

Recent parenting reports

As part of a continuing research effort in the field of child abuse prevention and parenting education, reports of two research studies have recently been published by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

The reports were launched on 26 February 1999 at a meeting of the National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse in Hobart by the Hon. Warren Truss, Minister for Community Services.

The first study looks at the relationship between parents and their adolescent children, and the second at men and the role of fatherhood.

Growing up in Australia

The role of parents in promoting positive adolescent development

Preventative family-based programs in Australia are receiving greater attention as interventions to prevent child abuse and neglect. This has led to increased levels of funding for programs and services targeting parents. While there has been a focus upon parenting young children, parenting of adolescents has largely been ignored.

The aim of the *Adolescents in Families Project*, by consultants Margarita Frederico, Cathy Davis and James Barber, was to explore elements of parenting of adolescents with the purpose of informing the development of new and existing policies and programs which address the needs of parents and their adolescent children. It was prompted by recognition that although there are many studies dealing with the problems of parenting adolescents, there has been less focus upon how parents support their adolescent child to develop resilience and competence in their transition from childhood to adulthood. In addition, it was thought important to hear what Australian adolescents and their parents say are those components of the parenting relationship which facilitate this transition.

The report commences with a review of literature on the adolescent stage of the life cycle, the impact of the transition to adolescence on family relationship, the development of resilience, competence and coping in adolescence, and parenting adolescents. The report then describes a secondary data analysis of three existing data sets, each of which had surveyed parents and young people in relation to issues concerning adolescents, and the findings of this analysis. The findings of a national telephone survey of a random sample of 750 parents and adolescents and focus groups which were held with parents and adolescents in



Picture: Rhonda Milner

both rural and urban areas are then presented and discussed along with relevant information obtained from key participants. The report concludes with a discussion of the findings and consideration of implications for policy. A principle underlying the selection of the research process was to

ensure that young people and their parents could provide direct input into the research questions.

The study provided the opportunity to ask parents and adolescents their views on the Australian experience of parenting adolescents and to hear from them what they find supportive in the relationship. As the child moves through adolescence their relationship with their parents needs to change, and parents and young people at times may need assistance to negotiate this change.

The report recognises that the period of adolescence can be a time of stress for families, yet the majority of families find a way to negotiate this stage and provide support to their family members. In understanding what is perceived as positive in the relationship, the study seeks to provide knowledge to inform policies and programs.



The reports *Growing Up in Australia* and *Fitting Fathers into Families* were launched on 26 February 1999 at a meeting of the National Council for the Prevention of Child Abuse in Hobart by the Hon. Warren Truss, Minister for Community Services, pictured here with the Chairman of the Council, Professor Kim Oates (left).

Key findings

The overwhelming majority of Australian adolescents are happy and well adjusted, and generally speaking their parents are quite involved in the adolescents' lives. Contrary to popular stereotypes conflict is not endemic in homes containing adolescents.

- The vast majority of Australian adolescents and parents agree that adolescent children are happy and well adjusted, a finding which is supported by existing literature.
- Key aspects of this relationship are seen to be good communication and a positive family environment.
- Parental support is important for adolescent development as is the quality of the relationship between the young person and their parents.
- Fathers and mothers play a key role in their adolescent child's adjustment. While fathers and mothers are equally influential with their adolescent daughters, fathers are the dominant influence on their adolescent sons.
- Adjustment of adolescents increases with age.
- At least one parent frequently provides the adolescent child with a wide range of caregiving practices.
- Family members get along well and can rely on each other in times of crises.
- Adolescents prefer parents to use non-intrusive methods of supporting them in times of crisis.
- Australian parents know their adolescent child's friends, and get along well with them.
- While adolescence may be a time of separating from parents and turning towards peers, it appears that adolescent adjustment is strongly influenced by how well parents and the adolescent friends get along.
- Parents and peers of the adolescent influence different aspects of behaviour in relation to substance abuse.
- Parenting education programs should ensure that the quality of relationship between parents and adolescents be focused upon rather than a sole focus on behavioural tasks in parenting.

The future

The Government has committed \$12 million over four years for child abuse prevention with an emphasis on parenting education initiatives. A further \$2 million per year has been allocated

through the family relationships skills training program to educate families in positive parenting and family functioning skills.

This report provides evidence of the importance of parenting education to promote a positive relationship between adolescents and their parents. It highlights the role of parents in the development of reliance and competence in their adolescent child and provides information to inform policies and programs to promote and support parent child relationships.

Supporting parents in their task of parenting adolescents, thorough integrated family policies and programs will assist in the development of resilience and competence in Australia's young people and hence strengthen our community.

Implications for policy

A number of conclusions and recommendations are made in the report. It encourages the development of policies and programs which recognise the diversity and complex interrelationship of factors which impact upon parents, adolescents and the parenting relationship. Recognition of this complexity demands an integrated approach to policies and programs which can provide support to families in undertaking the important role of raising adolescents and provides ready access to resources when parents or young people face difficulties in carrying out this role.

- A more positive and more realistic image of Australian adolescents and their families should be promoted.
- It should be recognised that parenting is a community concern and adolescents and their parents need policies and programs which support them in all aspects of their tasks.
- The importance of the parents' role in promoting resilience and competence in adolescents should be recognised and supported through positive family policies.
- Policies should be developed to promote the strengthening of families via a variety of programs to help parents and adolescents successfully negotiate their tasks.
- Support to parents and adolescents should be provided through integrated family related policies and programs. Such policies and programs should include all parents and young people as well as appropriate interventions when there is a breakdown of this relationship and/or the young person is at risk.



Parents' advice to other parents

listen
love them for who they are
boost their self-esteem
show that you care
give affection
model the behaviour you expect of them
do things together
give advice but don't force it on the adolescent



Adolescents' advice to parents

listen
trust
be more understanding
be open to talk rather than pushing ideas
let you make mistakes
spend time with you
show they care
parents should understand that people mature
understand that adolescence is a time to be a child and an adult



Professionals/ service providers' advice to parents

listen
communicate with the adolescent
understand and respond to the adolescent's feelings
don't try to control the young person
set limits but be able to negotiate using positive concern
hold a positive view of the young person
recognise that the need for rebellion is a need for difference, rather than an attack on parents



Adolescents' advice to other adolescents

communicate with your parents
listen to your parents
be understanding of your parents needs
try to see their side of the story

- Support to troubled youth should be provided by specific policies which provide resources to promote a more effective parent-adolescent relationship and to mediate against the impact of a lack of parenting support where adequate parenting support cannot be accessed.

- Parenting education should be made accessible to all parents. Such education needs to take into account cultural and other contextual influences and highlight the development of a positive family environment. It should be provided

through a range of approaches, acknowledging the particular needs and characteristics of parents and adolescents.

- Further research should be undertaken to enhance knowledge of the parents' role in promoting resilience

and competence in young people. Specific attention should be given to promote understanding through research of the particular challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and their families.

Fitting fathers into families

Men and the fatherhood role in contemporary Australia

The *Men's Role in Parenting Project* looks at the particular role of fathers and provides the basis for recommendations for specific strategies to address the needs of men and facilitate the development of more effective parenting. The primary responsibility for the study was shared by Associate Professor Graeme Russell and Professor Lesley Barclay, and the project managed by Macquarie Research Ltd. As with the *Adolescents in Families Project*, it is also funded by the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services.

The project provides a significant and timely opportunity to review, investigate and provide up-to-date information and analyses on men's role as parents. Major objectives of the project were as follows.

- to identify what men see as the important aspects of their role as parents, what their needs are and what their views are about how their needs could or should be met;
- to describe the diversity and level of involvement men have in parenting;
- to identify how the perception of men's involvement as parents held by their partners, children, professionals and family service workers matches the views of men and the reality of their involvement;
- to increase our understanding of the ways in which men learn their parenting;
- to identify what programs or services already exist for men as parents;
- to identify the mediums that are likely to be most effective in working with men on their parenting.

This project constructs a view of contemporary fatherhood from multiple perspectives through: a telephone survey of a random sample of 1000 fathers; a detailed overview of key programs and services for fathers; a review of fatherhood by professionals and service providers; an overview of current research knowledge and thinking about men as parents; and analysis of

how contemporary fatherhood is constructed and perceived by children.

The report provides a basis for recommendations for specific strategies to address the needs of fathers and facilitate the development of more effective parenting.

Key findings

Fathers have a significant impact on child development outcomes for both boys and girls, especially for self-esteem, emotional wellbeing, capacity to love and be loved, and ability to participate in society. Being a father is challenging yet relatively unsupported in contemporary Australia. This means that policy frameworks and programs are insufficient. While there is increased pressure and expectations for men to contribute more to families, increased working hours prevent this.

- Despite changing definitions of parenthood in society, the role of the father remains stereotypically gendered.
- A significant number of fathers reported experiencing high stress

and insufficient time for family, and strongly believed that the major barrier to being an effective parent was paid work.

- Few differences are evident in the average time fathers spent with their children in 1998 in comparison with 1983.
- Men are often alienated by the way in which information is presented to them. Men's perceptions and expectations are changing, particularly of relationships and their role as fathers.
- There has been an emerging commitment over the last decade to improve service provision for men as fathers. Insufficient and inconsistent funding precludes this commitment being realised.
- A policy framework grounded in research evidence needs to be developed. This could facilitate consistent funding commitment and increased social and community awareness of the challenges men face in their role as parents within changing patterns of male and female employment.



Picture: Double Jay Graphic Design

- A number of innovative programs and services have been developed for fathers within diverse settings.

The future

The Government has committed \$12 million over four years for child abuse prevention with an emphasis on parenting education initiatives. In addition, \$6 million over four years has been allocated for family relationship support services for men, including fathers. This report provides a framework to inform and guide policy makers and practitioners who are developing or implementing services for men as fathers.

By strengthening men in their role as parents and providing support at critical stages of parenting, the quality of family life in Australia could be improved. Enhancing the capacities of institutions and social systems to engage with men as fathers is necessary to enable them to increase their confidence and competence. The employment responsibilities of men and women need rethinking to balance paid work and family commitments for men.

Implications for policy

A number of conclusions and recommendations are made in the report.

- Develop a coherent multisectoral policy framework to address the needs of men as fathers.
- Encourage health, welfare and employment sectors to be proactive in addressing fatherhood issues.
- Budget implications of policies need to be addressed at local, Commonwealth and State level.

Families

- Gendered nature of fatherhood persists despite the public rhetoric of shared parenting.
- A better balance must be achieved between paid employment and parenting time.
- Continued emotional closeness for men with children as they mature needs to be facilitated.

Professionals

- Many professionals hold unduly negative views of men as fathers.
- Improved evaluation and reporting strategies for men's programs should be developed.

Program providers

- Father-inclusive approaches in agencies should be expanded.



Fatherhood – as experienced by men

Fathers work an average of 47 hours per week and 33 per cent reported working over 50 hours per week.

A significant number of fathers experienced high levels of stress and insufficient time for family, and believed strongly that the major barrier to being an effective parent was commitment to paid work.

Sixty-eight per cent of fathers said they did not spend enough time with their children.

Few differences are evident in the average time fathers spent with their children in 1998 in comparison with 1983.

About 50 per cent of fathers report having extremely close, warm and affectionate relationships with both sons and daughters.

Men rated being accessible when children need them and guiding and teaching them as the most important things fathers do.

Men's greatest concern is their changing identity, relationships and future role as fathers.



Fatherhood – as experienced by children

Fatherhood is defined and experienced differently across socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, but is mostly perceived as positive and life enhancing.

Play was the major characteristic in how children constructed fatherhood.

Many children identified their father's role in relation to paid employment, understanding his absence and recognising its economic contribution but regretting how it reduces their contact time.

Older children defined a father's love in attributes and described how love is expressed.

A minority of fathers were perceived by children as unkind or negative in their actions.

Opportunities for intimacy and overt expressions of love and affection appear to diminish as children grow older.

Stereotypical male roles persist in households and the type of relationship most children have with their fathers.



Professionals' views

The majority of professionals/service providers believe that mothers and fathers should share parenting tasks/activities equally.

Professionals consider fathers to have a significant impact on development outcomes for both boys and girls.

Forty-eight per cent of professionals believed that up to 24 per cent of fathers physically abused their children and 31 per cent believed the same number sexually abused their children.

Strong consistency exists in professionals' and fathers' views of the importance of fathers to children.

Professionals rated employment as the greatest barrier for men's involvement as fathers.

Professionals identified the top priority for men as parents as: greater confidence and skills, support and affirmation from other fathers, and a more positive attitude to being involved with children and achieving a better work-life balance.



Program providers' views

Commitment is within agencies to improve services for men and fathers.

The development of father-inclusive content and processes is emerging within organisations.

New, effective strategies, techniques and working principles are beginning to engage men as fathers.

Minimal and unstable levels of funding are available for services or programs that include fathers.

Insufficient research and program evaluations are occurring to assess or improve programs addressing the needs of fathers.

Interagency collaboration and alliances are improving services and access for fathers in some parts of Australia, through pooling of resources and expertise.

Diverse models of practice are emerging. These models vary considerably in their orientation and sophistication.

- Innovative strategies developed in programs that engage and work effectively with men should be broadly adopted.
- Stable funding for programs that meet men's needs and demonstrate effectiveness should be assured.

Further information: Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, Family Relationships Branch. Phone: (02) 6289 7530 or (02) 6244 7788.