



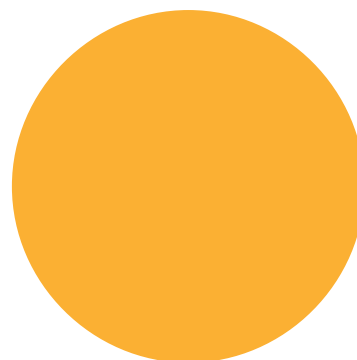
HALF the **EQUATION**

Why fathers are just as important
as mothers in preventing domestic
violence in the next generation

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**THE PROJECT TO END
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE**



This issue brief is a summary of four reports completed by Shift: The Project to End Domestic Violence: *Engaging Men and Boys in Domestic Violence Prevention: Opportunities and Promising Approaches*; *Working with Men and Boys to Prevent Domestic Violence in Alberta: A Provincial Scan*; *Promoting Positive Father Involvement: A Strategy to Prevent Intimate Partner Violence in the Next Generation*; and *Building a Provincial Positive Fatherhood Involvement Strategy: Results from the Nov 21, 2013 Consultation in Red Deer, Alberta*. All reports can be found at www.preventdomesticviolence.ca. Some sentences, phrases and examples are taken directly from these reports verbatim, while other excerpts are paraphrased.



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Shift recognizes that families come in many different forms, however due to limited available research, this issue brief focuses primarily on heterosexual partnerships. However, we believe the term “father” can be associated with any family context and/or nurturing, positive male role model actively involved in a child’s life, including gay/bisexual/trans-sexual/transgendered fathers.

Fathers who are positively engaged in the lives of their children can help to prevent domestic violence in the next generation.

Research shows that fathers are as important as mothers in raising healthy children, with new studies indicating that fathers influence their children independently from, and just as strongly as, mothers.¹ Positive father engagement is a vital part of good parenting. Dads who are positively engaged take an active role in caring for their child’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical health, and they promote their child’s well-being and security. Positive father involvement also means taking on nurturing and caretaking roles, and modeling behaviours that promote gender equity and peaceful ways of resolving conflicts.

Until recently, the vast majority of the parenting research and interventions focused on the mother-child relationship, with research regarding dads largely limited to the ways in which their economic contributions foster family stability and support a mother’s ability to parent well.²

Research is now confirming and clarifying the vital and distinct role that fathers play in child development.³ Studies completed over the past three decades have confirmed that both positive and negative parenting practices and adult relationship skills can be transmitted from generation to generation. For the most part, the research has focused on poor parenting practices and skills, showing that negative and abusive behaviours directed towards one’s children or partner (or both) are often perpetuated by those children when they become adults.⁴ In short, children who are raised by a parent with poor parenting skills are less likely to become supportive, nurturing parents themselves.⁵

Conversely, children who are raised in a loving, supportive household in which both the mother and the father are positively engaged are more likely to thrive and enter into healthy relationships as adults.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this issue brief is to:

- Highlight the important and unique role fathers play in the lives of children;
- Show how positive involvement can prevent domestic violence from occurring in the next generation; and
- Emphasize the need for new programs and policies that acknowledge and support positive father involvement.

Primary prevention in this context means reducing the number of new instances of domestic violence by intervening before any violence has occurred. Primary prevention “relies on identification of the underlying, or ‘upstream’, risk and protective factors for [domestic violence], and acts to address those factors.”⁶

Our decision to focus on fatherhood for this issue brief is a result of our provincial, national and international research on engaging men and boys in domestic violence prevention. That research is captured in four reports, which provide the foundation for this issue brief.

The first of these reports, *Engaging Men and Boys in Domestic Violence Prevention: Opportunities and Promising Approaches*,⁷ was developed in partnership with the White

Ribbon Campaign of Canada and consists of a scoping study of the relevant international literature in the area of violence prevention work with men and boys.⁸ In this report, we identify seven entry points as critical areas of focus for violence prevention. These are:

1. Build and promote positive fatherhood;
2. Support men’s health and mental wellbeing;
3. Leverage sports and recreation settings to influence positive norms and behaviours;
4. Engage men in the workplace to build parenting and healthy relationship skills;
5. Support healthy male peer relationships and networks;
6. Engage men as allies in violence prevention; and
7. Support Aboriginal leadership and healing.

Evidence suggests that each of these entry points shows some promise in working with men and boys to prevent violence and support healthy relationships.

The next phase of our research is captured in a second report, *Working with Men and Boys to Prevent Domestic Violence in Alberta: A Provincial Scan*.⁹ The report is a synthesis of 21 key informant interviews across Alberta, as well as a preliminary e-scan of programs, policies, and initiatives focused on engaging men and boys in violence prevention specific to the Alberta context. Most of the interview participants suggested that working with dads is crucial to prevent domestic violence in the next generation, however, the scan discovered only two father-specific, evidence-based programs operating in a total of four communities in Alberta.

Our third report, *Promoting Positive Father Involvement: A Strategy to Prevent Intimate Partner Violence in the Next Generation*¹⁰ identifies priorities for new research to improve ways of helping dads to be more involved with their children. In November 2013, Shift, in partnership with the Alberta Father Involvement Initiative, hosted a consultation with 21 community leaders, academics and policy makers to reflect on the research and to build recommendations for the Alberta context, which led to the fourth report, *Building a Provincial Positive Fatherhood Involvement Strategy: Results from the Nov 21, 2013 Consultation in Red Deer, Alberta*.¹¹

As a result of the research conducted it became clear that programs, policies, and practices in Alberta need to reflect a stronger emphasis on fathers and positive father involvement if we are going to prevent domestic violence in the next generation. This will require a shift in the way we currently fund and design prevention initiatives in this province.

It’s no secret that, historically, domestic violence programs and policies have focused on women as victims and men as perpetrators. Few of these programs and policies have examined the role of men as fathers, allies, and positive role models in the lives of children. And while we believe strongly in programs and policies that support victims of domestic violence and mothers, it is equally important to move the discourse in a new direction, one that says: If you want healthy kids, you need healthy parents – including dads.

POSITIVE FATHERING DEFINED

There are two primary components of healthy or positive fathering: being positively involved in the child's life and having an authoritative parenting style.¹² Family conditions that help dads to be great fathers include having a respectful, equitable relationship with the child's mother, even if the parents don't live together anymore.

Being involved in your child's life means interacting with the child in loving and consistent ways, taking an active role in looking after them to make sure that they are safe and their emotional, social, cognitive, and physical needs are addressed.¹³

Having an authoritative parenting style means supporting your child's sense of identity and independence within warm and responsive relationships. This includes high and consistent expectations about behaviour, maturity and complying with authority.¹⁴ It does not include corporal punishment in any form, not even spanking, which extensive research has been linked with serious developmental problems in childhood and beyond.¹⁵

BY THE NUMBERS: FATHERS' INCREASING PRESENCE IN CHILDREN'S LIVES

Most children in Canada live with their fathers. In fact, in 2006, 80 per cent of fathers lived with their children full time, while only four per cent of fathers had no children in the home.¹⁶ Fathers are also more involved with daily child care, and the number of stay-at-home dad and lone-parent families headed by men is increasing.¹⁷ Even divorced or separated fathers continue to have a role in their children's lives.¹⁸ Over the years there has been a clear trend away from sole custody by either parent toward

joint custody and shared custody.¹⁹ In most cases, even when a child lives primarily with the mother, the father continues to be involved in his child's life, suggesting that shared parenting has become the norm in Canada.²⁰

THE BENEFITS OF POSITIVE FATHERING

Research shows that, in addition to independently having a positive influence on kids, supportive, encouraging fathers also help mothers to parent better. It has long been established that:

- Positive relationships between parents promote a harmonious home environment, which fosters children's positive development;²¹
- Fathers' contributions to both parenting²² and home and family maintenance²³ foster maternal satisfaction with the inter-parental relationship;²⁴ and
- Supportive fathers can "buffer" the effects of a less supportive mother,²⁵ such as one who is depressed.

Not surprisingly, in addition to having a positive effect on mothers' ability to parent well, positive fathering also has a direct impact on children's well-being. Fathers help their children flourish by being accessible, exhibiting qualities of warmth, support, and consistency²⁶ and – importantly – being actively engaged with their kids. Studies indicate that:

- Positive father engagement reduces behavioural problems and delinquency in adolescent boys and emotional problems in adolescent girls;²⁷
- Dads who are positively engaged improve cognitive development and educational outcomes in both boys and girls in low socio-economic status families;²⁸

“...Only recently have child development researchers begun to identify the unique contributions of the father. Fathers contribute something different. Not better or worse, just different.”³⁹

- Boys who have engaged, nurturing fathers are less likely to use violence against female partners in adulthood²⁹ and are more likely to be nurturing and gender-equitable as fathers themselves; and
- Girls who have fathers as positive role models have more flexible perspectives on gender and gender-equal relationships.³⁰

EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMS

For the purposes of this paper, an evidence-based program is defined as one that: (1) has been identified as a model or best practice program, meaning that it has been repeatedly demonstrated to be effective through studies using good methods, a reasonable sample size, and an experimental, “gold standard” or a quasi-experimental design with the results published in a peer-reviewed journal; or (2) may be considered a promising program, meaning that it has been demonstrated to be effective in at least one study meeting the above criteria.⁴⁰

These positive effects begin in infancy. For example, fathers who care for and engage with their infants and toddlers help to nurture children’s secure attachment.³¹ These relationships promote emotional well-being and healthy relationships across the lifespan³² and lay the foundation for strong father-child bonds throughout childhood, adolescence and beyond.

Some research also suggests that dads may play a larger role than moms in supporting children’s confidence in exploration and interaction with their social and physical environments.³³ This is often facilitated through physical play between fathers and children,³⁴ which also has a direct link to children’s cognitive capacity and emotional well-being.³⁵

Finally, by normalizing the role of men in child care, the restrictions of traditional definitions of masculinity are expanded and replaced with a broader vision of men’s capacity in family life and society in general.³⁶ Dads who spend more time positively engaging with and caring for their children also improve their own overall well-being³⁷ while increasing their capacity to express emotions and experience empathy.³⁸ Clearly the benefits of positive

fatherhood involvement for dads, moms, children, and families as a whole are substantial.

PROGRAMS AND POLICIES THAT SUPPORT FATHERS

The facts outlined above are straightforward: Fathers who are positively involved in their kids’ lives raise happy, well-adjusted children and are happier themselves. This would suggest that just as much time, money and effort should be spent ensuring fathers are as well equipped to care for their children as mothers. However, that is not the case. Most parenting and family-strengthening programs specifically target mothers, and while in theory fathers are welcome, the programs are generally designed for women.⁴¹ In addition, many policies and programs aim to improve the mother’s parenting attitudes and behaviours, not the father’s.

Indeed, our preliminary e-scan of Alberta violence prevention initiatives that focused on men and boys revealed few supportive policies for fathers and only two evidence-based programs specifically geared to dads. Of the 71 activities related to domestic violence prevention initiatives for men and boys occurring at the local level, all were isolated activities, volunteer initiatives, or one-off programs and not part of a broader strategy or policy framework – one that guides investment, research, and practice.⁴²

Policies that support positive fatherhood involvement need to be considered and explored – policies such as: progressive parental leave for men; shared parenting workplace policies; and universal, affordable, quality, and accessible child care. Further, it is important that new policies adopt a gendered approach that recognizes both mothers and fathers as critical to children’s success in life.

Fortunately, new research is emerging to guide program and policy efforts to improve fathers’ ability to nurture their children’s healthy development, to build and sustain healthy intimate partner

relationships, and to prevent the perpetuation of domestic violence in the next generation.

In Alberta, two programs specifically support positive father involvement. The first is *Supporting Father Involvement (SFI)*, an evidence-based program offered by three community-based organizations in Edmonton, Lethbridge, and Cochrane. The program, funded by the Norlien Foundation, is a family-focused clinical intervention with the goal of effectively engaging fathers as key participants in family support and strengthening. A second program, *Caring Dads*, targets fathers who have physically or emotionally abused or neglected their children, exposed their children to domestic violence, or who are deemed to be at high risk for these behaviours. *Caring Dads*, offered in Grande Prairie, is considered a promising practice.

Another program, which is designed for both mothers and fathers, is the evidence-based Triple P – Positive Parenting Program. It is offered by the Government of Alberta to help strengthen parenting skills. The program's Triple P Level 4 is considered to be a "gold standard" program given its effectiveness in strengthening the skills of parents.

The good news is that these programs are highly successful. The bad news is that there are far too few of them. More money is needed to expand existing evidence-based programs that support positive father involvement and to fund programs that show promise but have yet to be researched and evaluated. It is also necessary to fully understand what types of programs

work for whom, and where they can be most effective.

While research shows that parenting programs that are designed especially for fathers can be very effective, this doesn't mean that mothers are excluded from the picture. Research suggests that positive fathering programs may be more effective if they fully or partially include mothers. This is because the quality of the mother-father relationship strongly affects a father's willingness and ability to be involved with his children.⁴³

Numerous studies completed in recent years have consistently demonstrated that comprehensive, evidence-based parenting training programs lead to improvements in parenting practices and children's developmental outcomes.⁴⁴ The components of successful parenting programs – including fatherhood programs – that are associated with improvements in parenting include:

- Teaching parents how to positively interact and communicate with their children;
- Teaching parents to use positive discipline techniques and the importance of parenting consistency;
- Creating opportunities for parents to practice new skills with their children during parent training sessions;
- Teaching parents problem solving; and
- Teaching parents to promote children's cognitive, academic and social skills.⁴⁵

“More money is needed to expand existing evidence-based programs that support positive father involvement and to fund programs that show promise.”

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM KEY EXPERTS

On November 21, 2013, Shift and the Alberta Father Involvement Initiative brought together a group of 21 Alberta-based policy makers and community practitioners who work with fathers, as well as academics whose research areas include fatherhood. The goal of the full-day session was to share information about new research and trends in positive father involvement strategies, as well as to explore recommendations and next steps in the areas of research, policy and programming in Alberta. The following is a summary of their recommendations.

- **Go Where the Men Are** – this means taking advantage of places where men regularly congregate and connect, such as at work, at the gym and during children’s extracurricular activities (i.e. sporting arenas) to increase learning opportunities or social support, recognizing that these social exchanges are chances to establish a community network that utilizes word-of-mouth referrals;
- **Intentionally Target Fathers** – this includes advertising specifically to “dads” and not “parents”, holding events that are targeted to men, creating environments that are conducive to male involvement, providing food, using men in advertising, and scheduling programs and events that better fit men’s schedules;
- **Improve Communication** – this includes establishing mechanisms to create communication between and among service providers and policy makers; create opportunities for academics to inform their research agenda so it better reflects “what is happening on the ground”; and change the discourse on families, recognizing that “family” means different things in different communities; and
- **Change the “Culture of Fatherhood”** – this includes changing cultural contexts regarding what it means to be a “man” and a “father”, definitions that are often counterintuitive to what it means to be an “involved father”. This also includes giving men the permission to be vulnerable and expressive, and educating service organization staff to improve their understanding of the male experience and what it means to be a dad.

DISCUSSION POINTS FOR ALBERTA SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS, WORKPLACES, GOVERNMENT, AND RESEARCHERS

More needs to be done to support fathers if we are to be successful in promoting positive fathering as a strategy to prevent domestic violence in the next generation. Contributions from service organizations, policy makers, practitioners, and private sector partners, as well as commitments from the Alberta Government, are all required to ensure that fathers are recognized as equal partners in childrearing who provide unique and important contributions that benefit this generation and the next.

Some actions for Alberta community-based organizations to consider are:

1. Implement evidence-based parenting policies, programs and practices for fathers;
2. Train practitioners to ensure they are well equipped to serve fathers and support positive father involvement. This may include changing the physical environment, messaging, training and delivery of the program, and ensuring flexibility with scheduling of programs; and
3. Improve the individual and shared parenting skills of mothers and fathers who are separating or divorcing.

Some actions for workplaces to consider are:

1. Include on-site “health and safety strategies” programs geared to men that focus on parenting and healthy relationship skills;
2. Support, implement, and normalize parental leave policies for fathers; and
3. Provide accessible, affordable, and quality child care on work sites.

Some actions for the Government of Alberta to consider are:

1. Establish a provincial research agenda that provides dedicated funding for ongoing research and evaluation focused on supporting fatherhood and positive father involvement;
2. Encourage a greater focus on fathers' roles in parenting as a whole and in early childhood development research, policy, and programming, taking care to reflect and further investigate the diverse needs and circumstances of Aboriginal, immigrant, ethno-cultural minority, and gay/bisexual/transsexual/transgendered fathers;
3. Review existing policies and legislation through a gendered lens to ensure both men and women are being served;
4. Amend Alberta's *Protection Against Family Violence Act* to include a requirement that states that parents or guardians who have been involved with child maltreatment or domestic violence complete a free, government-sanctioned parenting program;
5. Lobby the Government of Canada to repeal section 43 of the *Criminal Code*, RSC 1985, c. C-46, to prohibit corporal punishment of any kind; and
6. Make the Alberta Courts seminar *Parenting After Separation* mandatory when people file for a separation or parenting agreement, interim custody or support order, or divorce.

Some actions for Academics/researchers to consider are:

1. Create a long-term collective research agenda in partnership with key organizations and systems implementing this work in Alberta;
2. Purposefully translate research to practice through community networks to build the capacity of community-based organizations to implement practice change; and
3. Work with all levels of government to inform policy and legislation.

Creating programs, offering services, and adopting policies that recognize the important role fathers play will go a long way towards preventing problems before they occur.

CONCLUSION

There is little doubt that fathers who are actively engaged in the lives of their children in supportive, nurturing, and consistent ways model healthy relationships and positively influence children's development and life outcomes, thereby preventing domestic violence in the next generation.

It is our hope that in five years:

- There is a significant increase in Alberta parenting programs that are evidence based and evaluated, and that more of these programs actively serve and engage fathers;
- Marginalized communities are also served through best-practice programs and policies;
- A policy framework that guides research, investment, and practice is adopted by the Government of Alberta;
- More research is conducted along with more funding to support evaluation of existing initiatives and policies;
- More employers are supporting men to be great dads and partners; and
- Policy makers apply a gendered approach to their work, recognizing that both mothers and fathers are critical to children's success.

Creating programs, offering services, and adopting policies that recognize the important role fathers play will go a long way towards preventing problems before they occur. While there is a growing recognition in Alberta of the benefits of positive fathering programs, it is not yet reflected in policies, programs, and investment strategies. Given the increasing role fathers play in raising their children, now is an opportune time to adopt a comprehensive strategy to support fathers in developing healthier relationships with their partners, improve their parenting skills, and increase positive involvement in their children's lives to prevent domestic violence in the next generation.

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Shift's purpose is to enhance the capacity of policy makers, systems leaders, clinicians, service providers and the community at large to significantly reduce, and eventually end domestic violence in Alberta. We are committed to making our research accessible and working collaboratively with a diverse range of stakeholders to inform and influence current and future domestic violence prevention efforts through primary prevention.

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