Chapter 12
Indigenous Fathers in Canada

Multigenerational Challenges

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In Canada, about 70% of Indigenous\(^1\) mothers and fathers either spent most of their school years living in Indian Residential Schools far from their families, or were raised by parents who grew up in Indian Residential Schools. Research involving non-Indigenous fathers has shown that young fathers are less likely to be living with their children if their own fathers did not live with them during childhood (Furstenberg and Weiss 2001). Currently in Canada, approximately 45% of Indigenous children live with one parent, most often their mother (Statistics Canada 2006), and Indigenous children are significantly overrepresented in the child welfare system where they are placed temporarily or permanently in foster homes or adoptive homes (Trocme et al. 2006). Adolescent fertility is up to eight times higher among Indigenous youth compared to non-Indigenous youth in Canada, and this too is a multigenerational pattern (Guimond and Robataille 2008). Indigenous families are three times more likely than non-Indigenous Canadians to be living in poverty. The United States Bureau of Census (2003) reports that children in father-absent homes are five times more likely to be poor and these children are likely to start their own families in poverty.

Father absence or negative father involvement may be the result of a variety of circumstances, such as political upheaval, social discrimination, government interventions, family conflict, or attitudes and behaviors learned by children about fathers that are enacted when they become parents. Globally, tremendous numbers of boys are growing up without a father’s care and provision. In Canada, as elsewhere,

\(^1\) 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 inhabitants 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 colonial government in Canada coined the term “Aboriginal” in the 1800s as a catch-all label, and some people refrain from using this term because of its colonial derivation.

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awareness of the multigenerational patterning of fathers’ approaches to parenthood has grown. In the case of Indigenous children in Canada, for nearly a century, the federal government sponsored a nationwide program of forced separations of children from their parents and extended family clans, requiring children as young as 4 years of age to live in Indian Residential Schools far from their home communities (Wesley-Esquimaux and Smolewski 2004). As a result of this and other colonial government interventions, Indigenous Peoples—Indigenous men in particular—are arguably the most socially disenfranchised population in Canada. There are monumental systemic barriers to well-being and little social advocacy. The disruption to intergenerational transmission of fatherhood that colonial interventions caused in Indigenous children’s socialization experiences is a legacy that persists in Indigenous family life today.

Traditionally, fathers in Indigenous societies in Canada play crucial roles in families which were the primary unit of economic production (Volo and Volo 2007). Elder men typically led extended families, although women were leaders of Indigenous households and had important decision-making responsibilities as well. Childrearing was shared by men and women, with men being involved in teaching children skills for survival, including hunting, certain crafts, warfare, diplomacy with other families, and spiritual practices. In many societies, there was a distribution of responsibilities towards children among fathers, brothers, uncles, and grandfathers, who each played distinctive roles. Not only were the knowledge and skills passed down by older men to young children lost when the colonial government forced parents to give up their children, but children’s opportunities to be directly exposed throughout their childhood to the meanings and functions of adult men in family life were also lost (Anderson and Ball 2011). Indigenous educator Sally Gaikezheyongai explains that the mass removal of children from Indigenous communities was akin to ripping the heart and center out of Indigenous worlds (cited in Wemigwans 2002). Once the heart was taken, everything else began to shatter and fall away, including roles for men, who had no children to teach, protect, and provide for. This created conditions that Indigenous men struggle with today.

Indigenous men’s journeys to learn how to engage as fathers are part of the healing movement for Indigenous Peoples as a whole. First Nations Peoples, who comprise one of the Indigenous populations in Canada, often say that: “It took seven generations for the government to bring our families, communities, cultures and languages to the brink of extinction, and it will take seven generations for us to heal and re-build

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2 The roles of Canadian legislation and policy in contributing to social exclusion of Aboriginal individuals and groups have been extensively documented (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996; Salee 2006). Chief among colonial government intrusions into Indigenous community and family life was the Indian Residential School movement that required Indian and Métis parents to place their children in a government-sponsored school from an early age and throughout their formative years. Most children were transported to schools hundreds of kilometers from their families and many never returned. They were forced to give up their birth names and their mother tongue. A large number were subjected to physical and sexual abuse. As many as one-quarter of all children housed in these schools died as a result of illness, abuse, or poor nutrition (Fournier and Crey 1997; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996).
ourselves to the strength that we once had.” Many First Nations adults today declare that “we are the turn-around generation.” But what does it take to “turn around” a multigenerational experience that leaves a vacuum in place of positive memories of what it means to be raised by a caring father figure? Many Indigenous men who may be fathers in Canada today are either survivors of an Indian Residential School or “secondary survivors” of parents who were raised in a Residential School and therefore had little knowledge of how to engage in a caring and responsible way with a child. Compounding the struggle to fill a gap in embodied memory of Indigenous fatherhood is the reality that the conditions of life have dramatically changed in the intervening centuries, such that a full return to traditional male roles is neither possible nor relevant to raising children in today’s world. There is little theory or research-based insights into the kind of psychological and cultural reconstruction effort required to create a positive image of fathering almost out of thin air, to learn positive fathering behaviors and involvement, and to overcome the negative legacy of childhood experiences of abusive or neglectful men and women who were charged with raising Indigenous children in the context of Indian Residential Schools or foster care.

In view of increasing evidence of the important contributions that fathers can make to children’s survival, health, and development (Lamb 2004), what can we learn from exploring Indigenous men’s experiences of becoming positively involved fathers? To date, there has been only one Canadian research study about Indigenous fathers’ experiences. Conclusions would be premature. However, early findings suggest that while a history of multigenerational trauma has resulted in challenges for Indigenous fathers that are more severe than those faces by fathers from other ethnic groups, the nature of many of these challenges are familiar across groups. This chapter highlights challenges and aspirations of Indigenous fathers, while also identifying commonalities between Indigenous fathers and other populations of fathers studied in Canada and described in the fatherhood literature. Put into this broader perspective, recommendations for actions gleaned from Indigenous fathers’ reports may lend support to other populations of fathers as well, especially those for whom there has been disruption in opportunities to transmit meaningful father roles across generations and a vacuum of support at family, community, program, and policy levels.

The Canadian Context: Diversity and Social Inclusion

Over the past decade, there has been more scholarship on father involvement in Canada. Much of this scholarship has been produced by investigators and family-serving programs across the country and in many different disciplines that are loosely joined through a virtual coalition called the Fathers’ Involvement Research Alliance (http://www.fira.org). In addition to exploratory studies and descriptive surveys, policy studies are also beginning to focus on how conditions such as family law and provisions for parental leave affect fathers’ involvement from before the birth of their
child and over time (Lero et al. 2006). Father-focused practice in community-based programs is also gaining some momentum. Some provincial governments have recently allocated funding for training and employment of part-time father outreach and support workers associated, for example, with community-based family resources centers, child development centers, and community health promotion programs. Thus, while not yet warranting the label of a “movement,” there is a growing network of Canadian investigators, policy makers, and practitioners who are beginning to raise the visibility of fathers as important contributors to the quality of children’s lives and to family life as a whole. Together, they are calling for more investment in research and services to promote positive father involvement. Two key themes that have emerged as primary foci for research and practice on father involvement in Canada are diversity and social inclusion.

Diversity

The Canadian research agenda focused on fathers acknowledges and takes as a primary value the need to understand father involvement as diverse, embedded in multifaceted social contexts, and multiply determined. Canada is a nation of immigrants, as well as the original home of over 600 different First Nations, several distinct Inuit populations, and a comparatively large population of Métis people with a variety of Indigenous ancestry. The 2006 census showed that 19.5% of residents living in Canada today were born in another country, and that approximately 1.1 million immigrants came to Canada between 2001 and 2006 (the top three countries of origin were China, Indian, and the Philippines). Such a culturally diverse population results in a diversity of approaches to family life and to fatherhood: there is no single image, unifying role model, or standard that characterizes “the Canadian father.” In addition, the Canadian population is spread across the largest national land mass in the world. Fathers span a wide area: some live in very remote settlements where helping children to learn skills for living on the land or sea is a primary role for fathers, while others live in cosmopolitan centers, where facilitating and regulating children’s engagement with the risks and opportunities of urban life are important roles for parents. The limited ways in which father involvement has been measured, promoted, and represented in media imagery does not accurately reflect the heterogeneity among men in their needs, goals, readiness, or satisfaction with their involvement with children as fathers.

Father involvement investigators in Canada are stressing the need to characterize, conceptualize, and respond in more differentiated and culturally responsive ways to diverse fathers’ behaviors and experiences as these are embedded within different cultural, socioeconomic, and geographic circumstances. Rather than searching for a universal fatherhood experience or for the “typical” Canadian father, scholars and practitioners are becoming oriented towards understanding the diversity of fathers’ experiences, based on their ethnicity, socioeconomic status, rural, remote, or urban locale, whether they are parenting a healthy or typically developing child or a child
with a chronic health condition or atypical development, and other key sources of variability. While fathers share many common experiences in the process of becoming fathers, fathers may have specific challenges, goals, and expectations associated, for example, with their particular culture, religion, socioeconomic circumstances, age, immigration or refugee status, sexual orientation, or relationship with their child’s mother—to name a few sources of variation.

**Social Inclusion**

A related goal of Canadian research on father involvement is to go beyond the dominant portrayals of fathers in “intact,” nuclear, heterosexual families, and to expand the focus of research and theory and heighten the visibility of groups of fathers who have tended to be excluded from research, policy decision-making, practitioner education, and program design considerations. Among these populations—with overlaps among all of them—are Indigenous fathers, gay and transgendered fathers, refugee fathers, adolescent fathers, incarcerated fathers, and fathers of children with disabilities or chronic disease. The concept of social inclusion became a focus for investigators and social policy and program developers in the mid-1990s as a way of encapsulating Canadian values such as multiculturalism, protection of minority rights, equity, bilingualism, and religious freedom (Richmond and Saloojee 2005). Advocates and scholars are currently struggling to articulate theory, policy tools, and program models that encompass all fathers, especially historically, culturally, legally, and/or economically disadvantaged fathers. Associated with this goal are efforts to increase positive representations of father involvement in the media, compensating for the prevailing deficit model that presents fathers as incompetent, indifferent, “dead-beat,” or destructive. This social reform agenda includes efforts to engage fathers themselves and to strengthen their sense of empowerment and their resources to how to support fathers in making themselves and their contributions more visible in the Canadian social landscape.

**A National Study of Diverse Populations of Fathers**

In 2003, the first nationally networked study of father involvement in Canada was undertaken by a team of investigators and community-based agencies. The study, led by Daly et al. (2009), investigated seven populations of fathers who had previously been underrepresented in theory, research, policy decisions, media, and community programs. Investigators teamed up with community-based organizations to conduct studies focused on immigrant and refugee fathers, new fathers, young fathers, separated and divorced fathers, fathers of children with special needs, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual fathers, and Indigenous fathers. All the seven population studies that comprised this first national study of father involvement in Canada all involved fathers in designing, carrying out, and reporting the research. These
“community-based collaborators” worked with university-based teams to choose the guiding questions for the research, design data collection procedures, and plan analysis and dissemination. Questions asked in all the component studies included how best to use policy tools and legislation to reduce barriers to positive fathers involvement, and how to strengthen the capacity of community-based programs to reach out effectively to support men to become positively involved as fathers and to sustain connections with their children over time and changing circumstances.

The First Study of Indigenous Fatherhood in Canada

The first study of Indigenous fathers was conducted in the province of British Columbia, home to about one-third of the Indigenous Peoples of Canada. First Nations and Aboriginal Head Start programs in British Columbia had already identified a need to understand Indigenous fathers’ needs and goals and to improve their outreach and service 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.* An Indigenous team based mainly in communities that partnered in doing the study recruited 80 Indigenous father participants who all had at least one child under 7 years old. The fathers responded to two short questionnaires about their family composition and their experiences and needs in regards to programs, and they completed an interview consisting of open-ended questions and some opportunities to rate their experiences on a 7-point scale. The procedure took about 2 hours and was conducted by an Indigenous member of the research team.

Most fathers had large and complex families. As a group, they ranged from having 1 to 11 children, including children from many different relationships and variously related to them biologically, socially, and in terms of the father’s direct involvement as a caregiver. Some fathers were living with their children; some were not coresident with their children but had formal or informal custody for some periods of time, while some had only a little contact with their children. Four fathers had no current contact with their children as a condition of parole. Six of the fathers were lone fathers: their children’s mothers were missing, deceased, or had given them full custody. Many fathers were living with one or more adults, including a partner who, in various cases, was the mother of all, some, or none of the children living in the home, as well as relatives, most often their own mother, aunt, or sister. About one-fifth of the fathers in the current study reported that their name was not recorded on their children’s birth records. A few fathers did not know if their name was on their child’s birth certificate, health records, or school records. All fathers volunteered for the study because they wanted to share their experiences of being a father, and all expressed a desire to be positively involved with their children, regardless of the extent or nature of their current involvement.

Because this was the first study of Indigenous fatherhood in Canada, the goal was to yield a perspective based on fathers’ self-reports, and painted only in broad strokes. Nevertheless, there was remarkable agreement among many of the fathers about the
impacts of colonial history on their lack of opportunities to learn fatherhood, their challenges with personal wellness, poverty, and interpersonal relationships, and their strong desire to reconnect with their cultures of origin and to build relationships with their children. Their accounts highlighted historically conditioned experiences and needs that are unique to this population, as well as trends, barriers to appropriate supports, and goals that have been found in studies of non-Indigenous fathers.

Fathers’ accounts of their journeys spoke cogently about their challenges in “facing up to fatherhood,” “learning to be a father,” and “becoming a man.” Nearly all fathers explained their difficulties in terms of the lasting negative impacts of government-sponsored Indian Residential Schools and other colonial government interventions that dispersed and diminished Indigenous families, clans, communities and cultures, and promoted the continued removal of Indigenous children from their families. Virtually all the fathers in the study had either attended one or more of these Indian Residential Schools or had been raised by one or both parents who had survived the schools. Most fathers recounted the inability of their own father to love, care for, and protect them, or missing out on having a father altogether, which left them with little personal experience in positive fathering to draw upon when they became fathers themselves. The vast majority reported problems with substance abuse, psychological distress, and difficulties sustaining relationships with partners and relatives, preventing them from being as involved with their children as they would like. Four fathers described feeling so “low” about themselves that they felt they have nothing positive to offer their children. Three fathers said they did not think they were “worthy” of a relationship with their child.

Fathers who were successfully involved with their children traced a personal journey of healing and coming to terms with their negative experiences in Residential School or as secondary survivors of Residential School effects. They saw healing as a first step on their journey to becoming involved fathers. Most fathers’ narratives described a long and winding road to accepting fatherhood, learning what it means to be a father, learning how to communicate, how to play, and stepping up gradually to the responsibilities of fatherhood, often years after the birth of their first child. Here are some comments from participants in the study.

When I came out of Residential School I was out to prove something. I thought the world was against me. It turns out that I was doing this to myself. I was creating problems. It later affected my kids. It took me years to learn to forgive myself and the world, to take the focus off of myself, and focus on my kids and what they needed.

Many fathers described a vacuum of support from formal institutions, such as primary health clinics and schools, dominated by mother-centrism.

I went to my daughter’s daycare program on the day for vaccinations. I just did not feel comfortable there, walking in and being among all those women. No one even said hello to me, but the women all seemed to know everyone else there. When they called for my daughter’s mother to sign the form for her shot, I just did not feel I belonged there. No one thought that her dad might have been the one who brought her—who’s raising her.

Although programs and professionals were perceived as being set up for mothers, one-quarter of the fathers described learning about caring for children from their
own mothers, from their female partners, and from other women in their community. Many emphasized the need to show fathers 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. Fathers who were involved with their children often credited their partner’s receptivity, patience, and guidance in helping them to learn how to care for children.

In our community it has been the women. For me it was my mom, who raised us, my auntie, who helped my mom, and my wife. With their help, I feel I am finally becoming a man, finally growing strong spiritually, socially, emotionally, and as a father.

Promisingly, the Aboriginal women’s movement is focusing some attention on men’s roles, helping to create an environment that is conducive to social change among Aboriginal men.

Shifting notions of masculinity and gender roles in some Indigenous families and communities were also identified by some fathers as a factor that had enabled them to assume caregiving roles with their children.

I was taking my child to a clinic and my wife told me to look to see if there were other fathers there. I walked there and as I walked there, went to the program and walked back, I saw five other fathers with their children and two of them were First Nations.

Most fathers emphasized the reinforcing effects of experiencing a child’s love and watching a child learn and grow while feeling important in that child’s life.

It makes me feel great... It makes me feel happy... It is enlightening to see her smile and to know that she is a part of me, and I am a part of her—that we are important to who each other is.

While their journey to learning fatherhood almost invariably took a hesitant 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.

I changed my life, all for him. Instead of being young and partying all the time, I settled down and decided to raise him. I get a good outcome from him, and that makes me the happiest.

Many fathers emphasized that it will take time for Indigenous families and communities to reconstruct cultural, social, and personal meanings of fatherhood. While some fathers expressed hope for rebuilding Indigenous men’s roles as caregivers and providers for the younger generation, others were pessimistic. They pointed to the high rate of substance abuse, suicide, incarceration, and poverty among Aboriginal young men. Through stories from their own lives and those of other men in their communities, they described how being raised without sustained, positive contact with a father compounds the sociohistorical, economic, and emotional challenges for the next generation of young men who will face the birth of a child.
Knowledge Dissemination and Mobilization

The fathers who participated in the study believed that a documentary film would be the most effective way to “tell our own stories in our own way.” To communicate the research findings, they also suggested that the team develop plain language guidebooks for fathers and for community programs and they asked for posters to help make positive involvement by Indigenous fathers more visible. As a result, the research team produced a number of practical resources including a documentary DVD, a guidebook for Indigenous men, a guidebook for community programs, a poster showing caring Indigenous fathers, several fact sheets, workshop tips, short reports, and literature reviews. The research team, including some fathers who participated in the research or on the research team, has offered countless workshops and presentations to community-based agencies, provincial and federal policy groups and government agencies serving young children and families, and to academic audiences.

As well, the study has generated interest and collaborations with academic and practice groups in other countries where Indigenous peoples’ recovery from colonial incursions has become, to some extent, a priority, including the United States, Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa. In Canada and elsewhere, four sectors in particular have shown a keen interest in this focus on Indigenous fathers: criminal justice, reflecting interest in the research implications for preventing family violence; school-based youth workers, reflecting their concerns about teen parents; maternal and child health nurses who see a link between fathers’ involvement and maternal well-being; and early childhood educators eager to involve fathers in providing and caring for their young children.

Indigenous Fathers’ Experiences in Perspective

The inaugural study of Indigenous fathers’ experiences has effectively opened discussion in policy circles, community programs, and practitioner training programs about the multigenerational impacts of colonial interventions that disrupted Indigenous families and resulted in men having few, if any, positive memories and role models of fatherhood to draw upon when they become fathers. No doubt, the Indian Residential Schools debacle created extreme challenges for Indigenous fathers. Unique features of Indigenous fathers’ experiences were the degree of role loss and struggle they described, the length of time and often halting course of their journeys to becoming involved fathers, and the complexity of their family life in terms of the overall numbers and variety of relatedness among children and adults with whom fathers were involved.

3 For more information on the work of the Indigenous fathers’ project and for links to publications, presentations, and resources, visit http://www.ecdip.org/fathers.
At the same time, many of the challenges facing Indigenous fathers have also been found in studies of other populations of fathers, including some of the fathers who participated in parallel components of the national study of fatherhood in Canada (Daly et al. 2009; Estes and Tachble 2009). Indigenous fathers’ accounts resonated with accounts given by Russian immigrant and Sudanese refugee fathers who participated in another research component of the national study (Estes and Tachble 2009). These newcomer fathers identified multiple stressors, especially poverty, underemployment, lack of social support for parenting, social isolation, and racism. They cited the loss of an extended family support system as well as a mismatch between fathering roles they had learned as children and expectations for fathering roles in their current cultural milieu in Canada.

The lack of readily available models of positive father involvement that Indigenous fathers described was also a theme in the accounts given by immigrant and refugee fathers as well as by gay and transgendered fathers who participated in the national study. Many of these fathers reported that they did not begin their journey as a father with a coherent image or unified model of what fatherhood means or how to act as a father. Instead of drawing upon the memories and images of fatherhood from their childhood, they described piecing together how to be a father by observing other fathers in playgrounds, parenting magazines, television shows, and other sources. In this manner, they constructed an image and set of behaviors that worked for them and their family. This individualized, fresh approach was found in an earlier qualitative study by Daly (1993), in which fathers saw their own fathers as setting an example that was not desirable or not relevant to contemporary life. They described how they tended to base their approach on media representations, their own abilities, and visions of family life cocreated with their partners. There has been abundant theorizing in the father involvement literature about “generativity,” whereby fathers are motivated to care for the youngest generation and to ensure the reproduction of father-care in future time (Hawkins and Dollahite 1997; McAdams and de St. Aubin 1998). Yet, fathers today are not in the same contexts, do not embody the same cultural predilections, and cannot automatically apply the lessons they may have learned about fatherhood from their forebears. This raises the question of whether we are overinvested in the almost romantic notion of multigenerational transmission of (positive) father-care.

Indigenous fathers described how they would try out and modify ways of providing care for their child, relying to some extent on guidance and feedback from their partners, mothers, or aunts, as well as from what seemed to work with their child. They also described drawing upon direct teachings from their female partners, their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, as well as positive memories of being cared for by their mothers. The phenomenon of fathers drawing upon memories of being mothered, and learning from women about how to be a father has been reported in other studies (e.g., Pleck and Masciadrelli 2004), although how female family members effectively role model and teach fathers how to be positively involved in direct care is not well understood.
Discussion

Despite considerable challenges, the study found that most of the Indigenous men who volunteered for the study had successfully assumed positive caregiving roles with their children, including some who were lone parents to children whose mothers were absent. Fathers who were positively involved with their children described the rewards of fathering, but many also identified many challenges that must be overcome in order to connect with and care for their children. Personal challenges often include not having childhood experiences of a positively involved father, ongoing issues with mental health and addictions, relationship difficulties, and lack of knowledge about what to do with a child, including daily care routines, playing, expressing affection, and positive discipline. Social challenges often include negative expectations on the parts of some family members and the broader social community, lack of social support and culturally safe, “father-friendly” parent education programs, lack of information about children’s needs and about fathers’ rights, and policy gaps. Nearly all the fathers offered ideas about how to address barriers, discussed subsequently.

Time to Learn Fatherhood

The study highlighted the time and ongoing support that Indigenous men need in order to begin to identify with being a father, to “learn fatherhood,” and to assume the responsibilities that fatherhood entails. Fathers themselves must take the first step of recognizing and dealing with personal challenges, especially substance abuse, anger management, communication difficulties, and ineffective relationship skills. Beginning a journey of healing from childhood trauma and abuse, and working through personal wellness challenges takes time, and a father may take “two steps forward and one step back” rather than a linear path towards becoming a stable, committed, and effective father.

Negative Media

Media in Canada and in many other countries are replete with images of Indigenous and other marginalized men as subsisting on the edges of society, lacking personal health and relevant skills, and chronically in trouble at school, in the community, and with the law. These images promulgate negative social expectations for boys as they begin to imagine possibilities for themselves in the future as fathers and for men as they begin their journey to learn fatherhood. Many fathers who volunteered for the current study explained that they participated because they wanted to show other Indigenous fathers that they are not predestined to be dead-beat dads but rather that “there’s hope—if I can do it, you can do it”!
Mother-Centric Programs

Around the world, fathers receive little programmatic support for gaining the skills that many wish they had in order to be positively and effectively involved with their infants and children as they grow and develop. There is an almost exclusive focus on maternal experiences, needs, and well-being during the prenatal, antenatal, and postnatal periods, and an emphasis on mothers’ contributions to infant and child development through maternal child health programs and other programs focused on mothers. Mother-centrism in community programs continuously communicates to men that their roles are peripheral or even irrelevant (Ball and Moselle 2007; Strega et al. 2008). In Canada, teachers and family service practitioners also tend to assume that what men need to learn are the attitudes, skills, and forms of responsiveness thought to typify the good mother. This assumption constantly frames men’s readiness for parenting—and masculinity itself—as deficient with respect to contributing significantly to children’s well-being. Our gendered legacy of having women playing a primary caregiving role has resulted in a tradition of gate keeping activities where mothers are seen to manage and mediate relationships and activities between fathers and their children (Allen and Hawkins 1999).

While not yet having much influence on policy, critical resistance to mother-centrism in discourses, policies, and practices about parenting and father involvement is beginning to dominate scholarly work underway in Canada on fatherhood. For example, Doucet (2006) has addressed maternal gate keeping and elucidated the tensions in father involvement advocacy created by the interplay between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities. Many practitioners recognize the deficiencies of the motherhood-first paradigm and the need for its transformation (Rohner and Veneziano 2001).

Another issue that is frequently constructed as a central “problem” at family service conferences and in community-based programs is the reluctance of fathers to seek help and to participate in “father-friendly” or father-focused programs when they are offered. While some programs have emphasized the development of resources targeting fathers, investigators and program developers have made little progress in understanding or breaking through the “problem” that men tend to have low rates of help-seeking behavior (Addis and Mahalik 2003). Most fathering programs are modeled after mothering programs, and therefore it is not surprising that men tend not to participate. Yet, men’s purported “failure” to ask for help compounds the “failure” of men to take more responsibility for child care, magnifying the deficit model that dominates discourses about father involvement and how to elicit more involvement from men (Hawkins and Dollahite 1997; Kaufman 1993).

For Indigenous men, the likelihood that they would encounter a parenting education, family support, or child welfare worker that is Indigenous or is male is almost nil in Canada. The most recent survey of family support and child welfare workers, for example, reveals that workers are 94% white, 80% female, and 2% Indigenous (MacLaurin et al. 2003). Finding social service workers and other skilled practitioners, particularly men with fathering experience, to reach out to fathers and to lead father support programs remains a challenge and, again, funding has not been
readily available to offer training in father support. A recent survey (Hodgins and Ball 2009) of all undergraduate courses offered in public postsecondary universities and colleges in social sciences, education, and human services in Canada found not one course that focused specifically on fatherhood, and only one course that focused specifically on fathers and mothers.

**Mobility, Transience, and Incarceration**

The Indigenous population in Canada is characterized by much greater mobility than the non-Indigenous population (Statistics Canada 2006). For example, various members of a family may move on and off reserve lands in order to obtain services that are more readily available off reserves or to find housing that is more readily available (though often crowded and low quality) on reserves. In some cases, Indigenous youth and adults are transient due to family discord and/or homelessness. Mobility may also be due to the need to seek education, employment, or services, including Residential School recovery programs and substance abuse treatment programs. Geographic distances put a strain on father-child relationships, especially when combined with lack of funds for phones, computers, or travel that could help to maintain contact between fathers and children.

A population facing monumental challenges to sustaining connections with their children is incarcerated fathers. Although the Indigenous population represents 3.3% of the Canadian population, they account for 18% of the federally incarcerated population (Government of Canada 2008). Paternal incarceration can have significant collateral consequences on the family and is a known risk factor for children’s negative social adjustment (Farrington 2004). Links with the family can be a protective factor against men reoffending (Withers 2003), which in turn reduces adversity for children. A dearth of theory, research, or programs focused on incarcerated fathers hinders intervention, policy and program development. Withers has called attention to this area for further investigation, given the high stakes in terms of outcomes for all family members, and the increasing incidence of federally incarcerated men not only in Canada but around the world.

**Lack of Paternity Identification on Child Records**

Analyses of Indian Registry data collected by the Canadian government show that Indigenous children have a much lower rate of paternity designation on their birth certificates (nearly one in five lack paternity designation) and other records compared to non-Aboriginal children (Clatworthy 2004; Mann 2005). This may sometimes be a choice on the part of mothers, perhaps in order to avoid involvement from the father. However, in Canada it is generally acknowledged that paternity registration is not readily accessible to Indigenous men. For example, some fathers in the study
stated that their partner was relocated to a larger town with medical facilities for their child’s birth and they were not present for the birth, and they did not know how to go about having their paternity recorded at a later date. Clatworthy found higher rates of unstated paternity in communities that do not have community-based maternity facilities, and where maternity facilities are far from communities and fathers may not be present to sign birth documentation. Also, some Indigenous men may not be literate and some may not grasp all the implications of paternity registration, such as their rights to visitation should a child be apprehended by child welfare authorities or custody if parents separate. Alternatively, some men may aim to avoid child support payments by not registering their paternity.

Strega et al. (in press) have found that many agencies in Canada privilege the identity of mothers over fathers on all kinds of child records. The omission of paternal identity and contact information can contribute to the fact that fathers remain a largely untapped resource for children’s survival, health, development, and education. Paternity registration can increase the likelihood of sustaining involvement with a child over changing circumstances. Some research has shown that having a father’s name on a child’s birth record is correlated with lower infant mortality and morbidity (Gaudino et al. 1999; Mincy et al. 2005), greater likelihood that fathers will provide financial support and be involved with their child even after the parents separate (Argy and Peters 2001; Bergman and Hobson 2002).

**Policies that Overlook or Exclude Fathers**

A nation’s social values, norms, assumptions, laws, and institutional practices are embodied in policies within community programs and provincial government agencies and federal provisions for families. In 2006, a group of investigators associated with the Fathers Involvement Research Alliance in Canada undertook an inventory of policies that may shape Canadians fathers’ rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for involvement with their children (Lero et al. 2006). These authors concluded that fathers are all but invisible in government demographic data collection, policies, and programs in Canada, which are often oriented towards understanding and promoting the well-being of mothers and children. They also noted that father involvement policies and programs are informed by normative assumptions and cultural stereotypes about parenting, family life, sexuality, and children’s needs that can hinder certain groups/populations of fathers and parents from receiving the support they need to be positively involved in the lives of children (Lero et al. 2006). Policy-focused research on work and family has neglected the relationship between work and care by men (Daly et al. 2008). Of particular relevance for a population such as Indigenous fathers with high rates of poverty, the notion that providing for and financially supporting one’s family determines whether one is a “good father” continues to be pervasive in government policy provisions for families and among service providers (Hauari and Hollingworth 2009). Many Indigenous fathers work part-time, seasonally, or are unemployed, and do not have access to parental leave, unemployment, or family health care benefits.
Gender inequity is well-documented in institutional practices, if not official policies, of government service agencies that intervene and mediate in situations involving child protection, foster placement, and adoption (Mann 2005; Walmsley et al. 2006). This inequity particularly affects Indigenous fathers’ contact with their children because Indigenous children are up to seven times more likely to be taken into the care of the government compared to non-Indigenous children. Often, only the child’s mother’s name is recorded on child welfare files, with little or no effort made to identify or meet with fathers, to reunite children with their fathers, or to provide for sustained contact between fathers and children taken into care (Strega et al. 2008). Strega and her colleagues have found that contact of any sort between child welfare workers and fathers is rare; in more than half of the child welfare cases they studied, fathers were seen as irrelevant. Workers rarely pursued the option of declaring a fathers’ home a suitable placement for children taken into protective custody, sometimes from a lone mother-headed household. Child protection assessment and intervention focuses on the availability of the mother and her parenting skills, while fathers have been virtually ignored (Sullivan et al. 2000).

Five Key Action Strategies

Clearly, it would be premature to design programs or base policy conclusions on a single study of Indigenous fathers’ experiences. However, the foregoing discussion, putting these fathers’ experiences into perspective with findings about other populations of fathers suggests that there are at least five general strategies that could improve the social arena within which fathers explore and enact their roles with their children (see Fig. 12.1). For Indigenous fathers, supportive actions at the community, provincial, and national level would be timely, following on the heels of an apology issued by the Canadian Government to Indigenous Peoples for the multigenerational harms resulting from a century of enforced Residential Schooling of Indigenous children (Office of the Prime Minister Canada 2008). And, given that many of the challenges facing Indigenous and non-Indigenous fathers are similar in nature, though often more extreme for Indigenous fathers, the five areas for strategic action discussed in this section could be key elements of a generalized approach to support positive father involvement in Canada and elsewhere.

Patience

The multigenerational perspective that Indigenous fathers in the study brought to their understandings of fathering casts the need for policy reforms and systemic program solutions within a postcolonial, social justice agenda that requires a long-term commitment. Many Indigenous fathers have difficulty sustaining connections with their children across changes in their own mental health, recovery from addictions,
Fig. 12.1 Five key strategies for supporting fathers involvement

and changing circumstances. Fathers need support in the form of patience and understanding from family members and community practitioners, as well as long-term investments in programs to support healthy lifestyles, address mental health and addiction issues, and help expectant and new fathers develop the skills needed to form and sustain healthy family environments. Helping fathers with communication strategies, such as phone calls or emails, to sustain connections with their children even as their situations change, is also an important focus of father-focused outreach and program initiatives. This may be especially useful for fathers who struggle with poverty, who move frequently for work, job training, or education, or who have difficulty sustaining relationships because of substance abuse, incarceration, or homelessness.
Positive Media Images of Indigenous Fathers

In order to inspire boys and men to construct positive expectations for themselves in caring family relationships as adults, and to counteract social stigma, there is a need for media that show men assuming roles as positively involved fathers, including fathers who take on primary caregiving roles after a mother’s departure for the day (stay-at-home fathers) or for extended periods (lone fathers). Initiatives could range from television shows that feature families with positively involved fathers and father figures, talk shows involving fathers discussing how they have developed their confidence and skills as fathers, comic books for youth featuring young men imagining their future families or stepping up to the responsibility of fatherhood, and posters depicting fathers engaged with children of all ages. Fathers who participated in the study envisioned forming a popular theatre group to perform in junior and secondary schools in order to engage adolescents in thinking and talking about what it means to become a father or mother.

Program Supports for Fathers

In the study of Indigenous fathers, many men spoke eloquently about their wish for programs staffed by men, specifically for men or for fathers and their children, including activities that men enjoy and tend to be good at (Ball and Roberge 2007; Manahan and Ball 2008). Policy and program development to enhance Indigenous fathers’ involvement needs to occur at the level of communities or community agencies representing the particular needs, goals, and circumstances of particular Indigenous groups. Existing systems of services for Indigenous children and families can be made more transparent, accessible, and father-friendly through appropriate print materials and Indigenous staff who can serve as guides to help fathers navigate the systems such as child welfare, custody mediation, legal aid and law courts, hospital and other health care systems, and their children’s schools. Parent support programs, legal consultations, mediation, and family intervention services need to be offered in settings that are accessible and sensitive to the legacy of Residential Schools and other government interventions.

Public investment is needed to enhance preservice and in-service education for child welfare, social service and health practitioners so that they are prepared to work effectively with fathers. Credentialed practitioners need to be offered opportunities to become aware of some of fatherhood’s unique challenges and the diversity of fathers’ circumstances, experiences, goals, and needs.

On a positive note, anecdotal reports indicate that support for fathers is being provided to some extent through programs that are not primarily targeting father involvement but rather are seeking fathers’ help with the delivery of programs primarily targeting children’s health and early learning. This indirect approach may in fact work well to reach out to men, and requires only a slight shift in programs that already exist, rather than creating new programs. Canada’s orientation to public
health aims—conceptually if not always in practice—to bring sectors together and integrate supports for family members through any one of a number of community-based entry points, such as Aboriginal Head Start, Best Babies, Strong Start, and Community Action Program for Children. Again, the feasibility and sustainability of this integrated approach depends on a sustained government commitment to funding the father involvement component.

Based on a secondary analysis of data obtained from diverse populations of fathers in the national study described earlier, Daly et al. (2009) found that fathers of young children often talk about the importance of children for their own sense of growing maturity, responsibility, and engagement and for learning about their own emotions and how to deal with those emotions in the contexts of their parenting activities. Fathers were also found to express regrets about a lack of time for their own leisure and exercise. The investigators suggest that programs for fathers might be framed as ways for fathers to learn about their own emotions and responses to parenting and to share their experiences with other fathers, and that recreation and fitness programs that include fathers and their children may appeal to fathers. There must be resources, such as parenting education and mental health services, delivered in culturally safe, accessible ways by practitioners who are well-versed in the history of colonialism and the heterogeneity of Indigenous fathers and families, in order to support ongoing positive father-child relationships. Advocacy for Canadian government investments in fathering programs should emphasize the salutogenic effects of positive father involvement on fathers’ health, as much as on outcomes for children.

Disrupted father-child relationships exacerbate challenges for both Indigenous children and their fathers to elaborate cohesive and positive Indigenous identities, especially for those living off-reserve, away from their cultural and language community. Continuity of father-child relationships means that children are continuously given opportunities to learn and consolidate Indigenous cultural knowledge and identity. Following the diminution of intergenerational cultural learning as a result of Residential Schools, foster care, and adoption, programs are needed to enable Indigenous fathers to restore their cultural roots and reconstitute culturally meaningful roles for fathers, and to involve their children in learning their culture. In Canada, such programs are often delivered through the system of federally funded Friendship Centers. On reserves and in the north, a variety of Indigenous community programs serve this function and need sustained public funding to continue to do so (Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2006).

Paternity Registration

More effort on the part of maternity health personnel, and more information for expectant and new fathers, is needed to encourage father’s paternity designation on Indigenous children’s birth records. Access to paternity registration needs to be readily provided, in language that ordinary citizens can understand, and without
an onerous fee for late registration. Special efforts need to be made to reach out to fathers in rural and remote areas where maternity facilities are far from home, fathers may be working far from home, and there may be limited ability for fathers to travel to be present at their child’s birth. This is a first step in securing a young father’s identification with fatherhood and involvement with their baby.

**Policy Reforms**

Canadian society and its family justice, child welfare, corrections, and education systems should find ways to help fathers overcome structural, cultural, and sociopolitical constraints on their involvement with their children. For Indigenous Peoples in Canada, the issue of paternity registration and policies surrounding housing, education and training, employment, and child protection are extremely complex and directly related to Canada’s entrenched colonial approach to assimilating the Indigenous population (Ball 2008; Clatworthy 2004; Mann 2005; Salee et al. 2006). Many of the policy reforms needed to facilitate gender equity, family strengthening, and quality of life that would create conditions for increased father involvement are tied up with the Indian Act. This legislation governs many aspects of Indigenous peoples’ lives and has been blamed for high levels of poverty, social exclusion, shame, and vulnerability. There are significant differences in policies affecting different Indigenous populations. In particular, access to resources varies greatly between the largely urban, off-reserve population and the more rural on-reserve population of First Nations men. These variations combine with variability in policies across provinces and territories. Jurisdictional confusion, inconsistencies, and deliberate obfuscations account for the lack of a coherent system of services and supports for Indigenous fathers and families, as well as a persistent sense of unease and uncertainty about one’s entitlements under the Act. These issues and their possible resolution have been discussed extensively elsewhere (Ball and George 2006; Quebec Native Women’s Association 2000; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996).

Policy reforms in some Canadian provinces are responding to calls by Indigenous leaders to embrace an approach to child welfare that involves the least disruptive interventions, including “kinship care, whereby children requiring protective guardianship are placed in the homes of relatives (Gleeson 1996). Policy reform is needed to provide for equivalent levels of funding and access to support services to mothers, fathers, and children (e.g., counseling, respite, transportation) as are available when children are placed in the care of nonrelatives.

As a general strategy, institutions that serve children and families, including child care programs, schools, health clinics, and hospitals, need to introduce policies for child records to ensure that fathers’ names and contact information are obtained and fathers are notified about critical events. There is a need to examine and reform policies governing fathers’ opportunities to engage with their newborn child, their access to information about their child, and the conditions of their engagement if their child is taken into protective custody or if their relationship with their child’s
mother dissolves. More effort needs to be made to identify, locate, and involve fathers of children who receive social services or are taken into government care. There is a need to provide readily accessible, plain-language information, and access to appropriate legal services through renewed commitment on the part of provincial governments to legal aid, and to ensure that fathers understand their rights as well as their responsibilities regarding paternity designation on children’s records, guardianship, custody, and visitation with their children after separation, divorce, or removal of children into government care. There should be no gender bias in decision-making about child care arrangements after separation or divorce.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of developments in understanding and supporting positive father involvement in Canada. While some promising steps forward are being taken, gaps remain. Indigenous fathers’ voices have rarely been heard in community programs or research. In order to improve community outreach efforts, practitioners have called for more knowledge about Indigenous fathers’ intentions in regards to parenting, their living circumstances, needs, and goals. Community response to this exploratory study, and insights gleaned from fathers’ stories, suggest that research about Indigenous fathering can fill a distinct gap in knowledge about fathering, which has primarily characterized the experiences of men of western-European heritage. One father reflected the importance of listening to fathers:

I think it’s really important that Indigenous people are heard in this survey and I’m honoured to be asked to take part in this. The more that we do this, the more that we work on hearing the voices of Indigenous males and other males in Canada, then the government will get a better understanding of what it is they’re dealing with . . . instead of telling us what we need to be doing. . . . you know asking for input from us and getting out of what I’m saying and all the other men that you’re going to talk to or listen to or read about, put it all together and you’re going to get some answers, and programs and services are going to be put together in a way that’s going to come from down in the ground here.

There are over 600 culturally distinct Indigenous cultural groups in Canada and many sources of variation among Indigenous people living in rural and urban areas across the country. To avoid an overgeneralized, “pan-Indigenous” interpretation of Indigenous fathers’ experiences and the policy and practice implications of this knowledge, future research should explore the constitution of fathering and patterns of fathers’ involvement across specific cultural groups and settings with varied historical and current circumstances.

At this stage in the development of father involvement scholarship and practice in Canada, an important goal is to generate public dialogue about the conditions that shape father involvement and to make recommendations for policy reforms that will produce a social environment that is more conducive to fathers’ involvement right from conception and sustained over time. Over the past decade, Canada has
built a network of people interested in making more visible the diversity of fathers' experiences and their contributions to children's health and development, and in creating more spaces and supports for fathers to learn fatherhood, to enjoy and benefit from fatherhood, and to contribute to children's quality of life. This is a foundation upon which to build a program of research that can provide direction for expectant and new fathers and families, and for policy decision-makers and practitioners focused on families about how to enhance and make visible the positive contributions that fathers can make to optimal child health and development.

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