

Including fathers in work with vulnerable families



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Introduction

Research into the long-term benefits of early intervention to support families has highlighted the importance of fathers in children's development. Building on growing community and research support for including fathers, government and non-government organisations are initiating changes to make services more accessible to fathers.

This practice resource aims to support father-inclusive casework practice with vulnerable families. It takes a strength-based approach to acknowledging and building on fathers' contribution to their children's development and well-being, in keeping with the Brighter Futures service model.

The resource looks at the complexity and diversity of family situations, as well as the key lessons from research in this area. Evidence-based strategies for engaging with fathers and encouraging them to take a positive, active role in the parenting of their children are outlined, and a list of useful resources and websites is supplied.

The role of fathers

Recent changes in demographics in Australia have had a major impact on family roles, in particular, fathers' involvement in the care of their young children. Many fathers are taking a more active role in their children's lives

and care. Consequently caseworkers need to be more aware of and attentive to engaging fathers when working with the family.

Social changes experienced by families and communities over the past few decades may have left some fathers unsure of what exactly is expected of them or what sorts of behaviours are appropriate for a father in today's world. For example, shared custody arrangements between parents who divorce are now more common and fathers may have three or more groups of children in their lives: biological children living with them, children of a former partner living away, and stepchildren living with them or elsewhere.

Even when fathers know they are important to their children, they can struggle to define their fathering role. Brighter Futures workers can support fathers to feel more confident about their contribution to parenting.

Diverse family situations

Changing family arrangements mean that there may be more than one "father" in the family picture but the principle for engaging is the same: children do best when there is a solid team of "parents" supporting them. Both biological and non-biological fathers are capable of establishing an emotional connection with a child of any age and can be a

positive influence on children. Fathers can also remain an important reference point for children even when there is little contact. So even in families where the father appears to be absent, it is important to ask about the father's role and to understand the reasons for his absence.

Extended families are common to many Aboriginal communities and to some culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities where a number of men can play a significant role in family life and the care of children – grandfathers and uncles in particular.

The broad definition of "family" in Brighter Futures promotes the notion of a "care group", and supports the inclusion of all those providing care for one or more of the children. However, the decision to promote the inclusion of various family members, including fathers, should be made on a case by case basis and in keeping with the necessary risk assessment protocols.

Family conflict and violence

Father-inclusive casework practice may not be appropriate or may need to be approached differently in some situations, such as where there is marital conflict, when the mother does not want the father involved with the program, or where there is domestic violence in the family.



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Early Head Start services provide parenting support for vulnerable families in the USA. These services have employed a variety of strategies, including allocating separate caseworkers for mothers and fathers, or coordinating the provision of services by separate agencies.¹

Where there is conflict, it is important to take into account the history of the father's relationship with the child and with the mother, as well as the mother's views on his future involvement.

In some situations, parents may blame each other or find fault with one another's parenting rather than working together for the benefit of the child. Wherever possible, casework should aim to help parents to understand the importance of healthy co-parenting relationships, and how important it is, to children's development, for children to feel valued and supported.

Domestic violence is evident in a significant proportion of families participating in the Brighter Futures program.² Where domestic violence is present, caseworkers should refer to the Brighter Futures Practice Resource *Domestic and Family Violence Vulnerability*³ for a comprehensive discussion of the issues involved and practice strategies. Caseworkers should also use service networks and supervision sessions to obtain input and support for case planning.

Fathers and nurturing

In Australian communities, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, caring for young children may be seen as "women's work". While this is partly due to historical gender stereotyping, it may also reflect a general feeling that men are not as competent when it comes to dealing with children's physical care needs and emotions.

Encouraging fathers to become more involved with their children should not be simply a case of asking them to do more cooking and cleaning; it should also be about encouraging them to display more positive emotional expression as they interact with their infant or child.

Involvement in the physical care of their children provides valuable opportunities for fathers to share positive emotional expression. For example, changing nappies or bathing children can involve talking and singing or other playful and nurturing interactions.

Men and women are equally capable of providing physical care and emotional support to young children, but they may have different ways of expressing their care and affection. Encouraging fathers to recognise and respond to their children's needs for physical care and emotional support includes supporting fathers to expand their ideas of what men can do. For example, if you see a father who is nursing his six-month-old, instead of affirming his behaviour with a comment such as "It's good to see a man

who will cuddle his baby" (which implies that most men would not do this), you could say "He seems to know he's really safe with you". Most men do not take it as a compliment to be told that they are unlike other men in the way they care for children.

There are many differences amongst fathers, their attitudes towards parenting, and their abilities to parent. It can be helpful to ask a father, based on his own experience, how he thinks men usually show affection for their children. Also, asking fathers from CALD groups how fathers from their cultural background usually show affection and what they think about how it is done in Australia, can promote useful discussion of the issues.

Be aware that issues such as war trauma, migration experiences, changed gender roles and expectations (such as women working and becoming more independent), and reliance on children as interpreters, can work to undermine fathers' traditional role. Fathers from CALD backgrounds may also have strong beliefs about the nature of the family and father-child relationships that may or may not be supported in Australia.

Gender of workers

It is important for female Brighter Futures workers not to devalue their ability to support fathers in developing a positive role in the family. There is little evidence to indicate that fathers strongly

prefer an all-male environment for parenting courses, or that they are not able to gain valuable skills from female professionals. However, some fathers may feel that their perspective on parenting is not being acknowledged if they find themselves in a group that is overwhelmingly female, or if every service encounter is with female staff.

Some men (including Aboriginal men and some men from CALD backgrounds) may have a strong preference for male workers, but even here it should not be assumed that only males can assist. Even where a father's preference would be to have a male worker, he may be willing to work with a female worker if he can see that the family needs assistance.

There will be times when gender is an issue, for example, it may be culturally inappropriate for an Aboriginal male to discuss certain topics with a female worker. Where it is an issue, Brighter Futures workers should endeavour to co-work with a male colleague or make a referral and work in partnership with other agencies that can provide gender or culturally appropriate services. For more information about working with Aboriginal families and communities refer to DoCS practice resource *Working with Aboriginal people and communities*⁴ and consult Aboriginal staff members as appropriate.

The strength-based approach

A core principle of the Brighter Futures model is its strength-based approach and this will be particularly important in effectively engaging with fathers as part of your support for vulnerable families. Focusing on shortcomings and inadequacies of fathers is unlikely to lead to successful engagement. It is important to build on the positive aspects of a father's involvement including his interests, strengths and resources.

Working with fathers involves acknowledging the father's strengths observed during your visit (e.g. his playfulness or gentleness with a child or his presence at the visit), and building on a father's motivation and capacity to develop a nurturing relationship with his children.

A strength-based approach is essential for working with Aboriginal men who will have been exposed to multiple negative messages about Aboriginal men and their capacity as fathers.⁵ The Brighter Futures *Being Dad, Being Proud* information sheets have been developed by DoCS for use by Brighter Futures workers to support Aboriginal fathers to actively connect with their children.

It is important for Brighter Futures workers to be familiar with the research evidence that demonstrates positive developmental outcomes from the active involvement of fathers. This information can be shared with

families to support a strength-based approach to casework with fathers.

A brief account of some of the key research evidence is presented below.

Key learnings from research

In recent years there has been renewed interest in research on the impact of fathers' involvement on child development. While this area of research is still developing, and many conclusions await further testing, the overall trend is unmistakable; the evidence base is growing for fathers' separate influence on children's physical, emotional and social outcomes. Brighter Futures workers can put this emerging knowledge into practice in their interactions with fathers and their families.

Importance of father–infant and father–child relationships for child development

It is well known that a positive relationship between the mother and father is important for children to flourish, and the role a mother's nurturing plays in child development is also well established. Less well known is the evidence that the relationship between the father and child or father and infant, is also highly influential.

Fathers' relationships with children can influence school readiness, IQ and language ability. For example, several studies have found evidence for fathers' impact

on children's cognitive development. Children whose fathers are described as being involved and nurturing have been found to have better cognitive outcomes, including higher IQ and better linguistic capacity.^{6,7,8} Father-infant teaching interactions have also been associated with improved expressive language development and better engagement with school.^{9,10} Alternatively, high levels of restrictiveness by fathers during play sessions were associated with infants' poor cognitive outcomes.¹¹

A large Australian study found that fathers' parenting style was more influential than mothers' on preschoolers' obesity. Children who had a warm relationship with their father, but where the father also set clear limits for behaviour, were less likely to be obese than those where fathers were distant or permissive.¹²

Fathers can also have a positive influence on their child's development from birth through their relationship and interactions with the child's mother. Australian research has found that fathers' attitudes to breastfeeding play an important role in mothers' choice to breastfeed, and fathers' attitudes influence mothers' decisions about when to wean.^{13,14,15}

Fathers' involvement in infant care when mothers have postnatal depression can provide a buffer against the negative effects of maternal depression on the infant's development.^{16,17}

■ Fathers and depression

Postnatal depression affects around 15% of all childbearing women.¹⁸ The rate of depression amongst new fathers is less clear. Fathers in the first year after the birth may be depressed but not recognise it as such. Traditionally, men have not acknowledged that they may be suffering from depression. The issue of men and depression has recently been brought out into the open through media focus.

Brighter Futures workers who are concerned that a father might be depressed can refer to the Brighter Futures Practice Resource Parental Mental Health Vulnerability¹⁹, which summarises the typical symptoms of depression. Remember, diagnosis of mental health problems is the responsibility of mental health professionals. Brighter Futures workers who are concerned that a father is depressed or has another mental health issue, should discuss the issue and possible next steps with a manager. Referral may need to be made to an appropriate health professional. Some services are listed at the back of this practice resource, but it is good to be aware of local services as services may exist locally that are not available everywhere. It is preferable to refer families to services near where they live.

Where a father's partner is suffering from depression, he is very likely to be feeling confused, frustrated and worried about how the family is going to cope. He may also be wondering what

happened to the woman he knew before the birth. Giving him a chance to talk to someone about how he is coping is a good start. He may feel under pressure not to talk about family matters with outsiders. In this case the father may need encouragement to talk to a health professional about what is going on at home. A good idea might be to give him the Mensline number. Refer to Services on page 10.

■ The importance of play

Fathers can connect with their children via shared activities such as play.²⁰ Father-child play can provide enjoyment and stimulation, lead to positive developmental outcomes and encourage the formation of strong father-child attachment.

Brighter Futures workers should encourage fathers to engage in a range of activities with their children, including gentle activities such as reading, peek-a-boo, puzzles and craft, as well as the more active types of play commonly associated with fathers, including outdoor play and physical play such as ball games. The Brighter Futures Dads Make A Difference information sheets outline a number of ways fathers can play with their children, and are designed as a resource for Brighter Futures workers when talking with fathers about how they can support their child's development.

One type of play that fathers sometimes enjoy is called "rough

and tumble” play, and commonly results in shared laughter, positive emotions and exuberance. This is a unique style of play²¹ and is characterised by physical activities such as wrestling, chasing and running. During these play exchanges, fathers can express key parenting behaviours such as warmth (affection and positive regard) and control (setting clear limits and following through on reasonable sanctions). These parenting behaviours have been associated with optimal child development.²²

The intensity of rough and tumble play allows fathers to express sensitivity toward their children in a playfully challenging way. When the play is managed by the father so that it is physical and energetic, but not hurtful or overly

frustrating, then strong father-child bonds can be created.²³ Strong father-child bonds have been linked to greater attachment security later in life.²⁴ Although rough and tumble play is considered most common with boys, research shows that gender differences are not as great as once believed^{25,26}, and both girls and boys may benefit from physical play with their fathers.

When engaging in physical or rough and tumble play with his child, it is important that a father is aware of the need to provide a physically and emotionally safe play experience. The father therefore needs to have a clear understanding of his own and his child’s physical and emotional boundaries. He also needs to be aware that his role in the play is

largely about bonding with his child and helping his child to learn about his or her own capabilities. As some fathers in Brighter Futures may not have a clear understanding of these issues, Brighter Futures workers may need to exercise discretion about introducing rough and tumble play. Where fathers are already engaging in this type of play, Brighter Futures workers may need to raise these boundary and safety issues with them. Refer to *Physical play pointers* box (left).

Evidence-based practice principles

The preceding discussion highlights a number of principles upon which casework with fathers should be based. These include:

- recognise and take into account the diversity of fathers in relation to attitudes to parenting, parenting skills and abilities, and cultural and socio-economic backgrounds
- recognise and take into account the diversity of family structures and types and fathers’ varied roles within the family
- acknowledge and identify, through assessment and other casework processes, fathers’ unique strengths
- aim to build on fathers’ strengths in order to promote relationships between fathers and their children, and fathers and other family members, that support and enhance child development

Physical play pointers

The following points may be useful when talking with fathers about engaging in physical play with their children:

- not all children like rough and tumble play, or may enjoy it more at particular ages
- rough and tumble play is not the same as fighting. If father and child both have a good time and the child is not hurt, either physically or emotionally, it is rough and tumble play. If not, it is something else
- rough and tumble play can be good for learning limits and self-control
- as the parent, a key part of rough and tumble play for the father is adjusting his effort to ensure the child is not ‘defeated’. The idea is for the child or infant to try their hardest but not get hurt or overwhelmed. The task for the father (who is much bigger, stronger and older) is to keep it enjoyable for the child while making it a challenge
- remember to keep the emphasis on having fun. If it ends in tears, then the excitement was probably too much or the play too rough, it went on too long or was too serious.

- be sensitive to issues of gender, including power imbalances between family members
- identify and respond appropriately to issues of domestic violence if these are present in a family.

Evidence-based practice strategies

This section offers practical tips for engaging with fathers from the first contact and supporting the development of a purposeful working relationship with fathers. Many of the strategies are generic to engaging clients.

➤ Establish the father's current involvement with the family

Where appropriate seek information about a father's involvement or that of other father figures, by asking the referring agency and/or other services involved with the family.

Often the mother is the first point of contact. You can also ask her about the father to find out where he lives, and what regular involvement he has with the children.

➤ Show an interest in his world

Brighter Futures workers can quickly gain some initial information to assist them to engage fathers by noticing the father's immediate environment and talking with him about his interests. Initially

focusing on the father's interests rather than on perceived problems, is likely to place him in a more open frame of mind.

➤ Engaging with fathers starts immediately

Ask the father how he would like you to address him and then address him this way. This shows respect for him and his preferences. Remember that culture can be an important factor and that some fathers may prefer to be addressed by their title.

➤ Keep a focus on the connection between father and child

Fathers are more likely to be motivated by a conversation focusing on their child than one that is focused on them. Focusing on the child and father's connection is part of a strength-based approach in that it enables him to highlight and demonstrate his interest in his child. Questions about what he has noticed about the child and what the child seems to like to do with him will also show a father that you value his opinion.

It is important to recognise that men and women can both create opportunities for father involvement. Acknowledge the influence mothers have on the father-child relationship and work with mothers where necessary to help them support fathers' involvement.

➤ Engagement happens in small steps

Take your time. Expect to build your relationship with the father through lots of small interactions. If he has only met you once or twice, why should he trust you? Create opportunities for him to get to know you and your role with the family.

➤ Build your discussions around an activity

Whenever possible, give the father something to do besides sit and talk. He may be involved in making something with his child or supervising the child's play while you talk. During or after an activity fathers are more open to talk.

Also consider talking to him shoulder to shoulder instead of face to face, as this is a less direct and potentially less confronting style of communication. For example, if you are both watching the child push a toy stroller, you will be side by side and discussion can be more relaxed than when you are facing each other.

➤ Include fathers in the family documentation

Documentation such as forms, assessments, guidelines, checklists, handouts and promotional material should include the term 'father' as well as 'mother'. When helping families to complete forms for

accessing services or other support, be aware of protocols that ignore fathers. Often agencies do not have sections for recording the father's name or details on referral or intake sheets. When preparing documents, ensure they include the father as a valued member of the family.

➤ **Create father-friendly service environments**

Posters and photographs that convey positive images of men engaging with their children should be displayed in waiting rooms and foyers, giving the message that fathers are considered important. Handouts, brochures and information sheets should also include father-inclusive information and images.

➤ **Flexible service hours**

Improve engagement of fathers by organising meetings or interactions that include them. Where possible offer flexible and extended service provision times (e.g. late afternoons, evenings, weekends and early mornings) to accommodate parents and encourage their attendance.

➤ **Be specific about what you are asking fathers to do**

If you want a father to read to his child then maybe suggest five or 10 minutes a day (depending on the child's age) and give him information

about how to go about this and what type of material is suitable to read (refer to the Brighter Futures *Dads Make A Difference* information sheets). Modelling how to play and read with a child can also be an effective way of providing specific examples of positive parent-child interactions.

➤ **Reflect on your interactions with the father**

Working with fathers can be highly rewarding, but it may not be easy. Brighter Futures workers should expect some disappointments and setbacks as a normal part of the relationship-building process. It is important to take time to reflect on how contact with the father is progressing.

Brighter Futures workers need to observe their own interactions with fathers, and reflect on the origin of beliefs and attitudes and how these impact on their work with fathers. Supervision could be used to reflect on gendered assumptions, blind spots and biases.

Small changes may involve adjusting body language and eye contact, or asking fathers if they have any additional comments, questions or concerns. Such strategies do not require major changes or time, but do require awareness and intentional inclusion of fathers.

➤ **Reinforce the connection between father and child**

From birth, babies seek out a relationship with their father and other carers. Brighter Futures workers can look for opportunities to highlight for a father how his child is seeking to connect with him. For example, his baby may be looking to make eye contact with him or his toddler may be pointing to something of interest on the TV or in a book. Highlighting these behaviours can reinforce for the father the importance of his relationship with his child.

Remember to address the father, as well as the mother, when asking questions about the infant or child. It can be easy to refer questions about the child to the mother while the father is standing there. Also, it may be useful to make sure the father is aware of the NSW Health *My First Health Record*, commonly known as the 'Blue Book'.

➤ **Recognise the value of female staff**

Female Brighter Futures workers can be an important source of support for fathers. You don't have to be a male to build a strong relationship with fathers. You do have to make clear that you see his positive role with the children as important. Refer to the [Gender of workers](#) section on page 3 of this practice resource.

➤ Allow for fathers' personal style of communication

Get to know the father and learn from interaction and observation what language works best. Some men will readily respond to conversations about feelings, while others may not.

Do not assume that you can't ask a father about feelings. While some men may interpret this as something "belonging to women", don't automatically assume this is so

for all fathers. Questions such as "How does that sit with you?" or "What do you think about ... ?" may elicit a more useful response if a particular father appears reluctant or unable to respond effectively to questions about feelings.

As a Brighter Futures worker you can help to normalise emotional expression by a father by ensuring that, when this occurs, your body language expresses that it is okay. Making positive

comments about what is occurring emotionally may also be appropriate.

Language barriers may prevent CALD fathers from accessing services and communicating fully. Use qualified interpreters as appropriate. Casework staff from CALD backgrounds should also be used as cultural consultants to provide important information about the father's cultural background and appropriate community supports.

Using the Brighter Futures *Dads Make A Difference* information sheets

The Brighter Futures *Dads Make a Difference* information sheets can be used individually as a casework tool to talk to fathers about specific activities they can do to increase their connections with their children. These information sheets provide fathers with practical ideas for play with their children that will also promote their children's development as well as some basic factual information about age-related developmental needs.

The information sheets are not intended to be offered upon initial contact with a father. Rather, they provide an excellent opportunity for the worker to discuss positive ways that fathers can play with children of different ages.

The information sheets are aimed at giving fathers a series of activities to complete with their child as well as a means for fathers to create connections with their children.

It might be useful to demonstrate play activities or participate in activities alongside the father, and encourage the father's continued use of



these activities. Also remember that some fathers have literacy issues, in which case it is particularly important to use other methods such as demonstrated play, posters and photographs.

Use a strength-based approach to introduce these information sheets to avoid fathers becoming anxious or defensive regarding their current parenting skills. Try using the information sheet as a discussion starter about what sort of play his child or infant enjoys. For example, you can ask, "Are there any activities listed that she really likes?"

Resources

Brighter Futures *Dads Make a Difference* information sheets

These sheets are designed for Brighter Futures workers to use when engaging with fathers about age-related developmental needs and age-appropriate play activities. The sheets are available online at www.community.nsw.gov.au/brighterfutures. There is space on each sheet to write local service information.

Brighter Futures *Being Dad, Being Proud* information sheets

These sheets are designed for Brighter Futures workers to use when engaging Aboriginal fathers about age-related developmental needs and age-appropriate play activities. The sheets are available online at www.community.nsw.gov.au/brighterfutures.

You're A Dad: 7 storylines about being a Dad (Aboriginal)

Designed to encourage positive images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men's roles in the lives of their children, and provide parenting information about children's development and wellbeing. *You're A Dad: 7 storylines about being a Dad* is an A5 20-page colour booklet.

Order online at www.melmailing.com.au/snaicc/modules/orders/new.jsp

SNAICC and the University of Newcastle's Family Action Centre

DVDs

Being a Dad

This DVD includes a series of short information sessions provided by a medical specialist, as well as typical fathers talking frankly about their reactions to aspects of the pregnancy and the birth. Easy to watch, with information on fathers' perspectives delivered frankly and with humour.

*Snapper Lounge Media
(PNMG Media)*

Phone: 1800 505 471

www.beingdad.com.au

Hello, Dad

Workers who require a strength-based resource will find this DVD useful as it raises the importance of fathers being involved from birth, when relationships with their child are first formed. It also acts as a useful tool for the worker when highlighting the signs that a baby makes to communicate, even from birth.

*Good Beginnings & The NSW
Institute for Psychiatry*

Phone: 02 9840 3833

Email: institute@nswiop.nsw.edu.au

So now you're a dad (Aboriginal)

Four first-time Aboriginal fathers talk about getting ready for the birth, the big day and "being there" as a new dad. The interviews have lots of baby-interaction footage and encourage father-infant contact and care.

*Indigenous Programs, Family Action
Centre, University of Newcastle*

Phone: 02 4921 6821

www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/fac

Websites

- The **Engaging Fathers Program**, Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle, provides training and resources.
- **Men and Family Relationships Services** work alongside men to assist them to manage a range of relationship issues with partners, ex-partners and children.
- **UnitingCare Burnside** provides training courses relevant to men and family relationships.
- The **Raising Children Website** provides a comprehensive range of quality-assured information for parents of children birth to eight years.
- **FIRA (Fatherhood Research Involvement Alliance)** a Canadian website that provides clear, dedicated sections for working with immigrant fathers, divorced fathers, fathers and depression, and fathers with children with special needs.
- **Canadian Father Involvement Initiative** develops policy and resources for father-inclusive practice.

Services

Mensline Australia

1300 789 978 24 hours

provides 24-hour family relationships counselling service. Includes a Men's Services Database to locate services in NSW.

www.menslineaus.org.au

Parentline

1300 1300 52

seven days, local call cost

provides a confidential telephone advice and information service for parents of children living in NSW.

www.parentline.com.au

NSW Relationships Australia

1300 364 277

provides referral to programs that address men's violence issues.

www.relationships.com.au

Produced by the NSW Department of Community Services in collaboration with the Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle.

02 9716 2222

Helpline 132 111

www.community.nsw.gov.au

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