

Young Fathers Cluster Executive Summary**Father Involvement Community Research Forum Spring 2006***Annie Devault***WORK & RESEARCH CONDUCTED TO DATE BY THE YOUNG FATHERS CLUSTER**

Following a literature review and meetings with young fathers and service providers, the young fathers cluster planned two main activities: collecting data from young fathers, young mothers, grandparents and service providers, and creating an awareness tool including a DVD and practitioners' guide. The present document will be limited to the description of the first activity, that is, the research. To date, 36 young fathers participated in the research. Twenty-eight were met in focus groups and participated in an individual interview. The results presented here should be considered preliminary since we are still collecting data. We also conducted 2 focus groups with young mothers (n=14) and 4 individual interviews with service providers. We have not been able to recruit any grandparents yet. We asked young fathers to talk about their fatherhood experiences (how it has changed their lives, role models they have, obstacles they face, support they get, relationship with the mother and with the grandparents...). The information provided by the fathers is complemented by perspectives of mothers on father involvement as well as the perceptions of service providers who work with young fathers. Without being complete, results we describe represent the beginning of an ecological understanding of young fathers today's society.

Demographics

Demographics come from a sample of 33 fathers. Most fathers have one child. The mean age of the fathers at birth of the child is 21 years of age. Fathers who have more than one child usually have them with different mothers. The fathers have a total of 55 children (mean: 3 1/2 years old). About half of the children live with their fathers full time. A third of the children never see their fathers. The fathers are almost equally in the work force (48%) or living on social assistance (53%). The vast majority earn less than \$20,000 a year (90%). 77% have a high school diploma or less.

Becoming a father...

Becoming a father at 14, 16 or 20 years of age has a huge impact on young men. Most young fathers take this opportunity to make important changes in their lives: stop drinking or using drugs, going out and living an "unstructured" life. They all talk about "taking their responsibilities". But all fathers do not define responsibility in the same way. Some of them define it in terms of material achievement: quit school in order to find a job, earn some money pay for clothes and food, and find stable housing. The motivation comes from the responsibility to be the provider for this new family, and focuses on the basic things they have to do (a "compelled" responsibility). Some other fathers seem to extend the definition of responsibility and go beyond the basic (but essential) provider role. For them, becoming a father changes identity and the meaning of their lives. Instead of focusing on the sacrifices they have to make, these fathers put the emphasis on the child's needs in a more empathic way (a "voluntary" responsibility). These two types of responsibility may stand on the same continuum of becoming responsible in different aspects of fatherhood.

Role models

When asked if they have any model in order to play their role as a father, some fathers say they do not have any role model or, if they do, they are more negative models that they do not want to follow. These fathers confirm the "compensatory hypothesis". They want to compensate for the absence of models or the inadequacy of the models they had in their family of origin. Other fathers talk about a diversity of models. It can be their father, step-father or their mother. Some talk about television as a way of learning to be a good father and others mention that practitioners are their role models.

Co-parental relationship

For the majority of fathers, the child arrives in their life as a surprise. For some, the relationship with the mother is also new which creates multiple changes in the life of the father in a relatively short period of time. About half of the fathers in the sample are in couple relationships. Although these relationships are stable, fathers talk about conflicts around father involvement. Some fathers, trying to go back to school or to work in order to bring some money home, are accused by mothers of not being there, not being involved or not being responsible enough. For the other half of the sample, the relationship has come to an end. A few have a co-parental agreement, and both mothers and fathers are succeeding at getting along as parents even though they do not as a couple. For most of them, the relationship with the mother is not easy. When separated, it seems that a new partner, especially in the mothers' life, is challenging. The young father is scared of losing his place in his child's life. We also noticed that when the mother decides that the father will not have access to his child, the father has very little power to change the situation. Generally speaking, the couple separation can make the father-child relationship much more fragile.

Mothers' perspective on fathers

The young mothers we met in focus groups all agreed that children should benefit from the presence of both parents. They want their child to have a father, "a male presence", someone who brings money home. Paradoxically, beyond being the father figure, mothers' opinions about what fathers concretely bring is not very positive. They perceive that fathers' involvement is primarily toward their own interest: they take the baby to show off or to get women, or only if the mother gives them money. They perceive that fathers do not help much and that they concentrate on playing and going to the park. Mothers think that fathers are scared of getting involved and that they need more time to adjust. They may get involved when the child is older. The difficulties with commitment and responsibilities, the lack of training fathers have with babies, and their own expectations (about fathers doing things the way they want) can be obstacles to father involvement. Finally, mothers think that there should be services for young fathers equal to those provided to young mothers.

The role of grandparents

A number of young fathers do not have any contact with their own parents. For the ones who do, because fathers are quite young at the time of the birth of their child, the pregnancy can constitute a moment of crisis for grandparents as well as for young parents. After the crisis, three different patterns seem to emerge.

- i) The grandparents refuse to get involved with the father or the child.
- ii) Grandparents, mostly mother of the young mother, give support to the young parents (e.g. money, babysitting...). Some grandparents live nearby or even in the same house as young parents.
- iii) The grandparents actually take over the parents' role. They can live with the child even without the parent, sending the message that the parents are too young and not responsible enough to take good care of the child.

Practitioners' perspective

According to the practitioners interviewed, the main issues faced by young fathers are the lack of support (from the family, the community and the society) and the deficiency of resources (education, employment training, affordable housing). They point to the fact that services are not always father friendly; they can be judgmental and ask fathers to prove themselves to a greater extent than is asked of mothers. Service providers think that the mother plays a huge role in father involvement in that she can control the father's access to the child. They think that co-parenting should be the focus of the intervention with young fathers, especially after a separation.

Conclusion

Becoming a father at a young age creates a complex situation. Psychologically, fathers are not necessarily ready to take a step toward parenthood. The relationship from which the child is conceived is often recent. Fathers have to get to know the mother, the baby and ultimately themselves in a completely new role. The shock of becoming a father is great. All the fathers take their provider role very seriously. For some fathers, the responsibility goes further, and having a baby is actually changing their own definition of themselves, making them less self-centered. Young fathers do not seem to have stable role models. Some do not have any and those who do pick up different aspects from different people (fathers, mothers, television, practitioners). Co-parenting relationships, for those who are in couples and those who are not, are generally not easy. The fathers find it hard to try to fulfill the provider role while at the same time being criticized for not being involved enough. In almost all the cases, the power of the mother over access to the child is greater than that of the father. Interviews with young mothers reveal that although they think that children should have both parents around them, they are generally unsatisfied with father involvement. They think that fathers are scared of being involved and that, when they are, it follows their own interests. Grandparents' involvement in the young fathers' lives varies. Some are not involved at all, some give an adequate support and some take over the role of the parents. In the opinion of service providers, there should be more support available for young fathers, including some training in co-parental relationships.

FATHER INVOLVEMENT RESEARCH ALLIANCE* CURA

FIRA is a national alliance of researchers, community organizations and fathers dedicated to the development and sharing of knowledge on father involvement. One of the strategies FIRA uses to accomplish its goals is the engagement of the seven research clusters described below.

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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Father Involvement Research Alliance CURA
Centre for Families, Work and Well-being
17 University Ave. E.
University of Guelph
Guelph, ON
N1G 2W1

519/824-4120, ext. 53829
web site: <http://www.fira.uoguelph.ca/home>