

Practice perspectives ...

Supporting fathers who have a child with a disability

Dianne Beatty and Andrew King

'Hey, Dad! For fathers who have a child with a disability' is a new resource to assist organisations to facilitate a program of group sessions for fathers of children with a physical, emotional or developmental disability. This paper describes the program, the reasons for its development and the reactions to its 2007 pilot.

THE PROGRAM

The *Hey, Dad! For fathers who have a child with a disability* program utilises strength-based practice focusing on building stronger connections between fathers and their children with a disability, as well as with their partners and other children. The program aims to support them to increase their confidence, self esteem and parenting skills and to reduce their and their families' isolation. Men are assisted to develop their own strategies to work more effectively with their partner in caring for the complex needs of their children.

The program's manual provides resources for two group work formats:

- Structured play and activity sessions involving fathers and their children; and
- 12 Dads' Workshops.

Workshop topics include:

- Connecting with other fathers
- Working in partnership with service providers
- Juggling the needs of your family, work and your own needs
- Maintaining positive adult relationships
- Managing behaviour
- Encouraging your child's emotional growth
- Stress management
- Focusing on the future

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The range of session content allows facilitators to provide possibly 18 months of program material, depending upon the timing of sessions. Fathers are encouraged to select the workshop topics most relevant to them.

The program builds on other *Hey, Dad!* resources developed by Centacare Broken Bay and UnitingCare Burnside. Its development was funded by the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs.

THE NEED FOR THE PROGRAM

Research suggests that children raised by engaged fathers have better life skills, achieve better educationally and have longer lasting relationships (Children's Trust Fund 2004, cited in Sharp et al. 2006, p.3). However, parents of children with a disability have been found to have higher stress levels than other parents (Esdaile & Greenwood 2003 & Dyson 1997, cited in Sharp et al. 2006, p.4) with fathers reporting a range of impacts affecting their well-being, their relationships and their parenting:

- feelings of self-blame
- denial of the extent of the disability
- effects on their marriages
- the constant strains of caring
- feeling guilty about having negative feelings about their child
- negative experiences of service provision, and
- negative reactions in the community (Hornby 1992, cited in Sharp et al. 2006, p. 4).

Testimonies of British fathers of children with a disability in *Different Dads – Fathers' Stories of Parenting Disabled Children* (Harrison, Henderson & Leonard 2007), as well as fathers' comments during the *Hey, Dad!* pilot, show that fathers continue to experience difficulties with finding, accessing or receiving support particular to their needs. Common themes reported include:

- fathers feeling cut-off from services, friends and the community

- current health and community service systems for children with a disability being seen to focus heavily on mothers, with fathers often feeling excluded
- fathers having few confidantes
- fathers finding it difficult to speak openly about their worries and fears when their wives are present, and
- the fathers finding it difficult to seek help.

THE PROGRAM'S PILOT AND REVIEW

The program was piloted in the first six months of 2007. *Alt Beatty Consulting* was contracted to review facilitators' and participants' reactions to the pilot program, using an action research model, so that progressive review results could inform the refinement of the final program and its manual.

The time available for the pilot and, therefore, for the review was constrained between February 2007, when the facilitators' training occurred, and the end of May 2007, when the final review report was required by the funding body. The design of the review had to be responsive to not only these time limitations but also other pilot variables, including the facilitators' capacity to organise *Hey, Dad!* sessions, to recruit participants, to facilitate agreed sessions, and to collate and provide agreed feedback to the review; the range of session locations and schedules; and the parallel drafting and refinement of the program manual. The review needed to both respond to and inform pilot and program content changes.

For the pilot, twenty-seven workers from sixteen disability and community services from throughout NSW were trained in the *Hey, Dad!* program. In return for their training, they committed to facilitate at least one *Hey, Dad!* activity session and one workshop session before May 2007. In the event, 12 activity and 5 workshop sessions were conducted across 12 NSW locations, from Sydney to Casino in the north, Orange in the west and Kiama in the south. They involved a total of 83 fathers. Facilitators' and fathers' reactions to the trial were collated, via feedback sheets and phone and face-to-face interviews, and reviewed.

The motivation of the agencies and facilitators participating

Facilitators reported they were motivated to trial *Hey, Dad!* as they were looking for new ways to engage and support fathers of children with a disability.

I've been looking for a framework to work with dads.

Our parents are requesting this constantly.¹

¹ All quotes are from fathers or facilitators involved in the program trial.

Delivery and participation

Agencies experienced difficulties recruiting interested fathers and then finding workshop times suitable to them. The facilitators reported that free time seemed to be very limited for the targeted group of fathers. This was because the fathers were often the sole breadwinner for the family, with mothers unable to work due to extensive commitments associated with the support of their children with a disability. The fathers described being unwilling to take on commitments which cut into their free time, as they wanted to devote this to their family and to giving their partners a break from, or some support with, the care.

Further, a number of fathers were subject to unexpected shift or roster changes or worked more than one job. As a result, planned attendances of some fathers were disrupted, with re-scheduling of sessions reasonably common in the pilot.

However, while fathers expressed hesitancy about committing time to *Hey, Dad!* or to participating in groupwork, the pilot showed that, once fathers attended their first session, they were more likely to be interested in attending, or getting information about, others.

Sixty-two of the eighty-three participating fathers provided information about themselves:

- the majority of participants were Australian born, with one of these fathers identifying as Indigenous. Six were born in non-English speaking countries;
- the average age was 41, with the youngest father being 27 and the oldest 68;
- 50% of fathers had one or two children, with two fathers having 9;
- 50% of their youngest children were aged 2 or under;
- 92% had their children living with them full-time;
- 87% lived with their spouse/partner;
- 77% of the fathers were employed, 15% were not in the labour force and 5% were unemployed, with these characteristics varying significantly by session location;
- the employed fathers came from a wide range of occupations and industry groups.

REACTIONS TO HEY, DAD!

Facilitators' reactions

Facilitators were overwhelmingly positive about the program and the value of their sessions.

... the *Hey, Dad!* sessions were the best thing I have done for a very long time. Professionally they offer something really worthwhile. Dads connected so well.

Fathers' reactions

Fathers' reactions were similarly extremely positive to both the activity and workshop sessions. Areas particularly

appreciated by the fathers included further developing their parenting and relationship skills, and connecting with other fathers of children with a disability.

Parenting and relationship skills and understanding

Over three-quarters of the men predicted that their *Hey, Dad!* participation would improve their parenting skills and help them to better support their child. Just less than three-quarters said that the sessions had offered them something new to help their relationships with their children.

I am pursuing being more relaxed. I don't know that I have got to where I want to be yet, but I am still working towards it ... And I am trying different things with my daughter. I think I don't get as frustrated as often as I did before ... But I do have to concentrate to put what I learnt into practice. ... I have tried a few different things since the session. And I think I do feel a bit more at ease with my child, more comfortable ...

A number of the men also reported that the sessions helped them with their relationships with their partners and to learn new relationship strategies.

Connections and other benefits

The men described how seldom, if ever, they had had the opportunity to speak openly and freely, without judgement, about their concerns and reactions in relation to the disability of their child and about their care of their child and other members of their family. They spoke about how significant the absence of confidantes was to them and about how alone they at times felt.

So, the opportunity to form connections with other fathers, in a group involving only men, was overwhelmingly the aspect of the program most valued by fathers. And overwhelmingly, the fathers expressed relief that other fathers were experiencing similar reactions and feelings despite their children having often very different abilities or conditions.

[It was] very interesting meeting different fathers with children that have different disabilities but have the same concerns.

I found the session today very rewarding. It has been the first time that I have been able to interact with other Dads in similar circumstances.

[I liked most the] opportunity to discuss issues as fathers, with fathers only. Having done [another parenting program] I felt that this environment was more useful and I was more open and honest than [when in] an environment in which my wife and other women were present.

They particularly felt that *Hey, Dad!* groups would significantly help new dads:

The best thing would be to get people experiencing disability for the first time ... There is a silver lining and although it is hard, it can get better.

PROGRAM DELIVERY LESSONS

The pilot showed that considerable lead time, promotion and scheduling flexibility are required to recruit initially reluctant fathers to the program, with agencies with established relationships having greatest recruitment success.

Pairings of facilitators with both facilitation and disability experience promoted session success. Further, the *Hey, Dad!* program was most effective when sessions were individually tailored, focussing on the interests and situations of the participant fathers and their children, and building on the strengths and experience of the facilitators. Facilitators were positive about the manual, capitalising on its injunction to use the resource as an aid to, rather than a script for, facilitation of sessions.

As fathers most valued speaking to other fathers who have children with a disability, discussing support strategies, and realising the extent of commonality in their experiences and concerns, these attributes should be used to market *Hey, Dad!* in future roll-outs.

CONCLUSION

While there has been a limited roll-out of the new *Hey, Dad!* program to date, the reactions of the fathers and facilitators to its pilot suggest that the program fills a significant gap in the support of families with children with a disability and is likely to enhance the parenting and relationship skills and resilience of participating fathers.

Copies of the final manual, incorporating refinements informed by the pilot, and the pilot review report are available from UnitingCare Institute of Family Practice <info@ifp.nse.edu.au>. □

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