

Jessica Ball, School of Child and Youth Care

Dads: Role models pass on know-how

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Times Colonist

June 17, 2007

PHOTO: Jessica Ball is the author of a new study on Aboriginal Fatherhood.

Aboriginal men frequently feel like outsiders in the lives of their own kids -- a reflection of the social isolation, poverty, poor health and lack of positive fathering in their own lives.

Few of the dads involved with a groundbreaking **University of Victoria** study on aboriginal fatherhood felt "together" enough to spend as much time with their kids as they wanted.

"I would argue that aboriginal fathers are the most socially excluded population in Canada," says **study author Jessica Ball, a UVic professor in the School of Child and Youth Care**. The Indigenous Fathers Project is the first look at aboriginal fathers in North America.

Her Indigenous Fathers Project collated interviews with 80 men of all ages and backgrounds, from sole parents to men who had never met their children, as a way into the lives of 250,000 aboriginal men in Canada aged 15 to 65.

Few of the men studied had affectionate and available fathers.

"When I had my first child, it was the first time I had ever played," said one father from Terrace.

Aboriginal men have higher levels of poverty, illness, injury and early death compared to non-aboriginals, and the lowest standard of housing.

Half of all aboriginal families move every five years; they have lower levels of education, finances and health -- all of which affect how connected aboriginal fathers can stay.

Ball hopes the research and how-to guides created by the project will improve aboriginal men's relationships with their kids, their sense of themselves and the way agencies respond to their needs.

The decades-old residential school experience continues to resonate. "Every single one of the 80 dads talked about it," says Ball.

Tsaskiy, a.k.a. Ron George, 62, undertook a nine-year journey to heal from marijuana addiction and the "secondary trauma" of a mother who passed on the guilt and shame absorbed in a residential school.

The Victoria-based former president of the United Native Nations has five daughters aged 10 to 40. He has a good relationship with all of them, but his way of fathering has changed with his healing journey -- one he says many aboriginal fathers must take. "Everybody agrees, it's not our fault. But we still have to do the work. It's a cruel irony," says George, the aboriginal adviser involved with the project.

Aboriginal men's sense of themselves is still affected by the loss of their traditional role living off the land, and by history books that taught they were "primitive and savage and lazy and drunk."

Fathers have to work hard at healing but also at learning children's needs and feelings, and how to play and care for them, but the key messages from the research are:

- You can do it.
- It's not easy.
- It takes time.
- Fatherhood is magic.

One of the dads describes waking up with his little son on weekends. "I roll over and I see his face smiling in the morning and saying 'hi dad' and it's magic."

Ball wanted to tap into the strengths, possibilities and resources aboriginal men can offer their kids and each other despite the fallout from decimation of their communities, relocation, residential schools, foster care, racism, cultural losses and the general exclusion of fathers.

"When I'm with my child, people look at me as if I must have kidnapped this child," more than one father said during the research.

Ball has sold 3,000 kits across Canada kits in the last three months, including how-to booklets, DVDs, and posters -- a sign of the interest out there. "The project is just so full of hope," she says.

Her study is part of a \$1-million project funded by the National Social Sciences Research Council Community-University Research Alliance.

To see the film, made possible in large part by Victoria-based Asterisk Productions Ltd., call 472-4128.