



Identifying ways to engage with fathers in the early years of their child's life using video and social media

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Background

Fathers' involvement is associated with positive health and developmental outcomes for their children, independent of the influence of the mother. While many men are closely involved with the children, many others have a role that is mostly characterised by economic provisioning of the family and support of the mother. Furthermore, father involvement is particularly challenging in the earliest years of life, the time when evidence suggests that both mother and father involvement is highly influential for optimum child development. Ideally, fathers will be involved in preparation for the birth, as well as the birth, itself, and the first weeks and months of the child's life. During this perinatal period, both the mother and the father provide the foundations of a child's attachment security, which has implications for future social-emotional development. And yet, many men in Australia and other socially-advantaged countries are not actively involved with their child at this early stage, a problem which is compounded by virtually all pregnancy and early parenting attention and resources targeting women. To be fair, some attempts have been made to involve men in the early years of children's lives and some of these interventions have been successful. However, it is notoriously difficult to engage men in healthcare, health screening and health promotion activities. While it is not often possible to engage with men face-to-face, it is possible to engage with men using social media that is now used almost universally. Health promotion practitioners are increasingly looking to technology, such as video and social media to increase the engagement of various difficult to reach target groups, including men.

Aim and objectives

This project will aim to identify ways to engage men in the preparation for their child's birth, as well as the birth, itself, and the first months of their child's life. Specifically, the research will focus on how video and social media can reach men who are difficult to engage.

Significance

Despite the substantial public resources that have been invested in building the human capital of successive generations of Australians, approximately 20 per cent of children are still not adequately prepared for school and, therefore, fail to achieve literacy and numeracy, have poor outcomes in the key competencies of English, maths and science, and diminished opportunities for employment across the life course. This has serious implications for the Australian economy that is increasingly demanding a highly educated and competent

workforce. Substantial evidence points to the benefits of fathers being fully engaged with as co-parents, for children's emotional, social, and cognitive development, especially in the earliest years of their lives. A recent report suggests only half of Australia's fathers consider themselves a primary carer of their children and a similar proportion have never sought parenting advice. Although there are other indications of increased in father involvement, there is clearly room for much greater engagement with fathers regarding their role and parent involvement, which is likely to result in better outcomes for children and families, especially with regard to mental health.

Design and methodology

An advisory group will be formed, comprising: men in the target group; leading fathering advocates; and knowledgeable academics whose research is focused on the early years of life and fathering. The research will be conducted in two phases.

Phase 1 - a formative evaluation using mixed methods will be employed to inform a social media approach to supporting father involvement in the early stages of a child's life. An appropriately sized sample of men in the target group will be asked to complete an on-line survey that asks about: barriers and facilitators of father engagement with parenting support and networking; methods for increasing this engagement; and feedback and suggestions for the development of a specific social media strategy that supports father involvement. In addition, a number of men who complete the survey will be asked to participate in face-to-face interviews or focus groups where the focal questions will be discussed in detail. Chi-square tests and multiple logistic regression will be used to analyse quantitative data while thematic analysis will be used to analyse qualitative data.

Phase 2 - the findings of Phase 1 will be used, and the advisory group consulted, in the development of a social media intervention. When all content is created and the technical aspects are in place, the intervention will be evaluated for process and impact. This will involve the piloting of the intervention and a further wave of data collection that will also comprise an on-line survey, face-to-face interviews, and focus groups. The process evaluation will assess the acceptability of the intervention to the target group and the ease of use. The impact evaluation will assess changes to attitudes and behaviours related to involvement with children in the early years that may be attributable to the application.