



Guidelines for Action

to Make Room for
Fathers in Child and
Youth Welfare Services

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Centre intégré universitaire de santé et de services sociaux du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal

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Context

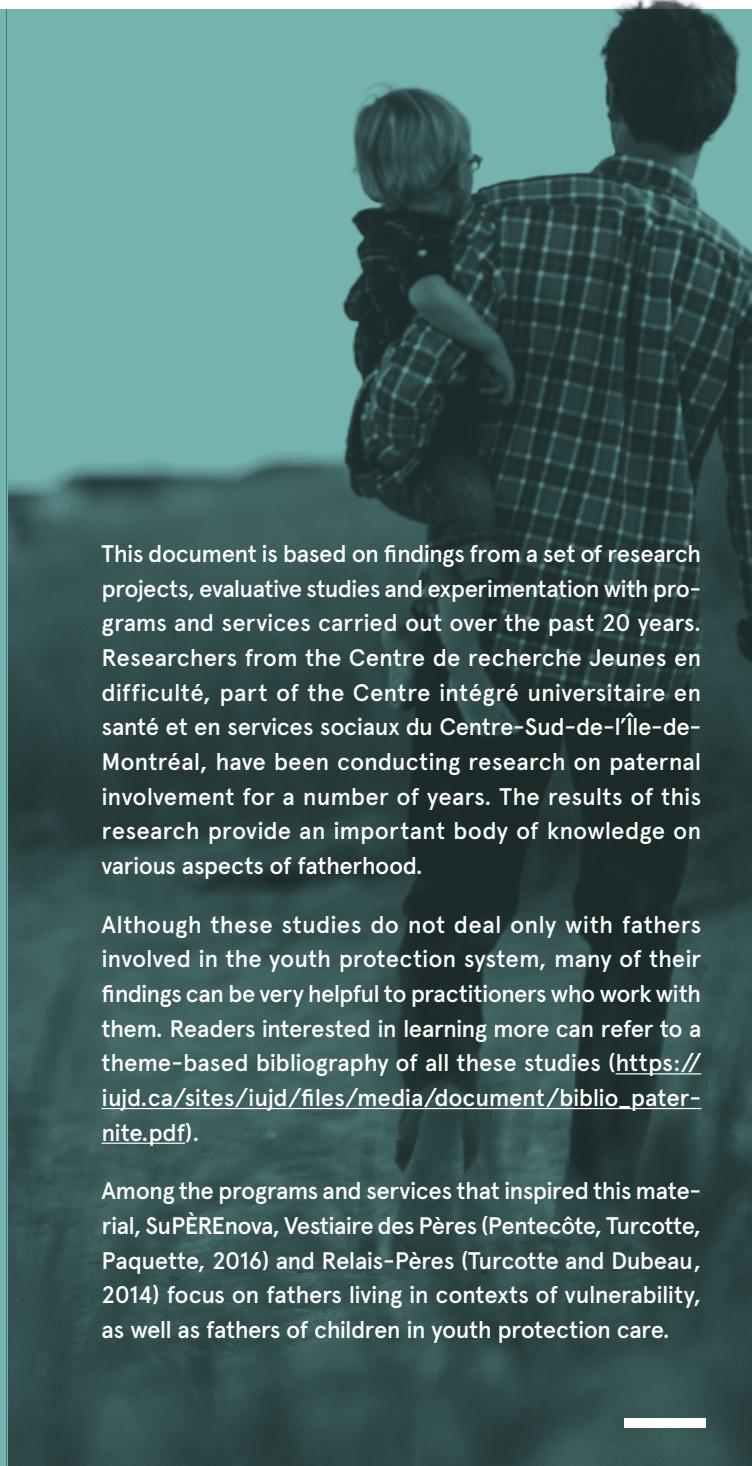
Recognizing the impact of increased paternal involvement on the well-being of children implies that fathers should be included in child and youth welfare services. This is all the more important given that the 2007 amendments to the Youth Protection Act (YPA) require that every effort be made to keep children in their natural families, thereby emphasizing the obligation to involve and engage both parents. The Youth Criminal Justice Act (YCJA) specifies that the parents of these young people must not only be informed of decisions that are made about them, but must also be encouraged to offer them support.

Including fathers in these services presents a major challenge for practitioners, who do not always have the guidelines and training to take into account the specifics of the father's role in a context of vulnerability. This document aims to share the latest knowledge and lessons from best practices aimed at involving fathers in their children's lives, particularly in the context of youth protection services. It is divided into three parts. The first is devoted to the importance of including fathers, the second deals with the challenges and obstacles to overcome in order to promote the involvement of fathers in child and youth welfare services, and the last part proposes guidelines for intervention.

This document is based on findings from a set of research projects, evaluative studies and experimentation with programs and services carried out over the past 20 years. Researchers from the Centre de recherche Jeunes en difficulté, part of the Centre intégré universitaire en santé et en services sociaux du Centre-Sud-de-l'Île-de-Montréal, have been conducting research on paternal involvement for a number of years. The results of this research provide an important body of knowledge on various aspects of fatherhood.

Although these studies do not deal only with fathers involved in the youth protection system, many of their findings can be very helpful to practitioners who work with them. Readers interested in learning more can refer to a theme-based bibliography of all these studies (https://iujd.ca/sites/iujd/files/media/document/biblio_paternite.pdf).

Among the programs and services that inspired this material, SuPÈREnova, Vestiaire des Pères (Pentecôte, Turcotte, Paquette, 2016) and Relais-Pères (Turcotte and Dubeau, 2014) focus on fathers living in contexts of vulnerability, as well as fathers of children in youth protection care.



Why make room for fathers in child and youth welfare services?

Because a father who is present and involved is important for the **CHILD**, for the **FATHER** himself and for the **MOTHER**.

A present and involved father is important for the CHILD because he:

- Supports the child's cognitive, emotional and social development.
- Can improve the child's economic security.
- Gives the child a male role model, thereby preventing him from over-idealizing or disparaging the father figure.
- Can offer protection against neglect.
- Is a resource to take into account when planning permanency for a child or youth entering foster care (in the context of youth protection).
- Is a positive factor in more frequent and earlier returns to the natural family when the child is in foster care.

A present and involved father is important for the FATHER because:

- Fatherhood has the potential to motivate and mobilize many men in vulnerability contexts. The birth of a child often gives meaning to their lives and is a call to take responsibility and make lifestyle changes (e.g. reduce substance abuse or contact with a criminal environment).
- The desire to be a good father can trigger actions that support social and professional integration.

A present and involved father is important for the MOTHER because he:

- Helps relieve her of the burden of multiple family responsibilities.
 - Reduces the risk of placing all blame on the mother for what is wrong with the children (mother blaming or scapegoating).
 - Reduces maternal stress and encourages better parenting practices
-



Making room for fathers in child and youth welfare services: the challenges

Making room for fathers in child and youth welfare services begins with an attempt to remove the barriers that prevent them from accessing services and programs. The scientific and clinical literature identifies five factors that hinder a greater integration of fathers into services for vulnerable families.

Social representations around the theme of absence

A major obstacle to integrating fathers in child welfare services is the tendency to assume they are absent from their children's lives. This trend results from a social construction of fatherhood whereby men in this context are seen as vulnerable, apathetic, resigned or irresponsible. These perceptions have an impact on the father's sense of competence as a parent, as well as his self-confidence, both being variables that determine his involvement.

In fact, research has shown that fathers are more involved than we think in the lives of their children in the child welfare system, and many of them want to contribute to their well-being.

A predominantly female service environment

The culture of intervention, along with social expectations, are strongly influenced by the values and learning styles of women, which may contribute to the "invisibility" of fathers in services for children and their families. Consider the following:

- Conceptual models often focus on the mother-child relationship.
- The mother's standards define the father's skills.
- Issues related to fatherhood are rarely addressed in university training.
- The culture of social intervention, along with certain types of assistance, are not compatible with the definition of the male role and the way men are socialized, making it difficult for them to seek help.

A reluctance among practitioners to work with fathers

Some practitioners admit they occasionally feel uncomfortable reaching out to the father to include him in the intervention. Their reluctance can be explained by various factors:

- Concern for the safety of the child and mother
- Fear of having to deal with aggressiveness and displays of hostility
- Concern for their own safety
- Fear of jeopardizing the bond of trust with the mother, or having less time to spend with her
- The prospect of an increased workload
- Lack of tools, guidelines and training to understand and interpret the father's attitudes, behaviour and language.

A difficulty among men to ask for help

Some fathers find it hard to relate to the institutional logic. This can be manifested by intense mistrust, aggressiveness or withdrawal, which do not encourage empathy from practitioners. These behaviours can sometimes contribute to fathers being excluded from services.

Mother gatekeeping

The mother and maternal grandparents may want the father to remain “invisible” to services for children and their families. This can take many forms:

- Not identifying the father on the birth certificate
- Hiding the father’s existence or giving false information about him
- Refusing to allow the father to have contact with the child, blocking his visitation rights
- Refusing to refer the father to practitioners, or opposing his involvement in the case planning process

The reasons may be positive (because they want to keep the child safe or in cases of domestic violence) or negative (because they are angry about a separation). The father may also be excluded for financial reasons (for fear of jeopardizing access to certain benefits or programs), or to protect him from the system (for example, in cases where his socio-legal status is unresolved).



Targets & guidelines for action

To address these challenges, practitioners must take action on several systemic levels at the same time. This entails working not only with fathers, but also with mothers, from a perspective of complementarity of parental roles and co-parenting issues. This ecosystemic approach also implies taking action in service environments, so that they are more open, better adapted and more welcoming to fathers.

Global environment

- Policies and measures to promote work-family balance
- Policies related to fatherhood
- Societal values and beliefs regarding the father's role

Living environment

- Financial situation and employment status
- Support from social network
- Openness to fathers in services
- Working conditions

Family unit

- Mothers values and beliefs regarding the father's role
- Mother's work constraints
- Power sharing in the family
- Characteristics of the marital and co-parenting relationship

Father

- Sense of parental competence
- Values and beliefs regarding the parental role
- Social status
- Age

Working with the father

Making room for fathers in child and youth welfare services

1 | ... means doing everything possible to build a bond of trust with the father.

Youth protection practitioners are required to identify, reach out to and mobilize fathers. The challenge, in this case, is to maintain contact with the father once he has been reached. The goal is to build a trust-based relationship. This is a considerable challenge, since these men often have a history of broken relationships, a major mistrust of institutions, and disqualification in their role as fathers.

The keys to success in building a trust-based relationship with the father are as follows:

- Welcome the father as he is, without judgment.
- Take the time to get to know him, focusing on the father's point of view.

The goal is to give the father the opportunity to tell his story (or give his version of facts), to talk about his experience as a father, his relationship with his children, what it means to be a father, the role he wishes to play in his children's lives, as well as his fears and needs regarding the role of father. To successfully open up a dialogue the practitioner should, as much as possible, focus on informal chats and listening closely to each person's story.

- Work to identify the needs behind certain behaviours and attitudes that may appear unacceptable at first glance.

Men tend to express their frustrations, fears and emotions differently from women. In their relationships with services, this may take the form of aggressive behaviour or a withdrawn attitude. No abusive behaviour can be tolerated, but in order to build a good relation with the



father, case workers must be willing to recognize that these behaviours or attitudes may be a way of expressing his emotions, and not a personal attack against them.

➤ Focus on strengths and build on positive things.

This implies believing in the father's importance for his child and in his ability to change. Actions taken in this regard should be aimed at helping the father:

- Understand the positive aspects of his behaviour and take an interest in what is going well with his child.
- Recognize what he can do differently with his children.
- See his value in roles other than that of provider (especially important for unemployed fathers).
- Feel responsible rather than guilty.

➤ Begin the intervention by responding quickly to the father's immediate and tangible needs in areas that cause worry and anxiety in his daily life.

2 | ... means taking the time to better understand and interpret the father's needs.

The experience of SuPÈREnova, Relais-Pères and other father involvement programs and services indicate that there are five types of needs among fathers living in vulnerable contexts:

Learn to be a good father.

Behind this goal lies the need to learn how to “take care of children,” communicate with them, interpret their signals, stimulate them and play with them. Assessments of the father-child relationship carried out as part of SuPÈREnova highlight the importance of acting on three dimensions of the father's role: comfort, stimulation and discipline.

Improve self-confidence as a father.

At the root of this need lies a lack of benchmarks and models for the father's role, as well as experiences that have disqualified him as a father.

Break the social isolation.

Many fathers feel the need to improve relationships with people around them, get to know other fathers and participate in neighbourhood activities.

Improve communication with the child's mother.

Clinical discussions as part of the SuPÈREnova project revealed significant problems in the relationship between spouses and ex-spouses, highlighting the importance of considering the co-parenting dimension of the father's role in father involvement programs and services.

Improve socioeconomic living conditions.

This may involve improving the father's housing situation, so that he can welcome his child at home, as well as balancing the family budget, getting out of chronic debt or finding a job to give his child better stability.

3 | ...means supporting the father in becoming more involved with the child.

To help the father better meet his child's needs, the following conditions for success have been identified:

- Involve the father in the case planning process and actively support his participation in all decisions concerning his child, especially those relating to permanency planning in the context of foster care.
- Set realistic goals that the father can achieve, and acknowledge his successes both big and small.
- Adopt approaches that are gender-sensitive, i.e. adapted to the specific interests, learning styles and relationship patterns of men. This includes activities that are task-and action-oriented, focusing on solving concrete problems and emphasizing the future rather than past actions.
- Offer enjoyable, fun-focused activities that connect the father with his child and with other fathers. This type of activity not only provides an opportunity to learn new things, but also encourages the emergence of new networks of socialization for the father and his child.
- Focus on networking, e.g. connecting the father to the community's resources. This serves a variety of purposes:
 - 1— Improve work with the father by providing complementary services.
 - 2— Help him identify as a member of a community.
 - 3— Break his social isolation.

Whatever the situation, the referral is always personalized and, in most cases, the outreach worker accompanies the father to the needed service or resource.

Working within the family unit

Making room for fathers in child and youth welfare services

1 | ... means supporting work in tandem with both parents, with a view to encouraging and supporting co-parenting relationships, i.e.:

- ✎ Working with the mother to get her to make more room for the father, even if they no longer live together.
- ✎ Making the mother aware of the value of the father's involvement for the child's education and development.
- ✎ Improving the quality of the relationship between spouses or ex-spouses, including building strong communication around childrearing issues, and using mediation to help parents when needed.

2 | ... means helping children and young people improve their relationship with their father, especially if they have been exposed to negative information about him.

3 | ... means raising awareness among those around fathers (e.g. grandparents and friends) of the father's importance for the child's well-being.



Working within the service environment

Making room for fathers in child and youth welfare services

1 | ...means creating a father-friendly service environment

Making a service environment more open to fathers and more welcoming to men includes adjusting schedules, displaying images of fathers on walls, in information brochures and in advertising. It also means routinely inviting them to take part in educational activities for their children and adapting existing programs and services to offer activities geared specifically to fathers.

2 | ...means implementing awareness-raising activities and training programs for the staff.

These activities should help practitioners:

- Assess their own attitudes, values and beliefs about the importance of fathers to children.
- Improve their understanding of men's learning styles and ways of seeking help.

3 | ... means having the support of management to support fatherhood.

Practitioners must be able to count on the support of management to implement programs, services and activities for fathers.

A photograph of a man with a beard holding a baby, overlaid with a teal semi-transparent filter. The man is looking down at the baby, who is looking towards the camera.

To learn more:

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