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# Engaging dads: Enhancing support for fathers through parenting programmes

*Lisa Glynn and Michael Dale*

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*Lisa Glynn is a Registered Social Worker based at The Bishop's Action Foundation, a community development organisation in Taranaki. She is an Accredited Leader for the Incredible Years Parent Programme, with a particular interest in family support, and a volunteer Coordinator for freshperspective, a parent mentoring programme.*

*Michael Dale is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work in the School of Health and Social Services at Massey University, Palmerston North. Michael has extensive work experience within the social services sector as a practitioner, trainer, project leader, policy adviser and manager. He has worked for central government, local government and the NGO sector.*

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## Abstract

Parenting programmes purport to improve the parenting capacity of both mothers and fathers; however it is predominantly mothers who participate. Father participation is important because fathers have a positive impact on both child development and behaviour, and outcomes for children are enhanced when both parents participate in parenting programmes. This article draws upon a study (via an online questionnaire) that explored the views of social workers about the issues affecting fathers' participation in parenting programmes. The results showed that participants considered the qualities of the programme leader, the programme content and the philosophy of the service delivery organisation to be the most important issues impacting on father participation. From the perspective of change, qualities of the programme leader and organisational philosophy were considered the most feasible to address. The sample comprised three times more female than male participants and there was an evident difference in viewpoint according to gender on issues including the gender of the programme leader and the gender make-up of the group.

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## Introduction

Whilst the findings of international research have highlighted the valuable role of fathers in improving outcomes for children (Holmes, Galovan, Yoshida, & Hawkins, 2010) and the advantages of both mothers and fathers attending parenting programmes (O'Brien, 2004), little research has been conducted in New Zealand on the role of fathers and their participation in parenting programmes (Luketina, Davidson, & Palmer, 2009).

A review of international research studies reveals several issues influencing the participation of fathers in parenting programmes. These issues include, but are not limited to, the goals and philosophy of the host organisation (O'Brien, 2004; Torr, 2003), the qualities of the programme leader (Berlyn, Wise, & Soriano, 2008; Fabiano, 2007), the locations and times of

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programmes (Gavazzi & Schock, 2004; Salinas, Smith, & Armstrong, 2011) and programme content and style of delivery (Cosson & Graham, 2012).

This article considers the views of social workers regarding the issues that influence fathers' participation in parenting programmes. Following a brief review of relevant literature the research methods employed in the study are outlined. Next the results of the online questionnaire are presented. The article concludes with a discussion of key findings and their implications.

## **Relevant literature**

A literature review was conducted to gain a broad understanding of the issues associated with fathers' engagement with parenting programmes. This established a solid rationale for the study and informed the formulation of the research questions. Firstly, the role of fathers is considered. Secondly, the issues that influence fathers' participation in parenting programmes are examined. Thirdly, the review concludes with a discussion of the New Zealand context.

The literature search was conducted through the electronic databases of Massey University Library's website, Google scholar and books available from Massey University Library. A systematic search was conducted using the key words 'fathers', 'dads', 'engagement', 'participation', 'attendance', 'involvement' and 'parenting programmes'.

## **The role of fathers**

Fathers play an important role in the development of children's self-regulation and social competence (McBride, Dyer, & Rane, 2008; Raikes, Summers, & Roggman, 2005; Roggman, Boyce, Cook, & Cook, 2002). Father involvement can be extremely beneficial to children's development (Berlyn et al., 2008; Fletcher, 2010; O'Brien, 2004). Several studies evidence the positive impact of fathers on children's development in areas such as school readiness, pro-social behaviours and cognitive development (Fabiano, 2007; McBride et al., 2008; Raikes et al., 2005; Roggman et al., 2002). Some research suggests that fathers have a greater influence on a child's misbehaviours than mothers (Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008). The research findings of Helfenbaum-Kun and Ortiz (2008) showed that an experimental group of fathers involved in a parenting programme reported lower levels of child misbehaviours than the control group of fathers. Other research underlines the fact that positive outcomes from father-child interactions exist regardless of the extent of mother involvement in parenting (McBride et al., 2008).

Whilst social services organisations may claim to support families as a whole, the research suggests they are mainly offering services to mothers (Fletcher, 2010). Statistics show that parenting programmes have been largely both attended and evaluated by mothers (Fabiano, 2007; Salinas et al., 2011). Previous research reviews highlight the stark reality that only a small percentage of parenting programmes include fathers (Lundahl et al., 2008).

## **Issues that influence fathers' participation**

Several issues impacting on fathers' participation in parenting programmes were identified in the literature review.

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### **Organisational philosophy and goals**

The first issue relates to the importance of the organisation's philosophy and goals. Several studies point to the fundamental role played by social service organisations in targeting fathers through service provision and enabling access through inclusive strategies (O'Brien, 2004; Raikes et al., 2005; Torr, 2003). It is the responsibility of the organisation to identify the barriers which prevent fathers from accessing support (Torr, 2003). Several authors argue that organisations must be intentional and proactive in their mission, in their employment policies, programme development, professional development and allocation of funding to ensure that fathers have a voice and that services are relevant and accessible for them (Birks & Callister, 1999; O'Brien, 2004; Torr, 2003). In their study of Australian fathers, Berlyn et al. (2008) found that many felt excluded from social services by an environment that lacked information and resources targeted at men and also lacked male staff and male clients. The overall philosophy of the organisation underpins the development of intentional policy and practice with regard to supporting fathers.

### **Characteristics of the programme leader**

A second issue impacting on fathers' participation relates to the characteristics of the programme leader. Professionals who are culturally sensitive, adaptable, encouraging, inclusive and who build trusting relationships are able to engage fathers more effectively in support services (Berlyn et al., 2008; Fabiano, 2007; Gavazzi & Schock, 2004; Meyers, 1993; Roggman et al., 2002; Salinas et al., 2011). Fathers engage with helping professionals who convey understanding of the complexity of fathering and the valuable contribution of fathers to family life and child development (Cosson & Graham, 2012; Meyers, 1993; Torr, 2003). Some studies indicate that fathers' engagement would be enhanced if the professional was male, a father themselves and with personal experience of the challenges facing fathers (Berlyn et al., 2008; Levant, 1990; O'Brien, 2004). Several research studies highlight fathers' frustration with professionals who make assumptions about their parenting capabilities and focus on mothers exclusively (Berlyn et al., 2008; Cosson & Graham, 2012; O'Brien, 2004; Torr, 2003). These studies identify both the ambivalence and resistance of some professionals towards engaging fathers in support services. The need for professional training to promote an inclusive approach when working with fathers has been consistently highlighted over the years (Birks & Callister, 1999; Fletcher, 2010).

### **The environment of the programme**

Another important issue in engaging fathers is the environment in which the programme takes place. There is an obvious need for the organisation's environment to be welcoming, comfortable and supportive; however, many are welcoming and supportive of women, but leave fathers feeling out of place (Berlyn et al., 2008; Torr, 2003). Study findings show that displays of positive and diverse images of fathers, information targeted at fathers and the presence of other men in the organisation can help mitigate fathers' feelings of alienation (Berlyn et al., 2008; Cowan, Cowan, Pruett, Pruett, & Wong, 2009; Fletcher, 2010; McBride et al., 2008; O'Brien, 2004; Torr, 2003). Attention to colour schemes can promote a more father-friendly environment and displaying notices about organisational processes, rather than assuming fathers already know, can reduce feelings of discomfort (Fletcher, 2010). Fathers engage more readily in services where there is a significant existing element of father involvement (Brickell, 1998; Raikes et al., 2005). Some studies indicate that organisations should provide specific father-only programmes (Berlyn et al., 2008) and should employ a member of staff dedicated to promoting fathers' engagement with services (McKenna, 2007).

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### **Locations and times of parenting programmes**

Other important issues highlighted relate to the locations and times of parenting programmes. Both the scheduling and the venue for parenting programmes must be convenient for fathers (Gavazzi & Schock, 2004; Meyers, 1993; Salinas et al., 2011). This may mean planning programme delivery for the evening or the weekend to accommodate fathers' employment commitments (Berlyn et al., 2008; Cosson & Graham, 2012; Fabiano, 2007; McBride et al., 2008; Meyers, 1993; Raikes et al., 2005). Selecting father-friendly venues, such as parks, recreational sites or sports clubrooms, may promote father participation (Berlyn et al., 2008). Such an action-oriented setting may encourage fathers to get involved more readily than a social service site (Fabiano, 2007).

### **Programme content and style of delivery**

The programme content and style of delivery are recurring issues relating to father participation. A key theme emerging was that the content of the programme should be interesting and relevant to fathers and include topics which concern fathers directly such as juggling work, family commitments and emotional wellbeing (Cosson & Graham, 2012; Meyers, 1993). Research shows that fathers seem more motivated to engage with services when they perceive that it can help with an identified childhood problem, therefore professionals should engage with fathers from the outset and explain the benefits to children of fathers engaging with the programme (Berlyn et al., 2008; Raikes et al., 2005). Other research concluded that fathers prefer programmes which were task-oriented rather than process-oriented (Berlyn et al., 2008).

### **Advertising of the programme**

The key role of advertising and marketing to promote father participation was highlighted (Salinas et al., 2011). Professionals should ensure that programme advertising occurs where fathers will access it, such as in community group settings, churches, workplaces and cafes (Berlyn et al., 2008; Gavazzi & Schock, 2004). Research shows that where professionals expect fathers to participate, fathers are more likely to engage (Gavazzi & Schock, 2004). Word of mouth has been shown to be an effective recruitment strategy (Berlyn et al., 2008), as is an explicit invitation from the programme leader (Fabiano, 2007). Research findings recommend an inclusive approach to advertising insofar as it should comprise images, photos or stories depicting a diverse range of fathers (Gavazzi & Schock, 2004; Meyers, 1993).

### **'Gatekeeping'**

The literature review reveals that the attitudes of mothers and helping professionals may impact on fathers' participation in parenting programmes. Some research points to the impact of mothers' behaviours termed 'maternal gatekeeping', whereby mothers exclude fathers from the parenting process (Cowan, Cowan, Cohen, Pruett, & Pruett, 2008; Gonzalez-Mena, 2010). Other research highlighted the role played by helping professionals in treating mothers as 'gatekeepers' to the family or in acting as gatekeepers themselves by failing to promote fathers' engagement with the service and prioritising mothers' needs over fathers' needs (Torr, 2003).

### **The New Zealand context**

New Zealand-based research echoes international research in demanding meaningful and consistent input from fathers into the development and delivery of family support services (Bigsby, Breiding-Buss, & Tritschler, 2002). Themes emerging from international research regarding the issues impacting on fathers' engagement with services are mirrored in the New Zealand context.

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Personal characteristics of the professional, father-friendly venues and marketing aimed specifically at fathers emerged as important issues affecting engagement (Brickell, 1998; Luketina et al., 2009). Research within the New Zealand population showed that the majority felt that fathers should carry an equal share of parenting responsibilities and rejected the notion that caring for children was not a masculine trait (Bigsby et al., 2002). In spite of this, provision of family support services in New Zealand, as overseas, has served to reinforce the division of parenting work into gendered roles (Bigsby et al., 2002). This has been attributed to organisational inflexibility in delivering support services during week days when many fathers are working (Bigsby et al., 2002; Birks & Callister, 1999). In addition, most social service staff are female (Fletcher, 2010). New Zealand research contrasts with international research in the key area of fathers' attitudes towards family service organisations. In their survey of New Zealand fathers, Luketina et al. (2009) aimed to investigate the role of fathers and how they were supported in their parenting. Almost all the fathers surveyed reported quite high levels of satisfaction with child-centred service organisations and with their own parenting performance (Luketina et al., 2009). However, almost 90% of those surveyed had never accessed any type of family support, a fact which questions the relevance of the services as perceived by New Zealand fathers. Over half of respondents indicated a need for parenting support but could not specify what type of support would be helpful. One of the conclusions of the study was that fathers in different circumstances have differing needs. The emerging New Zealand picture of fathers' attitudes, fathers' needs and the relevance of existing service provision is unclear.

## Methodology

The study explored the views of knowledgeable and experienced social workers about the issues influencing fathers' participation in parenting programmes. Given the paucity of New Zealand-based research on the topic, an exploratory approach was adopted using a survey tool. The research project received Low Risk approval from a university Human Ethics panel.

Social workers who had knowledge or experience of fathers' participation in parenting programmes comprised the study sample. The ANZASW acted as an independent third party for contacting potential participants. This was an effective method of ensuring anonymity and confidentiality (Tolich, 2001). The sample was restricted to social workers identifying with either the 'Parenting' or 'Men' field of practice who would be most likely to have knowledge or experience of fathers' participation in parenting programmes. A questionnaire was developed requesting demographic details, the participants' views on the importance of a range of variables related to the key themes identified from the literature reviews and also their views on the feasibility of addressing these variables. Participants were provided with the opportunity to make additional comments via text fields. Completion of the questionnaire was contingent on participants being able to affirm that they had knowledge or experience of fathers participating in parenting programmes. In total, 472 social workers were invited to participate and 50 replied, a response rate of 10.5%. While the response rate was low, the number of eligible participants from the pool of potential participants was not known. Eighty-six percent of participants commented on their personal experiences of successfully engaging fathers in parenting programmes. The richness of the qualitative data indicated that the respondents comprised a relevant sample.

As the aim of the research was exploratory, descriptive analysis was used to analyse the data. The views of the social workers were analysed by considering the mean average

rating of importance scored to each variable by respondents. Comments made in response to open-ended questions were grouped according to themes.

### Participant characteristics

Ninety-six percent of participants identified themselves as being knowledgeable or experienced in the issues relating to fathers participating in parenting programmes. Seventy-two percent of participants were aged 50 or over and only six out of 50 participants were under the age of 40. Approximately three quarters of the participants were female. The majority of participants were employed by Non-Governmental Organisations. The survey sample had a slightly higher representation of male social workers than the membership of ANZASW as a whole, of which 83 percent is female (ANZASW, personal communication, October 23, 2013).

### Results

The results of the online questionnaire are organised into two sections: firstly, the importance rating of issues influencing fathers' participation, and secondly, the feasibility of addressing these issues.

#### The importance of issues relating to participation

Participants were asked to rate the level of importance of issues relating to fathers participating in parenting programmes on a 5-point Likert scale where a rating of 5 indicated the issue was extremely important and 1 indicated it was not important. A mean average rating was calculated for each item and is presented in Table One in order of importance rating.

**Table one.** Issues relating to fathers participating.

Most important issue in encouraging fathers to participate in parenting programmes.	Mean average rating
Programme leaders convey understanding of the important role of fathers	4.79
The programme content is particularly useful and relevant for fathers	4.68
It is part of the organisation's philosophy to encourage fathers' active participation in raising children	4.62
Programme leaders build relationship with fathers	4.60
Programme leaders discard gender stereotyped attitudes about parenting	4.55
It is part of the organisation's philosophy to include fathers in parenting programmes	4.54
The programme environment is 'father-friendly' (e.g. displaying images of or information for fathers)	4.54
The programme content is task or action oriented	4.29
Advertising about the programme includes images of fathers	4.00
Wives or partners participate	3.96
Childcare is available	3.85
The programme is advertised in places where men go	3.85
One of the parenting programme leaders is male	3.55
There is a staff member dedicated to increasing fathers' participation	3.55
Transport to and from the programme venue is available	3.43
The programme takes place in the evening	3.37
The venue is close to the father's home	3.28
The programme is for fathers only	2.79
Both parenting programme leaders are male	2.07

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The scores show that almost every item was considered by the participants to have a degree of importance at the midpoint level 3 or above on the Likert Scale; this result is congruent with the importance of these issues identified through the literature review. The only two items rated below level 3 related to the programme being directed at fathers only and to both programme leaders being male. Thirty-five of the 50 participants added comments to their rating. Three substantive themes emerged from these comments; the first, related to the gender of the programme leader; the second, to the gender make-up of the group; while the third issue concerned the time and location of parenting programmes.

### **Gender of the programme leader**

The participants identified benefits in having both male and female facilitators; the following comments are illustrative:

It is important that fathers are able to relate to both male and female.

I think having the programme delivered by a male and a female is an excellent opportunity to role-model many positive aspects of parenting and relationship management.

Four participants commented that the skills and qualities of the leader were more important than gender for successful programme delivery:

I believe it's the quality of the person rather than their gender that matters.

Some participants commented on the relative importance of dedicating a member of staff to father participation and most comments indicated that an exclusive emphasis on fathers was unnecessary:

It is not necessary to dedicate a specific staff member to fathers' participation – this should be done by all staff as part of their engagement and relationship building.

These comments are consistent with the item rated most important in encouraging fathers to participate, which is that programme leaders demonstrate they understand the important role of fathers.

### **Gender make-up of the group**

The majority of comments on this theme (15) identified the advantages of having both men and women make up the parenting group, for example:

Parenting ideally is a dual role whether parents are together or not. Again a mixture of fathers and mothers gives a broader picture and different knowledge/experience which all builds on skills learnt.

Four participants highlighted the benefits to fathers of an exclusively male group:

The facilitators have found out that men are more open and willing to share when there are no females around.

### **Time and location of programmes**

Consistent with the rating of issues, a third theme related to the location and time of a parenting programme. Comments grouped under this theme were evenly split between comments acknowledging their importance and those which minimised their impact.

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### Other issues relating to gender

An analysis of the responses according to gender was completed in order to ascertain whether there were differences in the views of male and female participants. This was of particular interest, since the survey sample comprised three times more female participants than male. Male participants scored the items relating to the gender of the programme leader and the gender make-up of the group more highly than female participants. They also rated having a staff member dedicated to increasing fathers' participation and scheduling the programme in the evening as more important than their female counterparts. Female participants rated having wives or partners attend the programme and ensuring childcare was available higher than the male participants. In general, the gender of the leader and the gender make-up of the group were more important to male participants than to female participants.

### The feasibility of addressing issues

Participants were asked to consider the feasibility of addressing each of the issues on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 meaning not feasible to address and 5 meaning extremely feasible to address. A mean average rating was calculated from the Likert scale scores for each item and is presented in Table Two.

**Table two.** The feasibility of addressing issues.

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Issue most feasible to address	Mean average rating
It is part of the organisation's philosophy to encourage fathers' active participation in raising children	4.71
Programme leaders convey understanding of the important role of fathers	4.70
The programme content is particularly useful and relevant for fathers	4.62
Programme leaders build relationship with fathers	4.57
The programme content is task or action oriented	4.57
It is part of the organisation's philosophy to include fathers in parenting programmes	4.56
Programme leaders discard gender stereotyped attitudes about parenting	4.52
The programme environment is 'father-friendly' (e.g. displaying images of or information for fathers)	4.40
Advertising about the programme includes images of fathers	4.28
The programme is advertised in places where men go	4.14
Wives or partners participate	4.05
One of the parenting programme leaders is male	3.56
Transport to and from the programme venue is available	3.52
Childcare is available	3.48
There is a staff member dedicated to increasing fathers' participation	3.46
The programme takes place in the evening	3.29
The venue is close to the father's home	3.24
The programme is for fathers only	2.91
Both parenting programme leaders are male	2.27

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The two items rated the most feasible to address are first, the employing organisation's philosophy regarding fathers participation and second, the ability of the programme leader to convey understanding of the important role of fathers. Apart from two items relating to the gender make-up of the group and both programme leaders being male, all other items were considered feasible to address.

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Comments were received from 30 participants regarding issues considered more difficult to address (those rated 3 or lower) and were grouped under the two main themes of first, the gender of the programme leader and second, the location and time of the parenting programme. Most comments relating to the gender of the programme leader highlighted the shortage of male staff, for example:

There aren't enough men (look at any parenting service) to staff such services.

While comments on the theme of the location and times of the parenting programme highlighted the challenges involved:

Running evening programmes is logistically challenging for staff and it is impossible to run programmes close to home when to get viable numbers it is likely that participants will come from far and wide.

### **Additional comments**

Participants were also invited to comment on strategies considered to be effective in encouraging fathers to participate in parenting programmes, and on any other issues which influence fathers' participation. Participants' comments related to three main issues: firstly, the importance of programme leader qualities, values and theoretical approaches; secondly, the importance of practical programme content and an action-oriented style of delivery, and thirdly, the value of male programme leaders, providing male role models and an all-male environment.

Two other themes emerged which echoed the findings from the literature review. The first related to the value of using 'word of mouth' when recruiting fathers onto programmes both through talking with fathers who have participated and through working collaboratively with other agencies. The second theme related to the fact that fathers do not form a homogenous group and have different needs according to their circumstances.

### **Discussion**

The objective of the research study was to investigate the views of social workers with knowledge or experience of fathers participating in parenting programmes about the issues influencing participation. Social workers in related fields of practice were invited to participate in an online questionnaire. The literature review revealed a paucity of New Zealand-based research on the subject; hence the study was exploratory in nature. The results are discussed in light of the important issues influencing father participation, the feasibility of addressing these issues, the effective strategies identified by participants and the implications for policy and practice.

### **Issues influencing fathers' participation**

The study identified that the most important issues impacting on father participation related to the qualities of the leader, the programme content and the organisational philosophy. This would seem consistent with the major issues emerging from the New Zealand and international literature about the importance of the programme leader (Berlyn et al., 2008;

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Luketina et al., 2009), programme content (Cosson & Graham, 2012) and organisational philosophy (Birks & Callister, 1999; Torr, 2003).

A second finding is that both the location and time of the programme impact on father participation. Indeed, where these issues were rated lower than others, the reasons given related more to difficulties in addressing the issue than a lack of importance of the issue itself. This would seem to confirm the findings of New Zealand-based research on the importance of father-friendly venues and programme schedules which allowed fathers to attend (Bigsby et al., 2002; Luketina et al., 2009).

## **Feasibility of addressing issues**

The study findings show that the items considered most feasible to address relate to the organisation's philosophy as well as the qualities and values of the programme leader. A shortage of males in the social service profession in New Zealand was highlighted in the findings, which makes the provision of male leaders difficult. This echoes the findings of international research which concluded that most social service staff are female (Fletcher, 2010).

Previous research supports the view that organisational philosophy impacts on the support offered to fathers (O'Brien, 2004). However, the results of this study indicate a contradiction between the importance and feasibility rating of organisational philosophy in the survey and the additional comments provided by the participants. Participants' comments in general conveyed the lack of feasibility of addressing issues such as: dedicating a staff member to increasing fathers' participation, both leaders being male, a fathers-only group, and an evening programme. The literature review indicates that these are precisely the issues which need to be addressed if organisations are to reflect a mission which is truly inclusive of all parents (O'Brien, 2004; Raikes et al., 2005; Torr, 2003). It is surprising that the participants perceive organisational philosophy as being important and feasible to address, yet in general consider the related issues too difficult to tackle.

Other comments on feasibility confirmed findings from previous studies (Bigsby et al., 2002; Birks & Callister, 1999) that issues of location and venue for parenting programmes remain problematic. This study found these issues difficult to address due to logistical staffing challenges in the delivery of evening programmes and limitations in finding suitable venues, particularly in rural areas. Previous New Zealand studies have interpreted such issues as organisational inflexibility and a demonstration of an organisation privileging the needs of mothers by delivering support services during the weekdays (Bigsby et al., 2002).

## **Effective strategies identified by participants**

Participants' comments related to three key themes: firstly, the attributes of the programme leader; secondly, the marketing of the programme; and thirdly, the diverse needs of fathers depending on their circumstances.

The findings show that the most effective strategies in encouraging the participation of fathers relate to the personal qualities and values of the programme leaders. The theme of participants' comments corresponded to and confirmed the item rated most important in the survey.

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Some social workers identified that fathers' participation would be enhanced by having male leaders and father-only groups and perceived men to be more open and willing to share and discuss experiences in these settings. This was an interesting result, and not supported by the rating given these items in the survey. It is possible that this is an indication of gender bias in the sample, in that the high rating of items of this theme by male social workers was not apparent in the overall rating once the scores of female participants had been taken into account.

On the theme of the marketing and recruitment of fathers to parenting programmes, the research reflects findings in the literature review that recruiting by word of mouth can be an effective strategy (Berlyn et al., 2008) both amongst potential father participants themselves and by collaborating with other key agencies. This links to the theme emerging from New Zealand literature about the importance of agencies working together to address the barriers to father participation through the sharing of knowledge, resources and personnel (Bigsby et al., 2002).

Finally, the findings indicate that fathers do not form a homogenous group and that fathers need differing support strategies depending on their circumstances. This concept is consistent with the findings of Luketina et al. (2009) and with the recommendation of Gavazzi and Schock (2004) that advertising should comprise images of different types of fathers to appeal to all categories.

## **Influence of gender**

A dominant theme emerging from the results related to gender. An analysis of the results according to gender revealed a different picture of the views of participants. Male social workers in the study rated all items as more important than the midpoint level and rated the items relating to gender more highly than the female social workers. Specifically, the items thought to be more important by males than by females were either one or both of the programme leaders being male, having a fathers-only group and having a staff member dedicated to fathers' participation. The views expressed by the male practitioners are consistent with other research studies which found that fathers were strongly in favour of organisations providing exclusively male programmes and employing a staff member to enhance participation of fathers (Berlyn et al., 2008; McKenna, 2007). Male participants also rated having a programme take place in the evening as more important than their female counterparts.

Female social workers rated having wives or partners participating as more important than their male counterparts. They also rated the importance of child care more highly than the male social workers. It would seem from these results that there were evident differences in viewpoints depending on the gender of the participant and that the overall picture of social workers' views was biased towards the views of the majority of the sample, which were female social workers. Further research would be helpful in determining whether these attitudes were representative of the social worker population in general and whether there is any evidence in New Zealand to support the claims of professional gatekeeping to which some international literature alluded (Cowan et al., 2009; Torr, 2003). It emerged through the literature review that parenting programmes have usually been evaluated by mothers (Fabiano, 2007). Similarly in this study of social workers' views, it is the perspective of female professionals which prevails in the overall ratings due to the sample demographics.

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## Implications for policy and practice

The participants rated organisational philosophy as one of the most important issues in encouraging fathers to participate in programmes. Social service organisations in the field of family support have to be clear that they exist to support both mothers and fathers, as both parents are important to a child's successful development (Berlyn et al., 2008; Fletcher, 2010; O'Brien, 2004). Family support agencies may opt to regularly conduct agency appraisals such as that endorsed by the Families Commission (2012) to gauge the success of strategies in engaging and working with fathers.

Since little is known about the outcomes for fathers of engaging with social service agencies, agencies should prioritise the evaluation of services in order to be assured that the resources on offer result in improved outcomes from the perspective of fathers themselves.

The study revealed the social worker participants perceived advantages in parent programme delivery by both male and female facilitators. Participants also identified a shortage in male social workers, mirrored in the majority of survey participants being female. Social service agencies and central Government should address the barriers to the recruitment of male social workers in order to render the workforce more representative of all parents.

Programme content was rated as highly important in the study. At both a national government and regional service level, providers should choose and invest in evidence-based programmes which are likely to achieve their intended outcomes if delivered with fidelity by trained leaders.

Responsibility rests with social service agencies to overcome the barriers presented by the locations or times of programmes. This may require creative solutions such as flexibility around staff hours to enable evening delivery of a programme. A good starting point would be to involve the front-line staff in the problem-solving process since this study has shown that social workers in this field of practice value the role of fathers and are motivated to overcome barriers to support fathers. Social service managers could take the lead in exploring the potential for collaboration with other local community providers in order to effectively support fathers.

## Conclusion

The objective of the research study was to explore the views of social workers about the issues affecting fathers' participation in parenting programmes.

On the basis of the study findings and discussion, it is clear that several issues influence fathers' participation, including the qualities of the leader, the programme content, the organisational philosophy of the employing agency and the location and time of the programme. This research comprised a small-scale exploratory study which gathered information on several issues rather than detailed information on any particular issue. Future research could add to the existing body of knowledge by exploring the influence of programme leader attributes on father participation, identified as important by the participants in this study.

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New information emerged from the study relating to gender. A difference in viewpoint was evident between male and female participants on issues relating to the gender of the programme leader and the gender make-up of the group. The overall results reflected the views of the female participants because there were three times more female than male participants. Further research with fathers themselves, to investigate whether participation is influenced by the gender of the programme leader or the gender make-up of the group, would shed light on these study findings. Some previous research points to professional gatekeeping in this regard (Cowan et al., 2009; Torr, 2003), however, the New Zealand context remains unclear.

From a historical perspective, the important contribution of fathers has been neither understood nor acknowledged (Meyers, 1993). In spite of a shift in societal values regarding father involvement (Fletcher, 2010), social services struggle to attend to the needs of fathers, as evidenced in the low statistics of fathers engaged with support services generally (Berlyn et al., 2008; Fletcher, 2010) and with parenting programmes in particular (Salinas et al., 2011). The question raised is an important one. Do our current programmes take account of the unique contribution of fathers to parenting and if so, can practice be adjusted to ensure that their different needs and approaches are honoured?

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