

Children's well-being goes hand in hand with their dads' mental health

August 31 2018, by Catherine Wade And Julie Green



Credit: cottonbro studio from Pexels

We know from [new research](#) that children whose mothers are depressed may respond differently to stress, have altered immunity and be at greater risk of psychological disorders. This work adds to the [body of](#)

[research](#) showing [children can be affected](#) in negative and long-term ways by their mothers' mental ill-health.

But what about [dads](#)?

Men's [mental health](#) is more on the societal radar these days – but less so in terms of fatherhood. This area has been relatively under-researched. So how important is a father's mental [health](#) to the way thier child grows and develops? Very important, as it turns out.

Dads have a powerful impact on their kids

Fathers' mental health and the quality of their co-parenting relationships have a powerful impact on child development. [Evidence](#) shows [fathers](#) who are sensitive and supportive have children who develop better social skills and language, regardless of socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity.

[Research](#) also shows when fathers experience mental illness, their children are at higher risk of behavioural and emotional difficulties. The magnitude of this risk is similar to when mothers experience mental illness.

[Data](#) from the [Longitudinal Study of Australian Children](#) show fathers who experience snowballing distress report being less consistent in setting and enforcing clear expectations and limits for their child's behaviour, and show less warmth and greater hostility towards their children by the time the child is eight to nine years of age.

There is also [emerging evidence](#) to show supporting fathers' mental health early in their parenting journey has positive effects on children.

We also know in order to thrive, develop well and sail relatively

smoothly through to maturity, children need [parents](#) who feel confident, supported and equipped with the right skills to navigate the sometimes choppy waters of parenting.

It's critically important we understand how both mothers and fathers are doing when it comes to mental health. For the sake of their own health and the well-being of their children.

New insights on Australian dads

Recent [research](#) conducted by the [Parenting Research Centre](#) sheds some new light on the mental health of Australian fathers. The research found one in five dads has experienced symptoms of depression and/or anxiety since having children. This includes nearly one in ten dads who report experiencing postnatal depression.

This may sound surprising, but it gives us reliable Australian data from the perspectives of a large and representative sample of fathers. It's drawn from a new analysis of the [Parenting Today in Victoria survey](#) of 2,600 parents, 40% of whom were dads.

Fathers with poorer mental health told us they were less likely to feel effective as parents and were less confident in their own parenting. They were more critical of, less patient and less consistent in parenting behaviours with their children. They also spent less time with them, were less likely to be involved with their child's school or early education service and less likely to feel confident about helping them with their school work.

The proportion of dads reporting symptoms of depression and anxiety in this survey is lower than for mums ([one in three](#)). But the dads surveyed were less likely than mums to identify someone they trusted they could turn to for advice.

The dads were generally more positive than mums about the amount of support they received from their partner. But the fact many fathers are likely to be struggling with no clear view of where to get help should sound alarm bells.

Research on the [co-parenting relationship](#) (including for separated parents) shows the level of support parents provide each other through sharing everyday parenting responsibilities impacts [child outcomes](#).

So, what can be done?

It's important to note the majority of dads surveyed were doing well. In general, there's a very positive overall picture of fathering in Australia. This contradicts out-dated assumptions fathers are less involved or less effective than mothers when it comes to child health and development.

But we can't ignore the relatively high numbers of dads who aren't travelling so well. This research highlights three key areas that will reap rewards for children if we focus on them now:

make it routine to address fathers' as well as mothers' mental health in services for new parents – this isn't currently happening in maternal, family and child health services

offer support to parents around co-parenting and what it means to support each other, particularly those who are co-parenting across different types of family living arrangements to help them get on the same parenting page

work on ways to better engage dads in two areas: in parenting support services to give them strategies for parenting confidently and in early education settings and schools, where having both parents involved results in benefits for the child.

[Research](#) shows involving both parents in parenting programs rather than just one is more beneficial to children. We should consider what we know about dads' motivations for attending or not attending parenting programs or education sessions (such as lack of time or feeling uncomfortable asking for help) and tailor strategies specifically to dads that take these into account.

Fathers tend to look for information and advice about raising their [children](#) online, rather than consulting professionals or attending group sessions. Some 76% of the dads surveyed said they went online for parenting information or advice. But many (around 66%) said they used books. Dads need access to credible parenting information in formats they can explore on their own terms.

Five free resources for dads

The Australian government funded website raisingchildren.net.au has lots of evidence-based, dad-specific and general parenting information in the form of articles, videos and free webinars that can be viewed any time.

The University of Newcastle's [SMS4dads](#) is a text messaging service which aims to check in with dads through their smartphone before and after the birth of their baby.

The Movember Foundation [website](#) has a section devoted specifically to mental health that encourages men to start a conversation about their own mental health and reach out for help and advice.

Beyondblue has a four-part web series called [Dadvice](#), which follows four dads on their journey into fatherhood.

[Health Direct](#), funded by the federal government and most Australian

states, offers information on depression in men and where to seek help.

If you are a dad who needs to speak to someone immediately about a mental health issue, call Lifeline on 13 11 14.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Children's well-being goes hand in hand with their dads' mental health (2018, August 31) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-08-children-well-being-dads-mental-health.html>

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