

Practice Point: Father-Inclusive Practice

This Practice Point provides evidence informed ideas and tips for making a service more father-inclusive for fathers with learning difficulties. The aim is to assist services in developing specific recruitment and intervention strategies that target learning style and communication.

Key facts

Research suggests that father involvement is a significant contributor to children's long term social, emotional, and cognitive development. Amongst both fathers and mothers, skill level and confidence in parenting, level of engagement in the family role and ability to demonstrate positive parent behaviour is associated with better outcomes for children.

Fathers learn childcare skills at the same rate as mothers, and are motivated to parent effectively for the same reasons that mothers are motivated. One major difference is that traditionally, parenting information, services, and programs have placed a greater emphasis on targeting mothers rather than both parents.

Practice tips

Fathers with learning difficulties can be more isolated and experience greater disadvantage in the community than other fathers. To engage with them and keep them involved in family services, you need to be proactive, approachable and inclusive to their diverse needs and perspectives.

These strategies can help you strengthen your organisation's father-inclusive practice:

Ensure your service is easily accessible

- Introduce flexible hours to help fathers who work during business hours to participate in your service.
- Choose days and times that are suitable for fathers who might have changing schedules, other appointments, or seasonal work to consider.
- Consider holding your programs where fathers and children live, play, work or use child care. This can help create a safe environment for men to engage and talk openly. It can also make it easier for fathers to get there.

Actively seek out fathers

- Invite and encourage fathers to participate in your services. Don't wait for them to come to you.
- Be active, seek out fathers in places such as schools, religious organisations, sporting events, fetes and market days.
- Take advantage of Fathers' Day and organise events, such as a BBQ, picnic or sporting activity.
- Make the most of opportunities to contact fathers who already have some connection with your organisation. Think about where fathers are already involved in your service - they might be dropping children off at a service or look at material and resources sent to mothers.

Use father-inclusive communication

- Revise your existing promotional materials, such as brochures, pamphlets, parenting handouts, event schedules, calendars, and communication tools, to make sure that they represent the fathering role.
- Consider using photos in your resources and materials that emphasise that the program is for mothers, fathers and other care givers.
- Distribute your materials at key locations, such as schools, community service centres, hospitals, childcare centres or medical centres.
- Think about the way you speak to fathers. Men often like quick, practical solutions. The way you speak with mothers might not be as effective with fathers.
- Think about other communication approaches, such as role play, which is often helpful for parents with learning difficulties.
- Revamp your website to reflect your organisation's father-inclusive attitude – language, layout and images are important in communicating with fathers.

Include fathers throughout your organisation

- An organisation's capacity to become more father-inclusive depends on the values and attitudes of staff. Give staff time to critically reflect on how father-inclusive your organization is and to identify gaps.
- Integrate father-inclusive strategies into your organisation's core targets and activities.
- Have men involved in roles where family interaction is required, such as meetings. This might encourage both fathers and mothers to participate.
- Create a good first impression by displaying positive poster images of fathers and children on the walls, or have male staff greet new clients.
- Develop a strategy to make your organisation a more father-inclusive environment.
- Be clear about the changes you want to apply, set achievable goals and be familiar with the work you are doing to get fathers involved.
- Use a tips and ideas sheet, such as below, during staff development sessions to assist staff to critically reflect and identify ways to further engage fathers with learning difficulties.

For tips and ideas to help you build your own strategy see the Father Inclusive Practice tool on the Healthy Start website. This tool will help you consider what your organisation currently does well, and what could be done differently to engage fathers with learning difficulties. The questions are intended to highlight goals for increased father involvement and help generate ideas about how you can strengthen your organisation's father-inclusive practice.

What we know

Fathers with learning difficulties face the same barriers to accessing family services as other fathers; for example, the often higher numbers of female workers in a service can be a barrier for fathers who would be more willing to engage with a male worker. Fathers with learning difficulties may also face additional challenges as a result of difficulty understanding information that is heavily text based and does not address fathers' individual learning needs. Also, practitioners have reported a stigma surrounds fathers with learning difficulties; that these fathers are a negative influence on the family, and a person who prevents the mother from accessing support or services.

Father-inclusive practice can encourage communication skills, confidence in parenting and decrease feelings of isolation. It can also create a greater likelihood of positive attachment between father and child in support of better outcomes for children. In addition, by working with fathers as well as mothers, professionals are able to gain better insight into the family dynamics, child presenting concerns, and progress of developmental milestones.

Working with fathers provides fathers with the opportunity to develop peer networks with others in similar circumstances, and greater likelihood of increased interaction and involvement with the community. This is particularly important for those fathers with learning difficulties who haven't had a positive role-model or father-figure to demonstrate parenting behaviours and who might need additional support, matched to their learning needs, to develop these skills.

Want to know more?

The authors would like to acknowledge that some material for the content of this resource was adapted from:

Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2009). Father-inclusive practice guide.

Father Involvement Research Alliance (2007). The effects of father involvement: An updated research summary of the evidence. Guelph: Centre for Families, work and wellbeing, University of Guelph.

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