




ABORIGINAL FATHERS: Rebuilding Our Identity

*Fathers' and Practitioners' Experiences in a Central
Okanagan Aboriginal Fathers Engagement Program*



This report documents a project exploring the experiences of fathers and practitioners in a Central Okanagan Aboriginal Fathers Engagement program. The project was conducted by the report author, Wes McVey, in partnership with Aboriginal CATCH in Kelowna, British Columbia. It was conducted on a voluntary basis as part of the author's Masters degree program in Child and Youth Care at the University of Victoria, and completed in September 2016.

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Acknowledgments

For this project I was a visitor on the traditional territory of the Okanagan (Syilx) people, including that of the Westbank First Nation. I was humbled by the welcome and trust I was shown on this land by everyone at Aboriginal CATCH's AFEP, especially by the three practitioners and six fathers who participated in the project directly. There were many others who supported the work from the beginning.¹ Catherine Disbery and Brenden Moore stand out from this group.

I acknowledge the importance of the learning I did in preparation for this project at the University of Victoria, which is located on the traditional territory of the Lkwungen people of the Songhees Nation. Dr. Jessica Ball and Dr. John Hart, my project supervisors, as well as Dr. Sandrina de Finney and Dr. Charlotte Loppie, are each leaders at the University who provided me with important guidance, but none more than Dr. Ball.

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To all of these people, I say way' lim ləmpt, marsee, merci, grazie, tapadh leibh, and thank you!

¹ Artwork and photographs used in this report were provided courtesy of Aboriginal CATCH with assurances that permission had been obtained for their use. The AFEP logo on the cover was created for Aboriginal CATCH by graphic artist Morgan Summerskill.

Executive Summary

This document confirms that Aboriginal fathers and families in the Central Okanagan face unique challenges and until recently, have done so without adequate supports. The most significant of these challenges is linked to fathers' common experience of having grown up without men in their lives who modeled positive fatherhood. Many have not received knowledge about the traditional roles of Aboriginal fathers, who can be a great source of strength to their families. Fathers who have not received this knowledge will be less able to pass it on to the next generation. Instead, many fathers fear that they will pass on a cycle of father absence and trauma.

The negative effects of colonialism in Aboriginal communities in Canada are well established. Among other intrusions, settlers described and evaluated Aboriginal Peoples without their permission and without understanding what they were observing. This documentation negatively affected Aboriginal Peoples. A step towards ending this unwanted pattern is for outsider documentarians like me to ally with Indigenous leaders in support of their self-defined drive to document promising practices in their communities – such as a unique “Aboriginal Father Engagement Program” (AFEP) in the Central Okanagan. As a partner in such a documentation project, I have been informed by a culturally grounded research protocol that is based on meaningful participation of the community. Through this I have been led primarily by practitioners and participants within the AFEP.

The project to document the processes and impacts of this AFEP involved me attending meetings with community partners and then events at the program to build relationships with those involved, and to build a framework for the project together. This was the required foundation before I interviewed three AFEP practitioners, and six participants. I created transcripts of those interviews, which I thematically analyzed and used to write this report. Input from community partners at the AFEP was incorporated throughout the process.

Despite unique challenges, the project highlighted Aboriginal men and fathers in the Central Okanagan who are thriving, and are stepping up to care for their children. Successful Aboriginal men and fathers need to be held up as models for others to learn from and for communities to celebrate. Engaging thriving fathers alongside those who are facing the most challenges helps to strengthen the network of support available to all. The AFEP has done just this.

The peer network of support is the most valuable part of the AFEP for most father participants. Through connections with other fathers in the program, participants see and hear examples of positive fathering and successful problem solving, and they are inspired to know that “if he can do it, I can do it!” They gain hope for overcoming obstacles and for

taking positive strides in their fatherhood journeys. Peer networks have also helped fathers to understand how many of their experiences and feelings are common ones – they are not alone with their challenges, worries, and hopes.

Another integral part of this AFEP is helping fathers to learn and practice traditional parenting roles. Modern day needs are met through traditional practices by borrowing from Aboriginal groups across the country, and by blending roles for mothers and fathers. Through such teaching and support, the AFEP is helping to rebuild a sense of identity and pride for Aboriginal fathers through cultural connections, which in turn helps fathers to rebuild family and community care for Aboriginal children in the Central Okanagan.

This document provides information about how one community built a promising AFEP model, along with a set of guiding principles that may be helpful to other communities reaching out to and supporting Aboriginal fathers.



The Central Okanagan



The Regional District of the Central Okanagan (RDCO) was created in 1967 and includes the City of Kelowna, as well as a surrounding four municipalities and six Reserves.² This region is located within the unceded traditional territory of the Okanagan (Syilx) people, whose territory extends well beyond this region: over approximately 69,000 square kilometers across British Columbia and Washington state; as far north as Revelstoke, BC, west as the Nicola Valley, BC, east as Kootenay Lake, BC, and south as Wilbur, Washington.³

According to the last National Household Survey conducted in 2011, there were over 176,000 people living in the Central Okanagan.⁴ Of those people, 5% self-identified as Aboriginal, including a total of 3,900 Aboriginal males. Of those Aboriginal males, 95 described themselves as single parents to their children, a number that is expected to have increased by at least 10% in the last five years along with the trend in population growth. A conservative estimate is that there are well over 100 Aboriginal men who are single fathers to their children in the Central Okanagan today. The 2011 census also suggests that Aboriginal people in the region have a mean age nearly half that of all others, and an average income of less than half. Prior to the establishment of the Aboriginal Fathers Engagement Program by Aboriginal CATCH in September of 2014, there appears to have been no support programs in the Central Okanagan that targeted this population of Aboriginal fathers, who are more likely to be younger and have fewer financial resources in comparison to others in the area.

² Regional District of Central Okanagan website, at <http://www.regionaldistrict.com/about-the-rdco/what-we-do.aspx>

³ Okanagan Nation Alliance website, at <http://www.syilx.org/who-we-are/the-syilx-people/>

⁴ Statistics Canada at <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/index-eng.cfm>

The Aboriginal Fathers Engagement Program



“The Aboriginal Fathers Engagement Program is a recent initiative from Aboriginal CATCH (Community Action Toward Children’s Health) – an early years table representing Westbank First Nation, Ki-Low-Na Friendship Society, Métis Community Services and the Okanagan Nation Alliance. We help Aboriginal Dads (First Nation, Métis and Inuit) and Dads of Aboriginal children (ages zero to six years) in the Central Okanagan to become better fathers and help keep families together. The Aboriginal Fathers Engagement Program (AFEP) is designed to support Aboriginal dads (First Nation, Métis and Inuit), father figures, uncles, and grandfathers in their parenting role, and to increase their parenting capacity and knowledge. We assist with family support and crisis intervention, and aim to strengthen the father’s role within the family circle. We do this through one-to-one support with dads, connecting them to existing local programs, providing monthly talking circles on traditional parenting and relationships, and hosting cultural events each quarter with a focus on early childhood development, relationship building, and regenerating Aboriginal father’s identity... We help the Aboriginal Dads to learn traditional parenting methods, such as teaching our children the *7 Sacred Teachings*, like Honor, Respect and Love. We help them to improve their relationship skills, anger management and provide a peer support network of other dads who they can meet and share stories with.”⁵

⁵ Aboriginal CATCH website, at <http://www.catchcoalition.ca/Aboriginal>

The Documentation Project



Introduction

Project goals

This report is about a project that aimed to help Aboriginal CATCH document and improve the services they offer. The project also aimed to provide other community organizations with information about a promising approach to reaching out to and supporting Aboriginal fathers. It is hoped that this project will contribute to growing acknowledgment and use of Indigenous knowledge to promote positively involved fatherhood.

How the project began

In January, 2015, I was invited by Catherine Disbery, the Aboriginal CATCH Coordinator, to meet with their Aboriginal Fathers Engagement Program (AFEP) Steering Committee. We began by discussing an evaluation of the program by way of documenting participant and practitioner experiences. A Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach was used to incorporate input from stakeholders from the beginning of the process.⁶ This was used to avoid reproducing a long history of western researchers in Indigenous communities that has depicted people, programs, and communities both inaccurately and in ways that have been harmful to those who participated.⁷ Through the CBPR approach, the documentation project focused upon the AFEP's connections to culturally valid evidence: valuing Indigenous ways of knowing, respecting Indigenous sovereignty, emphasizing strengths, and maintaining ethical practices.⁸

I have been privileged to take part in multiple AFEP activities since that first meeting, including a healing workshop, multiple talking circles, and a trip with the fathers and their families to a local ski hill. This helped me to better understand the work being done there and to begin building a relationship with those involved in the program. In May 2015, leaders at Aboriginal CATCH and I agreed on an initial framework for the research project, one which we created collaboratively. In June 2015, Aboriginal CATCH invited me to partner in doing the

⁶ Chouinard, J., & Cousins, B. (2007). Culturally competent evaluation for Aboriginal communities: a review of the empirical literature. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Evaluation*, 4(8), 40-57.

⁷ Hart, M. A. (2010). Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and research: The development of an indigenous research paradigm. *Journal of Indigenous Voices in Social Work*, 1(1).

⁸ Cruz, C., & J. Spence (2005). Oregon Tribal evidence based and cultural best practices. Oregon Department of Human Services. Retrieved from <http://library.state.or.us/repository/2007/200710220927381/index.pdf> on February 14, 2015.

documentation project.

How the project was conducted

This project documented the experiences of fathers in the AFEP, as well as the experiences of the program practitioners. Interviews were held individually with six fathers who ranged in age from 31 to 45 years (average 37 years old) and had three or more children. Nearly 80% of their children were the fathers' biological offspring, while the other 20% were extended family members, or children from partners' past relationships. Children of these fathers have an average age of seven years, and are slightly more often female than male. Their eldest children are 10 years of age on average, and 83% of these eldest children are female. Participants report living alongside about two-thirds of their children. They had attended an average of nine AFEP meetings or activities (range 4 to 14). Many participants in the project said that they took part because they trusted that their anonymity would be protected, and because they believed that sharing their stories could help other dads and the program. There is much diversity in this small group, so it is not possible to provide their cultural self-identifications while protecting their anonymity.

Interviews with fathers focused upon how interactions may have changed with their children as a result of their involvement in the program, and how this may have been supported by them learning and adopting traditional fatherhood roles.

Interviews with three AFEP practitioners⁹ focused on their roles in developing the program in the past, and maintaining it at this time. Like the interviews with fathers, those with practitioners also focused on describing the existing program model, and aspects of that model that are working well or could be improved.

The interview data collected was thematically analyzed by me. The structure of this report is based on the themes derived from the analysis. The AFEP Steering Committee provided feedback on several drafts.

Ownership over the research

Aboriginal CATCH retains ownership over all of the data collected that participants consent to include, and will continue to oversee and direct the distribution of this report.

About the researcher

My name is Wes McVey. I am the lead researcher and primary author of this report. I learned from leaders at Aboriginal CATCH, leaders at the University of Victoria, and fathers at the AFEP that my introduction should begin with an account of where I am from, including my family and my connection to this land.

⁹ This number of practitioner interviews was purposely half of the number for fathers so that the focus of the project would be mainly upon the experiences of program participants. **Quotes from fathers featured below are highlighted in red for this purpose as well.** Quotes from practitioners are featured in black.

“Get to know your material really good, believe in it, and then don't speak from your book... Give your good examples and everything like that, but speak from your heart, and as soon as you speak from your heart, everybody will listen.”

I was born in White Rock, British Columbia, and grew up nearby, largely ignorant of the land I lived on. I grew up equally ignorant of the people whose traditional territory had been appropriated for families like mine to purchase a piece of it, namely that of the Semiahmoo First Nation. My family has its roots spread across Europe, including in Scotland, though I have retained few cultural connections to those places. Government policies in Great Britain centuries ago helped to ensure that future generations of my ancestors would be largely disconnected from their Celtic roots. The policies of the Highland Clearances in Scotland drove McVeys off their lands on the western islands of the Inner Hebrides, and forced them south-east to urban centres in the country before further abroad. These policies also banned my ancestors from wearing traditional clothing (our family tartan), from speaking our language (Gaelic), and from having the support of traditional clan structures that had been relied upon for generations. Such an engineered cultural disconnection parallels some of the policies that were implemented in Canada with regards to Aboriginal peoples over the past centuries. With tragic irony, those policies were likely constructed and implemented by many of my ancestors whose own families may have been subjected to similar policies in Scotland.

“So when you're asking a question, you're not only asking it to one person... the question that you're going to ask them is also going to be heard by their ancestors.... And your spirit is listening to you, and hoping, `do it right, ask the right questions`... even the way you're nodding your head right now, I can imagine your Scottish ancestors nodding their heads when somebody asks them a question.”

On the one hand, I have been privileged throughout my life in many ways, and was provided with an abundance of financial and emotional resources from family and friends to draw upon as needed. I became a professional who works with youth in the justice system within the Sea to Sky Corridor (across traditional territories of the Squamish and Lil'wat Nation Peoples), a Master of Arts student at the University of Victoria in the School of Child and Youth Care, a proud uncle to two fantastic young men, and more recently an elated and humbled father to a wonderful little boy. This followed an extensive history of building trust, and upholding principles of social justice as a service provider for marginalized populations: I

worked with adults with developmental delays for three years, adults with substance use issues for four, and youth in the alternative education and then justice systems over the past nine. I attribute my privileges and strengths primarily to the gifts I have inherited from my family and our ancestors, often due to their strength and sacrifice, not my own.

On the other hand, I have lacked many cultural connections, including those to the land I live on as described. I am also someone who graduated from high school with the least amount of credits and the lowest grade point average possible to pass with. I was the first student in my high school to be placed on a contract that warned I would be expelled in my final year if I missed another class. I have struggled with substance use and mental health issues at multiple points in my life. Luck and family influence, instead of choice and internal fortitude, have played major roles in me not having a criminal record to disclose, and in being given the chance to both recognize and show that I am more than one-sided.

The person I was, am, or hope to become is neither of these two sides alone - one focused on my privileges and strengths, and another on my deficits and failures. Evaluations provided to me of my past work have more often focused on one side or the other exclusively. I am instead both of these at once, and neither of these completely. I am dynamic and partly hidden, from others and me, and I am much more that could not be communicated in text even if it was available to be known. Like others, I demand to be the author of my own stories, and I refuse to be bound by any of their parts.

I do not offer this description to draw attention to myself, but rather to give some sense of the lens that I have seen through during the process of helping to prepare this report. As influential Indigenous scholar Shawn Wilson suggests, "we cannot be separated from our work, nor should our writing be separated from ourselves."¹⁰ I also acknowledge that my perspective biases how I write. This self-introduction is meant to further convey my belief that a shared knowledge can be constructed to capture the process and impacts of this AFEP. I do not speak on behalf of practitioners or participants. Throughout this project I was guided by many individuals, especially by practitioners and fathers involved in the AFEP at Aboriginal CATCH, and everyone who contributed to this document was clearly an empowered person before we met. We have created this document together.

¹⁰ Wilson, S. (2007). Guest editorial: What is an Indigenist research paradigm? *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 30(2), 193.

The Beginnings of the Program

Recognizing the need

In 2011, practitioners at Aboriginal CATCH traveled to Ottawa to attend a national showcase on Aboriginal father involvement hosted by the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. Dr. Jessica Ball from the University of Victoria was one of the keynote speakers at this event, and was one who inspired the group of practitioners to consider how their programs were supporting Aboriginal fathers. It is acknowledged by practitioners that many family programs in the community prior to this time had been “geared towards women.” This appears to be common to parenting programs across the country, as these are “most often designed for, delivered by, and subscribed by mothers, while fathers are considered secondarily, if at all”.¹¹ Aboriginal CATCH made it their goal to create such a support after they learned more about the potential benefits of supporting men in the lives of Aboriginal children.

As a community table, establishing a collaborative program that engages fathers in support services can be a challenging process. This is especially the case given that there are few road maps available to help guide the way in either popular or academic literature. Aboriginal CATCH found success by first engaging community stakeholders, such as fathers and potential partner programs, to identify and create a broad acknowledgment of the need for such a program. This was done by bringing together partner organizations to create a Steering Committee, and then to engage fathers and the broader community through fatherhood panel events.

The Steering Committee

There have been multiple challenges in bringing together and maintaining a group committed to furthering father engagement in the region, especially because each organization involved comes to the table with its own service mandate. The Steering Committee for Aboriginal CATCH's AFEP initially included representatives from the Okanagan Nation Alliance, Westbank First Nation, the Métis Community Services Society, and the Ki-Low-Na Friendship Society, although the makeup of the group has since changed. Despite this change, practitioners describe the Steering Committee as an important part of ensuring that all of the partners are communicating effectively, and the group has continued to meet on a monthly basis. The first task the Steering Committee had after it formed was to connect with fathers, and to find out from them what was missing in the community.

Early community engagement

The first of two Aboriginal CATCH fatherhood panels was held in February 2012, at the Ki-Low-Na Friendship Society office. The second was held in April 2014, at the Westbank First

¹¹ Ball, J. (2010). Father involvement in Canada: An emerging movement. *Childhood Education*, 87(2), 118.

Nation office. Approximately 60 fathers attended the panels in total. For each of these panels, Aboriginal CATCH invited a group of fathers and community elders to eat dinner together, to watch recorded interviews involving Aboriginal fathers, and then to speak about their experiences.

“They were very honest, and very open in talking about what had happened to them, [including much] that was very painful.”

The fatherhood panels created an open dialogue in the community about the diversity of fathering experiences, the common fathering needs, and the ways that fathers could be better supported. The panels also confirmed for Aboriginal CATCH that added support was something that fathers really wanted.

“Their role as fathers had become so minimized, and lots of times they felt shut out.”

“They said yes,” one practitioner describes: “They absolutely agreed that fathers needed more support,” and, “Yes, we did want to have a program of some kind.”

This call to action is consistent with research that suggests fathers across North America are providing care for children more often, and this care needs to be increasingly supported.¹² Men are benefiting from their shifting fatherhood roles, as are their families, but there also continues to be “little policy support, public health program investment, or practitioner preparation to support fathers' transitions to parenthood, or their positive involvement... especially with Aboriginal fathers.”¹³

After finding widespread consensus that investment in a father support program was needed, the Aboriginal CATCH's Steering Committee then sought funding for the initiative.

Accessing funding

One practitioner describes having initially found that “there just is not a lot of money and support for this kind of thing.” Eventually, though, the AFEP Steering Committee was successful in creating a collaborative funding proposal. This was written on behalf of one of the partner organizations, the Metis Services Society, by Kelly L'Hirondelle, Margaret Eli, and Catherine Disbery. The proposal was submitted to the Ministry of Children and Family Development in February 2014, for provincial *Aboriginal Service Innovations – Early Years* –

¹² Marsiglio, W., and Roy, K. (2013) *Father's nurturance of children over the life course*. *Handbook of Marriage and the Family*. Springer, New York, p 343.

¹³ Ball, J. & K. Daly (2012). *Father involvement in Canada: diversity, renewal, and transformation*. Vancouver, UBC Press, p 373.

funding. Upon approval, this provided Aboriginal CATCH with operating capital for an AFEP in its first two years, beginning with the hiring of a group facilitator.

Hiring a facilitator

The AFEP Steering Committee turned its attention towards hiring a program facilitator, leading to the addition of Brenden Moore in September 2014. Aboriginal CATCH did not have a job description for an AFEP facilitator when they hired Mr. Moore, instead developing this informally as they went along. However, practitioners describe having learned that a strong AFEP facilitator should:

- be a young Aboriginal father (in his late twenties or early thirties) so that he is someone that the young dads can best relate to, while he should also be a model of strong leadership and fatherhood qualities.
- display a passion for child care, in both his personal as well as professional lives. Maintaining connections to fathers who are struggling can be very difficult, and it requires this passion, as well as an inner strength, to consistently connect to those fathers and support them.
- be available for fathers and families outside of regular office hours. This may be in person, by phone or text messages, or through social media.
- have existing connections to traditional Aboriginal culture and spirituality, to draw upon as a resource for himself and to teach to fathers.



Getting the program started

The AFEP Steering Committee then sought to build a model of what the program would become. They consulted with practitioners at Success by 6 BC, and with other established father engagement programs in the province. They also made use of the “Resource Kit for Indigenous Fathers and Community Programs” provided by the University of Victoria.¹⁴

Practitioners built a program model mainly by “working it out as [they went] along.” An important part of the process was to include feedback from fathers. This was done through the fatherhood panels, as well as through a series of questionnaires that practitioners at Aboriginal CATCH distributed early on. This initial research was conducted mainly by Brenden Moore and Kelly L'Hirondelle knocking on doors across Kelowna, with a focus on Métis and Native housing. Aboriginal CATCH received 55 completed questionnaires. Practitioners note being surprised by how many single fathers they found in the area. They also learned that dads were primarily interested in increased cultural connections and activities, including taking part in hunting, fishing, dancing, and singing. Some of the skills fathers hoped to learn were also as simple as braiding their daughter's hair.

Connecting with fathers

Many of the AFEP participants were known to practitioners ahead of attending their first meeting, through parallel service streams, the fatherhood panels, or from practitioners going door-to-door. The AFEP was also promoted to fathers at an annual family gathering at Westbank First Nation, and through social media. Today, the Facebook page for Aboriginal CATCH's dads group has 306 followers.¹⁵ This is where AFEP events are posted, and where fathers involved can maintain contact outside of meetings.

Fathers recall having first heard about the AFEP from their children's mother or schools, from a social worker, or from the Facebook page. They attended their first meetings for multiple reasons, though most describe having no access to anything similar at the time. A father expressed his experience that parenting programs provide information tailored for mothers first, and that parenting programs in the area that he attended seemed to him to be made up of about 90% mothers. The AFEP targets his needs more specifically, this dad suggests. Another father reports having commuted for six hours to attend at the AFEP meetings initially, showing how important a connection to the program has been for him.

“There's nothing out there. That's why there's so much suicide, and fathers will drink themselves to death. So much abuse, and men move on to the next relationships then lose their kids. And where... does it stop?”

¹⁴ Resource Kit for Indigenous Fathers and Community Programs, University of Victoria's Early Childhood Development Intercultural Partnerships (<http://www.ecdip.org/order/>)

¹⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/AboriginalDads/?fref=ts>

Fathers most commonly describe having been drawn first to the program's promise of increased cultural connections, for themselves and for their children. This includes participating in traditional cultural activities, such as talking circles and drumming. Common also are fathers who describe first attending to build social relationships with other dads and families.

"I got to work those social muscles, and yeah, it was intriguing. I kind of needed it."

Fathers also note having first attended to get help with their anger issues, just to get a break from cooking for the night, or to help other fathers as a mentor.

"I figured I could probably be a pretty good role model to some of the other dads...to a lot of the single dads, or guys who were struggling."

Providing meals has been an important part of engaging with Aboriginal fathers and their families, especially in the early stages of the AFEP. Practitioners describe this as having been useful in building relationships with participants, which is an important first step for fathers having the courage to engage in the group. According to a practitioner, this trust building process was made easier by many involved having had common experiences, including past traumas. Trust was not a quick and easy thing to build, this same practitioner warns.



"Food was a time that we came together. In most cultures, but especially with Aboriginal people, we'd always feast together. This was a time when you're with your kids, and those were the biggest bonding moments."

Cultural Programming Provided at the AFEP

Talking Circles

- The concept of discussing feelings with a group of peers was new to the vast majority of participants, though it was apparent early to practitioners that it was an invaluable part of their program. Talking circles are held at least once a month, and have helped fathers open up. This leads to them letting out some of the negative emotions that they would otherwise hold in. One father describes it as a time that the dads can learn from their peers, and do so in an informal setting, even joking around about what their kids did on the previous day, for example. *"It's really needed,"* he adds.

"Let it out, let it go, keep it inside yourself and make yourself sick. Let it out and share it. You're with human beings."

Healing Workshops

- Aboriginal CATCH has many connections to mental health practitioners for fathers within their network of community partners. They have also brought cultural experts and healers from outside of the community to help the fathers "let go of traumatic things in their life" using traditional ways, as one practitioner describes the work. Workshops have been run as group as well as one-to-one sessions, and are focused on teaching fathers how to heal on their own.

"[Healing workshops] made a difference for just a few of those dads. They're not going to hold on to that for the rest of their lives. They're not going to pass that on to their kids, and then they now have the tools to self-heal. To let go when some of those issues do arise again."

The talking circles and healing workshops in particular are based upon a unique Aboriginal world-view and underlying spirituality. This world-view places a focus upon interconnections between all living and non-living beings, and on relationships between people that are rooted in trust and cooperation.

"When I look outside, I see medicine, and I see the different reasons for what everybody can do out there. Even the birds and the trees and the winds, even the winds."

Practitioners often choose to teach participants about this spirituality through stories. "One

of the worst things you can do is to preach," one practitioner suggests, "But you can tell a story, and everybody wants a story." "Every story is a learning tool," he adds. This practitioner further explains how Aboriginal languages embody the culture; they are alive, dynamic, and much is lost when they are translated into text. Oral storytelling preserves these in teaching an Aboriginal spirituality, culture, and identity to the fathers. Traditional ceremonies are also used to teach fathers about this spirituality. Every event that the AFEP runs both begins and ends with a prayer, often as a part of a smudge ceremony.

"These boys they understand those prayers, they understand the smudge, song, singing, and immediately their spirits settle down."

The drum is another ceremonial tool practitioners use to communicate with participants, and with the ancestors of all who are also present. The drum is described as something that crosses cultural boundaries, and boundaries between the living and non-living, the way a prayer might.

"So do the white men. They go and they pray too. They don't just go in there and pretend that they know everything. They know they don't, so they pray. Maybe not all of them, and maybe not visibly, but... they need help. We are just human beings and we need help."

Dads in Gear

- In Spring 2015, added funding enabled Aboriginal CATCH's AFEP to host the Dads in Gear program. This consisted of weekly workshops provided over nine sessions. These were focused on helping fathers to quit smoking, and to become healthier and more active. Many sessions included fathers learning healthy eating and exercise habits alongside their children, increasing the time they spent together as well.

AFEP activities have been based mainly out of the Westbank First Nation facilities, with support from their staff, and from Margaret Eli especially. The activities have been attended by more fathers the longer the group has been together. This has changed the dynamic of the group to include an increased diversity of participants, which some fathers recognize as an added strength. This growth also shows that word about the group and its success has been spreading in the community.

Service Providers Directly Involved in the AFEP

Facilitator, Brenden Moore

- The facilitator provides one-to-one support for fathers, and leads group activities. He does so in a way that instills a sense of safety for participants, focusing his intentions upon recognizing participants for “who they really are,” and providing them with supports to match. In this way, Brenden helps fathers build pride, a sense of identity, and hope for the future.
- The facilitator is also the main liaison between the fathers and the program administrators. He helps to plan and organize all AFEP activities.



Co-facilitators, Kelly L'Hirondelle and other volunteer supports

- The AFEP relies upon a number of professionals and volunteers who attend regularly, like Mr. L'Hirondelle, or on special guests who take part when available. These guests include community Elders, who lead learning opportunities or healing workshops, as well as family members, like the many mothers who help prepare food at AFEP events, for example.

Cultural Support Worker, Winston Wuttunee

- This position has been filled at Aboriginal CATCH full-time since January 2016, and Mr. Wuttunee has been available to the AFEP since then. All agree that he has been a tremendous support for practitioners and fathers alike. “It feels more balanced,” one practitioner explains, adding, “It just makes you feel like we’re unstoppable now; we have somebody here that we can always fall back on; we have a question that we can go and ask, and we just sit there and we learn; and we just try to model ourselves after him.”
- Being a Cultural Support Worker means that you are able to accept the responsibility for who you are, completely, especially as an Elder. You are also able to recognize the same in fathers, and respond to who they are compassionately. Mr. Wuttunee has participated in many of the AFEP group activities, as well as one-on-one meetings with fathers. He often leads cultural ceremonies within those activities, such as drum circles or smudges.

“I remember feeling really proud about who I was as an Aboriginal person when I earned the respect of someone who I respected.”

Administrators

- Aboriginal CATCH Coordinator, Catherine Disbery.
- Executive Director of the local Métis Community Services Society, Kelly L'Hirondelle.
- Early Years Services Manager at Westbank First Nation, Margaret Eli.



Program Participants

Thriving men and fathers



Aboriginal CATCH's AFEP is open to all Aboriginal fathers and caregivers, as well as all fathers of Aboriginal children. These fathers commonly describe having added difficulties in dealing with the assumptions and labels that others place on them based on race. *"I became a walking artifact, with comments like rain dances,"* one father recalls. This is despite the fact that fathers taking part do not fit the stereotypes that others have sometimes attributed to them.

"I don't know the 'others,' the stereotypes out there that people talk about. I've never... met any of them."

Participants in the program include thriving men and fathers. They have found success in academics, for example. This includes men who have completed post-secondary studies,

one finishing in the ninetieth percentile of his cohort, while others are continuing post-secondary education at this time. Fathers have also found success through lucrative employment positions, in the trades, service industry, military, and financial sectors. They donate time as volunteers in their community as well. AFEP participants include homeowners, taxpayers, and those who have built connections to both Aboriginal communities and leadership across the country through business.

“That's what I've always advocated for... We need to be out there on the front lines where people see us, and see the effects of our works.”

Participants have stepped up as fathers as well. As described above, they are not the biological fathers to about one in five of the children they provide care for. Along with caring for their own, some are father figures to their partner's children from past relationships, while others have formally adopted or have become *surrogate* fathers for extended family. Participants also include single fathers, as well as those who have parenting support from partners.

All of the dads describe having been rewarded for stepping up in some way, often in terms of improvements in their own sense of happiness and life satisfaction. Despite children being the source of many challenges fathers face, all describe in one way or another finding new direction and meaning in their lives through the relationships they have built with their children.

“I could be broke, but if my kids told me they loved me, I'd be happy with that. I'd be more happy with that than with a million dollars in my pocket.”

One father in particular notes having always drawn much of his identity from his employment before becoming a father. “As soon as I had kids that was it... exclusively, concretely, my title as dad will never change... that will never deviate from my number one priority,” he asserts.

“That's been my biggest, happiest feeling is when they just come and tell me they love me. Everything just stops, and you don't have to worry.”

Fathers of thriving children



Along with men at the AFEP benefiting from their role as father, children of those men are also thriving from the additional care and attention they receive. One participant gives an example of this in describing some of the material goods he is proud to be able to provide his children with, including them having their own room with bunk-beds and video games.

“My kids like how I treat them... and they do things that I couldn't do, that would have made me feel good growing up, that I never had.”

Another describes with pride how his child has excelled academically with his assistance, and yet another recounts how he has been successful in helping his son overcome an issue with anxiety. Of the few fathers who have raised children into adulthood, one reflects on how an extended family member he provided care to for over twelve years seems to be thriving as

well, having recently applied for post-secondary school to begin his career in a trade. It appears from these examples that the children of thriving fathers in the program are likely to grow up to help further redefine stereotypes of Aboriginal people, and are clearly not fitting into those that persist in society today.

“I was born to be a dad. You know, there's got to be something in your genetic code that just predetermined me to be a good dad.”

Overcoming challenges

AFEP participants include thriving men who have stepped up as fathers to their children, often having done so in spite of multiple challenges. Many are day-to-day challenges common to all parents, while these dads are managing them alongside multiple other issues unique to Aboriginal fathers.

The most common of their challenges appears to be balancing discipline with patience in providing children with direct care and supervision. One father explains that he does not want his home to be a dictatorship, though he wants to provide his children with boundaries that focus on safety as well. Supervising homework, making lunches, and driving children to activities are additional challenges common to most parents that these dads are taking on.

“One of the first things I understood when I became an adult was that I didn't have a clue how to parent. The way I parented was completely wrong, and I don't want to do it that way. So, I kind of had to reprogram, to learn something very different.”

The most commonly reported challenge unique to Aboriginal fathers is a lack of knowledge about their role as an Aboriginal father. Most who took part in interviews describe having grown up without men in their lives who consistently modeled positive fatherhood. One of the few fathers who did have someone that fit this role growing up notes how his dad did not openly embrace his identity as an Aboriginal for many years. Instead, the late Member of Parliament Elijah Harper was an Aboriginal figure from the media that he looked up to as a youth.

Participants often explain that they have not always had a strong sense of an Aboriginal father's role because they had been raised by parents without basic parenting skills.

"I've never had that father. I don't know what it's like to have that father-son relationship, and so it's been harder for me to connect with [my son] sometimes."

Substance abuse and physical abuse are common themes in the descriptions fathers provide of the homes they grew up in. This has affected fathers in many ways, including some having developed their own issues related to mental health and substance use, and some perpetrating the physical violence they often experienced. One father explains how growing up with an abusive parent made him hyper-vigilant about protecting his own children, expecting by default that others would likely harm them.

"Scary is a good word. Mostly, it's scary. I recall the first time that I knew I was going to be a dad."

Many participants describe having had a significant amount of fear about becoming fathers, in filling the role that often went unfilled in their childhood and then in possibly continuing the "cycle of violence," as one termed it. A father describes having been anxious about his ability to parent a girl in particular. Another admits he was scared when he found out he was going to become a dad, but learned at the AFEP that it was more important for him to focus on what he was going to do about facing this fear.

Aside from a common lack of fatherhood knowledge, and a fear that seems to come along with that, fathers have overcome additional barriers in stepping up for their children. This includes the children's mother and social workers sometimes interfering with the fathers' relationships with their children. More than one father attributed a limit to the amount of time they spend with their children to a bias the courts are said to have against fathers. Some also explain how ongoing financial constraints have kept them from having larger roles as care providers at points in their lives, having to be away for work very often, for example.

Multiple fathers acknowledge that there have been periods when limited contact with their children had been justified. This includes one who recognizes that educational opportunities were better for his children with their mother previously; and another father who admits that he was "dangerous to [his] children" during a time when he struggled with depression and substance use.

"I realized I was being exactly who I didn't want to be, which was my parents. So I quit drinking. I've been sober since that day."

Many of the fathers are open about having had issues with mental health and substance use

at some point in their lives. These fathers often describe having found limited community supports to help them with these issues before they were connected with the AFEP.

Along with a lack of support in the community, fathers often describe having had few cultural connections to rely upon before attending the AFEP. One father says that this apparent cultural disconnection is fairly common to many Aboriginal people in the region, at least compared with communities in the Canadian prairies and eastern provinces.

“You meet a lot of First Nations people who haven't heard their language spoken in three generations. They wouldn't know where to stand at a pow-wow.”

One of the few fathers who notes having had connections to traditional practices previous to attending the AFEP says that teachings associated with the medicine wheel have been an important resource for him. He calls the medicine wheel “our gift to the planet.” This father created a medicine wheel die that he could roll each morning when he needed direction in setting his intentions for the day. *“If it came up mother earth, came up green,”* he explains, *“then, 'Okay,' I'd say, 'Today I'm going to call my mom, or do something like my recycling.'”* Setting these intentions each morning when he was having the most difficulty *“helped [him] through [his] tough times,”* and reminded him of his connection to effective, traditional medicines. This father's adaptation of the teaching of the medicine wheel using a die and intention setting is similar to the way that the AFEP adapts traditional Aboriginal cultural teachings for modern day life.



Traditional Fatherhood: The AFEP Philosophy

A practitioner describes the long-term goal of the program: "If those dads, who are now young men, are getting old and frail, and their kids are there, checking in on them, bringing their grandchildren around, and including their dads in stuff, that will be the success, and then that will replay itself in generations."

In order to achieve this goal of connecting fathers to their children permanently and through upcoming generations, the AFEP has set an immediate goal of helping fathers to engage with their children more often, and to do so in a way that makes use of the strength in traditional Aboriginal parenting practices. "Get back to traditional parenting - we had it right," Aboriginal CATCH exclaims on their website.

It is acknowledged by practitioners that there is no single or unified Aboriginal identity or culture to draw from in defining the traditional role of an Aboriginal father. Instead, Aboriginal CATCH has incorporated values and practices that are common across many distinct groups in order to build their own definition. For example, practitioners report having borrowed primarily from traditional values and practices of the Syilx First Nation, with input from elders in the Okanagan, such as Chief Tim Manual of the Upper Nicola Band. Also influential have been contributions from Dené and Cree First Nations knowledge holders at the program, which have been blended further with those of Métis people involved. One practitioner explains how the main source of common ground between these groups was found within their spirituality, especially in their common connections to the Creator. This spirituality, along with a unique world-view, has been woven throughout the AFEP activities and its teachings.

More common ground between these Aboriginal groups was found within a traditional social structure that provides children with an ecosystem of care within families, and also connects families within communities. According to participants, this was a main source of social health and strength before the transmission of parenting knowledge was interrupted. Developing an ecosystem of care for children comes mainly from parents having a clear understanding of their roles, an understanding that had been passed down orally through generations

"A healthy society, and community, has roles for everybody. People feel a sense of identity about what they're supposed to be doing, about why and how... That's what we want to have for both mothers and fathers now."

Aboriginal CATCH has translated traditional teachings and roles for fathers into contemporary living. Values of self-sufficiency, pride, and competence are promoted in place of traditional roles; for example, fathers as protectors and providers, or mothers as homemakers. In this way, practitioners aim to blend fathers' and mothers' roles into a

traditional parenting role for dads. Examples of the teachings promoted at the AFEP to support this role include fathers understanding the importance of supporting their children's independence as they age, and eventually developing confidence that their children will find their own way.

“Imagine if you were hanging onto your boys as they are paddling down the river. They have got to do it by themselves, right? If you're hanging on to them... you're holding them back.”

Another example is the teaching that fathers must provide their children with love, care, and protection. Fathers need to hear that they are loved as well. A practitioner explains further how fathers have to understand that there are others close to them who both believe in and support them if they are to be successful. This understanding has traditionally been facilitated by fathers coming together to discuss their unique issues, and to gain support from one another. Gathering together in this way may not come as naturally to men as it may to women, a practitioner suggests, thus community supports for this may be even more important.

Interruptions in traditional fatherhood roles

The transmission of knowledge of traditional roles for Aboriginal parents has been interrupted by government policies that facilitated the removal of children from Aboriginal homes and communities in Canada for centuries.

“And then of course the residential schools. Most children were put into those schools, and they lost that parenting figure in their life. It was replaced by nuns and priests. So, when the kids came back, they didn't have parenting skills.”

Policies that led to the mass removal of Aboriginal children include those that filled Indian Residential Schools; those of the “Sixties Scoop” that filled foster homes and orphanages; and present day policies for Child Protection and Youth Justice Services, in which Aboriginal children and youth continue to be vastly over-represented in government care and in custody centres. Fathers in the AFEP have direct connections to these past and ongoing colonial abuses. Many describe having parents and grandparents who were residential school survivors.

One result of these interruptions has been the lack of Aboriginal fathers who have had the experience of learning traditional fatherhood from a role model, as described above.

Another result is that identity in many Aboriginal people continues to be fractured. A father

provides an example of how this has happened. He explains how his grandfather was forced to trade his "Indian status" for land, before dying in a farming accident while working that land. This left his grandfather's six daughters and their children without this status: "We were stuck in-between worlds because we weren't white, and we weren't native... it's growing up in-between worlds. Fighting with the Indians, and fighting with the white people. And you don't know who you are because you're sitting there, you're just lost."

Helping fathers to rebuild their Aboriginal identities is at the core of the program, and is the foundation of their understanding and use of traditional roles as Aboriginal fathers. A practitioner explains further how young men may be especially confused about taking on those roles. This, he adds, increases the likelihood that their families will not remain connected.

"All my kids knew was drugs and alcohol, and all this negative stuff. I want more positive."

Despite these significant interruptions, an ecosystem of family and community care for Aboriginal children remains intact today in many ways, along with the traditional fatherhood roles underlying those ecosystems. These require a community's ongoing attention and support for their maintenance and strength.

"Traditional fathering is the idea of learning what worked in the past, and using your culture to add the missing parts, such as spirituality. Learning how to release your emotions and how to physically take care of yourself, and learning wisdoms and values. That is now missed out on, and so traditional fathering programs are really needed today to reinstate that. The four teachings: the mental, physical, emotional, the spiritual. Trying to balance that out... and then also teach [fathers] some of the skills that your grandmother and grandfather knew."

Best Parts of the Program

In attending at multiple AFEP events over the past year alongside fathers and their children, I witnessed how practitioners were achieving their goal of helping to support and strengthen family connections through traditional practices adapted for modern day life. I saw dads spending time with their children, those children surrounded by friends, and the pride that fathers exuded when they introduced their families to me. I heard dads speak openly about their personal situations with a unique and contagious strength. This strength seemed to emanate from the program practitioners to the participants and I could not help but feel some of it as well. I was able to observe the skill that practitioners showed in creating an environment that dads and their families felt safe in, and I was privileged to learn about some of the work that the practitioners behind the scenes undertake in supporting all of this.

“There should be a fathers’ support group, plain and simple... there are people willing to learn.”

Each and every father I spoke with for this research project expressed appreciation for having taken part in the AFEP, and spoke about their continued involvement as being important for their future success as fathers. I asked each of them to provide me with more information on what it is about the program specifically that has had the most impact on them, and on their interactions with their children. The following is a summary of what I heard.

Network of support

By far, the majority of responses I received about the best parts of the program were related to the reciprocal relationships fathers are building with each other during AFEP activities. This includes fathers building a network of support with other program participants and with the practitioners - with the facilitator, co-facilitators, and the cultural support worker in particular.

Some fathers mention the meals as being an important part of them taking part or the free activities, for example, but all touch upon the social connections they make primarily.

“It's an awesome, awesome program. I'm very thankful there's a program here for people like me, in that situation, that have children. It's good to have that back-up support, where if I need anything or have any questions about the children or anything, I have that connection.”

These connections provide participants with a network through which they can share

parenting information as well as resources. An example of how this benefits fathers and their children directly is in the description one participant provides of having needed help with driving his children around following a medical procedure. The peer who stepped up to help this father had the extra time and ability to drive them. In exchange, he gained access to a vehicle for his own use, as well as reduced rent in that father's home.

"[The best part of the program is] the feeling of us all being united, like a brotherhood."

Another example of how fathers benefit from this network of support and reciprocity comes from one who describes having been able to provide financial advice to other fathers in regards to building a Registered Educational Savings Plan account for their children. Many of the fathers at the AFEP did not have access to this information previously. These dads are helping each other out beyond simply sharing information, materials or services, however.

"I found that peer support, and I've always been a big fan of peer support."

The mix of fathers involved in the group - with those who are clearly thriving alongside those facing the most challenge - provides a role for everyone, including dads who are models of parenting skills and mentors for others. All of the fathers have shown a desire to contribute to the program that supports them and their peers.

"We really need to help the fathers learn skills, and we have to have a program to teach, to model, how to be a parent, because some of these dads have just never seen any other dads in action. They don't know. They just don't know how to hold a kid, and how to do lots of skills. And there's really no Aboriginal parenting programs, there really isn't."

The most important part about fathers building this social network with other dads appears to be how the participants gain an understanding that they are not alone with any difficulties they may be having, and that others have been through similar experiences and feelings.

"When you see someone in front of you who's struggling with their emotions as they're trying to tell you what they're going through, it makes you really connect with this person, like, 'Wow, that's how I feel, so, I'm not the only one,' right? It's great. It's a great feeling."

Dads further describe feeling listened to and understood at the AFEP. The facilitator especially is one who has “done a fabulous job of making an environment where they're not afraid to come, where they feel safe, where they feel welcome, where they feel belonging,” his peer says. Brenden Moore is available to fathers 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and goes above and beyond his job description in providing supports. An example of this is provided by one father's description of how Mr. Moore helped him get a much needed medical device that he could not afford on his own.

Just as fathers report relying on the AFEP to build their social support network, many also describe the same being built for their children as well. Fathers have watched as their children navigate new social environments at the AFEP - “Which went really, really well,” one father recalls, adding, “They did so good.”

“They got to meet different friends and become playmates together...they just had such a great time here.”

Connections to traditional practices and culture



As fathers build connections to traditional practices and culture at the AFEP, they are gaining access to practical medicines and developing a stronger sense of identity and pride. The same can be said for the children of these fathers. Their children are learning about their shared histories as Aboriginal people, about the Cree language, and about ceremonial practices, like drumming.

“The beating of the drum. My kids really love that.”

The facilitator and his co- and guest-facilitators have provided cultural teachings to the fathers since the AFEP's inception, while all acknowledge that the addition of a Cultural Support Worker (or an Elder, as some at the program describe him) has greatly strengthened the group. Dads describe a compounding effect of their own cultural educations alongside that of their children, as both are provided with opportunities to be the student as well as the teacher once they return home.

“Music, education, language, dance, and just culture in general, that's huge.”

Promotion of healthy living



The AFEP gets dads out of the house during time that they have without their children, when they might otherwise stay inside on their own. One father warns, “If you're isolated at home, stuck with your own story, you can run yourself directly into the ground.” Another dad notes how coming to the AFEP on days when just the fathers are together gives him a much-needed break from the children, and “some adult, structured, intellectual time” that he would not have otherwise.

Exercise and nutrition are also a focus at the AFEP, and are important parts of fathers' and their families' increased well-being. One father describes having been “on the wrong side of the scale” because of his work, while the AFEP has helped him prioritize a healthy

lifestyle. Many of the dads note the same, with more than one saying that the program has helped them look ten or fifteen years into the future, when they want to still be active enough to keep up with their children.

“One of the major things from the program that I wasn't expecting at all was there was a bit of a focus on the self.. I went in there saying ‘Okay, well, what can I learn about my kids, about my relationship with my wife?’ But, some of the stuff we were doing was actually things about eating well, and exercising. So, kind of personal health and that, and, you know, they make good points.”

One of the fathers suggests that a change he made towards improving his health was directly connected to the Dads in Gear events at the AFEP. More specifically, when a personal trainer attended to lead workshops and was made available to the dads after program hours. Another father recalls how the same events helped a group of the fathers quit smoking together.

The AFEP is also connected to at least one father's ability to “*stay sober.*” He explains that the program is a “*pressure valve*” for him that increases his endurance to maintain his mental health. This was echoed by other dads in multiple ways as well.

“I have all this energy and time to spend with my kids on my own, going to Energyplex, going to Scandia, with the loud music, the dinging and the bells and whistles, and the kids running around. Do you think I'd be able to do that if I didn't come here?”

A result of fathers having healthier lifestyles has been their reports of also having more energy and patience to care for their children. Fathers further describe the AFEP as a structured support that has helped them build a routine in their family.

“Those kids are there with their dads, who are giving them that sort of loving and caring attention, right? So, to me, that's a real success of the program so far.”

Fathers report feeling more energized because of their participation in the AFEP, and feeling a higher capacity to engage with their children. This may be a direct result of their improvements in terms of nutrition, exercise, and reduced tobacco and alcohol use. It may

also come from having an expanded network of support as well as cultural connections. In the end, it is difficult to pinpoint the specific piece of the program that is having the greatest effect, though it is clear that these parts together are improving the fathers' ability to positively engage with their children.

“That could potentially be a reason why people come out, with peripheral benefits of you are engaging discussion, networking with people who might have spare cycles of time, and a vehicle to help someone become a bit more mobile to enhance their own lives. And you know, it'd be an exercise in futility... to explain the ripple effect of men getting together and talking candidly over a nice warm meal, and having a cultural aspect attached to it.”



Future Directions to Consider

A common characteristic of the best community programs is that they are responsive to the changing needs of stakeholders, in particular program participants. Evaluations such as this one are an important part of this responsiveness.¹⁶ Fathers have overwhelmingly described Aboriginal CATCH's AFEP as a successful model to be replicated. However, I heard from practitioners in planning this documentation project that they also wanted to better understand what changes the fathers might be interested in. In providing this feedback, fathers often prefaced their response by acknowledging the limits practitioners face in providing services. These include having access to limited funds, and needing to meet the needs of a diverse group of participants.

"They're trying to accommodate everybody and it's impossible, right? I guess in some ways we're all a little different... it can be a daunting task, saying this is who we're trying to help, this is what they look like, this is what they eat."

Fathers commonly show their understanding that practitioners are doing their best with what they have. They have provided the following responses mainly so that there will be more resources available in the future.

Adding cultural opportunities

While traditional Aboriginal practices have been woven throughout the program in many ways, fathers are still hungry for more. Some specific skills they request training in include bead work, canoeing, and hunting (especially in learning to dress deer or moose) – especially so that they might pass these skills on to their children in the future.

Increased structure

Fathers commonly note their appreciation of how flexible the AFEP is, but also suggest that there should be more structure to the program in specific ways. Having a predictable monthly schedule of events would mean that fathers could plan to attend them well in advance. There is no agreement between the dads as to the time of day events should be held. The group is split between those who prefer to attend during working hours in the week, and others who prefer evenings and weekends. One father suggests that events might at least be held consistently each month in either case, with talking circles on the first Tuesdays and larger family activities on the last Saturdays, for example.

¹⁶ Chouinard, J., & Cousins, B. (2007). Culturally competent evaluation for Aboriginal communities: a review of the empirical literature. *Journal of Multidisciplinary Evaluation*, 4(8), 40-57.

In addition to more predictability in setting meeting times, some fathers suggest adding structure to the meetings themselves. One dad offers the suggestion that the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous might provide a framework, to create a “**twelve step father program**” for example. In this way, new fathers might be matched with more experienced participants, and there may be specific actions for them to perform as they move through the program. Talking circles could be easily incorporated into this structure as well. More generally, multiple fathers suggest that the focus of any such restructuring should be towards adding opportunities for therapeutic work, both in a group setting, by “**healing together,**” or in one-on-one opportunities.

Increasing accessibility

Many of the dads suggest that there needs to be more awareness in the community about the success of the AFEP, especially so that all of the fathers nearby who would benefit from taking part have the opportunity to connect. This may be accomplished in the Central Okanagan through an advertising campaign, possibly including practitioners and participants creating and hanging posters to start. These endeavors could be focused on community service hubs and schools.

“If only more people knew about the program... I wouldn't have found out about this program if I didn't look for it.”

Practitioners acknowledge the need to address accessibility as well, starting with increasing outreach to the most vulnerable fathers and families. Areas identified where outreach would be most useful are on the rural outskirts of Aboriginal communities in Westbank and Rutland in Kelowna. Outreach to these regions might start with ensuring fathers there know about the AFEP, and then with arranging transportation for those fathers to attend. This would likely require additional funding to add an outreach worker to the program staff, though it might also be facilitated in the meantime through volunteers, especially through fathers in the AFEP network who live near these areas and have access to a vehicle.

“It continues to show that this is something that we need more of in order to have healthy families. We can have these traditional parenting programs, but if fathers aren't engaged, and if they're shut out from the lives of their children, then what does that all mean?”

Along with helping to make the AFEP more accessible to new participants, existing

participants suggest that there could be more variety in the sites where meetings are held. One dad suggests that talking circles could be held outside more often during summer months, along with “unplug and play” events for the entire family. Past outdoor AFEP activities that fathers note as having been most successful include camping, barbecues, movie nights in the park, and trips to Big White Mountain. These events may also be more likely to attract fathers from both sides of the Okanagan Lake, which appears to be a divider of the group practically speaking when events are held on either side of it.

Change to the meals

Dads generally report being happy with the meals provided at the AFEP events, and practitioners note how important these have been in engaging many families; however, some dads ask that there might be a change from the usual meals. One of the fathers also says that the food is not important to him, and that those funds might be better used on improving other parts of the program. With this diversity of opinion in mind, it may be helpful for practitioners to encourage more feedback from dads on an ongoing basis. Attending AFEP events, it appeared to me that fathers and their children were voting with their mouths in favor of business as usual, but making use of free technology, such as www.surveymonkey.com, could give participants input into choosing meals ahead of events without much added cost.

Consistent funding

As described, funding Aboriginal CATCH's AFEP has been an issue from the beginning. This was not solved after the group received its first grant from the provincial government in 2014. Since then, practitioners have learned that any future proposal for the same grant would draw from funds that one of their partner organizations has long received. The result is that both organizations are left to work on simply maintaining services for the programs that are currently running with less funding, instead of expanding those services. This also comes as the AFEP grows in popularity, presumably with the community's needs, and Aboriginal CATCH in particular is left to provide more with less.

“I'd love to do more of the Big White trips, but... money doesn't grow on trees - so I get that.”

The fathers very often acknowledge the great work practitioners are doing in addressing such administrative dilemmas.

Nothing to improve / more of everything

Far more than any criticism of the AFEP, fathers insist that there is either nothing to improve or that they simply want more of everything. “Keep up the good work,” was one father's response when asked what administrators should be doing more of. More AFEP

events of any kind is also a common response, with sharing circles as well as events for the entire family cited by dads specifically. One father suggests that weekly or even daily AFEP meetings would be well attended by fathers if they were available.

“And I’m not the only one who feels like this program has helped me.”



“I just hope it goes bigger and better.”

“I definitely can say I do rely on the program.”

Guiding Principles



The goals of Aboriginal CATCH's AFEP includes helping fathers engage with their children more often, and doing so in a way that makes use of the strength in traditional Aboriginal parenting practices. The program also hopes to promote this engagement between parents and children in a way that ensures those practices will tie families together and be passed on to future generations. Following is a set of guiding principles identified by practitioners and fathers in a successful AFEP that could help a community achieve these goals.

1) Engage community stakeholders to build support and funding

- i) Fatherhood panel events are a useful way to start a dialogue between fathers and potential partner programs, and to identify and create a broad acknowledgment of the need for a community AFEP.
- ii) Once this need is acknowledged, initiating and sustaining an AFEP depends upon continued and tangible recognition that it is an important resource in the community. This recognition includes expressed partnerships with local stakeholders, at least one source of long-term and dependable funding (Aboriginal CATCH found part of this provincially), and increased support from policy makers at all levels.

2) Seek direct service providers who reflect the population being served

- i) Prioritize finding an AFEP facilitator who is an Aboriginal father that models traditional fathering practices for others at the program.
- ii) Despite persistent institutionalized efforts to extinguish Aboriginal cultural connections and practices, these remain strong across Canada. Aboriginal culture is thriving today, just like many within the population - and the two appear to be closely linked. Supporting this link includes integrating cultural teachings and spirituality throughout the AFEP.
- iii) Helping fathers to build connections to and pride in traditional culture and practices lends itself directly to them building childcare skills, and to fathers being included in an ecosystem of care for children.

- iv) Drumming circles may be an effective activity to help fathers engage in traditional practices if they have had few connections previously.

3) Provide service to a diverse population of participants

- i) Fathers from across a spectrum of strength and success - from those who are clearly thriving, to those who are most challenged – all have important roles in building an AFEP's network of support. To engage thriving fathers may be especially important for these programs; given the difficulties many community programs face in accessing consistent funding and then in adding leadership positions and structural supports.
- ii) Vary meeting and event times to accommodate both fathers who may only be able to attend on evenings and weekends, and also fathers who are free during daytime hours during the week. Excluding either group of fathers may make it more likely that those who could help others the most, or those who need that help the most, may not be able to take part.

4) Count on fathers as leaders in an AFEP

- i) Peer support can be incorporated into the ongoing development of practice models for community AFEPs, and incorporated into developing clear roles for practitioners.
- ii) Fathers may also be the best resource available to practitioners in terms of advertising for the program and reaching out to those with the greatest needs, especially while program funding is limited.

It is a challenge, and each community will find their own time and pathway to take the journey towards increased recognition and support for Aboriginal fathers' roles in contemporary families, drawing on cherished traditions. But as the reflections of fathers and practitioners in the Aboriginal Father Engagement Program in the Central Okanagan convey, community support for positively involved fatherhood is timely and important, for children, parents, communities, and generations to come.