

CAFCA practice sheet

COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES CLEARINGHOUSE AUSTRALIA

Engaging fathers in child and family services

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This Practice Sheet summarises and builds upon the findings from the Engaging Fathers study (Berlyn, Wise, & Soriano, 2008). It provides ideas for practitioners and policy-makers about how to increase engagement of fathers in child and family services and programs.

Why is it important to engage fathers in child and family services?

Research demonstrates that fathers¹ are much less likely to engage with child and family services than mothers. The reasons for this lower rate of engagement are multiple; however, an obvious underlying influence is the traditional ideal of mothers as the primary carers of children and fathers as breadwinners (Berlyn et al., 2008).

Attitudes to fathering and fathering practices have undergone significant changes in recent years. Involved fathering—where men participate more directly and equitably in child rearing, rather than at arm's-length or through their financial contributions—has emerged as a new social ideal (Lamb, 2004).

Recent research has also demonstrated the positive contribution that fathers can make to children's development and family cohesion. Children with highly involved fathers experience positive outcomes in socio-emotional, behavioural and cognitive/educational domains (Lamb & Tamis-leMonda, 2004). The children of fathers who read to their children from an early age have better literacy skills and improved school readiness when compared to other children (Gadsden & Ray, 2003).

By harnessing the enthusiasm for the new social ideal of involved fathering, child and family services can play a significant role in supporting fathers to be positively involved with their children and families. Research suggests that this will then lead to better outcomes for children and families (Berlyn et al., 2008).

¹ In this Practice Sheet, the term "father" includes biological fathers, stepfathers and father figures. A father figure is an adult male who plays a significant caring role in a child's life, for example, a grandfather, uncle or a family friend.

Why is it challenging to engage fathers in child and family services?

Child and family services can find it challenging to engage fathers because fathers may:

- not attend services;
- not actively participate in programs;
- not have ongoing participation in a program; and/or
- appear reluctant to develop a bond with a service or a practitioner.

Similarly, fathers may find it difficult to engage with child and family services because:

- they don't know where to look for help;
- their working hours can be an obstacle to accessing services;
- child and family services are often seen as places devoted primarily to supporting women and their children and, as a result, men can be reluctant to seek help through these avenues;
- men are less likely to seek out health workers, child welfare professionals and parent groups if they need support in their role as carer; and
- entrenched beliefs and perceptions relating to the roles of men and women, such as men not being "natural nurturers", can enhance men's sense that child and family services are not meant for them.

For further discussion on the challenges child and family services face when trying to engage men and the challenges men face when trying to engage with child and family services, see Berlyn et al. (2008, pp. 19–22), and O'Brien and Rich (2002, pp. 37–45).

Introducing fathers to child and family services: Issues to consider

Some child and family services in Australia already provide services and programs for fathers. The lessons from those service providers suggest that there are some critical issues to consider when introducing programs for fathers:

1. *Fathers are a diverse group* and there are dangers in stereotyping them (e.g., "men don't like to talk about their feelings"). The NSW Department of Community Services (2009) suggests that practitioners:

Get to know the father and learn from interaction and observation what language works best. Some men will readily respond to conversations about feelings, others may not. (p. 8)

2. Research suggests that the vast majority of women clients support the inclusion of men in child and family services. However, *some women clients may find the inclusion of men unsettling*.

Letting women clients know that the service is going to introduce services for fathers and explaining why (e.g., the importance of fathers in children's development) will help existing women clients understand the change and provide them with an opportunity to comment.

3. When you begin to provide services for fathers *it is important not to marginalise women clients*: "Advancing the work with fathers while not alienating or marginalising mothers will be an important skill in many settings" (University of Newcastle, 2008b).

For further discussion on these and other issues to consider when introducing men to child and family services, see Fletcher (2004, p. 24; 2008), Lloyd, O'Brien, and Lewis (2003) and The University of Newcastle (2008b).

PRACTICE CONSIDERATIONS

Practice considerations are general principles based upon lessons from research and practice designed to provide additional guidance to service providers about specific issues relating to working with fathers.

What methods can child and family services use to engage fathers?

Many of the methods for engaging fathers are the same as engaging other potentially “hard to reach” groups in the community. See *How to Engage Disadvantaged Families in Child and Family Services* (McDonald, 2010) for more tips. This Practice Sheet focuses on what methods appear to be specific to engaging men in child and family services.

Acknowledge men and their needs and preferences

Recruitment

- Most communities have spaces where men gather (e.g., sporting venues and events, specific workplaces). These spaces provide opportunities for promoting programs and recruiting fathers.
- Promoting programs in spaces traditionally frequented by men will not necessarily reach *all* men in a community. For example, men from specific cultural groups may be more likely to attend a local religious institution than a sporting event.
- Fathers may be attending non-child and family services that provide opportunities for promoting programs (e.g., Centrelink, community-based welfare agencies). Workers at those services may not be aware of local programs available for fathers.
- Men may be uncomfortable with programs that emphasise the provision of “support” because it suggests they are not coping.
- Men are more likely to attend a child and family service if they are encouraged to do so by their partners. Similarly, a partner who discourages his involvement may reduce a man’s willingness to engage with a service.

For further discussion on acknowledging men’s needs and preferences in service delivery, see: O’Brien and Rich (2002, pp. 26–32), Berlyn et al. (2008, pp. 24–28); Fletcher, (2004, 67–84), Lloyd et al. (2003), and NSW Department of Community Services (2009).

Service delivery

- Services that operate only during business hours are most accessible to people who are home during the day; the majority of those people will be parents and most often women.
- Flexible hours of operation have a significant effect on how accessible a program is to fathers.
- Positive images of men and fathers in a program setting and in promotional materials (such as brochures) shows a service welcomes fathers and recognises their importance.
- Research suggests that many men have a positive response to activities that provide “hands-on” learning opportunities through activities such as cooking and physical activity (rather than seminars and presentations).
- Because child and family services are often staffed and attended mainly by women, having a male staff member or male volunteers (especially “front of house”) may make men feel more comfortable.
- A program specifically for men (e.g., a “Dads” group) may make men more likely to attend a service.

- Holding child and family activities in “male friendly” spaces (e.g., sporting clubs) may improve levels of father engagement.
- Some men (as well as women) may feel uncomfortable discussing personal issues freely and openly in a service environment. Some ways of reducing this discomfort are:
 - for workers to speak about their own experience, rather than positioning themselves as an “expert”;
 - interacting side by side rather than face to face; and
 - discussing issues whilst they are engaged in an activity (e.g., cooking, “tinkering”).

Questions to consider in planning and delivery of services:

- Where do men in the local community gather? Can you promote your program in these venues?

To encourage participants to attend, all potential participants were approached personally through a number of avenues including personally approaching dads as they dropped off and collected their children from school, child care and sporting events. (Kangaroo Island Children’s Services, 2010)
- Consider men from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds: Where do they meet? What challenges might they be facing as fathers? How can your program develop relationships with the men in these communities?

The Community Development Officer drew on personal connections and engagement in other community programs [in order to build networks in the African community]. These included personal friends within African Australian communities, and the Bi-Cultural Community Health Workers. (*Bridges for African Men and Families*, AIFS, 2010b)
- What type of language is used in promotional materials? Does it take into account men’s resistance to seeking help? Does it state what men will get out of the program and what they will be doing at the program?

When we put out the fliers, we make it very clear exactly what the workshop will be on and what we hope people will gain by coming to the workshop. So the dads have some sense that . . . they’re not just coming along to get support. We don’t use the word support. But they’re going to actually learn strategies on a, b, c [and] d. (Participant, cited in Berlyn et al., 2008, p. 23)
- Are there positive images of fathers in the space and/or in promotional materials? Are there positive stories about fathers in promotional materials?
- Does your program provide “hands on” learning experiences?
- Is your program available outside business hours?

We hold the courses both in the daytime and in the evenings and on the weekends. We’ve repeated some of the workshops that have been highly successful and well attended, but we repeated them at different times to ensure that [they are accessible] to everybody. (Participant, cited in Berlyn, et al., 2008, p. 27)

For further discussion on acknowledging men’s needs and preferences in service delivery, see: O’Brien and Rich (2002, pp. 26–32), Berlyn et al. (2008, pp. 24–28), Fletcher, (2004, pp. 67–84), Lloyd et al. (2003), and NSW Department of Community Services (2009).

Build staff and program capacity to engage with fathers

- Whether male or female, all workers require training in how to engage with fathers.
- Being a man or a father is not necessarily going to enhance a practitioner's ability to engage with fathers—although in some circumstances fathers may feel more comfortable with a male facilitator.
- The emotional stereotyping of men (e.g., “men don't express their emotions”, “men are afraid of their feelings”) has been shown to reduce practitioners' effectiveness when conducting family relationship work.
- The ability to include fathers in child and family services requires a range of competencies. Some of the key competencies are:
 - experience working with men;
 - the ability to work with fathers in a one-on-one or group setting;
 - skills in forming productive relationships with clients;
 - the ability to relate to others through personal experience; and
 - the ability to reflect upon and respond to cultural stereotypes about men and how these stereotypes may impact upon their own attitudes and practice.
- Competency working with men is an ongoing process. Practitioners will continue to learn as they continue to work with men.
- The following program characteristics may improve capacity to engage with fathers:
 - considering how to include fathers at the planning stage of a program;
 - a commitment from all staff for father inclusion; and
 - a staff member dedicated to engaging with men.

Questions to consider in planning and delivery of services:

- What training opportunities are available for staff to help them develop the competencies to work with fathers?
- Are staff given an opportunity to reflect upon stereotypes about men and how this might impact upon their practice?
- Are there opportunities for fathers to provide feedback about the service/program?

For more information and further discussion on building the capacity of staff to work with fathers see: Fletcher (2004, pp. 87–88; 2008), The University of Newcastle (2008b), Berlyn et al. (2008, p. 26), and Lloyd et al. (2003).

Adopt a strengths-based approach to fathers and fathering

- Research demonstrates that a strengths-based approach with parents increases the effectiveness of a program and improves parental engagement.
- A strengths-based approach to fathers and fathering is characterised by a focus upon fathers' capacities and the value of fathering. In practice this can be:
 - sharing information with fathers about how they already contribute and how they can further contribute to the wellbeing of children; and
 - resisting an “expert” approach.
- A strengths-based approach to fathers and fathering is especially important because:
 - fathers' competence in dealing with the emotional aspects of parenting small children can be underestimated within their own families and in the general community; and

- due to stereotypical views of men’s abilities (as compared to women’s) men may not realise their capacity to contribute positively to their children’s health and development.
- Improving engagement with men requires service provision that is based on notions of equality, highlights service users’ existing strengths and is non-judgemental.

For more information and further discussion on utilising a strengths-based (or an “anti-expert”) approach for fathers, see: NSW Department of Community Services (2009), Berlyn et al. (2008, p. 25), Fletcher (2008), and University of Newcastle (2008a).

Questions to consider in planning and delivery of services:

- Are staff aware of the strengths-based approach and how it relates to engaging with fathers?
- How is a strengths-based approach practiced in the service environment?

It is always ensuring that the men—they are the experts in their lives and I am not—ensuring that they are empowered to be proactive and respectful and to stay engaged with their families, their children and themselves; their lives... even when a man’s behaviour needs to be challenged, to have them do that in a respectful manner. (Participant, cited in Berlyn, et al., 2008, p. 24)

What might engaging fathers look like in practice?

There are a number of examples within CAFCA’s Promising Practice Profiles database of promising and innovative methods that have been used by services and programs to engage fathers.

For example, one parenting support program in a geographically isolated area used innovative recruitment and retention strategies to encourage and engage parents, particularly fathers (Kangaroo Island Children’s Services, 2008). Some features of the recruitment and retention strategies for men included:

- Approaching fathers at venues where they congregate: Personally approaching fathers at schools, childcare, sporting events, a local library and playgroups.
- Partner support: By approaching the partners of the fathers, many of them (especially those who attend parent training sessions themselves) became keen for their children’s fathers to have access to the same quality information and support.
- Familiar environment: A local football club was purposefully chosen as a male friendly environment to encourage dads to attend the sessions.
- Program design and structure: Timing of the sessions takes into consideration the target parents—if the group targets dads, it will be held in the evening.

For a full list of Promising Practice Profiles relating to the issue of engaging fathers see:
<www.aifs.gov.au/cafca/topics/issue/issue.html#father>

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The information provided in the CAFCA Practice Sheet series is for practitioners and policy-makers who plan and/or deliver services to children and families in Australia, especially those working in disadvantaged communities.

The series draws upon and builds on the findings of an evaluation of a nationwide strategy (the former Stronger Families and Communities Strategy) that was designed to bring about improved outcomes for families and young children.

This Practice Sheet summarises and builds upon the findings from the *Engaging Fathers* study by Berlyn, Wise, and Soriano (2008) which involved interviews with professionals who provide services to families and children (for more details regarding the methodology see <www.facsia.gov.au/about/publications/articles/research/occasional/Pages/ops-ops22.aspx>).