



TEN REASONS TO FOCUS ON FATHERS

By ROB KOCH

"When you look at most family support and intervention services across Australia, three features stand out: they are attempting to do an enormous job with modest resources; frontline workers are usually women; and it is mothers who access the services... but most services would like to involve fathers."

Richard Fletcher ('Bringing Fathers In' Handbook, University of Newcastle, 2004 p.3)

1. **Children need Dads who are confident, capable and caring.** Research shows these children will more likely have greater resilience, healthier relationships, better grades and social skills. They will be less prone to mental illness and anti-social behaviour. These outcomes should be a primary motivation to focus on fathers and be communicated to all stakeholders.
2. **Prevention is better than cure.** While we need services that help rebuild the lives of women and children, effort should also be spent on helping men foresee the consequences of passive parenting, abuse, neglect, and marital breakdown before the damage is done. Helping dads become better men who invest in their children, will in turn help their boys become better men.
3. **Men can produce positive change in their families.** Mothers without a supportive partner often struggle to implement new initiatives, direction and healing. If Fathers are included in the intervention they will more likely embrace their role and take on more of the parenting responsibility in constructive ways. Mothers and children benefit, and practitioners may exceed targets.
4. **Today's Dads need parenting support.** There is an emerging cultural norm among younger Australian men to be 'hands on' with their children, and to engage available services and supports. Men are realizing they have lost their way in the wake of the women's movement, multiculturalism and the taboo on corporal punishment. Many men are ready to redefine fatherhood.
5. **Men are more open to learning about fatherhood from fathers.** Masculinity is bestowed by masculinity, but it is often women telling Dads how to be a man and father. Perceived criticism often produces internal resistance to learning, so a female-free environment removes this pressure to perform to expectations and to conform to feminine ideas of fatherhood.
6. **Men traditionally lack positive role models.** They are less likely to have respect for or seek advice from their own fathers on parenting. They are less likely than women to read or to develop support networks. Mates tend to be too task-oriented to care or too cynical to be constructive. The new generation of fathers are more ready to enlist mentors if they are available.
7. **Men benefit from a male-only learning environment.** In mixed parenting classes the tendency is that a male will leave all the talking, engaging and note taking to his partner. But if he alone represents his family in the training there is no one else to take responsibility for the learning. Also, there are less sexual tensions to distract him.
8. **First Time Fathers of infants are most open to input.** Programs need to target the ante-natal and early years, without ignoring fathers at other stages. To neglect this window of opportunity sends a message at this crucial introduction to parenting that his role is not important. Research shows that fathers who engage their children and supports early will more likely maintain them.
9. **Parenting courses exclusively for men are rare.** Where courses have been developed in other places many participants have been willing to travel to attend. But this may not be possible for many men so there is clearly a need for other areas to cater for Dads. The more courses and options available to men the more perceptions and expectations will change over time.
10. **Governments realise the need for more father-targeted programs.** These are beginning to be in vogue, attracting new funding – but not all organisations will qualify. Institutional barriers to involvement need removing; after hours programs, male workers, flexible options, and strength-based activities, overturning the perception that services are run by women for women.