



DO FATHERS MATTER ?

Research shows they have a profound effect on their children's lives from birth into adolescence and beyond.

The crucial impact of fathers and father-figures on child development and wellbeing

The Fathering Project recognises fathers and father-figures play a vital role in children's lives¹. The evidence demonstrating fathers' potential to positively influence their children's health, social success and academic achievements is now robust, indisputable and compelling².

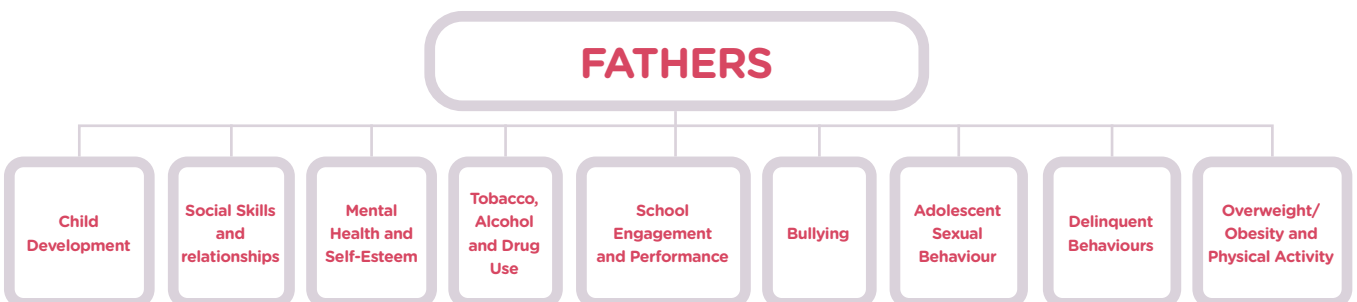
Along side of this evidence, the role of fathers has changed and is now perceived as unique and complimentary, compared to previously held ideas of fatherhood. These ideas were often aligned with stereotypes related to being disciplinarian or the 'breadwinner' of the family, whereby fathers are now acknowledged as caregivers and role models to their children³.

Current research now shows that targeted and universal interventions aimed at promoting positive parenting behaviours and fathers' engagement have been found to increase fathers' involvement with their infants, preschool and primary school-aged children⁴. The Fathering Project is the first intervention to be implemented, anywhere in the world, that focuses on the fathers of all children in the population of an entire country.

The evidence underpinning the work of The Fathering Project

This summary of evidence is based on a review of literature and research published primarily in the last ten years to describe the impacts of fathers on child development and wellbeing. These findings guide the program development of The Fathering Project to directly address the needs of the fathers and their children.

Reviews of the evidence have addressed child development in the following areas:



Child development

- Fathers and father-figures' self-efficacy and warmth in parenting are the most powerful predictors of children's improved health, academic, social and emotional outcomes⁵.
- Children who have fathers with consistently high, warm parenting styles have fewer emotional and behavioural problems⁵.
- Having a father or father-figure live with a child from the age of 4 to 12 significantly increases a child's learning outcomes (as measured by NAPLAN), their emotional wellbeing and leads to fewer problem behaviours⁵.
- Father engagement and involvement have been associated with increased levels of cognitive and social competence, greater social responsibility and capacity for empathy, positive self-control and self-esteem, fewer difficulties adjusting to school and improved academic progress¹.
- Father involvement in educational activities with their children is associated with improved cognitive outcomes⁶.
- Children with supportive and sensitive fathers have better language development outcomes⁷.



Social skills and relationships

Fathers play a critical and distinct (as different to mothers) role in their children's development of social skills and positive relationship formation. Positive behaviours including accessibility, engagement and responsibility, demonstrated by fathers contribute to the following among their children:

- Improved psychosocial adjustment.
- Increased social competence.
- Greater social responsibility, social maturity and life skills.
- Positive child/adolescent-father relationships^{1, 8}.

Additionally, children of fathers who have self-belief in their parenting have better social skills and fewer problems with their peers².

Mental health

- Evidence suggests fathers who are supportive, involved and engaged, provide significant protective and positive impacts on their children's mental health throughout the course of their development^{1, 8}.
- Poor quality early father-child relationships have been associated with negative impacts on a child's mental health that track through to adolescence and adulthood, with increased prevalence of depression, bipolar, anxiety disorders and phobias¹.
- Fathers may be more likely, through their own poor mental health status, to undermine the future mental health of their children. Their attitudes to mental health and mental illness very much influence children's attitudes towards seeking help⁹.

COVID-19 and Mental Health

- Sydney University's Brain and Mind Centre has done preliminary modelling predicting at least a 25 per cent rise in suicides post COVID-19.
- While The Fathering Project does not currently provide mental health support, better mental health for fathers is an outcome of the work we do. We provide that vital link to engage fathers and provide support and information which creates preventative interventions with a multidisciplinary and multilevel (psychological, social, familial) approach and creates a funnel for mental health services provided by the Government where needed.

Tobacco, alcohol and drug use

- Within dual parent families, fathers have a significant protective effect on their child's risk of having tried alcohol, cigarettes or marijuana, even after controlling for other family and child characteristics¹.
- Some research specific to fathers suggests the influence of fathers and father-figures on child and adolescent alcohol and illicit drug use may be distinct and stronger than that of mothers¹.
- Children from father-only or father-absent households are more likely to engage in cigarette, alcohol and marijuana use than those from mother-only or dual-parent households^{1, 8}.

School engagement and performance

- Children with fathers who have very high parental consistency from the age of 4 to 12, perform better in reading and writing⁵.
- Consistent parenting from fathers is predictive of increased NAPLAN scores across Year 3, 5 and 7⁵.
- Father involvement in educational activities with their children is associated with improved cognitive outcomes⁶.
- Children do better in school when their fathers are involved in their school, regardless of whether their fathers live with them or live apart².
- Children who do not live with their father or father-figure are significantly more likely to be absent from or drop out of school^{5, 8}.
- Children whose fathers participate in school activities, meetings and events also enjoy school more, and are less likely to have behavioural issues¹⁰.

Adolescent sexual behaviour

- Father support has been associated with increased protective sexual behaviours such as condom use among adolescents, and to decrease the likelihood of having sex at a young age among daughters^{1, 3}.
- Research indicates that the odds of increased sexual risk behaviours or teenage pregnancy are lowest when fathers are present throughout childhood, are increased when fathers are absent in later childhood, and at their highest when fathers are absent from an early age^{1,8}.

Delinquency

- Fathers are a critical influence on whether a child engages in delinquent behaviours, with the potential to play a protective role or increase a child's risk⁸.
- Children and adolescents who have more involved fathers or father-figures are less likely to engage in delinquent and anti-social behaviours such as property, violent or drug related crime, cheating at school or participating in gang fights – particularly for boys^{1,8}.
- Teenagers who have more involved non-resident fathers are less likely to engage in delinquent behavior (e.g. stealing, cheating in school, using drugs or alcohol) than those who have less involved non-resident fathers¹².

Overweight/obesity and physical activity

- Children who do not live with their father or a father-figure are

significantly more likely to have a higher Body Mass Index than children who live with their father⁵.

- Four-year olds whose fathers are overweight or obese are up to 15 times more likely to be overweight or obese at aged eight⁵.

Strengthening the evidence base for interventions designed to help men be better dads

Dr Garth Kendall and Dr Fatch Kalembo, Faculty of Health Sciences, Curtin University have conducted an annual evaluation to understand fathers' participation in the School Dads Group program and its influence on their engagement with their children, partner, school and community. This project which commenced in 2017 is jointly funded by the Stewart Foundation through The Fathering Project and Curtin University.



Findings

In 2020 260 dads and 22 partners were recruited from 115 primary schools from Western Australia and New South Wales. Of these fathers, 85% reported that they were committed to the School Dads Group, while 88% reported that they were satisfied with the School Dads Group. Fathers reported that their involvement with the Dads Group resulted in a positive change in their: connection with other fathers (71%), understanding of the importance of their relationship with their child (67%), awareness of their impact on child's development (66%), involvement with child's school community (64%), engagement in conversation with their child (58%), confidence in engaging positively with their child (58%), amount of time they spend with their child (55%), and involvement as a father-figure to other children. Fathers also reported that they talked more often with their child on a number of topics

and that their child talked more to them about school and their feelings, and came to them more often to: celebrate something good, play, ask for help, and for hugs.

Partners reported that fathers' involvement with the Dads Group resulted in a positive change in the fathers: connection with other fathers (70%), amount of time they spend with their child (70%), awareness of their impact on child's development (60%), involvement with child's school community (60%), engagement in conversation with their child (60%), confidence in engaging positively with their child (60%), and involvement as a father-figure to other children (60%). Partners also reported that the father talked more often with their child on a number of topics; that their child went to their father more often for hugs or to celebrate something good; and their child talked more to the father about their feelings (70%) and school (60%).



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The summary of the research and literature published in 'How fathers and father figures can shape child health and wellbeing' is defined by statements taken from major international reports on fathering and presents the Australian evidence to support or further expand these international claims. This summary was updated in 2020.

The Fathering Project review of the Australian Evidence of the Impact of Fathering contains a review of available Australian data which describe the impact of fathers on their children's development. This report explores the fathering variables included in Australia's first longitudinal study of children and their families, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). This dataset contains measures of key fathering characteristics measured over regular time intervals within a cohort of 10,000 families and includes measures of parental warmth, hostility, anger and consistency as well as parental inductive reasoning, efficacy, involvement and over-protectiveness, and the relationship between fathers and mothers. Each of these factors are explored in this longitudinal sample and are also modelled on the Fathering Projects key child outcomes of Learning; Health, Development and Problem Behaviours; and Mental Health and Social Skills.

