

# The Fathers Utilising Networks for Kids (FUN for Kids) program

External evaluation

Edited by Sarah Wise

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- Rennell Adams—conduct of interviews, quantitative data analysis, report writing;
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## Executive summary

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Attention has recently focused on the role of father-specific support programs in breaking down the psychological barriers and gaps in skills and knowledge that can prevent men from taking an active role in children's day-to-day care and looking after their wellbeing.

The Fathers Utilising Networks for Kids (FUN for Kids) project was developed and implemented by Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) to assist men to form positive relationships with their children and partners, and to increase the confidence and capacities that are related to positive father engagement. Specifically, the FUN for Kids program is a parenting education program for fathers that has been operating in Victoria since 2001. The program is coordinated by RAV in conjunction with maternal and child health centres, preschools, kindergartens and primary schools, and it currently operates in Point Cook, Footscray West, Werribee, Hoppers Crossing, Yarraville and the rural centre of Kyabram. The program focuses on increasing fathering skills and knowledge within a whole-of-family approach.

This report presents findings from an external evaluation of the FUN for Kids project conducted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS). The evaluation sought to ascertain what fathers, members of their families, and key program stakeholders believed were the impacts of the program, especially in terms of the fathers' relationships with their children and their partners. The findings are intended to inform the development of the FUN for Kids program.

Utilising the Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology, the evaluation required participating fathers to provide a self-assessment of change: (a) in the last session of the program, and (b) in the 12–16 weeks following program completion. Change “stories” were also sought from partners and selected professionals from associated organisations. Program facilitators and primary-school-aged children also provided their perspectives on the benefits of the program. The validity of themes emerging from interview transcripts was tested through a workshop process that included RAV staff and members of the “Y Dads” fathers group, which was formed from the membership of a former FUN for Kids program. In addition, at the completion of the program and 12–16 weeks after the program had ended, fathers completed a brief, self-administered parenting survey designed to tap levels of parenting confidence and involvement, the quality of the co-parental relationship and access to parenting support at program commencement.

The evaluation material suggests that programs like FUN for Kids are desired by men wishing to play an active role in their children's lives, and that partners and children see value in them as well. There was evidence that the program was successful in assisting dads to improve their confidence in their parenting capacity, as well as their parenting skills and knowledge, both immediately after program completion and in the 12–16 weeks thereafter. Although the value of the program varied according to the child's developmental stage, fathers commonly said they felt more confident, learnt about a certain parenting skill, or were able to develop their relationship with their child(ren) because of the program.

It is acknowledged that there are quite substantial barriers that prevent fathers from becoming more involved in direct child care. There was no tangible evidence that father presence, involvement and time with children increased because of participation in the FUN for Kids program within the evaluation timeframe. However, previous program attendees—the Y Dads—suggested that the knowledge and confidence gained through exposure to the program are important factors in father involvement in basic child care routines and children's learning and development.

There was also indication that the FUN for Kids program had an impact on the quality of co-parental relationships and the degree to which mothers and fathers supported one another and co-operated in matters of child care and children's development. In relation to new fathers, developing confidence and competence to look after children independently of their partners and giving mothers a break from infant care were salient outcomes. In relation to father-child relationships, men of primary-school-aged children often joined the program to spend some

quality time with their child, while new fathers saw the program as a means to develop a close bond with their baby. Children also reported that the activities were engaging and fun, and they genuinely enjoyed this time with their fathers.

Finally, fathers appreciated the opportunity to socialise with other fathers and to swap stories. This process normalised their feelings and experiences and provided some reassurance about how they were approaching the parenting role. Building connections within the local community was also seen as important. However, while new dads were encouraged to form a father and baby play group or to maintain some other form of regular contact, it was clear that participants needed more direct guidance and support in this regard.

Feedback on how to improve the program suggests that the future challenge for the FUN for Kids program will be to meet the high expectations of some participants and their preferences surrounding program content and structure while remaining faithful to the objectives of the program, such as enhancing the role of fathers as teachers. The program may also consider looking at new ways to facilitate the formation of ongoing fathers' groups. It may also be productive to extend the program's reach and relevance to fathers who would not typically seek assistance from formal services and/or who may be in particular need of advice, encouragement and remedial action in relation to their parenting.

# Chapter 1: Literature review

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## The role of fathers in contemporary society

Fathers today tend to view their role in their children's care and development differently to that of previous generations. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that fathers' perceptions of their relationship with and responsibilities to their children is undergoing rather rapid change. In one of the largest empirical studies of fatherhood conducted in Australia (Russell et al., 1999), fathers were asked about their roles and responsibilities as a father. Compared to research conducted fifteen years previously (Russell, 1983), the more recent cohort of fathers<sup>1</sup> was less likely to include the importance of being a breadwinner in their responses, and much more likely to identify providing children with emotional support and assisting them in their socialisation and development as important aspects of their role as a father (Russell et al., 1999). The importance of father involvement in children's lives, both for the child's benefit and for personal fulfilment, also emerged as a strong theme in a more recent Australian study involving in-depth interviews with 27 fathers from diverse socio-economic groups (Hand & Lewis, 2002).

Research has also been devoted to understanding the various aspects of fatherhood and how fathers impact on their children's development and wellbeing. Like motherhood, fatherhood is multidimensional and can involve: direct care and emotional support for the child, decision making with regard to the child, facilitating opportunities for the child's socialisation and engagement with the community outside the family, financial support, and the provision of emotional and physical support of the mother.

Several useful theoretical frameworks have been developed to explain and understand the various direct and indirect ways in which fathers contribute to children's development. For example, Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1987) developed one of the frameworks most frequently used to understand the complexity of fatherhood and quantify fathers' involvement with their children. In this framework, fathering is viewed as having three main components: engagement (direct interaction with the child), accessibility (availability to the child), and responsibility for the child (for example, arranging child care).

Another useful theoretical paradigm is the National Center on Fathers and Families (NCOFF) Fathering Indicators Framework, which was designed especially to measure the success of parenting programs. To measure father involvement, this framework uses: father presence (engagement, accessibility and responsibility), caregiving (regarding child's emotional and physical health and appearance), engagement in child's social and academic competence (active engagement with the child and others in developing these skills), cooperative parenting (supportive relationship with the co-parent), father's healthy living (role model of healthy lifestyle and appropriate social behaviour) and the father's material and financial contributions (Gadsden, Fagan, Ray, & Davis, 2004; NCOFF, n.d.).

While such frameworks are useful in conceptualising fatherhood, they do not prescribe optimal levels of father involvement. Nor do they suggest for which roles or responsibilities fathers should be accountable. Historically, fathers have played vastly different roles depending on their cultural, social and family milieu. There are also diverse perspectives on the roles and responsibilities attached to fatherhood in contemporary Western societies. This is evident, for example, in differences in social policy between the European focus on "gender equity" and that of the US focus on "father involvement" (Flouri, 2005). Furthermore, in a plural and multicultural society like Australia, meanings of fatherhood span contemporary values and the cultural traditions and expectations of culturally and linguistically diverse groups.

As Lamb (1997) points out, different roles will be valued in different contexts. The issue of importance is that the father's role matches the demands and prescriptions of his sociocultural and familial context. In some circumstances, breadwinning may be the most important role a

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<sup>1</sup> The interviews took place in 1998.

father plays; in other contexts this may be less important and direct care may be the most significant (Lamb, 1997).

## Fathers' time with children

Altered expectations surrounding the amount and type of involvement fathers should have with their children in Western societies has thus placed greater demands on fathers to spend more time with their children and to take a more active role in their children's care and development. Longitudinal studies conducted predominantly in the US provide some evidence that fathers are increasing their role in child care. In one overview of fatherhood studies, Pleck (1997) argued that, compared to the 1970s and early 1980s, fathers in two-parent households in the later 1980s and 1990s had increased their share of child care, vis-à-vis the mother's contribution. On average, fathers in the later studies spent about two-fifths (43%) as much time as mothers directly engaging with their children, whereas in the earlier studies fathers spent about one-third (33%) as much time as mothers (Pleck, 1997).

However, despite changing gender roles, the vast bulk of direct care and responsibility for children still rests with mothers (Bittman, 1998; Flouri, 2005). In a study conducted by Russell and colleagues, fathers were asked to indicate whether they were their child's caregiver on one specific day. Only 15% of fathers said they had been the main caregiver for a period of time on the day on which they were asked to report (Russell et al., 1999). The same study found that fathers share child care equally in only 1–2% of families, and fathers are highly involved in 5–10% of situations.

There are a number of practical barriers preventing fathers from engaging in their role as actively as they would like or feel they should be. In a study of Australian fathers, for example, 68% said they did not spend enough time with their children and many regarded paid work to be the major impediment to their parental involvement (Hand & Lewis, 2002; Russell et al., 1999; Russell & Llewellyn-Smith, 2001). Other factors that are viewed by researchers as being significant determinants of father involvement include gender role orientation and egalitarian beliefs, perception of competence and skill, and the father's own experience of being parented (Russell et al., 1999; see also Pleck, 1997).

There is some evidence to suggest that the time fathers spend with their children is qualitatively different to the time mothers spend with their children.<sup>2</sup> According to one Australian study of household time use (Craig, 2002), partners were present for the majority of the time fathers spent with their children. Of all the time fathers spent with their children, only 6–9% of this time was spent without the company of their partner. Not only was fathering thus less isolated than mothering, Craig also argued that fathers spent more time doing “discretionary tasks” (tasks that could take place when they chose) and did fewer other work tasks at the same time.

Moreover, mothers and fathers have been found to differ with regard to the types of activities in which they engage. Studies have found that fathers spend a greater percentage of time with their children involved in play (Craig, 2002; Flouri, 2005; Lamb, 1997; Russell et al., 1999) and tend to be involved in more physically stimulating activities, which may encourage competition and independence in their children (Flouri, 2005).

## Fathering and child outcomes

Despite differences in terms of the ways in which fathers and mothers spend time with their children, the “quality” of fathering is measured along the same dimensions as mothering; that is, in terms of those dimensions that research suggests is related to child wellbeing and development. Research has shown, for example, that parental warmth, nurturance and closeness are associated with positive child outcomes, whether the parent or adult involved is a mother or father (Lamb, 1997). There is also much crosscultural evidence to suggest that both men and

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<sup>2</sup> The data analysed in this study was drawn from the 1992 Time Use Survey data collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

women can perform the range of care-giving skills involved in parenting (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999).

Children's experience of quality fathering is one factor among many that is thought to play a role in children's positive development and wellbeing. Russell and colleagues' (1999) review of the research on developmental outcomes for children and paternal involvement has associated the quality and quantity of father engagement with various outcomes, including: adolescent emotional wellbeing; positive self-esteem in girls; empathy; prosocial sibling interaction; greater support networks; greater social interaction, and feelings of community involvement (see also Flouri, 2005; Lamb, 1997). Studies have also found relationships between the quality and quantity of father involvement and child academic achievement, although the mechanisms through which fathering has its influence are rather complex and poorly understood (Russell et al., 1999). Flouri's (2005) research, for example, suggests that father involvement is related to educational attainment in daughters but not sons.

Father involvement is also known to influence child outcomes indirectly. For example, the positive engagement of both mothers and fathers in parenting and family life increases the emotional, social and economic resources available to the child and within the household, and can reduce social isolation and parenting stress among mothers (Flood, 2003; Lamb, 1997; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Children can also benefit from differences in the behavioural styles of their parents (Lamb, 1997). Father involvement can also facilitate options around work and child care activities between parents. For a mother who wants to pursue career goals, this option can indirectly benefit the child through improved maternal personal functioning and more satisfying marital and partner relationships (Lamb, 1997). Lamb is cautious to point out, however, that relations between positive child outcomes and father involvement exist in families where fathers have chosen to be highly involved and both parents have been happy with this arrangement. In families where fathers are highly involved but did not choose to be, father involvement can have negative consequences; for example, in circumstances where the father is unemployed and resentful of having to care for the children while his partner works (Lamb, 1997).

## Parent education programs

Changing attitudes concerning the role of fathers and evidence of benefits for children from involved fathering have brought attention to the role of father-specific support programs in enhancing positive father involvement. Father-specific support programs are thought to be a useful means of enhancing positive father involvement, and may be tailored to the needs of specific father groups, such as new fathers, fathers caring for children post-separation, fathers from diverse cultural backgrounds, fathers seeking support to stop their violent behaviour and fathers with children with a disability.

Analysing the parenting support services available to fathers in Australia, Russell et al. (1999) argued that support programs can: enhance fathering skills, increase fathers' involvement in childrearing activities, improve their communication skills, decrease levels of parental stress, and improve family functioning. A recent investigation into child and family support programs funded under the Australian Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2004–09 also found that, for those fathers who participated in the research, contact with services and programs was a positive and valued experience in terms of knowledge and skill development, relationships with children and partners, connecting with other fathers and the community more broadly, and resolving personal issues (Berlyn, Wise, & Soriano, 2008). There is also evidence of individual programs having positive impacts on father involvement, including the group-discussion-based Parenting Program for Fathers (McBride, 1990), which is located in the US, and two parenting education programs for fathers located in Australia: one for Koori<sup>3</sup> dads in the north coast region of New South Wales and another in Newcastle (Newell, Franks, Lloyd, Telford, & Binge, 2006; Silberberg, 2002).

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<sup>3</sup> "Koori" is the term for Aboriginal people from southeast Australia.

On balance, however, the evidence base relating to services that facilitate men in their fathering roles is small, and more data is needed to determine the extent to which programs (and program elements) showed beneficial outcomes for fathers and their children.

## The FUN for Kids program

### Program scope and objectives

The Fathers Utilising Networks for Kids (FUN for Kids) program is a universal parenting education program specifically designed for fathers. The FUN for Kids program recognises that children can benefit socially and cognitively when they have active, interested and engaged parents. The program focuses on increasing fathering skills and knowledge within a whole-of-family approach.

FUN for Kids has been operating in Victoria since 2001. The program is currently offered in municipalities in metropolitan and regional Victoria, including City of Melbourne, Maribyrnong, Hobsons Bay, Wyndham, Shepparton, Gippsland and Kyabram. FUN for Kids is aimed at fathers with children aged between birth and 12 years of age. However, it is recognised that many fathers who attend the program have children 12 years of age and older, and the program is considered just as relevant for fathers' relationships with these children.

FUN for Kids is coordinated by Relationships Australia Victoria (RAV) in conjunction with maternal and child health centres, preschools, kindergartens and primary schools. FUN for Kids programs build on pre-existing networks and create new networks among local families. Participants are drawn from a local area or an existing community, such as a school or preschool, and attempts are made to connect participants with local services during the program.

The key objectives of the program are to:

- help develop successful life skills for all fathers;
- increase the involvement of fathers in schools, kindergartens, maternal and child health services and communities;
- improve relationships between fathers and their children;
- assist mothers/partners to feel supported within the family unit;
- help single/at-risk dads to feel supported;
- provide space for the father to reflect on his relationship with his family;
- allow time for fathers to connect with other fathers and develop social networks;
- make information on child development available;
- provide a public affirmation of the father's love for his children and family; and
- support the provision of a positive, safe, happy and nurturing environment for children.

### Program content

FUN for Kids programs are developed with three different groups of fathers in mind: first-time fathers with babies (New Dads program), fathers of preschool-aged children (Preschool program), and fathers of primary-school-aged children (Primary School program). The FUN for Kids programs are designed to run for 4–5 weeks, and take place either in the school or preschool that the participants' children attend or, in the case of the New Dads program, in a local community centre.

In the first week of each program partners and children attend with the fathers. After this introductory session the fathers decide whether they want to come for the rest of the program. Fathers in the New Dads program bring their babies to all sessions. In the Preschool and the Primary School programs the dads bring their children for only some weeks of the program.

The FUN for Kids program uses a “whole-of-family” approach. There are a variety of ways in which this approach can be seen in the program. Partners attend the first week of the program, and children attend this and some later sessions. The programs look at ways in which dads and their partners can parent together, and ways in which dads can support their partners.

The programs operate in a group discussion format. The program is structured so that specific topics are covered each week, but there is also a focus on general discussion and socialising to give fathers and their children the opportunity to spend time together, and for fathers to get to know one another.

In the New Dads program, topics include the importance of the father–child relationship, baby safety and infant cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), baby development, baby massage, the importance of play, and how to establish a father and baby playgroup. The Preschool and Primary School programs focus alternatively on numeracy and literacy. In the numeracy program, for example, topics include looking at approaches to numeracy, how children become numerate, ways to use everyday activities to talk about maths with children, and games to encourage maths development.

Two male facilitators are generally used to deliver the programs. Facilitators are often previous program participants. Guest presenters are also used in many of the programs. In one of the Primary School programs, for example, the vice principal attends and talks to the dads about the school.

Fathers, especially those participating in the New Dads program, are encouraged to continue to meet up after the program has finished. For this purpose, a speaker from Playgroups Australia attends to talk about how to establish a playgroup as a way for the fathers to continue meeting once the program is complete. “Y Dads” is a fathers’ group that was formed out of the first FUN for Kids program in Yarraville that has continued to meet regularly over the last four years (Clohsey, 2004).

## Chapter 2: The external evaluation of the Fun for Kids program

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### Background

Prior to the current evaluation project, RAV conducted an internal evaluation of the FUN for Kids program. All fathers who had participated in a FUN for Kids program reported that they would recommend the program to other fathers. RAV also found that more than 90% of fathers who completed a client evaluation form reported:

- they learnt more about how to relate to their children;
- they had a better understanding of fathering and family issues;
- they were more likely to talk with other fathers about fathering issues; and
- the program gave them useful information and advice.

RAV found that the FUN for Kids program led to increased participation of fathers in the lives of their children. Many of the fathers who had participated in the program went on to form their own Saturday morning playgroups. Mothers also reported how much they enjoyed the opportunity to take time out from their young children.

Given the universal nature of the program, “high-risk” families had felt comfortable to attend. Several fathers with concerns around domestic violence and relationship breakdown had approached RAV because of their participation in the program, and were referred on for additional support.

With these indicators of effectiveness emerging from internal evaluations, RAV was funded by the Ian Potter Foundation to conduct an external evaluation, and the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) was subsequently engaged for this purpose.

### Participants

Eighty-one men who commenced participation in seven FUN for Kids programs in 2006, their partners and children, FUN for Kids program facilitators, and service providers associated with the program were invited to take part in the evaluation.

Six FUN for Kids programs were based in Melbourne and one program operated in the rural town of Kyabram. The Melbourne-based programs took place in Point Cook, Footscray West, Werribee, Hoppers Crossing and Yarraville. Three were Primary School programs, two were Preschool programs and two were New Dads programs. The facilitators were all men and some were previous program participants. The program that was run in Kyabram was a general parenting program involving one male and one female facilitator. Each program had between four and eleven fathers attending in the last week of the program.

In order to test the research methodology, a pilot study was conducted in late 2005. Two researchers attended the first and last weeks of one of the New Dads programs. After the program had finished, participant fathers were contacted by phone and asked to take part in a follow-up interview. Pilot data were included in the current analyses.

### Method

#### Most Significant Change methodology

The FUN for Kids external evaluation was designed to evaluate the impact of parent education on fathers’ relationships with their child(ren) and their partners, and to identify good practice when working with fathers.

The Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology (Davies & Dart, 2005) was used to ascertain what fathers, members of their families, and key stakeholders of the program believed were the impacts of the program. MSC is an approach that is particularly valuable in ascertaining the impacts of programs, and gathers accounts from program participants and other key stakeholders

of most significant change. The current evaluation obtained data on whether participants noticed change due to the program, and what the nature of that change was.

## Interviews

Accounts of change were gathered during interviews with participant fathers, partners, program facilitators and service providers associated with the FUN for Kids program (such as teachers, child care workers, and maternal and child health nurses). Establishing the ways in which professionals think the program benefits fathers provides a basis for comparison and contrast with the views of fathers. The perspective of mothers provides insight into the impact of the program on the parenting unit. Interviews with children provide an opportunity for children to express their views on how the program has affected them and their relationship with their fathers.

The set of interview questions varied slightly depending on who was being interviewed. In all cases (except with the children), the person being interviewed was asked to identify the most significant change they had noticed from attending the program, and why this was significant. During the interview in the last week of the program, fathers were asked:

- What was the most significant change that took place for you after attending the FUN for Kids program?
- Why do you consider this/these change(s) the most significant?
- What difference has this made?
- What difference could it make in the future?

Children were asked if they enjoyed going to the program, what they liked best about it and what could be better. Children were also asked about whether they thought other kids and dads should go to FUN for Kids.

Fathers were interviewed twice: in the last week of the program and 12–16 weeks after the program had ended. Partners, children and professionals were interviewed 12–16 weeks after program completion.

In total, 69 interviews were conducted. Thirty-seven interviews were held in the last week of the program with father participants. Nineteen follow-up interviews were conducted with fathers from this group 12–16 weeks after FUN for Kids had ended. Six of the participants' partners agreed to be interviewed and the parents of two children gave consent for their children to participate in an interview. Three interviews were held with program facilitators and two with service providers.

## Validation of change “stories”

A process was included in the design of the study to determine whether results drawn from the interview data bore some relation to the general experience of FUN for Kids for fathers. This was drawn from an aspect of MSC methodology that seeks to relate the significant change “stories” of program participants to identified domains of change (Davies & Dart, 2005).

RAV service providers were asked to select a number of key stories from the father interview transcripts that they felt reflected the impact of the FUN for Kids program on fathers, and could also be related to the NCOFF Fathering Indicators Framework referred to above (Gadsden et al., 2004). A validation workshop involving members of the Y Dads group was held on a Saturday morning in a local community centre. The Y Dads were asked to individually identify the stories that were most significant to them and then take part in a group discussion.

Participants were also asked to rank the NCOFF Fathering Indicators (Table 1) in order of significance, based on their personal experience of FUN for Kids and to discuss their choices as group. Exploring the saliency of this framework was to provide some indication of which domains of change FUN for Kids was acting most strongly upon and provide some insight into the utility of using this framework as a basis for future assessment of the impact of FUN for Kids programs on fathers and children.

Table 1 Fathering Indicators Framework categories

Category	Dimensions
Father presence	Engagement, accessibility and responsibility
Caregiving	Regarding the child's emotional and physical health and appearance
Engagement in the child's social and academic competence	Active engagement with the child and others in developing these skills in the child
Cooperative parenting	Caregivers establish a supportive relationship
Father's healthy living	Provide a role model of healthy lifestyle and appropriate social behaviour
Father's provision of resources	Material and financial contributions to the child's wellbeing

## Parenting questionnaire

Participating fathers also completed a brief, one-page survey at three points in time: in the first or second week of the program (Time 1), in the final week of the program (Time 2), and 12–16 weeks after the program had ended (Time 3). Of the 81 men commencing participation in the program, 56 men completed the questionnaire at Time 1. At Time 2, 41 men completed the questionnaire, and 17 men completed the survey at Time 3. Only 11 men completed the survey at all three points in time.

The parenting questionnaire was designed to provide some quantifiable data on change in parenting beliefs and practices that the fathers had experienced due to attending the program. Questions were asked about parenting warmth, confidence and efficacy, and parenting support. The survey questions were modified from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC) (Sanson et al., 2002).

## Procedures

### Fathers

#### Interviews

Two researchers attended the first or second week of each program.<sup>4</sup> Before a break in the middle of the session, the RAV facilitators left the room so the researchers could discuss the project with the men. At this time, the researchers read out a plain language statement and participants were given written information about the study to take home and read, and a consent form to fill in and return if they wanted to take part in the interview in the last week of the program and the follow-up interview. Participants were asked if they were willing to be interviewed in the last session and then contacted for follow-up postal, email or phone interviews. If participants were willing to take part, they were asked to provide their contact details. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and would not affect their participation in the FUN for Kids program.

During the interview in the last week of the program, fathers had the option of providing written responses to the interview questions or for their responses to be recorded on tape. With one exception, all fathers chose to participate in a taped interview. Fathers were taken to separate rooms to be interviewed by researchers, and the interviews generally lasted between five and fifteen minutes.

Six to twelve weeks after the program had been completed, those fathers who had given their consent were contacted and asked to complete a follow-up interview. A letter was sent in advance telling them when the researcher would call. Fathers were also sent a list of questions that would be asked. Only two of the fathers who had given consent to be interviewed declined to take part at this stage, and a number were not contactable. Many fathers decided to complete the interview on paper and return it by mail, rather than be interviewed on the phone. The phone interviews usually took around fifteen minutes to complete.

<sup>4</sup> In one program, only one researcher attended due to the program being held on the same night at two centres.

### *Parenting questionnaire*

As part of the broader explanation of the evaluation provided at session 1 or 2, program participants were invited to complete a short questionnaire. Participants were informed that they would be asked to complete a similar questionnaire in the final session of the program, and again 12–16 weeks after the program had ended. Participants were given a postage paid envelope and were able to take the questionnaire home to complete, or were able to complete it while RAV facilitators were out of the room.

The survey was anonymous. Participants were asked to either use a pseudonym, or to provide no name at all. Participants were informed if they opted to use a pseudonym, it would be possible to link all their questionnaire data. They were also asked to disclose their pseudonym to allow researchers to link the questionnaire data to other evaluation material.

In the final week of the program, the parenting questionnaire was distributed for a second time. As before, the researchers read the plain language statement and asked participants to complete the questionnaire if they were willing, either at home or during the session.

During the follow-up interview described above, participants were given the option of completing the parenting questionnaire over the phone or returning a completed survey by mail. A copy of the questionnaire was included in the letter explaining when the researcher would call.

### **Partners**

On the initial consent form, the men had been asked if they were willing to allow the researchers to contact their partners and invite them to participate in an interview about the program. Where consent was granted, a separate letter was sent to these partners. They were asked to complete a consent form and phone interviews were conducted with the women who agreed to take part in the research. These interviews were conducted at approximately the same time as the men were contacted for their follow-up interview.

### **Children**

The fathers at two Melbourne-based Primary School programs were also sent a letter asking whether they would consent to their children (if aged eight years and above) being interviewed about the program (these children had taken part in the program with their fathers). Written consent was required from both parents/guardians and the child. Consent was also required from the schools, as the interviews took place at the school under supervision of a teacher.

Two children took part in the evaluation. During a face-to-face interview, they were asked to talk about what they liked about attending the program and ways in which the program may be improved.

### **Service providers and FUN for Kids program facilitators**

Service providers and FUN for Kids program facilitators were also asked to take part in an interview. The service providers were professionals who had been involved in the program in some way, usually because they worked at the school, kindergarten or maternal and child health centre where the program took place. The facilitators and service providers were asked to consider the same questions asked of the participating fathers. These were adapted so that service providers would offer their perspective on the most significant changes to the fathers from the FUN for Kids program. Service providers and facilitators were also asked to comment about what they thought could improve the program.

# Chapter 3: Results

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## Change interviews

### Analysis of interview transcripts

Transcripts from interviews with fathers, partners, service providers/program facilitators and children were coded and developed into key themes. Frequencies were also identified in relation to each theme, taking into account extracts concerning more than one theme.

Although themes concerning the benefits of the FUN for Kids program varied in importance for the different stakeholders, and similar issues were evident from fathers, partners, program facilitators and service providers concerning children at different developmental stages. These were: (a) building confidence in parenting ability, (b) developing relationships and communication with children, (c) building parenting skills, and (d) networking with other fathers. An additional theme of “giving partners a break from parenting duties” also emerged as being significant for new fathers. Participants were also asked about what they thought could improve the programs, so “things to improve” is discussed as a sixth theme.

To unpack these principal themes, material from interviews with fathers, partners, service providers and program facilitators are presented below. Sub-themes relating to each of the central themes are identified from the initial interviews with fathers. Together, these extracts provide insights into the benefits of the program on fathers, the parenting unit and those discussed by service providers and program facilitators. Relevant extracts from interviews are presented under each subject area. Material from initial and follow-up interviews with fathers is reported separately to illustrate changes over time in fathers’ perceptions of the impact of FUN for Kids.

As only two children were interviewed, the views of the children are presented separately from other interview data to give a snapshot picture of a child’s experience of FUN for Kids

### Coding of interview transcripts

Direct quotations from interview transcripts were labelled with an identification number and the program name (for example, interview 12, New Dads). Follow-up interviews were denoted with an “f” preceding the identification number, interviews with partners with a “p” preceding the identification number, and interviews with participants’ children with a “c” preceding the identification number. Interviews with program facilitators and service providers were labelled with an identification number only. The locations were not identified in order to maintain the confidentiality of research participants. The method of coding the interview transcripts is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2 Method of coding interview transcripts

Fathers: Initial interview	interview [id no.], [New Dads, Preschool or Primary School]
Fathers: Follow-up interview	interview f [id no.], [New Dads, Preschool or Primary School]
Mothers	interview p [id no.], [New Dads, Preschool or Primary School]
Children	interview c [id no.]
Service providers	interview service provider [id no.]
Program facilitators	interview facilitator [id no.]

## Theme 1: Building confidence in parenting ability

### Fathers’ perspectives during the program

An important change many dads experienced through taking part in FUN for Kids was increased confidence in their parenting. Several sub-themes emerged from the interview material. A real positive for new fathers was that they felt more confident about looking after their child without their partners present, both in the home and outside of the home. Generally, fathers felt that improved confidence in their caring role created new opportunities for building a strong father–

child relationship and contributing more directly to their child's development. Fathers also found attending the program and listening to other fathers reassured them about their own approaches to parenting and their capacities as a parent.

### *Spending time alone with baby*

Among participants in the New Dads groups, four fathers reported feeling more confident about looking after their child without their partner present. The FUN for Kids program provided them with a safe environment where they could take their child without their partner. Participating in the program helped them to build confidence in their ability to look after their child independently.

One father who had previously felt very unsure about whether he could look after his child by himself said that participating in the New Dads group had made him more confident:

I think probably the biggest difference is the confidence [with] my child. Beforehand I was always very sort of dubious about spending time with [my daughter] when [my partner] wasn't around and being by myself with her. But now I am quite comfortable taking [my daughter] out and going places with her by myself, that's the biggest difference I think, and it's a huge difference. ... If [my partner] says "I want to go out and do some shopping"—before, it was a case of, "Oh does that mean I have got to be with the baby? Oh, do I have to look after her for sort of an hour or two?" Whereas now it's a case of, "Yeah, that's OK". It's been a benefit for her as well because she doesn't have to worry about the fact that I am going to say, "No, I don't want to be left with the baby". (interview 12, New Dads)

Another father connected his increased confidence with a greater perception of his capacity and ability to meet his baby daughter's needs:

I guess it was the notion that you can look after your own child independently of milk and someone that you think is better at settling a child or your child. Obviously it wasn't forced, but it's a nice thing that happens every Saturday. (interview 27, New Dads)

For some dads, especially those with very young babies, the program was the first time they had taken their child out by themselves. One father talked about how important attending the program had been in developing his confidence in his parenting skills. This dad described how nervous he had been the first time he had brought his child to the New Dads group by himself:

I suppose it was the second week when we had to come on our own with [our children] and I was really a bit apprehensive about doing that at first. And my partner left me at 9.30 (am) and I had to get him all prepared and put him in bed and put him to sleep. And I suppose it got to 10.00 and he hadn't slept and I was like, "Oh, I don't know if I can go. I don't know if I can handle this". And then I got him in the car and was on my way here and it was an amazing feeling actually because I hadn't felt that I'd been with [my son] on my own. ... There had always been my partner and so it was great to experience that the feeling of just me and him on our own, and I could actually do it. (interview 30, New Dads)

Another father felt that he would not have had the empowering experience of looking after his baby on his own had he not taken part in the program:

I wouldn't have experienced it otherwise, or maybe it would have been a lot later in [my son's] life. But at this early stage I wouldn't have really chosen to go out on my own for a couple of hours and spend it with other people—just me, him and other people. I would have always gone with family. (interview 30, New Dads)

### *Father-child bonding and having an impact child development*

Having developed confidence to spend time with their babies by themselves appeared to lead fathers to a greater awareness of the role they could play in their children's lives. Men talked

about how caring for their child by themselves gave them opportunities to bond, build strong relationships and play a greater role in their child's development:

I just think it's because something ... you want as a father is to be confident with your children by yourself and not have to worry about having someone there all the time. I mean, it's good to have that confidence when they are at this age so you have ... great time to bond with them. And obviously when you are by yourself ... you are bonding with them. (interview 12, New Dads)

This father went on to talk about the pleasure he experienced at seeing his daughter respond to him because he had spent more time with her:

She actually smiles at me and is happy to see me now, whereas before she'd only get those responses with her mother. ... Now I get the same responses, so she obviously recognises being with me and sort of having fun with me a lot more now. (interview 12, New Dads)

When asked what difference learning to care for his baby by himself might make in the future, another father replied that he felt it gave him a greater opportunity to influence the development of his daughter:

Well hopefully we'll see a difference in the characteristics of [my daughter]. You know, I'm hoping that the male values and emotions and ways of looking at things will be passed on and you know I'm fairly sure that they will. So hopefully that will show in the child that's gonna grow into a great human being, you know. (interview 27, New Dads)

Feeling confident in their parenting and an increased awareness of the contribution they could make to their child's care and development seemed to help some men to internalise their identity as "dad" to a greater extent and become more emotionally invested in that identity:

In terms of being a dad, I suppose that feeling that I am actually a dad and also for him, I suppose, that we get a chance to be together and for his wellbeing as well. ... I know I can do it and I've got the confidence that I can go out for a few hours with him and everything's going to be fine and we'll have fun together. (interview 30, New Dads)

### *Reassurance about parenting practices*

Four fathers—two in the New Dads program, one in a Preschool program, and another in a Primary School program—talked about how they valued their participation in the groups because it gave them an opportunity to listen to the experiences of other fathers. This provided them with reassurance about their own parenting practices:

I feel a lot happier with our own, with my children. Like, listening to some of the other fathers and that, I feel like I'm happy within myself with how I'm bringing up my kids. (interview 34, Preschool)

Similarly, another father felt that while the program had not led to major change:

I think it's been a bit of reassurance and meeting other people in similar situations. I don't think we're doing anything sort of radically different. (interview 28, New Dads)

### **Fathers' perspectives 12–16 weeks after program completion**

Increased confidence remained a salient theme for half of the nineteen fathers who took part in follow-up interviews. Fathers continued to report that the most significant change emerging from their participation in the FUN for Kids program was that they felt more comfortable spending time with their child without their partner, and that the program had increased their sense of competence and closeness to their children:

[The] most important thing was to get out with [my son] ... and feel that I could actually ... do something with him for a couple of hours and not having [my partner] with me holding my hand and showing me the way. (interview f5, New Dads)

Fathers also reiterated that spending time with their children made them feel like they were building a better relationship with them. Several men said that because they felt more confident to be with their children by themselves, this would bring them closer to their daughters (interviews f12 and f13, New Dads).

The men continued to feel reassured about their parenting from having attended FUN for Kids and talking with and listening to other dads. One father described the benefits as a “reality check—I am doing okay” (interview f10, Primary School). Another dad said that after going to the program he felt:

satisfaction in the way that I get along with my children. Hearing other fathers talk about their issues/problems made me feel confident in my own parenting. (interview f14, Preschool)

The only additional theme to emerge during the follow-up interviews came from a new father who related the educational component of the program to his increased confidence in interactions with his child. Learning a little more about babies:

had an impact. Right from day one they had an impact and I think, apart from the confidence, it's just being a little bit more relaxed about it; saying, “Well, okay, I am in a go-ahead position to run and grab ... run around the room and play with her, without thinking I am playing too hard, am I doing the right thing ... should I be following a sleep and eating program”. And I have suddenly interrupted by running into the house going, “Yeah, dad's home, play time”, which is okay ... There are guidelines and things, but being able to know [that] if I screw it up for one day it's no big deal. ... The child and interaction with the child is more important than her sticking to a regimented sleeping program. (interview f19, New Dads)

### Partners' perspectives

Four women whose partners had participated in the New Dads program also felt the men had gained an increased confidence in their parenting. One woman talked about how her partner was already confident in his parenting skills, but that attending the program had helped to reinforce the fact he was doing a good job:

Just reinforcing that it is a positive role to be involved in and that he was doing a really good job. It was kind of a “Oh, OK, so I am doing really well and I am really enjoying it and it's valid”. Not that he thought it was invalid—I guess it sort of validates it even more for him. (interview p1, New Dads)

Women also appreciated how the program had provided men with opportunities to take children out by themselves that otherwise they may have missed out on. Going out alone with their child helped dads to recognise their own competence as caregivers and, in turn, build confidence. One woman thought the program was “sensational”:

Because it provided an opportunity for him to do that, whereas prior to that we had always been on family trips and family outings because there has been no purpose for him to venture out to anything on his own capacity. So I'd always been there. And it was just an opportunity where he went on his own and obviously had the opportunity to build his own confidence with spending time with our daughter and also being able to get out of the house and go somewhere on their own. (interview p3, New Dads)

Another woman responded similarly:

I think in the end the useful thing was he actually took our daughter by himself and I think that has given him confidence. (interview p2, New Dads)

However, she continued to say:

But it didn't last at all, it was only for those times actually during the program that he had plans to take her out by himself and [after] all this never actually did it. (interview p2, New Dads)

This comment raises questions about whether a program such as FUN for Kids can lead to fathers increasing the time they spend with children and taking a greater share of child care responsibilities. It may be that despite feeling good about their ability to care for their children, and the fact that FUN for Kids provided them with an organised space in which to recognise their competence, there are other barriers preventing men from taking a more active role in child care and childrearing.

### **Service providers'/program facilitators' perspective**

All the facilitators and service providers said that building confidence in fathers was a key aspect of the FUN for Kids program. One service provider responded:

I think it would probably just give them a little bit of courage in terms of knowing that they're either on the right track, or if they are not on the right track that they've got the power to change ... and to find out more information and become better educated about different issues and just mainly confirm to themselves that they are not doing such a bad job ... and, you know, just take a little bit of heart from that and, yeah, ... almost celebrate the parenting. (interview service provider 2)

A program facilitator discussed how men gained confidence through meeting and talking to other fathers, and that this often led them to:

realising all dads have similar problems and that often their child/children's behaviour was "fixable" [and this] seemed to hearten many apprehensive dads. (interview facilitator 3)

The expectation was that men would gain confidence from participating in FUN for Kids through confirmation of their competence as parents, realisation that other fathers faced similar issues, and through the provision of information and education.

## **Theme 2: Relationship building and communication with children**

### **Fathers' perspectives during the program**

Although bonding and relationship building were associated with increased confidence among new fathers, it also emerged thematically in the context of spending quality time with children and enhancing ways in which to communicate with and respond to children. Sub-themes that emerged from interviews with the fathers during the programs related to being together and having quality time, starting relationships with children early and being more involved in their lives, and listening and responding to children.

#### ***Being together and having quality time***

Particularly for men in the New Dad's program, FUN for Kids provided fathers and their children with a space in which they could spend time together and develop their relationship. One father felt that the main change from attending the program was that it:

gave me a chance to spend one-on-one time with [my daughter], which is a good thing. I try and spend as much time as I can, but working five or six days a week it just gets tight. So that aspect of it's been very good. (interview 25, New Dads)

Another dad talked about how the program had offered an opportunity for him to spend quality time with his child and to develop their relationship independently of his partner and family:

I was in a routine whereby mum was heavily involved in spending quality time with our child, and I would get involved as part of the family rather than developing an individual relationship. (interview 6, New Dads)

Being provided with an organised space in which to engage with their children benefited these fathers, who felt that work commitments and the greater traditional involvement of women in the care of infants were barriers to their ability to spend one-on-one time with their babies.

### *Starting early and having increased involvement*

Following on from this theme, new dads also felt that spending time together with their children would help to build strong “foundations” for their future relationship with their child:

I guess on an ongoing basis, having sort of kick-started in the early stage—my child is four months, just over four months old—you are laying a great foundation so that everything sort of comes from this, is on the right path, or you hope it is on the right path. (interview 1, New Dads)

Similarly, another father responded:

I think it will give me a stronger relationship with my child in the long run just because I am developing a much stronger relationship now rather than trying to develop that relationship in two years’ time when I feel they are more independent ... I am actually playing with her more and building that relationship now, so I think it will mean a stronger relationship in the future, which will benefit all round. (interview 12, New Dads)

Men participating in the Primary School program also talked about how attending the program was an opportunity to spend more time with their children. For one father, the program was a way of increasing his involvement in his daughter’s life, as he felt that attending her school was a way of showing her that he cared (interview 17, Primary School). A second father in this group also said he felt that attending the program at the school had increased his involvement in his child’s life and that his daughter had noticed this too:

[My daughter] has actually mentioned it: “Oh gee, it’s really good that now you have come to my school a few more times”. So that’s a positive. (interview 15, Primary School)

Another father felt that the program had helped him to become more focused on interacting with his children (interview 16, Primary School). A father who was separated from his children’s mother especially valued the program as a good activity in which he could attend and spend quality time with his children (interview 7, Primary School).

### *Listening and responding to children*

The program led many men to think about how they were interacting with their children and ways in which they could respond to them better or differently. This was a particularly salient theme for men in the primary school group. Additionally, one new dad talked about how the program had given him a chance to think about his own upbringing and the parenting techniques he wanted to adopt from his own experiences as a child, as well as how he wanted to do some things differently (interview 13, New Dad).

In the Primary School programs, men talked about building better relationships with their children through learning strategies for improving their interactions. Some of them said that an important aspect of the program was learning ways to communicate effectively with their children. Men felt that they were better equipped to have more positive relationships with their children through learning about listening and being more patient, improving their responses to challenging child behaviours, and generally through thinking more about and evaluating their own parenting approaches:

I just think the communicating with the kids and just listening to them and, yeah, just paying more attention to their opinions and thoughts and things. ... Oh it just helps in our relationship with the kids and, yeah, just a two-way street sort of thing. (interview 22, Primary School)

Another father became more aware of how the way he interacted with his child could have a positive or negative impact:

It gave me a few different options to explore too, in ways to sort of react to their bad behaviour or whatever that may have been. ... What I learnt in the program, just the impact that certain behaviours have on your kids and certain types of communication

and that sort of thing, just how you can negatively impact their lives, just in a couple of simple words really. (interview 24, Primary School)

Other men felt the program was useful because:

I think it was just learning the different ways to communicate with the kids. Like, my son, he's competitive so he's got to win at all costs, so that makes it hard. But just different things they showed during the program with how to handle kids and make it more fun and try and not to make it as competitive. That's probably the biggest part of it. (interview 8, Primary School)

The difference the whole program's made is ... I think it would be the attitude "talk with the kids rather than at the kids". ... Sort of try to be a little bit calmer with them when they're not necessarily doing what you want them to do. ... Whether that's made any difference yet, I don't know. I'll tell you when they turn 21. (interview 20, Primary School)

The program helped these men to reflect on how they could enhance their communication with their children. For the fathers, this often related to improving their approach to discipline. Dads reported:

Hopefully they'll be a little bit more calmer in their approach to things than I have been in the past. (interview 20, Primary School)

Probably makes you sit down and have a look at your picture from outside the square or circle or whatever, and makes you evaluate what you are doing, what you have done, how you are doing it. Instead of growling at the kids and things, sit back and think—is it deserved criticism or growling, or can you reward them and praise them a bit more, which we don't do as a rule. ... I suppose I have probably realised that my attitude or opinion has been my view or side of things. I haven't taken the kids' point of view, and they are only kids, etc. (interview 23, Primary School)

I think just the, I suppose, when I felt the kids needed to be disciplined I would take more time. I wouldn't just blurt out they were in trouble. (interview 24, Primary School)

Participating in FUN for Kids helped some dads to reflect on and evaluate how they were interacting with their children and ways in which they could enhance their relationships through more effective listening and communication and learning better ways to respond and react.

### **Fathers' perspectives 12–16 weeks after program completion**

After the completion of the FUN for Kids program some fathers continued to feel that communication skills and better relationships with their children were the most important changes they had experienced. New fathers spoke more directly about relationship building, with one responding that the program had helped him in "becoming closer to my little girl" (interview f6, New Dads), while for men with children at primary school, "reconnecting with kids" (interview f10, Primary School) and being more involved in their lives was pertinent.

Men felt that learning different parenting approaches was useful in enhancing their relationships with their children. This often related to how fathers communicated with children and responded to children's difficult behaviour: "I might be more ... patient ... I won't fly off the handle so quickly with the kids" (interview f4, Primary School).

One father spoke about how he had learnt that everyday activities could be useful in building a better relationship with his children. He felt that better communication was emerging from "thinking of ways to include kids in everyday activities and using the opportunity for learning" (interview f10, Primary School).

An important aspect of the program was that it gave dads and children a reason to spend time together. Fathers felt that increased involvement was a pathway to a strong interpersonal relationship. One father attending the Primary School program felt that the most significant

change for him was that FUN for Kids helped him to give his oldest child more one-on-one time:

I have got three children now ... so it was an excuse to do something exclusively with him because as the oldest child sometimes he misses out a little bit—a bit more attention on the younger ones. So any time you have got an excuse to do something just with them it's really nice. (interview f1, Primary School)

### Partners' perspectives

Relationship building and communicating was not as significant a theme of the FUN for Kids program for partners as it was for fathers. The women tended not to talk as much about ways in which the program had impacted on the father–child relationship. However, two women did recount that it helped to develop the relationship between father and child: one said it helped to “build their relationship” (interview p5, New Dads), and the other said it “helps with the development of the relationship between father and children” (interview p6, Preschool).

### Service providers'/program facilitators' perspectives

All participating facilitators and service providers discussed the ways in which the programs could strengthen fathers' relationships with their family, especially through giving them a chance to reflect. One service provider said:

I think that in today's society everything is so hurried and rushed that more and more people are reactive rather than proactive and I think it's a chance for people to actually plan and reflect and, you know, to almost look forward. And they've analysed maybe their situation and here is some information about how they can go forward and then have the opportunity to take a little bit more control. (interview service provider 2)

A second service provider reported that parenting skills can assist fathers to build positive relationships within the family:

Fathers can sometimes be left out of the loop. This program contributes to building parenting skills for them which in turn contributes, builds strengths within the family and has a ripple effect in the community. (interview service provider 1)

One of the program facilitators talked about how the programs could lay the foundations for more father involvement in children's education:

Many dads seemed more comfortable either in the kinder or the school with their kids. I hope that they could keep making a difference by continuing to grow positive and constructive relationships with kids and the kinder/school. (interview facilitator 1)

The FUN for Kids programs provides fathers with an organised space in which to think and learn about their parenting. Service providers and facilitators anticipated that engaging with this space would encourage men to interact with their children in more conscious ways. In turn, it was hoped that participation in the program would lead to enhanced outcomes for families and communities, and greater ongoing father involvement in children's schools and education.

## Theme 3: Building parenting skills

### Fathers' perspectives during the program

Helping children develop numeracy skills was a central focus of the FUN for Kids Primary School and Preschool programs, and many men talked directly about how their most significant change related to learning specific skills to assist in their children's education. New Dads tended to focus more upon how it was useful to learn general parenting skills, as well as specific skills like CPR and baby massage. Helping children to learn and learning parenting skills were the two sub-themes that emerged from the interviews.

### *Helping children learn*

Men attending the Primary School programs felt that the FUN for Kids program had made them more aware of the different ways they could assist their children in their educational development. One father talked about how he had realised that it was not difficult to incorporate education into everyday activities:

I think to be aware of interacting with the kids everyday and once you can actually teach them and when you think about it, without too much effort ... I think it gives you a bit more awareness of when you're with the kids, to use the time to talk about stuff that's educational. (interview 19, Primary School)

Another dad found that helping kids learn could be fun:

It's fun trying to organise activities for the two of them, but now, yeah, I have got a better idea—and I didn't have an idea. I guess the other thing [it's] given is a sense of where maybe the kids should be at, because you don't really know. (interview 15, Primary School)

The men learned that mathematics wasn't just limited to the classroom and could be taught in different ways:

For me because it just opened my eyes ... from my perspective in the fact that it's allowed me to see things in a different light and it's opened up my idea of what mathematics can be ... which is a good thing. (interview 9, Primary School)

Providing men with more information and ideas about how they could be involved in their children's education made some fathers more aware of different activities in which they could engage their children. Some fathers tried out at home specific activities from the FUN for Kids program, like a coin-counting exercise:

I suppose that trying to do your homework is an important thing, so I guess I tried probably two or three times to sort of come up with a numeracy issue to talk about, yeah. So we worked out some coin change and counted up to a dollar. I don't think I floated any of the other ideas. (interview 14, Primary School)

The most important aspect of doing this activity for this father was not that he was teaching maths but that it made him think about how he was interacting with his daughter:

Well, I suppose it forced me, instead of just going through a daily routine dealing with dinner and a bit of a play and TV negotiations, it forced me to find something outside of the box to talk about. [My daughter] also happens to like money, so having a little bit of a play with money, just a little extra thing in her day. (interview 14, Primary School)

### *Learning parenting skills*

Some men saw learning general parenting skills as well as more specific skills as useful. Two fathers talked about how attending the programs had had a holistic effect on their outlook on parenting:

I think it will improve my parenting, the way I approach numeracy and parents, just generally parenting. (interview 33, Preschool)

It opened my eyes more on what a father's role should be in his child's life. (interview 5, New Dads)

Other dads mentioned the benefit of learning CPR (interview 28, New Dads), and baby massage (interview 2, New Dads).

The FUN for Kids programs built up fathers' skills in a number of domains. While for some men a change in their outlook on parenting was their most significant change, others found more use in learning specific skills or learning about ways they could be more actively involved in their children's educational development.

## Fathers' perspectives 12–16 weeks after program completion

The logic behind educating fathers about the role they can play in their children's educational development is that providing men with ideas and skills will help them to be engaged and active in their children's learning over time. This was effective for some men, who continued to think about how they could include educational aspects in their interactions with their children after the programs had ended.

One of the New Dads said he had learnt:

to make any time with the kids not just quality time, but educational and fun, rewarding. (interview f7, New Dads)

When he was asked why this was a significant change for him, this father replied:

Because it has to do with kid's development, which is really important for the future. (interview f7, New Dads)

Educational activities were also another thing dads and kids could do together, and this could help build stronger relationships:

Yeah, look, I guess I learnt that just simple things can teach kids a lot and I guess the only thing, I suppose, is doing these sort of educational things also maybe assists your relationship with your kids ... Good for you and them [in future], probably encourage me to be a bit more proactive in things with the kids. (interview f2, Primary School)

Another father in the Primary School program talked about how he had continued:

thinking of ways to include kids in everyday activities and use the opportunity for learning. (interview f10, Primary School)

Through thinking about the role they could play as an educator in the lives of their children these men were thinking about both enriching day-to-day activities and interactions, and contributing to building good relationships and bright futures.

## Partners' perspectives

None of the partners interviewed felt specific or general skills were the most significant change to emerge from men's involvement with the FUN for Kids programs. Two of the partners commented that it was good that the men had learnt CPR (interviews p4 and p5, New Dads). Another felt that baby massage was useful to learn (interview p4, New Dads).

One mother, whose child and partner had participated in the Preschool program, talked about skills at length but she felt it was her son not her husband who had changed. While he was attending the program with his dad, her son had suddenly started counting things (such as house numbers). This mother felt that FUN for Kids had "helped him with development. Yeah, very big keen interest in it definitely" (interview p6, Preschool). Her husband had enjoyed it too: "He didn't stop talking about it", she said. However, she also felt that the things he was excited by were things she had already been doing with their son:

A lot of the things he found we had already just implemented on a daily basis ourselves ... As far as, like, when I go shopping with them, you know, I say, "OK, who can find the bananas? OK, can you go and pick me three bananas?" Sort of, things like that. I know he mentioned a lot about those type of things ... That was things I guess already mostly implemented. So, yeah, they are only a few things. ... Yeah, very keen and interested in it. Yeah, both of them. (interview p6, Preschool)

Another women spoke about how her partner's new skills would be particularly useful if she went back to work or if they had more children:

Well, it might make it easier if we have other children that he will be able to handle one and I could handle the other. Make life easier I guess ... and you know I haven't gone back to work, but if I did ... juggle a lot more household duties and children

responsibilities, it would probably mean he could take them on or ... I'd tell him to take them on. (interview p5, New Dads)

### Service providers'/program facilitators' perspectives

In interviews, program facilitators and service providers focused more on the provision of information and education than on building specific skills. One facilitator discussed how the programs offered dads an opportunity to talk about and try out different parenting styles:

Many times, fathers talked about stuff that their fathers did that they were not happy with, [like their] parenting style/discipline, but they often said, "What's the alternative?" The dads during the sessions often had opportunity to hear, test out, or learn about some positive alternatives, mostly from other dads. (interview facilitator 1)

## Theme 4: Networking with other fathers

### Fathers' perspectives during the program

For many participants, being able to meet other dads in their local area was the most important part of the FUN for Kids program. Men spoke about how this enabled them to share their experiences and ideas, listen to other people's stories and to generally connect with other fathers. Participants also discussed how the programs were useful for meeting new people and feeling more involved in the community. Some fathers were keen to continue to meet after the end of the programs.

#### *Sharing experiences and stories*

The discussion-based format of the programs gave participants the chance to share their experiences with other dads. Men from the New Dads, Preschool and Primary School groups all spoke about the importance of sharing experiences and listening to the stories of others. Talking through issues and sharing similar experiences promoted feelings of solidarity among the fathers and helped some dads to "normalise" their own experience of parenthood. FUN for Kids gave fathers:

a chance to talk to other dads who are experiencing the same sort of things as what I'm going through as well. So I think that's been a big help. (interview 25, New Dads)

Other dads discussed how:

it's nice to know that you're experiencing the same sorts of ups and downs and fun times and tough times as other dads. (interview 16, Primary School)

most people are going through the same thing. It's just a little bit easier to discuss it more easily and readily. Some things aren't quite dinner-time or meal-time discussion topics. (interview 20, Primary School)

I think it was more an exposure to other ideas, other people's experiences, I think, that was for me the most valuable outcome. Just [that] it's always handy to see how others perceive their own perspectives on parenting, as well as the historical aspect, I think, was interesting as well as different. (interview 35, Preschool)

Another man brought ideas about sharing experiences together with notions of community building:

Just actually getting the feedback from other dads, I guess, about things they might do or experiences they've had. And just those things are in the back of your head or maybe pushed forward a bit, so you think, "Oh, I might try that or, you know, and I guess ... you are like 50 metres away from where I live and, you know, oh, your kid is in the same grade as me". It's good in that regard. Regardless [of] the numeracy or the literacy or whatever the program was, it's not secondary but it's more like they are just as important really—it's part of the package. Just get people involved with their kids and schools and kids in general. I thought it was really good, the most enjoyable session for me was when we were ... just listening to other people. We could have

gone for hours ... really just introduce yourself and your kids and you know ... [I'm] interested in what other people do with their kids or how they think they are travelling and think, actually, everyone pretty much thinks the same, don't they (interview 15, Primary School)

### *Community involvement*

Other men also discussed the benefit of meeting other fathers and the significance of community involvement, both in the neighbourhood and in the school or preschool community. Some of the participants were new to the area and valued the opportunity to meet new people. Fathers also mentioned that it was good to come into contact with a diverse group of people.

Network building was seen as important for fathers and children:

[It's] helpful for myself and the rest of the family living in a community that we'll know more people, so my son can get to know more people because I know more people. Yeah, just greater community involvement I think. (interview 18, Primary School)

When asked what difference this has made and might make in the future, this father replied:

Just enrich our lives a bit I think. You know, the more people you know, the more chances there are of meeting people that you really like or just get a lot of benefits out of I think, socially, yeah. (interview 18, Primary School)

Another father talked about how he valued having the opportunity to meet a diverse group of people:

It's more to do with the opportunity of networking with others, especially others who would not normally be in the group of people that you would ordinarily meet in a day-to-day circumstance. So I think the diversity of the individuals is where the real opportunity lies. (interview 35, Preschool)

Some felt that they already had enough male friends but that the programs were a good way of involving men in the lives of their community and their children:

I feel like I have enough networks with other males and good close guy friends that I can talk to really quite meaningfully and I think that's something that men should do but don't really do, and I suppose something like this is the kick start for that sort of thing to happen. ... You sort of get people involved in their kids' lives and kind of get them involved in the community, rather than just staying at home and watching TV and veging out. ... So I think the difference it could make is a better community, better society, you know. (interview 17, Primary School).

Several dads indicated that they would like to attend an ongoing fathers' group with the other men they had met at FUN for Kids:

A good thing would be if the dads meet on a regular basis. I guess that's a good thing to create networks and meet people, so that aspect would be a significant thing. ... I think the best thing would be to create a friendship with other dads. I think that would be important, it would be good for me. (interview 25, New Dads)

Well, yeah, I am hoping that the program will continue. I am hoping, well, all the guys out there seem pretty keen to sort of continue with a fathers' group type thing. So, yeah, I am hoping that we can sort of get together, either once a week or, if not, at least a couple of times a month and just get together and share our experiences with each other and spend time with our babies. And, yeah, I am hoping it will continue a good relationship that I have with [my daughter] and help me be a better father, I guess. And help me know the other guys in the community and in the local area and just, um, yeah, it's hard to explain, but just be more involved in the community with [my daughter] because these kids are probably kids she is growing up with. It is good to know the dads and know the kids so I can sort of participate in this. (interview 2 New Dads)

We're new to the area, so I'm not sure if this is going to give me some sort of group or continuing network of people coming out of it. I think that would be good. ... I think meeting people in the local area and hopefully continuing relationships and out of that a broader support network is probably a potential benefit coming out of it. ... I think if the father's group continues as a networking group—which I think it will or certainly we've met a few people in the next street from us and that sort of thing—so I think there will be some ongoing relationships coming out of it. (interview 28, New Dads)

FUN for Kids programs were seen as a good opportunity to build social networks, get to know more people in the local area and feel more involved in the school and general community. The FUN for Kids program also gave men a genuine opportunity to meet other fathers and share stories and common experiences. This built a solidarity that some men wanted to maintain by continuing to meet with other participants as an ongoing fathers' group.

### **Fathers' perspectives 12–16 weeks after program completion**

Reflecting on the FUN for Kids program after its completion, men continued to speak about how much they valued the opportunity to network with other fathers.

One dad explained that his participation in the New Dads program was a unique opportunity to talk about issues with other men:

Dads don't in general voice their things as much, voice issues and chat about them, but in an environment where you almost have to drag information out of somebody ... give the opportunity to open up in amongst a male environment. Yeah, look that was good. We perhaps said things we may not have, had our partners been there. I know I wouldn't have. There was probably a few things that I probably wouldn't have ... so that by itself was a self journey as well. (interview f19, New Dads)

That fathers valued being able to share experiences and stories continued to be a significant theme in follow-up interviews. Men found the experience of solidarity with other fathers reassuring:

Well, just being a new father, I think it was important to sort of get together with other fathers and just share the experience, the new experiences, and it was reassuring that you are not the only one that's dealing with the different issues. (interview f18, New Dads)

Another father who had a preschool-aged child responded similarly:

Realising that I am not the only one in that boat, that was a real realisation for me which I thought was good. (interview f3, Primary School)

Meeting other fathers through the FUN for Kids programs promoted a sense of connection to community and this remained salient for some men after the programs ended. One father said he gained from the program a “sense of belonging to school community—especially dads' community” (interview f10, Primary School). Another spoke about how:

it was just a good experience and I got to meet another couple of dads that I otherwise wouldn't have. So there is a couple of people I now say g'day to and have a chat with that otherwise I would walk past because I don't know who they are. (interview f1, Primary School)

It should be noted that although men talked about feeling more connected to other fathers and to their local community, the follow-up interviews did not provide any indication that these feelings translated into actions and that men were socialising or meeting up with other fathers they had met at FUN for Kids.

### **Partners' perspectives**

Women felt that one of the most important aspects of FUN for Kids for their partners was that it enabled them to meet other fathers. Several mothers felt that it was good for their partners to

be able to share experiences because that was something men rarely do (Interviews p4 and p5, New Dads).

Woman also talked about how it was good that the men had had the opportunity to expand their personal networks and interact with other parents:

to share your experiences with some other parents. Not that we have kept in touch with any of them, but you might see them around or ... just for the fathers to be able to share some of their experiences. (interview p5, New Dads group)

I think it was just sort of becoming aware or knowing some of the other dads around the area. Yeah, he was already very involved in the fathering parenting sort of role, so yeah, just giving him a bit more of a network and seeing other dads doing the same thing, I guess. Well we were new to the area, so we didn't have very many contacts otherwise, and so yeah, I guess it gave him that network that I had already established a bit through mothers' group. But it sort of expanded on it in that sense (interview p1, New Dads)

Well, and I think it's a really good avenue for guys to get together and it's nice to open up friendships in the area so that you have got other sort of people that you can speak to about your child and you are both going through similar things. (interview p4, New Dads)

### **Service providers'/program facilitators' perspectives**

That men were able to share their experiences with other fathers was an important aspect of the program for facilitators and service providers. For example, one of the service providers discussed how the program:

provides a forum for fathers to get together and talk about being a dad—generally, time with mates is for sport/work. Validates, normalises feelings and experiences in a safe environment—supportive. (interview service provider 1)

One of the participating facilitators talked about how much the men valued meeting other dads:

The most consistent feedback I heard was that they said it was great to hear another dads' experience, often for the first time. (interview facilitator 1)

## **Theme 5: Giving partners a break from parenting duties**

### **Fathers' perspectives during the program**

The theme of “giving partners a break” emerged from interviews with participants in the New Dads program. Some men felt that the most significant change emerging from attending the FUN for kids program was that it gave their partners an opportunity to have some time for themselves. Some men saw this as a corollary of their new confidence in their ability to take their child out by themselves. For others, it was more that going to the FUN for Kids program gave them a reason to go out with their baby each Saturday morning.

Dads suggested that as a result of the program they would be able to continue to take their child out by themselves and give their partner a break. As one father reported: “there's the break that mum gets on Saturday morning which I think will continue” (interview 27, New Dads). Another father talked about how the program had:

been a benefit for [my partner] as well, because she doesn't have to worry about the fact that I am going to say, “No, I don't want to be left with the baby”. (interview 12, New Dads)

Other men talked about how they liked having a reason to go out on Saturday mornings with their baby and that partners also enjoyed having some free time.

I think the good thing about the program was the fact that it's somewhere to go on a Saturday morning which gives you a bit of structure to ensure you do leave the house

and so my wife gets a break. ... I'm quite happy to do it. I think I'd be equally as happy to go and get a coffee somewhere with a couple of people that had babies or just whatever [and] read the paper just to give her a break. (interview 26, New Dads)

For another father, Saturday mornings were a time his partner could do something for herself:

It's also giving my wife a chance to go out riding on her bike on a Saturday morning, but I think she may have done that anyway. (interview 29, New Dads)

These men were aware of the unequal distribution of the parenting "work" in their relationships, and were happy to have an opportunity to give their partner some time for themselves.

### **Fathers' perspectives 12–16 weeks after program completion**

Two fathers from the New Dads groups mentioned in follow-up interviews that the program had been useful in that it allowed them to give their partners a break (interviews f5 and f13, New Dads). One said it gave his partner some "freedom": "I suppose it's given [my partner] some freedom at times ... so its taken a little bit of weight off her shoulders" (interview f5, New Dads). The other said: "My wife has been able to have 'her time', knowing that I would be fine with my daughter" (interview f13, New Dads).

### **Partners' perspectives**

Only one partner who was interviewed said that the program was good because it gave her some free time away from her baby (interview p5, New Dads), suggesting women generally valued other aspects of the program more.

## **Theme 6: Things to improve**

### **Fathers' perspectives during the program**

In both the initial and the follow-up interviews, fathers had a lot of suggestions as to how the programs could be improved. Suggestions included expanding the program to better serve the client group. Other comments concerned the content of the course, its presentation and how well it met its stated aims. A final sub-theme related to assumptions about parenting presented in the program. Men's perceptions about what could be improved, as well as what they liked and did not like about FUN for Kids, were very diverse, and at times conflicting. This is because opinions about the program were shaped by subjective expectations and priorities, which differed broadly across the groups.

#### *Expanding the program*

This sub-theme related to program reach, program attendance and the length and number of sessions contained in the program.

Some fathers raised questions about whether FUN for Kids was reaching men who really needed to enhance their parenting. One father commented that it is fathers who are already confident in their parenting that are likely to attend programs like FUN for Kids:

It's probably more likely there'll be people who are fairly comfortable in their role as parents and taking an active supporting role in their partner already who are likely to participate in programs like this. (interview 26, New Dads)

Others felt that more men needed to be attracted to the program:

Maybe, look, it would be better obviously to have a few more dads here. I don't know how they'd do that—whether they'd promote it a bit more verbally through other dads who have done it. (interview 33, Preschool)

Another father talked about how the program needed to be better funded and operating in more locations:

I think the program is very under-funded and not very widespread or accessible in Melbourne as a resource. (interview 26, New Dads)

A number of participants commented on the difficulty of fitting the program content into the short time available. One felt sessions needed to be longer: “We would be just getting into something really juicy and your time was up” (interview 20, Primary School). While another father wanted: “More sessions, as I got a lot out of them” (interview 17, Preschool).

### *Program content*

Views on the content of FUN for Kids were split between men who wanted more structure and those who wanted more time for unstructured interactions with other fathers. Some dads wanted the program to be more skills-based and content-driven. One father commented that he: “would prefer a more syllabus-orientated structure” (interview 35, Preschool). Other fathers replied:

[It was] very nice talking to these dads and sharing our experiences about our fathers and all that, but that to me is men’s group, encounter group, psychoanalyst sort of stuff. Talking about women and finances and breakdowns and how our fathers treated us, that’s not why I was here. ... The amount of stuff we’ve actually spent on numeracy is miniscule. I’m really disappointed. Yeah, I’m quite angry actually. The whole thing has been an absolute shambles as far as utilising scarce parents’ time. After a long day at work ... I would like some, a lot more coherent, formal, disciplined structure because I just felt it’s been overwhelmingly a waste of time. (interview 32, Preschool)

I think a little bit of structure would be important and as far as involving the kids in an interactive session. ... Otherwise, it becomes more like a social. I don’t think it has got as much value. (interview 35, Preschool)

Two fathers (interviews 28 and 30, New Dads) felt that the program should have been more organised around the development of an ongoing fathers’ group. One said: “If the primary aim is to develop ongoing groups out of it, they could probably structure the actual introduction a bit more” (interview 28, New Dads).

Another father felt that the program should be more structured around the children and interactive activities between dads and kids:

I thought it was going to be interaction with the kids every week. That was a bit disappointing that the program was there to try and teach me something about a relationship with your children. (interview 36, Preschool)

On the other hand, other participants would have liked more time getting to know the other dads:

I think perhaps the only thing I might change is perhaps split the time between information-giving and socialising so there’s a little more socialising because, as I say, for me, the most important thing would be to try and build the network. (interview 29, New Dads)

Another reported:

I’d like to know a bit more about the other guys, what they do and maybe a bit more time. And when I say a bit more time, just to spend talking with the dads about, not necessarily about the kids stuff, but you know, it could lead to, that’s what I felt anyway, I’m interested in what they do. (interview 33, Preschool)

### *Assumptions about parenting*

Some fathers would have liked to have been told more about the ideas about parenting that informed the content of the program, and for the basis of these assumptions to be made more explicit:

It would be nice to know what the real facts are behind promoting a certain idea or assumption. (interview 27, New Dads)

Another father talked about how:

All teaching is based on a set of ideas which are current for a particular time. It's important to expand on what those are. I have got a fairly rich history in that I have worked and lived in a number of countries and that there are very different approaches used by very many people and I should say that all are successful in many ways and there isn't any pure single method. Whatever the method is that one is describing and let that method be first described and the structure towards facilitation should be something well known, more sort of a uni approach to problem solving. (interview 35, Preschool)

While some fathers wanted more structure and a more formal approach to education, this was exactly what put other men off. For example, one father said:

The only thing I didn't like was the video. ... [It] was a bit more classroom-like. It turned me off really. (interview 19, Primary School)

Diverse and at times conflicting comments on how the FUN for Kids Program could be improved reflects the heterogeneity of expectations, ideas about fathering and diversity of learning styles. While suggesting some issues that could be easily addressed, such as making more explicit the assumptions about parenting that inform the program, these responses also provide a salient reminder to service providers that, while programs need to be flexible enough to meet divergent needs, there is also a need to gauge and address participants' priorities and expectations.

### **Fathers' perspectives 12–16 weeks after program completion**

During follow-up interviews, men were asked to reflect on what they felt would improve FUN for Kids. Issues tended to relate to the client group of the program, program content and delivery and challenges in creating an ongoing fathers' group.

Scheduling was an important issue for several fathers, as they tried to fit attending FUN for Kids into already busy lives. Two men felt that the program sessions should be longer (interviews f9 and f17). One dad wanted: "more sessions, as I got a lot out of them" (interview f17, Preschool). Conversely, another dad thought it would be better to meet only every second week (interview f10, Primary School).

The client group the programs were reaching continued to be an issue for some fathers. Some fathers thought there was a problem with getting people to attend the program. One father felt that this problem lay in reaching those who would benefit most from attending FUN for Kids (interview f1, Primary School). Another described his own apprehensions about attending and suggested that a change of name might make the program more inviting:

I think the hardest thing was getting the dads to attend in the first place. I was very hesitant. I thought it was for "bad fathers", but I went as a couple of friends said they were going. I felt I should. But I'm glad I did attend. Firstly, drop the Relationships Australia name from the program, at least in the first meetings anyway. I think this is a scary word to some dads. Maybe "fun for dads", "fabulous fatherhood", "caring fathers club". First session with mums and kids, maybe get dads together in one room so they can get a real feel of the program. (interview f14, Preschool)

Participants made various suggestions about course content and delivery. One new dad would have liked the program to include more information that is practical: "Maybe something on how to handle babies, things like how breakable/unbreakable they are" (interview f12, New Dads). Another new dad suggested that there could be more activities with the children in the program, saying that he wanted: "more father and children tasks together" (interview f7, New Dads). A father who had attended the Numeracy for Preschoolers program felt that there needed to be more of a focus on numeracy: "Meeting with other dads was cool, but as the stated aim was to address numeracy, I was disappointed. ... Stick to the stated aims" (interview f15, Preschool). Among men in the Primary School group, one father thought the "video was bad" (interview f2, Primary School), while another felt that the presenter spoke too much (interview f11, Primary School).

Several New Dads spoke about how it had been difficult to form an ongoing fathers' group after the program ended. One father suggested that the program could offer more assistance with this: although his group had tried to meet up after the program had ended, this had not eventuated (interview f5, New Dads). Two fathers in another New Dads program also mentioned that their group had also tried to continue meeting but found it difficult to organise (interviews f18 and f19 New Dads). One of these fathers suggested that the program could have a follow-up session a few weeks or months after the program had finished to bring the dads back together again. This might, he felt, be a way to encourage the development of an ongoing group (interview f19, New Dads).

### Partners' perspectives

Partners also made suggestions about how FUN for Kids could be improved. The responses of mothers focused upon expanding FUN for Kids either to reach more people or to increase the duration of the programs. Women also talked about the structure and image of the program, as well as the need for better promotion.

Several comments were made about the need to increase the availability of the FUN for Kids program so that more dads could attend. For example:

I have spoken to so many people that are outside of our local community and all of them certainly wished that there was an opportunity like that extended to them and their families because there is so much focus put on the women and the mums in the family and not the fathers. And the changes it makes to them ... I thought it was very, very worthwhile. (interview p3, New Dads)

It would be great if they had more courses more sort of geographically placed for people to go or, if not, something they can increase the numbers and maybe even advertise it a bit better as well. ... I think it probably needs a bit more promotion and advertising. (interview p4, New Dads)

Women also talked about how the programs could have provided more facilitation for the formation of ongoing fathers' groups. One of the mothers thought the program should run for more weeks and so give the men more time to get to know each other. She felt that this would make the men more likely to continue to meet after the program had finished (interview p5, New Dads). Another mother felt that the men would have been better served by a course that was less content-based and more social:

We discussed a few times after the meetings that he had been to and also discussing it with some other dads who were at the group. I think they sort of felt it would have been [a] good opportunity just to chat, just to meet and really kind of get to know each other a bit and their kids. It was great that they had such an involved program and things to go to and a talking point, I suppose, for each week, but I think there was a feeling of just when they started to get to know each other it ended, or the session ended, or that they had to keep going with some formal part of it rather than just letting it go into informal chitchat and whatever. (interview p1, New Dads)

One woman's partner only went to the first two weeks of the FUN for Kids program. She said she wasn't sure why he had not continued; maybe it wasn't "blokey" enough for him. She reported:

I think it's a brilliant thing and I know that the other guys are still meeting. From some of the mums I know, they are still meeting every now and again ... for coffee, so I think it's a brilliant thing. I don't know how you would change the image that somebody would think, "Oh, not blokesy enough ... oh, what sort of blokes go there?" I think it's a brilliant idea. (interview p2, New Dads)

A few of the participants' partners felt the program could be advertised better. One mother, whose partner had only got into the course "through sheer persistence" (because the course was already fully booked), said that she was not sure how her partner found out about the program, but it could be advertised through the maternal and child health nurse (interview p4, New Dads).

Another woman, whose partner attended a Preschool program, found out about FUN for Kids through their child's kinder. She suggested that the program could be advertised in the paper to attract more dads (interview p6, New Dads).

### Service providers'/program facilitators' perspectives

Facilitators and service providers were also asked about what they thought could be done to improve the program. One felt that better advertising of the program would attract more dads:

I think maybe some better advertising of it. I mean, we certainly tried as hard as we could, but I think maybe if there was a capacity for funding to advertise a little bit better, it may help it get into people's psyche or whatever. Yeah, I think the whole thing is that people are busy and they have to almost, not hit on the head with it, but almost. (interview service provider 2)

### Interviews with children

The opinions were sought of children who attended FUN for Kids with their dads and were aged over eight years of age. Two primary-school-age boys took part in an interview conducted during the day at their school. The boys were asked if they enjoyed going to the program, what they liked best about it and what could be better. Children were also asked if they thought other kids and dads should go to FUN for Kids.

What was most important to the children was that they had fun at the program, played games and did activities and were able to interact directly with their dads.

The children said that they enjoyed going to the program. One said: "There is nothing I don't like about it" (interview c1). Both boys liked the activities, the games, and particularly the trip to a hardware store in the final week. Making a toolbox at the hardware store was one of the most memorable aspects of the program for these children and they had told other people about this experience after the program had ended. The boys said:

I liked it because you got to make toolboxes and then you got to play the games. (interview c1)

I liked going to Bunnings—that was pretty fun—and making things and there was playing snakes and ladders and playing card games ... and when we walked around Bunnings and saw what was there. And after we made the toolbox we looked around and saw how they could make those things and we were thinking about how they made it. (interview c2)

One of the boys said that going to FUN for Kids was a good opportunity to spend time with his dad. He said that he and his dad decided to go to the program so that they could spend more time together. He said that sometimes his dad has meetings or picks him up late and: "I don't get to see him much, so we thought this might be a good opportunity to just talk and play and have fun" (interview c2). This boy said he would recommend FUN for Kids to other children as a way to become closer to their dads: "I reckon it would be good with some people that maybe weren't so close to their dads might get a bit closer" (interview c2).

This boy felt that the best aspects of the program were the parts when kids got to interact directly with their dads and that it would be better to minimise other parts of the program that were not direct father-child activities. He felt that rather than having a structured activity like a board game on the first night of the program, the session should be more informal, with more direct interaction between dads and kids. Instead, he suggested that:

maybe on the first night, instead of having all the stuff, I reckon put that on the second last night, because at the start of the night you don't really get close to your dad on that night. (interview c.2)

This boy also suggested that the opportunity to mix with other dads and children should come at the end of the program:

I reckon put that [eating food and talking to dads and kids] on the last night so we could talk about all the things we did at the FUN for Kids thing. (Interview c2)

Both children said they thought other dads should take part in the FUN for Kids program. The boys said it was useful for dads to go because it would help them meet other people. When asked what other dads would get out of coming to the FUN for Kids program one child replied: “Like meeting people” (interview c1). The other child said:

I think they get to meet a lot of new dads ... and once they meet them if they see them down the street or something or in the video shop or anything they can talk and say, “Hey, remember about that FUN for Kids thing?” (interview c2)

This boy also said he would encourage other dads to go to the program, even though he didn’t know what dads did when they went without the children:

I’d encourage them because they sort of—I don’t know what they do on the dads’ night ... when it’s just dads—but I think when they come home or when my dad came home he was quite happy about what they did there, yeah. (interview c2)

This child also said it would be good if the program could be extended so mums could attend as well. Instead of making toolboxes with the mums on the last night, he suggested:

Maybe next year there should be one for mums too, the same thing but maybe on the last day you’d make like bracelets, or something sort of crafty. (interview c2)

Both children who were interviewed enjoyed going to FUN for Kids and liked the activities they did at the program. It was important to the children that they got to spend one-on-one time with their dads and both thought it was good for dads to go to the program because it helped them to meet more people. The children made some suggestions about what could be improved about FUN for Kids. For one child it was important that there be more direct dad and child activities and interaction. This child also suggested that it would be good if mums could also attend the program.

## Validation workshop

To explore the extent to which fathers’ accounts of their most significant change reflected the broader experience of FUN for Kids program participants, a validation workshop was held with four members of the Y Dads group. These men had attended the first FUN for Kids program four years ago and had formed an ongoing fathers’ group after its completion.

Participants were asked to comment on eight quotes gathered from FUN for Kids fathers in the interview stage of the evaluation. The quotes were selected by RAV service providers and were felt to capture the experience of FUN for Kids and its impact on participants.

### Change “stories”

The fathers who participated in the validation workshop could relate to at least some of the stories that were presented to them. Of the eight stories (see Appendix) presented to the Y Dads group at the validation workshop, three were selected as the most significant. Two participants chose Story three as being the most personally significant for them. The other participants identified Story one and Story six respectively. Participants then came together as a group to discuss their selections.

Themes relating to building confidence, networking, support and solidarity with other fathers, and building strong relationships with children were raised in the group discussion. This provides some validation of the analysis of the interview data, and suggests that the experiences of the current sample correspond in some way to the general experience of FUN for Kids participants.

### Story three

It’s nice to know that you’re experiencing the same sorts of ups and downs and fun times and tough times as other dads. (Primary School)

The unique male/father perspective on the experience of parenting was a compelling thread in the group discussion concerning the choice of this story. Workshop participants felt that dads needed opportunities to share their experiences and learn in an environment that catered to them as men, like women experience in mothers' groups. Two participants had attended mothers' groups and had noticed a difference between the two types of groups. The idea of "dads supporting dads" was considered important because "dads need different ways to communicate and learn". The experience of the local dads group (where dads were part of the same community) was also seen to contribute to improved relationships with children. The significance of this story appeared in part to be related to these men's experience as an ongoing group and their ability to reflect on their relationships over time.

### Story one

I think probably the biggest difference is the confidence [with] my child. Beforehand I was always very sort of dubious about spending time with [my daughter] when [my partner] wasn't around and being by myself with her. But now I am quite comfortable taking [my daughter] out and going places with her by myself, that's the biggest difference I think, and it's a huge difference. ... If [my partner] says "I want to go out and do some shopping"—before, it was a case of, "Oh does that mean I have got to be with the baby? Oh, do I have to look after her for sort of an hour or two?" Whereas now it's a case of, "Yeah, that's OK". It's been a benefit for her as well because she doesn't have to worry about the fact that I am going to say, "No, I don't want to be left with the baby". (New Dads)

This story was chosen by a participant who spoke of the way the program had provided an opportunity for him to gain confidence in being on his own with his child, helping them to develop a bond and positive relationship. He had also observed this experience in other dads. The group discussed how it was important that fathers come to recognise their own competence in caring for their children, and that this was an important part of building confidence. This in turn helped partners to accept that fathers could be on their own with their children. One dad mentioned the "relief that mothers feel when the burden is just not theirs".

### Story six

Many times, fathers talked about stuff that their fathers did that they were not happy with, [like their] parenting style/discipline, but they often said, "What's the alternative?" The dads during the sessions often had opportunity to hear, test out, or learn about some positive alternatives, mostly from other dads. (Facilitator)

This story was chosen because it encapsulated "elements of all other positives" such as confidence, involvement in parenting and improving the couple relationship. It represented an alternative to the "standard man's response" to fathering and this was important to at least one participant who had been very keen to be involved in parenting. The group reinforced this desire and gave him the experience and the practice of "dealing with all the issues that parents have with new babies". This participant compared his own situation with others who had attended the program and believed that while his partner supported him to be an active parent, he could see others who weren't supported as well; for example, "guys (whose) children are taken off them when they need to be changed—it's like they couldn't do things". He felt that he was able to support other dads in taking a more proactive role.

## Ranking indicators of change

The workshop participants were asked to rank in order of relevance (1 to 6) the indicators of change that they related to their personal experience of FUN for Kids. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3 Validation workshop exercise: Ranking of indicators of change

Most relevant areas of change	Rank (1 = highest)
<i>Engagement in child's social and academic competence (active engagement with the child and others in developing these skills in the child)</i>	1
<i>Caregiving (regarding child's emotional and physical health and appearance)</i>	2
<i>Father presence (engagement, accessibility and responsibility)</i>	3
<i>Cooperative parenting (caregivers establish a supportive relationship)</i>	4
<i>Father's healthy living (provide a role model of healthy lifestyle and appropriate behaviour)</i>	5
<i>Material and financial contribution</i>	6

The first and third items on the list (engagement and father presence) were each ranked by two participants as being the single most relevant area of change. When the scores were combined and weighted, the first two items (engagement and caregiving) received a similar and high overall relevance. The last two items were consistently ranked as less relevant areas of change.

In the group discussion, the justifications for the rankings suggest that the strength of the FUN for Kids program is that it provides opportunities for fathers to develop relationships with their children. It does this by providing a supportive environment where fathers can learn practical skills about child development, caregiving and parenting. This is consistent with the earlier thematic analysis; however, there is a strong emphasis given to confidence in the interviews. This theme of confidence cuts across skills development (parent and child), caregiving and family relationships.

The workshop participants reflected at length about their own experiences of the original FUN for Kids group and how it had impacted on their life. There were some comments made in the workshop that were not captured in the interview data. The participants spoke of a broader social affirmation and legitimacy that belonging to the group offered. The program provided opportunities for fathers to be with their children and take responsibility for them in a “practical” way.

## Parenting questionnaire

Data from the parenting questionnaire were used to provide an overview of men's involvement and relationship with their children, their confidence in parenting, the co-parental relationship and the extent to which fathers' support needs are met by partners and others.

As outlined in the methodology section, the questionnaire was distributed at three points in time: at the commencement of the program in session 1 or 2 (Time 1); in the final week of the program (Time 2); and 12–16 weeks after program completion (Time 3). All participants were given the option of completing the questionnaire, but due to the vagaries of program attendance and compliance with the research, the data available at each time point are not strictly comparable; that is, a different group of fathers completed the survey at each point in time. Indeed, of the 56 men who completed the questionnaire at time 1, 39 completed the questionnaire at time 2, and only 13 completed the questionnaire at Time 3.

These data are useful, however, in showing levels of parenting involvement, support and confidence at the commencement of the program, and how these aspects change from program commencement to program completion, and whether change is sustained several months after program completion.

Table 4 shows that, on commencement of the program, participants had generally positive co-parental and father–child relationships, relatively high levels of parenting responsibility, involvement and confidence, and relatively few unmet support needs. Although paired *t*-tests conducted at Time 1 and Time 2 ( $N = 39$ ), and at Time 1 and Time 3 ( $N = 13$ ) showed no significant differences at  $p < .05$ , there is an overall trend towards improvement on all aspects, especially in relation to the quality of the co-parental relationship and involvement in routine caregiving.

These findings concur with the interview data, in that participation in the FUN for Kids program was associated with greater confidence in performing routine care tasks independent of the child's mother, and more supportive co-parental relationships.

One potentially counter-intuitive finding was the trend towards feeling greater need for support and not being able to get it, at both Time 2 and Time 3. This may be explained by the fathers' increased awareness of the issues involved in parenting, greater attunement to the needs of their children, but also awareness of their own capacity to improve their parenting skills.

Table 4 Mean scores on parenting questionnaire items at Time 1, Time 1 and Time 2 difference scores, and Time 1 and Time 3 difference scores

Item	Time 1 Mean (N = 56)	Time 1 and Time 2 difference scores (N = 39)	Time 1 and Time 3 difference scores (N = 13)
<b>In general, how often:</b>			
do you have primary responsibility for the care of your child(ren)?	3.70	.03	-.07
are you actively involved in caring for your child(ren)?	4.32	.12	.09
do you have warm, close times together with your child(ren)?	4.34	.05	.31
do you enjoy doing things with your child(ren)?	4.59	.00	.00
do you feel that you are doing a very good job as a parent?	3.81	.16	.16
do you feel that you are very good at routine tasks of caring for your child(ren) (e.g., bathing)?	4.14	.16	.38
do you feel that you are good at calming your child(ren) when he/she is upset?	3.77	.10	.23
<b>When you and your partner discuss parenting issues, how often:</b>			
are you actively involved in parenting decisions with your partner?	4.30	.05	.08
is your partner a resource or support to you in raising your child(ren)?	4.62	-.07	.31
are you a resource or support to your partner in raising your child(ren)?	4.21	.14	.39
do you feel that your partner understands and supports your needs as a parent?	4.18	.23	.00
do you feel that you need support or help with your parenting but can't get it from anyone? <sup>a</sup>	2.36	-.01	-.07

Note: <sup>a</sup> Low scores = support needs met more frequently.

## Chapter 4: Summary and discussion of findings

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### Change as a result of the FUN for Kids program

Five key themes surrounding the benefits of FUN for Kids for fathers emerged from the evaluation data: building confidence, relationship building, skill building, networking and giving partners a break.

#### Building confidence in parenting ability

Data from all sources pointed to an improvement in parenting self-efficacy and confidence over the life of the FUN for Kids program, which remained salient months after program completion. Across the three programs (New Dads, Preschool and Primary School), participants reported that talking to other dads gave them confidence in their own parenting skills because it helped them to remember that their experiences were not unique and that they were doing a good job as dads.

The theme of confidence was particularly salient for fathers attending the New Dads program. The feature of the program, in which participants attended with their babies, provided an opportunity for men to prove that they could provide for their children independently, which, in turn, led to increased confidence in the parenting role, as well as an increased awareness of what they could contribute to their child's care and development. Improved confidence also appeared to lead to greater satisfaction and enjoyment in their interactions with their children, and also helped some new fathers to further internalise the "dad" role and become more emotionally invested in it.

Confidence was also an important aspect of the program reported by partners. Partners reported that, while they had confidence in the parenting skills of the participants, they felt the program had increased their confidence. Partners also valued the program for leading new dads to take their children out by themselves, sometimes for the first time. Service providers and program facilitators also reported that building confidence was a principal objective of the FUN for Kids program.

The finding that the program increased participants' confidence in parenting is consistent with results of an earlier evaluation of a similar parenting education program that was developed in the US. The main change for fathers in this parenting education program was an increased sense of competence in their parenting skills (McBride, 1990). McBride related this finding to the group discussion aspect of the program, which allowed fathers to talk through their feelings about their parenting role. Whether the group discussion component of the FUN for Kids program was the catalyst for improvement in parenting confidence remains unclear, as fathers differed in the extent to which they valued this aspect of the program. It was clear, however, that in the case of the New Dads program, the opportunity for fathers to take their babies out by themselves, giving them the actual experience of managing to care for their child on their own but in a supported environment, was a critical aspect of increased parenting confidence.

The issue remains, however, whether increased confidence translates into more time with children independently of partners and family. The impact of father support programs on time with children merits further investigation. This should include an examination of other factors in addition to motivation and confidence that may impinge upon the involvement of fathers in their children's lives.

#### Relationship building and communication with children

From a father perspective, building positive father-child relationships and enhancing communication was a significant theme for many fathers participating in the FUN for Kids programs, during both the initial and the follow-up interviews. Fathers valued the opportunity to spend more quality time with their children. Slight differences were detected in the responses of new dads and men with primary-school-aged children, which reflected the nature of father-child relationships at these different developmental stages. For new dads, developing a bond with their baby was important, whereas fathers of primary-school-aged children discussed themes of

enhancing the parent–child relationship in terms of being more involved in their children’s lives, and engaging in more effective and positive communication and discipline. For the Y Dads, maintaining a positive engagement and presence in their children’s lives was the most important aspects of change they identified from the FUN for Kids program. This aspect was also highlighted in interviews with program facilitators and service providers.

From the perspective of the two child participants, the time that they spent with their fathers during the program was the most enjoyable and important aspect to them. One child and some fathers also felt that the program should increase its focus on father–child activities, rather than focusing on the fathers’ connection with the other adult participants.

It was interesting to note, however, that the quality of the father–child relationship was only touched upon in a very superficial and limited way during interviews with partners, suggesting that this may not be the most salient aspect of program participation in their minds.

### **Building parenting skills**

The FUN for Kids programs aimed to develop general and specific parenting skills. While some men experienced a more holistic change in their attitude to parenting, other men focused on learning targeted skills such as CPR and baby massage or ideas about how to build children’s numeracy skills.

Men in the Primary School group in particular related their most significant change to learning about how they could play a greater role in their children’s educational development. Men spoke about how they learned to incorporate learning into everyday activities and that this was often enjoyable. Men also spoke about how the programs gave them new ideas and insights into the teaching role they could play for their children. Fathers also valued how FUN for Kids provided them with ideas for new types of activities they could do with their children.

Participants also reported that a flow-on effect of improved parenting was a better relationship with their children. Several participants in the New Dads program said that the program had helped them to bond with their baby. In the Preschool and Primary School programs, dads talked about how they learned strategies to improve their interactions with their children. Most commonly mentioned was that they learned ways to communicate with their children that would assist them to parent better.

Men continued to speak about the skills they had learned at FUN for Kids, and ideas and activities surrounding education some months after program completion. Some men reported new awareness about how everyday activities could incorporate educational elements and that this could be rewarding and enjoyable for both adult and child. The Y Dads fathers also ranked engagement in children’s social and academic competence as the most important aspects of change they experienced from the FUN for Kids program, and clearly, this was an integral aspect of the program design. However, partners did not discuss skill building as a significant change emerging from participation in the programs. While mothers did feel that learning specific skills was useful, others focused upon changes they observed in their child or how their partners could take a more active parenting role in the future.

### **Networking with other fathers**

Building on pre-existing networks and creating new networks among local families is a unique aspect of the FUN for Kids program. The program also provides an opportunity for fathers to form or strengthen their local networks by meeting other dads and their families and sharing experiences. On balance, participants found this aspect of the program to be very useful, as did their partners and children and the service providers and facilitators who were interviewed. Many dads said that they found it very valuable and enjoyable to be able to talk with other dads and share experiences and ideas and affirm their role as parents. Some reported how they had picked up new ideas from other dads and that it was good to be able to meet other dads from the local area, even if it was just to say hello when they saw them in the school and other places.

Both fathers and mothers spoke about the importance of parents having a peer group with whom they can share stories and experiences. Interacting with other fathers also helped men to

realise that their experiences of parenthood were similar to other dads, and to feel some solidarity with other men going through the challenges and rewards of raising children.

This sense of solidarity led some men to hope that they could continue to meet with other members of the group after the completion of the FUN for Kids programs. Indeed, in each of the three New Dads programs there was interest in forming an ongoing network; however, where the fathers did meet up, this was not maintained. Many fathers when interviewed some weeks after the program had finished were disappointed that an ongoing dads group had not eventuated. One dads' group formed out of the FUN for Kids program (Y Dads) is continuing to meet more than four years later. This suggests that there is the potential for such groups to continue. Y Dads was formed with a high level of involvement in its initial stage from the RAV facilitators, and such involvement may be necessary to establish other groups (Clohsey, 2004; Dornau, 2003).

Although fathers and their partners valued the idea of expanding their social network, and meeting other fathers in the local area allowed some men to feel more connected to their school and broader community, follow-up interviews did not indicate that these feelings led to increased community involvement or ongoing relationships with other participants in FUN for Kids. It may be that a greater level of formal support is needed to assist ongoing groups to develop from the FUN for Kids program and for fathers to connect with their community more broadly.

### **Giving partners a break from parenting duties**

Although not raised by service providers, program facilitators suggested an important part of FUN for Kids for some new fathers was that it provided mothers with an opportunity to have some brief respite from the care of their babies. This issue was discussed in the context of the demands of infant care for the primary carer. Fathers also liked that FUN for Kids was a predictable activity where mothers would know they had a set time for themselves. As discussed in the confidence building section of the report, FUN for Kids also contributed to fathers' increased sense of competence around infant care, and made participants feel more capable in assuming some more of the child care load.

### **Things to improve**

In both initial and follow-up interviews with fathers and interviews with partners, subjective comments were made about what they thought could be improved about FUN for Kids, based on their own experiences, needs and expectations. Through analysis, themes emerged that point towards things FUN for Kids could do to improve its service. Primary among these was that participants suggested a review of the structure of the programs, focusing on content, length and intensity. However, there was no consensus indicating a preferred model for program delivery, with some fathers preferring highly structured, content-based sessions, and others indicating a preference for a more informal, group-discussion-based approach. There was also a view among a minority of fathers that there should be a greater emphasis on father-child activities, and one child suggested that mothers, as well, could have an increased level of direct involvement in the program. The analysis showed that there is a diversity of perspectives and approaches to childrearing, and that approaches and techniques advocated in the program need to be qualified in terms of the theoretical developmental model from which they are based.

Participants also felt that more should be done to promote the programs and so meet the needs of a larger client group. Specifically, it was suggested that efforts needed to be made to reach fathers who were experiencing difficulties adjusting to their new role, or in parenting older children and negotiating the co-parental relationship. Indeed, findings from the parenting survey suggested that, on balance, participant fathers were experiencing: a high level of confidence in their parenting capacity, generally productive and supportive relationships with their partners, and good support from their partners. There was also a sense that participant fathers were involved in child care and childrearing to some degree.

There is also literature supporting the idea that men who access family and child support services are not necessarily the population who might benefit the most from them. The evaluation

strategy employed in the Early Head Start and Head Start programs in the US, for example, showed that fathers who were more likely to be involved in Early Head Start Programs:

- came from better functioning families;
- were more likely to be married;
- were more likely to be involved in their child's education;
- had less dysfunctional interactions with children; and
- had female partners who rated as warmer in their interactions with children (Raikes, Summers, & Roggman, 2005).

This suggests a need for the FUN for Kids program to becoming more responsive and skilled at engaging hard-to-reach fathers. As suggested by Fletcher (2008), this requires training, planning, action and shifts in thinking at multiple levels for both practitioners and service users. A recent evaluation of the engagement of fathers in programs and services funded under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy 2008–09 (Berlyn, Wise & Soriano, 2008) highlighted a number of initiatives that increased father participation in child and family support services. These initiatives included: flexibility in hours of operation, employing male facilitators, developing father-specific services, marketing services to men in male spaces, using male-friendly language and advertisements (e.g., addressing both mothers and fathers in correspondence and advertising or using a gender neutral term like “parents”), and creating service venues that men feel comfortable occupying.

Finally, the responses of fathers also indicate that participants are experiencing significant barriers to forming ongoing fathers' groups and require more facilitation to achieve this.

## Future FUN for Kids programs

Both the participants' partners and their children spoke highly of the program and seemed to have engaged with the dads about the program, indicating the value of this approach. For participants' partners who were interviewed, most had discussed the program with other parents, and believed the program should be implemented more widely. The two children who were interviewed about their experience of the program both enjoyed going to the program and felt it would be useful for other dads to attend. They enjoyed the interactive activities and spending time with their dads. Many dads said that they had attended the program as a way of spending time (doing something) with their child(ren). Fathers also agreed that others would find it valuable to have access to the FUN for Kids program, and that it should be extended to communities where it is most in need.

## Conclusion

The FUN for Kids program was developed by RAV as a way to assist dads to increase their parenting skills and knowledge. The rationale for the program is that there are significant benefits for children when they have positively engaged parents. The benefits that father support programs like FUN for Kids aim to provide may also be important for men personally, their partners, the quality of couple relationships, and the functioning of the family as a whole.

This evaluation of the FUN for Kids program suggests that the program has been successful in assisting dads to improve their confidence in their parenting capacity, as well as their parenting skills and knowledge, and that these outcomes are likely to be sustained in the short-term. Although the value of the program varied according to the child's developmental stage, fathers commonly they said they felt more confident, learnt about a certain parenting skill, or were able to improve their relationship with their child(ren) because of the program.

Although there was no tangible evidence that father presence, involvement and time with children increased as a result of participation in FUN for Kids, previous program attendees—the Y Dads group—suggested that knowledge and confidence gained through exposure to the program are important dynamics for father involvement in basic child care routines and children’s learning and development.

There was also indication that FUN for Kids impacted on the quality of the co-parental relationships and the degree to which mothers and fathers supported one another and cooperated in matters of child care and children’s development. In relation to new fathers, developing confidence and competence to look after children independently of their partners and giving mothers some respite from the demands of infant care were salient outcomes. In relation to father–child relationships, men with primary-school-aged children often joined the program to spend some quality time with their child, whereas new fathers saw the program as a means to develop a close bond with their baby. Children also reported that the activities were engaging and fun, and they genuinely enjoyed this time with their fathers.

Finally, fathers appreciated the opportunity to socialise with other fathers and to swap stories. This process normalised their feelings and experiences and provided some reassurance about how they were approaching the parenting role. Building connections within the local community was also seen as important. However, while participants were encouraged to form a fathers’ play group or to maintain some other form of regular contact, it was clear that participants needed more direct guidance and support in this regard.

Feedback on how to improve the program highlighted the diversity in learning styles, needs and expectations among fathers, indicating some flexibility in program delivery may be important to maintain the engagement of program participants. There was also a sense that new strategies may be required to reach fathers who may be most in need of support and advice in their parenting role.

In conclusion, father-specific support programs have an important role in redressing doubts about fathers having the necessary sensitivity and skills to care for children, and are an important way to facilitate positive father involvement. One can gather from the evaluation material presented here that programs like FUN for Kids are desired by men wishing to play an active role in their children’s lives, and that partners and children see value in them as well. Although fathers indicated individual preferences about program content and format, on balance, exposure to the program was related to improvements in parenting confidence and competence, acquisition of specific skills and better relationships with partners and children. Although it is acknowledged that there are quite substantial barriers that prevent fathers from becoming more involved in direct child care, there was no real sense that fathers increased their actual time involved in direct child care within the evaluation timeframe.

The challenge for the FUN for Kids program going forward will be to meet the high expectations of some participants and preferences surrounding program content and structure while remaining faithful to the objectives of the program, such as enhancing the role of fathers as teachers. The program may also consider looking at new ways to facilitate the formation of ongoing fathers’ groups. It may also be productive to extend the program’s reach and relevance to fathers who would not typically seek assistance from formal services and/or who may be in particular need of advice, encouragement and remedial action in relation to their parenting.

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## Appendix: Y Dads validation workshop documents

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### Y Dads validation workshop

28 July 2007

#### Story one

I think probably the biggest difference is the confidence [with] my child. Beforehand I was always very sort of dubious about spending time with [my daughter] when [my partner] wasn't around and being by myself with her. But now I am quite comfortable taking [my daughter] out and going places with her by myself, that's the biggest difference I think, and it's a huge difference. ... If [my partner] says "I want to go out and do some shopping"—before, it was a case of, "Oh does that mean I have got to be with the baby? Oh, do I have to look after her for sort of an hour or two?" Whereas now it's a case of, "Yeah, that's OK". It's been a benefit for her as well because she doesn't have to worry about the fact that I am going to say, "No, I don't want to be left with the baby". (New Dads)

#### Story two

I think it will give me a stronger relationship with my child in the long run just because I am developing a much stronger relationship now rather than trying to develop that relationship in two years time when I feel they are more independent .... I am actually playing with her more and building that relationship now, so I think it will mean a stronger relationship in the future, which will benefit all round. (New Dad)

#### Story three

It's nice to know that you're experiencing the same sorts of ups and downs and fun times and tough times as other dads. (Primary School)

#### Story four

I just think the communicating with the kids and just listening to them and, yeah, just paying more attention to their opinions and thoughts and things. ... Oh, it just helps in our relationship with the kids and, yeah, just a two-way street sort of thing. (Primary School)

#### Story five

Most important thing was to get out with [my son] with myself and feel that I could actually get out and do something with him for a couple of hours and not having [my partner] with me holding my hand and showing me the way. (New Dad)

#### Story six

Many times, fathers talked about stuff that their fathers did that they were not happy with, [like their] parenting style/discipline, but they often said, "What's the alternative?" The dads during the sessions often had opportunity to hear, test out, or learn about some positive alternatives, mostly from other dads. (Facilitator)

#### Story seven

Because it provided an opportunity for him to do that, whereas prior to that we had always been on family trips and family outings because there has been no purpose for him to venture out to anything on his own capacity. So I'd always been there and it was just an opportunity where he went on his own and obviously had the opportunity to build his own confidence with spending time with our daughter and also being able to get out of the house and go somewhere on their own. (New Dad, partner)

### Story eight

Fathers can sometimes be left out of the loop. This program contributes to building parenting skills for them, which in turn contributes [and] builds strengths within the family and as a ripple effect in the community. (Service provider)



## Y Dads validation workshop

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### Indicators of change

- Father presence** (engagement, accessibility and responsibility)
- Caregiving** (regarding child's emotional and physical health and appearance)
- Engagement in child's social and academic competence** (active engagement with the child and others in developing these skills in the child)
- Cooperative parenting** (caregivers establish a supportive relationship)
- Father's healthy living** (provide a role model of health lifestyle and appropriate social behaviour)
- Material and financial contribution**
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