¹⁶⁹

Invest in research and education to advance the field

- Conduct a review of all father-related epidemiological data in Canada (i.e., demographic, and social data) to:
 - o Identify gaps
 - o Develop a profile of fatherhood by province/territory as well as nationally
 - o Inform future decision-making and policy.¹⁷⁰
- Revise existing education curricula to include gender-transformative content that aims to build caregiving competencies in boys and adolescents.¹⁷¹

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