



Alberta Home Visitation
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Message from the Provincial Director Lavonne Roloff

“In my career, there are many things I’ve won and many things I’ve achieved, but for me, my greatest achievement is my children and my family. It’s about being a good father, a good husband, just being connected to family as much as possible.” **David Beckham**

This quote sums up the sentiments in this issue of *Connections*. There are a variety of articles discussing aspects of being a father. For practitioners working with parents, we need to be mindful of our “cultural blindness” (see the article by David Long) when setting up our programs and forms. Do we unintentionally leave fathers out of the picture because we have typically focused on mothers as the main caregiver?

In home visitation, we have typically offered services to mothers. In recent years, there has been a shift with programs as they have increased flexibility and openness to meeting with both parents and single dads. Some programs have hired male workers to support dads in their role. Research is being done on the involvement of dads, the effects of the birth of a child in relationships (e.g. postpartum depression for fathers) and ways to support dads in their role (e.g. the work of Stuart Shanker and the MEHRIT centre on self-regulation). Programs are being offered to fathers to support their parenting role.

There have been many changes over the years regarding the role of fathers and mothers. In many families, dads are the main caregiver while mom works outside the home. Many dads are engaged with caregiving and sharing the responsibilities of being an active parent. This might mean getting

up in the middle of the night to rock a crying child, staying home with a sick child, driving to children’s extracurricular activities or taking paternal leave at the birth of their child.

One thing that I have realized in my career, is that both parents have different roles in their children’s lives and both parents want the best for their children. Children benefit when parents are supportive of one another and are involved in their child’s life. Under circumstances such as divorce, it is still possible for parents to treat one another with respect and stay involved in their child’s life. When we recognize the importance of both parents in parenting, we strengthen our society and contribute to children having a good start.

For resources on working with dads check out www.dadcentral.ca or www.abdads.ca. ■

Lavonne Roloff is the provincial director of AHVNA. She has worked in the family life education field throughout her career. Most recently she has worked in the support of home visitation programs in the province.

Creating Fatherhood Opportunities



By Michael Bautista

Father-focused programming has long been a challenge in our sector. While there has been advancement and support to engage them, fathers are still vastly under-represented within our communities.

“Fathers-only programming is essential so that men can explore their role and experiences of fathering and share their doubts and concerns with others who are walking the same path.”¹

By providing a welcoming and non-judgmental space where we listen to their stories, build their strengths and foster relationships amongst men, we can help fathers realize their important parental role. They will come to understand that by being a loving and engaged father, they can influence the positive outcomes of their children.

Organizations can sometimes leverage pre-existing programs to engage fathers. Families Matter Society of Calgary has adapted and designed “fathers-only” programs to do this.

- **Terrific Toddlers for Dads** provides fathers with ages and stages information for parenting toddlers. This was customized using the Alberta Health Service program, Terrific Toddlers.
- **Papa Bears** is an evening of fun that promotes healthy attachment through songs, stories, activities and play.
- **Postpartum Education and Support for Fathers** is an informational group supporting fathers whose partners are navigating post-partum depression. Led by a husband/wife team.
- **Be a Great Dad** has been delivered to the public and to agencies supporting fathers experiencing addiction, incarceration, immigration and homelessness.

To remove barriers to participation, programs use male facilitators when possible and are scheduled during evenings or weekends.

A common misconception our culture has is that fathers are not willing to engage in reflective practice and are hardwired to resist talking about their feelings.

“Having the opportunity to connect with other young dads has been awesome. It is hard enough being a parent, but sometimes I feel judged by society because I am a teen father. It’s cool to be able to hear that the challenges I am facing as a parent are also felt by others. I am able to learn from and with them. Having this time doesn’t make me feel so lonely.” – Successful Young Parents Program participant

A common misconception our culture has is that fathers are not willing to engage in reflective practice and are hardwired to resist talking about their feelings. This further perpetuates gender stereotypes and an unhealthy view of masculinity. Exploring the variety of roles fathers can play in their children’s lives highlights the idea of legacy. “A consistent hook for fathers is talking to them about the kind of adult they want their child to become. Fathers appreciate the idea of legacy.”²

- “What are my hopes and dreams for my children?”
- “What characteristics or traits do I want my children to have as adults?”
- “What values do I want my children to live by?”
- “What am I doing today to prepare my children for the future?”

When we create opportunities for fathers to share their stories, we validate their experiences. When we provide a safe space for connections to be established, we send a message that their needs are equally important to their female counterparts. When we truly listen to what they say, we foster a sense of trust and reflection that reinforces the important role they play in the lives of their children. When we understand their perspectives and come from a lens of non-judgment and curiosity, we can tailor our approaches to moving forward with them. When we highlight the strengths they already possess, we better

acknowledge their areas of challenge, and guide them to necessary resources. When we do all of this, and then work with excellent curriculum, we have a receptive parent who is ready to learn. ■

Michael Bautista is an individualized support worker with Families Matter where he has worked with fathers in various capacities for the past 11 years. For more information on the programs noted above, Michael can be reached at michaelbautista@familiesmatter.ca.

[1] The Be a Great Dad Facilitator Resource Guide, Families Matter Society of Calgary, Barbara Elder, 2018, p. 6.

[2] Best Start Resource Centre. (2012). Step by Step: Engaging Fathers in Programs for Families. Retrieved January 23, 2018, from https://www.beststart.org/resources/howto/pdf/BSRC_Engaging_Fathers.pdf



Understanding “The Problem” with Dads

By David Long

My life has been filled with the world of dads for just over 60 years. During the last 30, I have had the privilege of working on a wide variety of research projects and community-based initiatives with government and family service agencies (FSAs). These focused on understanding and addressing the support needs of dads. I have also been involved with informal support groups for dads, including Indigenous, young, older, divorced, immigrant, gay and homeless. And as the dad of four caring, gifted and (relatively) independent adult daughters, I continue learning to smile and celebrate their triumphs, listen to, and at times mourn, their losses and share the most important lesson of what it means to love and be loved. These experiences have invited me into the diverse and largely unpredictable world of dads.

The findings of my 2018 study of FSAs in Edmonton showed that supporting dads enables the relationships they have with their children to flourish. While it has long been the mandate of these well-established agencies to address the support needs of the parents in their communities, every respondent stated that their organization continues to struggle with understanding and addressing the lives and support needs of dads. As I noted in the Supporting Our Fathers report for this study, this struggle will continue until everyone involved is able to identify what is “the problem.”

Let me be clear; I do not view dads, or their support needs as “the problem” that must somehow be fixed. Seeing the problem in this way reflects a deficit-based perspective which assumes that men are inherently incapable of understanding who they are and what they need. In contrast, the problem that I see which needs to be fixed is the deep cultural blindness. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, for funders, policy developers, program providers and members of the public to acknowledge that dads have the capacity to see, understand and communicate their relational needs when they are given meaningful opportunities to do so. This blindness is pervasive, and it is evident

whenever someone responds with the word “mom” when asked who comes to mind when they hear the word “parent”

in the stereotypical and highly exclusionary ways of thinking about families, dads and their support needs that abound in popular culture and in most every social context in which there are dads

when funders, policy developers and human service providers have little difficulty supporting the programs and services that address the needs of immigrant, single, new, Indigenous, young, older, divorced, Christian, Muslim, lesbian or homeless mothers, but great difficulty gathering financial, organizational and community support for programs and services for dads

While there are many more examples of our cultural blindness than are discussed in Supporting Our Fathers, addressing the fundamental problem will require “seeing” the lives of dads in a new and much more hopeful light. This will be challenging as it will require a shared commitment to shifting our cultural attitudes and organizational practices in relation to dads. Our goal should continue to be for all stakeholders to work collaboratively on the development of more supportive programs and services for dads. However, we will continue to struggle in these efforts until we ask dads what they need and listen patiently and respectfully to them. I am confident that when we do, they will teach us the same profound lesson they learn from their children - their deepest need and greatest hope is to love and be loved. ■

During his 30 years as a sociology professor at The King's University, David Long has been committed to working with others to understand and raise awareness about the needs of boys and men, and to affect the kinds of changes that give hope to them and all their relations.





Helping Young Fathers Move Forward

By Lowell Clare

Navigating the challenges of parenting is difficult, regardless of age or gender. Young fathers often get left out of the parenting equation, especially if the relationship has ended with the mother. Catholic Family Service (CFS) aims to change that by creating a safe space for young fathers to feel less isolated, and provide opportunities to learn effective parenting tools from helping professionals and build connections with like-minded peers.

The most significant life transition that many men experience is the birth of their first child. If men can be supported so that they adapt well emotionally, psychologically and relationally, they are more likely to be involved throughout their child's life (Best Start Resource Centre, 2012). However, young fathers can struggle with reaching out for support as they may see expressing the frustration or loneliness that can come with parenting as a sign of weakness (Coles, 2018). By providing a safe learning environment that is encouraging and supportive, CFS hopes to create a sense of belonging for young fathers, impacting both their wellbeing and motivation. Attending a weekly group can reduce social isolation, give young dads a greater sense of purpose and confidence and increase their involvement in their child's life.

Fathers Moving Forward is an innovative program offered through the CFS Louise Dean Centre that seeks to increase the confidence of young fathers around parenting. This 12-week program serves young males who are either new fathers or soon-to-be fathers. A male social worker and an early childhood educator co-facilitate engaging sessions that focus on what it means to be a dad. In this warm, welcoming environment, young fathers are seen as experts in their own lives and their opinions are valued. Topics include strategies on meeting basic physical, emotional and social needs of children; understanding and expressing feelings; how to be a nurturing dad; how to lead without fear and violence; anger and substance abuse; discipline and behaviour management; and communication. Support and access to resources outside of the groups is also offered through one-on-one meetings with a social worker.

Evening sessions include a nutritious supper, and hands-on activities complement group learning. For example, the child development educator will set up

the gym with different environmental hazards, and will walk alongside the fathers as they determine how to create an environment safe for a child to play in. This is also a place where fathers can develop friendships with peers in similar situations, reducing social isolation and creating a network of peer support. A sense of belonging to groups and networks is associated with greater life satisfaction, self-esteem, self-efficacy, ability to cope, physical health and ease of transition from adolescence to adulthood (Dozois, 2017).

As young fathers learn effective ways of co-parenting, it benefits all members of the family. Learning to understand and express feelings can increase the ability of fathers to parent better and understand their role and how they fit into the family picture. It can give them a more confidence co-parenting voice. As their skill set increases, fathers can reduce the amount of stress on mothers by sharing the workload of caring for the child. When children are involved with their fathers, emotional benefits may include being more securely attached to their fathers, being more resilient and able to handle stress, experiencing less fear and guilt and having a higher sense of personal control and self-esteem (Best Start Resource Centre, 2012). Fathers Moving Forward aims to build formal and informal connections to support young fathers in strengthening wellbeing and sense of identity; both as men and as fathers. ■

Lowell Clare, BSW, RSW, is a social worker, counseling and social support, with the Louise Dean Centre, Catholic Family Services in Calgary.

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Fathers: Under-served and Under-represented

by Derek Dicks

Tyrone found out that he was going to be a father shortly after his nineteenth birthday. He was heavily involved in a world of drug trafficking to fund his addictions, and not in a place to be an active and engaged father. A few years later, after a period of healing and self-reflection, Tyrone was ready to parent but needed help bridging the gap caused by years apart from his daughter. He wasn't sure where to begin, so he turned to Terra Centre for Teen Parents for help.

Terra has been offering programming for dads under the age of 25 for nearly two decades in the Edmonton area. What initially started out as a half-time position has grown into 2.5 positions that

serve over 38 dads and their families on a weekly basis. Services for Young Dads is a home visitation program that supports young fathers, meeting them where they are at in their fathering journey. While some aspects of the program closely mirror those of traditional home visitation programs with a focus on parenting and child development, many of the fathers that Terra serves are vulnerable and face barriers that prevent them from focusing on their role as fathers. These barriers can include limited or no access to their children, struggles completing their education, finding a stable income source and dealing with social isolation. The staff in the Services for Young Dads program support their

participants in overcoming these barriers, all the while focusing on how successes—small and large—have a positive impact on their children and their role as a father.

The Services for Young Dads program has been very successful. Formal feedback collected in 2017 from fathers in the program showed that 94% felt that they had increased knowledge of how early father involvement affects their child's well-being and development, due to their involvement with Terra. Data also revealed that 94% felt more confident as a parent since becoming involved with Terra and 76% agreed that Terra helped them work towards their parenting goals.

Today Tyrone has gained access to his daughter and is embracing his role as a father. He has taken a leadership role with other young fathers and is open and willing to share his story. "Terra is an amazing program that really helped me in shaping myself into the great father that I am today and the even greater father I aspire to be," Tyrone says. "I found the parenting course helped me in learning how to communicate, take care of and connect with my child. Terra has assisted me in my struggle to figure out my parental rights and stood by my side during family court dates. I have gotten more support from Terra than I could've ever hoped for."

Every father's journey is unique, and, like Tyrone's, few are linear or easy. Often fathers are the forgotten variable in the parenting equation with research suggesting that they are frequently under-served and under-represented in work relating to families and children. Fortunately, like Terra, agencies in Alberta and abroad are working to change the narrative on engaging fathers by offering programming or simply having the conversation on how to integrate fathers into their agencies. In doing this, we can realize better outcomes for fathers, their children and the community. ■

For more information regarding the importance of engaging fathers, see these resources:

- Engaging Men and Boys to End Domestic Violence: <https://preventdomesticviolence.ca/our-work/#men-and-boys>
- Supporting Our Fathers Analysis of Family Service Agency Representative's Views of Policies, Programs and Resources for Fathers in Edmonton: <https://preventdomesticviolence.ca/our-work/#men-and-boys>

Derek Dicks is a family outreach worker who has been working with young dads at Terra since March 2016. The father of two young children himself, Derek uses that experience to influence his daily work.





Working with Dads in Home Visitation

by Shannon Mitchell

Research into working with dads in family support programs has established some best practices. In *Engaging Fathers: Tips and Ideas* available from Dad Central Canada (<http://www.dadcentral.ca>), you can see how these ideas and values fit with home visitation.

Dads, like moms, are motivated by their children; they want what's best for them. Dads will use their resources and strengths to benefit their children. They have often experienced the same types of trauma, grief and challenges as the moms we work with, but are rarely offered support. They are then blamed for being a poor father or, worse, a bad guy. They need supports like those of moms, ones that recognize and build on their strengths.

Parent-child interactions can be supported with positive reinforcement and information about child development. Increasing a father's understanding of his child's needs will ultimately create an improved parent-child relationship. Many dads often would rather "do" than talk. Developmental screenings can be used to find out how the dad supports his child's development, to point out areas in which the child excels and support areas that might need strengthening. Activities that seem to have dad appeal are those that are immediate, tangible and have some built-in physical play or motor play. Examples might be to hunt for bugs, roll in the grass or pull cushions off the couch and make a mountain to climb. Of course, you can add language, social emotional, problem-solving and parent-child interaction information into this kind of play.

Moms often act as gatekeepers, both for the father-child relationship and for the father's engagement with services. When mom is the primary participant in home visitation, that can be both a benefit and a

barrier. It took me a long time to learn to not only ask mom about her relationship, but also the child's relationship with dad. After hearing things were unhealthy between dad and mom, or that he wasn't interested, I would let the conversation drop. Now I attempt to help a mom separate her relationship with the child's dad and the child's relationship with him, and brainstorm ways to encourage dad and child to have a positive relationship. As we develop close working relationships with a mom, we may relate very strongly to her perspective of the child's father. Focusing on what is best for the child and understanding where both dad and mom are coming from might help home visitors avoid casting dad in a negative light.

Dads might approach their child, parenting and life differently than many moms. But there is strength in having different ideas at the table. Home visitors build on a family's strengths and support them in developing new problem-solving skills. Adding dad's strengths and ideas to the mix, especially if he can be supported to understand his child's developmental needs, creates a more resilient parenting relationship and a more resilient child. In the end, that is the heart of all the work that home visitors undertake in partnership with the families they support.

One final thought. When dad is there, talk to him. It sounds so simple, but I recall how hard this was when I was new to working with fathers. Many dads would be in the same space of the visit, but not participating in the visit. They would be playing a video game or getting something in the kitchen. I refer to them as orbiting dads. They are almost always checking out their home visitor. Ask them about their child or tell them some brain development tidbit. Or even ask them about a hobby or event mom shared. If they answer, you have started building a relationship. If they don't, well...you aren't any worse off. Don't assume dad isn't interested. Assume, as a parent, that he is. ■

Shannon Mitchell is the AHVNA training coordinator, supporting Home Visitation practice. She has worked in home visitation as a visitor and supervisor for fifteen years, including supervising a home visitation program specifically for young dads. She is a passionate "dadvocate" and has worked to integrate dads into her practice. To contact her: training@ahvna.org.

Support and Stress Reduction for Dads

By John Hoffman

How can we help men be the best dads they can be? How do we make parent/family programs more father-inclusive?

Dedicated Canadian service providers have grappled with these questions for over 20 years, and I've been involved in some of those discussions. My perspective is unique because I'm not involved in family programming myself. I'm a writer. I wrote my first fatherhood article for a pregnancy magazine called *Great Expectations* in 1988. Since then I've lost count of the articles, booklets, brochures and blogs I've written for and about fathers, not to mention what I've written about parenting in general. I'd like to share the two most important things I've learned about fathering: support and stress.

Having worked in the parent information business for 30 years, I believe that, while dads (and moms) need and want information, what they need most is support. Numerous studies (and personal observations) have convinced me of that. Here's one example.

The Supporting Fathers Program started as an intervention to help heterosexual couples navigate the relationship challenges of early parenthood. They found when dads and moms started understanding and supporting each other better, fathers became more involved in childrearing and housework. And both dads and moms used better parenting strategies, even though this program made no attempt to teach parenting skills.

This dovetails with my point about stress. Stress is normal and necessary. Everything we do that is worth doing, including raising children, involves stress. But too much stress can negatively affect our behaviour, mood and health. I'd venture that a key reason for the improved fathering seen in Supporting Fathers Program participants was reduced parental stress due to the improved support that parent partners gave each other. The work of psychiatrist-neuroscientist Stephen Porges confirms that social engagement (which includes mutual support) is the number one way of managing stress.

So, while the traditional approach to enhancing parenting is to give parents information and

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connections

Coming up

The next issue of Connections will focus on home visitation practice. If you would like to submit an article or resource for this topic, please contact the AHVNA office by June 15, 2019.

Hearing from you

Connections is published two times per year by the Alberta Home Visitation Network Association. We welcome comments, questions and feedback on this newsletter. Please direct any comments to Lavonne Roloff, AHVNA provincial director, by phone at 780.429.4784 or by email to info@ahvna.org.

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strategies, we would do well to put intentional effort into supporting fathers by helping them understand and manage the stress that affects their parenting and relationships.

The best model I have seen for helping people understand and manage stress is Dr. Stuart Shanker's Self-Reg. I'm not an unbiased observer here. I have been doing communications work for Dr. Shanker's organization, The MEHRIT Centre, for several years. But the reason I wanted to work for Stuart was that his Self-Reg framework answers so many questions and pulls together ideas I grappled with for years. His approach says that everything we do and feel is affected by the amount of energy and tension in our bodies and brains. And stress is the biggest factor that influences our levels of tension and energy. When we feel calm and have lots of energy, we're best able to do things well. But when we're highly tense and our energy is sapped because of excess stress, it's hard to be our best selves.

I wrote a tongue-in-cheek comment in Today's Parent, declaring, "Eureka! I have discovered the key to being a good parent! Always be in a good mood!" When I was in a good mood, I had good judgment, more patience and better problem-solving ability. And I had more fun with my kids.

The trouble was, I didn't know what to say to parents about how they could help themselves be in a good mood more often.

Taking the Self-Reg program is a great way to look after yourself. It enables an understanding of, and addresses, what causes your own stress. Upon assessing and mitigating these stress issues, participants find they are better able to help the kids they work with and care for. There's a lesson here for all fathers and those who work with them.

One of Stuart's pet sayings is "there's no such thing as a bad kid." In other words, when we unlock the stressors that are blocking kids' ability to think, behave, learn and feel well, we start to see a different kid, a potentially good kid who needs our support and help, not correction.

What if we started thinking: "There's no such thing as a bad dad (or mom)?" What might we be able to accomplish if we could help fathers understand, reduce and recover from the stressors that interfere with good fathering? The possibilities are exciting! Learn more at <https://self-reg.ca>. ■

John Hoffman is a stay-at-home father and the communications officer with the MEHRIT Centre in Ontario. He is a freelance writer who has written for Today's Parent, The Psychology Foundation of Canada and Dad Central Ontario.



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