



Glad You Asked

Fatherhood is challenging. Is it more so for Aboriginal men?

Every man experiences some challenges when he becomes a father.

Aboriginal men face many of the same challenges as all men becoming fathers. But as a group, there are some unique challenges facing Aboriginal men when they become fathers. This is because of the unique history of Aboriginal men. In Canada, Aboriginal peoples' various cultural ideas about manhood and various ways of supporting one's family were interrupted by the reservation system and by colonial laws. Then the residential school experience disrupted family life, and many Aboriginal people lost a chance to play, to have a father, or to live in a loving family. This means that many Aboriginal fathers have to work hard to observe and learn about fatherhood – how to know what their children feel or need, how to care for children, and how to play with their children. Some fathers may need and ask for understanding and guidance from other fathers, from mothers, community programs, books, and stories shared by Elders.

Everyone has to learn to be a parent.

Is learning to be a father any different from learning to be a mother?

Becoming a father is not the same journey as becoming a mother. One huge difference is that mothers have the time during pregnancy to begin to take on the identity of being a parent, and to begin to become involved with her child. For men, the birth of a child can be a jolt, and many men say they don't really identify as a father until some time after the birth of their child. Another huge difference is that, generally, girls and women receive more education, practice, social support, and encouragement for their motherhood journey. Boys and men often receive very little education, practice, social support, or encouragement for their fatherhood journey. This means that fathers may require more time, more guidance, more support, and more encouragement. We need to ask men becoming fathers what they need to prepare and to build their confidence, capacities, and sense of being supported as they learn to become fathers.

Are there more dead-beat dads who are Aboriginal?

In general, Canadian society tolerates and even promotes many images of dead-beat dads. Aboriginal dads seem to get even more negative media coverage and negative expectations. No doubt, as a group, many Aboriginal men have personal challenges that prevent them from accepting or adjusting to the role of fatherhood and from sustaining contact and support for their children. But this seems to be changing, as more Aboriginal men become role models for other men. Negative expectations are a kind of social obstacle that contributes to the struggle that some Aboriginal men have in taking the first step toward becoming involved with their children. One of the messages that fathers in the recent Indigenous Fathers Project wanted to send to other Aboriginal men who are struggling with fatherhood is: "*You can do it!*"

Are a lot of the teen fathers in Canada Aboriginal?

Aboriginal fathers stretch across the lifespan from teen fathers to fathers who are seniors and grandfathers. But as a group, Aboriginal people in Canada have a higher birth rate than non-Aboriginal peoples, and so the proportion of young Aboriginal people in Canada is growing more rapidly than the proportion of young non-Aboriginal people. Within this generation of Aboriginal youth, many First Nations have noted a growing trend towards having babies during adolescence.

One of the biggest concerns for teen fathers is that they typically do not have job skills or material resources such as housing or a steady income. Added to this, a large number of Aboriginal youth have not had an experience of being cared for by an involved father. And this is one of the most important ways that boys learn about fatherhood. But some Aboriginal teen fathers are showing that they want to do things differently, and they want to be involved with their baby or young child. Having positive expectations, listening to youth, and reaching out with

meaningful kinds of support to teen fathers will help them to commit to becoming a positively involved father.