The role of dads in families has changed over the years, with men often more involved in parenting than in previous generations (Boström & Broberg, 2014). This is true in families without disabilities as well as those with autism. However, research and services about autism is often focused on mothers, rather than fathers (Flippin, & Crais, 2011) leaving dads with fewer sources of information and support and less involvement than they would like (Beatty & King, 2008). Other issues for dads can include:

- Feelings of self-blame
- Effects on their marriages or partnerships
- The constant strains of caring
- Restrictions on family life
- Difficulty telling other people about the disability
- Feeling guilty about having negative feelings about their child (Beatty & King, 2008)

This fact sheet has been written for dads and for people supporting families to help them understand the important role men play.

**Dads are important**

Dads play a really important role in their child’s development and how well the whole family is functioning. Research about dads show that they contribute significantly to the way their child develops language and play (Flippin, & Crais, 2011), and that a father’s presence in his child’s life contributes to his child’s and his partner’s well-being. Some research has shown that when dads are involved with their children at a young age, their partners show fewer signs of depression later on (Laxman et al., 2015).

**Dads often cope in different ways to mums**

All parents cope differently with a diagnosis of autism in their family. While there is quite a bit of research about how mothers cope, less is known about fathers of children on the spectrum. Some research suggests that dads are less likely than mothers to seek social or emotional support (Boström & Broberg, 2014). They also report having fewer opportunities for meeting other dads for support or to talk about their concerns about their children. Some men find that they have few confidantes to talk about family issues with, and others find that friends fall away (Beatty & King, 2008). Other research has found that dads with children on the spectrum are more likely to feel depressed than fathers of children with other disabilities (Hartley, Seltzer, Head & Abbeduto, 2012). This is likely to be related to the types of behavioural symptoms that children on the spectrum can show, which can be stressful and hard to manage.
Supporting dads

Research and practice tells us that many dads have difficulty finding services and often rely on information that comes through their partner’s network. It is often hard to find a service that suits them. Sometimes this is because of practical issues like the timing of groups or workshops. In other cases, information and services are geared more towards mothers and don’t always meet the particular needs of men. Some dads find it difficult to talk about their emotions and feelings (Beatty & King, 2008). This can be particularly hard for some dads when their wife is there as well, often because they are used to being the ‘strong one’.

Dads involved in Positive Partnerships workshops for men have indicated that a mix of information and time for discussion was good and that they appreciated meeting other dads in a similar situation to them. All the fathers surveyed indicated that a few hours on a weekday or on a weekend was the best time to meet and most said that 3 or more sessions were the right number, with some dads indicating that they would like ongoing sessions. The dads surveyed didn’t have a preference about whether the sessions were run by men or women.

In general, it is important for services supporting dads to focus on their particular needs. This includes:

- Ensuring that the timing of sessions allows the majority of fathers to attend
- Looking at practical strategies including information about how to support behaviour
- Focusing on strengths, practical supports and developing relationships with their child (Boström & Broberg, 2014)
- Allowing plenty of time for discussion and sharing
- Encouraging dads to meet each other to share their stories

Resources and links for dads


In summary

Dads play a crucial role in families of children on the spectrum. They cope differently to mothers and might not have access to the same emotional supports. Services for dads should focus on providing a mix of information and time for discussion at a time that allows fathers to attend.
References


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