

# Why do we need Dads Groups?

A cooperative research project between Dads Group and the University of the Sunshine Coast.

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Dads  
Group



# Research Overview

This research overview outlines a cooperative research project currently being undertaken between Dads Group Inc (DGI) and the University of the Sunshine Coast.

## What is Dads Group?

DGI is a leading, national, not-for-profit organisation that facilitates support for fathers of young children primarily through the establishment of social groups. With the view that supporting fathers ultimately contributes to addressing broader social issues such as domestic violence, suicide, and isolation, Dads Group has proven successful in engaging dads, establishing groups in over 70 locations across Australia.

## Research Background

Although the transition to parenthood is widely considered a challenging time for new mothers, the experiences of new fathers have long been under researched. Parenting by fathers is occurring in the context of changing norms about masculinity and fatherhood (Johansson, 2011). Men may struggle in negotiating their new identity as a father and are known to be reluctant to seek help – this may have negative implications for their family (Asenhed et al., 2013; Yousaf et al., 2015). It is recognised that father-child bonding contributes to healthy child development (Fletcher, 2011; Lamb, 2010). Furthermore, supporting fathers who are struggling through parenthood, reduces the burden on families which translates into better psychological and behavioural outcomes for the child (Wilson & Durbin, 2010).

The success of DGI makes it a suitable case study to inform the design of community-based interventions seeking to engage dads in social activities. With expectations on fathers increasing, investigating the operation of an organisation that engages and supports fathers, facilitating their negotiation into a new role and identity as a father, is timely. This research will capture the intersection between support groups and these changing norms, providing an important research understanding of community-based programs for fathers.

## Research Aims

The aims of this research therefore are:

1. To explore the approach of DGI in their implementation of new dads' groups, including:
  - a. required resources and the functions they perform
  - b. measures of success and how they contribute to the overall vision of DGI
2. To provide a 'systems' model of DGI's strategic approach and vision, offering greater insight into the operations and potential for optimising community impact.
3. To undertake a community survey aiming to inform the ongoing development of DGI by exploring the approaches and challenges of dads, mums and care-givers.
4. To identify an ideal DGI system that best supports social change which will contribute sustainably to the ongoing wellbeing of dads and families.

## Challenges for men in Australia

The health and wellbeing of men in Australia is recognised as requiring urgent action (Burns et al., 2016). In Australia, intentional self-harm is the leading cause of death for those aged between 15 and 44 years, with men accounting for three quarters of these deaths (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019). Suicidality is well-researched and key risk factors have been identified, such as acute stress, depressed mood, unhelpful conceptions of masculinity, and ineffective coping strategies, particularly, withdrawing socially (Proudfoot et al., 2014). The ways in which these risk factors affect suicidality are complex and interrelated. Men who report greater social isolation, for example, also report greater psychological distress and self-stigma, and lower personal wellbeing (Burns et al., 2016).

Domestic and family violence is a further societal issue in which men are implicated. Domestic violence includes physical, sexual, emotional and psychological abuse, and family violence is a wider term that encompasses violence between family members as well as intimate partners. In Australia, one in six women have experienced sexual or physical violence (Cox, 2015) and one in four women have experienced emotional abuse by a current or former partner (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017). Children exposed to domestic and family violence are likely to experience maltreatment as a result of diminished parenting capacity and neglect (Campbell & Thompson, 2015) or through direct violence (Horton et al., 2014). Consequently, there can be significant trauma and negative effects for children's cognitive functioning and emotional wellbeing (Kimball, 2016; McTavish et al., 2016).

There is a clear need to address these challenging and prevalent societal issues in Australia. The transition to fatherhood, bringing new sense of identity, demands on resources, and responsibilities, may be an opportune point at which to support men's mental health and address the risk of domestic and family violence.



## The New Fatherhood Experience

New fatherhood is a time of excitement and joy for most men. In a survey of new fathers in Australia (N = 1379), most reported finding real joy in being a father (89%) and feeling satisfied with their role as a parent (81%; Colquhoun & Elkins, 2015). Fatherhood may, however, involve elevated risks that come with life disruption, additional stressors (e.g., sleep deprivation), and new commitments. It has been argued that fatherhood has become increasingly individualised in the face of societal and household change and that fatherhood is increasingly being challenged by partners and social institutions, such as the media and government (McKelley & Rochlen, 2016; Williams, 2008). Furthermore, although fathers in Australia today may be more involved in child care than in past decades, recent statistical trends for most families indicate that the time fathers spend in employment remains the same before and after having children (Baxter, 2019). Many new fathers report not spending the amount of time they wish to with their child (55%) and less than half have reported that it was easy to find someone to talk to when feeling stressed or down (44%; Colquhoun & Elkins, 2015). Many also report feeling stressed or anxious about needing to be “the rock” in their family (47%) and a high proportion scored highly for risk of depression or anxiety (39%; Colquhoun & Elkins, 2015). Across studies globally, approximately 25% of fathers have been estimated to experience depression in the period 3- to 6-months postpartum (Paulson & Bazemore, 2010).



The support of new fathers and prevention of mental ill-health is imperative given the influence fathers can have on their children's development. Historically, warm and involved fatherhood has been associated with a range of positive outcomes, such as school readiness (McWayne et al., 2013), and cognitive, emotional, and social development broadly (Lamb, 2010; Towe-Goodman et al., 2014). More recently, the father-child relationship has been directly linked to child prosocial behaviour, even when controlling for the influence of mother and teacher relationships (Ferreira et al., 2016). A father's positive beliefs about parenting in early life have also been associated with their child having fewer challenging behaviours in subsequent years (Kroll et al., 2016). Furthermore, emerging research suggests that rough-and-tumble play, common in father-child interactions, is associated with better social and cognitive outcomes, as well as fewer aggressive behaviours in the child (Anderson et al., 2019; StGeorge & Freeman, 2017). In contrast to these beneficial outcomes, when parental mental ill-health is present, there can be significant social, economic and psychological impacts on families and the capacity for sensitive care may be compromised (van Santvoort et al., 2015).

Help-seeking behaviour is infrequent in men (Yousaf et al., 2015). Indeed, men typically enter services for mental health only when the severity of symptoms, extent of disability, and number of comorbidities becomes highly elevated (Harris et al., 2014). Help-seeking in relation to fathering, specifically, is also likely to be low. In qualitative research (N = 20), Australian men have reported feelings of marginalisation based on services being designed for access by mothers (Rominov et al., 2018). Fathers also viewed their partner as the gateway to parenting information and expressed preference for informal supports, such as family and friends, rather than formal programs (Rominov et al., 2018). Determining ways in which to engage fathers in behaviours that support physical and psychological wellbeing, particularly before concerns become severe, remains a challenge to be addressed in the academic literature.



## How Dads Group Can Help

Community-based programs are an avenue through which individuals can become engaged in a strengths-based environment. For example, peer-led support has been used to facilitate behaviour change by building trust based on shared lived experiences, role-modelling living well, and engaging others with help available and the broader community (Gillard et al., 2015). The community-based Men's Sheds program in Australia has been used to address social isolation in men and provides another example (Ballinger et al., 2009; Morgan et al., 2007). Gendered approaches to encouraging help-seeking have been recognised as important (Harris et al., 2014) and community-based groups may be well-suited to cater to these needs, providing an inclusive and non-pathologising environment where men build relationships and engage as peers (Morgan et al., 2007). Such programs may be viewed as a form of "social prescription" (Chatterjee et al., 2018), which help bridge the gap between medical involvement—such as the birthing process in the parenting context—and psychological wellbeing in the community.

Community-based groups could also have a role in addressing the broad societal issues men face. Dads play groups, for example, aim to help fathers develop supportive social relationships, sense of purpose, family harmony, and connections to physical and mental health services, all of which are recognised as protective factors against the risk of suicidality (Black Dog Institute, 2018). Further to this, the act of empowering fathers to develop an identity as a father and embrace this new role is a step towards challenging gender stereotypes as well as strengthening equal and respectful relationships, both of which contribute to the prevention of domestic and family violence (Our Watch, 2015)

Community-based programs for new fathers remain to be formally investigated in the academic literature. In Stage 2 of the research, a systems analysis is thus being applied to understand the ways in which Dads Group Inc supports outcomes related to men's mental health and domestic and family violence.



## The Next Phase Of The Research

As part of Stage 3 of the research, a Community Perspectives Survey of new mothers, fathers, and other primary caregivers is underway.

This survey is examining:

- The support needs of new fathers
- The impact of Dads Group programs and events on new fathers.

If you would like to participate, please go to:

[https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/USC\\_DGI\\_survey](https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/USC_DGI_survey)



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