



# **What about the fathers? Engaging men to protect children**

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# What this presentation will address

- **Barriers to father engagement**
- **Reasons to engage violent fathers in child protection**
- **Principles and practice strategies for engaging fathers**

# Basis of presentation

- **Practice**

- Child protection
- VAW
- Centre for Response-based Practice

- **Research**

- “The case of the missing perpetrator”
  - Analysis of legislation & policy
  - Interviews with mothers
  - Interviews with CP social workers
- “Fathering and child welfare”
  - Quantitative study – child protection files
  - Interviews with fathers, CP workers & agency workers
  - Review of Canadian BSW curricula & parenting literature

# The paradoxes of fathers in child welfare

- Popular and professional discourses promote the *involved* father – but child welfare policies and practices promote the *uninvolved* father
- Fathers *exist* in the lives of women and children in child welfare – yet fathers are *rarely seen* by child welfare, even when present



# What is the impact of not seeing fathers?

- Inability to protect against father danger
- Inability to access father resources
- Increase in child protection workload



# Gendered danger

- **97% of Canadian spousal homicides involved a male perpetrator and a female victim (Data 1991-2003, Li & Dauvergne, 2006).**
  - Average: 75 women a year murdered
- **Men are the perpetrators in 88% of substantiated incidents of partner violence (73% are fathers) (CIS, Black, 2010)**
- **Men who kill an intimate partner are 10x more likely to have been recently divorced or separated than men who commit non-lethal violence**
  - More than 1/3 of serious assaults occur post-separation
- **In Canada between 1991 and 2003, fathers (66%) and step-fathers (2%) committed most family homicides involving child or youth victims (Dauvergne & Li, 2005).**
  - Most child/youth murders occur post-separation

# Why see violent fathers?

- **Likely to remain in their children's lives**
  - Almost 80% of men convicted of partner assault had a fathering role
    - 50% expected this to continue after release
- **May go on to establish new families**
  - Most not concerned about effects of their violence on children (but some are)
- **Danger to mothers and children**



# The making of “ghost” fathers

- **Administrative practices: no requirement to see**
  - Files in mother’s name
  - Gendered discourses in CP
    - “Failure to protect”
    - Non-offending (“protective”) parent
- **Professional education: no training to see**
- **Professional practices: no tradition to see**
- **Mothers as gatekeepers**



# Gaps in education & training

- **Survey of Canadian undergraduate BSW programs & parenting literature**
  - Less than 5% included content on men/fathers
  - Language = parents, Content = mothers
- **Stereotypes & biases**
  - Definitions of “good fathering”
  - Internalized ideas about racialized or underclass men
- **Support/lack of support in workplace**
  - Team leaders/supervisors set the tone
  - Team members reinforce each others’ biases

# Mothers as gatekeepers

- **Can block or facilitate access**
  - “Contracted out” surveillance
  - Managing the worker-father relationship
- **Mothers’ fears**
  - Increased violence
  - Loss of resources

# Barriers within us

- **Myth of reduced workload**

- *Most of them walk away and go off to find new families. There's lots of times I meet the mom and she'll say he did the same thing to his last family. She'll even have a copy of the restraining order that he brought with him from the other relationship. (Research participant)*
- *Often he's not only causing trouble in a new family, he's still causing trouble in the old one. (Research participant)*

- **Fear**

- Dangerous, volatile, unpredictable
- Influence of our own experiences
- Cultural prohibition on naming men's violence
- Cultural insistence on women's responsibility



# Facilitators of engagement

- **Re-frame**
  - Fathers as “core business” in CW
  - Many men are looking for support in ending their violence
    - This is an opportunity for engaging with men on a variety of family issues
- **Knowledge, education, training & support**
  - Training resources exist (Mederos, CRBP)
  - Resources for violent fathers
- **Fear reduction**

# Knowledge, education, training & support

- **Appreciate the complexities**

“...some may pose risks, some may be assets and some may incorporate aspects of both”

- Ability to accurately assess & manage risk-asset balance

- **Response-based approaches**

- From confrontation to engagement and collaboration

- Language awareness essential

- Elicit specific and detailed accounts

- Excuses and externalizing responsibility = invitations to engagement

- **Find supports for new practices**

- Creative ways of making contact

# Fear Reduction

- **Assess dangerousness thoroughly**
  - Use many information sources
  - Note “trigger events” & contextual contributors
- **Be safe**
  - Interview separately
  - Interview safely (preparation, location)
- **Consult**
- **De-escalation strategies**

# Principles and practice strategies

- **Principle**

Fathers are responsible for their children

- **Practice Strategy**

Provide support to enable fathers to take responsibility





# Principles and practice strategies

- **Principle**

Violence does not necessarily eliminate men from being involved as fathers, but it must be taken up directly with them

- **Practice Strategy**

Respectful engagement with violent fathers requires a structure that ensures safety, respect & accountability



# Principles and practice strategies

- Principle

Understand there are many different ways to be a father

- Practice Strategy

Be strengths-focused



# Principle: Violence is never OK

## **Voluntary strategies are preferred**

- Leave the home until he can guarantee safe conduct within it
- Seek out & attend programs specific to violent fathers
- Enroll in an anti-violence program
- Voluntary agreement to a no-contact order.

## **Use legislation and policy when necessary**

- No-contact orders
- Protective intervention orders
- Supervision orders
- Information-sharing with mothers.

# Principles and practice strategies

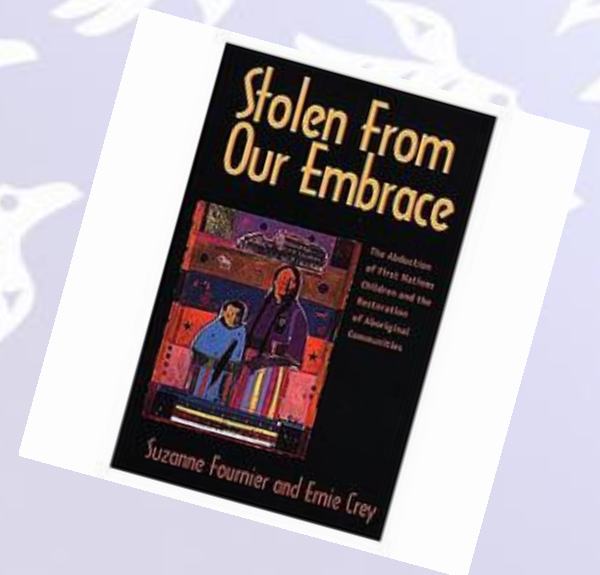
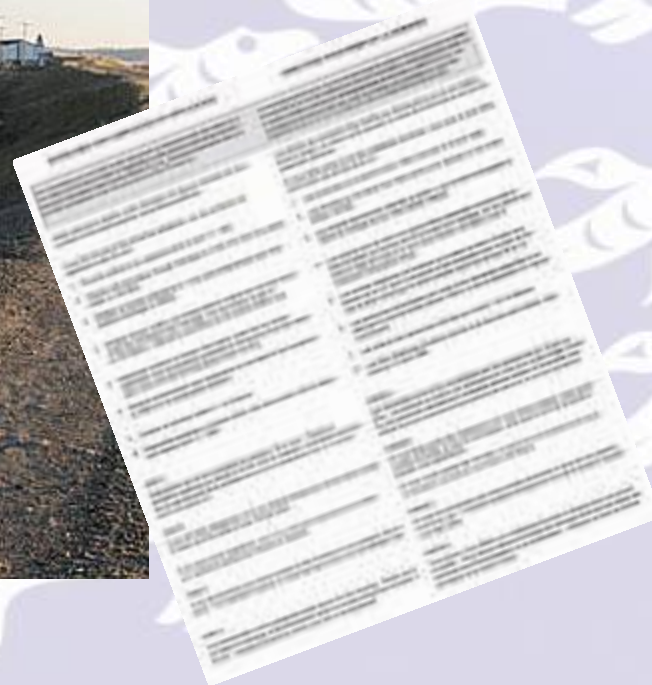
- **Principle**

Understand the context of fathers' lives



- **Practice Strategy**

Be knowledgeable about structural contexts and how these impact father involvement



# Choosing invisibility

*I'm scared that these people will take my kids away forever if they know that sometimes I'm around, I'm visiting them, that I'm loving my children. I'm scared that they're going to say, well he's no good. Look what's going on. You know if they look at my (child in care) file. Oh, this and that, and oh, he's garbage.*

*(Research participant)*



# Relationship, relationship...

- **Keep fathers informed and involved....not out in the cold.**

*“I have a relationship with them – like the workers. Like you know, they knew me.”*

*“I was just another case in their batch of files that they had.”*



# What violent fathers say

- **Work with me, not at me.**



*“They’re helping me ... they’re not against me. So that’s what helped me to become this.”*

*“She takes one baby, maybe I take one baby to sort of make it easier and stuff like that.”*



*“I’ve had a lot of support to become a different, a better parent.”*

*“Sit on that couch until [child welfare] gets here!”*

# A father's plea to workers

*...instead of letting the willow bend you know, you don't have to snap the damn thing in half. You can let it bend and let it go back and it'll swing on forever. You don't have to snap the damn thing to make it work.*

