by Jessica Ball

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The 2010 International Focus Issue of Childhood Education, guest edited by Jyotsna Pattnaik and Rajalakshmi Sriram, explored the topic of male involvement in the care and education of young children. We revisit that theme with this article.

Fathers have been all but invisible in Canadian government policies and programs (Lero, Ashbourne, & Whitehead, 2006), but growing momentum among researchers and community-based practitioners aims to address that exclusion. In the past decade, research on father involvement in Canada has grown from a scattering of disparate studies to a collection in which some unifying themes can be discerned. Much of this research has been produced by investigators across the country working in a variety of disciplines and networked through a coalition called the Father Involvement Research Alliance (FIRA). Exploratory studies, descriptive surveys, and policy analyses are examining what fatherhood means to men, how they learn fatherhood and are involved with their children, and the ways that family law and provisions for parental leave affect fathers' involvement with their children, prenatally onward. Father-focused practice in community programs is also gaining momentum. And some provincial governments have recently allocated funds for training and employment of father outreach and support workers in community-based family resource centers, child development centers, and community health promotion programs.
While these developments do not yet constitute a father involvement movement, a growing network of Canadian investigators, policymakers, and practitioners are raising the visibility of fathers as important contributors to the quality of children’s lives. This article highlights research, policies, and programs that promote positive father involvement and explores shifting gender roles, diversity, and social inclusion as themes that are particularly salient to fatherhood in Canada.

CURRENT TRENDS
Shifting Gender Roles
One of the essential ways that Canada supports families is via the 2001 Employment Insurance Act, which allows parents to receive almost a year of paid parental leave. While the initial 15 weeks can only be taken by mothers as maternity benefits, either mothers or fathers can take the latter 35 weeks. While mothers most frequently take that leave as well, fathers increasingly are taking more. In 2000, the last year before Canada introduced the new leave allowance for fathers, only one in 33 men took paid parental leave. By 2006, one in five men took paid leave. The average length of a paid paternity leave in English-speaking Canada was 17 weeks (Marshall, 2006). In Québec, where fathers are entitled to 3-5 weeks of paternity leave with higher benefits than are provided under the federal program, over 50% of fathers take paternity leave (Doucet & Tremblay, 2007).

Pointing to shifting gender practices in parenting, Daly (2009) emphasizes the need to base programs of support for fathers on a recognition that the kinds of information and support men need—and the kinds of programs they will respond to—are likely to be different from those for mothers. In Canada, most fathering programs modeled after mothering programs have not been well-attended.

Daly suggests turning the tables and focusing on children’s impact on their fathers as a more productive approach to understanding and reaching out to fathers. In his exploratory study, Daly found that fathers of young children often talk about how their children contribute to their sense of growing maturity, responsibility, and engagement, and help them learn about and deal with their own emotions in the context of their parent-
at various stages (Ball, 2009; Daly, Ashbourne, & Brown, 2009; Devault, Dubreau, & Forget, 2009; Este & Tachble, 2009). However, the research also underscores the need to consider—and provide programs that reflect and address—the diverse needs, strengths, goals, and circumstances of Canadian fathers. Acknowledging diversity among fathers is a first step toward a socially inclusive vision for father involvement initiatives (Long, 2007).

**Father Support Initiatives**

Obstacles to providing socially inclusive services for fathers in Canada have included a lack of referral systems and information networks. A decade ago, Taylor, Brown, and Beauregard (1999) observed that fathers, practitioners, volunteers, and investigators craved opportunities to share information and actively support father involvement. However, they noted that “across Canada, people who do innovative work with fathers remain isolated from one another” (p. 134). To counter that isolation, several coalitions have since formed to raise fathers’ visibility, share and mobilize knowledge, and lobby governments to create new policies, reform existing ones, and invest in father involvement initiatives. Key organizations and initiatives are described below.

**National and Regional Father Involvement Initiatives**

A handful of important initiatives have led to some promising first steps at the community level, toward practitioner inservice training about how best to reach out to support father involvement. However, these initiatives have been time-limited (e.g., two to five years’ duration) and dependent upon one-time, special project funding. An outstanding need remains for advocacy and a commitment to father involvement at the provincial, territorial, and federal government levels.

*The Father Involvement Research Alliance* (FIRA; www.fira.ca). FIRA is the most significant initiative in Canada to date. It was formed in 2002, when over 100 community activists, social service practitioners, researchers, and policymakers recognized their common interests and the value of forming a national network. FIRA has grown out of and supported regional alliances that participate in research and community action, such as the Father Involvement Initiative–Ontario Network and the Father Involvement Network of BC (British Columbia). Members share a commitment to the development and exchange of knowledge on father involvement.

FIRA has been active in bringing forward policy recommendations through provincial and federal roundtables, consultations, and expert advisory committees. It has supported community capacity-building projects, as well as a project to enhance postsecondary training in community engagement focused on fathers. FIRA’s communications officer writes regular articles on father involvement for *Today’s Parent* magazine, and many FIRA investigators initiate contact with radio talk show hosts to ensure positive coverage and opportunities for advocacy. FIRA and its affiliates are campaigning the federal government to sponsor a national father involvement advisory council or secretariat. This body would serve as a clearinghouse to share information, knowledge, and resources related to father involvement among family-focused organizations and networks and with the public at large. FIRA also hopes to stimulate federal government investment in a research grant program to fund community-engaged investigations of effective practices for supporting fathers’ involvement.

In 2008, FIRA convened the first national conference on fatherhood, which was attended by investigators, policymakers, and community-based practitioners. The unifying themes for the conference were diversity, community, and visibility. The conference illuminated the numerous positive impacts of recent research and knowledge mobilization activities, as well as the growing number of community and regionally based father involvement initiatives and programs across Canada (Hoffman, 2008).

*Father Involvement Initiative–Ontario Network* (FI-I-ON; www.cfii.ca). FII-ON is the first provincially based coalition of organizations and individuals with the goal of consolidating and mobilizing knowledge about father involvement, focusing on fathers of young children (0-6 years). The network takes a population health approach, emphasizing broad-based community engagement and diversity (FII-ON, 2001). Its goal is to be a catalyst for acknowledging and supporting fathers’ involvement in the development of healthy and resilient children. To achieve
this goal, FII-ON creates partnerships among various stakeholders, including fathers, mothers, service providers, policy- and decision-makers, employers and the business sector, labor organizations, professional associations, community-based coalitions, government agencies, academic institutions, and the media. To create a sense of common purpose and approach across diverse stakeholders, FII-ON is guided by the following principles: 1) child-first, 2) importance of both parents, 3) responsible father involvement, 4) social responsibility, 5) diversity, 6) empowerment, 7) collaboration, and 8) sustainability. Actions undertaken by FII-ON are decentralized and variously funded. They include community development, community capacity building, social marketing, creation of partnerships, knowledge development, and educational activities.

**Father Involvement Network—British Columbia** (FIN-BC; www.bccf.ca). FIN-BC essentially replicates FII-ON on a smaller scale, reflecting British Columbia’s smaller constituency, smaller budget, and shorter history. Similar networks are developing in other provinces.

**ProsPère** (www.graveardec.uqam.ca/prospere/). ProsPère is a Québec-based network that combines research, advocacy, a clearing house, and training for staff in community-based programs. The organization began in 1993 as a coalition of researchers focused on father involvement as a protection against child victimization. Their early research led to other studies (all conducted in partnerships with communities), to the development of a new tool to assess salient dimensions of father–child relationships, and to a series of training workshops for staff of community-based agencies that are well positioned to reach out to fathers.

**My Daddy Matters Because . . .** (www.mydad.ca). This Health Canada project surveyed community programs serving fathers across Canada. It produced a compendium of resources and a series of posters, television spots, and other social marketing tools under the slogan Fatherhood—It’s the best job on the planet.

**Invest in Kids** (www.investinkids.ca/). This initiative aims “to transform the way Canadian parents are educated and supported.” The organization offers a Parenting Partnership program designed to help new fathers and mothers become well-informed and effective parenting teams.

**Community-level Initiatives**

National and regional initiatives have provided encouragement, tools, and advocacy for some community-level initiatives. Examples of programs that have achieved some stability are noted below.

**More Than a Haircut** (www.macaulaycentre.org/barbershop_project.html). This Caribbean Canadian fathers’ group holds an innovative monthly drop-in support group for fathers in a community barber shop. The group facilitates conversation about important issues of concern to black fathers, such as teaching and reinforcing a positive cultural identity or guiding children’s behavior. Their publication *Black Fatherhood on Fathering: Tips From the Barbershop* is available on the website.

**Family Services Association of Toronto** (www.fsatoronto.com/). This association offers programs for gay, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual men aiming to become fathers, called Daddies and Poppas 2B, and peer support groups for those already involved as fathers.

**DadsCan** (www.dadscan.org). This Ontario-based group offers Canada’s longest standing pre- and postnatal father education programs. The “Dad Classes” is a 12½-hour program spread out over five weeks, and men usually attend when their wives are three to eight months pregnant. The approach is “less about teaching parenting or baby care techniques and more about helping men adapt to fatherhood.”

**Focus on Fathers** (www.ccssyr.org/Fathers/Groups.html). This program, offered by a faith-based organization in Ontario, has been successful in eliciting fathers’ participation through secular courses. The program is designed to give fathers insight, information, and strategies on parenting children from birth to 6 years old. Programs are available for fathers facing special challenges, as well as for young fathers, single fathers, and fathers belonging to a distinct cultural group (Caribbean, Chinese, First Nations, Iranian, Korean, Russian, etc).

**Young/Single Parent Support Network** (www.ottawayoungparents.com/yps.htm). This Ottawa group sponsors a Young Fathers Program that offers practical and social support and parenting education to young, mostly single, fathers. The program is funded in part by Health Canada’s Community Action Program for Children (CAPC), Ontario Trill-
The Janeway Family Centre (www.parentingskillsproject.com). This St. John's, Newfoundland, organization offers a six-week father education program through its Fathers' Network.

Embedding Supports for Father Involvement
As noted, government initiatives that are specifically mandated to support positive father involvement are virtually nonexistent in Canada. However, anecdotal reports suggest that support is being provided in a variety of ways through programs that do not ostensibly target father involvement. One example is Aboriginal Head Start, an early learning and holistic wellness program aimed at ensuring conditions for optimal development, health, and educational outcomes for indigenous preschoolers. A mandated component of the program is parent involvement, and many communities that host Aboriginal Head Start have successfully engaged indigenous fathers in the preschool programs and in special outreach and networking opportunities for fathers. Many Aboriginal Head Start and other community-based centers create their own program models using a set of resources created by the author as part of the nationally networked FIRA research project, including an inaugural video and a set of books about indigenous fathers’ journeys (Ball, 2007).

Challenges Ahead
Parenting programs for heterosexual couples and for expectant and new mothers are readily available in nearly every community in Canada. Yet, few programs or resources address the specific needs and interests of fathers. The initiatives described above are rare; they have been championed by individuals or small groups that worked tirelessly to get them started, and they are constantly at risk of being discontinued due to a lack of public support. Sustained government investment is needed in a variety of father outreach and support initiatives that address the languages, cultures, sexual orientations, needs, and goals of the diverse populations of fathers in Canadian communities.

The organizations mentioned above provide some training for community-based practitioners working with families. However, finding skilled male facilitators with parenting experience remains a challenge; again, funding is not readily available to offer training in father support. Scholars and community partners involved in FIRA have advocated for public investments in preservice education, as well as regularly scheduled inservice training for social service and health practitioners, to strengthen their preparedness and their skills in reaching out to and working effectively with fathers. Little progress has been made on this frontier to date.

A group of post-secondary educators based in the maritime provinces of Canada, called the Father Involvement in Education Institutions Action Group, is attempting to address this outstanding need. A recent survey (Hodgins & Ball, 2009) of all undergraduate courses offered in public postsecondary universities and colleges in social sciences, education, and human services found not one course that focused specifically on fatherhood, and only one course that focused specifically on fathers and mothers. Numerous courses are geared to families, but coverage of fathers' specific experiences, needs, and contributions is sparse. Credentialled practitioners need opportunities to become aware of some of fatherhood's unique challenges, as compared to those of motherhood, and of the diversity of fathers’ experiences, goals, and needs.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice
This article has provided an overview of developments in understanding and supporting positive father involvement in Canada. A number of promising steps have been taken, but many gaps remain. The community of scholars and practitioners focused on father involvement in Canada recognizes the need to appreciate fathers’ diversity and to refine our understanding of fathers’ aspirations for their roles in relation to children and family life. To avoid a monolithic and prescriptive image of what positive father involvement entails, scholars and some fathers are asking critical questions about one of Canada's most cherished values, that of social inclusion. As Long (2007) contends, a socially inclusive approach to providing support for fathers in Canada requires a new way of thinking about the diversity among men as individuals, as fathers within and apart from their families, and as cultural groups. To that end, several strategies are recommended:
• Invest in research to explore what fatherhood means to the broad spectrum of men in various settings and situations in Canada.

• Through community-based organizations and community-based research, involve fathers themselves in setting priorities for research, for policy reforms, and for improvements in program outreach and involvement of fathers.

• In practitioner training programs, include a focus on fathers’ unique contributions to children and families, and on how to honor and support them through community- and school-based initiatives.

• Disaggregate data analysis concerning “parents” to show mothers and fathers separately, so that demographic changes in household composition and caregiving patterns, in terms of father presence/absence and father involvement, can be discerned.

• Similarly, differentiate between mothers and fathers when designing and reporting on programs intended for “parents,” such as parent education, parent support, parent-child groups, parent-teacher sessions, and so on. Most often, these programs are designed for, delivered by, and subscribed by mothers, while fathers are considered secondarily, if at all.

CONCLUSION
Negotiating the tension between recognizing the diversity of Canadian fathers and working toward greater social inclusion for fathers in family policy, programs, and community life will be a preoccupying theme in future work on fathers’ involvement in Canada. Research showing the contributions that positive father involvement can make to children’s health, development, and education outcomes, as well as to fathers’ well-being, has provided strong support for advocacy efforts calling for more public recognition of fathers as a resource for children. Commitments are now needed from local and federal governments to prepare teachers, health and social service professionals, and child welfare workers to reach out to and support fathers’ transitions to fatherhood and their sustained, positive involvement with their youngsters. Changing constructions of gender roles in Canada—with greater flexibility and equality in the kinds of things that men and women do for their children—call for greater responsibility and equality in the ways that professionals and programs regard and reach out to fathers to ensure their optimal and sustained involvement.

References
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