



# WHY FATHERING IS CRITICAL IN A CHILD'S LIFE

Research shows we shouldn't underestimate the role of fathers in children's lives

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# Fathers and father-figures have a crucial impact on a child's development, education and wellbeing

## Overview

This summary of evidence underlines the vast importance of fathers in children's lives, not only because children 'need and love their dads', but also because of the significant impact that fathers have on the social, cognitive, emotional and physical wellbeing of children from infancy to adolescence and with lasting influences into their adult life.

The Fathering Project has summarised a recent review of literature and research published primarily in the last 10 years to describe the impacts of fathers on their child's development and wellbeing. This review brings further attention to the need for community engagement and education through Dad Groups at school and where Dads meet together to bring about much needed change in the gender story around the important role fathers play in their child's life.

These findings guide the program development of The Fathering Project to directly address the needs of fathers and their children.

## About The Fathering Project

The Fathering Project recognises fathers and father-figures play a vital role in children's lives. The evidence demonstrating fathers' potential to positively influence their children's health, social success and academic achievements is now robust, indisputable, and compelling<sup>2</sup>.

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 children. 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 children<sup>4</sup>.

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 summary of evidence

This summary of the research and literature includes statements taken from major international reports on fathering published primarily in the last ten years to describe the impacts of fathers on child development and wellbeing. It also presents Australian evidence to align with or further expand in these international claims.

Included in this summary is the Fathering Project report reviewing Australian data<sup>5</sup>. This report explored the fathering variables included in Australia's first 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.

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. These findings also guide the program development of The Fathering Project to directly address the needs of the fathers and their children.

## Key areas of review

### School engagement and performance

- Children with fathers who have extremely high parental consistency from the age of 4 to 12, perform better in reading and writing<sup>5</sup>.
- Consistent parenting from fathers is predictive of increased NAPLAN scores across Year 3, 5 and 7<sup>5</sup>.
- Father involvement in educational activities with their children is associated with improved cognitive outcomes<sup>6</sup>.
- Children do better in school when their fathers are involved in their school, regardless of whether their fathers live with them or live apart<sup>2</sup>.
- Children who do not live with their father or father-figure are significantly more likely to be absent from or drop out of school<sup>5, 8</sup>.
- Children whose fathers participate in school activities, meetings and events also enjoy school more, and are less likely to have behavioural issues<sup>10</sup>.

### 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 outcomes<sup>5</sup>.
- Children who have fathers with consistently high, warm parenting styles have fewer emotional and behavioural problems<sup>5</sup>.
- 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 behaviours<sup>5</sup>.
- 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 progress<sup>7</sup>.
- Father involvement in educational activities with their children is associated with improved cognitive outcomes<sup>6</sup>.
- Children with supportive and sensitive fathers have better language development outcomes<sup>7</sup>.

## Mental health - Child and adolescent

Much of the research on fathering has focused on its implications for child and adolescent mental health, with **compelling evidence that fathering has significant protective and positive effects on the mental health of children across various ages and stages of development.**

- 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.<sup>1, 8</sup>
- 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 phobias<sup>1</sup>.
- 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 help<sup>9</sup>.



## 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.<sup>1,8</sup>

Additionally, children of fathers who have self-belief in their parenting have better social skills and fewer problems with their peers<sup>2</sup>.

## 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 characteristics<sup>1</sup>.
- 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 mothers<sup>1</sup>.
- 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<sup>1,8</sup>.

## Summary of findings of the report

Effective fathers display warmth toward their child, believe in their ability to parent well, are able to reason with their child, are involved in their child's life and parent well with their partner.

Ineffective parents are over-protective, hostile toward their child, angry and have argumentative relationships with their partners.

Each of these characteristics has a unique influence on a child's health, social, emotional, and academic outcomes.

## Key factors around fathering

1. Fathers have a crucial impact on a child's development.
2. Fathers self-efficacy and warmth in parenting are the most powerful predictors of children's improved health, academic, social and emotional outcomes.
3. The age and occupation of a father matters. Younger parents report more anger and hostility than older parents, yet are more consistent with their parenting and had fewer argumentative relationships. Men with trade and production occupations have on average, poorer fathering skills.
4. Children who have a father or father figure live with them throughout their life have better learning outcomes, general health, emotional wellbeing and fewer problem behaviors.
5. While mothers have a significant influence on their child's health, academic, social and emotional outcomes, after accounting for this, fathers have a unique and diverse role in improving outcomes for their child.
6. A father's influence on their child's outcomes becomes most prominent when children reach school age.
7. Fathers who consistently parent well over time have children who perform better academically, socially, emotionally and enjoy better health and development.



## Key Benefits of having an engaged father in a child's life

Children who have engaged fathers with warm parenting styles have few emotional and behavioral problems.

They have:

- Self-esteem
- Resilience
- Social and emotional capability
- Better physical health outcomes
- Social responsibility and social maturity

They have reduced:

- Engagement in unhealthy and risky behaviours
- Alcohol, tobacco and drug use
- Bullying behaviours
- Suicide & self-harm
- Substance abuse
- Delinquent behaviour

### Statement from CEO Kati Gapailard

As we celebrate Father's Day it is important that we also value the role father's and father figures play in a child's life, and better understand the life-long and significant impact of an engaged, warm father on his child's life from birth into adulthood.

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.

Our goal over the next five years is to implement our Fathering First Dads Group program across all primary and secondary schools in Australia to promote and change fundamental archetypal roles of fathers as bread winners only to fathers as caregivers, role models, engaged in positively influencing their children's health, social and academic achievements, compared to previously held ideas of fatherhood.

The research unequivocally tells us how important it is to start this partnership with dads and children as early as possible and ideally in primary school.



## 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 it's influences 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.

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 their 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 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%)

**For more information on The Fathering Projects Dad Groups Program please reference:**  
[www.thefatheringproject.org](http://www.thefatheringproject.org)



## References

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