

# THE SOUTHLAND MISSION INITIATIVE



THE  
FATHER FACTOR

**THE BENEFITS OF  
FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS IN  
OUR COMMUNITY**

## INTRODUCTION

Father involvement has increased dramatically over the past several decades, and simultaneously, the role of fathers in their families has evolved from conceptions of fathers as distant breadwinners to a more holistic recognition that fathers are equal co-parents. Accompanying these changes has been a growing interest among researchers in studying the role that fathers play in the lives of their children. Findings from these studies have overwhelmingly shown that children with involved fathers fare better across a wide range of domains compared to children without an involved father.

Federal and state investments in promoting the positive impact fathers have on their children and families continue to increase. Many men are becoming fathers in particular disadvantaged situations.

They are younger, unmarried, and lacking in education, these men face a multitude of barriers to becoming the fathers they want to be, from poor employment prospects and high incarceration rates to juggling multiple parenting roles among the children they live with and the ones with whom they do not.

## MOBILISE

### VERB

mobilise (verb)

#### **synonyms:**

marshal · deploy · muster · rally · call to arms · call up · summon · assemble ·

- organize and encourage (a group of people) to take collective action in pursuit of a particular objective.

#### **synonyms:**

bring into play · bring into service · arouse · generate · induce · cause ·

- bring (resources) into use for a particular purpose.
- make (something) movable or capable of movement.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

What We Believe Fathers Need	5
Parenting Interventions	7
8 Issues Our Fatherhood Programs attempt to address	9
Having Success with Fatherhood Programs	15
Partnering and Program Delivery Services	17
Programs we aim to Deliver	19

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# WHAT WE BELIEVE FATHERS NEED?

## Assistance

What we believe fathers need from our community groups are support and assistance. A place where they can feel safe to come and chat about issues that are troubling them and investigate pathways to help them get the help they require and need.

There are many challenges faced by men in Australia, and more specifically, by those who participate in responsible fatherhood programs. But what are they?

There have been studies done attempting to answer these questions. It is critical because these challenges may be, strongly associated with why there are lower levels of father involvement in children's lives and lower quality co-parenting relationships.

In connecting with other fatherhood programs that serve primarily low-income, unmarried, non-residential fathers about the challenges they face. The top 5 challenges fathers mentioned in descending order of frequency were:

1. Unemployment
2. Lack of money to buy things for their children
3. Inability to pay child support
4. Difficulty keeping a job
5. Inability to pay bills

The other challenges they mentioned were wide-ranging, from physical and emotional health problems to their living situation preventing their children from coming to see them, to drug/alcohol use, to being accused of abusing/neglecting their children.

These challenges underscore one of the most vital pieces of guidance needed: the importance of helping fathers meet their most immediate, pressing needs as part of or even before enrolling them into a responsible fatherhood program. Meeting these needs is often the “hook” that encourages fathers to enrol in a responsible fatherhood program and to maintain their participation rather than learning how to be a better father and parent (e.g. through increased knowledge of child development, child discipline and child needs, etc.).

Indeed, assisting fathers to overcome these challenges is a component of our responsible fatherhood program, through the provision of services (often called

"wrap-around services") run by our organisation or partnering with other groups that provide the necessary programs to help combat these problems.

We want to help bridge the gap between child welfare workers and fatherhood practitioners by delving deeper into the impact of these fathers' challenges. Looking into the fathers and their perceptions so that child welfare workers and fatherhood practitioners [*within and who work with the child welfare system*] could better understand these fathers and, as a result, work more effectively with them to develop better strategies and encourage them to find help by enrolling into fatherhood programs offered by our Southland Mission Initiative.

We have identified the following elements in the lives of fathers dealing with these challenges:

- The financial and emotional devastation caused by their own absence from their children's lives.
- The belief that they are constantly extorted by the mother of their children, with their children being bargaining chips in a constant tug-of-war between them and the mother in which the mother seems to have the upper hand.
- The loss of control over their lives and hopelessness about the future.
- The belief that the judicial/court system fosters poor fatherhood.

A deeper understanding of these fathers' lives is so critical to effective program delivery and development.

The staff of responsible fatherhood programs must look not only at fathers' needs but how those needs affect men and the whole family unit. It is those effects that drive fathers' behaviours. Indeed, the success of any program is one seen by fathers to meet fathers' needs and care about fathers' welfare; this is the best initial starting point.

Next, we will look at why evidence based interventions are key to successful fatherhood programs.



# PARENTING INTERVENTIONS

It is vital that we find ways to engage fathers in parenting interventions separately from mothers. We call such interventions "fatherhood" or "fathering" programs.

A recent global review\* concluded that parenting interventions must do a better job of including and engaging fathers. It also concluded that evaluations of interventions' impact should include separate analyses of fathers and mothers rather than parents in general. The team of UK and US researchers examined 199 published articles on parenting interventions that included at least some discussion of father engagement and impact. The researchers uncovered three specific problems when it comes to interventions' inclusion of fathers:

- Despite the evidence of fathers substantial impact on child development, well-being, and family functioning, parenting interventions rarely target men or make a dedicated effort to include them.
- Parenting interventions that have included men as parents or co-parents give insufficient attention to reporting on father participation and impact.
- A fundamental change in the design and delivery of parenting interventions is required to overcome pervasive gender biases and to generate robust evidence on outcomes, differentiated by gender and by couple effects in evaluation.

It is the final problem that is most damning because it has led to parenting interventions, focused on mothers, that will never reach their full potential to improve child well-being. There is a gender bias in parenting interventions that reflects a broader, global, damaging bias that says fathers aren't as important as mothers when it comes to child well-being. It is the most pervasive barrier we've encountered in more than 20 years of existence.

What have we done to help tackle this problem?

We have created workshops and other resources that build the capacity of our organisation to engage fathers, to value fathers as much as mothers in improving parenting behaviour and, consequently, child well-being. We've said for many years, that because the culture, infrastructure, and staff training of most organisations are designed to serve the needs of women and mothers that they are not well suited for effectively engaging fathers.

\*<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/jcpp.12280>

Instead, they have created a mindset that focuses on programs, services, and staff on mothers. In response, we have examined how our organisation can change the perceived norms, the attitudes and beliefs of staff, to focus more on improving infrastructure to effectively serve all parents.

Parenting interventions will never truly be parenting interventions until they are implemented within organisational cultures that value fathers as partners in parenting who are critical to the child's well-being. The sad fact is it isn't that difficult to do. It simply takes "gumption." Gumption involves courage, initiative, aggressiveness, and good old common sense.

The good news is that more organisations than ever are rolling up their sleeves to take a good hard, long look at their efforts to improving parenting and child well-being.

Several examples include state and local government agencies that have worked with and integrated fatherhood programming among the organisations they fund. Things like designing customised approaches to engaging fathers and using evidence-based programs. We have found through our research that in rural Australia, there are very little resources and programs to assist with this very significant sector in the communities.



## 8 ISSUES OUR FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS ATTEMPT TO ADDRESS

In this section, we will focus on eight societal issues (or fatherhood challenges) that father-specific programming helps address. *“We want to help Fathers deal with the challenges and not focus on them.”*

### 1. Child Well-Being

There are a greater number of children living apart from their biological fathers. In some urban communities, the father absence rates are closer to 80%. Sadly, the number of children having limited contact with their nonresident dad is increasing. This absence leads to several risks to a child’s health and well-being. There is a direct correlation between child well-being and improving the skills of fathers assisting them in understanding the importance of their role in their children’s lives.

For example:

- Children from father-absent homes are two times more likely to be obese.
- The poverty rate among children in father-absent homes is four times higher than among children in two-parent homes.

We believe anything you can do to encourage fathers’ involvement in their children's lives goes a long way towards a child's well-being.

### 2. Father Involvement

There are many reasons that a father may not be involved with his children. Unfortunately, many excellent social service programs focus mainly on resources for mothers and children. What about skill-building for fathers? How can we serve them?

We believe that it’s important to consider father-focused programs and resources in our communities. Often, increased father involvement is a “means to an end” because an involved father brings many benefits to mothers and children.

### 3. Child Welfare

Father absence is not one single issue. With so many children going through their day without the love and support of their father, we are facing a crisis in child well-being that affects all aspects of child welfare, and this impacts our society.

For example:

- Studies show that children from father-absent homes are more likely to be abused. And are at a higher possibility of continuing the cycle of abuse.
- Studies show that a “father hunger” appears in children within 1-3 months after a father is suddenly absent, causing the child to experience nightmares, sleeplessness, and night terrors.
- A study of 3,400 middle-school students indicated that not living with both biological parents quadruples the risk of having an affective disorder.

The presence of a child’s father in the home lowers the likelihood that a child will be abused. One possible reason for this connection is the very important role that fathers often play as the “protector” of their children. The facts are clear that children feel safe when their dad lives in their home.

For these reasons and more, we find it important to provide father-focused, skill-building resources that help fathers not only understand their role as a man but also the importance of their involvement as a father.

### 4. Maternal and Child Health

A child’s health is directly tied to his or her father’s presence. From emotional and behavioural issues to sexual activity and abuse and neglect, father absence affects many issues related to a child’s health. Mothers can encourage father involvement, and in doing so, father involvement is increased.

For example:

- Children from father-absent homes are at a two times greater risk of infant mortality.
- Children from father-absent homes are two times more likely to be obese.

However, when dads are involved:

- Babies are healthier, with fewer complications at birth, four times more likely to celebrate their first birthday, less likely to experience sudden infant death syndrome, and have improved learning and emotional development.
- Children are more likely to go to wellness-baby visits and have higher developmental scores and fewer behaviour problems later in life.

Dads and mums need to understand the importance of father involvement, and the benefits to their children. In fact, the importance of a mums' need in this area, is why we intend to create resources, to help them understand the importance of a fathers involvement, and how to include dad in the lives of their children for the benefit of the children.

## 5. Expectant/New Fathers and Healthcare Settings

Fatherhood resources make sense in healthcare settings (e.g. pregnancy and birthing centres and hospitals), and anywhere else you can reach new or expectant dads (e.g. home visits with pregnant and new parents). When there is a crisis pregnancy, for example, the crisis is often that the father of the baby is unable or unwilling to be involved in its life.

Science reveals that mothers don't have the market cornered when it comes to being biologically connected to their children. Nature provides a way for men to prepare for the arrival of their children and to bond with them well after birth. In her ground-breaking book *The Male Brain\**, neuropsychologist Louann Brizedene points out that men's hormone levels change during the pregnancy of their partners. Specifically, men's levels of cortisol (the "stress hormone") increase. This change puts men's brains on "alert" for the arrival of their babies. In contrast, men's levels of testosterone (the "wandering hormone") decrease. This change lowers their competitiveness, aggression, and sex drive.

It is during this time that expectant/new fathers are most open to fatherhood skill-building and preparing for their baby. We want to take advantage of this opportunity to help expectant and new fathers understand the importance of their involvement right from the start.

\*View the book: <http://www.amazon.com/The-Male-Brain-Louann-Brizendine/dp/0767927540>

## 6. Substance Abuse and Mental Health

Children are more likely to use and abuse drugs when they grow up without an involved, responsible, and committed father. Drugs and alcohol often serve as surrogates for children who experience a lack of love from and an emotional connection with their dads and fathers.

Father absence creates mental health issues as well. Research reveals that within one to three months, the child of an absent father can experience nightmares, sleeplessness, and night terrors. There is a strong correlation between father absence and emotional and behavioural problems.

Consider these facts:

- Children of single mothers show higher levels of aggressive behaviour than children born to married mothers.
- Youth without a highly involved father are more at risk of first substance use.

## 7. Poverty and Crime

With such a greater number of children living daily without their biological fathers [one in three children], there is a father factor in poverty and crime.

For example:

- Children from father-absent homes are four times more likely to be poor.
- A child with an incarcerated father is seven times more likely to become incarcerated.

Father absence and poverty are strongly related. Data shows that it's more difficult to get fathers to provide financial support when they are not married to the mother and especially when they lack an emotional connection to their children.

Furthermore, the "story behind the story" of a violent crime committed in Australia reveals a "crime of fatherlessness." Good fathers serve as regulators of aggressive behaviour, particularly for young boys. However it's not just boys, the fastest growing prison population is young girls and women, many of whom have grown up in father-absent homes.

By engaging fathers in the lives of their children, we can help reduce poverty and crime.

## 8. Workforce Development

Many children in Australia have limited contact with their non-resident dads. This lack of contact leads to a host of risks to their well-being, from teen pregnancy and drug abuse to poverty to poor performance at school. Unfortunately, many fathers believe that if they don't have a job, then they don't have anything valuable to contribute to their children's lives. Therefore, we need to create sustained partnerships at the local level to help connect dads to fathering skills and jobs.

Helping a dad understand his importance as a dad will give him the motivation he needs to get and keep a job, which will also help him feel valuable to his children and society. This feeling of importance and value is especially important for fathers who have been incarcerated.





# HAVING SUCCESS WITH FATHERHOOD PROGRAMS

There are thousands of organisations across this nation, incorporating fatherhood resources and programs into their everyday efforts to serve fathers and families, and we can, too. There are many ways for our organisation to promote Involved, Responsible, and Committed fatherhood.

Here are some suggestions we are looking at:

1. Taking a Father Friendly Check-Up survey: This tool helps us assess how organisation encourages (or doesn't encourage) father involvement in the activities and programs offered by the organisation.
2. Starting small: We intend to add fatherhood skill-building resources such as brochures, tip cards, or pocket guides to our organisation's offerings (e.g. in waiting rooms, at one-on-one sessions, at events, and in goodie bags).
3. We are considering to offer a one-time workshop for dads or mums: covering important issues related to fatherhood, such as communication, domestic violence, and mothers' gatekeeping behaviour.
4. Implementing a program called "7 Steps to Starting a Fatherhood Program." Including topics like:
  - Making the Case for a Fatherhood Program.
  - Assessing the Father Friendliness of our Organisation and community.
  - Focusing our efforts on the Type(s) of Fathers we will serve.
  - Selecting the Right Resources and Programs.
  - Preparing for a Sustainable Fatherhood Program.
  - Funding our Fatherhood program.
  - Launching our Fatherhood program and measuring the Results.
  - Creating a Community Mobilisation Approach for our community.



# PARTNERING AND PROGRAM DELIVERY SERVICES

We intend to partner with and leverage on the 20 years of experience in developing custom fatherhood-focused materials from an American Organisation known as “National Fatherhood Initiative®.” One program we wish to deliver is called 24/7 Dad®. We also wish to offer other “wrap-around” services to residents, such as parenting skills, advocacy/empowerment, job training and support, homeownership training, money management/budgeting classes, and more.

The 24/7 Dad® program is an ideal complement to wrap-around services because the program speaks to why men do what they do. Fatherhood can provide men with a greater context and purpose for life, and when we tap into that, we can make significant inroads in other service areas as well. Motivating men to care more about their children is a great way to capture the heart of a man, and 24/7 Dad® does just that.

Although men are somewhat involved in the lives of their children, they recognised, and we recognised that they needed to learn better parenting skills. Furthermore, they needed to learn ways to be more engaged with their children and their families and to develop the resources in order to become more self-sufficient. In addition to parenting skills, we also wish to provide them with classes in financial literacy and also help them build their employment skills.

The 24/7 Dad® program will help Fathers with:

- Developing their relationship with their child's mother. Specifically, to show her that he's doing something constructive to be a better dad and father.
- Learn how to better interact with women and help deal with their expectations.
- Understand the demands and responsibility of being a dad and father – that it's more than just providing financially and picking up his child from school once and a while.
- Learning to take care of himself and be healthy so that he can physically and emotionally be available for his children.
- This program will cost us \$1,500.00 to acquire and implement.

Our mission is to create healthy outcomes for children, their families, and the community. One of our goals is to educate and empower the youth and young families in communities so they can make well informed, healthy decisions.

We wish to maintain that a father's love is just as important as a mother's love to a child's development, and sometimes even more so. That's why we want to also offer the TOPS DAD program, which works with fathers of all ages, teaching them to be involved in their children's lives and to raise healthy children by instilling the "Dad Factor." The Dad Factor means that every dad has a unique and special gift he brings to raising his child. The TOPS DAD program, through peer support, one-on-one facilitation, and group sessions gives dads the tools and confidence they need to be involved in their children's lives and becoming the dad they want to be.



# PROGRAMS WE AIM TO DELIVER

We want to develop community programs in the areas of substance abuse, anger management, anxiety, fatherhood and life skills.

## Substance Abuse

The Substance Abuse Program would cover topics like.

- States of change
- The four L's (Liver, Lover, Law, Livelihood)
- Lifestyle balance
- Self-Perception
- Distorted thinking
- Power and equality
- Problem-solving
- Goal setting
- Decision making
- Relapse prevention

## Anger Management

The Anger Management Program would cover topics like.

- About Anger
- The cycle of violence
- Recognising anger
- Self-Talk
- Communication
- Response to anger
- Relationships
- Self-Management

## Anxiety

The Anxiety Program would cover topics like.

- Use tension in a positive way
- Emotions that cause negative and positive stress
- Self-Awareness
- The power of belief
- Turning challenges into opportunities
- Motivation
- Creating a new vision
- Staying focussed

## **FATHERHOOD**

The Fatherhood Program would cover topics like.

- Family History
- Being a Man and Dad
- Handling Emotions
- Grief and Loss
- Your Health
- Talking with Mum
- Co-Parenting
- Fathering Skills
- Child Development
- Child Discipline
- Sexuality
- Intimacy
- Work-Family Balance
- Managing Money

## **Life skills**

The Life Skills Program would cover topics like.

- Prepare for change
- Self Esteem
- Moving forward
- Find and keep accommodation
- Control your money
- Find, get and keep a job
- Develop relationships
- Parenting skills
- Staying on track
- Putting it into practice