



## **Fatherhood: Indigenous Men's Journeys**

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### **Summary**

Using a community-university partnership approach, informed by Indigenous<sup>1</sup> research ethics, this study opened up Indigenous fathering as a new area of inquiry in Canada. Conducted as part of a national study of fathers' involvement, conversational interviews with 80 First Nations and Metis fathers illuminated the socio-historical conditions associated with colonialism that have shaped Indigenous fathers' self-reported challenges in 'learning to be a father' and 'becoming a man.' Qualitative analyses guided by grounded theory methodology suggested three patterns of response to becoming a father: an avoidance pattern termed fathers-in-waiting; learning fathering through play; and stepping up/settling down to fathering responsibilities. Fathers described a gradual process of accepting and learning fatherhood, often years after the birth of their first child. Widespread shifts in gender roles and constructions of masculinity were identified as reciprocally influential conditions that have enabled some Indigenous men to become more involved in care-giving roles with their children.

Findings from this study and further research can extend community practice beyond a prevailing focus on mothers, and extend fathering theory beyond a prevailing European-heritage perspective. Supporting Indigenous fathers' involvement requires sustained, macro-system, policy-driven efforts to reduce barriers to initiating and sustaining positive engagement with children. Steps include increasing information about and access to declaring paternity on birth records, engaging Indigenous fathers with adolescents (e.g., in schools) to promote awareness of how fathers' can be important in children's lives; increasing acknowledgement of fathers in children's programs and decision-making about children, and implementation of 'kith and kin' policies in child protection programs to keep children closer to home.

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<sup>1</sup> The terms Indigenous and Aboriginal are used almost synonymously in Canada to refer to the population of peoples who identify themselves as descendents of original habitants of the land now called Canada. Some prefer the term Indigenous because it connects to a global advocacy movement of Indigenous peoples who use this term, most notably the Maori in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The term 'Aboriginal' was coined in the 1800's by the colonial government in Canada as a catch-all label, and some people refrain from using this term because of its colonial derivation.

## **Introduction**

*"I grew up on the rez and life is different here. I grew up with a lot of social, economic, and spiritual chaos, and I suffered a lot of spiritual, emotional, and mental pain because of it. We all did. The growth of spirit, mind and body that is needed for recovery is not for the faint of heart. My healing process was very taxing. I either had to learn or die. It took a long hard time to mature into becoming a father, long after my kids were born. With 39 years of life behind me, and with the help of my wife, I feel like I'm finally becoming a man. At last I'm growing strong, spiritually, socially, emotionally, and as a father."* (Leroy Joe, father of five girls, Lil'wat Nation)

Indigenous fathers are arguably the most socially disenfranchised population in North America, with monumental systemic barriers to well-being and little social advocacy. Indigenous children and families have been under-represented in demographic, social, educational and health surveys, and little is known or understood about the experiences of Aboriginal fathers. This summary describes the first research investigation of Indigenous fathers in Canada. The study was intended to provide preliminary clarification for a larger program of research examining whether theories that dominate scholarship on fathers' involvement and that guide parenting programs resonate with the experiences of Indigenous fathers. The study was motivated by the question: What kinds of new theoretical understandings, policy reforms, and community initiatives may be needed to represent and support Indigenous fathers' experiences, needs and goals?

## **Indigenous research ethics**

The research was guided by emerging principles to for establishing ethical research practices involving Indigenous peoples, including: ensuring social relevance; establishing partnerships; strengthening Indigenous research capacity; and privileging Indigenous vetting of key messages derived from data interpretation. The study was conducted in B.C., where some First Nations and Aboriginal Head Start programs had already identified a need to understand Indigenous fathers' needs and goals and how to reach out to this population. As one program staff said: *"It's not so much that we have failed to reach Aboriginal dads. It's more that we have never tried."*

## **Partnerships**

Community-university partnership agreements to conduct the research were negotiated with one First Nation on reserve (Lil'wat Nation), and three community-based agencies serving First Nations and Metis children in the vicinity of Prince George. As the study progressed, one community partner in Prince George dropped out of the project due to difficulties implementing the project at the recruitment stage. After news of the study spread, the research team received many requests for participation, and the study expanded to include another Aboriginal Head Start program (Esketemc), a community program offered by the Terrace Child Development Centre (Park Centre Dads' Group), as well as 18 First Nations and Metis fathers without affiliations to the community partners who asked to contribute their stories to the project.

## **Research plan**

An Indigenous research team worked with Jessica Ball to design two short questionnaires, and a set of interview questions, recruit fathers to participate, collect, transcribe, and interpret data, and hold feedback sessions with community partners. A total of 80 fathers (72 First Nations; 8 Metis) participated. Information gathering included: (1) a demographic profile of Aboriginal fathers in Canada using census data; (2) an original Personal Characteristics Questionnaire and an original Father Involvement and Supports Questionnaire; and (3) a one-hour, audio-taped interview with each father about their experiences as fathers.

## **Findings**

The fathers' accounts emphasized the lasting negative impacts of residential schools and other colonial government interventions that have forced the dispersion and diminution of Indigenous families, clans, communities and cultures and promoted ongoing removals of Indigenous children from their families. For nearly all fathers in the study, the legacy of disrupted of intergenerational relationships meant that they had negative or no experiences of being fathered themselves. Most fathers' narratives described a long and winding road to accepting fatherhood, learning what it means to be a father, learning how to play, and stepping up gradually to the responsibilities of fatherhood. One quarter of the fathers described learning about caring for children from their own mothers, as well as from their female partners. Most fathers emphasized the joys of experiencing a child's love and watching their children learn and grow while feeling important in their child's life.

## **Conceptualization**

While their journey to learning fatherhood almost invariably took a hesitating and circuitous route, all but four of the Indigenous fathers who volunteered for the study currently had contact with at least some of their children. Most reported that they had sustained some degree of positive involvement over time, especially with children born after they had matured and recovered from substance abuse or other personal challenges. Thus, a key message from the study was: *It's about time!* Bronfenbrenner's construct of the 'chronosystem' is useful for framing Indigenous fatherhood within a socio-historical perspective, appreciating that it will take time for Indigenous families and communities to reconstruct cultural, social, and personal meanings of fatherhood and how fathers' involvement fits into reconstituted gender role relationships. And fathers need to be shown patience and support as they build up their confidence, courage and capacity to connect with their children and play a fathering role in their lives.

## **Recommendations**

Fathers pointed to a lack of supports, especially in rural and remote settlements, and especially for men who were raising their children alone. All fathers described incidents where they felt that programs, policies, and society as a whole are biased in favour of mothers. Fathers recommended reforms to legislation in the Indian Act governing registration as Status Indians, and changes to make the process for designating a child's paternity more accessible. In order to sustain father-child relationships, they urged more funding for legal representation, mediation and counseling in custody decision-making, as well as implementation of kinship care policies when children are taken into protective custody, so that children remain in the community.

## **Knowledge dissemination and mobilization**

The research team has engaged in dialogue about the study findings with each of the five community partners, and has given presentations to academic and professional conferences as well as several in-service workshops for practitioners across Canada serving Indigenous children and families. To date, four sectors have shown a particularly keen interest in this focus on Indigenous fathers: (1) Justice Canada, with their interests in preventing family violence; (2) school-based youth workers, with their concerns about teen parents; (3) maternal and child health nurses who see a link between fathers' involvement and maternal well-being; and (4) early childhood educators eager to involve fathers in providing and caring for their young children.

A presentation of the policy implications of the research findings was well received at the Second Tri-Annual Aboriginal Policy Research Conference in Ottawa in March, 2006. A paper entitled "*Policies and Practices Affecting Aboriginal Fathers' Involvement with their Children*", is forthcoming in *Aboriginal Policy Research in Canada, Vol. III* (Thompson Educational Press). An article entitled "*Indigenous fathers' involvement in reconstituting circles of care*" is forthcoming in a special issue of the *American Journal of Community Psychology* focusing on reconceptualizations of men and masculinity. An article on entitled "*Policy and Practices for Promoting Positive Transitions to Fatherhood Among Aboriginal Young Men*" is forthcoming in a special issue of *Horizons* (Policy Research Initiatives in Canada).

Fathers in the five communities that participated in the study and that subsequently helped to formulate the conclusions and implications placed priority on the creation of a documentary where fathers could "tell our own stories in our own way." They also suggested that the research findings be communicated through plain language guide books for fathers and for community programs, and they wished to see posters making Aboriginal fathers more visible.

- A 40 minute documentary DVD featuring six First Nations fathers of young children has been produced with a title chosen by participating fathers: "*Fatherhood: Indigenous Men's Journeys*." This DVD was made possible largely through the generosity of Victoria-based documentary makers of Asterisk Productions Inc.
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- Two guide booklets have been produced, entitled: "*Beginning the Journey of Fatherhood: A Guide for Aboriginal Fathers*" and "*Aboriginal Fathers: A Guide for Community Programs*."
- A poster has also been produced to help schools and community programs join in promoting positive images of Aboriginal fathers' involvement.

This project and others focused on fathers involvement will be the topic of an international conference on Fathers Involvement in Toronto in 2008, convened by the Fathers Involvement Research Alliance of Canada ([www.fira.uoguelph.ca](http://www.fira.uoguelph.ca)).

For more information on the work of the Indigenous fathers project and for links to publications and presentations, visit <http://www.ecdip.org/fathers/index.htm>.

To order the DVD, 2 Guide Booklets, or poster, contact Jessica Ball at [jball@uvic.ca](mailto:jball@uvic.ca)