

**Submission
No 13**

SUPPORT FOR NEW PARENTS AND BABIES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Name: Dr Richard Fletcher

Date Received: 16 November 2017

Submission to the Inquiry into support for new parents and babies in New South Wales

SUPPORT FOR FATHERS

A/Prof Richard Fletcher,
Family Action Centre
Faculty of Health and Medicine
The University of Newcastle, NSW 2308
Richard.fletcher@newcastle.edu.au

Dr Jennifer StGeorge,
Family Action Centre
Faculty of Health & Medicine
The University of Newcastle, NSW 2308
Jennifer.stgeorge@newcastle.edu.au

Men and women who become parents face a major life transition, one that places considerable demands on their emotional and mental resources. For many, the challenge of becoming a parent will lead to depression, anxiety and high levels of stress, compromising their ability to provide a safe, secure and stimulating environment for their infants¹. This is particularly true for those who have experienced significant poverty, stress and trauma throughout their lives. Because infants rely on their parents for affectionate, sensitive and responsive care the impact of poor parenting will affect future generations. Although there have been important initiatives, in terms of policy and programs, to address mothers' mental health² and to offer support for women to foster a secure attachment with their infants, **the crucial role of fathers in family wellbeing has been neglected.**³

This submission suggests that an important gap in the services and structures for new parents, especially those who need extra support to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their babies, **is the lack of parenting support for new fathers.** We point to the robust evidence clearly showing that fathers influence children in profound ways, including in their social, emotional and cognitive development.^{4,5} Fathers' important role in the raising of children is separate to that of mothers but the two are linked. Fathering involves care and connection with newborns, babies and toddlers in partnership with mothers, and so fathers should not be seen as simply 'a helper' to mothers.⁶ Given the clear evidence of paternal impact, it will be necessary to conceptualize and design services for new families in a way that avoids focusing only on mothers and babies and brings fathers into services' views of family systems. We first identify important gaps in the support for fathers and then suggest strategies to address these gaps for the benefit of families.

IMPORTANT GAPS:

1. **Policy makers, senior administrators and clinical staff are generally uninformed** of the robust evidence that fathers play a key positive role in children's development and that they do this not only by their relationship with the child but through their parenting

- partnership with the mother.²
2. **Policy makers, senior administrators and clinical staff are not aware** that up to one in ten fathers may be suffering from postnatal depression and many will have severe anxiety. They are also uninformed of the impact of fathers' depression on infant development.^{2,4}
 3. **Fathers are also unaware** that they may experience postnatal depression and they are uninformed about the services that do exist (such as PANDA the national Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia national telephone helpline).⁷
 4. **Parenting support services** (such as antenatal classes) do not adequately address the needs of fathers who will have a key role after the birth.⁸
 5. **Parenting interventions** (such as Triple P) do not target fathers effectively and do not accurately report this failure (Triple P) outcomes.⁹
 6. **Treatment for paternal PND and support for fathers in cases of maternal PND** has not been researched, even though fathers are key support for the 15-20% of mothers who have PND or severe mental illness.¹⁰

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THE NEEDS OF NEW FATHERS:

1. **Changes to current services and structures that could improve physical health, mental health and child protection outcomes.**
 - a) Address the knowledge gap among policy makers, senior administrators and clinical staff by fostering and funding educational activities and fora at all levels across government departments supporting families, to raise awareness of paternal mental health and its importance for infant wellbeing.
 - b) Commission research into service models, including web-based services for fathers, to meet the needs of new fathers.
2. **Changes to current services and structures that could improve physical health, mental health and child protection outcomes.**
 - a) Build father-inclusion into specifications for non-government organisations tendering for government contracts to support families.
 - b) Include separate counts for mothers and fathers (including social fathers) in reporting on programs and policies for families.
3. **Focus on specific areas of disadvantage or challenge in relation to health outcomes for babies.**
 - a) Recognize and address the particular strengths and needs of young Aboriginal fathers. Aboriginal men may face significant hurdles in the transition to fatherhood. They are more likely to become a father at an early age, be unprepared for fatherhood and lack positive parenting role models. Traditionally, young Aboriginal men have been educated about Aboriginal Law (lore) and culture by older male relatives; however, many contemporary Aboriginal men have been left unsupported in the transition to adulthood, lacking guidance on how to lead healthy lives and take responsibility for fatherhood.
4. **Provide models of support, as provided in other jurisdictions, to support new parents and promote the health of babies.**

- a. The Commonwealth has legislated for two week paid paternity leave but the perinatal services under state jurisdiction do not support fathers to make use of that leave. Models of father support exist in states outside NSW¹¹ and overseas.¹²

5. Create opportunities for new and emerging technology to enhance support for new parents and babies.

- a. *SMS4dads* for new fathers and *Stayin on Track* for young Aboriginal fathers utilise technology to reach fathers who would otherwise remain outside of the new parent support service network. See below.

SMS4dads¹³

A new mobile phone-based service sends texts to expectant and new fathers. The SMS4dads project which was sponsored through *beyondblue* with Movember funding, delivers hints and tips about baby development, getting along with their partner and staying healthy. Many messages use the voice of the baby to build the connection with the father.

Hey dad. I am going to triple my weight in the first year of life. Don't let this happen to you too.

The messages also help dads support the mum

Find ways to tell your partner she is doing an amazing job. This could be really important to her.

The feasibility study that enrolled over 500 fathers in SMS4dads has shown that connecting new fathers to information and support through their mobile phones is successful. After six months, 85% of the fathers stayed with the program and 92% say it helped them in becoming a new father.

Comments made by the fathers on the way that the texts have helped their relationship

It is easy to forget to pay attention/complement your partner with a new child - the text messages were often a great reminder to do that.

The reinforcement of what I was trying to do such as being supportive of breastfeeding helped us both out.

The messages also include a 'Mood Tracker' interactive text asking dads every three weeks how they are travelling. Fathers can reply with *Awesome* or *Cool* or *OK* or *Shaky* or *Bad*. 'Bad' responses are escalated to receive a telephone call from a national perinatal mental health help line. As one father posted after completing SMS4dads:

The best SMSs were the ones asking how I was going. At one stage I was really struggling and received a call-back from PANDA [Perinatal Anxiety and Distress Australia] which basically saved my relationship with my wife and child, as I was getting severely depressed, anxious and stressed. I've since found help and am now back on track. Without getting the push from SMS4dads to get help I don't like to think of where I could

have ended up. Thank you for this fantastic program.

Stayin' on Track ¹⁴

The *Stayin' on Track* program¹⁶ is an example of engaging with young Aboriginal fathers using web and mobile phone-based technology to give these young men a voice. *Stayin' on Track* uses internet and mobile phone modalities to encourage young Aboriginal fathers to be confident in their fathering role, supportive of their partner, closely connected to their infants and children, and a role model of positive male parenting for the community. The project consisted of four main components:

- discussions (yarn ups) on fatherhood with 20 young Aboriginal fathers;
- brief video clips featuring young Aboriginal fathers describing their transition to fatherhood;
- building a website to situate the video clips (www.stayinontrack.com); and,
- testing Short Message Service (SMS) messages sent to the mobile phones of the fathers in the project on topics related to being a new father.

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