

Dads make a difference

Being a father

A father is a male parent or carer of a child. A father may not be biologically related to his child or live with his child all the time. He may be a grandfather, step-father, foster father or adoptive father of a child. In this resource, the terms 'dad' and 'father' include these relationships. Some children might have more than one father or relationships with other males who undertake a significant portion of parenting and care giving. There is no one right way to be a father. Each father brings unique ideas and experience to being a parent or carer and has a lot to contribute to the mental health and wellbeing of his child and family.

There are different ways families are constructed. For example, some families have many people, some have few people, some have people of different genders, ages, and cultural backgrounds. Some children have contact with a father, while others do not. It is not necessary for a child to have a father figure in their life for them to be able to feel loved, secure and happy in their family. Supporting a child and having their best interests in mind is what is important, as this has a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing.

A father and his child building their relationship together is a special and deeply rewarding experience.

Why are fathers important?

Children benefit from secure, loving relationships with their parents and carers. Not long after birth, babies start to notice that their mum and dad feel, sound, smell and look different from each other and from other people. In particular, a baby might notice that their father has a deeper voice and bigger hands, and may spend lots of time looking at their dad, fascinated, noticing everything that is unique to him. When dads bond, engage and spend time with their baby, they are introducing their child to something new and interesting—their dad!



Did you know?

- ▶ Young children who receive lots of affection from their dad will have a more secure relationship with him.
- ▶ Children whose fathers are involved in their life are more likely to be emotionally secure, confident to explore their surroundings, and have a better social connection with their peers.
- ▶ Men who are involved in their child's life feel more confident and effective as a parent or carer, find parenthood more enjoyable, feel more important to their child, and feel encouraged to be involved.
- ▶ When fathers are involved in their child's everyday activities (e.g., eating meals together, reading and helping with homework), children tend to have fewer behaviour difficulties and better social skills.
- ▶ How a father feels about being a dad and how he cares for his child has a large influence on a child's social and emotional development. Children whose fathers feel good about being a dad and are sensitive and responsive to their needs tend to have better social and emotional skills.

Dads being involved

Fathers and families can get involved with their children and the early childhood service by:

- ▶ becoming familiar with their early childhood service and getting to know the staff
- ▶ sharing children's developmental milestones with early childhood staff
- ▶ giving feedback to the staff about experiences their child has enjoyed (e.g., a weekend trip to the zoo or a family picnic)
- ▶ listening and talking to their children regularly to help their child learn, even if their child cannot understand words yet
- ▶ explaining to their child how things in the world work and having a go at answering their questions (e.g., 'Why is the sky blue?')

Early childhood services can encourage father involvement by:

- ▶ including dads when making contact with families (e.g., initiating discussions with mothers and fathers, asking fathers specific questions about how their child is going, keeping in regular contact with fathers via text messaging and email)
- ▶ providing an environment that is friendly and welcoming to fathers (e.g., having photos of children and their dads, putting up posters of children interacting with male adults)
- ▶ creating opportunities for dads to spend time at the early childhood service and meet other dads (e.g., by organising specific father-child events such as a dads' breakfast or a Saturday playgroup)
- ▶ taking time to build trust and form relationships with fathers who are new to the service
- ▶ promoting and getting involved in community events that may be of interest to dads.

This resource and further information on the national KidsMatter Early Childhood initiative is available to download at www.kidsmatter.edu.au. The KidsMatter Early Childhood team also welcomes your feedback which can be submitted through the website.



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