Fathers in the heart of Early Childhood

Presentation to
Early Years: From Research to Policy to Practice Seminar
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Are the needs of fathers known or unknown?

Surveying fathers to identify needs
- Russell and colleagues (1999) asked 1000 fathers in their telephone survey ‘What support and information do you feel you or other fathers need’?

Surveying fathers to identify needs
- The most common answers were: “don't know” and “nothing”.

Two mistakes
- Using surveys on fathers
- Concluding that they don’t have needs
Needs of new fathers?

Average age of first time fathers

33

So most were born around 1976

What do the dads say?

I ask them

Where was your father when you were born and what did he do with you in the first six weeks?

They say

- Outside or at work
- Not much involvement
- No idea

Fathering is different now

Involvement is expected

What do the dads say?

I ask them

Why do it different to your own dad?

They say

- Community expectation
- “She’ll kill me”
- Because I want the connection
“Because I want the connection”

- Their dads didn’t do it
- They want to do it

BUT

- No men to observe
- No understanding of exactly how or why

Knowledge Gap

Fathers don’t know about...

- brain growth
- self regulation
- attachment
- The father’s influence on development

The evidence that underpins father inclusion?

- Men are different to women
- Fathering ≠ Mothering
- Fathers influence children

Recent research
Startling discovery - fathers are men!

Brain architecture

Men are different to women
DNA – male or female

- Boy Brains
- Girl Brains

Effects of childhood lead

Brain damage:
- Problems with thinking
- Difficulties with decisions
- Anti-social behaviour
- Difficulties fine motor control

Effects of childhood lead (Cecil et al. 2008)

Males

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Females

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Men are different to women

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2nd Digit to 4th Digit Ratio

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Fathers ≠ Mothers
Fathers = Mothers?

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Build brains with affection

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Father-infant attachment is different

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Children benefit from Rough & Tumble Play

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• Fathers have a role guiding physical risk-taking

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Why fathers…

‘A skinned knee or a twisted ankle in a challenging and exciting play environment is not only acceptable, it is a positive necessity to educate our children and to prepare them for a complex, dangerous world.’

Tom Mullarkey, chief executive of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents
20% preschoolers overweight or obese

Why Fathers...

Less walking
Less running
More screen time
Less active play
The ‘bubble wrapped’ generation

Recent research
Startling discovery – fathers influence children!

The Transition to School

600 children (USA)
videotaped fathers and mothers completing a task with children
teachers rate children on behaviour and social skills
Research question:
What best predicts social skills with peers and with teacher?

The Transition to School

The tasks:
– playing with a set of toy African animals
– drawing a sailboat together using an Etch A Sketch toy (with the parent controlling one knob and the child controlling the other)

The Transition to School

Code videotapes for:
– sensitivity to their child’s cues and support for their autonomous activity

The Transition to School

Best predictor of children who had fewer behaviour problems and higher social skills?

Fathers who were sensitive and supportive of autonomy

This is independent of the mothers’ effects
An emotionally intimate marital relationship added to the positive effect of the fathers’ effect

National Institute for Child Health and Development (2004) Fathers’ and Mothers’ Parenting Behaviour and Beliefs as Predictors of Children’s Social Adjustment in the Transition to School
Father’s need practitioners who can...

enable fathers to understand their roles and impact as fathers and partners in their children/s lives

SELF RATING SCALE FOR FATHER ENGAGEMENT SKILLS

1= Very true  
2= Somewhat true  
3= Neither true nor false  
4= Somewhat untrue  
5= False  

There are 7 questions. On your page put numbers 1 to 7.

1. I can strike up a conversation with men who come from different backgrounds to mine  
2. I can often tell what fathers need to connect to their children  
3. I recognize that I bring with me my own history of being fathered  
4. I have a good grasp of how fathering is similar and different to mothering  
5. I often discuss how I dealt with a father and then come to a better understanding of what to do  
6. I am competent at dealing with angry fathers, fathers with mental health or drug& alcohol issues  
7. I can show a father that I respect him

How do you…

enable fathers to understand their roles and impact as fathers and partners in their children/s lives?

• There are several skills involved  
• Knowledge of the evidence base will help

There’s nothing wrong with the women in early childhood
There is a lot wrong with this picture

Fathering at the heart of early childhood
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Involving Fathers in Early Childhood Services
www.newcastle.edu.au/childrens-centres