Rising Above the Wound:Strong Men Forging Safe Homes

Addressing the unique needs fathers face when parenting children from hard places, including FASD

Welcome, and thank you for taking the time to view this presentation. My name is Joshua Lay. I am a pastoral care and mental health coach, and Board Chair of the Papillon Center for FASD.

This presentation is called *Rising Above the Wound: Strong Men Forging Safe Homes*. My work focuses on fathers who are parenting children from hard places, including children impacted by FASD, trauma, attachment disruptions, and other developmental challenges. One of the consistent observations throughout this work is that fathers are often underrepresented in support systems. Many services are designed around supporting the child and the primary caregiver, but the father's experience is frequently overlooked.

The purpose of this presentation is to explore how fathers' own histories, wounds, beliefs, and patterns influence the family system, and to demonstrate a practical framework for helping fathers become more connected, present, and effective within their homes.

This program was developed in response to the extraordinary demands that parenting children from hard places places on families. Fathers often describe feeling isolated, overwhelmed, and unsure how to respond to behaviours that traditional parenting approaches do not adequately address.

The program can be delivered individually or in a group setting over a minimum five-week period. I often use the metaphor of a blacksmith's forge to explain the experience. A blacksmith does not create flaws in steel; the heat simply reveals what was already there. In the same way, parenting children with significant needs does not create wounds in fathers. Rather, the pressure of caregiving often exposes fears, insecurities, unresolved issues, and longstanding patterns.

The goal is not to shame fathers or identify weaknesses. Instead, the goal is to understand what pressure reveals and help fathers develop healthier ways of responding. When fathers learn to carry the weight differently, they often become more connected, more present, and more resilient within the family system.

The fatherhood journey unfolds across five weeks. The first week focuses on felt safety and brain-based parenting. Fathers begin by understanding how regulation and connection influence behaviour.

The second week examines personal history and historical impacts. Fathers explore how their upbringing, attachment experiences, and life events influence the way they currently parent.

During the third week, the focus shifts to self-awareness. Participants learn to identify the beliefs and internal narratives that shape interactions with their children and partners.

The fourth week focuses on recognizing roadblocks and identifying patterns before they escalate. Fathers learn practical tools for noticing stress responses earlier and responding more intentionally.

The fifth week brings everything together through planning and implementation. Fathers identify priorities, strengthen support systems, and develop sustainable practices for ongoing growth.

The overall outcome is a trauma-informed pathway that helps fathers move beyond simply surviving family stress toward becoming emotionally steady, connected, and safe leaders within their homes.

One of the most important concepts within the program is the distinction between providing safety and felt safety. Most fathers naturally focus on providing safety. This includes shelter, supervision, structure, boundaries, and physical protection. These responsibilities are critically important.

However, felt safety is different. Felt safety refers to the internal experience of being understood, connected, secure, and able to predict what comes next. Children impacted by FASD and trauma often struggle to experience safety internally, even when their environment is objectively safe.

Because of this, parents frequently need to do more than provide rules and structure. They must also build connection, trust, and emotional atonement. When fathers understand felt safety, they begin to see behaviour differently. Instead of viewing every challenge as opposition or defiance, they become better able to recognize distress, dysregulation, and unmet needs. This shift often changes the entire dynamic within the family.

Every father parent through a lens. That lens is shaped by attachment experiences, family messages, cultural influences, successes, failures, and painful experiences accumulated over time.

Many fathers are unaware of how strongly these experiences influence their interpretation of present-day situations. For example, a father's reaction to a child's emotional outburst may be strongly connected to the messages he received about emotions while growing up. Similarly, beliefs about control, independence, strength, vulnerability, or failure can influence how parenting decisions are made.

One of the key ideas within this program is that parenting children from hard places often reveals beliefs and wounds that were already present. Awareness is important because fathers cannot change patterns they cannot see.

As fathers gain insight into the lens through which they parent, they become better able to respond to the actual needs of their children rather than reacting automatically from past experiences.

Under stress, fathers often develop predictable responses. Some withdraw and become emotionally unavailable. Some escalate conflict. Others become controlling, over functioning, or disconnected. These patterns are rarely random. They often reflect deeper emotional, cognitive, relational, physical, and behavioural responses that have developed over many years.

The purpose of pattern mapping is not self-criticism. The purpose is awareness. When fathers can identify their own stress responses earlier, they gain opportunities to regulate themselves, repair relationships, and make healthier choices.

For professionals working with families, this has important implications. Fathers' engagement should be intentional rather than assumed. Professionals can support fathers by teaching felt safety principles, exploring family-of-origin influences, and including fathers more directly in service plans and support structures.

The primary learning outcomes of this work are helping participants understand felt safety, learn practical father engagement strategies, and identify scaffolding that better supports fathers within families impacted by FASD.

I would like to acknowledge the fathers and families who continue to inform and shape this work, as well as the Papillon Center for FASD and the many community and professional partners dedicated to supporting families impacted by FASD.

I also declare that I have no financial conflicts of interest related to this presentation.

Thank you for taking the time to review this presentation. The references and resources listed represent many of the foundational influences behind this work, including contributions from Bruce Perry, Stephen Porges, Dan Siegel, Karen Purvis, Bessel van der Kolk, and Canadian FASD resources.

My hope is that this presentation highlights the important role fathers play within the family system and encourages the intentional inclusion of fathers in support, intervention, and conversations related to FASD.

Thank you for your time. I look forward to any questions or discussions during our conference session.