

# Perspectives on being a father from men involved with child welfare services

Gary Cameron, Nick Coady and Sandy Hoy

Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University, Kitchener, Ontario, Canada

## Correspondence:

Gary Cameron,  
Faculty of Social Work,  
Wilfrid Laurier University,  
Kitchener,  
Ontario,  
Canada N2H 3W8  
E-mail: camerongary@wlu.ca

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## ABSTRACT

Fathers can make positive contributions to their children's well-being. However, involving the literature and this research indicate that fathers are much less likely to be engaged with child welfare services than mothers. This paper reports the findings of life story research with 18 fathers involved with child welfare. It focuses on these men's perspectives of fatherhood and their relationships with their children. Also, reactions to these fatherhood stories from father and service provider focus groups are examined. The findings challenge common perceptions of these fathers and highlight similarities and differences in perspectives between fathers and service providers. Implications for engaging fathers in child welfare practice are discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

The review of the literature for this research indicated that fathers are largely ignored in the child welfare literature discussions about interventions and what children need in their lives. It is also clear that fathers are much less involved than mothers when their families become involved with child welfare agencies. The reason so few men have been actively involved in these services is neither due to the general absence of men in such families nor primarily to the difficulty in engaging men in such interventions. Rather, the literature attests to a strong tendency among child welfare workers to overlook fathers' involvements with their families (Daniel & Taylor 1999; Franck 2001; O'Donnell 2001; Scourfield 2001, 2003; Risley-Curtis & Heffernan 2003; Dubowitz *et al.* 2006; Strega *et al.* 2008, 2009; Bellamy 2009; Brown *et al.* 2009; English *et al.* 2009; Lee *et al.* 2009; Malm & Zielewski 2009). One consequence of this lack of attention to fathers is that very little is known about how they perceive their everyday lives, relationships with their children and families or child welfare service involvements.

This paper adds to the nascent literature highlighting the perspectives of fathers involved with child welfare. It draws on 18 life stories collected from fathers involved with a child welfare agency in South-

ern Ontario, Canada (see Note 1). These life stories attempt to describe father's experiences in various life domains from their perspectives. Each father was invited to decide what was important to include in their stories guided by a few general questions (Riessman 2008). This paper focuses on what it meant to these men to be fathers and on their perceptions of their engagements with their children. More detailed consideration of these fathers' experiences with child welfare service providers is available elsewhere (Cameron *et al.*, in press; Coady *et al.* 2012). In addition, separate focus groups of fathers and child welfare service providers read and discussed summaries of these 18 stories. Their reactions to these life stories are compared. The implications of these findings for fostering constructive child welfare engagements with fathers are considered.

In reading the paper, it can be helpful to understand the authors' perspective. Our experiences and prior research predispose us to believe that it is often useful and possible to engage with fathers of children involved with child welfare services. We also believe that fathers are important in children's lives. Finally, we think that fathers have both rights and responsibilities when their children become involved with child protective services.

The Partnerships for Children and Families Project's (2003) program of research highlighted how

little was known about fathers in families involved with child welfare services. They were acknowledged mainly as potential dangers to women and children. They were often defined in quite limited and negative terms by their women partners. They usually were not engaged with child welfare service providers, even if they lived with the mother and children. From our perspective, the descriptions of fathers by others resembled 'cardboard cut outs' rather than real people.

Earlier in this program of research, similar life stories were gathered from mothers involved with child welfare services (Cameron & Hoy 2003; Freymond & Cameron 2007). These stories showed greater complexities and strengths than conventional images of these women. Why should this not be the case for fathers? And could not our capacity to engage constructively with these men be increased by knowing more about how they perceived their everyday lives and being a father? These questions provided the motivation for the fathers' life story research presented in this paper.

The literature suggests that men tend to be emotionally and physically avoided by child welfare service providers (Lazar *et al.* 1991; O'Hagan 1997; Daniel & Taylor 1999; Franck 2001; O'Donnell 2001). Male partners are often viewed by child welfare service providers as transient and interchangeable (Marshall *et al.* 2001; Scourfield 2003). Reinforcing men's invisibility is mothers offering their own interpretation of fathers' roles in children's lives and effectively acting as gatekeepers (Sonenstein *et al.* 2002). Service providers who do engage with fathers have reported feeling less capable in their involvements with men (Duggan *et al.* 2004).

Some have argued that the lack of attention to men in families involved with child welfare results in women being blamed and held responsible for most of the problems in families. Some attribute this focus to a gendered occupational discourse in child welfare that supports excluding men. This exclusion has been noticed whether fathers are living with their partner and children or not. When men are ignored by child welfare, they are neither given fair opportunity to be involved in family matters nor are they held responsible for family problems (Swift 1995; Risley-Curtis & Heffernan 2003; Strega *et al.* 2008, 2009).

In theory, fathers are now understood to have a positive contribution to make to children's well-being. This is considered to be true whether or not the father is living in the home (Sanders 1996; Coley 1998; Lamb 2000; Eggebeen 2002; Palkovitz 2002; Sonen-

stein *et al.* 2002; Featherstone 2003; Guterman *et al.* 2009).

Fathers are generally more engaged with their children than in previous decades and the majority of noncustodial fathers remain involved in their children's lives to some extent, though there is evidence that this engagement decreases over time (Lupton & Barclay 1997; Daniel & Taylor 1999; Cabrera *et al.* 2000; Eggebeen 2002; Sonenstein *et al.* 2002; Mincy *et al.* 2005). Nonetheless, fathers generally are still often seen as less essential parents than mothers (Lupton & Barclay 1997; Daniel & Taylor 1999).

There is some evidence from the literature that fathers involved with child welfare who wish to be more involved with their children frequently have to overcome obstacles and demonstrate their commitment in ways that mothers often do not (Franck 2001; O'Donnell 2001; The National Child Welfare Resource Centre for Family-Centered Practice 2001; Sonenstein *et al.* 2002). Fathers are often seen as potential physical threats to their partners and children, as well as to child protection service providers. This can contribute to a reluctance of front-line service providers, as well as foster parents, to be actively involved with these men (Greif & Bailey 1990; O'Hagan 1997; Marshall *et al.* 2001; Scourfield 2001, 2003; Featherstone 2003). Predominantly female service personnel may fear that men may become violent, particularly in situations of domestic violence when men may be actively and automatically avoided (O'Hagan 1997; Featherstone 2003). There are recommendations in the literature for a more concerted effort to engage fathers in child welfare services through intervention models that are physically and psychologically more accessible to men (Hopkins 1972; Hendricks 1987, 1988; Harris 1991; Leashore 1997; Dalla & Gamble 1998; Daniel & Taylor 1999; Peled 2000; Franck 2001; Connor 2002).

A recent review (Shapiro & Krysik 2010) of five social work journals found that only 24% of articles about families included information about fathers. Also, most of the available research about fathers involved with child welfare focused on their limitations. They were portrayed in terms of their personal challenges, difficulties in their partner relationships and criminal or delinquent activities (Lazar *et al.* 1991; Hamer 1997; O'Hagan 1997; Scourfield 2001, 2003; Devault & Gratton 2003; Featherstone 2003; Eamon & Kopels 2004; Bellamy 2009; Brown *et al.* 2009). While some suggested that a majority of families involved with child welfare authorities have men in fathering roles, consideration of their capabilities and

potential contributions to caring for their children remain largely absent from the literature (Hendricks 1983; Bellamy 2009).

## METHODS

A life story interview approach was used to gather information about fathers' lives, allowing fathers to highlight what they considered essential to their stories (Riessman 2008). The interviewer was a guide and responsive listener to fathers' stories and interpretations (Atkinson 1998; Haglund 2004). This method was chosen to centre fathers in elaborating their identities and to provide more nuanced portraits of individual fathers. Finally, it was selected to engage fathers in talking about aspects of their lives beyond their experiences as child welfare clients.

Eighteen fathers were chosen randomly from a longer list of cases identified from computer records at the host agency that had a custodial or noncustodial father involved with child welfare services in some way. One constraint on this selection processes was including a comparable proportion to the host agency's proportion of cases having a child placed in care. Also, a similar proportion of cases involving domestic violence to the host agency's ratio were selected.

Given the relatively small sample of fathers, it cannot be assumed that these fathers are 'representative' of fathers at this child welfare agency or elsewhere in the system. As with most research of this nature, the focus is on generating potentially useful insights from the experiences of this particular group of fathers.

Table 1 shows the fathers' age, marital status, employment, the living arrangements of the children and their ages. It also includes the reasons for the family's child welfare involvement. These fathers were all Caucasians. This sample included fathers with custody of their children to fathers whose children had become permanent wards of the state. It included men of various ages, although these fathers may have been a little bit older overall than the agency norm. The fathers were facing common child welfare concerns including physical and sexual abuse, domestic violence and family conflict, anger and addictions, physical and mental illness, and youth emotional and behavioural challenges. While it is certain that these men had backgrounds and challenges common in child welfare, it is essential to highlight that this was not a representative sample. For example, it probably included more instances where the mothers' behaviours were a primary concern as well as a higher proportion of single fathers.

Fathers were interviewed two or three times, representing about 4–6 hours of conversation with each father. All of the interviews were carried out by the authors. A very simple interview strategy was used involving a preamble asking each father to imagine that a movie or book of his life was being made and to decide what was in the story. Fathers were asked where they would like the story to begin and neutral probes were used to encourage them to discuss this topic. The interviewer kept a list of additional topics mentioned during the discussion and returned to them later in the interview. Otherwise, the father was asked what came next in the story. Interviewers also asked questions about a standard set of topics (e.g. childhood, family life, education, work, child welfare involvement) in later interviews if these were not discussed through the previous procedures. Each interview was audiotaped and listened to by the interviewer prior to the next interview to identify possible focuses for discussion.

Each interview proceeded on the basis of informed consent and participants were given a gift of \$100 for consenting to be interviewed. The research ethics were approval by the appropriate committee at Wilfrid Laurier University. The tapes for each father's interview were transcribed and each respondent received a copy of this transcript for his own use. Respondents who wished also were given a copy of the study's summary report.

Two broad analytic strategies were used with these stories. First, three research team members read the complete transcript of the interviews with each father. They agreed on the predominant topics and story lines in each life story. The story lines and topics were encapsulated in an approximately 13–15-page summary story almost exclusively in the respondent's own words. Each respondent received a copy of this summary to verify its appropriateness. The purpose of these summaries was to allow general comparisons to be made across fathers' stories. However, unlike thematic analyses, in life story research, the goal is to make such comparisons without losing a sense of individual stories (Riessman 2008).

To aid with the interpretation of these stories, one group of six self-selected fathers involved in the study, and another group of nine self-selected child welfare service providers at the host agency, read all 18 story summaries. Each group met separately for about 3 hours to share their reactions to the stories. Each group was asked to share their understanding of the lives and child welfare service involvements of the men in the stories. They were also invited to reflect on the

**Table 1** Participants' pseudonyms and demographic and family descriptions

Name	Age	Children	Relationship status	Employment status	Description of Children's Aid Society (CAS) involvement
Burt	39	Single dad, son (3); son (5) lives with ex-partner	Separated	Employed, construction	Accused mother of abuse; She accused him of molesting son
Caleb	33	Child (4); stepson (7)	Lives with common-law wife	Employed, seasonal jobs	Caleb hit stepson.
Carlos	25	Child (18 months); single father	Single	Employed, seasonal work	Child's mother use of drugs
Collin	51	2 sons (15, 17) in foster care; 1 daughter (20) independent	Separated for 10 years	Employed, night security guard	Children were taken into care from mother.
David	44	2 biological children (18, 20) separated from for 10 years; stepchild (15) in foster care	Second marriage	Employed	Stepchild arrested numerous times, after custody chose to go to foster care; accused David of abuse
Dean	34	Daughter (3) lives with mother	Separated	Employed, meat packing	Doctor smelled marijuana; on CAS visit saw black eye of partner (domestic violence)
Dylan	38	Twins with special needs removed at age 5	Single	Social assistance	Children are crown wards.
Eric	43	2 children (12, 14)	Married	Employed, machinist	Children in care for 1 year
Felix	39	2 daughters (ages 10, 12) in home	Married	Unemployed	Sister came forward with sexual abuse as a child; CAS removed from home for 3.5 years
George	41	3 daughters (4, 5, 8) and 2 stepdaughters in home	Lives with common-law wife	Runs own business	Ex-wife's drug addiction and prostitution
Nigel	44	Son (14) lives with him; daughter (7) lives with ex-wife	Divorced	Employed, printing business	Children were in care; ex-wife accused him of threatening her; ex-wife's mental health issues
Paul	46	5 children; 1 daughter in care; some children have disabilities	Married; partner with health issues	Employed, factory for 30 years	Daughter in care due to behaviour issues
Peter	40	4 children (ages 5-12) and 1 stepchild live with their mother	Single	Social assistance; in rehab for stroke	
Raymond	44	3 teenage children - shared custody	Divorced	Employed	Physical abuse of daughter by ex-wife and her neglect of child with special needs
Rob	43	2 children (10, 11)	Married	Employed, factory work	Domestic violence incident; arrested; back in home
Tarak	56	Son (4); stepson (18)	Married	Disability support	Domestic violence; was required to be separated from family for 2 years
William	50	2 children with learning disabilities	Married	Employed, hospital housekeeping	Incest between siblings; son currently removed from home
Zack	50	Single dad to 3 of 5 children; 2 with mom	Separated from 2nd wife	Social assistance; piece work in home	5 children were apprehended when second wife left; unkempt state of house and his drinking

implications of these stories for child welfare services engaging with fathers. These group discussions were audiotaped and transcribed. These transcripts were examined for areas of agreement and disagreement in the fathers' and service providers' reading of these stories.

The second broad analytic strategy involved building a thematic coding schema from the original transcripts based on consensus among multiple readers from the research team. The major patterns within each part of this coding framework then were summarized with illustrations from the transcripts. However, to be consistent with narrative methods, coding focused upon larger sections of dialogue from each father about particular topics than is often typical in thematic coding (Riessman 2008). This intent was to continue to provide a sense of individual fathers' stories when presenting illustrations about specific topics.

Readers desiring access to the summary stories for the 18 fathers or wanting more supporting illustrations than could be included in this paper should access the material on ([www.wlu.ca/pcfproject](http://www.wlu.ca/pcfproject)).

There are several strengths to this study. It focuses broadly on the lives of these fathers and not upon their experiences as child protection clients. This allows us to see aspects of these men's lives that are normally less accessible. In addition, the 4 to 6 hours of conversation with each father provided fairly extensive information on his struggles, successes, fears and hopes. Nonetheless, these remain stories about only 18 fathers involved with one child welfare agency in southern Ontario, Canada.

These stories were considered by the authors to be constructions. They represent how these men chose to present themselves. Under different circumstances, and talking to someone other than a researcher, modified versions of these representations of self would emerge (Riessman 2008). Inevitably, even though supporting illustrations are provided, this paper has been shaped by the readings and interpretations of these life stories by the authors (Alvesson & Skoldberg 2009).

## RESULTS

### Father interviews

#### *Importance of becoming a father*

Most of the participants talked at length about benefits of being a father. Almost all of the fathers at some

point commented on what becoming a father meant to them. Three fathers were less enthusiastic about becoming a father. However, for most, it was one of the defining events of their lives. Such a sentiment was most obvious among fathers who were still active in caring for their children:

'I was the happiest person on earth. When I left, you know, that day I was like, I can't believe I'm a father, and I said, 'You know, I'm, I'm gonna do everything I can to take care of you and make sure you're ok.' And when I left the hospital with her, I was so proud. I was showing everybody . . .' (Carlos [see Note 2])

' . . . because like my son, he was just like you know, my pride and joy right, and him and I had been like, like this since he was a baby, right?' (Nigel)

Approximately a third (31%) of the fathers interviewed no longer had their children living with them. Some of these men acknowledged that this was in the best interests of their children. In a couple of instances, the children had become permanent wards of the state. Yet these fathers also communicated the importance having children had for them, sometimes hoping that connections with their children could be established again when they were older:

'My plans are to move out, get a two bedroom apartment. One room for me, one room for Victoria on the weekends . . . I don't wanna be the every other weekend dad . . . it's the way she looks up at you . . . and you can see the pure, pure love. Something nobody can take from me.' (Dean)

#### *Motivation for positive life changes*

About one third of these fathers described how their concern for their children provided the motivation to try to make difficult yet necessary changes in how they were living:

' . . . I didn't want to be . . . pushing my baby down the street in a stroller and have a car pull up beside me and shoot me down and have my baby roll down the street, or sit there without a father . . .' (George)

'I went into detox . . . same afternoon as [Children's Aid Society (CAS)] took the kids . . . And they got me into a treatment centre . . . I spent twenty-one days there . . . [I got them back] eight months [later] . . .' (Zack)

#### *Rescuing children*

Three custodial fathers told long stories of the challenges they had faced 'rescuing' their children from inappropriate and sometimes dangerous living conditions with their mothers. These stories illustrated the time and effort invested over a long period of time by these men to regain custody of their children:

‘... just after we got divorced, she got into with a... bad crowd... she had this friend that was probably not the best sort of person she should have... And then 2001 I got a letter through the door... it was a court order saying... you’ve been summoned to go to court by your, by your ex-wife, she... as it turns out she thought that I was out to get her and out to kill her or something... (And had you made any threats or anything like that?) No I hadn’t, no I hadn’t actually...’ (Nigel)

### *Pain of separation*

Many fathers whose children were out of their lives for a limited period of time talked in very vivid terms about how terrible this time was for them. These men were strongly motivated to re-establish connections with their children:

‘[Because of the shock of having his kids removed from the home]... did a lot of, oh lot of pacing and, damage at work, you know, I did over, almost twenty thousand dollars worth of lost product [made mistakes at work]. (So it was affect, affecting your work?) Oh yeah, it was, it was work and everything.’ (Eric)

‘I had a huge loss... When it all went down the, the toilet and she [his first wife] took off with Thomas... I couldn’t think... I was getting lost just driving around the city, that I’ve known for fifteen years... I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t, couldn’t relax... It was... the darkest time of my life...’ (Burt)

Some of the fathers who were not able to live again with their children also voiced their distress over this loss.

### *Investments in parenting*

Five of these fathers cared for their children as single parents. Each clearly talked about his commitment to his children and the demands of being a single parent made upon him. Despite these challenges, each also portrayed the personal benefits of caring for his children:

‘(So wh- what’s it like being a single dad?) Well I have no social life... Uh, but I like being a single dad. I, I like going out and shopping for my kids and- and, you know, trying to buy them the right stuff and, uh, it’s, it’s hectic. It’s busy...’ (Zack)

‘(What’s it like being a single dad?) Well I don’t mind it... I’m home with Christopher [his son] and... we do a lot of things together. So I’m home cooking and you know, making lunches and doing laundry and stuff like that. And I don’t get to go out a lot [without son]... it’s a small sacrifice really, because I really enjoy the fact that he’s here.’ (Nigel)

Fathers with a partner also talked about their active investments in parenting their children:

‘(Do you, do you do a lot of the parenting?) Um, I do a lot of it. I do a lot preparing suppers... Because my wife’s not feeling good. I do the laundry... Vacuuming, now a lot of times on, during the week nights, because I’m tired, I come home from work... I might have to go out... there’s a doctor’s appointment, stuff like that... the weekends, if I’m not working, then, is basically just clean up.’ (Paul)

A notable pattern for many fathers was sharing activities with their children:

‘... lot of the times when Thomas and I get home, especially in the summer, what we do... for an hour, we’ll go and hang in the backyard and he plays, he’s got lots of cars and stuff. I get his pool filled up for him... we were both in it last night... sometimes we go down to the park... I’ll barbeque out in the backyard and Thomas and I will just hang out... We’d read our books out there. I set up a tent for him. Him and I sleep out there [sometimes] in the summer.’ (Burt)

Many of these fathers were heavily invested in providing a home for their children, as well as in their everyday care. Many talked about how their children were doing physically, socially and emotionally:

‘Tiffany has dyslexia. She’s in grade seven and Richard’s in grade ten, both in [family home town]. They’re both slow... Tiffany is in a special school program and has extra help at school... You have two kids living apart from each other... It’s back and forth, somebody had to stay with Tiffany to make sure she did her homework and help her out... You know we’ve had to make sure Richard gets fed well; clothes and whatever.’ (William)

‘Doing stupid silly little things, like leaving notes for them. I left my, my seventeen year old a note, just telling him how I respected him and everything else. And I figured he would just throw it out... And I found the note underneath his mattress, he actually kept... and my daughter kept hers, my other son kept his... Sundays is family dinner, everybody has to go and it’s still that way now.’ (Raymond)

On the other hand, most of these fathers talked about circumstances in their family homes that were harmful for their children. The majority were aware that their behaviours at this time represented a danger for their kids: Often these risks involved conflict or violence with partners, problems with addictions or criminal/delinquent behaviour. In most of these instances, at the time of the interview, these men were living with their children:

‘And, so we got into one fight... at Christmastime, ... where I hit her, and well we both were fighting, but I hit her... and there was one where it got really carried away, and the children witnessed it... we were both drunk... [He described reading some devastating testimonials given by his children about life in his home].’ (Rob)

‘And then Vicky was my first long term relationship, it was great. And then drugs got involved... it was hurting the

children, they seen us fighting all the time, arguing all the time . . . you know, which was no good.’ (Dean)

### Focus group interviews

Not surprisingly, the fathers’ and service providers’ focus groups drew upon very different life experiences in reading the 18 story summaries. Fathers identified with the fathers in the stories and supplemented their observations of the stories with comments about their lives and involvements with child welfare services. Although the stories made some of these fathers sad and angry, they did not overly surprise them. The service providers focused more on the child welfare service involvements in the stories and the implications for their future involvements with families. They periodically used professional templates to assess fathers’ circumstances and behaviours. They frequently expressed surprise about the stories. However, while the language used by the two groups was very different, and there were differences in emphasis, in our opinion, their areas of agreement were more significant.

Both groups acknowledged that circumstances in the homes in these stories required that something be done to help children and parents. Both commented on the difficult circumstances many fathers had to confront as children and as adults. Both commented on some fathers’ personal problems, with addictions and anger in particular. Both groups had specific criticisms about child welfare services. However, they recognized that in quite a few stories child welfare involvement provided the catalyst for needed changes in the home.

The dominant theme about fathering from both group discussions was the strong commitment most of these fathers showed to their children and how this often motivated them to try to make changes in their lives:

#### Fathers

‘No matter why the CAS have become involved, bottom line is you’re still loving, every single one of these fathers loved their kids . . .’ (P1 [see Note 3])

‘I would [say] . . . that all these father love their children . . . I think there’s a huge difference between these fathers and the fathers of a generation before . . .’ (P3)

#### Service providers

‘I think, right off the bat, that really struck me, was the level of joy at the births of their children . . . it’s very easy to start

thinking well, men don’t really care about their kids . . . it brought me back to the reality that men do care about their children.’ (P2)

‘And . . . surprisingly and remarkably, all of them were, they wanted better for their children . . . They weren’t looking for their wives to do it, they were gonna do it themselves . . .’ (P3)

The second major recognition in both group discussions was the persistence and strength showed by some fathers in struggling on behalf of their children and in coping with persistent difficulties in their lives:

#### Fathers

‘Some I’d call heroes . . . some of the men that got custody of their children from the lesser of the two parents . . . I think that’s great.’ (P3)

‘Fighters, I’d call them all, fighters.’ (P5)

‘Desperate [enough to carry on trying to be involved with their children] is another word that comes to mind.’ (P6)

#### Service providers

‘That, even though many of these people had experienced . . . all kinds of pain and anguish, they all had a really positive outlook on, on their life . . . and what they wanted for their children. And I thought wow, this is really amazing. Because we often see, we see them in a crisis state . . .’ (P2)

‘He’s [Paul] been working at the same job for twenty-eight years . . . Trying to provide a living for his children, struggling to [get] his children back, and things like that. And he’s been involved with social services all through his life, but . . . a lot of strengths come out. Emotional, spiritual, all kinds of strengths.’ (P7)

Both groups agreed that some fathers were ‘their own worst enemies’. Some distanced themselves from family life and child welfare service providers. Others clearly should not be caring for their children. On the other hand, both groups agreed that the fathers wanting to care for their children often confronted unique obstacles from child welfare service providers:

#### Fathers

‘The only profile they got is usually from the woman. And she’s so mad at you and she’s just saying anything to hurt you, to get you out of her life or get you in trouble. And then they’re gonna take that . . .’ (P1)

‘And I think maybe Children’s Aid should realize that the emotional attachment that fathers have for the children, it’s not just the mothers that have it with the children, it’s the fathers too.’ (P2)

#### Service providers

‘I was struck by how open fathers were to sharing their experiences . . . my work . . . focuses a lot on working with moms . . . And this really challenged my thinking around that.’ (P4)

'I have never asked a father, what do you see your role in this family . . . I've never said to a dad who's not living in the home of the children . . . where do you see you with your children . . . That's awful . . . I've never even thought of it until just now.' (P2)

There was one more major area of agreement between fathers and service providers about these fathers' stories. Both groups believed that it was necessary to make more concerted efforts to engage these fathers in child welfare services. They also thought that these fathers' commitment to their children created opportunities for service providers to connect with them.

## CONCLUSION

The stories told by the fathers in this research were much more complex and nuanced than the typical characterizations of these men. Equally important, these stories show that many of these fathers were not only willing but capable of engaging constructively with their children. However, to take advantage of this potential, child protections service providers need to become less fearful and more engaged with these men. They need to become more open to fathers' points of view. If the stories in this research are indicative of others experiences, many fathers involved with child protection authorities are willing to make substantial investments in their children's well-being.

This study supports the recommendation from the earlier literature review for more concerted efforts to engage fathers in child welfare services through intervention models that are physically and psychologically more accessible to men. This does not mean that learning how to meaningfully engage with fathers would be easy. Yet there is much to be gained through such connections.

This engagement process might begin by reinforcing in child welfare cultures that 'fathers matter to children'. A natural corollary would be creating a strong expectation that front-line service providers talk with fathers about family circumstances whenever this can be done. This would involve more service providers becoming comfortable talking with men. Ideally, there would be greater openness to fathers' perspectives on their families and what should be done.

There are suggestions from this research that the process of engaging fathers will not be identical to relating to mothers. In addition, a substantial obstacle to engaging men is that so little is known about their lives and how they experience child welfare services. This study is a contribution to understanding these

realities. There is clearly a need for much more information and dialogue about fathers and child welfare. Undoubtedly, knowing more about fathers' lives, their relationships with their children and their experiences with child welfare will enable some front-line service providers to be more productive in their approaches to fathers and families. Also, individual child welfare agencies have some capacity to create innovative program approaches based on this information. However, in our opinion, success meeting the challenges of engaging fathers is linked to changing system norms to accept that engaging fathers is important. Equally important, it is connected to the broader issue of creating a child and family welfare system that can be more focused on providing useful and welcome assistance to children, parents and families.

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## NOTES

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**2** The fathers' names are fictitious.

**3** P refers to a participant in the focus group discussion. The numbers indicate different speakers. Because of the group format for interviews, while it was possible for the transcriber to identify different speakers, it was not possible to confidently name the different speakers (e.g. Burt, Rob). However, it is still useful to indicate how many different people are speaking in any quoted segment of the group interview.