How educators can support fathers to get involved

Educators can support fathers to understand the benefits of actively engaging in their child's development and learning, which positively impacts the child, the father, and the learning community.

Fathers' involvement in early learning services and schools

Children and young people spend significant amounts of time in their early learning service or at school, so it's important fathers engage with these communities.

A father is a male carer of a child or young person. They may not be biologically related to the child or young person or live with them. Some individuals have contact with their father, while others don't. A father can be a biological parent, stepfather, foster father, adoptive father, grandfather, kinship career or another significant caregiver.

Some children and young people might have more than one father or have relationships with people in their community who take on a key caregiving role.

When fathers are made to feel welcome at services and schools, it helps build an inclusive family environment and fathers can become involved in another part of their child or young person's world.

Children and young people thrive on the feelings of belonging and affection that come from caring and supportive families. Whether families have one parent or two, include step-parents, grandparents, kinship systems, same-sex families, or other carers, they can build strong, positive relationships that support children and young people's mental health

By taking the first step of connecting, fathers can become closer to their child or young person and can bond with them at a place that's a big part of their world.

When fathers feel good about being a dad, and are sensitive and responsive to children's needs, this contributes to children and young people's development of social and emotional learning skills, as well as having a positive effect on fathers themselves.

New dad stress

Most people are aware that anxiety and depression can affect new mothers, but fathers are also at risk.

The signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression in new fathers are generally the same as those experienced at any other point in someone's life.

However, because becoming a caregiver represents such a big life change, there are also some feelings and responses that are unique to the new situation.

Some men experience pressure in their role as fathers

While fatherhood can be a time of great joy and happiness, it's not unusual to have a number of reactions and some men may feel overwhelmed.

Like many caregivers, some fathers may feel pressure to meet various expectations such as

In collaboration with

Early Childhood Australia
A voice for young children

headspace
National Youth Mental Health Foundation

Funded by

Australian Government
Department of Health, Disability and Ageing

providing support for their family, balancing work and caregiving, or adjusting to new responsibilities. They may also feel they need to manage these challenges alone rather than seeking support.

First-time fathers with a child under 12 months of age are at the greatest risk of experiencing psychological distress

Prevention, early intervention and support is important to help reduce the impact on their mental health, relationships, and ability to engage and support their children.

It's important to note that some fathers may view their own feelings and experiences as less important than their partners.

Some fathers don't want to identify 'dad stress' with depression and anxiety

The stigma around depression and anxiety generally, and specifically towards postnatal depression among fathers, can present a significant barrier to men seeking help and support in their role as fathers.

As men become more open to acknowledging the challenges of fatherhood, engaging through notions such as 'dad stress' are likely to work more effectively.

The partner relationship is of critical importance and facilitates access to support and information

Having a child can deepen the relationship between parents/caregivers but also changes it fundamentally. Families who are aware of the challenges that lie ahead, and who have planned and negotiated their roles and responsibilities prior to the birth, tend to fare better than those who are less prepared.

Some fathers tend to seek information reactively and rely on their partner to be a conduit for advice and direction They are open to seeking help and information but tend to learn as they go and seek information specific to the challenge they are currently facing.

Fathers often show a general lack of satisfaction with their engagement with professionals and the availability of father-specific support and advice

There's a sense that men may feel somewhat remote from the pregnancy and restricted in their new role as a father, as the majority of information and support is directed towards the mother.

Ideas for practice

Here's some tips for you to encourage father involvement:

- Observe how often fathers are involved. Is most of your contact with other family/community members? Do you know the names of fathers of the children at your early learning service or school?
- Routinely send emails to both mum and dad.
- Take time to build trust and form relationships with fathers who are new to the early learning service or school. When fathers get to know educators, it makes it easier to approach you when they have a concern or question about their child or young person. Fathers may also be more comfortable with sharing exciting news or developmental milestones with you once there's familiarity.
    - Building authentic relationships can encourage deeper trust, enable meaningful conversations and promote mutual understanding and collaboration.
- It's important for fathers to try and become familiar with the learning community and to see the physical space (for example, different rooms and the playground) that their child or young person enjoys.
- Create opportunities for fathers to spend time at the school or service and meet other fathers. For example, organising specific father-and-child/young person events, such as a fathers' breakfast, suppers, working bees or movie nights, at times that suit fathers.
- Provide a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere, supported by including newsletters, pamphlets, and posters which recognise the positive role fathers play.

- Include fathers when contacting families. For example, initiating discussions with both mothers and fathers, asking fathers specific questions about how their child or young person's going, keeping in regular contact with fathers via text messaging and email. Fathers want to be informed about their child or young person's day and valued as a primary carer in their life.
- Develop inclusive environments where diversity is acknowledged, respected and embraced.
- Check in with the family on enrolment as to who is the first contact, if the child becomes unwell during the day or who the billing account goes to. Do not assume it will be the mother.
- Check in with the family on enrolment as to who is the first contact, if the child becomes unwell during the day or who the billing account goes to. Do not assume it will be the mother.
- Consider family situations when sharing progress information such as written feedback and portfolios. For example, it may help to prepare two copies, one for each adult family member, if they don't live together.
- Have pictures of fathers and children or young people around the service or school. This will help children and young people feel happy to see the picture, and fathers to feel comfortable when they visit.
- Tell fathers you appreciate their involvement – this can help them feel included and proud and make it more likely they'll continue their involvement. Ask fathers if they have any skills or hobbies they could share with the educators and children
- Be aware of major life changes and how they can impact engagement (for example, when a family has a new baby) and check in regularly.
- Enquire whether they would like an interpreter service included or First Nations Liaison/Education Officer.

Be You Resources

Learn more about creating welcoming, culturally responsive learning environments for First Nations peoples in Reflect, Respect, Respond: Protocols for culturally respectful engagement with First Nations communities.

Learn more about when, how and where you can find help or support help-seeking

Be You Professional Learning

Learn more about creating and maintaining strong partnerships with families in the Family Partnerships domain.

Learn more about fostering the mental health of children and young people in the Mentally Healthy Communities domain.

External Links

Raising Children Network – Resources for families.

Bibliography

Visit How educators can support fathers to get involved for a list of references for this Fact Sheet.

**Be You acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of all the Lands on which we work and learn.
We recognise their deep and ongoing connection to Country and pay our respect to Elders, past and present.**