Poster and Networking Session

Abstract Template Form

**Indicate Presentation Type :** ***Paper or poster***

**Title** Connecting: The parenting experiences of fathers of children with neurodisabilities

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Parenting a child with a neurodisability (ND) can be a life altering experience. To date, representations of parenting in research are often gender-neutral. Less is known about the unique experiences of fathers and the meanings that these experiences hold for them. The objective of this study was to explore the meaning of involvement among fathers of children with ND. This study employed Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009) to explore the meaning of this parenting experience among fathers of children with ND. Study participants were eleven biological fathers of children and youth with ND who were recruited from Alberta, Ontario and Quebec. Children presented with a range of ND conditions (i.e. autism, cerebral palsy, and intellectual disabilities) and a range of functional impairments (i.e. difficulties in walking, talking, understanding and socialization).

Fathers were interviewed one to two times, at a time and place most convenient for them. Interviews, lasting from 45 minutes to 1.5 hours, were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Measures were taken to ensure rigour, including the production of field notes that were taken to record reflections, insights, observations and descriptions. Three master themes emerged from fathers’ narratives centred on their connection to their child. (1) “Forming connections – from disruptions to new understandings” describes fathers’ early struggles and joys in fatherhood and the influence of their children’s contacts on their appreciation of their role. (2) “Taking our place in the world” describes fathers’ experiences and negotiations with the world inside and outside of their family. (3) “Anticipating, emerging and growing” describes how fathers came to understand themselves and grow in new ways as a function of their relationship with their child. In the absence of an emotional connection and meaningful support, parenting was a difficult and solitary journey.

Practice implications of this study include the importance of noticing and reinforcing fathers’ emotional connection with their children, discussing parenting experiences with fathers, acknowledging fathers as resources in the family unit, and prioritizing fathers' information needs. The findings of this study revealed the importance making visible and understanding fathers' poorly understood parenting experiences.

**Keywords (up to 6 words):** father involvement, fathering, neurodisability,

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