



How educators can support fathers to get involved

As an educator, you can support fathers to understand how taking an active interest in their child's development and learning can bring benefits to both their child or young person 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.

However, it's not always easy for fathers to get involved. Some dads don't have the time or availability to get involved because, for example, they work long hours or work or live a long distance away. For other dads, the early service and school is simply a new environment they're not familiar with and they may feel uncomfortable or unsure of what to say or do.

There's also the fact that society has enforced, and in some ways continues to enforce, the idea that the world of children and learning communities is a mothers' world. At least for some fathers, engaging in the emotional worlds of their child or young person, and getting involved at the early learning service or school, will entail pushing against gender

norms and ideas they may be taught regarding what it means to be a man in the world.

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

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

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 mums or other family members? Do you know the names of dads of the children at your early learning service or school?
- 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.

- 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 dads to spend time at the school or service and meet other dads. For example, organising specific father-and-child/young person events, such as a dads' 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 have with children and young people.
- Include dads when contacting with 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
- Check you have contact details for all adult family members and balance communication between mums and dads (address letters or correspondence to all).
- 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 dads to feel comfortable when they visit.
- Tell dads you appreciate their involvement – this will make them feel included and proud, and make it more likely they'll continue their involvement.

- Be aware of major life changes and how they can impact engagement (for example, when a family has a new baby).

New dad stress

Most people are aware that anxiety and depression can affect new mothers, but did you know that fathers are also at risk?

The signs and symptoms of anxiety and depression in new dads are broadly the same as those experienced at any other point in someone's life. But because becoming a father represents such a big life change, there are also some feelings and responses that are unique to the new situation.

Previous research by Beyond Blue identified that:

Men experience significant internalised pressure in their role as fathers.

While fatherhood is a time of great joy and happiness, men can feel overwhelmed by the need to be the financial and emotional support of their family and the sacrifices they have to make in their new role. New fathers perceive they need to be 'the rock' and bear the weight of their responsibilities without the support of others.

First-time fathers whose child is under 12 months of age are at the greatest risk of psychological distress.

39% of fathers in the study reported high levels of psychological distress. They're also likely to see their own feelings and experiences as less important than their partners.

Men don't want to identify 'dad stress' with depression and anxiety.

The negative attitudes towards depression and anxiety generally, and specifically towards postnatal depression among fathers, present a significant barrier to men seeking help and support in their role as fathers. As men are 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 deepens the relationship between parents but also changes it fundamentally. Couples who are aware of the challenges that lie ahead, and

who have planned and negotiated their roles and responsibilities prior to the birth, fare better than those who are less prepared.

Fathers tend to seek information reactively and rely on their partner to be a conduit for advice and direction.

New fathers 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 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 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.

Be You Professional Learning

Check out tips for creating and maintaining strong partnerships with families in the [Family Partnerships](#) domain.

References

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