

BEING DAD TO A CHILD UNDER TWO

Exploring Images and Visions of Fatherhood
Evolving Expectations in a Changing Society

A TRI-AGENCY COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH STUDY

Conducted by

**NGALA FAMILY RESOURCE CENTRE
ANGLICAREWA
LIFELINE WA**

With Research Advice from
**The Discipline of Social Work and Social Policy
The University of Western Australia**

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February 18, 2003

ANGLICARE
CHANGING LIVES WA


Hey Dad WA.


Ngala


Western Australia
Millions Won. Thousands Helped


LifeLine WA
Enriching the lives of Western Australians.

AUTHORSHIP, ACKNOWLEDGMENT AND OWNERSHIP

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PERTH
February 18, 2003

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OWNERSHIP

The Project is owned by the community of Western Australia. Ngala Family Resource Centre holds the Archive. The project report is downloadable in PDF format from Ngala's website [www.ngala.com.au]. Print copies are available by request to Ngala (08) 9368.9368 on a cost recovery basis.

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INVITATION

The first two years is a priceless period of life. It has an open window that soon shuts, a passageway into the formation of the child's brain, mind, memory-bank, sense of trust, personality, and ability to relate with others. Three sources offer the child the most immediate and far-reaching inputs into his or her future during this short blink of an eye. The three are the Mum, the Dad, and the relationship between them.

Some men and some women don't realise how important to their children they are. Read here the words, and hear the heartbeats of the dads and mums who speak of raising their child in the first two years of life and of some experiences of living with an absent or departed dad or mum.

When a boat carrying Middle Eastern asylum-seekers sank off the northwest coast of Australia in 2001, an ABC television crew captured scenes and voices of people still in the water after ten hours. Viewers heard the faint voice of a nine year-old girl clutching grimly to her nearly drowning father:

'Don't die – I won't survive without you.'¹

The little girl's beseeching voice echoes across Australia where thousands of children could also appeal to their dads (and mums):

'Don't go – I won't survive without you.'

Men reading this report can discern the minds and hearts of 22 men who poured out their life stories, hopes and fears. They can also find answers to a question many ask, 'What do women want?' in the words of 19 young mothers who shared their hearts, experiences and yearnings.

Women reading this report can capture a snapshot of the range of ways 22 men approach and experience their relationships and parenting. And they can see what 19 mothers of children under two face in their parenting experience, and how they address issues and plan futures.

The reflective comments come from a team of scholars, practitioners, mothers, fathers and grandparents. Perhaps you have other experiences, observations or comments you might like to make to the research team. We welcome them.

Denis Ladbrook

¹ This desperate child expresses the essence of the African philosophy of Ubuntu – "I am because of you" – see Battle, Michael, Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu, Cleveland, Ohio, Pilgrim Press, 1998.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Embarking on the Journey

A vacuum prompted this Lotteries Commission-funded research. We do not know much about what fathers do in the first two years of their child's life. So we set out to begin to chart this territory by asking fathers what they grew up to expect, what shaped their expectations, what they actually do, and how they envision their future as dads. We also asked mothers of children under two what they expected of the father of their child, what he does, and how they see his future as a dad. We found many strengths, and some tales of woe.

Ngala Family Resource Centre, the lead agency, built a collaborative partnership with The University of Western Australia, which offers technical research support, AnglicareWA, which has an impressive record with separated parents, and Lifeline WA, where the [Dads@Lifeline](#) program has pioneered counselling and support for sole fathers.

We established the collaboration framework by negotiating a Memorandum of Understanding between the four agencies and by working together. Six agency staff worked with the Research Associate in co-facilitating six research groups; groups of dads and of mums parenting together, in separation, and alone. Each group had strict selection criteria, and most met for three hours on each of two evenings.

We attracted and engaged 22 men and 19 women from the Perth environment. All told us life stories and symbolically shared the textures of their home lives.

The Report describes how the research was conceptualised, designed and conducted, presents and interprets participants' narratives, brings out the limits of the qualitative methodology, relates the findings to relevant literature and social policy, and suggests some lines for further research.

Some Tentative Findings

Our work found commonality and variation in viewpoint and experience among both fathers in and mothers all three parenting structures. Some common themes:

- Adjusting to having a new baby means dealing with crying, sleep disturbances and exhaustion.
- The dominant influence on parenting roles comes from the family of origin. Identity as a dad is 'socially bestowed'.
- Close friends, work colleagues and television characters modify these notions.
- Boys remember activities dad did with them and carry 'Dad images' deep inside.
- Men vary in their preparation for being a dad. One-third 'never really thought about it until it happened'; others talked about it and took courses, which gave them confidence and hands-on skills. These know broadly what to expect and are more likely to have satisfying experiences as dads. Yet there is an enormous need for education in early parenting. 74% of completed calls to Ngala's Helpline in the first half of 2002 related to early parenting education issues. 94% of all callers were the mothers of the child concerned.

- 'Masculinity' has deep, contested roots. Many nesting mums wanted 'foundational' stability, and many spoke in the retro images of 1950s family architecture. Yet they appealed for flexibility and human rights.
- A continuum among men and women stretches from standardised to negotiated gender roles. This is influenced by generational themes and conditions, and by the 'hidden hierarchies' of patriarchy and matriarchy.
- Men are not born fathers. They can learn to attach, relate to and nurture their child. The men in our groups take being Dad seriously.
- Collaboration between Dad and Mum provides the optimum framework for a young child; entrenched conflict is immensely destructive.
- The mothers in our groups put motherhood before career:
 - 'Becoming a mother', said a university graduate, 'was the greatest desire in my life.'
- Mums told stories rich in imagery and a number wished their men were more playful.
- Occupational conditions eg mining, have far-reaching effects on relationships and children.
- People parenting together showed role clarity, an investment consciousness, and forward momentum, though men were tired at night and sat before the TV.
- Depression guts family life and influences separation decisions.
- Parenting in Separation: Six out of eight separated and sole mothers said the children's lives improved after separation from their violent father. Yet father absence may erode kinship capital and leave children yearning. Adjusting to the early stages of separation often leaves parents and children in a limbo of uncertainty and erratic arrangements.
- Separated parents with collaborative relationship styles are pioneering a new family form.
- Our eleven sole parents recounted epic journeys through violence, betrayal, tragedy and despair. Many consider their major life purpose to be to raise their child, though most of our sole dads fear 'losing the child'.
- Social support is vital for all, especially parents on their own. Often Grandparents play important roles. One sole mother said she is building her own 'ecosystem of community support'.
- The State sustains life by providing roof, income, protection and counselling:
 - 'Neither the family nor community were with me through my hour of need, but the State was.'

Filling the vacuum is a long journey. We've made a start, with mainstream populations. A huge field lies open to all potential researchers.

The research report will be available in PDF format from Ngala's website at www.ngala.com.au

We envisage offering a forum mid - 2003 for the community and those working in this area to come together to discuss the findings and their future implications. Please come.

CHAPTER 1

HISTORY AND OBJECTIVES

HOW DID THIS PROJECT COME INTO BEING?

1.1 History and Rationale

Our topic is an expression of the growing interest in fatherhood in a child's first two years, and in the relationship framework within which human life starts and develops. Exciting neuropsychological research suggests that both dads and mums make important contributions to shaping a child's cognitive capacities and personality,² yet the territory of fatherhood with young children remains poorly-mapped, and local research has yet to explore early fatherhood practice in Western Australian families.

So we decided to start the mapping by asking some basic questions of a small number of fathers and mothers. Immediately, though, we arrived at a conundrum. What happens where there isn't a dad, or where dad has access to the child for short, intermittent periods only? And what about cases where there is only a dad, or where it's mum who has only limited time with the child?

Thus our question evolved to: how do Perth dads and mums, whether they are parenting together, in separation, or alone, view dad's role in the child's early years? This framing led us to both our study objectives and our operating method.

1.2 Objectives

We set out on our journey into being dad to a child under two by exploring four substantive questions and one process question within a designed structure where fathers and mothers have different opportunities to care for the baby or toddler, and different levels of support in their task. As we conceptualised the topics against the backdrop of our changing society, two questions plumbed the past, one the present, and one the perceived future. We framed each question as an objective so our five objectives were:

1. Expectations - Before you became a father (or mother), what were your expectations of what you would do (or what the father of your child would do) as dad?
2. Sources - Where did your expectations come from?
3. Experiences - What do you (or what does the father of your child do) as a dad?
4. Visions - How do you see you're (his) fatherhood developing into the future?
5. Engagement - In addition, we targeted a process objective, what methods can agencies use to engage men in interactive groups dealing with being dad and relating to his partner? Behind the engagement question lies a deeper metaquest, to explore how dads come to be fully involved in the child's life and development.

² See, for example, Ontario Children's Secretariat, Reversing the Real Brain Drain: Early Years Study Final Report, Toronto, Ontario, 1999.

1.3 Operating Method

In order to recruit fathers and mothers in different parenting situations, we organised the Project collaboratively among three agencies, which had established track records working with parents in different relationship situations, which we called 'parenting structures'.

Developing and Managing this Collaborative Project

(Written by Helen Mein, Project Manager and Ngala Family Resource Centre,
Community Education Network Manager)

Ngala has a 110 year history of working with parents and young children and holds a key role in providing Early Parenting services in Western Australia. The organisation was encouraged by key staff who championed the father's position in parenting to consider our services and approach to fathers.

The Hey Dad WA project was initiated to improve access for fathers to Ngala services, inform practice, and enhance staff skills in working with fathers and families. As we moved further along the road sharing ideas and advocating within the organisation and other agencies, which were developing a similar awareness, it became clear that there was little literature to guide practice around fathering in the early years.

A heightened awareness of research in the area of brain development and the impact of the early years on the child's development and social and emotional health pointed to the importance of looking not only at the mother's attachments and roles, but also at the father's relationships, roles and partnerships in parenting. The process and structure of the research was greatly enhanced by working with Lifeline WA and AnglicareWA. These agencies have philosophies and values compatible with Ngala's and also work with men in their role as parents. The encouragement and support of the Lotteries Commission of WA and the University of WA Discipline of Social Work were essential.

Collaboration in the preparation of the proposal and submission for funding assisted in the development of a working partnership. The work of the Co-ordinator of the Hey Dad WA program in the development of the project and assisting with communication, feedback and administrative issues was essential to a collaborative approach. A memorandum of understanding was negotiated with partners with Ngala as the funded agency taking responsibility for administration and reporting requirements.

Goodwill and commitment of all involved did however mask some of the real costs for all the organisations in terms of time and resources not accounted for in the funding of the project. We would encourage future research proposals to carefully consider making provision for recruitment of participants and project management.

Recruitment of a researcher with not only outstanding academic qualifications, but also a passion for the aims and objectives for the research, was central to the smooth collaboration. The researcher's practice of working with the staff of the partner agencies to refine the research method, conduct the group consultations and to check and reflect on material collected, meant that partners were informed of progress and actively involved in the research. This process provided many opportunities for action learning.

Ngala is confident that this research will help to inform practice, program development and future research to more rigorously examine many of the issues raised in this initial foray into the expectations, experience and visions of fathers.

Short statements from each of the four collaborating organisations follow. We start with Paul Murphy's statement showing how The University of Western Australia was involved and how the agencies connected with the Lotteries Commission Social Research Grants Program. We follow this with a statement by the intellectual father of the Project, Ngala Family Resource Centre's, Even Webster, and view-points from Janice Dickinson of AnglicareWA and Noel Giblett of Lifeline WA.

1.4 Collaborating Agency Statements

The University of Western Australia's involvement in the development of this project (Written by Paul Murphy)

The University of Western Australia (UWA) prides itself on fostering collaborative research relationships with a range of external partners. This project epitomises the University's policy and is a relatively new venture for the Discipline of Social Work and Social Policy, which is now raising its profile in research activities.

The Fatherhood project had its genesis in January 2000 when Eryn Webster discussed his ideas of a study about men and parenting at the Discipline's first workshop for social work practitioners, which was aimed at promoting practice-based research. Eryn's ideas were refined and considered in detail at a subsequent meeting with UWA social work researchers Maria Harries and Paul Murphy with a view to Ngala applying for funding through the newly introduced Social Research Grants from the Lotteries Commission of Western Australia.

The Lotteries Commission guidelines emphasised the desirability of agency-led research projects together with inter-agency collaboration. The UWA team suggested that having two other partners, AnglicareWA and Lifeline WA join the investigation would provide access to a wider range of parental experiences and add strength to the proposal. The project partnership was formed, a joint proposal was prepared and submitted, funding was obtained, and an independent researcher was employed by the lead agency (Ngala) to undertake the fieldwork. UWA's Discipline of Social Work and Social Policy continued in a supporting role by providing technical advice on

research matters such as background literature, methodology, sampling, data collection, data analysis, and preparation of the project report.

The collaborative approach of this project has enhanced the research capacity and confidence of the three agency partners who are now each developing further studies to extend the lessons learned from this first experience. These new projects are being developed in consultation with the UWA team - an outcome totally consistent with the University's policy of encouraging and promoting external research partnerships.

Ngala Family Resource Centre

(Written by Eryn Webster, Co-ordinator Hey Dad WA)

How did we identify men's 'Expectations, Experiences and Visions' as the areas to study?

There was a significant gap in the research. The key facet was understanding the dimensions of fatherhood. The debate at personal, relationship, community and structural levels refers to fatherhood, however the definition is not clear.

Much of the previous work around fatherhood focussed on its negative impacts, as seen through the framework of family disintegration with the propensity for violence by men, with little regard to relationship-induced violence that is the couples'.

The strength-based approach, through which we conceptualised and conducted the project, looks at contribution and family building, not attrition. This approach highlights possibility, and empowers individuals to give voice to secretly held beliefs and fears that might otherwise be hidden under a veil of community-generated expectations. These expectations can become internalised whether they are self-evident or not.

While 'motherhood' evokes a series of community-held attributes that have form and texture, 'fatherhood' does not. Fatherhood has been measured loosely against the themes of motherhood. Some commentators using a deficit model, as contrasted with a strengths approach, suggest that motherhood is the ideal. They measure the effectiveness of fatherhood by the degree to which fathers mirror mothers. As this is never fully possible, men are in a no-win situation.

The questions for me were how do we understand fatherhood, how do we discern it in its own right, and how do we create some tangible form for community discussion? The starting point is, 'what do men, women and the community define as fatherhood, and how have these notions arisen?'

How did Ngala select the Research Associate, study participants and facilitators?

The choice of the Research Associate was based on an organisational decision. Ngala was keen to attract an external researcher with superior technical skills, and recruited the Research Associate after receiving and assessing expressions of interest. The Research Reference Group met and received progress reports on four occasions, and supported the Project organisation throughout.

Ngala invited the Group 1, 2 and 6 participants using information collected during their contact with one of the Ngala services, and by a snowball technique i.e. asking those who had accepted whether they knew of others who might be interested in the research.

The Hey Dad WA Co-ordinator was the logical person to co-facilitate Group 1 with the Research Associate. We asked Mrs. Anne Beach, a very experienced child health nurse, social worker and Ngala staff member, to co-facilitate Group 2 and the first sub-group of Group 6. (6a) Ms. Helen Marsh, a well-credentialed and experienced midwife and Ngala staff worker, co-facilitated the second sub-group of Sole Mothers (Group 6b).

AnglicareWA

(Written by Janice Dickinson, Manager, Mums and Dads Forever)

The AnglicareWA management for some time has encouraged collaboration on research projects between AnglicareWA and other government and non-government agencies. The University of Western Australia was the link that provided for AnglicareWA's involvement in this project. AnglicareWA has a wide range of programs that assist people, including homes for families and young people, counselling, relationship education and job training to name a few. It was decided that the Mums & Dads Forever (MDF) program would be involved in this project as it assists separated parents in learning to co-parent their children. As many young fathers in MDF have the experience of little or no contact with their young children, being perceived as incapable of dealing safely with the children, the project was very relevant to MDF clients.

Selection of the facilitator for the project was easy, the MDF Co-ordinators being the logical choice (Paul Murphy for Group 3 Separated fathers and Janice Dickinson for Group 4 Separated mothers). Selection of participants, however, was more complex. The need for participants to have a child of 2 years or younger reduced the number of people that could be approached. In addition, separated parents tend to be more itinerant than the general population. So it is not surprising that we had fewer participants than we would have liked (four in Group 3 and five in Group 4)³. Most MDF clients we approached were very willing and eager to participate in the project. Single parents on low incomes, however, have the additional stress of finding babysitters, a problem not usually experienced by the intact families participants.

For separated parents this project highlights the importance of dads for their children. It enhances the goal of the MDF program in focusing separated parents on the importance of both Mum and Dad to their children. We envisage that this is the beginning of future research into how Dad's role in their children's life can be enhanced in this ever-changing world.

³ For Paul Murphy's account of participants' difficulties in attending, see Chapter 2, Methodology.

Lifeline WA

(Written by Noel Giblett, Manager, Counselling Services)

Lifeline WA (through Dads@Lifeline) has been delighted to be part of this project. It has been encouraging to link with colleagues who share a concern for the devaluing of the father role in our society and are committed to fostering opportunities for men to reflect on their experience as fathers.

Dads@Lifeline assists men who are disenfranchised from their fathering role by the adverse relational, legal and financial processes that often follow separation. Many of our clients who remain closely involved with their children after separation do so despite opposition and a lack of support for their role as a father. Therefore, the opportunity to be involved in this project was welcomed by those clients who were invited to participate in Group 5 Sole Dads. I was equally pleased to co-facilitate Group 5 with the Research Associate as it gave me an opportunity to hear clients' stories in depth.

Participating in this research project has confirmed our belief that group work programs for men in general, and separated Dads in particular, are much needed. In recent months we have piloted our first two post-separation groups for fathers, to great effect.

Participation also inspired us to submit a follow-up Social Research Grant Application to the Lotteries Commission (which has been short-listed for funding in 2003). This forthcoming project will examine the decision making processes of separating parents regarding their children's living arrangements. This will hopefully enhance our understanding of one of the emergent areas of concern (the obstacles and impediments to fathers maintaining their fathering role post-separation).

Dads@Lifeline was delighted to be involved in this project, both for the opportunity it provided for our clients to have a 'voice', and also for the very positive working relationships that emerged and deepened with the other agencies and individuals involved. We commend the Lotteries Commission for their vision and initiative in establishing the Social Research program and the Research Associate (Denis Ladbrook) for his heartfelt and able guiding of this project.

This final report highlights several crucial and common themes reported by fathers in general, and separated fathers in particular, that require our urgent attention as researchers, service providers, and as a society.

1.5 Helpline Survey

As a way of securing a quick, broad sweep of issues that are of concern to parents of young children, we asked three questions of four Helpline staff. Ngala's Helpline is a free telephone service, offering assistance with parenting issues. Helpline keeps contact statistics and we include some of these here, along with some of the four staff's qualitative comments.

During the first six months of 2002, Helpline completed 9608 calls. 30.5% were after hours and 86.7% were metropolitan. Fathers completed 321 calls and of these 55.2% were after hours.

Between them, the four staff had 37 years of telephone support experience and 75 years of health-related work with children and families, mostly as Midwives and Child Health Nurses. The three questions we asked were:

Question 1: What issues are most frequently phoned in about?

Many triggers lead parents to call Helpline. Qualitatively, the staff said parents were concerned about:

- Adjusting to having a new baby
- Lack of sleep due to frequent night waking, with many parents feeling exhausted
- Learning how to respond to the baby's crying
- Having to make too many lifestyle adjustments to accommodate a new baby⁴
- Dissatisfactions with individual expectations of parenthood, and seeking reassurance
- Managing on reduced income when one parent reduces or ceases work and costs increase
- Maintaining the relationship when the partners' parenting styles and expectations conflict.

Socially isolated parents may have more difficulty coping with a new baby than those accessing knowledge and assistance from other people. For example:

- Some mothers who have moved to mining towns and haven't set up a support network yet, or whose partners work on a periodic fly-in fly-out arrangement
- Some people who migrate or shift from inter-state lose their close social networks. Some quickly create new networks of support, others take longer to align with the new community.
- Some worried dads working on long-shifts in mining towns also call Helpline: 'My wife doesn't seem to be coping well. I'm at a loss. What can I do?'
- Some men and grandparents looking after a child with difficult behaviour ring up quite desperate for strategies.

⁴ The process of adjusting to a baby starts before conception and continue across the family life cycle. Women who expect a 50-50 parenting relationship may experience more adjustment problems, whereas those who see being Mum as their major role at this stage of life appear to adjust more smoothly. 'They just get on with it', said a Helpline counsellor.

Knowing what to Expect and Making Adjustments

- Couples who have a knowledgeable overview of the child development process anticipate changes in child behaviour and are more likely to feel confident with their parenting and work as a team, which reduces conflict and strengthens the relationship. Those with less information are more likely to be unsure, unrealistic or disheartened. Like the puzzled man who phoned up with, 'My baby doesn't like me. He screams at me, but goes quietly to his Mum.' This could be expected from a 4-month old being breastfed.
- The amount of information now available from books, videos, the internet, early childhood classes and community nurses, is enormous. Equally diverse are the different viewpoints about what to do about anticipatable events. Some parents ring up in confusion, trying to make sense of the different sets of 'advice from experts'. The resources they want from Helpline are information, strategies and reassurance. But often there is no one right way to do things.

Question 2. What changes have you seen over the past 10 – 15 years?

- The "biggest change" is the way the men are now involved in rearing babies and toddlers. Up until the 1980s, even the experts said that child-rearing was the woman's role. Now they want Dad more involved. The Dads we talk to are very positive about this. They really want to know how to be a good parent. In particular, they want the same attachment, to be valued the same as Mum. One man put it this way:

'I want to be as important to my child as her Mum is.'
- Women have changed a lot too – perhaps because the old traditions are changing. They've become more independent. They've changed faster than the men – they've studied more, read more, discussed things more, and more go to work. The difference between the generations is a real thing.
- Also the media are changing their images of fatherhood. It's now trendy for a man to walk the pram in the park. It wasn't that way years ago. Other women now talk to them if they've got a baby in the pram – that's a bit new too.
- Child Health Nurses and other professionals also try to involve fathers more. The whole system's changing.

Question 3. What encourages fathers to become more deeply involved in their child's life ?

- Attachment can develop through being aware of the unique relationship between father and child, by keeping the connection active, maintaining their presence in the child's life, and being nurturantly involved in every aspect of their lives.
- Men seem pleased to become aware that they can be both masculine and nurturant.
- We hear from men who thirst for information. Both parents expect much more now, and they go for second opinions when there are concerns with their child. Especially the fathers. They search out answers much more now. They use the internet. They want to 'do it right', and fear adversely affecting the child.

The Helpline staff spoke with experience and wisdom. It isn't surprising that the themes they mentioned come up quite frequently in the discourse of our study participants.

Our outset rationale and objectives and the framework of participating and resourcing agencies gave us an agenda of preliminary exploratory research. Next we needed a method for securing answers to the research questions. We take these issues up in Chapter 2.