



# Support for Fathers

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS FOR DADS

## Professionals' Toolkit

Funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services.

## Author

Dominic Alford, Project Coordinator - Support for Fathers, Relationships Australia Victoria

Additional writing, editing, graphics and production by Relationships Australia Victoria's Marketing and Communications Department.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank:

- dads, families and support services in Australia
- the Support for Fathers project reference group
- colleagues, clients and the providers and users of services
- contributing government departments.

The Support for Fathers project is funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services as part of the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children 2010-2022.

Visit [www.dss.gov.au](http://www.dss.gov.au) for more information.

First edition, printed August 2019

Second edition, May 2021

© Relationships Australia Victoria

This work is copyright. You may download, display, print and reproduce this material in unaltered form only (retaining this notice) for your personal, non-commercial use or use within your organisation. All rights are reserved. Requests and enquiries concerning reproduction rights should be addressed to the following.

Chief Executive Officer  
Relationships Australia Victoria  
PO Box 180, 2 Prospect Hill Road  
Camberwell VIC 3124  
Ph: (03) 8573 2222  
Email: [enquiries@rav.org.au](mailto:enquiries@rav.org.au)

## Introduction

Support for Fathers has developed a Professionals' Toolkit based on existing research and consultations with dads, partners, families and support services around Australia.

A practical guide for support services working with dads and families, the aim of the toolkit is to improve:

1. opportunities for dads to access support services
2. support services' approach to working with dads.

The Professionals' Toolkit consists of seven elements and provides services with practical support and strategies focused on the following.

We encourage professionals to explore all seven elements and use them to reflect on



their program or service and the interaction they have with dads and families.

Contents

Element 1 - Think about dads ..... 3

Element 2 - Promote to dads ..... 5

Element 3 - Engage with dads ..... 7

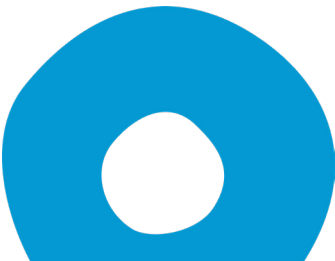
Element 4 - Work with dads ..... 10

Element 5 - Motivate dads .....11

Element 6 - Grow a professionals’ network ..... 13

Element 7 - Learn more about working with dads ..... 14

References ..... 15





# Element 1 - Think about dads



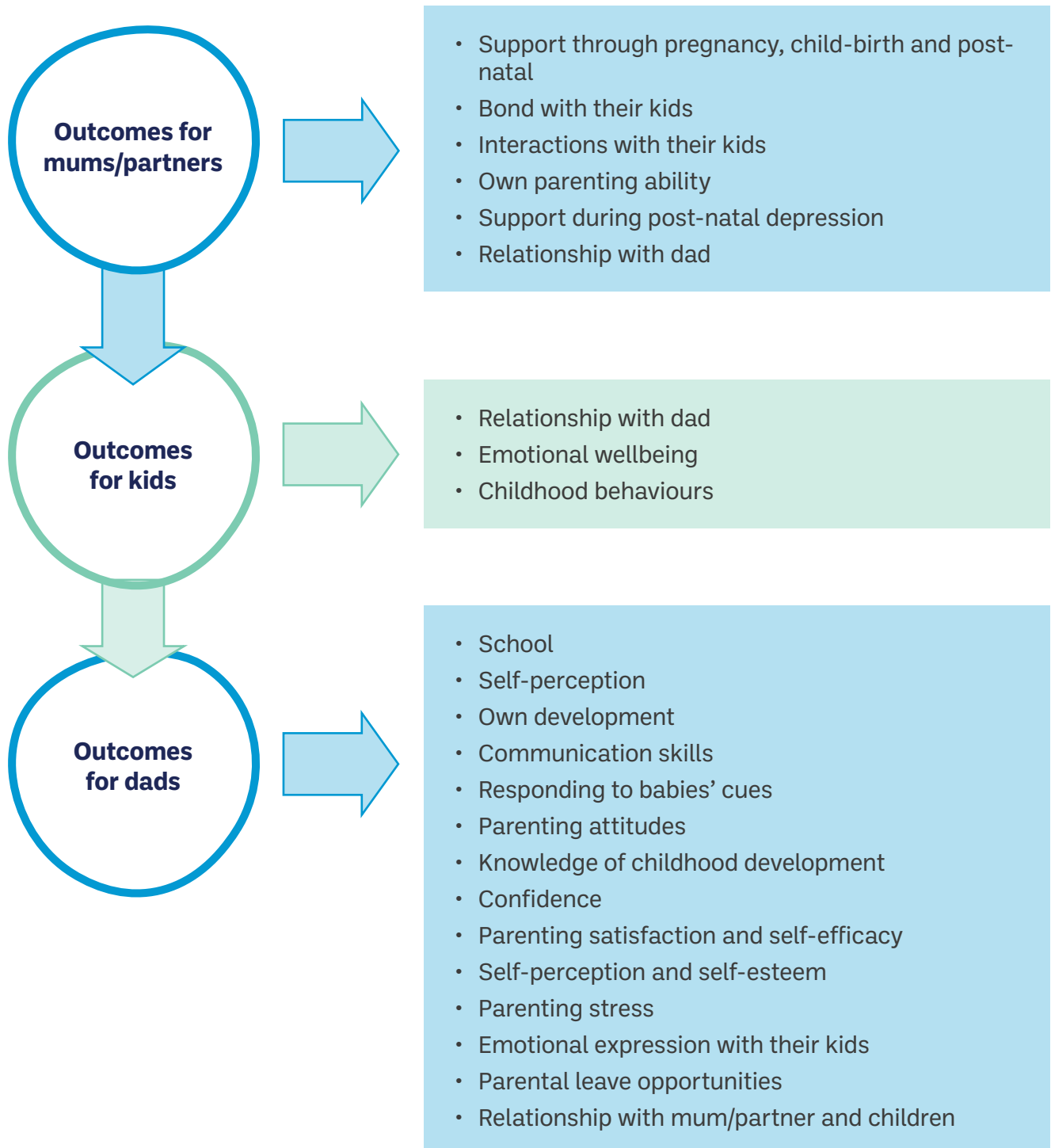
**Thinking about dads is the first step towards doing inclusive and positive work with dads and their families.**

## **Why include dads?**

- The evidence shows dads' parenting influence as a separate, important factor in childhood development at all ages (Fletcher et al, 2014).
- Dads are generally becoming more involved in parenting.
- Dads have a strong desire to be fathers and are motivated to be good ones (Smith, 2008).
- The dad's role needs to be clearly defined, even more so in separated families, for example, how does the dad see himself? How do the kids view their dad?
- When dads have positive involvement, this leads to positive impacts on mums/partners, and the kids in their life (King, 2010).
- The more dads respond to their child's needs, the more they will be involved in healthy community activities (McKeering and Pakenham, 2000).

## **Dads' positive involvement in the lives of their children can have a positive impact for all family members.**

For each family member, improved outcomes can include the following.



(Adapted from Burgess, 2009)

## Element 2 - Promote to dads



### **When dads make contact with a service, there is a greater need to make them feel included and welcome.**

Dads are not likely to engage with family-focused services and programs, including maternal and child health, family support and parenting programs, due to a number of reasons including the following.

- Fathers are generally not used to receiving help from services and may be reluctant to ask for help (Forrest, 2005).
- Existing services are rarely geared towards supporting dads and may in fact institutionally discriminate against them (Smith, 2008).
- Professional practice within child and family based services remains gendered, with a focus on mothering and an avoidance of fathers (King, 2010).

We can address barriers to engaging with family-focused services and programs by looking at how we:

- promote services to dads
- use dad-friendly language
- make the first meeting with dads positive.



**Use our checklist over the page to get started.**

[Contents page](#) 



## Checklist: Promote to dads



### Promotion

- Use positive images of dads on promotional material.
- Invite dads to your service and let them know they are welcome.
- Use word-of-mouth advertising, for example, promote in person.
- Reach out to places where men already gather.
- Identify a 'gatekeeper' who can influence your target dads. A gatekeeper can be a person, a place or a group.
- Promote flyers amongst trusted 'gatekeepers'.



### Dad language

- For dad-focused activities, use the word "dad" instead of "parent".
- For general activities, use "dad and mum" instead of "parents".
- Make the service relevant to the dad's immediate needs and situation.
- Build faith in the dad's ability.
- Have honest and direct discussions.



### First meeting

- Gain a recommendation to your service by someone the dad trusts.
- Have a dad-focused worker in your team.
- Offer male-specific activities.
- Provide a range of services, for example, one-to-one, group and events.
- Provide flexible working hours and venues.

**Fathers are generally not used to receiving help from services and may be reluctant to ask for help (Forrest, 2005).**



## Element 3 - Engage with dads



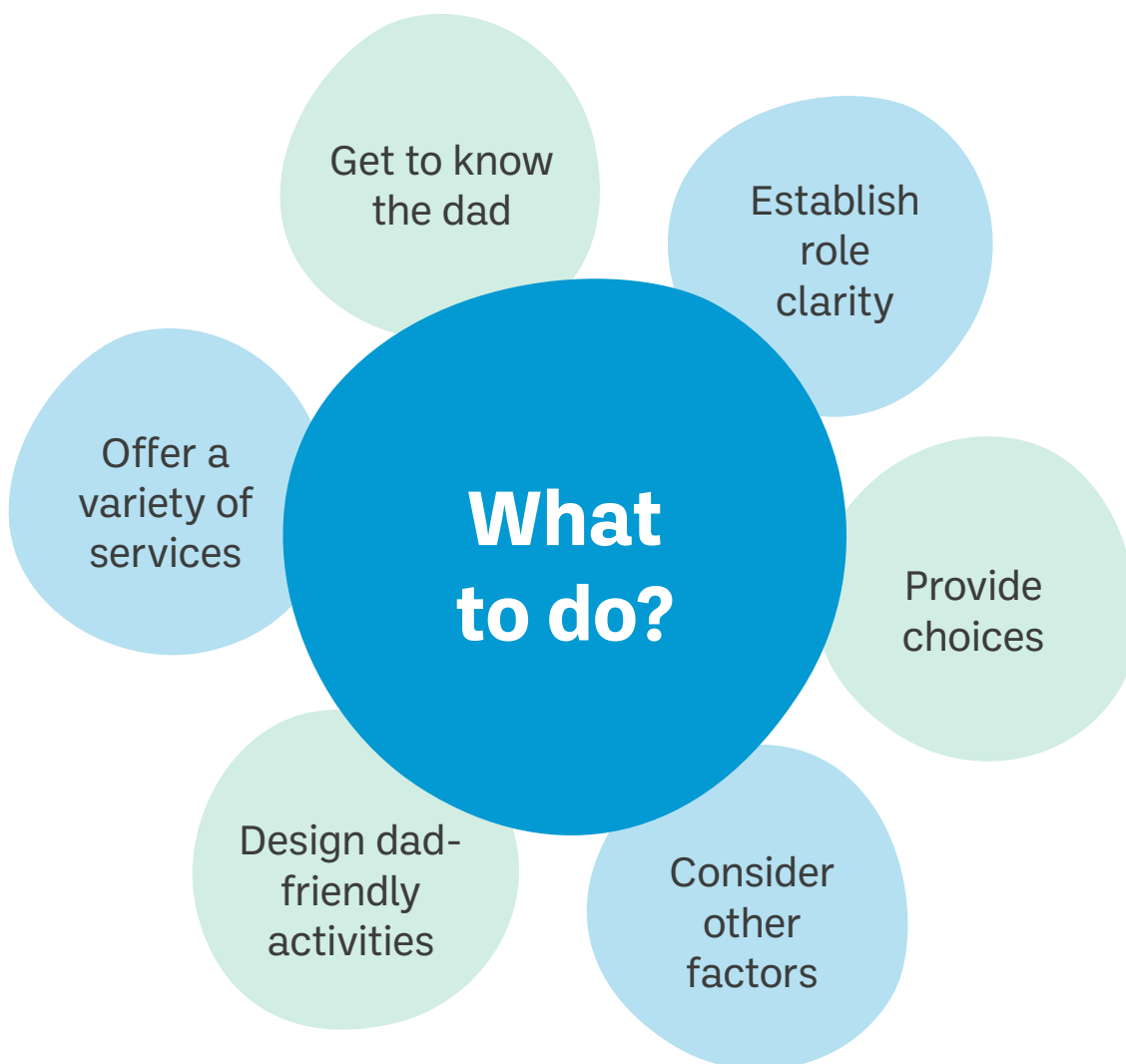
**Whether support services are looking for a new opportunity to engage dads or looking to improve what they already do, it's important to create a positive space for dads.**

Family-focused services and health services have created a positive space for women, which enhances women's access to and engagement with information, support and referral services.

Men are not regularly accessing and engaging with support services, and support services are generally not accustomed to tailoring their work to meet the needs and expectations of men (Forrest 2005; Smith 2008; King 2010).

Use our checklist over the page to review your services and find out how you can make the most of your work with dads and their families. It includes steps that are important for professionals and services to be mindful of when working with men and fathers.

## Checklist: Engage with dads



### Get to know the dad

- Welcome the dad to the service.
- Explore the dad's understanding of the service.
- Understand the dad's past experiences of engaging with services.
- Clarify the dad's aims for the meeting.

### Establish role clarity

- Explain and ensure a mutual understanding of your role as the professional.
- Explain and ensure a mutual understanding of the dad's role in accessing the service.

## **Provide the dad with choices**

- Offer the dad a range of information, consultation, support or referral options.
- Ensure that the dad understands what each of the options involves.

## **Design dad-friendly activities**

- Focus on designing activities that involve dads doing things with their kids that are relevant and accessible.
- Consider the location of activities to ensure that they are held in places dads are comfortable to attend.

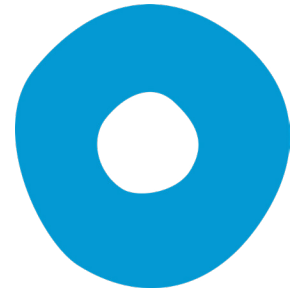
## **Offer a variety of services**

- Dads are looking for a choice when engaging with your service and keen to try out different things. Provide a range of options such as:
  - one-to-one support, for example, with a father-focused worker
  - small group activities, for example, dads' parent education programs
  - large group activities, for example, dads' and kids' catch ups
  - community events, for example, Father's Day BBQ, dads' days and families' days.

## **Other important things to consider**

- Work on building the trust first – dads, like mums, work more openly in a trusting relationship.
- Work towards changing behaviour not beliefs. Behaviour can be changed, however beliefs are much more ingrained and harder to shift, particularly in short periods of time.
- Be mindful that men often seek support after a crisis. If a dad is presenting to your service, it may be a small window of opportunity to support them. The next opportunity may not present until the next crisis occurs.

## Element 4 - Work with dads



We've developed a set of guidelines to help support services prepare and deliver their programs to dads in more effective ways.

Typical programs that dads can access are:

- one-to-one counselling or family support
- parent education programs, for example, Dads Tuning in to Kids
- community-based groups, for example, Dads Group Inc.

We've looked at how the content, approach and methods of providing programs can be tailored to better engage and motivate dads participating in these programs.

**'Work with dads' is a set of guidelines to help programs achieve this, using the following principles:**

### Belief

All workers believe in the program and the approach being used with dads.

### Appropriate

Methods and materials are tailored to dads.

### Training

Workers are provided with relevant training and coaching specific to working with dads.

### Content

Content is targeted to and appropriate for dads. This includes the images, scenarios, case studies and activities you use, to ensure that they feature dads doing everyday things with their kids and families.

### Goals

Make the program goals clear and achievable. When you read books together, you ask them what they think of the story.

### Approach

Use a strength-based or narrative approach to delivering the content, for example, dad stories, case studies at home.

### Personal

Focus on dads as individuals, each with unique experiences of being dads.

### Flexible

Identify core program activities and focus on these. Ensure that the program is flexible in terms of session time and program funding to complete the core activities.

### Focused

Allow for workers to engage in one-to-one work with dads, before, during and after the program.

### Motivate

To help engage dads and families, provide incentives for activities and dad/child-focused activities, for example, adult and child movie tickets, dads' and kids' BBQs, dads' and family fun day.

(Adapted from Bronte-Tinkew, Horowitz & Metz, 2009)



## Element 5 - Motivate dads



### Encourage dads to view fatherhood as motivating, positive and aspirational

We are focusing on the theory of generativity and how it works for dads.

Generativity is about raising the next generation.

Dads and generativity is about giving dads and support services a chance to talk about dads' motivations, feelings and behaviours by focusing on their relationship with their child.

The research suggests having a child and caring for that child facilitates generativity for mums and dads. Social activities, such as a dad taking his child with him on routine jobs, are most strongly linked to building dads' generativity (McKeering & Pakenham, 2000).



[Contents page](#) ↩

## Dads raising the next generation

Describe the dad using the steps below

### **Provide the dad with positive messages**

- Becoming a dad is a life-changing event.
- Raising your child is raising the next generation.
- The type of dad you are and your approach to being a dad influences the kind of person your child will become.
- Doing practical things with your child teaches them about the world.
- The more you're involved with your child's life, the more they learn from you.

### **Discuss how dads can do practical things together with their kids**

Examples might be:

- dropping off or picking up from school
- going to the supermarket
- hanging out with the dad's friends
- doing house work
- walking the dog
- hanging out with the child's friends
- going to a dads' group.
- Add your own...

### **Name the dad**

Examples might be:

- role model
- leader
- guide
- teacher
- coach.
- Add your own...



## Element 6 - Grow a professionals' network

Support for Fathers has consulted with support services across Australia about how we work with dads and families. We discovered that one of the major gaps is the sharing of knowledge and practice between services.

To address this, we are encouraging support services to start up networks to bridge these gaps and get more discussions happening about how we work with dads. We've provided a guide on how to start up a professionals' network.



**Are you looking at starting a professionals' network in your area?  
Follow these steps to help make it happen:**

### Existing networks

- Find out if there is a network focused on working with dads in your area.

### Gaps in your work

- Assess the way you work with dads in your organisation and service sector.

### Collaborate

- Find out who else wants to start up this network and start this work together.

### Resources

- Get the local council on board to provide venues, promotion and links to existing networks.

### Recruit dads

- Have dads attend your network meetings - recruit them from your programs or local community.

### Launch

- Make your first meeting a big one with guest speakers and a key message.
- Name your network 'Working with dads'.

### Identify

- Figure out the top five topics you want to cover. Workshop these in the launch meeting.

### Meetings

- Hold four to six meetings throughout the year at venues where dads already gather. For example, libraries, sports clubs, schools etc.
- Tell stories about dads, provided by dads and workers, including via YouTube and social media.
- Engage professionals at different reporting levels together, for example, teachers, support staff and managers.



# Element 7 - Learn more about working with dads

Support for Fathers encourages support services to continue to improve the ways they engage and work with dads.

Through our consultations, we've found that no one piece of information provides the best way to work with dads and families, so services need a range of options for how to work with dads.

We've put together a brief list of existing frameworks and toolkits that might be useful.



## **Professionals' toolkits**

### **Men's Health Resource Kit**

University of Western Sydney (NSW),  
[www.westernsydney.edu.au](http://www.westernsydney.edu.au)

### **Dad's Toolkit**

Families NSW, [resourcingparents.nsw.gov.au](http://resourcingparents.nsw.gov.au)

### **My Dad Matters Toolkit**

Dad Central (Canada), [www.dadcentral.ca](http://www.dadcentral.ca)

### **A checklist for organisations working with men**

Groupwork Solutions (Australia),  
[www.groupworksolutions.com.au](http://www.groupworksolutions.com.au)

### **Renovate your relationship - a toolkit for men**

Relationships Australia Victoria, MensLine Australia (Vic), [www.rav.org.au](http://www.rav.org.au)

## **Frameworks - Dads and families**

### **Introduction to working with men and family relationships guide**

Australian Government Department of Social Services, [www.dss.gov.au](http://www.dss.gov.au)

### **Father-inclusive practice guide**

Australian Government Department of Social Services, [www.dss.gov.au](http://www.dss.gov.au)

### **Engaging with families practice paper**

Queensland Government Department of Communities, Child Safety and Disability Services,  
[www.communities.qld.gov.au](http://www.communities.qld.gov.au)



## References

- Bronte-Tinkew, J., Horowitz, A., & Metz, A. (2009). *“What works” in fatherhood programs? Ten lessons from evidence-based practice*. US: National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse.
- Burgess, A. (2009). *Fathers and Parenting Interventions: What Works?* UK: Fatherhood Institute.
- Fletcher, R., May, C., St George, J., Stoker, L., and Oshan, M. (2014). *Engaging fathers: Evidence review*. Canberra: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).
- Forrest, S. (2005). *Engaging with Fathers in Family Support Services: A summary of the learning acquired through Barnardos’ Da Project*. Ireland: Barnardos.
- King, A. & Fleming, J. (2010). *A road less travelled: Working with men as fathers in family based services*. Australia: Groupwork Solutions.
- McKeering, H & Pakenham, K. (2000). *Gender and Generativity Issues in Parenting: Do Fathers Benefit More Than Mothers From Involvement in Child Care Activities?* Sex Roles. Vol. 43.
- Smith, M. (2008). *What about dads? The issues and possibilities of working with men*. UK: University of Strathclyde.