



Neglecting to invest in fathers will cost our children their lives

Key Takeaways

1. Disengaged and dysfunctional fathers damage children's lives
2. Existing Parenting programs fail to meet the needs of most fathers
3. Fathering programs create more equitable opportunities for workplace participation
4. The investment in fathering programs is an investment in children, families, and communities

What research tells us is needed to support Australian children to survive and thrive

Disengaged or dysfunctional fathers damage children's lives

When children do not receive quality care from a father – either through a father's absence or by poor fathering practices, e.g., harsh or unresponsive parenting, abusive or neglectful behaviour – the risks to their long-term health and wellbeing greatly increase.

The Fathering Project has reviewed more than a decade of Australian and international fathering research with studies spanning the domains of child development.

The research is clear on the significant and pervasive consequences that disengaged or dysfunctional fathering can have on children. Children who are deprived of healthy father-child relationships are more likely to experience mental health disorders, perform poorly in school, develop substance abuse problems, engage in riskier sexual behaviour, and engage in delinquent and anti-social behaviour.



One of the most compelling findings to come out of the fathering research is that children who grow up in communities with more engaged fathers have better developmental outcomes, irrespective of whether their own biological father is engaged. Everyone benefits when fathers are more engaged with their children.

Access to an engaged, involved, and responsible father greatly increases the likelihood that children will thrive, across all areas of their life. Positive father-child relationships have profound and long-lasting benefits for children's mental health, cognitive development, social development, self-esteem, educational outcomes, physical health, and career prospects.

“One of the most important findings to emerge from parenting and fathering research around the world is the fact that the immense risks to children can be mitigated through focused and sustained fathering programs. Fathers can build their fathering capacity to become a positive influence for their children when the right supports are in place. Urgent national action is needed to ensure our children thrive, across all areas of their life, through access to engaged, involved, and responsible fathers.” – Kati Gapillard, CEO The Fathering Project

Though the risks of disengaged or dysfunctional fathers are clear, existing parenting programs fail to meet the needs for many fathers. Programs designed for parents (e.g., mothers or fathers) are less effective at enhancing the father-child relationship than the mother-child relationship. Alarmingly, only 20% of parents who engage in current parenting programs are fathers – at a time when fathers are more actively involved in caring for children than ever before. This leaves many families and communities yet to unlock the social and economic advantages of increased father engagement.

What the Research Tells Us

Top five areas of risk for children impacted by disengaged and dysfunctional fathering

Mental Health Challenges

- Low levels of father involvement, a combination of frequency and quality of father-child contact, increase the risk of children developing internalising, e.g., anxiety and depression and externalising, e.g., conduct problems, oppositional defiant disorder, as well as low levels of life satisfaction.^{2,3}

Poor Physical Health

- Patterns of father involvement shape child health prior to birth. For example, low father involvement in antenatal care increases the risk of birth complications, preterm birth, and infant mortality.^{4,5}
 - Children of physically inactive fathers are also more likely to be physically inactive.⁶
 - Children with fathers with low levels of parental involvement are more likely to be overweight.⁷
- An Australian study showed that fathers who are obese are four times more likely to have obese children.⁸

Reduced School Engagement

- Children with disengaged fathers are more likely to have behaviour problems in school, struggle academically, be absent from school, and fail to complete their schooling – irrespective of socioeconomic status, race, and ethnic background.⁹
- Children whose fathers have low levels of involvement during childhood have poorer educational attainment at age 20 years.

Delinquency and Incarceration

- International research estimates show that 70-85% of incarcerated youth grew up in a fatherless household or were exposed to dysfunctional fathering behaviours, e.g., abusive fathers.
- Father departure in later childhood is associated with greater delinquency among adolescents.
- Low levels of father involvement also increase the risk that children will exhibit bullying behaviour towards their peers. Low levels of father involvement also magnify the impact that bullying can have on bullying victims.¹

Increased Risk Taking Behaviour

- Children with absent fathers are more likely to engage in cigarette, alcohol, and illicit drugs in later life.⁹
- Children with fathers who are disengaged or provide inadequate support in early life are more likely to participate in increased risky behaviours in adolescence, e.g., unsafe sex, substance use.¹¹
- Youth aged 13-21 years who report low levels of closeness to father figures are more likely to experience dating violence victimisation, e.g. intimate partner violence.¹²

Mitigating Risk through Fathering Programs

A proven strategy to overcome the issue has been the creation of fathering programs (i.e., programs designed for fathers, that focus on fathering). Demonstrated in both domestic and international jurisdictions, fathering programs increase men's participation in parenting programs, allowing children, families, and communities to benefit from better engaged, responsible and skilled fathers.

Father-focussed parenting programs offer a complementary approach to boost the quality of fathers' involvement in caring for their children.

Fathering programs have also been proven to lift families out of socioeconomic disadvantage, drawing the attention and monetary investment of policymakers and governments committed to improving the health and wealth of their nations.

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.

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. From school and community fathering programs to workplace engagement, we support fathers where they are, offering evidence based learning designed specifically for fathers.

Find out more at <https://thefatheringproject.org/programs/>



An Australian review of 28 studies on parenting interventions found that less than 20% of parents enrolled in parenting interventions are fathers. Second, parenting programs are less effective at improving father-child relationships compared to mother-child relationships.

Economic Benefits of Investment in Fathering

Programs that build a parent's capacity to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of their young children create a 13-fold cost saving for families' expenditure on social, education, and healthcare costs by the time their children reach adolescence.²⁴

- With the annual cost of mental illness in Australian youth estimated to be approximately \$10.6 billion (due to absenteeism and reduced productivity, welfare and forgone taxation, direct health system expenditure, and carer costs) – empowering fathers to support their children's health can reduce this cost.
- The economic costs of child abuse and neglect in Australia exceed \$5 billion/annum. From the evidence available, it is clear that, with the exception of child sexual abuse, children are most likely to be abused or neglected by parents and/or caregivers.
- Violence between intimate partners with children is overwhelmingly a gendered issue with the vast majority of incidents involving a female victim and male perpetrator. In 2021-22 this was estimated to cost the Australian economy \$15.6 billion. Clear links between positive father involvement and the absence of violence against partners and against children, as shown in multiple studies indicate fathering programs can greatly reduce DV and associated costs.

- Children with fathers who are proactively involved in their education journeys are more likely to stay in school and perform better academically – allowing them to undertake further study and/or move into higher paying roles.
- Fathers who are better equipped to provide nurturing care for their children provide mothers with increased opportunities to return and contribute to the paid workforce.
- Being a better father is often cited as a key mechanism of positive behaviour change for men who are incarcerated, or at-risk of incarceration. Supporting fathers to achieve this need will help to redirect men away from the justice system, thus reducing costs passed onto taxpayers.
- As co-parenting difficulties are a major reason for divorce and separation, supporting fathers to co-parent effectively can help to stem the economic cost of divorce and separation – currently estimated to cost Australians approximately \$3.7 billion in legal expenses and \$45 million in divorce application fees annually.

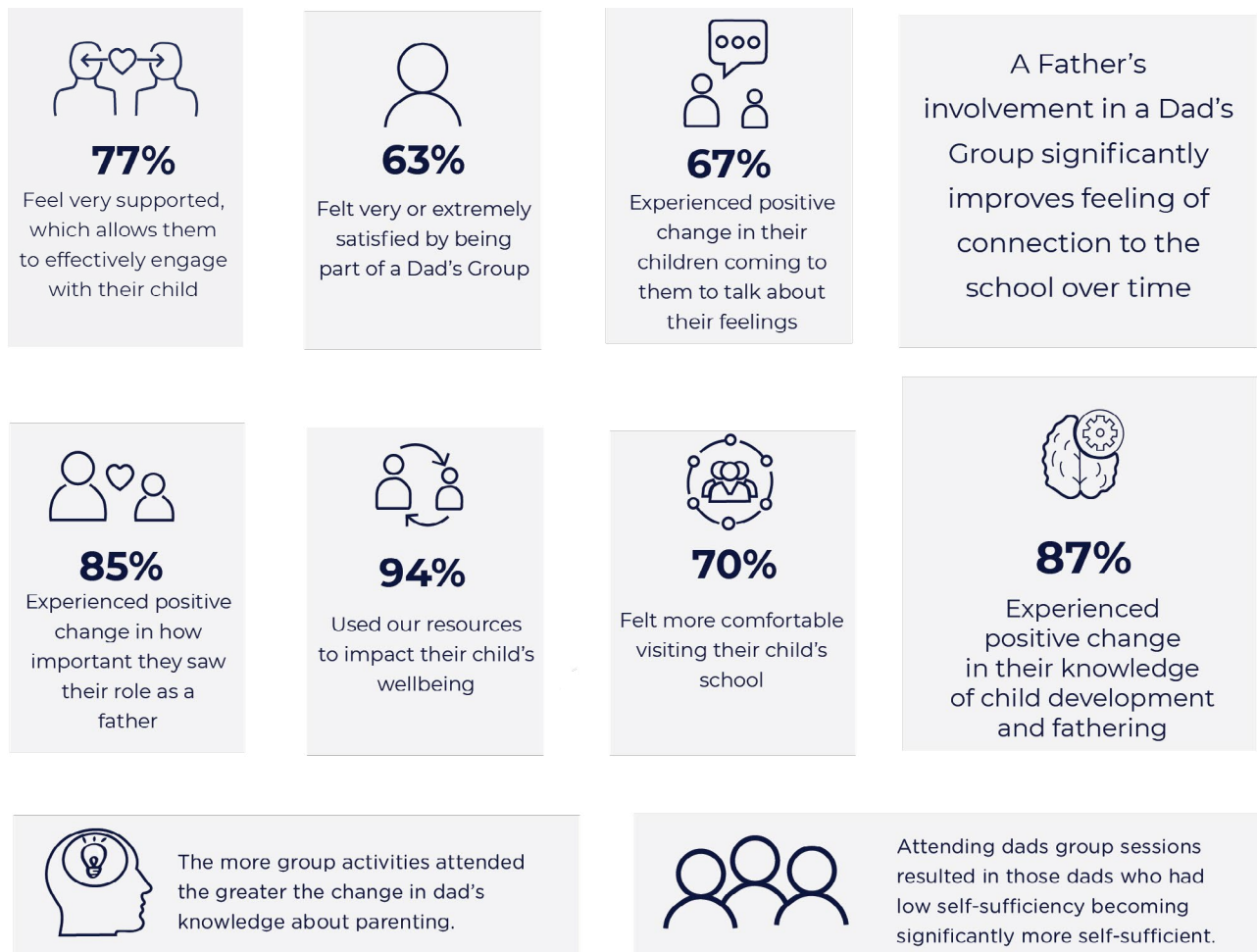
Programs that promote positive and responsible father engagement will help to stem the cost of disengaged and dysfunctional fathering, allowing the Australian public to reap the economic benefits to those already observed in other countries that have invested in similar programs.

Australian Case Study: The Fathering Project School Dads Group

We surveyed 390 dads who had been involved in Dads Groups. The findings showed that:

- Knowledge of child development increases investment in the parental role, and is associated with more positive father-child interaction.
- Children who talk to their fathers about their emotions develop positive ways of coping.
- A Father's involvement in their child's school is a distinctive, independent positive influence on their child's school outcomes.

After involvement with The Fathering Project



The Fathering Project - who we are

The Fathering Project (TFP) is a not for profit, non-denominational, research and evidenced based organisation that empowers fathers and father-figures to actively engage with their child's development and provide positive change to their child's life.

Our aim is to improve every child's future by supporting their fathers and father-figures, through programs and resources designed to help men become more effective in their first and most important role of being a Dad.

The Fathering Project was founded by Professor Bruce Robinson almost 10 years ago in Western Australia. As a doctor he spoke to many male patients about their life and legacy and heard countless times how these men wished they had been better fathers. After years of hearing these stories of regret Professor Robinson acted to find a way to improve fathers' connections with their child. Through his research to find program material to support fathers he found international statistics and case studies that demonstrate a direct correlation between non-engaged or effective fathers/father figures and some of the major issues facing children and youth today.

The Fathering Project is a harm preventative initiative that seeks to address the issues of suicide, substance abuse, self-harm and domestic violence, and to improve child development outcomes such as school engagement and performance, socialisation and physical activity. Our initiatives target the improvement of fathers' and father figures' performance to assist in child development and to help to prevent negative consequences of father absence and neglect for children.

Our goal is transformational - we aim to have a lasting impact on society through a preventative approach because today's parents are shaping tomorrow's parents. We are helping dads to break the cycle and leave a positive fathering legacy. Your investment will deliver intergenerational change - improving children's lives today and in the future.

www.thefatheringproject.org

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