

Are you an individual or making a submission on behalf of an organisation?

Organisation

Organisation name

The Fathering Project

Is your organisation....?

- A provider currently funded under one or more of the 5 programs in scope for this consultation
- Research, academic or advocacy organisation

What type of service or support do you mostly provide?

- A national program and/or information service
- Prevention or early intervention services
- Intensive family supports

What state or territory does your organisation deliver services and supports in?

- New South Wales
- Victoria
- Queensland
- Western Australia
- South Australia
- Tasmania
- Northern Territory
- Australian Capital Territory
- Western Australia

Where does your organisation deliver most of their services and supports?

Major city

1. Does the new vision reflect what we all want for children and families?

Yes. The new DSS vision strongly aligns with The Fathering Project's long-standing belief that children's wellbeing is built upon stable, confident, connected families and that parents and caregivers require the right tools, relationships and support mechanisms to raise healthy children.

The vision recognises:

- the importance of prevention and early intervention,
- the need to strengthen family capability before problems escalate, and
- the essential role of parents and caregivers, including fathers and father figures, whose involvement is now explicitly acknowledged.

For over a decade, The Fathering Project has advocated that positive, consistent father engagement is a key protective factor for children's long-term outcomes.

The DSS vision reflects contemporary evidence, public health prevention principles, and community feedback emphasising the need for a more joined-up, relational approach to family wellbeing. It also aligns with the national wellbeing framework Measuring What Matters, particularly the domains of Connected, Healthy, Secure, Skilled and Engaged.

In this sense, the vision is not only appropriate but timely. It sets a strong policy foundation for a national program that supports families early, connects them to trusted local networks, and builds capacity within communities to sustain change.

2. Are the two main outcomes what we should be working towards for children and families? Why/Why not? - Outcome 1: Parents and caregivers are empowered to raise healthy, resilient children - Outcome 2: Children are supported to grow into healthy, resilient adults.

Yes. These outcomes reflect the core evidence base underpinning The Fathering Project's programs and the broader child development and family wellbeing literature.

The Fathering Project supports these outcomes because:

- Parents are the primary agents of long-term change. Capacity-building, confidence and relational skills within caregivers, particularly fathers, directly influence children's resilience, school engagement, social development and mental health.
- These outcomes recognise prevention as a system priority. They emphasise supporting families early, before the emergence of crisis indicators such as child protection involvement, family violence, mental health deterioration or disengagement from education.
- They acknowledge the central role of safety in child development. With the right

supports, fathers can be powerful contributors to creating safe, stable, nurturing environments for children. Without accessible guidance and connection, risk factors can escalate. A prevention system that empowers fathers is therefore essential to reducing harm and strengthening family safety.

- They are measurable and actionable. The Fathering Project can readily demonstrate contribution to these outcomes through improved parenting confidence, increased father–child connection, stronger co-parenting, higher help-seeking behaviours and improved social support networks.
- They align with public health and wellbeing frameworks. The outcomes are consistent with the Measuring What Matters domains and with national strategies such as the National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children.
- They acknowledge fathers as critical contributors. The Fathering Project welcomes this explicit inclusion, as fathers have historically been overlooked in service design despite strong evidence of their influence on child outcomes. The Fathering Project recommends maintaining these outcomes while ensuring the “parent and caregiver” focus explicitly includes father figures, as their involvement is a significant protective factor in prevention.

3. Will a single national program provide more flexibility for your organisation?

Yes. A single national program simplifies contracting, reduces duplication and allows The Fathering Project to:

- deliver father engagement supports consistently across diverse communities,
- align evaluation frameworks nationally,
- build an integrated prevention and early intervention model, and
- reduce administrative burden associated with multiple grant structures.

It also supports digital scaling through our national portal and Fathering Channel resources, enabling equitable access for rural, remote and low-SES communities. The unified structure will allow The Fathering Project to expand Community Fathering and Dads Group programs strategically, based on data (SEIFA, AEDC, child protection trends), rather than navigating differing funding rules per jurisdiction or program type.

4. Does the service or activity you deliver fit within one of the three funding streams? Do these streams reflect what children and families in your community need now – and what they might need in the future?

Yes. The Fathering Project’s work aligns strongly with:

Stream 2: Prevention and Early Intervention (Primary Stream Fit)

Our core programs—Dads Groups, Community Fathering hubs, Schools & ELC

Programs—build protective factors and address early signs of vulnerability. They are relational, strengths-based, community-led and grounded in evidence about child development and father engagement.

Stream 1: National Programmes and Information Services (Secondary Fit)

The Fathering Project delivers national digital fathering resources, evidence-informed school packages, online webinars, video content and widespread public health messaging. These align with Stream 1's objective of ensuring universal access to trusted advice.

Stream 3: Intensive Family Support (Tertiary Fit)

The Fathering Project does not operate as a crisis or statutory response service, but our Community Fathering hubs engage fathers who may be experiencing emerging complexity (mental health, separation stress, unemployment, low social support). Our triage and warm referral pathways contribute meaningfully to early risk identification, complementing local targeted services.

Are the streams appropriate for future needs?

Yes. The three-stream structure reflects current and emerging needs, particularly through its recognition of “proportionate universalism”, which mirrors the way families engage across universal, selective and indicated prevention.

For The Fathering Project, it is important that the streams are understood as interconnected rather than siloed. While our strongest alignment is with Stream 2, our ability to deliver effective prevention outcomes depends on access to Stream 1 functions that provide universal father-friendly information, digital engagement and public health messaging. These universal supports are what draw fathers in early and allow us to identify vulnerability before it escalates. Likewise, elements of Stream 3 are essential to ensure seamless referral pathways when complexity emerges. If The Fathering Project were confined solely to Stream 2, it would be challenging to achieve the intended prevention outcomes, as our model relies on a coordinated approach across all three streams.

5. Are there other changes we could make to the program to help your organisation or community overcome current challenges?

The Fathering Project recommends:

- Explicit recognition of father-inclusive practice as a valid and necessary component of family support.
- Funding for volunteer training, given most Dads Group leaders are volunteers and DSS has emphasised community-led approaches.
- Support for digital inclusivity, ensuring father-friendly, flexible access for shift workers, FIFO workers and regional communities.
- Investment in evaluation capability, including funding for data systems

compatible with DEX.

- Stronger guidance on place-based collaboration, enabling organisations to formalise referral pathways and co-location with family hubs, ACCOs and early years services.
- Longer-term contracts to sustain early intervention models, acknowledging Trust-based relationships cannot be built in short cycles.

6. Do you agree that the four priorities listed on Page 4 are right areas for investment to improve outcomes for children and families?

Yes. The priorities strongly reflect the needs of the families The Fathering Project serves:

1. Prevention and early intervention – central to our mission. Early, evidence-based support for fathers and caregivers strengthens protective factors before issues escalate. Engaging fathers early improves children’s social, emotional and educational outcomes, supports mental health and resilience, and reduces the likelihood of behavioural or academic difficulties developing. Prevention is most effective when delivered in a strengths-based, relational, and accessible way, which is embedded in all The Fathering Project programs.
2. Supporting families at risk of child protection involvement – father engagement is a key protective factor. Positive, confident and connected fathers contribute to safer home environments, improved co-parenting, and emotional stability for children. Strengthening fathers’ capacity helps keep families together and reduces the need for statutory intervention, directly supporting the priority of keeping children safely at home and out of care. Our programs are designed to identify emerging risks early and provide practical supports and warm referrals to address vulnerabilities before crisis points occur.
3. Place-based, community-led models – embedded in Community Fathering. Local, community-driven approaches allow fathers to build connections, share experiences and access support networks in environments they trust. Place-based engagement fosters long-term sustainability, cultural relevance, and meaningful social cohesion, enabling fathers to participate actively in their children’s lives and community life. By working in schools, workplaces and community hubs, The Fathering Project ensures interventions are responsive to local needs and effectively integrated with broader support services.
4. National access to trusted information – aligned with our digital platform and school resources. Universal access to evidence-based fathering guidance, online resources, webinars, and public awareness campaigns addresses information gaps and reduces stigma around seeking support. National resources ensure consistent messaging and equitable access, enabling fathers across diverse

locations and circumstances to engage, develop parenting confidence, and take preventive action before challenges escalate. This complements place-based and intensive interventions, creating a coherent national prevention framework. These priorities create clear space for father-engagement services within the national program.

7. Are there any other priorities or issues you think the department should be focusing on?

The Fathering Project recommends prioritising:

- Young fathers, who face elevated risks yet remain largely invisible in family services.
- New fathers, who are adjusting to their first experience of parenting and often require targeted support to build confidence, manage mental health, and establish positive father–child relationships early.
- Fathers of children with disability, who often report exclusion from service systems and require tailored supports to engage meaningfully in their child’s development.
- CALD and LGBTQIA+ father inclusion, where tailored materials and cultural adaptation are essential to ensure accessibility and relevance.
- The prevention of male social isolation, a known risk factor for mental ill-health and family stress.
- Strengthening father involvement in the early years (0–5), where The Fathering Project sees a major service gap nationally and early engagement has the greatest long-term impact on child development.

8. Do the proposed focus areas – like supporting families at risk of child protection involvement and young parents match the needs or priorities of your service?

Yes. The proposed focus areas (families at risk of child protection involvement, young parents, vulnerable communities) closely mirror the cohorts The Fathering Project engages across schools and community settings. Our Community Fathering hubs, in particular, provide:

- warm-entry pathways for fathers who distrust formal services and do not seek help,
- early detection of family stress and vulnerability, and
- community-led support to prevent escalation.

The Fathering Project’s work aligns well with DSS expectations for relationship-based early intervention.

9. Are there other groups in your community, or different approaches, that you think the department should consider to better support family wellbeing?

The Fathering Project recommends adding:

- Separated fathers, particularly those navigating the early stages of family breakdown.
- FIFO and shift-working fathers, who face barriers to attending mainstream parenting supports.
- Culturally distinct fathering cohorts, such as Pacific, Middle Eastern and South Asian communities where father roles may differ.
- Community volunteer-led models, which harness internal community strengths and promote sustainability.
- Co-designed father-inclusive interventions, ensuring CALD and First Nations cultural authority shapes program delivery.

10. What are other effective ways, beyond co-location, that you've seen work well to connect and coordinate services for families?

The Fathering Project recommends:

- Formal referral pathways with clear warm-handover protocols.
- Shared training and joint workforce development across local services.
- Collaborative outreach, including joint events, antenatal classes, school engagement sessions or community festivals.
- Integrated digital systems, enabling shared information (with consent) and streamlined communication.
- Place-based leadership networks, where local schools, ACCOs, councils and services plan collectively.
- Volunteer-led community connectors, especially effective for engaging hard-to-reach fathers.

11. What would you highlight in a grant application to demonstrate a service is connected to the community it serves? What should applicants be assessed on?

The Fathering Project suggests applicants be assessed on:

- evidence of co-design with the community,
- local leadership (volunteers, champions, Elders, father leaders),
- demonstrated partnerships with schools, ACCOs, early years services, councils,
- place-based planning using SEIFA, AEDC and local vulnerability data,
- ability to deliver culturally safe, inclusive and trauma-informed services, and
- clear pathways to warm referral and collaboration.

The Fathering Project would highlight its national school partnerships, local

volunteer networks, ACCO collaborations, community hubs and established local service relationships.

12. Beyond locational disadvantage, what other factors should the department consider to make sure funding reflects the needs of communities?

The Fathering Project recommends:

- Child protection involvement rates,
- developmental vulnerability (AEDC),
- levels of male social isolation,
- young parent prevalence,
- CALD community needs,
- LGBTQIA+ family inclusion,
- disability prevalence and gaps in father support, and
- local service system gaps (e.g., areas with minimal early intervention services).

13. What's the best way for organisations to show in grant applications, that their service is genuinely meeting the needs of the community?

Through:

- Local data analysis (SEIFA, AEDC, council profiles) to identify areas of need.
- Co-designed program models that reflect the priorities and lived experiences of communities.
- Letters of support from partners demonstrating local endorsement and collaboration.
- Evidence of lived-experience participation, showing programs are informed by those they aim to support.
- Case studies demonstrating real change, illustrating tangible impact for families.
- Outcomes-based reporting linked to DSS indicators, ensuring measurable accountability.
- Reach and awareness metrics, demonstrating engagement across the target population. Effective prevention and intervention rely on first connecting with and raising awareness among fathers and communities; high reach ensures early engagement, encourages participation, and sets the foundation for meaningful impact.

The Fathering Project can demonstrate need and impact through school feedback, father participation data, DEX-aligned outcome reporting, qualitative stories, cross-sector partnership evidence, and national reach and awareness data, showing both breadth and depth of engagement.

14. How could the grant process be designed to support and increase the number of ACCOs delivering services to children and families?

The Fathering Project recommends:

- dedicated funding streams for ACCO-led fathering programs,
- expectations for shared decision-making in mixed partnerships,
- longer contract terms to enable cultural governance and workforce development,
- simplified reporting requirements that respect data sovereignty, and
- eligibility rules that allow organisations like The Fathering Project to partner under ACCO leadership when appropriate.

15. What else should be built into the program design to help improve outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families?

- Co-design with local Elders and Aboriginal fathers.
 - Cultural governance embedded in service design.
 - Dedicated funding for Aboriginal father connectors.
 - Resources adapted for local culture and language.
 - On-Country engagement and yarning circles as core components.
 - Alignment with Closing the Gap Target 12 (child protection).
 - Shared evaluation frameworks reflecting First Nations wellbeing concepts.
- The Fathering Project supports the creation of a First Nations Fathering Advisory Group to provide ongoing guidance.

16. What types of data would help your organisation better understand its impact and continuously improve its services?

The Fathering Project requires data on:

- Parenting self-efficacy – confidence in one’s ability to parent effectively
- Parental self-esteem – feeling valued and competent as a parent
- Parenting satisfaction – contentment with the way one parents
- Self-perceived parenting effectiveness – how well parents feel they manage parenting challenges
- Parental agency – feeling able to influence child outcomes through parenting
- Self-regulation and resilience – capacity to manage emotions and cope with parenting stress
- Parenting motivation and stress management in parenting – commitment to positive parenting practices and ability to handle challenges without negative outcomes
- Co-parenting quality – ability to work collaboratively with another caregiver

- School engagement indicators – children’s participation and engagement in learning
- Referral outcomes – connections to further supports or services

This aligns directly with DSS SCORE domains and the Measuring What Matters framework, providing both actionable insights and alignment with national reporting standards.

17. What kinds of data or information would be most valuable for you to share, to show how your service is positively impacting children and families?

The Fathering Project can demonstrate positive impact through:

- Pre/post measures of parenting self-efficacy, parental self-esteem and parenting satisfaction to show improvements in self-efficacy and strengthened parenting identity
- Participation and retention data to demonstrate sustained engagement
- Measures of self-perceived parenting effectiveness, parental agency and co-parenting quality to capture perceived capability vs actual capability
- Indicators of self-regulation, resilience and stress management in parenting to show capacity to cope with parenting challenges
- Qualitative stories of behavioural change and empowerment to illustrate meaningful change in parenting practices and family functioning
- Partner school data on student engagement to reflect indirect outcomes for children

The Fathering Project integrates digital analytics, group-based surveys and interviews to capture these measures across its programs, providing evidence of both perceived and demonstrable positive impact.

18. If your organisation currently reports in the Data Exchange (DEX), what SCORE Circumstances domain is most relevant to the service you deliver?

Mental Health, Wellbeing and Self-care
 Personal and Family Safety
 Community Participation and Networks
 Family Functioning

19. What kinds of templates or guidance would help you prepare strong case studies that show the impact of your service?

The Fathering Project recommends templates that include:

- context (community need and cohort),
- father’s starting point and barriers,

- program engagement and activities,
- changes observed (linked to DSS outcomes),
- father's voice (quotes),
- facilitator or partner observations,
- measurable indicators, and
- follow-up impact after 3–6 months.

20. What does a relational contracting approach mean to you in practice? What criteria would you like to see included in a relational contract?

For The Fathering Project, relational contracting means:

- long-term, trust-based partnerships with DSS,
- shared outcomes and shared accountability,
- flexibility to tailor delivery to local communities,
- strong communication and iterative improvement,
- recognition of the relationship-based nature of early intervention,
- joint problem-solving rather than punitive compliance.

21. What's the best way for the department to decide which organisations should be offered a relational contract?

Criteria should include:

- proven track record in prevention and early intervention,
- ability to deliver at scale with consistency,
- evidence of strong local partnerships,
- reputation for culturally safe practice,
- robust data systems and evaluation frameworks,
- community governance structures, and
- demonstrated organisational stability.

The Fathering Project meets these criteria.

22. Is your organisation interested in a relational contracting approach? Why/why not?

Yes. Relational contracting is highly suitable for The Fathering Project because:

- our programs rely on long-term trust-building with communities,
- relationships with schools, ACCOs, councils and community hubs require stability,
- our outcomes are relational and developmental, not transactional,
- it supports sustained capability-building and cultural partnership development,

and

- it reduces administrative burden and increases impact.

23. Is there anything else you think the department should understand or consider about this proposed approach?

The Fathering Project emphasises:

- Father-inclusive practice must be recognised as a central prevention strategy, not an optional enhancement to general parenting services.
- Early father engagement reduces late intervention costs, contributing to DSS's \$22.3 billion cost-avoidance strategy.
- Volunteer capacity-building is essential, as fathers supporting fathers is a powerful and sustainable model.
- Digital resources must be funded adequately to ensure equitable national reach.
- Evaluation investment is critical, particularly for capturing father-specific outcomes.

The Fathering Project provides a unique, evidence-informed contribution to Australia's family support system, addressing a well-documented service gap and improving outcomes for children, families and communities.