Father's Day: Support dads as parents, not just 'mother's helpers' [1]

Report says system is bureaucratic, risk-averse and in need of reform and investment after years of cuts
Author: Ball, Jessica & Pratezina, Jessica
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EXCERPTS

School and child care closures during the COVID-19 lockdowns have been a crisis for parents with children at home, felt mostly by mothers.

In Canadian mother-father partnerships, women continue to take on the majority of child care and household tasks. Even when both parents work outside the home, moms still do disproportionately more housework and child care than dads.

Take away school and child care, add homeschooling to the mix and you have a recipe for disaster. With moms leaving the workforce in droves to attend to increased responsibilities at home, their mental health is plummeting.

Yet despite the disproportionate burden mothers have faced during lockdown, encouraging parents to share child care and housework more equally is almost never suggested as part of the solution.

While there have been calls in Canada and around the world to increase support for women, particularly mothers, it would seem that no one is asking fathers to step up and take on a more equitable share of the work at home.

Dad as the helper?

A tremendous amount of government funding is poured into social programs that support mothers. And while it is certainly necessary to give moms all the help they need, this kind of imbalance also conveys a strong message: that as a society, we believe mothers are ultimately responsible for children. And dad is the helper who steps in on occasion to relieve mom of some of the responsibilities.

This eagerness to fund programs that support mothers to the exclusion of fathers is not a reflection of how progressive Canadian society has become in supporting gender equality, rather it reflects the fact that we continue to see child care and family-home management as a woman's responsibility.

Dissatisfaction with gender equality in the home is more than a relationship problem. It is reinforced in our social and health policies and by the professionals who work with families. Across social service settings, policies and practices are not designed to accommodate the needs of fathers and child welfare files don't always include the father's name and contact information.

Over the course of our combined five decades of experience as front-line family support professionals, counsellors and researchers, we have seen innumerable examples of how excluding fathers overburdens mothers and often harms the parenting relationship.

Mom is always called

To see how excluding fathers overburdens mothers, look at the real-life case of Sue, who participated in a well-baby support group for parents of preterm infants. As the child grew, a dietitian became involved and Sue explained that the child's father did all the grocery shopping and cooking. She asked the dietitian to make an appointment that included the father, but the dietitian just kept talking to Sue. There was never so much as a phone call to dad.

This scenario is similarly played out in parent-teacher communications. As long as the teacher has communicated with the mother, the task of communicating with "the parents" is considered done.

Anyone who is a mom can tell you that they are the ones who get called when something is up with their child. This is because mothers are considered morally accountable for their children in a way that fathers are not. Kid is in trouble at soccer practice? Coach calls the mom. Kid needs vaccinations? Mom is called to set up the appointments. Too much junk food in a kid's lunch? Call the mom. If a social support worker needs to discuss a concern about a child, it is undoubtedly the mom's phone that rings.

Promoting positive father involvement

Politicians and policy-makers are happy to get behind legislation that specifically supports mothers. In doing this, however, they let dads off the hook and, at the same time, let down mother-father co-parents who want a more equal distribution of domestic labour.

Not only does society exempt fathers from the kind of routine care work that makes up daily life with children, but they are also denied the opportunities to learn direct child-care skills and to be supported as fully involved, nurturing parents.

Promoting positive father involvement is the crucial missing link to gender equality in the home and beyond.

How can we fix this? By calling dad first when an appointment needs to be made. By providing supportive programs for men to give them confidence in their parenting skills. By expecting fathers to be co-parents and not "mother's helpers." By changing the name of maternal child health to parental child health.

In making these types of changes, we signal that it is not OK to continue mother-centric values, expectations and practices. We need to start demanding that fathers are equally included in the support offered to families.

We've learned a lot through the COVID-19 lockdown. One thing being the urgency of balancing supports for mothers' involvement with supports for fathers' involvement. This will ensure that in a post-COVID society, men have the skills and social messaging to step up and be all they can and, often, want to be in family life.

Region: Canada [3]

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Links

[1] https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/21/06/father%E2%80%99s-day-support-dads-parents-not-just-%E2%80%98mother%E2%80%99s-helpers%E2%80%99 [2] https://theconversation.com/fathers-day-support-dads-as-parents-not-just-mothers-helpers-160816 [3] https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/7864 [4] https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/gender-equality [5] https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9065 [6] https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/fathers