

Families in the child-bearing period: Fathers and the COVID-19 pandemic

Families have faced unprecedented hardship throughout the world and in Canada since the COVID-19 pandemic was declared in March 2020. These hardships include lack of proximity to family and other sources of support to deal with the social isolation and fear raised by COVID-19, in addition to financial burdens and childcare commitments.

The experience of becoming a parent involves both the joy and the challenges that come with having a child. In addition to the responsibilities, expectations, and challenges that come with a new baby, new fathers experience a high level of anxiety and uncertainty (Cameron et al., 2020). The perinatal period provides a window of opportunity when fathers are most likely to engage in positive actions for the good of their children and their families. While fathering itself is a life-changing event, the emergence of COVID-19 augments fatherhood challenges as a result of constraints on health-care practices and interventions that solely focus on mothers and babies, excluding the fathers from the “family-centred” equation (Lista & Bresesti, 2020).

While working as a lactation consultant during the COVID-19 pandemic, I observed and listened to the concerns raised by some fathers, who spoke of the impact of one-person or no-visitor policies on their participation in postpartum care. Several fathers expressed concern about the lack of opportunities to learn infant-care skills and to receive information from health-care professionals. Additionally, families expressed heightened fear and anxiety, including concerns regarding childbirth without family support (Lisa & Bresesti, 2020). This paper addresses the effects of COVID-19 on fathers during the child-bearing period through a brief literature review and outlines implications for health professionals and community organizations in

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implementing father-inclusive practices in the face of a “new reality.”

VULNERABLE FATHERS IN A PANDEMIC

The COVID-19 virus has had devastating effects on individuals and families of various social classes. Young fathers, immigrant fathers, and fathers in same-sex couples are profoundly affected by this epidemic. These fathers are at higher risk of mental health disorders such as suicide, violence, and addiction (Recto et al., 2020). For adolescent fathers specifically, the mental health toll is exacerbated by a lack of economic, social, and organizational resources. These challenges, combined with racial and gender biases or inequalities, have shown the importance of promoting mental health and well-being for both mothers and fathers during the child-bearing period.

Iztayeva (2021) examines the psychological well-being of mainly low-income, single dads. The research highlights that limited co-parenting and family support from extended family has led to social isolation and feelings of loneliness. Also, nesting arrangements, such as living arrangements in custody sharing, pose unique challenges for separated fathers, especially for divorced fathers, which intensify problems with child care (Koeman, 2021). Fathers from visible minorities and immigrant families might face added challenges during pregnancy, child birth, and postpartum owing to a lack of family support, fewer social networks, and international travel

restrictions that curtail the presence of grandparents.

DADS IN DUAL-PARENT HOUSEHOLDS

In dual-parent families, fathers have seen their roles and responsibilities change both positively and negatively during the pandemic. While lockdown measures fostered father-child relationships, they also imposed additional demands on parents, such as homeschooling young children (Cameron et al., 2020). According to Iztayeva (2021), the COVID-19 pandemic has created an opportunity for some fathers to share household responsibilities and childcare duties, which is a positive step toward promoting gender equality and creating a more harmonious family life. Some fathers who have the opportunity to work from home report more time spent and greater involvement in child care. Other fathers who worked in person, with the increased risk of exposure, were anxious about contracting and transmitting the virus to their families and children (Cameron et al., 2020).

FATHERS' MENTAL HEALTH: A SILENT CRISIS

A father's mental health is an essential component of their overall well-being. The COVID-19 pandemic's impact on mental health is felt globally, nationally, and locally, and there is an evolving crisis in paternal mental health. Over the course of the pandemic, fathers have seen a 4- to 10-fold (37.1 percent) increase in depression and a 1.5- to 3-fold (22.9 percent) increase in anxiety issues, relative to the general prevalence rates of 4-15 percent of paternal mental health concerns before the pandemic (Cameron et al., 2020). Exhaustion, blurred boundaries between the work and household identities, lack of social connec-

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tions, and fewer social ties compromise both parents' psychological well-being. COVID-19 undoubtedly affects fathers' mental health now and will continue to do so into the future (Recto et al., 2020). This has implications for mothers and their children. Therefore, special attention needs to be paid to fathers' mental health now and after the pandemic.

Worldwide, the COVID-19 pandemic, in both the short term and the long term, has caused immense social, economic, environmental, and mental health effects (Cameron et al., 2020). The absence of informal check-ins from family and friends and a lack of other programs that were previously available during the early years of parenting have negatively affected fathers with newborns and young babies during COVID-19.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

As a result of the constant policy changes and pivoting, health-care professionals face increasing challenges in implementing solutions that help new parents. Using telehealth to maintain social connectedness and inclusivity may be helpful during interactions with new parents. Health-care professionals should provide trauma-informed care to vulnerable fathers—young dads, new immigrants, and single fathers—when the family

is experiencing multiple psychosocial challenges. Counselling and mentorship through father-inclusive programs could benefit those who do not have a vast support network (Recto et al., 2020).

With ongoing restrictions in place, the lack of continuity in perinatal care and inconsistency of support in perinatal programs leave fathers with less opportunity to express their feelings of fear, anxiety, and depression. Even though fatherhood research has grown exponentially over the past 30 years, universal screening for mental health issues specific to fathers and father-inclusive practices have been sparse and limited during pregnancy, child birth, and postpartum periods (Recto et al., 2020). The pandemic has shown the cracks in our system for fathers of families in the child-bearing years. In the long run, implementing programs that target the mental health and well-being of fathers is a social responsibility. Consciousness raising and transformational changes across both the structural and systemic levels are essential to promote and support the mental health and well-being of fathers. 🍁

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