

**Submission
No 36**

SUPPORT FOR NEW PARENTS AND BABIES IN NEW SOUTH WALES

Name: Dr Chris May

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

Engaging with Parenting Partners during the Transition to Parenthood

Dr Chris May
Family Action Centre
Faculty of Health and Medicine
The University of Newcastle, NSW 2308
Chris.May@newcastle.edu.au

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Strong parenting partnerships are linked to levels of parenting stress (Feinberg et al., 2010), higher levels of parenting self-efficacy (May et al., 2014), and the enhanced social and emotional development of children from these relationships (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Parenting partnerships are formed and tested during the first year of parenting when couples are learning to manage a range of parenting challenges, relationship changes, and isolation from previous streams of informal support; such as friends, workmates, and extended family (Feinberg, 2003; May et al., 2017). Although research has found that early intervention that focuses on the parenting partnership can be effective in enhancing partnership quality, reducing parenting stress, and increasing parenting satisfaction the expansion of these programs has been hindered by issues of scalability and poor paternal attendance (Feinberg et al., 2010; Panter-Brick et al., 2014).

SMS4dads&mums, a program of relationship focused text messages, was sponsored through beyondblue with Movember funding. The project was founded on evidence of relationship difficulties during the transition to parenthood along with evidence that text based intervention can lead to behavioural change (Mitnick et al., 2009; Zubin & Paterson, 2015). The feasibility and acceptability trial of SMS4dads&mums has found that a text based intervention is both feasible and acceptable with high levels of paternal participation (39%) and low levels of maternal and paternal incompleteness. This program sent 40 weeks of relationship focused text messages to mothers and fathers for 40 weeks of their first postnatal year. The program was promoted to parents through Child and Family Health Nursing Services and the qualitative evaluation found that parents reported that participation helped in their relationships with their babies, partners and with themselves. The messages are founded on Thaler and Sunstein's (2008) model of behaviour change and parents reported that the messages helped in normalising their experience, giving them knowledge, reinforcing knowledge in a timely manner and influencing the way that they behaved with their partner's and children. It takes 40 weeks to grow a baby and SMS4dads&mums works with parents for a further 40 weeks to help them grow a strong parenting partnership.

The parenting partnership focus of this highly scalable intervention addresses the committee's terms of reference in the following ways.

The adequacy of current services and structures for new parents, especially those who need extra support, to provide a safe and nurturing environment to their babies.

Mothers and fathers reported that timely messages reminding them about their baby's innocent intentions were important in helping them to reset their emotions at key times in their early parenting experience. The messages from the baby to the parent are devised to encourage bonding and to keep parents abreast of the baby's developmental capabilities.

Mothers and fathers described how they talked about the messages together, how the messages helped them to appreciate that their experience was not abnormal, and how the messages helped them to give each other encouragement and support.

Parents also reported a sense of affiliation with the messages and described this as a form of non-judgemental support that they could not find in their relationships with services, families or friends.

The key advantage of SMS4dads&mums is the continuous and long term support that it can offer to new parents while operating, in a complimentary manner, alongside current services which can only provide periodic intervention.

Changes to current services and structures that could improve physical health, mental health and child protection outcomes.

Coparenting theory and intervention is founded on key principles of support, trust, and conflict minimisation. While messages also promote parent child relationships and remind parents about putting their baby in a safe place if they are struggling a major focus of the intervention is in reducing tensions in the partnership by encouraging mothers to invite their partners in and fathers to get involved.

Messages are founded on the principles of strength based intervention and therefore seek to remind parents about important and supportive behaviours rather than assuming that these will not occur. Parents have described the importance of the non-judgemental tone of the messages when illustrating their experience of participation.

A recent proposal, still in submission with HNELHD, seeks to assess the influence of SMS4dads&mums on antecedents of family violence. We have been encouraged to seek this evidence due to parent reports of the positive influence that participation has had on relationships between parenting partners.

Specific areas of disadvantage or challenge in relation to health outcomes for babies.

SMS4dads&mums was tested in the Hunter Valley (HNELHD). The feasibility and acceptability trial did achieve 2% participation by indigenous parents without a push toward this community. It was pleasing to see that these parents remained in the program to completion.

It was also evident from enrolment and interview data that the program does have appeal to parents from non-English speaking backgrounds however the program is currently only offered in English.

There is enormous scope to enhance the adaptability of this program to a diverse range of parents and parent types.

Models of support provided in other jurisdictions to support new parents and promote the health of babies.

SMS4dads&mums has been founded on principles of coparenting theory and intervention developed primarily in the US and applied mainly in the UK and US. However, there is rising interest in this type of intervention due to its capacity to act as an effective conduit to father engagement but also due to the adaptability of this approach to meet the needs of different family types.

Children are rarely raised by a single parent in total isolation. Although the current iteration of this intervention has focused on traditional mother/father partnerships it is readily adaptable to a wide range of family types including LGBTI and parents who are raising children with friends, grandparents etc.

Opportunities for new and emerging technology to enhance support for new parents and babies.

A key advantage of SMS4dads&mums is the push nature of texting. Although it is easy for parents to opt out they tend to remain in the program and evidence of click rates (by over 50%) suggests that they are also engaging with the information. This is differentiated from app based intervention where parents would be required to interact with and update the app. As new technologies emerge this style of intervention is well placed to take advantage of change and therefore remain both applicable and contemporary.

Any other related matters.

During 2017 SMS4dads&mums sent more than 30,000 messages to over 230 parents in the Hunter Valley of NSW. Parents demonstrated the acceptability of this intervention by staying with the program, by clicking on linked information and through qualitative reports of the influence that the intervention had on their family relationships. However, the current iteration, although developed with substantial consultation, is open to continuous improvement as it becomes more adaptable to parents needs and more integrated with mainstream interventions. The experience in the Hunter has been very encouraging but support is needed to further develop and test this intervention against specific outcomes in diverse populations.

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