



Play is the game changer!

Fathers' role in play, developing resilience and Fun!

Presented by: Tim Wemyss

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Acknowledgement Of Country

I'd like to pay respects to the local Elders and Indigenous Elders and fathers, Knowledge – holders and custodians across the continent. May their Dreaming continue to guide us forward. I also want to extend that respect to all Indigenous people here today. Finally, I'd like to pay respect to you and your families and your ancestors no matter where you come from.

To our fellow Australians this culture, this history, the songs, and stories. all belong to this land. So, it belongs to you all. Utilise its strength and grow and learn from the land on which you are on today. Whether the land is consumed by brick and mortar, a calm desert, powerful ocean, or a wise Forest. Embrace its gifts

Who am I? Tim Wemyss

- Father of 4
- TFP NSW Community Fathering Manager
- 12+ years working with children and families within the Illawarra



Preface

- When we refer to dads or fathers, we use it as an umbrella term to also include:
- Grandfathers
- Step-Dads/Foster Carers
- Uncles/Cousins
- Sports Coaches/Teachers
- Anyone else playing the specific role of ‘Father’ in the life of a child



Fathers and Kids – What we know

- The vast majority of dads want to be great dads who are effective and engaged. However, often they aren't sure what this looks and feels like.
- 'Dad guilt' and 'passenger parenting' can be very real feelings for dads
- Dads often nurture through play and are crucial for engaging children in many different and important types of play
- When dads are engaged and present children experience greater positive outcomes than when dads aren't involved.



Compelling Evidence

‘The evidence demonstrating fathers’ potential to positively influence their children’s health, social success and academic achievements is now robust, indisputable and compelling’.

Evidence review. Canberra: Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY).



Compelling Evidence

‘Father-child play is important for children because it is **physical** and **highly stimulating**, which allows the child to experience the activation and regulation of arousal. It also helps children understand and test boundaries in a safe environment, which helps them in countless ways as they figure out the world’

(Allen S 2007)



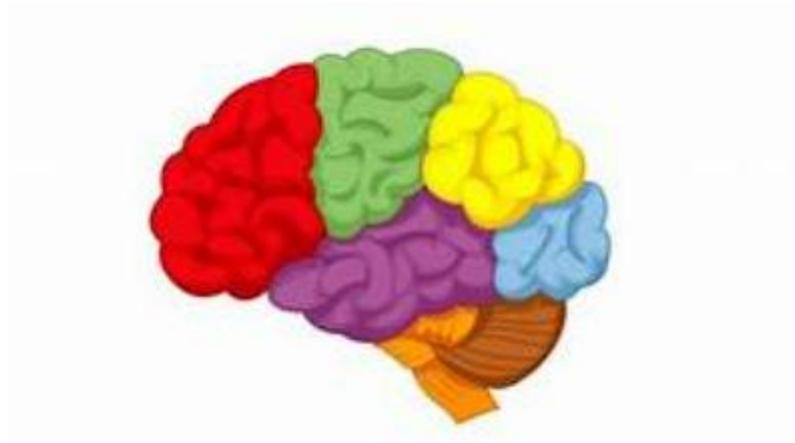
Activity – Group Discussion

- Introduce yourselves and:

1. Share some of your favourite play/activities that you and your kids really enjoy together?

2. Share a favourite activity from your childhood that you and your father or a father figure enjoyed together.

Neurobiology of Play



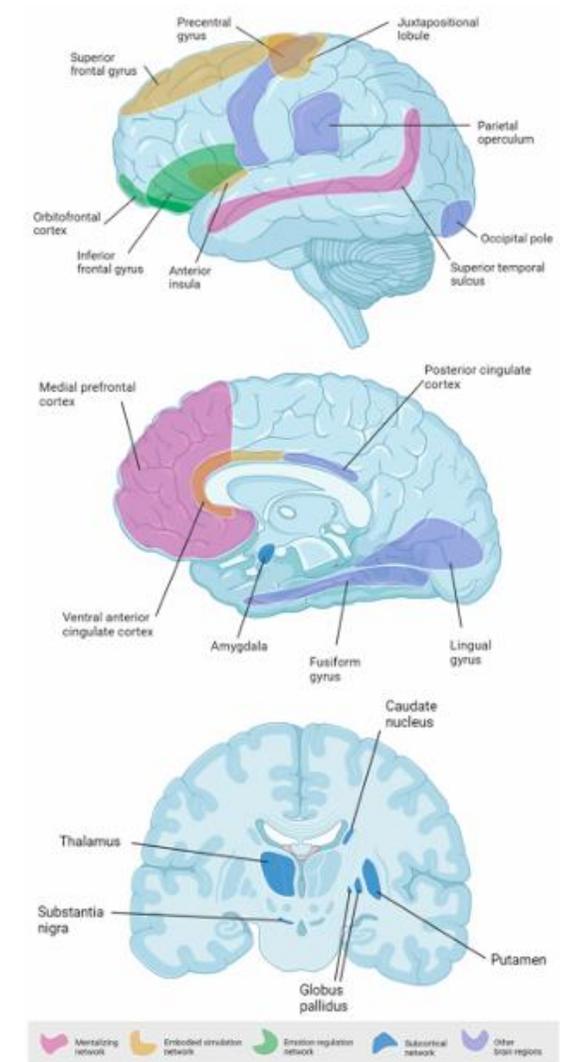
Dad Brain

- Dad Brain is a real thing!
- The research strongly suggests the quality of the interaction between dads and kids is a large factor in achieving positive outcomes
- When dads feel confident in providing positive experiences for their kids through play and interaction dads are highly skilled in interpreting their children's social cues.



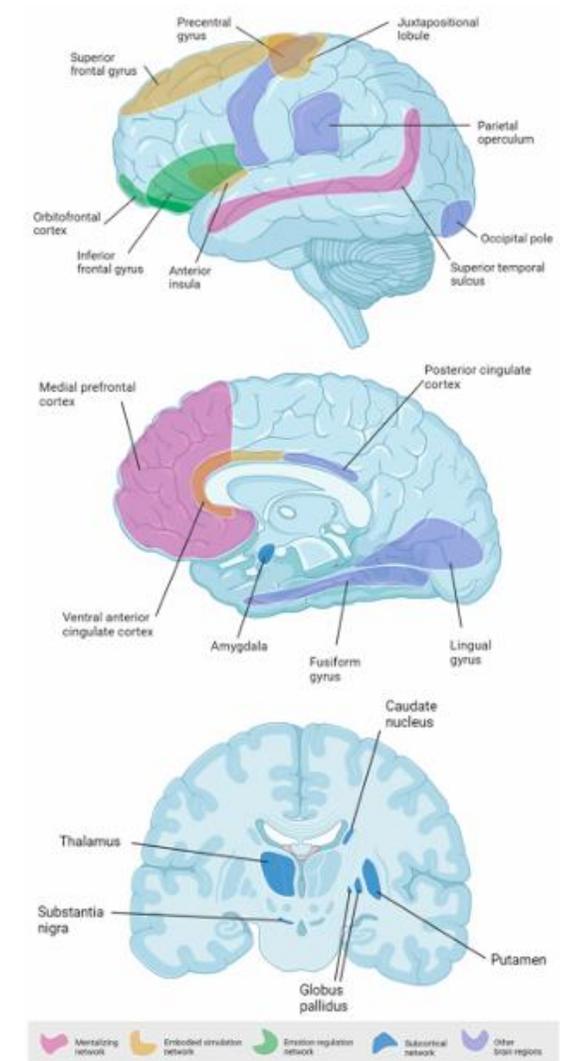
Neurobiology of Play

- The Dad Brain: Awareness, Assessment & Appraisal
- Thought to be comprised of 3 specific (incorporated) networks that were measured to be incorporated when Father's spend time interacting with their infant children
- **Mentalising Network (STS)** – Associated with the processing of human faces and voices and may support a greater understanding of the intentions and interactions between people. Fathers appear to use this network to gain a better understanding of their children's social and emotional cues



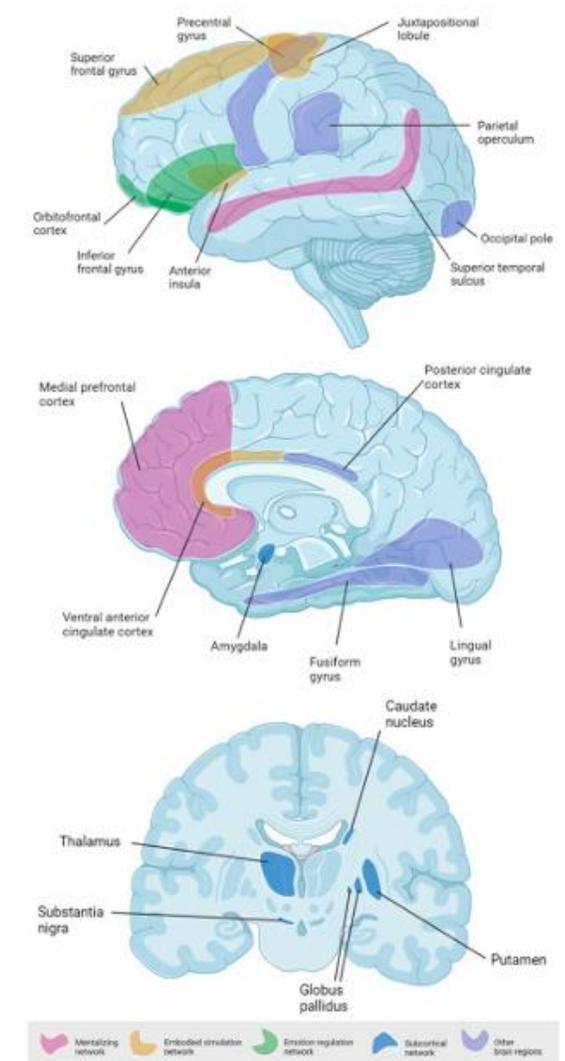
Neurobiology of Play

- The Dad Brain: Awareness, Assessment & Appraisal
- **Embodied Simulation Network** – This region appears to favour the synchronisation and resonance of interactions between two people (amongst many other functions). Activation of this area seems to support fathers being really ‘in-tune’ with social cues and signals received from their children particularly during play involving physical touch



Neurobiology of Play

- The Dad Brain: Awareness, Assessment & Appraisal
- **Emotional Regulation Network** – Positively associated with the perception and appraisal of emotions
- **key to caregiving sensitivity and reliable caregiving provided by fathers** - This is likely due to the building of positive infant related memories which increases the likelihood of promoting appropriate and sensitive caregiving responses in dads.



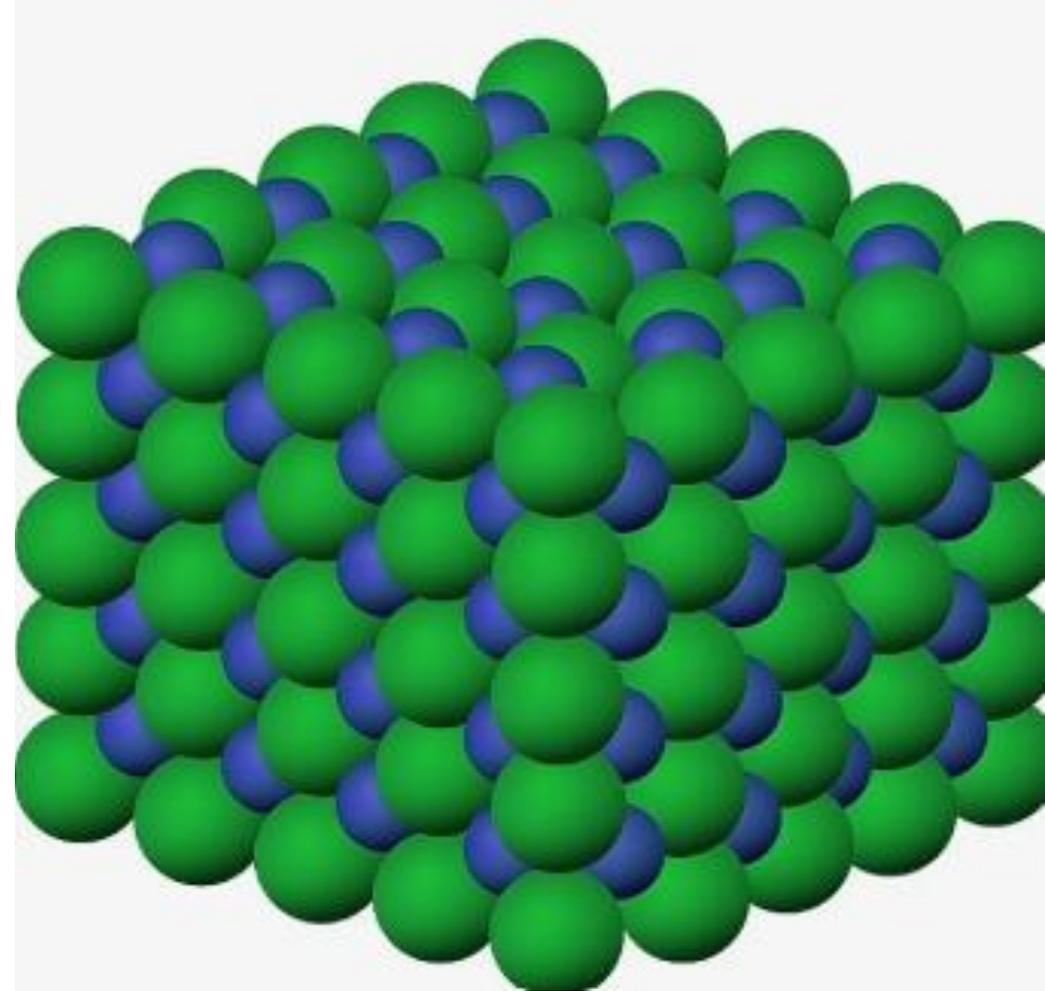
Neurobiology of Play

- The role of Oxytocin for dads and kids:
- One of the functions of Oxytocin is to act as a protective factor against the impact of cortisol (stress Hormone). This occurs readily in mums when they nurture or provide swaddles and cuddles particular for infants.
- Fathers and children create this relationship with oxytocin through tactile stimulation and play.



Why does any of that Matter?

- 1. Fathers are innately driven to read the cues, signals and emotions of their children
- 2. Father's most often connect with and nurture their children via play – in particular positive physical based play.
- 3 keys areas – physical stimulation, emotional regulation and cognitive development





Activity - Discussion

- **Share an example of grit or determination you have you seen in your child/ren.**

and/or

- **Give an example of when your child or your family has had to bounce back from a problem or difficulty or mistake.**

What trends are we seeing today

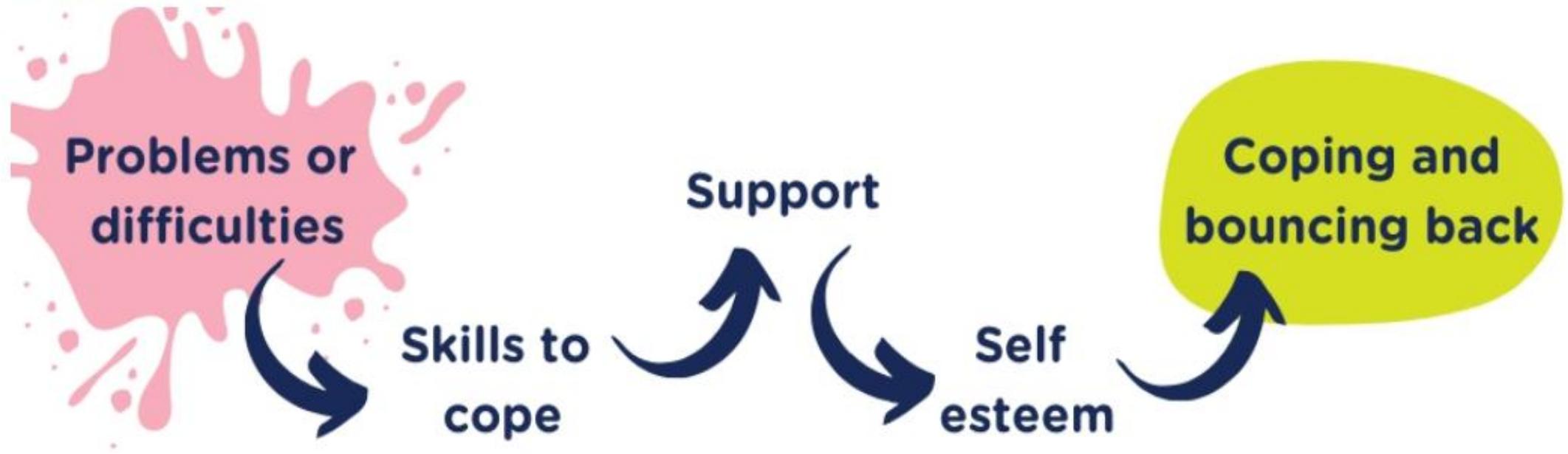
- Impacts of COVID
- Higher levels of anxiety and other mental health issues
- Less time outside
- More time with screens
- Less time interacting/connecting face to face
- More time in organised/highly supervised activity
- Less time PLAYING/unstructured

How can children develop the skills they need to be successful in an ever-changing world?

Resilience

Resilience is our ability to cope with change and challenge and to bounce back in difficult times.

Resilience model:





Resilient children and young people

- They have Grit – passion and perseverance.
- They are hopeful, optimistic, and strong.
- When they encounter a difficult problem, they try to solve it instead of giving up.
- When bad things happen, they quickly bounce back, ready to face the next challenge.
- When they make mistakes, they grow and learn from them.

Characteristics of resilient children

- family

- Close relationship to caring parent figures
- Parenting is warm, firm, positive and consistent.
- There is structure, routines, boundaries and expectations
- Connections to extended supportive family networks
- Parents and carers work as a team.



Fathers fill a different role

- Fathers communicate differently
- Less likely to worry about the small stuff.
- Not so quick to try to step in when kids face challenges
- More likely to encourage analytical thinking – “work it out”
- Tend to encourage more problem solving and risk taking
- Fathers play differently



The Way Dads play

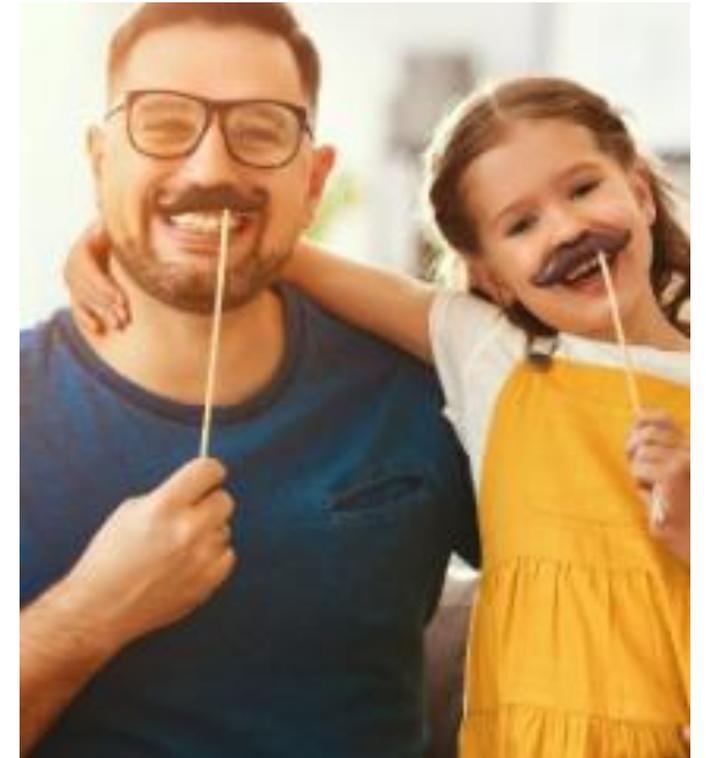
- *Reviews of attachment research point to fathers' capacity to provide for a secure child-parent attachment relationship, defined in the same way as a mothers secure child-parent attached relationship is defined.*

Cashin et al, (2018)

Nurturing

- **‘Dad as a secure base for deeper exploration seems to be key. The way in which fathers nurture is from an outward perspective, providing security and safety to allow the child to begin to explore and achieve success in the world around them, preparing them for life’s challenges as they grow and develop’**

‘The paternal brain in action’



Father's play is a game changer

- for confidence, self-esteem and resilience

Fathers are more likely to:

- Engage their kids in stimulating, active, playful activity.
- Engage their kids challenges and safe risk-taking activities.
- Challenge their kids to have-a-go and bounce back from failure or mistakes.



Other important impacts for development

- Strong brain connections for learning.
- Human movement development
- Dads are helping them to manage these emotions when they play
- Skills for impulse control - Reducing aggression
- Social skills - how to play well with others
- Language and numeracy skills



Play as a Gateway

- Often kids may not directly tell Dads what is on their mind but they will use play as a vehicle: For example:
- ‘Come and kick the ball with me Dad’ will open up conversations about what’s on their mind
- Side by Side not face to face

What 'type of dad play' is important

- Active real world activities
- Safe challenges and stimulating activities
- Safe, rough and tumble play for children
- Engaging with their environment
- Most importantly "fun together"



Games for: Emotional Regulation

- Hide and seek
- What's the time Mr Wolf/statues
- Red light Green Light
- Simon Says
- Chasey
- Animal movements
- Scavenger Hunt

Challenges

- Balancing
- Climbing
- Tumbling
- Running
- Catching/throwing, kicking
- Obstacle courses
- Hiking
- Bike riding

Top tips to support dads when playing with young children

- Engage in safe, physically active play
- Go on play adventures
- Engage in pretend play or role play.
- Ask questions and use lots of words.
- Get down on their level so that you are at the same height as them
- Encourage their child to use their words



Supporting Emotional Development

Key message: I am feeling all kinds of emotions, but I am not good at handling them yet.

- Bring your child's attention to emotions.
- Help them learn the names of emotions.
- Talk about how you feel.
- Identify 'triggers' for your child's big emotions.
- Model self-regulation



Why is play a game changer for older children?

- Keeps your relationship strong.
- It supports strong self-esteem
- They are more likely to have-a-go at life challenges.
- Helps them stay healthy, active and connected.
- Being active with Dad gets kids off screens
- Better overall wellbeing and mental health



Top tips for encouraging play with older kids

- Get back to your inner child and play with your kids.
- It doesn't need to be formal.
- Don't stop as they get older.
- Encourage them to 'have-a go' to try new things.
- Use the time to really connect
- Make a bucket list for you and your kids to do together



Top Tips for resilience

- Avoid eliminating all challenges.
- Don't provide all the answers.
- Ask 'how' questions.
- Let your kids make mistakes.
- Help them manage their emotions.
- Teach your kids skills to handle situation they may encounter



Top tips

Curiosity and Connection

- We find that dads value curiosity over inquisition types of connection. Curiosity implies there is a genuine want for rapport and relationship which is key to getting dads involved.

Father Inclusive Services

- **File Audits** – We highly encourage all services, schools to conduct file audits as a starting point and review and record how many pieces of information don't include dads as a primary or even secondary carer.
- **Text Introductions** – Most often our first point of contact is an introductory text message to the dads we're supporting. This allows for processing time and is much less confrontational than a direct phone call which is often interpreted that way by dads.



Side by Side

- **Activity Based** - When engaging dads, it is highly encouraged to be as activity based as much as possible. This is often how men are brought up to engage and ‘chat’ while performing other tasks.
- **Child-Focused** – Dads are far more likely to engage and see value if they feel the purpose is for direct outcomes for their children.



Just remember - all the best dads play dress-ups



Flashlight moment

**“The family that plays together,
stays together.”**

Strong lifelong bonds are developed between you and your children when you create positive memories of playing together.

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Thank you

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