

The Culture of Public Fathers in the Small City: Where does the culture of involved fathering reside in the public spaces of the small city?

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Father Involvement research often focuses on issues relating to the impacts of paternal engagement on child development and the broader benefits of Father Involvement for fathers and their families. This study arose from an initiative taken by a group of service providers from various children- and family-serving organizations in the Comox Valley which together constitute the Comox Valley Father Involvement Network. Their task was to identify an activity and event in which fathers were able to actively and publicly parent in this small city. Mapping spaces appropriate to the nurturing of Father Involvement was its first mission.

Let me begin by defining some of the terms of this question that we will be considering. An 'involved father' is a father whose enhances the well-being and healthy development of their child through a sensitive, supportive, nurturing, affectionate, encouraging, comforting, and accepting relationship. While parenting is often perceived to take place in the private realm, our focus is on this fathering 'culture' of shared values and sensibilities as it reveals itself in the public sphere : a place where fathers interact with their children in community with other fathers and children. This may express itself as a place of performance – active fathering together - or as a place of dialogue within a collective body (as expressed by Habermas). Finally, the small city in this case is a small valley – namely the Comox Valley on Vancouver Island - defined as the combination of a small city, Courtenay, a small town, Comox, a quaint village Cumberland, and the surrounding rural areas.

In the spring of 2006, a group of service providers from various children and family serving organizations in the Comox Valley - Success by 6, C.V. Boys and Girls Club, Vancouver Island Health Authority, Ministry of Children and Family Development, C.V. Family Services Association, Teddies & Toddlers Parent Support Program, and School District 71 - recognized a key community priority : to provide opportunities for fathers, particularly fathers of young children, to come together in organized, public, father-focused community events and programs.

This group participated in a workshop entitled "Changing Fathers ~ Evolving Practice" presented through the B.C. Council for Families, formed the Comox Valley Father Involvement Network (CVFIN) and began researching and planning for events that could meet this need in the community.

Over the past 30 years, even in the absence of basic data about fathers and fathers' experiences, Father Involvement research has advanced significantly, often focusing on issues relating to the influences of Father Involvement on child development and the benefits of Father Involvement for fathers and their families. Although fathers are often absent from focused demographic analyses – with the exception of policy research about child custody and access issues – an increasing number of researchers (starting in the late 1990's) have been "examining how fathers are constructing and redefining their roles and identities in a period of rapid social, economic and cultural change, in part to appreciate what factors enhance or constrain fathers' opportunities and efforts to provide for their children economically and be active engaged parents"(Lero, Ashbourne & Whitehead, 2006). Rarely, however, has this research focused on the subject of 'Fathering as a Public Culture', the value of these opportunities for fathers and their children relating to other fathers and their children, and looking at the factors that affect successful father participation in public spaces.

Community supports, events and public programs for parents of young children in the Comox Valley - parent/child drop-ins, summer park picnic days, parent education programs, neighbourhood houses - are diverse and offer valuable educational services as well as opportunities to meet and, critically, network and learn with other parents. However, to a great extent, these public opportunities of 'being parents with other parents' in organized community programs and at public events are populated by mothers and their children. Significantly, at a school-based Strongstart toddler and parent morning drop-in program or a public library afternoon Storytime, the participants inhabiting these parenting spaces are very often all mothers and their children, and the programs are almost always facilitated by women. Fagan and Palm have accurately identified that universal access services and programs (ones that are supposed to be designed to be accessible to anyone) "have been developed ... within a female-dominated context [and often would] require significant adjustment and change to be comfortable for men" (Lero, Ashbourne & Whitehead, 2006). Fletcher, an Australian author of *Defining Fatherhood*, further "suggests that it is not simply that services for infants and children are female-oriented, or that they are hostile to men, but rather that 'the invisibility of fathers is taken for granted'" (Lero, Ashbourne & Whitehead, 2006). He states that organized opportunities "targeting families and children often see mothers as particularly relevant and fathers as irrelevant. The challenge is to recognize the needs and concerns of fathers and incorporate these into more inclusive [or directed] programs that are relevant and responsive to the needs of fathers, mothers and their children" (Lero, Ashbourne & Whitehead, 2006).

An obvious exception to this scenario is evident with regard to the engagement of fathers in recreational or sports programs. "Fathers often take on leadership roles within sports organizations or community-based clubs, and they are actively present at children's games and practices. In these cases, the visibility of fathers and the inclusion of their needs as points of consideration when planning programs (e.g., practices at the end of the work day or on weekends, and including mothers and fathers in consultations with parents about upcoming events) is noteworthy"(Lero, Ashbourne & Whitehead, 2006). However, while fathers can be seen standing - supportive monoliths - on the sidelines of soccer games, there are, clearly, few public spaces or opportunities where fathers get to actively perform more broadly as engaged fathers in community with other fathers and their children. Where then is public father-focused cultural

activity welcomed and located in a small city?

The C.V. Father Involvement Network (CVFIN) recognized that the existing successful father-friendly public cultural events in the Comox Valley - an evaluation based on the longevity of the event and on accessible community-wide father and child participation in the events - included the basic factors of physical activity, low cost, and easy access. Could a long standing tradition such as the Father's Day Kite Flying event at the Goose Spit in Comox be replicated so that fathers had more than one day of public father celebration and community each year? Helpful research compiled by the Father Involvement Research Alliance (FIRA) - a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council CURA funded project at the University of Guelph's Centre for Families - offers further criteria and strategies for success in engaging Father Involvement. Significantly, Lamb and Oppenheim (1989) defined these critical factors: Father Involvement is influenced by "institutional practices, skills and self-confidence, motivation and support".

Addressing this national research and consulting best practices documented in grassroots Father Involvement events organized in other British Columbia small cities, the CVFIN network set about organizing a Father and Child Free Swim and Barbeque public event to create just such an opportunity. But would fathers come, and would they appreciate the chance to be public fathers in community? What is the necessary formula or program model that would attract fathers to come together and father publicly in this small city?

The resulting annual public father and child-focused cultural event, "The Comox Valley Father Involvement Network Dad and Kid Free Swim and B-B-Q", now in its fourth year, provides a model for identifying the criteria for creating, and a means of evaluating, a successful father-friendly public cultural event in the Comox Valley and other small cities. In the first pilot year of the Swim event (2007), approximately 90 fathers and children participated; in the second year, over 200 fathers and their children from across the Comox Valley were part of the event; the third year brought similar numbers, 250 participants, and a sense of having created a valuable community tradition. Fathers and children were asked to fill out brief surveys (adult and child versions created by CVFIN) in regard to the event they were attending and future father and child-focused public events in the Comox Valley. The event planning process (including organization, scheduling and public awareness / publicity), and survey results and their interpretation by the Father Involvement Network, will help to answer the question: What are the factors in creating successful father-friendly community cultural events in the Comox Valley and nurturing a culture of Public Fathers?

First, why a swim event? The CVFIN network realized that a public, accessible event for fathers necessarily needed to be free and inviting; they also had to provide fathers an atmosphere that was familiar and non-intimidating - a recreation and pool centre. Research has consistently indicated that scheduling of parent/child events often conflicts with work schedules for fathers, and so the decision was made to hold the event on a Saturday afternoon from 4:30-6 p.m. Informal focus groups of fathers made it clear that providing food - in this case barbequed hotdogs and juice/pop donated by the local Thifty's Grocery Store - was an important key to making the event complete. In order to provide support, CVFIN network hosts (male and female) welcomed fathers and children and encouraged a celebratory atmosphere - rather than a support initiative or a free lunch. While parent/child programs and events are customarily announced at schools and at other parent/child programs, the organizers recognized that a different public awareness strategy was required to reach this particular audience. Newspaper announcements with the heading "Kids, bring your Dads", free ticket leaflets handed out directly

to fathers on the street, and an invitation and demystification of the event on the local Shaw cable channel all aimed at reaching fathers with concrete 'dad' language and clear invitations.

We may assess the success of the event by returning to Lamb and Oppenheim's critical factors for successful Father Involvement. The 'institutional practice' of event venue, scheduling, publicizing strategy and even the type of food was adjusted to suit fathers. The location of a pool where fathers could actively play and swim with their children provided an invitation for them to display fatherly 'skills and self-confidence'. The 'motivations' included free swimming and a free lunch with no need to register in advance or special criteria for participation – all fathers and children welcome - and finally the 'support' was provided by helpful CVFIN volunteers asking only for feedback by completing a simple empowering survey.

The survey sheet, completed by fathers on one side and children on the other, revealed that the publicity in its many forms reached fathers, but most came out to the event because of 'word of mouth' from partners and other fathers– an interesting revelation that participating fathers were once removed from the primary publicity message. Participants had not been to previous CVFIN events, were extremely thankful for the event, and interested in volunteering at future activities; fathers were anxious to leave contact information. Perhaps not surprisingly, children's responses focused on their favourite parts of the event: swimming, water slides and eating. Both dads and kids had lots of ideas for future father and child events, with the clear favorites being skating, fishing and soccer activities – all accessible physical activities in outdoor public spaces.

Finally, what did this public culture of fathering look like? Well, nothing too surprising, but at the same time nothing that you see very often. Imagine a pool, water slides, and wading pools filled with fathers playing with their children and talking with the fathers beside them – not unlike what happens at the average parent/child program, but unusually more direct. Men looking to the side to see how 'someone else is doing it' - some modeling behaviour while others following a lead - in what appeared to be a supportive and non-judgmental environment. In the absence of all but a few mothers, play seemed to be a bit more physical and the sound of voices was deafening. When fathers and children turned their attention to the barbeque, fathers were anxious to fill out a survey and were vocal about supporting more such opportunities; the mood was relaxed and some men newly recognized other men as fathers rather than as working colleagues in the community. While ultimately the family unit of fathers and their own children remained, one could observe three fathers (relative strangers to each other) and 5 children (familiar to each other) sitting around a table eating - a new dynamic of interaction and community was created. Not all the fathers looked equally comfortable socially, but the children were very helpful in overcoming initial hesitation in joining into conversations or sitting with strangers. In short, the picture was that of a variety of fathers engaged with their children in the company of other engaged fathers – enjoying themselves on a Saturday afternoon.

The vision of the FIN network is to continue organizing these events – a winter movie, games and pizza night has been held successfully for the past two years - using this emerging formula and following survey suggestions in order to encourage a growth and diversity in this culture of fathers in public spaces. While plans are in place to create a communication network for local fathers and a monthly father/child recreation event, sustainable government funding is the main limiting factor. With research increasingly showing the critical role of father involvement for children in terms of social, emotional and cognitive development, it is indeed important that fathers, and the culture of public fathers, are enthusiastically supported by the wider community in the small city.

Works Cited

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