



**KIDS
FIRST™**

EVALUATION OF THE CARING DADS PROGRAM TRIAL

This document summarises the findings of a University of Melbourne evaluation of the Caring Dads program, conducted over three years across three sites in Victoria.

The report cites positive changes in father's parenting as well as an overall reduction in abusive behaviours.

ABOUT KIDS FIRST & CARING DADS

Caring Dads is a 17-week family violence group-work intervention program for fathers who have neglected their children or exposed their children to family violence. Caring Dads is delivered by Kids First, a leading provider of family and support services for children for the last 120 years.

Kids First has delivered many ground-breaking, evidence-based programs for children, young people and families and was instrumental in bringing the Caring Dads model to Australia.

The Caring Dads program is based on a successful Canadian model that has been trialed with success in a number of other countries, including the UK, US and Sweden. It is Australia's first evidence-based behavior change program helping fathers who have used violence to improve their relationship with their children, and is helping bridge a gap within a system that offers limited assistance to fathers.

The program works at the crossroads between men's use of violence in the family and their desire to see their child develop into a healthy, happy adult. It aims to increase the safety and wellbeing of children and mothers by helping fathers to understand the impact of their behavior by tapping into their motivation to be good dads.

CARING DADS TRIAL IN VICTORIA

In 2017 Kids First received funding from Gandel Philanthropy and the Department of Health and Human Services Victoria to conduct a three-year research trial of the Caring Dads program in Victoria.

The trial ran in two metropolitan Melbourne sites – North East Melbourne (a partnership between Kids First and UnitingCare ReGen), Western Melbourne (a partnership between Anglicare Victoria and IPC Health) and one rural site, Inner Gippsland (Anglicare Victoria).

Sites were selected based on the prevalence of family violence within these regions, with Kids First providing clinical oversight and support.

The University of Melbourne conducted an independent evaluation of the trial between June 2016 and June 2019.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE EVALUATION

In an evaluation of the trial conducted by the University of Melbourne, the Caring Dads program has been shown to:

- have a positive impact on fathers' parenting and co-parenting practices
- reduce the risk of children's further exposure to domestic and family violence
- increase fathers' ability to identify the impact of their aggressive behaviour on their children and improve men's responses to people more generally.



The evaluation findings are based on triangulated analysis across fathers' self-reports, mothers' reports of fathers' behaviour, Caring Dads facilitator observation of fathers, and referrers who stayed involved in the case management of the fathers.

Fathers' post-program self-reports indicate they have improved their parenting practices and this continued through the post-program interviews. Data collected from mothers support the positive impact.

The evaluation found that the Caring Dads program offers an opportunity to fathers who perpetrate family violence to change their behaviour in order to father more safely and improve their relationships with their children and the mothers of their children.

Despite traditionally high dropout rates in family violence intervention programs, Australia has the highest retention rate of all the countries where Caring Dads operates.

The evaluation is also supported by converging evidence that suggests programs focusing on parenting as well as intimate partner relationships are more likely to promote better outcomes within family units and beyond. Increasing adoption of Caring Dads and similar programs internationally marks a shift in understandings of the link between fathers, violence and harm.

THE NEED FOR A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

In Australia, there are few services for men who use violence that specifically focus on improving parenting practices.

In the last 20 years, there has been an increase in research and clinical initiatives focusing on fathers who are violent toward their partners and/or their children.

Research suggests that most children exposed to domestic and family violence continue to have regular contact with their fathers, even if the parents have separated. In addition, services for domestic and family violence are traditionally focused on supporting victim/survivors and, as a result, staff often lack the training and confidence to engage effectively with perpetrators.

To access the full evaluation report, visit kidsfirstaustralia.org.au/caringdads

For program enquiries, contact:
Kids First Caring Dads team
telephone: 1300 938 790

or email:
caringdadsintake@kidsfirstaustralia.org.au

A review of literature conducted as part of the evaluation found that:

- Men who attend domestic violence intervention programs, such as Caring Dads, commonly report a desire to improve and maintain relationships with their children.
- Programs such as Caring Dads hold fathers accountable for their behaviour and for their children's wellbeing — a role that is often assigned to women as protectors of their children.
- Existing Australian programs for men who use violence (e.g. men's behavioural change programs) have limited content to address family violence in the context of fathering, and do not consistently offer pathways to improve violent fathers' capacity to care for their children.
- Men may be more likely to engage in a program, and wider services, if the program philosophy includes gaining skills to be a better father.
- Improving father-child relationships can enhance children's social, emotional and psychological wellbeing.
- Increasing father engagement with services by providing opportunities for men to participate in interventions allows fathers' behaviour to be monitored. This can contribute to regular assessments of the risks fathers may pose to children and/or their partners.