

# STEP BY STEP:

## Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families



*best start*  
*meilleur départ*

by/par health *nexus* santé



## Acknowledgements

The Best Start Resource Centre thanks Brian Russell, Provincial Coordinator, The Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network, for researching and writing this resource. Thanks also to those who provided input during the development of this resource:

- Brian Desjardins – Brighter Futures (Ottawa)
- Claudette Lamontagne, Early Years and Brighter Futures Program Supervisor, Child and Family Services of Timmins & District
- Dan Boivin – Our Children, Our Future (Sudbury)
- Dave Elder – Ottawa Public Health
- Ed Bader – Social Services Network (York Region)
- Ed Reinhardt – Children’s Mental Health Services (Bancroft)
- Gary Glover – Connections (Lanark Health and Community Services)
- George Legacy – Children’s Aid Society of Simcoe County – DADS Network
- Ginny Jones and Julie Hickey – Family Space Quinte Inc
- Greg Lubimiv – Phoenix Centre (Pembroke)
- Janette Bowie – Ministry of Health Promotion and Sport
- John Hoffman – Communications Coordinator, Father Involvement Research Alliance
- Laurel Broski – Niagara Region Public Health
- Linda Edwards, Barb Brown and Doug Krystia – St Mary’s Family Learning Centre (Windsor)
- Lorraine Kirlew – Project Coordinator, Macaulay Child Development Centre
- Manan Fazli – Ontario Early Years Centre (Toronto)
- Nikki Taylor – Oakville Parent-Child Centre
- Patrick Mahoney – Toronto Public Health
- Rachel Epstein – LGBTQ Parenting Network, Sherbourne Health Centre
- Roland Dutrisac – Sudbury & District Health Unit

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### CITATION

Best Start Resource Centre. (2012). *Step By Step: Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: author.

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## Introduction:

Dads are taking up the challenge to be more engaged with their children. They are waiting in lines at supermarkets, sitting in the waiting rooms at doctor's offices, patiently and attentively watching dance classes, coming to, and coaching baseball or hockey games, showing up in classrooms as guest readers, and leaning over change tables while wrestling with dirty diapers. These are the dads of today. Men want to be more and more engaged with their children. They are showing an interest in their lives and being attentive to the little details of the family.

Learning to be a father takes time and experience. Many men enter fatherhood without previous experience with pregnancy and children (Hoffman, 2011). They need opportunities to bond with their children, develop new skills and build their confidence in nurturing their children.



At the same time there is an increasing interest in engaging fathers in family support programs. The rapid growth in fatherhood research, resources, and programs in recent years indicates an increased acceptance and understanding that responsible fathers play a vital role in their children's development. Fathers are more than a nice, supportive add-on to the family system mostly managed by mothers. Fathers matter. They bring a special way of nurturing and bonding that must be encouraged and affirmed for the benefit of the children.

The best time to reach fathers is when they are experiencing change and are looking for support. This most clearly happens during the prenatal and postnatal periods. Dads begin to look seriously at their future, their lifestyle, and if they have the tools necessary to raise a child. Motivation is high and dads are more interested in accessing services and programs. This gives an opportunity to establish a good working relationship with fathers which encourages their involvement, educates them about the positive impact they will have on their children and connects them with other fathers. It also mediates the couple's adjustment to life with a baby (Cowan and Cowan, 2009). Parenting programs need to start prenatally, be offered once the baby arrives and continue throughout the first few years of the child's life (Crill Russell, 2003).

**Purpose:** This manual is designed to give you a step-by-step guide for planning and implementing your strategy for engaging fathers. Each section provides ideas from fathers and practitioners, some with over a decade of experience. There are *Reflections* after each section to guide your work. *Program Perspectives* are also provided for a glimpse at effective programs.

**Note:** This resource uses the terms mothers and fathers since most fathering research is conducted in parenting situations where there is a mother and a father. However, we recognize that fathers may be parenting in a range of situations such as single parents, separated parents, or with a partner who is male or female.



## STEP 1 Influences on Father Involvement

The majority of fathers today want to be more involved in more ways than ever before. This desire begins from preconception when many men are thinking about the kind of father they want to be. Yet there is vulnerability in the fathering role (Doherty, et al, 1998). The ability to follow through on the desire is often mediated by external factors such as levels of support, life challenges and even employment. The following categories influence fathering capacity.



### MOTHERS

Mothers are a key influence on the fatherhood role. Fathers tend to be more involved in parenting when their partners are supportive and encouraging (Hoffman, 2011). It is a good idea to talk to mothers about this influence and how they can facilitate their partner's involvement in ways that will be beneficial not only for the father, but for the mother herself. Fathers need to understand that mothers need lots of postpartum support. Fathers need to understand the important role they can play in ensuring she gets the support she needs.

Both mothers and fathers also need to understand the importance of co-parenting. Learning to be an effective co-parenting team takes time and effort, but sharing the territory of parenting can be difficult. The majority of mothers are supportive of the idea of dads being involved with the children – but some may find it unsettling. Having dad highly involved may be a challenge to mother's perception that women need to be able to handle everything about parenting. Some mothers show hesitation around a father's ability to handle the care of a newborn or to interact in a safe way with a toddler. It can be helpful to:

- Help mothers understand that having dads more involved can be good for them and their child
- Help mothers see that their encouragement and support will help their partner to become the skilled and engaged parenting partner she needs
- Discuss with mothers the benefits of her partner's involvement in programming
- Give mothers a chance to share their ideas about father's programming

## HIS FATHER

All men have a father to follow – some involved, some distant, and some somewhere in between. Regardless of the situation men have grown up in, they are impacted by the presence, absence, action, words, and/or silence of their father.

## LIFE TRANSITIONS

Many men will say that the most significant life transition they go through is the birth of their first child. Men who adapt well emotionally, psychologically, and relationally are more likely to be involved throughout their child's life.

## CHOICE

The majority of men have high motivation to be involved fathers who are there for their children. But it is still a choice to change diapers, give baths, to turn off the TV and play with the kids, to come home a few minutes earlier than usual from work, or to read the same story every night.

## CONFIDENCE

Confidence comes from experience and knowledge about child development. It takes fathers time to develop this confidence because they tend to get less hands-on experience early in their parenting journey. Fathers are more likely to develop confidence when they are engaged from conception and are able to spend time with and care for their babies. The nine months of pregnancy bring a lot of changes and it is good for men to gain knowledge of what is happening early on. This sets them up to be more confident in their skills when their baby arrives.

**Filippe was so excited about having a child. Those first months after Manuel was born, he changed diapers, played with his son, took his son for walks, and got up most nights to bring him to his mother. Doing these things gave him a feeling of satisfaction and close connection with Manuel.**

## SUPPORT

When fathers have strong, reliable social supports around them, they are more likely to be involved with their families. This support includes their parents, their partner's parents, peers, and social services they can access.

## WORK

Work is still a significant part of a man's definition of himself. Fathers are doing more nurturing than in previous generations, but the majority still see *provision* as a key role. Fathers' involvement can be diminished by long work hours. Some research shows that lack of labour market success can have a negative impact on the fatherhood role (Fox, 2009).

**Shandra knew her husband wouldn't come to 'Dads Time' on his own and no amount of urging would change his mind. One day, as he came home from work, she told him they were going out, but wouldn't tell him where. When they arrived at the door to the centre, the look of shock was clear on Amil's face. He reluctantly came in with their 1 year old son and Shandra left. Dad and son had a great time and have not missed a Dads' event since that day.**





## GENDER

Non-heterosexual fathers face invisibility in programs. They often come out after raising children in a heterosexual relationship, and face fear and discrimination about what it means to be a Gay/Bisexual/Trans/Queer (GBTQ parent).

## PARENTAL LEAVE

Knowing the rights fathers have for parental leave will increase their time and involvement with their children. In Canada, the parental leave law was changed in 2001 to give fathers greater opportunity to influence the development of their children and to promote gender equality. Prior to 2001, 3% of Canadian fathers would take some part of the parental leave. As of 2006, 20% of fathers were using a piece of the leave and the percent continues to increase. In 2005, Quebec instituted its own parental leave program, which included five weeks of non-transferable paternity leave along with the opportunity for men to use the standard allotment from the federal parental leave program (Statscan, 2008).

Many things influence a father's choice to use parental leave, including:

- Financial status of the family (the impact of a loss or reduction in dad's income compared to the mother's)
- Social culture (what do dad's friends and peers say about him using parental leave)
- Flexibility in the program (is dad able to take the time off work when it is available to him)
- Labour market (what are employer attitudes towards fathers' taking leave)
- Education level of the father
- Employment level of mother (when the mother makes equal or more than dad, dad is two-and-a-half times more likely to take the leave)
- Mother's preference to stay home for the whole time
- Awareness of his rights to parental leave
- Level of interest in using his right to parental leave

Fathers who take parental leave are doing an incredibly important thing for their children and the bond they have with them. Extended time from work where dad is dedicated to the care and responsibility for his child gives him opportunity to:

- Bond with his baby
- Learn the ropes of parenting
- Be part of establishing and maintaining good routines
- Be engaged in decision-making about the baby
- Attend medical appointments
- Access community programs and support

In fact, there is evidence to suggest that parental leave has emotional benefits for dad and has a positive impact on a child's emotional and educational development. It also provides support for mothers (Statscan, 2011).

## REFLECTIONS: Influences on Father Involvement

1. Which of the influences on fathers can you directly address?
2. How can you address these influences?

## STEP 2 Know the Impact Fathers Have

A consistent hook for fathers is talking with them about the kind of adult they want their child to become. Fathers appreciate the idea of legacy:

- “What am I leaving behind?”
- “Is my daughter making a difference in her world?”
- “Is my son the kind of man I am proud to have raised?”

One strategy to help motivate men to be more intentional in their parenting is to tell fathers about research that shows their positive involvement can have a unmistakable impact on various aspects of child development:

**Cognitive:** Children with involved fathers are more likely to:

- Be more cognitively competent as babies and toddlers
- Live in cognitively stimulating homes, enjoy school and be better academic achievers

**Emotional:** Children with involved fathers are more likely to:

- Be securely attached to their fathers
- Be more resilient and handle stress better
- Experience less psychological distress (fear, guilt, depression, etc.)
- Have a higher sense of personal control and self-esteem

**Social:** Children with involved fathers are more likely to:

- Show higher social competence, social initiative, and social maturity
- Get along with their siblings and peers better
- Have a greater respect for authority
- Have a greater sense of empathy, tolerance, and understanding

**Physical Health:** Children living with both biological parents are more likely to:

- Not suffer a burn, have a bad fall, or be scarred by an accident
- Not die in infancy
- Be breastfed longer
- Maintain a healthy weight

(Allen and Daly, 2007)



### REFLECTIONS: Know the Impact Fathers Have

1. Do any of the impacts fathers have on their children surprise you?
2. Which evidence would resonate best with the families and fathers you work with?



## STEP 3 Understand the Diversity of Fathers



Men raising children can be grandfathers, uncles, step-dads, adoptive dads or big brothers. Fathers come from a diversity of situations that do not reflect the traditional family structure, including single fathers, stepfathers, newcomer fathers, young fathers, gay/bi/queer/transgendered fathers, Aboriginal fathers etc. There is a cultural and racial diversity that is common in the Canadian landscape. All types of fathers need to feel welcome, to be able to connect with other dads, and to have facilitators who they can identify with.

### PROGRAM PERSPECTIVE:

#### MORE THAN A HAIRCUT – TORONTO

“African-Canadian Fathers were often overlooked,” says Lorraine Kirlew, coordinator of the More Than a Haircut program (MTAH) run through the Macaulay Child Development Centre in Toronto. “We realize the importance of enhancing father’s involvement in their children’s lives.” So the Macaulay Centre embarked on a mission to engage the African-Caribbean Fathers in their community. And they do this where these men traditionally gather: the local barbershops. Now groups of fathers will be found converging in barbershops for lively conversation about important issues of concern to Black Fathers, such as teaching and reinforcing a positive cultural identity or guiding children’s behavior. At the sessions refreshments and resources are available, and there may also be a skit, a video clip, or a spoken word performance to inspire thinking and discussion. This is a grassroots initiative that needs the support and influence of leaders in the community. The participants guide the agenda. Consistency of times and places, coupled with regular reminders of upcoming events also bring success.

“Being a Father from the Caribbean, many of the values can be different in Canada, for example, child discipline. We have to adapt to the new practices... and new culture.”

*MTAH Participant*

## REACHING SINGLE FATHERS

Men can become single fathers through divorce, separation, death of spouse, custody decisions, or by choice. In Canada, 20% of lone-parent households are led by fathers (Statscan, 2011). Becoming a single father requires a significant adjustment by men. They need to separate from their partner while maintaining a strong relationship with their child. Sometimes parenting skills need to be adapted to the new circumstances. Many will require clear and accurate information about their legal rights and responsibilities (Whitehead et al, 2008).

### Program Suggestions:

- Provide referrals and support for separation, divorce, and grief counseling
- Offer parenting courses for families in transition
- Deliver support groups and parent education for single dads

## REACHING NEWCOMER FATHERS

Encouraging and supporting fathers who are newcomers to Canada supports the family's adaptation to Canada. It gives entire families the opportunity to learn together, talk about the adjustments to Canadian life and to bond together.

### Program Suggestions:

- Connect with settlement agencies to promote the services and programs that would benefit these families
- Maintain a flexible schedule that can meet the needs of these men
- Have appropriate resources available about the role of fathers
- Provide activities and events where fathers and children can gather and meet other families
- Partner with an interpretation centre to translate flyers and resources and/or find interpretation services
- Share positive discipline techniques, like setting clear limits, using logical and natural consequences, and distracting a child from misbehaviour
- Provide referrals to community counseling, housing, crisis support and mental health agencies
- Provide a relaxed, welcoming atmosphere for families



## REACHING YOUNG DADS

Though the average age of fathers is on the rise (Statscan, 2011), young fathers make up approximately 6-8% of dads in Canada. Less than 1% of children born to a teenage father lives in the same home with dad, yet over 75% of young dads see their children every day (Kiselica, 2008).



## Program Suggestions:

Many of the strategies mentioned in this manual apply to young fathers. But here are some ideas specific to young dads:

- Go to where the young men are (schools, sports complexes, skate parks, etc.)
- Address concrete skills they can develop – relationships, communication, job, etc.
- Give practical help, like connecting them with employment services, housing agencies, and food banks
- Reinforce that their involvement is beneficial to the mother, the child and themselves

Young dads need organizations and people who create a culture where it is assumed that fathers are involved in all aspects of fatherhood beginning with preconception.

## PROGRAM PERSPECTIVE:

### YOUNG FATHERS' PROGRAM – OTTAWA

The main goal of the *Ottawa Young Fathers' Program* is to help young men be the best dads possible for their children regardless of their situation. “Young dads find themselves in some really tough situations,” says Brian Desjardins, who runs the program through the Ottawa CAPC Project, Brighter Futures for Children of Young Parents. They may be fighting for access and custody, trying to figure out the relationship with the mother, wondering about work and school, or needing to learn the first steps to being a parent. “It’s not easy for them. And many of these guys need the hope that things can be better. We build trust with them by running activities they enjoy doing, like hockey and basketball.” But it doesn’t stop with sports. *It’s My Child, Too* is a 10 week parenting program where the skills and abilities of a father are taught and developed. Because the dads have different relationships with their kids, it is a challenge to keep a balance in the discussions. The issues that fathers appreciate most are how to cope with the relationship with the mother, how to have a positive relationship with children, managing children’s behaviour, and coping with stress and anger.

Other supports offered to these young dads include guest speakers, meeting other young dads, help finding a job, one to one support counselling, access the food bank and opportunities to get some exercise. Brian says, “Over all we are seeing young dads gain confidence in their fathering role. That is what it is all about.”

## REACHING ABORIGINAL DADS

Ball and George (2006) found that Aboriginal fathers often have no clear role models for passing on the traditions of fatherhood. They are more likely to face poverty and unemployment.

## Program Suggestions:

- Ensure Aboriginal fathers are connected to the people and group(s) to which they belong
- Provide programs in the Aboriginal language with a leader from the community
- Involve the whole circle – mother, grandfathers, grandmothers, uncles, etc.
- Reinforce the cultural activities appropriate to their community
- Encourage fathers to teach their children the traditions of their community



## REACHING GAY/BISEXUAL/TRANS/QUEER DADS

GBTQ fathers are often invisible in programs and literature. These men often become fathers in the context of heterosexual relations and, after coming out, experience discrimination and disrupted father/child relationships. Gay men who desire to become fathers face challenges of surrogacy, adoption, and co-parenting relationships (Epstein and Duggan, 2006).

### Program Suggestions:

- Provide books, posters and other media that reflect a diversity of family structures
- Develop referral knowledge of adoption agencies, legal support, and counseling services
- Create a list of Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Trans/Queer (LGBTQ) friendly agencies and services in the area
- Pay attention to the assumptions embedded in language in all forms and documents
- Learn about the history/culture/social context of LGBTQ communities, and about LGBTQ parenting
- Train staff/board/volunteers in LGBTQ cultural competency
- Discuss the barriers to LGBTQ inclusion
- Develop inclusive curriculum and activities in centres
- Develop policies and procedures centred on equity
- Look at intake and other forms for LGBTQ inclusiveness
- Discuss what it means to be an ally to LGBTQ communities



## DIVERSITY OF ROLES

The following are important roles that all fathers take at all stages of a child's life, from preconception to adulthood. It is likely that every dad will have strengths in a few of these areas and will need to pay closer attention to development in other areas. Consider the diversity of strengths and needs of fathers in your programing, as well as the diversity of backgrounds and family situations.

1. **The Provider Father** (for the necessities of life) Dads need to look after the basics – food, clothing and shelter. Providing these things by contributing to the family's economic well-being is an important part of fatherhood.
2. **The Interactive Father** (for human interaction) Spending time with their dad gives them a chance to learn communication skills, social rules, and the values that are important to their family.



Kyle is really looking forward to being a dad for the first time. After he found out his wife was pregnant, he began to pay close attention to how other dads interacted with their kids. He noticed that most dads liked to play with their kids and they talked mostly about how they are providing for their children. He now wonders what kind of dad he will be and what his child will think of him. He hopes to be an affectionate, attentive dad who is really aware of his child's interests. But he knows that time with his child is the best way to figure out his role.

3. **The Nurturing Father** (for care and comfort) Nurturing means helping someone or something grow. Dads provide an environment where children feel important and cared for.
4. **The Affectionate Father** (for warmth and love) A child's first relationships need to be filled with love and warmth. Right from birth dads need to give kisses, smiles, hugs and affirming words to their children.
5. **The Responsible Father** (for guidance and protection) Fathers show they are responsible by giving their children guidance, keeping them safe and secure, and teaching them about the world.
6. **The Committed Father** (for being important to someone) Commitment shows children that they belong somewhere and are important to someone. They learn that their dad will have their best interest in mind, no matter what happens.

(Hoffman, 1999)

## REFLECTIONS: Understand the Diversity Fathers Have

1. *What diversity in families do you see in your work?*
2. *Which of the six roles would influence a father's decision to access your service or program?*

## STEP 4 Acknowledge how Fathers Relate with their Children

Men are looking for programming and resources that support their parenting. They are aware of the benefits they can provide to themselves and their families.

“

*“I appreciate the opportunity to connect with other dads. We share our stories and experiences. It’s almost like a support group.”*

“

*“It’s good for my son and me to spend time away from mom. We get time on our own – and so does she!”*

“

*“I like learning about the different things my kids are learning to do as they grow. Sometimes I have questions about how they are developing and it’s nice to have a place where other dads have the same questions and we can all get answers.”*

*Fathers’ comments*

Providing a place for men to be with their children encourages one of the things that dads do best: connect with their children through play. Some unique things fathers bring to play include:

- Urging a child’s independence
- Encouraging risk taking
- Focusing on stimulation, protection, and self-control
- Using their bodies as the toy (being climbed on, wrestling, etc.)





Play provides the context for father-child attachment. “Children love to play, and men tend to be both comfortable with play and good at it, so play often becomes a preferred mode of interaction” (Hoffman, 2011). Attachment can begin even before birth as the baby gets to know their voice and dads begin to feel a sense of connection when they touch their partner’s belly. It then continues as dads encourage exploration, risk-taking, persistence, and independence.

It is not enough to play with and excite a child. Responding to children when they are in distress is key attachment behaviour. Healthy attachment between fathers and adolescents has been connected to dads’ level of play sensitivity when those children were toddlers (Grossman, et al, 2002). Fathers’ play sensitivity has been linked to their involvement in caregiving. Children need to learn that dad can keep them safe and comfort them when hurt. Involvement in both caregiving and play helps fathers learn to read the cues and needs AND respond appropriately to them.

**Chuck loves to be with his two kids at the playground at the local park. He recalls that one time his son, Todd, was trying to escape from being caught by dad and in his hurry to get away, and slid really fast down the slide. Todd flew off the bottom and landed with a hard thud. It scared him and he started to cry. Chuck jumped down from the top of the slide, picked up Todd with a warm and gentle hug, said a couple of encouraging words, and within two minutes Todd was back up on the climber trying to tag his sister and father.**

## PROGRAM PERSPECTIVE:

### DADS MATTER – ST MARY’S FAMILY LEARNING CENTRE, WINDSOR

St. Mary’s Family Learning Centre sees the value of having a variety of opportunities for fathers to engage their services. They hold play sessions where fathers are welcome to join. They offer monthly dads groups where men gather to talk about parenting their children. This is also a time to plan for Dads Matter, an annual one day conference for men that gives them a chance to focus on their parenting and to have some fun at the same time. These conferences have covered topics such as discipline, relating with mom, child development, and even offered a golf tutorial. Linda Edwards, Executive Director of St Mary’s, says that having men involved in the decision-making and planning of their fathering groups is key to success. “We hear that many dads carry a stigma of what it means to be an involved father and we want to be part of changing that.”

## REFLECTIONS: Acknowledge how Fathers Relate with their Children

1. *How comfortable are you with the ways fathers play with children?*
2. *Considering your context, how can you encourage fathers to play with their infants and children?*

## STEP 5 Assess your Father-friendliness

Although more and more dads are involved with their children these days, there are still barriers to fathers' engagement in programs and services for families.



*“Since we brought our son home I have tried to be a hands-on dad. I’ve even gone to a Mothers and Tots program a couple of times. It’s not always easy walking into a room full of mothers and their babies. The staff tries their best to help me feel welcome, but I can see how most guys wouldn’t feel too comfortable in that situation.”*

*Earl, dad with an 8-month old son*

### BARRIERS FOR DADS:

#### Stigma

Some men sense a social stigma that can discourage them from asking for help, being part of a group, or playing with their children. Men can also make assumptions about who the programs are for (e.g. only for single, struggling, or abusive fathers). Some men experience shame when there are issues in the home that need addressing.

#### Time

Although the amount of time men are spending with their families has nearly tripled over the past decade (Bianchi, Robinson and Milkie, 2005; Fisher et al, 2006), finding time to attend a program or even read up on an issue is becoming more difficult. As one father commented, “Coming to the fathering group without my kids takes my time away from them even more.”

#### Outnumbered

Men walk into a family drop-in centre or resource program and know right away they are not the majority. For some this is not an issue, but many men will not feel comfortable being the only guy in a room of women and children. It’s important for staff members to be aware of this and to work hard to make fathers feel welcome and accepted.

#### Work and finances

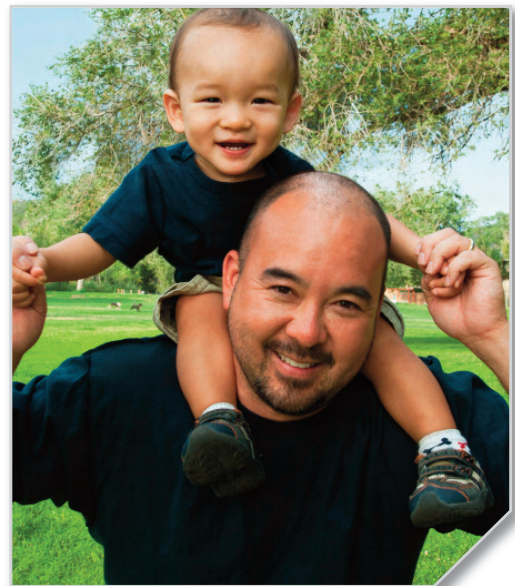
Families require money to survive and dads often find long hours, long commutes, and stressful work environments take them away from their time with their family. Work culture can make it difficult for men to take parental leave and to take time off for children’s medical appointments, school functions, etc.

#### Value

Some men are not convinced of the value of using community programs. They may not see the link between involvement in programs and the parenting they do at home.

#### Off the Hook

Some fathers believe they are not expected to attend appointments, meetings and home visits. If they do, it is often treated as a novel event. As one program coordinator said, “Men are able not to be there.”





## BARRIERS FOR PROGRAMS:

### Environment

First impressions matter to men. What they experience when they enter a centre will impact their choice to stay or leave. Some things that may turn a man off are:

- An over-zealous welcome – Men don't want to be put on the spot or centered out.
- The physical layout – Men are less attracted to a program if the space feels crowded, the chairs are too small, if it is not comfortable to get down on the floor to play or if the décor feels too feminine.

### Time

Centres sometimes offer programs during standard working hours when many fathers (and mothers) are not available. There are exceptions, but most dads are available evenings and weekends.

### Biases

Fathers sometimes detect subtle signs of bias in family program environments. Men will be turned off if they sense that staff members operate out of a deficit perspective, seeing fathers as optional extras, helpers for mothers or less interested, knowledgeable and skilled as parents. Operating out of a deficit model may lead a program towards making decisions for men or telling them how to parent instead of engaging them in planning or tapping into their innate ability and desire to be good dads. This will often inhibit fathers' engagement with their children during programs or their participation in programs and services.

### Cultural Influence

Fathers who are newcomers to Canada may bring with them expectations of the father's role based on their culture. This can sometimes be at odds with expected parenting practices in Canada and can lead some fathers to be wary of social service programs. Language is also a barrier as fathers may not be fluent in English or French.

### Father's Age

Fathering is different for a 22 year old, a 32 year old, and a 42 year old. These men will have different attitudes, peer influences, maturity levels, and experiences with their own fathers. These need to be taken into account in the planning of services, resources, and programs.

### Rural Areas

Many rural sites report that weather, certain seasons, seasonal/out of town work, and transportation are barriers to reaching fathers in a consistent manner. Maintaining confidentiality, limited access to internet and cell service, and fewer programs available are also significant.

## REFLECTIONS: Assess your Father-friendliness

1. *Does the entire staff have an understanding of the role men play in children's lives?*
2. *Do fathers believe there is value to using the program?*
3. *Is there a male on staff that fathers are able to connect with? Is there a male volunteer or representative (another father) who is the point man for fathering activities?*
4. *Is the physical environment welcoming to fathers?*
5. *What biases may be influencing your efforts to engage men?*
6. *Are there resources available that speak to fathers?*
7. *Do promotion materials reflect fathers in the wording and images?*

## STEP 6 Outline Potential Strategies

Success in engaging fathers requires being strategic, methodical, welcoming, and relevant.



*“It is vital for men to be working – for their families, for their ego – so it is imperative that we program around them, and not vice versa.”*

*Program Manager*

### BE STRATEGIC

Being strategic begins with identifying goals through a mission or purpose statement. Clearly defined goals will allow for proper assessment of progress. For example, the *Dads Today* program at the LAMP Early Years Services has as its mission statement: *creating deeper connections between Dads, their kids, and other Dads*. This provides opportunity to assess every activity, resource and idea in light of its ability to meet the mission statement.

**Talk with the Dads.** Have focus groups where fathers and other parents can share their ideas about what a relevant program would look like for them.

**Determine your population of interest.**

Which fathers do you want to reach? Here are four categories of programs used by Canadian organizations:

1. **Universal programs:** Programs aimed at fathers in general. They include family drop-ins, father-child activities, parenting programs, resources on involved fathering, and posters showing fathers interacting in positive ways with their children.
2. **Fathers at transition points:** Services and resources for fathers who are going through change, like the birth of a baby, adapting to Canada, school-readiness, adolescent life, or understanding child development.
3. **Fathers facing stressors:** Programs and services for men going through grief and loss, divorce, or other issues that impact parenting.
4. **Unique issues:** Some men require specific help with their parenting. Domestic violence programs or therapy for men and couples are examples.

**Create an identity.** A good catchy name becomes the identity of the program as people recognize it more and more. Some examples are *Dads Matter*, *More Than a Haircut*, *Dads Today*, and *Daddy and Me*. Ensure that the program is not just a re-named mothers' program. Fathering programs need to speak to fathers and allow men to interact with their kids and each other in their own ways.





**Develop partnerships.** Research shows that one of the keys to successful fathers' programming is developing partnerships. Some partnerships that work well include:

- Food banks for meals
- Stores for gifts, incentives, and support for activities
- Community centres and other agencies for use of space
- Volunteer organizations or high school students for childcare
- Media outlets for help with promotion

## PROGRAM PERSPECTIVE:

### THE POWER OF DADS – OTTAWA PUBLIC HEALTH, OTTAWA

*The Power of Dads* is a family-friendly community event to celebrate the role of the father, using a Strongman competition as a draw. This one-day event includes motivational speeches, parent education stations, activities for children and a barbeque. "There is a clear parallel between the physical power that is displayed at the Strongman competition and the inner strength that dads have to positively influence the lives of their children," says Dave Elder. Dads are encouraged to be patient and to model the behaviors they wish to see in their children as they grow. But the competition is not the end. As a nurse with Ottawa Public Health, Dave partners with the Bethany Hope Centre to provide the *Power of Dads Parenting Series* for young dads. This gives these young men a chance to talk about key parenting strategies, like managing behaviour, promoting self-esteem, child development or caring for a sick child.

## BE METHODICAL

**Get staff on board.** The strength of any program is in the people who are making it happen.



*"Skilled staff is key. On-going training and development to build confidence and capacity in my people impacts the quality of engagement with the dads."*

*Executive Director*

Front-line workers in drop-in programs, child care settings or home visiting programs have the most opportunities to have contact with dads. It helps if staff members are:

- Passionate about the role dads have with their kids
- Friendly and approachable by the men
- Aware of how they are engaging and welcoming fathers
- Willing to share observations and helpful insights about the families they work with

**Staff Development.** There is value in getting father-friendliness training for all staff, including managers, board members, funders, and other decision makers. The Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network offers training and consultation services. Training can also include certification on fathering curricula (like Super Dads Super Kids), staying current with research, reading magazine articles, and staying in touch through the internet and social media options (see the Resources section at the end of this manual).

## WOMEN WORKING WITH MEN

It is possible for women to work effectively in men's programs. Here are some suggestions from women who have done this work:

1. Hear men out. Find out their interests.
2. Do more facilitation of discussions than teaching of content.
3. Be prepared for some men to challenge your role in this work from time to time.
4. Ask, "What do you think?" instead of "How do you feel?"
5. Keep discussions solution-focused, rather than idea or sharing focused.
6. Promote the message that dads can go to parent meetings, field trips, and volunteer at schools.
7. Start with the assumption that dad is important to his family and really wants to be part of the group.
8. Have a sense of humor.
9. Try to make ice-breakers activity-based and relevant to the topic at hand.



Here are some suggestions from fathers who have been in women-led groups:

1. Do not openly challenge a man to respond in front of the class.
2. There is a danger in thinking too much about how men and women are different. This can lead to condescending behaviour and change the focus of the group.
3. Men like to be direct and to the point.
4. Allow the men to be the experts of their lives and families.
5. Be patient, and curious about what they have to say. Learn from your learners.

## FORMAT OF SERVICE

There are two main options for services for fathers:

- Creating programs just for dads
- Integrating fathers into existing programs



**Dad-only programs** allow dads to be on their own with or without their children. Examples of dads-only programs include activities for dads and their kids, drop-in programs, dad's conferences, parenting groups, prenatal classes for dads, and father discussion groups. This type of programming benefits fathers and families in different ways:

- Dads get to connect with other dads and have significant discussions with men that may not often happen in other settings.
- Information can be readily shared with men in a way that they will hear it.
- Father/child programs give fathers a chance to be in charge of their child, responsible for feeding, changing diapers and supervision without being able to defer to mom.
- Father-child activity programs give mothers time on their own. One program worker said that when he needs to cancel one of the drop-in nights, it is the mothers who call in to protest. That is their night, their shopping time, and their couple of hours of peace because the kids are out with dad.



*“Coming to Daddy and Me gives me a chance to hang out with my daughter and do things daddy-style once in a while. We eat a little messier and play a little louder than at home, but it’s a good time for us both. And I know Anjelika loves it.”*

*Program Participant*

**Integrating fathers into existing programs** means being more welcoming for fathers at family drop-ins, engaging fathers in conversations about issues their children are facing, offering parenting programs when the dads are available, and having posters and resources that speak directly to dads. One of the main benefits of this approach is that both parents can experience and learn the same things. The discussions at a parenting group, for example, will be heard by both and therefore they can be on the same page with their parenting. Sharing these experiences also reduces the likelihood that one will be seen as the expert with more knowledge and more ability than the other. One parent won't need to go home and try to explain or teach the other what was discussed. It levels the playing field.



*“My wife and I don’t get much chance to talk about how we parent throughout the day. Our lives are pretty full. But coming to the parenting class together gives us stuff to talk about and we can catch each other trying new things or even making some mistakes through the week. But overall it brings us closer. You know, we understand each other better.”*

*Program Participant*

## PROGRAM PERSPECTIVE:

### DADDY AND ME – ONTARIO EARLY YEARS, BANCROFT

Activities are the basis of the *Daddy and Me* program. “We broaden the invitation to all guys who may have a child under their wing so that the relationship is strengthened between caregiver and child,” says Ed Reinhardt. And there are many cool things that men and kids are invited to: Touch a Truck events, fishing and hunting activities, and even a dogsled demonstration. The key is to keep things interesting and fun. There is also a literacy component at each event where stories are read to the group. A key to the success of *Daddy and Me* is the partnerships. “We couldn’t provide all the elements to the program without involvement from other organizations like children’s mental health, Children’s Aid, and the Early Years,” says Ed. About 20 dads and their kids come out to the monthly events.

## DIVERSITY OF OPT-INS

Although one program may not be able to do everything, increasing the points of contact will allow fathers to connect in ways they are comfortable with. Here are some suggestions:

- Offer father-child activities that give dads time with their children. These can be done in the evenings and/or the weekends. By offering different times, fathers can attend when they are available.
- Provide parenting groups for fathers. There are fathers who are looking to get information about parenting and to build their skills as a dad.
- Use the internet to share information and provide quality resources for dads. This allows fathers who may not be able to attend or have no interest in attending a program to have their needs met.
- Use social media, like Twitter and Facebook, as avenues for sharing information about parenting and about programs offered.

## ACTIVITY-BASED PROGRAMMING

In general, fathers want to be playing and teaching in very active and concrete ways. Activities can be the doorway fathers use to enter a program. Some successful activities include:

- A dog-sled demonstration (Bancroft)
- An airport tour (Etobicoke)
- Hikes and barbeques in local parks (many areas)
- Gym time (Belleville, Toronto)
- Read ‘n’ Swim (Toronto)
- Cooking with Dad (Milton, Simcoe County, Timmins)
- Father’s Day events, festivals (Halton Region)
- Strong Man Competitions (Ottawa)

Many of these activities require good connections with community partners.



## BE GUY-FRIENDLY



*“I’m not sure I’ll ever go back to that drop-in centre. It felt like a women’s washroom.”*

*A new dad looking for a place to play with his daughter*

It is so important that the environment dads walk into is attractive to them. It doesn’t need to be a man-cave, but there are ways to have an environment that is comfortable for both women and men. Try some of these ideas:

- Make the centre as open and spacious as possible – if dads feel cramped and too close, it will be less attractive for them
- Use neutral colours on the walls
- Offer magazines that guys will not feel embarrassed to pick up
- Put up posters on the walls that reflect fathers in positive relationships with their children
- Ensure a baby change area is easily accessible for the guys, like in the men’s washroom
- Display resources, booklets, and pamphlets that deal with issues dads may face

Ask a few dads to walk through the centre, office, or waiting room with an eye to what may be attractive or unattractive to guys. Use the suggestions that fit the overall purpose of the centre.

## KEEP IN TOUCH



*“We need to stay on their radar. It takes an effort, but regular contact makes a big difference.”*

*Public Health Nurse*



Personal contact is very important. Many centres admit that the face-to-face invitation or conversation clinches a father's attendance. If a dad misses a scheduled event, a phone call or quick email is a nice touch that is rarely rejected. Other ways to keep in touch that show dads are welcome include:

- Sending regular email updates of scheduled activities
- Calling fathers who have not been around for recent events
- Sending notes to fathers with their children
- Having specific questions for dads during pre/postnatal appointments, interviews and home visits
- Encouraging fathers to attend prenatal appointments and confirmation of the pregnancy

Another way to stay in touch is to offer classes and programs in places like libraries, schools, religious centres, or even local restaurants. These may be more accessible to fathers who may be uncomfortable with going to an agency or centre.



*“We partnered with a local store-front café and invited expecting dads for a discussion on changes they can expect with the baby coming. The environment was laid-back and comfortable. Thirteen dads came and had a great discussion. Most of these guys now keep in touch with each other.”*

*Program Worker*



## PRACTICAL STUFF

This section is about reducing practical barriers that may keep a very interested dad from attending a program.

**Forms.** Forms with information about the family need to reflect information about all parents. The family could be two fathers so the forms can say: parent 1 and parent 2. This way everyone feels welcomed. It sends the message that both matter and either may be contacted if necessary.

**Food.** Providing a meal for dads is something that makes a huge difference. Meals provide a place to talk and give the guys something to do while talking around the table. Meals also require the dads to feed their children, which is an important part of the bond between father and child. Use community partnerships with food banks, restaurants, religious institutions, and schools as possible sources of meals and the people to cook them.

**Access.** Especially in rural locations, it may be difficult for men to access programs because of the distance. Consider ways to help men get to programs. Urban centres may have access to public transit. Tokens or fares can be provided to men if they need it.

## PROGRAM PERSPECTIVE:

### THE PARENTING PARTNERSHIP

The Phoenix Centre recognized that there was a lack of programming and resources for expecting and new dads. This was one of the main considerations in *The Parenting Partnership (TPP)*, a pre/post natal program for new parents. *TPP* gives expecting parents quality information about the impending birth and opportunities to discuss the impact a baby has on the couple relationship. It involves both face-to-face meetings of parents and on-line learning and discussion forums. Greg Lubimiv, who was instrumental in the design and implementation of *TPP*, acknowledges that fathers were given special consideration for many reasons. “It was important for us to think intentionally about the voice and tone of *TPP* to be inclusive of men. There has been a fairly feminine feel to environments where parents are served. We wrote our own material to bring some balance. Now fathers have a place to get their questions answered and be closely connected to the birth and parenting their child.” says Greg. ([www.phoenixprembroke.com](http://www.phoenixprembroke.com))

### BE RELEVANT

The greatest pitfall in attempts to design fathering programs is not being relevant to the needs, interests and requests of fathers. Here are some ways in which fathers’ needs and interests may differ somewhat from those of mothers.

**Goal Oriented.** Men tend to be goal oriented and focus on cause and effect. One program responds to this by offering a children’s nutrition workshop for fathers. They use charts, pictures, and examples to make the information very practical and accessible. When providing information to dads, it is important to build content around practice. This means giving them practical things to do. It may mean teaching infant massage or sharing the benefits of tummy time for babies and then having the fathers try it out right away. Men also benefit from having practical information about caring for and relating with their partner. For example, give dad three or four things he can do to help with breastfeeding. This will encourage him to be involved in that important part of his family’s life.

**Timely Information.** Being relevant also means being timely and appropriate with information and resources. Transition points are excellent opportunities to share the message of involved fatherhood. One of these points is the impending and/or recent birth of his child. Expecting and new dads have many questions about how the child will change their life, their relationships, and their identity. These dads can be recruited at prenatal classes, visits to OB/GYNs, through baby shows, and other places new and expectant parents can be found. Other transition points include the toddler stage and heading off to school.

**Teaching Their Child.** Fathers are often focused on their children’s ability (potential) to be ready for school. Engage fathers is through literacy, numeracy, and science activities. These give dads hands-on opportunities to interact, guide, and learn with their children. Charts, graphs, videos, and pictures can help to make the content more accessible since they can bring the information home to refer to later. For example:

- Handouts that outline key developmental stages related to math skills
- Colour-matching activities
- Printing practice sheets

## Conversation Starters

*We would all like to have positive conversations with fathers that go beyond the weather, the local sports team and the newest technology. Here are some ideas for getting dads to talk about what is important to them in their relationship with their child:*

1. *What has your infant/child taught you?*
2. *When did something really special happen between the two of you?*
3. *What have you changed about yourself because of your infant/child?*
4. *What have you done to make things better for your infant/child?*
5. *What tactics help you and your partner raise your infant/child together?  
Or on your own?*
6. *What would your partner say is your unique contribution to the family?*
7. *When things look rough, what keeps you going?*

**Facilitation.** Although there are many successful programs that are run by women, it can be very valuable to recruit male facilitators to connect with the dads, organize events, and become the face of the program. A male facilitator gives a common point of connection and encourages conversations on issues guys share. This also allows the facilitator to model healthy male involvement with children.



*There is something unique about a guy being in our drop-in centre. When he walks in the kids gravitate to him. He gets down on the floor and lets them climb all over him. He shows these kids that it is OK to be close to a guy.*

*Program Manager*

It can be difficult for programs to find male facilitators or the funding to create a position to hire them. Some centres have been successful using the following strategies:

- Looking to community partners for men who may be interested in being involved
- Asking board members or other stakeholders who may be able to help out
- Approaching partners of staff who may be able to step into the role of facilitator
- Finding a dad who is committed and consistent in the program to volunteer to be the face of the program

The main role of this person is to be the point of contact for dads interested in or coming to the program. This guy can make the phone calls, send the emails, and be the one to welcome dads when they come. The rest of the staff can give him the support he needs to make it all happen. But, as one program director says, “Just because you have a male on your staff doesn’t mean your job is done.” The style of facilitation matters, as does the type of relationship the facilitator has with the men.



*“I find the most effective way to run a group for men is to have conversations where they talk about the issue and come to their own conclusions and implications of what they have done. The more I tell them what the implications may be, the less they seem to learn.”*

*Program Facilitator*



Effective facilitation of men's groups includes:

- Looking to the dads' interests and keeping it practical
- Knowing the uniqueness of how men parent
- Highlighting things that dads do that show their strengths as a parent
- Doing more asking than telling
- Having conversations that encourage a balance between taking in new information (learning) and awakening innate parenting wisdom (building on strengths)

**Ownership.** Being relevant to fathers means increasing their sense of ownership in the program. This can be encouraged in a number of ways:

- Involve the men in a leadership team that plots the course for the program and activities. Men take ownership when they are part of the decision-making process.
- Give the dads a project to complete. There could be work that is needed around the centre. Have some dads take initiative in getting it done.
- Delegate some tasks. There may be guys who can design a quick website for the program. Some may like to cook and would help prepare the meals. Maybe there is someone who loves crafts and can work on some for different events.



*“Carl would come with his son from time to time. Once, while getting something from our kitchen, he noticed the door of one of the cabinets was falling off. The next time he came, he went around fixing all the cabinet doors. It was a great opportunity for him to give back to the program and we’ve been seeing him a lot more since then.”*

Service Provider

**A Word of Caution.** Avoid intentional discussions about occupations in the group. For men, occupation is a definition of who they are and they will easily compare themselves to each other based on their employment situation. This can lead to assumptions between the men about the abilities, knowledge, and influence each father has in the group.



*“Tony joined our group a week into the program. He was a rough-looking guy with no job and was just beginning to get more connected with his young family. As the weeks went by, he became the one who the other men went to for opinions and ideas. Judging him by his appearance and employment status would have minimized the wisdom, perspective, and influence he brought to the group.”*

Service Provider

Men will likely ask each other about their careers and what they do, but it is imperative that facilitators not make an issue of this. The men need a level playing field and job type doesn't determine fathering ability. The men are in groups to support and learn from each other.



## PROGRAM PERSPECTIVE:

### DADS TODAY – LAMP COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTRE, TORONTO

In 2001 the LAMP Community Health Centre decided to reach out to Dads in a purposeful way. Through its Ontario Early Years Centre, LAMP began providing activities for fathers and their children to attend together. It began with a hike, which is now an annual event every September. Other activities the LAMP OEYC offers include a very popular Gym Day on Saturday mornings, a regular Tuesday evening drop-in for dads and kids twice a month, 3 parenting groups for fathers each year, and an annual Dads Count event around Father's Day.

Most important is the connection fostered between the men. Regular emails remind the men of what is happening and connection is encouraged as men and kids spend time together doing things they enjoy. As one dad says, "This drop-in gives me time with my son in a relaxed atmosphere where I can talk with other dads about what they are going through. We share our ideas and have a lot of fun in the process."

Momentum also comes from the partnerships forged within the community. "Because we serve a meal every time the guys come," says Brian, "we rely on donations from a local foodbank. It is amazing what falls off the back of the truck sometimes!" Other partnerships include another community centre that provides gym space, Toronto Public Health to help run fathering groups, and local businesses to help fund the Father's Day events.

## REFLECTIONS: Outline Potential Strategies

Here is a checklist to guide efforts in reaching fathers.

|  | Yes                      | No                       |
|--|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| <b>Be Strategic</b>  |                          |                          |
| 1. We ask fathers about their needs and interests (survey, focus groups, etc.).                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. We ask mothers about their needs and interests (survey, focus groups, etc.).                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. We know who our priority population is.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. We have a name for our dads program that resonates with fathers.                                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. We have a list of potential community partners.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. We have contacted potential partners.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>Be Methodical</b>   |                          |                          |
| 7. Staff members have attended training about involving fathers.                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. We have resources, articles, etc. for staff to read and stay current on the role of fathers.    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Female staff members are aware of their role and influence in fathering programs.               | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. We provide dads-only programs.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 11. We work to better integrate fathers into existing programs.                                    | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 12. We have at least 2 ways fathers can connect into our programs.                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 13. We offer activities for fathers and children to share together.                                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>Be Welcoming</b>  |                          |                          |
| 14. We have assessed the father-friendliness of our environment.                                   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 15. We have avenues to stay in touch with the men.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 16. We can provide food (meals or snacks).   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 17. We can provide transportation for the men.   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>Be Relevant</b>   |                          |                          |
| 18. We have resources and information that speak to fathers, grandfathers, and other men.          | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 19. Our resources cover a broad spectrum of developmental stages, from preconception to childhood. | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 20. Our planned programs and resources are practical and hands-on.                                 | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 21. We access referrals to services men may be looking for.  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 22. We have a male facilitator/point person who gives leadership.                                  | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 23. We give men opportunities to provide leadership to the program.                                | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |



## STEP 7 Connect with Dads – Marketing to Men



Once the plan is laid out and the program is ready to launch it is important to figure out how to let fathers know about what you have to offer. This means reaching out to fathers and the people connected to them in various places.

### IT'S ABOUT HOW MEN SHOP

According to one father, marketing to men begins with understanding how men shop. They tend to not do much grazing or looking around. Usually, guys will know what they want and go and get it. Reaching fathers is the same. They must see the program as practical, to the point, having a clear purpose, and of value to themselves and their families. They are less likely to respond to something that seems too self-reflective or sounds like a support group. So keep titles and descriptions short but accurate and focused on the children or the family. For example:

- **Making the Most of Fatherhood:** 8 sessions that give dads, grandfathers, and other men some ideas about the kids they are raising.
- **Daddy Matters:** A course for new and expecting fathers looking at the changes your family will go through, how to be a supportive partner, and ways to keep your baby safe.
- **Dads Time:** A drop in for men and their kids.

**Involve All Male-Caregivers.** This is often tricky because the wording can become tedious. There are many men who influence children. Dads, grandfathers, uncles, brothers, and neighbours are all guys raising kids. And it is good for them all to feel invited and welcome. Come up with a phrase that catches all of these roles. For example:

- **Me and My Dad:** Activities for all guys raising kids.

**Who Can Carry the Message.** Since women are most likely to be connected with services, have mothers, nannies, or grandparents take flyers, resources and information home to dads. Even better, have the children take something home to dad, if they have a father. Kids who are involved in nursery schools, daycares, school or community programs can come home with something to share with dad. From time to time have the children take home something that refers to their relationship with dad or highlights an upcoming event dad is invited to.



*“We often tell the children about something coming up for them and their dads. This way, when the children see dad again, they are already excited about the event.”*

*Program Worker*



In using this approach, be careful not to stigmatize children. Inviting dad for a special event may be stressful if the father is not present, does not speak the language, and with LGBTQ families.

There are many **community partners** who can help spread the word:

- Connect with local stores
- Visit religious centres in the community and generate their interest and help
- Use doctors' offices and other medical services to hand out flyers or hang posters
- Go by local sports complexes, arenas, community centres, gyms, and clubs
- Offer lunch-and-learn events at local businesses

Remember that word of mouth often works the best. This means that doing a good job will be the best promotion strategy. If dads are enjoying themselves and believe it is worth their time, they will tell others.



*“We spend a lot of time handing out flyers and visiting places in the community to do outreach, but the consistent way that dads find out about what we do is through the mothers, their kids, or other dads.”*

*Executive Director*

## USE THE MEDIA

Fathers also spend time listening to the radio, reading websites, and watching TV. These are all places to share messages about the programs available for fathers. Service providers can:

- Request interviews on local radio or TV programs
- Write articles for local newspapers or websites
- Ask TV or radio stations to air public service announcements available from the Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network (media outlets are required to donate a portion of their airtime to public service announcements)

## PROGRAM PERSPECTIVE:

### PROMOTING SERVICES THROUGH THE MEDIA

Barry has a good relationship with his local newspaper. For a number of years he has contributed articles addressing issues single dads and mothers face. This gives him opportunities to promote the services he offers and educate the public about the role of fathers.

FII-ON has a media kit that can help with promoting services for fathers through local media. A link can be found in the Resource section of this manual.

**Stay In Touch through Social Media.** Many men are on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms. Get familiar with these programs and begin to use them to promote Father Involvement messages and services.

Having a known and respected man in the community speaking about the importance of fathers is very helpful. This person can be a voice for fathers, speak at fathering events, and give support in many ways to reaching fathers.





## STEP 8 Signs of Success

Fathering programs take on a life of their own and can go through stages as they grow and mature. Here are some marks of a mature, vibrant, well-developed fathering program:

1. Successful programs focus their attention on the dads as men, not just in their role as fathers. They provide support, referrals, and resources for issues outside of parenting.
2. Successful programs value the role of mothers.
3. Successful programs have staff-time dedicated to engaging fathers.
4. Successful programs are consistently providing training opportunities for staff. This keeps staff on the edge of new resources, ideas, and innovations in working with fathers.
5. Successful programs recognize and respond to the diversity of fathers. Diversity comes with culture, age, experience, living situations, and more.
6. Successful programs create a father-friendly atmosphere. Men must feel welcome when they come to an event, group or meeting.
7. Successful programs forge partnerships with other community agencies.
8. Successful programs do regular self-reflection on their work with fathers. This allows for highlighting successes and adjusting to barriers as they come along.



## STEP 9 Consider Key Issues

### PRECONCEPTION PERIOD

Eighty-seven percent of men aged 15-44 who currently do not have children hope to become a father one day (Pew Research, 2011). Men in the preconception stage can benefit from information about how to improve their health. The choices men make at this point will keep them healthier, and will also influence their partner's choices and lifestyle. Men also need to prepare for sharing the responsibilities of caring for a baby. Men need to know they will likely not have as much free time as before, to expect changes in their relationship with their partner, and to acknowledge all the sacrifices that come with raising a family. A new baby will impact work, lifestyle, and finances. Men need to discuss these questions with their partner:

- Will one parent be a stay-at-home parent?
- Will the parental leave be shared?
- How flexible are their employers with medical appointments and emergencies?
- Does work provide benefits for drug plans, dental and life insurance?
- Is their life insurance up to date and adequate?

### PRENATAL PERIOD

Once the couple knows they are pregnant, dad's main role is providing support during the pregnancy. His caring attention helps her be healthy and calm throughout the pregnancy. A father's early involvement will strengthen the bond between baby and dad and ease the transition into fatherhood.

Service providers can suggest the following ideas to encourage fathers to plan an active role in the pregnancy. Fathers can:

- Attend medical appointments
- Talk and sing to the baby before it is born
- Read stories to the baby
- Listen for the baby's heartbeat and feel the baby kick
- Run interference so the expectant mother gets the rest she needs
- Care for the expectant mother – rub her feet or back, clean the bathroom, cook dinner, pay the bills
- Attend prenatal classes to learn to be a support during labour
- Watch videos of a birth
- Pack the hospital bag, not forgetting things for himself, like a change of clothes, a magazine or book, and toiletries
- Get the stuff the baby will need – car seat, crib, playpen, and stroller







## POSTNATAL PERIOD

Fathers have many different expectations about parenthood. Some men expect their partner will be strong and will know how to handle everything that the baby throws at the couple. Others may see themselves being there for the baby a lot, involved in everything, and being a real hands-on dad. Still others believe their employer will be very supportive in their new role as a father and that everyone will love looking at baby pictures over and over and over. Some men believe that the baby will deepen the bond between mom and dad, especially if their relationship is not too secure. For many men these realities do come to pass, but for some there is disappointment. People are not as interested in their baby as they had hoped, their employer is not being flexible with them, they do not have as much time with the baby as planned, and the relationship with mom is strained. In fact, marital satisfaction for mothers declines from six to eighteen months postpartum and plunges steeply for fathers during the same period (Cowan and

Cowan, 2009). Men and women need to be given realistic guidance and support that allows them to deal with the transition to parenthood. This is where parenting support groups can help. Groups that give the couple opportunities to talk about the changes their baby brings can be set up before birth since families often do not have the energy to do this after the baby comes. Cowan and Cowan (2009) have shown that professionally led groups for expectant couples significantly reduce the likelihood of divorce.

## POSTPARTUM MOOD DISORDERS

New parents need to be aware of postpartum mood disorders (PPMD) that affect about 25% of families at one level or another. Ideally this topic should be introduced during the preconception period in case there are signs and symptoms of depression early in pregnancy and to assess risk factors such as heredity. Men can be encouraged to support mothers dealing with PPMD by:

- Being aware of the signs and symptoms of PPMD
- Telling her she is working hard, the baby is doing great, and she is a good mother
- Sharing household chores – cleaning, preparing meals, etc.
- Taking the baby out to give her a break
- Suggesting she get outside for a walk or to call a friend
- Listening without judging or trying to fix her situation
- Being the gatekeeper who regulates the flow of visitors in and out of the home
- Coordinating other people to make meals and to help out in practical ways
- Going with her to medical appointments and psychological follow-ups





A significant number of fathers experience postpartum depression. These men tend to be new fathers, and have partners who also struggle with PPMD (Paulson and Bazemore, 2010). Fathers with postpartum depression may:

- Withdraw from or avoid the family
- Stay at work longer hours than normal
- Not interact with the baby in positive ways
- Feel inadequate or fearful in their role as a dad
- Have difficulties relating to the mother
- Feel more irritable, aggressive, or angry
- Experience sadness or despair
- Have increased drug or alcohol use

If these symptoms last more than two weeks, families need to consult with a doctor. Ignoring the signs and hoping they just go away is dangerous and can lead to more serious situations. Since paternal depression is not widely acknowledged, it is important that more efforts be made for screening and referrals. There is growing evidence that paternal depression may have significant emotional, behavioural and developmental effects on children. Men can be encouraged to talk with people about their feelings (either a friend or a professional), to look after their health, and to be involved in the support and treatment the mother is receiving. Prevention and intervention efforts need to focus on the couple and family, not just individuals (Paulson and Bazemore, 2010). Families can access support for PPMD in either partner through public health or their health care provider.

## Conclusion

This manual focusses on designing a plan to engage fathers. By intentionally following specific steps, ideas, and principles, more men will feel welcome in centres, waiting rooms and offices. As the steps are implemented, here are a couple things to consider from those who have been working with dads for some time:

1. **Be patient.** Building a viable, successful program for fathers takes time. Give yourself that time and the freedom to build slowly. Focus on quality, not quantity. In time, the guys will come.
2. **Be consistent.** Although there may be times and events that need some adjustment, the consistency of staff, location, programming, and messages will help build trust in what is being offered.
3. **Be flexible.** From time to time reassess how things are going. Look over this manual periodically to see what is going well and what can be changed.

Our children, our families and community deserve our efforts to encourage men in their roles as fathers. The effort will be worth it.



## Resources:

### GENERAL RESOURCES FOR DADS

Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network – resources, training, and networking for anyone working with fathers and families

[www.dadcentral.ca](http://www.dadcentral.ca)

Super Dads Super Kids Program – an 8 session father-child activity program

[www.dadcentral.ca](http://www.dadcentral.ca)

Involved Fathers Booklet Series – six booklets covering issues relevant to a broad range of fathers

[www.dadcentral.ca](http://www.dadcentral.ca)

24 Hr Cribside Assistance for New Dad – the manual every new dad is looking for

[www.newdadmanual.ca](http://www.newdadmanual.ca)

Father Involvement – Building Our Children’s Character Program – a 6 Tool program focused on fathering and character development in children

[www.thefiboccprogram.ca](http://www.thefiboccprogram.ca)

My Daddy Matters because... – toolkit for engaging fathers created through the National Project Fund

[www.mydad.ca](http://www.mydad.ca)

Caring Dads – a program for fathers involved in domestic violence

[www.caringdads.org](http://www.caringdads.org)

FIRA – dedicated to the development and sharing of knowledge focusing on Father Involvement

[www.fira.ca](http://www.fira.ca)

Parents 2 Parents – Knowledge from experts. Experience from parents

[www.parents2parents.ca](http://www.parents2parents.ca)

Twitter feeds:

[#dadsontario](https://twitter.com/dadsontario)

[#newdadmanual](https://twitter.com/newdadmanual)

### RESOURCES ON POSTPARTUM MOOD DISORDERS

Canadian Mental Health Association – information about postpartum depression

[www.cmha.ca/bins/content\\_page.asp?cid=3-86-88&lang=1](http://www.cmha.ca/bins/content_page.asp?cid=3-86-88&lang=1)

Life with a new baby: Dealing with Postpartum Mood Disorders

[www.beststart.org/resources/ppmd/index.html](http://www.beststart.org/resources/ppmd/index.html)

Men Postpartum Depression

[http://footprintsoffatherhood.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/fathers\\_ppd1.pdf](http://footprintsoffatherhood.files.wordpress.com/2010/11/fathers_ppd1.pdf)

[www.postpartummen.com](http://www.postpartummen.com)

[www.postpartumdads.org](http://www.postpartumdads.org)



## RESOURCES FOR YOUNG DADS

Believe in Me – a DVD and discussion guide about young fathers  
[www.dadcentral.ca](http://www.dadcentral.ca)

## RESOURCES ON PRECONCEPTION PERIOD

Men's Information – How to Build a Healthy Baby  
[www.beststart.org/resources/preconception/index.html](http://www.beststart.org/resources/preconception/index.html)

Is there a Baby in Your Future – Plan for it. Health Before Pregnancy Workbook  
[www.beststart.org/resources/preconception/index.html](http://www.beststart.org/resources/preconception/index.html)

## RESOURCES FOR NEW AND EXPECTING DADS

24 Hr Cribside Assistance for New Dads booklet; Daddy, I Need You  
[www.dadcentral.ca](http://www.dadcentral.ca)

The manual every new dad is looking for  
[www.newdadmanual.ca](http://www.newdadmanual.ca)

## RESOURCES FOR NEWCOMER DADS

Giving Birth in a New Land – a guide for women new to Canada and their families  
[www.beststart.org/resources/rep\\_health/index.html](http://www.beststart.org/resources/rep_health/index.html)

Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs – offers links to a variety of parenting resources in many languages  
[www.welcomehere.ca](http://www.welcomehere.ca)

Citizenship and Immigration Canada – Assists newcomers to Canada with citizenship registration and language instruction  
[www.cic.gc.ca](http://www.cic.gc.ca)  
1-888-242-2100

Canadian Association of Family Resource Programs – website offers links to a variety of parenting resources in many languages  
[www.welcomehere.ca](http://www.welcomehere.ca)

Ontario Immigration – Information for new immigrants to Ontario on procedures to follow and relevant links  
[www.ontarioimmigration.ca](http://www.ontarioimmigration.ca)

Settlement.org – Offers settlement resources and information in more than 30 languages. Links to resources such as Newcomer Information Centres and Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC)  
[www.settlement.org](http://www.settlement.org)

## RESOURCES FOR SINGLE DADS

Full-time Dad, Part-time Kids; One Step at a Time  
[www.dadcentral.ca](http://www.dadcentral.ca)

## RESOURCES FOR ABORIGINAL FATHERS

Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres  
[www.ofifc.org](http://www.ofifc.org)

Fatherhood: Indigenous Men's Journeys – a DVD with 6 Father's stories – includes practitioner's discussion guide  
[www.ecdip.org/fathers](http://www.ecdip.org/fathers)

A Sense of Belonging : Supporting Healthy Child Development in Aboriginal Families  
[www.beststart.org](http://www.beststart.org)

## RESOURCES FOR GAY/BI/QUEER DADS

LGBTQ Parenting Connection  
[www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca](http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca)

Gay Fathers Cluster Executive Summary  
[www.fira.ca](http://www.fira.ca)

Father Involvement Community Research Forum Spring 2006  
[http://fira.ca/cms/documents/44/Gay\\_Fathers.pdf](http://fira.ca/cms/documents/44/Gay_Fathers.pdf)

## RESOURCES FOR FATHERS ABOUT FASD

Father Involvement and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder: Developing best practices – a helpful overview  
FASD Ontario: [www.fasdON.ca](http://www.fasdON.ca)

## RESOURCES ON PARENTAL LEAVE

[www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/es/pubs/guide/pregnancy.php](http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/es/pubs/guide/pregnancy.php)

[www.servicecanada.gc.ca/eng/ei/types/maternity\\_parental.shtml#eligible](http://www.servicecanada.gc.ca/eng/ei/types/maternity_parental.shtml#eligible)

[www.worksmartontario.gov.on.ca/scripts/default.asp?contentID=1-5-3](http://www.worksmartontario.gov.on.ca/scripts/default.asp?contentID=1-5-3)

[www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/2008106/article/10639-eng.htm#a6](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-001-x/2008106/article/10639-eng.htm#a6)

## RESOURCE ON CONNECTING WITH THE MEDIA – some helpful tips on working with the media to promote father involvement programs

[www.dadscentral.ca](http://www.dadscentral.ca)

## RESOURCES ON CONNECTING WITH FAMILIES

How to Engage Families in Services; How to Reach Rural Populations  
[www.beststart.org/resources/howto/index.html](http://www.beststart.org/resources/howto/index.html)

## Referrals

Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network – for help with finding fathering programs and support in communities across Ontario

**[www.dadcentral.ca](http://www.dadcentral.ca)**

Local Public Health department - for health information on pregnancy and children's health

**1-800-267-8097**

Ontario Early Years Centres – where parents can get parenting information and take part in parenting programs

**[www.ontario/earlyyears](http://www.ontario/earlyyears)**

**1-866-821-7770**

Telehealth Ontario – a free Ontario government phone service to get health advice from a nurse

**1-866-797-0000**

LGBTQ Parenting Network – Sherbourne Health Centre – for information about same-sex parenting

**[www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca](http://www.lgbtqparentingconnection.ca)**

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## FOR FURTHER READING:

*Fatherneed* by Kyle Pruett (2000)

*Digital Dads: I am not a subsegment.* (2011)

<http://advertising.yahoo.com/article/digital-dads-im-not-a-subsegment.html>

*Partnership Parenting* by Kyle Pruett and Marsha Kline Pruett (2009)

*On Father's Ground : A portrait of projects to support and promote fathering*  
by Christine Bolté, Annie Devault, Michèle St. Denis and Judith Gaudet (2001)



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