

THE FATHERING PROJECT: PROJECTED SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS

OVERVIEW

The growing body of evidence about the potential impact of improving fathering quality on children indicates long term positive social and economic gains. The Fathering Project is designed to encourage fathering skills, engagement and quality to promote and support the health and wellbeing of children and families. A comprehensive intervention, The Fathering Project will incorporate strategies such as school presentations by trained professionals, workshops, camps, volunteering programs, resources (dvds, books, newsletters) weekly tips, and formation of school groups to undertake activities.

This summary presents the importance and potential impact of early prevention and intervention programmes targeting families to generate far-reaching social and economic benefits. Research underpinning the social and economic benefits likely to be achieved through the implementation of The Fathering Project are presented. Prospective Return on Investment (ROI) was used to analyse the projected economic savings of The Fathering Project on mental health costs using programme benefits estimates and data extrapolated from existing research. Furthermore, this summary provides evidence of the potential societal impact of The Fathering Project on learning and education and health and delinquent behaviour of its target audience.

TOTAL PROSPECTIVE RETURN ON INVESTMENT FOR MENTAL HEALTH COSTS

Based on a conservative impact of 2.5%, the estimated prospective ROI benefits[^] for The Fathering Project in reducing mental health costs alone could reach **\$3.7 million annually**. Additional potential long-term benefits include the savings following outcomes from improved child learning and education and reduced risky health and delinquent behaviours. Using conservative estimates, the prospective benefits from mental health that are anticipated to be generated by the project outweigh the costs of its operation, potentially **returning \$2.45 for every dollar invested** in one year of operation. By reaching the goal of impacting 5% of its target audience, plus the additional impact on learning and education and reduced risky health and delinquent behaviours, The Fathering Project is anticipated to achieve even higher return on investment.

[^]Note this estimation is based on available extrapolated data; further economic modelling is required to provide a more accurate estimate.

BACKGROUND

Prospective Return on Investment (ROI)

Prospective ROI is based on estimations of economic benefits that are difficult to measure; estimation is required and uses indirect economic reasoning and assumptions. These non-measurable benefits provide an understanding of potential economic impacts of the program. This is important because many of the benefits are due to indirect economic impacts, such as the value of improved fathering on family functioning. Formal evaluation cannot establish these outcomes thus the economic benefits derived from the program cannot be without the use of assumptions and indirect reasoning about the presumed impacts.¹

Fathering and parenting programs; ROI

The Minnesota FATHER Project estimated an actual plus prospective ROI of \$9.47 for every dollar invested in the program (a saving of \$7.4 million to the economy)¹.

A ROI analysis of The Triple P program in Alberta Canada³ estimated a potential 25 year net benefit of \$23 million; attributable to the immediate impact of the program on special education, social services, mental health and criminal justice.

Returns to a Unit Dollar Invested

(a) Return to a unit dollar invested at different ages from the perspective of the beginning of life, assuming one dollar initially invested at each age

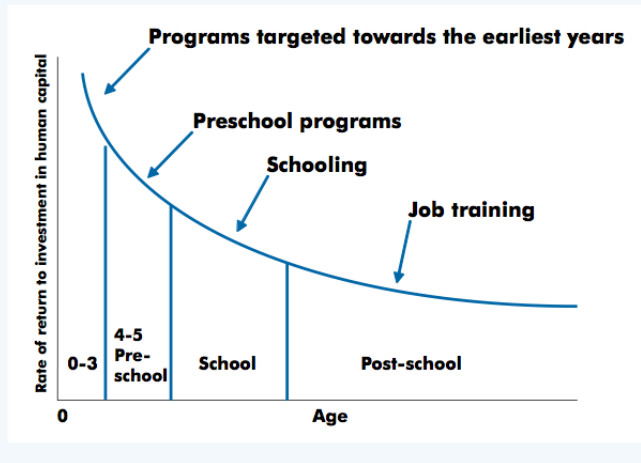


Figure 1: The Heckman Curve⁴

Early prevention programs

Early prevention programs provide exceptional return on investment for societies³. This is particularly applicable to parenting programs that not only provide immediate benefits to child and adolescent outcomes, but also lifelong advantages to participants, their community and subsequent generations. Early prevention interventions are proposed to offer more return for investment than interventions introduced later in a child's life (see Figure 1; The Heckman Curve).

In Australia, 23% of the total burden of disease and injury experienced by Australian children and young people aged 0 to 14 years is due to mental disorders, the largest burden of disease for this age group². Early prevention strategies for mental health are vital.

In addition to the individual benefits accruing for children who are adequately nurtured and supported into adulthood, there are key societal benefits that have prompted advocates and policymakers to explore the promise of parenting education as a preventive approach yielding economic benefits (due to a reduced need for remedial social and education programs) and increased productivity (due to an educated and health workforce). Government investments in parenting education often revolve around reducing the negative and expensive outcomes associated with child abuse, low academic achievement, and crime.

QUALITY FATHERING BENEFITS...

Evidence indicates that fathers' who exhibit more parenting knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviour and presence are related to childhood outcomes including;

1. Learning and Education

- Enhanced child development⁶
- Improved academic progress⁶
- Reduced school adjustment problems⁶
- Enhanced occupational achievement in adulthood^{6*}

2. Mental and social skills and health

- Reduced avoidant/dependant attachment styles¹³
- Reduced rates of psychological maladjustment¹⁴
- Reduced rates of depression, bipolar, anxiety disorders and phobias in adulthood¹⁷
- Treatment seeking for depression¹⁸
- Increased social competence⁶
- Increased social responsibility, social maturity and life skills
- More positive father child/adolescent relationships⁶

3. Health and delinquent behaviours

- Reduced rates of early onset conduct disorders²¹
- Reduced alcohol, tobacco and drug use²³
- Decreased rates of teen pregnancy²⁵
- Increased condom use in adolescence²⁷
- Increased psychosocial adjustment⁶

Many of the benefits resulting from outcomes attributed to father engagement, skills and behaviour are extremely difficult to estimate. As this is a relatively new field of research, additional positive outcomes not yet examined are likely.

Fathering Interventions Work

Whilst fathering presence is important in children's lives, emerging research has highlighted the dual importance of fathering quality. Indeed, overseas programmes impacting fathering quality have resulted in:

- increased knowledge and skill levels of fathers⁵,
- more positive, healthy attitude of fathers regarding fatherhood and parenting⁵,
- increased understanding of fathers about their children's developmental stages and health,¹⁰
- improved parent/child bonds and connections¹⁰, and
- fathers being more active teachers of their children¹⁰

TRANSLATING OUTCOMES TO POTENTIAL ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL BENEFITS

Table 1: Prospective measurable benefits

		% problem in Australian youth	N children/adolescents potentially assisted with The Fathering Project	
			2.5% reach/impact*	5% reach/impact*
Education/learning	Problems with emotions, concentration, behaviour or getting on with people	26% ⁷	2730	5460
	Leave school before high school graduation (WA)	30% ⁸	3150	6300
Mental and social health	Family functioning issues	14% ⁷	1470	2940
	Depression, bipolar, anxiety disorders & phobias	14% ¹²	1470	2940
Health and delinquent behaviours	Conduct disorders/delinquent behaviour	7.1% ¹²	746	1491
	Alcohol, tobacco, drug use (aged 12-17)			
	current drinkers (in last week)	17.4% ¹⁵	1827	3654
	current smokers (in last week)	6.7% ¹⁵	704	1407
	illicit drugs (past month)	7.7% ¹⁵	808	1617
	Teen pregnancy (aged 15-19 in WA)	4.4% ¹⁹	462	924
	No condom use (last sexual intercourse, secondary schools students)	31% ²⁰	3255	6510

* target population 420 000 children/adolescents; previous similar program evaluation indicates conservative impact rates of 6%³.

Prospective Return on Investment; Mental Health Cost Savings[^]

Youth mental health problems cost Australia \$10.6² billion annually. This equates to an average cost of \$2501.50 per Australian child/adolescent. **With an estimated conservative initial impact on mental health for 2.5% of The Fathering Project target population (420 000), the potential economic saving on mental health costs is approximately \$3 677 205/year. With an annual running cost for The Fathering Project of approximately \$1.5 million, this equates to a potential return of \$2.45 for every dollar spent.** The longer term goal of the program is to impact 5% of the population, equating to a saving of \$7 354 410/year.

This cost saving does not include projected disability and premature death associated with mental illness which costs an extra \$20.5 billion to Australian economy each year. Treatment of young people with mental illness aged 12-25 has an estimated financial cost of \$10,544 per person per year; however including the value of lost wellbeing the cost is estimated as \$31,014 per person per year².

It is important to note that these estimates are applied to the potential impact on mental health alone. Significant additional projected benefits achieved from improved fathering on children's education and learning and delinquent and health behavioural outcomes are also anticipated to be achieved through the programme.

[^]Note this estimation is based on available extrapolated data; further economic modeling is required to provide a more accurate estimate.

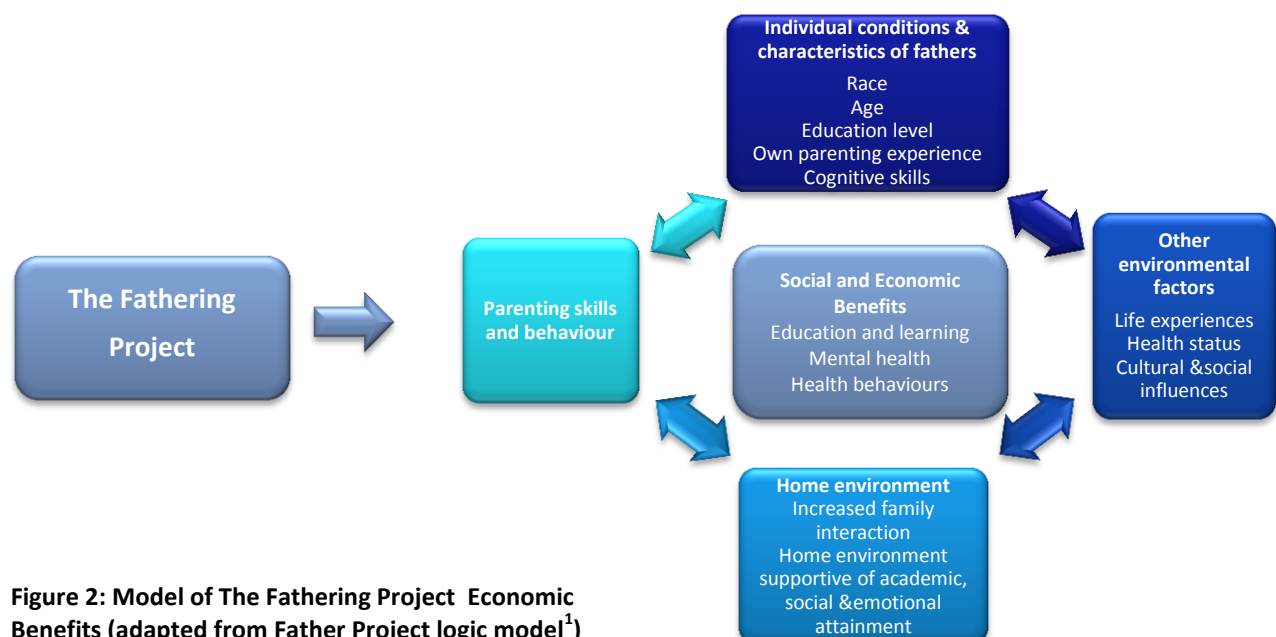


Figure 2: Model of The Fathering Project Economic Benefits (adapted from Father Project logic model¹)

Longer Term Impact of Adverse Events

It is important to note that the outcomes from improved fathering are likely to lead to additional longer term impacts; these further anticipated social and economic benefits have not been incorporated in the above mental health prospective ROI. Evidence related to the potential longer term impact of improved fathering are detailed below.

Learning and Education

Fathering can impact children's learning, cognitive and social development⁶. Children who exhibit better social skills (less aggression and more prosocial behaviour) have better literacy achievement as they enter school⁹. Moreover, research shows that school setbacks such as reading below grade level and grade repetition, have lasting consequences for school achievement, high school completion, and educational attainment through early adulthood¹¹. In Western Australia 70% of young adults had completed up to year 12 in 2010⁸. This is beneficial for society as well as these graduates; those completing Year 12 are more likely to have a personal gross weekly income in the highest quintile than those who had not completing year 12⁸. Failure to finish however, is costly: those not completing secondary school are more likely to be unemployed and have more difficulty securing employment¹⁶.

Mental Health

Mental health issues are rising for children; the proportion of children aged 1 to 15 years ever treated for an emotional or mental health problem more than doubled between 2002 (3.0%) and 2012 (6.2%)⁷. Poor mental health is associated with many negative outcomes that are experienced during youth and have a chronic course that place individuals at increased risk for difficulties that continue into adult life¹². Mental health problems cause considerable personal distress and contribute to lower educational achievement, family breakdown and unemployment¹² amongst other issues. Research estimates that half defendants in criminal trials have a mental health problem²². This creates a heavy social and economic financial burden on the entire community, addressing these mental health problems at the earliest opportunity is likely to provide significant gains for these individual as well as communities.

In addition to these long term outcomes, young people with mental disorders are over 5 times more likely to misuse drugs than those without a mental disorder (36% compared with 7%)²⁴. Early and preventive interventions show promise in reducing the burden of mental illness, particularly in young people; research indicates that half of all serious mental health and substance use disorders commence by the age of 14²⁶.

Health and delinquent behaviours

Tobacco, alcohol and illicit drugs conservatively cost the Australian government \$56 billion annually²⁸. Father communication has been shown to be associated with lower marijuana use for adolescent boys²⁹. Overall, parent communication such as satisfaction with the family system, caring, and conflict resolution ability are modifiable and are indicated as mediating children's health-risk behaviours. In addition to the potential impact of improving fathering quality on health behaviours, there is evidence that delinquent behaviour and the outcomes of this are likely to benefit from early intervention. Conduct disorders are costly; individuals with conduct disorder have been shown to cost governments 10.0 times more than for those with no problems and 3.5 times more than for those with conduct problems³⁰. There is extensive literature about the effects of conduct problems and disorder on education, crime and unemployment³¹. Additionally delinquent behaviour tracks from childhood to adolescence; one Australian study found 86% per cent of children with conduct and oppositional defiant behaviours at age seven also exhibited these behaviours at age 15³². Delinquent behaviour in adolescence is associated with criminal activity³²; with an estimated annual cost of dealing with crime \$13 billion annually³³, the Australian Institute of Criminology have advocated for effective early intervention programs targeting delinquent behaviour to ensure the most productive and effective crime prevention strategies are implemented³³.

The Fathering Project Impact and Outcome Evaluation

The Fathering Project evaluation will incorporate assessment of;

1. Time spent with child/ren by father
2. Perceived relationship between father and child/ren
3. Perceived family relationship
4. Child school attendance rates
5. Child academic achievement
6. Children's mental/emotional problems requiring a professional
7. Perceived child emotional/mental health problems
8. Child and delinquent health behaviours

Initial project evaluation outcome results and detailed economic analysis will enable calculation of an Actual Return on Investment.

THE FATHERING PROJECT IN VULNERABLE POPULATIONS

Populations within Australian society who are exposed to issues and vulnerabilities surrounding fathering, such as Fly-in Fly-out (FIFO) workers, low socioeconomic groups, Australian Aboriginals, migrants and refugees, and incarcerated fathers are likely to benefit greatly from The Fathering Project. Future strategies targeting these populations are planned within the Fathering Project Business Plan.

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