

# HOW FATHERS AND FATHER FIGURES CAN SHAPE CHILD HEALTH AND WELLBEING

## OVERVIEW

We shouldn't underestimate the vast importance of fathers in children's lives, not only because children 'need and love their dads', but also because of the significant impact that fathers have on the social, cognitive, emotional and physical well-being of children from infancy to adolescence and with lasting influences into their adult life.

*"Involved fathers bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring."*

Popenoe, D. (1996) p.163.

This summary of evidence is based on a review of literature and research published primarily in the last 10 years. As there is a vast volume of research relating to parenting and children more generally, the review focused on evidence relating specifically to the influence of fathers and father figures.

While there is a growing body of evidence about the role of fathers in children's lives, there are also knowledge gaps, and the quality of evidence varies. Although a concerted effort has been made to capture evidence about the positive influences of fathers on child development and wellbeing, it is pertinent to note that studies to date have more often focused on the negative impacts of poor or absent fathering on children.

Quite a number of studies have investigated very specific subsets of fathers (such as incarcerated fathers or those with serious substance addiction issues), but for the purpose of this overview, we have primarily focused on evidence that is applicable to general populations.

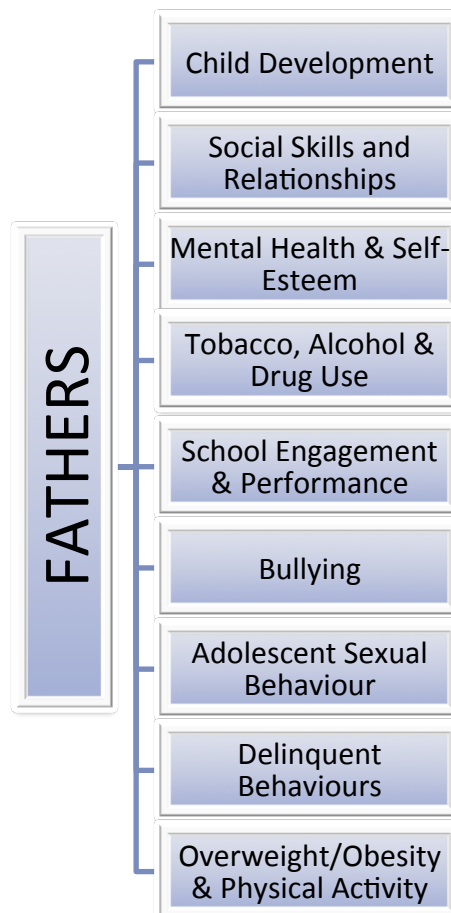


Figure 1: Key Evidence Themes

## GROWING UP IN AUSTRALIA @ 2013

The landscape of childhood has altered dramatically since many parents were children themselves:

- The demographic profile of families has changed, with higher rates of single parent households, parental divorce and blended families<sup>2</sup>.
- 'Stay at home' parenting is increasingly rare, with both parents often working and/or working longer hours<sup>2</sup>.
- New modes of working such as fly in fly out (FIFO) alter family dynamics and ways of life<sup>3,4</sup>.
- The world has also changed in ways that impact on children: such as new technologies, and greater fear and uncertainty (globally and locally). In turn this has fostered a protective culture of "cotton wool kids" and "helicopter parenting", but this can stifle children's independent mobility and discovery of the world<sup>5,6</sup>.
- Australian children are not as 'healthy' as they once were, with many insufficiently active and growing rates of overweight and obesity, mental health issues and concerning levels of adolescent alcohol and drug use<sup>7</sup>. They are however much less likely to smoke cigarettes than previous generations<sup>8</sup>.

## CHILD DEVELOPMENT

There is growing evidence and attention to the importance of early childhood development and how this has flow on impacts throughout childhood and into adult life. Although research on parenting has tended to focus more on mothers or families in general, there is mounting evidence supporting the critical role of fathering.

*"Available evidence clearly demonstrates the importance of fathers to the developmental health and well-being of their children. While fathers' traditional breadwinning role remains important, the paternal role is now recognised to be much broader than this, reflecting societal change in role expectations for women, as well as increasing knowledge about the contribution of paternal influences to children's developmental well-being."* Wilson, K & Prior, M. (2011) p. 405.

**Evidence from a systematic review of 18 studies, indicates that father engagement positively affects social, behavioural, psychological and cognitive outcomes of children<sup>9,10</sup>. More specifically, high levels of father involvement have been linked to<sup>8</sup>:**

- higher levels of cognitive and social competence
- increased social responsibility and capacity for empathy
- positive self-control and self-esteem
- more positive interactions with siblings
- fewer school adjustment difficulties and better academic progress

Whilst both parents play critical roles in the early development of child security and attachment, some influences are more pronounced among fathers or mothers. For instance, evidence suggests that fathers contribute most to providing play exploration which helps develop emotional and behavioural self-regulation, whilst mothers tend to be the providers of comfort in times of distress<sup>11</sup>. These early experiences with fathers can help foster "secure exploration" of challenging or unknown situations and this can have a lasting impact through childhood<sup>12</sup>. Fathers can further contribute indirectly to child development, as research indicates mothers are more patient, flexible, emotionally responsive, sensitive, and available to their infants and young children when they are supported and encouraged by the child's father<sup>13</sup>.

### DOES ONE MATTER MORE?... QUANTITY AND QUALITY OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT

While there are differing views and findings surrounding the relative importance of quality and quantity in relation to fathering, overall, both are important.

**Quality:** A father who spends lots of time interacting with his children but does so in a critical or demeaning way may be doing harm rather than good, as it can negatively affect self-esteem<sup>8</sup>.

**Quantity:** Insufficient time hinders the building and maintenance of a positive father-child relationship. It has also been argued that dads who don't spend much time with their children may lack confidence or understanding of their child's characteristics<sup>8</sup>. Significant father absence in a family can have a deleterious effect on children's development<sup>8</sup>.

## SOCIAL SKILLS AND RELATIONSHIPS

*"Supportive parenting behaviours in which the father provides expressive and instrumental affection, nurturance, interest and companionship enhance children's self-esteem, life satisfaction and social competence"*

Harris, K. et al. (1998) p. 202

Current literature indicates that fathers play a particularly critical role in fostering social skills and capacity for positive relationships in their children. Fathers who demonstrate positive behaviours such as accessibility, engagement and responsibility contribute to<sup>8</sup>:

- better psychosocial adjustment
- higher levels of social competence
- increased social responsibility, social maturity and life skills
- more positive child/adolescent-father relationships

**Recent research also highlights that fathers play a distinct (as in different to mothers) and integral role in children's socialisation.** For example, a US study of parental involvement during the transition from childhood to adolescence found that the social time (time with parents in the presence of others) that teenagers spent with fathers was significantly associated with increased social competence (eg social skills, effective social interactions), but the same effect was not observed for mothers<sup>15</sup>.

**Conversely, poor paternal relationships and fathering behaviours can have a lasting effect on children's social adjustment and relationships.** A 2012 study highlights that the perception of a poor father-child relationship during childhood is associated with poorer adult social functioning, significantly decreased likelihood of secure adjustment style, and a significantly increased risk of avoidant or dependent attachment styles<sup>16</sup>.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY POSITIVE OR INVOLVED FATHERING?

LOVING, SENSITIVE, WARM,

ENCOURAGING, close,

PROVIDING, friendly, intimate, playful,

sharing, NURTURING,

MAKES TIME,

affectionate, AVAILABLE,

INVOLVED, accepting,

SUPPORTIVE, COMFORTING

PATIENT, RESPONSIBLE,

AWARE, consistent, ...

## MENTAL HEALTH AND SELF-ESTEEM

*"Overall, father love appears to be as heavily implicated as mother love in offsprings' psychological well-being and health, as well as in an array of psychological and behavioural problems."*

Rohnern, R. & Veneziano, R. (2001) p. 11

Much of the research on fathering has focused on its implications for child and adolescent mental health, with **compelling evidence that fathering has significant protective and positive effects on the mental health of children across various ages and stages of development**. Being warm and supportive<sup>18</sup>, involved<sup>19</sup>, and engaged with their child<sup>9</sup> are among fathering traits that have been shown to positively impact a child's mental health.

**Conversely, poor father-child relationships can negatively impact on a child's mental health, both in childhood and later during adolescence and in adulthood**<sup>20</sup>. In a recent study, poor quality early father-child relationships were consistently associated with an increased prevalence of adult mental health disorders such as depression, bipolar, anxiety disorders and phobias. This was irrespective of socio-economic status and perceived quality of childhood maternal relationship or current social relationships<sup>16</sup>. One study noted that depressive symptoms in fathers are associated with increased father-child-conflict and child externalising symptoms<sup>21</sup>, whilst another study found that lower father involvement was significantly linked to lower life satisfaction in teenage boys<sup>22</sup>.

The transition through puberty and into adolescence is a challenging time for many young people, with heightened risk of mental health issues. During this period, the father-child relationship can be a significant protective factor. For example, youths who spend more one-on-one time with their father have been found to have higher general self-worth than those spending less time with their father<sup>15</sup>.

Fathers are also important to their teenage children's health seeking behaviours, with one study demonstrating adolescents were more likely to seek treatment for depression when their fathers demonstrated warmth and supportiveness<sup>18</sup>.

Recent parenting books often highlight the importance of fathers in the lives of boys, particularly as they transition into and through adolescence<sup>23</sup>. However, fathers play a critical role for daughters also, including positive influences on their mental wellbeing. A recent retrospective study with young adult females found that father involvement and father nurturing during childhood were significantly positively correlated with daughter's self-esteem and life satisfaction in early adulthood<sup>24</sup>.

Fathers need to stay mentally healthy themselves, as this enhances their ability to be a great dad, and to enjoy the experiences of being a father. Taking care of their own health and mental wellbeing also enables fathers to cope better with challenges or stresses that parenting might bring.

## SO WHAT AFFECTS A MAN'S CAPACITY TO "FATHER"?

Most men aspire to be great fathers to their children, but some life circumstances can make this more challenging.

### 1. SPOUSAL RELATIONSHIP & PARENTAL CONFLICT

Parental conflict is associated with behavioural problems and other negative impacts on children, regardless of whether the parents live together or apart<sup>14</sup>. Spousal conflict can in fact negate the benefits for children of protective factors such as father involvement or co-residence<sup>25</sup>. Mothers' involvement with their child and support of fathers has also been noted as important to paternal involvement and the quality of the father-child relationships<sup>25</sup>.

### 2. CO-RESIDENCE WITH CHILD

While it is not always possible for fathers to live in the same house as their children, overall this has been found to have a positive effect on fathering and father-child relationships. Relatedly, co-residence is associated with higher father involvement and child wellbeing<sup>25</sup>. Nonetheless, it should be noted that longitudinal research indicates that contact between children and fathers living away has been increased significantly over the past few decades<sup>26</sup>.

### 3. OWN EXPERIENCE OF FATHERING

Thoughts about their own fathers and experiences as children are a backdrop on which men build their own fathering identity<sup>27</sup>. How men negotiate the demands of fatherhood is also linked to their own experience of fathering. For example, men whose fathers were involved in raising them, have been found to show more positive fathering behaviours such as nurturance, warmth and responsibility<sup>28</sup>. Conversely, men not close to their own fathers are less likely to define fathering in terms of a nurturing role, and more likely to view it primarily as a breadwinner role<sup>29</sup>.

### 4. ADVERSITY & LIFE CIRCUMSTANCES

At a population level, a fathers' disadvantaged socio-economic circumstance can affect their child's wellbeing both directly, through the provision of financial support<sup>30</sup>, and indirectly, through increased risk of factors such as father absence, domestic violence<sup>31</sup>, mental health problems<sup>32</sup>, or incarceration<sup>33</sup>. This has implications for targeting support to fathers who face difficult life circumstances.

## TOBACCO, ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE

While much of the evidence relates to the influence of parents and the home environment more generally on the risk and extent of substance use in children and adolescents, a growing number of studies focus more specifically on the important role of fathers in preventing smoking uptake, under-age drinking and illicit drug use. Indeed, some of the **research specific to fathers indicates that their influence on alcohol and illicit drug use in children and adolescents may be distinct and stronger than that of mothers.** For instance:

- Research indicates that within dual parent families, fathers have a significant protective effect on their child's risk of having tried alcohol, cigarettes or marijuana, even after controlling for mother-child relationship, maternal monitoring, other maternal characteristics, family- and household-level characteristics, and child-level characteristics<sup>34</sup>.
- Youth from father-only households have been reported to engage in higher levels of cigarette, alcohol, and marijuana use than those from mother-only or dual-parent households<sup>35</sup>.

### Alcohol

- Research shows that parental influences regarding vulnerabilities for alcohol use may be specific to parent-child gender matches for some pathways, and specific to fathers or mothers (irrespective of child gender) for other pathways. For example, having an authoritarian father has been found to increase neurotic symptoms in the tension reduction pathway to alcohol-related problems among male offspring, but not female offspring<sup>36</sup>.
- Heavy drinking or alcoholism in fathers (but not mothers) has been associated with earlier onset and heavier levels of alcohol use, and increased risk of transition to hazardous consumption or alcohol disorders by children or teenagers<sup>37,38</sup>.
- Protective factors such as parent-child closeness and discipline have been significantly associated with reduced chance of alcohol consumption and reduced risk of a recent alcohol binge in the case of fathers but not mothers<sup>39</sup>.

### Illicit Drugs

- Fathers can be influential in their absence as family structure and living arrangements are particularly critical to illicit drug initiation and perception. For example, children of single parent or step parent homes are at significantly higher risk than those of dual biological parent household<sup>35,40</sup>.
- Within father-only homes girls appear to be at highest risk, with one study indicating that their inhalant, marijuana, and amphetamine use significantly exceeded that of daughters living with single mothers, whereas gender of the parent was not associated with sons' usage<sup>41</sup>.
- When regarding protective factors, father communication appears to reduce risk of marijuana use in sons but not daughters<sup>42</sup>.

### Tobacco smoking

- The smoking behaviour and attitudes of both fathers and mothers can influence the likelihood of smoking experimentation. Both mother's and father's smoking are significant predictors of smoking in adolescents, yet the probability of ever smoking has been reported to be most strongly associated with frequency of mothers' smoking<sup>43</sup>.
- Mothers' smoking has been particularly linked to girls<sup>44</sup> and there is some evidence to indicate that father-son relationships are also significantly linked<sup>34,45</sup>.
- Stronger effects of father's smoking have been found for smoking initiation among adolescent boys, although these effects were dependent on father co-residence<sup>46</sup>.

## FATHER VERSUS MOTHER INFLUENCES ON SUBSTANCE USE

Whether fathers or mothers have a greater or different influence on substance use is not strongly established and the evidence is at times inconsistent<sup>37</sup>. Some studies report a unique or greater effect for fathers compared with mothers; others focus on parents more collectively. In a 2012 US survey of 1003 teenagers, those who reported an excellent relationship with their dad were four times less likely to have used marijuana, and two times less likely to have used alcohol, but similar patterns were observed for teen perceptions of their relationship with their mother<sup>47</sup>.

What is clear is that the vulnerability of children is exacerbated if both parents have drug or alcohol issues themselves<sup>47</sup>. Conversely, the consistency of parental role modelling, attitudes and rules regarding drug and alcohol also emerge as important protective factors<sup>48</sup>.

## WHAT CAN FATHERS (AND PARENTS) DO TO PREVENT SUBSTANCE USE?

Parental factors shown to reduce the likelihood of adolescent initiation and use of alcohol, tobacco or illicit drugs include<sup>35,49-51</sup>:

- substance-specific rules
- parental modelling of abstinence or low consumption
- limiting availability of substance to the child
- parental monitoring of child's consumption
- parent-child relationship quality eg. acceptance, involvement, warmth, communication
- parental norms about initiation/consumption
- positive mother-father relationship



## SCHOOL ENGAGEMENT AND PERFORMANCE

In addition to the collective influence of parents on children's attitudes towards, and engagement with school, there is a growing body of evidence about the **important contribution fathers can make to the school preparedness and performance of their children, with far reaching implications across their development and into adulthood**<sup>52,25</sup>.

A 2011 literature review into fathering and child wellbeing noted that positive fathering contributes to<sup>8</sup>:

- fewer school adjustment problems
- better academic progress
- enhanced occupational achievements in adulthood

Children's positive and negative school outcomes have been linked to father beliefs (eg. about teachers), perceptions, school involvement (eg. motivation for involvement, father-teacher relationship quality), efficacy and child attachment<sup>53</sup>. Additionally, father absence has been linked to higher incidence of negative outcomes such as school suspension and expulsion<sup>54</sup>.

Other research has highlighted that paternal support may function complementarily with maternal support, with fathers particularly associated with social competence in the school setting whilst mothers' more so with academic competence<sup>52</sup>. This research further indicates that *fathers' support may be most critical where levels of mother support are lower*<sup>8</sup>.

Research also indicates an intergenerational link between a father and child's school achievements, which is partially attributable to a father's expectations of his child's educational achievements<sup>55</sup>. In one study fathers' academic achievements and peer relations at school were directly related to these same factors in their offspring, regardless of the fathers' educational attainment, or both the fathers' and the children's general cognitive abilities<sup>55</sup>.

## BULLYING

Parents play a pivotal role in both the risk of their child being a bully, and a victim of bullying, and there is some evidence to indicate that fathers and mothers may influence bullying and victimisation in distinct ways.

Parent-child conflict has been noted as a potent predictor of both bullying and victimization. Low parent involvement or support is also implicated in bullying, with one study finding that both low father and low mother involvement contribute significantly and independently to bullying behaviour in adolescents<sup>56</sup>. Witnessing domestic violence and child maltreatment are also predictors of bullying<sup>57,58</sup> however, child maltreatment is concurrently associated with victimisation too<sup>57</sup>. High levels of child disclosure (communication with parents) are protective against bullying, however poor communication with parents conversely predicts bullying behaviours<sup>59</sup>.

When looking specifically at paternal influences, an Israeli study found that children of authoritarian fathers tended to associate more with bully friends and the highest degrees of bullying were demonstrated when adolescents had authoritative fathers and valued power themselves<sup>60</sup>. Another US study concluded that whether paternal employment is full- or overtime, if a child perceives they do not spend enough time with their father, the risk of bullying behaviours significantly increases<sup>61</sup>.

Nonetheless, fathers can also have a positive impact, with results from a UK study suggesting a buffering effect for perceived father involvement which protects teenage boys from extreme victimization<sup>22</sup>. Parent-child communication, meeting children's friends, and encouraging children academically have also associated with lower bullying odds<sup>62</sup>. Furthermore, the father-child relationship appears to be particularly critical when mother involvement is lower<sup>56</sup>.

## FATHERS WHO WORK AWAY

New patterns of work-life such as FIFO have created families where dads are part absent, part present, but research into how this impacts on child wellbeing is only just emerging in the published literature.

A recent West Australian study found that having a 'FIFO father' was not a discreet homogeneous risk factor for children, with evidence suggesting that boys and girls may deal differently with such father absences<sup>3</sup>. However, this and another WA study<sup>4</sup> found elevated stress among mothers in such households, which Bradbury suggests indicates "mothers may buffer the strains of regular family disruption from the other family members"<sup>3</sup>. This supports other international research with fishermen and truck drivers which found mothers play a critical role in maintaining the father-child connection when fathers work away<sup>63</sup>.

## WHAT ABOUT CHILDREN WITH NO FATHER OR NO CONTACT WITH THEIR BIOLOGICAL FATHER?

In today's society, many children do not live with their biological father or have lost their dad. **The most critical thing is that they have the love, support and involvement of a 'father figure'** - this could be a grandparent, uncle, neighbour, coach or family friend.

Children in families without any father figure are more vulnerable to poorer health and wellbeing outcomes such as school adjustment problems and poorer academic outcomes<sup>8</sup>, and children in father absent homes are more likely to have problems in emotional and psychosocial adjustment and exhibit a variety of internalising and externalising behaviours<sup>13</sup>.

Close, stable relationships between stepfathers and stepchildren, and also between stepfathers and non-resident fathers are associated with better adolescent wellbeing and outcomes<sup>64</sup>. Noted benefits include improved grades, higher self-efficacy, fewer internalising or externalising behaviours, and less acting out in school<sup>64</sup>. The level of closeness and support that stepfathers provide can also continue into young adulthood even when the child has left home<sup>65</sup>.

## ADOLESCENT SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

Much of the research into fathers' influences on adolescent sexual behaviour (early or risky sexual activity) has focussed on the risks associated with absent fathers or negative fathering behaviours.

**Father absence** is a critical contributor to adolescent sexual risk behaviour in both sons and daughters. Research has demonstrated the importance of a father figure in reducing the risk of early fatherhood<sup>66</sup> with sons of teenage fathers 8 times more likely to become teen fathers themselves, compared with sons of older fathers<sup>67,68</sup>. This is true of daughters too, and it has been indicated that odds of increased sexual risk behaviours or teenage pregnancy are lowest when fathers are present throughout childhood, are increased when fathers are absent later in childhood, and peak when fathers are absent from an early age<sup>69</sup>. In a US study, daughters who experienced early father absence were 2.01 times more likely to engage in sexual risk behaviour and 3.15 times more likely to have a teenage pregnancy, whilst in New Zealand the odds were 2.14 and 3.19 times higher respectively<sup>70</sup>. Lower monitoring (knowing a child's whereabouts) by fathers has also been significantly associated with early first sexual intercourse among girls, and with not using a condom during last intercourse among boys<sup>71</sup>.

Conversely, **father support** has been associated with protective sexual behaviours such as increased condom use in adolescents, irrespective of whether the teenager co-resided with their father<sup>72</sup>. In one study, girls who had a close relationship with their father were found to be less likely to report a young age for first sexual intercourse, whereas this was not found for closeness to mothers or for sons<sup>73</sup>. Although teenagers experience significantly more discomfort in discussing sexual behaviours with fathers rather than mothers<sup>74</sup>, interventions involving fathers indicate positive outcomes such as increased condom use<sup>75</sup>.

There is growing concern about the sexualisation of children in the media, and fathers have been found to have an important role to play in how sexual media socialises their daughters. In one study, females whose fathers often communicated about sex with them were found to be less likely to engage in sexually risky behaviours despite exposure to this sexual media, whereas the same influence was not evident for communication with mothers<sup>76</sup>.

## FATHERS BENEFIT FROM FATHERING ALSO....

- Higher levels father involvement are associated with more positive child–father and adolescent–father relationships<sup>11,89</sup> which are beneficial to both father and child
- Men who are involved fathers are more likely to feel self-confident and effective as parents and to find parenthood more satisfying<sup>13</sup>.
- Fathers who are involved in their children's lives are more likely to be more satisfied with life, and to feel less psychological distress, and have greater empathetic understanding of others<sup>13</sup>.
- There is some evidence that men's emotional involvement with their children can act as a buffer against work related stresses<sup>90</sup>.

## DELINQUENCY

There is a pocket of research stemming predominantly from the criminology field, which has looked at the relationship between fathering and child engagement in delinquent behaviours.

Fathers have been highlighted as the most critical figure in child and adolescent delinquency, with one study noting that arrests of the father predicted a boy's delinquency independently of all other arrested relatives<sup>77</sup>. This is supported by research which found that sons whose fathers had at least one prison sentence, had 2.06 times higher odds of having a criminal conviction than those whose fathers had no sentences<sup>78</sup>. This was even more pronounced for daughters who were 2.66 times more likely to have a criminal conviction if their father had one or more prison sentences<sup>78</sup>.

**Fathers can also have a protective influence against delinquency and anti-social behaviour**, with one longitudinal study indicating that higher non-resident father involvement predicted subsequent decreases in adolescent delinquency, particularly for youth with initial engagement in delinquent activities<sup>79</sup>. It is important to note that whether biologically related or not, co-residence with a father figure is also protective against delinquent behaviours such as property, violent or drug related crime, and taking part in a gang fights, particularly in males<sup>80</sup>.

## OVERWEIGHT/OBESITY AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

The paternal influence on child and adolescent weight is particularly strong, with some evidence suggesting fathers are more influential than mothers in childhood overweight and obesity<sup>81</sup>. A father's BMI (Body Mass Index) has been found to predicts sons' and daughters' BMI independent of offspring's alcohol intake, smoking, physical fitness, and father's education<sup>82</sup>. It has also been associated with physical activity in children across various developmental stages, from toddlers through to adolescents<sup>83,84</sup>.

Paternal influence has been linked to numerous factors such as encouragement of physical activity (eg. verbal encouragement, paying sports fees)<sup>85</sup>, modelling positive behaviours<sup>86</sup> and influencing diet (eg. restriction, provision, pressuring)<sup>86</sup>. Play may also be to be an important factor as unlike mothers, fathers tend to bond with children by encouraging exploration and challenges through play and physical activity<sup>87</sup>. Targeting fathers has been effectively used as a novel and efficacious approach to improving health behaviours in their children<sup>88</sup>.

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