Evoking men's creativity to address the challenges of new fatherhood: a model of early intervention for fathers of special needs children: supporting fathers of special needs children to claim their own experience of fatherhood.

Ron Baer
University of Massachusetts Amherst

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EVOKING MEN'S CREATIVITY TO ADDRESS THE
CHALLENGES OF NEW FATHERHOOD:
A MODEL OF EARLY INTERVENTION FOR FATHERS
OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

SUPPORTING FATHERS OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN TO
CLAIM THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE OF FATHERHOOD

A Dissertation Presented
by
RON BAER

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 1994

School of Education
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Approved as to style and content by:

Doris Shallcross, Chair

John Wideman, Member

Theodore Slovin, Member

Bailey W. Jackson, Dean
School Of Education
DEDICATION

To Renee
with whom I have shared many precious years.
You are a wonderful mother.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to acknowledge:

The support of my wife and friend, Renee.

My children, Ian and Mia, without whom, I would never have known the joys and challenges of fatherhood. Their presence in my life has deeply enriched my understandings about life and manhood.

Dr. Dorris Shallcross, who welcomed my participation in graduate work, and who has supported me to explore areas of study which have held deep personal meaning. Her belief in my creative process invited and grounded my growth.

Dr. John Wideman, whose concern for personal authenticity, and careful attention to personal process and conceptual detail has challenged me throughout my time at the university.

Dr. Theodore Slovin, who depite his very busy schedule enthusiastically took on the work of being a committee member.

Dr. Mary Claire Powell, who has been a good friend. When I needed a hand, she was there.
The men who participated in the study. Their vitality, courage, trust, and openness will always be remembered. Together, we were able to explore fatherhood in a new way. Thank you.
ABSTRACT

EVOKING MEN'S CREATIVITY TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES OF NEW FATHERHOOD: A MODEL OF EARLY INTERVENTION FOR FATHERS OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

SUPPORTING FATHERS OF SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN TO CLAIM THEIR OWN EXPERIENCE OF FATHERHOOD

MAY 1994

RON BAER, B.A., EARLHAM COLLEGE
M.ED., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
Ed.D., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST
Directed by: Professor Doris Shallcross

The purpose of this study was to design and test-out a workshop to help fathers of special needs children with their transition to fatherhood. The workshop was evaluated to ascertain how effective it was in helping the fathers to understand and feel more engaged and open to their experience of fatherhood. Also of importance was the positive impact that the workshop had on men's sense of isolation as fathers, self-esteem as fathers, and their ability to see their experience from a larger, more self-accepting and positive perspective.

This is an unexplored area of study and this was a pilot project focused on developing a new resource. In the dissertation specific components of the study and workshop process, such as interviews, leadership style, as well as, specific workshop
exercises (the sharing of personal stories, photography, collage making, guided imagery and infant massage) were examined to evaluate how they contributed to the over-all effectiveness of the workshop.

In the dissertation a model of intervention is proposed by which fathers of young special needs children could more fully align themselves with their own creativity, and, thereby, empower themselves to take on the challenges of new fatherhood in a way that enriched and supported their personal growth. It was a model that supported men to more fully engage their experience of fatherhood and claim its richness and power. It was a model based on men supporting men, and in this regard, it provided men with models of male caring, and it supported men to experience themselves as nurturers.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

There are virtually no resources generated specifically to help fathers of special needs children with their transition to fatherhood. Men's transition to fatherhood is often difficult even when a baby is healthy. As expectant fathers, men typically feel socially unrecognized and unimportant, and when the baby is born, men often feel as though they are viewing the birth from the sidelines. However, with the birth of a child, men have the opportunity to become more involved and engaged as fathers. They can move beyond their more limited identity of themselves as biological contributors and develop a strong emotional and psychological bond to their children. Their choice to do this takes determination and creativity because men have so few models and little social validation for this type of engagement.

When a child is born with special needs, men's transition to fatherhood becomes much more difficult. Men are making the transition to fatherhood in a storm of confusion. The child is often born in physical distress, and there is a lack of clarity about what will unfold. Men are having to face realities different from what were hoped and planned for, and they are addressing the challenges of new fatherhood in the context of deep personal grief.
The support and guidance that men typically find from family is often eroded, because families too are disoriented. The creativity of these fathers is powerfully challenged. These fathers are faced with the challenge of reclaiming a sense of personal power and hope that has been dashed with the birth of their handicapped child. This experience challenges the father's self-esteem and his belief in himself as being capable of creating something of value. This fundamental connection with self needs to be attended to. It is not surprising that the father's response to the birth of his child is often one of withdrawal and defense, rather than open engagement. Men often remain unable to bond, grieve, and become actively involved in the caregiving of their special needs child, and there is little or nothing that is available to help these fathers.

Socially their needs have gone unrecognized because society does not value the father's direct involvement with his family. Men are who emotionally and socially disengaged from family life fit within the cultural norm of father behavior. Therefore, men may come to experience their alienation and disengagement as ordinary and not a defined problem.

If these men have the will, courage, and awareness to reach out and try to find support, often their needs are not taken seriously, or they may be even judged harshly for having them because they are going against the cultural norms. The truth is that there is virtually no support for them from medical
practitioners, social service agencies, the community at large, or even in the research literature. Support available for families is really a euphemism for support for mothers.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to design and test out a workshop to help fathers of special needs children with their transition to fatherhood, and to evaluate its effectiveness.

This is an unexplored area of study and this will be a pilot project which is aimed at developing a resource for these fathers which is currently unavailable. I hope to follow this study with an article that would reach a greater audience and be a primer for future studies.

I plan to conduct future workshops with fathers of special needs children. My work will be guided by what I have learned from developing and evaluating the workshop in this study, and I will continue to develop and refine the work that I have begun in this dissertation.
Significance of the Study

This study explores the creation of a new resource for fathers of special needs children. Hopefully this study will illuminate what may help these men more effectively meet the challenges of fatherhood; as such, it will be an important contribution to a field where virtually nothing is presently available.

It is significant that I approach this study from the viewpoint of creativity, which has been my field of study. I believe that looking at the challenges that these men face from this vantage point adds a new dimension to our understanding of the problem. I believe that it is our creativity that enables us to transform the challenges we face in life into sources of growth and change. This dissertation proposes a model by which fathers of special needs children can more fully align themselves with their own creativity, and, thereby, empowering themselves to take on the challenges of new fatherhood in a way that enriches and supports their personal growth. It is a model that supports men to more fully engage their experience of fatherhood, and claim its richness and power. It is a model based on men supporting men, and in this regard, it gives men models of male caring, and it supports men to experience themselves as nurturers. I believe that this is critical for men, and especially men who are taking on the challenges of fatherhood.
Even though this research is focused on a very particular group of fathers, I believe that this study may have applicability to the development of supports for other parents.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Men's Emotional Self-knowing and Caregiving

Sternbach, (1990), a researcher and therapist devoted to men's issues, suggests that most men have no clear sense of affective self-knowing because men have not had the experience of other men being emotionally available, and this has left men with no models. Most boys learn that to be a man is to be emotionally unavailable. He points to research which suggests that even successful family men in this society lack a capacity for intimacy or generativity.

I believe what he is saying is that without a core emotional sense of themselves as men, men lack the capacity to develop close personal connections with self and with others. For fathers of special needs children this emotional self knowing is the energetic basis for the creativity that is required to meet the challenges of engaged fatherhood. If fathering is about taking care of and caring for others, then men's ability to do this caring work is profoundly affected by what their experience and understanding of being a male is in this society. If men lack this basic connection to their affective self-knowing, then their ability to address the affective challenges of life that face them is impeded. Fatherhood is such a challenge.
This issue of affective self-knowing as it relates to fathering is addressed by Pruett in *Nurturing Father*. He writes:

Nurturing requires the abiding capacity for caring physically and emotionally for dependent beings. It is achieved best in the context of... human feelings such as empathy, love, compassion, self-sacrifice, and the wish to protect the nurtured object from harm. How does it happen that so many men have come to their adulthood so removed and uncertain as nurturers (Pruett, 1987, p. 45)?

Pruett, as a clinical psychologist involved in early childhood studies, answers this question by pointing to research in child development which shows that boys are jostled more, talked to less, and less often held close to the adult's body, by both men and women. Words such as independent and strong are used more frequently, and they are taught as they get older that they are expected to control their feelings.

Cohen (1987) suggests that work and the whole cultural climate in which men live legislates against men's active involvement in families and makes it difficult for men to even know their desires to be more involved. In order for men to connect to and become emotionally engaged in their experience of fatherhood, not only are they confronting the ways they were socialized away from their feelings in childhood, but the concurrent challenges of claiming their feelings for something which they are expected not to value and to do this without the
benefit of earlier role models. This draws deeply upon their creativity.

**Men's Transition to Fatherhood**

Pregnancy is the time of expectant fatherhood. It is a time in which men begin their transition to fatherhood, and it is a time in which men are beginning to form their identities as fathers. Men unlike women do not become pregnant. There is nothing about expectant fathers that is a signal to others that these men are soon to be dads. Consequently, their status as expectant fathers typically goes unnoticed.

Pregnancy is a time when women's bodies are changing, and these changes are responded to and often validated by friends and even strangers. In her pregnancy, the expectant mother often feels an increasing bond with other mothers, as she herself experiences a tangible relationship with the child growing within her. A woman whom I interviewed about pregnancy, said the following:

We have one male friend who has two girls, who said to me in both cases that, that he felt that his daughters came out of nowhere, that suddenly one day they appeared. And it was such a strange concept to me, where every stage of this pregnancy has been this little person who has been very real to me and I think that is an experience that women tend to have . . . I
was really surprised when he said it came out of nowhere. No, it really came out of somewhere (Baer, 1991, p.14).

In response to this her husband said, "But I understand that statement very well." I believe that most men do not feel personally connected to or socially accepted into the ranks of fatherhood until the baby is born, and as such, men often see themselves and are viewed by others as outsiders in this developmental process of parenthood. For many men, this view of being an outsider in the parenting role continues.

Cohen (1987) writes that for men the transition to parenthood is "... sudden, irrevocable, and preceded by little or no training (p.64)." Jordan (1990) found that for the men in her study, during the time of expectant fatherhood men's sense of their competence and abilities as potentially significant caregivers was undermined. She speaks of the transition to fatherhood as an internal process which is greatly influenced by the father's social involvement. She writes:

The essence of the experience of expectant and new fatherhood is laboring for relevance, which has both intra- and interpersonal aspects. The man labors to perceive the paternal role as relevant to his sense of self and his repertoire of roles. He labors to incorporate the paternal role into his self-identity as a salient and integrated component of his personhood (p.12).
This transitional process is typically arrested in men because men are not

... perceived as parents in their own right by their mates, co-workers, friends or family. This lack of recognition and accompanying feelings of exclusion interfere with validation of the developing reality of the pregnancy and child, as well as taking on the new role of parent... [these men] were relegated to the expendable position of "stagehand" (p.14).

Jordan suggests the period of time that follows the birth of a baby is the time for the "role-making of involved fatherhood". Her research suggests that this is a time that fathers find themselves without good models to assist them in taking on the role of active and involved parent. Most men in her study describe their own fathers as disengaged breadwinners. These men also reported that prior to parenthood, they had had no opportunity to learn infant or child caretaking skills.

What Jordan refers to as the "actualization of involved fatherhood" is achieved when the child is integrated as part of the father, ... a salient and integrated piece of the father's sense of self (p. 15)." She suggests that this takes "great commitment" on the father's part as well as a supportive environment. An essential element in this supportive environment is the baby her/himself, the baby becomes a "... key recognition provider. The ability of the infant to communicate recognition of the father as a special person was powerfully supportive (p. 15)." However, when the infant has special needs, the communication between
father and child is potentially much more difficult. This communication of recognition is dependent upon both the father's ability to perceive it, and the infants ability to communicate it. A handicapped infant's ability to communicate is often impaired, and the infant's father's ability to recognize this response is often impaired because of his distressed state of mind, his inability to know what to look for, and the messages that he may receive from the medical professionals as well as others that tell him to not expect much from the child.

Even if the father of a special needs child is able to overcome these barriers to involved fatherhood, "the actualization of involved fatherhood" is emotionally problematic for fathers of special needs infants. It seems that the very fathers who are able to emotionally engage in the experience of new fatherhood are confronted with the deep emotional loss that is part of the experience of birthing a handicapped child. Without support even these men may choose to withdraw from the challenge of engaging new fatherhood. Meyer (1984) writes, "...[fathers of special needs children] who view their handicapped child as an extension of their own egos are apt to become isolated and to reduce or withdraw from societal interactions (p.35)." What appears to be a healthy and sought after goal of parental engagement for fathers of typical children becomes problematic for fathers of special needs children.
Fathers of special needs children are coming to fatherhood unprepared in terms of knowledge and experience; they are emotionally distressed, and they face a task which in its newness to them holds no historical meaning in their experience, and the value of the task is unrecognized by the society at large. Self-esteem depends upon the belief in one's ability to effectively meet challenges, (as we see ourselves as active agents in the process), to the extent that we ourselves find meaning in it, and it is recognized as valuable by the society. I believe that fathers of special needs children are typically facing the profoundly difficult challenges of involved fatherhood with low parental self-esteem (Because there has been so little research done on these fathers, I have not been able to find research that specifically addresses this point. Seligman (1985) has found that parents with handicapped children generally have lower self esteem as parents than parents without a handicapped child.)

**Fathers of Special Needs Children**

"Much of the research leaves one wondering whether handicapped people have fathers (Wolfesnberger, 1983, p.9)."

Fathers of special needs children have received little research attention. Traustadottir (1988) writes: "The under representation of fathers leaves us without knowledge and
understanding of the father's view and experiences (p. 6)." In
special education literature, even though families have received
an increasing amount of attention over the last years, this
research gives us little understanding of the fathers themselves or
their needs. What is referred to in the literature as "parents" or
"families" is really a discussion of mothers (Traustadottir, p.6),
because they are the ones who are traditionally involved in the
caregiving of the children.

Cummings in 1976 did a pioneering study of fathers of
special needs children. In evaluating his findings, he writes: "... 
especially noteworthy is the clearly diminished sense of
competence as a parent among these fathers, compared to the
mothers of the chronically ill (p.252)." He goes on:

Fathers, relative to mothers, thus characteristically
have fewer opportunities to do something directly
helpful for their handicapped child, something which
provides concrete evidence of their loving, caring, and
benevolent concern. Relatively few opportunities for
counterbalancing the sense of loss, frustration, and
attendant anger are thus included in the father's role
(p.253).

These findings were noticeably different than the finding
from his earlier studies with mothers where he found, "... a
reduction in the sense of impotence, futility, and guilt achieved
through daily health maintenance practices (p.252)."
What Cummings is suggesting is that the fathers' lack of expertise and involvement in the caregiving of their children leaves them with little opportunity to feel affirmed in their fathering role. Concurrent with this experience, he points out, are fewer support services to help men.

For many fathers of special needs children, the experience of their child's birth and handicap looms over them. It is like a shadow cast from afar that dims their lives. The experience of fatherhood is not an experience of engagement in which the challenges of fatherhood are brought forth. Fatherhood lacks a tangible, visible, malleable, substantive quality which inspires creative engagement. For many men, there is neither the day-to-day involvement as fathers, nor the societal support from other fathers to help men attend to their experience of fatherhood. There is little to foster men's consciousness about fatherhood. This is why it is so important that men see other men valuing it.

**Interventions for Families with Special Needs Children**

The interventions to parents of special needs children come in many forms. (That is not to say that these services are readily available, or of good quality when parents can find or get them.) First, there is respite care, which is designed to give parents an occasional break from the "... physical exhaustion and continued
psychological burden of caring (Intagliata and Doyle, 1984, P.4)."
(Child care for these families is often hard to find.) Another
intervention is services available to help parents learn about
their child's disability. There are also self-help parents groups,
which help parents overcome their sense of isolation and
difference, and some offer the opportunity to share feelings and
experiences and form social connections. There are also training
programs to teach parents how to teach their children adaptive
skills and manage their child's problematic behavior (Davidson
and Dosser, 1982). Other options that are available to parents
include individual or family therapy, which can assist parents in
understanding their feelings and coping with the stress related to
their special needs child. A more recent offering has to do with
developing stress management techniques. I want to underscore
that references to these interventions are available in the
literature; however, in practice the offerings are "... neither
available or adequate, and are often costly (Helm and Kozloff,
1986, p.4).

One criticism of these programs is that the emphasis has
been solely on the disabled child, and this has lead to the child
being the recipient of virtually all the intervention support, as
well as the child being seen as the cause of virtually all of the
family problems. Another criticism is that the services are
fragmented and compartmentalized, with no connection or
coordination between them. Further more, the model of human
and family behavior that these interventions suggest is simplistic and limited. Human behavior is seen as a cluster of discrete and isolated behaviors. The parent training programs teach isolated skills, and as such their usefulness is limited. Helm and Kozloff write: "In sum, then, parent training programs typically help families with respect to a limited number of short term needs (Helm and Kozloff, 1986, P.4)." They suggest as proof, that despite these interventions, family problems tend to worsen over time. Families become increasingly closed and isolated. It appears that these interventions do not help parents feel more competent or empowered as caregivers. The programs focus almost exclusively on the child, and parents are often left feeling that there is little to personally help them.

Some researchers have suggested that interventions for parents can be much more useful and empowering. Intagliata and Doyle (1984) suggest that services should be aimed at helping the entire family. They believe that social support is crucial to the physical and psychological health of the entire family. Parents can learn how to get all the social support they need, if they are able to reach out to the community to get it. Even though I agree with the researchers' emphasis on helping parents improve their interpersonal problem solving skills, I do have serious doubts about the effectiveness of this approach. Parents will not be able to get all the support they need even if they do become more competent at interpersonal problem solving skills. The resources that they need from the community may simply not be available.
In addition, particularly in the early stages of parenthood, parents are often not able to reach out to others. Parents are often physically and emotionally overwhelmed and disoriented. They are feeling too vulnerable and isolated to even desire to reach out to others in the community. Their approach is patronizing and sets up parents to have unreal expectations of themselves, and of the supports in the community. It sets up parents to believe that their needs will be met if they only learn how to do things correctly.

Singer suggests that family needs can be addressed through a "... package of family support services (Singer et al., 1989, p.313)." The aim of the support is to learn "... to act on oneself... to gain a sense of mastery and empowerment (Singer et al., 1989, p.313)." They teach problem solving techniques to use with children, meta-cognitive teaching techniques to help parents be more effective teachers to their children, stress management training to help parents learn to relax and be aware of what they are feeling (self-monitoring) and reflective thinking techniques to help parents to become aware of and to modify their negative thinking (a cognitive awareness). Singer, Irvin, and Hawkins write: "Stressors are made up of aversive stimulus events and a person's appraisal of these events (Singer, Irvin, and Hawkins, 1988, p.275)." For example, teaching toileting can be viewed as a stressful task for one parent, or as a matter of course for another, depending on one's outlook.
Some of the parents in our experimental group reported that they were able to coach themselves to look at difficult situations differently and that this new set of internal responses helped them to be more relaxed or less upset in difficult situations (Singer, Irvin, and Hawkins, 1988, p.275).

The training takes place in an intensive support group setting that meets as two hour classes once a week for eight weeks. Participants spoke of significantly reduced anxiety and depression.

What is unique to both of these alternative forms of family support interventions is that parents focus on themselves and how to modify their own behavior. I believe that this is empowering to parents. Parents learn to become more active agents in their own lives. It affirms their centrality to their own lives, and encourages them to take greater responsibility in solving problems which are ultimately their own. This affirms that they also have value and meaning as individuals outside of the context of parenthood, which can feel all-consuming. These trainings teach them new skills which are useful and at the same time, enlarges their sense of who they are in the world.

I found that Singer's program went further in helping people understand that they themselves are central in creating their own perceptions about the world. This program also gave parents more information, and it taught them concrete skills in dealing with their children.
I believe that the interventions that these researchers have put forth to help families are indeed helpful in the development of creative problem-solving skills, as well as to the development of creative personality attributes. Risk taking behavior is encouraged through asking the participants to bring their problems and feelings out in the open, as well as to risk assuming greater responsibility for their lives. Participants are taught to increase their tolerance for ambiguity, and to consider divergent ideas by not making assumptions nor jumping to conclusions, and by allowing for the possibility of many simultaneous feelings. Flexibility and the capacity to innovate is encouraged by helping them recognize the possibility for many behavioral responses, and by teaching them how to use a meta-cognitive teaching style with their children.

In addition, parental self-esteem is supported through peer support, through giving the participants caregiving information leading to greater parental competence, and through the social recognition and affirmation that this type of group gives to the importance and difficulty of parenting. The locus of control of these parents is increased through the affirmation of their centrality in their own lives, and through helping parents come to the awareness that they have more choice in their own behavior and attitudes, and as such can more clearly see themselves as active agents in their own lives. Of course, these categories overlap, and are interdependent, and not truly discrete.
These interventions are designed to give parents some useful skills and experiences that will hopefully help them to more effectively meet the challenges they face. There is certainly no guarantee that someone will really be able to effectively use these skills as life unfolds. Certainly one's ability to execute what one may know is always in flux.

In addressing the issue of transference of learning in these parent training programs, Hills and Knowles write:

... the inferred guidelines are that people can learn individual skills and practice them in relative isolation. The related inference is that eventually learners will come to integrate the various skills and modify their personal styles of relating in natural settings (Hills and Knowles, 1987, p.158).

Their research suggests that a factor that they term the "discovery of personal meaning" strongly influences parents' ability to transfer learning. This is a principle of learning developed by Combs (1965, 1982). They describe it as follows:

... [the] discovery of personal meaning is considered to consist of three components: 1) the process of comprehending the relationship of events to self, 2) the judgment that this relationship is relevant to a perceived personal need or is consistent with a belief, and 3) the awareness of feelings associated with the events. The essence of this process is summarized in Comb's statements, 'Any information will affect a person's behavior only to the degree to which he has discovered its personal meaning for him' (Combs, Avila and Purkey, 1978 as found in Hills and Knowles, 1987,p.161).
Even though this research was done in relation to more traditionally based parental skill training programs, modeled after Parent Effectiveness Training programs, this principle of learning is still equally relevant. It supports the notion that one's efficacy as a parent is directly connected to the meaning that one finds in it, and for men this meaning seems particularly hard to hold, because men have culturally been dissuaded from attaching meaning to the caregiving role. And for the men who might choose to participate in these trainings, it may be more difficult for them to attach meaning to, and to apply what they have learned. Men are disinclined to understand the importance of caregiving, and its relevance to themselves. In addition, it may be more difficult for men to feel deeply connected to the child because of the way males are reared in this society, and this emotional connection seems vital in developing and maintaining a sense of purpose and meaning in caregiving, particularly when things are difficult.

Traditional programs have not been effective in helping parents. Even though the newer ones may be more helpful, will their differences be significant? Maybe as long as the larger issue of the gendered nature of caregiving is not addressed, things cannot really significantly improve. When I read the research of Intagleata and Doyle, on interpersonal problem solving, and Singer, on stress management, which both claim to focus on the needs of the parent, I wondered about the composition of the
parent groups in terms of gender. The researchers only referred to parents, not mothers or fathers. To what degree did both parents participate? Many group members were referred to as "single" parents. I assume that most of these were women. It seems to me that this type of training is most relative to and is attended mostly by the parents who are most actively involved with their children, which is most often the mother. My experience has been that I have often been the only man to attend parent support meetings set up for parents.

**Interventions Specifically for Fathers of Special Needs Children**

Studies on the effects of various social interventions with parents of handicapped children have almost without exception been limited to mothers and their relationships with their children (Vadasy, et al., 1986). McNeil and Chabassol (1984) report in their study of parental involvement with hearing impaired children that there is virtually nothing known about what the effects of social and informal support for fathers are, and how it impacts their marriages, the involvement with their children, and their level of stress. We are left without knowing through the research literature what the effects of these interactions have been. However, we do know that men's participation in early intervention has been extremely limited.
In 1981 the University of Washington started an intervention program specifically for the fathers of special needs children between infancy and five years of age. The program has a three-fold purpose: 1) to get men together to talk, 2) to give men information about caring for their child, and 3) to give mothers a respite. The underlying assumptions of this program are that fathers have many concerns in common about their roles as fathers, and that these fathers have much to offer each other. The program has:

... a flexible rather than a pre-defined agenda, which enables program facilitators [there are two of them, one of whom is a father who has a child with special needs] to identify, define, reflect, and respond to participants' most immediate concerns (Meyer, 1984, p.16).

The children come with their fathers to bi-monthly Saturday morning meetings. The eight fathers and their children all meet together, and they learn games, songs, and exercises that they can each enjoy doing later at home.

Part of the time the children are cared for by a daycare staff, and fathers are together to talk about whatever concerns they have. The final part of the program involves a guest speaker who talks to the fathers about topics that have been previously chosen by them. The expressed aim of this program is to "... lessen the impact of the child's handicap on the family by
reducing isolation, building social networks, and educating participants (Meyer, 1984, p.18)."

The program has been successful in getting fathers to be more involved with their children outside of the bi-monthly meeting and fathers report feeling more competent and less isolated as caregivers. Men have reported feeling better about themselves as fathers because they feel more competent, and because they have an opportunity to talk and meet with other fathers who understand their experience. As one of them put it, "I wouldn't even bother telling the guys at work about Toni . . . If I told them that Toni finally started walking at age two and a half, I'd probably get a strange look. (Meyer, 1984, p.13)."

In a follow up study of this program (Vadasy, et al., 1986) it was found that "... not only fathers . . . but also their wives, report significant changes in their stress, depression, grief, social supports and satisfaction, and information level after participation in the program (p.25)."

I believe that this program is effective in increasing the men's self-esteem in several ways: 1) the existence of these men is socially acknowledged, 2) these men are learning how to be more effective caregivers to their children, and therefore feel more competent in doing it, and 3) they are involved in a community of men who value involvement with their children. This supports each of them in understanding and valuing
themselves as fathers. I believe that peer support is crucial for these fathers because it enables them to form a community, which can support the value of involved fatherhood that the society at large does not support.

**Self-claiming and Fathers of Special Needs Children**

How fathers of special needs children respond to the birth of their child is critical. If men wall themselves off from their feelings (in this case their pain), then in essence they are walling themselves off from the roots of their creative power from which they can hold and creatively transform their experience. I believe that our connection to ourselves and others depends on the access that we have to our emotions and it is through them that we find our creative energies, and our more hidden inner knowing and inner strength. For men who are so socialized away from their feelings, as well as systematically denied affirmation of a relationship to their developing newborn, connecting to the pain of birthing a handicapped child becomes even more difficult. Without these connections, the challenges of involved fatherhood become insurmountable. There is no context of relatedness to other to give their experience meaning.
However, if men are able to feel their pain, then this opens the door to their creative connection to self and their creative energies, from which men can form their own authentic understanding and meaning. The connection to other is possible, and within a context of relatedness, men feel empowered to be involved. Fathering involves at its core the development of relationship. It is in the context of relationship that fathering has meaning. It is their depth of connection to other as well as self which will sustain men in the challenges they face.

Grieving is opening to experience. Grieving is an active process which involves letting go and letting something else emerge. Grief needs a meaningful context, an experience, a relationship through which to unfold. There needs to be something real to grieve.

For me as a father of a child with special needs, the upwelling of deep new emotional understandings emerged from the deep pain of my grief. It was this knowing that allowed me to let go of the why and hold the "it simply is" of my experience. It was an experience that affirmed my belief that I could in fact recreate my seemingly shattered life, even though life's events felt out of my control. It is easy to claim responsibility for creating your own reality when life tastes sweet, but not so easy when life feels unkind. With this upwelling of inner knowing came a sense of inner support and strength that allowed for the possibility of a dialogue between myself and my experiences as they were
unfolded. It gave me strength to courageously let go of some of my old beliefs about reality and to embrace new ones that had less to do with controlling external events, and more to do with creating my internal responses to those events. In this way I could reorganize and find meaning despite the confusion and disorientation that I felt at this time.

I believe that the creation of these new understandings draws upon our deepest creative abilities. It is our creative ability which allows us to enlarge the context in which we experience the pain. I think the degree to which we can enlarge this context is the degree to which we can hold the pain and work with it, much like the potter turning mud into pots.

For myself, it was this ability to enlarge my perspective that allowed me to affirm my centrality, to see myself as the originator of my unfolding life. It is what allowed me to claim my fatherhood experiences back to myself, and to claim them for myself -- no one could take the joy of parenting away from me but myself.

It is this self-claiming that says, yes, maybe things are not the same as I had hoped or wished, maybe my understandings are incomplete and I don't understand, but nevertheless I am still the center of my own life experience -- my fatherhood experience is my own. It is this self claiming that speaks to an ability of one to hold the experience and witness it. To do this is to have an aerial
view, in which we can look down at our world and at ourselves, and see ourselves standing in the center of our own world. I am speaking of understanding things not in an absolute sense, but in a relative sense, that was mine alone. This is my sense, my understanding, my life. It is the sense of ownership of one's own life. Motivation comes from this ownership. I am the one who resides in this experience of my life, therefore it is in my benefit to take care of it. In self-claiming we are redefining our world and relocating ourselves at its center and in this process we reclaim our power to act and to create.

I believe that this process of enlarging our perspective and self-claiming was at the core of the development of the "positive belief system", referred to by Frey, Greenberg, and Fewell (1989), that some mothers exhibited that allowed psychological distress to be minimal, even with high levels of social criticism. They had the power to actively create a frame of reference in which they were empowered to act. They were not victims of fate. Even though the researchers talk about "parents", they did not discuss this belief system in relation to fathers.

The research that Frey, Greenberg, and Fewell did on families with a handicapped child focused on the question, "How do parents cope?" They suggest that parents are not passive "victims" of stress as traditional research would suggest. Instead they wanted to focus on the "resiliency" of families and the importance of psychological and environmental resources that
they muster. They suggest that if one's personal resources are
great enough to meet the demands placed on them, then "... the
individual can successfully adapt, even if the environmental
demands are considerable (Frey, Greenberg, and Fewell, 1989,
p.241)." They investigated three areas of coping resources: social
network, problem-solving skills, and general and specific beliefs.
They found that "... social support is a powerful mediator of
personal well being and family adjustment (Frey et al., 1989,
p.241)." They looked at problem-solving skills, and they found
that those who engaged in active problem-solving rather than
avoidance, self-blame, or wishful thinking coped better. They
looked at general and specific beliefs and they found that
"Parental beliefs were the single most powerful correlate of
parent outcomes (Frey et al., p.247)." Beliefs about their ability to
control their own lives and their beliefs about their ability to
"cope better than most", were associated with more effective
coping.

A positive belief system, the degree to which the parents
viewed their child's disability in a larger, more positive
perspective, (e.g., "We're blessed in that this is not a degenerative
disease, and she's physically healthy.") was a factor that kept
psychological distress minimal, even with high levels of social
criticism. Their research underscores the importance of a larger
frame of reference in meeting life's challenges.
I believe a positive belief system is related to our sense of ownership for our lives. I believe that this is strongly related to our ability to be present to our experiences, and to value them. I believe that it is related to our ability to be open to our feelings, and to claim our deep creative energies. In turn, it is our creativity which enables us to transform the challenges that we face in life into sources of growth and change.
CHAPTER III

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The Study and Workshop Focus

This study involved the implementation and evaluation of a workshop which was offered to fathers of special needs children. The purpose of the workshop was to help fathers of young special needs children with their transition to fatherhood.

Using photography, storytelling, guided imagery, and infant massage, fathers were encouraged to explore their experience of fatherhood. To accommodate the fathers who work during the week, the workshops took place on the weekends. The workshops were limited to two single day sessions, in consideration of the time demands placed on families with young special needs children. They were two weeks apart, and there was a follow-up evening session six weeks later. The fathers were asked to do some planned assignments in between the workshop meetings. The specific details of the workshop will be discussed in a later section of this dissertation. [See Appendix A for the workshop agenda handouts.]

The workshop gave men the opportunity to use their creativity as they listened to and revealed to themselves and each
other their own unique experiences. Looking at and sharing the stories of their experiences of fatherhood in this way, helped the fathers to understand themselves as creative and generative. This helped fathers feel more empowered as they came to decide how they would respond to the challenges of fatherhood. [See APPENDICES B and C for workshop goals, and discussion of creativity as a context for the workshops.]

Subjects

The group was open to fathers who had special needs children who are less than three years of age. I contacted early intervention centers in Western Massachusetts, sending them written information about the group. The agencies gave information about the group directly to the fathers. In some cases I contacted the father directly once he had given permission for me to do so. I had initially interviewed seven fathers, and five of the fathers chose to participate for the full duration of the study. The five fathers, who participated in the study, were white and they ranged in age from twenty nine to forty one years of age. The fathers ranged in occupation from blue collar to professional. I am not claiming that the group is a representative profile of men who are fathers of special needs children.
Initial Contact with Subjects

I did initial telephone screening of the potential group participants. I wanted to know that it was these men's own volition to participate in the group. After the initial telephone contact, I sent the fathers a packet of information. Included in these packets were: 1) Personal notes written to each of the fathers in response to the initial telephone conversation, 2) a letter outlining my expectations in regards to their involvement in the study and information about the nature of the workshop, 3) a sheet of information about the purpose of the interviews and a brief outline of what would be covered, and 4) participant consent forms. I followed up this packet of information with another telephone call to schedule the first interview. The first workshop occurred approximately two to three weeks after the interview. [See APPENDIX D for copies of the informational packet that was sent.]

Workshop Evaluation

The workshop was evaluated to ascertain how effective it was in helping the fathers to understand and feel more engaged and open to their experience of fatherhood. Also of importance was the positive impact that the workshop had on men's sense of isolation as fathers, self-esteem as fathers, and their ability to see their experience from a larger and more self-accepting and positive perspective.
To evaluate the changes in the men in this regard, I did audio taped pre and post interviews of the participants as well as an audio taped follow up group evaluation session involving all the participants six weeks after the completion of the workshops.

The initial interviews were between a half an hour and three quarters of an hour in length. The exit interviews were between three quarters of an hour and an hour in length. These took place either in the participant's home or in another location, depending on participant's wishes.

The group evaluation meeting ran two and a half hours and it was an opportunity for the men to get together again and reflect on their experience in the workshop. It was a way for the participants to come to understand what meaning the workshop had for them, and what impact the workshop has had on their lives as they reflect on it six weeks later. (This session was taped.) The follow up session was designed to help the participants understand, value, and retain the learning of the workshop experience, and this helped the fathers integrate the learning of the workshop into their lives. This follow up session was intended to be a model for the learning that can take place from reflecting and attending to our life experience (this learning is one of the goals of the workshop).
Additional workshop evaluation came from a written workshop questionnaire that was given to each of the fathers at the close of both workshop sessions. At the end of the exit interviews, with the permission of each of the fathers, a letter was given to their wives, asking how their husband's participation in the study had affected them personally. This gave the wives the opportunity to discuss how the study had impacted them. Only one of the five wives chose to send the letter back. [See APPENDIX E for copies of the forms for the workshop evaluations and the letter.]

One of the questions that arises in regards to this research is whether the person who designed and implemented the workshop is best to evaluate it. I believe that in this situation I was the best person to evaluate it for several reasons. First of all, I think as a father of a special needs child who has thought deeply about the issues of fatherhood, I knew the right questions to ask. Because I would have a deep understanding of what participants were talking about, I would be able to understand what their responses meant. This allowed me to ask follow-up questions that others who were less familiar with their experience could not.

Secondly, one of the important pieces of information from this study will be how to redesign this workshop so that it can be even more effective. As the person who initially designed and implemented the workshop, it would be very helpful to me for me to be involved in the evaluation process.
This is not a study to evaluate the effectiveness of one workshop in relation to another. It is an exploratory study using new and creative approaches to deal with problems which have not yet been addressed. If this workshop appears to be successful, and this model continues to be used as an intervention for fathers, future studies employing more traditional research methods may be of value. [See APPENDIX F for the interview questions.]

A Qualitative Approach

I am basing my evaluation of the effectiveness of the workshop primarily on the self-reported responses of the participants to the interview questions. As such I am primarily basing my evaluation upon the perceptions of the participants and their willingness to share them. This type of investigation is best done through qualitative research. It is a methodology which honors and seeks to understand the individual's world view. This research methodology is used to understand people's experience on a very personal level. The researcher strives to understand the meaning of the experience from the framework of those being researched, rather than interpreting the experience from a more external frame of reference (Merriam, 1988). Understandings and learning reached through this method of inquiry are grounded in
the experience and understanding of those who it studies.

Merriam (1988) writes:

... qualitative research assumes that there are multiple realities—that the world is not an objective thing out there but a function of personal interaction and perception. It is a highly subjective phenomenon in need of interpretation rather than measuring. Beliefs rather than facts form the basis of perception (p. 17).

Merriam (1988) suggests that this type of research, which is

... focused on discovery, insight, and understanding from the perspectives of those being studied offers the greatest promise of making significant contributions to the knowledge base and practice of education (p. 3).

My hope was that men's participation in the workshop and study would help them to better understand their experience as fathers. In this research process, I asked these fathers in an interview format to reflect on their experience of fatherhood and their experience of the workshop. I believe that this research process was experienced by these fathers as a form of support. Lather (1986) as cited in Powell (1990) writes, "The research process itself should 'enable people to change and grow by encouraging self-reflection' (p.6)." In essence this form of research is appropriate for my exploration of this subject because it was consistent with the aims of my study.
Trustworthiness

Monitoring of the study took place in several ways. I sent the participants copies of their transcribed interviews, asking them if the interviews accurately reflected their thoughts and feelings. I welcomed their comments and clarification and any comments were included as part of the workshop evaluation.

I kept a personal journal of my thoughts and feelings throughout the study. I recorded my reflections, thoughts, ideas, insights, and feelings in regards to myself and the participants. This was a way for me to monitor my feelings, biases, and attitudes toward myself and the participants. This was done after each interview and workshop session in addition to other intermittent times.

Qualitative case study does not pretend to be completely objective. Information and understandings are filtered through the very particular frame of reference of the researcher, who by virtue of his/her unique world view, comes to her/his own understandings about what has been observed. If we are aware of our biases as researchers, then we can be conscious of how "... they slant and shape what we hear, how they interface with our reproduction of the speaker's reality, and how they transfigure truth into falsity. (Guba and Lincoln (1981) as cited in Merriam, 1988, p. 39.)" The trustworthiness of the study is rooted in our self awareness of our biases.
Oakley (1981, as found in O'Grady, 1990) suggests that the trustworthiness of interviews lies in: 1) keeping the relationship between the interviewee and the interviewer non-hierarchical, and 2) the interviewer's willingness to make his/her "own personal identities" accessible in the research relationship. Kruger (1985, as cited in O'Grady, 1990) suggests that as researchers we need to refer back to ourselves in our study of others and make this connection explicit, because in "reality" we are connected.

What they are suggesting is that self-awareness, personal honesty and openness, makes far more trustworthy research. They are suggesting that trustworthiness is not a function of complete objectivity, but rather it comes from an honoring and monitoring the personal realities of the research participants. This includes the researcher. Trustworthiness comes from creating a climate of trust so that those who are being studied will come forward and be truthful. As researchers we can facilitate this if we greet what they offer with empathetic understanding.

In my study, I was open about my own experience as a father with my participants, and I participated as both facilitator and father. I hold my experience of early fatherhood clearly in my mind and heart, and yet I have many years of reflection between now and my past experience. I believe this allowed me to be empathetic, available, and not judgmental.
Limitation of This Study

I investigated only a small group of fathers each of whom has a child with special needs. In evaluating the effectiveness of this workshop, I can only know what the impact of this particular workshop is on these particular men. This group of fathers cannot be looked at as a representative sample of special needs fathers. In fact, the very act of their choosing to be involved in the study would suggest that they are to some degree willing to take risks and be open to new experiences. Because I am a white, English speaking man, men who are not English speaking were not actively sought for inclusion in the group.

Some limitations arose in relation to my research methodology. There were variations in the depth and content of individual interviews. The questions were of a reflective and personal nature. Even though I asked each of the participants very similar questions, many factors such as time of day, life events surrounding interviews, and the sequence of the interviews, all affected both my and the participants perceptions and state of mind during the interview.
Ethics

I transcribed the audio tapes of the interviews and the tapes were heard by no one other than myself or a professional I hired for this purpose. Parts of the transcriptions with identifying information will be removed. Utmost care was taken to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.

Participants were asked to sign consent forms. This provided the participants with a clear statement of the purpose of my research and any potential uses of it. Even though participants signed these forms, it was my understanding of the consent process that it was ongoing and negotiable.

Data Management

My own personal diary/journal was an ongoing way to record my field observations. These and transcriptions of the interviews were typed into the computer on an ongoing basis. All information on the computer was backed up with copy discs in addition to the ongoing hard copy of the material.
Data Analysis

Data of the transcribed interviews and evaluation session were analyzed and organized according to themes that were suggested by the interview questions. Field notes were organized according to the same organizing themes and other themes that emerged from the data. I analyzed my data in regard to these initial themes and questions. I also analyzed the data with an eye to the new categories that appeared from the careful and repeated review of the data and from the direct interactions I had with the participants.

The topics and discussion of the workshop in the review session in which the whole group participated were generated by both myself and the other group members; therefore it was an unknown as to what themes would emerge. Here again, I analyzed the data from both the perspective of the initial aims and themes of my study, and the new themes that emerged.

Even though I entered this study with an intention to analyze the data according to some preset themes, I anticipated that the responses and themes that emerged from the study would be far richer and more varied than what I had initially envisioned. I did data analysis throughout the study. I wrote memos to myself about what I was learning. These served to reflect on issues that were raised in the study and their relation to larger research questions. Throughout the research process, I
assessed the focusing research questions to determine how I wanted to modify the questions and how I wanted to modify the workshop structure or methods for collection or evaluation of the data.

In the analysis of the data, the themes that emerged from the data of the interviews and workshops which seemed most important and vital to the fathers themselves became the guiding organizational element by which the data was ultimately organized. In this regard, the analysis of the data is organized differently for each of the fathers.

[See APPENDIX G for questions that framed the initial investigation. These are questions upon which the interview questions and organizing questions were rooted.]
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS:
HOW THE WORKSHOP IMPACTED THE PARTICIPANTS

The focus of this study is to evaluate the impact of the workshops on each of the fathers who participated in the study. I am evaluating the impact of the workshop in regards to how effective it is in helping these fathers understand and feel more engaged and open to their experiences of fatherhood. Also of importance is the positive impact that the workshop has on men's sense of isolation as fathers, self-esteem as fathers and their ability to see their experiences from a larger and more self-accepting and positive perspective.

Each of the fathers came to the study with his own uniquely personal experience of fatherhood, with a special needs child. For instance, none of the fathers were exactly the same age, had the same occupation, or lived in the same community. Consequently, the impact that the workshop has had on each of the fathers who participated was unique to each of them. What happened to them as they participated in the group was in relation to the deeply personal concerns and questions that each of these men brought to the group. Questions such as: Can I love my son? Can I forgive myself for the way I feel? How can I not feel so guilty about my limits of time and financial resources as a father? How can I be more emotionally present as a father? How can I feel better about doing the fathering work?
Some of the dads were feeling strained in their relationships with their children and/or their wives. For others the stress was around work and being away from home. Each of the dads came away from the workshops changed. In my presentation and discussion of the data I will show how the workshop and interviews impacted each of the fathers in the context of their deeply personal concerns.

What I am discussing is the impact that the workshop has had on these fathers in an existential sense. I am looking at how the workshop affected the men in terms of how they felt about themselves. In my evaluation and discussion of their experience of fatherhood, my eye will be focused on this level, and it is on this level that the workshop was designed to impact these fathers. I believe it is from this internal reference point that their outward experience is understood and shaped. And the outward changes will also be better understood if we can understand the inner context in which these changes are rooted. I have chosen to present the data in such a way that the impact of the workshop will be understood as each father’s own personal experience and understandings of fatherhood is explored. In this regard, the presentation of the data analysis will be different for each of the fathers in the study.
Relationship to His Child--and His Self-esteem

At the time of the first interview, Dale had a one year old son, Carlos. He has Down Syndrome. Carlos's birth had been deeply stressful for Dale. As a father and provider, caring for Carlos had placed increased demands on him, but Dale felt none of the emotional rewards that fathering had brought with his first child.

The following is an excerpt, from the first interview that I had with Dale. Dale discusses his relationship with Carlos. Dale was very sparing with his words as I interviewed him, so I am presenting the dialogue between us.

I [Interviewer]. How does your relationship with him [your son] feel to you?

D [Dale]. We don't have much of a relationship. He's just beginning to develop a personality.

I. So it feels very formative, something it's hard to . . .

D. I'm a caregiver. That's how it feels right now . . .
[a little later]

I. What's been most joyous? Is there anything that's been a source of joy in relationship to him over the last year?

D. That's a strong word, joyous. So I would say nothing.

I. What's been most difficult?

D. Is dealing with Downs. When you look at a child, you should see a little boy or girl who is some one's kid or this and that. What I look down at him, I see a Down's child whose my son... There's still a big black hole that, I don't know, seems, in my heart hasn't been filled yet. It's this void, I don't know if it can be filled, will be filled?

As Dale spoke about his relationship with Carlos the words came slowly and tentatively. I was moved by his courage to talk about his pain, and the deep emotional void that he felt about his son. He wanted to feel differently about his son. His concern about whether he could ever really connect to the loving feelings about his son, Carlos, was deeply present. Dale had an older son, who is two and a half years older than Carlos, the younger son with Down Syndrome. Dale was aware of the less than equal love that he felt for his sons, and this weighed heavily on him. Dale
remembers about talking to other parents about having a second
child, and he sees a disparity between how he feels, and how
others told him that he would feel. Dale says the following:

You love them all the same. They'll be different but
you'll love them all the same. And I could not give
that advice to someone right now cause I don't have
that feeling. That's part of fatherhood, so I feel
deficient from this point of view.

Dale did not feel good about himself in this regard. He
describes himself as "deficient" as a father. He is suggesting, that
in this way, he is failing in his own eyes as a father. It appears
that Carlos's presence in his life has caused him to feel less good
about himself as a father. Dale goes on to talk about the impact of
Carlos's presence in his life:

It seems like a very personal thing that you have to go
through. And you start questioning your religious
values, your social values. You start a little
introspection on who are you really. And sometimes
you don't like what you see.

It appears that Carlos's presence in his life has caused Dale
to start evaluating himself and his life in more general terms, and
Dale appears to be looking at himself rather harshly. Each of the
men who participated in the workshop felt a disparity between
who they felt that they wanted to be as fathers, and who they were. In Dale's case the disparity seems to not have just affected his self-esteem as father, but his self-esteem as person.

As the fathers came together to share stories at the first workshop, Dale described his experience of fatherhood with Carlos this way: "I'm just at the beginning of all this. I'm still in denial. I'm still in grief about a lot of things." Dale has an older sister who has Down Syndrome. Dale saw little relationship between the feelings he had about his own child with Down Syndrome and his feelings about his sister with Down Syndrome, with whom he has had very little connection.

**Relationship to His Wife**

Not only was Dale's relationship with his younger son, Carlos, difficult, but his relationship with his wife, Lois, was stressed. "We're probably very close to breaking up at times . . . we've had lots and lots and lots of stresses." Dale spoke repeatedly of the difficulty they had in communicating with each other. Dale was not able to share his conflicted feelings of fatherhood with his wife.
Relationship to His Friends--Isolation

Part of what has made the birth of Carlos difficult has been how isolated Dale has felt in relation to friends. Dale has felt that friends have avoided spending time with his family since Carlos's birth because of the distress and awkwardness that everyone had felt. Dale says the following:

People don't know how to respond. They don't know how you are taking it, and that's followed through the whole year. I'm almost isolated from a lot of friends. We've initiated the contact, and when we confront somebody on that they say, 'Oh, you're so busy now. We did not want to bother you.'

Dale was feeling stressed and alone. In my first interview with Dale, I asked: "Have you talked to others much about your experience of being Carlos's dad? [Dale responds] "Nope". Dale, like the other fathers in the study, had not talked to anyone in an in-depth way about his experience of fatherhood. When I asked Dale:

In regards to the workshop, is there anything in particular that you'd like to come away with having done it? What would feel important to you, hey, this felt worthwhile because . . .

50
Dale: Probably just seeing someone else talk about situations and feelings that I might be able to identify with, so I don't feel so alone.

Supports

The following are excerpts from the my first interview with Dale. We were talking about family supports. I asked Dale the following:

Has there been anything in particular that's been of help to you, support to you in kind of, you talked about turmoil, is there anything that you say, yeah, this has helped me in my sense of turmoil about this?

Dale: No, there has been no help.

We discuss early intervention:

D [Dale]: Early intervention has been around since day one.

I [Interviewer]: Has that felt like a source of support or has it been...
D: Yeah, in that my wife gets into it more so . . .

I: So for you personally, maybe yes, maybe no.

D: For me? No.

I: So the experience [of being Carlos's dad] for you has been bad, you haven't felt support coming from any particular place and it's been a kind of lonely experience in relation to that. Is that . . .

D: True. Right.

Even though Carlos and his family had been receiving services from early intervention, Dale felt that for him, personally, there had been no help. Dale was clearly in pain, and feeling very alone in it.
Dale: Impact of the Workshop

Personal Awareness

As Dale told his story about being Carlos's father, he started talking about his past. He talked about his sister, who has Down Syndrome, and some of the painful feelings that he has had in regards to her. As Dale did this, he was able to begin to see the emotional link between his distant relationship with his older sister, and his relationship, now, with his son, Carlos. Dale says the following:

With regards to before the meetings and after, I think I have kind of a revelation on how my past was affecting my present relationship. [How my relationship with my sister was affecting] my relationship with my son. Keeping it at a distance... Why I was being so distant and retaining such deep seated, why me? And withdrawing and just doing what I had to do.

Relationship to His Child--and His Self-esteem

In the final interview six weeks after the second workshop, Dale reported spending more time with his children. He is
enjoying being with them more. Dale says the following at the group evaluation session:

But recently I've been spending more time with Carlos and realizing that I hadn't been before, as much. It feels better now, it feels much better . . . But now, when I walk in the room, he goes, 'Hi, Dad! . . . When I mention it, people go, 'Whaaatt?' And I go, 'You listen, you wait.' and then I'll go, 'Hi, Carlos, whaddaya say?' and he'll go, 'Hi, Dad!

I was struck deeply by his story. He playfully reported this story, with a lot of gesturing. He imitated his child's voice and gestures with perfection. Dale's ability to imitate his son communicated to me how carefully and attentively he had listened to his son. Dale's story was about Carlos's own acknowledgment of him as a father, and Dale's unabashed joy and pride of this acknowledgment was clear. He had clearly connected to some joy in his parenting of Carlos.

In the final interview, Dale talks about some of the changes in regards to Carlos, that have happened to him in the last several months. Dale says the following:

I think I'm a little bit more close to him and I'm just looking at more of his accomplishments rather than his limitations . . . I don't know how much of that is just
his growing up and my growing up . . . I'm just more laid back and accepting. Less critical.

I. Less critical of him, of you?

D. Both.

Dale is talking about a shift that he has made. He is more open to Carlos. He is more accepting of who Carlos is. Dale is suggesting that he has grown in the last few months, and he sees that Carlos has grown too. Much of this change that Dale sees may be related to the new level of communication that he and Carlos share. One of Dale's deep concerns that he had shared in the group was whether he would ever be able to communicate with his son in a meaningful way (meaningful communication has been rather absent for him in his relationship with his sister).

Dale is a man of few words, so it is not clear exactly how Dale does see that he has changed (I do not think that Dale is by nature introspective, so I believe that it is hard for him to conceptually know or express these internal changes. However, he is aware that his relationship feels different.) It is clear that Dale feels less defensive and judgmental of himself as Carlos's father. And consequently, I am suggesting that his self-esteem as a father has improved.
Support--Sense of Isolation

One way in which the workshop was helpful to Dale was that he was able to be among other fathers with whom he was able to talk about feelings that he had not been able to talk about before. Dale says the following:

I just feel better being able to express what I feel inside all the time. Kind of letting the steam out of the pressure cooker . . . Since the workshop I've noticed that other people are going through similar feelings and situations.

In the group, Dale was able to express his feelings, and gain greater clarity about his experience of fatherhood. Dale was able to start to understand his experience from a larger perspective. As he heard the experiences of other fathers, he heard that he was not the only one who struggled with expressing and understanding his own feelings. He was not the only one who faced difficult challenges, that he seemed ill-equipped to face. As Dale was able to connect to other fathers, he was able to share his experience with them, and they in turn were able to share theirs with him. In this way, Dale's context for understanding his experience of fatherhood has become larger, and he feels less isolated.
The following interchange that took place between the fathers in the evaluation session reveals both the deep support that Dale received as a group member, and the very significant changes that Dale had undergone in the course of the study. Joel, a group member, says the following:

I think being here's a remarkable difference from the first time you came into the group, the first meeting and tonight -- you know, you talk to your wife about your feelings! [You talk about] your relationship between your son and your sister, and you're just, just, just different! Really! Absolutely! Just talkin' about your son tonight, about him sayin' 'Dad'! . . .

Dale: . . . If it hadn't been for you guys.

Joel: I think that's a remarkable thing! Don't you think so?

Chad: You seem a lot happier, a lot happier! You don't always say a lot, but, boy, it's pretty profound.

This interchange in the group not only reveals and validates the changes that Dale has undergone, but it shows the depth of feeling and compassion that the men in the group share as well as the openness to share it. (The group process will be discussed in more depth later.) Their joy for Dale and his growth mirrored the
joy that Dale had felt for his son and his son's growth. And as Dale remarked, his changes had much to do with the men in the group. When I interviewed Dale several weeks after this group, he again spontaneously told me another story with great pride and he wasn't even aware he was doing it.

Relationship with His Wife

Dale reported that his relationship with his wife, Lois, was still quite difficult. However, during the three months between the initial interview and the final interview, they decided to start counseling. Dale states:

All we've got to do is start talking to each other . . . with everything that has gone on over the years, we've just pulled apart . . . It's like I can understand now that it's more a product of our environment than something that we did to ourselves.

It is hard to know if in fact his participation in the group lead to their decision to go into counseling, but I suspect that the experience of the positive support he received was a contributing factor. Also noteworthy is that he sees his life, his relationship with his wife in a larger, less self-blaming perspective. Again the group may have had an impact.
Relationship to His Child

At the time of the first interview, Joel had a year and a half old son, Dean. He has Down Syndrome. Joel spoke of the deep grief that he experienced with his son's birth but how differently he feels now.

When it came time to have the baby, it was a shock. If God had come down and said, 'Do you want me to take the baby back?' I would have said, 'Yes, take the baby back.' Today I wouldn't give up the baby for anything.

For the first couple of months, Joel struggled with accepting Dean in his life. Joel's family of origin gave him a lot of support, and they warmly accepted his son. With this help, Joel's distress started to dissipate. Joel goes on to discuss his emotional bond to his child, at the time of the first interview:

I look forward to coming home and seeing him . . . he started growing and becoming his own person, you can't help but love him . . . if he cries, if I make him angry, I feel sad about that. When he's happy, when I make him laugh, I feel good.
Joel is strongly bonded to his child, and he is emotionally sensitive to him. He looks forward to spending time with Dean and he is very involved in his caregiving when he returns home from work.

Joel talks about his acceptance of his son's limitations:

Obviously his development is a joy to me . . . His limits are different than our other kids'. Each and every one of them have their limits. So hopefully we're going to dig and strive to meet their potential.

As I interviewed Joel, I was struck by his matter-of-fact, acceptance of his son. The issue of his son's disability appears to not be burdensome for Joel. Part of what may have helped Joel and his family feel less burdened by Dean's birth is that Joel's son has been healthy, and he has not had many of the physical problems that children with Down Syndrome often have. Dean's physical development has not been significantly delayed, and the delays in Dean's cognitive development are still unclear.

Self-esteem as a Father

Joel is also a father to six year old twin boys from another relationship, who he sees only on the weekend. He has a step-daughter who is eleven, with whom he lives.
An issue that weighs heavily on Joel as a father is the lack of time that he spends with his children. He works full time outside of the home, and when he gets home he is often tired. Joel describes himself as a worrier who is often caught up in his worries, and he deals with his worrying by constantly doing. When he is at home, he often finds it hard to be emotionally present as he would like to be because his mind is often filled with all the things that he feels he should also do as a responsible home owner. Joel says the following:

Some days I feel like I’m doing a real good job. Other days, I don’t feel like I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing with the children. You know, spending enough time with them. That’s a major issue . . . I’m talking about guilt. Guilt about the time especially for my twin boys because they only come on the weekends . . . I work all week . . . and the weekend’s busy . . . I own a house, repairs . . . a variety of things that have to be done.

Guilt, about not doing enough and not spending enough time, is an issue that Joel referred to on several occasions both in this interview and in the workshop. For Joel there is a disparity between the father who he would like to be and the father he is. Joel clearly loves his children, and he feels good about his love for them, but he is not as available both mentally and physically, as
he would like to be. Even though much of Joel's guilt centers around his twin boys, I believe that Dean's extra needs and the extra burden that this places on his wife certainly contributes to Joel's guilt. I believe that Joel feels basically good about himself as a father. However, he is living with a lot of guilt, and he often feels torn between the role of father, the provider, and father, the nurturer.

Relationship with His Wife

Joel talks about his relationship with his wife, Karen, as sometimes stressful and difficult, and he says that it is often hard for them to communicate their difficult feelings with each other. However, they work hard at making their relationship work, and their relationship is strong and loving. He sees that his son's birth has strengthened their marriage. [He is their only child whom they have raised together from birth.] "Obviously it's had it's impact. It's been a positive impact. If anything, for us . . . we got a little closer."
When I asked Joel what he hoped to get out of the workshop, he said, "... to be a better person as a father, as a parent to this child and to my other kids. I don't really know what I'm going to learn ... [maybe] find out you are not so alone." Joel's response suggested that he felt he could parent more effectively and that he was open to learning new things as a father. His response also suggested that he was feeling alone in his experience. When I asked Joel, "Have you talked much to others about what it's been like for you to be Dean's father?", Joel responded, "No, I haven't." Even though Joel has had a lot of emotional support from his extended family, and he is not in distress about being Dean's dad, he still has not really talked to others about what it has been like for him to be Dean's father. I think that Joel is clearly within the cultural norm in this regard. I believe that it is common for men to not talk about their experience of fatherhood with others whether their children have disabilities or not. However, when a child has disabilities, demands and stresses on parents are greater and the child's and family's future is more of an unknown. I believe that it would be beneficial for all dads to talk more about their experiences, and maybe this would help more fathers to be actively involved. And for fathers of special needs children, I believe it is even more important that they talk, because by virtue of having a child who is not typical, there is a sense of difference and this, I believe,
contributes to a sense of isolation. Joel's words, "... find out you are not so alone" certainly suggests a sense of isolation.

**Joel: Impact of the Workshop**

**Support--Isolation**

In the following quotation, Joel talks about the apprehension that he had about meeting with other fathers before the group started, and how good it felt to him to meet and connect emotionally with other fathers. Joel says the following:

At first I had a little apprehension. You know, fear. I got that fear. Well, once I got involved in talking with you guys, something personal about your life, something that comes from the heart . . . Then, right away, I feel connected. I feel like, Ahh! . . . telling personal things about our life. Intimate, personal things that we had a hard time telling our wife . . . We are talking to each other about it like we were life long friends. That's something. That's something unbelievable.
The men in the group were really able to talk deeply and personally about their lives. The men talked about many feelings and events surrounding their experience of fatherhood. Much of what they talked about, they had never shared with others before.

Joel spoke about how miraculous this felt to him to talk to other fathers who could really understand his experience. Joel says the following:

People know first hand what I was going through. Geez! Imagine trying to grab four or five people together who know first hand what you are going through. Out of all the people in the world. How did it happen? It's a miracle, when you think about it.

Joel speaks about how different the fathers were, but how they were joined by a common thread:

Five totally different people from totally different walks of life -- different careers, different jobs. Our children didn't even have the same problem. But there's one problem with disability. There's a child with a disability, and there's the problem of being a father, coping with the disability and we all have that.
Joel spoke about how isolating having a handicapped child was, and how differently he feels now:

I think that when we have a child, all of a sudden we're unique. None of our friends have handicapped kids. We have one. Now we're unique. We're not. There's so many other people who are dealing with the same stuff and I met some.

The workshop helped Joel feel less isolated as a father. He was able to talk and share with five other fathers who were different, but who shared a similar personal challenge -- having a handicapped child. The event, of having a child born with a disability, made him feel different than other dads who he knew, and now the same event, has brought him closer to other dads. A real sense of community was created.

Self-esteem as a Father

Joel talked about how important talking to other fathers was to his sense of self-esteem as a father. As Joel talked to other fathers, he was able to appreciate what he was already doing. Listening to other fathers gave him a frame of reference by which he could see his own experience more clearly. It allowed him to appreciate what he was already doing. Talking with other fathers,
allowed Joel to more fully focus his attention on his own experience of fatherhood, and this helped him validate the importance of what he was already doing. Joel says the following:

I got four or five other perspectives. How people spend time with their kids and how people do things with their children... So, after the workshop, I got done. I said, yeah, I'm doing okay with Dean and not to be so hard on myself... I'm doing what I am supposed to be doing for me... I saw people who were doing more than I was doing in certain areas and I saw people, guys that were struggling with what I took for granted and came almost natural... [It] reaffirmed my position. I'm doing okay. I had to be told that. I had to be shown that. And that was good. I got that from the group... That made me feel good. So I guess it did... It made me feel good as a father, as a dad.

For Joel, a big piece of his feeling better was feeling less guilty about the time he spends with his children.

Yeah, I did [feel 'pretty good' about myself as a dad before the workshops.] I felt good, but I had some guilt. Guilt with spending time, and I needed reassurance, and I got that from the group... So, yeah, the guilt [still] pops up. But... [I] realize that
there are five other guys who have the same guilt I do sometimes because they are working.

Knowing other fathers gave Joel a larger frame of reference, and this helped Joel feel better about himself as a father. He could see that the time limitations he faced as a father were not his alone, and that what he was doing was "sufficient" and "on the right track". His limitations were not the result of his own personal failings. This helped Joel feel less guilty about himself as a father. As Joel heard the experiences of other fathers, he was able to make a shift from the more chronic sense of failing in some way as a dad to feeling he was doing okay.

As Joel talked to other fathers, he was able to distance himself from the constant internal dialogue of all the "shoulds" that, I think, contributed to his chronic sense of guilt. As he joined with these men, he made a shift, and he became more fully present to his experience. And he could stop and appreciate the fullness of what he brought to his own experience.

Increased Awareness to Act

Joel felt supported by the group, and he was able to feel better about himself as a dad. As Joel listened to the other fathers, he gained a larger perspective from which he could see
his strengths as a father. This enlarged perspective allowed him to let go of some of the chronic feelings of guilt as a father. I believe that as we feel less guilty, we become less guarded and defensive. And in Joel's case, he could frame some of his limitations as a father in a way that was not so self-blaming. He shared common problems with other fathers. These were issues that were part of the challenges that most working fathers faced.

As Joel was more able to look more specifically at his own experience, and he listened to other fathers, he saw areas in which he could grow and take on more responsibility as a father. I believe that as we become more conscious and we feel better about ourselves, we are open to taking on greater responsibility. Our desire to take on challenges comes from a sense of empowerment, rather than guilt. Joel says the following:

> There were areas that I could improve on, and that [the group] made it evident. It just confirmed it. Things that I knew, maybe I should be getting involved but hemmed and hawed. But, now, somebody else reiterates that they were involved with it. Now I hear that bright and clear and loud. Not just because I was attentive to what everybody was saying, but the things that I was weak about I really heard, you know? . . . I knew there were areas . . . but now I'm pretty well on my way doing the good things [getting more involved in his children's schooling, for example].
What Joel is talking about is that the workshops provided Joel with a frame of reference. By listening to other men, Joel could reflect upon what he himself was doing or not doing, and he was able to hear what felt right to him, for himself. This allowed Joel to feel better about his involvement and growth as a father, and it allowed him to see more clearly areas that he wanted to change. For Joel, the workshop, the exercises we did, and his ability to identify with the other fathers, gave him the opportunity to evaluate his own life, and enlarge his understanding, his perspective.

Self-claiming

One of the issues that Joel talked about in the group was how difficult for him it was to slow down and not be caught up in all the things that he felt he should be doing. The workshop gave Joel the opportunity to slow down and to really listen to himself.

A workshop like you had makes me step back and say, 'whoa, whoa, what's really important here ... That was one of the tools. That was one of the things that God put in my path to make me stop. Stop the fast pace that's in my head. The fast pace is in my head. The outside stuff is still the same.
What Joel is talking about is being able to take time to focus his thoughts, to quiet the background noise of his life so that he can be more inwardly peaceful and focused. He goes on to talk about this a little more.

We sat down quietly for Saturday. Now when's the last time I did that? When was the last time I sat down with a bunch of guys and we talked about good stuff? . . . How relaxing that is . . . the workshop made me step back and say, what's important here?

For Joel, taking this time to do this workshop was an act of self-claiming. He says the following:

[It's] okay to take time for yourself. It's okay to do that, even though you have kids . . . [Just because you have kids] that still doesn't mean you can't take time for yourself. There's less time for yourself, but I think it's important.

For Joel this self-claiming is directly related to slowing down this fast pace in his head of all the "shoulds" and "worries". It has to do with choosing how he wants to spend his time, whether it is attending the workshop, being with his kids, or alone with his wife. For Joel this is directly related to being able to focus on his priorities, what's really important to him.
It's a constant battle. And, every now and then something will come up in my life that will make me stand back and say, wait a minute, wait a minute. What's really important? What's really important here? ... Is it more money? Is it a new car? Is it a bigger house and all that?

Joel talks about this same theme of conscious attention to the important as he looks more carefully at his life as a father.

Who cares if the lawn is more than six inches tall, you know? ... The fact that I'm doing something else, it's not because I don't love my kid, don't want to spend time with him. It's just that my priorities must be screwed up. What's really important? You make time for them. You're not [always] gonna have that time ... . He's walkin', now, man, he's gone! Geez, I remember when he did that. My other kids, I don't remember! I wanna' remember! ... All the things of being a successful father: give them a little bath, take them for a walk, read a book, put him to bed. Just the mundane things, that's what makes for success. Just because you can't take him to Disney World ... It's doing the small things.
As Joel spoke, his desire to be available to his children was clear. He wants to remember and savor the moments of fatherhood. For Joel, making space for the fathering time is very hard when other things need doing. What he is saying is that the time spent doing the mundane with the children, the moments that tend to ordinarily slip away without notice, are important, maybe even more important than the big events.

Many of the exercises in the workshop, that I will discuss later, focused on this theme -- looking at the mundane -- attending to and noticing the common events in our lives, and appreciating them. I believe, what was also helpful in helping the fathers appreciate the richness of the ordinary events of their lives as fathers was that these men were coming together as a group of fathers. And by virtue of that, the message that these fathers heard was, that what you do in your lives as fathers is important.

The workshop gave Joel the opportunity to focus on a piece of his life, a very important piece, that ordinarily he has little opportunity to validate. As Joel talked about this deeply felt issue -- of not being able to do it all -- I had the feeling that he was letting go (as he had in the workshops and other interviews) of some of the guilt he carried with him and he was able to more fully appreciate what he was doing. In essence the workshops helped him more consciously align himself to what he already felt was internally true and right to him. Through the workshops he
had the opportunity and support to claim his experience of fatherhood more fully.

**Awareness of Feelings and Sense of Empowerment**

Joel was able to more fully claim his experience of fatherhood because he was able to more fully connect to his feelings surrounding his experience as a father. As other fathers talked, Joel was able to more fully feel and understand his own feelings. Joel says the following:

There was a lot of stuff said. A lot of stuff that came up that people, the guys in the group including myself, were ready to say. Some stuff I’d never talked about, you know. Not that I didn’t want to. It didn’t come to light until the questions that you asked and people started sharing. Oh, yeah, I do feel like that. That’s okay.

The workshops provided Joel the opportunity to more consciously attend to his experience of fatherhood and to move forward in the ways he wanted. Joel says the following:

The thing I learned from the program is that if you have something to talk about, you’ve got to talk about
it. You got to find out . . . You can't take things for granted and think other people are going to take care of you, like schools, like doctors, or therapists . . . if I have something to question about my job, I go ask it. Why not about the kids? I think that's what I learned a lot from the program. You got to get involved.

What Joel is touching on here is the empowerment to act. He is staking out new territory for himself. He is claiming responsibility for a piece of his life that men ordinarily feel less empowered. He is talking about being more assertive as a father, whether it is creating space for his own feelings or taking greater responsibility for his son's education.

Relationship with His Wife

The group also helped Joel validate his relationship with his wife, Karen. Joel says the following:

It's the mundane things. You've got to make sure you chip in and maybe wash the dishes now and then, do the clothes, pick up after yourself. Simple things like that. It made me aware of that . . . Maybe I should continue doing that, because that's an important thing. It's a trivial thing but it's very important . . . maybe
it's not the kids that come first. Maybe it's my relationship with my wife.

As a father, Joel became more aware and present in his relationships with his children. He also became more aware of the importance and richness of the mundane in his life as a father. Joel is bringing this same awareness to his relationship with his wife. Joel is saying that the workshop reminded him of how important the every day acts of support are in regards to his relationship with his wife. Joel is suggesting that his wife needs his respect, appreciation, and support as much or even more than his children do. The workshop validated the importance of Joel's conscious support for his wife. I believe that if we can remain conscious of the importance of our relationships, we will be less likely to take them for granted, and they will be more likely to endure in the face of hardship. Parenting a child with significant special needs is often a hardship that pulls parents apart.

Jean: Pre-workshop

Relationship to His Child

At the time of the first interview, Jean had an eight months old son, Lloyd. He has Down Syndrome. Jean described the birth of his son this way:
I sat down and the blood came out of my face. It was just like [when] I got a phone call, just like when my sister died. It was all these feelings that came up in me. And all of a sudden, I was overwhelmed by this inspiration, determination, I guess. I'm going to do everything I can, and he is going to be all right . . . Suddenly, I had a mission and purpose in life.

A family friend who researched alternative therapies was there to help the family within hours. And when Jean's son was only six hours old, the family started doing nontraditional movement therapies with him. Jean spoke of having someone there at "that critical moment" to say, "There are some things that you can do to help your child be well." Jean believes that pursuing these therapies with his son has been healing for him.

Lloyd's birth has been a real watershed in Jean's life. He says the following: "With my first son, I think I missed a lot because he was 'normal.' I worked in my own business from sixty to one hundred hours a week." (Jean is no longer in the business, and he is now involved in a major career transition.) Jean goes on to talk more about Lloyd's birth: "it gave me a very clear focus. It took a cloud and blew it all away and I think I am lucky. Some people live their entire lives [without focus] and I've gained an inner strength."
Jean's heartfelt connection and commitment to helping his son has given his life greater meaning. Jean talks about his son's birth being a "gift". As he spoke, I could see how tightly woven the threads of his son's life are with his own. Jean talked about his deep desire to see both himself and his son thrive in this world. Jean says the following:

He and I will both grow and live to our fullest potentials. And that is our goal and that is our mission and that is our reason for living . . . and when he gets it, it's like aahh, okay. You know, a new challenge, a new goal, a new obstacle. But you've made that one and that gives you more reassurance that you can then continue to reach the next one and the next one. And when he looks at you and smiles, there's nothing more precious. It almost brings me to tears but he's very connected. He's very with us.

As Jean spoke, I could feel the intense emotional connection that he had to his son. It was as though Lloyd's accomplishments were his own, and together they were facing and overcoming the challenges they faced. Jean wanted his experience of fatherhood to be positive, and I could see how hard he was working at focusing on his positive and optimistic feelings.

Jean was the father in the group who had the youngest child with special needs. As Jean spoke, I had the sense of how
fatherhood with Lloyd was still so new for him. Thinking about Jean, I am reminded of the research by Jordan, (1990), on new fathers. She describes the "actualization of involved fatherhood" as a time when the child is integrated as a piece of the father's sense of self. Listening to Jean, I had a strong sense that his son Lloyd was an integral piece of his sense of self.

Self-esteem as a Father

Jean was feeling a disparity between the father who he wanted to be and was. He felt deeply connected to his love for his children, but he felt as though he wanted to be spending more time with them. As a committed father, Jean was carrying around a sense of frustration and guilt because he felt as though he was not doing enough for both Lloyd and his older son. Jean says the following:

We learn about all these things that we can do [to help our son], and we didn't have the time to do them. And having the knowledge but not the time is frustrating . . . We get the kids to bed at eight o'clock and then the day's gone. And another day, and another day gone. Guilt, you know. It's so frustrating, you know . . . I think I'm good dad. But I wish I had more time . . . [It's] a natural tendency when you have a child with
special needs is that you'd probably like to spend all your time with that child doing everything you absolutely could for that child.

Jean brought up his feelings of guilt in regards to being Lloyd's father many times. Jean felt guilty for what he was not able to do with Lloyd, and for the things that he "... took for granted with Peter [his oldest son]", with whom he had been much less involved. What Jean is bringing up and struggling with is how do I attend to my own needs and that of my family? And will I ever feel like I can give enough?

As Jean is suggesting, these are particularly difficult challenges to parents who have special needs children. I believe that parents of special needs children are not only vulnerable to guilt because of the increased demands, but because I believe that parents have a desire to protect their children, and in this regards parents feel guilty that they have produced children who are socially much more vulnerable.

The experience of having a special needs child can feel all-consuming and overwhelming. This can be particularly true when you take on the added responsibility as Jean as of "... trying to make his son well." What Jean is discussing is his active exploration of anything which might help mitigate the impact that the genetic abnormality has on the child's physical health and on his physical and mental abilities. This in itself can be an
overwhelming task, let alone the other added caretaking responsibilities. To pursue this goal takes great commitment and much optimism, which can leave little room for other feelings. In Jean's case, I sensed that this might be true. I had the strong impression that Jean found it difficult to give himself permission to have less than positive feelings as Lloyd's dad. I know that this was true for myself as a parent, and I believe that this is common among highly involved parents.

Jean's self-acceptance, or self-esteem as a father was deeply tied to both his son's achievements and his own willingness to pursue his goal of making his son well. I believe that Jean's high ideals that he had for both himself and his son, made him vulnerable to feelings of guilt and negative self-judgment. My sense was that Jean's self-esteem as a father was being balanced against his guilt.

Isolation—Support

When Lloyd was born, Jean received a lot of support to help him feel more empowered to help his child. This was healing for Jean because it helped him feel as though others cared, and this support also helped Jean to find a way to express his loving concern to help his child. This support helped Jean to feel more empowered to shape his child's destiny, and in that regard the
destiny of the family. This was healing. However, as important as this was to Jean, this support was not specifically focused on Jean's own personal needs as a father. This support did not assist Jean in helping him understand or emotionally connect to his experience of fatherhood. And in this regard, as time unfolded, Jean started to feel alone with little support. Jean in the following quotation talks about the loneliness he feels in this regard:

You know, I don't talk about this [being Lloyd's father] because I think my experience with family and friends, the sort of comments they made that to me were just off target and weren't helpful... People trying to relate but not being able to and their efforts sort of almost frustrating me to the point, I think I'll just shut down and will go on and I'll deal with it in my private way at home. I can talk to my wife, but again a lot of those inner voices and concerns being suppressed, things I didn't want to talk about with my wife. So I wouldn't worry her. Raise concerns with her.

Because Jean found it very difficult to talk to friends and family, and even in some cases his wife, about his experience of fatherhood, his experience of fatherhood became emotionally isolating for him. Jean also tried to reach out and talk to colleagues at work (senior high teachers and staff) about his experience of fatherhood, and again he found it difficult to talk and frustrating
Jean was left with the impression that others were unwilling to engage him in conversation that felt really meaningful to him. There seemed to be little room or opportunity for Jean to share his experience with others in a way that felt affirming to him as a father. Having a child with special needs, in this regard, became socially isolating.

Jean's family was receiving services from an early intervention program. John's involvement with early intervention felt awkward and somewhat alienating to him as a father. He says the following:

I feel the people from early intervention aren't quite sure how to deal with me when I'm in the room. My involvement with who ever I'm with is sometimes looked upon with questions. Why is this father here? Father's aren't involved. Fathers don't belong here in this group . . . Dads need to know that they are critical.
As a father, Jean received no formal social support. He felt discounted as an important parent. Jean felt as though his participation in the early intervention program was not really welcomed, and that his value as a father and nurturer was unrecognized.

Although Jean found himself somewhat isolated emotionally and socially as Lloyd's father, this was not something that Jean himself was aware of until he started to talk to myself and others as a participant in the study. This will be discussed in more detail later as I discuss the impact of the workshop on his sense of isolation.

**Relationship to His Wife**

He describes his relationship with his wife, Sara, as close, and that Lloyd's birth has had a positive impact on their relationship. Jean says the following:

I think as marriages go and as I've observed things, we have good communication skills. We truly love each other. We really care about each other and our children. [Lloyd's birth] initially, it brought us together. It sort of rebonded our relationship. Even
though we're back into the everyday life experience that bond that won't go away. I have to say, I think it's crazy -- it's had a positive effect.

For Jean and his wife, the experience of having a special needs child brought them together as a team. Rising to the challenge of having a special needs child reaffirmed and cemented their relationship.


Jean: Impact of the Workshop

Increased Awareness

One of the ways in which the workshop and interviews impacted Jean was that he became more aware of his needs as a father. As a committed father who was actively involved in pursuing alternative treatment modalities for his son, Jean had been very focused on doing for his child. Even though there had been little emotional support for him as a dad, and he had become somewhat emotionally isolated as a father, he was not consciously aware of his sense of aloneness, or of his emotional needs. It was only as he had the opportunity to talk to myself and others in the interviews and workshop, that he became more aware of his own
emotional needs, and his desire to be with others with whom he could share. Jean says the following:

I feel good that I can admit to myself right now, that I've been afraid of this sort of group. I told people, "I don't need a support group. I just need to make my son well". I've learned something here. You need to stay well to help, and part of that is being able to talk about it and get support.

Jean's participation in the study was a real emotional awakening for Jean. As Jean more fully focused on his experience of fatherhood, he became more keenly aware that previously unrecognized feelings did in fact exist. He became aware that as a father he too had needs. He had been afraid to acknowledge his needs. If he had acknowledged them, then he would have been confronted with not only meeting his son's needs, but his own, for which there seemed to be little support. Jean says the following:

I feel very lucky that this [workshop] is happening so early in my son's life. And it's something I didn't really even recognize until when we had that interview, and then I said, 'hey, yeah, this is pretty good.' And I suppressed these feelings for so long . . . The message that maybe I wasn't letting myself hear . . . share, and sort of pull out the things that were deepest inside me . . . I feel a lot better about having
had an opportunity to get those inner voices out . . . so that I could acknowledge them and begin to deal with them, rather than suppress them for years.

As emotional support became available to him, Jean was able to allow his needs and feelings to come to the surface. And as they surfaced, he felt the desire to express them. As Jean was able to express them, he realized how important this was for him. Jean says the following:

We need to express ourselves. We need to get out our feelings. We need to get out our ideas. We need to be able to listen to others and hear what they have to say . . . So, I see it [the expression of my feelings] as a real positive, positive thing, very helpful for my mental health. I'm just touching back to reality.

Being able to express his feelings was healing for him. Jean felt more grounded. It was a sense of homecoming. He was more fully coming home to himself.

Isolation and Support

In the final interview that I had with Jean, he talked about his participation in the group and how he was feeling less isolated.
He said that he was feeling more relaxed and grounded, and that his participation in the group had anchored him. He did not feel so alone and adrift as a dad. Jean says the following:

You know, you're not alone out there anymore, just floating on an oasis, hoping I'll be able to survive on my own. We need each other . . . I've talked to a lot of people about the group, and I told them I thought it was good. It was good to be with people who I knew understood. I think some people have looked at me a little hurt. 'Oh, you don't think I'd understand.' No, I don't. I really don't. It's not your fault.

In the workshop, Jean had found a group of fathers who could really understand his experience of fatherhood, for in some fundamental ways their experience was like his own. As Jean joined together with the other fathers and shared his experiences and they joined together as fathers, he felt emotional support. As a group the fathers were acknowledging and joining together around their shared needs as fathers. In the following quotation, Jean talks about the sense of camaraderie and support he found:

It's camaraderie there, you know. There's this feeling we're in it together . . . There's really no question that we understand what each other's talking about. . . . It's a sense of support and understanding. That's helped, you know?
Jean comments on how deeply bonding their shared issue of being a father of a special needs child was for the group:

It's amazing how you can take a diverse group, people who have never met one another, and yet they have one thing in common and it unites them. There's a trust and a bond... It is a group in the true sense of coming together.

Each of the fathers commented on how surprised he was at how quickly and intensely the group bonded together. I believe that the intensity of the way in which the fathers came together revealed the deep need for community and understanding that they all shared.

I believe that what made the group experience particularly rich and significant for Jean, as well as the other men, was that the group was composed only of men. I believe that men are socially accustomed to turning to women for emotional support, and here, the men were turning to each other. They were giving and getting emotional support from one-another. The group modeled a different way that men can be with each other. In the following quotation, Jean talks about how important and healing it was for him to meet men like myself or the other dads.
You know also what was helpful was meeting nice people like yourself, just good human being, wonderful human beings . . . [who] are open, communicate, are willing to share, that's a wonderful experience, especially for men. It's something you and I both know; it's not that common . . . It's refreshing. It's wonderful. It's cleansing in a way.

Self-esteem as a Father

The workshop helped Jean gain a larger perspective on his life, and the issues he faced. This enlarged perspective helped him to see the stresses that were in his life not as a result of his personal failings, but rather as challenges common to fathers like himself. Jean says the following:

Just, like I said, just hearing men talk about time, this makes me feel a little better. It's all right! We're all having to struggle . . . I realize that the things that I can't control, other people have those same issues. So maybe that helps me realize, hey look, you're doing the best you can. You have a life too. Lloyd has a life. We're all just trying to do the best we can with what we have to work with. What more could you ask of any human being? And we all just have to do the best
we can with what we got . . . I was getting down on myself for stupid little things. Gotta remind yourself, it's all right.

Jean is saying that he has a life which is filled with many other things other than being a dad. There is no way that he can do all the things that he wants to do for his children. As an involved father of a special needs child, who is keenly aware of many of the things that he can do to facilitate his child's development, there is always much more that he could be doing with Lloyd, in particular. In the past this has weighed heavily upon him, and he has felt a lot of guilt (". . . the thing I feel most guilty for").

As Jean heard other fathers talk, he could see that other dads faced this same issue. They too had feelings of guilt about the amount of time that they spent with their children. Jean could see that he was not the only one who needed to balance his needs with those of his children. Rather this issue was part of the nature of fatherhood. (I believe that this is a conflict that fathers of 'typical" children face; however, I think that the special needs of a child exacerbates this issue.) Jean says the following:

It's different knowing that others feel the same way. The same exact feelings or they'll bring it up while I'm even just thinking about it. It helps me realize that
this isn't just a problem that I have, but it's probably common amongst most dads in the same situation.

As Jean was able to frame this issue from a larger and less personal perspective, he was able to feel better about himself as a father. Jean says the following: "Does the group make me feel better as a dad? Yes! And some of it's cause . . . you know, you gotta let go, and you just can't do all these things." Yet he finishes his thought this way: "And, yet there's the guilt. It just doesn't go away, I know this. Why don't I just get rid of [many of the things he is involved in]."

The workshop has helped Jean become more self-accepting of himself as a father, and, as a father, Jean does feel better about himself. He has been able to let go of some of his expectations about what he is able to do. He has a better understanding of his own needs, and yet, the balance between attending to his own personal needs, and those of his children is still clearly a very present issue for him.

Relationship to His Child

When Jean returned home after the workshop, he talked about feeling more open to Lloyd. Jean says the following: "I
would just wanna go home and look at my son, you know? It's like a re-appreciation, a real sense of respect, you know?"

For Jean, it was a sense of connecting to the joy of fatherhood rather than to the work of all the "shoulds" of making his child better. It was more wanting to simply be with him. As Jean became more aware and respectful of his own needs, then giving to Lloyd became more of a choice than an obligation.

Coming home from these workshops, I wanted to get my hands on my kid and play with him and smile with him and be with him . . . so that's really how I felt maybe differently coming out of the workshops. Very positive. Very, very positive.

Self-claiming

The workshop helped Jean feel more fully present to himself. He felt more centered, and connected to his feelings and his inner knowing, and this felt deeply affirming to him. Jean says the following:

This is wonderful! I haven't felt this good in years!
That's sort of what this group does, re-focuses. Wait a
minute, you know. What am I doing? Why am I here on this planet? What's really important?

I believe that what Jean is talking about is "re-focusing" on his world in a way that is more self-referencing. He is looking at his own life from his own unique perspective. He asks: "why am I here? What's really important?" The 'to me' is implied. What Jean is discussing is creating and affirming, for himself, his own personal context for his life. I believe, that this came from Jean's focusing on and valuing himself and his own experiences. He was actively claiming what was his. (Moving the fathers more in this direction was one of my hopes for the workshop. I will be discussing this in more detail when I talk about the specific workshop exercises.)

For Jean, this self-claiming was emotionally satisfying, and it gave him a sense of greater self-assurance. He felt more clear and self-accepting. Jean says the following:

Even in relating with professional colleagues or anybody, I speak more openly now then I did before because I'm not concerned about what they think. Well, I guess I am concerned about what they think. I'm more comfortable with my life, my son and how I feel. What matters as a father.
To participate in the study, Jean took a risk. He reached out to others as a man and as a father. In the workshop, Jean felt valued. He left the workshop feeling more self-assured. Now Jean is more open to taking new risks. He says the following:

I took a step, I didn’t think I was going to ... so I’m glad I did. And from this experience if new opportunities come along, I’ll probably be much quicker to say, yes, I’d love to try that.

Chad: Pre-workshop

Relationship with His Child

At the time of the first interview, Chad had a two year old daughter, Jill. She was born three months prematurely with numerous medical complications. Many of her medical problems have lessened over the last two years. Her present problems are manifested as mild cerebral palsy, possible speech delay, delayed growth, and an impaired immune system. Jill's survival was questionable for the first three months and she was frequently in medical crisis for a year and a half.
Jill's medical condition has significantly improved over the ten months previous to the interview. Even though she was vulnerable to getting sick, and did fairly frequently, it is neither as common or serious as it has been in the past. Life had settled down to a more stable daily routine. Chad was involved in typical caregiving chores with Jill such as her feeding, bathing, and assistance with dressing.

Because Jill's medical condition had improved, the whole family, or just Chad and Jill, have the time and opportunity to go out and do things together. Chad says the following:

We play. I take her to the store with me. We go out . . . [I do] the day-to-day things I would normally do, [but I do them] with her. And then, of course, there are the extra things, like you take her to the mall or to the zoo, the petting zoo, or whatever . . . I take her over to my parent's house or my wife's parent's house and we visit because I like her to know that she has grandparents.

Chad has been through a lot of trauma and stress with his daughter. He feels very emotionally close to her after all they have been through, and, now, he is enjoying being able to play and spend time with her. For Chad, being together as a family, and sharing the every day parts of life together is something rather new and special for him.
At the time of the first interview, Chad was describing his displeasure with himself as Jill's father. He felt easily frustrated with Jill, and less involved with the caregiving than he thinks he should be. He says the following about his relationship with her:

It [my relationship] could be better, I think. Probably in regards to what we were talking about previously [getting up, cooking, bathing, etc.]. Doing the daily things a little more with her instead of just the fun things . . . I would feel better about it and I think I would be able to discipline her a little better or guide her a little better. 'Cause right now I get very frustrated with her . . . She's not as critical, as in a critical condition as she was. So maybe I kind of backed off and stopped doing a lot of the things, like administering her medicines except when I have to . . . I felt more comfortable taking care of my daughter then [when she was in medical crisis]. I know it seems funny being on a monitor and being on medicine then, than I do now. I felt like I had control.

Chad is saying that he is not as involved in the daily caregiving with Jill as he thinks he should be or would like to be. He is suggesting that right now he is too much in the role of playmate and not enough in the role of caregiver or limit setter.
Jill does not readily respond to Chad when he tries to guide her behavior, and he feels frustrated and somewhat out of control with her. In some ways it was easier when she was smaller, and his role was better defined by her age and her medical needs. The tasks as a father now are more interpersonal and interactive and more self-initiated.

Relationship with His Wife

Chad and his wife, Dora, spent much of their lives during Jill's first year and a half of life traveling to or being in the hospital. Chad describes the emotional impact of this experience on his relationship with his wife this way:

When all of this is going on how can you be close? You don't get emotional when all this happens. You don't have the time or energy to get emotional. All the emotions, anger, arguing, bickering, fighting, come out after she was home. Not at the hospital while this was going on. It's like you store this away and save it for a rainy day.

Chad is saying that initially both he and his wife in order to cope just pushed their distressed feelings aside. It was only after Jill came home, that they were able to express their pent-up
distress, and when the distress did come out, it was often expressed in such a way that it was directed at each other.

The events around Jill's medical problems had taken over and had overwhelmed their lives. As Chad discussed this, he shared how they felt guilty and self-blaming for their child's problems at this time. The blaming and guilt was an expression of their distress, and a response to an event that seemed inexplicable and out of their control. They wondered, what had they done to make this happen.

Now they are not in crisis and they are relearning how to be together outside of crisis. Chad characterized their relationship at the time of the first interview this way:

We need to start interacting and stop reacting. . . . But a lot of that has to do with stress, I think. I just think we're so caught up in what she does day-to-day and what I do day-to-day, that we don't take the time to interact or communicate with each other. I think she gets frustrated and I get frustrated. And when we do communicate, it's usually to snap at each other, you know, so that could be better . . . I feel things have gotten better [since the hospital] but they could be much, much, much better also.
Chad is saying that with all the stress and demands in their lives, both he and his wife get very self-involved in their own lives, and it becomes difficult for them to listen to each other. When they feel stressed, the way in which they have dealt with their stressful feelings has served to push each other away. It has been difficult for them to join together around their distressed feelings and support each other.

Isolation—Support

Both Chad and his wife, Dora, are close to their families, and during this difficult time with Jill, they were a source of emotional support for both of them. In addition, Chad discussed the assistance and support of a hospital social worker and a pediatrician. In this respect, Chad and Dora were not alone. They had people who they could turn to for emotional support, and they had people they could turn to for support and help in addressing their medical questions and concerns.

And yet as I talked to Chad there was a way in which he felt alone in his experience. He had been feeling alone as a father, and his value as a caregiver had not been really recognized. Chad and his family had received support services from an early intervention program. In regards to the services Jill received,
Chad felt positively, but in regard to himself, he felt very differently. Chad says the following:

Early intervention has been great! [for my child] . . . but this is nothing against them because I don't want to sound sexist or anything, because I'm not. They are all women. They are great. I mean, I think they think it's great that I work second shift and I'm home and I take part in all these things, but again, there are no men to relate to, you know?

I: So for support for you as a father, as a man . . .

Chad: Nope . . . I have felt that way [that I didn't belong]. I've felt out of place because all of the people coming to my house were all women.

Chad felt out of place and somewhat discounted as a caregiver in regards to early intervention supports, and, also, by nurses who had been involved in Jill's care. Chad felt insecure and that he lacked expertise as a caregiver. And he did not get support from the nurses or the home educators to help him feel more relaxed and competent. He reported that, in some instances, he was actively distrusted. Chad had no men to model as a caregiver and nurturer to a special needs child, and he felt that he had little support to learn how to become more actively involved.
When I asked Chad: "Have you talked to others about what it's been like for you being Jill's father?" he replied, "No. That's a quick and easy answer. No. And nobody asks, so why should I. I'm not going to sit down and start pouring my heart out to somebody who doesn't care or doesn't want to hear it."

When no one asks, then an assumption that can be made, as Chad has, is that others don't want to hear about your life and that they don't care. Chad did not feel that anyone with whom he worked was really interested in talking to him about his experience of fatherhood. His family had been a support, but he didn't feel free to really talk about what was happening to him on an emotional level, and they didn't ask.

Part of what made it difficult for Chad to share what was going on emotionally for him were his beliefs that he had internalized about what it meant to be a man in this culture. Chad says the following:

I think we all spoke about this. In the meetings. We're not supposed to. We're all brought up this way. You're not supposed to show your emotions. You're not supposed to say how you feel.

What Chad is speaking about are the very real psychological boundaries that inhibited him and the other fathers from talking
to others about their feelings, and most particularly other men. And in this case their feelings about fatherhood. Fatherhood by its very nature is a male experience. If men do not feel free to talk to other men about what is going on emotionally for them, then this leaves little opportunity for men, such as Chad, to really emotionally connect to other fathers. And this contributes to a sense of emotional isolation that Chad, as well as the other fathers in the study felt.

**Chad: Impact of the Workshop**

**Isolation--Support**

In the workshop, Chad had the opportunity to talk to other fathers and share his experience of fatherhood. The stories of the other fathers helped Chad feel less alone. As he listened to other fathers, he came to understand his own experience in a different way. He was not the only father who had endured hardship. In this regard, he was able to identify with them. They were ordinary men who also faced the challenges of fatherhood with a special needs child. Chad came to understand the experiences of others fathers on an intimate and emotional level. Intimately knowing the experience of these other men felt emotionally healing to Chad. I believe that as Chad felt less unique and alone in his experience, he was able to let go of some of the blame and
guilt that he had as a father. The other fathers in the workshop were not bad men who had done something wrong.

Chad says the following about how meeting with and talking to these other men has affected him:

I feel a lot happier with you guys. [We] can talk about things and share our experiences. I think it was great that we did that. It makes you feel, WOW! I'm not the only one that went through a bunch of [pause] I don't know [pause] shit!

And Chad says the following: "seeing that they go through the same things if not more than what I've been through, it helps . . . It really felt good."

Emotionally connecting to other fathers, with a special needs child, felt deeply affirming to Chad. Getting to know the other fathers gave Chad the opportunity and permission to become more aware of his feelings. As he talked to other fathers, his feelings became a meeting point -- a source of connection with other fathers rather than a barrier. Chad says the following:

. . . [I] realize I'm not the only one that feels that way. I do have feelings. I can be weak at times. I can be strong. It just helped as a whole to get together with the group of men and trade our stories, our
experiences. And maybe build on them and connect with other people.

As Chad was able to claim his own feelings about fatherhood more fully, he was able to feel more intimately connected to others. And as Chad was able to feel more intimately connected to others, he was able to claim more fully his own feelings. As Chad is suggesting, this workshop is the beginning of a process of connecting more fully to others. The value of connecting to others has been affirmed for Chad, and he feels more open to reaching out to others.

Relationship to His Child--Greater Awareness

Chad's involvement in the workshop and interviews significantly impacted his relationship with his daughter, Jill. As I interviewed him, six weeks after the second workshop, he talked about how he was spending more time day-to-day taking care of Jill. For Chad, talking to other dads affirmed the importance of his involvement with Jill. Chad is now looking at his involvement in a new way. Being with her, doing the day-to-day things is important for both of them. Chad says the following:

One thing I have taken fatherhood a little for granted, you know. Like, going out with friends . . . partying,
and sleeping late the next day... my daughter comes up to me, 'Daddy, look!' 'No, not right now, I'm tired,' or 'I'm busy.'... It's made me see that, you know, life is short and you really can't take fatherhood or anything for granted. I think I've become a lot better or a lot more responsible in the past couple months... I have made it a point to make more time for that [caregiving things].

As Chad talked and listened to the other fathers, the importance of his own family was affirmed. As he became more conscious of how important his relationships with his wife and daughter were to him, he consciously chose to spend more time with them.

I believe that as Chad got the emotional support he needed to feel more emotionally whole as a father, he could value more fully the love he had to give. And he could see his own value as a dad was not simply that of provider, but also nurturer. As Chad is able to value himself more as a nurturer, he is able to more consciously choose to spend more time with his family, even if it meant making less money at work. Chad says the following:

... Oh, and talking with some of the fathers and realizing, well, gee, what's more important, working overtime and making a little extra money or spending quality time with your family, or with your daughter
and your wife... [Now, I'm] spending more time with my daughter, doing more things with her.

Self-esteem as a Father--Self-claiming

As Chad has been able to affirm the importance and value of himself as a caregiver, he became aware of the nurturing that he was already giving to his daughter. Chad was able to let go of some of the defensiveness he had as a father, and appreciate himself more as a father, and that which he had already been doing. Chad says the following:

I was not counting the times when I'd sit down and read a book, or give her a bath, you know, we'd go for walk, or a car ride, or whatever, you know... small things like that as opposed to taking her to some grand place... It's the simple things. Because a lotta children, you know, don't get that. And I think they do appreciate it. It's a great feeling, when she comes and climbs up on your lap, and give ya a book, and 'Read, Daddy?' Y' know, it makes you feel great.

Chad is now aware of how much he enjoys reading to Jill because he is not feeling defensive. Now Chad is more able to focus on what he is doing, and how good that feels, rather than
what he is not doing and how bad that feels. The very things involved in fathering that Chad had felt bad and defensive about are the things that now give him great pleasure.

As Chad has been able to value himself more as a caregiver and to respect and enjoy what he has to offer as a father, the small moments that make up his life as a father and caregiver have renewed pleasure. He feels more open to his experience, and less critical of himself. His self-critical and judgmental voices have quieted. He has become more self-referencing and self-accepting in his understanding of his own experience of fatherhood. Chad says the following:

I'm not as hard on myself, you know? I stop and smell the roses, and enjoy things a little more, instead of saying, 'Well, am I doing this right?' . . . Is there really a right way of doing it? Because I'm sure that every one of us has a different way of fathering -- disappointing our children or whatever. That's just one small part of [my experience] of fathering, you know? I turned out to be too hard on myself. And [now] I tend to go with the flow, and just try to do my best and be a father.

Chad is looking at his experience of fatherhood with greater perspective and more compassion. He is feeling more self-confident. He is able to enjoy the pleasures of his life as a father
more. Because he is more self-referencing, he sees that even when he may do something that is disappointing for Jill, that does not mean that he is a bad father. Chad is now feeling much better and more self-confident about himself as a father. He says the following:

Yeah, yeah, I'm not so hard on myself, [I'm] more self-confident in what I'm doing, and I'm not too judgmental or harsh on myself. And that makes you feel a whole heck of a lot better about yourself. And you're better at what you do, if you're not thinking: am I doing the right thing? Should I be doing it differently? [I am] just more positive, more self-confident . . . I feel more self confident about the way I act as a father . . . Remember those cartoons we had, and angel on one side, devil on the other? I don't have that anymore. I don't worry about it.

As Chad has felt more self-confident he has felt less frustrated in his interactions with her. He is able to step in and guide her in a way that he had not been able to in the past. He is feeling greater self-esteem as a father because he is able to more effectively guide her behavior. Chad says the following:

I feel much more self-confident so I can come across that way also . . . [Now, I'm] very convincing to my
daughter when I'm trying to discipline her or tell her something, or teach her something.

As we talk about this Chad has an insight:

It just dawned on me that my daughter is more appreciative of me as a father, or I'm just realizing that. So I'm taking that in also. And it's making me feel more self-confident and less critical. The connection [between us] is stronger there. Or maybe it was there before, and it just didn't connect, or I didn't realize it because we were so busy.

Now, that Chad is more attentive, and less defensive as a father, he is able to see how much Jill values him as a father. Chad is saying that a big piece to his feeling better and more self-confident as a father is that he feels more valued by her. She values their relationship. His relationship to his daughter is different now. Their bond is stronger, and now Chad feels more fully affirmed by it. Chad is more aware of their deep bond and this has served to strengthen their relationship and his self-confidence as a father.

Having a daughter who was so critically sick for so long had a deep impact on Chad. I believe that his fear about her very survival made it difficult for him to trust and open up fully to their relationship, for fear that it would not be there. The internal
shift that Chad made in regards to his experience of fatherhood is not cognitive, but more on the affective level. "My experience -- it's not like I never understood the experience. It's just how I felt about it, more or less, and now I feel much better."

As Chad has become more conscious of his own experience of fatherhood and he has felt less defensive, he has been able to become aware of how pleasurable the small day-to-day activities can be. Chad is more present in his experience as a father, and he is more engaged in the moments as they unfold. He is able to look at these things not so much as a should, but I want to because I enjoy it. As Chad has been able to focus more on the small details of his life and to treat them with respect, he has been able to be nurtured by them.

His life of fatherhood feels more authentically like his own. He can take greater responsibility for whatever actions he takes. Because he is more connected to the authenticity of his own experience, he is able to move forward with greater self-confidence and appreciation.
Relationship with His Wife

Not only does Chad feel better about his experience with his daughter, but he feels better about his relationship with his wife, Dora. Chad says the following:

As a whole, our relationship is better ... Pretty much, I knew what was wrong, or what I thought I was doing wrong. And I just had to get the self-confidence to correct or do something about it.

Chad is now taking more responsibility for his own actions as a partner. Chad is feeling more self-confident, and his sense of ownership of his own life has increased. He is approaching his relationships with more openness and a greater sense of his own value. I believe that this has served to improve his relationship with Dora.

Rick: Pre-workshop

Relationship to His Child

At the time of the first interview, Rick's second child, Kim, was two and a half years old. (Shortly after the second workshop,
his wife gave birth to their third child.) When Kim was born everything appeared to be normal. At two days old, she started manifesting severe medical problems. It is unclear what happened. Kim spent months in the hospital. Kim is home and still is on oxygen and receives nursing care. She is on a monitor when she sleeps. Kim has cerebral palsy and is presently non-ambulatory. She has what appears to be very significant cognitive delays.

The lack of clarity around Kim's medical condition (the unknown causes of her medical problems, the severity of her condition, and the uncertainty of the medical prognosis) has made parenthood with Kim even more stressful. In terms of dealing with the severity of his child's disability, Rick is in the most challenging position of any of the dads in the study. Kim does not demonstrate much response to verbal communication, and so communication with her on that level has been frustrating for both Rick and his wife, Kate. Kim does respond more readily on a nonverbal level. She laughs, cries, and expressively communicates with her eyes. However, often times it is still very difficult for Rick and his wife to know what she wants, or how she is feeling. Rick hopes that some day she will be able to tell them verbally what she is feeling and that she loves them.

In our first interview, Rick talked about how he had initially removed himself emotionally from Kim. He was focused on her
medical problems, rather than on their bond as father and daughter. Rick says the following:

I was definitely more into trying to pursue the medical aspect of her condition and trying to read all I could about cerebral palsy and trying to find out what parts of her brain were damaged and what functions they control. Then one time it just hit me -- I'm just wasting my time on this stuff here. It's not going to change. Why don't I just look at this little girl as my daughter and love her that way. So, I've started to do that now . . . You know, when I see her, like last night, I was thrilled to see her crawling. So that meant a lot to me when I saw that. It was a pretty happy occasion. It's something I thought she would never do.

Pursuing medical knowledge in regards to Kim's condition was a way for Rick to try to gain some control over Kim's medical situation. It at least gave him the opportunity to communicate more knowledgeably with doctors, and to make more informed medical decisions. However, Rick realized that his attention was almost exclusively focused on reading about things that were medically related to Kim, and he was not focused on his emotional connection to her. She was his child, his baby daughter, despite her medical problems. Rick realized that he needed to shift his priorities, and spend time with her, not just reading about her medical problems.
As I talked with Rick, it was clear that he was still keeping up with some of the medical issues, but his primary commitment was to spending time with her. (Including Kim in family activities outside their home presented many challenges, but they often tried to do this.) His heart was open to Kim, and he was encouraged and delighted by her accomplishments.

Relationship to His Wife

Soon after Rick and his wife, Kate, married she became pregnant with their first child. A little more than a year after their first child was born, Kim, their second child was born. The stress of Kim's health problems added additional stress to an already stressful situation (a relatively recent marriage with two children under sixteen months of age). Rick says the following about how the added stress of Kim's birth problems impacted their relationship:

There were times where we . . . attacked the doctors, the hospital, and when there was no one left we attacked each other. There were strains like that initially.
Rick and Kate sought counseling and it helped them in dealing with a lot of the stress in regards to Kim. Over time they learned to function more closely as a team. They realized that they needed to work together if they were to effectively meet the challenges they faced. Rick says the following:

Some days I didn't know that I was going to make it myself. We pretty much stuck together as a team . . . It drew us closer together as one -- trying to make this kid better in any way that we could.

Rick spoke positively about his relationship, now, with Kate. Even though there is still a lot of day-to-day stress in their lives which puts a lot of stress on their relationship, they are able to remain supportive of each other most of the time. Rick worries about the amount of caregiving work that falls on Kate's shoulders because he is away at work for long hours. He feels that he could be more supportive of her, and he could take on more of the caregiving work that needs to be done at night.

Isolation--Support

Rick felt rather emotionally and socially isolated as a father. The time and stress involved in attending to Kim's day-to-day care, and her chronic medical problems left little time for family
recreation and social interaction outside their home. Neither Rick, nor his wife, Kate, had the time or energy to reach out to others for support. They received some emotional support from their families, but support from others was not forthcoming.

Rick returned to work soon after Kim was born. Rick described himself as being really withdrawn at work, but nobody asked him about what was going on for him. This left Rick feeling that others did not really care to hear what was going on for him as Kim's father. He felt that others were not open to hearing him talk about his experience, and, consequently, he has kept his discussion with others in regard to Kim brief and "superficial". Rick says the following:

It's just hard. A lot of what I've talked about with people at work has been I'll say how she's doing. I could tell them all the stuff that we do, but I never throw a lot about how I feel in there.

Not only was it difficult for Rick to talk to his work colleagues about what had been going on emotionally for him as Kim's father, but it was also difficult for him to talk to his friends. The subject of Kim was not talked about unless Rick brought it up. Rick says the following: "I still don't talk to friends a whole lot about it . . . Unless I'm the one who mentions it first, no one is really going to say anything." The reticence of others to bring up
the subject of Kim, contributed to Ron's sense of social and emotional isolation.

In the first interview I had with Rick, it was clear to me that he wanted very much to talk to others about his experience of fatherhood with Kim. Even though it was emotionally difficult for him to talk about aspects of his experience of fatherhood, he was very forthcoming. Fatherhood with Kim had been emotionally challenging for Rick, and he had had little opportunity to talk about it. Rick says the following:

I haven't talked a whole lot. Not a whole lot on my feelings, anyway. How I feel about what it's like? How do you really feel about having this kid? What makes you feel bad? What makes you feel good . . . Those are some of the things we talked about here [in the interview]. I've never really said before.

Rick spoke about how our discussion of his experience of fatherhood felt really affirming to him. He spoke about how this discussion felt much different to him than discussions he had tried to have in the past with friends or medical personnel. Rick felt that there had been an emotional gap of understanding, and that others hadn't really understood him. Rick says the following:

It's hard to get your point across. Sometimes you don't even think it is worth trying. Because you say
they're not even going to understand. So why should I tell them how I really feel about having a kid like this.

Rick discussed that one of the avenues that he had sought out as a way to try to deal with his feelings about being Kim's father, was to join a parent group at the early intervention center where his family was receiving services. Rick felt that it was helpful and healing to meet other parents who had disabled children, but he did not feel comfortable to really talk to them about what was going on with him emotionally. A big part of the issue for him was that it was almost all women who attended the parent group. Rick says the following:

Where I have talked about how I felt, maybe to a limited capacity is with some of the people who are in the parent group at the early intervention program. But that is difficult, too, for me, because it's 90% female.

As Rick found out, men rarely participate in parent's groups, and if they do, as Rick did, they often drop out. I believe that men often feel awkward and isolated in parent groups because other men are not involved. I believe that few men come forward to participate because they are disinclined to value their own involvement as fathers, and there is little support in the community to suggest otherwise. Another issue, I believe, is that due to cultural gender issues, men often find it more difficult to
both acknowledge and share their feelings. I think that this would be particularly true for men who are in a group that is predominately composed of women.

I believe that men, such as Rick, want and need to be with other men. However it is socially unfamiliar and emotionally challenging for them to do this. Rick talks about his own reticence in regards to talking to other men. Rick says the following:

I've never really sat down and talked to my father about this. We've had some brief conversations about it. I think he really knows how I feel and he is interested in everything that we're doing. He has helped us out quite a bit. But it's hard to sit down with any man and just open up about all this.

To better understand and feel less isolated in regards to his own experience of fatherhood, Rick sought out readings in regards to fathers with disabled children. Rick was not able to find much, because as Rick found out, there has been very little written on the subject. Rick says the following:

You don't hear a whole lot on how men feel about this. You can pick up any magazine or book and there's always moms' feelings on this and that and everything else. You get to hear what women say, but there just isn't a whole lot for men.
Rick felt socially and emotionally isolated as Kim's father. Even though he made efforts to be less isolated, he continued to feel that way. I believe that cultural issues that had to do with both fatherhood and manhood contributed to his sense of isolation.

**Rick: Impact of the Workshop**

Rick attended the first workshop and the evaluation session. He did not attend the second workshop because he was concerned that his wife might be in labor with their third child.

Because of the birth of their third child, much about Rick's life has changed. So, as Rick discusses the workshop and changes in his life, he's speaking of them within the context of life with a newborn baby.

**Isolation--Support**

In the workshop, Rick was with other fathers who could emotionally understand the stress and struggles that he had faced as Kim's dad. This felt emotionally affirming to Rick. They, too,
had experienced emotional and social isolation as fathers of a special needs child. Their common experience of being a father to a special needs child bonded them.

It was deeply affirming, for Rick, that this was a group of men. His past involvement in early intervention (he had attended local parent support groups and state wide conferences) had almost exclusively been with women. Here were men who were interested enough in fatherhood to come to a workshop. This affirmed, for Rick, the importance of his own involvement.

There seemed to be an immediate trust and camaraderie among the fathers in the group. And Rick was surprised by the ease in which they, as fathers, were able to join together and talk openly about their feelings. As the fathers talked, Rick no longer had to wonder how other fathers felt. He knew. Rick says the following:

I know, initially, when all this started, the first time that you came over to talk to me, this would be a good feeling. But I really had no idea it would be this great! You know, we have that camaraderie . . . It was nice to hear what everybody had to say. I was interested in what they had to say about anything. Sitting there with people with that common bond, that same situation, it's nice to meet other people and to trust them, to feel comfortable. Whatever you said would
stay within the group. That's pretty important right there that that was able to happen. That was surprising too. It seemed to happen like that. An hour maybe.

As Rick listened to other fathers and felt safe with them, he was able to talk about his experience without feeling different, judged, or misunderstood. In the workshop, Rick had the opportunity to share his feelings openly, without feeling defensive that he did indeed feel deeply about his experience. The men were open to listening to what he had to say. As Rick talked about his experience, and shared his feelings, he realized that the other fathers, too, shared many of the same feelings. Rick says the following:

It made me feel more comfortable that other people had these similar feelings, experiences. You know, you always know that fathers probably did. . . . You know, it was nice to get some feelings out there in the open . . . . That's what was nice about this, because you know no matter what you say, people may have felt this way before, other people sitting right here with you. And it turned out in a lot of cases [it] did happen.

In the workshop, Rick was able to emotionally connect to other fathers, and not feel so socially and emotionally alone.
Relationship to His Children—Enlarged Perspective

Rick is spending more time with his children. He is more aware of his life as a father as he is living it. He is looking at his own experience of fatherhood with a greater sense of perspective and greater sense of purpose. He is able to notice, appreciate, and value the moments more, as they are unfolding.

As Rick has become more conscious of his own experience of fatherhood, he has been able to appreciate it more. He is more able to see the richness of the moments in his labor as a father. And the fathering work feels more emotionally nourishing for him. Now, he is less conflicted about the limited amount of personal time he has. Rick describes the change in how he approaches the fathering work as being "more open" and being able to "slow down". As he is able to be more present and relaxed as a father, he is able to shift gears and look at his own experience with greater perspective, as he might reflect on his own experience when he is older. In essence he is more aware of how he wants to look at his experience in the present moment. Rick says the following:

The savoring of fatherhood, that we were talking about before. At least, now, I make an attempt to sit back and think about this. And be more open and
slow down. And to spend more time with the kids. Instead of going out running or something. And remember some of those moments . . . And I can set this in my memory so where I'll remember all this, when I'm old. I'll look back on all this as a really nice experience. And, you know, hearing everything from all you guys, and thinking about what you said, is kinda what set me off on that track. It's kinda a nice feeling . . . I look for things more now. Like at 3 o'clock in the morning [when the baby is up] when we're watching Dragnet on TV, and he starts smiling and laughing . . . I look for something like that . . . savoring that experience. That was a choice for me to try and directly related to the workshop. To try to spend more time with all the kids, not only Kim.

As Rick has become more able to reflect on his experience, he has been more easily able to make choices that are in accord with his wishes. When I had initially interviewed Rick, he had felt that he should be more involved in the caregiving at night. And, now, he was choosing to do more of it and he is enjoying it. Rick is feeling less tension between doing things for himself and spending time with the family. He feels more comfortable during the time he spends with the family, and he enjoys spending more time with them. Rick says the following:
But in the last three months [time from the first interview to this interview] I can say I've been just more comfortable in the situation [of being with the family]. It matters more to me now to make that attempt to spend more time with the kids.

Life with a new infant is demanding. Rick is sleeping less, and he has less time for his personal pleasures. In the past, with his first two children, Rick experienced these demands as stress and personal loss. "It did hurt at first. It bothered me." However, this time the transition feels easier for Rick. He feels more comfortable and he is choosing to spend more time with the family. There has been a shift for Rick in how he is looking at his experience of fatherhood. He is approaching the time he spends with the children with greater intention and appreciation. Rick is more able to accept his life of fatherhood for what it is. For Rick, fatherhood has become more intrinsically pleasurable. He has been able to value his experience more as he has seen other fathers valuing their experience. I believe, that Rick has been able to make these changes as he has become more comfortable with his feelings about fatherhood.
In the workshop, Rick became more aware of his feelings as a father. As Kim's father, Rick had been through a great deal of stress and emotion, and he had not been able to intimately talk to others about how his experience felt to him. Much about Rick's life demanded his attention, and Rick focused his attention on all that needed doing. And what he was feeling inside did not get much of his conscious attention. He knew that he was feeling distressed at times, but since there was no one present in his life with whom he felt he could openly and safely talk, many of his feelings were not explored. When Rick joined the group and talked to other fathers, he had the opportunity to more carefully listen to his feelings. His feelings became a meeting point with other fathers rather than something that made him feel isolated from and uncomfortable with others. As Kim's father, Rick had found it hard to validate the difficult emotions that he was experiencing. It was not clear to him that it was okay that he had them.

As Rick listened to other fathers, in the workshop, he realized that the other fathers, too, felt deeply about their experiences. He was not different from them in this regard. He realized that it was okay for him to feel the way he did. It was all part of his experience of being a father of a special needs child, and it was part of their own experience, too. Rick says the following:
Meeting in this small group and all having disabled children and talking about some of the problems encountered with this, and some of the feelings you have which is probably more important, that's where I just felt more comfortable about myself to know that it's all right to maybe feel like I do.

In the workshop, Rick talked and listened to the other fathers. He was able to explore his own feelings in a way that he had not been able to do in the past. Rick found permission to explore and accept his feelings. Those that he had been aware of, as well as those that he had not even consciously been aware of. He felt safe enough to do this. He realized that it felt good to him to explore them. Rick says the following:

There were still a lot of things there I really never talked about until I came in with this group. So, right there, that was very helpful to me. I felt after that first one feeling real good and I hadn't thought I had kept all this in. It hadn't bothered me. I guess it was suppressed. It wasn't all bad either. It was nice to have the opportunity to talk about it. I came out of it feeling a lot more comfortable about my feelings.

Rick came away from the workshops feeling better about his feelings and better about himself. Rick was able to claim his
feelings as they related to fatherhood, in a way that he previously had not been able to do. This process of self-claiming felt deeply affirming to him. He was exploring and sharing his feelings around fatherhood with others. This was something that he had not been able to do before. For him, this was not only an opening up to himself, but to others as well. Rick says the following:

It was tough for me to open up about how I felt about Kim, even just normal talking about what you do with your kids. Things like that [as well as] other things that you might feel are personal and you might not want to share with someone. But meeting in this small group . . . [I was] really able to open up to other people. That was a pretty nice experience there . . . . It made me feel better as a person to be able to do that, as a man to be able to do that, as a father.

Talking intimately with other men was a new experience for Rick. For Rick, this not only felt affirming to him as a father, but even on a more basic level, to him as a man and a human being. He really was able to claim for himself in this situation a new way to be in the world. Rick says the following:

I've been able to open up a little bit more, y'know, to people . . . I'd like to be able to use some of the things I've learned here to try and open up to people who aren't in the same situation . . . be a better
communicator of my feelings . . . I feel better about myself where I might be able to with some people.

Rick experienced the power of sharing his feelings with others. And this brought him to the realization that this is something that would be good to do with others in his life. Now, Rick was feeling emotionally clearer and stronger, and he felt that he was better able to be more emotionally open with other people.

Rick had taken a risk and joined the group. He was feeling more open to others. He was more aware of his own feelings, and he was feeling better about them. He was feeling better about himself, and his day-to-day life as a father. He was feeling more open to his life as a father, and he was responding to the challenges that he faced with greater consciousness.
CHAPTER V

HOW THE INTERVIEW AND WORKSHOP EXERCISES CONTRIBUTED TO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE WORKSHOP

What I have been focusing on in my discussion is how and why the men have changed as a result of their involvement in this study. I have looked at how the study has impacted: the fathers' sense of isolation as fathers, their self-esteem as fathers, and their ability to see their experience as fathers from a larger, more positive, and more self-accepting perspective. In my discussion, my emphasis has been on the participants, and on understanding and describing the changes that they have undergone in these areas. Now, I will focus on the study design. I will be looking more specifically at the parts of the study and workshop design, and assessing how they contributed to the overall impact of the workshop.

Related to this discussion is the question, what were some of the underlying intentions and processes that guided the design of the study and workshop? This study was guided by specific beliefs and values, which I held, as they related to men, fatherhood, growth, creativity, and empowerment. How the group was run, the participant activities that we did, and my own personal style that I brought to this study were all important and critical aspects of the study experience for these men. And each of these pieces was guided by my understandings about
creativity, and how we can claim creative energies in addressing the life challenges we face. The following will be a discussion of elements of the study that I believe helped these men more fully claim their creativity as they addressed the life challenges they faced in fathering their children with special needs.

The Initial Interview

Joel: I knew right after the interview with you, that I already knew in my mind that this was a good thing. There was some fear about meeting new people . . . [but] I knew the value of that already, so I knew this was gonna be okay. It was going to be a good thing.

In the first interview, Joel spoke openly about his experience of fatherhood. Even though the focus of the first interview was primarily on Joel, he asked me questions too, and we talked as two fathers. It was an important experience that we shared together. He talked about things that he had never shared with anyone before. And in our discussion, the value and purpose of the workshop was underscored. Because of the interview, Joel's anxiety about meeting and talking to other men was mitigated. The interview process affirmed for him the value of sharing with others.
Rick, too, spoke of the initial interview as being important to him. We had the opportunity to talk about his experience of fatherhood in a way that he had never talked to another father. Our connection made it easier for him to come. "You knew someone who was going to be there. You. Each of us knew you and you knew each of us." Rick felt that I knew him. He also felt that he knew me. I believe that this was important and critical to the success of the workshops and study experience. In the course of the interviews, I was emotionally available to them, and I talked openly about myself and my own feelings about fatherhood. As I started the interviews with each of the fathers, I gave them the prepared written interview questions, if they wanted them. (Each of the men had been sent a letter several days prior to our interview, generally outlining the topics to be covered in our interview, and a discussion of the spirit of the workshops. This is located in APPENDIX D. A participant consent form was also included.) As we spoke, I let the men take the lead in directing the interview if they chose to.

Jean describes the first interview experience as being one of the two most important moments of his involvement in the study. He describes it this way:

There was just a wonderful feeling, doors were opened, feelings were out . . . It's like your first kiss.
The rest are going to be wonderful but, hey, your first kiss is special.

I'll never forget that feeling after that first interview, the realization that this is the first time that I've said how I feel to who I was talkin' to. [It was the first time I had] taken a moment to reflect on this really powerful experience.

Jean describes the first interview experience as being a real awakening for him. Something deep inside Jean was touched. He felt seen. He felt affirmed. He had shared feelings that he had never shared before. For Jean, it was a powerful experience. He was awakening to his own experience of fatherhood.

As we started the first interview, Jean felt ambivalent about his participation in the study. After the first interview, he felt eager to attend the first workshop. The first interview had affirmed the importance and value of the workshops for him. For Jean, the interview was an emotional turning point, in regards to how he felt about sharing his feelings about fatherhood.

Joel sums up how important he felt the first interview was for him and the other fathers:

Things would have been a lot different if you had called everybody and talked to everybody and said,
okay, we'll meet at the college without coming for an interview first. I think that [the first interview] relieved us a lot. It opened us up before the workshop. You know, you [are] thinking about--what is this going to be about? The personality that you have. [Your] coming and talking to me was saying--gee, this is going to be something good . . .

I think that it was set up good that way because, you know, you eased into it. Phone call. You called to see if we wanted to get involved. And then [your] coming to our house. Coming and talking in familiar surroundings. We weren't sitting in an office somewhere. You came somewhere that was familiar to me, and I felt comfortable . . . And I felt like I already knew you by the time I got to the workshop. You weren't trying to introduce yourself to me. I wasn't trying to get to know you. I already knew you. And that made that, the workshop, a lot easier for me, and maybe for the other guys too. Already we knew someone in the room, that was you. We didn't know anybody else but we knew you. It made it a lot easier to get things rolling, to start talking, because you already had our trust. I think that was an important part of setting up the workshops--the interviews.
Joel raises some important points about the value of the first interview. To conduct the first interview, I came to them, in their homes, where they felt comfortable. (This interview was not the first personal contact that I had had with them. Previous to the interview, I had talked to them at length on the telephone, and I had sent them personal notes. I believe that this made the first interview feel more relaxed.)

When the fathers arrived at the workshop, they already knew and trusted me. They already trusted and valued the importance of coming together and sharing as fathers, and when the fathers came to the workshop, they were eager and ready to talk.

I had assumed that the first interviews would be important to the fathers, but I had not anticipated that it would be as critical as it was to the success of the workshop design. Two of the fathers specifically sighted this interview as one of the key moments of the study for them. I had designed the interview primarily for my research purposes, but I see, now, that for conducting future workshops this would be a critical piece to include.

It is often difficult to find fathers who are willing to come forward and participate in workshops. I believe that by initially interviewing men in their own homes, where they feel comfortable, they would then be more inclined to come forward.
and participate in a group. They would know someone who was there, and as in the case with these fathers, who participated in this study, I believe that the interview would serve to support the importance and purpose of fathers coming together for support.

**Workshop Exercises: First Workshop**

**Telling Their Stories**

In this first workshop, fathers had the opportunity to share the stories of their experience of fatherhood from beginning to end. The men were eager to share their stories with each other, and I decided to discard some of the workshop exercises that preceded this part of the workshop. To introduce this exercise, I handed out questions that fathers could use in framing their stories. They can be found in APPENDIX H. Most of the dads found this helpful.

Jean, the first father to share his story, felt that the sharing of his personal story was the most memorable part of the workshop for him. As Jean told his story, he expressed feelings "... that had been sitting inside, suppressed", and the other fathers listened.
Chad referred to the time of the fathers sharing their stories as the most significant part of the workshop for himself. As Chad told his story and listened to the stories of others, he began to feel, for the first time, that he was not alone in the way that he felt as a father. He was in the company of other fathers who understood his experience.

Rick says the following about his experience of telling of his story:

It was helpful. It was good everybody got a chance to tell their story from start to finish, however much time you wanted . . . so much came out for me about how I felt . . . [I] could tie so many of my experiences in with theirs. I found myself thinking through all this, well that's how they cope with this. You know, it's great to hear all this. You know, like, I felt like that too. These things were popping up in my head as I was listening to everyone else.

For Rick, and the other fathers, the time of telling their stories was a time of real bonding. The fathers had just met each other, and they were telling each other things that they had never told anyone. Right away there was a sense of intimacy and identification with each other. As Joel put it: "I was really feeling bad for someone I didn't even know."
I planned the workshop so that each father could have the time to tell his story from beginning to end, if he chose to. The questions that I had given the dads asked about the sequence of events in their experience of fatherhood, from pregnancy, through birth, to where they were today. The questions supported them in thinking about their experience of fatherhood as an experience that had unfolded over time. It was a story about a journey.

As the men talked, there was a force to their stories. It was greater than the sum of the events that made up the story. The voice and presence of the speaker was the force that drove the stories. It was mesmerizing. As the other men listened to these stories, they were not just listening to the events of another man's life, but to the feelings, and the emotions expressed, by the words, and in the sounds of the voice. And this too helped each of them claim and honor his own feelings which had been a largely unexpressed and unrecognized part of their own experience. Each of the fathers listened with a deep sense of respect.

As each father told the story of his experience, his experience of fatherhood took on movement, growth, and change. As they spoke, they were reliving their lives. However, this time, by virtue of the fact that they were the ones telling their own stories, they became conscious, active creators in what unfolded. They were the main characters of their stories—not their children or their wives. The actions that they had taken, their perspective, and their understandings of what had unfolded was what gave
shape to their stories, as they told them. As they told their stories, they became the creators in recreating the experience of their own lives.

I believe, that as they told their stories, their understandings about who they were in the world was changed. They are no longer the victims of a bad experience, but the heroes, who had made a hero's journey. In the telling of their stories, I believe that they were actively giving shape to their past experience. I believe, that in the telling of their stories, they had the opportunity to more fully experience themselves as creators in their own lives, and they felt empowered by this.

I believe that the more we are able to understand ourselves as active participants in the creation of our own lives, the more we feel empowered and motivated to continue to be actively involved in the process of creating it, as it unfolds. And we evoke our creative energies as we do this.

Savoring the Experience

One of the closing exercises at the end of the workshop, was for each father to take an item of food, that I had put out (that they enjoyed eating). They were asked to sit quietly and eat the item of food. They were asked to focus their attention on what
they were eating. After they had time to savor their food, we
talked about savoring our experience of fatherhood. This exercise
was a way to introduce, to the fathers, the notion of attending to
our experiences as fathers, and noticing the small moments that so
often go by unnoticed. This was in preparation for the
photography assignment, in which the fathers were to photograph
the ordinary in their lives. Rick was not able to attend the second
workshop where we shared the photography, but he talked about
the impact of this exercise on his experience of fatherhood.

At the end of the first workshop when you had
everyone go up and grab whatever you wanted to eat,
and savor the experience, and talk about maybe we
should do that as a father. I've thought about that. I
thought maybe a lot of this [my experience] was going
by the wayside because things seem to move so fast.
And you should kind of step back and look at this and
enjoy it more. I've tried to do that in some ways. It
seems like [I can do that] on some days -- on the good
days. And [they there are] the days when things are
just going 110 miles an hour, and it just goes the same
[old] way. But one thing that I can say, it made me
step back and think about that. Maybe to forget
[decide not] to mow the lawn that day, and go outside
with the kids and put them on the swings.
When we are able to attend to our experience and really notice what it is, then we can begin to appreciate the richness of the moment. It is a process that is by its very nature nourishing. Because we are more conscious to it, then we can integrate it with more intention. We are aligning ourselves more fully with the power of the moment. We are using the information/energy that is coming in to us at each moment and saying yes, instead of no. As we are more conscious and more aligned with the energy that is there in that moment, then we can more consciously and energetically respond in a way that allows fuller expression of our intention and creative energies. We can more fully choose our response in the moment. In this way our experience can invigorate us, rather than overwhelm us.

This was much of the basis for the workshop, and I repeatedly focused on this theme of attending to our experience in different ways: whether it was the telling of their stories, doing the focusing exercise, or taking pictures of their lives as fathers.

**Workshop Exercises: Second Workshop**

**Picture Taking**

In the two weeks between workshops, I had the fathers take pictures of their lives as fathers. My intention was to have
the fathers really look more carefully at their experience. At the beginning of the second workshop, Dale says the following:

In the last two weeks . . . Carlos was always ready with a smile for me, as soon as I walked in the room. I'm sure that it was always there before, but I was tuning in more. I thought, 'I ought to take a picture'.

Dale, just a few weeks before in the initial interview, had spoken of there being virtually no emotional connection between him and his son, Carlos. He saw the relationship as joyless and when Dale looked at his child what he saw was a child with Down Syndrome who had little personality. Now, when he looked at Carlos, he saw a smiling child who loved him, "... always ready with a smile for me." Dale was now seeing Carlos differently, and he was looking more carefully, "tuning in more." I believe that the photography assignment helped Dale in his process of connecting more fully to his child. It gave him a structure, a context by which he could focus in and look at his son. The camera became the symbol of the eye of his enlarged consciousness. This eye did not filter out the expression of love.

This exercise I believe gave each of these men the opportunity to really look at their experience of fatherhood with a careful eye, an eye that was open to the richness of the moment, an eye that was connected to their enlarged sense of consciousness. Jean says the following:
You had to be thinking about, "what is the everyday kind of thing?" ... things that you would normally take for granted. ... attention to detail of things in life ... in the hour by hour, day by day activities. You can actually go one step further and say, "what is the relevance here?" ... I feel good, I took a look at it.

Taking the pictures felt good to the men. This process helped affirm the richness of their lives. It made them stop, and look, and think.

Sharing Pictures

The fathers brought in the pictures they had taken. Some of the dads brought in additional pictures from earlier periods of their lives as fathers, and one dad chose to bring in pictures chronologically recording his entire history of fatherhood and did not do any new photography expressly for this exercise.

Initially, we gathered the pictures and we sat down in a circle and informally shared them with each other. As the fathers shared their pictures, a real feeling of intimacy was created. We were looking at the ordinary, but in some ways the most private. We were looking at the lives of these men and families in a way
that outsiders do not really get a chance to see. "This is a typical evening... the orange cat sleeps on his head." "She has a band-aid on because she was trying to take off from me and tripped... She still can't really feed herself with utensils. She gets a spoon up to her mouth and it goes every place."

Men really looked, listened, and learned about the threads that made the fabric of each other's lives. It was an intimate time. It was a relaxed time with much laughter. It had the sense of good friends being together.

Collages

After we shared the pictures informally and took a break, I handed out large sheets of cardboard. In the photography assignment, I had asked the men to include at least one picture of themselves, and one picture of themselves with their child. What the rest of the pictures were about was totally up to them. I had asked them to include these pictures for the purposes of the collage.

The central issue that I was addressing in this second workshop was: how can I evoke the creative energies of these men so that they feel more empowered to address the challenges that they face as fathers? As I reflected on this question, I
thought that the most important element in this process was that of evoking the feeling of ownership for their own lives.

I then asked myself the question, how can this workshop support this feeling of ownership? To understand how I might develop an exercise to do this, I thought carefully about the energetic, self-claiming process which seemed to be at the core of our claiming ownership of our own lives.

I believe that our sense of ownership comes from our feeling deeply rooted in our own experience, and it comes from the affirmation of the centrality of ourselves to our lives. It is a self-claiming that says, despite whatever hardships I face, I am nevertheless still the center of my own life experience — my fatherhood is my own. It is a self-claiming that says: this is my sense, my understanding, my life. In this self-claiming we are redefining our world and relocating ourselves at its center.

As I reflected on this workshop, I realized that if these men took their pictures and made a collage of their lives as fathers, and they placed their own picture at its center, then they would be visually representing their experience of fatherhood, and placing themselves at its center. They would be creating a mandala of their lives as fathers. I hoped that in doing the collage they would feel an increased sense of ownership of their lives as fathers. I hoped that the creative process of making the collage would mirror and symbolize the larger creative process involved
in the claiming of one's own life. I saw this exercise as the focal point of this workshop.

I suggested to the men, that they would take 15 to 20 minutes to do this exercise, and then we would check in and see if they needed more time. The men worked on their collages for an hour, and then we spent another hour talking about them. Each one of the men commented that this was a very meaningful exercise. (Regretfully, I did not tape this portion of the workshop.)

Joel speaks about his experience:

The thing that stuck out in my mind [as] the best exercise [was] the exercise with the collage of pictures. I think it was fantastic! . . . we had pictures from the beginning to where we were today. I saw so much in those pictures . . .

I knew exactly how I felt.

Seeing it all laid out in front of you, all of a sudden it didn't look so bad . . . . Having it all laid out in black and white. The shock of the first night, and then two months later -- the change! It's unbelievable . . . I've come a long way.
As Joel looked at the collage he made, he could feel the shock and pain, that he had initially so keenly felt as a father. However, it was not the experience of these distressed feelings that stayed with him, as he looked at the whole collage. Rather, it was the feeling that things were okay. As he looked at the collage the distressed feelings were held within the larger context of his whole experience.

As Joel looked at the collage, he could see his change and growth as a father, and this became the primary focus of his attention. His understanding of his experience of fatherhood was changed. The experience of fatherhood was not an experience that happened to him, but an experience of growth and change, that he, himself, had undergone as a father. I believe Joel developed a greater sense of himself being at the center of his own experience of fatherhood.

Joel says the following about his experience of making the collage:

I didn't know what I wanted to do with the pictures. I was feeling kind of confused, so I just started laying them out and moving them around.

I believe that, the process of doing the collage, mirrored Joel's experience of fatherhood. In making the collage, Joel started from a place of confusion and disorientation, and using his
creative abilities, he created order and meaning to his experience. To make a whole out of the seemingly separate pieces, Joel needed to focus on that which unified the pieces, and that was himself. I believe that the process of doing the collage awakened his understandings of himself as an active participant in the creation of his own experience of fatherhood.

As a group, we went around the room to look at all the collages. When Chad saw his own he spoke with great surprise. "I guess I really have had a lot of experience as a father!" Chad had spoken earlier in the workshop of feeling unsure about himself as a father, because he felt inexperienced. As Chad did the collage, he could more clearly see the whole of his experience of fatherhood, and in this enlarged context, Chad could see himself differently as a father. I heard in Chad's statement, a new self-confidence.

Each of the men was clearly proud of what he had made. When I interviewed the fathers six weeks later, each of the men had shown their collages to their wives, and most if not all the men still had their collages. Dale was talking about laminating his.
Guided Imagery

The guided imagery that I did with the fathers worked for some and not for others. In the guided imagery, I had the fathers meet themselves as older fathers, and, now, they were looking back at their lives to see what had been most important to them as fathers. Unfortunately, just as the dads were meeting and talking to themselves as older fathers, we were disturbed by a group of people talking loudly outside the room. Nevertheless, Joel was able to stay with it and spoke of being moved to tears. The other men did not say much, and spoke of how the noise made it very difficult for them. I do not know how effective this exercise would have been if the jarring noise had not intervened to disturb us.

The intention of this exercise was to have the fathers, in a different way, reflect on their experience of fatherhood from an enlarged context. I chose to do this exercise after the collages; however, if I were going to attempt to do this again, I would do it before the collages.

I realize that guided imagery is tricky because some people find it difficult to visualize. Others find it difficult to be inwardly focused. I was aware of this before I chose to do this exercise. I felt that the relaxation exercise preceding the guided imagery was a helpful change of pace for the group, and I do think that exposing these fathers to an activity which reveals the power of
their own thoughts has value. However, the exercises that seemed to evolve most spontaneously from their own every-day experience seemed to be the most meaningful. I am not clear whether or not I would choose to do the guided imagery again.

**Infant Massage**

I scheduled thirty minutes near the end of the second workshop to discuss the permission we felt as men to touch our children, and to demonstrate how to do infant massage. The response that I got from the men was -- we don't have any issue around touching -- we feel free to do that, and there was really no discussion about it. If I were to attempt to discuss this subject again, I would not stick it on to the end of a workshop. This subject was not what this workshop was primarily about, and was not something that the fathers felt that they wanted to explore. My intention in bringing it up, was to introduce the infant massage. My desire in demonstrating the infant massage, was to teach the men a way that they could feel comfortable tactiley communicating with their children. Because it has medical, as well as emotional benefits, I thought that they might be interested and motivated to do it.

I demonstrated the infant massage on a life-size doll. I asked the men to try to do some massage with their children.
before we met again for our evaluation session. To my knowledge, not one of the men tried to do any, and in fact at the final interview when I asked them expressly about it, some of the men had even forgotten that I had suggested that they try to do it.

What I realize, in reflection, is that the workshop was about fathers attending to their own experience of fatherhood, and not judging it, or imposing any specific ways that they should do the fathering work. But to simply attend and notice what they were already doing. In this regard, the fathers may have felt that this agenda was a violation of what we had set out to do in the workshop.

Even though I framed the infant massage in the context of how we touch, I think the men perceived this as my agenda of how they should father. In some ways, I believe that it was a correct assessment.
CHAPTER VI

HOW THE LEADERSHIP STYLE CONTRIBUTED TO THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE WORKSHOP

Group Process—Ownership of the Group

In the interviews and in the workshops the fathers had the opportunity to explore their experience of fatherhood from their own perspective. As the men came to understand and cleave to their own experience of fatherhood, I believe that the men developed a stronger sense of ownership for their own lives as fathers. This greater sense of ownership of their own lives was at the heart of their choosing to take greater responsibility for their lives.

I believe that a sense of ownership for our own lives awakens our creative energies. It opens the door. It invites of our deep creative energies to come forth. As we begin to more fully create an internal frame of reference for understanding our lives, we are more fully able to understand our lives from our own perspective. We come to understand that it is from within us that we create our perceptions, understanding, and beliefs about our world. As we make this shift, we begin to more fully experience ourselves as creators in our own lives. As we come to know this, and more fully believe this, our creative energies are more available to us. We are saying yes to our creative energies. Our creative energies are not threatening to our sense of place in
the world, but rather they are involved in helping us create and define our world.

The fostering of this sense of ownership was a primary objective in the design and implementation of the workshop. The internal process of self-exploration took place within the context of a supportive group environment. As each of the men saw other men exploring and valuing their own experience of fatherhood, each man was more fully able to do the same.

As these men came together, they felt empowered, not only as individual fathers who were more fully embracing their own lives, but also as group members who were jointly creating this group. It was clear that these men felt a strong sense of ownership of the group itself. The group process was an outward manifestation of what was going on inwardly. The sense of ownership of their experience was simultaneously happening on the group level, and on the intrapersonal level, and this sense of ownership on one level energized the other.

The sense of shared group ownership was critical to the emergence of the group's powerful creative energies. What contributed to this sense of group ownership?

The sense of group ownership, I believe, came in part from the sense of psychological space that was present for each of the men. The men were given time to tell their own stories as they
wanted to. No one was rushing them. The group discussions evolved along the lines of the emerging themes. Men did not feel that what they had to say needed to fit someone else's agenda.

Joel discusses the group process this way:

You never set it up with a strict agenda, well, this is what we are doing. This is what I think... If the conversation took off in one direction, no one says, 'We got to get back into this.' That's where it went, and then, when there's a lull, you got it back on track with a subject or something from your agenda... You allowed people to talk, what they had to say... You allowed people to just let go... It was like you'd been doing this for your lifetime. That's how the workshop went.

Even though the group had a clear agenda, which was handed out, it was a basic guideline for the day, that presented the group with options, as the day unfolded. Rick speaks about the structure of the workshop this way:

It seemed like you just kind of let it within reason take whatever course it was going to take. You had some goals down there and even if they weren't met in that order, maybe it would be hit at some point.
In the beginning of the workshop, the dads participated in setting the goals for the workshop, and in some of the scheduling decisions. I participated in the discussions and exercises. At times I would check back with the dads to make sure that they were really finished with what they needed to say, if others in the group had not already done it. The men carefully and thoughtfully listened to each other. Jean discusses the quality of listening that was present in the group:

Not just hearing what somebody is saying, but hearing what's being said and letting them feel very comfortable that they can say it, and say it until they are done. And it's obvious that they are done. They pause and there's a silence and that silence is saying, we hear you and accept you. That was one of the things in the group I noticed again and again. Total respect for another and their space and their time.

The space, in the group, that each of the men enjoyed was critical to their sense of self-respect and their value as a group member. The space, that each father felt, came in part came from the group's ability to listen to and to follow the direction that each father took. Each of the fathers, in this regard, shared the leadership of the group.

The fathers were able to share the leadership more fully in the group because they did not feel judged. Joel spoke of this in
this way: "There was no expert here, telling us what we should feel, or what we should do, or how we should act."

Chad addresses this point as well:

I didn't feel like I was being analyzed, I have to admit [I had that experience in the past, and it made me defensive about participating in this group] ... But I never felt intimidated. I never felt like that. That made me feel really good, like you said, we're all equal participants.

The men in the group were very sensitive to the issue of not being listened to and not being treated with respect by professionals. Chad, as well as the other dads, all had stories about their voices, as fathers, being discounted by mental health professionals, doctors, nurses, or even from early intervention support service professionals. Rick summed up his past experience with health professionals this way: "It seems like they have the expertise, and you're supposed to listen to them."

In this group, the fathers had a strong voice. They were respected and valued as group members. Each of the fathers actively contributed to creating the workshop as it was unfolding. What each of the fathers chose to contribute was not judged. Each contribution was welcomed, and listened to with respect. I believe that this was critical to the fathers feeling empowered as
group members, and to the emergence of the group's creative energies. These very qualities have been shown by Torrance and others to be critical to the development of creativity (Haplin, Haplin, and Torrance, 1974). Together, the fathers jointly felt a real sense of ownership of the group. I believe that this contributed to their claiming ownership of their lives as fathers.

Leadership Style
And Its Importance in Addressing Issues of Fatherhood

I was there as a facilitator, who was also a father of a child with special needs. I was self-disclosing about my own experience and pain. Joel speaks about my role this way:

There's no leader here . . . Ron coordinated this . . . You were a participant, a member of the group, as much as a leader. More than a leader of the group. There wasn't really any leader, here, everybody is on the same level. We all have children with special needs, as you do, Ron. And you did a very good job of coordinating us all together, and coordinating the agenda . . . and the group ran the group.

What Joel is expressing is that I was not a leader in a traditional sense. I was there as both a father and a facilitator.
As a leader/facilitator, right from the beginning, I was open about my feelings and I was able to reveal myself as a man in my own authentic way. For the first workshop, I brought flowers because I love flowers, and it seemed important that I allow myself to have the freedom to do that for myself. At the beginning of the workshop, I talked to the other fathers about giving myself permission, as a man, to extend the boundaries of what might be traditionally okay as a man. I talked about giving myself permission to bring flowers to the workshop. The group was able to joke about it. For me it was important to do this, and for the group, I believe it was important too. As I listened to the audio tapes of the workshops and interviews, I realized it was after the times that I was the most self-disclosing about my feelings, as they related to my needs within the group, that we were able to join together more intimately, and to become even more self-disclosing. I took emotional risks.

I think that how I presented myself as a man in relation to others was particularly significant since fathering is a male issue that has to do with how we as men emotionally relate to others.

I believe that how we father and how we talk about fathering has to do with some basic beliefs about manhood. How I facilitated the workshop as a man among men, I believe, had a lot to do with how men could effectively claim this experience for themselves. I facilitated the workshop as someone who genuinely, cared deeply, about these men, because I did. I believe
that my caring allowed these men to emotionally open up more fully to themselves, the other men, and their own children.

The importance of men openly caring about men seemed particularly relevant to supporting fathers. I believe that it is critical for men to have models of male caring. I believe that most men have not experienced an openly caring relationship with their own fathers.

Fathers have little opportunity to have social validation for the nurturing they give. Men are not socially acknowledged or valued as caregivers. I believe that for men to claim a fuller sense of personal wholeness and self-worth, it is important that they value the love and nurturing they give. In this regard, I believe that it is critical that the workshops be conducted in an openly caring way. The workshop itself needs to be a model for men caring for others. The quality of caring that was shared between the men in this group represented an alternative model to that which most men are socially accustomed. Chad says the following:

I think we've all been very respectful of each other’s feelings. Not your typical group of men. You know what I am saying. You have your buddies . . . you go out and have a few beers with them or something, but don't you
dare for the slightest moment act un-macho or God forbid, you might be labeled something. You know how it is.
CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Each of the fathers who joined the group had a child who had special needs, and each of the fathers was profoundly affected by the birth of his child. Each of the fathers had been deeply pained by the birth of his child with special needs. (It was the death of the healthy full term hoped for child.) For some the anguish lasted very briefly; for others the anguish had not stopped. For some the birth of their child gave greater meaning, clarity, and purpose to their lives. For others the birth simply meant confusion and disorientation and crushed hopes. For some the presence of this child in their lives brought them closer to their wives; for others, it moved them apart. For some the bonds with their children became strong and deep, and for others the bonds remained very tenuous. Each of the men had a story to tell, and as I heard each of the men speak, I was moved.

Each of the fathers had embarked on a journey which they had never consciously chosen, and for each of the fathers, the journey was eventful and arduous. The group was a meeting of fellow travelers, who had traveled to foreign lands. They had survived to tell the tale, and the tale was deeply heartfelt. None of these fathers had shared his tale before. They had not been asked. No one seemed interested in hearing it.
These were the stories about ordinary men, who were no longer just ordinary. Their journey had changed them, and identified themselves and their families as different.

There stories were deeply personal and richly infused with feelings. These were stories about an inward journey, even more than they were about an outward journey. The plots were simple, but the stories deeply complex. This is what made their journey so difficult to see, and so difficult to tell. Who could understand the complexity of feeling beneath the events? Who could really understand and embrace the inward journey which they had taken?

Who had noticed them in their family stories as they lived them? These men and their journeys had gone essentially unnoticed by others, and for the most part their journeys had gone unnoticed by themselves. So in a real sense the stories of their personal journeys were created in the moment of their telling. (None of the fathers had engaged in any kind of in-depth discussion about their experience of fatherhood before they participated in this study.)

At the heart of this workshop was the belief that when we attend to our own experience, we honor it, and that we can support each other in this process. When we choose to look carefully and thoughtfully at our lives, we affirm that every part of our life is important. Even the seemingly insignificant or the
painful experiences in our lives can be attended to and savored. Our experiences can turn into bitterness or sources of growth. It was my hope in these workshops that I could support these men, as they carefully attended to their experiences in their lives as fathers, and their experiences would not turn into bitterness and despair. All five of the fathers reported feeling better about their lives as fathers. My hope was that they would come to honor their experiences, because their experiences were uniquely their own. Each experience has the potential to enlarge us by its presence in our lives. I am not suggesting it is easy, but with support from others we can begin to develop a context in which we can hold our experience, and not be stopped by our judgments of our own limitations.

As the fathers participated in the study over the course of several months, from the initial interview to the evaluation session, they were able to focus on their experience of fatherhood, in a way that they had not been able to before. They were changed. In the most basic sense, they more fully awakened to their own experience. The men came to understand their experience differently. It was a sense of being more present to it, and the richness of their experience was revealed. All five of the fathers reported feeling more engaged as fathers. They found themselves more fully in their experience, and this felt deeply affirming. As the fathers became more present to their experience, they felt more open to it. All five fathers discussed
seeing their experience of fatherhood from a more positive perspective.

In the workshop, the fathers talked, and they were able to see the common issues and concerns they shared. They saw themselves in relation to other fathers, and this, too, contributed to the development of an enlarged frame of reference from which they could better understand their own experience. All five fathers talked about increased awareness and understanding of their experience of fatherhood. They could more clearly understand the challenges they faced. They more clearly understood what they had achieved as fathers, and what challenges they had not yet met.

All five of the fathers reported feeling clearer about their achievements and limitations as fathers. Even though the issues that the fathers brought to the workshop were unique to each of them, all the fathers came to the workshop feeling a disparity between who they were as fathers and who they wanted to be, and each of the fathers came to the workshop feeling guilt in relation to this, i.e., I don't love my child enough. I am not a responsible father. I am not doing enough for my child. (I believe that parents of handicapped children are particularly vulnerable to this.)

As the fathers participated in the workshop, they were able to more fully embrace their feelings, and honor and engage their
own experience of fatherhood. As the men came to experience their lives as fathers, as more authentically their own, they felt a greater sense of ownership of their own lives as fathers. All five fathers reported feeling an increased sense of personal power in relation to their lives as fathers. Their relationships with their children began to feel better to them, in part, because their giving came from a sense of greater awareness and conscious choice. All five of the fathers reported feeling better about their relationships with their children. They felt more motivated and empowered to begin to take more responsibility for their lives. All five fathers talked about making clearer choices about how they wanted to spend time as fathers. Four of the fathers talked about taking on more direct and active caregiving with their children. The fathers were able to begin to let go of their guilt and move in the directions that they had felt blocked. All five of the fathers reported feeling less guilty as fathers, and they all reported moving in the areas that they had felt blocked.

The fathers came away feeling better about themselves as fathers. All five fathers reported significant increases in their self-esteem as fathers. I believe that as they began to make this shift, they were aligning themselves more fully with their own creativity. As they chose to become more active participants in their own lives, their creativity was called forth. The workshops were designed to support and foster this kind of self-claiming.
In the workshop, the exercises, such as the personal stories, the photography, and the collages were designed to help the men feel more rooted in their own experience, and to see themselves as more central to their lives of fatherhood as it was unfolding. The exercises were designed to do this, in a way that would naturally evoke the creativity of these fathers. The fathers called upon their creativity as they participated in: telling their stories, taking their pictures, mentally visualizing the guided imagery, and creating their collages. And these exercises were also designed to evoke the creativity of the fathers on a deeper level. It is the creativity involved in creating our own unique and deeply personal frame of reference. It is this frame of reference that enables us to experience our lives from our own authentic perspective.

When the fathers came together, they did not know each other. They looked to me to provide the leadership and the support. Very quickly this changed. As a group, we were soon sharing intimately with each other. We each contributed our stories. Each contribution was welcomed and listened to with respect. The agenda of the workshop was flexible, and it changed in response to our mutual needs. As valued group members, our contributions were not judged, and over time, all of our voices became stronger, as we each actively participated in focusing and directing the energies of the group. The group followed the direction that each father took, and in this regard, we each shared
the leadership. I believe that this sense of group ownership was critical to the success of the group.

As the men participated in the workshop, they became a part of the powerful creative energies of the group. The group had a life of its own, and it, too, was going through its own creative evolution. As the fathers actively participated in the group, each one of them participated in its evolution, and they felt a real sense of ownership as a group member. As the fathers participated in the group, they were actively claiming and creating a place for themselves in their world. The sense of shared group ownership was critical to creating an environment which actively supported the fathers in feeling empowered to take greater responsibility in their own lives as fathers.

The workshop was a safe place to openly share feelings, and deeply meaningful, authentic feelings were expressed by all the fathers. All five fathers reported being more aware of their feelings about fatherhood, and they each shared feelings in the group that they had never shared before. The energy generated by the fathers openly sharing their feelings with each other contributed to the creative power of the workshop.

Another aspect of the group culture, that I believe was critical to its success, was leadership style as it was expressed by my own sense of identity as a man. My leadership style helped give permission to the men to expand the boundaries of what is
traditionally permissible for men in this society. I brought flowers to the workshop, and I talked about it. I openly shared my own personal pain, as well as my own loving and tender feelings. I was open about my needs within the group. I was not ashamed to share my deeply caring feelings for the fathers. I believe that this supported the fathers to feel safer to take risks in and outside the group. I believe that it helped the fathers to emotionally open up more fully to themselves, the other men, and to their families. It gave the fathers a model of male caring, and I believe that this is critical and particularly relevant in supporting fathers. I believe that this, too, contributed to the success of the workshop.

In the workshop, these men created a sense of community in which they felt much less isolated as fathers. All five fathers reported feeling significantly less isolated as fathers. As the fathers listened and talked to each other, they came to actively and openly care for each other. As they were able to affirm each other in this way, the love and nurturing that they were able to give as men and fathers was affirmed. Each of the fathers reported a greater awareness of their feelings of love for their children and family. All five fathers reported feeling more open to the love of their children. Four of the fathers reported feeling more open to their love for their wives. Their experience in the workshop was clarifying for them, and they felt more deeply connected to a sense of what personally mattered for them, and they were more deeply connected to a sense of purpose and
meaning in their own lives. (Four of the dads reported feeling a greater sense of purpose and meaning in their lives.)

As fathers, the men joined each other and shared their lives. They felt cared about and they felt supported by each other. All five of the fathers chose to continue to stay involved in the group, even when the study was over. The sense of support and community, that the fathers created with each other, reaffirmed their value as men and nurturers.

Joel addresses how this sense of community, that the men created in the workshop, changed his life, and will continue to grow and impact the lives of others. He says the following:

You got my name through an agency, and you called me up. And you changed my life. And you certainly did, because now I am involved in some other people's lives. And they're going to be talking to other people and they're going to be involved with other people. And they're going to touch a lot of other people's lives just from this one workshop.

The support that Joel received in the workshop was life-changing for him. Joel became intimately connected to other men's lives, and he was changed. He will never again feel isolated in the same way, as a father. He believes that the sense of community and support that was created amongst the fathers will
ripple out and continue to affect others who the fathers meet, because, as fathers, they now feel more open to reaching out to others.

Jean's life, too, was changed by his participation in the workshop, and he feels committed to reach out to other dads. He understands how important the support that he received from other dads was to him, and he wants to offer other fathers the same kind of support.

We've got a purpose, not only for ourselves, but for other dads. Because I think everyone in that group realized the benefit of having had that group. That we are our children's advocates. And the more we can learn and stick together and share with one another, the more we'll grow. Maybe the more we grow, the more we're able to reach out and help others grow. It's sort of like growing up. Your parents take care of you, and you can never really pay them back. But the payback is doing that for your children. That's the hope and the wish and the dream, and that would relate to this group too.

Jean is suggesting that our growth as fathers, men, and people is intimately connected to our ability to support and share with one another. As we assist others, we grow ourselves, and as we grow, we are more empowered to assist others. Jean suggests
that this speaks to the spirit of fatherhood, and to the spirit of the group. I strongly agree.

I believe that the best kind of support is often from those who are facing or have faced similar challenges because it helps us more easily enlarge our context. In this regard, it becomes a joining together, rather than someone joining us. We are bonded together by the challenges that are shared. And in this regard, we do not feel so alone in it. If others come to me, and try to join me in something which is mine, I still feel alone. But if we both share the experience, then mine becomes larger. It's not just mine anymore, it's yours too.

As the fathers joined together, they were able to develop a greater context from which they could hold their own experience. As they joined together, their own creative energies, and their connection to self as well as other was strengthened. Their context become enlarged, and they felt connected to a greater whole.

I believe that men's personal growth is strongly served by the opportunity to support others. Fathering is such a challenge, and fathering a special needs child is even a greater challenge. Men can use support to do this. I believe that the most valuable support that these fathers can get is from each other. I believe that a workshop, such as the one that I designed and implemented, is an effective and valuable way to support fathers
to take on the challenges of involved fatherhood. It is a model in which fathers of special needs children can more fully align themselves with their own creativity, and, thereby, empowering themselves to take on the challenges of new fatherhood in a way that enriches and supports their personal growth. It is a model that supports men to more fully engage their experience of fatherhood, and claim its richness and power. It is a model based on men supporting men, and in this regard, it gives men models of male caring, and it supports men to experience themselves as nurturers. I believe that this is critical for men, and especially men who are taking on the challenges of involved fatherhood. In this regard, this model supports fathers in creating richer lives for themselves and their families, in creating new paradigms for what it means to be a male and a parent of a special needs child in this culture.
APPENDIX A

WORKSHOP AGENDA HANDOUTS

FATHERS' WORKSHOP

ORIENTATION INFORMATION

AGENDA

INTRODUCTION EXERCISES
  Who am I?
  My child

WHAT WOULD I LIKE TO GET OUT OF THE WORKSHOP?

MY DESIRE AS A DAD TO REACH OUT TO OTHERS--Ron

CREATING A SENSE OF SAFETY WITH EACH OTHER

THINKING ABOUT OURSELVES AS DADS

OUR STORIES
  Reflecting
  Talking and listening and responding
  Checking in with each other

LUNCH

OUR STORIES
  Checking in with each other

OTHER EXERCISES--As time permits

CLOSING EXERCISES
  Attending to our experience
  Photography
  Contacting each other
  In praise of self
  One last question

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FATHERS' WORKSHOP

RECONNECTING EXERCISE
SHARING OUR PICTURES
GUIDED IMAGERY--A LOOK BACK FROM THE FUTURE
DISCUSSION
LUNCH
PICTURE COLLAGE
RELAXING AND TOUCHING OUR CHILDREN
EVENING MEETING--WHEN?
CLOSING EXERCISE
A SHORT EVALUATION
APPENDIX B

WORKSHOP GOALS

To connect to other fathers -- Witness experiences of others
To hear others and be heard

To ground men in own experience
Greater capacity to see/hold their own experience

To foster more active engagement with their own experience as fathers -- To Actively describe and giving form to it
Extend previous understandings of life experience

To increase sense of ownership of own experience

To feel more self-accepting of ourselves as fathers
Increased self-esteem as fathers

To feel more grounded in relationship to child -- More aware of loving, caring connection to child -- Greater awareness of the element of touch and paraverbal communication in relationship with child -- Feel more bonded to child

To feel more connected to emotional/affective center
More comfortable with loving/ nurturing feelings

To become more conscious of personal meaning of fatherhood

To witness themselves as creative in workshop exercises
To become more conscious of their own creativity
To see themselves as more creative

To foster attitudinal shift for fathers -- To see themselves as creators in their own lives -- Greater ability to creatively meet life's challenges
To see their experience of fatherhood from a larger, more self-accepting, and more positive perspective
APPENDIX C

CREATIVITY AS A CONTEXT FOR UNDERSTANDING
THE FOCUS OF THE WORKSHOP

In order to understand the purpose and generation of this workshop design, it is important to understand the context in which I am viewing the challenges that face these men.

Creativity speaks to the power that is inherent in all of us to create: new forms, meanings, and actions. Our creativity is called forth in response to the challenges we face. These challenges arise from the ground of our experiences. Creativity as it relates to men and fathering is grounded in the challenges men face. Men who are facing the challenges of new fatherhood with a child who has special needs are facing many critical challenges to their creativity.

These fathers are meeting these challenges to their creativity at a time when these men are forced to face realities different from those that had been hoped and planned. It is a time in their lives when they are often feeling stress in their marriages. They are also often under financial stress, and they are often feeling alienated from friends, family and community. They are also dealing with either acute or chronic grief (anxiety, guilt, anger, sorrow, depression) that is part of their life as a parent to a handicapped child. It is a time when their self-esteem
is wounded, and their belief in their power to control the destiny of their lives is threatened. This is a time for them to reach down and embrace their deepest creative power, because the situation demands it. These are the challenges to ones creativity that challenge ones basic sense of self. This involves the creative act of self-claiming.

These challenges to self, which these men face, call forth a creativity rooted in affective self-knowing. These men are confronted with these challenges in the context of the fathering work, which in itself, is a challenge to the creativity of these men. This fathering work requires a kind of creativity in which the barriers between self and other are broken. It speaks to a creativity of relatedness, in which the focus of the activity is to nurture and to bring forth that which is struggling to find a fuller expression in oneself and within what one embraces as family.

As engaged fathers, these men are confronted head on with all the beliefs that they have internalized about manhood and fatherhood. Few of these men have had the experience of nurturing male caregivers, which affects the way in which these men are able to relate to themselves as fathers, and it leaves most of these men with no models to follow. As caregivers, these men are called upon to relate in a way which is rather foreign to them. It involves the challenge of allowing themselves to feel vulnerable, and allowing feelings, which men have been socialized away from, to surface.
What uniquely characterizes the nature of this creative activity is the personal honesty and generativity that this process demands. It is a creativity in which the self is deeply rooted in the creative act. It is a time when our very skin is peeled back to reveal that which is most basic and elemental within us, and it is from these roots that we create. This is done from a deeply personal as well as from a profoundly other connected frame of reference and both these points of reference are culturally foreign to most men.

Our responses to the challenges of our lives is not a linear nor a one way process. Rather, it is cyclical and interactive. We impact the events of our lives at the same time that the events of our lives are impacting us. And so the question is not simply, "What can men do to change so that they can move forward?", but rather, "What can happen to men as they try to engage their experience so that they will choose to move forward?" In this context, I am designing an intervention that can help men affirm and ground themselves in their experience as new fathers of children with special needs so that they can begin to move forward and engage it. We cannot affirm ourselves outside of our life experience. Affirmation comes from our very involvement, our participation in life. However, if life feels too scary, or if we have a sense of helplessness or hopelessness about it, then we are reluctant to engage it, and find meaning and affirmation in it. What I am talking about is the development of an intervention in
which men are able to embrace and take hold of their life experience and do it in a non-threatening and supportive way, so that the embracing of their experience will feel affirming, and that they will be motivated to move forward and continue to engage it as it unfolds for them in their lives.

The very act of engaging our experience is a highly creative act. It speaks to a willingness to be open to the life experience in which we are presently involved. Engagement in life opens the door to extending our previous learning and understandings about life. It extends the boundaries of our self-knowing. Sometimes we are confronted with a new situation that so profoundly challenges our old knowledge, expectations, beliefs, and feelings that it shatters the very foundations of our understandings because our understandings are inadequate to incorporate it. This challenge is very threatening and we may try hard to repress it. To actively engage it draws deeply upon our creativity, and as we claim this experience we are recreating parts of ourselves. Both Carl Rogers and George Land speak to this profound creative process as disintegration and reintegration. Engaging and claiming one's fatherhood with a handicapped child is such a challenge. Self-claiming is a highly generative process that involves this fundamental challenge to ones deepest creativity abilities.

The workshop design will focus on helping men to embrace this fundamental challenge to their creativity:
engaging self engaging experience
self-claiming claiming of one's experience
ownership of self ownership of lives (sense of responsibility for).
APPENDIX D

INFORMATIONAL PACKETS SENT TO THE FATHERS

A WORKSHOP FOR FATHERS
OF YOUNG SPECIAL NEEDS CHILDREN

Workshop facilitator:  Ron Baer, M.Ed., Doctoral Candidate,
Certified Mental Health Counselor,
Father of Child with Special Needs

In the workshop we will come together as a group of six to eight fathers to share and explore our experiences of fatherhood. We will meet for two full day workshops and we will have the opportunity to get to know each other and to appreciate the experience of other fathers who are faced with similar challenges.

As fathers of a special needs child, we are faced with all the demands that typically come with being a father, and the additional demands and stresses that are part of having a child with special needs. As men we often feel alone and at a loss to know how to respond to this experience of fatherhood. In this group we will explore our own authentic experiences and come to understand and appreciate what it is we are already doing and become clearer about choices we may make in the future.

The workshops will be Saturday, April 3 and Saturday, April 17 from 9:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. at -------------. [If you are interested in the workshops and you have a conflict with these dates, let me know.]

This will be a structured experiential workshop. [The sharing of personal experiences will be encouraged from everyone
but not required.] In the workshop there will be the opportunity to talk and explore our experiences of fatherhood in a variety of ways. For example, in preparation for the second workshop you will be asked to do some photography that will help you document your life as a father. [Provisions will be made if you do not have a camera.] During the second workshop this photography will be shared. An evening follow-up session is planned for the group at end of May.

These workshops are a pilot project that I am doing as part of my dissertation [designing a workshop to help fathers of special needs children with their transition to fatherhood]. Because the workshops are part of a study, I will be asking each of you to participate in an initial pre-workshop interview and a post-workshop interview that will be set up at your convenience. There will be no fee charged for participation in the workshops.

If you are interested in registering for the workshops or learning more about them, please contact me. I can be reached at 527-1131. If you prefer, you can communicate your interest to the person from the agency from whom you have gotten this information and I will get in touch with you. Participants will be accepted on a rolling-admissions basis.

I'm looking forward to your participation.

Sincerely,

Ron Baer
I appreciate your willingness to participate in both the fathers' workshops and in the interviews. The workshop dates are April 17th and May 1st from 9:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m. There will be a two hour evening follow-up session approximately six weeks after the second workshop. This date will be arranged by all of us at the end of the second workshop.

There are some points that I would like to emphasize in regards to your participation in the workshop. This workshop is for you. My intention in organizing these workshops is to create a resource for you which will support you in the challenges you face as an involved father. Your choice to come forward and choose to participate has taken courage. None of us come to fathering as experts, and few of us have had any experience in dealing with the additional challenges that parenting a child who has special needs presents. We are coming together to learn from each other. If we come together in the spirit of respect and compassion, then we can truly support each other as we each deserve. Confidentiality within the group is extremely important. If we know that what we share with each other as men will not be discussed with others, then we will feel safer to disclose our thoughts and feelings.

I have enclosed a form that I would like you to fill out prior to our interview. This is basic information that will help me in my research but I did not want to include in the interview. I have also enclosed a participant consent form that needs to be signed before the interview. If you have any questions about this or anything else, I will be happy to discuss them with you. You can call me at 527-1131, or we can discuss them when we meet for the interview. I'm looking forward to meeting each of you.
PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEWS

There are virtually no resources that have been developed specially for fathers of special needs children. In fact, what has been traditionally referred to as family support is really most accurately support for mothers. These workshops are an attempt at creating a good support model for fathers. The interviews that each of you will be participating in are for research purposes. They will help me evaluate the effectiveness of the workshops. My initial interviews with each of you will help me get an understanding of how you feel about issues concerning your fatherhood before you participate in the workshop. The later interviews will help me understand your subsequent thoughts on these same issues.

My desire is that these interviews not be invasive. The interviews are to help me understand and evaluate the ways in which the workshop has been helpful for you. To do this I will need to have a general sense of what your experience of fatherhood has been, specifically as it relates to your child or children with special needs. For myself, I know that many of my feelings surrounding fatherhood in regards to my son, Ian, were difficult and painful. I felt vulnerable. Some of the questions may naturally bring up some of these feelings, however, these interviews are not designed to explore all these feelings in depth. Your feelings are very important, and you will have the opportunity to explore them in greater depth in the group if you choose.

The areas to be covered in the interview are:

- your experience of fatherhood
- support you have received
- relationship with family members
- your sense of the future
NAME

AGE

NAME OF CHILD WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

AGE OF CHILD

BIRTH ORDER

DESCRIPTION OF CHILD'S SPECIAL NEED

NAMES and AGES OF BIOLOGICAL CHILDREN

NAMES and AGES OF STEP-CHILDREN
CHILDREN WITH WHOM LIVING


SPOUSE and/or SIGNIFICANT OTHERS IN FAMILY


APPENDIX E

WORKSHOP EVALUATIONS AND LETTER

(First)
WORKSHOP EVALUATION

It was my hope that we would come together as fathers --to hear others and be heard--that we may come away from the workshop today feeling more connected to our own experience, and not so alone in it. To what extent, and in what ways did we do that? What was most helpful?

(Second)
WORKSHOP EVALUATION

It was my hope that we could come together as fathers, and together in the course of the workshops, explore and support each other in this life experience of fatherhood that we all share. It was my hope that we would each come away knowing more about our own lives as fathers and what it may mean to us. To what extent and in what ways did we do that? What was most helpful?

[LETTER TO WIVES]

I am conducting a study for the purpose of developing a workshop for fathers with children who have special needs. I am evaluating the effectiveness of this workshop based on the responses of the dads to specific questions regarding the impact of the workshop on them. As partners and co-parents, I value your input in this evaluation process. Has your husband’s involvement in the workshops had any impact on your experience as a mother, partner, or co-parent? How? (A response of a few words or more would be appreciated -- thanks.)
APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

(Pre)

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Do you have any questions about the interview before we start?

What are some of things that you do with ______?

How does your relationship with _____ feel to you?

As you reflect on your relationship with _____ what stand out for you as what has been most important and meaningful for you?

Most joyous? Most difficult? What helped you get through these hard times?

Is there anything that you would like to change in regards to your relationship with ______?

How do you feel about yourself as a father?

Do you feel that this experience has changed you personally -- your sense of who you are? How?

How is your relationship with your partner now, is it easy or hard?

Has _____'s birth had a big impact on it?

Has _____'s birth had an impact on your relationship with your extended family and friends? How?

What has your experience been in regards to the community and social supports you have received?

Have you talked much to others about what it has been like for you being _____'s father? To whom?

As you reflect on your experience of fatherhood with _____, are there any questions that you have found yourself, or find yourself now, thinking about?
As you think about the future as ----'s dad what comes up for you?

Is there anything that is really important to you, about what we have been talking about that you have not had a chance to say?

Have you thought about what you might like to get out of the workshop?

(Post)

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Have you noticed any ways that you feel differently about yourself as ------'s father since the workshops? To what would you attribute this?

[Optional]
Do you feel more or less appreciative of yourself as a father? How?

For most of us we have voices inside that stand back and judge ourselves. Has there been a way in which these voices changed in the last three months as it relates to yourself as a father?

Did the workshop have any impact on your self-confidence or self-esteem as a father? If so, how?

Do you think that your understanding of your experience with ------ has changed? What has contributed to this change?

Are there ways that you feel differently about ------ since the workshops? To what would you attribute this?

Are there things that you may be choosing or not choosing to do now with ------ that you feel is directly related to your involvement in this study experience?
Have you noticed any change in your involvement with the caregiving and/or decision-making as it relates to _______?

Is there a specific story or anecdote that you would like to relate in regards to _______ that has occurred during the past three months that you feel would be interesting or meaningful to include in this interview?

How is your relationship with ____ (wife) now as compared to three months ago?

Have there been changes in relation to friends or family?

Are there any specific personal learnings that you have had as a result of your involvement with the interviews and the workshops?

Has there been a change for you in terms of what matters to you as a father?

As you look ahead to your life with ________, it could be hours from now or weeks or even years, is there anything that has changed for you as you look ahead?

Why do you think that this workshop was helpful or unhelpful to you?

How did the specific elements of the workshop effect you?

- Participation of other men
- Leadership style of facilitator
- Informal discussion
- Structured exercises (setting of goals, personal stories, collages, guided imagery)
- Homework (picture taking, massage)

Is there any one element of the workshops that strikes you as the most important?

What do you wish would have been included in the workshops?

Is there anything else you would like to say that feel unfinished in regards to our discussion?
APPENDIX G
FOCUS QUESTIONS
FOCUS QUESTIONS -- CONCEPTUAL MAP

A. What are the fathers' perceptions of themselves as fathers? What are the fathers' perceptions of their feelings about the child? What is their sense of their relationship with their child? What is their sense of their relationship with their wife as a co-parent--their extended family -- their larger social system?

B. What changes have occurred in regard to these previously mentioned areas [A]-- since the workshop? What contributed to these changes -- particular activities in workshop -- homework -- leader -- structure -- other men --changes in sense of own creativity -- own initiative/ideas Locus of agency for the change and creativity

C. For Questions A and B:

1. Sources of empowerment for coping, change, creativity

2. Beliefs about what matters -- what gives meaning -- How have beliefs changed/or how have beliefs of fathers formed to make change possible?

3. Future -- expectations, plans, attitudes

4. Fathers own personal questions, concerns, hopes

D. To what extent has the whole process [workshops and interviews] helped them to awaken, appreciate, and be empowered by their own creativity?

E. For all questions -- The words they use and how they talk about their experiences are critical data for analysis.
APPENDIX H

QUESTIONS FOR FOCUSING STORY

BEFORE WE BEGIN TELLING OUR STORIES

QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON

What I wish others could really see and understand about my experience of fatherhood?

What can I say so that others can really understand this?

What could get in my way?

STORY

MAIN QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER—a backdrop to all other questions

HOW DID IT FEEL?

WHAT WAS IMPORTANT TO YOU?

COMING TO FATHERHOOD---What brought you to it?
PREGNANCY—Expectations

BIRTH

What happened?

When did you know that the child may not be typical?

Where were your supports?

How was it for you?

What did it bring up for you?—Did this connect to your past?

How did your partner respond?

What were the challenges? The stresses?

When did they come?

How was it dealing with others—their responses?

Where have you come to?

What has felt rewarding?

BABYHOOD

RESPONDING TO OTHERS

POSSIBLE SUGGESTIONS

What I appreciated hearing............

What I heard as important to you............... 

I felt.........................
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