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Building Fathering Competencies Through a Universal, Soft-Entry, Early Intervention and Prevention Service

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There is sparse research on playgroups for fathers, therefore, the benefits of such programmes are difficult to discern. However, there is much research on the positive developmental outcomes children experience with involved fathers (Appl, Brown, & Stone, 2008; Evans, Harrison, Rempel, & Slater, 2006; Green, 2003; Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). This research focused on a Dad's playgroup run as part of the Communities for Children Logan Project in south-east Queensland, Australia. The research found that the fathers gained positive results as being a part of the playgroup, including improved family functioning, a feeling of belonging to a community in which advice was freely available, improved relationships with their child/children and feelings that this programme met the unique needs of fathers when others in the community have not. These needs were met through the play environment, scheduling, staffing and support networks.

■ **Keywords:** Dad's playgroups, father's playgroups, father services, family dynamics, relationships, support services

Introduction

Minimal research explores the outcomes that father playgroups and father support programmes may have for children and families. In terms of parenting programmes, research has found that father participation in programmes, including infant massage and school-based activities, has an impact on their connection with their children (Magill-Evans, Harrison, Rempel, & Slater, 2006). Furthermore, despite the significant under-representation of fathers in parenting programmes, those that involve fathers have been shown to increase fathering capacity and children's positive behaviours (Sanders, Kirby, Tellegen, & Day, 2014). Additionally, these programmes increase positive parenting practices and a child's development (Houghton et al., 2014). However, as there is sparse research and focus on playgroups for fathers and it is possible that there is still a societal stigma attached to this form of community support (Appl et al., 2008; Halle et al., 2008; Green, 2003). Despite this, there is an increasing awareness of the benefits of positive fathering in the early years of a child's life (Appl et al., 2008; Green, 2003; Magill-Evans et al., 2006; Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). Involving fathers in early childhood programmes is essential and improves both the child's and the families' wellbeing (Anderson, Aller, Piercy, & Roggman, 2014).

This paper reports on a Dad's Playgroup that is run as part of Communities for Children Logan (CfCL) project in south-east Queensland, Australia, that is facilitated by The Salvation Army (TSA). The programmes run as part of this CfCL project are reflective of The Family Place Approach: A Framework of Practice for Soft-Entry, Universally Accessible, Early Intervention and Prevention (SUEIP) Practice (Macfarlane, 2016 which aims to build client competencies through play. Specifically, the Dad's Playgroup aims to build father and child relationships through a play-based programme. However, this playgroup differs to normal playgroups in a number of ways. First, this playgroup is exclusively available to men who have children aged 0–12 years.

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Second, it is held on a Saturday to enable access for fathers who have full-time occupations. Finally, the playgroup is facilitated by two male workers from CfCL who are both fathers themselves. With respect to this facilitation, these two fathers merely unlock the space and make some resources available. They do not organise the playgroup in a particular way.

Exploring the Literature

Much of the earlier literature concerning fathering focuses on absent fathers and the negative developmental outcomes for children from such homes. (Shannon, Tamis-LeMonda, London, & Cabrera, 2009). Children who have absent fathers are at risk for poor academic achievement, increased school dropout, emotional and behavioural difficulties, substance abuse, increased violence, aggression and delinquency and earlier sexual engagement (Shannon et al., 2009). The earlier literature also focused on comparing mother to father interactions with their child (Shannon et al., 2009). Mothers tend to be the caretaker, providing more didactic, verbal socialisation and play experiences, whereas, fathers tend to engage in active, "rough and tumble play" (Houghton et al., 2014; McWayne, Downer, Campos, & Harris, 2013; Shannon et al., 2009). However, there has been a recent shift resulting in myriad reports and articles focusing on the positive impacts fathering can have on the development of a child (McWayne et al., 2013). There is a particular focus on the positive health, wellbeing and attachment outcomes the children who have engaged fathers experience, which has been described as "independent and unique" of experiences children have with their mothers (Houghton et al., 2014, p.2). Therefore, much literature now focuses on the positive impacts fathers play in the early development of a child.

Recent research and study has found a clear link between absent fathers and societal problems, thus, there has been an influx of parenting support programmes that focus on increasing father competencies as a solution to this problem (Houghton et al., 2014). To represent best-value for money, these programmes generally focus on increasing parental knowledge and sound parenting practices (Houghton et al., 2014) to promote healthy father–child relationships (Anderson et al., 2014). Although father involvement in early childhood programmes has increased over the last 10 to 15 years, there are still difficulties engaging fathers in these programmes due to pre-conceived ideas regarding the fathering role, societal stigma and generally female biased-play environments (Anderson et al., 2014; Houghton, et al., 2014: Palm & Fagan, 2014). Despite this, when fathers do engage in early childhood programmes and the play experiences of children, their children reap numerous positive benefits, and the family's overall wellbeing is improved (Anderson et al., 2014; Appl et al., 2008; Green, 2003; Magill-Evans et al., 2006; Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). Thus, although there has been a shift to engage fathers in early childhood services, there are numerous factors that contribute to the poor engagement trends among fathers in such programmes.

Methodology

The Dad's playgroup at CfCL was investigated as part of a larger research project known as TSA/Griffith University Knowledge Partnership. This research partnership was designed to inform the service delivery of CfCL. To this end, the Dad's playgroup was studied in order to answer the following questions:

- What was the underpinning philosophy for the delivery of the Dad's playgroup for fathers and staff?
- What changes occurred for fathers (and mothers) as a result of their attendance at the Playgroup?
- What changes occurred for their children?
- What changes occurred for staff?
- How does the playgroup function as a support service for fathers?

Thus, researchers used the most significant change methodology (Davies & Dart, 2005) to gauge how fathers and staff felt about their participation in the playgroup and the resulting impact on the relationship with their children.

Additionally, fathers were interviewed and were asked the following questions during their interview. These questions acted as a guide only and were implemented in a semi-structured way.

1. How long have you been participating in this playgroup?
2. How did you find out about the playgroup?
3. How does this playgroup compare to other Dad's services you have experienced?
4. How has the playgroup impacted your child's health and wellbeing?
5. How has the playgroup impacted you and your child's relationship?
6. What is the most significant change in your family life that has occurred as a result of your participation in the Dad's playgroup?
7. How are your needs being met by this group?
8. How are your child's needs being met?
9. How are the staff contributing to these experiences?
10. What are the advantages of participating in this playgroup through the Family Place?

The use of interviews is common in qualitative research for good reason. Interviews enable a collaborative experience in which the interviewer and interviewee are active participants in conversation (Silverman, 2006). However, as Macfayden, Swallow, Santacroce and Lambert (2011) assert, males in particular are more inclined to engage in research if there is a male doing the interviewing. Furthermore, males

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tend to appreciate being interviewed in familiar settings, such as their home, workplace or a community venue (Macfayden et al., 2011). Therefore, for these reasons, the men were interviewed by the project research assistant, who is a male, in the CfCL setting.

Recruitment

The research assistant attended the Dad's Playgroup from April 2014 to July 2014 to recruit participants and collect data. Fathers were initially approached with an introductory information sheet by the project research assistant during his first visit to the playgroup. During this visit, the research assistant went through the information sheet with each participant and answered any questions that they may have had. During the next two sessions the research assistant provided consent forms for participants who had been previously approached with an information sheet. Participants were given the consent form to take home and encouraged to contact the research assistant or chief investigator with any questions that they may have had. During the remaining sessions, the research assistant organised and conducted interviews with participants who had provided consent. Ethics approval for the conduct of this research was part of TSA/Griffith University Knowledge Partnership HREC 2013/404.

Participants

Six participants in the CfCL Dad's Playgroup were interviewed for this research project. The fathers ranged in age from 29 to 36 years old and the children ranged in age from several months to seven years old, although there was no limit on the age of attendees. Four fathers resided within the Logan City district while the remainder came from Brisbane Council district. The education level was varied from fathers who had high school only, trade qualifications and university qualifications to those who worked in office, industrial and private business areas

One of the six participants was a staff member employed by CfCL, but who also brought his son along to the playgroup. One of the other five participants was the founder of the programme prior to it being held in the space at CfCL. He facilitated the programme (rarely) if the CfCL worker was unable to attend. He also brought his son along to the programme on a weekly basis. All six participants were male and were not chosen on the basis of age or marital situation. Four of the six participants were in a relationship with the children's mothers, and two were separated. In all situations, the father had contact with the child on a regular basis even if they did not live in the same household.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and verbatim transcripts analysed using a modified grounded theory approach. Given the absence of a definitive theory around the impact of father-specific playgroups on children and families, this approach – which aims to develop theory grounded from data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) – was identified as the most appropriate. Thus, the transcribed interviews were coded using the initial stages of a Grounded Theory approach (this project is ongoing). The Grounded Theory approach has been described as involving three stages of coding - open, axial and selective - and these stages can be employed sequentially or concurrently (Walker & Myrick, 2006).

For this study, the initial coding stage, open-coding, was undertaken (Oktay, 2012; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Open coding entails line-by-line coding to identify themes (titled codes) from the raw data (Oktay, 2012). In line with this approach to analysis, interview transcripts were reviewed in-depth, line by line, and concepts in relation to the data were written within the margins of transcripts (Walker & Myrick, 2006). Throughout this stage an inductive approach was employed through which concepts were generated from the data without preconceived distinctions. After this, sets of related data were grouped together into main themes (Oktay, 2012; Walker & Myrick, 2006). Main themes were determined after multiple in-depth reviews of transcripts, particularly when data from multiple research participants related to a particular concept. Finally, these themes were reviewed in relation to one another, and comparable themes grouped.

Findings and Discussion

Father-Specific Playgroups

Interview findings were populated into eight themes: father-specific playgroups, support services for fathers, playgroup environment, father/child relationships, changing family dynamics, significance for father and their child, significance for mothers, and significance for staff. Findings underpinning each of these themes, and a discussion of these findings in relation to the literature has been included under the theme headings below.

Father-Specific Playgroups

Participants clarified the general benefits of the father-specific playgroup approach. Four of the six participants indicated that the nature of this particular playgroup allowed them to have meaningful interactions with their child on a weekly basis. For example, one father said:

> Really positive. Yeah, just really positive. I really wanted something that I could do with [name of child] outside of her mother's house, I suppose – we're not together – so it's time just for me to spend with her without her brothers or her mother there or anything like that. So just to get some one on one time with her and stuff like that. Yeah, it's been really good. (Father A)

Clearly, the playgroup provided the opportunity for fathers and children to share quality time that they may not have experienced otherwise. Furthermore, fathers suggested that the father-specific nature of the playgroup was paramount, and catered to their distinct needs. This point is best exemplified by the participant comments below:

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> I think this is a great programme. Like I said, they cater for you know, fathers, who work full-time Monday to Friday. (Father B)
>
> You know, and I know I've got a sound board there to get some advice off them, they've offered me some advice and sort of directed me where to go for different, different sort of support networks – so it's been good, yeah, definitely. (Father A)

Fathers are seen as an extremely difficult group to engage in early childhood programmes (Houghton et al., 2014). However, there are a number of evidence-based reasons as to why fathers do not engage in early childhood services as readily as women. According to Anderson et al. (2014), work rosters, family commitments, existing beliefs with regard to fathering and the father role, "gatekeeping" by the mothers, and feelings of not being accepted in this setting are reasons why fathers fail to engage with early childhood services.

This playgroup provides access and engagement for fathers, specifically. It does this through running the group on a weekend. Having programmes scheduled at convenient times for fathers, specifically, is essential to enable access and engagement by men (Anderson et al., 2014; Honig, 2008; Houghton et al., 2014). Second, male workers facilitate this programme. Having males in leadership roles is also important to create an inclusive atmosphere for fathers in an early childhood setting (Honig, 2008). Furthermore, this service engages fathers specifically, through a flexible strengths-based programme (Honig, 2008). Building on client competencies and promoting a soft-entry learning environment are important aspects in achieving access and engagement for fathers while improving parenting (Honig, 2008).

Therefore, programmes that cater to fathers, specifically, like the one at CfCL are essential to improve access and engagement from this particular hard-to-reach group.

Support Services for Fathers

Interviews provided participants with the opportunity to discuss the father-specific support landscape. Participants raised the point that there is a lack of father support programmes that focus on the unique needs of fathers. For example, Father C indicated:

> I really haven't seen much except some online forums and blogs and stuff like that, but there is not much out there for Dads.

Furthermore, three participants highlighted that programmes that are offered "universally", are often father exclusive or catered solely for female service users. For example, one father stated that:

> Oh yeah, yeah. There's plenty of children's playgroups during the week. And that's . . . they cater for like stay at home mums or mums that are working part-time. (Father B)

Providing support, encouragement and education for fathers in the early years of a child's life is essential to reduce the likelihood of mental illness and emotional distress (Halle et al., 2008). According to Green (2003), fathers are more likely to participate in programmes when there is a deliberate effort to involve them. However, providing programmes that are inclusive of fathers can be a challenge because play environments often reflect feminine preferences, and female workers often staff such play programmes. (Palm & Fagan, 2014). This can be off-putting for some fathers (Houghton et al., 2014). Therefore, father-specific playgroups, such as the one offered at CfCL are essential to increase positive fathering practices and behaviours (Green, 2003).

Playgroup Environment

Participants indicated that, in part, the benefits experienced were resulting from the playgroup environment. The playgroup environment was one which encouraged active play and engagement. This point is best exemplified via the following comments:

> It's a brilliant location. You've got inside play, you've got outside play . . . it's really child friendly. It's good for fathers too, you know because fathers aren't always indoorsy, so it probably gives the chance for fathers to show the kids what fathers are about. You know running around outside, kicking footies and wrestling. All the things that fathers do. (Father D)
>
> The space, I like that it's more natural. It used to be in a basement, which was concrete, which had a very small outdoor area. Here they get to engage with the environment, play in the leaves, it's much bigger, we got a garden – I got the guys to dig it in at one point. It's much more outdoors, which I think guys are most comfortable with their children; doing sort of active things, big activities, gross motor skills. (Father E)

The playgroup environment where the programme was administered was one which encouraged fathers and children to interact with one another through active play. Recent research has established that fathers are more likely to interact with their children through active play (Houghton et al., 2014). Fostering this play in father specific playgroups is important as it increases engagement in services, and increases the time fathers play with their child/children (Houghton et al., 2014). Moreover, environments that enable physical activity to occur are seen as an appropriate method to engage fathers in play with their children (Houghton et al., 2014). All six participants noted that they liked the playgroup environment and it enabled them to play with the children in multiple, "father-like" ways.

Hence, it is essential that play environments enable active play, increasing father-engagement and the time these fathers play with their children (Houghton et al., 2014). Thus, play environments like the one at CfCL increase father engagement through an environment that enables active play to occur.

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Father–Child Relationships

The playgroup helped to strengthen father–children relationships. During interviews, three participants stated that their relationship with their child/children had improved as a result of this playgroup. For example, Father B indicated:

> I think it gives me time with them even for a couple of hours, because usually it's Mummy Mummy. Children tend to like, be more attached to their Mum. So it's good for them to build the relationship with me as well.

A staff participant also made this comment that further illustrates the point made above:

> I think that dedicated space for them to interact with their children, it builds rapport and their relationship is . . . important in its own right. One guy mentioned to me, makes my point – he said he gets to be half a parent, whereas, normally its mum the kids go to for a glass of water even though he might be in the kitchen. But when he's here, he's number one, so that's provided that opportunity for him to building that relationship. (Father E)

Additionally, four participants stated that the space enabled them to play with their child and have this dedicated "father time", enabling this unique parenting style to flourish. This is demonstrated in the following two comments:

> It's been great. It's spending time with the kids and father time not just doing family time- you need both, and kids need both. It's just bonding with them doing different things, other than what you'd be doing with Mum . . . (Father C)

Moreover, both staff participants noted that this playgroup enabled this father-specific play to occur:

> The fathers are following their children around, the fathers are interested in what their children are doing, and you know, they're getting involved with their kids – they're wrestling. (Father D)

Father-responsiveness and involvement in a child's life enables a secure father–child attachment to form (Rolfe, 2004). Fathers have a unique parenting style that assists with the healthy development of their child (Turner, 2009). Fathers play with their children in a playful and stimulating way, whereas mothers are often in a more caretaker-like role (Lewis & Lamb, 2003; Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). Paternal styles of caregiving are seen to be more playful and stimulating, as it is less predictable and more physical than mothers (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006; Turner, 2009). Paternal styles promote social and intellectual development through challenging play situations and fathers are seen to provide less support than mothers when their children are frustrated (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006; Turner, 2009). Maternal styles of caregiving are seen to be focused on nurturing and playing with children through songs and games (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006; Turner, 2009). Moreover, mothers intervene more quickly when their child is faced with a frustrating situation (Tuner, 2009). However, both maternal and paternal parenting styles are essential to the healthy development of a child (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006; Turner, 2009).

Interactive play, often termed "rough-housing" or "rough and tumble play" usually involves fathers making use of their bodies to interact with their children (wrestling, piggy-back rides, tickling, etcetera), which therefore, assists with developing children's impulse control and coping skills (McWayne et al., 2013; Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006; Turner, 2009). Furthermore, this form of play provides play exploration, which promotes emotional and behavioural regulation for the child (Wood & Lambin, 2013). This form of play both stimulates the child and enhances the child–parent relationship (Fletcher, May, St George, Morgan, & Lubans, 2011). Moreover, this type of play can increase feelings of parenting self-efficacy on the father's behalf (Houghton et al., 2014). Therefore, fathers have a unique parenting style that significantly benefits their child/children, and playgroups such as the one at CfCL are important to allow this alternate (to the mother) relationship to form.

Changing Family Dynamics

During interviews, four participants commented that attending the playgroup changed the dynamics of their family life and/or their outlook on parenting. As Appl et al. (2008) state, fathers are increasingly becoming more aware of their responsibilities in this changing world, acknowledging that parenting is a two-person "job". This can be exemplified by the following participant comments:

> I'd say that parenting is a partnership and you can't expect your spouse to take care of the kids and do the laundry, and everything else. It's a partnership, and you know, this is my contribution as a parent as well. (Father B)
>
> No, it's been great, I think it's really important. I think that there should be more Dad's playgroups to get the Dad's involved in raising the kids. It's really handy for people, for Dad's like me who work Monday to Friday . . . and spend time with the kids by myself. I mean some days it's good to have family time with my wife as well but it's good for the kids to just hang out with me as well. (Father B)

When fathers actively participate in the upbringing of their children, evidence shows that it reinforces the belief that they are just as important in their child's life as the mother (Honig, 2008). Thus, father specific playgroups, like the one at CfCL are imperative to develop father-beliefs surrounding their worth as a parent.

Significance for the Fathers and Their Child

Fathers indicated how the playgroup was significant for both them and their child. During interviews, five participants stated that their child's health and wellbeing has been positively impacted by the playgroup. For example, Father E stated:

> Yeah, one of the kids I think he's been coming for almost 18 months as well, he's very sort of quiet and reserved, but coming to a safe place that he knows regularly, where he gets that facilitated socialisation, yeah he's come out of his shell a

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lot more. I've noticed that from my son as well, he has trouble at school socialising with other kids, but me being here able to coach him, structure that socialisation, has helped me see where I can help him, and has helped him as well.

Furthermore, every participant raised the point that this playgroup gave them the opportunity to talk to other fathers about fathering and childhood. Specifically, two participants said:

> It's good, for Dads as well, talk about parent stuff, it's good to exchange notes about fatherhood as well, compare notes. (Father B)
>
> Oh well, listen, the only reason you really meet people with the same ideas and the same, oh, same needs, or the same life experiences, then the . . . people you hang around with, but when you meet new people they're totally different. It does help you in your life, other people's experiences help you out. (Father C)

Moreover, in terms of knowledge sharing, fathers also clarified that the relaxing, non-stigmatising atmosphere was important to them, and supported their ability to learn new parenting techniques. This can be exemplified in the following participant comments:

> Oh yeah they're just very happy every time, I mean if I want something you just ask them, they're just really, really friendly. They just make me feel like home – like brotherhood. I have no pressure here I just relax . . . (Father F)
>
> I think they also get role modelling as well. You know, talking about dad stuff. Partners, children, work, whatever, just sort of that social support, that peer support network. (Father E)

Fathers are often seen as having a minimal impact on their child's health and wellbeing, but in fact there is emerging evidence that father involvement in their child's upbringing has a direct positive impact on the child's health and wellbeing (Halle et al., 2008; Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). For example, when fathers are involved in the early development of their child, their child often has a higher than average IQ/better school performance, better impulse control, exhibits less violent behaviour, has increased self-esteem, healthier sex-role development, the ability to emotionally regulate, improved language development and more advanced pro-social behaviours (Appl et al., 2008; Green, 2003; Magill-Evans et al., 2006; Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). Hence, during interviews, five participants stated that their child's health and wellbeing has been positively impacted by the playgroup.

Therefore, father-specific playgroups are essential to increase father involvement in the early years of a child's life, thus positively impacting their health and wellbeing.

Soft-entry playgroups, such as the one at CfCL, enable fathers to learn from other fathers by observing and conversing (Palm & Fagan, 2014). This interaction is important to improve father parenting and skills (Palm & Fagan, 2014). Furthermore, it is essential that partnerships between fathers are encouraged, as this increases engagement and participation for fathers who would not normally engage in such a service (Honig, 2008). This partnership also provides peer-support (Honig, 2008). All six participants noted that this playgroup enabled this partnership to occur.

Hence, playgroups such as the one at CfCL enable partnerships between fathers in the local community to form. Therefore, this increases both engagement in early child services, and father parenting capacities through conversing with, and observing others.

Significance for Mothers

Participating fathers also suggested that the playgroup had an impact on the mothers. Specifically, out of the participants with a partner, three stated that they have seen improvements in their relationship with their spouse due to involvement in the playgroup and support from their partner as a parent:

> And like I said, overall, for the family as well, just having that time for my wife as well some peace and quiet on her own. It helps the overall family, not just me as a parent or the children. I know my wife as well, the benefits. (Father B)
>
> That's a good question. I think the answer, I mean my wife would give me a good answer for this – she's very happy 'cause I mean she always said I should spend more time with kids and I said okay, okay. But sometimes we will just stay at home and maybe I just do some job in the garage or I play on the computer. Yeah I always say I will spend more time with my kids but sometime it just, I mean it's always my wife that spends more time with them so the Daddy playgroup it's only for Daddies . . . I mean it is very good, I play with my kids and I think we all just enjoy it. I am happy. (Father F)

Another participant noted that even though he did not have a spouse, other fathers had told him that the playgroup had impacted their relationship with their partners:

> I've known fathers who have come and the mum is kind of grateful for actually have that Saturday morning to do what they want to do and stuff. If anything, it's actually encouraged healthy relationships with the partner, because they're not doing it on their own. Fathers are starting to learn stuff and so they're starting to get more involved at home. (Father D)

Mothers supporting fathers in child-rearing (and vice versa) is important for fostering a child's attachment security with their caregivers, marital quality, parenting quality, psychological health and parental functioning (Brown, Schoppe –Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, & Neff, 2010; Coyl, Newland, & Freeman, 2008).

The quality of the parents' relationships is a firm indicator of the quality of the father–child relationship, and assists with the child developing a healthy attachment to their father as well as their mother (Brown et al., 2010; Coyl et al., 2008). A father's participation in their child's upbringing also reduces family conflict, leading to a healthier child–father relationship (Anderson et al., 2014). Parents that have a healthy relationship are seen to be more responsive to their children and more confident in their parenting (Rosenberg

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& Wilcox, 2006). Thus, it is important that parents have a quality relationship to ensure that the father and child can form a healthy attachment. The father's playgroup at CfCL has seen to improve relationships between the father and mother, and as a result, enables a healthy father–child attachment to form.

Significance for Staff

The playgroup also had an impact on facilitating staff. One of the two staff participants stated that that they felt the nature of this playgroup promoted feelings of efficacy and father role construction:

> I think we have legitimised that role. Probably the main thing, dads are important, so we've got a special playgroup just for you. You guys are parents, and equal parents, and contribute to the development of your children. I'm not just the bread-winner, and not just the disciplinarian here. We want you to play, we want you to have a relationship, we want you to teach and learn from your children. Yeah, I think that's the main contribution we've had. (Father E)

Moreover, one of the staff participants said that this playgroup enabled interactions between fathers in the community to occur when they normally would not have the opportunity:

> I think, firstly, it's socialisation. I get a few calls from guys wanting to sort of get out of the house and meet other people and it's a good space to meet other dads. When I take my own son to school, probably 10% of the people there are dads, if that. Mostly mums, so you don't meet other dads at the school pick up or drop off. When I take my son to Scouts, I don't meet other dads there either, it's mainly mums. I think it's important that this is sort of a recognised space for men and children to, for dads to spend time with their kids, to meet other dads. (Father E)

It is important that the staff in leadership roles educate (in a soft-entry style) men about their role as a father (and its importance) and good fathering practices to increase feelings of self-efficacy, increase engagement in early childhood settings and develop sound parenting skills (Honig, 2008). As stated above, partnerships between fathers enable a peer-support network to form, which increases fathering capacity (Honig, 2008). Having an avenue for these partnerships to form also increases participation from fathers who would not usually engage in an early childhood service (Honig, 2008). Thus, father-specific playgroups, such as the one offered at CfCL, are important for the local community to connect with one another, thus providing peer-support.

Conclusion

Dad's playgroups reap numerous benefits for the child, father and overall family. Programmes that target fathers specifically are important to increase fathering capacity in local communities, develop the health and wellbeing of children, increase father's self-efficacy/role construction and reduce the societal stigma attached to fathers involved in early childhood services. Therefore, programmes such as the playgroup offered at CfCL are essential to develop and promote the aforementioned topics, and the evidence presented demonstrates how such a programme can facilitate positive changes and provide countless benefits to children, fathers, families and communities.

Significantly, this playgroup is part of a SUEIP programme, which allows fathers to come and go as they please into this space (Macfarlane, 2016) Fathers then, feel no pressure to come along, as it is a welcoming environment, based on high quality play experiences and open engagement, allowing fathers and children to design their own participation programme in ways that benefit them. These characteristics add to the benefits of the playgroup and enable engagement in ways that facilitate grass roots participation. Fathers and children build their relationship through this participation method and thus the wellbeing of the child and the family as a whole improves.

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