



Submission cover sheet

Inquiry into men's suicide rates

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Inquiry into men's suicide rates

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Parenting Research Centre

Acknowledgement of Country

The Parenting Research Centre acknowledges and respects the diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this country and the Elders of the past and present.

Contact

Melbourne office

Hub Southern Cross
Level 2, 696 Bourke Street
Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

Sydney office

Hub Hyde Park
Level 3, 223 Liverpool Street
Darlinghurst NSW 2010

P: +61 3 8660 3500

E: info@parentingrc.org.au
www.parentingrc.org.au

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Parenting Research Centre

The Parenting Research Centre (PRC) is an independent, non-profit organisation that helps children thrive by advising on new and better ways to support families in their parenting. We help governments and community organisations in the fields of early childhood, health, education, disability and welfare put the best evidence on parenting and family support into action.

We have an outstanding record of accomplishment in program development, practice support, research and evaluation related to parenting, including when a parent has a disability and for parents of children with a disability. We focus on achieving real world outcomes by helping service providers, families and policy makers to develop and implement parenting and family support solutions that are informed by evidence and sensitive to culture and context.

We have expertise in understanding and addressing fathers' needs, including our leading role in national data collection on fathers' health through our *Parenting Today in Victoria* study (now expanded nationally and currently open for participation), and our collaboration with *ForWhen*, a national perinatal and infant mental health care-navigation service. Our landmark programs and services, including Raising Children Network, MyTime and *smalltalk* are all accessible to fathers and tailored towards managing wellbeing and reducing stress.

Factors contributing to male suicide rates

Research tells us a lot about factors that contribute to male suicide, such as mental illness. Our own research and that of others has explored mental health among fathers, identifying several key contributors to depression and anxiety among fathers over the parenting journey.

The *Parenting Today in Victoria* study, conducted by the Parenting Research Centre and funded by the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, highlights the complex and under-recognised mental health challenges experienced by fathers. While most fathers in the 2016 sample ($n=1044$) reported strong parenting confidence and frequent use of positive parenting strategies, almost **one in five fathers disclosed symptoms of anxiety (19%) or depression (18%) since becoming a parent**. Fathers classified as having 'poorer' mental health were significantly more likely to have a child with a medical condition or learning difficulty, and less likely to speak a language other than English at home. In addition, our research using *Parenting Today in Victoria* data has revealed that fathers are **less likely to seek formal support**, preferring to rely on their own efforts such as online searches (Wade, Matthews, Forbes, Burn, May, & Cann, 2023).

These findings align with large-scale national data from the *Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC)*, which found that around **10% of fathers experience elevated psychological distress during the postnatal period**, with a substantial number continuing to experience persistent or worsening symptoms over time. Around one in eight fathers not living with their children reported symptomatic and clinical distress (Giallo et al., 2012). Further analysis of the LSAC data has identified **key psychosocial risk factors for fathers' postnatal mental health**, including low job quality, poor relationship quality, low parenting self-efficacy and maternal psychological distress (Giallo et al., 2013).

Together, these studies demonstrate that mental health difficulties among fathers are not only common but also predictive of parenting challenges, child wellbeing outcomes, and persistent distress over time. This has clear implications for suicide prevention efforts targeting men, especially in the early parenting years.

Promotion of positive mental health behaviours

MyTime

Research shows that parents of children with disabilities have a higher risk of poor emotional and physical health and are more likely to feel isolated, overwhelmed, and unable to relate to other parents. For parents and carers of children with complex needs, **social and peer support** may buffer against increased stress, improving parental wellbeing (Boyd, 2002; Gray, 2002). Peer support interventions aim to enhance the social support available to parents and carers, providing opportunities for participants to share experiences and receive emotional and tangible support from others, including increased access to local social and health services (Eysenbach et al., 2004, Wynter et al., 2015). In addition to increasing emotional and instrumental support, peer support interventions may also improve parents' sense of self-efficacy and confidence in supporting their children's needs through exposure to incidental learning opportunities and via interactions with others that foster a sense of parental competence (Sartore et al., 2013).

MyTime is an example of a well-established, facilitated peer support program in Australia, funded by the Department of Social Services and designed and coordinated by the Parenting Research Centre. It supports parents and carers of children (0-18years) with a disability, developmental delay or chronic medical condition. MyTime connects parents and carers, including fathers and male carers, with others in similar situations and offers skilled guidance from a facilitator to help them access local services and reliable information. The PRC coordinates more than 200 MyTime groups across Australia, which are delivered by state-based disability and family support partner agencies, such as Playgroup NSW (who co-ordinates the **ACT MyTime groups**). Groups are delivered in both virtual and in-person settings to minimise barriers to the service, such as geographic isolation, transport and significant health concerns.

Peer support programs like MyTime offer parents, including fathers, the opportunity to share their experiences with peers and gain valuable social and emotional support. More than 12,000 parents have attended MyTime since it began in 2006. Through MyTime, parents and carers meet, learn from each other and learn about local support services. While they're accessing that support, play helpers engage the children in targeted activities.

Further tailoring of MyTime groups could help to increase the engagement of fathers and male carers to provide critical peer support that alleviates stress and impacts on wellbeing.

Raising Children Network

Parents experiencing vulnerability are increasingly accessing digital support and information, as are parents in general. Our research shows that parents overwhelmingly turn to online information for advice, second only to family and friends – including parents experiencing socio-economic disadvantage and psychological distress (Parenting Research Centre, 2017).

We are part of a consortium (with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute) delivering the **Raising Children Network (RCN)**, an initiative delivering online resources and information to Australian parents, carers and professionals who work with them. The RCN website has been funded by successive Australian governments since 2006 to bring up-to-date, evidence-based, plain language information about raising children to more than 80,000 parents and professionals every day.

Audience survey data¹ from the RCN website, raisingchildren.net.au, shows that connecting with trusted, credible information helps parents know what to do next, try something new, feel less worried, grow their confidence and connect with support services.

Raising Children Network content meets the needs of diverse parents and families, including information for fathers, grandparent and kinship carers, information about children with disability, family violence and child sexual safety. Content is presented to cater for different preferences and literacies, including audio, video and parenting in pictures. Collaborating with the Raising Children Network can ensure that services are providing families with up-to-date, evidence-based, user-friendly information, as shown in the following case studies.

Key focus areas for RCN in the 2024-26 period include ensuring our messages cut through in the growing use of AI tools, new forms of content for social media and other digital channels outside our own online platforms. RCN also has a significant increased focus on partnering with government and non-government entities to ensure RCN messages are reaching a catchment of approx. 2.5 million families across all states and territories.

The mental health and wellbeing of mothers, fathers and carers is also a core focus of the RCN-developed App - Raising Healthy Minds - funded by the federal Department of Health.

RCN and the Raising Health Minds app have significant potential for expansion and promotion as a one-stop shop for information and resources that reduce fathers' stress and increase parenting efficacy in the early years.

smalltalk

smalltalk is an evidence-based parenting program designed to support parents of children from birth to four years by promoting quality everyday interactions that boost children's learning and development. Delivered through supported playgroups, the program equips parents with practical strategies such as tuning into their child's cues, using everyday moments for learning, and fostering a stimulating home environment. It also emphasises parental self-care and community connectedness. Developed through rigorous research, *smalltalk* has demonstrated sustained improvements in parent-child interactions, home learning environments and early literacy outcomes.

smalltalk contributes to improved mental health for both mothers and fathers by increasing sense of efficacy and confidence in the parenting role. The focus on self-care and stress management supports fathers in maintaining their wellbeing, while the group-based delivery fosters social connection and reduces isolation. By offering practical, strengths-based strategies and promoting access to local support services, *smalltalk* empowers fathers to engage more positively with their children and manage the challenges of early parenthood with greater resilience.

ForWhen

ForWhen is a national initiative led by Karitane and funded by the Australian Government that supports parents experiencing perinatal mental health concerns. Recognising that men can also face significant mental health challenges during this time, the initiative provides tailored support for both fathers and mothers through a national navigation and referral network that offers seamless, stepped care for families.

¹ Raising Children Network Audience Survey 2019/20 (unpublished)

Emerging Minds

The Parenting Research Centre is a key delivery partner in Emerging Minds: National Workforce Centre for Child Mental Health. The National Workforce Centre was established in 2017 to equip parents, professionals, and organisations with the skills to proactively promote child wellbeing and help those who are struggling as early as possible, to reduce long term impacts of poor mental health.

Our partnership with Emerging Minds, since its inception, has resulted in the development of several evidence reviews that have informed e-learning modules, as well as published resources. Examples of our contributions include:

- [Fathers' mental health and parenting: Implications for promoting children's mental health](#)
- [Working with fathers who use violence: Highlights from the Invisible Practices project](#)
- [Parental mental health and parenting: How are they related?](#)

Summary

The Parenting Research Centre remains committed to advancing the mental health and wellbeing of fathers, mothers, and carers across all stages of parenting. Through evidence-based programs such as *MyTime*, which provides peer support to parents of children with disabilities or complex needs, and the *Raising Children Network*, which delivers trusted, accessible parenting information to millions of Australians, we help reduce isolation, strengthen parenting confidence, and connect families to the right supports. Our collaborations, including with initiatives like *ForWhen*, demonstrate the importance of integrated, responsive services that address the diverse needs of parents—from the perinatal period through to the later stages of childhood.

It is clear from the research that investment and ongoing commitment to resources such as the programs and services we have identified in this response have a significant and positive impact on the support for all parents and carers, but in particular vulnerable and at-risk people. In turn this is a protective factor that can help support people who are at risk of suicide and should be a key consideration in the recommendations of the inquiry.

We welcome the opportunity to meet with members of the Inquiry if this would be of assistance, and we are available to support the ongoing work of the Inquiry to address this important public health issue.

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