

**Poster presented at SRCD Developmental Science Teaching Institute,  
Society for Research in Child Development Biennial meeting Montreal  
Canada March 2011**

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**A Father's Place in Child Development: Using Reflective Exercises to Promote Authentic Learning**

In this poster, we describe a set of exercises for a postgraduate social science course in which the role of fathers in children's socioemotional development is problematized. Teaching about fathers' place in child development faces two major hurdles: the relative immaturity of the research base linking fathers to child development outcomes, and the lack of established service experience in successfully engaging with fathers. Even though investigations of father-child developmental processes are becoming more numerous, the evidence linking fathers' involvement with their children's wellbeing remains contested (Cabrera et al, 2007), and children's services for the most part target mothers.

One task for educators in this postgraduate course therefore is to facilitate critical appraisal of father presence in child development texts, research and service settings. The exercises, 'fatherhood experiences' and 'fathering contexts', used in the postgraduate course, have been adapted from professional development courses in a variety of family-related services across the early childhood, education, health, and welfare sectors, and have been extensively used in these settings as well as in undergraduate courses. The fatherhood experience exercises address awareness of fathers' influence on children's development through self-exploration, on the premise that critically reflecting on self and family of origin patterns facilitates mindfulness and understanding of self and others (Kaslow, Celano & Stanton,

2005). Students' own relationships with fathers and father-figures are brought into the discussion through sharing experiences in exercises with clear boundaries and opt-out mechanisms to preclude embarrassing or unintended disclosures. The fathering context exercises require students to deconstruct and critique research, texts and settings in order to identify gaps and biases in attitudes and knowledge. Research, for instance, is framed as an agenda-setting question: "What would you need to know, in order to decide", (for example) "if a father's involvement in his 2-year old's language development was important?" Father-influence exercises include debating the need for 'mother-only' and 'father-only' parenting opportunities, as well as examining current promotional material from health and early education sources to assess the representation of fathers' roles and impact.

The use of reflection and discussion to encourage students to integrate new information, attitudes and values into their understanding of topics which have emotional and value-based aspects is well recognized. Such reflection is a form of extended abstract thinking that contributes to deep learning (Biggs & Tang, 2007). The experience of reflecting on what is known, felt and acted upon in relation to fathers' impact on child development is key to students developing understanding and flexibility of thinking for the complex family settings of their future disciplinary and professional practice.

## A Father's Place in Child Development: Using Reflective Exercises to Promote Authentic Learning



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### What's it about?

We briefly describe here a set of exercises for a postgraduate social science course in which the role of fathers in children's socioemotional development is problematized. Teaching about fathers' place in child development faces two major hurdles: the relative immaturity of the research base linking fathers to child development outcomes, and the lack of established service experience in successfully engaging with fathers.

One teaching task is to facilitate critical appraisal of father presence in child development texts, research and service settings. A second task is to have students reflect on their personal and professional experience of 'fathering' in the context of the course. The exercises have been adapted from professional development courses in a variety of family-related services across the early childhood, education, health, and welfare sectors.

#### 1. Visual awareness: "Parents" ≠ "Fathers"



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#### 2. Purpose: Why involve fathers?

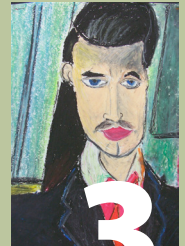
Students describe their role (current or future) within a family-related service. Three answers are then required: "How do fathers come into fulfilling the Policy Objectives of the organization?", "Where are fathers implied in your Job Description?", and "How do fathers come into your day-to-day work?"



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#### 3. Evidence: What will you need to know?

Students are provided with a range of research report summaries. Their task is "Describe how you would explain the importance of including fathers" to a) a colleague who is concerned about their ability to work with fathers, b) a manager who requests evidence for allocating resources to work with fathers, c) a father who is unsure about whether to undertake a 'fathering' activity, and d) a single mother.



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#### 4. Strategy development exercise: Strengthening the father-child connection

Kerry is seven years old, and has been displaying very challenging behaviours such as frequent tantrums, fighting with other children, stealing and swearing at her teachers. She lives with her mother Julie and half siblings who she is made to care for (four-year old twins and a two-year old). An unsubstantiated report notes that Kerry was left alone in the house to care for her siblings during the day for some hours in the school holidays.

Eduardo is the father of Kerry but not Julie's other children. Eduardo emigrated 10 years ago but all his family still live in Ecuador. He has been away working interstate for the last four years and returned home some months ago. He works regular day shifts at the local petrol station three days a week and is hoping to get work in the Goodyear franchise next door. Eduardo shares a house with his mate and lives close by but the house is too small to have Kerry over to stay. He has taken Kerry out occasionally. There is conflict between Julie and Eduardo; however Eduardo pays child support when he can and always remembers Kerry's birthdays and Christmas.



Drawings of fathers are by 15 year old boys from Australian schools.

With the added pressure of a new baby, Julie requests respite care for Kerry. Julie has received several periods of respite care when she was unable to cope with Kerry. After having the twins, she was diagnosed with post-natal depression, however, no record is available of any treatment or support offered or taken up. Julie's mother lives two hours away and sometimes helps out, but she finds Kerry's behaviour distressing. She said she won't come to stay as Kerry "gets on her nerves."

Julie is advised by the duty child protection case worker that there are no respite carers available. After discussions with Julie, the case worker contacts Eduardo and asks if he would be willing to regularly read to Kerry at bedtime to help her settle into a routine. Eduardo agrees and for the first week arrives at the arranged time to read Kerry a bedtime story. After one week he misses a night, then reads again for three nights then misses a night, then reads for two and misses a night, reads for one night and then stops coming. Julie rings the caseworker and explains that "He is too unreliable".

- QUESTIONS**
1. What is your first guess at why Eduardo stopped the reading sessions?
  2. What factors or experiences might push Eduardo away from his child?
  3. Who or what might encourage Eduardo to stay connected with Kerry?

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#### 5. Personal relevance: Our fathers

This deceptively simple exercise can operate at many levels and so care needs to be taken to ensure that students do not access personal materials that may require a therapeutic response. Break the participants into small groups of three or four. Ask them to decide who will speak after the instructions have been given. Only one person is to speak, the others are to listen. The task is to introduce yourself to the small group. You are to describe your personality, the sort of person that you are. But, you are to do this as if it was your father making the introduction. That is, you do not say "My father would probably say that I am a happy person" You are to speak as your father and use his voice. So you would say "My son Bill is a happy person..." Important points to consider before you decide who will speak and begin.

1. This is not a therapy group so we are not trying to uncover painful thoughts and feelings. You decide what you would like to tell the group. There is no requirement to talk at all if you don't wish to.
2. There is a confidentiality agreement as part of this exercise. The group agrees not to discuss your personal details with anyone. However they may say what they have learnt from the exercise.
3. Appropriate questions to ask after the speaker has introduced herself/himself should focus on the influence of professionals' fathers on their work role with fathers.
4. There is no requirement to pick your biological father. You may describe yourself using the voice of any important male parental figure or 'make up a father' who you would like to have had.



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