

WHY FATHER-INCLUSIVE PRACTICE?

1. **Equal opportunity for women**
2. **Benefits to children and family**
3. **National goals for Australia**

The answer to this question will depend, to a large extent, on who is asking. But it is an important question since it underpins what we do with fathers and how we do it. In this page four approaches to the 'Why?' question are described and links are given to more extensive discussion of the various approaches.

Those providing face-to-face support to families are generally supportive of changes to include fathers because of their personal experience of fathers (of their own father or as fathers of their children) confirms the importance of fathers for family well being, or they find the lack of fathers in their service to be a problem. For service staff the 'Why' question is often translated into 'How?' since the practical day-to-day involvement of fathers is a new area of practice. (See *What difference would it make if fathers were included?*)

Managers and policy advisors however, are often in the position of putting forward submissions to include fathers requiring extra resources or at least a change in normal procedures. For individuals in these positions evidence will be required of the benefits to be gained from changes in protocols and policies to be father inclusive.

Since the Father-Inclusive Practice Framework is directed to both groups – practitioners and those in management or planning roles – both the competencies involved in father engagement as well as the research basis for father involvement were addressed in the Forum and in these pages. However, we recognize that as services change to be more inclusive of fathers there will be many specific questions to be answered which relate to the precise nature of the service and the families that it serves. The examples offered during the Forum provide some suggestions for how specific issues can be tackled but it should be recognised that staff development and involvement will be needed to resolve the myriad of practical questions surrounding the inclusion of fathers.

At the broadest level the 'Why?' question may be addressed through a number of approaches. In planning the Forum consideration was given to the evidence from the recent survey of research on Australian fathers which found that the evidence base addressing fathers was weighted towards family dissolution rather than toward family formation and maintenance *. For this reason the emphasis of the Forum was directed to early intervention services and to the early years of family life. The Forum presentations by Professors Binns and Cairney address two important areas of development in the early years of life: breastfeeding and literacy. However it should be recognised that institutions, services and individuals may choose a variety of reasons for including fathers.

* Fletcher, R., Fairbairn, H., & Pascoe, S. (2004) *Fatherhood research in Australia*. The University of Newcastle.

THREE POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Three examples of different but credible answers to the 'Why?' question are provided on the attached pages.

1. An answer based on equal opportunity for women

The framework of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission discussion paper '*Striking the Balance: Women, men, work and family*' offers a strategic way to link the inclusion of fathers with the broad aims of a more just and equitable society. See a brief summary of this approach below [Father-inclusion and the Work and Family campaign](#).

2. An answer based on benefits to children and family

Approaches using the evidence base of children's well being have been adopted in recommendations from professional organizations and in the formulation of national policy by governments. Two examples:

A. The proposal from the American Academy of Pediatrics for paediatricians to change the way that they interact with parents so that fathers are included

The American Academy of Pediatrics last year published a bulletin calling for a change in paediatricians' approach to fathers. They argued that the scientific evidence of fathers' influence on children's social, emotional, and cognitive development justified a more inclusive approach from paediatricians. See [Paediatricians' role in Enhancing Men's Roles in the Care and Development of Their Children](#)

B. The National Service Framework of the Health and Education authorities in the UK is a national policy to include fathers which relies on evidence of benefit to children

In October 2004 the Department of Health and the Department of Education and Skills in the UK launched their National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services. The framework included a core standard to recognise fathers' influence on children's development. See [The UK National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services](#).

3. An answer based on national goals for Australia

A third approach, which combines elements of the above rationales, is to take national goals which have wide support among institutions and the community, and ask how including fathers might help in meeting these goals.

Two presentations at the Forum attempted to sketch out how this approach might work. The desire across the community to have our children be as healthy as possible is taken for granted in general discussion and incorporated into service approaches at every level. A specific goal however is to have babies breastfed exclusively for at least six months and some breastfeeding for at least the first year. The benefits of breastfeeding for children and families are thoroughly documented in the scientific literature and the evidence of the benefit of breastfeeding for infants' health was an important part of the argument by HREOC that a system of paid maternity leave should be introduced. Since we also have very strong evidence that fathers have a crucial role to play in the establishment and maintenance of breastfeeding, the incorporation of fathers into the practice of antenatal and postnatal services supporting mothers seems a logical step.

A second commonly-agreed goal for the nation as a whole is that our children be literate. While there is continued debate about the best method of instruction within the school setting, the recognition that parents play a vital part in transferring the skills and attitudes necessary for literacy is widely accepted. What has not been well recognised to date is the way that fathers currently influence the literacy achievement of their children and the benefits to schools and families of fathers' direct involvement in support of literacy.

See the Forum presentation [Fathers, Breasts and Babies](#) by Professor Colin Binns and the Forum presentation [Fathers and Literacy](#) by Professor Trevor Cairney.