

Survey Shows Fathers Lacking in Support

By: John Hoffman

The results of a national survey of parents showed that Canadian fathers are feeling a lack of social support for their parenting role. Invest in Kids, a Canadian charity dedicated to improving outcomes for children by supporting and educating parents, conducted an online survey of Canadian parents of young children in 2006. The survey was designed to assess how well supported parents feel in their parenting role.

The survey's sample included a substantial number of fathers. Invest in Kids did separate analyses of partnered mothers (n=1661) and partnered fathers (n=893). This article highlights some of the key findings from these parents.

Looking for Support

Overall neither mothers nor fathers feel particularly well supported in their parenting role. Only about a quarter of parents feel strongly supported by their communities and about half feel highly supported by their families.

The data also revealed that Canadian fathers are feeling less supported in their parenting role than mothers.

- Only 27% of fathers and 29% of mothers strongly agreed that Canada values the role of fathers
- 34% of fathers reported high levels of support for their parenting role from family and friends compared to 50% of mothers.
- 46% of fathers felt that their own parents were highly supportive, compared to 55% of mothers.
- 44% of fathers and 43% of mothers said their spouse was highly supportive.

Support Matters

The fact that mothers have more options for social support than fathers could leave fathers vulnerable to the negative impacts of low levels of support, especially if the support from their partner isn't there. "I'd be concerned that the half or more of fathers of young children who don't feel highly supported in their parenting role by their partner, may not have much support at all," says Carol Crill Russell, Senior Research Associate with Invest In Kids. "In our data, support from partners, family/friends and grandparents had direct influences on mothers' parenting. However, only support from the spouse/partners of fathers was associated with higher levels of good quality fathering. It seems that while mothers benefit from the support from all the sources we examined, fathers only seemed to derive direct benefit from one source, their partner."

Not surprisingly perhaps, fathers were less likely than mothers to report high confidence in their parenting role and also displayed lower levels of child development knowledge on a quiz that was part of the questionnaire.

Mothers' Influence on Fathering

The Invest in Kids data also revealed that fathers depend on mothers for information and advice more than mothers depend on fathers. 53% of fathers strongly agreed that their partner provided good advice and information about parenting, while only 35% of mothers said the same thing about fathers.

These findings also provide another window into the substantial influence that mothers have on the paternal role. Previous research

with heterosexual couples has shown a positive correlation between marital quality and quality of the father child relationship (Doherty et. al. 1998) and also the father's satisfaction and sense of competence as a parent. (Bouchard and Lee, 2000). Other studies have shown that a father's level of involvement is influenced by the extent to which the mother facilitates or hinders that involvement (Allen and Hawkins, 1999).

Russell and her colleagues conclude that our society and its institutions need to:

- find more ways to help parents feel supported
- pay special attention to finding ways to support fathers, and
- do more to help new parents support each other.

"We think that if we want to improve both mothers' and fathers' parenting behaviour the

best place to start is through measures that increase mothers' and fathers' support for each other in the parenting role," she says.

With that in mind invest in Kids has developed The Parenting Partnership, a parenting curriculum to help couples increase their knowledge, develop confidence and establish effective teamwork as they navigate the transition to parenthood. The Parenting Partnership is a prenatal and parenting course offered in a combination of weekly web-based sessions and flexibly scheduled face-to-face sessions. Course material covers pregnancy, birth, supporting healthy child development and developing an effective parenting partnership. The Parenting Partnership has been pre-tested and evaluated based on pilots with 240 parents in over a dozen sites. It is now being disseminated broadly across Canada.

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