Working with fathers: guidelines for strengths-based practice and research

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Introduction

There are now many texts and papers drawing out the implications of adopting a strengths-based approach to family work in contrast to a pathologising or conventional or problem-based approach (Healy 2005). Here is one example of the criteria for strengths-based practice (they are numbered for easy reference in this presentation):

1. **Every Individual, group, family and community has strengths**
2. **Trauma, abuse, illness, and struggle may be injurious, but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity**
3. **We best serve our clients by collaborating with them**
4. **Assume that you do not know the upper limits of the capacity to grow and change, and take individual, group, and community aspirations seriously**
5. **Every environment is full of resources**
6. **Caring, caretaking, and context are important (Poulin 2005 pp30,31)**

While the proponents of strengths-based approaches are at pains to point to the radical break with usual practice entailed in these guidelines, to anyone recently trained in the helping professions, these guides to practice hardly need mentioning; everyone, these days, is a strengths-based practitioner.

In this paper, rather than examine the benefits or drawbacks of a strengths-based approach, I will be taking it as given that a strengths-based approach is desirable for family-related services and address my remarks to the question of how this approach might be applied to

fathers in particular. The criteria for strengths-based family practice listed above will be applied to working with fathers while highlighting the research implications of applying the strengths approach to fathers. The intention in this presentation is to offer a set of principles which can guide service development to be more effective with families. However let me commence with an example of the practical application of a strengths-based approach.

This example comes from the ongoing work that we have been doing with fathers whose partners had postnatal depression. At one point we were piloting a free service for new fathers which we described on the flyer as for fathers who may have “a wife or partner who is not doing so well”. The intention was to trial a home visiting service for fathers using videotape to record the father doing ‘whatever they enjoyed’ with their infant and then viewing the tape together to discuss questions such as “What is the baby thinking here?” (for a description of the project and the research underpinning the approach see Fletcher R 2009, “Brief report: Promoting infant well being in the context of maternal depression by supporting the father”, Infant Mental Health Journal 30 (1), pp. 95-102.)

Tony

Tony (not his real name) rang the number advertised on the brochure three months after William was born (he had picked up the brochure before the birth). At the initial interview he explained his reason for contacting the service as wanting to be “the best father possible”. During the interview, he described his wife’s serious depression after William’s delivery by emergency caesarean. He also described his determination to be the opposite of his own father. We agreed to have three fortnightly visits which led to a total of ten home visits over seven months. By the time of the first visit, Tony’s wife Vicki was no longer taking medication and was not in contact with any support service. Vicki appeared to be pleased at the support for Tony and offered to stay in a separate room during the sessions, although she often joined in the discussions at some point during the sessions.

At the first home visit when William was three months old, Tony’s interactions with William appeared intrusive and frenetic. Tony would move William to a different activity or object every few seconds. When reviewing the videotape of the first visit, I asked why he interacted this way. Tony explained that babies had a short attention span.

In the final session with Tony and William, I conducted a 'devil's advocate' interview to try to gain a perspective from Tony (and Vicki) on the effects of the intervention. Here is a brief summary of the interview.

The 'devil's advocate' interview

Richard: **Tell us what happened in the first interview. How did you get started?**

Tony: **... I wanted to be a good father ... I didn't have any issues that I wanted to resolve I didn't have any concerns I just wanted to be a better father than I could be and I thought that this program would maybe teach me something new, something that I hadn't thought of...right from the start it was positive...the questions were very positive they made me think about when I was a child...the issues I had...I want to do things differently ...All in all I want to have a very good relationship with my child and that's what I got out of the interview, that things like that were possible.**

Richard: **So let me get this straight Tony, this man Richard comes to your house every week and stays for a couple of hours, what does he do?**

Tony: **He films William and I interacting, ..he sets specific exercises for William and I to do, like it might be "See if you can hold his gaze for ten seconds" or "Can you get him to talk to you" or "Can you two interact and just see how it goes" and then he shows me the educational/training/instructional/learning DVD. He explains it to me and shows me what was happening... it was really good because it opens my eyes to things on my own video that I pick up when Richard shows them to me, that I don't see when its actually happening....anybody can change a nappy, anybody can pick him up if he is crying ... but what I am looking for out of this is the interaction that's missing...and that's what I am picking up. Through the DVDs and my own videos I am picking up those little signals that William wants to interact. Which I think in the long run will bring William and I a lot closer and improve our relationship and that's the whole point of the exercise.**

Vicki joined Tony in front of the camera with William who squirmed and got down. After a short wait the camera was restarted and the questions addressed to both Vicki and Tony.

Richard: **Have you noticed that anything is different because of the visits?**

Tony: **We started to see William as a real little person instead of a baby…we realised that even though he couldn't do much, there was an individual in there trying to interact with us…**

Tony looked at Vicky and they both convulsed with laughter. When, after some seconds Tony, still grinning, said "your turn", Vicki pointed to him through the giggles, "You've already said everything!" After some time she continued…

Vicki: **I think that you (indicating Tony) taught me to be more aware. I think that I spent the first months going "Oh there is this to do and that to do and everything to do", and because Richard would ask you "What do you think he's doing there?", then you would ask me "What do you think that he is doing there?", and it actually made me more aware that he is actually thinking about things…not just a lump…I think that made me love him even more because I stopped thinking about all the things that had to be done… (Fletcher 2011)**

What is strengths based about this work?

The first important strengths-based aspect is having a program or service that explicitly targets fathers. The recognition that fathers are not simply 'mothers' helpers' but deserve recognition as parents in their own right, is a key element in recognizing their possible contribution to the family. This point is often overlooked when services recruit 'parents' and then, when fathers do not respond, assume that they are not interested.

The strengths approach suggests a different that all fathers are viewed as potential recruits to the service. As you would be aware, strengths-based practice is generally discussed in the context of one-to-one work with individuals and groups. The notions of strengths-based

practice came initially from social work, particularly face-to-face models of practice such as case work. It is a key assumption in descriptions of strengths-based practice that the 'client' is in contact with the service. This may sound like an obvious statement but this is a key point for strengths work with fathers. For many family-related services, fathers are not recognised as part of the client base. The implication then in applying the first criteria of strengths-based practice, *Every individual, group, family and community has strengths,* is not only to identify the strengths of fathers that you may be encountering, but to include the father as a possible source of strength in your picture of the family.

A first principle of strengths-based approaches to fathers is:

1. **Fathers need to be specifically targeted**

It is worth noting that to specifically target 'fathers' does not have to exclude same sex couples or others who may be taking a parenting role. In striving to be inclusive of same sex couples and diverse family forms, many publications and programs are labelled in such a way that fathers are excluded. Effective titles that signal the importance of fathers without excluding other groups are: 'father or support person' which can be used in antenatal or postnatal services; 'fathers or male carers' for general parenting situations; and for Indigenous programs and services, 'fathers, uncles, pops or brothers'.

<u>Clarifying the number of fathers (male parents) accessing the service</u>

When we work with services to change the way that they think about fathers, there is no simple switch to flick and everything is father-friendly. If you just think of how many complexities there may be in suddenly having fathers attend all those health, education and welfare sites where currently mothers attend, then you will immediately understand that a strengths approach to fathers might present a challenge to the way that we deliver services to families.

There are places to start however. The simple activity of counting how many fathers are attending a venue or service can be an important awareness-raising exercise for staff. An example from a Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) illustrates this point. As part of a father engagement project within a tertiary NICU, fathers' groups were run in the Unit and discussions held with the staff.

An important factor in the senior nursing staff developing a commitment to fathers' involvement came through the realisation that existing approaches unintentionally excluded fathers, not from attending the NICU, but from being considered as part of the business of

the staff. As an example, the NICU use *Partnerships in Care* sheets to record parents' intention to visit their sick baby. When reviewing these forms for father inclusion, only two instances were found where fathers' intentions were recorded in the notes section. Since many fathers were known to attend, it was clear that the current recording system did not provide an accurate record of fathers' attendance and needed to be modified. The relevant column on the form was split into two and changed from 'Parent' to mother and father/partner.

The numbers of mothers and fathers attending educational sessions in the NICU was also tallied. Although no one expected equal numbers of fathers and mothers to attend the 'Handling Your Baby' educational sessions delivered by a physiotherapist, the staff thought that 'plenty of fathers' attended these sessions. However, there was considerable when surprise when the records were counted:

	Handling Your Baby		CPR	
	Jun-Dec 2001	Jan-Aug 2002	Sept – Dec 2001	Jan – Aug 2002
Female	29	85	34	99
Male	9	23	11	29

The evidence of precisely how many fathers attended provided additional impetus for the staff to address fathers' participation in the care of their babies and provoked discussion of alternative arrangements for delivering these sessions (Fletcher, 2003).

Recognising the father-infant relationship

A second strengths element in the approach to men in Tony's position was the focus on his relationship with William. The targeting of the father and his infant in this free pilot service acknowledged the importance of the father's role in the family. This again may seem an obvious statement but many services that have a history of identifying mother's needs see the father only in relation to the mother, not to the infant or child.

Here is one dramatic example from my own experience (see Fletcher 2011). I was asked to come to a hospital to discuss with a midwife how we might start a group for fathers whose wives had postnatal depression. There was already a group for the mothers who had

depression, and the midwives were wondering if there was a need for a fathers' group. The mothers' group was doing well. In fact, the midwife was particularly proud of how the group had reacted to a terrible accident involving the baby girl of one of the mothers. She had been at home and left her new baby in the care of the baby's father while she slept. The father had been bathing the infant in a shallow bath when he left the room briefly to answer the phone. When he returned, the baby had drowned.

The midwife explained how important the other mothers had been to this woman in her terrible grief. They had been able to put aside their own distress and offer strong support to the distraught mother. There was a brief silence when she had finished this description of heroic women pulling together to support a mother in crisis. After a short while, I asked, ' … and the father? What about the father?'

The midwife frowned and paused before saying, 'Oh … the father? Um … I don't know what happened about him … I have no idea.'

I was shocked at this response: the crushing guilt and self-blame the father would have felt following such a catastrophic event was overwhelming even to think about. However, the midwife's response was not based on a dislike of fathers – far from it. This midwife was an advocate for fathers and was actively trying to get them more involved. But the framework for her caring role was so firmly based on the care of the mother that fathers could slip out of the picture, even in critical incidents such as this one.

This 'blind spot' for the importance of fathers' relationships with children was also identified in an evaluation of websites providing information and support for families where one of the parents is suffering from depression in the period after the birth. In 2009, the well-known website for depression, *beyondblue*, had very general information for parents and no mention of the father-infant relationship, although the Raising Children Network website contained many pages of father-specific information and included information on the father-infant relationship. Since our evaluation, the beyondblue site has developed a range of information for fathers, so change in this area to recognize father-infant relationships is possible.

A second principle of strengths-based approaches to fathers is:

2. **Father-infant and father-child relationships are central to fathering**

But what if fathers are abusive or harmful to children?

A common reaction to the notion of strengths-based approaches to fathers is to wonder how this can apply to men who are the cause of harm to children and families. There is a concern, particularly among those at the 'sharp end' of family services, that involving fathers will not only increase their workload but put children at risk of further abuse (Brown et al, 2009). These concerns deserve attention. However, as pointed out in the social work literature on fathers in child protection work, having concerns about fathers should not be used to justify ignoring fathers.

When researchers examined a random sample of child protection case files for young mothers in medium sized Canadian city, they recorded the following profile of the 128 fathers children: incarceration history 19%; drug history 22%; alcohol history 27%, violence towards children 3%; violence towards mother 24%; sexual abuse of children 0%. So that while there were legitimate concerns for the well being of the children and the family due to the fathers' alcohol and drug use, their history of violence towards the mother and their incarceration, none of these risks applied to the *majority* of fathers.

The case files also recorded how the case worker described the father in relation to the children. In 21% of cases, fathers were described as a risk to children; in 20% he was described as an asset to children; and in 11% as both a risk and an asset. But in 49% of cases, fathers were described as irrelevant to their children. It would seem that in this example, the wholesale exclusion of fathers as a source of support for the children does *not* match the identified risk to children and mothers attributed to fathers.

Considering fathers' potential as both asset and risk is implied by the second strengths-based criteria: *Trauma, abuse, illness, and struggle may be injurious, but they may also be sources of challenge and opportunity.* You will notice that the assumption in this criteria is that the person being addressed is the victim of abuse. For fathers (and I would say mothers too) the trauma may also be a result of their own violence or abuse of another. Researchers from Scotland have provided a starting point for a strengths approach to fathers that has implications for services everywhere:

> Every child is conceived from two biological parents and both parents can play an important role in the identity development of the child. Even if a child has an absent parent or anonymous sperm or egg donor, that fact has a potential to influence their identity development. Both parents usually have a potential role in the care and or harm of the child. Both parents in turn are part of wider family networks who have a stake in the nurture of the child (Taylor & Daniel 2000 p12).

The point of fathers' wider family networks is particularly relevant in cases of fostering and identifying support for children in care when the members of the fathers' family may be and important resopurce and support. There is now a substantial literature on the detrimental effects of ignoring fathers in child protection work (see Brown et al 2009 for example). And from children's perspective, a recent interview study of teenage mothers from the USA gave a poignant example of the effect of 'living without a strong father' on their initiation of sexual activity. The study included girls whose fathers were living in the home but emotionally absent through personality or substance abuse. As these girls approached puberty they created imaginary fathers in place of their absent or uncommunicative fathers. One teenager was a gifted artist who created a series of imaginary family portraits from the time she was five years old, and had used the art works to manage the turbulent feelings of puberty. The father figure in the portraits was always a large, prominent, colourful figure, dressed in a bright flannel or cotton shirt, blue jeans and boots. The father was actively working around the house with the other family members watching him with smiling faces. The young woman artist said that painting these portraits made her feel less "alone in the world" (Burns 2008 p290).

A third principle of strengths-based approaches to fathers is:

3. **Fathers (and their kin) are seen as a potential source of support and risk for the child's development**

Collaborating with fathers

The third criteria of a strengths-based approach from the list above, *We best serve our clients by collaborating with them* can be translated for fathers as *Collaborate with fathers on the basis that they are important for their children's development.*

This is one point where the strengths approach to fathers implies more than an attitude to fathers: it implies *knowledge* about fathers. As many of you will know, there has been a wholesale shift in our approach to separating parents in Australia. In place of an adversarial system based in the courts, we now have a community-based set of services targeting mediation on the basis of what is best for the child. Because an important part of this shift was the recognition that father-child relationships were important for child development, the engagement of fathers in mediation became a significant issue for services.

Important knowledge for practitioners

Prior to the law reforms, counsellors and family therapists would expect to see women seeking help to address relationship difficulties, while men attended reluctantly. One of our research projects asked mediation practitioners how they went about making sure that the fathers who came in with their wives or partners were fully involved in the discussion. They identified an effective practice in engaging fathers was to reframe the father's comments, based on a view of what would be effective in building a strong bond between the child and the father. Practitioners turned to their knowledge of changes in community attitudes toward fathers, and the evidence that fathers were an important influence on children's development in order to help fathers reframe their perspective on parenting. The relevance of knowledge about fathers' role in child development applies to all practitioners. Since all practice is based on ideas about how parenting and family processes can be awry or can be improved, knowledge of the effects of father-child interaction, for example, can be seen as essential for effective work with families.

In the example of Tony and Vicki who participated in the Devils' Advocate Interview described above, the practitioner's knowledge that the attachment relationship between Tony and William was important to William's development, and not simply an 'add on' to the

mother-infant attachment relationship, was important in justifying the resources being directed to Tony.

There are now publications available that provide a summary of the evidence linking father involvement and children's well being. (See for example, the 'Father-inclusive practice and associated professional competencies' resource published by AIFS (which can be downloaded , at http://www.aifs.gov.au/afrc/pubs/briefing/b9pdf/b9.pdf) or check the Family Action Centre website for further links.) There is also the Australian Fatherhood Research Network bulletin which reports on recent research from the social sciences literature as it relates to fathers. This free bulletin is distributed via email three times a year and is also available via the Family Action Centre home page.

Reflecting on practice

A second avenue for increasing knowledge about fathers and how to effectively collaborate with them is through reflecting on instances of practice and adjusting the approach to future father encounters. The reflection can take place as part of supervision when staff has the chance to describe an incident or interaction with a father and then verbally think through how the situation evolved. Building in an expectation that fathers will be discussed during regular supervision (with the understanding that they can be a resource and a risk for children's development), is one way to make sure that fathers are not ignored. However, while it is natural to focus on the difficulties involved in family work, it is also important to identify and communicate successes in engaging with fathers. Thinking about how they might 'celebrate' fathers can be for staff a useful prompt to notice and challenge deficit approaches to fathers' abilities. Even simply asking staff to think about how well they do with fathers can be an important step in noticing features of the service or program that unintentionally exclude fathers.

In a home visiting program for example, 54 home visitors were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 0-10 on how well they could engage with fathers compared to mothers. Clearly these home visitors were fairly confident of their ability to engage both mothers and fathers; however the lower scores for fathers points to an area of practice that may be targeted.

	Confidence in gaining **mothers'** trust	Confidence in gaining **fathers'** trust
Gaining mothers'/fathers' trust so that they can say how they really feel	9.3	7.6
Gaining mothers'/fathers' trust so that they can confide in me	9.2	7.3
Gaining mothers'/fathers' trust so that I am looking after their families' best interests	9.0	8.0

(from Duggan et al., 2004)

The exercise also provided the home visiting service with a way to begin to address the limitation of what was being provided; although more than two thirds of the 390 families involved with the service were targeted at least in part because of the father's risk factors, fathers participated in few of the visits.

Reflecting on real-life situations to expand our mental pictures of fathers' motivations can be important for up-skilling staff to notice fathers' strengths. Here is an example from workshops with staff whose focus is on child protection. Families who are targeted by these services often have complex problems, and thinking about the father can seem like a luxury. So it will be important for the service as a whole, or teams within the service, to discuss why it is important to include fathers.

Kerry is seven years old, and has been displaying very challenging behaviours such as frequent tantrums, fighting with other children, stealing and swearing at her teachers. She lives with her mother Julie and half siblings who she is made to care for (four-year old twins, a two-year old and a 3-month old). An unsubstantiated report notes that Kerry was left alone in the house to care for her siblings during the day for some hours in the school holidays.

Eduardo is the father of Kerry but not Julie's other children. Eduardo emigrated 10 years ago but all his family still live in Ecuador. He has been away working interstate for the last four years and returned home some months ago. He works regular day shifts at the local petrol station three days a week and is hoping to get work in the Goodyear franchise next door. Eduardo shares a house with his mate and lives close by but the house is too small to have Kerry over to stay. He has taken Kerry out occasionally. There is conflict between Julie and Eduardo, however Eduardo pays child support when he can and always remembers Kerry's birthdays and Christmas.

With the added pressure of the new baby, Julie requests respite care for Kerry. Julie has received several periods of respite care when she was unable to cope

with Kerry. After having the twins, she was diagnosed with post-natal depression, however, no record is available of any treatment or support offered or taken up. Julie's mother lives two hours away and sometimes helps out, but she finds Kerry's behaviour distressing. She said she won't come to stay as Kerry "gets on her nerves."

Julie is advised by the duty child protection case worker that there are no respite carers available. After discussions with Julie, the case worker contacts Eduardo and asks if he would be willing to regularly read to Kerry at bedtime to help her settle into a routine. Eduardo agrees and for the first week arrives at the arranged time to read Kerry a bedtime story. After one week he misses a night, then reads again for three nights then misses a night, then reads for two and misses a night, reads for one night and then stops coming. Julie rings the caseworker and explains that "He is too unreliable" (Fletcher 2010).

Exploring the reasons that may have led Eduardo to stopping the reading sessions can help service team members expand their non-deficit, strengths approach. A discussion of "Who or what might encourage Eduardo to stay connected with Kerry?" can broaden the view of Eduardo beyond him simply being "unreliable".

A fourth principle of strengths-based approaches to fathers is:

4. **Practitioners require knowledge about fathers –from research evidence and from reflective practice**

Conclusion

I want to finish this description of how a strengths perspective might apply to working with fathers within the human services arena with an illustration of one individual's change when given the opportunity to consider the implications of a strengths-based approach. A student in one of the Family Action Centre courses offered the following comment on her experience:

> Feminism is not only integral to my life but also to my role as a women's support worker at a domestic violence refuge. Much of what I had learnt about males until this point was negative. So as you could imagine, I started this course quite nervous of the fact that the content might differ from my own values.
>
> At Community Services my first client was a single father with sole parental responsibility for his two children. Having only ever worked with women that had been victims / survivors of domestic violence mainly perpetrated by males, I was terrified to get this father as my first case, solely because I was unsure if I would be able to support him and his children as well as what I had done in the past for women. This course provided me with a fantastic basis for everything that I needed to know to get thinking critically about how best I could work with this father.
>
> I think the biggest highlight for me was when he said to me "I'm the man, I'm meant to be able to look after my family" (in reference to his financial status). I replied "You're a single father, who has fought hard so his children would have a wonderful life away from the ugliness that they were subject to, and if that's not looking after your family.....I don't know what is." The smile on his face nearly brought me to tears.

I look forward to developing with you an approach to the human services and research that embraces and celebrates fathers for the benefit of all families.

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The 6th National Family and Community Strengths Conference 2010

Thinking tools working with father and their families

Powerpoint slide outlines – see following pages

Thinking tools for working with fathers and their families

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Fathers, fathering, fatherhood…

At the *The 6th Australian Family and Community Strengths Conference, 2010*, held at the University of Newcastle, NSW three presentations addressed important questions about fathers, fathering and fatherhood

Fathers, fathering, fatherhood…

- The three presentations arose from the work of the Fathers and Families Research program at the Family Action Centre in the Faculty of Health, The University of Newcastle.
- We wish to acknowledge the sponsorship of Interrelate Family Centres and the work of our colleagues in the Healthy Dads Healthy Kids project as well as all members of the Fathers and Families Research program in the development of this research.

Fathers, fathering, fatherhood…

The three topics were:

- What more could practitioners know about fathers?
- How do dads think about fatherhood?
- Where does active play and fathering fit in?

What more could practitioners know about fathers?

Basis for Research

- The 2006 family law reforms signalled a new recognition of the importance of fathers in children's development and in family well-being
  - Emphasise both parents' roles
  - Outline the importance of a father's relationship with family members, in determining a child's well-being

Basis for Research

- Raises the possibility that services might overlook gender differences between mothers and fathers
- There is consistent evidence of sex differences in men's and women's approaches to seeking assistance when their personal well-being is under threat
  - Stereotyping can be both negative and positive

Focus Groups

- Looked at the ways in which practitioners aim for and recognise the engagement of fathers in the mediation process
- The focus of the planned discussion was on the strategies, knowledge, and skills employed by practitioners

Focus Groups

- Practitioners indicated that a father's engaged attitude was typically expressed by cooperation, willingness, and attentiveness, which carried through repeat sessions
- There was a shift for fathers from 'observers' to 'customers':

  Suddenly sometimes the shift happens, when suddenly something happens and they realise, 'Maybe it is my responsibility'. That's taken a lot of engaging and a lot to get to that point. When they suddenly realise that the guilt and blame doesn't work.

Focus Groups

- A significant barrier to father engagement was identified as being fathers' perceptions that relationship talks are 'feminine':
  If a female practitioner tells a male client that they are neutral, but they still speak the same language as the ex-, then it is hard [for the father] to accept that they are neutral.

Focus Group

- Practitioners felt that one of their principle strategies was to acknowledge the values of fathers as parents:
  As part of their engagement you have to respect and value their position as a father.
- Through listening to, empathising with, and eliciting a father's story in a non-judgmental manner, practitioners aimed not to critique his perceptions, but to allow him to lay these out for reflection and reframing.

Focus Group

- A core principle was to preserve impartiality, maintaining neutrality at the same time as being curious, nonjudgmental and understanding.
- Important to have specific knowledge of substantive father issues including the influence of fathers on child development, family dynamics, and parenting after separation.
- All groups mentioned the importance of self-reflection

Knowledge About Fatherhood Checklist

- Developed from the focus group findings
- Online survey (N=300)
- Covers two areas:
  - Competency
  - Knowledge

Knowledge About Fatherhood Checklist

- Competency Questions
  - 7 items
  - Previous experiences and perceptions of their abilities when working with fathers
  - Indicate how true each statement is of themself

I can strike up a conversation with men who come from different backgrounds to mine

Knowledge About Fatherhood Checklist

- Knowledge Questions
  - 29 items
  - Recent evidence of the effects of fathers on child development and accepted best practice when working with fathers
  - Indicate confidence in the accuracy of each item

The father-child relationship is very important for the child's development

Your Turn!

- Please consider how well each of these statements describes you as a practitioner
  - *I can strike up a conversation with fathers who come from different backgrounds to mine*
  - *I have a good grasp of how fathering is different to mothering*
  - *I often discuss how it went with a father and then come to a better understanding of what to do*

Knowledge About Fatherhood Checklist

- Competency results
  - Used a method of analysis that grouped respondents according to how they answered.
  - The method is called Latent Class Modelling (LCM)

Knowledge About Fatherhood Checklist

- Competency results
  - High proportion of 'True' responses
  - Proportion of 'True' responses increased with years of experience
  - LCM showed two distinct groups of people:
    - Participants in Cluster 1 (72%) were confident in their abilities and understanding of fathers and fatherhood. The likelihood of belonging to Cluster 1 increased with age, training and years of experience.
    - Participants in Cluster 2 (28%) were unsure of their ability to work with fathers.

Your Turn!

- Please discuss with your neighbour the accuracy of each of the following statements
  - *Fathers naturally have less impact on their daughter's emotional development as their daughter becomes a teenager*
  - *Separated fathers have a higher risk of developing mental health problems than separated mothers*
  - *Fathers seldom know how to raise their children*

Your Turn!

- *Parents need to be interacting with their children in much the same ways*
- *The practitioner should communicate in exactly the same way with mothers and fathers*
- *An infant who is raised by a stay-at-home father (whose mother works fulltime) is likely to show delayed social and emotional development*
- *When fathers do not show their feelings in the sessions it means that they are not interested*

How do you compare?

- *Fathers naturally have less impact on their daughter's emotional development as their daughter becomes a teenager*
  - Incorrect
- *Separated fathers have a higher risk of developing mental health problems than separated mothers*
  - Correct
- *Fathers seldom know how to raise their children*
  - Incorrect

How do you compare?

- *Parents need to be interacting with their children in much the same ways*
  - Incorrect
- *The practitioner should communicate in exactly the same way with mothers and fathers*
  - Incorrect
- *An infant who is raised by a stay-at-home father (whose mother works fulltime) is likely to show delayed social and emotional development*
  - Incorrect
- *When fathers do not show their feelings in the sessions it means that they are not interested*
  - Incorrect

Knowledge About Fatherhood Checklist

- Knowledge Results
  - Accuracy was quite low (55%)
  - LCM revealed three clusters of participants:
    - Cluster 1 (37% of respondents) showed a poor understanding of fatherhood and acknowledged that there are large gaps in their understanding. People in this cluster were more likely to have a certificate type qualification and be 60+ years of age.
    - Cluster 2 (32%) showed some knowledge about fatherhood, but admitted that they were unsure about some aspects of fatherhood. People in this cluster were more likely to have a Masters, PhD, or Post Graduate qualification, were less likely to have a diploma.
    - Cluster 3 (31% of respondents) demonstrated a good understanding of some, but not all, aspects of working with fathers. People in this group had strong opinions and were unwilling to admit uncertainty. They were more likely to be under 30 years of age and to identify themselves as a support worker.

Knowledge About Fatherhood Checklist

- Initial findings suggest that although practitioners working with separated fathers rate themselves as generally competent at engaging fathers, they may lack important knowledge of fathers and fatherhood

Things to think about

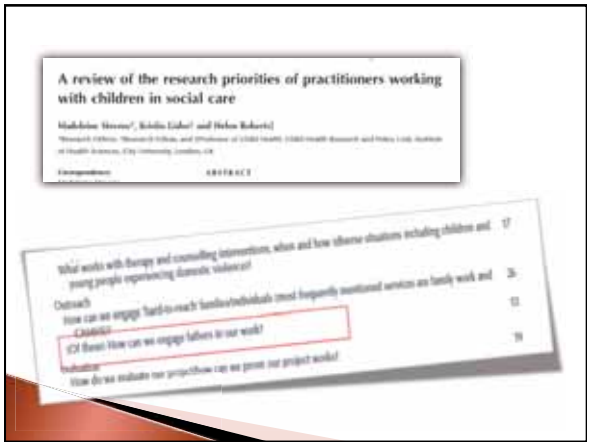
- Competence should be viewed as a continuum that starts with training and becomes a lifelong process
- Competence assessment should be ongoing, particularly as systems change
- Some contexts may require specific skills and knowledge that extend beyond the givens of practitioner expertise
- Achieving competence with fathers is more difficult than with mothers
- Perhaps more father-inclusive training is required

Final thought

As counsellors we don't have any biases [laughter], we don't have any preconceived ideas [laughter], and the fact that we are laughing highlights the fact that we hold some conflicting beliefs and clients hold some and until they are identified and played with then change can't happen.

(Taken from Focus Group Discussions)

What do fathers think about fatherhood?



Some of our research

- Men's help-seeking in the context of separation
  - How do men manage their mental and physical wellbeing during the crisis of family dissolution?
- Strengths of young parents
  - What are young parents' perceptions of child development?
- Travelling well: Commuting parents and family life
  - How do time-poor parents connect with their children?

Some of our research

- Constructing the nurturing father on YouTube
- Online fathering
  - How do fathers use the web to explore and shape their understandings of fatherhood?
    - What aspects of fatherhood are portrayed in 'father and baby' videos presented on Youtube?
    - How do fathers seek and give support through web-based chatrooms?

Separated fathers

- **Family support**

"My mum and dad live around the corner probably two hundred metres away, they're seventy-seven now, they have been excellent, they've been an absolute rock ... really when you look at my situation, we're very close and see each other every day and you know the kids love them."

- **Emotional and informational support**

"She was very good at teaching me those sort of skills. And helping me to manage the situation instead of reacting to situations."

Parent-child connection

Teach: "He also learns to share...he learns that we've both got to play with the toy, he doesn't get the toy all to himself. He learns to share, he learns to utilise all toys, not just get one, we play with all his toys. We tip them all out all over the floor and he gets to pick and we both use them to play."

Enjoy: "It's definitely more rewarding than I thought it would be. That's why I say, I'd be the worst spokesman at high schools to tell the young people not to get pregnant."

(Young Parents study + Commuting study)

On the Web

"You will, on the day of the birth, pick up this absolutely compelling and impelling mass of squirming, screaming humanity, your heart will melt and you will wonder how you ever existed without that precious bundle you're holding."

Talking with Indigenous dads

- Craig Hammond talks about learning fathering

When you think about…

- **Fathers and support…**
  - Some fathers often turn to family members for support
  - Some fathers value talking to others who are going through the same thing
  - Some fathers prefer talking to other men about father-related issues, others do not mind
  - Some fathers are keen to support and mentor others
  - For some, virtual spaces encourage sharing and support
  - Many fathers will create their own opportunities when there is a short-fall

When you think about…

- Fathers and communication…
  - Some fathers find humour really facilitates interaction, with peers, with children
  - Some fathers use story telling as a way of advising, informing, connecting, and reflecting
  - Some fathers find virtual communication is helpful, encouraging or cathartic

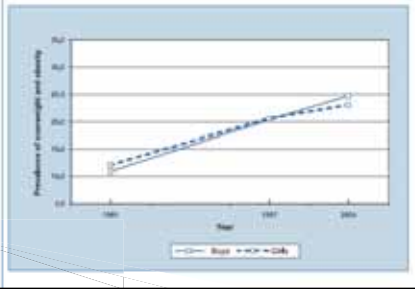
When you think about…

- Fathers and their self-esteem, their identity or their strengths, think about…
  - Eliciting stories of reflection and strengths
  - What spaces could provide guidance and facilitation without direct involvement from service
  - Vulnerability can be acknowledged in the right sort of space
  - Fatherhood is transformative for some

Thinking Tools – Fathers' active play

Childhood obesity and overweight is a very serious problem for Australia

Figure 3: Trends in the percentage of students who are overweight or obese



Kids are getting heavier

- Photo deleted

...and so are their parents

- Photo deleted

The reasons are no big surprise

Children's activity levels have changed:

- Less than10% of children walk to school
- Less than 20% of girls and less than 50% of boys are competent in performing fundamental motor skills
- 70% of children spend more than 2 hours each day in screen recreation

DADS as physical activity leaders

Dads can encourage…

- Incidental physical activity
- Fundamental motor skill development
- Rough and tumble play

Healthy Dads, Healthy Kids

Session 2:
Raising active children in an inactive world

In partnership with our community

HMRI

COAL & ALLIED

Rough and Tumble play

Rough and Tumble Play (RTP)

- **Animal studies** show RTP in most mammals
- Monkeys, rats, goats, dolphins
- More common in boys
- Important for development
- Show effects on brain areas
- **Human studies** show RTP common in western
- Some evidence of lower aggression if RTP

Winning is a big issue

Fathers have to manage the competition

And the sibling tensions

...the children drive it

..the enjoyment is very powerful

...bonding happens in front of your eyes

Thinking Tools – Fathers' active play

- Father-child activity important for weight
- RTP important for children's development
- Consider RTP in assessing parenting
- Raising father, child activity levels is possible
- Raising ideas such as % win can lead to change

Thank you