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Engaging fathers in child and family services

Participation, perceptions and good practice

Research has consistently indicated that positive father involvement in childrearing can lead to good child outcomes across socio-emotional, behavioural and cognitive/educational domains (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004). While the mechanisms for the effects on children of involved fathering still require some unravelling, involved fatherhood is also thought to have positive benefits on the co-parental relationship and on family cohesion and resilience (e.g., Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera, & Lamb 2004). Additionally, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that involved parenting can benefit fathers themselves from a psychological growth perspective (Bradford and Hawkins, 2006; Palkovitz, 2002).

While fathers do exercise considerable self-determination in terms of the extent to which they involve themselves in their children's upbringing (Cook, Jones, Dick, & Singh, 2005), men's commitment to involved parenting is thought to be significantly moderated by how others—including partners, extended family, child and family services, community members and work colleagues—provide support and encouragement (Henley & Pasley, 2005).

In the context of formal supports, fathers are much less likely than mothers to be in contact with child and family services. This article discusses issues relating to how child and family services can better support men in their parenting. Of particular interest are the challenges services face when trying to engage with fathers, and useful strategies for facilitating fathers' involvement with services. How fathers and service providers experience and understand the participation of men in child and family services is also considered.

Fathers and child and family services

Although only a handful of formal evaluations have been conducted, the available evidence suggests that contact with child and family services can be beneficial for increasing fathers' parenting skills, confidence and involvement (e.g., Doherty, Erickson, & LaRossa, 2006; Fletcher, Silberberg, & Baxter, 2001; Lloyd, O'Brien & Lewis, 2003; Magill-Evans, Harrison, Benzies, Gierl, & Kimak, 2007; UnitingCare Burnside, 2003).

However, engaging with fathers can be a challenging task for many services (e.g., Lloyd et al., 2003; Raikes, Summers, & Roggman, 2005). Some commentators (Fletcher, 2003; McAllister, Wilson, & Burton, 2004) argue that the female-orientated service culture of child and family services actively excludes and alienates fathers. Other factors that have been raised include: differences in men's and women's help-seeking preferences and behaviours (Russell et al., 1999), men's lack of awareness about the existence of services, the negative attitudes of

service workers and men's work commitments (see Fletcher et al., 2001, for a comprehensive overview of the barriers affecting men's participation in family and parenting services).

The Engaging Fathers study

There is an apparent need for child and family services to innovate in order to increase men's participation. The Engaging Fathers study was one of three themed studies undertaken as part of the National Evaluation of the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) 2004–08. It was designed to evaluate the efforts of SFCS-funded services to engage with fathers in order to contribute to the development of models of good practice.

The choice of father engagement as a topic for thematic analysis was in response to awareness that, despite best intentions, father engagement in child and family services can be difficult. It was anticipated that improvements in engaging fathers could be brought about by sharing good practices with other child and family services. The central aim of the project was to provide an account of how fathers and service providers experience fathers' engagement with services and the barriers that affect their participation, and to identify effective strategies for facilitating this engagement.

Method and participants

The study was conducted over two phases. Phase one involved a survey of selected SFCS services that was designed to gather information about the types of services with which fathers were involved, rates of participation and strategies for facilitating father participation.The survey instrument and sample were constructed to include services that were targeted specifically to fathers as well as general services in which fathers may or may not have been participating. Findings from Phase one indicated that fathers were involved in fairly low numbers in a diverse range of activities within the SFCS. While many services reported that they were successfully employing a number strategies to facilitate father engagement, others reported encountering significant difficulties in attempting to attract fathers to try their services and program activities. Phase two of the study was in-depth fieldwork with a purposive sample of services identified from survey responses. This article focuses on findings from the qualitative fieldwork.

Eight services were included in the fieldwork. They were located in urban, rural, regional and remote locations across New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria, Tasmania and Queensland. The services targeted a diverse client base, including culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) fathers, fathers of children with disabilities, new fathers, young fathers, fathers in economically marginalised communities, and fathers seeking support to stop their violent behaviour. Service objectives ranged across building parenting skills, family relationships and local support networks to supporting the transition to parenting, and teaching about health and nutrition and behaviour change.

For the purposes of the study, service managers and facilitators recruited fathers involved with their service and arranged for them to attend a focus group facilitated by the researchers at the service site. Thirty-two fathers participated in seven focus groups. The eighth service was unable to coordinate a focus group and two fathers from this service took part in one-to-one phone interviews. Seventeen professionals participated in in-depth interviews: seven managers (two male) took part in phone interviews, one male manager/facilitator participated in a face-to-face interview, and nine facilitators/project workers (three male) participated in a mixture of telephone, face-to-face and group interviews.

The fathers studied ranged in age from 20–62 years (M = 35 years) and had between 1–5 children (M = 2) each. Just over half of the sample (56%, n = 19) was married, while 23% (n = 8) reported that they were in de facto relationships. Almost three-quarters of the fathers (73%, n = 25) were in full-time, part-time or casual employment. Less than half of the fathers (41%, n = 14) had completed



either a university or a TAFE qualification, while one quarter (26%, n = 9) stated that they had completed their education to a year 9 level or below. To gain a sense of the fathers' cultural and ethnic identities, they were asked if they spoke any languages other than English at home. Just less than half (44%, n = 15) reported that they spoke another language at home. Only one participant identified himself as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent.

Analysis of findings

All interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed. The coding of transcripts and analysis of content was undertaken by two researchers and led to the emergence of a number of themes that were then organised around five key themes: perceptions of fatherhood and fathering; barriers to successful engagement of fathers; effective strategies for recruiting fathers; good practice in program implementation; and benefits of father involvement in services. Where quotes are used to illustrate findings, the type of service or program with which interviewees were associated, and its targeted client group, has been included.

Perceptions of fatherhood and fathering

The views of fathers and professionals supported the idea that an ideal of involved fathers has emerged in Australia (Russell et al., 1999). All participants felt that fathers should be actively involved in childrearing and family life. Fathers also felt that the roles of men and women in society had changed and that this was a rationale both for fathers attending services and being more involved with their children:

> Back then, they thought women should stay in the home and cook food. Well, that's just rubbish. They've got just as much rights as we do. They come out into the workforce and stuff like that, why can't we go into what they were doing [i.e., attend family services]. (Father, nutrition and healthy living program—parents)

> Not enough fathers get involved with their kids. [They] go back to the old viewpoint: me man, me tough, me go out and do work, that's it … [Children] need to see their fathers be a part of their lives, rather than sit back, go out and earn a living and do nothing else. (Father, nutrition and healthy living program—fathers)

The following comment was typical of service providers' views:

> The traditional roles of men working and earning the bread and coming home and having minimal contact with children—life's changed. It's very different these days. I think men want to engage. Parenting is very different now to even when I grew up. Fathers do engage much more. (Service manager, parenting education program—parents)

Both fathers and professionals had a well-developed sense of how father involvement benefits children. Unsurprisingly, professionals were more theoretically grounded, citing issues such as academic achievement, financial security, psychological benefits and reduced likelihood of child abuse and teenage offending. Fathers spoke about how it was good for children to feel that their dad was there for them. For several men, the need to be different from their own fathers was a strong motivation to be involved:

> My mum and dad split up when I was 12 and he was pretty abusive and a drunk, so I just over the years tried not to do what he did. Sometimes I fail, but I try. Try not to make those mistakes. I always try and make sure I've got time for the girls and stuff … we find ways of spending time together. Even doing the dishes. (Father, nutrition and healthy living program—parents)

Barriers to successful engagement of fathers

As anticipated from the literature highlighting the barriers to father engagement (Fletcher et al., 2001), the number of fathers participating in the services that took part in the study was generally low. Most service providers felt they experienced significant barriers connecting with fathers. Gender-stereotyped attitudes and values emerged as a salient barrier to engaging fathers, and service providers often felt that they came up against entrenched beliefs and perceptions relating to gender roles held by both men and women:

> I found in working with these groups is that it's kind of okay for mums to be out and about during the day with their children. That's a legitimate activity for a female. But often dads, especially if they're unemployed or whatever, don't like to be visible. It's like you're on show to the world. Especially in situations like the neighbourhood house or whatever, where there's heaps of women … "Here I am at the neighbourhood house when all the other men are off working". (Project facilitator, nutrition and healthy living program—parents)

Men were understood to be particularly reluctant to seek professional support. Both professionals and fathers made associations between seeking help and perceiving a sense of personal failure or fearing to appear a "whinger".

> [Australian] men don't want to be whingers … you talk about something, everyone thinks you're a whinger. You don't want to be a whinger and you don't want to be weak and you don't want to be emotional. (Project facilitator, transition to parenthood program—fathers)

> I thought it was gay, to be honest with you. I thought it was not on—a bunch of blokes getting together and having a whinge … it is just girlish. You see men who do cry and you are just like no, "not right". Yes, I guess, for me personally, I would not go to a men's group because I would have to go there and be the centre of attention and talk. And a part of the stigma of being in a poofy man's group. (Father, family violence programs—fathers)

In contrast, some fathers felt that many men would be generally interested in accessing services but lacked information about what was available. These men felt that the services needed more publicity and that information about services was not reaching those who were not proactively seeking help:

> Because just getting the information that these sorts of things are out there isn't that widely available. Unless you know where to look, a lot of the time you'd really miss them. So those that are in the know take advantage of them [programs and activities], but there are still a lot of people that don't know that all this stuff is out there. (Father, nutrition and healthy living program—parents)

Aspects of the culture of child and family services were also perceived to be a barrier. Professionals noted that services were set up in ways that were comfortable for women but often uncomfortable, unappealing or uninteresting for men. It was also noted that many services are not "father-friendly", in the sense that men don't see images of themselves at services, can't pick up information that is inclusive or targeted to them, and don't see male staff or other male service users.

Other barriers that were identified by participants included the difficulty that working fathers have in attending services that operate during business hours, and the availability of private and public transport in some areas. For providers working with CALD groups, cultural appropriateness and language barriers were issues. One facilitator commented that when information was delivered in their own language it was easy for his CALD clients to understand concepts, but that programs delivered in English were much harder for his clients to understand and take in.

Effective strategies for recruiting fathers

Service managers and facilitators generally had a good to extensive knowledge about different strategies for engaging fathers. A number of providers mentioned the importance of tapping into existing networks to reach men. Some services were linking with other community and faith groups, government organisations such as Centrelink, workplaces, or children services like kindergartens. Other programs were contacting fathers through other activities in their organisation, for instance by first running a mixed group for mums and dads and then offering a separate group just for dads.

In line with the views of providers, many fathers reported that they found out about services through contact with another community-based agency:

> I was down at [service] . . . and the lady over the counter said, "Oh, there's also the father's course, do you want to join in on that too?" So I read the brochure and it sounded really good. (Father, transition to parenthood—fathers)

However, word-of-mouth from the participants themselves emerged as one of the most effective recruitment vehicles:

> I guess the things that appealed to me was more about hearing it from other dads. (Father, transition to parenthood—fathers)

For fathers, the recommendation of a service from another man was an extremely effective way of facilitating participation. Several service providers also noted this, mentioning that once they had one or two dads coming along, it was easier to get more participants because the dads then knew they would not be the only man in the room.

Some professionals spoke about the importance of using innovative marketing to attract fathers. In particular, it was perceived to be necessary to advertise "in the places where men go". Some services were advertising in what they perceived to be "male spaces", such as workplaces, pubs and hardware stores. Another service was having some success adopting a collaborative approach with local workplaces:

> When we did the [activity], we actually sent a letter to all businesses within [local area] and asked them whether they would consider allowing fathers to start a little bit later or make up some time, or have an RDO. (Service manager/facilitator, transition to parenthood and supporting children's development programs—fathers)

Service providers were also aware of how the marketing and branding of programs can impact on father engagement. The title of programs was felt to be important and some service providers were using words like "tools" and "building" to appeal to men, and avoiding words like "support".

Men were perceived by professionals to be highly outcome-focused. By clearly and concretely highlighting the benefits that men will get out of a program, services felt they were better able attract fathers:

> When we put out the fliers, we make it very clear exactly what the workshop will be on and what we hope people will gain by coming to the workshop. So the dads have some sense that it's not a nebulous thing, they're not just coming along to get support. We don't use the word "support", but they're going to actually learn strategies on A, B, C, D. (Service manager, parenting education programs—parents).

Good practice in program implementation

Fathers and professionals indicated that a number of factors are important to sustaining the engagement of fathers. The ability to build relationships and trust with dads was found to be highly valued both by professionals and fathers. In particular, it was important for many of the men that they were able to relate to the facilitator, in the sense of sharing similar life experiences with them, whether this was from coming from the same community, being a father themselves or having personal experience of issues of anger and domestic violence. This made fathers feel more comfortable in sharing their own experiences and it gave them respect for the facilitator.

> We all have problems, including the facilitator. It is the honesty and the willingness to open up, and they have been through the same stuff. They are just as human . . . Our [human services] worker had never had a kid—she was 23. No kids. I have got five. So the experiences; they are willing to share themselves. That is what stopped me. (Father, family violence programs—fathers)

Many professionals emphasised the importance of relationship-building over appearing as an expert, and talked about how it is more important to facilitate sessions so that fathers learn incidentally and from each other. Adopting the expert stance was viewed as alienating and ineffective:



Both fathers and professionals had a well-developed sense of how father involvement benefits children.

> It's no good an expert going in because the message just won't get there. It's about developing that relationship so there's not some bigwig standing up in front of the dads sprouting something they're totally disinterested in because they don't know this person, they don't trust this person, they don't have a relationship with this person. (Project facilitator, nutrition and healthy living program—parents)

It was also important to adopt a strengths-based approach. Fathers did not want to attend a service to hear about negative things like depression, or to be told that they weren't going about things the right way or should be doing more. Generally, fathers wanted services to be enjoyable, fun and social. Fathers wanted professionals to acknowledge the positive things they were doing and that they were, as one facilitator said, "the experts in their lives".

Several project facilitators indicated that men have definite preferences in terms of interaction styles. The concept of men preferring to learn "side-by-side" was particularly striking:

> What often works really well with men is to have conversations alongside them rather than face-to-face. The fathers in a focus project that we ran … we included a lot of barbecues. So the men were cooking while they were talking. They were doing things with their children while they were talking. (Project facilitator, parenting education programs—parents)

By providing an activity, professionals found they could encourage peer learning. Fathers were also perceived to dislike sitting around and talking without an activity or objective and, conversely, being restricted by highly structured program formats. What men appeared to enjoy was being task-orientated in a participatory and flexible environment:

> The first session, I turned up and said, "Right, we're going to do an hour of lecture, then we're going to cook". By the end of that first session, they said to me, "Sit down, we don't want this. This is crap. We just want to cook". From then on, I realised that as soon as we got there we would start cooking straight away. Within that cooking experience was when we started to raise some questions around healthy eating and lifestyle stuff. I'd raise the question, for example, "So what do you guys think about watching television and physical activity?" That would start them all talking. (Project facilitator, nutrition and healthy living program—fathers)

There was also a strong sense among professionals that men prefer programs to be delivered outside of service sites that are orientated towards women and children, and enjoy activities such as playing in the park or having barbecues. The importance of male-friendly environments was also stressed by fathers:

> We do a lot of great stuff working alongside with the mum's group at times, but they also need their space and we need our space … a space where we can have a bit more macho stuff there, because a lot of the males don't come into the centre and they're scared to come in. (Father participant, nutrition and healthy living program—fathers)

The need to be flexible and adaptable was challenging for some workers. A wide range of worker attributes were identified as being important when engaging with fathers; some related to general case management and family work skills, whereas others were more specific, such as being a father themselves, actually liking men, and having understanding and empathy with their issues.

To help overcome male preconceptions of services catering mainly to the needs of women, some services have made very conscious moves to create spaces where men feel comfortable:

> Pictures of dads and their children hanging on the wall. Colours that are neutral. Colours that are not going, for example, pastels and things like that have a particular gender feel. So we try to go for neutral, neutral colours, actual pictures of dads. (Service manager, transition to parenthood program—fathers)

Although some of the fathers enjoyed participating in mixed sessions, there was a strong view in the sample that male-specific programs were important for engaging with fathers. This was felt to be important because professionals perceived that men and women deal with issues differently and need services that are targeted. It was also important because men were felt to be less willing to talk about some issues in the presence of their partner and more willing to talk to another man or group of men.

> The [activity] is a prime example of where men feel at ease. They can talk about anything over there that they can't talk about to their doctors or their wives or anything, but over there they'll yap on about all their aches and worries. (Father, transition to parenthood and supporting children's development programs—fathers)

Benefits of father involvement in services

Service managers, facilitators and fathers were in total agreement that father participation in child and family services can produce positive outcomes for fathers in terms of improvements in their knowledge, skills and confidence. There were also perceived benefits in regard to the couple relationship, the father–child relationship and in relation to child wellbeing.

Fathers and providers spoke about how dads gained in skills, knowledge and confidence through their participation in service activities. Increased confidence was not only gained through professional facilitation, but through fathers being given opportunities to share their parenting knowledge with and learn from others:

> I think it also helps you open up and ask another father or something like that. Well, I was, like [asking another father]: I was looking after my son and this happened, you know. Got any suggestions? I think it helps a lot with it. (Father, nutrition and healthy living program—fathers)

Fathers also spoke about how building skills and knowledge had improved their interactions with their children:

> It's heaps better at home. It's not so rough. Because … now I understand more. And, like, I can communicate with them [children]. I can get them to do things without yelling. (Father, service for children with disabilities)

Program participation could also have the desired flow-on effect of increasing paternal involvement with children generally. Fathers commented that their relationships with their children were growing stronger: they were doing more activities with their kids and taking more of an active interest in what was going on at school. Fathers also commented that participation in programs had effects on their relationship and some commented that they were arguing less with their partner.

Having access to and building a support network was also an important benefit for fathers. Being part of a group helped to normalise parenting challenges and helped fathers work through particular issues. The fathers had built friendships and looked forward to meetings to vent their frustrations and have a laugh.

Professionals saw children benefiting from spending time with their fathers and perceiving that their dads were there to help them. Children also benefited from fathers gaining the skills to interact with them in better and more appropriate ways:

> But also major spin-off of benefits for the children, because dad is suddenly doing things appropriately with me, communicating properly with me, playing with me, helping me with my tantrums. You know what I mean? The father's parenting skills have improved. So yes. Major benefits to the children long-term. (Project Facilitator, parenting education programs—parents)

Conclusion

By their nature, services that were most successful at engaging with fathers were specifically tailored to men and exclusive to fathers. More broadly, fathers and professionals tended to share the view that positive father engagement is most likely in situations where the facilitator is male and a father himself, is liked and trusted, and creates dialogue by sharing personal experiences. Fathers tended to be alienated by "experts" and a highly structured program format and preferred informal peer discussions and "hands-on" program activities.

A number of useful strategies for facilitating father engagement were identified. These included networking with other services and programs, word-of-mouth promotion, and using innovative approaches to marketing, branding and advertising. Adopting a flexible and strengths-based approach to program delivery, and making service sites more "male-friendly" was also important.

The professionals who participated in the study demonstrated a well-developed understanding of the benefits of father involvement, were keen to engage with fathers, and were often enthusiastic and passionate about working with men. Contact with services and programs was a positive and valued experience for those fathers who participated in the research in terms of: knowledge and skill development, relationships with children and partners, connecting with other fathers and the community more broadly, and resolving personal issues.

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