



The Early Years Strategy

Submission from The Fathering Project



The Fathering Project

The Fathering Project (TFP) is a not for profit, secular, research and evidenced based organisation that equips fathers and father-figures to actively engage with their child's development and provide positive change to their child's life.

Our aim is to improve every child's future by supporting their fathers and father figures, through programs and resources designed to help men become more effective in their first and most important role of being a Dad.

The Fathering Project is a harm preventative initiative that seeks to address the issues of suicide, substance abuse, self-harm, and domestic violence and to improve child development outcomes such as social and emotional development in babies and toddlers, school readiness, engagement and performance, socialisation and physical activity as well as confidence and resilience. Our initiatives target the improvement of fathers' and father figures' performance to assist in child development and to help to prevent negative consequences of father absence, abuse and neglect for children.

Our goal is transformational - we aim to have a lasting impact on society through a preventative approach because today's parents are shaping tomorrow's parents. We are helping dads to break the cycle and leave a positive fathering legacy. Investing in TFP will deliver intergenerational change - improving children's lives today and in the future.

This submission has been written by The Fathering Project (TFP) to highlight and promote inclusive and equitable parenting by bringing additional understanding to the importance of fathers and to ensure fathers' parenting needs are included in this conversation and strategy, to give Australian children the best possible start in life.

1. Do you have any comments on the proposed structure of the Strategy?

Overall, the proposed structure of the early year's strategy is comprehensive and provides the logic and flow required to support intervention and focus on this crucial social issue. We would, however, like to recommend additional considerations and activities to support this critical period in each child's life.

These include:

- The collective term 'parent' needs to be addressed when discussing parenting evidence, intervention, support, and service. Fathers are underrepresented in many areas of parenting research, policies, interventions, and service. Largely the term 'parents' in each of these contexts has encompassed mothers, with very few fathers represented. Awareness of this issue needs to be raised and included in the strategy, vision, outcomes, and subsequent strategies and activities. Action is also needed to increase rates of father participation and to maximise the effectiveness of parenting interventions in preventing childhood social and health problems, thereby enhancing child outcomes at a population level.
- Focusing on parental support and needs-based funding where there would be equal state and Commonwealth support programs for fathers as well as mothers.
- Provision of support where it is critically needed to the primary carers and influencers of children; mothers and fathers and not circumventing that by 'delegating and professionalising' the care of children to childcare workers.
- A national awareness and education campaign promoting dads to be more involved and explaining the difference fathers makes in a child's future and outcomes. Our vision calls for equal parenting, making dads an active 50% of the parenting partnership to ensure our children get the best possible start in life.
- Based on the ARACY consultancy model, hold open conversations and ask for input from children, young people, mothers, fathers, education bodies, employers, services, and government agencies on the role and changes needed to increase fathering involvement to achieve equal parenting and replace the parenting norm being seen as mainly mothering for future generations. Enabling a much needed and overdue cultural shift to evolve beliefs, behaviours and outcomes as parenting = mothering, transitions to parenting = 50% mothers and 50% fathers.
- The establishment of a bi-annual research and data collection program into parenting behaviours, skills, beliefs, and attitudes, especially with fathers. This investigation and analysis would provide insights into the short and long-term economic costs of disengaged and inactive fathers.
- A rollout of The Fathering Project's, Raising New Dads program, provided to the Departments of Education and Social Services, which will reach 300,000 new fathers each year. The program is designed to support expectant and new dads who often feel left out and unable to help when they are needed the most, to be engaged caregivers. The generational change needed would be achieved by committing to this program for three to five years. This would ensure that today's fathers increase their parenting activity well beyond the current 30% increase achieved over the last decade. This change would mean that the cycle of disengaged and dysfunctional fathering which is currently damaging children's lives would be dismantled, as a consequence of the impact made on the next generation of fathers and mothers.

We highly value the strength-based approach as a positive step towards coordinating and amplifying existing strategies across portfolios, and we appreciate the critical need to maintain the child and family-centredness of the strategy, including the importance of parental support. We know that creating a lexicon, especially focusing on fathering being fifty percent of the parenting dynamic, will

increase the involvement of fathers and in turn, improve outcomes for children during the first stages of their development. In addition, it will have benefits for working mothers and achieving gender equality.

Collaboration with early childhood parenting programs (ECP) is also necessary to achieve the goal of all children feeling a sense of self-worth and pride in their identity. Valuing the cultural and social context of children and their families, ensuring provision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children have the right to thrive and grow up healthy, supported by strong families is essential. The Fathering Project's research-based program on engaging aboriginal fathers will enable this.

Inclusivity is also a crucial aspect of the strategy, and it is heartening to see a focus on children with disabilities or developmental concerns. Working with parents, including fathers of children with neurodivergence, is a critical part of the work of The Fathering Project ensuring that all children have positive experiences and opportunities to reach their full potential.

Developmental stages

Further consideration may be needed to ensure that the planned parental involvement and parenting styles as children grow and develop are phased and broken down into the critical period of a child's first 5 years.

The suggested phasing to support each parents' concentration on their child's needs and development would be:

- Pregnancy and birth - Conception to birth
- Newborn - Birth to 2 months
- Infant – 3-12 months
- Toddler – 1 – 3 years
- Preschool – 3 – 5 years

This focus is an excellent way to ensure the needs of children at different developmental stages are adequately addressed and spotlighted over this limited and fleeting period of a child's life.

Equality in parenting in the early years

Finally, it is essential to acknowledge the additional benefits of investing in the early years, such as supporting workforce participation and improving women's economic security. It is also crucial to recognise that one of the big problems with contemporary policies aiming at support for families to improve the lives of children, is that they leave out fathers. We now need to move from having to prove the value of fathers to designing policies and services that include rather than marginalise them. By prioritising the early years and supporting each parent's understanding of the role they should play and the importance of equal parenting, children will be supported to thrive. Connecting with fathers and encouraging them to take advantage of their new paid parental leave in combination with education and support, will enable them to develop their parenting skills early while connecting and engaging with their babies and establishing a bedrock on which to build their lasting bond.

Research has shown that:

- The growth in the 'modified male breadwinner model' has seen more mothers engaging part-time in paid work while continuing as the primary caregiver. (Warren D, Qu L, Baxter J. 2020)
- Fathers are generally expressing a desire to be more actively engaged with their children and involved in their care. However, mothers and fathers still tend to have gendered roles when it comes to work activities in the years after becoming parents. (Carroll M, Baxter J. 2022)
- The availability of parental leave for fathers and the gender pay gap are still barriers for

couples who would otherwise choose to share family responsibilities more equally. (Carroll M, Baxter J. 2022)

- There is a perceived lack of support from managers for a substantial number of parents and carers. This differs by gender – women feel unsupported in returning to work and having access to the same opportunities as colleagues who have not been on parental leave; men experience fewer issues but can receive negative comments from managers about their involvement in family caring responsibilities (Parents at Work 2019)
- The persistent belief that ‘flexible work is for women’ is a primary barrier to men’s access to flexible work, and this attitude forces women to take on the bulk of family care work. Flexibility stigma persists for both men and women. Worker’s commitment to their job is questioned if they use flexible work arrangements. (Parents at Work 2019)
- Gender inequality in unpaid care work is the missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes, such as labour force participation, wages and job quality. Tackling entrenched gender norms and stereotypes is a first step in redistributing responsibilities for care and housework between women and men and consequently labour force participation. (OECD)

To address these findings in current research, The Fathering Project is supporting National policies and initiatives focusing on Family Friendly Workplaces, by encouraging an emphasis on strategies to support fathers in the workplace, as well as mothers and other carers. The Fathering Project’s work with corporates in Australia is designed to support [organisations](#), [businesses](#) and [employers](#) to prioritise both men and women as important caregivers, and ensure they have equal access to organisational support.

2. What vision should our nation have for Australia's youngest children?

The parent-child relationship is the most powerful of all relationships as it lays the foundation for the child's life. It is a unique bond that sets the foundation for their social, physical, mental, and emotional health. Our vision for Australia's youngest children is a home which is safe, stable, and loving with both mothers and fathers engaged equally in their care. As a society we need to recognise the critical – but often overlooked – role a father can play in caregiving, breaking harmful social norms and gender dynamics, and creating healthier, more equitable families.

“Imagine if fathers were held as responsible from birth and were trusted with their children's lives and development as mothers are.”

To enable this vision, all children should have access to high-quality, responsible, and engaged caregivers who are equipped to provide not only the basic needs of a child, that is, to keep them safe and loved but also to empower them to flourish as they become adults. Giving each child the fundamental building blocks on which to possess self-worth and the ability to create a fulfilling and satisfying life that enables the building of their future on positive ground. Our children today should be encouraged and surrounded by examples of good parenting, mothers, fathers and father-figures, so they can thrive and give to the next generation in a positive formative way.

Calling for a change in approach

We are calling for change to ensure fathers can also play an informed, active, and involved role in parenting their children from the start. To achieve this positive and child-centric vision, the role that fathers, and father figures also play in children's development must be recognised, acknowledged and supported.

Australia is in an era of great change, where there is increased family diversity, increase in mother's employment and a focus on equality in the workplace. There are changing attitudes towards traditional gender roles at home and at work, and a focus on more of a shared balance in caring for the children. While Australian fathers have shown they are keen to be more involved in sharing parenting responsibilities, they report they often get little support or encouragement to do so. This is especially evident if they are young or otherwise disadvantaged dads. The Fathering Project has been addressing these 'gaps' by delivering tailored and effective programs and support other policy makers and organisations by providing a “fathering lens” to ensure dads are part of a solution and share in the work, joys, challenges and responsibilities.

Even with robust evidence that involved dads are good for children and families, fathers are often underrepresented in parenting interventions, limiting their ability to provide optimal care for their children. Fathers have been found to be underrepresented in interventions focusing on the well-being of children, yet father participation may be critical for intervention effectiveness. To date, there has been very little research conducted to understand the low rates of father participation and to facilitate the development of interventions to meet the needs of fathers (Tully, L.A., 2017)

We must prioritise programs and initiatives that are tailored specifically to fathers to ensure that they have the support they need to be engaged and effective caregivers. It is important for promotional materials to provide information to address misconceptions that fathers need not attend parenting programs if the mother attends or the perception that parenting programs are designed for mothers and that these programs are not suitable for fathers. In order to thrive, our children need both their parents informed, equipped, engaged and involved in their lives and upbringing.

To improve outcomes for children, especially those in vulnerable and disadvantaged circumstances it is crucial to address systemic barriers that prevent fathers and families from accessing support. These efforts should also consider non-residential as well as residential mothers and fathers. Research has consistently shown that fathers are less likely than mothers to access parenting programs and support services, in part due to systemic barriers such as gender stereotypes and cultural expectations. By investing in programs and resources that specifically target fathers, and by addressing these systemic barriers, governments can improve outcomes for children by ensuring that all caregivers have access to support.

The father deficit in the vision

Making assumptions about 'parents' as a homogenous group can make it difficult to consider the challenges faced by different caregivers, including fathers and father figures. Even with the shifts in knowledge around the importance of fathers in the life of a child, fathers remain underrepresented across most parent or family intervention programs, parent services and parent research.

While acknowledging the many parenting courses and supports available, fathers report feeling like these are aimed at mothers and generally only address the needs of mothers. They feel there is still an underlying belief that mothering is essential, and fathering is seen as a desirable optional extra or "a bonus" by health services.

The optimal scenario is the involvement of both mothers and fathers where possible and applicable, as this has been found to be most significant in contributing to wellbeing factors for children of all ages. (Ewell Foster, C, Horwitz, A., 2017). Even in two parent households, the mother generally takes on the role of 'gatekeeper' of the information and takes responsibility for child-related duties. Fathers are still not involved in the partnership with parent supporters, and their child's learning to the same level as mothers. This means they are at risk of missing out on vital information, and opportunities to be involved and contribute to their child's wellbeing and education.

In recent decades, these shifts in our society have not only seen transformation of the roles of fathers and mothers in two-parent families, there is also growing numbers of single parent families, and fathers increasingly taking on the role of a single parent, 20% according to the 2021 census. In single-parent families the lone parent must fill the parenting role regardless of whether the parent is the father or the mother. A positive finding from evidence shows that when directly targeted, single fathers are just as likely as single mothers to be involved with their children's activities. (Pleck, J.H. (2010). In response to this and other evidence, there needs to be deliberate action to change current thinking and practices in parent support, child services, schools and community supports around the role of fathers to be more father inclusive. Strategies to directly target and engage fathers need to be planned and implemented as sustained practice.

Early development and wellbeing

A child has a right to wellbeing. Their existing quality of life is significant in and of itself, just like everyone else's. Children have the right to the finest possible health, education, and childhood experience right now, in the present. They also have the right to be loved, appreciated, supported, and cared for. However, childhood is also a crucial period for development and growth, and the things that children do, learn, feel, and experience have an impact on them both now and in the future. Children's upbringing and developmental processes produce lasting impressions that can have an impact on their life for years to come.

In order to achieve this vision, we must prioritise the well-being of Australia's youngest children by focusing on ARACY's Nest - Six Domains.

- Valued, loved, and safe.
- Material basics.
- Healthy.
- Learning.
- Participating.
- Positive sense of identity and culture.

By addressing each of these domains, and ensuring fathers understand their impact in each area and are actively involved in delivering these needs to their child we can ensure that Australian children have the best possible start in life.

Parenting interventions, services and education

To achieve this positive and child-embraced vision, parenting services, programs and education systems must recognise the critical role that fathers, and father figures play in children's development. However, fathers are often underrepresented in parenting interventions, in engaging with parent services or early education providers limiting their ability to provide optimal care for their children. We must prioritise education for these services and providers to ensure they have the necessary skills and understandings to provide services and initiatives that are tailored specifically to fathers to ensure that they have the support they need to be engaged and effective caregivers. That is where TFP can not only deliver tailored and effective programs but support other organisation by providing a “fathering lens” to ensure dads are part of a solution and share in the work, joys, challenges and responsibilities.

3. What mix of outcomes are the most important to include in the Strategy?

In an increasingly globalised society – universal standards for measuring children’s health and wellbeing are necessary. The OECD 2021 Child Wellbeing Measurement Framework serves as an international framework in which the Strategy could monitor and evaluate effectiveness (see below Figure).

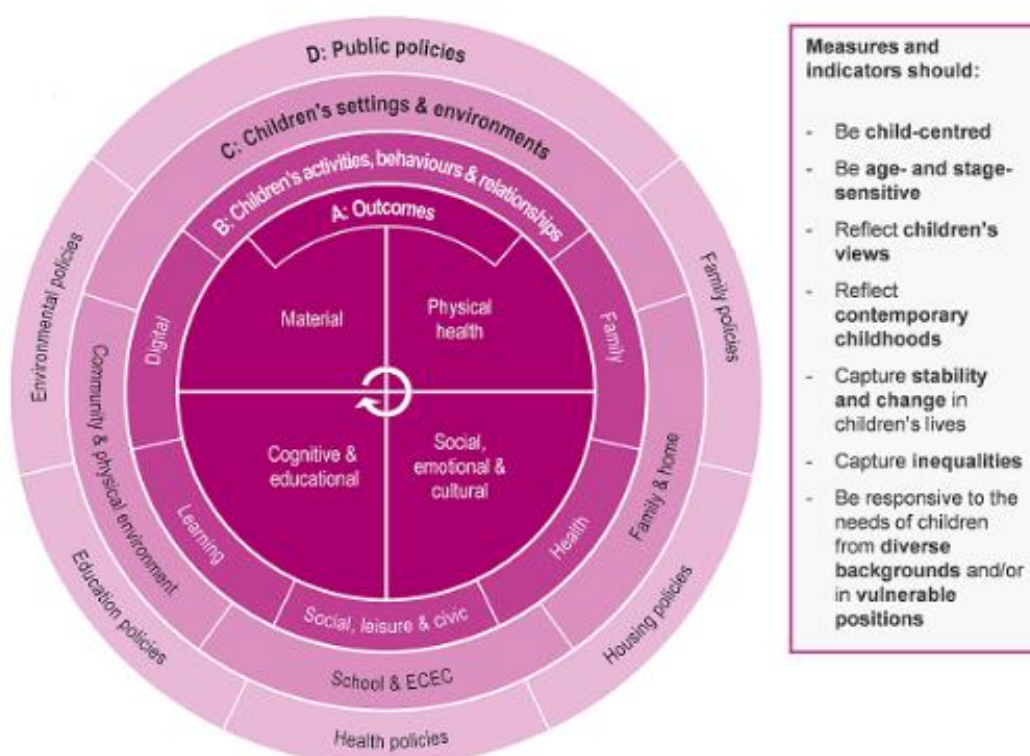


Figure 1. The OECD Child Wellbeing Measurement Framework

- A clearly defined Theory of Change should be developed with partners and key stakeholders such that there is a clear objective about *how* the Strategy will improve the lives of Australian children and their families. Our contention is that the OECD Child Wellbeing Measurement Framework provides a sufficiently flexible model in which a Theory of Change model can be developed.
- This framework outlines the complexity of the multiple systems and layers that contribute to the health and wellbeing of children – guiding opportunities to operationalise and assess Strategy outcomes.
- It is suggested that efforts for data linkage across government sectors is imperative, with many of these domains assessed within specific departmental structures. For example, the *Australian Early Development Census* (AEDC) assesses upward of 90% of Australian children, providing access to a scaled and sustainable model of monitoring the health and wellbeing of children. Moreover, other similar initiatives – such as those undertaken by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) and Medicare represent existing systems that – under the right governance structure – offer the opportunity for both a high quality and high quantity of data on early childhood that is yet to be realised.

- Nested within this model are several outcomes that should be assessed given their proximity as significant determinants of children's health and wellbeing. Irrespective of *where* this information is captured, and by whom, assessment of the following outcomes is recommended (in no set order):
 - Physical and neurodevelopmental health outcomes of children.
 - Developmental vulnerability.
 - Medical diagnoses.
 - Children's levels of school-readiness.
 - Family functioning.
 - Gender equality in two-parent heterosexual families across domestic and employment domains.
 - Exposure to domestic violence (DV) – using a contemporary and inclusive definition of DV (i.e., beyond merely physical violence).
 - Economic empowerment, beyond gainful employment and looking at upward economic mobility.
 - Caregiver employment and socioeconomic status.
- Put simply – efforts to unify data routinely collected by the Australian Government should be prioritised over attempts to re-invent the wheel or repeat assessments of domains of functioning that have been previously captured in another 'silo'.
- Multi-informant assessments of children's health and wellbeing should also be prioritised, considering that children – even in early childhood – can exist across multiple systems such as, professional services, early childhood education, family environment – and in some cases, multiple households.
- Historically, parent-informed measures of children's health and wellbeing are obtained from a single source – most often maternally rated. Obtaining assessments from additional sources can *complement* maternal ratings, reduce the burden placed on any single respondent (e.g., some measures can be obtained from fathers), and provide a more comprehensive account of the systems that surrounds the child.
- *The Fathering Project's* extensive track-record engaging and involving fathers has allowed the organisation to develop unique skills and strategies to engage with fathers in programs and research about their children. These strategies are essential to longer-term strategies that seek to empower *families*. For example, research has demonstrated that fathers (and father figures) constitute only 20% of parents who participate in parenting programs (Fletcher et al., 2011).

4. What specific areas/policy priorities should be included in the Strategy and why?

We need to take deliberate action to change current thinking and practices in child services, early education centres and schools and community supports around the role of fathers, to be more father inclusive. Strategies to directly target and engage fathers need to be planned and implemented as sustained practice.

The following sections outline some of the evidence and key points as to the importance of including and engaging fathers in policy priorities.

Pregnancy and birth

Pregnancy and the birth of a child is a pivotal experience of life for both father and mother, the father's influence on his baby's development, like the mother's, begins before birth and continues throughout the life of that child into adulthood. Fathers are increasingly attendant at their children's births, more involved in their children's education and health care, experience similar work-family conflicts to mothers and have unique relationships with their children. (Yogman et al. 2016) However, maternity services aimed at dads are discretionary and are not systematically engaging with them.

There is increasing understanding of the vital role of fathers in child development, particularly in the first 1000 days. (Bakermans-Kranenburg MJ, et al ,2019). Strong patterns are emerging with evidence of father involvement in shaping child health prior to birth. For example, low father involvement in antenatal care increases the risk of birth complications, preterm birth, and infant mortality. (Surkan P. et al. 2019)

Engaged fathering, and improved father-child attachment is known to improve developmental, behavioural, education and health outcomes for children, with intergenerational impacts. Fathering and Child Outcomes. (2005:126-152, 83-98, :99-111, 112-125126-152). However, prenatal, and parenting support programs are overwhelmingly designed for, and targeted at mothers.

Subsequently 80% of parenting program attendees are mothers. (Fletcher R, 2011) This leaves a significant skills and engagement gap for Australian fathers, resulting in inequality in parenting roles, exemplified by fathers' limited uptake of paid parental leave.

Maternity services have a key role to play in securing this huge potential resource. When fathers are highly involved from birth, their involvement tends to stay stable right through childhood and adolescence. And highly involved dads are also likely to become highly involved grandads creating generational change.

The Fathering Project has recognised this gap and the desire for fathers to feel more engaged in the whole parenting process rather than just an 'extra' and the developmental need for children to have engaged fathers.

Early learning and fathers

Fathers' engagement in early childhood brings many benefits to children including positive cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes from birth to adolescence. Fathers' involvement also helps reduce negative outcomes as children grow up, regardless of race, education status and socioeconomic status of the fathers. A fathers' influence on children's development is found to be separate to that of mothers, to operate in different pathways and to compensate for deficiencies in a mothers' parenting. The importance of *father-child play is now acknowledged for children because it is physical and highly stimulating, which allows the child to experience the activation and regulation of arousal. It also helps children understand and test boundaries in a safe environment, which helps them in countless ways as*

they figure out the world". (Allen S. 2007) Fathers tend to be more likely to challenge their children to try new things and persevere through these challenges, even if they don't succeed at first. This helps them to believe in their ability and to build resilience and positive self-esteem.

Social and emotional development

Social and emotional development begins with the parents in the family environment, and we can't underestimate the importance of nurturing positive social and emotional development in these early years. Children who develop strong social and emotional skills are more likely to have positive relationships, succeed in school, and have better long-term mental health outcomes. (Durlak et al; Farrington et al., 2012, Sklad et al., 2012). Fathers play a critical and distinct (as different to mothers) role in their children's development of social skills and positive relationship formation. Positive engagement and responsibility, demonstrated by fathers contribute to the following among their children: improved psychosocial adjustment; increased social competence; greater social responsibility, social maturity, and life skills; and positive child/adolescent-father relationships. (Cabrera, N.J et al 2018).

Therefore, we must invest in programs that promote positive social and emotional development, such as parenting classes, playgroups, and other community-based initiatives which are more welcoming and father inclusive. Children who have fathers with consistently high, warm parenting styles have fewer emotional and behavioural problems. (Waters, S. & Lester, L. 2016).

To co-parent and ensure parenting equity, both parents need to take part so children can see each parent in social situations and learn emotional development. TFP has experienced that when fathers take part in these activities they learn from other fathers and change their own habits. As TFP works with fathers and father figures in our Community Fathering Hubs we see dads learn how to handle stress, anger, and become self-aware to manage and regulate their own mood. These changes in behaviour are good for the entire family and provide a healthy environment for children to observe, learn and grow.

Cognitive development in early childhood

It is particularly important to recognise the importance of promoting cognitive development in early childhood. This includes providing children with opportunities for language and literacy development, as well as opportunities to explore and learn about the world around them. Having a father or father-figure live with a child from the age of 4 to 12 significantly increases a child's learning outcomes, their emotional wellbeing and leads to fewer problem behaviours. (Martin K, Wood, L, 2013). Research also indicated children do better in school when their fathers are involved in their school, regardless of whether their fathers live with them or live apart (Waters, S. & Lester, L. 2016).

Early childhood education - engagement of mother and fathers

Most children enter either Early Childhood Centres or, in some Australian states, early education in schools at the age of 4 and 5 years of age. We know that early childhood education has been shown to have a significant impact on a child's long-term outcomes, including academic achievement, social and emotional development, and mental health. Entry into early childhood education or school is also a significant time point for parents as they begin the process of what should be seen as partnership in the education of their child. When children begin school for the first time it can be an emotional experience for everyone in the family, including dads.

Unfortunately, even with the societal changes in the role of fathers, in early years education centers and schools we are still seeing family engagement largely perceived as the domain of mothers. Additionally, in two parent households the mother generally takes on the role of 'gatekeeper' of the information and takes responsibility for child-related duties, including reading newsletters and communicating with their children's early learning centre or preschool. Fathers are generally still not involved in the partnership with their child's school to the same level as mothers. This means they are at risk of missing out on vital information, and opportunities to be involved and contribute to their child's education and wellbeing at school. Consequently, they are also unable to share in their child's day, creating further distance.

The optimal scenario is the involvement of both mothers and fathers where possible and applicable, as this has been found to be most significant in contributing to school success for children of all ages. (Ewell Foster, C, Horwita, A.,2017). However, evidence also shows that when directly targeted, single fathers are just as likely as single mothers to be involved in their children's schools (Pleck, J.H. 2010).

By promoting a strong message during orientation that the school values the involvement and partnership with fathers as well as mothers, you are already breaking down the possible barrier of fathers seeing the school as a largely female domain. Evidence shows that when fathers are engaged from the start of their child's education, they are more likely to remain connected throughout the school years. (Baxter, J. A., & Smart, D. 2010). So there is great value in engaging fathers early with the view that they will connect with their child's education for the long term.

When Early Childhood Centres and schools intentionally and collaboratively plan and implement parent engagement strategies, they benefit from and contribute to family knowledge, experiences, capacities and networks. Collectively, this enriches their child's learning, improves wellbeing and strengthens communities. It also results in greater support and understanding for early childhood staff and procedures. Teachers and school staff who get to know both the new mothers and the fathers (where applicable) make it easier for fathers to approach the school when they have a message, question or concern about their child. Fathers are also likely to be more comfortable with sharing personal information about their child once a positive relationship and familiarity is established. It is important for fathers to have the opportunity to become familiar with the centre or school as a part of their child's life and to see the space and activities that their child participates in and enjoys during a school day. Early education centres and schools should send the message that right from the start they welcome and expects all fathers to be partners in the education of their children.

The evidence is mounting and the argument for fathers to be more involved in their children's early education is now compelling.

Below is just some of the findings from this research:

- Children are less likely to have stress and they learn how to control their aggressive behaviour. Also, the early engagement of fathers prevents stress and depression in children during their teen years. (Ewell Foster, C, Horwita, A (2017).
- Children have greater empathy, higher self-esteem and improved problem-solving skills. (Bronte-Tinkew, J., et al 2008).
- Children are less likely to have psychological maladjustment during their adolescent years if their fathers are involved early on in their education. (Pleck, J.H. 2010).
- Father involvement positively influences language development in young children. According to researchers, fathers tend to challenge children to develop language abilities. They also help

children understand the concept of communication exchange, which helps them with their social skills in the future. (Pancsofar, N., et al 2010).

- Children who have an involved father in their lives in early years education are more school ready. They are more patient, curious and confident. They are better able to remain in their seats, wait patiently for their teacher, and maintain interest in their own work. (Pagan, G., & Fagan, J. 2008).

Early years education centres and schools need to take deliberate action to change current thinking and practices in the ELC and school community around the role of fathers to be more father inclusive. Strategies to directly target and engage fathers need to be planned and implemented as sustained practice.

5. What could the Commonwealth do to improve outcomes for children – particularly those who are born or raised in more vulnerable and/or disadvantaged circumstances?

Supporting outcomes for children in more disadvantaged circumstances

Factors brought about by multi-faceted disadvantage which impact children include families with low socio-economic status, low educational attainment, poor mental and physical health, unemployment, unstable accommodation, CALD immigrant and marginalized communities, and disability. Disadvantage has been shown to have a negative impact upon family functioning and child development and the chronic stress associated with this disadvantage can impact upon a father's parenting capacity (Brooks-Gunn, & Duncan. 1997). The social value of the investment in fathers' involvement in supporting their children's mental health and wellbeing in disadvantaged communities is apparent. Plus, in the light of findings indicating the positive outcomes associated with father's own mental health outcomes, making it more compelling. As a result of this involvement, there is a strong need for further research to identify more accurately the needs of children in disadvantaged circumstances to strengthen this approach.

Programs to support disadvantaged children and families.

Raising children with a disability involves many parenting challenges. Fathers and mothers in these families are more likely to experience high levels of parenting stress. High levels of stress directly interfere with the communication and involvement of parents and therefore can negatively impact their child's development. While both parents experience elevated levels of stress fathers are less positive than mothers of their experience of parenting their child with a disability and tend to score lower than mothers on measures of seeking and receiving support for their parenting. Fathers of these children require different supports than mothers and have distinct ways of interpreting, coping, experiencing, and participating in parenting their child. Currently, support groups for parenting children with a disability are mainly attended by mothers and tend to be designed to meet their needs, and not those of fathers. Not only do we know that the father is the mother's most important source of parenting support, we also know that involved fathers can significantly promote their children's coping skills, independence, and self-esteem, and reduce the frequency of childhood behavioural problems. The Fathering Project (TFP) provides a program of support for fathers of children with a disability specifically designed to enhance their parenting skills, reduce their stress and provide them with peer support. By increasing the capacity of these fathers to positively promote their child's emotional, social, cognitive and physical development. These children will receive the additional caregiving required to keep them from the "margins" of vulnerability and support them to reach their full potential.

The Fathering Project has a place-based approach especially designed for disadvantaged families and places children at the centre of the support process. Fathers and families are supported to seek the services and support they need to allow them to go on to build their capacity to nurture their children, while also improving their own well-being and positive connection to other supportive fathers and father-figures and their community. The program is built on the foundation of the relationships and trust built between the fathers and the TFP facilitators, who work alongside fathers to offer practical advice and support. A high priority is also to connect the fathers with other fathers and father-figures who can support one another and collectively address the challenges they face.

Many of the fathers in these communities have considerable barriers to seeking and engaging with effective services and support. They often express 'service fatigue' and talk about being caught up in a system that doesn't support them or their needs. Our program recognises that attempts to support and enhance the parenting capacity of vulnerable families will be more effective when they are combined with community services to help them deal with the life challenges they are facing. This collaborative place-based approach is designed to build stronger communities with better capacity to address the needs of its' members.

The key foundations underpinning this program are:

- Universal approach - A multi-layered approach with a range of services and programs to form a coordinated system of care and support which is available for all fathers in the community.
- Place-based – Target specific circumstances of fathers and families experiencing multiple and inter-related forms of disadvantage and deliver more integrated and holistic supports.
- Well-being focused - Focus on building child wellbeing by strengthening the skills and self-efficacy fathers need to support their children to thrive.
- Culturally responsive - Programs and services include culturally responsive and respectful approaches to improve engagement and equity within the community.
- Community-based - Works within communities to help maximise their efforts, supports and services to improve the well-being of families.
- Needs-driven - Broader services facilitate linkages to targeted programs based upon an individual's unique strengths, needs and concerns.
- Evidence-based - Practical application of the findings of the best available current research combined with continuous evaluation and improvement of programs and services.

Community based Support - "Hubs"

Community Hubs – where families struggling with life's challenges are provided with wrap around support services, including counselling, parenting training, and other prevention programs.

Evidence from Australia suggests that 'place-based' interventions can have positive impacts on vulnerable children and families. (Larsen K. 2007) The Fathering Project's Community Hubs are being established in convenient locations where individuals feel supported to find effective services and to engage in social and learning opportunities both individually and with their children. To further build on these connections and social support, families are also encouraged to link with their local community through schools, sporting clubs, men's groups, and other recreational activities.

A range of different levels of support, learning opportunities and community connection are facilitated through the Community Hubs to cater for the different needs of families in the community, ranging from crisis management and one-on-one support to Dads groups and family activities to engage with their children and families.

Relationships and trust for father inclusion

A crucial factor identified by TFP facilitators working with the fathers in these local communities, is the need to build strong relationships with and among the fathers in the community. Vulnerable fathers need intensive interventions that support them at multiple levels, in addition to efforts to support the fathers' parenting and understanding of children's developmental needs. Other areas of support needed may include support around employment, education, partner relationships and mental health issues.

Community Mentoring

The community expressed the need for mentors and role models who will:

- Be available and readily accessible in their local community.
- Build trusting relationships and provide regular connections and ongoing support.
- Listen to them and be aware of their individual strengths and needs.
- Be the conduit between them and community services relevant to their needs.
- Assist them to build positive partnerships with the early education centres and schools their children attend.
- Help fathers build their capacity as fathers and father-figures.
- Facilitate the building of a social support network in their local community.

It is clear that once engaged, fathers in these disadvantaged communities clearly want to be involved in their children's lives and invest in their physical and mental health, however, there are many gaps between attitudes and actions. Fathers in disadvantaged communities require targeted support tailored to their specific needs. More consultation and collaboration with these fathers is needed to unpack what they need to best support their children's mental health and wellbeing and how they can best access and utilise effective parenting techniques. They also need support and opportunities for closer links with their children's schools and mental health and wellbeing support services where they can access specialist help and support with children with mental health issues if needed. (Council of Australian Governments. 2009)

The Fathering Project has also found that a father's desire to engage in learning about supporting their children, leads, in many cases, to a desire to access support and learning for their own personal development around mental health issues and wellbeing. With this strong evidence also linking fathers own mental health issues to the mental health and wellbeing of their children, improved mental health is a significant outcome of this work. Importantly the program's approach also considers the evidence suggesting the need for an increased focus on those fathers traditionally considered 'hard to reach' and disengaged from community activities, support or services. Factors such as social isolation, limited opportunities, lack of trust and cultural differences can impede the likelihood of fathers engaging with support services. The program's inclusive approach is also important in identifying and serving those fathers impacted by hidden issues such as domestic violence, who may find it more difficult to disclose.

Social value of investing in children's support through their fathers

The social value of the investment in fathers' involvement in supporting their children's mental health and wellbeing in disadvantaged communities is apparent. Plus, in the light of findings indicating the positive outcomes associated with a father's own mental health outcomes because of this involvement, there is an open opportunity for further research to identify more accurately the needs of these fathers to strengthen this approach.

Fathers in rural and remote areas may have additional complexity relating to isolation, and beliefs about rural masculinity which encourage stoicism and repressed emotions and require different assistance to men from urban areas to understand and address their use of violence against their partners and families (Bartels, 2010). Programs for fathers targeting father-child relationships generally fail to address violence-related aspects of fathering (Kaspiew & Humphries, 2014), while most programs attempting to change men's behaviour in relation to violence do not include fathering in their curricula, even though men's desire to be good fathers and to have a good relationship with their children is recognised as a motivator for changing violent behaviours. One of the biggest challenges of using fatherhood as an angle of motivation for perpetrators' behaviour change is that

fathers have historically remained invisible in policy and practice centred on family and child welfare matters (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007; Humphreys & Absler, 2011)

The Fathering Project has demonstrated that a well-developed and strategic approach for attracting vulnerable fathers to connect with supports and activity not only builds their capacity to nurture their children but will also lead to improvements in overall family wellbeing and circumstances. The Community Fathering program applies the evidence that engaging well with disadvantaged fathers relies on; the ability and willingness of professionals to form relationships, providing male workers, and through mentor learning where groups are facilitated by men who share common experiences.

Each level of Government could invest in upskilling existing services to support parents and call on fathers to take an increased share of parenting and help improve the outcomes for their children from conception. This could involve targeted training for health professionals, educators, and community workers to ensure they have the knowledge and skills to support fathers, understand the dynamic and influence fathers have on a child and promote gender equity in parenting.

Improving outcomes for children born into vulnerable and disadvantaged circumstances requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that addresses the unique needs of fathers and families. The programs and resources delivered by The Fathering Project offer valuable insights into effective strategies in supporting families. All Governments in the Commonwealth could build on these insights to develop targeted interventions that promote positive outcomes for all children. Awareness and education campaigns focused on the difference an engaged and skilled father can make and how this potential does not rely on the father or father figures' education, income, or culture. Only their willingness to be a dad that gives time, care, and attention to his child, particularly in the first years when bonds, trust and norms are formed.

Programs that support families of children with disabilities, such as The Fathering Project's ASD disability program, improves outcomes for children by providing targeted resources and support. By building the skills and knowledge of fathers and families, these programs improve the quality of care provided to children with disability, leading to better outcomes for these children and their families.

There is a clear need for the Commonwealth to improve outcomes for children born into CALD, minority and marginalized communities. Conservative estimates show that around 25% of children born in Australia are from CALD backgrounds and more likely to be developmentally vulnerable.

Parents are the greatest influence on children's development and learning and there is a need to harness parents' and particularly fathers' potential to support improved outcomes for children 0 – 5, especially in CALD communities. This is true for learning and development at home as well as participation in and access to the Early Learning Sector.

Early childhood education makes a difference to the development of all children. Children from CALD backgrounds in Australia are less likely to attend any sort of early childhood education compared to non-CALD children in each census, and the disparity has remained stable over time. In 2018, CALD children who did not attend had a 1.9-fold higher chance of being developmentally vulnerable than their peers who did.

Children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds may face unique challenges to their mental health, including the types of mental health issues, how they manifest, and whether or not families seek help. CALD parents may carry cultural norms and parenting methods with them, which influences the way they support their children, but also their participation in parental support groups and early learning.

Domestic violence is more likely to occur during the transition to parenthood and women and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds may be especially vulnerable. According to research, being a father can have a transformative effect on men's attitudes towards gender equality and there is a need for the Commonwealth to fund specific programs geared at CALD fathers to create healthy and respectful attitudes and behaviours in the family.

In some cultures, the father may be considered the head of the household and, therefore, may be responsible for making decisions for the rest of the family. In order to create a positive home environment for CALD children, it is necessary to engage and support fathers in these families.

The Fathering Project has experience working with culturally and linguistically diverse fathers and families and by building trust and positive relationships, supports children from these communities to thrive.

TFP delivers a range of programs aimed at filling the gaps that impede a child's development and potential when they are born or living in disadvantaged circumstances.

- Raising New Dads – focusing on the first 1000 days from conception and the first two years of life.
- Dads Groups – Facilitated peer-to-peer support and education groups which help fathers reflect and learn new skills and habits to improve child outcomes.
- Indigenous program: Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait fathers are empowered and guided to be present, engaged and positive role models for their children.
- Incarcerated fathers – an incarceration program to help fathers stay connected to their children while in prison and reconnect when they re-join their families. The program provides peer to peer educational support to ensure behavioural change, classes and counselling services. This could help to strengthen relationships between fathers and their children and reduce the negative impact of incarceration on children and family dynamics.
- Disability Parenting Support Program – Being a parent is demanding, and the strain worsens when a child has a disability. Every family has different needs depending on their child's abilities and needs. TFP delivers a program to support families, focusing on fathers where their child has neurodivergence. This program involves collaboration with Telethon Kids Institute's CliniKids to provide therapy supports as well as peer support and education specifically for fathers who are often marginalised, with mothers taking on the greater caregiving role in the family. In addition, fathers are “uniquely suited to support the play development of their children with ASD” (Flippin, M. & Crais, E. R. 2011) as fathers have special ways of playing with their children, such as physical and rough-and-tumble play which can be very helpful and motivating for children with autism.
- Fathering Fundamentals – basic fathering skills programs to support fathers who are struggling and often disengaged from their families to address issues and improve their parenting skills. We help the fathers and father figures in this program to embrace the fact they will always be a dad and regardless of anything else they can love their child and a presence in their life. Often these fathers need to become more active parents so they can parent equality.

6. What areas do you think the Commonwealth could focus on to improve coordination and collaboration in developing policies for children and families?

There is a need for coordination and collaboration across jurisdictions to educate and support the cultural shift which will allow for gender equality parenting and the inclusion of fathers as 50% of the parental team. This includes mass communication drip feed campaigns across the country which are further elaborated on in Q 7.

The Strategy should emphasise the significance of collaboration across government bodies at both state and federal levels to provide novel opportunities to gain comprehensive insight into the health and wellbeing of Australian children and their families. For example, meaningful linkages between Health and Education departments may make it possible to monitor how indices of early development captured as part of routine care are associated with educational outcomes upon entry into the school system.

While the availability of child data has increased significantly in recent years, there are still many aspects of children's lives that the data does not adequately or, in some cases, capture at all. Additionally, some children, often those who are most at risk, are frequently absent from the data. State and Commonwealth Governments need to improve coordination and collaboration with each other and with NGOs in order to increase research and access data.

The Strategy may also wish to consider how caregivers, male and female can be given the agency to be involved with and transform the health and wellbeing of their children. Rather than defer this responsibility onto the government, the Strategy should consider the complementary approach to empowering *families* to be agents of change. Health promotion efforts, including campaigns and services targeted at particularly difficult-to-reach caregivers can help to drive sustained and scalable change.

Efforts to provide voice to those Australian families who are most likely to experience developmental vulnerabilities in early life should be prioritised. The Strategy could develop a comprehensive engagement plan to identify target populations of increased risk such as families experiencing generational disadvantage, those living in rural or remote areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, those experiencing economic adversity, families with caregivers who are incarcerated, disabled, CALD and marginalised minorities. Such efforts can help to ensure that the Strategy does not leave these children and families behind, and instead optimise their ability to reap the benefits of the Strategy and policies that are developed.

7. What principles should be included in the Strategy?

The vital role of fathers in child development is increasingly understood, valued and advocated for, however, overall remains poorly supported. The Australian Government's recent investment in an improved parental leave scheme that not only extends entitlements, but provides targeted incentives for fathers, represents a step-change in social policy with the potential to improve outcomes for future generations of Australian children. There is currently a one-off opportunity to maximise the impact of this policy through targeted supports that build the skillsets and engagement of the 300,000 new fathers in Australia each year. This complementary support will ensure better equity in the antenatal and parenting support available to Australian parents and thus contribute to a more equitable model of co-parenting, and fairer sharing of unpaid and paid labour for families in Australia.

There is now a critical need for a cultural shift whereby both mothers and fathers are supported and empowered as well as seen, respected, responsible and accountable for their children's development. In the same way that attitudes and societal norms have changed over the years with regards to drink driving, racism, consent and respect, we need to challenge perceived social norms and behaviours around parenting to ensure both parents, regardless of their living arrangements work as a team to ensure their children's needs are met and they are thriving.

In Australia the default parent is often the mother, with the father seen as the support or back up parent. The parent who does the bulk of parenting duties on a daily basis is considered to be the default parent. The default parent is seen as the primary caregiver. When the primary parent is absent, ill, or in need of some assistance, the backup parent fills in. The child's default parent spends the most time with the child and builds a unique bond. The back-up parent, often the father handles childcare duties on weekends and afternoons, off-days and holidays and neglects to form the same unique relationship with the child, or be in a position to support the child adequately.

To ensure Australian children thrive, it is time to transform this paradigm and have fathers and mothers where possible, share the responsibilities of care equally.

In a summary of her research and the latest findings in genetics, neuroscience and psychology to tell the story of fatherhood published in book 'The life of a Dad – Making of a modern father' (2018) Dr Anna Machin found:

- Men are as equally biologically primed to parent as women are.
- As with mothers, there is an increase in grey and white matter in areas of the brain linked to nurturing, risk detection, empathising, problem solving, planning and goal orientation in new fathers.
- There is a drop in testosterone around the time of the birth, which is vital to shift the man's focus towards the family.
- Twin studies have shown that around 20% of fathering is inherited genetically, while 80% is influenced by the environment.
- A man is greatly influenced by the fathering he encounters as a child whether it be his own father or other fathers, he has knowledge of.

The Fathering Project envisions a future where every Australian child can thrive in life, their development is supported in all areas, and fathers are active, engaged, and skilled to support their child and partner from pregnancy to adulthood. We know the first 5 years are critical in establishing lifelong bonds for a child to flourish. These brief first few years allow time for parents and children to create positive habits and mindsets that will support every family member over future years. This vision is based on ARACY's six domains of child development: physical health and well-being, social competence, emotional maturity, cognitive development, and communication, language, and literacy, and finally, identity and belonging.

A core principle of the Strategy should include a commitment to ensuring that every Australian child can receive the highest quality of caregiving that their primary caregivers, both mothers and fathers can provide. Empowering caregivers to be the driving force in their child's developmental journeys is essential to achieve effective and widespread change. Mothers, fathers and other primary caregivers should be able to receive support for parenting *when* they need, and *as* they need. This is not the case now.

In order to break the cycle of intergenerational indifference, neglect and abuse, it is vital for us to change the parenting paradigm and start supporting and educating expectant and new fathers to bond, communicate and engage with their children from conception and pregnancy to the age of 5 and beyond. Fathers need to be, and also be seen and supported as 50% of the parenting team.

We know that modern Australian fathers come in various forms and that they are no longer the traditional married breadwinner, disciplinarian or occasional babysitter. Many are starting to actively participate in the everyday activities and routine care of their children and see fatherhood as an important component of their own identities and a proud characteristic of who they are as people. There is no doubt that we are now starting to see the rise of a new era of fully committed fathers which needs to become a reality for many Australian families.

However, they are facing many challenges including:

- Understanding and education of their newborn and children's needs.
- Confidence to look after their newborns and children.
- Limited recognition of their role as a caregiver and being seen as a secondary parent rather than a co-parent.
- Limited or no support available to them as fathers.
- Limited support from workplaces to be equal caregivers with men seen as less committed by their employers when they take advantage of options such as parental leave or working from home, which can potentially lead to career consequences.
- 80% of fathers suffer from stress balancing family and work, a higher rate than reported by working mothers.

New dads

With the increasing understanding of the vital role of fathers in child development, particularly in the first 1000 days, (Bakermans-Kranenburg MJ, et al ,2019) engaged fathering, and improved father-child attachment should be a priority. However, prenatal, and parenting support programs are overwhelmingly designed for, and targeted at mothers and this leaves a significant skills and engagement gap for Australian fathers.

The Fathering Project's Raising New Dads program has been designed to address this gap, informed by feedback from fathers that indicates men are more likely to engage with services to address their engagement, interactions and behaviour if they think it will benefit their relationship with their children. Raising New Dads aims to improve the engagement of fathers throughout the first 1000 - 2096 days and beyond, to create a generation of new fathers who are skilled and confident to create strong bonds and healthy attachment with their babies, thereby reducing the incidence of neglect and abuse.

Compared to previous years, there has already been a 30% increase in fathers being more involved, active, and hands-on in a child's life. Our expectation is that the next generations will think of both - mothers and fathers when the word parent is used. Not the current and traditional thought of mothers delivering most of the work and responsibility required to raise a child. Our vision is for every child to have two engaged parents or adult role models to ensure they have optimal influences and levels of care and that parents have access to resources to be the best they can be as parents.

National public awareness and education campaigns

In order to address the importance of mothers and fathers in the early years of a child, national public awareness and education campaigns are needed. They need to focus on the community as well as expectant and current parents and key stakeholders in the sector such as GPs, ObGyns, hospitals, midwives, maternity health care providers, child health nurses, parenting support organisations, Early Learning educators as well as employers.

The campaigns need to include a multiplatform advertising campaign and resources to support learning and action with the aim to build awareness of the barriers to gender equal parenting, which operate at a structural, family, community and interpersonal level. The campaigns would also need to give people the tools to recognise and address them to enable engaged fatherhood from conception to age 5 and beyond.

The "Fathers are Parents too" awareness and education campaigns must address a much-needed cultural shift and break down barriers and gender stereotypes. They need to:

- Change the language of caring from primary and secondary carer to simply carer
- Address the unconscious bias of equating parenthood with motherhood only
- Encourage men to access all available paternity leave
- Redefine traditional norms of masculinity and promote healthy, caring, empathetic masculinities
- Normalise fathers as caregivers and nurturers
- Promote men's involvement as equitable, nonviolent fathers and caregivers in order to achieve family well-being, gender equality, and better health for mothers, fathers, and children.
- Foster men as allies supporting women's social and economic equality, in part by taking on more responsibility for childcare and domestic work.

Efforts to upskill existing services rather than create and develop new services are key. For example, ensuring that child health nurses are trained and equipped to engage and support all caregivers regardless of gender.

The campaigns could include well known ambassadors who appear in a community service announcement where a group of Australians talk about their own experiences.

Our vision is to see more households practicing equitable parenting, with less stereotyping around gender roles in parenting. This will lead to generational and future change, where children are raised in environments that promote their overall development and well-being and see their parents practicing gender equality at home and work. We recognise that societal attitudes towards parenting vary across different communities, and we can learn from comparative cultures to improve parenting practices in Australia. We want to break down the stages in a child's life and identify the specific parenting needs for each stage, so that fathers can be guided in their role as active and engaged parents.

Working Parents

Family employment patterns have shifted over the past few decades, away from that of a sole breadwinning father and stay-at-home mother. The proportion of couple families with dependents, in which one or both parents were employed was 93.7% (2.5 million) in June 2021, up from 92.1% in June 2020 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021). However, even though there has been seen a shift in the 'breadwinner model' with an increase in mother's employment, there has been little change in fathers' employment patterns, with the vast majority in full-time work.

Their increasing rejection of traditional gender stereotypes, dissatisfaction with the time they spend with their children and their desire for more flexible working arrangements, shows a willingness of fathers to be involved in the day-to-day care of their children. In practice, however, most fathers still work full time, and many work long hours.

We want to see working fathers taking a more active role in their children's lives, being consistent and engaged, and making up 50% of the parental alliance. TFP's Raising New Dads program will empower fathers to use their new paid parental leave to learn to support their children's needs and put their skill development into practice. By developing fathering skills and bonds in this early stage where children need it most, mothers will be more supported and more able to work, and by bonding early, a father's active involvement will increase throughout a child's life.

To achieve this vision, we need to address cultural attitudes and stereotypes around parenting roles. We must promote gender equality in parenting and highlight the benefits of fathers being more involved in their children's lives from pregnancy. Workplaces should also support equitable parenting by providing flexible working arrangements and parental leave policies that encourage fathers to take time off work to be with their children. Workplace culture will need to adapt to meet new policies.

We acknowledge that there is a gap between policy and cultural attitudes around fathers' involvement in early childhood development, and we want to see this gap closed. Research provides evidence that fathers matter and that their involvement, beliefs, and actions make a difference in their children's lives. TFP wants to see fathers' impact understood and included in the development of programs to ensure inclusion in the equal parenting journey. We want to enable fathers to step up and share the load of parenting equally and consistently. But stereotypes about men being primary breadwinners and not the carers, plus workplace cultures that do not support men working flexibly are real barriers (VicHealth 2020)

Family-friendly workplace policy is not new. However, the primary focus of these first policies has historically been mothers, to support them to engage in the workplace while also maintaining their role as primary carer. However, now couples are increasingly sharing the caring and domestic work, as well as the earnings for the household. Plus, we are seeing more single fathers taking on the caregiver role with either shared or sole custody of their children. One of the big problems with contemporary policies aimed at gender equality in the workplace and support for families, is that they leave out fathers. Gender stereotypes that place fathers as the breadwinner and mothers as the carer are not just limiting fathers but also mothers in the workplace and continuing outdated role modelling for Australian children.

A consensus is emerging that we now need to move from having to prove the value of fathers to designing services that include rather than marginalise them. There is now growing recognition that by also including fathers or carers in these workplace family policies, there are far better outcomes for all family members and the community as a whole. Research shows that fathers who are able to be more involved in the home, promote future generations of involvement and gender equality, their daughters are more likely to have higher career aspirations and their sons are more likely to engage in more gender equal behaviours in their own relationships (Croft, 2014; Aleman 2020)

A summary of evidence

- The future of work must respond to the changing nature of modern family life and increasing caring demands to ensure families, the community and economy can thrive. (National Working Families Report 2019).
- As women continue to take on the lion's share of caring responsibilities, the future of women's wellbeing, career advancement and financial security remains at risk if we fail to invest in creating family friendly workplaces that also focus on fathers. (Australian Institute of Family Studies. 2019)
- Workplaces must make it more accessible and acceptable for men to lean in to caring by normalising men taking time to raise children or to care for others in their family. (Australian Institute of Family Studies. 2019.)
- A growing body of evidence suggests that the propensity of working dads to invest time and energy in engaged fatherhood is significantly influenced by the perceived supportiveness of their work environment, particularly their supervising managers. (Baxter J. 2018)
- Direct managers play a key role in encouraging and enabling working fathers' involvement in their children's lives. (Australian Institute of Family Studies. 2019)
- Employers must be willing to confront and tackle stigma, discrimination and gender bias associated with caring for children, working part-time or flexibly. (Humberd, B. 2015).
- However, the provision of family-friendly work policies in itself is insufficient if workers lack information or social support within their workplaces to utilise them. (Grau-Grau. 2021).

Allow more fathers to be engaged with their children.

One way to achieve more balance and allow more fathers to be engaged in the early years is by encouraging fathers to take advantage of their paid parental leave to learn new parenting skills at a critical time in their child's development. We also need to provide services and support for fathers to be more informed, equipped and engaged, such as parenting classes, support groups, and resources to help them navigate the many challenges and stages of parenting as we have done for mothers.

Companies with a real commitment to supporting families need to look at the bigger picture for their organisation and how they utilise the current trends to make a difference, while also acknowledging that many companies working towards similar goals can lead to a better workplace culture for everyone. The Fathering Project's Father Friendly Workplaces helps businesses answer some of the questions being raised in the current workplace setting.

For example:

- How can we support fathers to combine workplace responsibilities amid social expectations that they should be closely involved with raising their children?
- How can we reduce the workplace stigma attached to 'involved fathering' in situations where co-workers and managers resist the idea that fathers should prioritise family?
- How can we encourage fathers at all levels in organisations to negotiate access to family-friendly working policies?
- How can we ensure managers understand and believe that family-friendly working policies are not designed only with mothers in mind but also for fathers and other carers?

8. Are there gaps in existing frameworks or other research or evidence that need to be considered for the development of the Strategy?

There are several gaps in existing frameworks such as research, data collection and analysis as well as gender equality parenting service gaps from pregnancy onwards. These gaps need to be considered for the development of a strategy that will provide a robust start to any child's life and promote inclusive and equitable parenting practices that involve fathers and father-figures as well as mothers.

Effective child policies require a robust collection of data and research. Development of child well-being policies necessitates in-depth and reliable data on a variety of topics, including children's material living standards, physical and mental health, social lives, and learning and education. Since there is growing evidence that children's environments are critical for their outcomes, particularly for those growing up in the most vulnerable families and communities, data on the settings and environments in which children live their lives—their families, their schools, their communities, and their neighbourhoods - are vital. The OECD has highlighted the need for better data on children's well-being during early childhood (0 to 5 year-olds), and especially, and on the well-being of children in the most vulnerable or marginalised environments.

Data Gaps

Some of the research gaps that need to be addressed in the framework are:

- Research and data sources must address the gender bias towards mothers and include fathers in equal numbers. Additionally, long-term economic benefits of father involvement should be considered. It is also essential to address historical father stereotyping and mothers as gatekeepers to encourage child-centric and equitable parenting strategies that engage both mothers and fathers. Engaging and supporting fathers and father figures in this change process is critical to promote inclusive and equitable parenting services.
- Lack of diverse representation. Most existing research on father involvement is based on studies conducted in North America and Europe. With little representing Australian fathers and families and our wide mix of identities and cultures. This lack of diversity limits our understanding of how father involvement varies across different contexts and communities.
- Limited research on father-figures. While research on fathers has increased over the past few decades, there is still a limited understanding of the roles and responsibilities of other male caregivers, such as grandfathers, uncles, coaches, mentors, teachers, and stepfathers. This kinship model is particularly applicable to indigenous Australians.
- Focus on traditional gender roles. Many existing frameworks and research studies assume traditional gender roles and do not adequately account for the diversity of parenting roles and styles among fathers and father-figures. This focus on traditional gender roles may limit our understanding of how fathers can contribute to their children's early development.
- Lack of longitudinal studies that follow fathers and their children over time are relatively difficult to find. These studies would provide valuable insights into the long-term effects of father involvement on children's development.
- Research into the economic impact of fathers who share equal parenting and those not involved in a child's life would let the sector know the cost of effective fathering on a child's development and future.

- Lack of understanding and research on the intersectionality of fatherhood. This would allow insight into other aspects of identity, such as race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation. This intersectionality can affect how fathers experience fatherhood and how they interact with their children.
- While research has shown that father involvement positively impacts child development, there is limited understanding of its impact on maternal well-being. It is important to consider the potential benefits and challenges of involving fathers in parenting to ensure that maternal well-being is not compromised.
- Non-residential fathers, who do not live with their children full-time, may face unique challenges to involvement. However, there is limited research on how to effectively engage non-residential fathers in parenting.
- Lack of research on father involvement in specific contexts: While there is a growing body of research on father involvement, there is still limited understanding of how father involvement varies in specific contexts, such as in families with children with disabilities, families with multiple generations living in the one home, families experiencing financial hardship, mental health disorders or diverse family structures.
- It is important to consider these gaps in existing frameworks and research when developing a strategy that promotes inclusive and equitable parenting practices that involve fathers and father-figures. By addressing these gaps, we can ensure that our understanding of father involvement is comprehensive and representative and that our efforts to promote inclusive and equal parenting are effective and sustainable.
- Addressing these gaps in existing frameworks and research can help ensure that a strategy promoting inclusive and equitable parenting practices involving fathers and father-figures is effective and sustainable so every child can grow in a loving, safe, and healthy environment.

Gaps in Support Frameworks

The vital role of fathers in child development is increasingly understood, valued and advocated for, however, overall remains poorly supported. The Australian Government's recent investment in an improved paid parental leave scheme that not only extends entitlements, but provides targeted incentives for fathers, represents a step-change in social policy with the potential to improve outcomes for future generations of Australian children. There is currently a one-off opportunity to maximise the impact of this policy through targeted supports that build the skillsets and engagement of the 300,000 new fathers in Australia each year. This complementary support will ensure better equity in the antenatal and parenting support available to Australian parents and thus contribute to a more equitable model of co-parenting, and fairer sharing of unpaid and paid labour for families in Australia.

Decades of research show the environment of a child's earliest months can have effects that last a lifetime. Stress, uninvolved parenting, neglect and abuse can have both lifelong and intergenerational repercussions and dire physical, psychological and behavioural consequences. Early childhood safety, stability, development and the attachment relationship between infants and parents are critical in establishing the foundation for positive learning, behaviour and health through a child's school years into adult life. (National Research Council, US, et al. 2000)

While there are many parenting programs. Almost all of them are for mothers. Only two out of every ten parents who attend parenting programs are fathers, leaving a significant gap in parental skillsets, tools and engagement. (Fletcher R, Freeman E, Matthey S. T 2011)

Research shows that the influence of fathers on the health and development of their children is equal to that of their mothers, however current systems and structures fail to provide equal supports. (Featherstone B 2004)

The Fathering project's Raising New Dads program acknowledges the crucial impact of the Federal Government's recent parental leave reforms, and offers a unique and complementary service that will enhance the impact of this policy initiative by filling the gap in father-focused antenatal care and parenting support. As a result, every Australian child will benefit from a more skilled and engaged father with proven positive lifelong impacts.

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