



# RELAIS-PÈRES

AN OUTREACH  
AND SUPPORT SERVICE  
FOR FATHERS IN  
VULNERABLE SITUATIONS

## PRACTICE GUIDELINES

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## REGROUPEMENT POUR LA VALORISATION DE LA PATERNITÉ

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## PURPOSE AND RELEVANCE OF A PRACTICE GUIDE INSPIRED BY *RELAIS-PÈRES*, AN OUTREACH AND SUPPORT SERVICE FOR VULNERABLE FATHERS

**The purpose of this document is to propose some guidelines to outreach and support fathers living in vulnerable situations. These guidelines were developed following the work experience of outreach workers involved in *Relais-Pères*\* since 2005.**

The rationale behind the development of guidelines for work with this target population is evident in many respects. The past thirty years have seen an increase in the number of studies that demonstrate the positive contributions of father involvement to their children's development. Such contributions proved to be beneficial not only to children's cognitive, emotional and social development, but also to their health and well-being<sup>1</sup>. A greater father involvement has positive effects on the father himself as well as on the children's mother<sup>2</sup>.

Acknowledgment of father involvement's benefits constitutes a lever for the implementation of services to support fathers in the exercise of their parental role. Over the past two decades, a variety of activities, services, resources and programs aimed at promoting the role and status of the father have emerged in Quebec and Canada, as evidenced by a number of inventories of practices<sup>3</sup>.

However, with a few exceptions, these practices are still not sufficiently focused on reaching out to fathers who live in vulnerable socio-economic situations. Thus, little is known about their experience as fathers and the characteristics of services to meet their needs. Results of the few studies conducted with this population show that fathers are « invisible » in family welfare services even when the father or a father figure is present<sup>4</sup>. These studies highlight the importance of designing services able to outreach and support this group of fathers, which is the aim of *Relais-Pères*.

The expertise gained by *Relais-Pères* outreach workers is based on more than ten years work in four different neighborhoods of Montreal (Québec, Canada). The flexible nature of the service enabled the adaptation to these various environments and suggests its capacity to be implemented in other communities. During the first years of the service implementation, *Relais-Pères* outreach workers came from different backgrounds with a various range of expertise and profiles. They were employed by three community organizations which, each in their own way, have ultimately

influenced *Relais-Pères* approach. Evaluation of the service implementation shows that *Relais-Pères* approach is, in fact, at the crossroads of each agency and outreach workers' specific values and operating philosophies and the result of shared knowledge between all stakeholders all along the service development. All *Relais-Pères* stakeholders (partners and outreach workers alike) consider this combination of values and operating philosophies as one of the service's most valuable assets.

In addition, it is to be noted that the implementation of the service in certain neighborhoods that have a high proportion of immigrant citizens has contributed to a reflection on the type of intervention strategies to be followed when dealing with this particular group of fathers. These are cultural realities to be taken into consideration.

Finally, one of *Relais-Pères* characteristics that justify the relevance of developing this guide is the service's promoters concern to take a critical look at the actions being developed, which resulted in the undertaking of evaluation studies of the service implementation and its associated effects and impacts<sup>5</sup>. Knowledge originating from such experiential and evaluative exercises lays solid foundations for the development of practice guidelines.

These guidelines, which are intended for managers and practitioners who work with vulnerable families, aim, on the one hand, at providing avenues of intervention to help reach out to vulnerable fathers, build a trust-based relationship with them and meet their needs. On the other hand, this document highlights the structural conditions that support the implementation of a service of this nature. The request for this guide comes from the members of *Relais-Pères* steering committee and their desire to document the knowledge acquired as part of this service's implementation, with a view to extending it to other communities. The content of this guide stems not only from the outreach workers' experience but also from the point of view of the fathers who were helped over the years.

\* Translator's note: Service's brand name in French, which may be translated literally into English as Relaying Fathers



The guide was developed based on the main observations arising from the evaluation studies performed as part of *Relais-Pères* and particularly from the exercise of converting knowledge into action. The exercise was aimed at defining the practice as it takes shape on the field, which meant highlighting the “attitudes and approaches” as well as the actual resources (mechanisms, methods and techniques) used by the outreach workers to achieve their objectives. This was a major challenge, in the sense that social intervention is a reality with vague boundaries that are often difficult to define and articulate.

It is worth noting that the proposed approach is descriptive rather than prescriptive: the guidelines provide styles, attitudes and behaviors, but it still gives free rein to professional judgment and allows for adaptation to the specificities of the relevant environment. As pointed out by the *Institut national d'excellence en santé et en services sociaux* (INESSS): “a practical guide does not dictate; it supports the practice”<sup>6</sup> (Free translation).

**“Clinical practice guidelines  
are the demonstration  
of a culture of excellence  
characterized by its pursuit  
of quality and efficient  
interventions.”**

*(INESSS, 2012, FREE TRANSLATION)*





## RELAIS-PÈRES, AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH

**In order to develop a better understanding of the rationale behind these practice guidelines and identify the necessary adjustments needed in line with the specificities of the target populations' individual contexts, it is useful to start with an overview of the service characteristics.**

### SERVICE CHARACTERISTICS

- > OBJECTIVES
- > TARGET POPULATION
- > A RESEARCH-ACTION PERSPECTIVE
- > A REFERENCE FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION GUIDANCE

### OBJECTIVES

*Relais-Pères* is a support service that focuses on the following objectives:

- > reach out to vulnerable fathers in their natural environment;
- > provide them with a continuous support in various aspects of their lives (paternal, personal, co-parenting, socio-economic and relational);
- > help them gain access to local resources when needed;
- > reinforce their community participation.

The goal is to support the exercise of their role as fathers and to promote their social inclusion in order to, ultimately, improve children's well-being.

*Relais-Pères* support workers position themselves as outreach workers. The notion of outreach workers involves working within the local community, in partnership with community services, to reach out and support fathers, through proximity services such as in house visits. As such, outreach workers may be professional community development workers or non-professional fathers who wish to support other dads. It should be noted that non-professional workers receive basic training in helping vulnerable fathers and are supported by a clinical team.

From a perspective of developing a continuum of services for fathers, ranging from the promotion of father involvement to tertiary prevention interventions (e.g.: father-child shelter services), *Relais-Pères* falls into an intermediary category that has received very little attention to date. *Relais-Pères* indeed concentrates its efforts on prevention activities supporting fathers living in vulnerable situations. These efforts are in line with the guidelines proposed by the 2003-2012 National Public Health Program (Québec)<sup>7</sup>, which stresses the importance of planning prevention programs and services and broadening the scope of prevention objectives within the healthcare system.

### TARGET POPULATION

*Relais-Pères* targets fathers in vulnerable situations, from all age groups, with one or more children aged seventeen or less, either living with them or not. As far as the concept of vulnerability is concerned, *Relais-Pères* adopts a conceptualization that borrows from the work of Castel<sup>8</sup>. According to Castel, the concept of vulnerability incorporates three distinctive features:

> **Vulnerability is context-specific:** it must be seen as the result of overall social dynamics that weaken certain individuals, such as job markets imbalances that exclude ill prepared employees, weakening of community social networks, and budget cuts impacting social policies and services.

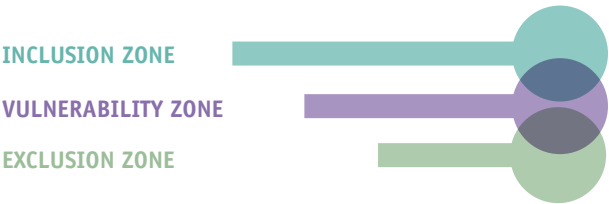
> **Vulnerability is a multidimensional concept:** it has socio-economic, relational and cultural dimensions (see Box 1).

> **Vulnerability is part of a process, in a continuum that goes from insertion to exclusion.** Castel places vulnerability in an intermediate zone between insertion and disenfranchisement (or severe marginalization), at the junction of socio-economic instability and weak social ties (see Figure 1). *Relais-Pères* aims at reaching out to those fathers who sit in that intermediate zone and at taking the relevant actions to prevent their problems from making them slip over the edge into disenfranchisement. From an operational perspective, to qualify for the service, fathers had to be less than 20 years old or, if over 20 years old, have less than a secondary school diploma, an income below the poverty line or insertion issues in connection with a recent immigration situation (less than five years).

A PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (PAR) PERSPECTIVE

The *Relais-Pères* implementation and evaluation effort builds upon a participatory action research (PAR) perspective. In its most general sense, PAR consists of generating a practice related knowledge by testing and evaluating an intervention model in a particular environment<sup>9</sup>. The cornerstone of this approach is that practice will gradually emerge from the constant interaction between an action and a reflective critique of this action. This involves close, ongoing collaboration between researchers and field workers. In this type of research, researchers are present on the field, they foster practice-related reflection and act as stakeholders throughout the various stages of the project development effort. Practitioners closely associate to this knowledge creation by their contribution to the reflective critique and the development of practice guidelines<sup>10</sup>. At *Relais-Pères*, this collaboration is realized through the steering committee, which brings together the various project partners.

FIGURE 1. INCLUSION-EXCLUSION CONTINUUM



A REFERENCE FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION GUIDANCE

First and foremost, it is worth specifying that the practice reference framework suggests guidelines, but is less explicit in terms of the actual activities to put in place. Consistent with the PAR approach adopted by *Relais-Pères*, and considering the fact that the service development is undertaken in a relatively new intervention area, the project partners have made a conscious decision to propose a reference framework that is broad and open-ended in order to stimulate innovation rather than to prescribe a defined way to envision the practice. The intent is to ensure that the project is developed on the field, step by step, as part of a process involving all stakeholders and in line with the needs of the fathers, their families and the realities of the surrounding environment.

The *Relais-Pères* reference framework takes into consideration the following two parameters as part of its practice guidelines:

- 1) A multidimensional definition of father involvement
- 2) A theoretical framework inspired by the ecological perspective.

BOX 1:  
DIMENSIONS OF THE CONCEPT OF VULNERABILITY

SOCIO-ECONOMIC DIMENSION	Financial insecurity, unemployment or informal employment, difficult access to decent housing.
RELATIONAL DIMENSION	Difficult access to mutual assistance network, formal services and social participation, lack of socio-relational references and models in support of the father’s role development
CULTURAL DIMENSION	Low education levels, integration problems into the host society.

FIGURE 2. A MULTIDIMENSIONAL DEFINITION OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT



### ***A multidimensional definition of father involvement***

The *Relais-Pères* reference framework adopts a multidimensional definition of father involvement. Father involvement consists of the continuous participation and preoccupation of the father or his substitute towards the physical and psychological development and the wellbeing of his child.<sup>11</sup>

The definition highlights various manners in which a man can enact his role as a father as shown in *Figure 2*.

### ***A theoretical framework inspired by the ecological perspective***

The reference framework is based on an ecological perspective<sup>12</sup> which considers social inclusion as the result of a system of complex interrelations between the individual's characteristics and the changing properties of both their proximal (family context, informal network) and distal (characteristics of work environment, service environment, social policies) environments.

The ecological perspective induces a practice which includes concomitant activities at several levels (see *Figure 3*). When applied to father involvement, the perspective involves not only working with fathers, in order to improve their personal

and social skills, but also with mothers, from a complementarity of parental roles perspective, as well as with service providers to ensure they see the father-child relationship as important as the mother-child relationship.

In addition, the perspective targets collective as well as individual changes by taking actions aimed at influencing the service environment so that it will be more accessible to fathers, better suited to men's needs and more fatherfriendly. It should also target the employment sector so that it will take into consideration the impact of unemployment and job losses on father involvement, and finally the work environment, in order to support measures balancing work and family life.

This overview of *Relais-Pères* has allowed the identification of the leading concepts that guide the strategies put in place. The next two sections of this guide build on these principles to describe the actual practice guidelines, namely those aimed at the following objectives:

- 1) Reach out to vulnerable fathers and build a trust-based relationship with them; and
- 2) Meet the needs of those fathers.

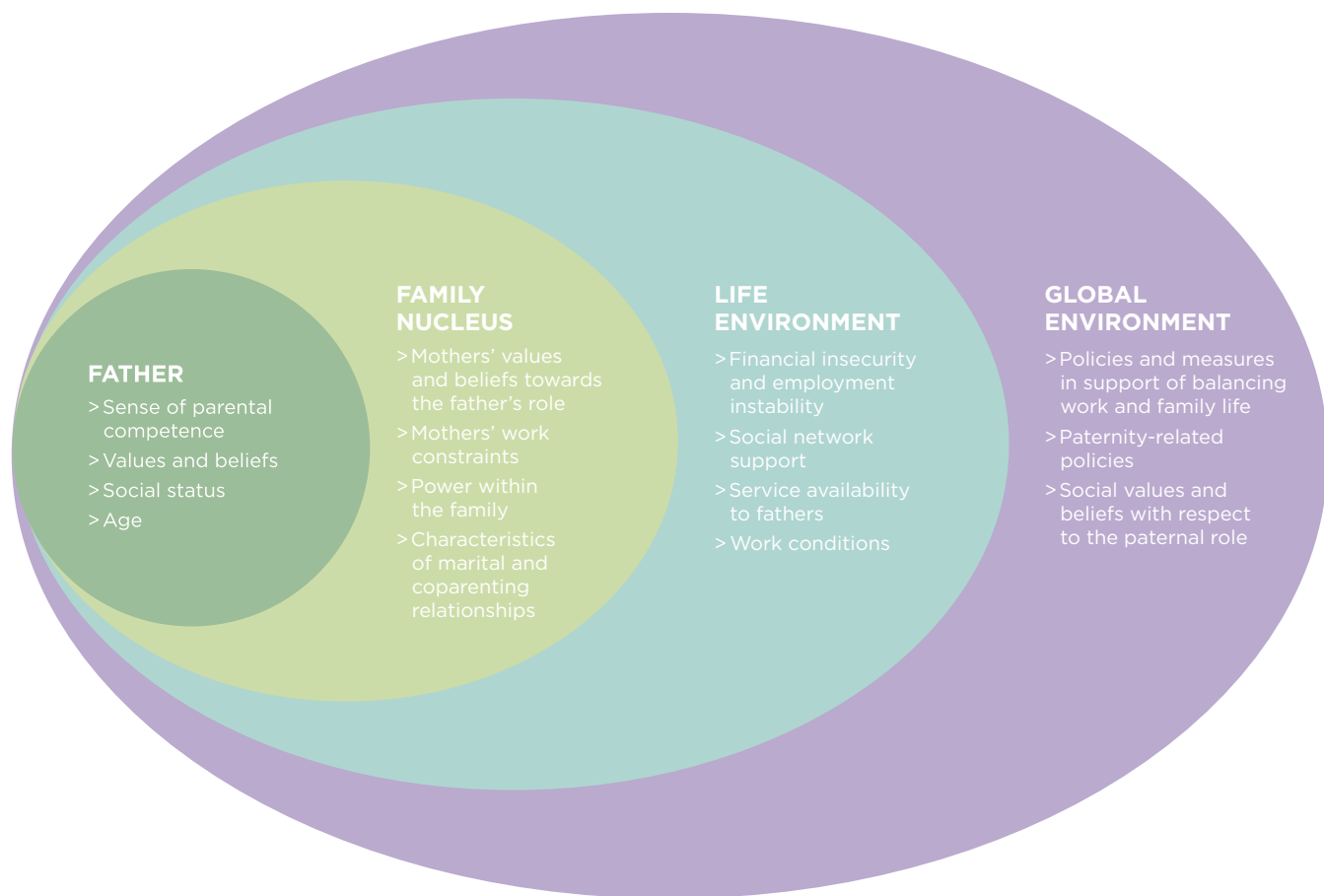


FIGURE 3. ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF FAVORABLE AND UNFAVORABLE CONDITIONS FOR FATHER INVOLVEMENT<sup>13</sup>  
(ADAPTED FROM BRONFENBRENNER<sup>12</sup>)

## PRACTICE GUIDELINES TO OUTREACH VULNERABLE FATHERS AND BUILD A TRUST-BASED RELATIONSHIP

### The development of a practice to support fathers in vulnerable situations faces two major challenges..

The first of these challenges is the practitioner's capacity to outreach and establish contact with vulnerable fathers. Research on service utilization<sup>14</sup> has shown that men are less likely than women to seek help or advice when they are faced with difficulty. When, in addition, it concerns their father's role, even fewer men seek support after their child is born, since all the attention is focused on the mother and the child. Furthermore, as previously mentioned, services, resources, activities and programs implemented to support father involvement have not reached out substantially to the most vulnerable fathers of our societies.

The second challenge is the ability to stay in touch with these fathers after the initial contact has been made. What is at stake, here, is building a trust-based relationship. This is a major challenge as these men have often experienced separation, isolation, significant mistrust of institutions and disqualification in their roles as fathers.

The key learning from the *Relais-Pères* experience is that vulnerable fathers can be reached and that it is possible to build a trust-based relationship with them. However, this requires time: A trust-based relationship builds over time and outreach workers often need to go through many steps before the father opens up and shares his story. The process also requires energy, determination and creativity. Although a causal link cannot be established, accounts from *Relais-Pères* outreach workers indicate that to achieve this, they go through a three-stage process: networking in the community, adopting a proximity approach and meeting father's immediate needs.

### THREE PRACTICE GUIDELINES FOR REACHING OUT AND BUILDING TRUST

- > NETWORKING IN THE COMMUNITY
- > ADOPTING A PROXIMITY APPROACH
- > MEETING FATHERS' IMMEDIATE NEEDS

### NETWORKING IN THE COMMUNITY

For *Relais-Pères* outreach workers, a key factor of success in reaching out for fathers is the ability to be grounded in the community, which represents one of the service's strengths and original aspects. As a first step, deemed critical by all *Relais-Pères* stakeholders, the outreach workers, each in their own ways, took the time to familiarize themselves with the neighborhood dynamics, to make themselves known among the community resources and to establish ties with them by participating in local events or in community network meeting or through their involvement in more formal consultation forums. The approach also values efforts by the outreach workers to be seen in men's common meeting places. The objective is twofold: increase the opportunities to make contact with vulnerable fathers and lay the foundations for a network based practice to meet the needs of those fathers.

- > Making oneself known in the community resources' network
- > Being visible in men's common meeting places
- > Involving community resources

## EXAMPLES

> One of the outreach worker had set a timeframe of six months for him to fully settle in the neighborhood. According to him, the exercise consists of visiting the public spaces where men meet, attending the special events and sociorecreational activities that take place in the neighborhood, and making direct contact with family support organizations and the neighborhood *Centres de santé et de services sociaux* (CSSS)\*.

> Another worker was already a neighborhood resident at the time of his recruitment and has been doing community work in Montreal for 18 years. For increased visibility, he first introduced himself directly to the neighborhood-based local organizations then he offered his services to take part in the organization of socio-recreational events, to then become involved in more formalized consultation forums. He established strong ties with a number of community organizations with diverse callings: family support, social economy, reception services for immigrants and socio-professional integration.

> A third outreach father took advantage of the fact that the social service environment had already been prepared in terms of awareness of the importance of fathers' inclusion. He had close ties with family support resources, two organizations working with fathers (one of which is a shelter for men in difficulty) and a collective kitchen that he helped put in place in the neighborhood. As part of antenatal workshops, and together with a Perinatal and Early Childhood Services team, he met future parents and discussed with them about the paternal role. He also participated in a campaign of visits to the neighborhood community resources to provide them with information about the *Relais-Pères* objectives.



All outreach workers highlight the importance of establishing contact with a local CSSS\*, which, according to them, remain access points of choice for the identification of fathers in need through their perinatal and early childhood prevention programs.

## EXAMPLES

> According to one of the outreach workers, who is already known in the intervention area, the most effective way to reach out to the father is to make home visits at a very early stage of pregnancy. In this view, he has developed an alliance with a CSSS\*, which allows him to accompany a child welfare service provider during the first antenatal home visit. "Calling out to the structure that offers services via the mother anyway and has a quick mechanism for conducting home visits, for me, is a very efficient approach" says the outreach worker. He has also established very strong collaboration ties with a neighborhood-based community service organization where he leads various workshops. This type of collaboration gives him an increasingly strategic access to fathers in the neighborhood, which creates opportunities to identify fathers in need.





## ADOPTING A PROXIMITY APPROACH

In order to reach out to vulnerable fathers and build a trust-based relationship, *Relais-Pères* adopts some of the distinctive features and action principles of street work<sup>15</sup>. The action takes place in a proximity context that has geographical, personal and relational dimensions.

### *Geographical proximity*

The work takes place within a defined geographic area. The organization responsible for the service at each of the experimental sites is deeply rooted in the life environment of the population targeted by the study. Outreach workers either live in the neighborhood or have developed strong ties to it. Vulnerable fathers are reached and helped within their natural environment (at home, a local coffee shop and a local event) rather than in a controlled or institutional setting. The *Relais-Pères* experience confirms the general findings of the inventories of best practices, which indicate that one of the key success factors to make contact with vulnerable fathers is reaching out to them in a meaningful context<sup>16</sup>

Reaching out to the father might mean identifying him and then making direct contact with him in a public casual context through solicitation techniques. At *Relais-Pères*, this was achieved through the creation of informal opportunities

to meet and talk in the father's home (mainly by going along with visiting mothers, social workers or nurses who visit the mothers), by chatting over a cup of coffee in a neighborhood café, by seeking the father's help or collaboration as part of an actual project, and inviting him to a neighborhood socio-recreational event.

**> A direct contact within a context that bears significance to fathers: reaching out to them.**

### EXAMPLES

> In order to make contact with a father, one of *Relais-Pères* outreach worker does not hesitate to knock on the father's door at home, leave messages and invite him for a cup of coffee in a neighborhood coffee shop. The father in question has provided the following description of the circumstances under which he got to know the outreach worker.

"Two people from the CLSC\* came to see me at home and told me that they knew a "visiting father" who would be able to help me for work, for my children, for improving my life and how to show affection to my children and provide for them. [...] He called me at home and told me: "I would like to meet you." He asked me whether I was interested in having a "visiting father" to support me. He told me a little bit about his initiatives and everything. [...] One day, he came over and knocked on my door. I opened the door and let him in. I started talking with him. I offered him a coffee and we started chatting and that is when I got to realize what kind of a person he was. I then started trusting him [...]. Since he came to see us at home, he started talking with us and he showed us what kind of person he was. He is like a father to me. Then we talked on the phone and we went to have a cup of coffee at Tim Horton."

*(Father A, individual interview)*

\* Translator's note: Local Community Service Centre

## Proximity from a personal perspective

Making contact with vulnerable fathers was made easier thanks to the following key feature of *Relais-Pères*: presence of male outreach workers, sometimes nonprofessionals, who, in their dealings with fathers, position themselves as men and fathers before anything else. This allows the establishment of an egalitarian relationship between the various stakeholders, which is one of the basic foundations of empowerment practices<sup>17</sup>.

Outreach workers rely on their common experience with the fathers (being a man, being a father, having experienced a divorce, having an immigration experience) and on sharing personal stories in order to initiate contact and open a dialogue.

- > Position oneself as a man and father before anything else
- > Position oneself as a guide or as a facilitator rather than as an expert
- > Rely on common experiences and on sharing personal stories to open the dialogue

### EXAMPLES

> The following narratives from two outreach workers demonstrate the importance of positioning oneself as a man and father rather than an expert when establishing contact with the father.

“What is also helpful is when we announce to the couple or to the father that a home visit is planned and that it will involve a male worker. It challenges the guys a little bit: a man is coming over.”

*(Outreach worker A, individual interview)*

“I say bravo to the non-professional part of it. That is the right way to do it because it helps build trust more easily. When you arrive and say: “I am a social worker.” Hum ... it does not sound like a smooth introduction. A social worker means CLSC (Local Community Service Centre). I am a “visiting father”. I am not a professional. I am the father of a family. I help people like you who ask for help. What do you expect from me? I always start with this type of sentences when I meet a dad.”

*(Outreach worker B, individual interview)*

## Proximity from a relational perspective

The work takes place within a close relationship environment. Outreach workers emphasize the importance of taking the time to know each other. To do so, they adopt a point of view that focuses on the fathers’ experiences. This includes starting the process based on the fathers’ view of what fatherhood means to them, the role they want to play in their children’s lives, their fears regarding the paternal role and the obstacles they are faced with. The objective is to get the father to tell his story, to share his experience as a father, to reveal his concerns and to describe his needs with regard to the paternal role.

Outreach workers rely on informal chats and attentive listening to the stories told by the fathers in order to start a dialogue.

- > Adopt an approach that is focused on the fathers’ experiences
- > Accept the father as is, with no judgment
- > Rely on informal chats and attentive listening
- > Be available and consistent

### EXAMPLES

> According to the fathers interviewed, the fact of feeling listened to does constitute one of the most contributing factors to the establishment of a trust-based relationship with *Relais-Pères* outreach workers, as evidenced by the following excerpt from an interview with one of the fathers.

“He is a gentleman who listens carefully to what you want. You are very lucky when you can find somebody who sits there for one or two hours listening to you and even give you some advice. So the gentleman came over to see me at home and he listened to me several times. [...] It is as if, in my mind, that man was sent by God. He does not give me millions, he does not give me any money, and he does not give me a Lotto 6/49 winning ticket either. He just gives me his words.”

*(Father B, individual interview)*

This also suggests that the story as told by the father is to be received in a respectful and judgment-free manner, and be deemed true, i.e. representative of the reality as perceived by the father. The key thing here is to make him feel that he is

taken seriously as a man and as a father. As pointed out by Breton<sup>18</sup> “this validation of their story becomes the means by which the members acquire their own voice and learn how to use that voice to describe their world”. All stakeholders consider the adoption of a “judgment-free” attitude, with regard to the father’s current or past situation, as a key requirement to enable the initial contact, to progressively create a trust-based relationship, and eventually to open a dialogue, which will ultimately result in the father revealing himself.

## EXAMPLES

>One of the outreach workers used the following words to describe the situation of a father he was supporting:

“What really matters to him in our trust-based relationship is the judgment-free aspect. [...] Because with his father-in-law, father or mother-in-law, there is always some sort of judgment. “No, it’s not like this. No, you can’t do that.” So, this is something he really values in our relationship.”

*(Outreach worker C, individual interview)*

>One of the fathers confirms how much he appreciates the fact of never feeling judged by the outreach worker.

“The one thing I appreciated more than anything else in his approach was the fact that he was not judgmental. “Oh, you come from such and such background, that’s not good for a child.” No, nothing of that sort. He just told me that one cannot always choose the way he goes. There are circumstances. [...]. I do not feel put down. I know there will be no judgment.”

*(Father C, individual interview).*

Relational proximity also means being easily available and maintaining consistency and continuity in the relationship with the fathers. Outreach workers talked especially about the importance of making quickly a concrete gesture (a quick favor, support the father in a procedure with institutions) to demonstrate their availability. When asked about the workers’ action that they believed were the most helpful, the fathers mentioned the feeling that someone was there for them, that someone cared about them, listened to them and was following up on their progress.

## EXAMPLES

“Who is that gentlemen here for? He is here or me. That is how I got started with *Relais-Pères* outreach worker who reached out to me. [...] We have stayed in touch since then. And what do I have to say about him? To me, meeting him was like a gift from heaven. [...] I tell him absolutely everything. It is as if we became really close to each other and we do not hide anything from each other during our conversations. It is important to know that there is somebody who really cares about you. I remember him sending cards on father’s day or Christmas day. You know, those cards meant a lot to me. I thought to myself: “there is somebody who cares about us. “It was really important. [...] because there is someone who cares about me and who knows that I have a child, that I have a family, who appreciates who I am. That is how I feel about it.”

*(Father B, individual interview)*

Finally, it is to be noted that building and maintaining trust between the worker and the father can only be achieved through the regular verification of the worker’s reliability, i.e. consistency between his plans and actions. In this respect, outreach workers put stress on the importance of “being forthcoming” and consistent, that is, by doing what they said they were going to do.

The use of strong expressions such as “He is like a father to me”, “He is kind of a role model, [...] the father I need in my life”, is a clear indication of the close ties that have been established with the outreach workers.

## MEETING FATHERS’ IMMEDIATE NEEDS

All outreach workers emphasize the importance of supporting the father in dealing with his actual immediate needs and with what causes him concern and anxiety on a day-to-day basis. This may involve suspending direct work on father involvement and focusing, for example, on improving the father’s housing conditions to allow him to greet his child or helping the father resolve his justice-related issues to give him a better stability. The practice is therefore personalized to fit unique situations; it respects individual’s choices, pace and style.

The following examples reflect the outreach workers’ views on this matter.

## EXAMPLES

> One outreach worker describes his approach as follows: “It is important to let them express their own concerns, in their own words, even if the source of such anxiety is basic and is actually material related. [...] I remember an experience I had once with one of the fathers. To get started, I had to accompany him to Court. That was something very important, the first time, I had to find a way to help him go to Court. [...] It is therefore all about being there when needed, before even talking about paternity, before talking about all that.”

*(Outreach worker C, individual interview)*

This outreach worker believes that this gesture has lifted a barrier in his relationship with the father: “had I say no, he would have thought: this man is here to talk just like everybody else, he is just there to tell me what to do. That helped build trust.”

> The father confirms this impression: “I had once to go to Court and he came with me. That was for fines issues, but he came with me anyway. That is how I started to find out more about that gentleman and how I got to know him. A very, very good person. I really appreciated his gesture because I did not have a car and he took from his family time to come with me so I could pay my fines. So that my family and my life get better. To make me feel happy. Yes, I was really moved by his gesture.”

*(Father A, individual interview)*

> Another outreach worker shared a similar experience described in the following testimony.

“Actually, the influence that I managed to have was to identify what was really worrying him, his immigration issues. [...] Well, his immigration issues were dragging on. He was not fixing that. [...] I said to him: “what matters is that you can stay here. You are expecting a child”. [...] Identifying that made him react. He called a lawyer, by himself. [...] So, it did make him move on.”

*(Outreach worker C, individual interview)*



To close this section of the guide, which deals with the practice guidelines to reach out to vulnerable fathers and build a trust-based relationship, it is worth highlighting that according to the 2003-2012 public health program<sup>19</sup>, the health systems that adhered to the outreach-based approach have seen an improvement in the efficiency of their actions. It is also recognized that the networking of services within local communities may contribute to the reduction of disparities.



## PRACTICE GUIDELINES TO MEET THE NEEDS OF VULNERABLE FATHERS

Once the challenging objectives of reaching out and building a trust-based relationships with vulnerable fathers are achieved, it is important to go one step further and identify the practice guidelines to better meet fathers' needs. This section of the document addresses this objective. The first part provides a brief overview of the action principles adopted at *Relais-Pères*. The second part describes the range of objectives that are addressed by a *Relais-Pères* service, with examples from worker's and father's experience. The third and final part addresses more specifically the methods of support to be followed in order to achieve these objectives.

### TO MEET VULNERABLE FATHERS' NEEDS

- > FOUR ACTION PRINCIPLES
- > A WIDE RANGE OF OBJECTIVES
- > A BROAD SPECTRUM OF ACTIONS

### FOUR ACTION PRINCIPLES

*Relais-Pères* approach is based on four action principles.

- > A holistic view of the person
- > A strength-based approach
- > Intensity in the support provided to fathers
- > A network-based functioning

#### *A holistic view of the person*

In order to address the diversity and complexity of needs and roles, *Relais-Pères* adopts a holistic view of the person, which takes into account the various dimensions of his life: personal, paternal, co-parenting, socio-economic, relational and civic, depending on the individual's own path, experiences and needs. This approach induces work in various spheres of men's lives.

From a personal perspective, *Relais-Pères* includes objectives linked with personal development (self-esteem, autonomy, identity development, and decision-making skills), improvement of physical and mental health and lifestyle matters. In the paternal sphere, work involves improving father involvement in its various dimensions. As to its coparenting dimension, the service refers to the parents-related communication and collaboration issues in connection with children's education. From a socio-economic perspective, *Relais-Pères* covers all types of objectives that deal with the improvement of family life conditions: access to decent housing, improvement of the financial situation, and skills development process for improved employability. Finally, in the relational and civic sphere, the service is focused on stimulating the development of social bonds and insertion into the community and society, mainly via social participation experiences and involvement in efforts aimed at improving the common good.

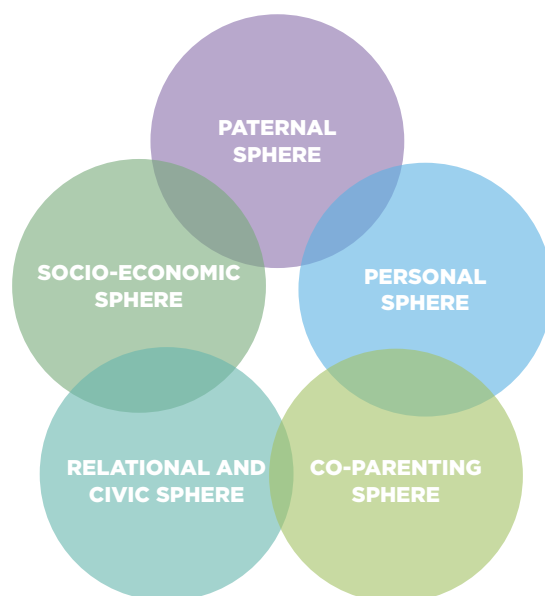


FIGURE 4. THE VARIOUS SPHERES OF WORK WITH VULNERABLE FATHERS

## A strength-based approach

*Relais-Pères* outreach workers adopt an approach that is based on the individuals' strengths rather than on their weaknesses. This entails:

- a) making the father aware of the importance of his role in children's development;
- b) helping him realize his skills and identify what he does best with his children;
- c) supporting him in his efforts and highlighting his successes;
- d) setting short term objectives to get him to know successes.

Outreach workers also mention the importance of not acting on the father's behalf when looking for solutions, but rather getting him to find and define his own solutions and to take full ownership of his actions.

### EXAMPLES

> These two comments from outreach workers illustrate this strength-based approach.

"You have to make them feel valued and give them a lot of importance: Hey look, you are not just somebody who lives on social welfare. You are a person who loves his children and who will do everything he can and you are actually doing everything you can."  
(Outreach worker B, individual interview)

"So right from the start, what I try to identify in the father are his main strengths and interests. When I see that the dad is having fun playing with the child, I will reinforce this and get down to the ground myself and play with them. [...]. For father D, [...] what turned out to be a strength [...] was going out to play at the park (with his child) and practicing outdoor activities. [...] I went with him a few times. So I could be attentive to both the father and the child."

(Outreach worker C, individual interview)

Outreach workers also resort to modes of action that are adapted to the fathers' interests and experiences. They corroborate what inventories of practices have already shown, namely that it is important to plan tasks-oriented and action-oriented activities<sup>20</sup>, while not neglecting those actions that are based on introspection and expression of feelings. Some of the actions can be rather original not to say unconventional. For instance,

outreach workers can use a car as a primary means of intervention, seizing the opportunity afforded by providing a lift or doing mechanical repairs to open the dialogue with the father.

### EXAMPLES

"Interventions with dads have to be part of a movement or something that moves and never in a formal way. You can start with having a coffee, then go out for a walk. We do three or four things at the same time during the same visit. I also found community activities to be very useful to involve dads as I get them to take on responsibilities"

(Outreach worker C, individual interview)

## Intensity in the support provided to fathers

Another characteristic of the practice developed at *Relais-Pères* is the intensity of the support provided to fathers. The level of intensity is based on each of the fathers' needs and is reviewed in order to make the required adjustments as the situation evolves. Contacts, which are initially very frequent, decline over time as the individual progresses. They may however ramp up in times of crisis or in case of relapse, subject to the father's consent.

### EXAMPLES

> Over the course of the first five months of working with father A, one outreach worker made 26 home visits, called him 34 times and went to 11 appointments with him. During the following months, while the situation appeared to be stabilizing, the practitioner maintained contact with this father by making one phone call and one visit every week. Father A, in turn, called the outreach worker in moments of "concern and uncertainty".

> Another outreach worker connected with father D when the latter was just granted custody of his 20-month-old child, unknown to the father until very recently. Inexperienced and living in a very vulnerable situation, the father wanted to prove he could be a good father. This father required a very close follow-up and the outreach worker dedicated eight to twelve hours every week to him during the first weeks.



## A network-based functioning

Sometimes *Relais-Pères* outreach workers elect to refer cases to community resources; for example, in situations where the father presents complex issues (drug addiction, mental health problem) or when a specialized service is required (such as a structured professional guidance procedure or a therapeutic follow-up). This serves a variety of purposes: 1. improve work with fathers by relying on complementarity services; 2. ensure availability and continuity of services after *Relais-Pères*; 3. create spaces and mechanisms to support fathers' social participation; 4. help men identify themselves as members of the community.. Whatever the situation, the referral is always personalized and, in most cases, the outreach worker accompanies the father to the needed service or resource.

### EXAMPLES

> There are situations where I have to deal with big issues. When this happens, I get the support of a social worker [...] because that is his or her role. I would ask him or her: "look, I'm seeing this and that. What can you do with that?"

*(Outreach worker A, individual interview)*

> If there is a drug addiction issue, a sexual issue, a criminal issue, the outreach worker cannot fix the father's problem. He can support him, he can refer him. But he cannot intervene.

*(Steering Committee member, group interview)*

## A WIDE RANGE OF OBJECTIVES

Adoption of a holistic view of the person leads to a wide range of action objectives. For each of the fathers who were met, a number of objectives can be carried out simultaneously, involving various spheres of the fathers' lives depending on their own paths and experiences.

## Within the Personal Sphere

- > Improving self-esteem
- > Stopping all types of dependency
- > Managing anger

Work in the personal sphere aims at improving self-esteem, addressing all types of dependency and mental health problems, violence and, to a lesser extent, physical health issues. Many fathers supported by *Relais-Pères* outreach workers had to deal with a combination of these issues. For some, being involved as a father also meant making lifestyle changes to better accommodate the child's needs.

### EXAMPLES

"Well, given that I come from an alcohol and drug consumption environment. I am a bar guy. I used to work in bars. My goal [...] was to stay away from drugs and alcohol. Away from judicial issues. I did not want my son having anything to do with that. [...] I really wanted to provide a healthy environment for my son. I did not want my son to end up without a father at the age of two because his father was hanging out with criminals"

*(Father C, individual interview).*

## Within the Paternal Sphere

- > Learning to be a good father  
(take care, stimulate, play)
- > Improving self-confidence as a father
- > Discovering all the dimensions  
of father involvement
- > Gaining recognition of one's rights as a father  
(including custodial rights)

Action within the paternal sphere is focused on four, often interrelated, objectives. A first objective consists of supporting the father in his endeavor to "be a good father". For most of the fathers that were met, behind the intention to be a good father, there is a need to learn how to "take care of a child," to communicate with him, to decode his signals, to stimulate him, and to play with him.

A second objective is to make the father aware of his potential as a father, to ease his anxiety about fathering. What is often identified to be at the origin of this need is the lack of references and models in support of the role of parent and father. Therefore, the actions undertaken in the paternal sphere all aimed at raising the father's awareness of his strengths and abilities as a parent. Action within this sphere is driven by a third objective, which is to raise the father's awareness of the meaning and importance of father involvement for the children's development and wellbeing. This is often about preventing the father disengagement by valuing all the pleasure there is to interact with his child, introducing him to the various dimensions of the paternal role and supporting him in roles beyond that of a provider. This type of action is particularly important for fathers who are unemployed. For some fathers, being unemployed and facing financial insecurity compromise two core dimensions of the paternal role, namely those of provider and family protector. A fourth objective can be to support fathers in their needs to have their rights as fathers recognized.

## EXAMPLES

> *Father D*, who was deprived of a father figure during his childhood, describes his need to the outreach worker as follows: "How do I invent myself as a father?"

> Two other fathers clearly demonstrate the type of needs expressed in the paternal sphere.

"I did not know how to take care of children, how to talk to them, like, you know, how to make sure the children are fine, how to hold them, stimulate them and play with them. When they cry, how to calm them down. [My expectation was]: "help me be a real dad."

(*Father A, individual interview*)

"Because I did not have any idea about how to look after a child. I was not prepared to have children as I had just finished a detox. [...] It was about learning how to deal with my son. Learning how to be a good father. I did not have a clue on how to get by with my child. That's what we had to work on"

(*Father C, individual interview*)

## Within the socio-economic sphere

- > **Balancing the household budget and get out of debt**
- > **Improving the housing situation**
- > **Taking action to enter the labour market**

In addition to direct support for the father's involvement with his child, which is the cornerstone of the service, many of the objectives of *Relais-Pères* involve addressing social and economic problems, as objectives focused on the father-child relationship cannot be dissociated from the overall family's living conditions. Work within this sphere was based on the following three objectives:

- 1) Support the efforts aimed at escaping poverty, balancing the household budget or ending a long standing debt situation in order to improve the child's living conditions;
- 2) Help improve the housing conditions (insalubrity, lack of space, absence) in order to allow the father to accommodate his children and offer them a more comfortable living environment. This also allows the father to take full ownership of his role as a citizen, to be fully involved in the democratic life and to have access to community services;
- 3) Provide help entering the labor market (including support efforts to return to school) of those fathers whose inability to assume their roles as providers has resulted in an identity crisis.

## Within the co-parenting sphere

- > **Improve the quality of relationship with the spouse or ex-spouse.**
- > **Improve children related communication**

*Relais-Pères* approach is carried out as part of a child-centered family approach. Adopting a vision that focuses on the complementary roles of the father and mother, it seeks to enhance the quality of the coparenting relationship. Through negotiation and mediation, this involves working to improve the quality of the relationship with spouses or ex-spouses, especially by encouraging clear communication on child-rearing issues.

## Within the relational and civic sphere

- > Promote the development of social networks
- > Facilitate immigrant's settlement in their new society
- > Regularize the socio-legal status
- > Improve relationships with government agencies

All outreach workers have, at a certain point of their interventions, carried out actions to address social isolation issues. Coming out of isolation is a need shared by a number of fathers who received support as part of *Relais-Pères*, especially those who recently settled in Québec. Objectives are multiple:

- 1) Make the neighbourhood's activities, services, resources and programs better known to fathers;
- 2) Stimulate the use of such resources when needed;
- 3) Promote father's participation in local socio-recreational and cultural events.

For outreach workers, such actions should result not only in the development of new socialization networks, but also enable fathers to interact with their children in a joyful atmosphere, connect with other fathers and see how other fathers interact with their children.

Many fathers also needed to be supported in their efforts to sort out their socio-legal status in order to secure a more stable living environment for their children. Situations here are also very diverse: judicial issues (criminality or custodian right negotiations), immigration status, child protection issues (DPJ). For other fathers, the objective is to improve the relationships with governmental agencies.

## A BROAD SPECTRUM OF ACTIONS

Adopting a strength and holistic approach requires multiple levels of action. These actions range from the promotion of the paternal role to the exploration of professional insertion avenues and include systematic accompaniment in dealing with community resources and activities (courts, health-care centers, and economic support resources). In certain situations, as part of a practical role modelling approach, the outreach worker shows the father how to care for and stimulate the child, find a job, draw up a budget, or run a household.

Another range of actions are mediation and advocacy activities. On some occasions, *Relais-Pères* outreach workers have supported fathers during negotiations with government agencies or legal authorities to have certain rights recognized (in particular those related to access to children), to

seek agreements in areas of tension between the two parties -role of mediator-, to speed things along by attesting to the father's involvement and the presence of a support worker in his life -role of advocate-. The outreach worker can also act as an interpreter making sure that the issues raised by the agencies are well understood by the father.

Moreover, among the specificities and key strengths of *Relais-Pères* is the fact that the service provides the necessary conditions for the reinstatement of social ties that numerous studies have identified as a prerequisite for social participation.

## EXAMPLES

>Oh, he taught me so many things. He used to put the girls on the floor, sit down and play with them. He showed affection to the kids. He would hold the kids and tell me: "well, you see, the little girl was a bit excited but now she has calmed down. And this is how we play with kids". He would sit down and read books to the kids. I would hold one of the little girls and he would hold the other and then we all played together. He was showing me how. I watched how he was doing it and then I would do the same thing. He really, really, really gave me so much support. He offered me so much guidance. How to show affection to a child. How to play with a child. How to stimulate children. How to make them move. You know, he showed me so many things. That's why, thanks to that gentleman, now I feel like a really good dad. Because in the beginning I lacked self-confidence. [...] he showed me how to do it. You know, I used to watch him do it then I would repeat the same thing. And since then I got really good with kids.

(Father A, individual interview)

Table 1 illustrates the type of objectives that can be carried out with the fathers reached by *Relais-Pères* and the associated intervention modes. >>

TABLE 1: OBJECTIVES AND THE ASSOCIATED INTERVENTION MODES

SPHERE	OBJECTIVES	INTERVENTION MODE
Personal Sphere	<p>Improve self-esteem</p> <p>Take actions to end all types of dependency.</p> <p>Learn to manage anger.</p> <p>Learn to manage mental health problems</p>	<p>Outreach workers' scope of action within this sphere is very limited as the issues are often too complex to allow a remediation action. Their potential area of intervention covers the following: listening and moral support, de-dramatization of situations, and referral to specialized resources.</p>
	Learn to be a good father	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Concrete educational guidance and information support</li> <li>&gt; Encouragement and recognition of efforts</li> <li>&gt; Role modelling: provide, during home visits, an actual model of how to nurture children (playing with children, reading them a story or showing them affection)</li> <li>&gt; Referral or accompaniment to community resources supporting parenting skills (early stimulation workshops, prenatal classes)</li> </ul>
Paternal Sphere	Improve self-confidence as a father	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Encouragement to express concerns; Encouragement and recognition of efforts</li> <li>&gt; Role modeling:</li> <li>&gt; Encouragement to participate in local family events which connect the father to his child and offer him the opportunity to see other fathers interact with children.</li> <li>&gt; Raising the awareness of fathers, mothers, parents and parents-in-law as to the significance and importance of father involvement for children, through dialogue and information sharing.</li> </ul>
	Discover all dimensions of the paternal role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Information support and awareness raising</li> </ul>
	Uphold one's rights as a father (including custodial rights)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Information gathering and sharing</li> <li>&gt; Support with procedures for regaining custodial rights</li> <li>&gt; On-the-ground support at courts</li> </ul>

SPHERE	OBJECTIVES	INTERVENTION MODE
Co-parenting Sphere	Create or maintain a sustainable relationship between the spouses or ex-spouses.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Concrete guidance and information support</li> <li>&gt; Create space for the exchange of views and ideas between spouses (or ex-spouses)</li> </ul>
Socio-economic Sphere	Assistance with balancing the household budget and ending debts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Concrete help with budgeting</li> <li>&gt; Efforts to raise awareness about consumption behaviors</li> <li>&gt; Information gathering and sharing</li> <li>&gt; Support access to economic aid resources (group buying, community kitchens, clothing banks)</li> <li>&gt; Support access to budget planning resources.</li> </ul>
	Improve the housing situation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Efforts to raise awareness of the importance of improving the housing situation for children's well-being.</li> <li>&gt; Supporting efforts aimed at finding a decent home, improving current housing conditions or acquiring missing furniture.</li> <li>&gt; Role Modeling: provide a concrete example of the actions to take for home maintenance.</li> </ul>
	Improve professional insertion and employability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Help define a professional integration project</li> <li>&gt; Share information about available trainings or jobs.</li> <li>&gt; Refer to relevant resources</li> <li>&gt; Support in dealing with relevant resources</li> <li>&gt; Effort recognition</li> <li>&gt; Support in job-seeking activities (résumé writing and other activities)</li> </ul>

SPHERE	OBJECTIVES	INTERVENTION MODE
Relational and Civic Sphere	<p>Promote and support the development of social ties.</p> <p>Promote and support the adaptation to the host society.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Creation of opportunities to meet other families and other fathers (days out, weekend camping, family visits to the museum, "guy's dinner out", fathers-children activities).</li> <li>&gt; Accompaniment in economic aid resources, courts or various administrative authorities.</li> </ul>
	<p>Regularize socio-legal status.</p> <p>Improve relationships with government agencies.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>&gt; Concrete guidance and information support.</li> <li>&gt; Support preparation for meetings or court appearances.</li> <li>&gt; Moral support and de-dramatization of situations.</li> <li>&gt; Support during negotiations with governmental agencies, child protection agencies or judicial bodies, to uphold rights, resolve tensions between the two parties or obtain recognition for progress made.</li> </ul>



## KEY SUCCESS FACTORS FOR *RELAIS-PÈRES* IMPLEMENTATION

*Relais-Pères* evaluation identifies eight key success factors for the service's development and implementation. Each factor comes with its own challenges.

### EIGHT KEY SUCCESS FACTORS

- > A CONCERTED ACTION AND EFFICIENT PARTNERSHIP
- > COMMUNITY SUPPORT
- > RECRUITMENT OF MALE OUTREACH WORKERS
- > COLLABORATIVE WORK WITH COMMUNITY FEMALE SERVICE PROVIDERS
- > CLINICAL SUPPORT
- > A FAVORABLE SOCIAL CONTEXT
- > THE ONGOING INVOLVEMENT OF RESEARCHERS
- > SUFFICIENT FUNDING

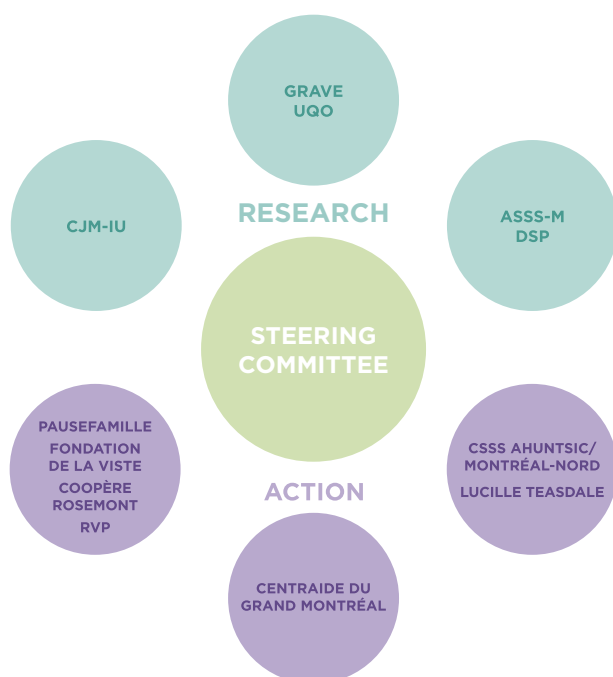
### A CONCERTED ACTION AND EFFICIENT PARTNERSHIP

In order to develop and implement *Relais-Pères* within the community, partners adopt a concerted action approach, which is one of the well-documented facilitators of innovative services and programs based on an ecological perspective<sup>21</sup>. The design, development and implementation of *Relais-Pères* were undertaken in September 2005 in four Montreal neighborhoods. It was made possible by the collaboration of a dozen stakeholders (representatives of community, institutional and university organizations) working together in a steering committee (See Figure 5).

The ultimate challenge lies in establishing efficient partnerships. *Relais-Pères* partnership first built upon a convergence of organizational, professional and personal interests around the importance of reaching out to vulnerable fathers. Secondly, it was based on a strong relational capital, stakeholders having previously experienced fruitful collaborations. Such relational capital was instrumental to the quick removal of cultural obstacles to collaboration, which resulted in easier definition and distribution of roles and responsibilities, joint effort and collective efficiency. Throughout the entire process, the stakeholders demonstrated their enthusiasm for the project, a willingness to share clinical and scientific knowledge and a commitment demonstrated by their steady attendance at the steering committee meetings.

The creation of a steering committee, which meets on a regular basis (every 6 to 8 weeks) and involves representatives from all partners, does promote the participatory nature of the approach through the involvement of all stakeholders in the critical reflection exercise on the action to be undertaken, as well as on all the steps of research operations. The steering committee also constitutes a forum for exchanging views on practices by drawing on the partners' experiences and expertise. In addition, it provides a space to share each stakeholder's ethical and deontological rules and allows discussion and negotiations over key implementation issues. For the project's researchers, being part of the steering committee proved to be extremely helpful in facilitating access to the outreach workers and to the fathers who spoke about the practices being developed, and in providing a more nuanced interpretation of the program implementation.

FIGURE 5. A RESEARCH AND ACTION PARTNERSHIP



Time, which is a precious commodity, is a key element in building cooperation between partners and developing a common representation of the action to undertake in strict respect of the parties' respective philosophies. Such meetings provide an opportunity to confront the values of the various parties with respect to the conceptual basis of the practice model. They also promote knowledge sharing and the development of a group solidarity.

As is typically the case for any concerted action, collaboration across different interests, values, organizational cultures and backgrounds gives rise to confronting views as to the implementation approach, which is characteristic of the start-up phase of innovative services or programs such as *Relais-Pères*<sup>22</sup>. For example, the desired profile of the service's target population may vary depending on the stakeholders' organizational agendas (fathers of children aged between 0 and 5 years or between 0 and 17 years). However, building on negotiation process based on mutual trust and respect of each other's specific missions, partners managed to identify and acknowledge their differences and subsequently define constructive compromises.

## COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Community organizations' willingness to reach out and support fathers obviously constitutes one of the key success factor for the implementation of a network-based operation. Over the months, both partners and outreach workers came to realize that the implementation of a service that addresses paternity in their respective neighborhoods led their community partners to reflect on their own practice towards vulnerable fathers. They also noticed an increase in the number of referrals from the neighborhood's healthcare centers and community organizations as well as a greater cooperation in the organization of activities such as home visits and family dinners.

However, outreach workers accounts show that networking was not carried out without difficulty: they highlight that alliances can be somewhat fragile. This leads to the conclusion that it is still difficult to make room for fathers in resources and community organizations.

Efforts to promote children's well-being, especially in health and social services, remain associated with "maternal and child health", as shared by the members of the steering committee in group interviews. Work overload and the discomfort mentioned by several services providers raise the issue of the ambiguity of services with regard the involvement of fathers: Are they part of the problem or part of the solution?

## RECRUITMENT OF MALE OUTREACH WORKERS

From the outset, the partners relied on male outreach workers to take up the challenge of reaching out to vulnerable fathers. Research findings has repeatedly underscored the importance of a men to men approach<sup>23</sup>. Evaluation of *Relais-Pères* confirms male outreach workers' critical input to this effort in support of fathers. Outreach workers often serve as role models to the fathers they support. Their involvement and the trust-based relationship they built with the fathers led isolated and resistant fathers to accept help.

Paradoxically, securing such masculine presence constitutes one of the major challenges of social responses to men's needs. Over the years, the recruitment of male outreach workers proved to be a difficult task. In one of the neighborhoods where *Relais-Pères* was implemented, three outreach workers have come and leave in the first two years. The experience at *Relais-Pères* shows how difficult it is to make this type of jobs attractive to male support workers. Two explanations have been suggested to such recruitment difficulties. First, there is a limited pool of such potential male practitioners, as men are near absent in family and child support training programs. This shows the necessity to find new ways of attracting more men to the care professions. The second explanation has to do with work conditions. Outreach workers expect adequate remuneration and working conditions that enable them to ensure a consistent intervention effort. However, the salary issue raises questions of equity and resources availability challenges, which restrict changes in this area.

## COLLABORATIVE WORK WITH COMMUNITY FEMALE SERVICE PROVIDERS

Experience in *Relais-Pères* shows that the collaborative work between the outreach workers and the community female service providers is especially productive, as other fathering support programs have shown<sup>24</sup>. Female support workers have a significant influence in the areas of referral and admission to *Relais-Pères*, depending on their level of openness with regard to father involvement. Moreover, they sometimes work hand to hand with the outreach workers. One of *Relais-Pères* partners, who developed its expertise in mother-to-mother support, now include male outreach workers not only in its organization, but also in the day-to-day practice of the female support workers. The latter now have someone to whom they can refer vulnerable fathers met through their home visits to new mothers.



## CLINICAL SUPPORT

Supporting fathers, especially those living in vulnerable situations, is a new reality that still has not been sufficiently investigated. It is therefore important to put in place clinical support mechanisms for practitioners who work with men. One of the strengths of *Relais-Pères* is the formal support provided to the outreach workers, who benefit from ongoing clinical supervision and training, two elements often lacking in outreach work.

One of the remaining challenges in *Relais-Pères* is setting up formal mechanisms to enable experience sharing and mutual support between *Relais-Pères* outreach workers and other practitioners who work directly with fathers. Such discussion platforms allow workers to take a holistic view of the diversity of issues experienced by fathers and the multiple intervention objectives being developed.

## A FAVORABLE SOCIAL CONTEXT

One cannot overlook the fact that there is currently a favorable “momentum” for the development of services, programs and resources aimed at promoting father involvement. Over the past years, many social changes have impacted the family dynamics, which, in particular, have seen fathers play a more active role in their children’s lives. The media played an important role in these social changes by publicising positive images of involved fathers and addressing issues related to this increased father involvement. These concerns are also shared by policy makers within ministerial bodies or practice environments. Paternity-specific financing programs are now available, which allow a better understanding of these realities.

These elements provide a favorable social context that raises organizational, professional and personal awareness on the importance of reaching out to vulnerable fathers and improve the practice in support of this particular group.

## THE ONGOING INVOLVEMENT OF RESEARCHERS

*Relais-Pères* innovated through the ongoing involvement of a research team that played an active role throughout all *Relais-Pères* development stages. Involved, from the outset, in the design of the program, the researchers also evaluated the service and helped documenting the outreach work within a participatory action-research (PAR) framework.

They were also active members of the steering committee responsible for the service implementation. Their role, as part of the committee, was to:

- 1) Observe, understand, formalize and make visible the practice being developed in the field;
- 2) Participate in the organization of joint training sessions;
- 3) Foster a critical reflection process on the practice development and the service implementation issues;
- 4) Support decision-making efforts aimed at removing implementation barriers.

Researchers' proximity with the intervention setting has proved to have many benefits, one of these being enrichment of knowledge for all parties, everyone learning from each other. Researchers benefited from the experience and the local context knowledge of the outreach workers. In turn, the outreach workers were able to further develop their knowledge of the vulnerable fathers' needs as well as of the best practices to mobilise and support them. The service evaluation shows that the adoption of a PAR approach helped the outreach workers structure their work and put what they do into words. The approach also served to disseminate this innovative service. Another benefit worth mentioning: researchers' proximity allowed a better adaptation of the results and contributed to improve the relevance and credibility of the proposed practice guidelines.

The PAR approach also raises many challenges. It is in fact very demanding in terms of time and effort for all stakeholders. The researchers' position in this type of approach also prompts the question about critical distancing from the action being developed: how to instrument the intervention and still apply critical thinking to the action foundations? Finally, the PAR approach still raises recognition challenges within the academic environment, in connection with the scope of data collected. The question remains the same: how to reconcile environment-specific requirements with those of scientifically recognized production?

## SUFFICIENT FUNDING

Funding is a key factor for adequate, efficient and sustainable implementation of an intervention program or service. Father-specific programs are very often part of the development of new interventions that require additional costs. Several inventories of father involvement support programs outline funding as a major barrier for implementation success<sup>23</sup>.

Although *Relais-Pères* is no exception to this funding issue, the service benefited from one main asset: the partnership established with a wide range of stakeholders increased the funding opportunities (e.g. university for the financing of the evaluation process) and costs distribution (e.g. access to facilities, materials, etc.).

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In summary, *Relais-Pères* evaluation highlights eight key factors of success for the implementation of such programs. From a dissemination perspective, stakeholders need to reflect on what these factors mean in their own environment. Despite the challenges, these factors foster very positive outcomes, as will be seen in the next section



## A SERVICE THAT MAKES A DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF VULNERABLE FATHERS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The development and experimentation of *Relais-Pères* were supported by a study aimed at evaluating the service's implementation process and its impact on fathers. This is an innovative aspect of *Relais-Pères*, as a review of social work with fathers revealed that few such programs or services undergo a systematic evaluation process<sup>24</sup>. Although the evaluation method adopted for this evaluation calls for a great deal of caution when interpreting data, the cross-perspectives of the outreach workers, the fathers themselves, the stakeholders and researchers, reveal that services from *Relais-Pères* had positive outcomes for the fathers.

With regard to the paternal sphere, both outreach workers and fathers report an increased self-confidence as fathers and a tendency to feel less anxious in this role. Fathers reported having learned how to care for, play and communicate with their children.

Regarding the relational sphere, the outcome evaluation clearly demonstrates that the focus on accompanying the fathers when they took part in activities and sought out community resources, helped them overcome social isolation. There were a number of indications of this: a greater awareness of community resources, a greater willingness to make use of available services, and an increasingly frequent participation in community-based neighbourhood social and leisure activities. Participation in these activities also facilitated the development of new social support networks. The practice of the outreach workers also helped some fathers to distance themselves from a negative social network.

With regard to the socio-economic sphere, the research team also noticed that many of the fathers under study had improved their living conditions and those of their families: improvement of the housing conditions, increased use of food banks, better financial management. Because they address three core dimensions of the father role, namely those of provider, family protector and role model for the children, these actions also helped restore men's level of confidence in their fathering ability.

The evaluation strategy also allowed the identification of distinct profiles of fathers reached by *Relais-Pères*. These profiles emerged from fathers' socio-demographic characteristics, the type of services they received and their perceived outcome of these services, as disclosed in a final interview at the end of the fathers' follow-up<sup>25</sup>.

Three father profiles have been identified: new immigrant fathers, fathers in crisis and fathers in search of social inclusion ion.

> The new immigrant fathers are older, they live with the mother of their children and adopt a traditional model parental roles. The issues most commonly reported are related to the social and professional spheres as their qualifications are not always recognized in Quebec. The outreach workers' practice is mainly focused on these spheres of life and the level of intensity of the support provided is higher at the beginning of the intervention. As a result of the use of *Relais-Pères* services, these fathers feel less isolated, they participate in community-based activities and use neighborhood community services. Some of them have even found jobs whereas others highlight that their relationship with their children has improved.

> Fathers in crisis were primarily born in Canada, were from various age groups and had lower education levels. They were distrustful of community services and their difficulties pertained to many spheres of life (personal, paternal, co-parenting). These fathers had adversarial relationships with the children's mothers, either living in couples or not. The outreach workers practice mainly aimed at developing these fathers' parenting skills, at supporting them in dealing with government services or at referring to specialized services. Overall, interviews indicated that, following their participation in *Relais-Pères*, the fathers had overcome their crisis, improved their couple relationship or settled their dispute by a separation or a divorce. One father had obtained custody of his son whereas another had sorted out his conflictual relationship with social service practitioners. Many felt more competent as parents and mentioned a healthier lifestyle.

> The last fathers' profile covers those who are in search of social inclusion. These fathers were born in Quebec and are in their thirties. They have completed high school and feel positive about their relationships with their children. What they need the most is being able to do more activities with their children and are open to receive help. As far as the intervention is concerned, follow-up is less intense and is mainly focused on the social sphere (sporting and cultural activities). They often feel that they have broadened the scope of their definition of the paternal role as a result of their participation in *Relais-Pères*.

In summary, fathers living in vulnerable situations are, by no means, a homogeneous group: their needs are different in many respects. The type of support offered must adapt to these multiple realities. In this respect, the flexible approach adopted by *Relais-Pères* constitutes a valuable asset.

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1. See Allen and Daly, 2007; Lamb, 2004 ; Paquette, Eugène, Dubeau and Gagnon, 2009 and Zaouche-Gaudron, 2001, for a detailed description of increased father involvement outcomes on children.
2. See Burgess, 2007 and World Health Organization Europe, 2007 for further details.
3. See: Arama 1996, 1997 ; Bolté, Devault, St-Denis and Gaudet, 2002; Dubeau, de Montigny, Devault, and Lacharité, 2013 ; Dubeau, Villeneuve and Thibault, 2011; Forget, Devault and Bizot, 2009 ; Forget, Devault, Allen, Bader and Jarvis, 2005, for further details on the results of the Québec and Canada inventories of practices.
4. Anderson, Kohler et Letiecq, 2002 ; Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley & Dominelli, 2009 ; Brown, Strega, Callahan, Dominelli et Walmsley, 2009 ; Coley, 2001; Lacharité, 2001; Nelson, 2004.
5. See Turcotte, Forget, Ouellet and Sanchez, 2009 ; Turcotte, Forget, Ouellet, Dubeau and Sanchez, 2011 ; Gamache, Dubeau and Turcotte, 2012, for further details on the results of the implementation and impact evaluation of *Relais-Pères*. This project evaluation was made possible thanks to grants from GRAVE (Groupe de recherche et d'action sur la victimisation des enfants) and CRSH (Conseil de recherche en sciences humaines) and financial support from the Public Health Department of the Montreal Health and Social Services Agency.
6. Institut national d'excellence en santé et en services sociaux (INESSS), 2012, p.14.
7. Quebec Ministry of Health and Social Services, 2008.
8. Castel, 1991, 1994, 2009. Other authors adopt a multidimensional definition of vulnerability concept too: Long, 2008; Richmond and Salojee, 2005.
9. Ouellet, 2009.
10. See Desgagné and Bednarz, 2005 ; Dolbec and Prud'homme, 2009 ; Gélneau, Dufour and Bélisle, 2012 ; Reason and Bradbury, 2008 ; Saini and Léveillé, 2011; Verspieren and Chia, 2012.
11. Dubeau, Devault and Paquette, 2009, p.75
12. Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986, 1996.
13. For further details, see Turcotte, Dubeau, Bolté and Paquette, 2001; Turcotte and Gaudet, 2009.
14. See, among others, Dulac, 2001; Rondeau, 2004.
15. Bastien, Battagliani, Bouthillier, Besse, Raynault, Frigault and Larose, 2007; Le Goff, McAll and Montgomery, 2005; Thalineau, 2009.
16. Bolté, Devault, St-Denis and Gaudet, 2002 ; Dubeau, de Montigny, Devault and Lacharité, 2013; Forget, Devault, Allen, Bader and Jarvis, 2005.
17. Breton, 1994 ; Zimmerman, 1995.
18. Breton, 2004: p. 9.
19. Ministère de la santé et des services sociaux (2008).
20. Bolté, Devault, St-Denis and Gaudet, 2002; Dulac, 1998, 2001 ; Forget, Devault and Bizot, 2009.
21. Ouellet, Paiement and Tremblay, 1995 ; White, Jobin and McCann, 2002.
22. Bilodeau, Chamberland and White, 2002; Prilleltienky, Nelson and Peirson 1999.
23. Bolté, Devault, St-Denis and Gaudet, 2002; Dubeau, de Montigny, Devault and Lacharité, 2013; Dulac, 2001; Forget, Devault, Allen, Bader and Jarvis, 2005.
24. Bolté, Devault, St-Denis and Gaudet, 2002.
25. Gamache, Dubeau and Turcotte, 2012.



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