

ALL DADS
MATTER:

**TOWARDS AN
INCLUSIVE VISION
FOR FATHER
INVOLVEMENT
INITIATIVES IN
CANADA**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The intent of this paper is to promote informed dialogue and debate. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of FIRA or of other researchers/collaborators associated with FIRA. Communications can be addressed to the author.

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Canada has long had an international reputation as a country that welcomes diversity and supports equality. Nonetheless, there is a lack of coordinated, state-sponsored human service policy and program support for diverse populations of fathers/parents in this country. This lack is despite the fact that fathers and parents from socially, politically, legally and/or economically disadvantaged populations consistently report feeling like failures and/or that they lack any and all sense of entitlement to be a parent. Many experience sadness, confusion, frustration and anger about their lack of “success,” the minimal control they have over their own lives, and their inability to provide and care for “all their relations” as they would like. Many also note that their reluctance to share their confusion, pain, sadness and sense of loss with family members, friends, counsellors and other human service providers is in part related to their shame at not measuring up to a relatively narrow, “responsible father” ideal. Their resulting feelings of being culturally invisible are exacerbated by highly stereotypical, discriminatory beliefs and attitudes towards members of disadvantaged populations in general and disadvantaged populations of fathers/parents in particular. While Canadians in general may welcome and even celebrate diversity, it is thus obviously a much more significant challenge to initiate human service policies and programs that address the diverse circumstances and social support needs of the fathers/parents who live in this country.

The following paper addresses the lack of coordinated support for diverse populations of fathers/parents in Canada by articulating a socially inclusive vision for father/parent involvement initiatives. The best/wise policy and program initiatives discussed throughout the paper illustrate that working towards a more socially inclusive ordering of society requires more than a willingness to engage in an ongoing dialogue that seeks to cultivate respect and appreciation for diversity. The case studies of Aboriginal, immigrant and refugee as well as gay, bisexual and trans-gendered father/parent involvement initiatives highlight that those responsible for initiating policies and programs must also be committed to challenging assimilationist thinking by supporting more just and equitable social, economic, legal and political processes and structures. They also indicate that socially inclusive father/parent involvement initiatives will seek to address the particular interpersonal, cultural, organizational, political and economic issues specific to the populations and communities being served.

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Furthermore, the case studies bring to light that developing a socially inclusive vision for father/parent involvement in Canada requires confronting numerous interpersonal, cultural, organizational and socio-structural factors that contribute to power imbalance and social inequality within and between diverse populations and communities. As noted early on in the paper, addressing these factors requires critical analysis of the ways in which a wide variety of cultural assumptions surrounding men, masculinities, father/parenthood and community development hinder individuals, agencies, organizations and communities from developing policies and programs that promote positive father/parent involvement.

It is clear throughout the paper that cultivating a strength-based, socially inclusive vision for positive father/parent involvement policy and program initiatives requires creative vision and shared commitment to honouring the diverse backgrounds, experiences, gifts and insights of individual parents, families and communities throughout the country. It is also evident that when policy developers and program providers respect and seek to understand the character and dynamics of the communities they serve, they are better equipped to contribute to the development of socially inclusive father/parent involvement policy and program initiatives. Recommendations included at the end of the paper therefore highlight the need for:

- 1) increasing support throughout Canadian society for socially inclusive father/parent involvement policy and program initiatives among different levels of government, communities, media organizations, educational institutions, health-care facilities, non-governmental human service organizations, corporations and small businesses, and researchers;
- 2) raising awareness and positive interest within government and non-government organizations and agencies as well as communities throughout Canada in support of father/parent involvement initiatives; and
- 3) the development of socially inclusive policy and program initiatives by organizations, agencies and communities that work with and on behalf of fathers/parents from diverse populations in Canada.

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Clearly, there is overwhelming consensus among FIRA participants and others who work with and on behalf of fathers/parents in Canada that the development of a socially inclusive vision for father/parent involvement in all policy and program discussions requires vigilance and commitment to engaging in transformative, intercultural dialogue. Such dialogue will be inclusive and transformative to the extent that it is based on “insiders” as well as “outsiders” sharing a respect for the integrity of individuals, families and diverse communities as well as a commitment to cultivating natural and more formal networks of support in all types of families and communities. In order to promote the types of interpersonal, cultural and structural changes necessary to transform the roots of exclusion, the case studies suggest a number of ways in which it is possible to cultivate a deeper understanding of and appreciation for diversity by bringing together those in positions of social, economic, legal and/or political power with those who experience exclusion in social, economic, legal and/or political terms.

Few would dispute that there are many challenges faced by those committed to providing meaningful support for diverse populations of fathers/parents in Canada. Nonetheless, the case studies examined in this paper signify that socially inclusive father/parent involvement policy and program initiatives are possible to the extent that those involved honour the integrity and socially embedded, intimate character of relationships that men have with their children. The case studies also signify that while there is a lack of coordinated, state-sponsored human service policy and program support for diverse populations of fathers/parents in this country, there is nonetheless widespread support in Canada for a more socially inclusive approach to father/parent involvement initiatives. The hope shared by fathers/parents as well as those involved in positive father/parent involvement initiatives across the country is that such widespread support will continue to advance the development of policies and programs that are based upon the rather simple and straightforward idea that “all dads matter.” The challenge, it seems, is for this rather basic idea to inform the Canadian public consciousness and the coordination of state-sponsored father/parent involvement initiatives to the extent that it informs the best/wise policy and program initiatives discussed throughout this paper.

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