

How fathers' warm and responsive parenting can support child mental health

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be aware that this resource may contain images or names of people who have passed away.

This short article explores the research evidence on how fathers' engagement can influence their children's mental health. Specifically, it explores the effects of fathers' warm and responsive parenting on their children's mental health. This article also provides insights into how practitioners and services can support fathers to display more warm and responsive behaviours to promote positive mental health in their children.

Key messages

- Fathers, like mothers, can influence the mental health and wellbeing of their children through their approach to parenting and the behaviours they demonstrate when interacting with their child.
- Warm and responsive parenting involves parents acting in a positive and affectionate way towards their child. For example, telling their child that they're loved, speaking to them in a warm and friendly voice, and listening and trying to understand their child's feelings.
- Children of fathers who are warm and responsive are more likely to display prosocial behaviours. Fathers' warm and responsive parenting also has benefits for infant development. There is mixed evidence on the influence of fathers' warm and responsive parenting on children's internalising and externalising behaviours.
- Practitioners can describe warm and responsive behaviours to fathers and families and discuss the benefits of these for child mental health.



Practitioners can also notice and highlight how fathers are already incorporating warmth and responsiveness into their parenting and brainstorm with fathers how they might build on these behaviours.

Introduction

Mothers and fathers¹ play an important role in shaping their children's health and development. Although mothers are still disproportionately responsible for childcare, Australian fathers are now spending more time with their children compared to previous generations (Craig & Mullan, 2012; Rubiano Matulevich & Viollaz, 2019). This means there is a growing opportunity for fathers to support the mental health of their children through adopting or building on positive parenting behaviours.

Both fathers and mothers can influence the mental health and wellbeing of their children through their parenting approach and behaviours that occur during parent-child interactions (Power, 2013). Such approaches and behaviour are sometimes referred to as 'parenting styles' (Power, 2013).

1. This resource discusses the experiences of cisgender heterosexual parents as the research literature focuses on this type of family. However, we acknowledge that practitioners may also work with fathers, mothers and non-birthing parents who may identify with diverse genders or sexualities.

In this resource we focus on fathers' 'warmth and responsiveness'. This describes fathers acting in a positive and affectionate way towards their child as well as noticing and responding to their child's emotions and needs (Pleck, 2010). Parents' warmth and responsiveness is an important positive influence on their child's wellbeing and development (Rothenberg et al., 2020).

In this resource, we also provide some suggestions as to how professionals working with children and families can encourage and support fathers in warm and responsive parenting. This resource is part of a series of resources examining father involvement and child mental health. Other elements of father involvement (i.e. positive engagement, indirect care and responsibility for planning and organising) are outlined in separate, complementary resources listed in the *Further reading and related resources* section of this paper.

This resource focuses on the experiences of cisgender heterosexual fathers as the vast majority of research literature focuses on this type of father. However, we acknowledge that practitioners may also work with fathers and non-birthing parents who may be gender diverse or do not identify as a 'father'.

How can fathers be warm and responsive in their parenting?

Fathers' can display warmth and responsiveness through a variety of activities, such as:

- being affectionate towards their child (e.g. hugging, kissing)
- telling their child that they're loved
- speaking to their child in a warm and friendly voice
- telling their child that they, and their ideas and actions, are appreciated
- noticing and saying positive things about their child
- listening to their child's feelings and trying to understand them
- recognising and responding to their child's needs and signals
- laughing with their child; and
- asking their child about important matters.

Warm and responsive parenting by fathers and mothers is important for child mental health as the nature of children's relationships with their caregivers influences their development and wellbeing (Daniel et al., 2016; Gryczkowski, Jordan, & Mercer, 2018; Lee, Pace, Lee, & Knauer, 2018). Such behaviours by parents can support children to develop a healthy self-image and confidence while helping make them feel safe and secure with their caregiver and in

their environment (Raising Children Network, 2023). Additionally, parents who are warm and responsive can act as role models for children, who are likely to copy the positive and caring behaviour (Daniel, Madigan, & Jenkins, 2016).

What do we know about fathers' warm and responsive parenting and child mental health?

In terms of fathers specifically, their warmth and responsiveness is associated with improved prosocial child behaviours and infant development. The impact on children's internalising and externalising behaviours is currently unclear.

There is good evidence from Australia (Rominov, Giallo, & Whelan, 2016) and Canada (Daniel et al., 2016) that fathers' warmth and responsiveness can have a positive influence on children's prosocial behaviours. Prosocial behaviour includes the child doing something to benefit or help someone else, such as sharing with others or comforting someone who is upset (Raising Children Network, 2022). Children are more likely to display prosocial behaviour when both fathers and mothers are warm and responsive, compared to when just one parent is warm and responsive (Daniel et al., 2016; Gryczkowski et al., 2018). There is also some limited evidence that the influence of fathers' warmth and responsiveness may differ for girls and boys. A study from the United States (US) that fathers' warmth and responsiveness was associated with prosocial behaviour in girls, but not in boys (Gryczkowski et al., 2018).

Fathers' warmth and responsiveness may also be associated with improved infant development (i.e. physical, emotional and mental growth of an infant). An Australian study of 81 preterm infants (born <30 weeks) and 39 full-term infants and their fathers found that fathers' warmth and responsiveness when the infant was 12 months was associated with better cognitive and language development at 24 months (McMahon et al., 2019).

There is mixed evidence on the influence of fathers' warmth and responsiveness on child internalising behaviours (e.g. anxiety, depression) and externalising behaviours (e.g. aggression, rule breaking). Fathers' warmth and responsiveness was found to improve child externalising behaviours in one study (Jacobvitz et al., 2022). There is also some evidence from the US that warmth displayed by fathers who don't live with the child (as opposed to married or co-habiting families) may have some effect on lower child internalising behaviours (Lee et al., 2018). However, there are many other studies that haven't found any association between fathers' warmth and responsiveness and the presentation of internalising or externalising behaviours by children (Feuge, Cyr, Cossette, & Julien, 2020; Gulenc, Butler, Sarkadi, & Hiscock, 2018; O'Gara, Calzada, & Kim, 2020).

How can practitioners support fathers to promote child mental health?

There is an opportunity for practitioners who work with families to assist fathers in adopting warm and responsive practices that support their child's mental health. Evidence suggests that the following considerations may help build practitioner awareness of the positive role that fathers can play in child wellbeing and support fathers in their parenting.

Have conversations with fathers about their relationship and interactions with their child

- Be curious with fathers about how they interact with their child. Explore whether and how warmth and responsiveness is demonstrated in the child-father relationship.
- Take a strengths-based approach by noticing and highlighting what fathers are already doing that is beneficial for child mental health. Brainstorm with fathers what they are already doing well and how they might incorporate more warmth and responsiveness in their parenting.
- Reflect on how to have collaborative conversations with parents. A practical guide on having conversations with parents about their children is provided in the *Further reading and related resources* section of this resource.

Support fathers and families to be warm and responsive towards their children

- Describe warm and responsive behaviours to fathers and their families, and discuss the benefits of these behaviours for their children's mental health. For example, you might:
 - encourage both parents to tell their child that they love them by showing physical affection, such as hugging and kissing their child; speaking to their child in a warm and friendly voice; listening to their child; laughing with their child; and being supportive and understanding towards their child; and
 - emphasise that warm and responsive parenting by fathers and mothers is beneficial for children's mental health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

Research evidence suggests that how fathers approach parenting and interact with their children can influence their children's mental health and wellbeing. When fathers are affectionate and warm, their children are more likely to engage in prosocial behaviours and have improved mental and language development in infancy.

However, there is mixed evidence on the influence of paternal warmth and affection on other children's mental health challenges (e.g. internalising and externalising behaviours). Practitioners can be curious with fathers and have conversations with them about their parenting, including how they incorporate warmth and responsiveness. Practitioners can also encourage fathers to express more warm and responsive behaviours and describe how these benefit their children's mental health.

Further reading and related resources

Emerging Minds resources

The following is a range of resources for practitioners working with and supporting fathers:

- [How fathers' positive engagement and caregiving can support child mental health](#)
- [How fathers can support child mental health through setting limits and managing behaviour](#)
- [How fathers can positively influence children's mental health through play](#)
- [Supporting fathers' mental health in the perinatal period](#)
- [The impact of paternal positivity on child mental health](#) is a short article summarising the findings of a meta-analysis on paternal positivity and child mental health.
- [Engaging fathers in early childhood services](#) discusses how practitioners can engage fathers in early childhood services.
- Learn more about having conversations with parents about the child and the child-parent relationship by reading:
 - [In focus: Parent-child relationships](#) is a paper exploring child-aware and parent-sensitive practice.
 - The [PERCS Conversation Guide](#) provides advice on having conversations with parents about their children.
- The webinar [Supporting fathers' mental health during the perinatal period](#) provides insights from research, practice and father's lived experience on fathers' mental health in the perinatal period.
- The webinar [Engaging fathers and their children](#) explores practices that make it possible for fathers to discuss their children's social and emotional wellbeing with health professionals.
- The podcast [Supporting dads in their role as fathers](#) explores practical ways in which services and practitioners can make fathers feel more included.

- The [Engaging fathers who use violence podcast episode](#) explores the importance of engaging fathers for children's social and emotional wellbeing, and how to keep the needs of children visible in work with men who use violence.
- The [Rebuilding our shields: Sharing the stories of deadly dads online course](#) is designed for non-Indigenous practitioners to develop their understanding and connection points when supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait fathers, children and families.

Other resources

Practitioners can also consider sharing the following external resources with fathers:

- The Raising Children Network has plain language [resources for fathers on getting involved with their children](#) and father's health and wellbeing.
- Dads Group is a [not-for-profit organisation that runs local father's groups](#).
- The Fathering Project is a charity that runs [programs to help support fathers](#).
- DadSpace is a service developed by the [Parent-Infant Research Institute](#) to provide [support for the emotional wellbeing of new or expectant fathers](#).
- SMS4dads is a [free text messaging service to support new or expectant fathers](#) in their role as fathers and increase awareness of their influence on their child's brain development. There is also Deadly Dads, a [free SMS service for new and expectant Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander fathers](#).

How was this resource developed?

This resource was developed as part of a series of resources based on a rapid literature review of research articles on fathering and child mental health. As part of this review, the authors searched for terms relating to fathering, child mental health, and prevention/association in databases Medline, PsycInfo and Web of Science from 1 January 2012 to 30 May 2022. The included relevant peer reviewed literature:

- examined the association between fathering behaviours when the child was aged <12 years and child mental health
- was published in English; and
- was conducted in high-income, English-speaking countries.

The scope and resources from the review were informed by a consultation process involving 14 practitioners, service leaders and researchers who are experts in parenting, fathering, and men's and children's health. Insights from the consultations were used to guide the scope and resources from the review.

The rapid literature review and related resources are informed by Pleck's (2010) father involvement framework which contains the following:

- Warmth and responsiveness (e.g. hugging and showing affection)
- Control (e.g. setting limits on amount of screen time)
- Positive engagement (e.g. direct caregiving, play, educational activities)
- Indirect care (e.g. making a medical appointment for the child); and
- Process responsibility (referred to as responsibility for planning and organising; e.g. being the primary caregiver for the child).

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr Mandy Truong for her help with screening and data extraction for the rapid literature review that informed this resource.

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This resource was co-produced with:



Australian Government
Australian Institute of
Family Studies



The National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health (NWC) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health under the National Support for Child and Youth Mental Health Program.

5 | February 2024

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