

Childcare and children's health

Health care information for childcare staff and families from the Centre for Community Child Health

Vol 9 No 2 May 2006

Bringing Dads In

The changing family dynamic

More Australian men are choosing parenting responsibilities, thus challenging the traditional role model of what constitutes a father. Gone are the days when dads went off to work for eight to twelve hours per day, did very little or none of the domestic tasks, interaction with a new born baby was only to give mum a break, demanded three square meals a day and an immaculately kept house in return for bringing home the household income. Just over two decades ago, a majority of Australian couples with young children fitted the male breadwinner pattern of father in the



workforce, mother at home. Today only 31 percent conform to this model. Twice as many couples, 62 percent, have both parents at work.

Each year in Australia well over one hundred thousand men become dads for the first time. On average they will be around thirty two years old. There is a challenge to get fathers prepared for their new role. Many men will attend a prenatal program in their local hospital or community centre to support their partner during the impending birth, but these programs are generally not designed to prepare either parent for their future roles following the birth of the child.

Father's role in parenting

Research tells us that "fathers have a significant impact on child development outcomes for both boys and girls" (Russell and Barclay et al, 1999) and men would like more involvement with their children (Russell and Bowman, 2000).

Fathers are becoming more aware of the significant impact their actions have on the health and well being of their children and the great majority of families. Today's fathers are much more involved in the shared responsibility of parenting to provide a loving, safe, nurturing and stimulating environment in which the baby can grow and learn. There is a greater realisation by men that it is a far more demanding full time role than being a full time member of the employed workforce.

What many men are guilty of, is not taking time prior to the birth of their child to think long and hard about the type of father they want to be and what they need to do in order to be well prepared for the days, weeks, months and years with their new child, doing the dad thing!

In all maternity services in Tasmania, one NSW and two Victorian hospitals a project known as 'Dads Connect' offers a fathers only parenting session to men participating in prenatal programs prior to the birth of their first child. The aims of these one to two hours sessions is to provide

expectant fathers with the opportunity to talk openly with other expectant fathers and assist them to:

- Feel connected to their infant and understand the important role they play in the early growth and development of their child
- Communicate more effectively with their partners about emotional and physical needs, relationship issues and sharing the care of the baby
- Gain enjoyment from the early months of fatherhood
- Be aware of family based services and how to access them.

All sessions are facilitated by an experienced male facilitator who is a parent himself. This project is currently being evaluated by the University of Technology, NSW. The report of the randomised controlled trial will be available in August 2006.

Understanding men's motivations

There is a perception that new fathers are concerned about themselves, and are self engrossed in their own issues around how the arrival of a baby will effect them. In asking family based service providers what they think are the most frequent issues the dads are likely to bring up in prenatal sessions, the response is nearly always sex, sleep and balancing work and family.

In fact, the most frequent issues named by the expectant fathers in the "Dads Connect" sessions are:

- postnatal depression
- supporting my partner
- balancing work and family.

This indicates that fathers are actually more concerned for their partner and their new family, than for themselves.

Is your service accessible to fathers?

The change in father's parenting roles can present a challenge. How prepared is your child care service to truly engage with fathers?

Without necessarily realising it, your initial response and behaviour towards a mum or a dad at the reception desk, in the car park, over the phone, and at every drop off and pick up time can contribute to that parent's preparedness to "do it again". Whilst many child care services are well prepared and mindful of developing good parent professional partnerships and inclusive practices for all mothers and fathers and grandparents, it is still beneficial to take time to reflect on your current practices in light of the needs of fathers specifically.

"What are the differences between fathers and mothers in relation to what they want from your service?", and "How could you cater

for these differences?". To answer these questions it is best tackled in such a way that it involves serious engagement with mums and dads who are accessing your service, hearing directly from them, their expectations of your service and what things your service could have done better for them in the past. Whilst there has been little research done in Australia around the differing expectations of men and women in accessing children's services and what they hope to encounter, there are a few general things worth considering about men and what they hope for from services.

- Men often prefer more task orientated activities to promote conversation and to give them a sense of contributing to community/family
- Men access services for practical information and advice
- Men are less inclined to want to form long term relationships with individuals in services
- Like anyone walking in the door, men do not want to be treated as a special case, patronised, or encounter behaviour that leads them to believe they can't be trusted with children.

In Australian research, it concluded that "many professionals hold unduly negative views of men as fathers" (Russell and Barclay et al, 1999). If staff encounter fathers whilst maintaining negative views or perceptions about men or their role as dads, how can these professionals possibly provide that dad and their child, with the most respectful, engaging and positive experience?

It is essential that your service does not see this challenge of engaging with fathers in a meaningful manner, as another task that will just take us away from core business. It is more positive to ask "What are the benefits for the child and for our service if we were to have more dads engaged?" Reflecting on this question at a staff meeting can be an enriching exercise and provide creative strategies for engaging with fathers for the benefit of their child and the service as a whole.



Considerations for making a service accessible to and engaging for fathers

The following areas and related questions may be a useful framework for reviewing and identifying what may be required to make a service more accessible to dads:

Environment considerations

- Are dads that drop off children or visit a particular child care service going to feel comfortable or welcome?
- Does the physical lay out of the service invite dads to occasionally stay a little longer and feel part of the place?
- Do you display pictures of families showing fathers and mothers?

Language considerations

- Is the language used in literature and the way we interact with parents inclusive of dads?
- Are dads an afterthought with comments like “dads are also welcome”?
- Consider that when reading literature about services, parenting, invitations, many men interpret the word “parents” as meaning “mums”.

Initial contact & marketing considerations

- Have you asked the fathers what they would like from the service?
- Does all the literature about the service take into account what fathers want to know about the service?
- Are your promotional materials inclusive of fathers?
- Fathers may be considered a “hard to reach” group. What strategies do you use for any “hard to reach” groups?

Service provision considerations

- Do carers introduce themselves to fathers when they are dropping off or picking up their child?
- Do you advertise fathering courses available?
- Do carers give simple and practical advice to fathers?
- Do you ever run “fathers only” sessions/activities? Do you ever run “mothers only” sessions/activities?
- How many fathers are represented on management committees in comparison to the overall service population?
- How do you engage with fathers who may not be the custodial parent?
- Have carers explored their feelings about dads involvement in the service?

- Do fathers want less conversation or more about their child’s day or sharing information from home?
- Can you generalise or are dads as diverse as the mothers?
- When fathers do turn up to ‘working bees’ do you take this opportunity to inform them about the service?

Conclusion

Given the increasing participation of men in Australia in undertaking active parenting responsibilities, the onus is on all children’s services to ensure that all parents, regardless of sex, family structure, economic status, religion, or individual capacity have equal opportunity to access these services, as this will support optimal health and well being outcomes for the child and have positive benefits for the family and wider community.

“The overall goal is not to stage one or more successful activities but to change the culture of family related services so that fathers are involved in ways that benefit the babies, infants or children concerned” (Richard Fletcher, Engaging Fathers Project, NSW).

QIAS Principles: 2.1, 2.2, 2.3, 7.1

FDCQA Principles: 1.2, 1.3, 1.5, 2.1, 2.3, 5.2, 5.3, 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.5

Paul Prichard

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Good Beginnings Australia

References

- Russell G, Barclay L., Edgecombe G, Donovan J, Habib G, Callaghan H., & Pawson Q. (1999) *Fitting Fathers into Families*. Canberra: Department of Family and Community Services.
- Russell, G. and Bowman, L. (2000). *Work and Family: Current Thinking, Research and Practice*. Canberra: Department of Family and Community Services.
- King, A. Sweeney, S. Fletcher, R. *A Checklist for Organisations Working With Fathers Using the Non-Deficit Approach*. Children Australia. Volume 30 No 3, 2005.
- A Video *Hello Dad* can be purchased from the NSW Institute of Psychiatry. Telephone: (02) 9840 3833 or email institute@nswiop.nsw.edu.au

The Parent Fact Sheet accompanying this article is available in different community languages and can be downloaded from the Early Childhood Connections website www.econnections.com.au

Case Study

A Fathering Project

The Infant's Home Fathering Project provided an opportunity to increase awareness of the importance of the role of fathers in children's lives and to promote father inclusive practices in the day to day work of all staff and carers. Two strategies were used in this Fathering Project, these being:

1. Program Play

In Program Play the fathering project worker participated in the program in The Infant's Home long day care centres. This provided a model of a male at play with the children and helped to maximise the work with fathers and their children.

2. Fathers Playgroup

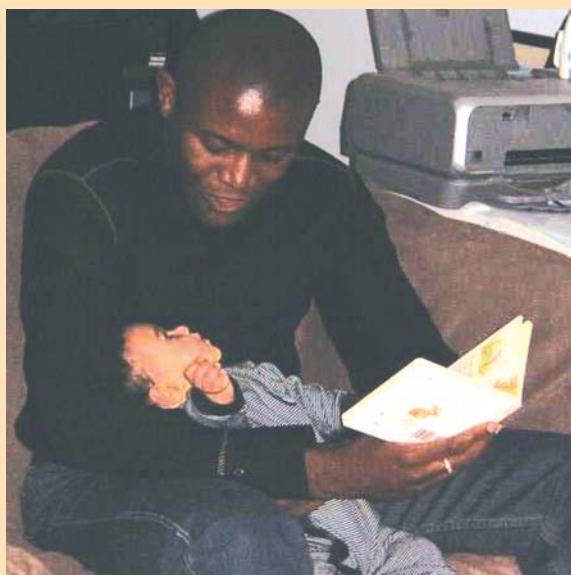
The Fathers Playgroup is a time for dads and their children to come together and get support from each other around parenting and to enhance father child relationships through play.

Jinder and Dinesh

Jinder's name could be heard being called every day, by both staff and children alike, as she would whirlwind her way from one end of the room to the other, dancing, skipping and hopping to music. Her energy was contagious. Jinder had developed a strong bond with all in the Nursery, especially John Betts. John is the Parents Support Worker of the Fathering Project. Jinder shadowed him when he came to the Nursery; playing with him, reading books and singing songs. John, with his quiet tone and powerful presence would often sit and read books cover to cover, over and over again.

At home Jinder told her parents about the things she did during the day, including stories about John. Her conversations with her parents often led to discussions between educators and families on the gender imbalance in children's services, including The Infants' Home.

Jinder and her father, Dinesh, attended the Saturday Fathering Playgroups facilitated by John. Dinesh later commented "I think many fathers want to be more involved in their children's life. This often involves changing attitudes about men and 'caring roles'. I thought the Playgroup was a fantastic opportunity for Dads to interact with other fathers, and spend some time caring for their kids in a supportive environment."



Eric and Carl

Eric attended the Father's Playgroup with his son Carl and wrote: "It has been a time where we have been able to reconnect after a working week where I don't see him very much. Having a special dedicated father son time allows me to get to know him better...It is an opportunity for me to become relevant to him as he is growing up, as an individual instead of part of mum and dad, through things we both do together, our games and rituals. This experience also allows me to develop more confidence as a father through interaction both with the people running the group and the other dads, who are at a similar stage of life and facing the same challenges as me."

John Betts, the Fathering Project Worker, said "In terms of attracting more males to children's services and encouraging fathers into early childhood services the first step is to check our own beliefs around this issue".

**With thanks to Karen Andrews,
Manager Child and Family Support.**

**The Infant's Home, Ashfield NSW and
to the Westpac Foundation
for funding of the Fathering Project.**

Hand Washing and Nose Wiping

Hand washing and nose wiping with children are two of the most commonly performed tasks in child care settings. In order to minimise the risk of cross infection in child care, it is essential that carers and children learn and consistently implement effective hand washing and nose wiping procedures. This is a vital part of offering a quality service.

Hand Washing

Carers need to be familiar with good hand washing hygiene practices. These practices ensure that hands are washed:

- upon arrival/departure from the service. This is applicable to children and carers
- after nappy change, and toileting of self or children
- before and after eating or handling food
- after dealing with body fluids for example, blood, nose secretions, vomit
- after cleaning or handling garbage
- after handling animals
- after outdoor play and other messy activities.

It is recommended that children and carers wash their hands:

- using liquid soap,
- for 10-15 seconds,
- rubbing all hand surfaces thoroughly, including wrists, back and front of hands, and between fingers. If rings are worn be careful to wash underneath them,
- rinse with running warm water, and
- dry thoroughly with a clean paper towel which can be used to turn the tap off.

In some situations where access to running water is difficult e.g. on excursions or at the park, the use of certain types of non-water cleansers or antiseptics such as alcohol based hand rub, gel or foam are adequate. Care must be taken to ensure that children do not inhale the fumes. If hands are visibly soiled, washing with soap and running water is a more preferable option.



Nose Wiping

Procedures for nose wiping include:

- use of gloves
- use of clean tissues which must be disposed of safely and appropriately in a covered rubbish bin
- hand washing.

Carers can reduce the 'clinical' nature of using gloves for nose wiping by discussing their use with children, explaining that they are being used to help keep the children safe and well. As with all routine activities, it is important for carers to use nose wiping as an opportunity to engage in positive, one to one interactions with children.

Involve and encourage

Hand washing and nose wiping practices can be supported by actively involving children in performing these tasks. The process of young children acquiring and managing skills to care for themselves is a vital part of their development. Carers play a significant role in facilitating and supporting children as they move toward independence.

To promote the development of children's self care skills, carers need to accept their efforts to help themselves and provide them with strategies and support to build their skills. When children attempt to wash their hands or wipe their nose, an adult response such as "You missed a bit – come here and I'll do it for you!" is equal to telling a child not to bother trying as their efforts are unappreciated. Apart from this being a negative outcome for children, it may also make children reluctant to attempt hand washing or nose wiping tasks independently of

carers. A more appropriate response would be "Well done! Let's look in the mirror and see if there is more that you can wash/wipe". This response values the child's efforts and allows the child to 'own' their development. At the same time the carer is able to positively and sensitively guide the child's skill development. By accepting and promoting even very young children's efforts to care for themselves, carers can foster positive self-care skills, an increased sense of self esteem, and willingness to accept challenges.

Practical Activities

Some practical activities and procedures which will assist children to develop independent hand washing and nose wiping include:

- ensuring that tissues and hand washing requirements are easily accessible.
- ensuring that bathroom areas are kept clean and tidy, i.e. make the area accessible and attractive for children – dirty sinks and towel strewn floors do not inspire a hygienic approach to hand washing for anybody!
- discussing the reasons for and importance of effective personal hygiene practices.
- placing culturally reflective posters and signs showing good hygiene practices at child height. Ideally these posters would be of the children themselves.
- engaging children in age appropriate literacy activities such as story writing, story time and drawing/writing activities about hand washing and nose blowing.
- incorporating songs/rhymes into transition activities which involve hand washing.
- small group times to discuss and practice nose blowing techniques.
- modelling and talking about appropriate hand washing and hygiene practice with children spontaneously throughout the day.

QIAS Principles: 4.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4

FDCQA Principles: 4.3, 4.4

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Resources and further reading

Barabour, J. (1998). 'Infectious diseases in family day care' in *Jigsaw*. (3), 22-23. National Family Day Care Council of Australia. Gosford.

Frith, J., Kambouris, N. & O'Grady, O. (2003). *Health and Safety in Family Day Care Model Policies and Practices* (2nd ed). University of New South Wales School of Public Health and Community Medicine.

www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au

www.health.qld.gov.au/germbusters/resources.asp

Enclosed is a hand washing poster. Copies can be ordered – cost – \$10.00 from the Centre for Community Child Health contact (03) 9345 6150 or email enquiries.cch@rch.org.au

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SUPPORTED BY AN EDUCATIONAL GRANT FROM



SUPPORTED BY THE NATIONAL CHILDCARE ACCREDITATION COUNCIL



SUPPORTED BY



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Community Services and
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