How fathers can support child mental health through setting limits and managing behaviour

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this resource may contain images or names of people who have passed away.

This short article outlines how fathers' approaches to setting limits and managing behaviour can affect child mental health. This article also provides considerations for practitioners to support effective practice with fathers and other caregivers.

Introduction

Mothers and fathers[1] can help their children learn what behaviour is appropriate in different situations and support them to self-regulate their behaviour and emotions. They can do this by guiding their children on how to behave, setting appropriate limits and supporting their children to behave within those limits (Staunton, 2020). The most suitable expectations, limits and consequences for children's behaviour will differ for each family and child. However, parental guidance and limits are generally most effective when delivered in a warm and loving way by a parent or caregiver with whom the child has a positive relationship (Staunton, 2020).

Setting and enforcing the expectations, limits and consequences for behaviour should ideally be done through conversations involving the whole family, including children. The set limits and consequences also need to be developmentally and age appropriate. Engaging in undesirable or challenging behaviour – when consistent with their developmental age – is part of growing up for many children (Rhodes, 2018).

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1. This resource discusses the experiences of cisgender heterosexual parents as the research literature focuses on this type of family. However, we acknowledge that practitioners may also work with fathers, mothers and non-birthing parents who may identify with diverse genders or sexualities.

Children often use their behaviour to communicate their needs and emotions and need help learning the skills to self-regulate (Rhodes, 2018). For example, children under three years can't understand rules or the consequences of their behaviour; and some challenging behaviours, like tantrums, are normal behaviour for this age group (Raising Children Network, 2023).

In this short article, we focus on how fathers' approaches to setting limits and managing behaviour can affect child mental health. Although ideally all parents should be involved in managing child behaviour, much of the information and guidance on this topic is based on evidence that has either completely or mostly focused on mothers (Cabrera, Volling, & Barr, 2018). Although mothers remain disproportionately responsible for raising children and child care, fathers are more involved in the day-to-day caregiving of their children than previous generations of fathers (Cabrera et al., 2018). This provides practitioners working with families an opportunity to encourage fathers to set limits and manage behaviour in a way that promotes child mental health. Given that fathers are more responsive when programs and information are tailored to them (Fletcher, St George, May, Hartman, & King, 2015), ideally practitioners working with fathers would have access to information that's specific to fathers' experiences. The father focus of this resource doesn't imply that mothers' approaches to setting limits and managing behaviour aren't also important for child mental health.

This resource doesn't explore domestic and family violence. However, resources related to this topic are provided in the *Further reading and related resources* section.

How can fathers' approaches to setting limits and managing behaviour support child mental health?

Setting limits and managing child behaviour is something that almost all parents and caregivers will do. Their chosen approach can have different impacts on child mental health. Although few studies on setting limits and managing behaviour have examined fathers specifically, the available evidence suggests that children's mental health is improved when fathers employ certain approaches. These are:

– balancing setting limits with granting child autonomy

– using nonphysical discipline; and

– consistently setting clear expectations and limits with their children.

If fathers are overly restrictive or cautious, or if they use harsh or physical discipline, their children are more likely to have poorer mental health.

Setting appropriate limits and restricting autonomy

Setting balanced and developmentally appropriate limits can benefit child mental health. Fathers can be involved in this form of caregiving by, for example, restricting the amount of time the child spends watching TV and what programs their child can watch. When fathers apply an age-appropriate level of caution about a child's health and safety (e.g. allowing some independence and avoiding unnecessarily interfering or micromanaging) and some restrictions on a child's autonomy, children demonstrate fewer externalising behaviours (e.g. refusing to follow rules, aggression, bullying) (McMahon et al., 2019) and experience less anxiety (Cooper-Vince, Chan, Pincus, & Comer, 2014). Conversely, fathers being overprotective and overly cautious is associated with poorer child mental health, such as increased anxiety (Moller, Nikolic, Majdandzic, & Bogels, 2016) and both internalising (e.g. depression, anxiety) and externalising behaviours (Gulenc, Butler, Sarkadi, & Hiscock, 2018). Similar impacts on child mental health have been found when mothers are overprotective (Moller et al., 2016).

Consequences for child behaviour

The research on fathers' practices in imposing consequences for children's undesirable behaviour has mainly examined how fathers' physical punishment (e.g. hitting, slapping) or harsh discipline (e.g. yelling at the child) affects child mental health. There is strong evidence that physical punishment delivered by any parent or caregiver (including fathers) can have negative impacts on a child's health and wellbeing and on the child–parent relationship (Gershoff & Grogan-Kaylor, 2016; Gryczkowski, Jordan, & Mercer, 2018). The research suggests that when fathers are harsh or yell at their children for their behaviour, their children are more likely to experience externalising and internalising behaviours than children whose fathers use less or no harsh punishment (Gulenc et al., 2018). On the other hand, less use of physical punishment can benefit child mental health and lead to children displaying more prosocial behaviours (Gryczkowski et al., 2018).

There are effective evidence-based strategies to managing child behaviour that aren't associated with negative impacts on children's health and wellbeing (e.g. losing a privilege for undesirable behaviour and receiving praise for positive behaviour). You can find information on effective behaviour management strategies for children in the *Further reading and related resources* section. However, the exact impacts of these strategies on child mental health when delivered by fathers is currently unclear.

Consistency

It's important for mothers and fathers to be as consistent as possible in their approaches to setting limits and managing child behaviour, that is, making sure that they respond to their child's behaviour in the same or similar way each time. This helps children learn what to expect when they behave in particular ways (Staunton, 2020). When fathers or mothers are inconsistent in setting and enforcing clear expectations and limits, their children are more likely to experience emotional-behavioural difficulties (Rominov, Giallo, & Whelan, 2016) and display less prosocial behaviours (Gryczkowski et al., 2018; Rominov et al., 2016).

How can practitioners support fathers to promote child mental health?

The following considerations and approaches may be useful for practitioners when encouraging fathers to set limits and manage behaviour in a way that supports child mental health.

– Be curious with fathers about their approach to how they set limits and manage their child's behaviour. Explore what approaches they take and whether they're consistent in their approach.

– Speak with fathers about which approaches to setting limits and managing behaviour can support child mental health and steer them away from approaches associated with mental health challenges, such as physical punishment.

For example, discuss with fathers how:

- consistently setting clear expectations and limits, having a balanced approach (that sets limits on some behaviour but also supports the child to have age-appropriate independence) and using non-physical consequences for non-preferred behaviour can lead to fewer mental health challenges for their child; and

- using harsh consequences, such as yelling or being overprotective and overly cautious could lead to more mental health challenges for children, specifically externalising and internalising behaviours.

– Take a family-centred approach by asking fathers and their family if they need support to manage their child's behaviour. A family-centred approach is a way of working with families to understand their unique circumstances and views parents as the experts on their children (Raising Children Network, 2021). You can discuss which approaches to setting limits and managing behaviour may work best for the child and family.

– Become familiar with effective behaviour management strategies for children and be aware of the impact that physical punishment has on child health and wellbeing. Links to evidence-based resources on these topics are provided in the *Further reading and related resources* section.

Note: Resources related to the impact or use of domestic and family violence by fathers are listed in the *Further reading and related resources* section if this is an issue that arises in your conversations with parents.

Conclusion

Fathers and mothers and can support their children to learn how to behave and develop self-regulation skills. There are some approaches to setting limits and managing behaviour that that are better for child mental health. When fathers balance setting limits and granting child autonomy, use non-physical discipline and consistently set clear expectations and limits, their children experience fewer mental health challenges. Alternatively, overly restrictive or cautious approaches and using harsh or physical discipline can increase the chance of child mental health challenges. Practitioners working with families can be curious with fathers about their approaches to setting limits and managing their child's behaviour. They can speak with fathers about the impacts of different approaches on child mental health and encourage fathers to use approaches that support child mental health. Practitioners can also become familiar with effective behaviour management strategies for children and share resources with families on these strategies.

Further reading and related resources

Resources about working with fathers

The following is a range of resources for practitioners working with and supporting fathers:

– *How fathers' positive engagement and caregiving can support child mental health*

– *How fathers' warm and responsive parenting can support child mental health*

– *How fathers can positively influence children's mental health through play*

– *Supporting fathers' mental health in the perinatal period*

– *The impact of paternal positivity on child mental health* is a short article summarising the findings of a meta-analysis on paternal positivity and child mental health.

– The webinar *Engaging fathers and their children* explores practices that make it possible for fathers to discuss their children's social and emotional wellbeing with health professionals.

– The *Rebuilding our shields: Sharing the stories of deadly dads online course*, is for non-Indigenous practitioners to develop their understanding and connection points when supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers, children and families.

– The following two resources on having conversations with parents about the child and the child-parent relationship are also recommended:

- *In focus: Parent-child relationships* is a paper exploring child-aware and parent-sensitive practice.

- The *PERCS Conversation Guide* provides advice on having conversations with parents about their children.

Resources about setting limits and managing behaviour

The following range of resources for practitioners are on managing and understanding child behaviour:

– Behaviour management strategies for children:

- *Effective behaviour management strategies for children aged 0–10 years*, a short article outlining how practitioners can support families to use evidence-based behaviour management strategies.

- Raising Children Network's short articles *A positive approach to discipline: Babies and children* (for ages 0–8 years) and *Discipline strategies for pre-teens and teenagers* (for ages 9-18 years).

- Supporting children to develop self-regulation skills:

  - Two podcast episodes titled *Supporting children through understanding regulation*, [part 1](#) and [part 2](#), discuss what self-regulation is and how children develop healthy regulation.

  - The short article *Children's self-regulation: Why is it important and how can we support it?* summarises the findings of an academic journal article examining what factors influence changes in child self-regulation.

- The webinar *Understanding children's behaviour as communication* explores the link between children's behaviour and underlying emotional and relational issues, and how to have conversations with parents about this topic.

- Use of physical punishment with children:

  - *What does the evidence tell us about physical punishment of children?* is a short article outlining the impact of physical punishment on children's health and wellbeing.

  - The *Physical punishment legislation resource sheet* outlines Australian legislation on the use of physical punishment as a means of disciplining children.

Resources about domestic and family violence

This short article hasn't covered the impact or use of domestic and family violence by fathers. The following resources are related to domestic and family violence and may be useful to refer to should this be an issue that arises in your conversations with parents:

- *Fathers who use violence* explores options for safe practice where there is ongoing contact between children and women, and fathers who use violence.

- The paper *Fathering programs in the context of domestic and family violence* examines how men's behaviour change programs, domestic and family violence specific fathering programs, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men's healing programs, address fathering issues for men who use violence.

- The *Invisible practices: Working with fathers who use violence* webinar explores how all-of-family approaches can help address the differences between service systems and the need to work with men who use violence.

- *Engaging fathers who use violence* is a podcast episode exploring the importance of engaging fathers for children's social and emotional wellbeing, and how to keep the needs of children visible in work with men who use violence.

- The following online courses on children's mental health and wellbeing in the context of family and domestic violence are also available:

  - *Family and domestic violence and child-aware practice*, which examines opportunities for prevention to promote children's mental health and wellbeing in the context of family and domestic violence.

  - *The impact of family and domestic violence on the child*, which examines the impact that family and domestic violence can have on a child's relationships, physical health, and social and emotional wellbeing.

How was this resource developed?

This resource was developed as part of a series of resources based on a rapid literature review of research articles on fathering and child mental health. As part of this review, the authors searched for terms relating to fathering, child mental health, and prevention/association in Medline, PsycInfo and Web of Science databases from 1 January 2012 to 30 May 2022. The included relevant peer reviewed literature: a) examined the association between fathering behaviours when the child was aged <12 years and child mental health, b) was published in English and c) conducted in high-income, English-speaking countries. The scope and resources from the review were informed by a consultation process involving 14 practitioners, service leaders and researchers who are experts in parenting, fathering, and men's and child health. The rapid literature review and related resources are informed by Pleck's (2010) father involvement framework (i.e. positive engagement, warmth and responsiveness, control, indirect care, and process responsibility).

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