REVIEW ARTICLE

Enhancing Father Engagement in Parenting Programs: Translating Research into Practice Recommendations

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Objective: Given the increasing research and practice interest in father engagement, this article aimed to develop a clinical narrative integrating the extant research literature to distil key practice recommendations for enhancing father engagement in parenting interventions for child wellbeing.

Method: A narrative review of research on father engagement in interventions for child wellbeing was conducted, to identify and distil evidence-based policies and practices to enhance father engagement for practitioners and organisations.

Results: Six broad policy and practice recommendations are provided that pertain to: engaging the parenting team, avoiding a father deficit model, increasing father awareness of parenting interventions, ensuring father-inclusive program content and delivery, increasing organisational support for father-inclusive practice, and increasing professional father engagement training.

Conclusion: This review provides practitioners with guidelines for enhancing father engagement based on the available research. It also provides recommendations for further research regarding the effectiveness of strategies to enhance father engagement.

Key words: child mental health; father involvement; parental engagement; parenting; parenting program.

Evidence-based parenting interventions have been shown to have immediate and long-term positive effects on child wellbeing (Nores & Barnett, 2010). However, the active involvement of both parents is the key to the success of these interventions (Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008). Yet evidence indicates that the participation levels of fathers[1] in a diverse range of parenting interventions—from child welfare services to targeted interventions for childhood mental health disorders and general psychoeducation programs—are often low (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Therefore, an important challenge for practitioners and service providers is to promote father engagement in order to optimise the benefits of parenting interventions for child

wellbeing. This paper aims to identify key practice recommendations to increase father engagement in parenting programs.

There have been increasing contributions to understanding father engagement in parenting interventions from diverse fields including paediatrics, psychology, social work, and social policy. However, the research conducted to date remains limited in quality and quantity (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Few randomised controlled trials (RCTs), the gold standard in research design, have been conducted (for exceptions, see Chacko, Fabiano, Doctoroff, & Forston, 2018; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009; Frank, Keown, & Sanders, 2015). Instead, the father engagement literature tends to be dominated by descriptive research involving narrative reviews (e.g., Maxwell, Scourfield, Featherstone, Holland, & Tolman, 2012; Tiano & McNeil, 2005), reports from expert working groups (e.g., FaHCSIA, 2009; Fletcher, May, St George, Stoker, & Oshan, 2014; King et al., 2014), or qualitative research with fathers or practitioners (e.g., Anderson, Kohler, & Letiecq, 2002; Gershy & Omer, 2017). While caution is needed regarding the generalisability of this research, taken together these studies contribute to an emerging understanding of potentially effective strategies for father-inclusive practice.

Alongside the growing qualitative research base, there are two noteworthy systematic reviews on father engagement in

parenting interventions. Lundahl et al. (2008) conducted a meta-analysis of 26 studies and found significantly more positive changes in child behaviour and desirable parenting practices for parenting programs that involved both fathers and mothers, compared with mother-only programs. However, this review did not provide recommendations regarding how to increase father involvement.

More recently, Panter-Brick et al. (2014) conducted a comprehensive systematic review of findings from 199 studies on father engagement in parenting interventions. This review found that the evidence base was highly fragmented, lacked coherence, and was variable in terms of the quality of evaluations and reported outcomes. The Panter-Brick et al. (2014) review provided some practical recommendations for increasing father involvement such as: engaging with coparents rather than just mothers; involving fathers early on; and, being flexible with timing and location of services. However the emphasis of this systematic review was weighted towards a thorough review and a discussion of the state of evidence of father engagement and provision of recommendations for improving research and data regarding father engagement with less attention to implications for practitioners or organisations seeking to increase father engagement in parenting interventions.

Since the publication of these reviews recent research has also yielded some of the first Australian based data on father engagement in parenting programs including a study of father preferences in parenting programs and barriers to their engagement (Tully et al., 2017), as well as a study exploring practitioner competencies in father engagement in parenting programs (Tully et al., 2018).

Therefore, the present paper does not provide a systematic review of the literature or focus further on the improved child and family outcomes resulting from father engagement. Rather, we seek to build on previous reviews, and, include recent findings to distil and translate extant research, into much needed clinical practice recommendations for increasing father engagement in parenting interventions.

In retrieving relevant literature to inform these practical guidelines we used an initial PsychInfo database search in October 2016 including search terms of "Father engagement," "Engaging fathers," "Working with fathers," and "Parenting programs." Following this, a more recent review of published literature was conducted in June 2018 using the same search terms which yielded several more recent publications for consideration. Other articles and publications were retrieved using a hand search and a bibliographic review of key articles retrieved in the database search including Panter-Brick et al.'s (2014) paper. From the database and hand searches, articles were included if they examined engagement of fathers in *services, programs, treatments, or interventions* for their children. Articles were excluded if they addressed father engagement with children more generally (i.e., not in the context of an intervention/treatment, service, or program) or if they were not published in peer review journals (i.e., dissertations and book chapters). Finally, published reports on father engagement were also considered in reviewing literature for these guidelines. These reports included research commissioned by Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) (Fletcher et al., 2014)—a report providing a review of evidence

with the aim of setting out knowledge and implementation support for engaging fathers in services for children; and research commissioned by The Department of Families, Housing, Community Services, and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) (FaHCSIA, 2009)—which provided an introductory guide for practitioners to use as a resource to engage men and their families. This guide was developed as an outcome from the 2007 National Men and Family Relationships Forum and drew on research as well as feedback from workshop participants. A further published report included was produced by Men's Health Information and Resource Centre, University of Western Sydney, with funding from NSW Ministry of Health and was developed by a group of expert practitioners who are noted to have drawn on their experience and contacts to present a resource kit primarily targeting other practitioners working with fathers (King et al., 2014). The inclusion of such published reports was in part due to limited empirical research data on father engagement in parenting programs as noted by previous reviews but also in recognition that such reports also yield potentially important practice-based evidence recommendations alongside summative literature reviews. This paper does not seek to systematically review each paper retrieved in the above described searches but rather to integrate findings into a narrative targeting practitioners and organisations working with families to provide parenting programs and highlights practical recommendations.

Engaging Fathers as Part of the Parenting Team

Research suggests that having both parents—the core parenting team—engaged in parenting programs leads to enhanced parent and child outcomes (Lundahl et al., 2008). There are three possible mechanisms through which engaging the core parenting team increases intervention effectiveness. First, the intervention may have a positive impact on co-parenting, including the extent to which parents support each other's parenting efforts, are aligned and consistent in their parenting behaviour, and manage conflict regarding child rearing (Casey et al., 2017; Zemp, Milek, Cummings, Cina, & Bodenmann, 2016). Second, it provides an opportunity to address the quality of the couple relationship, which has also been shown to impact family functioning and child wellbeing (Harold, Acquah, Sellers, & Chowdry, 2016). Third, it provides an opportunity to address father-specific, along with mother-specific, protective, and risk factors for child outcomes. Fathers' positive and dysfunctional parenting practices have been shown to be as much of a protective/risk factor for child outcomes as mothers' parenting practices (Flouri, 2005).

There is some evidence to suggest that co-parent programs are more effective than father-only programs. In one RCT, families were randomised to a co-parent program, a father-only program, or a control group (Cowan et al., 2009). While fathers' engagement with their children increased in both the father-only and co-parent programs relative to the control group, the co-parent group uniquely experienced significant reductions in parenting stress from baseline to post-intervention. Similarly, in a recent review of over 1,300 couples who participated in Supporting Father Involvement Program in the USA, Canada and the UK the researchers highlight that while

father only programs contribute to increased father involvement and parenting effectiveness, when both parents were involved, the family based programs were most successful (Pruett, Pruett, Cowan, & Cowan, 2017b). Furthermore, in a qualitative evaluation of therapy processes associated with improved father engagement it was argued that the engagement of fathers in the therapeutic process in behaviour parent training programs influenced the ability of both parents to benefit from the program and implement the program strategies (Gershy & Omer, 2017).

Indeed, other studies have found potential limitations of father-only programs, such as a lack of generalisation of positive intervention outcomes to non-participating mothers (Cowan et al., 2009; Fabiano et al., 2012; Spaulding, Grossman, & Wallace, 2009). Research also suggests that fathers may be more willing to engage in parenting programs with their partners rather than in father-only programs (Fletcher et al., 2014; Salinas, Smith, & Armstrong, 2011). With one study of a fathers only program revealing that in post-treatment focus group interviews some fathers noted they would have preferred to have the child's mother more involved in the parenting program directed at fathers only (Chacko et al., 2018).

Together, these studies suggest potential limitations to father-only groups, while engaging the core parenting team may be both preferable for fathers and more effective.

Engaging the parenting team also allows information to be obtained from both parents. In many instances, information (e.g., socio-demographic information, clinical interview, and questionnaires) is gathered only from a child's mother, and this not only limits the information obtained, but it also means that services are unable to track outcomes for fathers, along with raising the risk of marginalising fathers (Fabiano, 2007). Practitioners and organisations should collect family information, questionnaire data, and contact details from both parents to obtain more comprehensive information about the family and involve the core parenting team.

It is essential to recognise that a one-size-fits-all approach is unlikely to meet the needs of all fathers. Practitioners should be aware that every family structure is different, and it may take time to identify who forms part of the core parenting team. In some instances, such as where there is interparental conflict, it may also be appropriate to work with parents in separate sessions. Furthermore, practitioners should be aware that there may be circumstances (e.g., domestic and family violence) in which the appropriateness of engaging the father (or the mother) should be explored with the referring parent. Nonetheless, where possible, engaging the parenting team is likely to result in better outcomes for children.

Avoiding a Deficit Model of Fathering

Research and expert clinical consensus suggest that a father deficit model is a threat to father engagement in parenting interventions. Panter-Brick et al. (2014) identified that policy frameworks for family-based interventions often assume a deficit model whereby fathers are regarded as deficient in their skills and knowledge about child health and development. Staff attitudes and behaviour towards fathers—from reception staff through to practitioners—can also perpetuate a father deficit model and affect the tone of father engagement (Pfitzner, Humphreys, & Hegarty, 2015). For example, staff have been found to hold low expectations of the paternal role (Ewart-Boyle, Manktelow, & McColgan, 2015) and negative beliefs about fathers' commitment and interest (Storhaug, 2013).

Fathers themselves have called for a less critical view of their parenting roles. Negative assumptions made by staff are a commonly reported concern for fathers and a potential barrier to their engagement (Campbell, Howard, Rayford, & Gordon, 2015). In focus group research, fathers have highlighted the importance of not being made to feel as if they are doing a bad job when practitioners seek to engage them in parenting programs (Frank, Keown, Dittman, & Sanders, 2015). Moreover, a qualitative review of the literature on fathers' experiences in engaging with the child welfare system found that fathers desired respect, trust, to be heard, and not judged (Campbell et al., 2015).

However, it is important to note that not all research suggests that practitioners hold negative beliefs about father engagement. In a recent study conducted by Tully, et al. (2018), over 200 practitioners working with families in Australia to deliver parenting interventions were surveyed about father engagement. The overwhelming majority of practitioners thought father participation was extremely or very important in treatment of child issues (Tully, et al., 2018). It is possible that fathers may be sensitive to negative stereotypes of their roles and contributions to parenting even in the absence of expressed negative attitudes within a service. Salari and Filus (2017) found that fathers with higher perceived self-efficacy were more likely to express an intention to participate in a universal parenting program than those with lower perceived self-efficacy, indicating that fathers' negative views of themselves as parents may impede their attendance, participation and enactment of parenting programs.

Thus, a strengths-based approach that focusses on father competencies, rather than a deficit model of fathering, is likely to be important for father-inclusive practice (Grief, Finney, Greene-Joyner, Minor, & Stitt, 2007). To achieve this approach, it is important that positive representations of fathers' roles and contributions are clearly communicated by those delivering parenting programs. Other researchers have recommended that a strength-based approach (likely to improve father engagement) may be achieved by remaining child rather than parent focused by structuring program objectives around functional child outcomes such as language skills or reading rather than on a need to "fix" parenting deficits (Chacko et al., 2018). While others have recommended focusing both on child wellbeing and on "what kind of parent" a father wants to be as a way of fostering a strengths-based approach to engaging fathers in parenting interventions (Pruett, Pruett, Cowan, & Cowan, 2017a).

Furthermore, recognition and acknowledgement that both fathers and mothers are experts in their own lives is critical (Fletcher & St George, 2010). Qualitative research has indicated that assuming a "symmetric and non-judgemental" approach to both parents, where both parents' importance is emphasised forms an essential part of increasing engagement (Gershy & Omer, 2017, p. 52). Rather than imposing a view of fathers' deficits, it may be useful to work with fathers to understand

their specific strengths and needs in order to enhance engagement (Duggan et al., 2000). Collaboratively identifying key areas for skill-building with fathers may assist them to maintain an involved role with their children and increase their capacity to parent effectively (Gordon, Oliveros, Hawes, Iwamoto, & Rayford, 2012).

Increasing Awareness of Parenting Interventions for Fathers

Research has consistently found that fathers have low levels of awareness about parenting interventions. A community survey of 1,000 Australian fathers found one in six were not aware that parenting programs existed, and the same proportion did not know where to go to participate (Tully et al., 2017). Similarly, in a community survey of 161 fathers in New Zealand, only 13% of fathers had heard of at least one of the common parenting programs (Frank, Keown, Dittman, et al., 2015). While there is a clear need to provide fathers with appropriate information about parenting programs, there is little consensus about the most effective method for recruiting fathers. Some researchers champion the importance of word-of-mouth recruitment or referrals from trusted sources (Stahlschmidt, Threlfall, Seay, Lewis, & Kohl, 2013). Others emphasise the need to provide information about parenting interventions in community locations frequented by fathers, such as workplaces, schools, or sporting facilities (Anderson et al., 2002; FaHCSIA, 2009; King et al., 2014; Pruett et al., 2017a). Practitioners and services therefore may be best advised to take a multilevel approach to promoting parenting interventions to fathers (Stahlschmidt et al., 2013) and should trial and evaluate the success of different strategies over time (FaHCSIA, 2009).

Fathers have also reported that a lack of knowledge about program content and effectiveness is a key barrier to participation (Tully et al., 2017). Surveys have shown that fathers rate the following factors as most important in their decision to participate in parenting interventions: understanding what is involved, knowing the facilitator is trained, knowing the program has evidence to support its effectiveness, and ensuring the program is held at a convenient location (Frank, Keown, Dittman, et al., 2015; Sanders, Haslam, Calam, Southwell, & Stallman, 2011; Tully et al., 2017). Thus, efforts to increase the awareness of parenting programs should emphasise the importance of father involvement and include information about the program's effectiveness, content, and accessibility, as this information may enhance father engagement.

Ensuring Father-inclusive Content and Delivery of Parenting Interventions

Research suggests that the content and delivery of parenting programs may negatively affect paternal engagement if it is too maternally focused, does not address the needs of both parents, and/or is not accessible to fathers (Fabiano, 2007; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Historically, the content and delivery of many programs has been derived chiefly from studies of mothers and their children (Fabiano, 2007; Fletcher, Freeman, & Matthey, 2011; Tiano & McNeil, 2005). Fathers have reported dissatisfaction if program content and delivery is too maternally focused

(Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Ensuring that program content and delivery is relevant for both fathers and mothers is an important clinical consideration for not only promoting father attendance rates, but also for enhancing participation and enactment of parenting strategies (Fabiano, 2007).

Research on fathers' preferences for program content suggests an interest in topics broadly related to enhancing children's social competence, as well as practical parenting skills. In one survey, fathers indicated that their top three preferences for supplementary topics were dealing with bullying, social skills development, and problem-solving without aggression (Tully et al., 2017). Similarly, Frank, Keown, Dittman, et al. (2015) found that fathers' preferred topics were building positive relationships with their children, increasing children's confidence and social skills, and exploring the importance of fathers' influence on children's development. These findings were used to adapt the content of the standard Triple P parenting program, which was then compared to a waitlist control group in an RCT (Frank, Keown, & Sanders, 2015). At 6-month follow-up, fathers in the program had significantly more improvements in child behavioural problems and dysfunctional parenting practices, relative to waitlist fathers. Session attendance, participation levels, and program satisfaction were comparably high for both mothers and fathers. The study did not compare the adapted father-inclusive version with the standard version of the parenting program, although given that some previous studies have found lower levels of satisfaction and more modest positive outcomes for fathers relative to mothers (Fabiano, 2007; Fletcher et al., 2011), the findings offer tentative support for improved outcomes as a result of tailoring program content to meet fathers' identified needs and preferences.

In terms of program delivery, surveys indicate that fathers, like mothers, prefer less intensive or low dose interventions, such as Internet-based programs and brief parenting programs (Frank, Keown, Dittman, et al., 2015; Morawska et al., 2011; Tully et al., 2017). This suggests that practitioners may need to consider how programs can be made available in a variety of formats or delivered in briefer or more targeted ways. However, it should be noted that reliance on text-driven and/or Internet-based delivery could exclude fathers with low literary levels and/or those from linguistically diverse backgrounds (Meyers, 1993).

It is important for practitioners to directly invite fathers to participate in parenting interventions where possible (Pruett et al., 2017a), as evidence suggests a key reason for low rates of involvement may be that they are not directly invited to participate (Davison, Charles, Khandpur, & Nelson, 2016). Practitioners also need to be skilled in engaging fathers indirectly through mothers, which may include strategies such as emphasising to mothers the importance of engaging father involvement, and offering to contact fathers directly to discuss program participation (Tully et al., 2017). Practitioners should be mindful of assuming that a non-attending father is disinterested or disengaged. Indirect engagement, whereby a parent does not attend sessions but engages in at-home discussions about program content and enacts program strategies, may be an effective way of engaging fathers. Indeed, in a qualitative study, Huntington and Vetere (2016) found that for couples

who reported high relationship satisfaction, fathers perceived benefits (i.e., information sharing and promoting co-parenting efforts) even when they did not attend the intervention. Therefore, incorporating both direct and indirect engagement strategies into the design and delivery of a parenting intervention may provide practitioners with flexible options to engage fathers.

Increasing Father Engagement Practices at the Organisational/service Level

Experts in the field of father engagement have stressed the need for father-inclusive policies and practices to occur at the organisational level (FaHCSIA, 2009; Fletcher et al., 2014). Supporting father-inclusive practice at the organisational level could involve strategies such as emphasising the importance of father attendance at intake, offering sessions outside work hours, advertising that the program is for fathers as well as mothers, obtaining child information from both fathers and mothers, and monitoring father attendance rates. Tully et al. (2018) found that just over half of practitioners surveyed (mostly psychologists and social workers) rated their organisation as extremely or very supportive of father-inclusive practice, with the remainder indicating their organisation was only somewhat or not very supportive. While there is room for improvement, organisational culture is viewed by practitioners as one of the most amendable aspects of practice, along with practitioners' values and attitudes (Glynn & Dale, 2015).

Importantly, organisational support for father-inclusive practice can act as a critical top-down enabler for increased father engagement. In one survey, practitioners' reports of organisational policies such as commitment to involving the whole family and flexible working hours was found to be associated with greater engagement of the whole family—reflecting an effort to involve the father, as well as the mother (Lazar, Sagi, & Fraser, 1991). Moreover, organisational support for father-inclusive practice has been found to be a key predictor of practitioner-reported father attendance rates (Jiang et al., in press; Tully et al., 2018). Conversely, a lack of organisational support has been reported to be a major barrier to father engagement (Glynn & Dale, 2015; Tully et al., 2018).

In terms of specific strategy use, Tully et al. (2018) found that the most commonly reported service/program level strategies were obtaining information from fathers as well as mothers (reported by 67.4% of surveyed practitioners), and emphasising the importance of father attendance at intake (reported by 64.6% of surveyed practitioners). However, only 40.9% of practitioners reported that their organisation offered sessions outside working hours. While providing services outside working hours is unlikely to be feasible for all organisations, it is important for organisations to adopt greater flexibility in service provision so that programs are more accessible for fathers, for instance by delivering online interventions (e.g., Nieuwboer, Fukkink, & Hermanns, 2013). Finally, few organisations currently systematically collect data on rates of father attendance, which is important for monitoring levels of father engagement over time (Dadds et al., under review).

Increasing Professional Training Regarding Father Engagement

There are limited professional development and training opportunities in father engagement currently available to practitioners (Fletcher et al., 2014; Gordon et al., 2012). However, there is evidence from both surveys with practitioners and evaluations of training programs that professional training in father engagement strategies is associated with enhanced practitioner confidence and skills, with some studies also linking training to increased rates of father engagement (Humphries & Nolan, 2015; Scourfield et al., 2012; Scourfield, Smail, & Butler, 2015; Tully et al., 2018). Only a few quantitative studies have been conducted to evaluate father engagement training for practitioners. Training was found to result in improvements in practitioner confidence to engage fathers from pre-training to 2-month follow-up (Scourfield et al., 2012; Scourfield et al., 2015) as well as increased rates of father engagement across three out of six measures (Scourfield et al., 2012), and improved knowledge and attitudes about father engagement (Humphries & Nolan, 2015). Therefore, practitioners and organisations may benefit from undertaking father engagement training and professional development activities to increase father-inclusive practice. Undoubtedly more research (especially in the form of RCTs) is needed to examine the effectiveness of training on practitioner competencies, and rates of father engagement in services.

While further research is also needed to help identify the most important elements of training that contribute to increasing father engagement, a number of relevant research papers and expert reviews indicate that father-inclusive practice is likely to be maximised when training successfully targets the following practitioner competencies: knowledge about the importance of fathers for child outcomes; positive attitudes and beliefs about fathers; self-reflection to assist practitioners to recognise the link between their own attitudes and behaviour; skills to positively engage fathers; and skills to promote father-inclusive practice within practitioners' team or organisation (Fletcher, Freeman, Ross, & St George, 2013; Fletcher et al., 2014; Fletcher & St George, 2010; Fletcher & Visser, 2008; Humphries & Nolan, 2015; Scourfield et al., 2012; Scourfield et al., 2015).

Conclusions

Given the importance of father engagement in parenting programs for promoting child wellbeing, this paper has attempted to review and translate existing literature into practice recommendations to enhance father engagement. A number of practice points have emerged from the research, including the importance of engaging fathers as co-parents; replacing a deficit model of fathers with a positive focus on fathers' parenting; increasing fathers' knowledge and awareness of parenting programs; ensuring the content and delivery of interventions meets the needs and preferences of fathers; increasing organisational support for father engagement; and provision of training for practitioners to facilitate father-inclusive practice. However, there remain areas of father engagement research where significant investigation is still required, including the

effectiveness of specific father engagement strategies; comparing father engagement rates across different program approaches, such as couple versus father-only initiatives; and monitoring father engagement rates within services over time to better understand the impact of father-inclusive practice and/or practitioner training on father engagement. Furthering our understanding of father-inclusive practice is a shared responsibility, and practitioners and services, as well as researchers, all play an integral part in building awareness and knowledge about effective strategies for engaging fathers. Nonetheless, the growing research base on engaging fathers and the practice recommendations included in this paper serve as an important initial guide for increasing father engagement in interventions for child wellbeing.

Acknowledgement

Note

1 The term "father" is used to refer to biological and social fathers, and father-figures, who undertake parenting responsibilities. Likewise, where the term "mother" is used, it is intended to refer to biological and social mothers and mother-figures. Where the term "parent" is used, it is intended to refer to those in a primary caregiving relationship with a child.

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