

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

## Engaging fathers in student learning and school life



The impact of involved fathers or father figures on the life of a child has been well established over the last two decades. Significant studies in the UK, USA and Australia have found that involved fathers positively impact the cognitive, social and physical wellbeing of a child from infancy to adolescence, with lasting influence into adult lives.

Similarly, a father's involvement in a child's learning and the life of the school has long-term effects. Research commissioned by Australia's The Fathering Project has found the following benefits to fathers' positive involvement in student learning:

- Children do better in school when their father is involved in their school, regardless of whether their father lives with them or lives apart
- Students whose fathers or father-figures participate in school activities enjoy school more, are less likely to have behavioural issues and are likely to stay at school longer
- Students stay at school longer so retention rates improve
- Once engaged, the proportion of fathers or father figures who are highly involved in school or class activities doesn't decline over time
- Mothers are more likely to remain involved if a father is engaged at school

Despite the obvious benefits of getting dads engaged in school and class activities schools still struggle to engage fathers. Evidence suggests that the current generation of men want to be hands-on rather than distant dads typified by fathers of past generations. The timing is right as many men are working from home removing distance as a barrier for engagement. The challenge remains for schools and teachers to crack the code to meaningfully engage fathers in their child's learning and school life.

Engaging fathers is not an impossible task. In my work with schools and parents over three decades it's apparent that schools who successfully engage fathers tap into the following strategies:

### Targeted involvement

Conduct an event or activity aimed at 'parents' and you are most likely going to get a great deal of involvement from mothers. Studies have shown that women take on the primary parenting role in most families so a school activity, social media page or information night aimed at 'parents' will generally see high take up rates from mothers compared to fathers.

Schools and teachers who successfully engage men conduct and target events specifically for fathers. They make a special effort to invite fathers to events and activities and they make special efforts to involve fathers on social media by doing such things as creating a father's group with content relevant to dads.

## Purposeful involvement

Fathers will generally become involved in the life of a class or school if they can fully understand the purpose of their involvement. It's my experience that men are generally motivated to become involved when a mixture of the following four factors is present:

### 1. Being a better dad

Information and events that help men better understand what it means to be a good father are highly motivational for dads. Men generally respond positively to practical fathering strategies that focus on communication, relationship-building, the establishment of family values, understanding children's developmental stages and promotion of their children's wellbeing.

### 2. Supporting their child through problems and difficulties

Most fathers have an innate desire to skill their children up to resolve their own problems and issues. This biological drive to teach needs to be supplemented by a crash course in current issues and dilemmas if it's to be fully utilised. Provide information and programs for fathers focusing on current issues such as helping kids overcome bullying, smart use of digital devices and researched-based approaches to drug and alcohol use.

### 3. Supporting learning inside and outside of school

Dads want to help their kids learn but many become stuck on the 'homework roundabout', which can lead to frustration and arguments. Show dads how they can support their child or young person as learners both inside school and also in everyday life by focusing on how broad-based educational concepts such as play-based learning, growth mindsets and lifelong learning relate to their children's lives.

### 4. Making a contribution


Some men want to go beyond assisting their children and want to make a meaningful contribution to the ongoing life of their child's class or school. In the past a father's involvement was usually restricted to helping at working bees or joining their child's school council. While these are still viable options, they are not the only ways that men can contribute to school and classroom life. With more men working from home, the barrier of distance has been reduced and fathers may have more ability to assist schools in practical ways such as helping with excursions, hearing children read and assisting with elective programs.


## Collegiate involvement

Men are not natural networkers so a school's effort to bring them together for purposeful involvement outlined above will reap many benefits. Most men prefer to learn in a collegiate atmosphere so look for ways to bring fathers together for special father's nights, fathering programs, men's only events and through focused social media content.

The importance of a strong school-family partnership is now well established, yet it's mothers who tend to be the main links between schools and families. Research shows that by specifically targeting fathers, schools and classrooms will see specific benefits for students and schools as a whole. These benefits include better outcomes for students (including higher grades and better retention rates), improved school culture and long lasting family-school connections. With motivation high and more men working from home the timing is now right for schools to make the effort required to successfully target and engage fathers in the educational journeys of students and the life of the school.

 There is a workbook for this professional learning module

 There is a video for this professional learning module

 Login to your dashboard to access



**Michael Grose**

Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.