

Hey Dad! For Indigenous Dads, Uncles and Pops

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***Hey Dad! For Indigenous Dads, Uncles and Pops* has been written specifically to help Indigenous men to engage with and understand their children. It also provides a conduit to other family services and contributes to the building of community capacity in those regions in which it is adopted. Robyn Parker talked with Lynne Slocombe (Program Manager) and Matt Stubbs (Manager, Waitara Family Centre) about the creation and adaptation of the program.**

Brief history of the Hey Dad! program

Hey Dad! For Indigenous Dads, Uncles and Pops is the latest adaptation of a program that began in 1995 in NSW. Psychologists at the Mercy Family Centre running a parenting program noticed the uneven contribution to the program by mothers and fathers, with mothers more actively participating than fathers. Thinking that dads might be more likely to engage in a program designed specifically for them, they developed Hey Dad! The program was aimed at helping dads with their parenting and being involved with their kids. Within a few years, funding had been obtained from the Commonwealth Government to expand the original Hey Dad! program to more centres across Sydney.

In the early 2000s, Mercy Family Centre was absorbed by Centacare Broken Bay. Commonwealth Government funding for men and family relationships programs helped support the program. Soon the program was adapted for separated fathers by Centacare Broken Bay in partnership with UnitingCare Burnside. It has since been adapted for dads with children with a disability and the handouts have been translated into several languages.

The program

The aim of the *Hey Dad! For Indigenous Dads, Uncles and Pops* program is to build individual and community skills and provide the men with the confidence to be strong role models for their kids. It covers a range of topics such as being a dad today, understanding grief and loss, talking with and understanding kids, keeping kids safe, and coaching kids. Embedded in these are sessions on child development, communication, discipline, participants' experiences of parenting and being parented, conflict resolution and other parenting skills. It is based around a professional, comprehensive manual/workbook, which is also available on CD. The program can be delivered in various formats, as a 2-day workshop, a series of shorter workshops, or as an extended, weekly program.

The program is designed to be delivered by Indigenous men in their own communities. Focus groups with Indigenous men were conducted to ensure that the content and language of the program were culturally appropriate and that local terms and language were used. The program also functions as a conduit to other family relationship services for Indigenous fathers, such as counselling and other programs and services.

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As a program funded through the Family and Relationships Services Program administered by the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), the standard data are routinely collected from Hey Dad! participants. They are also asked to offer feedback on the program. Depending on literacy levels, facilitators may record participants' responses for them. An evaluation of the development and trial of the program was conducted in late 2006, early 2007. Participants were Indigenous men in two communities in NSW and in three NSW correctional centres. Feedback from participants was very positive, reporting that the sessions had helped them "yarn better with their mob", and better interact with and understand their children. They felt the program helped them to deal with tough times at home and gave them ideas about things to do with their children. The inclusion of uncles and pops was seen as a valuable acknowledgement of their role in Aboriginal families and culture and reflected the strong family connections in Indigenous communities.

Facilitators also provided feedback, commenting on the commitment to the program and degree of participation of the dads involved, and the benefits the men clearly derived from their experience of the program. The evaluation report also includes valuable information about which aspects of the program worked well, as well as the difficulties experienced in setting up and running the program, generating interest and engaging participants.

The initial trials of the Indigenous Hey Dad! program included male Aboriginal facilitators and female Aboriginal facilitators in the correctional centres. Feedback from the evaluation of the trials showed a preference for programs to be run, where possible, by at least two Indigenous male facilitators. A highly skilled non-Indigenous woman facilitator was seen as valuable, but not optimal. Facilitators are encouraged to vary the delivery and content of the program to suit their own strengths and the needs and local culture of the particular community.

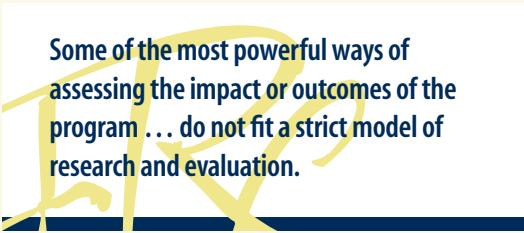
Delivery of the Hey Dad! program in correctional settings in particular requires very specific adjustments to recognise: (a) that the men are separated from their families; (b) the impact of security restrictions; (c) the often poor literacy levels; (d) the length of sentences; and (e) other activities within the centre, such as work programs. *Hey Dad! For Separated Fathers* has been available in these settings for a number of years. The value of the program for Indigenous dads has also been demonstrated in correctional facilities—even Corrections Officers have commented on the positive changes observed in inmates who have participated in the program. For these reasons, significant additional time was added to the program in one of the prisons at the request of the prison manager, in part to allow for the inmates to move through all the sessions in the program and optional activities, and to allow extra attention to be paid to issues of loss and grief. This freed the men up to work positively on their relationship skills with their children and families during phone calls and visits.

Challenges

Centacare Broken Bay conduct training for facilitators across the country, making enormous efforts to introduce the program gradually through Indigenous elders, Indigenous workers from organisations and other members of a community. Experience has taught Centacare Broken Bay that extensive consultation must take place prior to the trainers even arriving in the community. An Indigenous worker often makes the initial approach to elders and other workers in the community, seeking support and identifying men who may be interested in being trained to facilitate the program. Only when such support is received do the trainers enter the community.

Centacare Broken Bay's relationship with the community and the facilitators does not end with the completion of training. A significant amount of ongoing support is provided for those who train to conduct the program, to help them in building and maintaining their confidence and skills. At times this may involve an experienced worker travelling to the community to co-facilitate a session or program, or to just observe and provide supervision and support. Given that Hey Dad! is often run in rural or remote communities, extensive post-training support takes place by telephone.

All of these efforts are made to further contribute to a sense of community, to community development, and to the capacity-building that is at the heart of the program. The time taken to achieve this also has implications for the agency, with regard to decisions about allocation of resources. While support for the program within the government is strong, having the program accepted into a community, training facilitators to conduct it, and providing ongoing support requires a commitment on the part of Centacare staff and the Indigenous facilitators and community members themselves that is difficult to quantify or measure in financial terms. Some of the most powerful ways of assessing the impact or outcomes of the program, such as through songs, poetry or artwork created by incarcerated men, do not fit a strict model of research and evaluation.



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Summary

As well as being a culturally-appropriate, evidence-based parenting program, the development and implementation of *Hey Dad! For Indigenous Dads, Uncles and Pops* has provided invaluable lessons for successful implementation of programs in Indigenous communities. These include recognising that the difficulties faced by Indigenous men and communities require the application of extra time, effort and resources; acknowledging that their past educational experiences are likely to have been negative and the need to celebrate their participation in this program; allowing time for participants and facilitators to get to know one another; and recruiting Aboriginal agencies to help with promotion of the program, securing of venues, and referral of participants. Further strategies are noted in the evaluation report.

The Hey Dad! suite of programs are highly regarded as effective, evidence-based parenting programs. *Hey Dad! For Indigenous Dads, Uncles and Pops* fills a significant gap in the provision of services to Indigenous men. Although more rigorous evaluation is needed, the feedback from participants and facilitators, especially those in correctional centres, is suggestive of the potential significant health and well being benefits not only to Indigenous men but also to their children, families and communities.

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