

# Fathers and Families – Working with Fathers

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## **AAPCH Research Project Fathers in Early Parenting Services and Programs**

### **Abstract**

The aim of this research project was to consider possible future research directions about fathers in early parenting programs and services – families from pregnancy and with children 0-5 years. As part of this enquiry these programs were explored and evaluated from a father engagement perspective, with input from both researchers and practitioners in the field. Whilst parenting services are much more aware of the need to include fathers, and many more fathers want to be actively involved as a parent, fathers still do not participate in such programs in large numbers. This project explored why this might be so. Is it because of the style of programs offered, the business hours of operation, a lack of interest, and/or other factors?

What was revealed was a lack of base line information, for both services and fathers. Many general parenting programs have been developed on the experience, expertise and input of mothers. Furthermore, most men have experienced quite a different model of fathering themselves (especially with infants and young children) and could offer no useful comparisons regarding what such programs could indeed provide. For these reasons the main recommendation from this project is to collect stories, across the spectrum, of contemporary Australian fatherhood experiences. This would provide both a database for future research and a useful resource for practitioners, fathers and families.

## Outcome for Project

A defined short term research direction and priority question for the next step in supporting positive fathering in early childhood.

## Introduction

In September 2009, The Australian Association of Parenting and Child Health (AAPCH) received a \$15,000 seeding grant, from the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY), to further fatherhood research in early parenting work. A subcommittee comprised of AAPCH members, have overseen this project with a project officer to manage the process, consult with the various stakeholders and to report on eventual outcomes.

The original funding proposal's title was "Fathers and Families – Evaluating Frameworks for Working with Fathers", with a particular focus on recruitment, retention and engagement of fathers in early parenting programs, plus the evaluation of the effectiveness of such programs. This proposal required modification due to a reduction in the final funding allocation.

## Methodology

After consultation with researchers and practitioners in the field it was decided to change the format for our discussions from a day symposium to a different approach using webinar technology. This had the advantage of opening up the discussion with a large number of people, including those in regional centres, as well as being cost and time effective. The two webinars were held on February 10 and 18 and, with 65 and 40 participants respectively, and were well received. People from every Australian state, plus the ACT and New Zealand, participated, with about one third of "log-ins" not being from a capital city.

### 1. Webinar One

The first webinar was on the theme of Engagement with Fathers. The first presentation was from Dr Stefan Gruenert, the CEO of Odyssey House, a drug and counselling service in Melbourne. Dr Gruenert spoke on several related themes, all around flexible and non-judgemental ways to engage with men. Many men lack examples or role models of fathering from their own life experience, particularly in a contemporary context. Dr Gruenert also spoke about the therapeutic benefits to the men as clients when they are actively engaged with their fathering.

The need for rethinking how we engage with fathers was well supported by the results from our follow up participant survey in which the biggest barriers to engaging with fathers were viewed to be limits to the services themselves; operating restrictions out of business hours, the attitudes of the service and its

staff, the lack of suitable male practitioners and the style of the service delivery. It is also worth noting that these results and project participation in general, came from a 60+% female cohort.

The second presentation was from Dr Murray Fisher, Senior Lecturer at the Sydney Nursing School at the University of Sydney, who presented a more societal view on how masculinity is socially constructed as well as the current gender realities and divisions of labour in Australia. The aim was to provide a wider perspective and snapshot of contemporary life in Australia, particularly around gender roles and wide discrepancies were revealed between the genders in the amount of time spent actively parenting and working in and out of home. What also emerged is that there are different categories of men (and women), with differing views and expectations about fathering, and that early parenting programs may not be targeting large groups of fathers. A webinar poll, not surprisingly, highlighted that the difficult to reach fathers are from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD), Aboriginal and Low Socio-Economic communities.

## 2. Webinar Two

The second webinar had a specific focus on: *how we evaluate programs with fathers*. Dr Richard Fletcher, from the Family Action Centre at Newcastle University, asked: who benefits from these early parenting programs for fathers, how do they benefit and how do you tell? He also revealed that some highly acclaimed and recommended parenting programs were based almost exclusively on the responses and input of mothers. Successful programs focusing on and engaging with fathers are still not common. The suggestion was to just get on with it and have a go at such programs and evaluate their progress, rather than waiting to research what fathers want, as to date fathers mostly have no experiences or comparisons to draw on.

Dr Bruce Maycock, from the School of Public Health at Curtin University, then discussed his research project around the effect of fathers on breastfeeding. This was a good example of a collaborative research project, involving seven major institutions, and was most interesting in terms of methods and strategies utilised to engage fathers, including making fathers the conduit for much of the information and education in this controlled intervention. Persistence, flexibility, timely rewards, technology and simple feedback mechanisms all helped with father engagement. And yes, fathers do have a beneficial impact on the success and duration of the mothers' breastfeeding!

## 3. On-line Electronic Survey

After the webinars an electronic survey (Survey Monkey) was distributed to participants and the results of 28 responses were collated. On-line polls were also held during the webinars themselves. These results are available in separate attachments.

## Outcomes from Project

### 1. Collaboration between Researchers and Practitioners in Fatherhood work

This whole process was primarily aimed at enabling further discussion between researchers and workers at the “coal face” in this field. The conversations made apparent the need for the development of partnerships between researchers and practitioner organisations.

Whilst these types of collaborations do already occur, they are still tenuous, linked to individuals rather than organisations, involve issues of intellectual property and can become quite territorial. There is also the practical problem of differing time frames, with researchers needing a longer lead in time to co-ordinate with their other research initiatives and directions and to align with their funding sources, whilst practitioners are likely to be asking more immediate questions. It is also true that most researchers in early parenting have no particular focus on fathers. For real collaboration to occur, researchers and practitioners/administrators need to develop their research questions together. A major obstacle for this to occur is that researchers usually have their own research agenda well in place and funding bodies use the pre-history of the chief investigator in the field as a major selection criteria for projects, thus limiting new initiatives and changes of direction for researchers.

A major success of this project was to establish an interactive forum to discuss these issues.

The initial consultation phase specifically targeted researchers, with the hunger of practitioners for this type of gathering and connection immediately obvious from AAPCH members and other service providers. Indeed, several organisations participated in the webinars as small groups and used this process as a springboard for their own internal conversations. A quarter of participants for the on-line survey, and webinar “log-ins”, were researchers, but this group did require more pro-active initial recruitment. Feedback received suggests that there is a strong desire, and therefore the opportunity, to continue these types of forums. We also connected with, and thank, the Australian Fathers Research Network and Richard Fletcher as a key presenter and consultant, and the many participants who joined us from an announcement through this network.

Many positive comments were received about both the content and format of this project. Some feedback quotes include:

*“(this was a) very good technological solution to the tyranny of distance”;*

*“Loved it. Well done. I want to keep informed about future events, including webinars”;*

*“Thank you for giving us the opportunity to participate in this experience (content and technological)”;* and

*“It was great to be involved”.*

Most participants were experiencing webinars for the first time.

## **2. Increased collaboration/communication between early parenting services nationally**

About 30 different organisations were represented in the webinars and the subsequent follow up sharing of information. These services ranged from large to small and included men's programs as well as parenting services. Participants were from every State of Australia, the ACT and New Zealand. Remote and regional areas were also well represented. This project has sent the presentations and other information to all participants and other interested parties, and has collated and distributed relevant responses.

Links have also been made with the Australian Fathers Research Network (AFRN). Promotion of this project through this network attracted many participants and, conversely, other participants are now aware and have joined AFRN.

## **3. Future Directions for Research**

So, what should be the next research direction about fathers' involvement in early parenting services?

Whilst no clearly framed answer was distilled from these discussions or from the various feedback mechanisms, some general themes have emerged. The first is that many men have little or poor role modelling from their own fathers in how to be a contemporary father. In many cases they do not know what they need or want and have nothing to compare it with. Secondly, workers in the field have identified that it is often the style and attitude of the service itself that is a barrier to father engagement. These issues are of course further compounded when other factors are present for fathers such as separation, drug and alcohol concerns, CaLD backgrounds and economic limitations.

The historical outlook of early childhood and parenting services, and their workers to fathering can also lag behind current realities. What seems to be missing, and what some men are asking for, are real examples of how men are living their lives as fathers. How are they coping, what would have helped them and how has active fathering in the early years helped or changed them? This seems to be of great value to many men and addresses the negative feedback received, from both male clients and webinar participants, about the predominance of the expert driven service delivery model. Examples of fathering/fatherhood stories are needed from a wide demographic of men in fathering roles; including CaLD, Aboriginal, various separation scenarios, fathering second time around, and younger fathers, Mental health issues (including post natal depression) in families and various socio-economic realities. This spectrum of stories will obviously also include successful and creative fathering solutions to particular situations, thus expanding on and challenging the multiplicity of negative father stories we hear in the media.

For all of these reasons the steering committee is recommending that the next direction of research into fathering in early parenting programs is a qualitative study and collection of stories of fatherhood. Furthermore, it suggests that narrative approaches (possibly an appreciative enquiry) be utilised as a methodology as well as a way to provide a common framework across states and regions. A strength-based approach will be critical for the success of this project, both in terms of the engagement and interaction with fathers and with the collection of relevant and useful stories. This proposal would provide a huge resource to all parenting services, researchers in the field and to all interested men and families. Stories could be referenced and indexed by various themes, categories, word usage, regions and demographics. These real experiences would be a very useful adjunct to the generic statistical information we currently have about contemporary Australian fathering. The stories could then be collated into various products or technologies conducive to how best men and fathers would receive them.

For this type of funding proposal to be successful AAPCH would need to find research collaboration partners and, in particular, a “chief investigator” who would be working under the auspices of an interested university (or universities). These collaborations and funding options can be explored by AAPCH and further developed when in alignment with the intention to collect qualitative stories of fatherhood. This recommendation for the next step in father research could be a conduit to a greater understanding and engagement with contemporary fatherhood in Australia.

## Recommendations

1. **AAPCH, with suitable research partners, applies for funding to research and collect stories from fathers.**

Interest has been expressed in preliminary discussions with suitable partners.

2. **That AAPCH investigates and finds suitable funding bodies for such a project.**

This project is envisaged to be a 2- staged process:

**Stage 1** will seek funding from a philanthropic private organisation. The current intention is to make a submission to The Ian Potter Foundation.

The NIB Foundation and the Telstra Foundation have also been considered.

Applications would be made in 2010 for 2011.

The outcome of this stage would be to develop and produce a “book” (or possibly another medium) resource for use by services, fathers and families.

**Stage 2** of this proposal would be a much larger research project, involve a funding application to the Australian Research Council (ARC). This would be contingent on:

- \*The successful outcome of Stage 1

- \*The developing strength of the research team from Stage 1

- \*The creation of a strong partnership with a “chief researcher”

Applications would be made in 2011 for 2012 (or 1 year later).

3. **That AAPCH locates a suitable “chief investigator” for this project.**

One possibility has already been identified, but this position will emerge through the process of Stage 1.

4. **AAPCH applies for a grant to do a comprehensive Literature Review on Father Research across Australia and the world.**

The review focus would be on fathers in early parenting and fatherhood story collection and interview methodologies.

We are currently unsure of suitable funding sources for this recommendation.

## Attachments

1. Results of the On-line Survey (Survey Monkey)
2. Webinar Poll Responses
- 3-6. The 4 Webinar Presentations (PDF separate from this document)

## On-line Survey Results (28 completed)

Feb – March 2010

### AAPCH Research Project on Fathers in Early Parenting Programs

<b>1. In which webinars did you participate?</b>							
	answered question 28			Skipped 0			
	Response Percent			Response Count			
<b>Both Webinar 1 (Feb 10) and Webinar 2 (Feb 18)</b>	53.6%			15			
Webinar 1 only	35.7%			10			
Webinar 2 only	10.7%			3			
<b>2. How would you describe the nature of your work with men and/or early parenting programs?</b>							
	answered question 27			Skipped 1			
	Response Percent			Response Count			
Researcher	25.9%			7			
Practitioner	33.3%			9			
<b>Manager/Administrator</b>	40.7%			11			
<b>3. What is your Gender?</b>							
	answered question 28			Skipped 0			
	Response Percent			Response Count			
Male	38.5%			10			
<b>Female</b>	61.5%			18			
<b>4. For Webinar 1 Participants: How informative and interesting were the presentations in Webinar 1 for your work in this field?</b>							
	answered question 24						Skipped 4
	No	slightly relevant	Some-what relevant	quite relevant	extremely relevant	Rating Average	Response Count
Dr Stefan Gruenert	0.0% (0)	8.7% (2)	17.4% (4)	47.8% (11)	26.1% (6)	3.91	23
Dr Murray Fisher	13.6% (3)	18.2% (4)	18.2% (4)	40.9% (9)	9.1% (2)	3.14	22
<b>5. For Webinar 2 Participants: How informative and interesting were the presentations in Webinar 2 for your work in this field?</b>							
	answered question 20			Skipped 8			
	no relevance	slightly relevant	Some-what relevant	quite relevant	extremely relevant	Rating Average	Response Count
Dr Richard Fletcher	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	10.0% (2)	45.0% (9)	45.0% (9)	4.35	20
Prof Bruce Maycock	5.6% (1)	5.6% (1)	0.0% (0)	50% (9)	38.9% (7)	4.11	18
<b>6. What feedback could you give to any presenter(s)?</b>							
answered question 10 Skipped 18							
Webinar 1: more lively pace, less tied to Powerpoint. The second speaker seemed a bit slow with his presentation							

## 6. What feedback could you give to any presenter(s)?

do not know whether thought Richard's team review of websites was prompted in any way with the webinar series however thought this was a masterstroke to underline his messages- thank you for the critical eye (maybe he can get done what we cannot)

All presenters had an important perspective to share. Gender construction is so important, us females find it sometimes hard to grasp so therefore need a lot more fatherhood workers and researchers.

Be visible to other participants -get your camera working.

Thank you for your time and your challenging/provoking comments

Use overview of all topics, hard to get debate and greater depth

Look at your slide presentation quite messy, key points rather than reading everything on it.

Dr Murray Fisher's presentation was too academic and failed to make the links with direct service delivery

excellent - except those who read the slides (rather than interpreting)

## 7. What do you consider is(are) the biggest barrier(s) to engaging with fathers in early parenting services?

answered  
question 27

Skipped 1

	Response Percent	Response Count
The attitude of the fathers	37.0%	10
The attitude of the service and its staff	59.3%	16
<b>Limits to the service out of business hours</b>	63.0%	17
Lack of suitable male practitioners	55.6%	15
The style of service delivery	55.6%	15
The physical environment and/or location of the service	29.6%	8

## 8. What don't we know (and could therefore investigate) about fathering in children's early years?

answered  
question 16

Skipped 12

add to previous question choices: societal attitudes

I dont think education at Ngala has issues of capturing fathers at our scheduled workshops as we hold them in the evenings and satur morning never in Sep or on a test cricket day in Perth however very few fathers to partnered workshops

fathers in the child protection system- how child friendly practices

(families/agencies/communities/legislation) could support the fathering role

does involvement of fathers in developing care plans/planning change make a difference to outcome . eg attendance at DayStay or consultation or group workshop .

efficacy of parenting information and programs in prisons/remand centres for men and fathers particularly young men

I guess it is difficult to say what is successful fathering but men are interested in seeing how other men do things. What i am saying is that collecting stories about "successful fathering" would be extremely beneficial. It would be good to find out from dads and prospective dads what they are least confident about or want to find out more about and then deternining creative ways to help them develop whatever skills they need to meet these concerns. Most of the men I work with don't use a theoretical frame work in dealing with their children and relationships but tend to base it on previous practical experience including how they were fathered / parented.

Issues of very young fathers

How to change or overcome cultural/societal barriers.

How to access the competence of a father to parent an infant.

is the current training of future professionals in the health/education and allied field are prepare to integrate fathers into family/parenting issues?

## 9. In which area(s) of research into fathers, in early parenting services and programs, would you like to see further work and funding?

answered  
question 28

Skipped 0

**9. In which area(s) of research into fathers, in early parenting services and programs, would you like to see further work and funding?**

	Response Percent	Response Count
Post Natal Depression in Families	25%	7
Effects on Breastfeeding	17.9%	5
The benefits to sons & daughters of father involvement in the early years	57.1%	16
<b>The benefits to the father of being an involved parent in the early years</b>	82.1%	23
<b>The types and styles of services that fathers actually attend</b>	82.1%	23

**10. Any other comments about this project and/or directions for research into fathers?**

answered question 11      Skipped 17

Thank you  
 we need to normalise fathers and mothers they are a team so dads do feel comfortable working in groups where mothers and fathers both attend as this way of work normalises feelings of both men and women and great discussions occur  
 more please  
 what are the effective ways to utilise connection with mothers to effect engagement with fathers  
 webinar very useful medium for sharing knowledge  
 From experience I think that any kind of research needs to be action based and qualitative in nature. again my experience is that men learn about fathering and relationships by standing alongside not by developing a theoretical framework  
 How to engage dads in the antenatal period that don't go to antenatal classes?  
 Very good technological solution to the tyranny of distance.  
 Thank you for giving us the opportunity to participate in this experience (content and technological)  
 It was great to be involved  
 Loved it. Well done. I want to keep informed about future events, including webinars

## Webinar Poll questions & Responses

Webinar 1: 10/02/10

Webinar 2: 18/02/10

- 1. How many people are participating in this webinar at your computer/phone terminal? (Webinar 1)**

a. Just me	13/25 ( 52%)
b. 2 of us	4/25 ( 16%)
c. 3 of us	2/25 ( 8%)
d. 4 of us	2/25 ( 8%)
e. 5 or more of us	3/25 ( 12%)
No Answer	1/25 ( 4%)

65 participants (including host venue) in total
  
- 2. 2.Where are you from? (Webinar 1)**

a.NSW	8/25 ( 32%)
b.Vic	6/25 ( 24%)
c.QLD	1/25 ( 4%)
d.WA	5/25 ( 20%)
e.SA	1/25 ( 4%)
f.Tas	1/25 ( 4%)
g.ACT	1/25 ( 4%)
h.NT	0/25 ( 0%)
i.NZ	1/25 ( 4%)
No Answer	1/25 ( 4%)
  
- 3. Do you work in a: (Webinar 1)**

a.Capital City	15/25 ( 60%)
b.Major Regional Centre	7/25 ( 28%)
c.Smaller town, rural or remote	2/25 ( 8%)
No Answer	1/25 ( 4%)
  
- 4. From the early parenting programs and services that you know or work with, how would you describe their effectiveness in engaging with fathers? (Webinar 1)**

a.Excellent	3/25 ( 12%)
b.Fair	14/25 ( 56%)
c.Poor	7/25 ( 28%)
No Answer	1/25 ( 4%)
  
- 5. What would best describe your work (or that of the majority present) in this field? (Webinar 1)**

a.Researcher	7/25 ( 28%)
b.Practitioner	17/25 ( 68%)

c.Administrator/Manager 9/25 ( 36%)  
 No Answer 1/25 ( 4%)

**6. What category(ies) of fathers are least reached and represented in the early parenting programs that you know?**

<b>Category of Fathers</b>	<b>Responses Log ins/20 Webinar 2</b>	<b>% of responses /15</b>	<b>Responses Log ins/27 Webinar 1</b>	<b>% of responses /22</b>
Low Socio Economic	11	73	12	55
High Socio Economic	3	30	4	18
Separated	4	40	10	45
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander	11	73	Not asked	Not asked
Younger	8	53	6	27
Older	1	10	2	9
CALD	11	73	18	82
No Answer	5	33	5	19

So, no surprises! The group of fathers least represented in early parenting programs are fathers who are Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and from low socio-economic backgrounds. Separated and young fathers are also difficult to reach.

**7. What do you think is the biggest barrier to effectively engaging with fathers?**

mind set that parents = mothers  
 fathers aren't used to seeing themselves as major participants in their child's development  
 availability of services not fitting fathers working hours  
 meeting them where they are, both physically and culturally  
 paradigms, Access, getting staff to work out of hours,  
 practitioner attitudes, gendered workforce  
 The culture of some organisations who are not as father friendly as they could be  
 Social & cultural issues  
 lack of co-ordinated policy to support fathers programs and services.  
 Also the simple idea that fathers just need programs.  
 Almost seen as supernumery in childrearing Business hours service delivery. Focus on mothers.  
 Perceptions of Men's work cf Women's work  
 Socio-economic barriers, time, work, etc, cultural issues/knowledge  
 Cultural. Education levels and perception of needs

Community perception of roles  
Lack of info; about the service and about the importance of involvement

**8. What would you choose as the next area of research about fathers and early parenting?**

skills based parenting programs for fathers and outcomes for children  
successful models of engaging fathers in regional areas  
engaging and keeping  
how to engage men emotionally in the role of fathering  
does it make a difference when fathers are involved? whether current strategies reach fathers  
The significant role fathers play in determining the future outcomes of their daughters.  
What areas of parenting are fathers interested in  
Others whose wives/partners have PND. What fathers mean by focus on the child  
Impact on attachment of ante natal involvement of fathers.  
How and where do fathers of young children get information on fathering in the early years. Also, the number and % of fathers who actually receive info.  
Father/infant feeding  
How to engage more in ante natal period  
Societal views/awareness raising views of fathering & importance in the development of a child's brain  
Men fathering and the impact on libido and intimacy in relationship.

**9. Any other comments?**

funding is also lacking  
needs to be action based research  
getting men on board with their baby from day one is the most important intervention that we could help to happen