**Funded by:**
The Smith Family  
Brimbank  
Communities for Children  
The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA)

**Acknowledgements:**
Writer: Scott L. Hall  
Editors: Amanda Webb, Anna Clarke, Robyn McIvor  
Special thanks to the Brimbank organisations who have participated in this research.
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationale</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Scenario</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Findings</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A - Organisations Consulted</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B - Dads in Play - Resources and References</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 3 - Extracts</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the past decade, Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) Sunshine has been involved in early intervention with fathers through universal and targeted programs run in community settings. Over that period the wider service sector has begun to articulate the benefits of father inclusive practice and the links with better outcomes for children, families and communities. The Sunshine Centre has had a longstanding interest in and dedication to expanding the fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives. Communities for Children funding has enabled this opportunity to develop a local picture of the ways in which fathers are engaged in services in Brimbank.

Research has shown that fathers play an important role in parenting and have the ability to influence their child’s life in many positive ways. Furthermore, involved fathers can also help to promote family cohesion.

However, in today’s society there are greater demands on parents to adapt and be flexible to new pressures in child raising.

Child and family services can play an important role in supporting fathers to become more involved with their children and families. The *Dads in Play* project was developed with the aim of improving fathers’ engagement in Early Years Services within the Brimbank jurisdiction, by understanding the barriers, challenges and opportunities.

The Brimbank community is culturally diverse, and an important element of the project was to research and identify culturally appropriate strategies and communication tools to engage fathers from a range of backgrounds.

The *Dads in Play* project was developed by RAV’s Sunshine Centre and funded under Communities For Children, of which the Smith Family was the lead agency. The funding was provided by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).
Rationale

Focusing on fathers’ involvement with their children as early as possible is a positive investment for children and communities. Starting the process with expectant and new parents represents practical and early intervention. The financial justification behind such early intervention and the evolutionary work to engage fathers is evidenced in the quotes below.

“So when we talk about prevention we shouldn’t even be thinking about adolescence as ‘early intervention’. Intervening with adolescence is ‘late intervention’. Intervening with pregnant parents is early intervention, and the economic evidence is really strong. The 2000 Nobel Prize winning economist, James Heckman, plotted quite a famous graph that shows the return in dollars for every dollar you invest at different ages. In infancy, you get back something like five to ten dollars for every dollar you invest, and you get about dollar for dollar at about the age of seven, and from seven onwards your return progressively diminishes.”

Jon Jureidini, Child psychiatrist at the Women’s and Children’s Hospital
Psychotherapy in Australia – Vol 18 no 2. February 2012

“What is not so clear is how to get fathers engaged. There was a time when fathers were simply blamed for not being involved. Recently though, there are lots of unintentional barriers that prevent fathers from taking part when services see families. Professionals in Early Childhood Centres, Clinics, Schools and Family Support Services are beginning to make changes to their work with some positive results. However the progress in engaging fathers was patchy.”

Jannelle Gallagher, Director Kurri Kurri & District Preschool Kindergarten.

“Services were urged to work with fathers as partners in change with respect for their experience, gifts and capacities as fathers.”

Dr Richard Fletcher, Associate Professor - The Family Action Centre, Faculty of Health, University of Newcastle.

(Excerpts from ECA Webwatch 2012 - Engaging fathers in Early Childhood Services.)
Current Scenario

If engaging fathers in child and family services more effectively in Brimbank is our objective, how are we doing at the moment?

Many services in Brimbank that target new parents or parents are those that are used exclusively by mothers. Very few services attract ongoing participation by fathers.

Services that report some participation from dads are MacKillop Family Services, who ran a Tuning into Kids parenting course in Deer Park last year, attracting two dads as participants. CatholicCare offers Bringing Baby Home through Sunshine Hospital (offered under BrimWest Early Intervention Services). The one day relationship education program is offered four times a year for couples expecting their first baby. Between six and 12 couples attend these day programs from the local area. This equates to between 24 and up to 48 dads possibly participating in Early Years programs through the hospital (from a potential pool of more than 4,000 births per year).

CatholicCare also offers two camps and two family days a year for up to 25 dads and kids. These are again capacity building events for newly settled dads trying to adapt to new life and culture in Australia; from mainly Sudanese, Somali, and Ethiopian backgrounds. The program is also part of BrimWest Early Intervention Services.

Some Maternal and Child Health (MCH) services open for appointments after 5.00pm in the evening on weeknights, and this attracts more participation from fathers. Such services report: “We have lots of dads attend the Centre with their partners and babies. We also have lots of dads bringing their babies/children if mothers work.”

New mother’s groups are not a regular occurrence, and a dad’s group which was introduced a number of years ago faced enough difficulties to prevent organisers from running it again. Occasionally dads attend a new mum’s group, but this is rare. One MCH Nurse identified that they needed: “Someone to run dad’s groups for free”.

In the last two years Best Start sponsored six very successful programs specifically for dads, hosted in childcare centres and kindergartens. These attracted more than 300 family members with more than 60 dads participating in sessions covering play and learning, dad’s roles and experiences etc. Many coordinators were surprised at the participation levels from dads and their families in these programs. Some Centres still host ongoing dad’s groups (for example Phoenix Street Childcare Centre and Derrimut YMCA). These groups have also included visits for dads and kids to local libraries and other recreational venues around Brimbank.
The Sunshine Centre and Community West provide *Breakthrough*, a post-separation parenting program, under BrimWest Early Intervention Services. This program is successful in engaging separated fathers who are interested in reducing conflict with their ex-partner for the benefit of their children. Many of these fathers have young children.

The centre also provides a comprehensive Family Violence program that includes a focus on assisting fathers to parent after violence and trauma. A number of the dads participating are new parents. Reconnecting through play is provided at all levels of the centre’s men’s programs, including the Vietnamese Men’s Behaviour Change groups.

In summary, although there has been some success in engaging fathers within the Brimbank area, efforts have been sporadic and mainly program-based. The implementation of services and strategies that fit fathers’ schedules and are integrated within existing child and family services would assist in engaging a larger number of fathers on an ongoing basis. Services for dads need to be provided after hours, flexibly, in the community where dads meet, and consistently. Fathers’ perspectives on their children’s well-being need to be sought and utilised, as well as the resources that fathers offer to their children, and children’s services. Services that target families and couples need to consider men’s and women’s needs and engagement style, which can be quite different.
Methodology

1. Questionnaire - Engaging dads

A written questionnaire and information kit was developed and provided to Early Years service providers in Brimbank to gauge the current level of father involvement; and to determine barriers, challenges and areas of potential for engaging them in future. The specific questions posed were as follows:

1. How are dads involved in your services at present? What is an example of successful dads’ engagement?

2. What do you feel are the current barriers to engaging dads more in your service?

3. What is one simple thing you can do to increase dads’ participation in your service?

4. What help would you like to improve access for dads in your service and how might you use the Inviting Dads In kit within your service? The Inviting Dads In kits were developed in 2012 through a Brimbank Council Best Start grant and are accessible by Early Years programs in Brimbank.
2. Consultation with families, Early Years services and stakeholders

*Dads in Play* held individual and group meetings with kindergarten teachers; playgroup coordinators and facilitators; and Early Years services staff. Additionally, MCH nurses, *Bringing Baby Home* program managers, midwives, Family Violence practitioners, Family Support staff and Men’s Behaviour Change group facilitators were all consulted. *Dads in Play* also ran small focus groups consisting of families.

**CALD engagement**

In order to ensure our consultation was socially inclusive, we involved dads from a range of CALD backgrounds in discussion groups. This included meetings with dads from Chinese, Vietnamese, Sudanese, Maori, Samoan, Tongan and Sri Lankan backgrounds at child care centres and sessional kindergartens. Bilingual group facilitators were employed to assist discussions with CALD families where necessary, and information and resources were provided in translated form.

**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander engagement**

The engagement of fathers within the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community was determined through consultation with the following Indigenous family services professionals:

- CfC Indigenous Liaison Officer
- Western Region Indigenous Gathering Place Family Services Coordinator
- RAV Aboriginal Liaison Officer

*Dads in Play* also provided information and resources about Father Inclusive Practice to Aboriginal services, as well as specific resource material about ‘being an Aboriginal dad’.

3. Organisations consulted

A list of all organisations consulted during the *Dads in Play* project is provided in Appendix 1.
Findings

1. Questionnaire – engaging dads

Below is a summary of the responses to questionnaires and from individual and group meetings with service providers on father engagement:

**How are dads involved in your services at present? What is an example of successful dads’ engagement?**

- Dads are not usually involved in the service unless a psychologist requests for them to be; or the therapy plan with mum is not successful.
- When doing family goal planning meetings, we encourage dads to attend and occasionally they do, however work commitments prevent them from attending during our work hours.
- Attending appointments with their children, taking an interest in their child’s well-being.
- In some cultures the fathers make all the decisions regarding their children and they are the ones who communicate the child’s needs to the service provider.
- Dads come with their kids to attend the playgroup. eg one mum was in hospital to give birth to her second child and dad came with the elder daughter to attend playgroup.
- Parent information nights, dads and kids nights, sausage sizzles, working bees

**What do you feel are the current barriers to engaging dads more in your service?**

- Language
- Work commitments
- Time
- Confidence
- Dads are busy with their jobs earning money
- They feel shy to come and join playgroup with other mums
- They prefer to do other things rather than ‘wasting’ time at playgroup.
- Overall dads/fathers engage very well with the refugee health program. However men are at times reluctant to seek assistance with their own health matters or difficulties and this may also include parenting issues.
What is one simple thing you can do to increase dads’ participation in your service?

- Father-focused events
- Involving fathers in our policies
- By avoiding discrimination
- Highlight father’s involvement or lack thereof with the child health team at our next planning meeting.
- Discuss the resource kit and service models to increase fathers’ involvement.

What help would you like to improve access for dads within your service and how might you use the Inviting Dads In kit in your service?

- Set up displays for dads so they can borrow resources
- Assistance in sourcing inviting information that can be displayed throughout the service. I find it difficult to access Father Inclusive resources.
- Take pictures with permission from our dads and families, showing that it is normal and fun to get involved with your kids’ play and learning.
- After hours sessions need to be made available, and child care may also assist.
- Parental leave (for dads) to be seen as normal.
- More resourcing, campaigning and awareness of the benefits of letting dad come to playgroup. Build his relationship with kids: not just work, work work!
2. General feedback from Early Years services

Many services which tried an activity such as the FUN for Kids program were pleasantly surprised at the benefits of getting more dads involved in an activity at the centre. Immediately they had information about play and learning for dads - as well as mums and extended family members. This included CALD dads who expressed basic and universal needs and aspirations for their children; eg wanting to spend more time with their kids and for them to be happy and a good person. Simply by running a father’s group, staff established a conversation with the dads and started to learn more about them and their child/children.

Feedback from the Vietnamese Men’s Behaviour Change group was very powerful. Many of the fathers in the group commented that they had an opportunity to deal with traumatic events in their life, and at the same time take responsibility for their own behaviours; improve their relationships with their kids and family; and contribute to their community. To be recognised as more than just a ‘worker’ was very important, and making time to have fun with their family was sometimes lost in the drive to pay bills and work.

**CALD communities**

Fathers from CALD backgrounds often showed an enthusiasm to connect with other fathers in their child’s centre and more broadly with their community. They also expressed a wish for events and excursions to local parks and recreation venues, such as Brimbank Park and libraries, with other dads and families at the centre. They preferred these events to be hosted by a fathering facilitator. Even though they were running a business or holding a job they indicated they liked the practicality of events being organised by someone confident in such groups.

Fathers from CALD backgrounds were also interested in continuing to participate in discussion/activity groups about fathering and children’s development, play and learning.

Another positive that emerged from the discussion groups with CALD families was that staff were surprised and pleased to meet these dads and could see the benefits for developing curriculum specifically for their children. With the National Framework rolling out in many Early Years centres, the benefits of engaging dads became even more rewarding, because their involvement led to engagement with mums and extended families also.

The Inviting Dads In resource kits were a positive tool to encourage Early Years centres to model more parental (and specifically dads’) participation. They encouraged services to develop resources such as posters of dads and kids learning together at that centre.

Finding ways to get dads engaged in playing with their babies, toddlers and kinder kids was seen as a very positive goal to work towards!
Challenges

Prioritising time

Many Child and Family services identified having little time for reflection, practice innovation and development. Father Inclusive Practice is perceived as extra work and overly demanding. This was evidenced by the fact it was challenging getting time to talk with key services, as general service demand is already over capacity. An example is the Sunshine Hospital Maternity Department responding to over 4,000 births per year. Antenatal education services are contracted to Tweddle and even engaging prospective parents in basic services is challenging.

Tweddle has put considerable time and effort into developing a dad’s strategy with aspirations of running specific and general groups for dads; however these have not been implemented yet. The Dads in Play project shared research and resources that provide an overview of the evidence and practical examples of engaging dads in our area with Tweddle.

MCH services were also universally very busy, responding to the growing birth notifications. Nurses recognised the potential and practical benefits of engaging dads more effectively, and often shared frustrations about establishing new parents groups for mums, before they can start to think about father engagement.

Despite this, quite a few services were already implementing flexible and responsive practice methods that were successful in engaging dads; such as out of hours opening, posters and resources that invited dads in.

Although child care centres and kindergartens are challenged to find time to engage dads, after looking at requirements for the National Early Years curriculum framework we could establish that this learning assists services’ other general and specific objectives.

Practice culture

When a service developed a practice culture suggesting that including dads was ‘too hard’ or not core business, low participation rates usually resulted. Conversely, services that tried some simple activities and invitations to dads were pleasantly surprised at how easy and productive the practice was. In these cases, service staff commented on how interesting and enthusiastic the dads were about their family and kids’ development.

The services that have previously participated in the Best Start funded dads programs had a practical knowledge and experience of engaging with Father Inclusive Practice, as well as the immediate benefits. Using resource kits such as the Inviting Dads In kits, and hosting evenings where dads and kids participated, gave services confidence that it was not too difficult, and simply getting more dads through the door opened the conversation that could then grow and evolve.
Recommendations

The evidence base linking better engagement of Fathers in Early Years is very clear and this is even more critical with vulnerable families in the Brimbank area. The key recommendations resulting from the project are as follows:

1. Specific and dedicated sessions for all new expectant parents in antenatal education through Sunshine Hospital Maternity Department regarding fathers’ roles in early family life.

2. Expanded education opportunities for new dads and mums, such as *Bringing Baby Home* and *FUN for Kids* new dads’ programs.

3. Establish playgroups, activity groups and specific sessions for new dads and advocate for fathers’ participation in playgroups in Brimbank.

4. Provide Father Inclusive Practice workshops for all Early Years staff in Brimbank. This includes specialist, Family support and universal services such as MCH, Hospital, Ante and Post Natal Education, Child care and Kindergartens.

5. Development of more *Inviting Dads In* resource kits for additional Early Years services in the postcode areas of 3020 to 3023.

6. Dads and Kids Day Out events for mums, dads and families in kinders and Early Years services, (normalise dads’ engagement with their kids and families in services).

7. Establish a ‘Dads Matter’ style resource unit, such as the unit at City of Casey, in Brimbank.

8. Assist the MCH Centres to establish new groups for mums and dads groups through their general practice.
9. Establish a coordinated dads and fathering network in Brimbank. A network of workers to share information and resources and keep father inclusive practice on the agenda of their organisations. This network would require specific resourcing from a worker.

10. Work with specific CALD communities that are both successful and challenged in engaging active fathering participation.

11. Ongoing focus on breastfeeding work and education programs for expectant and new fathers, relating to their critical support role.

12. Develop dads’ reading programs through MCH, playgroups, kindergartens and childcare centres.

13. Run more specific Men’s Behaviour Change programs for CALD groups like the Vietnamese community; and include Reconnecting programs (for fathers to learn how to re-engage with children after violence).

14. Develop more specific dads’ groups in partnership and consultation with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

15. Develop more resources such as posters and booklets on dads and kids.

Fathers need to be encouraged to engage with their children from an early stage and to stay engaged throughout their lives. When we involve fathers and mothers we have more possibility of engaging culturally diverse and vulnerable communities and having a positive impact on children’s lives. It is recommended that;

• organisations focus more on fathers in both general and specific services
• early years services are provided with regular training regarding early intervention with fathers,
• resources are provided to do this and
• organisations develop policies and strategies to support this fundamental work.
## Appendix A - Organisations Consulted

The following organisations assisted in the delivery and planning of the Dads in Play project:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Type of Service</th>
<th>Type of Collaborative Relationships (check all that apply for each partner)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sunshine Hospital</td>
<td>Maternity Dept</td>
<td>Shared knowledge / training / mentoring, Joint community planning, Community partnership joint service delivery, Formal referral policy / procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tweddle</td>
<td>Early Parenting Service</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIS Primary Care</td>
<td>MCH coordination, Refugee program, Playgroups &amp; Family Support</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>MCH nurses</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISIS</td>
<td>Indian Playgroup facilitator</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BPA</td>
<td>Child Care Centres and kindergartens</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jindiworaback</td>
<td>Child care and Kindergarten</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noahs Ark</td>
<td>Early Intervention and inclusion support</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derrimut YMCA</td>
<td>Child Care, Kinder and Community Centre</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Suburbs Indigenous Gathering Place</td>
<td>Health service and family support</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RAV</td>
<td>Family Violence and Mens Behaviour Change Programs, Vietnamese Family programs</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brimbank</td>
<td>Library Service, Best Start, Early Years network</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith Family</td>
<td>Community Development, CF, and Indigenous Liaison officer</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mackillop Family services</td>
<td>David Cameron – Drug abnd Alcohol Worker and Tuning into Kids facilitator</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tweddle</td>
<td>Lactation Consultant</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic Care</td>
<td>Bringing Baby Home Coordinator</td>
<td>Survey, discussion and information sharing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B - Dads in Play - Resources and References

- Australian Fatherhood Research Network, research and resources

- Engaging fathers in child and family services CAFCA practice sheet

- The Children of Parents with mental illness (COPMI) Initiative- dads resources

- Raising Children Network- range of info on kids, families and dads
  http://raisingchildren.net.au/

- Napcan dads and kids resources on preventing child abuse

- Mensline - 24 hour telephone counseling service

- UK Literacy and Numeracy Sure Start Blokes Projects
  http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/search?q=Blokes

- FaHCSIA Father-inclusive practice guide and Introduction to working with men and family relationships guide

- Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander relationship support at RAV

- Men's Referral Service – advice, referral and information on family violence, family and relationship issues

- RAV Sunshine Centre ‘Men and family relationships programs in Brimbank’

- Innovative New dads programs- Parmas Cut the Dramas

- Dads and breastfeeding article

- Post and Ante Natal Depression information- PANDA

- Bringing your Baby Home Courses, African Dads and Kids, and Vietnamese Parenting programs through Catholic Care
Why is it challenging to engage fathers in child and family services?

Child and family services can find it challenging to engage fathers because they may:

• not attend services;
• not actively participate in programs;
• not have ongoing participation in a program; and/or
• appear reluctant to develop a bond with a service or a practitioner.

Similarly, fathers may find it difficult to engage with child and family services because:

• they don’t know where to look for help;
• their working hours can be an obstacle to accessing services;
• child and family services are often seen as places devoted primarily to supporting women and their children and, as a result, men can be reluctant to seek help through these avenues;
• men are less likely to seek out health workers, child welfare professionals and parent groups if they need support in their role as carer; and
• entrenched beliefs and perceptions relating to the roles of men and women, such as men not being “natural nurturers”, can enhance men’s sense that child and family services are not meant for them.

For further discussion on the challenges child and family services face when trying to engage men and the challenges men face when trying to engage with child and family services, see Berlyn et al. (2008, pp. 19–22), and O’Brien and Rich (2002, pp. 37–45).

Practice considerations

Practice considerations are general principles based upon lessons from research and practice designed to provide additional guidance to service providers about specific issues relating to working with fathers.

What methods can child and family services use to engage fathers?

Many of the methods for services to engage fathers are the same as engaging other potentially hard to reach” groups in the community.

Acknowledge men and their needs and preferences
Recruitment

- Most communities have spaces where men gather (e.g., sporting venues and events and workplaces). These spaces provide opportunities for promoting programs and recruiting fathers.

- Promoting programs in spaces traditionally frequented by men will not necessarily reach all men in a community. For example, men from specific cultural groups may be more likely to attend a local religious institution than a sporting event. Therefore, research needs to be conducted before the promotion takes place.

- Fathers may be attending non-child and family services that provide opportunities for promoting programs (e.g., Centrelink, community-based welfare agencies). Workers at those services may not be aware of local programs available for fathers. Therefore, communication with other non-child and family services is important.

- Men may be uncomfortable with programs that emphasise the provision of ‘support’ because it suggests they are not coping.

- Men are more likely to attend a child and family service if they are encouraged to do so by their partner. Similarly, a partner who discourages involvement may reduce a father’s willingness to engage with a service.

Service delivery

- Services that operate only during business hours are most accessible to people who are home in the daytime; this will most often be women. Therefore, flexible hours of operation have a significant effect on how accessible a program is to fathers.

- Positive images of men and fathers in a program setting and in promotional materials shows a service welcomes fathers and recognises their importance.

- Child and family services are often staffed and attended mainly by women. Recruiting a male staff member or male volunteers (especially at front of house) may make men feel more comfortable.

- Programs specifically for men (e.g., Dads groups) may make men more likely to attend a service.

- Research suggests that many men have a positive response to activities that provide ‘hands on’ learning opportunities, such as cooking and physical activity, rather than seminars and presentations.

- Holding child and family activities in male-friendly spaces (e.g., sporting clubs) may improve levels of father engagement.

- Some men (as well as women) may feel uncomfortable discussing personal issues freely and openly in a service environment. Some ways of reducing this discomfort are:
  - For workers to speak about their own experience, rather than positioning themselves as an “expert”;
  - Interacting side by side rather than face to face; and
  - Discussing issues whilst they are engaged in an activity (e.g., cooking, “tinkering”).
Questions to consider in planning and delivery of services:

- Where do men in the local community gather? Can you promote your program in these venues?

- To encourage participants to attend, all potential participants were approached personally through a number of avenues including personally approaching dads as they dropped off and collected their children from school, child care and sporting events. (Kangaroo Island Children’s Services, 2010).

- Consider men from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds: Where do they meet? What challenges might they be facing as fathers? How can your program develop relationships with the men in these communities?

- The Community Development Officer drew on personal connections and engagement in other community programs [in order to build networks in the African community]. These included personal friends within African Australian communities, and the Bi-Cultural Community Health Workers. (Bridges for African Men and Families, AIFS, 2010b)

- What type of language is used in promotional materials? Does it take into account men’s resistance to seeking help? Does it state what men will get out of the program and what they will be doing at the program?

  When we put out the fliers, we make it very clear exactly what the workshop will be on and what we hope people will gain by coming to the workshop. So the dads have some sense that … they’re not just coming along to get support. We don’t use the word support. But they’re going to actually learn strategies on a, b, c [and] d.

  (Participant, cited in Berlyn et al., 2008, p. 23)

- Are there positive images of fathers in the space and/or in promotional materials? Are there positive stories about fathers in promotional materials?

- Does your program provide “hands on” learning experiences?

- Is your program available outside business hours?

  We hold the courses both in the daytime and in the evenings and on the weekends. We’ve repeated some of the workshops that have been highly successful and well attended, but we repeated them at different times to ensure that [they are accessible] to everybody.

  (Participant, cited in Berlyn et al., 2008, p. 27)
Build staff and program capacity to engage with fathers

• Whether male or female, all workers require training in how to engage with fathers.
• Being a man or a father is not necessarily going to enhance a practitioner’s ability to engage with fathers – although in some circumstances fathers may feel more comfortable with a male facilitator.
• The emotional stereotyping of men (eg, “men don’t express their emotions”, “men are afraid of their feelings”) has been shown to reduce practitioners’ effectiveness when conducting family relationship work.
• The ability to include fathers in child and family services requires a range of competencies.

Some of the key competencies are:
• experience working with men
• the ability to work with fathers in a one-on-one or group setting;
• skills in forming productive relationships with clients;
• the ability to relate to others through personal experience; and
• the ability to reflect upon and respond to cultural stereotypes about men and how these stereotypes may impact upon their own attitudes and practice.
• Competency working with men is an ongoing process. Practitioners will continue to learn as they continue to work with men.
• The following program characteristics may improve capacity to engage with fathers:
  o considering how to include fathers at the planning stage of a program
  o a commitment from all staff for father inclusion; and
  o a staff member dedicated to engaging with men.

For more information and further discussion on building the capacity of staff to work with fathers see: Fletcher (2004, pp. 87–88; 2008), The University of Newcastle (2008b), Berlyn et al. (2008, p. 26), and Lloyd et al. (2003).
Appendix 3 - continued

Adopt a strengths-based approach to fathers and fathering

- Research demonstrates that a strengths-based approach with parents increases the effectiveness of a program and improves parental engagement.
- A strengths-based approach to fathers and fathering is characterised by a focus upon fathers’ capacities and the value of fathering. In practice this can be:
  - sharing information with fathers about how they already contribute and how they can further contribute to the wellbeing of children; and
  - resisting an “expert” approach.
- A strengths-based approach to fathers and fathering is especially important because:
  - fathers’ competence in dealing with the emotional aspects of parenting small children can be underestimated within their own families and in the general community; and

Questions to consider in planning and delivery of services:

- What training opportunities are available for staff to help them develop the competencies to work with fathers?
- Are staff given an opportunity to reflect upon stereotypes about men and how this might impact upon their practice?
- Are there opportunities for fathers to provide feedback about the service/program?
- Due to stereotypical views of men’s abilities (as compared to women’s) men may not realise their capacity to contribute positively to their children’s health and development.
- Improving engagement with men requires service provision that is based on notions of equality, highlights service users’ existing strengths and is non-judgemental.

For more information and further discussion on utilising a strengths-based (or an “anti-expert”) approach for fathers, see: NSW Department of Community Services (2009), Berlyn et al. (2008, p. 25), Fletcher (2008), and University of Newcastle (2008a).

Questions to consider in planning and delivery of services:

- Are staff aware of the strengths-based approach and how it relates to engaging with fathers?
- How is a strengths-based approach practiced in the service environment?

*It is always ensuring that the men—they are the experts in their lives and I am not—ensuring that they are empowered to be proactive and respectful and to stay engaged with their families, their children and themselves; their lives... even when a man’s behaviour needs to be challenged, to have them do that in a respectful manner.*

*(Participant, cited in Berlyn, et al., 2008, p. 24).*