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Mental Health

Engaging fathers in early childhood services

Lucy Tully, Australia, December 2019

Key messages

- Many services for child wellbeing are delivered mainly to mothers. Research shows that fathers have low levels of engagement (attendance and participation) in these services.
- Practitioners play an important role in encouraging father engagement in early childhood services and implementing father-inclusive practices.
- Involving fathers (along with mothers) in early childhood services provides an opportunity to obtain comprehensive information about parenting and child wellbeing. It is also a chance to provide support to both parents, which may enhance outcomes for children, parents and families.
- There are six key practitioner tips provided in this paper to enhance the engagement of fathers in early childhood services:
 1. Setting up a father-inclusive environment.
 2. Encouraging fathers to engage from their first appointment.
 3. Using a strengths-based approach when working with fathers.
 4. Using active listening skills to engage fathers in sessions.
 5. Encouraging sharing of information if fathers cannot attend.
 6. Promoting father-inclusive practice at your service.



What is this resource about?

This paper aims to highlight the importance of engaging fathers in early childhood services, and to provide practical tips that practitioners can use to increase their knowledge, skills and confidence in engaging fathers. It is based upon evidence from published research as well as practitioners' experience in working with fathers.

While parenting teams may include a range of caregivers, and may not be limited to mothers and fathers, this paper focuses on parental engagement in the context of mother-father co-parenting.

Who is this resource for?

This paper has been written specifically for child health nurses, but may also be useful for other early childhood practitioners in health, community services and early childhood, education and care sectors.

Delivery partners:

The National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program.

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Key terms

For the purpose of this paper, the term 'father engagement' refers to a father's attendance at, and active involvement in, early childhood services, with the recognition that engagement may take different forms.

The term 'father-inclusive practice' refers to practice that aims to value and support men in their role as fathers, actively encourage their participation in services, and ensure they are appropriately and equally considered in all aspects of service delivery (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009).

The term 'father' refers to biological and social fathers and father figures. 'Father' is defined broadly as men most involved in caregiving and committed to the wellbeing of the child, regardless of living situation, marital status, or biological relation (Yogman & Garfield, 2016). The term 'mother' is also used to refer to biological and social mothers and mother figures.



Fathers play a key role in the development and wellbeing of young children (Lamb et al., 2010). However, services provided to families in the early childhood years are delivered predominantly to mothers.

Research shows that fathers have low levels of involvement in a range of services that focus on child wellbeing, including parenting programs, child welfare services and paediatric services (Maxwell et al., 2012; Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Yogman & Garfield, 2016). However, research also indicates that services such as parenting programs are more effective for improving parenting and child wellbeing when both parents participate (Lundahl et al., 2008).

Early childhood practitioners may have more frequent opportunities for contact with fathers of young children than other practitioners, so they are well-placed to support parenting and child mental health in the early childhood years (birth to age 5).

There may be circumstances in which the appropriateness of engaging the father (or the mother) should be further explored with the referring parent (Lechowicz et al., 2018). This is especially important where there are concerns around family and domestic violence (FDV) or drug and alcohol use. It is now acknowledged that engagement with services is crucial in instances where fathers are using violence or acting in ways which are unsafe for children. This engagement gives professionals the opportunity to intervene early and preventatively through a child-focused lens.

Child-focused ways of working with fathers who are engaging in FDV are explored throughout module one of the Emerging Minds e-learning course, [Family and Domestic Violence and Child-Focused Practice](#).

Many fathers who play an active role in caregiving never access services. This means that they may miss out on much needed support in raising their child or co-parenting effectively. It also means that the responsibility of effective parenting continues to be seen as the sole responsibility of mothers.

This practice paper is not intended to be a comprehensive guide to the topic of engaging fathers. Expertise in this area develops through clinical experience with families, professional training, reflective practice, discussion with colleagues and supervision. The resources section of this paper provides links to resources which offer more information across a range of related topics.

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Benefits of engaging fathers in services in the early childhood years

Fathers play an important role in the wellbeing and development of children. However, early childhood services are predominantly delivered to mothers. Research has identified a range of barriers that may prevent fathers from engaging in early childhood services, or practitioners from working confidently with fathers. Most of this research has focused on barriers to participation in parenting programs. The key barriers include the following factors (Palm & Fagan, 2008; Tully et al., 2017; Tully et al., 2018):

- Practical factors – such as father's work commitments and time constraints.
- Personal factors – such as father's traditional beliefs about gendered roles, negative beliefs about help-seeking or low awareness of service availability.
- Family factors – such as poor quality inter-parental relationship between mothers and fathers.
- Practitioner factors – such as low skills and confidence in engaging fathers or previous negative experiences in working with fathers.
- Service level factors – such as a lack of policies and practices, key performance indicators or reflective supervision which support father inclusion.

Engaging fathers (along with mothers) in early childhood services offers many benefits to parents, children and families. It can help practitioners to:

1. Obtain a comprehensive understanding of the child's wellbeing.

For example, in instances where there are concerns about a child's mental health or development, information received from both parents (rather than just one parent) can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the child's wellbeing. Research has found that mothers and fathers may differ in their ratings of children's social, emotional and behavioural problems (Alakortes et al., 2017). These discrepancies may be an important source of information for aiding decision making about next steps.

2. Gain a more complete understanding of the parent and family factors that may affect children's mental health and development.

It is important to collect information from both parents about their use of parenting strategies, the quality of the inter-parental relationship, and their mental health. This information will help to create a more complete picture of how the family is functioning, and to identify the risk and protective factors and strengths that may be impacting on the child's wellbeing.

In relation to parental mental health, recent research has highlighted the detrimental effects of paternal depression on children's wellbeing and has emphasised the importance of assessing fathers (as well as mothers) for depression in the perinatal period (Glasser & Lerner-Geva, 2018; Sweeney & MacBeth, 2016). By working with both parents, practitioners are better able to provide supports to parents and to tailor resources and services to their needs.

3. Enable the provision of information and support to both parents.

Having both parents engaged in a service allows for collaborative discussion around next steps, and the opportunity to provide information and support to both parents. This information may include resources about child mental health and development or parenting, or referrals to other services. Discussing the information with both parents can offer a range of benefits for parents, children and families, including:

- increased likelihood that parents act on the information provided
- increased likelihood that parents will follow-up on referrals
- the opportunity to enhance both parents' knowledge relating to child mental health and development
- the opportunity to enhance both parents' skills in parenting, and to strengthen parent-child relationships
- the opportunity to strengthen the co-parenting team by ensuring parents are taking a consistent approach in their parenting
- the opportunity to increase both parents' confidence and competence in their parenting role
- increased satisfaction with the service provided.

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4. Support the expectation that fathers are involved in children's lives and as a result, will attend services.

While the importance of engaging fathers in conversations about their children's wellbeing is acknowledged, some fathers remain reluctant to fully engage in services. The more services include father engagement in key performance indicators, practice policies and reflective supervision processes, the better the chances of fathers fully engaging.

Promoting engagement and responsibility among fathers will not only benefit children; it will help ensure mothers are no longer held solely responsible for their children's social and emotional wellbeing.

Setting up a father-inclusive environment

Explicit and inclusive messages from their first point of contact can help fathers overcome the perception that early childhood services are mother-focused and not appropriate for them (see Palm & Fagan, 2008). If fathers perceive the physical space of early childhood services as mother-focused, they may be less likely to attend.

Suggestions for setting up inclusive environments include (Palm & Fagan, 2008; Commonwealth of Australia, 2009):

- signs, pamphlets and initial explanations about the service's commitment towards father inclusion and the importance of both parents attending
- displaying and using resources which depict images of fathers as well as mothers at the service (e.g. brochures, leaflets, posters)
- advertising, promoting or describing that the service is for fathers as well as mothers
- providing children's books that depict fathers and children
- providing a toilet area marked for fathers (or unisex).

Example: Inviting fathers to attend a service

"At our service we really encourage both mothers and fathers to attend sessions together where they can. We tend to find that discussions are more helpful when both parents attend.

Your views about (child's name) are really important, so it would be wonderful if you could attend the next session with (mother's name) so I can speak with you both together. How does this sound to you?"

Encouraging fathers to engage from their first appointment

Studies have found that some fathers believe that services for children and families, such as parenting programs, are only suitable for mothers (e.g. Sicouri et al., 2018). They may worry that the service will be critical of their parenting or overly instructive. Fathers may also worry that their parenting challenges will be highlighted. It is important to address these misunderstandings at the initial point of engagement.

Fathers who are ambivalent about attending a service might seem withdrawn or argumentative, which can be challenging for practitioners. In these instances, it is important that practitioners maintain the assumption that the father would not have attended unless he had a genuine commitment to his child's social and emotional wellbeing.

Developing a partnership with fathers regarding their hopes for their children is often the most effective way to engage with them. This partnership is most likely to occur where practitioners are actively curious about the relationship that the father has with his child – what is working well, what they enjoy doing together, what his concerns are, and what aspects of his child's development he would most like support with. Through this genuine curiosity, it is more likely that a father will begin to feel less worried that his parenting will be criticised.

Example: Demonstrating curiosity with fathers

"John, you mentioned taking Lucy to the park on Saturdays. What does she talk to you about when you go to the park? Her language is really well-developed for her age. Why do you think that is? Is she used to having conversations with adults such as yourself? I'd be really interested in your views on this, and would like to chat to you more. How does this sound to you?"

Fathers can be encouraged to attend by inviting them directly, or indirectly through mothers, and by offering a flexible approach to their involvement. Fathers are more likely to attend when they feel their involvement

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is important, so conveying this message to fathers and mothers is critical.

When directly inviting fathers to attend early childhood services, it can be important to emphasise why their attendance is important. This means highlighting the unique knowledge or expertise a father has in caring for his child.

If a mother is the primary contact with the service, it may not be possible to directly invite the father to participate. In this instance, it may be helpful to engage fathers indirectly through mothers. Depending on the mother's attitude towards father involvement and willingness to facilitate father engagement, the practitioner may also need to provide a rationale for the importance of father engagement (Tully et al., 2018).

The indirect approach to engagement may involve the following:

- Supporting mothers to invite fathers to attend the services.
- Discussing opportunities for the mother to discuss program attendance with the father, in ways that encourage his participation.
- Encouraging mothers to pass on the invitation to fathers to attend, even if mothers believe fathers may not be interested or able to attend.

Example: Engaging fathers indirectly through mothers

“It sounds like [father’s name] is very busy with work at present. However, we really encourage fathers to attend these sessions where possible, so we can talk about child development and parenting with both parents. We tend to find that the discussions are more helpful when both parents attend. How would you feel about asking [father’s name] about attending the next session and letting him know that his involvement is important, and let’s see if we can find a time that would work for you both to attend. How does this sound to you?”

In some instances it may be helpful to obtain the mother's consent to contact the father by phone to directly invite him to attend. A flexible approach could also involve including fathers via phone or Skype during the session, or having mothers and fathers participate in alternating sessions in cases where only one parent can attend.

It is important to note that the indirect approach is not about encouraging mothers to take responsibility for fathers' attendance. Instead, it is about helping mothers to understand the value in fathers' participation, and working together to engage the father in the service.

In summary, to increase father attendance at early childhood services, practitioners can focus on:

- being welcoming, empathic and interested in fathers
- acknowledging the importance of fathers in the lives of children
- emphasising the importance of father involvement in services
- setting an expectation in the service that fathers routinely attend appointments along with mothers
- acknowledging and problem-solving barriers to father attendance
- directly inviting fathers to attend, or inviting them indirectly through mothers
- offering flexible ways of engaging fathers in services, and being responsive to the needs of fathers.

Using a strengths-based approach when working with fathers

A recent Australian survey with over 200 practitioners from a range of professional backgrounds found that 9 out of 10 believed parenting programs were more effective when fathers were involved (Tully et al., 2018). However, research has consistently highlighted that some practitioners lack confidence in engaging with fathers, for a number of reasons. Therefore, it is important that services and organisations develop strong supervision practices that support practitioner competence and confidence in working with fathers.

Using a strengths-based approach when working with fathers, as when working with all parents, can be an effective engagement strategy. This approach recognises and focuses on the parent's strengths, resilience and individual skills.

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The following tips can help practitioners to use a strengths-based approach when working with fathers:

- Recognise fathers' strengths and competencies.
- Demonstrate active curiosity in the relationship that fathers have with their children – what they value about the relationship, and their hopes, observations and concerns for their children.
- Actively recruit fathers as partners in supporting their children's social and emotional wellbeing.
- Convey positive attitudes towards fathers and acknowledge the importance of the fathering role.
- Use supervision to help you if you are having challenges engaging with a father.
- Acknowledge fathers (and mothers) as experts in relation to their children.
- Acknowledge and appreciate the attendance and input of both parents in session and encourage their attendance at subsequent sessions.

Using active listening skills to engage fathers in sessions

When fathers attend a service, it is important to engage them in sessions. Using active listening skills and seeking input from both parents equally have been found to be effective strategies. It is also helpful to highlight both parents' shared commitment to their child.

There may be a tendency for one parent to speak more than the other, but it is important to provide equal time to both. Practitioners should also ensure that the perspectives of both parents are taken into account.

Specific efforts may be needed to engage a disengaged parent in the session by inviting them to comment on the topic of discussion, using active listening skills to confirm their concerns and needs are understood, and to provide empathic responses. Active listening skills include non-verbal and verbal acknowledgements of a parent's view and paraphrasing to check for understanding.

If one parent appears argumentative or withdrawn during a session, it may be helpful to explore and discuss their feelings with them,

possibly in an individual session, depending on the practice policies of the service.

When both parents attend sessions together, there may be disagreements in regards to their beliefs, experiences or expectations. It is important to acknowledge and normalise disagreements between parents, remain impartial and avoiding siding with one parent where possible (Yogman & Garfield, 2016).

Having both parents attend together provides an opportunity to discuss and potentially resolve disagreements, which strengthens the co-parenting team. For example, disagreements over parenting may be resolved through further discussion about the use of specific parenting strategies, and deciding together on an approach.

Example: Responding when mothers and fathers disagree

"It's quite common for parents to have different experiences of parenting and differing views about their child's behaviour. It's really helpful to hear your different perspectives on this issue. Thank you for sharing them with me.

I would just like to check that I have understood what you both have said about (child's name)'s behaviour, then we can discuss the next steps. (Paraphrase concerns each parent has expressed).

It also sounds like, although you both want what is best for (child's name), your differing views on this issue are leading to some disagreements over parenting. It could be helpful for us to talk about strategies that you could both use to get a consistent approach. How does this sound to you both?"

Encouraging sharing of information if fathers cannot attend

Despite practitioners' best efforts, practical barriers to attendance such as work commitments and limited time may mean that fathers simply cannot attend sessions. It is important to be mindful about any negative assumptions you may have about non-attendance – for example, that if a father cannot attend a session, it therefore means that he is not interested in what is being discussed (Lechowicz et al., 2018).

Practitioners can still find ways to include fathers in the sharing of information even when they do not attend in person or via the phone.

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Practitioners can encourage the sharing of information with fathers indirectly through mothers. This may involve providing resources to the mother and discussing how she can share and discuss these resources with the father. It may also involve encouraging the mother to bring any questions or comments from the father along to the next appointment for further discussion with the practitioner.

When sharing resources with the mother, practitioners should check that she is comfortable to pass on information to the father.

Promoting father-inclusive practices at your service

Practitioners have an important role to play in increasing father-inclusive practices at their services by (Lechowicz et al., 2018):

- discussing with colleagues and supervisors the strategies and practices that can be used to increase father involvement
- implementing service-level policies and practices that aim to enhance father engagement
- participating in professional development, staff supervision and training to increase skills and confidence in father engagement
- collecting data on rates of attendance of fathers. This can be helpful to determine if the introduction of father-inclusive policies/practices result in increasing rates of attendance.

A recent Australian study examined the effectiveness of a brief training program for increasing practitioners' skills in engaging fathers in parenting programs.

Both formats of the training program – online and face-to-face – led to significant improvements in practitioner-rated competencies from pre-training to post-training and two-month follow-up. Improvements in practitioner-rated service support for father-inclusive practice, and increased levels of father engagement (as rated by practitioners) were also reported (Burn et al., 2019).

These findings highlight the importance of increasing the availability of training programs for early childhood practitioners in order to enhance skills in engaging fathers and promote father-inclusive practices.

Conclusions

Many services for child wellbeing are delivered predominantly to mothers, but practitioners play an important role in encouraging father engagement at early childhood services and implementing father-inclusive practices.

Involving fathers (along with mothers) in early childhood services provides an opportunity to provide support to both parents, which may enhance the outcomes of the service for children and families.

There are a range of practices that practitioners can use to enhance the engagement of fathers in early childhood services, as outlined in this paper.

Finally, it is important for practitioners to have access to professional development, supervision and training on engaging fathers as this may increase skills and confidence in this area.

More from Emerging Minds

[Engaging parents: An introduction \(e-learning course\)](#)

[Family and domestic violence and child-focused practice \(e-learning course\)](#)

[Keeping families and children in mind \(e-learning course\)](#)

[Sharing information with parents about children's social and emotional wellbeing: A step-by-step approach](#)

[Working with fathers who use violence: Highlights from the Invisible Practices Project](#)

Further information

[Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth \(ARACY\), Engaging Fathers: Evidence review](#)

[Australian Institute of Family Studies \(AIFS\), Engaging Fathers in Child and Family Services](#)

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