

Caring Dads: Helping Fathers Value their Children

The Potential of Fathers in Families

Research done over the past two decades has clearly established that, when fathers are positively involved with their families, children benefit cognitively, socially, emotionally and developmentally. Unfortunately, the generally positive impact of father-child contact cannot always be assumed. There are over 100 thousand substantiated child maltreatment investigations in Canada each year, with over half involving fathers as perpetrators (Trocmé et al., 2010). Police reports further confirm that fathers are perpetrators in the vast majority of cases of domestic violence. Of even greater concern, men clearly predominate as perpetrators of severe, injury-causing physical abuse of children and women and commit the majority of family-related homicides (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2006). Despite the importance of fathers in families, our child protection and child and family mental health service systems tend to work primarily with mothers; a trend that is exacerbated when fathers are deemed to be high risk. Ironically, this means that those fathers who most need to be monitored and helped by our intervention systems are not involved. Men's children pay the price with higher rates of aggression, substance use, criminal involvement, suicide attempts, mental health problems and chronic health conditions.

What we are Doing to Better Address the Needs of Fathers and their Families?

Caring Dads is devoted to ensuring the safety and well-being of some of our communities' most valuable children through working with fathers who have been abusive, neglectful or violent in their families or who are deemed to be at high-risk for these behaviours. We have developed an empirically-based manualized group parenting intervention for men that includes contact with mothers and coordinated case management. Associated with this program, we provide training for communities and for group leaders and ongoing consultation for improving services.

In Canada, the Caring Dads program is operating in London, Thunder Bay, Toronto, Niagara region, Huron-Perth county, Oxford county, Waterloo region, Oakville, Burlington and Sudbury. Caring Dads has also gained international attention and the program is running in the USA (Massachusetts, Colorado, California, Texas), Sweden, Germany, Ireland and is being advanced as a national program in the United Kingdom.

Evidence for Efficacy

We have been engaged in ongoing, community-based, collaborative, cross-site research on the efficacy of Caring Dads. To date, we have established that:

- Caring Dads is meeting a significant need within and across communities, as shown by referral patterns and numbers and by request for the program from other communities
- Caring Dads is liked by fathers, their families, group counsellors, professionals who refer men to the program
- There is a match between the theory and intervention strategies behind Caring Dads and the characteristics of fathers referred to the program

- Evaluation of change from pre- to post-treatment of approximately 100 clients completing the program finds evidence for statistically and clinically significant change in risk mechanisms for maltreatment, specifically in fathers' overreactivity to children's misbehaviour, ability to co-parent with children's mothers, and their ability to prioritize their children's needs.

Challenges and Directions

More rigorous research. At this point in program development, Caring Dads requires more rigorous research evaluation. It is important to establish that the program is able to help men and their families and that it is not having unintended negative effects. Answer these questions require randomized control trial research following men and their families over a one or two year period. A challenge for us has been finding the approximately \$500,000 necessary to conduct this research.

Structure for scale up. In the past year, more and more communities have begun contacting the Caring Dads program for information about training, accreditation, consultation and start-up. This interest is part of a wave of change in practice with fathers, evidenced in documents such as the *What About Dads* report to the US Department of Health and Human Services, B.C. Research to Practice Network report *Fathers in the Child Welfare System* and the launching of the National Institute on Fatherhood and Domestic Violence. We are currently ill-prepared to respond to this increased demand. We have the beginnings of a structure in place for a new website, a facilitator accreditation process and a train-the-trainer model but we lack the human resources required to manage and support the program. We would benefit from one-time funding to support the development of a program structure that is able to generate sufficient income to be self-supporting.

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