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Father Involvement Research Alliance

Gay Fathers Cluster

Gay Fathers Cluster Executive Summary

Father Involvement Community Research Forum Spring 2006

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FACTORS RELATING TO PARENTING BY NON-HETEROSEXUAL FATHERS (AKA GAY FATHERS CLUSTER)

This research involves three groupings of gay men – those who had children in the context of heterosexual relationships; those who became fathers in the context of gay identity; and those who are not yet fathers. We have included non-fathers because issues of entitlement are central to gay parenthood and can be illuminated by the perspectives of those who are not parenting. We used two methods of data collection: an online survey and individual face-to-face interviews.

Emerging themes:

- Extreme invisibility of gay fathers - connected to a lack of programs and services.
- Issues of entitlement to fatherhood. Many give up the desire to parent when they “come out” and are impacted by negative stereotypes about gay men and parenting.
- A sense of hopelessness amongst formerly straight fathers about gaining access to their children through the court system. More research required to determine how gay fathers are actually faring in Canadian courts, and whether these men’s fears are based on legal realities, and/or perceived homophobia and heterosexism in the court system – particularly deeply-held cultural stereotypes about gay men as pedophiles and resulting cultural fears about gay men being in the proximity of young children.
- Participants identified many complex issues related to “coming out” to children and spouses. These include fear of the children’s and spouse’s homophobia – and the subsequent consequences of this homophobia on access to children.
- Gay men who have children after “coming out,” face different, but no less challenging issues. Most significant are the complexities involved in acquiring children - through adoption, surrogacy or co-parenting arrangements. Participants describe the time, energy and financial resources required, and the emotional toll of the process.

Preliminary Results

This research involves three groupings of gay men – those who had children in the context of heterosexual relationships; those who became fathers in the context of gay identity; and those who are not yet fathers. We have included non-fathers because issues of entitlement are central to gay parenthood and can be illuminated by the perspectives of those who are not parenting. We used two methods of data collection: an online survey and individual face-to-face interviews. The online survey was used mainly to collect demographic data and, to a lesser extent, to tap into thematic questions. The advantage to the online survey is that we were able to collect data from across Canada (we had participants from eight provinces). The downside is that often these responses lack the detail that comes from a personal interview. The interview data are much deeper in scope, and provide a more experiential view of non-heterosexual male parenting.

In total, we obtained 99 usable responses to the online survey and conducted 40 personal interviews. We are currently in the process of analysing the data. Following are some preliminary findings and speculations. It should be kept in mind that these are subject to change as new analyses are completed.

Extreme Invisibility of Gay Fathers

A prominent and recurring theme is the overall invisibility of gay fathers. Many participants spoke about an extreme lack of awareness of their existence, and a connected lack of programs and services. Most would like to see increased public awareness of the existence and experiences of gay fathers. This is sometimes combined with a hesitation due to a desire to protect their children from public attention. Most indicated how excited they are that someone is finally doing research on this group of fathers in hopes of increasing visibility, countering some of the commonly-held negative stereotypes about gay fathers and increasing the availability of services.

Issues of Entitlement and Pride

The issue of entitlement to fatherhood is a huge one for gay men. Many give up the desire to parent when they “come out” and are impacted by negative stereotypes about gay men and parenting. For men without children, this lack of entitlement can be increased by lack of available information about the options available to gay men to become parents. Some participants who had children in heterosexual contexts spoke about how hopeless they feel about gaining access to their children through the court system. Some allow their former female partners to dictate where and when they can see their children, for fear of going to court and losing what access they do have. More research is required here to determine how gay fathers are actually faring in Canadian courts, and whether these men’s fears are based on legal realities and/or perceived homophobia and heterosexism in the court system – particularly deeply-held cultural stereotypes about gay men as pedophiles and resulting cultural fears about gay men being in the proximity of young children.

Many men spoke of a sense of pride in fatherhood, and also a sense of pride at developing an identity that could incorporate both being gay and being a father. Some of the men are struggling with a newly-acquired gay identity and the integration of this with identity as a parent. This struggle is often most acute for men who had children in the context of a heterosexual relationship and then later “came out.”

Disclosure of Sexual Orientation to Children and Spouses

Participants identified many complex issues related to “coming out” to children and spouses. These include fear of the children’s and spouse’s homophobia – and the subsequent consequences of this homophobia on access to children. A few of the men interviewed are still married. Some have disclosed their sexual orientation to their wives while some have not. Experiences here vary widely - from men who, after coming out to their heterosexual spouses, are able to transform these relationships into deep and, in some cases, co-habiting relationships, to men who do not come out to their spouses for fear of deep animosity and potential loss of access to children.

Becoming Fathers as Gay Men

Gay men who have children after “coming out,” face different, but no less challenging issues. First, and most significantly, are the complexities involved in acquiring children - through adoption, surrogacy or co-parenting arrangements. Participants describe the time, energy and financial resources required, and the emotional toll of the process. For some, it has taken years to become a parent, and some have spent enormous amounts of money doing so. Those with fewer financial resources feel they do not have the same options available to them, often resulting in less access to children (i.e. the necessity to work long hours in order to pay debts; co-parenting arrangements which involved more shared parenting than they would have ideally chosen).

FATHER INVOLVEMENT RESEARCH ALLIANCE* CURA

Immigrant Fathers Cluster

Focus: The challenges faced by immigrant men (Russian and Sudanese) as they parent in Canada including role reversals of parents and children due to children’s rapid acculturation; racism and its impact on immigrant fathering; family and neighbourhood isolation and the impact of un/under-employment on fathering. Based in Calgary with links to Toronto and Montreal, and led by Dr. David Este, University of Calgary.

Gay Fathers Cluster

Focus: The effects of homophobia on gay fathering; social, legal, and cultural barriers to fathering for gay men; access to services for gay fathers and what can be learned about parenting from men operating outside of traditional gender dynamics. Based in Toronto and led by Rachel Epstein, coordinator LGBT Parenting Network/David Kelly Services, Family Service Association of Toronto (FSAT).

Separated and Divorced Fathers Cluster

Focus: The salient legal, emotional, and financial issues faced by separated and divorced fathers; the strengths they bring to their family relationships; identification of patterns that sustain and interfere with positive father involvement; identification of needs and evidence based solutions. Based in Vancouver and Vancouver Island, and led by Dr. Edward Kruk, School of Social Work and Family Studies, University of British Columbia.

New Fathers Cluster

Focus: The support services provided to fathers through the first eighteen months of the child’s life, including pre-natal period; the impact of becoming a dad on the father’s physical and mental health and on the father’s personal development; and examination of the degree of support afforded to fathers by the health care system. Based in London, York Region, and Toronto, and led by Ed Bader, Co-Chair FIRA (Community): Catholic Community Services of York Region.

Young Fathers Cluster

Focus: The multiple dimensions for young fathers that need support (work, school, housing, relationships); challenging the negative perceptions of young fathers as expressed through social services and the courts; identification of programming needs for young fathers. Based in the Ottawa/Hull Region and led by Dr. Annie Devault, Université du Québec en Outaouais.

Fathers of Children with Special Needs Cluster

Focus: The challenges of fathering a special needs child and determining the factors that limit or facilitate involvement; improving the practice of “family-centred” care with fathers of children who experience a chronic health condition and/or a physical disability. Based in Toronto and London, and led by Dr. Ted McNeill, Director of Social Work, The Hospital for Sick Children.

Indigenous Fathers Cluster

Focus: The unique issues affecting Indigenous fathers’ caring for young children (0-6) enrolled in centre-based child care; improving community outreach to Indigenous fathers; creating meaningful roles for Indigenous fathers involved with their children in child care and development programs; and to alter program structures, program materials, and program activities in order to better serve fathers. Based in Victoria, Vancouver and northern British Columbia, and led by Dr. Jessica Ball, University of Victoria.

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