



# Promising Practice Profiles

<b>Project title</b>	<b>Aboriginal Dads Program</b>
<b>Project practice</b>	Supporting young Aboriginal fathers in positive parenting and community involvement through mentoring
<b>Project undertaken by</b>	Males in Black Inc. and UnitingCare Wesley Port Pirie Port Augusta SA
<b>Start date</b>	June 2006
<b>Focal areas</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Healthy young families</li><li>• Supporting families and parents</li><li>• Early learning and care</li><li>• Creating child friendly communities</li><li>• Families and children's services working effectively together</li></ul>
<b>Program</b>	Communities for Children
<b>Issue</b>	<p>Port Augusta is a community which has a transient population and is culturally diverse with over 20 different language groups. It has tended to be a conservative community and returned a majority "NO" vote in the 1967 referendum.<sup>1</sup> Port Augusta has a total population of 13,874 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006) of which the Aboriginal community represents 16.6% (2,303 persons). In comparison to the Australian average of 2.3%, the proportion of Aboriginal people in Port Augusta is significant.</p> <p>Port Augusta is an area of cultural significance for Aboriginal people as a gathering place. It has long been a meeting place and a trading place but has lacked structures and projects that were supportive of this. As a result of poverty, racial discrimination, isolation, and limited opportunities, personal aspirations are low. Given the nature of Port Augusta as a regional service centre, a number of significant service providers to Aboriginal communities are resident in Port Augusta including the Indigenous Co-ordination Centre, Pika Wiya and Bungala Aboriginal Corporation (Northern Regional Development Board, 2007, p.1).</p> <p>Key issues identified during the Port Augusta Communities for Children consultation process, which preceded the development of the strategic plan, were the need for positive Aboriginal male role models and increased support for fathers. Young Aboriginal fathers were not seen to take an active role in parenting, and there were no services offering support and education to new Aboriginal fathers. During the consultations, which included focus groups and interviews, comments from participants reflected the belief that many Aboriginal fathers lacked confidence in becoming involved in their child's education.</p> <p>In the last 20–30 years there has been a change in the way that Aboriginal men are providing for their families ... that connection with family got broken ... There has been a loss of role models ... (MIB2)</p> <p>The Aboriginal Dads Program was set up to address these issues.</p>

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<sup>1</sup> This referendum was to amend the Australian Constitution so that Aboriginal people would be counted in the national census and be subject to Commonwealth, rather than just state, laws.

## Program context

Aboriginal Dads Program is run primarily by Males in Black (MIB), in partnership with UnitingCare Wesley, Port Pirie.<sup>2</sup> The role played by members of the project's Community Partner is pivotal to the success of the Aboriginal Dads Program, so it is important to understand what this organisation is and how its members have been involved.

MIB began in 1996 as a group of Aboriginal men who wanted to make a difference in their local communities through supporting men and their families to respect themselves and their culture and become contributing community members. MIB became an incorporated organisation on 10 July 2003. It is managed by a committee of seven men and has a membership of approximately 40. Many of the committee members work in government agencies in Port Augusta. While it is not uncommon for Aboriginal workers in government agencies to network and collaborate, MIB is unusual in that it has become an incorporated body and that the committee has consciously identified what would be most useful for men in their community and taken steps to make it happen. In this respect, as one informant commented, it is functioning like early feminist groups where women chose to act for themselves and like a service club where respected community members give back to their community. One of the areas of need identified by MIB was helping young men be better fathers and break/intercept cycles of unemployment, offending, incarceration, and addiction.

It's about breaking the cycle – Aboriginal people have no skills so they can't get work, so they have no income, so they break in to somewhere and steal something and then they end up in prison. (MIB2)

The availability of funds through the Communities for Children strategy provided an opportunity to meet this need through employment of a peer project worker and the establishment of the Aboriginal Dads Program. MIB members provided a mentoring role for the project worker and, through community activities, for other young men. The MIB committee welcomed the development of partnerships with other organisations, although there was some resistance initially to the arrangement where money for a project for Aboriginal fathers was channelled through a mainstream organisation. This relationship has however proven valuable for both parties.

A strong working partnership between UnitingCare Wesley Port Pirie (Facilitating Partner) and MIB has contributed to acceptance and endorsement of the Aboriginal Dads Program by local Aboriginal communities. Administrative support provided by the Facilitating Partner and the Early Years Parenting Centre team has been essential given that MIB is a voluntary organisation and all committee members contribute to it in addition to their full-time employment elsewhere.

Critical to the success of the Aboriginal Dads Program has been:

- the commitment of the MIB leadership team to the agreed principles and outcomes of the strategy;
- the willingness of skilled MIB members to provide intensive mentoring support; and
- the employment of a peer project officer who was accepted within and across different Aboriginal communities.

ADP [Aboriginal Dads Program] is about local outcomes, showing young men how to reconnect with their culture, developing living skills and personal development skills. (MIB4)

The Aboriginal Dads Program has provided an opportunity for young Aboriginal fathers to receive mentoring from elders and subsequently make changes in their lives which have directly and indirectly strengthened their capacity as parents.

The objectives of the Aboriginal Dads Program include:

- developing culturally appropriate ways of working with new and young Aboriginal fathers;
- establishing positive partnerships with Aboriginal leaders and organisations;
- establishing partnerships with mainstream child and family services;
- recruiting and training Aboriginal male mentors;

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<sup>2</sup> UnitingCare Wesley Port Pirie is a Community Services agency of the Uniting Church. UCWPP cares for country people by providing a range of welfare and support services throughout regional South Australia. They strive to do this with dignity and respect, and in appropriate and creative ways. UCWPP provide Children's Contact Services and Men & Family Relationships Services.

- increasing father involvement in the lives of their children (0–5 years); and
- demonstrating the effect of father involvement on the well being of children.

## Practice description

The model for the Aboriginal Dads Program is underpinned by the strengths-based mentor support approach of Males in Black. Key elements include:

- a peer (project) worker;
- mentoring support;
- capacity building and leadership development;
- promoting community development activities;
- getting people out bush to chat with them;
- family focused activities;
- teaching about culture; and
- strong partnerships.

### Peer project worker

The employment of a peer project worker has been key to the success of the Aboriginal Dads Program. This worker has provided other younger fathers in the community with a person they can relate to, and who understands them within the context of their current lives and personal and social issues. MIB committee members reported that finding the right person took time.

Committee and community members alike reported that the Aboriginal Dads Program peer worker was successful in his role because he was involved in many community activities (including football and other sports) and was known within and across networks, and because as a young father himself he provided a good role model and motivated other young dads to get involved.

The peer worker's ability to effectively engage other young dads was later enhanced through the provision of a community bus which enabled the Aboriginal Dads Program to provide transport to young dads from different communities. Providing transport was reported to be a critical component of the project.

The bus is a good thing. It really makes a difference. Fuel is expensive and it means less stress for families organising themselves. Also they can't say no. (Aboriginal Elder)

### Mentoring support

MIB members offer significant mentoring support not only to the peer worker but to all of the young dads involved in the project. MIB members come from diverse backgrounds and work across different cultural contexts. Their extensive and diverse skills and experience are a significant resource for young men and include:

- experience in working across different (and sometimes conflicting) Aboriginal cultures;
- strong leadership;
- knowledge of and representation in many sectors (including education, justice, police, sport and recreation, welfare, health, community development, advocacy etc);
- broad and intimate knowledge of the community and its networks;
- administration skills;
- an interest in young people and their future; and
- A "passionate and compassionate vision" (MIB2).

We are like a fibre optic cable, we channel through to many services!  
(MIB4)

A minimum of 20 MIB members are available as mentors when needed by the Aboriginal Dads participants. Mentoring support is provided on many levels and includes:

- program planning and development;
- events management (e.g., with camps, social events, and community events);
- training workshops;
- securing successful employment;
- facilitating meetings; and
- being available at all times via telephone contact.

Committee members affirmed that their ability to provide successful mentoring to the young fathers in spite of age differences was related to their visibility in the community, being fathers, and that they are seen as passionate about creating change for young people in the community.

You have to be very community oriented and passionate about young people and their future. That's what's important – to be passionate about the organisation. In 1996 Males in Black was not as passionate as it is now. Therefore we were slower to gain momentum. (MIB2)

### **Capacity building**

The Aboriginal Dads Program involves building the capacity of young Aboriginal dads not only to take their seat as parents who are positively involved with their children, but also to become active and contributing members of their community. For MIB members key aspects of capacity building in the Aboriginal Dads Program have included:

- leadership formation;
- developing positive work ethics and practices;
- gaining experience with planning for and managing events;
- creating a culture of “giving back” or volunteerism;
- developing living skills such as getting finances in order, home cooking, keeping your house and yard tidy; and
- developing social and relationships skills.

Aboriginal Dads Program related activities such as bush trips, hunting, family camps, and community based events, playgroups, community visits etc, have all provided good ground for leadership formation and capacity building.

It's been about supporting them and teaching them ... For example with the camps there's the planning, costing, buying food and also what they'd like to see in the program. It's about how they see their role as fathers in the community, in their families as an Aboriginal man. How they see themselves as parents and partners. (MIB2)

MIB committee members emphasised that support plays a key role in capacity building but that this has also involved teaching the young dads that support is a resource and not a proxy for leadership – it is hoped that they will actively take on responsibilities in the community. MIB's vision is that through building capacity and sharing, the young dads will gradually take the reins and become community leaders and mentors for their children's generation.

We want them to sit around the table and tell us “what we want is ...”  
They take two steps forward and we take one step back. (MIB2)

### **Community development activities**

The Aboriginal Dads Program has been the catalyst for multiple community development activities which provide the ground for engagement, observational learning, connection with peers and elders, skills development, capacity building and reconnection with family, culture, and the land.

#### *Getting people out bush to chat with them*

It is important to provide the opportunity for young fathers to spend time with older men. Taking people out bush provides time and space away from daily distractions and pressures and allows time for chatting and important social interaction. Camps and day trips focussing on traditional hunting activities have provided an arena for the teaching of Aboriginal values in a modern way. Additionally there was a representative from Pika Wiya primary health care service offering health checks, as well as a local Aboriginal Community Constables. One MIB member reported that they all cooked, were sitting and talking, and played sports together.

It's teaching young men to listen, to learn and then they appreciate this and they say “thank you” and “will there be more camps? We want more camps!” (MIB4)

Spending time out bush with the young fathers also provided insight into factors affecting the participation of young men in the Aboriginal Dads Program.

We invited people [to the ADP activities] and they didn't come. Then we took them camping and asked them why they didn't come. Some said that their partners wouldn't let them. So we had a family camp which was really good and now we are planning more. (MIB1)

### *Family focused activities*

The Aboriginal Dads Program provides 4–6 hours per week of activities for young Aboriginal dads. These activities are family focused and are predominantly based at the Early Years Parenting Centre. The activities include a young dads playgroup, a family playgroup, a small babies playgroup, and community BBQs.

### **Family camps**

To date, two family camps for young fathers, their partners and children have been held. The family camps have supported partners to understand that the Aboriginal Dads Program is a positive and family-friendly young men's group.

There was a lot of jealousy from the young ones [women] and so we said it is ok to take [female] partners. They saw that at camp there was something different going on and that it wasn't about men getting together and drinking. (MIB2)

As an engagement activity "camping works so well because the equipment, the ride and all resources are provided" (MIB1). Once out bush young dads and their families are able to spend relaxed time together in ways that would not occur in their own homes and communities.

### *Teaching about culture*

While learning about their culture takes place in a range of settings and modalities, camps provide an ideal container within which the young men can hear about, experience, and reflect on "culture". Under the guidance of MIB, the Aboriginal Dads Program has held three camps for young fathers (two of these included partners and children). Future camps have been planned.

In addition to social connection/engagement and family-focused activities, the camps provide a well-resourced bush classroom where young men learn about "culture" through cooking, dancing, and storytelling. Storytelling plays a critical role in developing cultural identity, which MIB members see as critical to survival. The emphasis on "teaching culture" at these camps reflects the traditional, communal approach to learning about what it means to be Aboriginal, and to be a parent and raise children. To be Aboriginal is to live the culture through ties with one's community, and through sharing, supporting and giving back to the community. Being a parent and raising children is a family and community endeavour in which children are cared for, responded to, and develop close relationships with, multiple caregivers in their kinship group (Yeo, 2003). Teaching Aboriginal Dads about culture helps them to become more family- and culturally-focused in their daily lives.

[T]he suicide rate here in Port Augusta [for young Aboriginal men] is the highest in South Australia. It's all about "Who am I?" This is very important. (MIB2)

We took for granted that cultural knowledge but a lot of kids are growing up not knowing their family group. The last thing we want is ... for the young people to start to drift. (MIB3)

The key to the "bush classroom" philosophy is sharing information and watching and learning from others.

We teach what we know. We are not experts. (MIB4)

Learning from others has sometimes led to raw confrontation with personal and collective cultural disconnect. MIB members report that at the first camp young fathers were shocked at having to learn traditional Aboriginal hunting skills from a "young" Maori man (who had been a part of an Aboriginal community for 16 years). For young Aboriginal fathers learning about their own culture shows them who they really are and "brings out their true potential as an Aboriginal person rather than adopting Afro-American street style and attitude" (MIB4).

They have taken on a culture which is synthetic ... We are not saying don't do this but rather "respect your own culture first". (MIB2)

### **Strong partnerships**

A partnership approach underpins the philosophy and approach of the Aboriginal Dads Program. Partnership occurs through: coordination with key Aboriginal services and organisations; co-location and partnerships with the Early Years Parenting Centre; and informal partnerships between MIB and other community based services and groups.

In developing the Aboriginal Dads Program the Communities for Children team and MIB coordinated with many local Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations including: Aboriginal Family Support Service; Aboriginal Resource Centre; Carlton School; Pika Wiya Health Service; Warndu Wathilli-Carri Ngura Aboriginal Family Violence Legal Service; Bungala Child Care Centre; Pathways to Healing project; Aboriginal Advisory Council; Aboriginal Elders Group; Davenport Community; Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress; the Family Birthing Unit; Aboriginal Education Workers; Aboriginal health nurses (CYWH); Umeewarra Aboriginal Media; Family Violence Action Group; Centacare; and Red Cross.

A strong and positive working relationship has developed between the Communities for Children team and MIB/Aboriginal Dads Program. The Aboriginal Dads Program peer worker is based at the Early Years Parenting Centre and together with their staff has worked hard at creating a sense of co-ownership of this space and its facilities by members of different Aboriginal communities and organisations. As a result of this partnership and coordination with UnitingCare Wesley Port Pirie, the Aboriginal Dads Program was successful in securing a community bus. The bus contributes to ongoing partnerships between Aboriginal community groups and the Early Years Parenting Centre (EYPC).

Getting people to EYPC was hard in the beginning and it was the same people coming each week and others would say they were too tired to come. But getting the bus made a huge difference. (ADP2 young father)

The Aboriginal Dads Program has demonstrated promising practice through supporting young Aboriginal fathers and their families to achieve better outcomes for their children and their children's futures. Young fathers have developed knowledge and skills in the areas of early learning and care as well as skills which promote better family relationships and community involvement.

## Research base

The work of the Aboriginal Dads Program is underpinned by a range of theoretical understandings drawn from recent local and international research.

### A peer (project) worker

Many young Aboriginal men have experienced a lack of male role models (Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care [SNAICC], 2004). Research suggests that the lack of male role models in young men's lives leads them to glean information from ill-informed peers or the media (Condon, Donovan, & Corkindale, 2001).

The United Nations Working Group of Indigenous Peoples recognises the importance of empowering younger generations of indigenous people through education and mentorship (Boyer, 2004). This concept is further supported by Canadian research on indigenous knowledge which suggest that Aboriginal ways of knowing and knowledge must be controlled and driven by Aboriginal people (Manahan & Ball, 2007)

Male only support groups provide men with the opportunity to share stories, develop social relationships, and observe other men interacting with their children (Manahan & Ball, 2007). Peer support groups are most beneficial when they are facilitated by a local Aboriginal person (SNAICC, 2004, p. 22). Positive engagement of Aboriginal fathers in parenting and support "groups is most likely in situations where the facilitator is male and a father himself, is liked and trusted, and creates dialogue by sharing personal experiences" (Berlyn, Wise, & Soriano, 2008, p. v).

### A safe environment

There are well known barriers to men attending parenting programs and these include the hours, environment, and that content/facilitation style is frequently directed at mothers. Recommendations to overcoming these barriers highlight the value of male-specific groups utilising venues where men feel comfortable (Dye, 1998; Berlyn et al., 2008).

The need for a safe and culturally appropriate environment for Aboriginal fathers to share and develop parenting skills and strategies was highlighted by the peer project worker who commented that many young fathers have too much shame to leave their communities and come to something in the town. Research (e.g., Berlyn et al., 2008; Franks, Smith-Lloyd, Newell, & Dietrich, 2001) suggests that a safe environment (such as the bush environment utilised by the Aboriginal Dads Program) could support young Aboriginal fathers "to explore their boundaries, their inner self and the importance of being a father" (Franks et al., 2001, p. 47). Such environments also offer an ideal space within which to facilitate the sharing of stories and the building of relationships.

Berlyn et al. (2008) also suggest that the development of trust between fathers is most powerfully initiated through facilitators sharing stories about their own experiences. Such trust then promotes increased engagement in parenting activities and with parenting services.

### **Mentoring support**

The benefits of mentoring partnerships are discussed within a wide range of literature. It spans human services and social work, education, management, and marries university-based research to community-based practice. Mentoring as a collaborative strengths-based relationship allows for effective learning, which is constructed within the context of interaction with others (Mullen, 2000; Treston, 1999, p. 2). The experiential and reflective nature of mentoring partnerships is seen to be empowering for mentors and participants alike and a significant catalyst for change in the community (Mullen, 2000).

Franks et al. (2001) comment that Aboriginal fathers face complex issues that need to be acknowledged and addressed, and that “working with Aboriginal fathers needs to come from the heart and not only be based on theoretical knowledge”. Through interviews with the local evaluators Males in Black mentors highlighted the importance of passion and commitment for young people when working with mentoring relationships.

Mentoring in an early childhood setting facilitates reciprocal learning and sharing underpinned by support, feedback, and guidance (Pavia, Hawkins, Monroe, & Filima-Demyen, 2003). Within the context of the Aboriginal Dads Program the consistent-over-time mentoring partnership can lead to increased feelings of confidence on the part of the young father (Mullen, 2000; Treston, 1999). The MIB elders provide positive father figures for young Aboriginal men to emulate—especially men who may have lacked this in their own lives. Recent research indicates that such relationships appear to be important for young Indigenous men who want to be positively involved with their children (Manahan & Ball, 2007, p. 45).

MIB mentors are also parents and grandparents. Aboriginal Dads Program participants have the opportunity to connect with each other and receive support from elders. Such support can encourage the widening of support networks and facilitate reconnection with culture, cultural identity, and community (Franks et al., 2001; SNAICC, 2004). The benefit of this type of support has also been shown to be important in normalising parenting challenges and helping fathers work through particular problems and issues (Berlyn et al., 2008).

### **Parenting support**

Neurobiological research (Mustard, 2005; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Sims & Siggers, 2008) indicates that intervention in the early years provides the most effective positive changes for children throughout their years of schooling and into adulthood.

Outcomes for Aboriginal children lag significantly behind those of non-Aboriginal children. High levels of disadvantage in early childhood are associated with poorer outcomes in health, education and life expectancy. Without preschool learning opportunities, Aboriginal students are likely to be behind for their first year of formal schooling (Australian Government, 2009, p. 13)

Aboriginal men and their communities understand that increasing long-term outcomes for Aboriginal communities is dependent on improving conditions for children through parenting programs (Franks et al., 2001). Research suggests that programs which are culturally inclusive and enable the transmission of culture through Aboriginal-specific play and recreation appear to improve parents’ attitudes towards the value of early childhood education (Windisch, Jenvey, & Drysdale, 2003). The Aboriginal Dads Program is unique in that it is simultaneously able to support young men in their parenting role within the context of a men’s group as well as promoting activities which involve the whole family. Family inclusive parenting programs have been identified as important in strengthening traditional cultural values and practices which plays a critical role in healing community disorders (Franks et al., 2001; Manahan & Ball 2007; SNAICC, 2004).

### **Capacity building**

The Aboriginal Dads Program is underpinned by a strengths based approach to working with young fathers, their families, and community (Berlyn et al., 2008; King, 2005). This has been shown to be an effective approach when working with men in early childhood contexts. The Aboriginal Dads Program emerged from a community-identified need which has provided the context for building and increasing both

individual and community capacity. Scougall (2008, p. 82) asserts that Indigenous capacity cannot be created in a vacuum or as an end in itself, and exists only in relation to its social purpose arising from community need.

The Aboriginal Dads Program aims to increase community capacity through empowering young men to take their seat as Indigenous fathers and partners, and as active community members. It has been found that developing Aboriginal capacity is "at least as much about attitudinal and behavioural changes, and the rebuilding of confidence and self belief, as it is about the transfer of knowledge and skills" (Scougall, 2008, p. 82). (See section 12.1.4 for a discussion of changes in attitudes and behaviours of the young fathers.)

The Aboriginal Dads Program encourages young fathers to be actively involved in the early year's development of their children and acquire positive parenting strategies. Increased involvement by fathers has been shown to have significant benefits for children (Fagan & Iglesias, 1999; SNAICC, 2004). Group activities support ongoing personal and skills development (especially in relation to esteem and long-term bonds with children/partners/peers and elders) and also provide a gateway for increased family and community involvement (Franks et al., 2001).

### **Community development activities**

Community development has been recognised as a useful strategy for addressing issues in Aboriginal communities (Campbell, Wunungmurra, & Nyomba, 2005; Ife, 2000). A community development approach is also "strongly supported by Aboriginal leaders and Aboriginal controlled health services and consistent with Aboriginal demands for greater control over their affairs" (Campbell et al., 2005, p.152).

Community development activities provide an ideal arena for the development of leadership skills and for providing pathways into increased participation in local communities. Burchill and Higgins (2005) identify leadership as a critical aspect of Indigenous community generated development and change. Such change contributes to the community as a whole (Campbell et al., 2005).

### **Strong partnerships**

Scougall (2008) observes that few Aboriginal organisations have links with the non-government sector. Research shows that when community groups and services come together and identify gaps in service provision with plans to fill those gaps (such as in the case of the Aboriginal Dads Program) these local choices are more likely to be sustained (Broadhead & Armistead, 2007).

In rural areas links between groups and services are often informal and establish themselves over time (Baulderstone, Tually, Cutler, & Geuenich, 2009). Research shows that these links facilitate trust and positive networking which lead to improved quality of early childhood resources and more sustainable service provision (Selden, Sowa, & Sandfort, 2006; Broadhead & Armistead, 2007).

Collaborative partnerships increase the likelihood of workers and participants remaining connected to the vision of the activity (Selden et al., 2006; Broadhead & Armistead, 2007, p. 50). Interagency collaborative relationships have also been found to have a direct positive impact upon parents' and families' experiences of early childhood learning and development, as well as significantly impacting upon school readiness (Selden et al., 2006, p. 421).

Collaborative partnerships also facilitate co-learning between workers (and communities) as both are simultaneously drawing on and extending their community knowledge (Broadhead & Armistead, 2007, p. 50).

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## **Outcomes**

As a result of the MIB/Aboriginal Dads Program mentoring partnership practice a range of outcomes for the young fathers, their children and families have been observed. These include young Aboriginal fathers:

- getting involved with their children;
- taking on roles of responsibility and leadership;
- learning to be a good dad;
- demonstrating changes in attitude leading to changes in lifestyle;
- improved participation in playgroups and preschool by Aboriginal children;
- improved nutrition in the home;
- families getting out and getting involved in the local community; and
- giving back to the community through a range of community development activities.

The following outcomes are supported by a range of (predominantly qualitative) data collected over the period 2007–2009. Two site visits to Port Augusta were undertaken and interviews were conducted with the Aboriginal Dads Program peer worker, three Males in Black members, and a focus group with Aboriginal Dads Program participants and their female partners. In addition, interviews were conducted with the Facilitating Partner, workers from the Early Years Parenting Centre, the local Magistrate, and other locally based service providers. Additional data was gathered through participant observation, and from quarterly reports, Facilitating Partner Progress Reports, and Early Years Parenting Centre data.

As a result of the Aboriginal Dads Program a range of outcomes were achieved in practice for the young fathers, their children, families and the broader community.

### 12.1 Outcomes for the dads

Between 10 and 15 young fathers participate in the Aboriginal Dads Program on a regular basis. They work closely with members of Males in Black who provide intensive mentoring support.

#### 12.1.1 Getting involved with the kids

The 10 to 15 young fathers who are attending Aboriginal Dads Program activities are finding new ways of being with their children. As a result of this project young Aboriginal fathers are getting involved with their children's learning and development.

Getting the young men involved has not always been easy because of reluctance to change routines, and reticence in going somewhere new. However, being able to offer transport, as well as understanding and encouragement from the project worker and other young fathers has supported increased engagement.

The thing is you just gotta get out there. You've got to let them [young dads] know that there is no point just doing nothing, sometimes they don't want to hear it but it's what's right. It's best to start off somewhere because people are finding it hard [to be a father]. (ADP2)

The Aboriginal Dads Program has encouraged young men to come into the Early Years Parenting Centre and begin to develop a sense of ownership. Over the period of eighteen months the number of young Aboriginal fathers using the centre has increased to between 8 and 10 on a weekly basis. In addition the young dads have been instrumental in the development and delivery of the Warla Time playgroup (see below), Nunga Tucker Time and the Family Fun Day crèche's. The Early Years Parenting Centre provides a stimulating environment for the children and is especially suitable as a venue for fathers who are separated from their partners to have contact with their children.

We bring them here and introduce them to the learning centre. In the beginning most of them were with shame and like "what's going on here" ... some were keen and the others were asking "what am I getting myself into?" (ADP1)

Some of them were scared ... This centre is run and occupied by a lot of other families and there are so many different things going on here. We are using the building to show them and encourage them that this is "not a shame job" that it is for you and your young ones and a few of your mates. (ADP1)

Young Aboriginal Dads Program members promoted and along with the peer project worker, now facilitate the weekly Warla Time playgroup. This playgroup is for young fathers and their children aged 0–12 months. Warla Time is located at the Early Years Parenting Centre and has contributed to promoting the importance of fathers' relationships with their toddlers and young children.

#### 12.1.2 Being responsible

Through the Aboriginal Dads Program young fathers are engaging with their children in play-based learning. For many young men alcohol has featured strongly in their lives and "in the past alcohol had a big influence in dads not engaging with their children" (MIB1). The Aboriginal Dads Program provides activities that enable men and their children to come together in an alcohol-free environment. As a result young fathers are finding ways to spend time with their partner and children.

What I see is that now in everyday activities you tend to see everyone together. Before you only saw the mums because the dads were at the pub with their mates. Now you see all the family together. (ADPW2)

One young father comments on the impact of the Aboriginal Dads Program activities on parent–child relationships:

At the first family camp at Wilmington there were about six young dads and this was the first time they'd done this. Through the camp they strengthened their relationships with their kids. (ADPW2)

Anecdotal evidence (from Early Years Parenting Centre staff members, MIB mentors, and the young women partners) suggests that the young men are beginning to assume their role as parents and begin to contribute more equally in their partnerships.

It was an alcohol free weekend and this really opened their eyes. One of the dads cooked and the women just sat back. It really helped the young fathers to take ownership in being the father figure of the family. (Young woman partner ADPW1)

It's amazing to see dads I've grown up with and never seen them even in the same room with their wives and kids and now they are playing with their kids and going away on camps with them and their families. (MIB3)

Supporting the young dads to get involved and share parenting responsibilities with their partners has involved guidance from the MIB members as well as challenges from within the Aboriginal Dads Program group.

You just have to give them things to tackle and then they do it. (ADPW1)

As a result the young dads are asking for more family times and other young dads are eager to get involved in the Aboriginal Dads Program. MIB mentors report that news of the Aboriginal Dads Program is spreading via word of mouth and that they currently have about eight young men to visit and talk to about the Aboriginal Dads Program.

### *12.1.3 Being a "good dad"*

Young fathers participating in the Aboriginal Dads Program are developing effective parenting skills and learning that there are different ways of being a "good dad". Two MIB mentors discussed how the Aboriginal Dads Program is helping to challenge more traditional views of parenting where the fathers were not involved with children in their early years.

Now we see the public display of parenting. (ADPW2)

MIB mentors and the Aboriginal Dads Program workers commented on the role of the Early Years Parenting Centre in supporting young men to be good dads.

It provides a good foundation for us to get them here first and then we talk to them. The ADP and the EYPC help provide positive pathways for parenting. (ADPW2)

For example, young men separated from their partners are now spending quality time with their children at the Early Years Parenting Centre, after a period of non-involvement with these children. Young fathers in the Aboriginal Dads Program support each other in being a "good dad". Early Years Parenting Centre staff, MIB mentors and the peer worker reported that now the young dads are:

- getting involved with their children;
- getting down on the ground and playing with their children;
- sharing parenting responsibilities with their young partners;
- showing increased awareness of the consequences of their behaviours and actions; and
- getting out into the community so that their children are exposed to different experiences and meet other children.

There was a person in the program and they were really struggling. They had no idea about the teething process or the diapers or anything. Now they are out and looking for work. Before they were just hibernating, before they would send their family to town but he wouldn't go and stock up on food and baby things but now he is out doing things and stocking up on baby things. (ADPW1)

Local service providers and MIB members report increased visibility of young Aboriginal men and their children in the community.

Now you see the young fellas pushing prams everyday. (MIB2)

For the young fathers the ADP has been an opportunity to learn that parenting is “men’s business” too.

[The peer worker] introduced me to the program and then we learnt to look after the kids as well as the girls. (Young father ADP2)

#### *12.1.4 Change in attitude, change in lifestyle*

Staff at the Early Years Parenting Centre and workers from other service providers (e.g., health) report that involvement in the Aboriginal Dads Program is helping young fathers to make changes to their thinking and daily routines and encouraging others to do likewise:

Their attitude has changed. Before, in their old life, week by week they would just talk about the next party, now they are getting licences and now they are talking like a foreign person. They have plans for their future and you can have a good conversation with them whereas before you couldn’t. (MIB3)

ADP and MIB have helped [young father] turn his life around and he’s started realising that he has a family. Now he’s inspiring a lot of others (Service provider)

MIB members report that young men who previously would have been in bed until early afternoon each day were up at the crack of dawn on the camps and are now approaching MIB members in the street and asking about more activities for young fathers and their families.

Aboriginal Dads Program and MIB supported 19 young men to develop resumes. A group trip was then organised to visit the mines in Roxby Downs and meet with HR managers. All young men secured employment and will receive mentoring support from MIB members. For those young men who are fathers, Aboriginal Dads Program is working with them to help them understand how fly-in fly-out employment will impact on their children and partners, and how they can continue to be good parents with this lifestyle change.

#### *12.1.5 Accessing services and supports*

Early Years Parenting Centre staff and the MIB mentors report that young fathers involved with the Aboriginal Dads Program are frequenting the Early Years Parenting Centre where they access additional resources and supports in the areas of health and wellbeing, and children’s development and learning.

Now there is a counsellor here every couple of days. We talk with them [the young dads] and say “well here it is this resource is available to you”. (ADP1)

As a result young fathers have demonstrated increased engagement with allied health professionals as well as participating in early childhood activities at the Early Years Parenting Centre.

The Aboriginal Dads Program has also facilitated programs for young dads in the areas of gambling awareness, suicide prevention, and managing depression. Early anecdotal evidence suggests that involvement with the Aboriginal Dads Program may be having a positive impact on young fathers’ mental health. MIB members say that there appear to be fewer suicides by fathers who have lost access to their children.

Aboriginal Dads Program both receives referrals (through the Early Years Parenting Centre and through MIB mentors who work across most services in the region) and refers young families to other community based services and supports.

## **12.2 Outcomes for the children**

The Aboriginal Dads Program has contributed to an increase in the number of Aboriginal children participating in playgroups and preschool. Young dads and their families are utilising existing programs at the Early Years Parenting Centre such as the Nunga Yakarti playgroup. About 4–8 dads regularly attend the playgroups and others are encouraged to attend as assistants. Aboriginal Dads Program members have been pivotal in the “Dad’s and Tji Tji’s Playgroup” as well as initiating the “Warla Time Baby Playgroup”. The latter is a partnership activity between the Early Years Parenting Centre and the Aboriginal Dads Program. Approximately 30

Aboriginal children participate weekly across these three playgroups. The Aboriginal Dads Program bus provides transport for those who need it.

Today I went to do the picking up and all the kids were itching to get on the bus. (MIB3)

Children are benefiting in numerous ways from increased engagement in play based learning with their parents and the opportunity to socialise with other children.

Now there are opportunities for kids to be in playgroup and kindy. Otherwise they would never have had that. (MIB2)

It was amazing watching the parents with them; they spent hours and hours playing. (MIB3)

Excursions to the community library are instilling an appreciation of books and reading for both parents and children. Changes are being noticed by service providers out in the community:

The other day when I was in the supermarket I saw a group of little kids hanging out in the book aisle. I've never seen this before. Usually they would all be in the toy section. (MIB3)

MIB members report that there are also changes for children in the area of food and nutrition. Through bush camps and community BBQs the Aboriginal Dads Program peer project worker has emphasised the importance of home cooked meals. One MIB member comments that children are now eating meat and salad whereas "normally they would have eaten chips and coke".

## **12.3 Outcomes for the families**

### *12.3.1 Getting out and getting involved*

The Aboriginal Dads Program promotes the importance of parents being involved in playgroups and preschools. Increased numbers of young Aboriginal families are accessing the Early Years Parenting Centre programs and activities (See 12.2 above re: children) and participating in large numbers in community events such as Communities for Children Family Fun Days.<sup>3</sup> Aboriginal Dads Program dads are actively involved in the organisation and facilitation of these events.

Aboriginal Dads Program has initiated weekly family gatherings such as BBQs and picnics. The peer project worker comments that many people are shy and just need encouragement.

It's about getting people out and about in the community. And then they do it for themselves after. The [name of one Aboriginal community] families are very shy, but they come to the BBQs and meet with others. And then they come out of their shell. (ADP1)

There is a lot of interaction between families which is wonderful and you don't usually see a lot of that. (MIB2)

Increasing numbers of Aboriginal families are accessing the council toy library/children's library through combined Aboriginal Dads Program/Early Years Parenting Centre library visits. Workers report that individual families are beginning to visit the library of their own accord. The Aboriginal Dads Program peer worker has also facilitated interaction between the Aboriginal Let's Read project officer and the Aboriginal Dads Program fathers. This has been in the form of Let's Read in attendance at social occasions and play groups. Trips to the toy library and children's library reinforce Let's Read philosophies.

## **12.4 Outcomes for the community**

In addition to leading to outcomes for individual fathers, children and their families there is evidence of broader benefits for Aboriginal communities and their inhabitants in Port Augusta.

### *12.4.1 Giving back*

MIB mentors have worked with the young dads to foster an ethic of giving back to the community. "Giving back" helps foster a culture of volunteerism, and provides opportunities for connecting with other families and elders across different Aboriginal communities in Port Augusta.

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<sup>3</sup> Four Family Fun Days have been held and have included a Cinema Experience, Splash Down, Gladstone Square event, a Magic Show and Kite Flying Day.

#### 12.4.2 *Communities for Children Family Fun Days*

The young Aboriginal Dads have been responsible for facilitating the under 5's playground at Family Fun days. Service providers report that this has been an important way for the young fathers to "showcase their ability to take on the role of care provider and promote fathers' positive interaction with young children to the wider community":

Now they are teaching others about how to care for their kids, empowering others, encouraging them to watch and learn. (Service Provider)

Communities for Children program staff report that large numbers of Aboriginal families are now participating in the various Family Fun Day events. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the active presence of the Aboriginal Dads Program fathers is a factor in the increased participation of young Aboriginal families.

#### 12.4.3 *"Nunga Tucker Time"/Food for the Elderly*

In partnership with the Early Years Parenting Centre and MIB the Aboriginal Dads Program group of participants have developed two community development programs of which they have ownership. The first of these is Nunga Tucker Time. This is a Food for the Elderly program that involves assisting the community through collection and distribution traditional fare such as kangaroo tails to the elderly.

In the late eighties and nineties hunting was one of the main priorities for the aboriginal people, it involved a lot of cultural practices and in turn created a lot of trust between people ... these events have died out and [now] the food providing program is slowly bringing these events back to the community. (Aboriginal Elder)

This Nunga Tucker Time group is allowing the strength and knowledge of Aboriginal elders to filter back through to younger members of the community. Links with community elders and family are strengthened through this project.

... as young Aboriginal men we try to do things for our people ... we give the meat to the old people. We're not worrying about ourselves. We are trying to look after them, do something for them. (ADP1)

It's about the young people working together so they can give something back to the community. (MIB3)

#### 12.4.4 *"Blackyard Blitz!"*

The second Aboriginal Dads Program community support activity is Blackyard Blitz. A group of 8–12 Aboriginal Dads Program participants assist others in the community who find it difficult to maintain their yards. In addition to yard maintenance they advise families on how to create child-friendly environments at home. This group usually finish designated workdays with a family BBQ, which provides opportunities for the families to socialise together and appreciate the fruits of a hard days work. Outcomes of this project have included positive team building, skills development and role modelling to others the benefits of work together within your community to support each other. Blackyard Blitz has also provided an opportunity for other young fathers not yet engaged with Aboriginal Dads Program to become involved.

The Aboriginal Dads Program has led to significant changes for young Aboriginal fathers, and their families. There is also evidence to support positive change for the broader community. Key outcomes have included:

- increased engagement by young Aboriginal fathers with their children's learning and development;
- increased utilisation and development of preschool activities;
- increased capacity and interest of young men to assume their roles as parent and partner;
- increased active involvement of young men in local community development activities;
- reconnection with cultural traditions and values; and
- increased social capital.

The Aboriginal Dads Program has developed local evidence which supports the need for a commitment to ongoing resourcing/funding so that young Aboriginal men will continue to be supported in having a strong and positive role in the lives of their children, partners and communities. This evaluation of the Aboriginal Dads Program

also highlights the effectiveness of the strengths-based mentoring approach of the community partner, Males in Black, and the value of their extensive support network and resource base.

We are not only going there for our kids but it's good for us too and good for our kids. (ADP2)

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## Project evaluations

Draft evaluation currently in progress

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## Project related publications

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