Accounts of modern fatherhood reveal stories of strength, compassion, courage and love.

Modern Fatherhood
Paternal Involvement and Family Relationships

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The “classic” father figure has traditionally been portrayed as an emotionally distant disciplinarian fulfilling a breadwinner role – an important figure in a child’s life, but one that was largely detached from certain aspects of their lives. While fathers certainly were not quite as homogeneous as historical depictions may suggest, today’s 8.6 million fathers in Canada clearly represent a more diverse picture of fatherhood featuring a greater number of non-biological fathers, stepfathers, sole-support fathers and fathers in same-sex relationships. However, underlying this increased diversity, there does seem to be a common shift within fatherhood in Canada: growing involvement in the lives of their children.

The Involved Father and Gender Equity project, a partnership between the White Ribbon Campaign and DadCentral.ca (funded by the Ontario Women’s Directorate), was launched in order to better understand the experiences of fathers who are active in the lives of their children and to draw connections between involved fatherhood and gender equality. While many studies over the years have focused on the negative effects of paternal detachment, this project was initiated to explore and understand the positive aspects of father involvement and how it might promote gender equality. Listening to the stories told by these modern fathers and the qualitative data coming from their narratives enriched the understanding and helped to capture the richness, complexity and diversity of modern fatherhood and modern families.
One of the major components of this project was a series of nine focus groups in communities across Ontario, which supplemented information gathered through surveys of fathers who participated in these focus groups, interviews with stakeholders and professionals working on engaging fathers, as well as a preliminary environmental scan of the services available to them. Conversations with these fathers revealed that they were highly involved in the lives of their children, fulfilling diverse roles that went beyond those of the “traditional” father. These accounts of modern fatherhood were stories of strength, compassion, courage and love.

**Fatherhood is a transformational journey**

Fatherhood was described by many participants in this study as a transformational journey that positively changed them and their relationships with their children and partners. They often spoke about the shifts that occurred in their own sense of self, as having children became an opportunity for them to evaluate the self-centred nature of their behaviour and to be able to begin to place the needs of others first.

Watching and interacting with children encourages the personal growth and development of fathers. Academic literature has shown that the more involved men are in the lives of their children, the more likely they are to develop nurturing qualities. Such involvement with their children is seen as an “opportunity to develop the sensitive, vulnerable and caring parts of themselves.”

Some fathers said that their relationships with their own fathers were based on clearly expressed unconditional love – a nurturing environment they sought to replicate. They spoke of the emotional bond or attachment they had with their children, and how that was more powerful than any other experience they had in their life:

“I think my dad is one of my best friends and we spend so much time together and I would like to have that relationship with my kids their whole life, and that would be amazing.” (Participant)

However, not all fathers were raised in a context of regularly and clearly expressed unconditional love. Some noted that their fathers had been either absent or emotionally distant during their youth. This was reflected in focus group conversations when participants discussed the desire to be emotionally present in the lives of their children:

“...growing up and not having a dad, I made one promise to myself, that if I ever had a kid I wouldn’t want them to miss me being there. I mean, my father was there financially, but emotionally he was not there.” (Participant)

Many of these fathers expressed a desire to provide more emotional support for their children than they themselves had experienced. Often, men become fathers in the absence of having their own father or a male role model in their lives. This can have a devastating impact on them as they lack norms, values or beliefs about the role of a father. Quite simply, they have no healthy reference point from which to enact their own fathering. This cycle can be insidious, impact generations and influence the ways in which these men interact with their children, their partners and their extended family. For them, fatherhood presented an opportunity to break this cycle and to raise their children differently.
Involved fatherhood can transform relationships in the household

According to the fathers in this study, being an involved father was not only transformational for the self, but also for relationships in the family household. With greater involvement, these fathers reported less stress for their partners, more emotional support in their relationship and less isolation in raising the children for both parents. In this way, involved fathers highlighted that their involvement often led to increased gender equality with their partner. This is consistent with existing literature, which holds that high commitment to fathering roles results in improvements in the quality of the relationship between partners.\(^2\)

Sometimes, the communication skills fathers develop through interacting with their children can benefit their relationships with their partners. Previous studies have demonstrated that in learning how to understand the cues of their children and by engaging in nurturing care, fathers are often able to pay more attention to the emotional cues of their partners.\(^3\) In other words, nurturing skills learned in one relationship transfer into others.

Parental leave was identified as an important factor in fostering equality between fathers and their partners. In academic literature, parental leave has been found to “change the gendered division of labour in the family sphere”\(^4\) in opposite-sex couples, as it allows fathers to take on nurturing roles that have been traditionally associated with mothers. Participants in this study who took parental leave after the birth or adoption of their children reflected these findings, indicating that the experience was important in developing attachment and bonding with their children, as well as providing an opportunity to understand the experiences of their partner and build empathy.

Community and workplace supports facilitate father involvement

New fathers were quick to express the importance of utilizing parental leave benefits as a way to be active in family life. Some of the benefits of using parental leave included increased attachment between fathers and children, and increased empathy toward the child-rearing process. Many of the fathers in the study embraced parental leave as an opportunity to establish close bonds with their children:

“I liked my job, but I still weighed the pros and cons and I said, ‘You only get this chance once’ and it’s … the formative years, it sets a good foundation to be that involved for the rest of their life and it’s so worth it.” (Participant)

Despite the gains that have been made in parental leave policies, some fathers identified parental leave as an isolating and often frowned upon aspect of their experience. Their attempts to access services or reduce their own isolation were often conducted against a backdrop of uncertainty about how they might be perceived by others, and several fathers reported either being ignored or being met with surprise by other parents when they revealed that they were home with their children:

“I spoke to a lot of the moms in the playgroups and they would all be surprised: ‘Oh, you’re staying home with the baby?’ I’m like, ‘Yeah! I’m staying home for a few weeks.’” (Participant)

Father-specific programs were described as a way to connect with other fathers, share experiences and build informal support networks regarding their parenting. These programs acted like “hubs,” where fathers knew they could count on being supported regardless of how often they attended. While these programs offered support in their own right, fathers in the focus groups also reported that the connections to other fathers established in these programs were also an important source of emotional and practical support in their lives.
Father involvement encourages equity in family gender roles

Fathers who participated in the focus groups indicated that their involvement with their children promotes gender equality. Part of this is an inevitable result of greater co-parenting: by playing a large role in nurturing and raising children – particularly with regard to parenting roles that have been traditionally attributed to mothers – these modern fathers are redefining gender roles and contributing to the erosion of the gendered division of household labour.

Some of the fathers discussed finding ways to actively counter the traditional gender stereotypes. In their roles as fathers, they are providing opportunities and making choices for their children that allow them to exist outside of the stereotypes that are often associated with boys and girls.

Many fathers in this study indicated that the traditional male–female roles were no longer clear, and they suggested that it was not enough to be the traditional father figure. Rather, they had to be able to fulfill the traditional roles of both parents in order to meet the needs of their children. In this way, these fathers were equating the work done by both genders as being the same and they understood the importance of doing that, as the following father suggests:

“You know, we’re expected to be out making money, the breadwinner, et cetera, and an involved father is what I learned is somebody who actually sits down, listens to their partner, listens to the needs of the family and works with the family, not independently.” (Participant)

For Aboriginal fathers, gender equality was not only a product of their involvement with their children, but it was knowledge to be passed down as part of their traditions and lineages. Understanding the importance of the cultural teachings and the importance of the role of specific genders is consistent with the fact that involved fatherhood is a complex series of experiences.

Stories help to enrich our understanding of modern fatherhood

Understanding modern fatherhood requires examining the layers and complexities that exist in the lives of fathers and within the context of the society they live in. Since these subtleties and complexities can be lost in the inherently distanced nature of statistics, it is important that the stories of fathers be shared. These stories help to validate the data and ideas found in academic literature and to thus enrich our understanding.

Discussion with these fathers helped to confirm that many of the old stereotypes regarding the distant, absent and full-time working fathers may be losing influence with a younger generation. Fatherhood was described as a transformational journey in which their involvement can have a profound impact on child development, relationships with their partners and gender equality generally. Continued community and workplace supports are instrumental in assuring that their aspirations can be realized and that their stories will continue to be heard.

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