AN INVESTIGATION OF BARRIERS AND FACILITATORS OF FATHER INVOLVEMENT: A MIXED METHODS DESIGN

A thesis submitted by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents the findings of a mixed-methods program of research devised to investigate barriers and facilitators to father involvement in parenting. Study 1 hypothesised that the specific barriers and facilitators of father involvement in parenting programs may have universal applicability to fathering. Therefore, Study 1 used a qualitative method that employed semi-structured interviews with twelve couples regarding a hypothetical dilemma of their participation in a parenting program. Thematic analysis found factors consistent with the literature such as design and delivery methods, and Fathers' employment commonly noted as an impediment to their participation. Further, findings suggested that fathers were tending to collude with mothers taking a lead parental role and this collusion was based on the notion of maternal essentialism. The second study was accordingly devised to expand on these findings, specifically through the lens of fathers' experiences of their involvement in parenting their children. A cross-sectional survey of 298 fathers found that fathers' reported *maternal gatekeeping*, or the involvement of the mother in either facilitating or inhibiting parenting access of the father, which was evident in impacts on levels of fathers' involvement with their children. These impacts were mediated by fathers' role perceptions, sense of self-efficacy in their parenting, and levels of conflict within the coparenting relationship. In sum, the findings were consistent with the literature that a positive coparenting alliance, and facilitative attitudes and behaviours of mothers, produce a conducive environment to increased father involvement. The findings are discussed in relation to father involvement specifically relating to parenting programs, as well as father involvement generally. The implications of these findings are considered in the context of the family microsystem, in families in Australian society in general. Recommendations which improve the transition to parenthood period, such as paid parenting leave, were advocated as having the greatest potential to increase father involvement, and produce greater coparenting equality.

CERTIFICATION OF THESIS

I, James Laurence Brown, declare that the PhD thesis entitled *An investigation of barriers and facilitators of father involvement: A mixed methods design* is not more than 100,000 words in length including quotes and exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, bibliography, references, and footnotes. The thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

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CHAPTER 1: BACKGROUND

According to the United Nations, the family is the most basic unit of society, deserving of our protection and support (United Nations, n.d., in Lee, 2010). At the most fundamental level, it is the fabric of our societies, providing individual members with a sense of belonging and security. The most common family form in Australia consists of a mother, father, and children (Australia Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2015). Families are diverse in their constitution and undergo changes and stages of development. The media tends to perpetuate an idea that families are in decline; however, this seems to be incongruent with the views held by members of society, who still express that their families are of great importance to them (Australian Institute of Family Studies [AIFS], 2020).

Over the past few decades, societal views on fatherhood have experienced a shift from the emotionally detached, authoritarian figure, to one whose role is more involved in the nurturing of children, while still being seen as the primary breadwinner (Daly, Ashbourne, & Brown, 2012; Morman & Floyd, 2002; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hoffarth, 2001). Society now expects the modern father to be more caring and emotionally available to his children, and this expectation is equally met by the desire of many fathers (Cabrera, Volling, & Barr, 2018; Yoshida, 2012). A new ideal of 'new fathers' has emerged in contemporary western societies – fathers who hold the potential to contribute as an active and equal parent and provider (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). Men increasingly want to spend more time with their children and are looking to share the responsibility of childrearing more equally with mothers (Cabrera et al., 2018; Yoshida, 2012). Fathers today are more directly involved in caring for infants and toddlers, and increasingly incorporating a more nurturing identity in their role (Schoppe-Sullivan, Donithen, Lee, Simon, & Wang, 2021). Yet less is known about fathers' experiences as parents than mothers' experiences due to their longstanding omission

from developmental and family research (Cabrera et al., 2018). The specific area of inquiry for this program of research arose out my observations from working with families as a Clinical Psychologist. Over several years, my professional role involved meeting with parents when their children were experiencing behavioural and emotional difficulties. These meetings occurred in both a mental health context, consulting with parents and their children as a Clinical Psychologist while providing evidence-based treatment, as well as in public forums when I delivered parenting programs in the community. It was my experience and observation that fathers were often absent in both settings. As an anecdotal example, when delivering a parenting program to a group of 30 parents, the number of fathers in attendance would be a tenth of participants. Sometimes the mothers would complain about not being able to have their partner attend the program with them, with reasons including work demands, lack of childcare arrangements, or other miscellaneous comments. Sometimes mothers would express frustration that the reasons given by fathers for non-attendance were a lack of interest or engagement.

This also caused me to reflect upon my own experience of fathering, which has now spanned over 20 years. From ante-natal classes, natural birthing experiences, night-time feeds, nappy changing, kindergarten daddy days, school reading programs, sports coaching, 'daddy-date-days', laundry and cooking meals, driving lessons, fatherly lectures, to doctor appointments and hospital emergency rooms, I have been determined to place my role as father as priority number one albeit imperfectly, clumsily, yet with good intentions. However, this has not been without opposition. I know what it is like to feel the influences of social barriers to father involvement personally. I have experienced some prejudice and bias, due mainly to my gender leading to an apparent lack of ability or instinct for childrearing. I also acknowledge that my own internal biases did influence some of my actions. My personal and clinical experience of father involvement piqued my desire to investigate this topic further.

This inquiry broadened to the body of literature on fathering generally, but to father involvement more specifically.

Thesis Structure

The following thesis comprises the review of literature and subsequent proposal of a program of research focused on fathering. Chapter 1 includes a narrative review of relevant literature on fathering and father involvement in child development generally, for the purpose of providing context to this program of research by reviewing the relevant research background and theoretical influences in the field of fathering. Chapter 2 comprises a critical literature review on the specific area of father involvement in parenting programs, followed by an outline of the intended program of research, which is presented including the objectives and proposed methodological approach for this program of research. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology for the qualitative study referred to as Study 1. The subsequent chapters comprising Chapters 4 through to 7 are organised to present the findings for Study 1 thematically, in line with this approach. Chapter 8 acts to bridge between the two studies and presents a literature review relevant to specific factors identified in Study 1 that form the focus of investigation for Study 2. Chapter 9 also includes the aims and quantitative methodology for Study 2 followed by the presentation of the results and discussion of these findings. An integrative discussion of the results of both qualitative and quantitative data from Study 1 and Study 2 will then be presented in Chapter 10 including strengths and limitations, and contributions to research and practice, as well as recommendations for future investigation.

Definitions and Scope

While family structures are diverse and the role of fathering is often performed by stepfathers, grandfathers, and other male figures or same-sex partners, the current program of

research focuses on the traditional mother/father dyad cohabiting with their biological children. This decision was taken due to the greater availability of data on such families in the literature, and because this family type is demographically numerous (ABS, 2015). It was not possible for all family types to be considered as this would require a sufficiently large sample to dissect the varying groups, to give attention to their differing experiences, and this was beyond the capacity of this program of research. It was determined that once focus was given to this more common group of fathers and family types, future research could then carry out investigations of more diverse families and fathers where fathering is potentially experienced differently. Therefore, in this program of research, the sample of interest would be a couple family defined as a mother and father residing in the same household with their children 'who share a social, economic, and emotional bond usually associated with marriage…or marriage-like union' jointly providing care for their children (AIFS, 2020, p.14).

The term fathering describes two facets: presence and involvement. Presence is viewed two dimensionally, being either present or absent in a child's life (Flouri, 2005). Involvement refers to the availability and accessibility of the father to their children, and the responsibility taken for their welfare (Flouri, 2005). This program of research is more focused on father involvement. Father involvement is comprised of the following: *endowment*, being the acknowledgement of the child as his own; *protection*, meaning the father's sense of responsibility to protect the child from danger, and decisions relevant to the child's welfare; *provision*, relating to the concern of the father to ensure that the child's material needs are provided for; *formation*, being the socialisation activities such as teaching and discipline that the father engages in; and *caregiving*, through practical activities such as cooking, minding, and monitoring a child's activities and interactions with others (Flouri, 2005; Lamb et al., 1985; 1987). However, in general terms, father involvement is defined as

the *engagement*, *accessibility*, or availability of the father to his children, and the sense of *responsibility* of the father towards his children for their social, emotional, and practical care and wellbeing (Lamb, 2000; Wilson & Prior, 2011). Father involvement has been measured in both qualitative and quantitative terms, however the quantitative data has arisen to more prominence, with behavioural, cognitive and emotional involvement of fathers having been observed and reported in statistical terms in the literature (Flouri, 2005). Behavioural involvement is normally considered in terms of frequency of fathers' participation in activities with their children; cognitive involvement has been studied in terms of the time given to planning for, monitoring of, and reasoning-related time given to their children; emotional involvement has been measured by things such as relationship closeness, warmth and affection (Flouri, 2005). Evolutions in research on father involvement over time have also increasingly taken into consideration child developmental stages, socioeconomic factors such as the role of economic provision or 'breadwinning' performed by fathers, and cultural influences (Shwalb et al., 2013). This has allowed for a broader appreciation of the role of fathers and the research has been able to investigate different aspects of fathering in greater detail. While it is acknowledged that father involvement has some cross-cultural variances the terms or references described here are generally applicable to the population of Australian fathers of interest to this study. There has also been previous application of such terms and references regarding fathering that have been the focus of previous investigations in Australian studies, many noted in the ensuing literature review, which is considered to give validity for their use in this program of research.

Australian Families

To give context to this program of research, it is important to place it within contemporary Australian social studies on the family. The Australian Institute of Family Studies (2020) has provided a recent update on the state of Australian Families, something it

has done for over four decades since it was established in 1980. The report, *Australian Families Then and Now* (AIFS, 2020) draws on census data to provide a 'snapshot' of the lives of Australian families, and to make comparisons with previous data to explore trends and future directions. The following comments are derived from this report. The overall picture shows that the size of families has reduced, with the average Australian household comprising 2.6 people, down from 3.6 in 1961. This is in parallel with a decline in couple families with dependent children, which represented 36.8% of all households, while one parent families with dependent children increased substantially to 10.2% of all households. Families where members report Indigenous heritage, or those from multicultural backgrounds, have increased in representation. These trends were relatively stable over the decade leading up to the census in 2016. There has been a general decline in marriage, and a delay of first marriages to later in life since the mid-1970s, with men on average being 30.7 and women 29.2 years of age when first married. Couples are also choosing to have children later. Divorce rates reached their highest peak in the 1970s, following the *Family Law Act 1975*, but have fallen slightly since then, remaining steady for two decades, then slightly declining to now. It has become increasingly common for couples to cohabit; however, marriage still remains relevant and admired. Same-sex couples have become more prominent, and Australian society has shown strong support for equal rights, which culminated in amendments to the *Marriage Act* in late 2017, enabling same-sex couples to legally marry in Australia. Despite many changes in the past 40 years to the lives of Australian families, many still report that family relationships are important, and a great source of satisfaction in life (AIFS, 2020). Of note, of all the relationships examined, feelings of satisfaction were highest for relationships between parents and their dependent children. It seems that family life is a source of great satisfaction for contemporary Australian homes.

Parenting Roles

Historically, parental roles have largely been determined by social, cultural and even economic factors (Milkie, Nomaguchi, & Denny, 2015; Roberts & Moseley, 1996). Becker (1981) argued in *Treatise on the Family* that marriage was a union based on specialisation of roles to increase efficiency and improve the collective wellbeing of the family. The notion of specialisation incorporates traditional views of gender roles, whereby one partner, usually the husband or father, engages primarily in what is termed market work and the other focuses on non-market work such as domestic duties and childcare (Kamp Dush, Yavrosky, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2017). For generations, cultural norms have determined mothers to have been considered the primary caretakers of children within most societies, including our Western and European societies (Gaunt & Pinho, 2018). Power imbalances between men and women persist, where men's role in performing market work is privileged, and women's role as primary carer in the home is seemingly less valued, which is reinforced by social and cultural beliefs (Kamp Dush et al., 2017). Gender role beliefs also influence individuals' perception of whether tasks and activities are consistent with their idea of what is appropriate to their role, therefore affecting the behaviours that parents engage in (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2021). The terms 'parent' and 'family' are even said to have a gendered nature, placing the mother in the role of primary parent (Macleod, 2008). The role of mother has been quite well defined in duties and expectations, and despite the increasing number of women entering the workforce over the past three decades, the role description of 'mother' in the family has changed very little for generations. In fact, more recent social narratives have seen an increased intensity added to the role (Hauser, 2015; Pedersen & Kilzer, 2014). Juxtaposed with this perhaps more fanatical approach, the role description of mothering remains generally quite clearly defined by terms laid down centuries before: caregiver, nurturer, homemaker, and so on. There is some advantage that mothers bring to parenting, either

consciously or unconsciously, that comes from this clearer understanding of their own role and in turn, a formed idea of the defined role of the father in the family (Cabrera et al., 2018).

The role of fathers, on the other hand, has seen significant evolution. Historically, fathering was considered a more voluntary act or set of behaviours, in contrast to the natural instincts of mothering (Gaunt, 2008). Centuries ago, fathers were seen as 'all-powerful patriarchs who wielded enormous power over their families' (Lamb, 2000, p. 2). In many Anglo-Saxon societies, fathers were viewed as teachers of morals, with a responsibility to guide their children in enshrining important values found in the dominant religious text, namely the bible. According to Roberts and Moseley (1996), fathers had a central role in family life up until the 1700s, when the advent of industrialisation saw the feminisation of home life. While some former descriptions of a father's role continued, there was shift to more economic responsibility as the main breadwinner. Fathers became viewed as having a more singular role, defined by his capacity to provide financial security for his family (McBride et al., 2005; Machin, 2015; Yan, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Kamp Dush, 2018). This was particularly perpetuated by the notion of the 'nuclear family' post-World War II. This traditional view of the family comprised a dominant breadwinning role played by fathers, and a homemaker, childrearing role enshrined in the role of mothers.

Parenting Research

The mother-child relationship has drawn great attention in psychological research over a number of decades (Lee, 2010). Post-World War II, the father's role in the family has largely been adjunct or peripheral to the mother's, with the main focus being on the mother-child relationship (Anderson, 1996; Morman & Floyd, 2002). Parenthood became synonymous with motherhood, and fathers were viewed as lacking in either instinct or inclination to be parents (Roberts & Moseley, 1996). Something quite significant that arose within the field of developmental psychology was the notion of maternal essentialism, the

belief that mothers have a natural or biological advantage over fathers and are therefore more disposed to raising children (Liss, Schiffrin, & Rizzo, 2013). Maternal essentialism has close alignment with more traditional beliefs of gender roles in the home, and society (Berrigan, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Kamp Dush, 2020). This strongly held view of maternal essentialism was warmly embraced by developmental psychology theorists and influenced empirical studies on parenting and child development. Fathers' contributions to parenting and child development were mostly forgotten, and all major developmental psychology theories demonstrated an apparent overemphasis of the role of the mother (Anderson, 1996; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003a; Lamb, 1975). For example, attachment theory is considered pivotal in understanding the impacts of early child development on later life outcomes, yet ironically has been mother-centric up until recent decades (Anderson, 1996; Palm, 2014). Bowlby emphasised the mother-child relationship, in particular the mother's significance in the child developing secure attachment with the father's role as secondary, something that was revised only in recent decades (Anderson, 1996; Palm, 2014). As a result, even today we still know relatively little about fathers in comparison to mothers, and ironically, some of the research on fathers has been born out of reports of mothers (Lee, 2010). This has been observed especially in the parenting and child development literature, wherein mothers are over-represented as participants and yet the term 'parent' is often used to describe study samples, resulting in an absence of father perspectives in this area (Costigan & Cox, 2001; Phares, Lopez, Fields, Kamboukos, & Duhig, 2005).

The post-World War II years saw significant technological advances that enabled families to complete domestic chores more efficiently, allowing more time for leisure, increasing the presence of fathers in family life, and supporting increases in women's participation in the workforce (Stevenson & Wolfers, 2007). Spurred on by social change and

the influences of movements such as feminism, the family landscape continued to evolve. There became a growing appeal for father involvement in family life for two reasons; first that it is more equitable, and second that it is more beneficial for the children (Amato, 1994; Yeung et al., 2001). Fathers were no longer seen as providing a singular role of financial support and security to their children but were increasingly being seen as equal partners with mothers in providing for the physical and emotional needs of children, in a more nurturing role (Lamb, 2004). Simultaneously, the omission of fathers in the theoretical and social-contextual understanding of child development began to be remedied by researchers. In time, an accumulation of investigations into the role of fathers, and an understanding of fathers and fathering in broader society, began to reveal some important themes. It became recognised that fathers could be as nurturing as mothers, and there arose the belief that fathers should be more involved as primary carers for their children (Amato, 1994; Roberts & Moseley, 1996). Thus, parenting research has bridged the gap from the initial position of fathering being a forgotten aspect in child development to the stage that fathers were worthy of specific scientific investigation deserving of its own field of study.

Fathering Research

Fathering research has generally accepted fathering to be multidimensional and multifaceted, and perhaps more susceptible to contextual influences than mothering (Flouri, 2005). According to role theory, fathering is considered a voluntary activity, therefore, father actions and behaviours are heavily influenced by the social and cultural context, such as expectations of others, broader cultural and institutional influences, the expectation of those close to them such as mothers, children, and extended families, and also the beliefs and expectations that fathers have for themselves (Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999). Early fathering research tended to show support for similarities with mothers and concluded that

father-child and mother-child interactions showed no discernible stylistic differences (Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, & Roggman, 2014). However, other objections have noted that such outcomes showing similarity may be due to cross-parent influences (Cabrera et al., 2014). In other words, fathers may parent *like* mothers for reasons such as expectations, or copying, of mothering behaviours. Further research demonstrated that children develop unique and separate attachments to their mothers *and* fathers, and that the unique inputs of fathers and mothers influence different stages of development (Palm, 2014). As this area of research has matured, observations have been made that show that although fathers can provide for their children in a similar way to mothers, the ways a father contributes to, establishes, interacts, and maintains relationships with children are often unlike that of mothers, and are uniquely different and beneficial for the development of their children (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Hauser, 2015; Palkovitz, Trask, & Adamson, 2014; Roberts & Moseley, 1996; Roggman, Bryce, Cook, & Cook, 2002; Tully et al., 2017). For example, fathers are more likely to engage in behaviours such as leisure activities, than mothers are, in their role as parent (Keizer, 2015). Cross-culturally, fathers have been found to interact in a more physical, interactive, and playful way, often with a reliance on play and humour; a style often different to mothers which may have positive developmental effects on children (Feldman, 2003; Flouri & Buchanan, 2002; Roberts & Moseley, 1996; Roggman et al., 2002). These forms of interaction, often described as *rough and tumble play*, can sometimes be seen as adventurous risk taking, at times incorporating teasing, and involving elements of hands-on activities such as building or constructing things, and simple activities like playing catch with a ball (Kulik & Sadeh, 2015; Cabrera et al., 2018; Hauser, 2015). In sum, the role of fathering in child development has received important scrutiny from researchers and has been given particular emphasis in parenting research in more recent decades. Fathering has been shown to display similar *and* unique features to mothering and contributes to child

development in discernible ways. The uniqueness of fathering has been demonstrated, with fathers having a perceptible style of parenting more disposed towards *rough and tumble play.* As a consequence of fathers becoming more understood as a unique influence on child development, researchers shifted emphasis to exploring factors that predict father involvement more intently.

Theoretical Frameworks that Inform Father Involvement Research

Fathering research has endeavoured to identify and understand the interaction of particular factors that influence father-child relationships, and to place them in a framework that can aid better comprehension and further investigation. Historically, understanding parenting, and hence the involvement of fathers with their children, was informed by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological systems theory of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner, & Morris, 2006; Goldenberg, Stanton, & Goldenberg, 2017). Parenting was understood in the social context of the family microsystem, in which subsystems of parents and children had a high level of interaction (Lee, Knaver, Lee, MacEachern, & Garfield, 2018). Father-child involvement was viewed as part of the family microsystem within the family environment and was considered as part of this dynamic system, effected by multiple factors which, in turn, are affected by father involvement. Small changes in one part of the system effect changes in another, referred to as proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Early research suggested four key factors that influence fathers' level of involvement, being motivation towards parenting, social support, fathers' skills and confidence in their parenting, and institutional practices (e.g., health systems, educational systems, etc.) (Lamb, 2000). Further development proposed four major contributing factors that influence fathers' involvement, namely characteristics of the fathers themselves, characteristics of mothers,

coparenting relations, and contextual factors (Lamb, 2000). More recent research has investigated the characteristics of the children (Cabrera et al., 2014; McBride et al., 2002).

Belsky's process model of parenting (1984, in Cabrera, et al., 2014) also considered many of the contextual factors of Bronfenbrenner's theory in understanding parenting, and parent-child relations. The marital, social, and work contexts of the parents were represented in this model and used to examine processes that occurred in parent-child relations, and to determine such factors as father involvement (Cabrera et al., 2014). However, similar to the bioecological model, Cabrera et al. (2014) argued there were deficits in the model's ability to understand and explain fathering. Limitations in these earlier models led to further development by Cabrera and colleagues, first outlined in 2007, and then later expanded based on new research data and theoretical developments (2014). For example, attachment theory had been a useful addition in understanding mother-child relationships in the family microsystem, but less for father-child relationships (Cabrera et al., 2014). Other theories such as relational theory had clarified adult relationships impacting on each other in this microsystem, but less for parenting, and lacked any understanding of reciprocity in the dynamic interactions between parents and children within this system (Cabrera et al., 2014). Therefore, Cabrera et al.'s expanded model incorporates a transactional and reciprocal relationship between father and child, rather than some narrowed down, static influence, which was founded in what the research was saying best explains what fathers actually do, and what impacts these more dynamic relationships have on their children (Cabrera, et al., 2014). A further difference between Cabrera et al.'s model and Bronfenbrenner's is that whereas the latter considered systems in a more hierarchical relationship, where one system influences another at a lower level, Cabrera et al.'s more expanded dialectical model allowed for an understanding of each system interacting more synergistically, with 'feed-back and

feed-forward' dimensions (2014, p. 341). This transactional and dynamic model is argued to better explain fathering and father involvement (Cabrera et al., 2014).

The Ecology of Father-Child Relationships: An Expanded Model

Fathering in Cabrera's model is presented as broadly contextualised, rooted in dynamic systems, and involving reciprocal processes that change through time (2014). The expanded model is presented as a mental model, which is both informal and heuristic, and represents the conceptualised flow and actions as affecting both quality and quantity of father effects on child functioning. The model allows for dynamic relations and feedback loops that influence the various members within the family system. Cabrera et al.'s more expanded dialectical model allowed for an understanding of each system interacting more synergistically, with 'feed-back and feed-forward' dimensions (2014, p. 341). These influences will change over time, due to normal developmental transitions of the children, as well as changes in family dynamics, and changes in children's understanding of parents as different to others that also evolves over the course of their development. Changes in the external environment are also accounted for in this model, such as workplace influences on parents, or changes in public policy, which in turn have impact on the parent-child system.

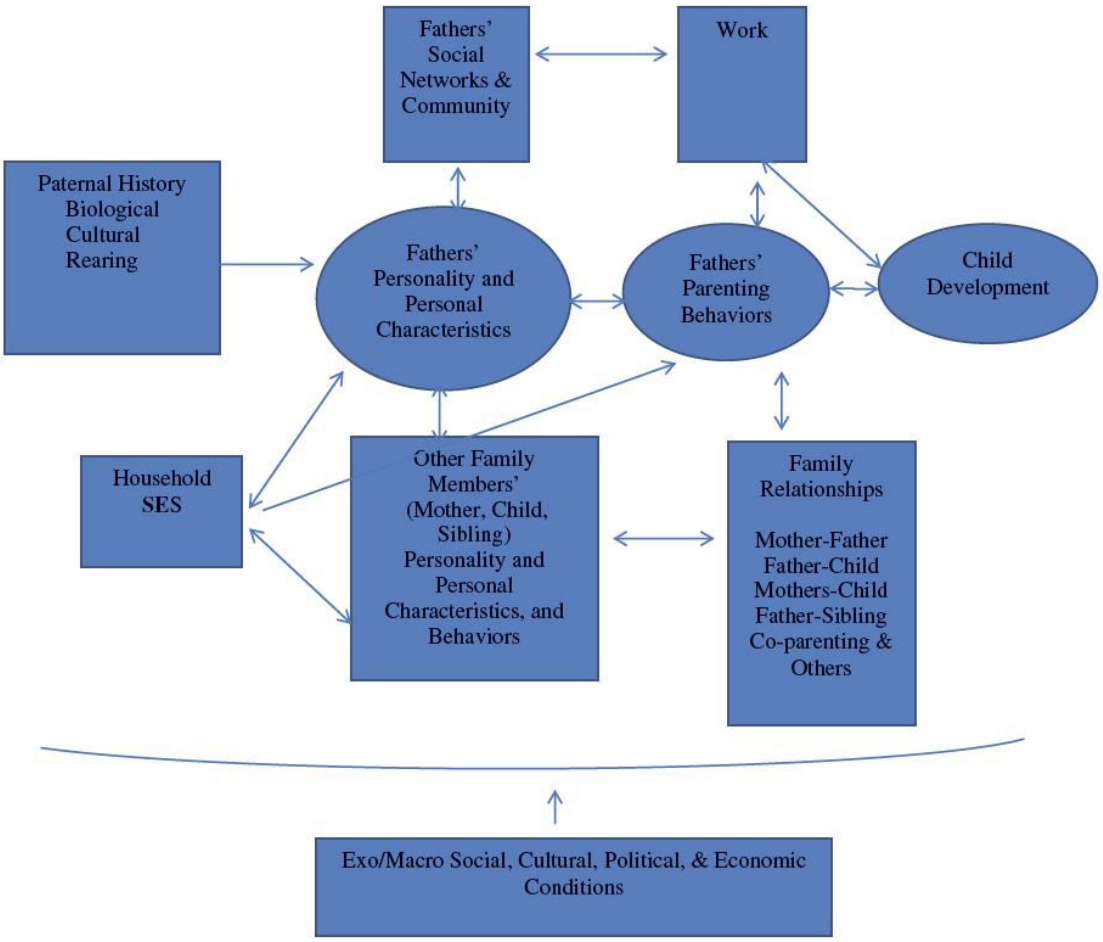

Figure 1 Taken from Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, Roggman (2014, p. 342). The Ecology of Father-Child Relationships: An Expanded Model

The expanded model also allows for changes in other individuals also having an impact on the variation of father involvement within the family system. This transactional and dynamic model is argued to better explain fathering and father involvement (Cabrera et al., 2014). The Cabrera model is based on the latest research evidence in the father involvement arena and is therefore considered the most contemporaneous to guide the development of research on fathering in today's society. Research has endeavoured to test the factors represented by the theoretical models and to establish which factors predict levels of fathers' involvement with their children and how these factors interact. The major factors of consideration to this thesis can be categorised as child characteristics, father characteristics,

mother characteristics, characteristics of the coparenting relationship, and macrosystemic factors. These categories will now be elaborated upon in further detail.

Factors Relating to Children's Characteristics

The characteristics of the children in the household have an influence on the level of father involvement (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003a; McBride et al., 2002). Fathers tend to be more involved with sons than daughters in daily physical care, and with first-born children more so than later-born children (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003a). Child temperament can also affect father involvement (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003a; McBride et al., 2002). For example, Flouri and Buchanan (2003a) collected survey and interview data from 100 American cohabiting parents of preschool aged children. Logistic regression analysis showed a significant difference between mothers' and fathers' experiences of child temperament and parental stress, with fathers found to be less involved with a more temperamental child, for example expressing intense emotions or being difficult or acting out, as reported in time/diary data collected (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003a; McBride et al., 2002). Relative family size has also been noted to impact on fathers' involvement, with fathers of larger families less involved with their children, perhaps due to increased financial pressure and work responsibilities (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003a). Kulik and Sadeh (2015) noted that the age of the child can be an influence on father involvement, specifically relating to areas of education and punishment where fathers would more often engage with these demands as the child aged, as they perceived their input was more required with older children than with infants. While some studies, such as those by Yan et al. (2018) and Stevenson et al. (2014), do provide understandings of father involvement and its importance to adolescents, the literature is sparse on the role or influence of fathers on children over two years of age.

Factors Relating to Father's Characteristics

Characteristics of fathers themselves, such as engagement in employment, and higher education, a father's age, including a correlated increase in maturity and sense of responsibility, as well as knowledge, attitudes, and skills in parenting, have been shown to contribute to levels of involvement with their children (Baxter & Smart, 2010; Roggman et al., 2002). Roggman et al. (2002) examined characteristics of 71 fathers involved in the Early Head Start program, who were fathers of a young infant, through a cross-sectional survey and interview data collected over the time of their involvement in the program. It was found that fathers' psychological wellbeing, as measured by levels of depression, attitudes regarding relationship closeness with their children, religious activity, and use of social support, was positively related to increases in fathers' level of involvement in parenting as indicated through observation by the researchers (King, 2003; Roggman et al., 2002). King (2003) also found that religiosity played a part in father involvement, with regression models indicating that higher levels of religiosity predicted increased levels of father involvement and better-quality relationships between fathers and their children in a sample of 810 American fathers.

One key factor that has been shown to influence fathers' levels of involvement is fathers' own sense of identity in their role as a parent (McBride et al., 2005). The parent-role identity of fathers is a central construct in father involvement and is an antecedent to participation and engagement activities (McBride et al., 2005). Fathering behaviours are less prescribed or scripted by societal norms, unlike mothering which is heavily socially determined. Therefore, fathers' identity and attitudes towards the importance of fathers in the lives of children become a powerful determinant of fathers' investment in their parenting role and levels of involvement in the care of their children (McBride et al., 2005). In early research on this construct, McBride and Rane (1997) conducted interviews and collected survey data from 89 American couples who were parents of young children (up to 5 years of

age). They found that fathers who held favourable attitudes towards the importance of the role of fathers in children's lives were significantly more involved in childrearing activities. Fathers' self-efficacy in their parenting is another identified predictor of involvement (Cabrera et al., 2014). Bandura (1977, 1994) defined self-efficacy as an individual's own appraisal of their capacity to successfully complete certain tasks; in other words, self-efficacy is the perception people have of themselves in relation to their capacity to perform a task successfully. In relation to parenting, parental self-efficacy can be thought of as the belief a parent has in their own ability to parent well and to perform the role of parenting including the sustained effort needed to cope with the demands of parenthood and the flexibility and resilience needed to face the challenges of learning new skills (Sevigny & Loutzenhiser, 2009; Traham, 2018). A father's self-efficacy relates to their appraisal of their competence in their parenting (Traham, 2018). While self-efficacy is an internal process that contributes to how a person thinks and feels about their capacity, it also fuels motivation and behaviour (Traham, 2018). Therefore, it is possible that a father's positive belief in his own parenting ability may directly affect his feelings of competence, performance and autonomy, contributing to greater influence in his relationship with his children. Fathers are more likely to feel motivated towards being more involved with their children when they are experiencing a greater sense of satisfaction in their role in their homes (Traham, 2018). This sense of satisfaction in their role is related to their self-efficacy. Further, Traham conducted multiple regression analysis of survey data collected from 91 American fathers to determine the strength of predictive relationships between identified characteristics of fathers and levels of father involvement. Findings indicated that the two most predictive factors were fathers' self-efficacy and fathers' expectations of their own involvement, with these two factors accounting for 27% of the variance in father involvement in the sample. Traham (2018) argued that fathers' internal characteristics, such as self-efficacy and attitudes to the paternal

role, may be resilience factors that progressively lead to positive father involvement, controlling for other external factors. Further investigations of fathers' self-efficacy as parents have found relationships with fathers' warmth in their style of parenting, which shows a strong predictive relationship with outcomes such as improved physical health, academic success, and social and emotional capacity for their children (Opondo, Redshaw, Savage-McGlynn, & Quigley, 2016; Rollè et al., 2019; Volling, & Cabrera, 2019).

Factors Relating to Mother's Characteristics

The characteristics of the mother have been noted to influence the level of fathers' involvement (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003a). Fathers tend to be more involved with children if the mother is educated, involves herself with the children, is employed outside the home, and is older than the father (Bailey, 1994; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003a; Yoshida, 2012). Mother support of fathers has been found through the literature as a significant factor in how much time and in which activities fathers are involved with their children. For example, Schoppe-Sullivan, Cannon, Brown, Mangelsdorf, and Sokolowski (2008) investigated expectations of the role of fathers amongst 97 American couples with infants. Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2008) found that mothers with a positive expectation of fathers' involvement were more likely to encourage, and less likely to be critical of fathers, and that these factors were associated with greater father involvement in infant care activities. Therefore, mothers are a key influence on father involvement. This is especially noted in research on coparenting.

Factors Relating to the Coparenting Relationship

Fathering does not occur in isolation. It is therefore important when considering barriers and facilitators to father involvement that the research on coparenting be given consideration. According to family systems theory, fathering occurs within the dynamic couple dyad of the executive subsystem of the family known as the coparenting relationship (Olsavsky, Yan, Schoppe-Sullivan, & Kamp Dush, 2019). The coparenting relationship is

defined as the relationship between caregivers, in this context fathers and mothers, who share a joint investment in the concern for a child (Fienberg, 2003). This relationship emerges in the transition to parenthood stage when a couple has their first child, is denoted by a period of adjustment, and sometimes decreases the couple's relationship satisfaction and increases conflict (Olsavsky et al., 2019). The coparenting relationship exists outside of the couple's romantic relationship and relates to the interplay of factors between the two parents as they provide care for their children (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015; Olsavsky et al., 2019). The relationship is generally typified by behaviours relating to the support of each parent in the childrearing, including agreements made, division of duties, and general management of family life (Olsavsky et al., 2019).

Overall, family functioning tends to show general benefits from father involvement (Panter-Brick et al., 2014), primarily due to the ability to effectively coparent (Carlson, McLanahan, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008) and have higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Lechowicz et al., 2019). Of importance to this thesis on fathering, a positive coparenting relationship tends to support an increase in father involvement. Further, research also indicates that supportive coparenting relationships are associated with fathers' greater engagement in parenting as evidenced by levels of childcare activities, and higher-quality father-child relationships, higher parenting satisfaction and lower parenting stress as indicated on self-report measures (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Relationship harmony and quality in the coparenting relationship has been found to predict increased levels of father involvement in childrearing (Flouri & Buchanan 2002, 2003a; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). A study by Schoppe-Sullivan, Settle, Lee and Kamp Dush (2016) reported that when fathers experienced greater coparenting satisfaction there was a correlation with higher perceived self-efficacy in their own parenting (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016). Schoppe-Sullivan et al. argued that if fathers perceive that mothers support their parenting, they may experience

psychological safety in the context of the coparenting relationship, and this may facilitate their adjustment to parenthood and contribute to increased father involvement. Conversely, conflict in the coparenting relationship leads to decreases in fathers' involvement (Schopped-Sullivan et al., 2016). Altogether, this indicates that fathers who feel safe and supported in the coparenting relationship, and are encouraged and appreciated by their partner, may experience feelings of higher self-efficacy and parenting satisfaction, resulting in higher levels of father involvement in childrearing.

Factors Relating to Macrosystemic Conditions

Societal attitudes and norms also have influence on levels of father involvement. Such attitudes are encapsulated in values espoused in households, socialisation through systems such as education, and even media portrayals of fathering, and have influence on the formation of expectations of those performing fathering roles and thus the prescribed level of involvement of fathers in the lives of their children. Mahalik and Morrison (2006) have postulated that father-child involvement and style may be mitigated by masculine gender norms. A man may in fact wish to be more engaged with his children, be more emotionally expressive, and take on a nurturing and soothing role, but due to a sense of gender role conflict may restrict himself and hold on to more traditional gender roles of fathering, namely being a successful breadwinner (Mahalik & Morrison, 2006). Petts, Schafer, and Essig (2018) conducted research on a sample of 2194 American fathers of children aged between 2 and 18 years to investigate the relationship between adherence to stereotypical masculine norms and father involvement. They found that fathers with higher adherence with masculine norms were less involved in parenting activities, and of concern, were more likely to use harsh parenting practices (Petts et al., 2018). Further, adherence to masculine norms moderated any effect for embracing more 'new fathering' ideals as expressed in modern society. Petts et al. reported that it seems that masculinity norms continue to shape fathering behaviour.

Similarly, political attitudes and subsequent public policy can be a factor that influences father involvement. Many western countries have embarked on social policy change to improve family functioning in specific social or health outcomes such as increasing father involvement (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). One example of a policy intended to increase father involvement, and more particularly father participation in childcare in early infancy, is paid parental leave (Fletcher & St George, 2011; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). This thesis is focused on Australian fathers and families; however, it is worth contrasting with our overseas counterparts for comparison. The Scandinavian region boasts some of the most progressive social policies designed to bring about a more egalitarian model of parenting and to increase father involvement. Sweden has probably the most generous paid parental leave scheme in the world (Wells & Sarkadi, 2012). Importantly, Sweden (as well as Norway and Iceland) has a much higher proportion of fathers using this leave, in comparison to their European neighbours (Rostgaard & Ejnaes, 2021). Overseas evidence shows that policy changes such as paid parental leave are increasing the choices of mothers and fathers regarding sharing unpaid and paid work. Specifically, leave aimed at fathers increases time spent with their children in their early years, which casts a 'virtuous shadow', with these fathers more likely to be involved in the care of their children as they get older (Wood, Emslie, & Griffiths, 2021, p. 21). Studies have shown that fathers who take parental leave in the first year of a child's life are more likely to be actively involved up to three years later, and in addition, longer periods of leave are found to indicate more frequent father engagement (Wood et al., 2021). Research has also shown unequivocally that fathers who take extended leave to care for their children in early infancy are likely to coparent more equitably in later years and share domestic responsibilities (Wood et al., 2021). Icelandic families have experienced a significant improvement in sharing care for their children since gender equal paid leave was introduced in 2000 (Arnalds, Eydal, & Gislason, 2013). More discussion on the Australian

experiment with paid parental leave will occur later in this chapter. Suffice to say that public policy can be a significant factor that contributes to father involvement and may proactively influence increases in the levels of father involvement in children's lives.

The Benefits of Father Involvement

As mentioned, fathers have rarely been considered by researchers in the child development area and unfortunately, once father involvement was identified as an area of interest, it was the more negative aspects of a father's impact on child development, such as fathers' absence, that became the focus of investigation (Wood & Lambin, 2013). A large body of literature on fathering accrued, much of it centred on specific subsets (incarcerated fathers, fathers with substance abuse disorders. etc.), or focused on negative aspects of father involvement, or rather the lack thereof (Wood & Lambin, 2013). In terms of father absence, one in four children in Australia live in a home with only one parent, and of those children, 80% live without a father or father figure (ABS, 2020). Of concern for such children are the number of social, psychological, and economic risks that they are at increased likelihood of experiencing as a result. *Growing Up in Australia: The Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC;* Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), 2021) commissioned by the Australian Government contains a dataset of 10,000 families followed since 2004 and reports on important insights into the lives of children, including characteristics of their fathers. For example, children without a father or father figure in their life have been found to be at increased risk of financial hardship (Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS), 2021). Additionally, children from father-absent homes tend to have poorer school attendance and subsequently perform worse on academic measures such as the NAPLAN testing regimen (AIFS, 2021).

Fathering research has subsequently endeavoured to define the benefits of fathering to those impacted. Over time, accumulating evidence indicated that aspects of outcomes in

adulthood such as employment, physical and mental wellbeing were associated with positively involved fathers in early developmental periods in activities relating to childrearing (Amato, 1994). As a result of such observations, specific scientific investigation of fathers' positive impact on child development commenced in the 1970s (Lamb, 1975). Notwithstanding the important role and influence of mothers, research has demonstrated that fathers' involvement has a unique and important influence on the long-term development of children (Lamb & Tamis-Lamonda, 2004). These benefits of father involvement seem to persist across time, with longitudinal studies revealing positive outcomes for children in later life well into adulthood, and to some extent shaping the patterns of their own parenting (Abrams & Lamb, 2002; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003b; Wood & Lambin, 2013). Additionally, research has supported the contribution father involvement makes to mothers' wellbeing. For example, it seems that mothers can be more patient, sensitive and responsive to their children when they feel supported by the child's father (Allen & Daly, 2007). Interestingly father involvement also acts as a buffer against stress for mothers (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016). Father involvement has demonstrated benefits to the couples' relationships, the family system, and even benefits to fathers themselves (Machin, 2015; Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Sarkadi, Kirstiansson, Oberklaid, & Bromberg, 2008; Schoppe-Sullivan, Altenburger, Lee, Bower, & Kamp Dush, 2015; Volling et al., 2019). While increased involvement of fathers can be associated with increased work-related stress, financial strain, pressure on marital relationships, and impacts on social networks (Daly et al., 2012), there are also positive impacts for the fathers themselves. In a large qualitative study, interviews with 215 fathers revealed that many felt that fatherhood had brought about a review of their life values and a sense of purpose, and changes in the ways they relate to self and others because of having children (Daly et al., 2012). Further, fathers reported a greater sense of maturity, empathy, and self-confidence because of becoming fathers (Daly et al.,

2012). In their study, Eggebeen and Knoester found that involved fathers reported feeling the benefits of increased socialisation, life satisfaction and family connection that were derived from being involved in the lives of their children (2001). Other benefits to fathers include increased satisfaction with the fatherhood role, as well as an improved sense of confidence and competence as a parent, and improved physical health (Fletcher & St George, 2011). Despite the many and varied benefits of father involvement to multiple stakeholders, the bulk of the literature emphasises the benefits of father involvement to child development, and so the following section will place particular emphasis on the benefits of father involvement to children.

Benefits of Father Involvement to Children

Children that have a consistent father figure who resides with them throughout their childhood are more likely to perform better in school, have better global health and emotional wellbeing, and are less prone to behavioural problems (Wood & Lambin, 2013). Children from homes with a supportive father present tend to perform better academically (Amato, 1994; Fletcher, 2008; Wood & Lambin, 2013), particularly in educational outcomes such as language and literacy, and tend to have improved cognitive abilities, similar to those who have a supportive mother present (Martin, Hiscock, Hardy, Davey, & Wake, 2007).

Father involvement appears to be a protective factor to a child's physical health. For example, in the case of childhood obesity, children from homes where there is an involved father are in better health, as represented by such indices as their body mass index (BMI) (Fraser et al., 2011; Burke, Beilin, & Dunbar, 2001). Father involvement has also been indicated in children's physical activity across time, right through to adolescence, as evidenced by their higher participation in sport and recreation activities (Finn, Johannsen, Specker, & Falls, 2002; Ferreira et al., 2007). Further, fathers have a significant effect on children's propensity for trying alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana after controlling for mothers'

influence (Bronte-Tinkew, Moore, & Garrano, 2006). For example, father-child involvement has a significant relationship with minimising substance abuse and reduced risk for binge drinking and otherwise excessive alcohol use (Abrams & Lamb, 2002; Habib et al., 2010). Children of households where there is an involved father have significantly less likelihood of illicit drug use in adolescence, whereas teenagers in single parent or stepparent households show a higher risk for illicit drug use (Hemovich, Lac, & Crano, 2011; Hoffmann, 1995). In terms of the sexual health of both sons and daughters, fathers' presence is a critical factor in reducing early unplanned pregnancies and risky sexual behaviours such as unprotected intercourse, and in increased use of condoms in more positive sexual encounters (Ellis et al., 2003; Kalina et al., 2013; Pingel et al., 2012; Regnerus & Luchies, 2006; Ogle, Glassier, & Riley, 2008). Fathers who were open in their communication with their daughters about sex led to more heathy sexual attitudes and behaviours and acted as a buffer against exposure to negative influences on social media on such matters (Wight & Fullerton, 2012; Wright, Randall, & Arroyo, 2013).

Regarding psychological impacts of father involvement, a warm, supportive, involved father has a positive impact on their children's mental health and wellbeing (Bamishigbin, Wilson, Abshire, Mejia-Lancheros, & Dunkel Schetter, 2020; Cowan & Cowan, 2019; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003b; Sarkardi et al., 2008; Wilson & Prior, 2011). Since early research on father involvement began, it has been consistently found that the closer the children were to their fathers, the more likely they were to be happy, satisfied with life, and less distressed, independent of their relationship with their mothers (Amato, 1994). Further, the positive effects of a father's involvement have been correlated with factors such as preventing mental health disorders such as anxiety, phobias, depression, and bipolar disorder (Goodwin & Styron, 2012).

The correlation of father involvement and mental health indicators may have something to do with the style of interaction a father has with their children. Fathers who are more involved with their children, particularly through play, lead to the development of children who are often better able to regulate their own emotions and have better social skills and self-control (Abrams & Lamb, 2002; Flouri & Buchanan, 2002; Roberts & Moseley, 1996; Roggman et al., 2002). Children's increased capacity for emotional regulation and social skills may have something to do with how fathers seem to foster a sense of safety and security for children to explore and navigate challenging situations (Grossmann et al., 2002). Such exploration through play assists with emotional development and self-regulation and has been found to be related to a greater capacity for empathy and increased sense of social responsibility and competency (Lamb, 2002). Rough and tumble play is seen as a mechanism that may help with social and emotional skills development and may assist with bully-proofing children and promoting autonomy (Machin, 2015; Tully et al., 2017). Father involvement also seems to be impactful on mental health across the years of child development through to adolescence (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003b). A five-year study of adolescents revealed that a quality father-teenager relationship, as reported by the young person, was predictive of adolescent mental health, equally to the mother-teenager relationship (Videon, 2005). Teenagers who spend one-on-one time with their fathers report higher levels of self-worth and life satisfaction and are also more likely to seek help for their mental health (Reeb & Conger, 2011). Further, increased time that adolescents spend with their fathers in social situations has shown benefits to teenagers' social competence and effectiveness in social situations (Lam, Mettale, & Crouter, 2012). Fathers seem to act as role models on how to engage socially, which teenagers can adopt in their own social engagements.

The Current State of Father Involvement in Australia

The previous section contains evidence for the collective benefit of father involvement to various parties. Despite the substantial evidence base supporting father involvement, a gap between what is hoped for and what is the reality in Australian homes remains. Father absence remains of great concern in Australian society. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, one in four Australian children live in a one parent family, and 80% of these children do not have a father involved in their lives (ABS, 2020). Putting numbers, and faces, to these statistics is a cause for alarm, especially given the social, emotional, psychological, and other benefits recounted already of involved fathering to the lives of children. As indicated, father absence has been linked to poor child development outcomes, some that persist into adulthood. For the remaining three out of four Australian children who do have a father present in their lives, what can be found for evidence of the levels of father involvement in their lives?

Australian attitudinal changes towards the role of fathers in society are evident, with an early study in the late 1990s finding that 96% of respondents believed that responsibilities for raising children should be shared (Russell et al., 1999). Almost a decade later, a similar study from the Australian Survey of Social Attitudes found that most males (90%) and females (91%) reported they believed that fathers and mothers should be equally involved in caring for their children (Wilson, Meagher, Gibson, Denemark, & Western, 2005). Similarly, the AIFS (2020) noted in their report that community attitudes reflect support for women being in paid work, and that fathers 'should be as heavily involved in the care of…children as the mother' (p. 5). Certainly, Australian attitudes to involved fathering have shifted in a positive direction. Australian fathers are more involved in the lives of their children than 40 years ago, which is encouraging (Baxter & Smart, 2010). An important study in 2010 by Baxter and Smart, based on longitudinal data, found that fathers in Australia were spending

several hours per day with their children, much more than previous generations, although this is still often in the presence of mothers (Baxter & Smart, 2010). Fathers were reporting being involved in play-based activities and were also more involved in care activities such as bathing and feeding (Baxter & Smart, 2010). Fathers generally reported feeling well supported by mothers and having the resources to participate in domestic life and childcare (Baxter & Smart, 2010). Yet there still seems to be slow progress in the more equitable sharing of paid and unpaid work between mothers and fathers. Since the 1970s there has been an increasing trend for mothers to remain in the workforce after having children (AIFS, 2020). This may be intertwined with other factors, such as smaller family sizes and couples delaying starting to have a family till later, allowing women to attain higher levels of education. Further, there has been an increase in flexible work arrangements and childcare support, which have mainly been taken up by mothers, allowing them to remain in contact with the workforce rather than withdrawing fully when they have children, as was the case in the 1970s and earlier.

In contrast, fathers' participation in the workforce remains static before and after having children, when compared to mothers (Baxter, 2013). In Australia, fathers of young children rarely take time away from paid work to take over care for their infants (Skinner & Chapman, 2013). Australian fathers are more likely to work full-time, with care for children tending to fall outside of work hours, showing that the traditional 'breadwinner role' is still upheld (Chapman, Skinner, & Pocock, 2014). Fathers have been less inclined to take up flexible work arrangements, and only tend to take up part-time work out of necessity rather than as a proactive choice to share the burden of childcare (Chapman et al., 2014). The most common flexible work arrangement adopted by Australian fathers to balance their work and family roles involves working from home arrangements, however the rates of fathers taking up such options is very small in proportion to those in full-time work away from the home

(Chapman et al., 2014). The main cost for fathers is that they are reportedly working longer hours than desirable, especially self-employed fathers, who report less satisfaction with their work-life balance than their peers (Chapman et al., 2014).

There still appears to be a very gendered role of 'breadwinner' in contemporary Australian homes. The sharing of unpaid work still tends to follow gendered lines, with mothers more often either employed part-time or not employed and taking the lead in unpaid domestic responsibilities (Chapman et al., 2014). Working mothers continue reporting experiencing an unequal distribution of paid work and domestic responsibilities (Chapman et al., 2014). Women comprise approximately 40% of the workforce, yet mothers still report that they often perform more than their fair share of unpaid work, including domestic and childcare (Chapman et al., 2014). Men seem to still be underperforming in the domestic arena, and there are many differing explanations (Chapman et al., 2014; Skinner & Chapman, 2013). One finding of note in a study by Hand (2006) investigating mothers and decisions concerning work and family, is that the mothers did not see the emphasis on fathers as breadwinners as evidence of a lack of participation, but as being a good provider and thus a 'good father' (Hand, 2006). Further, Hand (2006) found that decisions as to who performs paid work and who cares for children were not always based on explicit discussions, but rather on assumptions and expectations based on the broader social context. Something of an anomaly is that the rise of dual-income families and the decline in the role of the father as the main or only breadwinner has fostered some negative attitudes towards fathers, with some seeing fathers as a target for criticism and disrepute now that their economic value to the family has declined (Walsh & Furshich, 2008). Especially in scenarios where paid work has become more shared, there has often not been a counterbalance of fathers contributing their efforts in the domestic space.

The Australian Government implemented a paid parental leave scheme in 2011, encouraging parents, especially fathers, to take leave in the early infancy period. Up until this time, for many years Australia had a provision in industrial law for all employees, male or female, to take up to 52 weeks of unpaid leave in the event of having a child (Wood et al., 2021). Mothers have been the main users of this entitlement, and colloquially it is often referred to as maternity leave. Many private employers offer their own paid parental leave schemes, and most women take up to six months' leave, which can be a combination of paid and unpaid leave (Wood et al., 2021). The Australian Government has adopted a very limited paid parental leave scheme, which allows a payment for the 'primary carer' of a newborn for up to 18 weeks at minimum wage, which can be used in addition to any employer scheme (Wood et al., 2021). In addition, the *Dad and Partner Pay Scheme* allows for secondary carers to take two weeks' leave at minimum wage (Commonwealth of Australia, 2021). Sharing of Paid Parental Leave is possible, but difficult, as it must be taken in a continuous block of 12 weeks. Fathers are not a primary target of this social policy by the Australian Government, with the main beneficiary being the mother. This has resulted in almost all recipients of paid parental leave in Australia being women, with less than 0.5% of users being men (Wood, et al., 2021).

Many Australian employers have created their own schemes offering paid parental leave, which are quite generous for both mothers and fathers. Some offer schemes for secondary carers, although they are less generous, sometimes only allowing eight days of paid leave (Wood, et al., 2021). However, very few fathers in Australia use paid parental leave as the primary carer (ABS, 2020a). In sum, the Australian paid parental scheme is a long way from what is offered by contemporary countries, one which provides for an equitable approach to childcare in the early transition to parenthood period for both mothers and fathers. Australia spends less than half the average OECD nation on paid parental leave.

For both length of time available, and the amount of paid leave available, Australia lags behind its contemporaries and does not make good attempts at targeting fathers (Wood et al., 2021). Advocates of paid parental leave maintain the view that such schemes address multiple issues including increasing father involvement and more equitable distribution of paid and unpaid labour between mothers and fathers (Wood et al., 2021). However, as it currently stands, the progress of these types of schemes in Australia replicates the issue more generally as stated in this chapter thus far; levels of father involvement in the lives of their children are not meeting the expectations of Australian society and factors that act as barriers and facilitators need further scrutiny and action.

Summary of Literature Review of Father Involvement

Parenting research has identified the unique influence of fathers on the lives of their children. So much is now known about fathering, fathers themselves, the benefits to children from their involvement, and factors that are indicated in enhancing the bond between fathers and their children. The benefits of father involvement, to child development, mothers, and to fathers themselves, have been well established in the research. It was noted that the vast quantity of research on father involvement had been devoted to early child development periods from infancy up to and including the first year or two of childrearing, yet there is a lack of literature on father involvement beyond. Concerningly, despite the known benefits of father involvement in the lives of children, father absence is still of profound concern in Australia, with statistics noting a significant deficit in the levels of involvement of fathers in the lives of children.

The nature of family life has changed dramatically over the past few decades. Societal attitudes towards fathering have shifted from the traditional role of provider accompanied by the more emotionally detached, authoritarian figure, to the current notion of fathering as being one who is more involved in nurturing children (Daly et al., 2012; Morman & Floyd

2002; Yeung et al., 2001; Yoshida, 2012). Society now expects the modern father to be more caring and emotionally available to his children. Indeed, an increasing number of 'new fathers' report the desire to be more involved in the lives of their children: men want to spend more time with their children and are looking to share the responsibility of childrearing more equally with mothers (Yoshida, 2012). As much as it was noted that attitudes towards the importance of father involvement have progressed in Australian society to where it is now considered optimum for both fathers and mothers to be equally involved in childrearing, the literature reveals there is a large gap between the ideal of involved fathering, along with the more desired egalitarian model of coparenting, and the current status quo in Australian households. For example, mothers are participating at higher rates in the workforce than previous generations yet still report being burdened by managing home life and performing more unpaid work than fathers. While fathers report feeling the strain of increased involvement in domestic life, Australian fathers still experience very traditional 'breadwinner role' expectations and there has not been sufficient progress towards more equitable sharing of family responsibilities with mothers. What seems to be apparent overall, is that while women's participation in the workforce has increased, there has not been a reciprocal reduction in their contributions in the home.

Hence, the results of this review of the background literature on fathering conclude that the area of investigation of father involvement in child development holds great importance to multiple parties. There has been progress in societal attitudes embracing the notion of involved fathering, however there is a clear need for continued investigation of the factors that inhibit or facilitate father involvement as this is still of concern as found in the rates of father absence and less than equitable sharing of childrearing in the coparenting space in Australian homes.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND PROPOSAL FOR PROGRAM OF RESEARCH

The previous chapter reviewed the literature relevant to fathering and father involvement. It was noted that father involvement presents as a significant benefit to all members of the family, but particularly to the immediate and long-term success of children in areas of social, emotional, academic, and health outcomes. It was noted by research conducted by the (Australian Institute for Family Studies, [AIFS],2020) that attitudes towards fathers have changed and that the current expectation of Australian society is for involved fathering and an egalitarian model of parenting, such that both parents are equally able to participate in paid and unpaid work to contribute to family life. However, research has identified that there is still considerable disparity between the ideal and reality in contemporary Australian families, with mothers shouldering the lion's share of domestic responsibilities including childrearing (Chapman et al., 2014) and that the problem of father absence, as revealed in census data, remains of concern to all stakeholders (ABS, 2015).

The issue of lack of father involvement is problematic in many areas, but especially in respect to coparenting, where mothers and fathers are required to respond to various challenges for their children. Parents confronted by certain difficulties may need to seek resources and assistance when they feel stretched beyond their own capacities. Many parents will seek assistance for their children for numerous health, educational, and psychological needs. A common need of parents is to seek assistance for psychological issues experienced by their children, such as emotional and behavioural concerns. Common psychological difficulties faced by parents include behavioural and conduct disorders of childhood, as well as mental health difficulties such as anxiety (Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008). Disruptive behaviours, including aggression and defiance, are the most common precipitant for a parent to seek help from a professional (Lundahl, Risser, & Lovely, 2006). Longitudinal

studies have demonstrated that persistent conduct problems in childhood predict a higher likelihood of problematic or risky behaviours in adolescence as well as in later life, including criminal acts, substance abuse, violence towards others, as well as psychiatric disorders (Dretzke et al., 2009). Parents encountering such challenges can also experience psychological distress and other adverse effects as a result of prolonged difficult periods of navigating childhood behavioural disorders (Dretzke et al., 2009).

Interventions for children with behavioural disorders have increasingly focused on parenting training programs. This has been premised on the empirical links between parent behaviours and childhood behavioural disorders, and evidence that a change in parenting behaviours will result in an improvement in children's behaviour (Lundahl et al., 2006). Further, parents can act as change agents for their children's behaviour, thus reducing reliance on trained helpers to intervene directly with child behaviours. Generally, parenting training programs have demonstrated moderate effectiveness in reducing children's behavioural difficulties and are considered to be an effective treatment for conduct disorders (Dretzke et al., 2009; Lundahl et al., 2006; Wade, MacVean, Falkiner, Devine, & Mildon, 2012), and in some cases more serious delinquency and family dysfunction (Woolfenden,Williams, & Peat, 2009). Such programs are also considered to be time and cost effective, especially for financially disadvantaged families (Lundahl et al., 2006). Evidence-based parenting programs are recommended as preventative and treatment interventions for social, emotional, and behavioural problems in children by the World Health Organization and the United Nations and are considered to be one of the most effective and best supported mental health interventions (Dadds, 2012). Parents struggling with the externalising problems of one of their children often experience distress and even mental health disorders such as depression (Barlow, Smailagic, Huband, & Roloff, 2012). It can also influence the couple's relationship harmony (Barlow et al., 2012). Receiving assistance can often bring welcome

relief, and the strategies offered by evidence-based parenting interventions have proven effectiveness (Dadds, 2012). However, as noted in the introductory comments in Chapter 1, fathers are often under-represented in participation in parenting programs, and this is an example of the challenges to improving father involvement generally. This chapter will thus review the relevant literature on father involvement in parenting programs and will identify areas for investigation for this program of research. The chapter concludes with the development and proposal of a program of research, with objectives and methodology, which forms the substance of the remaining chapters that follow.

Engaging fathers in parenting interventions

As previously highlighted, a substantial body of research demonstrates that fathers are critical to child wellbeing. Researchers and practitioners advocate that involving fathers in preventative interventions for children's psychological wellbeing is good science and practice (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). However, fathers are often absent or marginalised in parenting interventions (Lundahl et al., 2006; Lundahl et al., 2008; Fletcher, Freeman, & Matthey, 2011; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Fletcher et al. (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of the Triple P program, one of the more well-known parenting programs with a well-established evidence base, both in Australia where it was developed and internationally. Fletcher et al. found in their review that of the 4959 participants in 21 studies, only 20% were fathers. Stahlschmidt Threlfall, Seay, Lewis, & Kohl (2013) report that a systematic literature review of American programs aimed at preventing child maltreatment found father participation to be lower than 30%. Fletcher et al. (2011) estimated that fathers' participation rates for parenting programs generally were as low as 13% of eligible fathers. This is concerning given the finding that fathers are more likely to report using less than optimal parenting strategies, such as physical punishments, for managing disruptive behaviours, which in some cases can have long-term mental health consequences for children (Sanders, Dittman, Keon, Farrugia, & Rose, 2010).

The use of such strategies may result from a lack of awareness of better options, and in the context of fathers experiencing significant distress (Sanders et al., 2010). The effectiveness of parenting strategies is more likely when both parents agree on a shared approach, which may be achieved via both parents participating in a parenting intervention (Sanders et al., 2010). A meta-analysis conducted by Lundahl and colleagues (2008) reviewed parent program evaluation studies of a collective sample of 1075 participants in treatment groups and 965 participants in control groups. A key aim of their study was to investigate whether father participation in these parenting programs enhanced overall outcomes for improvements in parenting practices and reductions in problematic behaviours in children. They concluded that father involvement in parenting programs leads to improved outcomes for children, namely positive improvements in behaviours for children (Q_b = 6.91, p<.01), (Q_b = 6.91, p<.01), and improved parenting practices (Q_b = 10.56, P< .01) (Lundahl et al., 2008). Lundahl et al. (2008) reported that failure to involve fathers in parent training also results in less-than-optimal outcomes in both child behaviours and positive parenting measures, particularly in that treatment gains may not be maintained, as was found in post program follow-up evaluations that were included in their meta-analysis.

Similarly, Panter-Brick et al. (2014) reported that program evaluations have demonstrated that the involvement of both parents leads to immediate and long-term benefits as measured by child development outcomes. Hence father involvement in parenting programs is universally recommended by researchers and practitioners (Lundahl et al., 2007; Lundahl et al., 2008; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Therefore, the challenge for researchers and practitioners is to overcome identified barriers and improve father engagement and participation in parenting programs (Lundahl et al., 2008; Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Sanders et al., 2010). In the context of this program of research, a better understanding of father

involvement in parenting programs specifically may elucidate factors relevant to father involvement more generally.

Factors that Predict Father Involvement in Parenting Programs

A key systematic review by Panter-Brick and colleagues (2014) aimed to identify the factors that were primarily indicated as predictors for engaging fathers in parenting programs. Their approach included a systematic review of parenting program evaluations published in global databases. A total of 199 parenting programs were identified and then coded for quality outcomes, which allowed an extensive evaluation of factors that improved or inhibited father involvement. A key theme noted was that few of these evaluations reported father data separately from couple data in describing the effects of the program. This is consistent with previous reviews in the literature. Often the data collected on program engagement or outcomes did not disaggregate findings between mothers and fathers, and of the coparent relationship; rather findings are often short-term impacts and self-reports, mainly of mothers, who are the dominant participants (Patner-Brick et al., 2014). The findings of this review were that key barriers to father participation in parenting programs include factors such as cultural, institutional, professional, operational, content, resource, and policy considerations (Panter- Brick et al., 2014). These factors are explored in detail below and connected with other similar research findings in addition to the Panter-Brick review.

Factors Related to Program Design

One reason that parenting programs have had difficulty engaging fathers is related to their design. The design of parenting programs has been described as ‘synonymous with mother training’, predicated on a previous societal or cultural notion that mothers were the ‘primary socialising agent’ of children (Lundahl et al., 2008, p. 97). Parenting program design has tended to take a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach which essentially replicates the social

constructs of mothering-as-parenting (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Therefore, family interventions have tended to reflect and perpetuate cultural stereotypes such as gender bias and gender roles (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Compounding this is that parenting programs are often based on a framework that assumes a father-deficit model, either through ineffectual or neglectful fathering (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Based on the evidence of their review, Panter-Brick et al. argue that such design flaws may act as a deterrent to engaging fathers.

The following example from the UK provides some context to the dilemma of father-friendly design. Macleod (2008) explored factors explaining UK fathers' lack of representation in parenting groups. The study involved families from low socioeconomic backgrounds; many of the fathers had recently been made redundant due to a downturn in the region's manufacturing sector. Despite many of the fathers therefore being available during the day, and indeed being observed transporting children to and from school (where the groups were held), only six fathers attended out of 169 participants, and only one completed the 10-week program. Interviews with the fathers, including those that were available but elected not to participate, suggested many men perceived the group learning environment as highly 'feminised' – the tasks and activities of the program were perceived as 'mothering' in nature, being mainly nurturing and teaching roles. The program was also seen to be more suited to women, with some men feeling that their attendance may be seen by others as suspicious or not 'masculine' and perceiving it as potentially threatening. Interestingly, many of the mothers also felt that the group environment was not for men and felt more comfortable without men present in the groups (Macleod, 2008). These findings are consistent with Panter-Brick et al.'s (2014) review, finding that program designers rarely considered whether the content was relevant to both parents, and especially fathers, potentially contributing to father disengagement from parenting interventions. Panter-Brick et al. recommended that parenting programs be more attractive to coparents in their design,

especially the content. Panter-Brick et al. also recommended that organisational policies such as staff training consider cultural factors such as bias that may preclude fathers and be more focused on recruitment of coparents as participants.

Factors Related to Program Delivery

Recruiting and engaging fathers to these programs has proven challenging to providers (Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Stahlschmidt et al., 2013). In an Australian study investigating the delivery of parenting information to new fathers, qualitative analysis of comments provided by 67 fathers indicated that work demands were a dominant reason for non-participation (Fletcher, Vimpani, Russell, & Keatings, 2008). However, in the previously discussed UK study by Macleod (2008) it was noted that making the delivery of the program convenient to fathers didn't produce expected results. Despite the UK program being readily available to fathers to attend, at a convenient location that they frequented, at convenient times, the participation rates of fathers were extremely poor. Practical reasons for fathers not attending such groups often cited in parenting program evaluations, namely the time of offering being inconvenient due to work, were negated in this instance as most of the fathers were unemployed and therefore available (Macleod, 2008). This is an example of the conundrum of father participation faced by parent-training program providers.

Program developers have considered how different delivery methods may address this as program evaluation studies have found higher rates of father participation via internet delivery of parenting interventions (Enebrink, Hogstram, Forster, & Ghaderi; Fletcher, 2008). For example, a randomised control study of an internet-based parent-training program delivered to 104 Swedish couples achieved 69.2% participation of both parents via online delivery (Enebrink et al., 2012). Fletcher et al. (2008) found that 78% of fathers reported a change in parenting attitudes or practices as a result of their participation in an online program and suggested that the tailored delivery of information to fathers via the internet may

be a viable way of supporting fathers and increasing their involvement in both parenting and parenting interventions. The online delivery method may negate the barriers to fathers' participation, such as work conflict, or gender role conflict. This is a promising avenue of both program development and research exploration. However, the use of internet delivery doesn't comprehensively resolve the dilemma of improving father participation. The decision to participate in the first instance involves several barriers for fathers to negotiate. How fathers receive notifications or advertisements of parenting program offerings may still be filtered through a number of decision points, which will be discussed more in the exploration of delivery factors below. Therefore, Fletcher et al.'s and Enebrink et al.'s findings must be considered as promising but preliminary.

Another aspect of parenting program delivery is the recruitment methods used by program providers. Panter-Brick et al. (2014) noted that of the 92 programs encompassed by their review, from 11 different countries, none of these included data on father recruitment, nor engagement or satisfaction with the program. Where a program specifically targeted one parent in its recruitment, this was most often mothers (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). In Fletcher et al.'s review of the Triple P program, 21 of the 28 reviewed studies reported on separate rates of participation for fathers and mothers. As previously noted, a participation rate of 20% was reported for fathers (Fletcher et al., 2011). For example, one study identified in this review was a large Australian study, which was found to have recruited only 16 fathers in comparison to 1610 mothers (Fletcher et al., 2011). When attrition is considered in addition to this, only ten of these 28 studies reported rates of attrition for fathers, which ranged widely between 0 and 100% of the 700 fathers represented by this review (Fletcher et al., 2011). This makes the picture of father recruitment particularly vexing as it is hard to ascertain how many fathers were recruited and who then fully engaged in the program. If attrition rates of fathers

are especially high, it also means that overall participation rates, already estimated as poor, become even more concerning.

Factors Related to Program Evaluation

Outcome measures in parenting program research are often more heavily weighted to mothers' data due to recruitment and data collection biases (Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Lundhal et al., 2008). Recruitment bias is related to the lack of fathers engaged to participate in parenting programs, with low rates being the prevailing norm, meaning that mothers are often reporters of program evaluation data. Further, data collected to ascertain program effectiveness has often combined parent data as opposed to separating data for both mothers and fathers (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Therefore, outcomes relating to program effectiveness, such as reduction in problematic child behaviours or improving positive parenting practices, are often solely from the mothers' perspective. In a systematic review of father engagement in the Triple P parenting program, an Australian design program yet internationally recognised, Fletcher et al. (2011) identified 92 studies evaluating this program from 20 different countries and found that *none* provided sufficient data on fathers' recruitment, engagement and program feedback, with results consistently reported as combined 'parent' data. For example, identified in this review was a large Australian study, which was found to have recruited only 16 fathers in comparison to 1610 mothers, yet the results were reported combined for 'parents', with no differentiation between mothers' or fathers' evaluations in the report (Fletcher et al., 2011). This lack of fathers' input further exacerbates the problem of improving father engagement in parenting programs as data on factors that may increase father involvement in parenting interventions that could be obtained by parenting program researchers is missing.

Father Preferences for Parenting Programs

With increased focus being given to increasing fathers' involvement in parenting programs, studies were developed to seek father specific input from fathers themselves as well as providers and practitioners in the design and delivery of such programs. An online survey of Australian fathers' experiences of and preferences for parenting programs was conducted by Tully and colleagues (2017). A community sample of 1001 fathers was obtained, 15% of whom had participated in a parenting program at some stage. The overall sample indicated that practical factors such as cost and work commitments were most of concern (Tully et al., 2017). The fathers also reported that knowing what the content or design of the program included was important to them, and a similar proportion (about one in six) reported not being aware that such programs were available (Tully et al., 2017). The fathers indicated they preferred the facilitator to have expertise in the area (Tully et al., 2017). The sample indicated that they would prefer an online format if it were offered (Tully et al., 2017). The study attempted to ascertain how the factors identified in the sample may form a predictive relationship. Logistic regression analysis, however, did not reveal any significant predictive relationships amongst the factors, with only two factors (age of the child and severity of child's behaviour problem) showing a marginal predictive relationship with fathers' propensity to participate. This research did confirm factors previously considered and improved the collective understanding of how fathers are influenced in their decision to attend. Factors such as practicalities, program design, facilitator characteristics, and delivery were given an order of importance by the sample of fathers. However, the study was not able to make any predictive commentary that might aid better understanding of the interplay of these factors.

A qualitative study of Australian fathers sought to investigate fathers' perceptions of barriers to their involvement in parenting programs as well as preferences that might make

such programs more engaging to fathers (Sicouri et al., 2018). A community sample of 41 fathers participated in nine focus groups and were asked to respond to a series of questions around their participation (or not) in parenting programs, as well as input they might have on improving fathers' participation in these programs (Sicouri et al., 2018). The group format allowed for discussion amongst fathers of the questions, which was seen to aid the process and enhance data collection (Sicouri et al., 2018). Barriers that were identified included fathers' perception of these programs as being more for mothers, accompanied by commentary from fathers that indicated that gender roles and parenting were influential to this sample of fathers. There were some indications that fathers felt that mothers' encouragement to attend such programs may be important to consider (Sicouri et al., 2018). The fathers also indicated that there may be a lack of knowledge or awareness amongst fathers of such programs (Sicouri et al., 2018). The sample of fathers indicated preferences for the content to be more interesting and relevant to fathers, and for group-based formats, perhaps even father-only groups. Comments regarding qualities of the facilitator were noted, including that they have some level of expertise and training, and some indicated they would prefer a male facilitator, with the researchers commenting this may be due to a perception that this would increase trust and disclosure amongst father-only groups. Many of these findings were consistent with previous research on father participation in parenting programs, and therefore confirmatory in nature. Such stated preferences from a sample of fathers, aligning with previous research such as Tully et al., would embolden further research to test these factors, as was the case with the following study.

A Case in Point

An evidence-based approach to increasing father participation in parenting programs using father preference data was attempted in a New Zealand study by Frank, Keon, and Sanders (2015). Frank et al. (2015) aimed to increase father engagement in a parenting

intervention to include both parents in all aspects of the intervention, from design to data collection, and evaluation of the parenting program, based on the Triple P program. Survey (n = 161) and focus group (n = 15) data was used to tailor the content specifically to fathers (Frank, Keon, Dittman, & Sanders, 2014). Fathers' preferences for style of delivery were obtained, ranging from father-only groups to television or web-based delivery. Program features most likely to engage fathers included location of sessions, content that seemed personally relevant to fathers, and personal characteristics of the practitioner delivering the intervention. The program evaluation revealed some interesting findings. Fathers' education, stress and depression levels, and perceptions of child behaviours, were predictive of fathers' ratings of program effectiveness. In addition to gaining insight into fathers' preferences and ideas to increase engagement, the researchers achieved equal numbers of fathers and mothers in the sample from development to delivery of the program and follow-up evaluations. Significant beneficial effects were found for both children and parents and were maintained over a 6-month period. Session attendance and satisfaction with the program was high for both mothers and fathers.

These are promising findings and identify factors of importance, however, the outcome of Frank and colleagues remains an isolated anomaly. To date these findings have not been replicated. Further, the methodology has not been tested on other parenting programs, to provide comparisons with this study using Triple P. Such studies would need to be undertaken to further establish whether online delivery methods may be more conducive to increasing father involvement across *all* parenting programs generally, and not just one. Further, the promotion of such programs to the wider community would need to be evaluated to see whether in a naturalistic setting, as opposed to a research setting, online programs attract more fathers to participate when compared to offerings of face-to-face programs. In

addition to this, in this real-world setting the decision to participate would potentially involve the mother, which would be an additional variable needing further investigation.

Coparenting Factors in Father Participation in Parenting Programs

Collectively, researchers in this field have not yet been able to demonstrate a consistent design, delivery, and evaluation approach to increasing father involvement in parenting programs. As noted, the review by Panter-Brick et al. (2014) speaks plainly to the dilemmas and difficulties, and makes recommendations towards best practice guidelines for research, practitioners, and policy makers. One important point made by Panter-Brick et al., is particularly poignant to this thesis. In discussing the outcomes of their systematic review of father engagement in parenting interventions, Panter-Brick et al. (2014) make an interesting recommendation that they considered to be especially impactful, which was 'engaging unequivocally with coparents' (2014, p. 1205). Fletcher, May, St George, & OShan (2014) conducted a similar systematic literature review, although their review included more general programs, including parenting programs. A search was conducted of articles in the literature between 2008 and 2014 exploring the evidence for engaging fathers in family and child interventions and services (Fletcher et al., 2014). Their findings provided evidence-based recommendations to increase father engagement. As a result of their review, Fletcher et al. recommended more emphasis be placed on the coparenting relationship, in the provision of such programs. This recommendation, although seemingly sensible, is in fact in contradiction to the bulk of interventions noted in their systematic review. The majority of studies in their review are replete with limitations as, noted (Fletcher et al., 2014) Fathers are absent in parenting interventions from recruitment through to participation and evaluation in far greater numbers than is acceptable, and sub-optimal for child outcomes and improved parenting practices (Fletcher et al., 2014). It is argued that if coparenting factors were to be pursued there would need to be better comprehension of the coparenting subsystem. Aspects such as

relationship quality and relationship satisfaction between parents, as well as levels of conflict, et cetera, are known to be factors interacting in this coparenting relationship. Importantly, as noted in Chapter 1, the coparenting relationship has been implicated as a facilitator of and barrier to father involvement generally, and therefore may reveal important data if studied more specifically. It is therefore reasonable to consider the low engagement of fathers in parenting programs be the outcome of factors that percolate within the coparenting relationship. The literature on fathers' participation in parenting interventions was further scrutinised for studies that had specifically investigated the coparenting relationship.

Comparisons of Coparent Data in Parenting Program Research

Feinberg, Jones, Kan, & Goslin (2010) utilised a random control study design with coparents participating in a pre and post birth parenting program trial that particularly emphasised coparenting partnerships. The coparenting relationship was emphasised in the design, delivery, and evaluation phases of this parenting program, with researchers arguing the dynamics in this relationship to be pivotal to family functioning. Heterosexual couples (n=169) expecting their first child were recruited to participate and were assigned to either the intervention program or a control group. Those in the intervention group (n=80) participated in the Family Foundations program, which was designed to enhance coparenting quality in the use of positive parenting behaviours delivered over a series of group classes (Feinberg et al., 2010). Separate surveys of both parents' responses to pre- and post-test measures were collected, allowing for father and mother data to be contrasted. Participation rates for fathers and mothers were fairly consistent across the phases of the intervention program, with 23% of fathers and 17% of mothers not completing the full program. Couples who attended these classes reported higher levels of parenting self-efficacy, lower levels of parenting stress and better coparenting quality on outcome measures when compared to the control group over the three and half years of the study (Feinberg et al., 2010). At follow up

five years post intervention significant intervention effects were found for child outcomes, with lower reports of child internalising disorders by children's teachers, and reduced reports of boys externalising disorders by teachers when compared to the control group (Feinberg, Jones, Roettger, Solmeyer, & Hostetler, 2014). Interestingly, parents in this study who reported poorer quality relationships during pregnancy demonstrated the most benefit at the five-year follow up, as indicated by a reduction in negative communication patterns (Feinberg et al., 2014).

Although an unintended aspect of the design, an element of this program of interest to this thesis was that participation of both parents was necessary for enrolment. It was not possible for one parent to attend alone. Further, separate father and mother data was collected at pre- and post-intervention stages. Noteworthy is that attrition rates for both fathers and mothers were similar. The researchers were able to achieve better than average father engagement in this parenting program when compared to other programs due to its emphasis on the intervention being targeted at coparenting. To reiterate, of the 80 couples who commenced the intervention, with 80 fathers available, 77% or 61 fathers completed the program. Contrast this with fathers' participation rates in parenting programs ranging from 13% to less than 30% (Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Fletcher et al., 2011). This is quite a successful outcome on the measure of father participation rates alone. A final factor of note is that Feinberg and colleagues (2014) demonstrated that positive psychoeducational interventions in the transition to parenting period can have a longstanding impact on the coparenting relationship, as evidenced by the overall impact on the intervention group at 5 year follow up (n=41) when compared to the control group (n=37) on all outcome measures.

Coparent Decisions on Participation

A Swedish study by Wells, Sakardi, and Salari (2016) investigated the characteristics of couples who attended a parenting intervention together compared to those in which only

one parent attended (usually the mother). Parents of children aged 4 and 5 were given the option of participating in a study where fathers and mothers responded separately to a survey that included demographic information, child characteristics such as behavioural concerns, and parenting behaviour (Wells et al., 2016). From the sample of responses, participants were invited to participate in the Triple P program, in which 33 mothers and 11 fathers elected to participate (Wells et al., 2016). The researchers then analysed the data and assessed how the factors measured interacted and predicted fathers' decisions to attend in comparison to mothers of the same couple, and of the sample generally. Something novel to this study was the opportunity the methodology provided in allowing comparisons of father and mother data within the same coparenting relationship. Further, as the study allowed for analysis of coparents that attended together, or mother only, it provided a real-world insight into how such outcomes are arrived at. In other words, what factors lead to one parent, the mother, attending alone in that scenario, as opposed to when both mother and father elect to attend as coparents. They confirmed that mothers were more likely to attend than fathers, and that mothers and fathers attended for different reasons, ranging from different responses to recruitment strategies, to more practical issues such as childcare arrangements. The researchers noted that during the decision-making couples' processes, fathers were either 'opting out' or their participation was not considered essential (Wells et al., 2016). Wells et al. (2016) proposed that mothers may feel obligated in their role as primary caregiver and may feel guilty if they were to share or relinquish this role. This may link to traditional views of gender roles and mothers assuming parental responsibility, causing fathers to further withdraw from involvement rather than experience interparental conflict.

The results from this study are of note given the Swedish context. For instance, in an earlier project, Wells and Sarkadi (2012) reviewed father-friendly practices in the literature, and in particular parental leave policies in Sweden aimed at increasing father involvement.

They found similarities in both studies for reasons given for the poorer uptake by fathers when compared to mothers, in one scenario to use paid parental leave and in another to attend a parenting program (Wells et al., 2012). Wells et al. reported that when coparents discuss these offerings, there is a tendency in the decision-making process to reveal a very stereotypical outcome based on gender roles. Wells et al. recommended that further research needs to investigate fathers' and mothers' responses to recruitment strategies more thoroughly and, interestingly, separately. Certainly, other studies have done so and, for example as noted in this Chapter, have investigated fathers' preferences for participation in parenting programs. One thing that was not recommended, which is argued by this thesis as being a valid follow up to Wells et al. (2016) study, is that the outcomes of the study gave an insight into a factor that had not been more thoroughly investigated: the decision-making process of couples when considering attending a parenting program. Wells et al.'s. study did very well to replicate what was occurring in the homes of Swedish families when considering seeking help for their child by attending a parenting program. However, it is postulated that a further progression or replication of this research might consider additional methodological options such as qualitative methods to better understand how mothers and fathers considered the identified factors as part of their decision-making conversations on whether to attend together or separately.

Factors within Coparent Decision-Making Process

A study by Wong, Roubinov, Gonzales, Dumka, and Millsap (2013) was identified in the literature review process and was noted as another that considered coparenting factors in their program design, delivery, and evaluation. Wong et al. studied individual or interpersonal factors, as well as socioeconomic and occupational factors, that interact in the coparenting relationship, which may influence a father's engagement in parenting programs. Of note was that interparental conflict was directly studied using an adaption of the Multidimensional

Assessment of Inter-parental Conflict scales (Wong et al., 2013). While various contextual factors such as higher maternal education and lower economic stress were associated with father involvement in the parenting intervention, interparental conflict between mothers and fathers was also a significant factor (Wong et al., 2013), with less conflict being associated with higher rates of father involvement. Further, Wong et al. suggested that behaviours of both mothers and fathers while considering seeking assistance may exacerbate interparental conflict and further inhibit fathers' involvement. It is also likely that the decision-making process of couples in this scenario is evidence of a pattern that has arisen in their coparenting journey together. Further, Wong et al. indicated the need for exploration of both coparenting factors and the decision-making processes of couples considering seeking parenting assistance. This is a novel point given that the research thus far has considered mothers and fathers as separate individuals, and obtained data through interviews, focus groups, observations, cross-sectional surveys, but not as a couple representing the coparenting executive subsystem of the family.

It is argued that, based on the studies of Wells et al. (2016) and Wong et al. (2013), the coparenting relationship, and factors within, deserve focus in order to better understand how coparents make decisions to seek help for their children. Wells et al. (2016) particularly advocates for qualitative methods, such as of interviews of couples, may have advantages in such endeavours as these methods allow for capture of verbal and non-verbal information, and observation of couples' interactions as they discuss such issues.

Research in the coparenting literature has previously identified that patterns of decision-making regarding childrearing in the early months and years of parenthood can become established and may perpetuate through time (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2021). One study by Shockley and Allen (2015), provides interesting insight into the decision-making processes of coparents when faced with competing demands for work versus family time. The

researchers took an episodic approach, asking participants to record their decision-making process when confronted with a decision on how to allocate resources (i.e., time) when there were competing demands from work and family domains. The study captured 78 participants, and 274 episodes, that were used for analysis using decision process theory (Poelmans, 2005, as cited in Shockley and Allen, 2015). The methodology thus allowed for a within-groups comparison of decision-making processes across time, which revealed some pattern formation amongst couples in these processes (Shockley & Allen, 2015).

Of note was that coparents' decisions regarding instances of work and family conflict found that after a process of time, patterns emerged in couples' decision-making, and some decisions become almost 'automatic' based on previous reasoning and consequences (Shockley & Allen, 2015). In other words, the outcome decided was less determined by a present weighing up of pros and cons, but rather an assumed outcome based on a pattern of decisions made throughout their coparenting experience. For example, fathers prioritised work-related demands over family-related demands in instances where their spouse had supported this decision outcome in previous occurrences (Shockley & Allen, 2015). Further, Shockley and Allen (2015) noted in their analysis that the largest predictor in their decision-making analysis was what they termed role sender pressure. Role sender pressure is a term used by the researchers to denote where appeals are made to the individual based on seriousness of consequences that may result from noncompliance to the decision outcome as a motivator to gain compliance. For example, where there is a conflict between work and home domains, role sender pressure from within the family such as a partner, will lead to the likelihood of the other partner choosing family over work. It thus follows, that if this pattern is repeatedly sufficiently, coparents will default to this decision outcome when presented with similar decisions. This study highlights that when the pressures that surround work and family conflicts collide, with all possible factors under consideration, what occurs within the

executive subsystem of the family proves to be prominent in consideration. Relating this back to parenting program participation, when coparents come together to discuss the importance of all factors relevant to their attendance, the outcome may be less predicated on the present scenario and more the result of patterns established over time in the coparenting relationship determined by previous decision-making processes.

Summary

This chapter encapsulates a literature review of fathers' participation in parenting interventions. Parenting programs are an evidence-based approach to many behavioural and emotional difficulties of children and are commonly sought by parents seeking assistance. This literature review confirmed, unfortunately, that fathers are often absent, or lack engagement in parenting interventions as evidenced by low recruitment and participation rates, and high attrition rates. Studies highlighted that the lack of father involvement in such programs weakens their effectiveness and is therefore detrimental to outcomes for children's wellbeing (Lundahl et al., 2008). Systematic literature reviews, such as Panter-Brick et al. (2014), meta-analyses such as Fletcher et al. (2011), and community samples such as online surveys by Tully et al. (2017) and focus groups such as Sicouri et al. (2018), seeking father preference data, represent a concerted effort by researchers and program designers to remedy the problem of poor father engagement and participation. One area of investigation identified in this chapter which has not previously been given due attention was the coparenting relationship, and how couples make decisions regarding their participation in parenting programs. These decision-making processes repeatedly conclude with many fathers being absent from parenting programs, as represented in the outcome data. It was therefore postulated based on the studies reviewed in this chapter that the decision-making process in the coparenting relationship was a potential area of investigation.

Overall Summary Identifying Research Opportunities

Previous research reviewed in the preceding chapters has highlighted the importance of understanding factors that encourage or prevent father involvement. Even with the benefits of positive father involvement being supported by both theory and evidence throughout the literature, there is still some discrepancy between the 'ideal' and 'actual' father involvement in contemporary Australian families. Changing attitudes in society towards fathering, and social policies to influence change in the levels of father involvement in family life, have been demonstrated in the literature However, there is still a large gap to bridge between the current societal expectations of an egalitarian approach to coparenting, and the present situation, where father involvement remains at levels far below expectations of society. As indicated, father involvement occurs within a dynamic, organic, and interpersonal dyad between the coparents at the executive subsystem within the family, and the discrepancy between the ideal and actual experience in the family may be due to father involvement often being facilitated through the coparenting relationship (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Cabrera et al., 2014). The executive subsystem of the family unit may be displaying broader influences from the macrosystem such as beliefs and cultural nuances in society (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Therefore, the complexity of the coparenting relationship needs to be brought into focus when considering the notion of how father involvement variances occur (Volling & Cabrera, 2019).

The dilemma of increasing father involvement is brought into focus when considering fathers participation in parenting programs. Multiple stakeholders such as researchers and parenting program developers have endeavoured to improve father involvement through participation and engagement in said programs , as this improves treatment outcomes for the child, which are more likely to be maintained over time (Lundahl et al., 2007; Lundahl et al., 2008; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Until now, research has not sufficiently considered the

coparenting relationship, and the decision-making processes that occurs between mothers and fathers regarding their participation. This thesis argues that this may demonstrate how factors are considered by coparents, reveal specific issues not previously identified, and lead to remedies of worth to parenting program researchers and developers, as well as practitioners in the field. Further, the factors identified in this investigation may be transferrable to father involvement more generally, and therefore be of great worth to increasing father involvement universally. It is postulated that a parallel process may exist, whereby reasons not yet fully explored for fathers lacking involvement in parenting programs may be similar if not the same as barriers to father involvement that may continue to be operating generally.

Program of Research Aims

This program of research aimed to contribute to a better comprehension of relationship factors in the coparenting relationship that inhibit or facilitate father involvement. Further, it was an aim of this program of research to assist in further advancing the notion of involved fathering, especially in participation rates in parenting interventions, as it can be expected that we will see improved outcomes for children both socially and emotionally, which in later years will translate into better mental health in their adulthood. This will benefit service providers, program designers, and policy makers in the design, recruitment, and delivery of parenting interventions and by doing so increase father participation in these important interventions. Beyond the impacts on father involvement in parenting interventions, it is expected that the decision-making process around participation in a parenting program will elucidate more general patterns of coparenting decision-making, and factors that inhibit or facilitate father involvement generally. Further, an aim of this program of research through the exploration of coparents' decision-making processes was to contribute to the conversation on a more egalitarian approach to modern parenting. Last, it was an aim of this program of research to bring greater awareness to the experiences of

fathers in their parenting, to improve the understanding of father involvement, and to address barriers observed, and make recommendations for future research and practice.

Program of Research Objectives

The following research objectives were developed to achieve the stated aims of this program of research, which were:

1. To construct a study that allowed for the observation and exploration of couples decision-making processes when seeking help for their children.
2. To use an analytic method that allowed for the identification of factors that are acting within the coparenting relationship as facilitators or barriers to father involvement when parents seek help for their children.
3. To idenifty themes of barriers and facilitators of father involvement in the coparenting relationship, that may impact on father involvement and fathers' experiences of parenting generally.
4. To construct a study that would investigate how factors within the coparenting relationship might be acting on fathers generally in their experiences of parenting.

Mixed-Methods Design

Different methodological approaches have been taken to explore the problem of understanding and improving levels of father involvement in the lives of children. However, as noted in the review, some studies thus far have considered comparisons of father and mother data and preferences for parenting programs, and a few have considered the coparenting relationship, but none to the authors knowledge have specifically investigated the dynamics of the coparenting relationship on its own. Further, no previous study had taken an approach that investigates father involvement in the family subsystem of the couple dyad by

examining decision-making processes that occur between coparents in this subsystem. The decision to do so would be theoretically informed by Cabrera et al.'s (2014) ecological model, which denotes the coparenting relationship as a separate entity of influence on fathers' parenting behaviours. The nature of decision-making processes involves a discussion of factors of consideration and is therefore more readily investigated by qualitative methods that allow for the observation of both verbal and non-verbal communication, and the identification of patterns of themes.

As such findings are not generalisable due to the small sample size, a follow-up study of specific factors identified through this initial exploration using quantitative methods with a larger sample size can then allow for a deeper understanding of the phenomena. To make meaningful statements of learning around father involvement from the perspective of the father, a significant sample size would be required. Therefore, it was decided that a mixed-methods approach, which involves the use of both quantitative and qualitative data, was most suited to the achieve the research objectives described above. Research using mixed-method approaches has good support, with proponents arguing that this design type accommodates for when one method may not be sufficient to thoroughly attend to the research objectives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Thus, a mixed-method approach allows for a more thorough, deeper, and contextualised outcome, producing a better result than if either qualitative or quantitative investigations were taken on their own (Plano Clark, 2017; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009).

The qualitative study, hereafter referred to as Study 1, was deemed to be beneficial to this project to address the first and second research objectives, as it allows for exploration of both known, and potentially unknown factors, that act as either facilitators or barriers to father involvement. Something novel to the approach taken in this study is that couples will be interviewed together to observe their communication when considering a hypothetical

scenario of attending a parenting program. A cross-sectional survey method, hereafter referred to as Study 2, was deemed to be the most appropriate quantitative approach, and would address the third and fourth research objectives.

Sequence of Research Stages

The sequence of the two studies was decided to be sensible based on the above rationale, with an initial exploratory study using qualitative methods, which once analysed, would then inform the subsequent quantitative phase (Creswell et al., 2014). The data is also integrative, in that the quantitative study can be discriminatory, by validating findings from the qualitative study, as well as rejecting any possible erroneous hypotheses. The final discussion of results therefore provides an integrated piece of research, with the discussion of these results being more robust, meeting objective five. This more specific examination of factors identified will therefore provide a useful addition to the literature and inform further research and practice. Study 1 will involve a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2019) of semi-structured interview data obtained with couple dyads exploring barriers and facilitators of father involvement in parenting programs. The interpretation of findings will be completed first, allowing for the reporting of themes identified, before the construction of Study 2. Study 1 therefore will inform the development of the factors of interest for Study 2, which will quantitatively analyse a larger cohort through a cross-sectional survey design. Specific hypotheses will be proposed, and therefore tested and scrutinised by Study 2. The data from Study 2 will be considered separately at first. This is to acknowledge the need to consider the differences in approaches, and the analytic methods required, before bringing focus to findings. What will follow will be an integrated discussion of the findings of both Study 1 and Study 2, where the findings of one may better inform the other, and so forth. This sequential approach allows for findings that are consistent to be more meaningfully interpreted, as well as welcoming any inconsistent findings and possible interpretations of

consequence to the literature (Feilzer, 2009; Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). To the best of the author's knowledge, no previous studies have adopted this approach towards understanding barriers and facilitators of father involvement in parenting.

CHAPTER 3: STUDY 1 RATIONALE AND QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a rationale for the qualitative approach taken, and to outline in depth the qualitative research methodology utilised in Study 1 of this program of research. Following this chapter will be four chapters that report on the findings of the qualitative analysis.

Given the exploratory nature of the qualitative phase of research, an inductive approach to data collection and analysis was adopted for this study to allow varied themes to be identified from the data. This approach would allow for the reports of the individuals and couples in the interviews to form the basis of evidence to be analysed within the couple dyad, and also shared across participants. The project was designed upon epistemological and ontological assumptions, which guided the methodological approach and subsequent analysis. This approach would be described as pragmatic, taking the data at face value, without interpretation or seeking any underlying meaning in the words expressed by the participants. Epistemology is considered as one of the four main 'branches' of philosophy interested in understanding the obtaining of knowledge (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2006). It is best typified by the question 'how do we know what we know?'. Sources of knowledge or truth might be perceptions, reason giving, memory, and personal testimony. Various epistemological approaches may be employed, including realist, where a position is taken that only one truth is possible, or relativist whereby multiple truths are possible such as the different perspectives that may be taken (Willig, 2013). A phenomenological epistemology is one that pursues knowledge as constructed through the interpretation of one's experiences (Willig, 2013). The current research draws on a phenomenological tradition in that its focus is on the lived experiences of the couple dyads in managing decisions concerning children and families. It is

therefore assumed that many positions are possible, with no single truth, but rather each dyad and individual will operate within their own specific lived experiences.

Ontology, also from one of the four branches of philosophy known as metaphysics, is the study of our being or existence, as in our common humanity, and thus, inferences made about human relations, and interpretations of the world, form a common understanding of our existence (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Individuals' experiences can provide a basis of knowledge that may be investigated. The social and cultural context in which the experiences are formed may not be easily visible, as the knowledge is shaped through individual processes of various experiences and is therefore biased. Therefore, the interpretation of the knowledge of these experiences gives rise to understanding of processes that may be occurring within individuals and systems, in this case the coparenting executive subsystem of the family, within which they interact (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach allows for the observation and analysis of the data that arises in the dynamics between the individuals in the dyadic system, as well as through the experiences reported by the individuals themselves.

Method

Qualitative methodologies are ideally placed to investigate the nuanced topic of father involvement and the associated barriers, facilitators, and negotiations of these due to their flexibility and attention placed in the individual perspectives and how these shape eventual actions. Despite the focus being at the individual level, several strategies were employed to ensure the robustness of the present research, following the advice of Morrow (2005). To ensure the robustness of the methodology used in this program of research, certain processes were followed as advocated in the literature, which included a deliberate choice to use a semi-structured interview approach, member checking, and the use of multiple analysts (Creswell et al., 2011). The semi-structured interview approach had clear protocols to improve validity, as well as allowing for multiple perspectives to be obtained, while also

addressing the stated research questions. In terms of member checking, all couples were given copies of their transcripts to allow for feedback. In all cases, the participants provided feedback that the responses as recorded in the transcripts were accurate. The data was reviewed by multiple analysts to ensure appropriate rigour was taken with the analysis, and to reduce bias in the interpretation and discussion of results (Morrow, 2005). In summary, the methodological procedure involved semi-structured interviews with cohabiting couples who were the biological parents of at least one child aged between the ages of two to 12 years, which were recorded and transcribed verbatim, to allow for rigorous and robust analysis.

Research Questions

In line with the first two stated objectives of this program of research it was proposed that qualitative data regarding coparents' decision-making processes in considering their enrolment and participation in a parenting program be the focus of investigation. This is in line with the gaps identified in the literature as per the review. The research questions specific to this Qualitative Study 1 are:

Question 1. What barriers and facilitators to fathers' involvement in parenting programs are evident in the couples' decision-making discussions?

Question 2. What barriers and facilitators to father involvement in parenting programs bear similarity to father's experiences generally?

Question 3. What are the decision-making processes of couples when deliberating whether to attend a parenting program?

Participants

Couples able to be included in the study needed to be cohabitating with their biological children. Both parents were required to be 18 years and older in order to participate. In total, 12 couples were interviewed, resulting in a sample of 24 participants in this study. The participants were biological parents, over the age of 18 years, who both cohabit with their children (at least one child aged between 2 and 12 years) who were interviewed together. Fathers were aged between 34 and 46 (mean=39). Mothers' ages ranged between 33 and 45 (mean=38). One couple were both born in the UK but had been permanent residents in Australia for 13 years at the time of interview. One male was born in New Zealand but has been a resident of Australia since early adolescence. One female was born in the UK and moved to permanently reside in Australia with her Australian husband and three children. All other couples reported having been born and raised in Australia, and all couples stated that English was their first language. All couples reported their relationship status as married. Education levels varied, however the majority held tertiary qualifications (Males=7, Females=9), with three fathers and one mother having trade qualifications. The remainder had secondary level education (fathers = 2, mothers = 2). All fathers reported being in full-time employment. Of the mothers, four reported being in full-time employment, five were employed part-time, and one was a full-time student. One indicated her status as a full-time stay-at-home mother. The average number of children per household was 2.8 (min = 2, max = 5). The children represented in this sample of couples ranged in age from 1 to 13. All couples had a least one child between 2 and 12 years of age.

Table 1 Participants with pseudonyms and demographics

	Pseudonym	Age	Country of Birth	Education Level	Employment Status	Children
Couple 1	Phillip	43	UK	Tertiary	Full-time	3
	Elizabeth	43	UK	Tertiary	Full-time	
Couple 2	Kevin	38	Aus	Secondary	Full-time	3
	Fiona	37	Aus	Tertiary	Uni Student	
Couple 3	Jeff	34	Aus	Tertiary	Full-time	3
	Janet	33	Aus	Tertiary	Part-time	
Couple 4	Amanda	42	Aus	Tertiary	Full-time	2
	Richard	41	Aus	Tertiary	Full-time	
Couple 5	Jillian	40	Aus	Secondary	*SAHM	2
	Jack	42	Aus	Secondary	Full-time	
Couple 6	Mary	36	Aus	Tertiary	Full-time	3
	Simon	39	NZ	Tertiary	Full-time	
Couple 7	Luke	35	Aus	Tertiary	Full-time	2
	Leia	33	Aus	Tertiary	Full-time	
Couple 8	Sam	39	Aus	Trade	Full-time	3
	Jenny	38	UK	Tertiary	Part-time	
Couple 9	Michelle	37	Aus	Tertiary	Full-time	2
	Mark	40	Aus	Tertiary	Full-time	
Couple 10	Brad	46	Aus	Tertiary	Full-time	3
	Rachael	45	Aus	Secondary	Part-time	
Couple 11	David	34	Aus	Tertiary	Full-time	2
	Dana	34	Aus	Trade	Full-time	
Couple 12	Allan	38	Aus	Trade	Full-time	5
	Katie	38	Aus	Tertiary	Part-time	

Aus = Australia; NZ = New Zealand; UK = United Kingdom

**Stay-at-home Mother*

Recruitment

Ethics approval was provided by the University of Southern Queensland prior to proceeding with recruitment activities (H17REA173, see Appendix C). Couples were recruited by advertisements within the community (email distribution lists, local radio interviews, and social media) by the researcher seeking volunteers to participate in a research project related to father involvement in parenting. Potential participants were directed to a description of the research project hosted on the researcher's webpage, by which interested parties could complete an information sheet with contact details that would be returned to the researcher via email indicating their consent to be contacted. Potential participants were then sent an information sheet and consent forms, which also included questions to collect demographic information. Once these were returned, interviews were scheduled at a mutually convenient time and place.

Approach

Twelve couples were interviewed from this recruitment process. The researcher conducted all the interviews. The majority (9) of interviews took place in the couples' homes. In instances where distance was a barrier, three interviews were conducted online using the Zoom platform. All environments were appropriate for recording and private so that couples were able to speak freely and honestly. The interviews were recorded using two devices to ensure data capture and quality and stored securely as per the ethics approval. Participants in the study were asked to participate in a semi-structured interview together as a couple. The choice regarding use of semi-structured interviews was in accord with recommendations by Braun and Clarke (2013) as they allow for a scripted approach, fostering consistency in interviews across participants, while also allowing for flexibility in participants' responses and exploration of areas of interest to the interviewer and participants. The interview questions were structured using information from the literature on barriers and facilitators of

father involvement, as highlighted in the literature review. To obtain information from the dyad, as well as individual responses from both fathers and mothers, couples were asked a series of questions in response to a scenario-based dilemma for considering parenting assistance for one of their children. They were encouraged to discuss the hypothetical dilemma or scenario together and describe their decision-making process. The interview then proceeded by exploring this scenario in detail using appropriate micro skills such as open-ended questions, active listening, and minimal encouragers or prompts (Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2018). Recruitment continued until 12 interviews were successfully conducted, at which point it was determined from review of the transcripts with the researcher's supervisory team that sufficient data had been obtained, in line with recommendations on sample sizes for thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2013; Morrow, 2005). A further consideration was that the dataset had reached a point of saturation, where no new themes were identified, and a preliminary review of the data revealed a rich tapestry of themes amenable to analysis. Interviews ranged in length from a minimum of 21 mins 05 secs to a maximum of 46 mins 54 secs, with an average length of 32 mins 08 secs. A total of 6 hours and 31 mins of interviews was captured. Generic pseudonyms were created by the researcher and then randomly assigned to be used in the analysis process to maintain anonymity. Following the completion of the analysis, participants were provided with a copy of their transcript for checking for accuracy and were encouraged to contact the researcher to provide feedback or discuss any concerns, however none of the participants chose to do so.

Interview Structure

The interview was organised by first presenting the couple with a scenario for them to respond to and allow the interviewer to observe and record their decision-making process in response to the hypothetical dilemma. The scenario asks the couple to consider a situation in which they have emotional and behavioural concerns regarding one of their children, and

they receive an advertisement for a parenting program that may be suitable to their situation. The first question to prompt discussion was, *'would you please describe how you and your partner would decide whether you would attend this program?'* Follow-up questions were then determined to ensure all factors (i.e., time of offering, location, costs, etc.) would be considered by the couple in relation to the scenario. The questions then allowed for further elaboration of couples' decision-making processes historically when faced with similar dilemmas relating to their children by the question, *'How would this decision-making process be similar to others that you have previously made in real life?'.* This also allowed for consideration of the couple's coparenting approach from formation of their roles as parents at transition to parenting. In the latter end of the interview there was less structure, allowing couples to reflect and comment on their experiences parenting together from when they first started a family till the present time. Couples were also encouraged to reflect on connections with their own experiences growing up and their parents' style and any connections to their own experiences. (See Appendix A for the semi-structured interview questions.)

Analysis

Analysis was thematic analysis, drawing on the guidelines proposed by Braun and Clarke (2019, 2006). This process followed the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2019) as follows. An initial review of the transcripts was conducted manually, generating initial themes which were highlighted and discussed with the associate supervisor for cross-checking. Each transcript was then reviewed individually, and the themes highlighted were categorised before another review was conducted to ensure that each of the themes identified entailed as little overlap as possible. There was a reduction of themes in this process as a result, with some themes being subsumed by other themes, and inevitable convergence at points. At each stage, the identified themes were checked with the associate supervisor to

ensure rigour and quality in the process as per the guidelines and to account for any potential bias in reporting. This reflexive approach allowed for a deep immersion in the data that enabled exploration of key themes in the decision-making processes of the couples, and identification of factors that facilitate or inhibit fathers' involvement in parenting interventions (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This process was assisted with the use of NVivo software. During the review of the transcripts of the decision-making process of couples with respect to the hypothetical scenario it was determined that a consistency in language or terms relevant to decision-making was needed. This would allow for ease in reporting of the thematic analysis and consistency in language and terms used. This was achieved by reviewing the process with which couples described their approach to the scenario, and the final decision they came to as to who would attend the program using terms established in the literature. The model of Lee and Collins (2000) was adopted, who proposed assimilation of decision-making processes into the following five categories: experience, legitimate, coalition, emotion, and bargaining. Further discussion to the selection of this model will be given in Chapter 7.

Thematic analysis of the transcripts identified the following themes: Parenting Program Factors, Coparenting Factors, and Microsystemic Factors, that inhibit or facilitate father involvement (see Table 2). Discussion of these findings addresses Qualitative Research Questions 1 and 2. Given the significance to this program of research of the coparents decision-making processes, Chapter 7 is devoted to demonstrating how these themes and subthemes were navigated by the couples in their decision-making process, which addresses Qualitative Research Question 3. Chapter 7 also includes a summary of the findings of Study 1 and how together they have addressed the Qualitative Research Questions. The following chapters align with this sequence of analysis and are titled as such for ease and comprehension. While each chapter is an exploration of the themes and subthemes, they are

not intended to be viewed in isolation. The complex interrelationships with other themes are acknowledged and interwoven into the discussion to create a picture of the decision-making processes of couples, and the evident barriers and facilitators to father involvement. No theme is considered to have any greater or lesser value than another, and all are given equal consideration.

Table 2 Themes identified through thematic analysis to address Qualitative Research Questions

Theme	Subthemes
Program Factors	• External Factors (e.g. Work demands) • Program Costs and Considerations (e.g. Childcare) • Program design and delivery
Coparenting Factors	• Parenting Roles • Society and Culture • Importance of Fathers
Microsystemic Factors	• Inter-parental conflict • Maternal Gatekeeping

CHAPTER 4: PARENTING PROGRAM FACTORS FACILITATING OR INHIBITING FATHER INVOLVEMENT

This chapter contributes to addressing Qualitative Research Questions 1 and explores the first identified theme: barriers and facilitators to father involvement in parenting interventions associated with program factors. These include the interaction of factors outside of the family microsystem, such as work demands, that impact on resources and time, that would enable both parents to attend a parenting program together, as well as factors relevant to the design and delivery of the program such as content, credibility, location, and timing. These are grouped into the subthemes: external demands, costs and considerations, and design/delivery factors. These themes are described, with connection to excerpts from the verbatim transcriptions.

Background

Previous research has identified barriers to fathers' participation in parenting interventions (Lundahl et al., 2008; Panter-Brick et al., 2014; Stahlschmidt et al., 2013). Father specific data had long eluded researchers until recently, however there are still gaps in understanding the poor representation of fathers in parenting interventions, and more particularly, how to increase their engagement. Emerging data has indicated that father involvement might be improved by more father-friendly program design and delivery (Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Program features most likely to engage fathers included the location of sessions, content that seemed personally relevant to fathers, and personal factors of the practitioner delivering the intervention. However, collectively, researchers in this field have not yet been able to demonstrate a consistent approach to increasing father involvement in parenting programs (Frank et al., 2015). An aspect not yet explored is how couples navigate the decision to attend a parenting program within the executive subsystem of the family. This is especially relevant to dual-income couples, where competing work demands

might make it difficult for both parties to attend. In such circumstances, how would coparents negotiate the conflict in demands and priorities that may arise, leading to a consensus decision on who would attend the program? What factors would couples identify as barriers or facilitators to attending a parenting program together? The following findings provide insight into these questions based on a thematic analysis of the transcripts of couples.

Findings

The following findings provide insight into these questions based on a thematic analysis of the couples' transcripts. The couples discussed factors that may act as barriers to attending a parenting program together. These were all noted in the couples' transcripts as key considerations in their ability to attend a parenting intervention together. External demands, such as work, was a prominent response in the transcripts, followed by childcare considerations. Costs for participation and childcare considerations were important to all couples in their deliberations. Comments were also noted relating to the program itself, such as the delivery method, credibility of the program, and the perceived expertise of the presenter.

Table 3 Themes identified in the couples' transcript representative of program factors

Subtheme	Description
External demands	Work schedules, flexible work arrangements, and in-principle support from employers for parents in the workplace to provide care for children
Costs and considerations	Childcare availability, timing of the program, program costs for attendance, and where the program will be delivered (i.e., location if face-to-face)

Design/Delivery Factors	Format of the program content, delivery of the materials (i.e., face-to-face seminar, or online), evidence-based materials, and the perceived expertise of the presenter

Subtheme 1: External demands

All couples noted work as the primary inhibitor to both parents being able to attend a parenting program, and in the majority of interviews this was mentioned as the first impediment when considering the hypothetical scenario. Of note was that in all couple considerations of their availability to attend a parenting program, the fathers' work was the primary consideration and also often indicated as the main inhibiting factor for fathers' involvement in parent related events such as school activities. If the time of the program meant that arrangements needed to be made with the father's employer, or that the father would have to make changes to their work schedule to attend, this may lead to only one of them attending, typically the mother. However, if such arrangements were possible, then the father often reported a willingness to attend. The following examples are offered as evidence of the above:

> *It all comes down to work really, because we have a lot of family help if needed (David – Couple 11)*
>
> *could I get the time off work? I guess that's the biggest factor…[work] would be the only obstacle (Sam – Couple 8)*

Some fathers noted that their workplace held to traditional stereotypes of fathers' involvement in home life, which in some cases may have been an inhibiting factor to their potential participation, and that attending a parenting program would be *'considered the mother's place to do that sort of interaction' (Jack – Couple 5).* For example, one father reported the following sentiment from his workplace:

you're the dad…why do you need to finish work early for… or change your work hours? (David – Couple 11)

Many of the mothers in the sample reported that their work arrangements were far more flexible, which often made it easier to accommodate activities such as attending a parenting program. For most of the mothers, work flexibility was reported as more common and accessible to them, often in contrast to their partners' circumstances. For example:

Mine's a lot more flexible than yours [said to Phillip] (Elizabeth – Couple 1)

…absolutely, I know that I would be able to organise work to accommodate being able to do something like that (Jenny – Couple 8)

When discussing the impacts of employment, couples volunteered information from their previous experiences that indicated that work and taking leave for childcare related matters have been a consistent consideration throughout their parenting journey. Couples discussed some of their experiences early in their relationship when considering their transition to parenting. For some, the decision on who would stay home to care for their infant children was determined by who was the higher wage earner, for example Jenny (Couple 8) put things plainly when saying, '*it's who earns the most; it's so sad'*. It was evident for some of the couples that circumstances such as employment, earning potential, and flexible work arrangements encouraged their staying with traditional gender roles, rather than considering alternative, more contemporary models. For example, a factor mentioned was access to parental leave. The following discussion between Jenny and Sam (Couple 8) on their experience of paternity leave is of note:

Jenny: It was rubbish [paternity leave], absolutely rubbish. Sam literally got 2 weeks off, but the money that he would have been paid was terrible, so he actually decided to take annual leave.

Sam: Like half my wage or something so it was more beneficial to get full wage and annual leave which I took in the end anyway.

The attitudes of companies towards things like parental leave, or leave for childcare, tended to be a consistent experience for most couples. For example, Jack (Couple 5) indicated *'it's an industry experience'*. Comparisons were made to times when children were sick and in need of care, as described by Jillian:

I think it's a workplace stigma though as well, like if the kids are sick, mum takes time off. Dad – dad can't do it, dad has to work, I know all of my girlfriends are the same, if they still work, it's them that takes the unpaid time off quite often to look after the kids whereas if, I know the few times Jack has gone to his boss and said, look, I need to take a day off [for] my child … it's not welcomed. It's frowned upon. (Jillian – Couple 5)

However, another father's experience was in complete contrast. Phillip reported that when he and Elizabeth were first pregnant, he found his boss to be very supportive in finding flexible work arrangements to allow for a shared approach to childcare and parenting:

I think I was lucky as well because my boss at the time had a young son and I think he totally got 'it' so I had that local support from him (Phillip – Couple 1).

Stereotypes in the workplace towards fathers participating in childcare, and the flexibility in work arrangements to support fathers being involved in parenting activities, were consistent themes discussed by all couples. The interplay of work and family life, especially for the fathers in this study, has a longstanding effect on the level of father involvement, and will tend to persist throughout the life of the child. Couples' discussions on this matter indicated that patterns laid down in their early experiences while transitioning to parenting seemed to have then become established by the time they would be involved in considering seeking parenting assistance. Therefore, work demands are external factors that

play a part when parents consider attending a parenting program. For the fathers particularly, it was the key difference in whether they would be able to attend and participate or not.

Subtheme 2: Costs and considerations

Once couples had thoroughly discussed the impacts of work on their mutual availability, other factors such as cost, childcare, location (venue), and timing were considered. Timing was mainly discussed in relation to work, with outside of normal business hours being the preference for all couples. Some couples indicated that they had access to childcare (family, friends, babysitter), for them to attend together. Yet others indicated that childcare was a major consideration for them. For some of the couples, the lack of available childcare would mean the possibly only one of them would be able to attend, especially if the time commitment to the program was over an extended period as this would make arranging childcare potentially problematic. For example:

> *say it was a commitment of 6 weeks or something like that, that's a big ask for friends and neighbours so that would – I think that would have an impact and it would depend on what time it was as to whether both of us could go or not (Phillip – Couple 1)*
>
> *[To] get someone [over] a consistent … number of weeks it would [be] really challenging to be able to find the help (Janet – Couple 3)*
>
> *The arranging is just as stressful as…going along… just the people you've got to get to do the babysitting sometimes. That's more what I'm talking about (Kevin – Couple 2)*

For some of the couples, the lack of available childcare would mean that possibly only one of them would be able to attend. Cost was mentioned, although this was only minor in discussions. There was a sense that the importance of seeking help for their child

outweighed the impact of expense, however there was a belief that the cost was not expected to be excessive. The following example is provided.

So I don't think cost would be a barrier, I think we would do it if it came at some kind of financial cost (Simon – Couple 6).

...in terms of cost with that sort of stuff, I don't sort of feel like, particularly I guess behavioural and emotional stuff, like we have no real issues with that at all (David – Couple 11).

Location was mentioned, with the main preference being that the program was local (e.g., at their children's school), however one couple did indicate that they would prefer to go to a venue where they are *'not known' (Phillip – Couple 1)* by others as they felt a slight apprehension about being identified as having a child with difficulties. There seemed to be a sense of safety in anonymity. The following exchange between Phillip and Elizabeth is provided as evidence:

Elizabeth: I'd probably want to go something that's slightly more anonymous.

Phillip: Yeah, I agree, I think you'd both prefer to go into town than go into an area where we're not – yeah, we're not known.

One father also mentioned that family settings like schools and community health centres can feel welcoming to fathers, and therefore more comfortable for attending a parenting program.

Interviewer: And you felt like, things like schools and health services have been generally welcoming, like you've felt comfortable being there?

David: Yeah I think so, yeah (David – Couple 11)

Comments made by the couples in their discussions of the hypothetical scenario did indicate consideration of costs, timing, and the availability of childcare, as important to whether they would be able to attend a parenting program. However, these were reported by

couples to be lower in priority to things like work demands, as discussed above. Costs and other considerations were more seen as inconveniences to manage, rather than obstructions. Further discussion of couples' prioritisation of factors is contained in Chapter 7.

Subtheme 3: Design and Delivery factors

Couples reported that the credibility of the program was important, however fathers tended to mention this concern more than mothers, with fathers seeming to be more interested in the expertise of the presenter or the credibility of the material as critical. It was noted that the fathers indicated their preference to research the background of the program as part of their considerations. For example:

> *I think it would depend on the recommendations around the program…and who we think would get the most benefit. So if it was aimed at fathers…that would obviously be a consideration…we'd probably have done our research and seen that this is a valuable and useful approach…I think, for me, it would have to be a registered psych[ologist] or someone of that – and I don't mean it to be hierarchical or anything like that but I think if you're putting yourself out there, being quite vulnerable, it would need to be a really credible source (Phillip – Couple 1)*
>
> *[We would] probably do a bit of research on the program itself, whether it actually suits our actual parenting style (Jack – Couple 5)*
>
> *It's different to when you're hearing it from someone who – like a professional who's actually delivering [the program] (Brad – Couple 10)*

For most couples, there were stated preferences regarding the format for the delivery of the program. Interestingly, fathers made more comments around whether the program was face-to-face or online. Most fathers reported that they would prefer a face-to-face format over online. For example:

[I] would see that as a bit of a negative for the program. I think having a group of parents there together discussing the program as it goes along rather than just reading it online and asking whatever questions come to your mind…definitely having a lot of different parents there with a lot of different ideas…it makes it less academic, more [of a] community type of thing (Jack – Couple 5)

it depends on the format; I don't like anything that's workbook [based]; I like doing stuff (Simon – Couple 6)

Interviewer: so you're more of a role play… show me, practise something, …

Yeah and get to the point as well (Simon – Couple 6)

When looking at the mothers' statements on preferences for the format of the program, an interesting theme emerges. Comments made by the mothers of their partners indicated that the format of the program, i.e., online or face-to-face, was a key concern. Mothers in the sample expressed a level of concern for their partner to benefit from learning material if not presented in a more favourable, 'male-friendly' way. For example:

Simon and I have different learning styles…so the online thing… when he was at uni he didn't like reading the textbook, he liked listening to the lectures, just going through it that way and so I thought the online one [program] because it was predominantly this video message and then a little bit of activities that you work through [and] I thought 'oh yeah, that should work for Simon'. I don't mind that stuff, actually I quite like some of that stuff, but I also find it really easy if I can just read through something (i.e. online materials) and I just write out the points for myself (Mary – Couple 6)

Mark learns best from video and seminar [sic face-to-face] presentations (Michelle – Couple 9)

he does not retain information well. So, to send him to a course, especially a paid one ... that information is never coming home (both laugh) (Jenny – Couple 8)

As shown in the examples above, some of the female participants made comments around their partners' learning style being a factor, and that a seminar or face-to-face format would be a better learning modality for their partner. The father attending without the mother was considered more problematic, as the mothers did not consider this the best format for the fathers. Comments by some mothers noted that the fathers would find such formats would not hold their attention and were also sceptical around how much information the fathers would retain. The mothers lacked faith that the fathers would bring home the information and share with them effectively. Of note is that this is an assessment of their partners' learning style observed by the mothers, which was not challenged or refuted by their fathers. In all cases the fathers accepted this assessment of their learning preferences made by their partners.

Another aspect relevant to the program format is the topic area. Fathers tended to state that, given the topic was related to emotional or behavioural difficulties, this was more in the area of strength of the mother. For example, Richard stated:

if it's a situation where there's a logistical issue which prevents one of us from attending – for example, no babysitter available – I think then it comes down to the scenario that we're trying to address as to who was relating to it more. So, if it was an emotional distress and stuff, I'd say you'd [mother] be more likely to go because it – they're speaking a language you can understand better than I can. But then if it's another issue – academics or music or whatever it is – I might be the one who's better suited between the two of us to go (Richard – Couple 4)

This sentiment of Richard's was consistent for most fathers in the sample. There seemed to be a presumption of expertise of the mothers in child emotional and behavioural difficulties. Importantly, as highlighted by Richard, if any of the other external demands mentioned thus

far would prohibit both attending, such as childcare, then the preferred negotiated outcome in this decision-making process was for the mother to attend.

Discussion

The findings of the above analysis show how factors related to the design and delivery of parenting programs discussed and considered by these couples. Work demands featured prominently and were cited as the most common reason for fathers in this sample not being able to attend if there was conflict in schedules with work and attending a parenting program. This was particularly the case if compounded with a lack of childcare availability that would only allow one to attend. Mothers' work was not cited as a key concern and comments were made about them having greater flexibility. Costs were noted as something to take into account, however were not seen as prohibitive, and there was an attitude that any reasonable costs of attendance were to be expected, and if the program provided the needed assistance, it would be worth the expenditure.

Program factors related to design and delivery were of note and were consistent with recommendations by Panter-Brick et al. (2014). The design of the program was important to fathers, with emphasis placed on the need for the material to be trustworthy, reliable, and evidenced based. Similar notions were mentioned regarding those who might be presenting the material, with fathers indicating a preference for expertise and qualifications on the part of the presenters. Location of delivery was also a focus, and preferences were stated for places like schools, or other similar community venues. Some couples' comments noted a preference for anonymity. Comments made by mothers that were of note included that the formats of programs are often seen to be less favourable to the fathers' learning styles, such as if the material is manualised and less interactive and may not hold their attention. This also precluded some of the fathers from attending on their own instead of the mothers, if both

were unable to attend together, and a few mothers stated concerns about the fathers' ability to retain and relay the information to the mothers. Noteworthy also were comments about learning styles related to online programs, whereby some mothers indicated that this would not necessarily been seen as attractive to fathers. These comments were mostly affirmed by the fathers. This would confirm the recommendations made by Panter-Brick et al. (2014) that best practice for father engagement would be considerations of gender-based preferences for content and delivery. The analysis in this chapter gives greater depth to our understanding of how factors relevant to design and delivery of programs are considered by coparents, allowing a view into the interpersonal dynamics of the decision-making processes whereby these factors are weighed and considered. It also adds weight to the recommendation of Panter-Brick et al. (2014) that it is optimal that both coparents attend and should be a prerogative for those in the parenting program space.

In summary, this chapter addressed Qualitative Research Question 1, with the analysis demonstrating how the deliberations by couples of external factors facilitate or inhibit father involvement in parenting interventions. Work demands and the timing of such offerings, the availability of childcare, and preferences regarding program format were factors identified by couples in their discussions and confirm findings in previous research on parenting program participation. If all external factors, once considered, made conditions favourable for both parents to attend, then this was the confirmed preference in response to the hypothetical. If any of said factors were inhibiting, the couples co-operatively 'brainstormed' all possible solutions that might enable them both to attend. However, a finding of particular importance from this study was that if one factor alone, or a combination of factors, proved too difficult to enable both to attend, the consensus decision would be that the mother would attend the program alone in all but one couple. These deliberations demonstrate how easily a seemingly 'default like' position is taken when opposition is encountered to both attending. It was

evident in the couples' decision-making processes that when such factors prevail, mothers are perceived as the better candidate to attend on the couple's behalf. Reasons given related to work demands, childcare arrangements, and the format or nature of the program being perceived as more mother-friendly, as well as other factors more relevant to the couple dyad such as coparenting attitudes, which are discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 5: COPARENTING FACTORS INHIBITING OR FACILITATING FATHER INVOLVEMENT

This chapter contributes to addressing Qualitative Research Questions 1 and 2 and explores the second identified theme: barriers and facilitators to father involvement in parenting interventions associated with Coparenting Factors. These include cultural influences or beliefs that act upon the individuals of the microsystem as expressed by attitudes and beliefs towards coparenting. This theme references specific aspects of the couples' deliberations that are related to coparenting factors, that is, they consider the hypothetical scenario of attending a parenting program, and specifically, the fathers' importance in attending together with his partner, as influenced by their shared and individual attitudes towards coparenting. Couples also reflected on their experiences of coparenting together, from the early beginnings during the period of transition to parenthood till the present. Some couples also reflected on their family of origin experiences and influences. Coparenting attitudes are formed or shared by factors such as gender role attitudes, influences from family of origin, and social/cultural factors. The subthemes of gender roles, society and culture, and attitudes towards father involvement are identified and discussed along with examples from the transcripts.

Background

Coparenting is defined as the way in which parents come together to meet the complex needs of childrearing over the lifespan of the child (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). It includes the way the couple organise and manage their time, tasks, and parental issues related to childrearing as well as the facilitation of family interactions (Lee et al., 2018; Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015; Feinberg, 2002). The coparenting relationship is seen as the head management team of the family unit and functions as a result of how well the two

parents work together (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). Attitudes towards coparenting are shaped through societal and contextual influences, such as gender role norms and expectations. The coparenting relationship is an important aspect of childrearing, with high quality coparenting tending to be conducive to support for critical parenting behaviours, and importantly, is supportive of father involvement (Lee et al., 2019). Research suggests that mutually supportive and cooperative coparenting relationships increase the quality of interactions between parents, and their subjective experience of parenting (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Different beliefs and expectations regarding appropriate caregiving roles of mothers and fathers between members of the parental couple may be a source of conflict within the coparenting relationship (Feinberg, 2003). How couples resolve these conflicts can establish a pattern of behaviours for future coparenting dilemmas. The transition to parenthood is a critical period when couples establish how they expect to coparent together, which can be enduring throughout their coparenting relationship (Feinberg, 2003)

Findings

During the interviews, couples commented on early developmental experiences they had as a couple during the period of transition to parenthood that had been influential in the formation of their approach to coparenting. Other data highlighted in the transcripts include the influences of parents, friends, employers, and society, and the Australian cultural context, that shaped their attitudes to coparenting. The themes identified that were relevant to the formation of coparenting attitudes highlighted through analysis of the interview transcripts were: gender role attitudes, society and cultural influences, and attitudes towards father involvement.

Table 4 Themes identified in the couples' transcripts representative of coparenting factors

Subtheme	Description
Parenting Roles	Attitudes or expectations of the role of each parent in the coparenting dyad
Society and Culture	Influences of Australian society and culture, including through family of origin experiences, that shape attitudes towards coparenting
Importance of Fathers	Attitudes of both mothers and fathers towards the importance of fathers in childcare and parenting

Subtheme 1: Parenting Roles

The couples reflected upon their experiences of coparenting together, mostly with fondness. Most couples reported a desire to coparent together effectively from the early transition to parenthood stage, as is well reflected by the following comment made by Jeff:

> *We pretty much want to be on the same page, and I think that's been the case for our relationship pre-children too (Jeff – Couple 3)*

Richard and Amanda (Couple 4) said the need to effectively coparent together was a necessity due to the lack of resources or support. They describe an attitude of teamwork that was enshrined in their relationship from the very beginning, as the following statement captures:

> *we had to because we never had family around us either. So, where a lot of people could go back to their – to the grandparents, we didn't have it at all. So [we had to] do it ourselves (Richard – Couple 4)*

David and Dana (Couple 11) also reported they had discussions in the preliminary stages of their parenting journey on how they hoped to coparent together. As David remembers:

> *We both wanted children, we had like similar values and ideas about how to raise kids and how not to...and we were both of the same sort of opinion. So, like there was a bit of a consensus of what not to do and what we sort of felt was valuable in terms of raising children. So, we kind of established that a long time before we had kids. I guess we had those conversations inadvertently, I guess you start talking about parenting and looking at how other people parent and this is what I wouldn't do, this is what I would do (David – Couple 11)*

In contrast, other couples indicated that they approached coparenting with a 'trial and error' attitude, willing to learn as they went along, as described by Kevin below:

> *Both of us didn't know what we were doing, so you just have a chat and see if you can nut it out. … you've got no idea, and the other ones got no idea, well you just go with it. If there's no trust in your relationship then you're buggered from the start I reckon (Kevin – Couple 2)*

Jenny and Sam (Couple 8) also reported a similar attitude in their coparenting development, as depicted in the following comments:

> *I suppose I would come up with an idea and then put it to you, and then we try it and see how it goes (Laughing) (Jenny – Couple 8)*
>
> *Interviewer: And then if it works keep doing it?*
>
> *Absolutely (Jenny – Couple 8)*
>
> *Yeah if not try something else (Sam – Couple 8).*

Most couples indicated that their style developed incrementally. Their coparenting attitudes and approach have changed over the course of their parenthood journey, impacted by the arrival of each child and the surrounding challenges. For example:

> *I feel like this has evolved across time. I feel like when the kids were little, you certainly, kind of, just deferred to me a little bit more and just followed what I did or said or recommended. Whereas now that – now it's definitely 50/50 and both on board. Having said that, even when they were young if I said read a book, you'd read it and be engaged in it (Amanda – Couple 4)*

In considering the hypothetical scenario, most couples initially indicated a preference to attend together, and that was consistent with their shared approach to coparenting. Most indicated that they had hoped to have a more egalitarian approach to coparenting, with a more equal sharing of domestic and work life. For example:

> *This is 50/50, we have the same job. I do the exact same job as he does, so if I can have the same career as you, why can't I have the same home life as you? Feminists didn't fight for us to have these rights without sharing some of them with, with rights come responsibilities and … I just expect it (Michelle – Couple 9)*
>
> *We both wanted children, we had like similar values and ideas about how to raise kids and how not to…. So like there was a bit of a consensus of what not to do and what we sort of felt was valuable in terms of raising children (David – Couple 11)*

The couples described experiences in their parenting journey that influenced the formation of their coparenting attitudes, which underpinned their decision-making process. Parent roles and gender stereotypes were acknowledged as an influence on their coparenting. A few couples reported very traditional gender roles, which were reflected in their approach to parenting. The following exchange between Sam and Jenny (Couple 8) is an example of more traditional views of gender roles being adhered to:

Firstly, I think it's a given that the mother is going to stay at home I think. I don't think we ever really needed to have that conversation, you were the main bread winner, you earnt more, you had more of a 'career', ... than I did. So, it just made sense ... I think it was always known… it's built in, it's who you are and the way that it works in your head and in life and forever has been, that you go out, you're the hunter, you're the gatherer and then you come home, and you show us your wears (laughing together) from the day, and we then prepare it and do everything else (laughing) ... She then prepares it, she then looks after the children, she raises the children, she [cleans] the house ... That's why I think it's an automatic given…and I'm not the one standing there fighting for change (laughing). Sam always jokes when we talk about, he takes the rubbish out, that's the man's job in our house, and he says to me, darling the bin is full you can take it out, I'm like nuh (Jenny – Couple 8)

Equal opportunity I say [both laugh] (Sam – Couple 8)

So he always jokes about equal opportunity and I'm like, look I never stood up and burnt my bra I'm quite happy with you being the man in the house (Jenny – Couple 8)

Role differentiation according to gender and the impacts on coparenting were also commented on by many of the couples. This is reflected in the following exchange between Mary and Simon (Couple 6):

We've worked it out so it's manageable, but if you were to ask, I think Mary would feel that she takes on… (Simon – Couple 6)

I was just thinking if we go by the kids, if the kids have a need they'll come to me unless it's to fix something then they'll be like 'Dad fixes things'; like if a toy breaks 'take it to Dad' (Mary – Couple 6)

And even at night time Mary… they'll be upset because of the day and it's Mary that's spending the time with them to work through that, whereas I just say 'go to sleep' (Simon – Couple 6)

For those who started with a more traditional approach, some couples described going through a period of adjustment in their roles as parents, after having time to reflect on the influences of gender stereotypes, which resulted in wanting a more egalitarian approach to coparenting. The following exchange with Couple 4 demonstrates this:

Interviewer: So, [in the] early days, you're saying that you … tended to be… more the lead around …child 'stuff'.

Definitely. Yes (Amanda – Couple 4)

Yeah, it was just something – I think we we're a very traditional nuclear family at that particular point in time (Richard – Couple 4)

I think we were evolving as a couple as well…I think – especially when the kids were really young – our views were very traditional. Richard went out and earned the money and expected that things were organised at home. And when the wheels completely fell off with that as a philosophy…[laughter]…So, now it's… different…[and] being okay with wanting that. I think we get fed by society a little bit…I also have a right to choose something else as well and choose to feel – do something that feels right for me...[and] as a couple too (Amanda – Couple 4)

In one instance, Couple 5 reported that they had discussed that the father would prefer to be a 'stay-at-home dad' to raise their children as both agreed he was more suited to this role based on certain personal qualities. This would be considered a very non-traditional approach in contemporary society, although is becoming more common. However, their desires to take a less traditional approach to parenting roles were thwarted by less flexible

employment options for Jack, and greater support for Jillian to take a traditional path, as Jillian and Jack explain:

Jack: I was going to be the one staying at home.

Jillian: there was no jobs, part-time jobs that he could go to whereas I could cut my hours back at work, he couldn't do that, he was just not allowed so that's why I ended up being the stay-at-home parent and Jack working full-time. We actually didn't want to do that.

Jack: Yeah, it wasn't our first choice.

Jillian: He was the more patient one. I enjoyed my job, I was good at my job, the pay was better, so we were kind of back and forth with all of these and there wasn't a lot of arguments, well, why wouldn't we do it…But then we just couldn't logistically do it because we couldn't – you couldn't get a job, could you?

Jack: No, the place where I was at, they didn't have part-timers at all and as far as getting a part-time job was concerned, it was going to be considerably less money and I wouldn't get to choose what hours I did.

Interviewer: So the flexibility wasn't there. Financially it was not going to be a good option. In a way it sounds like it almost made the decision for you in a way, didn't it?

Jillian: Definitely because we got better leave pay, we got better flexibility in coming back in terms of we could pick our days a little bit more flexibly, [Company] is pretty good and when you're coming back to work, you – for the first 12 months it would have been, they really worked with me because I was breast feeding as well because … was four months when I went back, he would have to bring him in to me on the weekends and things so they were very flexible so I was like we had to do it because they were willing to work with us whereas his work was not willing to work with us at all.

Interviewer: And what about yourself [to Jack], do you have times where you feel like, geez, I really wanted to be that dad and stay at home and have those early years with the kids and –?

Jack: Yeah, for sure, …You feel that it's been denied you a little bit… I mean, I sort of understand that everyone has to make sacrifices, that sort of stuff. It would have been nice if we could do what we had planned.

Attitudes amongst employers are a societal and cultural influence and were explored in the previous chapter relating to the external demands theme. However, it is noteworthy that the dismissive reaction of this father's employer to his desire to take on the childcare role, compared to the far more flexible workplace of his partner, and different attitudes to her as a mother, almost created a forced choice towards a more traditional path as parents, which was not what they both desired. Many years later both lamented what might have been their experience if there had been better support for their non-traditional path. However, another father's experience was in complete contrast. Phillip and Elizabeth (Couple 1) explain:

Elizabeth: so [he] went to speak to his boss and said, look, my wife's – she got herself a new job, we've got a 3-month-old baby and your boss said, work from home for two days a week while she goes to work.

Phillip: Yeah, so, I … [worked from home] two days a week ….

Elizabeth: Which was amazing.

Phillip: We got him into childcare for one day a week and…

Elizabeth: So, I only worked 2 days a week and [he] worked from home for those two days with [child's name] as a baby and then that continued, I think – I'm sure your boss let us do it until he was about 6 or 7 months old and then he went into childcare.

In sum, the couples in this sample reported experiences indicative of most parents' coparenting journeys, with changes over time in response to the challenges encountered.

Most noted the influence of gender stereotypes on the roles they took in that partnership. While some were able to explore different approaches, the majority have felt comfortable in traditional roles and approaches, except that there is a more shared approach to family life in their homes. Contextual influences such as society and culture became evident and are explored further in the following theme.

Subtheme 2: Society and Culture

Many of the couples mentioned cultural or social influences. For example, couples referred to aspects of Australian culture that have influenced their coparenting attitudes. The following from Michelle (Couple 9) is an example:

> *I think it's a cultural thing as well. There's unfortunately in our country, I think there's a culture of kind of that's not the male's job [childcare]. The male's job is that they go to work and then they watch football and drink beer…I think something that will help that is a little bit more public advertising around the importance of dads, the value of dads. A little bit more than just the socks and ties on Fathers' Day, kind of stuff, but really valuing the input that men have instead of thinking that dads are so secondary to mothers, because I've never thought, apart from breastfeeding and birthing, there's nothing that Mark can't do and that's been really important to me that he has been involved in that, but I don't know if that's public perception. I think dads are really underappreciated and there needs to be a little bit of a stronger cultural message and I think the media could have a big role in that, in how we promote dads, how we write dads into our television scripts, how they're represented in popular movies [etc.] (Michelle – Couple 9)*

Societal and cultural influences are often filtered down to members of society through their family of origin experiences. Most couples noted the influence of attitudes towards coparenting from their own childhoods. When reflecting on their own parents' coparenting

approach, Jack and Jillian (Couple 5) reported that they learned from their observations and experiences of their own parents, and absorbed parts that they felt were desirable, and discarded others:

so I think we took what they did, pulled it to bits and picked out what we wanted (Jillian – Couple 5)

reconstructed a new idea of what we wanted to be (Jack – Couple 5)

For many, their coparenting approach, and especially father involvement, was quite different to their own family of origin experiences. Elizabeth (Couple 1) described the following observations of Phillip's engagement in childcare:

I think one of the early things was – and that's very different say to my parents' generation is you got in there right from the start. You were changing nappies, you were getting up in the night – we bottle fed so I was getting up. So, I think I felt very much a part of his [child] early nurturing as much as Phillip. It was very shared responsibilities (Elizabeth – Couple 1).

Michelle and Mark (Couple 9) also indicated their experiences of being parented having an impact, but more from a desire of wanting something similar in a more equitable arrangement, which they say was evident in their own families of origin:

But I think that's a lot of subconscious following of patterning from parents that was done in the generation before. I just expect that Mark's going to do the same things that I'm going to do (Michelle – Couple 9)

50/50 (Mark – Couple 9)

Kevin was raised by a very involved father, reporting that his father '*was happy doing all the parenting stuff, yeah no problems at all [reflections of own father]'* (Kevin – Couple 2), whereas others embarked on a mission to parent quite differently to their experiences in

their family of origin. For example, not wanting to repeat the experiences of the past, Brad (Couple 10) set out to be much more available to his own children:

> *That was one of the key things which was weighing on me – which was I didn't want this to be the model for my kids to think that when they grow up, that if they're in a relationship it's normal for people to be away from their family so much. So that was a – that was a key determiner trying to reduce that. But these days – no, it's very different because I'm actually around. I am available (Brad – Couple 10)*

Parents in this sample noted the influences of society and culture on their approach to coparenting. These influences were often mediated through culture, employment, or family of origin experiences. Of note, many of the fathers wanted to explore more involved approaches to fathering to what had been the societal or cultural experiences in their own childhoods, and this is explored further in the following theme.

Subtheme 3: Coparents Attitudes Towards the Importance of Fathers

Many couples reported on their attitudes towards father involvement in parenting. For some, this was clear during the transition to parenthood phase. Most of the fathers in the sample reported a desire to be actively involved in parenting their children early in the transition to parenting period. *'I was 30 and I was quite excited about being a new dad, very committed to it'* (Phillip – Couple 1). Many reported examples of changes they made, such as reductions in work-related travel and career choices that enabled them to be available to their children, and to share the burden of childcare more equitably. David (Couple 11) indicated that he really enjoyed caring for young children and chose to take a more administrative business hours career that allowed for family friendly hours so that he could be an involved father, despite having tertiary qualifications and a career trajectory towards a more professional pathway that would take him away often. As David states:

I like little kids and, do you know what I mean, like I didn't want to father a child to fob it off to the mother and the grandmother (David – Couple 11)

Many of the fathers described a real intent to be incredibly involved in raising their children. Mark (Couple 9) reported being very assertive with his partner Michelle, insisting that he do things to provide care for his young daughters. Initially this caused some conflict with Michelle, as they had different ways of doing things, but in time this has forged a strong alliance between them as parents, and a special bond for Mark with his daughters.

Consistent with father involvement literature, the fathers in this sample acknowledged the child/s gender as having played a role in determining the fathers' feelings of comfort in their involvement. For example:

Obviously, I'm used to saying my boys and probably at the moment I don't think it's a slip that I say my boys because I do see at this stage I will admit, I do see [daughter] mostly as Janet's job. I play with her; I talk with her; I hold her; I bathe her – bathing is my job but I do see her more as Janet's job, whereas I do see the boys more at the moment as my job (Jeff – Couple 3)

Similarly, consistent with the literature on father involvement, the age of the children can moderate a father's involvement of raising children over time. This was noted by one of the mothers, Amanda (Couple 4) in the following example:

I feel like in some ways it is interesting because to me it is age dependent… Richard's assertiveness around being actively engaged with the girls – the desire has always been there, but his assertiveness around it has been more recent in the last 3 or 4 years I'd say (Amanda – Couple 4)

For some fathers, the language of emotions and helping their children when distressed is not an area of comfort or strength and seen as the domain of mothers. For example:

I think then it comes down to the scenario that we're trying to address as to who was relating to it more. So, if it was a[n] emotional distress and stuff, I'd say you'd be more likely to go because it – they're speaking a language you can understand better than I can (emphasis added). But then if it's another issue – academics or music or whatever it is – I might be the one who's better suited between the two of us to go (Richard – Couple 4)

Mothers who may have initially held more traditional expectations of parenting, but were willing to allow for their partner's influence, found this had a positive effect on their own parenting. Most of the mothers reported feeling extraordinarily strong support for father involvement in coparenting, as shown below:

I notice different from you [to father] to many other dads in that you were part of the kids routines very early on, like from birth, bathing and settling to bed, and those things. But you did that from the beginning…You knew what you were doing. From the first one, yeah, you were always putting them to bed, or feeding them if you could, or whatever…Everyone's got their own way of doing stuff, he'd just do it his way (Fiona – Couple 2)

dads are really important, and I think for me, that is a fundamental value that I hold. Dads are crucial, and we have daughters, so that's even more important to me. You are the blueprint for the first relationship they will have in their life – wow, pressure's on, man, you've got to do this and you've got to do it well, so read this and watch this, let's grow together and be better parents together so that we can try and do a better job for our daughters than we've seen be done for your sisters because they haven't really fared so well, not having an involved dad, but my relationship with my dad is beautiful and I really love and respect this person even though his parenting has often

not been what I would like to choose to do, but the closeness that I have with him is really important to me in my life and throughout my childhood (Michelle – Couple 9)

Most couples described more of an evolution of ideas on father involvement as they traversed the territory of parenting together. Michelle (Couple 9) reported increased comfort over time with 'dad's way' of doing things:

Mark: As we moved forward as well, I think Michelle saw that she could let go and because being the father, I did things differently…

Michelle: We have a book, 'Daddies are for Wild Things'.

Mark: But then, I … situation we were at the park, I'd go, it's okay, you don't have to go over there and hold her hand, let her have a bit of space…and let her graze her knee, it's okay.

Michelle: Yeah, so dads are super important.

Mark: And, I guess, I feel like it gave Michelle the opportunity to move out of that kind of real helicopter time early on to a position where she went, oh, yeah, it's okay, they …

Michelle: I saw that they bounce.

Mark: Yeah (laughter).

The path to involved fathering can often be strewn with obstacles. Fathers themselves reported that they have sometimes felt that their partners held a position of power as mothers and have been relegated into a position of being less involved. Some of the fathers had to negotiate a role that was more involved, with apparent permission seeking from some of the mothers, as evident of some form of power differential held by mothers due to the nature of that role. For example:

I kind of wonder, I guess, whether or not it's a case of a lot of mothers kind of go into motherhood and feel like, especially you were saying about being a powerful woman,

it's about being able to do this and take control of this, and yet by doing that, in some ways they're pushing the fathers into a position where they can't get involved and can't get into that sort of situation, in a way… And then that then continues on right through parenting where the fathers are still on the outer (Mark – Couple 9)

Of note in this sample was a representation of fathers who wanted to be actively involved in parenting from the outset. Two fathers within the group took on shared-care arrangements when the children were in their infancy, and one father wanted to be a stay-at-home father. These dads represent a shift in attitudes towards father involvement, and importantly, recognition that fathers are capable of more nurturing roles traditionally seen as the domain of mothers. This is in line with the notion of 'new fathers' or 'new age fathers' which has been expressed in the literature. The mothers in the sample were generally very encouraging and welcoming of their partners' involvement and held highly favourable attitudes towards the role of fathers in the lives of their children.

Discussion

The sample of couples displayed attitudes towards coparenting that existed at the period of transition to parenthood and were shaped by social and cultural factors. In each of the transcripts, it was noted that many of the parents approached the transition to parenting with thoughts of how they hoped to coparent. The couples' coparenting approaches further evolved over time, however for most, traditional views towards coparenting were held, with evidence of maternal essentialism displayed in comments by both mothers and fathers (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2021). Attitudes towards father involvement were favourable for both mothers and fathers, and actively fostered in the coparenting relationship. There were some indications that the fathers' involvement was facilitated by mothers, often referred to in parenting literature as maternal gatekeeping (gate opening) behaviours. However, there were also examples where fathers showed initiative in the coparenting space and in a way 'pushed'

the maternal gate wide open, enthusiastically wanting to be in the coparenting space. This was met with a warm embrace by most mothers, with only a few examples where there was sense of conflict over the 'management' of the family.

Two couples reported a very modern or contemporary approach to coparenting that arose in the early stages. For one couple, David and Dana (Couple 11), their aspirations were for a more egalitarian model of coparenting, equally sharing both unpaid and paid work in their family life. David felt more than capable and competent in his role as a potential father, certainly meeting the criteria of the description in the literature of 'new fathers' or 'new age fathers'. Of all the couples, David and Dana were the only ones who decided that if only one couple would attend then in their case it would be David, the father. David's enthusiasm to be an involved father, since before they had children together, has been maintained through the course of their coparenting journey.

In summary, when couples considered a hypothetical scenario of attending a parenting program, the decision-making process was influenced by underlying factors in the coparenting relationship. These were shaped and formed through societal and cultural influences, in the refiner's fire of the coparenting experience. These coparenting attitudes were pivotal in the couples' considerations of the scenario, as when there were inhibiting factors to both attending, such as work demands, the consensus decision was for the mother to attend. This analysis of coparenting factors contributes to addressing Qualitative Research Question 1. In regard to Qualitative Research Question 2, the decision whether to attend was consistent with a pattern of similar decisions in the coparenting history where the mother was seen as having some higher level of expertise in the care of children. This expertise was often attributed to the mother's traditional role in the home, with her being viewed as the primary carer or lead parent. Sometimes this was fostered by mothers themselves, and there were also indications that this may have been facilitated by the fathers, again also based on traditional

views. These experiences are consistent with the notion of maternal essentialism, which often underlies the phenomenon of maternal gatekeeping, which will be explored further in the following chapter on interpersonal factors.

CHAPTER 6: MICROSYSTEMIC FACTORS RELATING TO THE DYNAMICS OF THE COPARENTING RELATIONSHIP

This chapter contributes to addressing Qualitative Research Questions 1 and 2 and explores the third identified theme: barriers and facilitators to father involvement in parenting interventions associated with microsystemic factors. This theme relates specifically to the executive subsystem of the family, and the dynamics within the coparenting relationship. The subthemes of interparental conflict and maternal gatekeeping were identified in reviewing the transcripts. These are described, with connection to excerpts from the transcriptions.

Background

One aspect of the coparenting relationship that may impact on father involvement is interparental conflict (Waller, 2012). Conflict may be 'between' the parents for reasons related to their relationship or relating to their parenting together. Evidence suggests that interparental conflict affects fathers' involvement with children more than mothers' involvement (Waller, 2012). Conflict may escalate into arguments and friction or may settle through consensus decision-making where there is a negotiated outcome. Relationship quality is correlated with behavioural characteristics in coparenting, such that conflict leads to a lower level of positive parenting behaviour (Fagan, Day, Lamb, & Cabrera, 2014). In relationships where parents disagree about how to parent, the chance of conflict is much higher (Feinberg et al., 2014). Mothers may fall into a pattern of taking a lead role in the parenting space, and can either facilitate or inhibit father involvement, a phenomenon known as maternal gatekeeping (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2021). Further, fathers may possibly collude with mothers to reduce conflict, and limit their involvement in domestic life, keeping their contribution limited to specific tasks, maintaining a 'status quo' (Pedersen & Kilzer, 2014). Fathers' collusion may be unconscious or conscious acquiescence

to mothers' attitudes or behaviours, relegated to a position of 'amateur' or 'lesser' parent, influenced perhaps through notions of maternal essentialism.

Findings

The two themes comprising microsystemic factors highlighted through analysis of the interview transcripts were interparental conflict and maternal gatekeeping. Conflict was not always evident by 'heated exchange' or disagreement, but often the resolution of the conflict by the father acquiescing to the outcome of the mother attending the program, with little contention or resistance. When exploring this negotiated outcome further, the theme of maternal gatekeeping became evident. There is an overlap here between the two themes, however it is important to consider them separately.

Table 5 Themes identified in the couples' transcripts representative of microsystemic factors

Subtheme	Description
Inter-parental conflict	Conflict, and the resolution thereof, that arose in the couple's discussion of the hypothetical scenario, and also in their general parenting narrative
Maternal Gatekeeping	Attitudes and behaviours by both mothers that exhibit either facilitating or inhibiting behaviours of father involvement.

Subtheme 1: Interparental Conflict

Building on the previous chapter, to provide context to the couples' parenting history, it is important to first consider the experience of couples in working through conflict that arose in their coparenting journey, and how such conflicts have traditionally been resolved. Most couples acknowledged that coparenting together had at times resulted in conflict

between them, which had caused tension in their relationship, and the need to find compromise. When reflecting about their experiences as parents, most couples indicated a level of conflict that they have needed to navigate. The following exchange between Mark and Michelle (Couple 9) is noteworthy:

> *Michelle: I think at times we have gone head-to-head.*
>
> *Mark: Yeah, so there's been definite locked horns. But then again, that's because we both care and that's because we're both invested in this thing called parenting.*
>
> *Michelle: and…I'm like, well, sit down, put your beer away, turn the football off, we're going to talk about this. This isn't what a team looks like. I feel like I'm carrying the lion's share here, what do you think about that? And Mark has always been very reasonable in saying, 'righto, okay, fair enough, we did agree to that, let's do it'. It's begrudgingly, it's not perfect and sometimes it's heated and we shout at each other, but generally, if we agree to do something, we agree to do it together and with parenting...there's going to be things that are uncomfortable that we have to talk about and you need to promise that you'll work through that.*

Another example is offered from David and Dana's (Couple 11) experience. Both reported a willingness to discuss and work through any differences in their parenting, and that the leadership role was more shared and balanced, especially as David had a strong desire to be engaged. For example:

> *David: I'm [a] pretty opinionated sort of dude too, so that does come through in the parenting, like I've always [wanted to] discuss things because I think we've got something to discuss. I feel comfortable expressing my opinions to be honest with you.*
>
> *Dana: it's amazing...It's great cos … [I] see friends and their husbands don't care, it's like 'well you wanted the babies', 'you're the mum', yeah whereas we are the complete opposite to that, it's really nice.*

In terms of the hypothetical scenario, couples were asked if there might be any conflict that may arise when considering this situation. Couples did not indicate any heightened levels of conflict that they would predict or expect. Some noted that external pressures (e.g., work demands as noted in Chapter 3) may cause some conflict for them to navigate for them to attend together. However, very few indicated any inter-relationship conflict. For example:

> *I'm thinking more conflicting demands, rather than conflicts between us (Fiona – Couple 2)*
>
> *I don't think it [i.e., the decision-making process] would cause much conflict (Janet – Couple 3)*

Phillip and Elizabeth (Couple 1) indicated that it may cause conflict if there was a differing view of the value of the program to them both as a couple:

> *the only conflict would be if one of us sees value and the other one doesn't because obviously if I'm going…[and] you're not finding it personally valuable, you're not …doing it because you feel kind of pressured or guilty. That's not a good reason to be doing these types of things. I think the key important thing is that we mutually agree that it's valuable and I think there'd be no conflict (Phillip – Couple 1)*

Simon (Couple 6) did indicate that the discussion around the importance of attending the program might cause some conflict, and that he might tend to withdraw in order to avoid further conflict on the issue. For example:

> *I know Mary is mainly the one that identifies that there's improvements that could be made and she usually starts to discuss that and I usually shut down I suppose and almost start off at the point of not acknowledging that there is issues and that things are probably going well. So I'm probably a bit more resistant towards that, whereas Mary is going you know, all the information that we can get is going to be helpful and*

that we can always be doing things better; so that's probably my response to it (Simon – Couple 6)

When the interviewer intensified the hypothetical scenario to the point where external factors such as timing, costs, childcare etc. might only allow for only one parent to attend, in every dyad except one, it was decided that the mother would attend alone, without much protest by the father. The following exchange between Sam and Jenny (Couple 8) when deliberating on this scenario is given as an example:

Sam: We're probably just stereotypical and yeah.

Jenny: It would be me that would go.

Sam: It would be [you that would] go, yeah.

Sam and Jenny's response to this scenario was typical for the majority of the couples and is very poignant. Note that Sam's response to Jenny indicates that she would go on their behalf and he displays no resentment, and almost a sense of it being a normal pattern in the decision-making in their relationship.

Some mothers indicated frustration or irritation with their partners over this tendency to be left holding the metaphorical and literal baby when it comes to parenting. For example, Mary and Simon (Couple 6) report some tension around this issue in the following comments:

Simon: Mary is mainly the one that identifies that there's improvements that could be made and she usually starts to discuss that, and I usually shut down…My observations is Mary gives up and she just does it herself. So, it's almost like 'if I can't convince him to come on board I will try and make the changes how I can and try and bring in some type of system and hope that he comes on board eventually'.

Mary: I say it causes major friction in our relationship because I get so frustrated with me being the parent that goes and does these things and learns it and then

implements things with the kids and the kids really respond to a lot of the stuff and Simon resists it...So it's a major source of friction and I think it's to his deficit that he doesn't do it because he's then left with no tools in his tool bag to respond to the kids, but he can see that they're working for me because he often comes to me when they're not listening to him going 'Mary, they're not listening to me what do I do' or 'Mary you go fix it'.

Katie and Allan (Couple 12) also reported some conflict that occurs in their relationship over the sharing of parenting responsibilities:

Allan: Yeah, I'll go along with anything.

Katie: I was going to say, that's pretty much how the whole, our whole marriage runs with everything ... (Laughing). I'd like it to be more 50/50 probably a lot of our argument stems from that. I do get tired of running everything but it's like if you want it done well do it yourself, hey? I guess that's where my skill lies do you think, of organising it and his is to follow, so ...

David and Dana (Couple 11) were the only couple where it was indicated that a father would attend the program if only one parent were able. The following exchange shows that this was based on a fairly established pattern in this couple's decision-making history regarding parenting matters:

Well, I guess there's been plenty of times when I've attended [events]...it's more of just how it suits [us both] isn't it really (David – Couple 11)

Yeah, I'm very comfortable knowing that David's going (Dana – Couple 11)

In most couples, where it was decided that the mother would go in order to resolve the conflicted scenario, the fathers did not offer any objection or disappointment in following the lead of the mother. It was a *fait accompli*. In terms of the mothers' behaviour in this negotiation, there was no evidence of hostility towards the fathers; there were frustrations

noted on the part of some, yet there was a sense of assumption of a 'lead role' in the parenting space that fell upon the mothers. Fathers' comments could also be considered to show some form of collusion with this, noting their consent to the mothers' leadership in parenting or childcare matters. This is explored further in the following theme.

Subtheme 2: Maternal Gatekeeping

When reflecting on their responses to the hypothetical scenario, the theme of the mother being viewed as a lead parent, or having greater expertise on childcare, became evident. Comments of note were indications by the fathers that they saw this domain (emotional, behavioural, or other problems in children) as being the sphere of the mother. For example, Richard indicated that:

> *it comes down to the scenario that we're trying to address as to who was relating to it more. So if it was emotional distress and stuff, I'd say you'd be more likely to go because it – they're speaking a language you can understand better than I can (Richard – Couple 4).*

Reasons given often indicated greater interest or level of expertise attributed to the mother over the father around parenting or child development. Many of the couples made statements that indicated that this position of 'lead parent' was an understanding shared in their relationship; the fathers gave little resistance to this and made comments to note their concurrence with this status. This is evident in the following exchange between Richard and Amanda (Couple 4):

> *Richard: That goes back to, I just did what you told me to do. (All laughing).*
>
> *Amanda: I want to clarify that and say we would do auto-pilot unless I wanted to do something differently, but we never have made any decisions about our girls or the way things are going to be done until we have both arrived at the decision together. In all fairness.*

Richard: Oh, but you definitely take the lead.

Although Kevin (Couple 2) shows a willingness to attend if absolutely necessary, Fiona (Couple 2) responds by asserting her role, as this exchange demonstrates:

Kevin: If for some reason that she just physically cannot go, then I'd just go.

Fiona: Yeah, but if not I would because it's my deal.

Rachel (Couple 10) notes that this role has fallen on her, and that parenting concerns are not often a focus for Brad (Couple 10), as demonstrated by the following;

me being the primary care giver, as being the mother, … and not working for a period of time I think that's just fallen to me to do a lot of those kind of … things that I guess sometimes are not in his circle of concern (Rachel – Couple 10)

Despite Mark and Michelle (Couple 9) having ambitions for an equitable partnership, there are key discussions that indicate a similar dynamic of 'lead parent', as in this exchange:

Mark: women have a lot of responsibility for establishing the ground rules in the relationship that if we're going to have kids together.

Michelle: so that's probably why I insist on it so much with Mark.

Similarly for Allan and Katie (Couple 12), where Allan indicated a willingness to go with Katie's lead, Allan indicated a belief that mothers have a more biological disposition that suits them to this role:

Interviewer: [So] a lady has more expertise with children or parenting…?

Allan: Well they were in there for 9 months so I suppose.

(All laughing)

Interviewer: So that incubation period caused some kind of high[er] learning?

(All laughing)

Allan: Yep.

Katie: I'd like it to be more 50/50 probably a lot of our argument stems from that. I do get tired of running everything but it's like if you want it done well do it yourself, hey?

Brad and Rachel (Couple 10) indicated that it had something to do with the mother being in the role of primary carer:

... me being the primary care giver, as being the mother, ... and not working for a period of time I think that's just fallen to me to do a lot of those kind of ... things that I guess sometimes are not in his circle of concern (Rachel – Couple 10)

David (Couple 11) commented on a particular attitude held by many fathers he knew that indicates many assume that mothers are the experts when it comes to children. In his words:

I definitely see that in friends ... that had that sort of opinion, it's like 'Oh well they're the mother so they know best' (David – Couple 11)

Of note was that this opinion was very much in contradiction to both David and Dana (Couple 11). Because David has training in allied health, Dana valued his opinion and input highly when it came to decisions regarding parenting as she reported feeling that David brought a level of expertise and science to the discussion.

David: Yeah, I guess we'd just both go wouldn't we .... Well, I guess there's been plenty of times when I've attended, not plenty of times but like there's been, it's more of just how it suits isn't it really…

Dana: Yeah I'm very comfortable knowing that David's going.

Most mothers indicated a sense of responsibility to take this position of 'lead parent', as if it were a responsibility imposed on them. For example:

it's sometimes hard for the mum to give over, because you feel all this responsibility (Fiona – Couple 2)

Some mothers also felt some frustration with professionals such as teachers or health care workers, who can foster the 'mother-as-lead parent' role or the idea of maternal essentialism inadvertently, as described by Jillian (Couple 5):

> *Well it's even like parent-teacher interviews because while they do have some available after work hours, they're the first ones that are filled up so they're very limited so generally dads don't get to interact with teachers either so they don't get that feeling of 'how's my child going', it's all relayed through me to say, well, the teacher said he did this today, this is what's occurred again or we've had a phone call from the school. Their first port of call is the mum and even when I was working, that was the case from day care, they would call me at work, they wouldn't think to call him [Jack] first (Jillian – Couple 5)*

Simon (Couple 6) reported finding it hard to take on board Mary's (Couple 6) leadership when it came to coparenting. He stated the following:

> *I do feel criticised if I'm not doing things a certain way and that's why I shut down because it's a feeling of not being good enough, so it's like okay what's – it's almost the attitude of 'what's the point then?' (Simon – Couple 6)*

Something particularly evident, both verbally in the transcripts, and in non-verbal communication as observed by the researcher, was the active facilitation by the fathers of the mother taking the lead parent role. The following exchanges, when placed side by side, demonstrate the active facilitation by fathers of this lead-taking tendency of the mothers:

> *So if it was emotional distress and stuff, I'd say you'd be more likely to go because it – they're speaking a language you can understand better than I can (Richard – Couple 4)*

Because Jillian's at home all the time and I'm at work, generally speaking it would be Jillian who would go … because she has a lot more to do with the kids before school, after school type of thing, so… (Jack – Couple 5)

Leia in our situation knows what she's talking about as well. So, I do sort of trust her judgement *(Luke – Couple 7)*

We're probably just stereotypical and yeah. It would be … [indicating Jenny] [would] go yeah (Sam – Couple 8)

So essentially, Michelle really drives it [referring to coparenting]… She's very persuasive (Laughter) (Mark – Couple 9)

Yeah, I'll go along with anything (Laughter) (Allan – Couple 12)

The above displays fathers' collusion with mothers in their taking a lead role. This was overtly through words chosen in the exchange, such as referring to the mother's expertise in parenting, or that they would follow the direction of the mothers when it came to parenting matters. These exchanges often involved the use of humour and laughter, perhaps to relieve any discomfort or tension within these exchanges.

Discussion

Most couples indicated that some level of conflict was normal and an understandable part of their coparenting relationship. However, when confronted with the hypothetical scenario of who would attend a parenting program, minimal conflict was evident. The scenario was resolved by the mother assuming the 'lead parent' role and the decision being made that she would attend, which the fathers fully supported. This followed a fairly traditional model of the role of mothers in the home. Most couples indicated that this was predicated on an understanding of attending a parenting program being seen as the mother's domain or place of expertise as 'lead parent', again consistent with the notion of maternal

essentialism. However, it would be wrong to place all of the responsibility of this outcome on the mother, and her 'gatekeeping' attitudes or behaviours. In many ways, it was evident to the researcher that the fathers were very much participants in this interpersonal exchange and outcome. The fathers, certainly in many ways verbally, were the ones to state their preference that it was mothers who were best placed to attend the parenting program. Of note, for the one couple who did not go with this status quo, David and Dana (Couple 11), it was due to a consistent pattern that the couple had established early in their coparenting relationship in the transition to parenthood phase, as noted in the previous chapter. David had established himself as capable and involved and felt happy to go to the program on the couple's behalf if needed. However, for most of the fathers, the decision that the mother would go was not resisted, but rather, was supported as the consistent pattern in their coparenting relationship, that the mother was understood as best placed to attend the program. Further, this outcome was in most cases facilitated by the fathers, or at least, was not in any way objected to by the fathers. In other words, the 'gate closing' was acquiesced to by the father. It is therefore important to note that the term 'maternal gatekeeping' maybe too obtuse or one-dimensional, in terms of describing such a phenomenon that can occur in the coparenting relationship. By interviewing couples, the researcher was able to observe the two-way exchange in this dyad in the executive system of the family and found that gatekeeping was more two directional. This is of additional importance not only to barriers to father involvement in parenting programs, but also to father involvement generally. In terms of the immediate conundrum of fathers' participation in parenting programs, Panter-Brick et al. (2014) are correct in their determination to see that parenting programs are targeted to coparents unconditionally. In other words, to make it a condition of participation that both available parents attend. Otherwise, despite the best endeavours to design father-friendly programs, it will all fail in the delivery if patterns continue whereby mothers are seen to be the primary parent

responsible for such matters, and fathers concur, as evident in these hypothetical scenarios. Greater consideration needs to be given to the coparenting relationship in future endeavours to improve best practice. This will be discussed in more detail in later chapters.

In summary**,** this chapter has explored themes of the couple dyad, such as interparental conflict, that impacted on couples deliberations of the hypothetical scenario, which contributed to addressing Qualitative Research Question 1. When couples considered a hypothetical scenario, they were asked to consider what, if any, conflict may ensue during the resolution of the dilemma. Couples spoke of the context of their coparenting, and how they typically resolve conflict as coparents. Regarding the scenario, couples were asked to discuss how they would resolve a situation in which only one of them might attend a parenting program. It was noted through the analysis of transcripts that the majority of mothers took a lead role in this scenario and the decision was made that they would attend on the couple's behalf. This was wholeheartedly agreed with by all the fathers, except one father who indicated he would happily attend alone. Most mothers indicated that this decision was based on acceptance of their leadership role in the coparenting arena, with fathers mentioning aspects of the mothers' expertise or interest in parenting or child development, giving them good reason to acquiesce to the decision of the mother attending. This was considered evidence of maternal essentialism contributing to a form of maternal gate closing to fathers' involvement, however a key observation was the active collusion by fathers in this interchange. These responses were considered in the specific context of the decision to attend a parenting program but were also explored with respect to how such coparenting patterns of decision-making may be influencing father involvement more generally, addressing Qualitative Research Question 2.

CHAPTER 7: DECISION-MAKING PROCESS OF COUPLES DELIBERATING HYPOTHETICAL SCENARIO

A major objective of this program of research was to observe the decision-making processes of couples as they deliberated over a hypothetical dilemma. This was a unique aspect to this study, as previous research has focused on more conventional methodological approaches, such as surveys and individual interview data, to understand the problem of low participation of fathers in parenting interventions. The following chapter reviews the decision-making process of each couple, assisted by the use of a model by Lee and Collins (1999) to aid interpretation and discussion, and addresses Qualitative Research Question 3. This chapter demonstrates how couples considered factors previously highlighted in the themes and subthemes, and the processing of such factors as they navigated the hypothetical scenario and came to a decision on their attendance. This chapter concludes with a discussion of the overall findings and implications of Study 1 with respect to the research questions.

As noted in the literature review, the coparenting relationship is a crucial element of the executive subsystem within the family system and is formed in the transition to parenthood stage when a couple has their first child. The term coparenting relates to the interplay of interpersonal relational factors between the two parents as they care for their children (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015; Olsavsky et al., 2019). This relationship is generally typified by behaviours relating to the support of each parent in childrearing, including agreements, division of roles, and general management of family life (Olsavsky et al., 2019). Couples engage in regular discussion, negotiation, and decision-making in relation to the needs and concerns of their children, often necessitating prioritising multiple competing demands. The coparenting relationship is dynamic, at times transactional, in nature, with feedback and feed-forward dimensions (Cabrera et al., 2014). In other words, one interaction leads to another, and feeds back into the system, influencing future

interactions, and repeated transactions lead to pattern formation, which in turn influences the ongoing functioning of the relationship. Therefore, couples who make regular decisions regarding their children will, over time, form a pattern of responses and an assumption of roles, that may be drawn upon time and again. As has been argued in this program of research, the decision-making process of couples in this sample will reveal important considerations for the present dilemma, which subsequently will also be indicative of the functioning of their coparenting relationships generally. This will have important considerations for father involvement in parenting interventions and fathering more universally.

The literature base regarding family decision-making was reviewed to find a robust model to use for this part of the analysis. Having consistent language and terms to use to describe the observations made assisted with the analysis. The search results focused on Lee and Collins (2000) as the researchers had developed their model based on assimilation of four other well-researched models that existed in the literature. The Lee and Collins (2000) model was therefore considered robust and well-grounded for this purpose. The family decision-making process proposed by Lee and Collins (2000) describes the strategies used by individual actors within these transactions and reduces them to the following five categories: experience, legitimate, coalition, emotion, and bargaining, the definitions for which are found in Table 6 below.

Table 6 Definitions used to assist with analysis of decision-making strategies of couples*

Term	Description
Experience	Influencing the outcome of the decision by referencing one's experience or knowledge.

Legitimate	Placing emphasis on one's stereotypical role, in order to influence outcome of decision. May involve a sense of a specialist taking charge or control.
Coalition	When members of a decision-making unit cooperate to achieve a particular outcome.
Emotion	Members of the dyad use emotive tactics to persuade or dominate in order to gain influence on the outcome.
Bargaining	Giving in to the other member on this occasion in order to obtain some other benefit.

*Adapted from Lee and Collins (2000).

Findings

Table 7 maps all couples in this process and the outcome that they came to in deciding who would attend the program. Note that this mapping shows an initial reaction to the dilemma and the indication of who would attend, an intermediary position after consideration of barriers and facilitators as per the semi-structured interview, and then the final decision made after couples navigated the scenario. The definitions by Lee and Collins (2000) are used to describe the strategies used during the process, as well as the outcome of each couple's decision-making process as observed by the researcher. Note that the strategies observed are weighted to denote the predominant strategy utilised by the couples and are therefore noted in Table 7 as primary and secondary in order (i.e., primary/secondary). Examples from the transcripts were chosen as useful exemplars to use in this chapter as they demonstrate the strategies employed in their discussions, and the outcomes reached, which are indicative of the sample as a whole.

Table 7 Couples' decision-making process regarding hypothetical scenario

	Pseudonym	Initial Decision	Intermediary Position	Final Decision	Strategy (Primary/Secondary)
Couple 1	Phillip and Elizabeth	Both Attend	Both	Mother attend – father less inclined to group format	Coalition
Couple 2	Kevin and Fiona	Both Attend	If mother cannot father willing	Mother attend – mother's expertise noted	Coalition/Experience
Couple 3	Jeff and Janet	Both Attend	Both attend	Mother attend – only if babysitting/work absolutely prevented both	Coalition/Legitimate
Couple 4	Amanda and Richard	Both Attend	Either – depends on issue	Mother attend – seen as emotional issue, so more suited to mother	Experience/Legitimate
Couple 5	Jillian and Jack	Both Attend	One or the other – mainly childcare noted as issue	Mother attend – mother noted as primary carer	Legitimate
Couple 6	Mary and Simon	Both Attend	Mother attend – reluctance of father	Mother attend – pattern in their coparenting	Legitimate/Emotion
Couple 7	Luke and Leia	Both Attend	Both attend	Mother attend – seen as having more expertise in such matters	Experience
Couple 8	Sam and Jenny	Both Attend	Mother – work likely to be a conflict for father	Mother attend – based on mother as primary carer	Legitimate
Couple 9	Mark and Michelle	Both Attend	Both attend	Mother – note mother's lead	Coalition/Experience
Couple 10	Brad and Rachel	Both Attend	Mother – mainly work and care conflicts	Mother attend – mother seen as primary carer	Legitimate
Couple 11	David and Dana	Both Attend	Both attend	Father attend – seen as his area of strength	Coalition
Couple 12	Allan and Katie	Both Attend	Both attend	Mother attend – mother seens as primary carer	Experience/Legitimate

Initial Reaction

In describing their decision-making process of who would attend the program, initially all couples indicated that their preferences were to attend together. Often colloquially referred to as a 'win: win' or consensus decision, and evidence of a coalition strategy taken early in the decision-making process. Hence this represented a consensus decision being reached, with both in agreement, and both pleased with the outcome of this process, with little conflict evident. David and Dana (Couple 11) were typical of many couples who indicated in their initial response that they would both attend, as evidenced by the following:

David: Yeah, I guess we'd just both go wouldn't we.

Dana: We would…Yeah I would always do my very best to go.

Similarly, Couple 3 (Jeff and Janet) are a good example from the sample of a couple who initially intended for both to attend, as indicated in this sample exchange:

Jeff: We would see what we could do so that both of us could hear some information.

Janet: Yeah I think we would both be going.

Jeff: We would both be there for sure.

Phillip and Elizabeth (Couple 1) reported egalitarian attitudes towards coparenting from the very outset, with both willing to adjust to share the paid and unpaid work in the home. They would seek each other's input on childrearing matters, and neither displayed any sense of leadership over the other in this domain. At the time of considering the hypothetical scenario, neither displayed any assertion that one should attend and not the other. The determination for an egalitarian approach to coparenting that was established in the period of transition to parenting was very evident years later when considering this dilemma. Their decision-making process typified that of a *coalition,* working through the different variables

that were considered. As evidenced in the following statement, Couple 1 indicated their initial preference would be for them to attend together:

> *Elizabeth: We'd both attend, yeah.*

Intermediate Position

The hypothetical scenario required couples to consider many variables in their decision-making process on whether they would attend together. As noted by Couple 8 (Sam and Jenny), the desire initially was for both to attend, but as the scenario continued, the possibility became increasingly difficult:

> *Sam: It's not the fact that we wouldn't want to it's just the obstacles of actually physically getting there or potentially getting there.*
>
> *Jenny: And we always try and do things together as I said so we both, like what we were talking about earlier so we can both learn the same things from the same trainer.*

As the scenario progresses, and barriers were noted, there was evidence of an *experience* or *legitimacy*-based strategy taken by fathers and mothers in the decision-making process. At the intermediary stage, some couples had indicated that the barriers noted would likely preclude them both attending, and the mother was noted as the one who would attend. Fathers in these exchanges often referenced a quality of the mothers as indications of the *experience* or *legitimacy* in this area (i.e. childrearing), which are shown by the following examples:

> *it comes down to the scenario that we're trying to address as to who was relating to it more. So if it was emotional distress and stuff, I'd say you'd be more likely to go because it – they're speaking a language you can understand better than I can (Richard – Couple 4).*

Leia in our situation knows what she's talking about as well. So, I do sort of trust her judgement (Luke – Couple 7)

Noteworthy is Couple 5, Jack and Jillian, who in the transition to parenting period also desired a more egalitarian model of the way they hoped to coparent together. Jack and Jillian agreed that Jack had a good disposition for caring for young children, and it was their preference that he take leave to care for their infant children, with Jillian to be the main breadwinner during that time. Unfortunately, Jack and Jillian met with barriers to this desired approach. As mentioned, Jack approached his employer hopeful of being able to obtain some flexibility in his work arrangements so he might take some parental leave when each of the children were born, and that he might be able to have a more flexible work schedule, so he could more equally share the unpaid and paid work with his partner. However, the barriers that he encountered with his employer led to Jack and Jillian reverting to a more traditional role, whereby Jillian ended up taking the significant maternity leave needed to care for their infant children, and then maintained a more flexible work arrangement with her employer while they continued to raise their young children. Jack was resigned to taking the more traditional role of primary breadwinner, despite his earlier wishes. When we then follow this couple through to the scenario that is presented to them, where their children are much older in their primary school years, we see the responses to the hypothetical dilemma are consistent to the pattern laid down in the transition to parenting period. Jillian takes the lead in seeking this parenting assistance, and Jack remains in a secondary role, more as a supporter and in the more traditional role of primary breadwinner. Jack notes Jillian's role as primary carer as his reasoning, which is indicative of a *legitimate* strategy as per the model. The following demonstrates their initial response to the hypothetical dilemma:

Jack: We'll do one or the other.

Jillian: One goes, the other stays.

Jack: One person goes and then comes back and does a report and … just talk about it afterwards.

Interviewer: So how would you make that decision as to who would go and who would stay in that scenario?

Jack: Because Jillian's at home all the time … generally speaking it would be Jillian who would go … because she has a lot more to do with the kids before school, after school type of thing.

Throughout the interview the use of humour was noted, often observed as a way of easing through any tension that might arise in conflict discussions. Further, the researcher observed that some of the mothers displayed body language, such as rolling of the eyes on one occasion with Sam and Jenny (Couple 8), and tones of frustration with Mary and Simon (Couple 6), that indicated some reluctance on the part of the mothers to be repeatedly afforded the role of lead parent. During the intermediate stage, Mary and Simon discuss the many different variables in their considerations, most of which were consistent with the themes identified such as external demands, design and delivery, etc. When it becomes clear that the likelihood would be for Mary to attend on her own, the following is reported:

Mary: I get so frustrated with me being the parent that goes and does these things.

A noteworthy example is Couple 9, who reported experiencing some conflict in their transition to parenthood period around how they might coparent together. Mark held a more traditional view of parenting and expected that his role would be more as primary breadwinner, which was similar to how he was raised. However, Michelle came to the coparenting arena with an expectation of '50/50'. As quoted in the transcript, Michelle's understanding was that they were equally capable of earning the necessary money for their family's needs, equally educated, both in the same profession, and equally able to parent

together. Michelle did not have a belief that parenting was the biologically determined domain of mothers. Thus, they did experience some conflict as they worked out their differences and came to an understanding together of a more egalitarian approach. When we follow them through again to the stage of life when this hypothetical dilemma is considered, we see an interesting response. Initially, the desire for both to attend is clear. Both would make efforts for them to be there together; they would expect that is what is needed for the best outcome. Their predominant strategy was a *coalition*. Their decision-making process, as particularly evident in the intermediary stage, showed consistency with patterns established in the coparenting history, that were especially formed through the transition to parenting period. Their desire for a 50/50 approach was very evident, and they were determined to find a way to attend together. The following exchange demonstrates the strategies employed in their decision-making process that demonstrate this determination to work as a *coalition* in considering this dilemma, much like similar decisions in their coparenting:

> *Michelle: it's been helpful that we've both been willing to consider it from each other's point of view.*
>
> *Mark: And I like to think that I am a flexible and willing… to look at all options as well.*

There was little evidence of any appeals based on *emotion* in this intermediate stage of the decision-making process. Neither was there evidence of significant *bargaining*, whereby one parent may have conceded to attend in exchange for some other exchange or reward.

Final Decision

The final outcome of this decision-making process shows that all couples except for Couple 11 indicated that it would be the mother who would attend. The outcome for Couple 1

(Phillip and Elizabeth) was interesting as both were willing to go on behalf of the couple, but if any preference needed to be stated, it was Elizabeth who was willing to attend, mainly as Phillip is less comfortable in group settings and this is an understanding they have. Couple 1 was an example of a true coalition, collaborative and egalitarian in their views and approach.

Couple 9 showed a tenaciousness to find any way possible for them to both attend. However, when the scenario was pressed, and barriers noted that it may be only one who would attend, it was decided that the mother would go. This was noted in their discussions as due to her having expertise in this area, and that Mark was happy to follow her lead. When reflecting on their transition to parenting period we can see this pattern back then. Mark initially was intent on a more traditional coparenting approach, but with Michelle's insistence and tenaciousness, they reached a more egalitarian model. However, when pressed, the default of Michelle taking a lead role rose to the surface of their deliberations. In describing their efforts to be collaborative, Michelle acknowledged that she would sometimes have to exert her influence, making appeals using a *legitimate* or expert-based rationale, as noted in the following exchange:

> *Mark: So essentially, Michelle really drives it and … I … consider it and if it's something that I value as well, then I wouldn't say that I'm a pushover or I just agree with everything.*
>
> *Michelle: No, but I know how to sell things in a way that appeals to Mark 's intellect as well. I know how to sort of explain to him, this is valuable because, or I would like you to participate in this because, because I do lots of parenting reading.*
>
> *Mark: She's very persuasive.*

Mark noting that Michelle has an ability to persuade him illuded to her use of *legitimacy* or appeals to *experience,* however, also indicates the use of *emotive* strategies in

her argument. The is evident in some of the language they used to describe the exchanges they have had in the past regarding their parenting. Some conflict was noted, but through ongoing discussion they were able to bring about a consensus decision aligning with their values on coparenting. As already noted with Couple 6 (Mary and Simon), some couples did report a level of frustration with outcomes such as in the hypothetical scenario, where the mother feels the burden of the responsibility of lead parent seemingly falling upon her often.

David and Dana (Couple 11) were the only couple who decided that if both were unable to attend, as was their initial position, David would attend on their behalf. From very early in their relationship, David had shown an eagerness to coparent with Dana as an equal and felt comfortable sharing this responsibility of caring for their children, as well as the role of provider. Examples of decisions made by the couple that were consistent with their values can be found in their management of both paid and unpaid work, with David choosing to relegate his professional career and take a more '9-to-5' job that enabled him more family and friends hours so he could be available to his children and contribute to their care equally with Dana. When we then follow the timeline through for Couple 11, who at the time of interview were considering the hypothetical scenario for their primary school aged children, their approach to the dilemma matched the pattern that was established in the period of transitioning to parenthood. This is consistent with the literature that found patterns laid down during this period will endure throughout most of a couple's coparenting experience. Strategies noted in their process were consistent with a coalition. Dana did refer to David's knowledge in the area, based on his education in allied health, which is considered an appeal to *experience* according to the model. However, there was no apparent imbalance in the way power was experienced by Dana, and David's evidence-based approach to help-seeking, typical of a *legitimate* strategy, was well received:

David: Well I guess there's been plenty of times when I've attended…just how it suits isn't it really.

Dana: So [sometimes] I can't go, but I always know David's going to be there. So yeah … Yeah I'm very comfortable knowing that David's going.

Study 1 Overall Discussion

The premise for Study 1 was that qualitative data regarding parents' decision-making processes in considering their participation in a parenting program may elucidate how identified factors act as barriers or facilitators to father involvement. The development of Study 1 aligns with objectives 1, 2 and 3 for this program of research, which were:

1. To construct a study that allowed for the observation and exploration of couples' decision-making processes when seeking help for their children.
2. To use an analytic method that allowed for the identification of factors that are acting within the coparenting relationship as facilitators or barriers to father involvement when parents seek help for their children.
3. To identify themes of barriers and facilitators of father involvement in the coparenting relationship that may impact on father involvement and fathers' experiences of parenting generally.

The Qualitative Research Questions for Study 1 were as follows:

Question 1. What barriers and facilitators to fathers' involvement in parenting programs are evident in the couples' decision-making discussions?

Question 2. What barriers and facilitators to father involvement in parenting programs bear similarity to fathers' experiences generally?

Question 3. What are the decision-making processes of couples when deliberating whether to attend a parenting program?

With regard to Question 1, the thematic analysis from Study 1 produced a confirmation of factors that act as barriers or facilitators of father involvement in parenting interventions that aligns with the previous literature cited in the review. Regarding particular factors that emerged in the couples' discussions as barriers or facilitators to father participation, Study 1 demonstrated that external factors, such as work demands, were considerations that emerged amongst that data, and were very prominent in the negotiations. Work demands were more often mentioned for fathers than for mothers, with mothers often reporting having more flexible work that would enable them to attend. In combination with this was considerations surrounding childcare, which if problematic, would often result in the coparents deciding that only one would attend, again in most cases the mother. Further, concerns regarding the quality of the material in parenting programs, as well as the expertise of the presenters, et cetera, were also considerations mentioned particularly by fathers in Study 1. This provides support for the evidence-based guidelines developed by Panter-Brick et al. (2014), especially regarding design and delivery of parenting programs engaging with coparents unequivocally in order to improve father involvement. As already noted, something unique to this study that had not been previously explored in the literature was how couples processed and prioritised these factors in their decision-making. When looking at the prioritisation of factors, external demands such as work were dominant. Program providers may consider experimenting with varying venues that engage with father's employment as a way to remedy this. Further exploration of this recommendation, and others, will ensue in the final chapter.

Regarding Question 2, it is argued that the decision-making process and outcome observed in Study 1 was the result of patterns established in the coparenting relationship since the transition to parenting period and are therefore indicative of general experiences in coparenting. It was apparent in Study 1 that most of the fathers in the sample reported an

acceptance of the lead parent role taken by the mothers. Regarding the mothers, the lead parent role hung heavily on many in the sample. The burden of being the one who has primary responsibility for the children, despite also working, was noted as tiresome. It seems for mothers that the closing of the maternal gate can sometimes weigh heavily on them. In one instance, it was reported as a point of difference and frustration between the two partners. Therefore, the experiences of fathers in this dynamic may be that there is the presence of maternal gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours, both opening and closing, that are active ingredients in the facilitation of father involvement that they are experiencing generally. Further, it is argued that fathers' collusion with maternal gatekeeping, may be a pattern that occurs generally, negatively impacting on father involvement in child rearing.

When considering Question 3, what was unique to Study 1 was the interview setting that allowed for observation of couples' decision-making processes around attending a parenting program. This process allowed for observation of factors highlighted in the literature be given consideration by couples in this process. In two couples, the process would be consistent with a true coalition whereby there was a sense of equity in the process and the outcome. In one case, the outcome was collaborative, however there was some appeal to the mother's experience and knowledge by the father, and demonstrated by the mother. For the majority, there was very little conflict reported or evident in these hypothetical decision-making processes; the outcome was agreed to with little protest by either. There were consistent appeals to the *legitimacy* and *experience* of the role of the mothers, for example her role as primary carer and assumed child development expertise, which was deemed to be better suited to the program format and environment. Strategies observed included couples working as a coalition towards a mutually beneficial outcome, to scenarios whereby appeals to *experience* and *legitimacy* both by fathers and mothers led to an outcome that was without much reported conflict. This is likely due to the negotiation concluding with mothers taking

the lead role of attending the program, and the father in agreement, in most couples. However, resentment was noted by some of the mothers in the sample, which is important. Some mothers indicated a level of fatigue or frustration with taking the responsibility for childrearing. Further, fathers may in time feel disaffected with their role as fathers if they are repeatedly made to feel as secondary to mothers in importance in the lives of their children. The observed decision-making processes in this sample did seem to align with similar patterns in the coparents' journey together. There were evident patterns established in the early years of parenting which had become set and predictive, and in fact, sometimes there may be very little decision-making at all, with a 'shortcut' taken to an outcome that is pre-determined by many similar decision-making processes before.

In sum, Study 1 has highlighted that there seemed to be a clear decision-making process relied upon by this sample of couples, which had its beginnings in the parenting story of the couples that first laid the groundwork for such patterns during the transition to parenthood period. This pattern is then relied on for all similar parenting dilemmas, with a predictable outcome of the mothers taking the responsibility for the issue, with the fathers' support or acquiescence. What emerged through this study was a factor not previously well explored in parenting program literature, which was how mothers may be assuming a lead parent role when deliberating whether one or both parents would attend the hypothetical program. Taking a lead role, whether in parenting generally or in the specific case of attending a program, can be seen as an act of maternal gatekeeping, based on notions of maternal essentialism. Further, it was also noted from Study 1 that fathers were in many cases eliciting this gatekeeping behaviour. For example, fathers' decision-making strategy involved appeals to the mother's *expertise* or *legitimacy* in her role, such as fathers reporting having presumptions of the mother's greater expertise in parenting and child development, and thus giving the lead to the mother to attend a parenting program in the hypothetical scenario.

Much of the parenting program literature has previously focused on factors relating to the programs themselves, including design and delivery. As well intended as these attempts are, they may fail in their attempts for equal participation of fathers because they are not taking this gatekeeping dynamic into consideration. While much attention has been given to maternal gatekeeping in the coparenting literature, as will be shown in the brief literature review in the following chapter, there has been insufficient attention to the experience of fathers of maternal gatekeeping, and whether behaviours and attitudes of fathers are complicit in this phenomenon (Olsavsky et al., 2019). It is argued that if fathers repeatedly relinquish the lead parent role to mothers this may form a pattern, which may endure throughout their coparenting relationship. Over time this may lead to a decrease in fathers' levels of involvement in the lives of their children and may increase fathers' feelings of dissatisfaction in their role, further compounding the problem. Further, it may increase levels of conflict in the coparenting relationship, which is potentially resolved either through heightened arguments and tension, or passivity and withdrawal by the fathers. This is a recipe for disaster for the coparenting relationship and may also impact on the mental health of the parents, and of interest to this project, on the fathers themselves. However, while there has been a growing base of research on the attitudes, behaviours, and experiences of mothers with respect to maternal gatekeeping, less is known from the perspective of fathers. If the decision to attend a parenting program serves as a specific example of how maternal gatekeeping plays out in the coparenting relationship, it becomes even more important to investigate this phenomenon in general coparenting experiences. If maternal gate closing becomes an established pattern of behaviour across the coparenting experience, it will affect levels of father involvement in general. It is proposed that attention be given to the experiences of fathers and how maternal gatekeeping is either impeding or facilitating their involvement in the lives of their children. These matters form the basis of the development of Study 2.

CHAPTER 8: LITERATURE REVIEW AND RATIONALE FOR STUDY 2

As indicated in the background literature review contained in Chapter 1, there is substantial evidence supporting positive father involvement being of benefit to all family members, including children, mothers, the family unit, and fathers themselves, which perpetuates across the lifespan. The outcomes from Study 1 highlight that inhibiting or restrictive attitudes and behaviours of mothers, termed maternal gatekeeping, may be impacting on fathers' involvement in parenting. It was also identified that this phenomenon of maternal gatekeeping is not one-sided, with attitudes and behaviours of fathers also evident in this interpersonal transaction in the coparenting relationship. It was observed in Study 1 that fathers colluded with mothers' gatekeeping, either through tacit agreement or advocacy of the mother as expert and better suited to parenting tasks. Consequently, in Study 1 it was argued that what was observed in the decision-making processes of coparents concerning parenting program participation may be typical of patterns of behaviours between coparents generally. These reciprocal and dynamic patterns of interaction, which form in the transition to parenting period and persist throughout the journey of coparenting, lay the foundation for the coparenting relationship, and if gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours arise in the early periods, these patterns are likely to persist throughout the couple's coparenting journey. It was therefore deemed important to further explore the impacts of maternal gatekeeping, interparental conflict on fathers' attitudes towards their roles as fathers, their self-efficacy as parents, and the resulting impacts on father involvement. In accordance with the aims of this program of research, the perspectives of fathers was the primary focus of investigation. More specifically, Study 2 was designed in accordance with objectives 3 and 4 of the program of research, which were:

3. To identify themes of barriers and facilitators of father involvement in the coparenting relationship, that may impact on father involvement and fathers' experiences of parenting generally.
4. To construct a study that would investigate how factors within the coparenting relationship might be acting on fathers generally in their experiences of parenting.

This was in alignment with the sequential nature of the mixed methods design of this program of research, whereby constructs identified through the qualitative study would inform the development of the quantitative study. What follows is a brief literature review of relevant constructs that were included in Study 2; being coparenting, maternal gatekeeping, and fathers' sense of self-efficacy and attitude towards their role in their parenting. This is then followed by the proposed study and methodology, and finally by the subsequent results from the statistical analysis, which in its entirety constitutes Study 2.

Coparenting revisited

The literature regarding coparenting was briefly reviewed in Chapter 1. The following is provided to highlight key points from the coparenting literature relevant to the development of the research questions and aims of Study 2. The coparenting relationship exists separately from the couple's romantic relationship and commences when each child is born and relates to the inter-relationship between parents in providing care for their children (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). This coparenting relationship continues to grow and evolve in parallel to the growth of each child for their entire developmental pathway, from infancy to adolescence and beyond (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). The coparenting relationship generally involves behaviours including support of each parent in childrearing, negotiating agreements, determining division of duties, and orchestrating family life (Olavsky

et al., 1997). Lee and Doherty (2007) reported that a positive coparenting relationship is necessary even in the absence of a romantic relationship and is a critical factor in children's development.

Generally, when coparents are supportive of each other's parenting, and are consistent in parenting, relationship harmony is optimal and children experience a happier home life (Feinberg et al., 2014). Relationship quality is correlated with behavioural characteristics in coparenting, such that conflict leads to a lower level of positive parenting behaviour (Fagan & Cabrera, 2012). Not only is the coparenting relationship an important aspect of childrearing but it is also a factor that can support higher father involvement (Lee et al., 2018). A positive coparenting alliance tends to support increased father involvement, and interestingly is also a buffer against stress for mothers (Waller, 2012; Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). Research indicates that supportive coparenting relationships are associated with fathers' greater engagement in parenting, higher-quality father-child relationships, and lower parenting stress (McBride & Rane, 1998; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). McBride and Rane (1998) conducted early exploratory work on predictors in the coparenting alliance of father involvement. Multiple regression analysis of the sample of 89 couples found that mothers' appraisal of their parenting and sharing a common philosophy towards childrearing were significant predictors of fathers' involvement. Furthermore, fathers who felt supported by their partners experienced higher parenting satisfaction (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016).

Of particular importance in the development of the coparenting relationship is the transition to parenthood period. The transition to parenthood is a complex and challenging time, even a pivotal point in the relationship of each couple. How each adapts and functions will depend on attitudes, personal traits and characteristics, and the self-efficacy of each parent (Feinberg, 2003). For some, the complex transition to coparenting can be a strain on the relationship when patterns of conflict become potentially harmful to the ongoing viability

of the relationship (Feinberg, 2003). Regular inter-parenting conflict, particularly related to differences in parenting practices, leads to poorer relationship quality, and conversely, high coparenting quality enhances relationship quality for both parents (Feinberg et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2018). In a study of 182 new fathers over the pre-natal to early infant stage, Donithen and Schoppe-Sullivan (2021) found that when fathers held a better perception of the coparenting relationship, they were more likely to report higher parenting self-efficacy. The authors suggested that coparenting quality may provide a form of feedback to fathers on their parenting competency, consistent with Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). The authors found from their longitudinal study that self-efficacy was predicated on coparenting quality after excluding for other personal characteristics.

Traditionally, mothers hold the role of primary caregiver and identify with this mother role strongly, and therefore may take on a 'lead parent' position in the coparenting relationship (Pedersen & Kilzer, 2014; Sano, Richards, & Zvonkovic, 2008). This relationship seems to continue in contemporary society (Pedersen & Kilzer, 2014; Sano et al., 2008). Men on the other hand may not see fatherhood as central to their identity and therefore are likely to retain a stronger sense of connection to their breadwinner role, and see their fathering role as secondary, and in support of the mother as lead (Sano et al., 2008). In sum, research suggests that mutually supportive and cooperative relationships increase the quality of interactions between parents, and their subjective experience of parenting. Importantly to this project, a supportive coparenting relationship facilitates increased father involvement. Where beliefs and expectations regarding appropriate caregiving roles of mothers and fathers differ between members of the parental couple, this may be a source of conflict. The resolution of such conflict may perpetuate patterns throughout the coparenting journey. If this pattern were to relegate fathers to a secondary or apprenticeship role to mothers, through

maternal gatekeeping behaviours or attitudes, this may be problematic to father involvement generally.

Maternal Gatekeeping

Parental gatekeeping was initially observed in the coparenting relationship whereby the behaviours and beliefs of one parent would regulate the other parent's relationship with their children. Given that mothers hold a unique position in their role in the family as a whole and in the coparenting relationship specifically, it was more common for this to be observed in mothers (Hauser, 2015). Allen and Hawkins (1999) were the first to develop a conceptual model and measures to explore mothers' regulation of fathers' involvement in domestic life and were the first to coin the specific term of maternal gatekeeping. Maternal gatekeeping has come to be understood as the type of influence mothers' display in the coparenting relationship, which regulates the involvement of the father with their children (Lee et al., 2018; Fagan & Cherson, 2017; Pedersen & Kilzer, 2014; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015; Kulik & Sadeh, 2015; Trinder, 2008). The greater emphasis on *maternal* gatekeeping has mainly been due to traditional gender roles that still tend to persist in western society, with mothers tending to spend more time than fathers in childcare, and a large proportion of fathers' time in childcare or childrearing activities tending to be in the presence of mothers (Lee et al., 2018; Craig, 2006). Further, research on maternal gatekeeping has mainly focused on biological, co-resident, dual-income parents, due to the increased need for father involvement and the apparent variability in levels of father involvement (Lee et al., 2018)

Early research using survey data, observational studies, case studies and interview data defined maternal gatekeeping as a collection of conscious or unconscious controlling and restrictive attitudes and beliefs that manifest as behaviours of mothers that govern fathers' interaction and involvement with their children, and potentially inhibit fathers' involvement in childrearing (Gaunt & Pinho, 2018; Kulik & Tsoref, 2010 Kulik & Sadeh, 2015; Sano et

al., 2008; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). It was estimated that approximately twenty percent of mothers engage in some form of maternal gatekeeping (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). As research progressed, it was further demonstrated that there were also positive or facilitative behaviours of mothers, and therefore determined that two dimensions existed, defined as gate opening and gate closing (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008; Trinder, 2008). Maternal gate opening is defined as behaviours deemed to encourage father involvement, and generally is described as mothers' support and encouragement of fathers' involvement in parenting (Lee et al., 2018). Conversely, maternal gate closing is viewed as behaviours that discourage father involvement and includes behaviours such as the mother's criticism and negative appraisal of the father or his contribution, leading her to restrict or deny a father's time or involvement with the child, and which undermine effective coparenting (Lee et al., 2018). In everyday life, gate closing behaviour from a mother may range from critical comments directed at the father before, during or after he completes a childcare activity, to more extreme behaviours which intentionally limit or exclude the father (Pedersen & Kilzer, 2014). In more traditional coparenting relationships, gate closing can also be behaviours of mothers to protect the father's time so he is not disturbed by the children, if this detracts from his role as breadwinner (Pedersen & Kilzer, 2014).

It may seem difficult to conceive that a mother is 'unaware' of these gate closing behaviours and patterns in everyday life, however Hauser (2015) found from interviews and observations conducted in couples' homes, that even those mothers who purported to hold egalitarian beliefs regarding parenting, still demonstrated gate closing behaviours. It must be noted that in some instances mothers use gate closing behaviours to protect their children from the more extreme circumstances of domestic violence which sadly can be found in far too many homes (Fagan & Cherson, 2017; Sano et al., 2008). This more extreme use of gate closing in complex family situations is outside the scope of this research project. When gate

closing is referred to in this project, it will be used to describe less extreme behaviours that affect couples in the everyday activities of coparenting. For this project the construct of maternal gatekeeping will be understood to denote maternal attitudes and behaviours, either intentional or unintentional, used to influence the involvement of the father in tasks relating to childcare and parenting (Fagan & Cherson, 2017).

Schoppe-Sullivan and colleagues (2015) conducted a longitudinal study of expectant parents to explore for factors that may determine whether a mother will actively engage in maternal gatekeeping. Their research highlighted attributes of mothers and fathers that contributed to a tendency to gatekeeping behaviours. Mothers who tended to have more perfectionistic expectations of the father, and poorer psychological functioning, tended to engage in gate-closing behaviour. Fathers' attributes were less predictive of maternal gatekeeping, however of note was that fathers' lower levels of self-efficacy were related to higher levels of gate-closing behaviour by the mother. The authors contend that potentially mothers may assess the fathers' low self-efficacy as a lack of motivation or ability, and may therefore limit a father's involvement, resulting in a 'Master and Apprentice' relationship between mother and father. However, this study only followed couples through to 3 months post-partum and it is therefore difficult to make longer-term predictions of implications for future father involvement.

Not all gatekeeping behaviours are detrimental to father involvement. As noted by the definitions of maternal gatekeeping, research has identified that mothers engage in gate opening behaviours that tend to support fathers in their contribution to childrearing (Fagan & Cherson, 2017). Mothers have been observed to afford time and opportunity for fathers to learn and become competent and do not see an initial lack of skill or mistakes to be evidence of deficits in fathers' parenting ability (Kulik & Sadeh, 2015; Hauser, 2015). This display of a positive attitude and behaviours by mothers conveys a belief that the father will gain

competence in childcare tasks (Feinberg, 2003; Kulik & Sadeh, 2015; Sevigny & Loutzenhiser, 2009). Research has found that maternal gate opening is associated with higher levels of father involvement in childrearing irrespective of factors such as income, hours of work, and beliefs regarding fathers' roles as parents (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008). Learning and skill acquisition in parenting is comparable to learning and skill acquisition in other fields such as study or work – the more one participates and is involved with the task, the greater competence is acquired (Traham, 2018; Trinder, 2008; Pedersen & Kilzer, 2014). Fathers who make or are given more time to learn will become more competent, and once seen as competent will be given more time to parent (Pedersen & Kilzer, 2014; Gaunt & Pinho, 2018). However, until competence is gained, these feelings of lacking do not help when added to the fact that fathers often parent differently to mothers.

Fathers' Experiences of Maternal Gatekeeping

It is possible that fathers may feel less prepared for parenting and lacking in some of the necessary skills in comparison to mothers, which perhaps contributes to the tendency of maternal gatekeeping (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). Aside from the obvious such as breastfeeding, it has been demonstrated that fathers have comparable ability to perform childcare tasks to that of their partner (Abrams & Lamb, 2002; Lamb et al., 1985). Machin's (2015) study found that when fathers are compared to their partners, differences in priorities may provide a better explanation of different approaches, and at times a source of conflict, rather than deficits in capacity or ability. However, the mother's self-appraisal of her knowledge and skill may result in fathers feeling relegated to the role of the secondary parent. (Hauser, 2015). Fathers may demonstrate a sense of insecurity, assuming they are continually learning and striving to be an equal parent, while the mother is seen, or perhaps sees herself, as the expert (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015; Kulik & Sadeh, 2015). This scenario creates a discrepancy between fathers' and mothers' contributions in everyday tasks, with the father

forming a view of himself he may internalise as unskilled, incompetent or in some way defective (Machin, 2015).

Further, fathers often perform childcare tasks while the mother is present, perhaps because fathers prefer the mothers being available to provide support, or due to mothers tending to hover to ensure that the father performs the childcare tasks correctly, or in other words to the expected standard of mothers (Kamp Dush et al., 2017). When a father is met with gate closing behaviour, and as a result misses out on time or opportunities to learn and practise skills related to childcare, his participation and involvement become more reluctant and less confident (Kulik & Sadeh, 2015; Pedersen & Kilzer, 2014). A cycle of ineffective participation ensues, which may then further precipitate gate closing behaviours (Feinberg, 2003; Kulik & Sadeh, 2015). Fathers can then be confronted with what they perceive to be gate closing behaviours from the mother in the moments when they are learning a new skill or contributing differently to the child's development (Sano et al., 2008). Furthermore, fathers, who lack confidence in their ability in childcare tasks or lack competence in their own unique parental contributions, may react to these gate closing behaviours by reducing their time in childcare or withdraw altogether. A cycle may appear of less participation from the father leading to feelings of lower competence in their own ability, leading to the mother's gate closing behaviours escalating as she perceives this lessened involvement by the father as a lack of competence. This cycle becomes the status quo in the coparenting relationship, and more generally in the home, as fathers drift to the periphery and function less actively in family life (Hauser, 2015). Given that lower levels of fathers' involvement in childcare have been linked with maternal gatekeeping, it is postulated that this pattern of master and apprentice interaction continues perpetually in the coparenting relationship. Some have come to view gatekeeping behaviours as part of the operation of the coparenting relationship, and thus in parallel with indicators of relationship quality (Lee et al., 2018).

Further, maternal gate closing may lead to tensions between the coparents, where mothers assume too much responsibility for domestic tasks and fathers feeling either left out or not needed (Kulik & Tsoref, 2010). However, research is yet to sift out the details of these interacting factors. Linking back to the coparenting relationship, such relationship power imbalances in unpaid work may contribute to relationship dissatisfaction, heightened conflict, and family disharmony. These are examples of the 'feed-back and feed-forward' influences noted in Cabrera's model (2014). Fathers who are experiencing maternal gatekeeping may react by withdrawal or stonewalling, or an escalation in conflict in the coparenting relationship. The effect of increased conflict on relationship conflict may be lower relationship satisfaction, and decreased father involvement. Over the years, we may find this pattern evident in coparents' interactions over common dilemmas regarding their children.

Research Opportunities within the Gatekeeping Literature

There are two important omissions noted within the literature review on maternal gatekeeping thus far. Firstly, the demographics of fathers investigated have been mainly restricted to the early infancy period, with many of the studies on maternal gatekeeping in the literature focusing on the early childhood or infancy period, looking at fathers' and mothers' experiences and reports of observations of maternal gatekeeping for parents of children ranging from 1 month to 9 months post-partum (Lee et al., 2018; Olsavsky et al., 2019). Schoppe-Sullivan et al. investigated maternal gatekeeping in couples expecting their first child and covered the post-partum period (2015). Gaunt (2008) investigated maternal gatekeeping of 209 Israeli couples with children from 6 months to 36 months in age. McBride et al. (2005) explored maternal gatekeeping with 30 American couples of children aged between 2 and 3 years of age. These studies are examples of the common demographics of maternal gatekeeping research.

Secondly, fathers have not been the focus of these investigations. To clarify, most of the studies have investigated the impacts of maternal gatekeeping on father involvement, however the predictive factors have mainly centred on internal factors of mothers. It was determined in the gatekeeping literature that mothers were predominantly the *senders* and fathers the *receivers* of gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours, and hence much of the literature has been considered from this perspective. As such, many of the investigations have investigated the characteristics of mothers as part of predictive and conceptual models. For example, a very early study by De Luccie's entitled *Mothers as Gatekeepers: A Model of Maternal Mediators of Father Involvement,* which investigated predictors of maternal gatekeeping amongst 144 American mothers, is an exemplar of the sentiment on gatekeeping research (1995). While the outcome of such studies has been to investigate maternal gatekeeping's effects on father involvement, most studies since have not considered fathers' perspectives on maternal gatekeeping and how it is impacting their experience of fathering. Further, few studies have explored internal factors of fathers that may act as mediators/moderators in gatekeeping and father involvement. To reiterate using the words of Cabrera et al. (2014), much of the literature has looked at 'feed forward' factors of mothers, but not 'feed backwards' factors of fathers, which interact in a dynamic way in the coparenting relationship resulting in gate opening or gate closing behaviours of mothers towards fathers' involvement.

Fathers' Experiences of Fathering

Cabrera et al.'s (2014) model of father-child relationships implicates several factors predictive of fathers' involvement in the lives of their children. As reflected in Chapter 1, fathers who view their role as being important to their children are more likely to be involved (McBride et al., 2005). Fathers' self-efficacy in their parenting has also been implicated as a critical factor in this model as predictive of their involvement, and therefore impactful on

children's outcomes (Donithen & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2021). Bandura (1977; 1994) defined self-efficacy as an individual's own appraisal of their capacity to successfully complete certain tasks, or in other words self-efficacy is the perception people have of themselves in relation to their capacity to perform a task successfully. People with a higher level of self-efficacy will face life with an enhanced level of flexibility in facing new or difficult tasks. Parenting self-efficacy has been defined as a parent's own appraisal of their competence in performing parenting tasks (Donithen & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2021). Parenting self-efficacy can be thought of as the belief a parent has in their own ability to parent well and to perform the role of parenting including the sustained effort needed to cope with the demands of parenthood and the flexibility and resilience needed to face the challenges of learning new skills (Sevigny & Loutzenhiser, 2009; Traham, 2018). Therefore, a father's self-efficacy relates to their appraisal of their competence in their parenting (Traham, 2018). While self-efficacy is an internal process that contributes to how a person thinks and feels about their capacity, it is also a mediator of motivation and behavioural activation (Traham, 2018). Higher levels of parenting self-efficacy have been associated with increased parenting competency and improvement parenting functioning (Jones & Prinz, 2005; Schuengel & Oosterman, 2019).

Not as much is known of fathers' self-efficacy as opposed to mothers', however, what is reported on fathers is that lower levels of self-efficacy are related to poorer parenting practices and less consistency in parenting involvement (Rominov, Giallo, Whelan, 2016). Fathers generally have lower levels of self-efficacy than mothers, particular in the first year post-partum (Rominov et al., 2016). Fathers are more likely to feel motivated toward being involved with their children when they are experiencing a greater sense of satisfaction in their role in their homes (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). Additionally, fathers with high self-efficacy reported greater coparenting satisfaction (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2016). This sense

of satisfaction in their role is related to their self-efficacy and as noted by Traham (2018), may progressively lead to increased father involvement in childrearing activities. Donithen and Schoppe-Sullivan (2021) conducted a longitudinal study of 182 American fathers in dual-income relationships expecting their first child. Data was collected from the sample during the third trimester of pregnancy and again 3 months post-partum, and regression analysis was employed to determine what characteristics of fathers held a predictive relationship with fathers' self-efficacy (Donithen & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2021). They found that fathers with more progressive beliefs towards fathering, in line with the 'new fathers' idea previously mentioned, positively correlated with parenting self-efficacy; in contrast, those who held to more maternal essentialism beliefs were negatively correlated to fathers' parenting self-efficacy (Donithen & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2021).Therefore, it is possible that a father who hold views that align with more contemporary notions and expectations of the role of fathers, and has positive beliefs in their own parenting ability, may decide to be more involved in fathering. How this determination transfers to the coparenting relationship and directly affects feelings of competence, performance, and autonomy, contributing to a greater influence in the coparenting relationship, is less well known.

Altogether, this indicates that fathers who feel encouraged and appreciated by their partner may experience feelings of higher self-efficacy and coparenting satisfaction, which in turn allow them to support the mother as she confronts challenges of parenthood. Further, studies have found maternal gatekeeping to be operating on fathers' self-efficacy, with gate opening behaviours encouraging greater involvement, and conversely gate closing inhibiting father involvement (Lee et al., 2019). Another example is provided, with Shoppe-Sullivan et al. (2015) describing fathers who were low in parental self-efficacy before the birth of their baby reporting significantly higher levels of gate closing by mothers at three months after the birth. Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2015) suggested that fathers who tended to be lower on levels

of self-efficacy may elicit gate-closing behaviour by the mother, who may assess the father's motivation and ability as deficient and may therefore limit the father's involvement. Therefore, fathers' self-efficacy is a factor of interest to this particular study.

Consistent with Cabrera's model, particularly the feed-back and feed-forward dimensions of family systems, fathers' self-efficacy may be an important mediating factor acting on fathers within the coparenting relationship (Feinberg, 2003). As noted, self-efficacy is also a mediator of motivation and behavioural activation (Traham, 2018). Not much is known about how self-efficacy may act as a mediator between maternal gatekeeping and father involvement. It is postulated that high levels of self-efficacy and a belief held by fathers of the importance on their involvement may mitigate the effects of maternal gatekeeping and allow for a father's desired levels of involvement with their children. In other words, fathers with affirming beliefs in the importance of their role and confidence in their abilities to parent may be undeterred by mothers' gate closing attitudes and behaviours and persist with their efforts to be involved. Conversely, those with low levels of self-efficacy will collude with maternal gate closing, thus decreasing fathers' involvement. It is postulated that the combined effect of maternal gate opening, and high levels of father's self-efficacy will greatly enhance father involvement.

In summary, this chapter has reviewed the existing literature on father involvement, and the need for further investigation. Much has been said about factors that act as barriers and facilitators of father involvement in parenting. One such factor is the phenomenon known as maternal gatekeeping. However, the literature in this field is only emerging, with areas that are yet to be better understood. With mothers often taking the lead in parenting and 'new fathers' redefining their role with a more hands-on, engaged form of fathering, it is important to understand the dynamics of the coparenting relationship and how maternal gatekeeping may be exerting influence, if any, on fathers. How maternal gatekeeping affects the

coparenting relationship, and in doing so increases or decreases levels of conflict between parents, further impacting on father involvement, is relatively poorly understood when compared to other factors in parenting and child development research. Additionally, fathers' experience of maternal gatekeeping is poorly understood. Much of the existing literature has mainly explored this phenomenon from the perspective of mothers, with little research that has investigated what effect maternal gatekeeping may have on levels of father involvement specifically *as reported by fathers*. Further, fathers' experiences of coparenting relationship quality was of interest and identified in the literature as an area for further investigation. It was noted that gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours may further contribute to poor relationship quality and increased conflict, which may interact to bear influence on fathers' involvement. The following chapter details the aims of the quantitative study to address the research questions that have arisen from this review, and the subsequent methodology of Study 2.

CHAPTER 9: A CROSS-SECTIONAL SURVEY OF A SAMPLE OF AUSTRALIAN FATHERS

The purpose of Study 2 is to examine fathers' experiences of maternal gatekeeping in the coparenting relationship, whether this affects their levels of involvement, and how factors such as fathers' self-efficacy and their expectations of their own involvement may mediate the influence of maternal gatekeeping, to provide a valuable contribution to research and practice. Research on fathers' involvement has tended to focus on fathers of younger children, and there is a lack of knowledge of fathers' experiences of fathering children past the first few years. Noteworthy is that maternal gatekeeping has primarily been studied in families with children pre-birth and in the early infancy to toddler stages (Schoppe-Sullivan et a., 2015). Little is known of the existence or effects of maternal gatekeeping for fathers of older children. Therefore Study 2 aims to provide an insight into the experiences of fathers of older children.

Study Aims and Research Questions

The combination of the literature review and the factors identified in the qualitative study prompted the design of this second stage of research. Study 2 aims to explore the experiences of fathers' parenting, from the perspective of fathers of children aged between 2 and 12 years. This age bracket was also chosen as a linkage with Study 1, being the age group that most parents consider seeking parenting assistance for emotional and behavioural difficulties. It covers the preschool and primary school periods. Further, it was an aim of this study to investigate how factors within the coparenting relationship act upon father involvement in parenting. In addition, internal factors that may mediate these relationships will also be investigated. What follows is a detailed methodology, including specifics of the participants, construct measures, and results of statistical analyses conducted. This chapter will conclude with a thorough presentation and discussion of all findings. A more robust

discussion of the implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research and practice will be contained in the final chapter.

The purpose of this study is to obtain quantitative data to test the following quantitative research questions, which are derived from the literature and the outcomes highlighted in Study 1, which are as follows:

1. What role may maternal gatekeeping play in fathers' involvement in parenting (from the fathers' perspective)?
2. What role may maternal gatekeeping play in fathers' attitude towards their role as fathers (from the fathers' perspective)?
3. What effect does maternal gatekeeping have on fathers' sense of parenting confidence (satisfaction and efficacy)?
4. How does maternal gatekeeping affect fathers' experience of coparenting relationship satisfaction?
5. What effect does maternal gatekeeping have on fathers' experience of coparenting relationship conflict?

The study will specifically focus on data obtained from fathers to address the aims and questions determined in Study 2. It is again noted that biological fathers who cohabit with their partners, who are also the biological mothers of their children, will be the focus population. This was decided due to the statistical data on family households in Australia, with the more numerous family structure being co-resident, biological parents (ABS, 2020). It was presumed that samples for the project would therefore be more easily accessible, and the results more generalisable to most fathers and Australian families. Certainly, family diversity is acknowledged, and no group, large or small, is more important than another. It is hoped that this project may lead to further study of fathers in other family groups not represented by this project.

Hypotheses

Based on the literature and factors highlighted by Study 1, it is acknowledged that multiple factors may relate to levels of father involvement, and those factors that are the subject of this investigation may not be comprehensive (Cabrera et al., 2014). The literature reviewed, and the outcomes from Study 1, have drawn the researcher's interest to further examination of the factors identified; maternal gatekeeping, relationship conflict and satisfaction, fathers' parenting self-efficacy, and father involvement (Lee et al., 2018; Fagan & Cherson, 2017; Pedersen & Kilzer, 2014; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015; Kulik & Sadeh, 2015; Trinder, 2008). Given the importance of these constructs on the fathers' perspectives and experiences of maternal gatekeeping, and on the coparenting relationship, measures specific to these constructs will be the focus.

We note that the sets of hypotheses within this quantitative study are divided to two broad categories of hypothesis. First, we examine hypotheses that represent base level bivariate relationships in H1, H2, H3, H4, and H5.

Second, we also examine hypotheses in the context of complex effects, with one variable designated as a primary path (e.g., an 'X' variable related to a 'Y' variable outcome) and a third variable modelled as a mediating variable 'M'. The reason for examining these complex effects was because the mediating constructs may be targets for therapeutic change if the effects suggest they should be areas to develop with practical settings such as therapeutic and psychoeducational interventions, In these cases, which we illustrate in Hypotheses 6 and 7, we divide the hypotheses between direct effects, which capture the direct path between the primary path (e.g., an 'X' variable related to a 'Y' variable outcome), and indirect effects, which account for the interaction between the 'X' variable and mediating

variable ‘M’ on the outcome ‘Y’. Furthermore, there is a total effect, which combines both the direct and indirect effects.

It is predicted that specific relationships will be found to exist between these factors and levels of father involvement. Specifically, Quantitative Research Question 1 suggested that there will be a relationship between gate opening behaviours and higher levels of father involvement. In addition, and conversely, there will be significant relationships between gate closing behaviours and lower levels of father involvement (measured by subscales of Level of Activity and Total Time Spent).

These ideas underpin Hypotheses 1A, 1B, 1C, and 1D, which are as follows:

1A. Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – will display a negative association with fathers’ involvement in parenting as *Level of Activity*.

1B. Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – will display a negative association with fathers’ involvement in parenting as *Total Time Spent.*

1C. Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – will display a positive association with fathers’ involvement in parenting as *Level of Activity*.

1D. Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – will display a positive association with fathers’ involvement in parenting as *Total Time Spent*

In addition, Quantitative Research Question 2 suggests that regarding fathers’ attitudes toward their roles as fathers, it is predicted that a significant relationship will be found between higher levels of positive attitudes towards their roles as fathers as well as maternal gatekeeping, with gate opening leading to higher levels of fathers’ positive attitudes towards their role, and the opposite relationship for gate closing. These ideas underpin Hypotheses 2A, and 2B, which are as follows:

2A. Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – will display a negative association with fathers' attitudes towards their roles as fathers.

2B. Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – will display a positive association with fathers' attitudes towards their roles as fathers.

Quantitative Research Question 3 suggested that in regard to fathers' sense of parenting confidence, it is predicted that a significant relationship will be found between higher levels of parenting competence (measured by the subscales of satisfaction and self-efficacy) and maternal gatekeeping, with gate opening leading to higher levels of fathers' sense of competence in parenting, and in the opposite direction for gate closing. These ideas underpin Hypotheses 3A, 3B, 3C, and 3D, which are as follows:

3A. Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – will display a negative association with fathers' sense of competence in their parenting as *Level of Satisfaction*.

3B. Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – will display a negative association with fathers' sense of competence in their parenting as *Level of Self-efficacy.*

3C. Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – will display a positive association with fathers' sense of competence in their parenting as *Level of Satisfaction*.

3D. Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – will display a positive association with fathers' sense of competence in their parenting as *Level of Self-efficacy.*

Also, Quantitative Research Question 4 suggested that in the coparenting relationship, it is expected that maternal gate closing behaviours will have a detrimental effect on coparenting quality and will therefore lead to higher levels of interparental conflict (as

reported from the father's perspective). In contrast, it is predicted that higher levels of maternal gate opening behaviours will enhance the coparenting relationship and contribute to lower levels of relationship conflict. These ideas underpin Hypotheses 4A, and 4B, which are as follows:

4A. Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – will display a positive association with fathers' reports of coparenting conflict as measured by *Level of Coparenting Conflict*.

4B. Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – will display a negative association with fathers' reports of coparenting conflict as measured by *Level of Coparenting Conflict.*

Finally, Quantitative Research Question 5 suggested that the effects of maternal gatekeeping will be seen to have an overall effect on fathers' perception of the coparenting relationship quality. It is predicted that fathers will report a greater sense of collaboration, when there are higher levels of gate opening from mothers, and again, the opposite will be found with higher reports of gate closing behaviours from mothers. These ideas underpin Hypotheses 5A, and 5B, which are as follows:

5A. Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – will display a positive association with fathers' reports of *Level of Coparenting Quality*.

5B. Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – will display a negative association with fathers' reports of *Level of Coparenting Quality.*

In addition to basic bivariate relationships, we also examined Hypotheses 6 through 11, which dealt with complex effects. In the context of the mediation model depicted in Figure 2, Quantitative Hypothesis 6A hypothesised that there will be a direct effect upon the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Levels of Father Involvement as measured

by levels of activity. Furthermore, Hypothesis 6B posits that there will be an *indirect* mediating effect of Maternal Gate Closing through *fathers' attitudes* towards their roles as fathers that will influence Levels of Father Involvement as measured by levels of activity. Hypothesis 6C indicates a total effect, combining both direct and indirect effects.

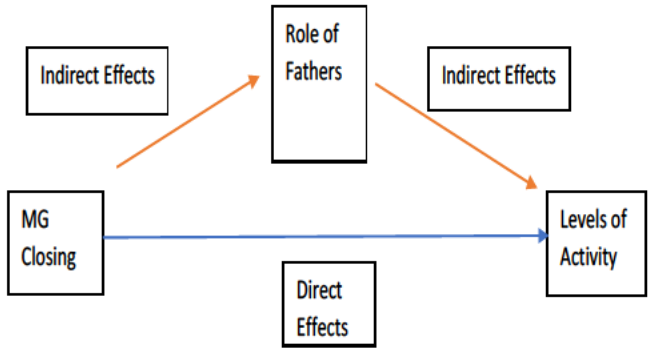

Figure 2 Mediation model for Hypothesis 6 with single variable M (Role of Fathers) causally located between X & Y (maternal gate closing and levels of activity)

In the context of the mediation model depicted in Figure 3, Quantitative Hypothesis 7A hypothesised that there will be a direct effect upon the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Levels of Father Involvement, as measured by levels of activity. Furthermore, Hypothesis 7B posits that there will be an *indirect* mediating effect of Maternal Gate Closing through fathers' reports of levels of *coparenting conflict*, that will influence Levels of Father Involvement as measured by levels of activity. Hypothesis 7C indicates a total effect, combining both direct and indirect effects.

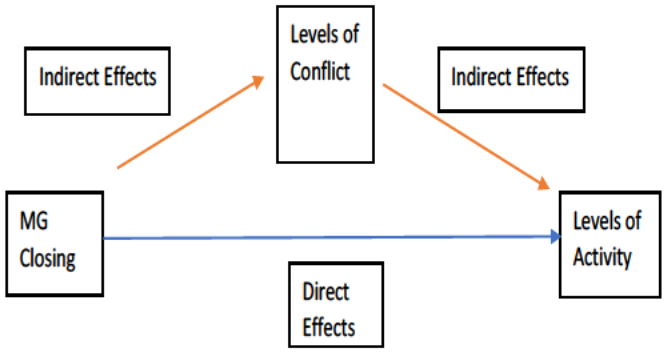

Figure 3 Mediation model for Hypothesis 7 with single variable M (Levels of Conflict) causally located between X & Y (maternal gate closing and levels of activity)

In the context of the mediation model depicted in Figure 4, Quantitative Hypothesis 8A hypothesised that there will be a direct effect upon the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Levels of Father Involvement, as measured by levels of activity. Furthermore, Hypothesis 8B posits that there will be an *indirect* mediating effect of Maternal Gate Closing through fathers' reports of levels of self-efficacy, that will influence Levels of Father Involvement as measured by levels of activity. Hypothesis 8C indicates a total effect, combining both direct and indirect effects

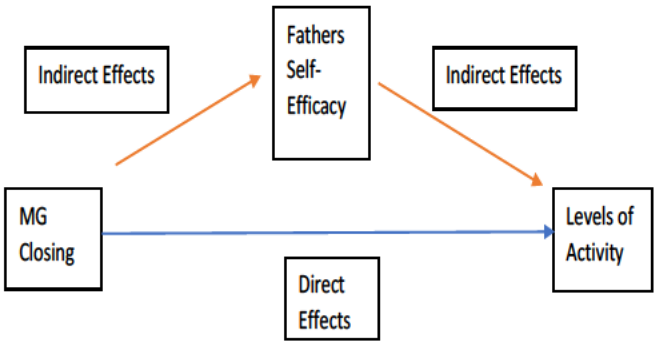

Figure 4 Mediation model for Hypothesis 8 with single variable M (Fathers' Self-Efficacy) causally located between X & Y (maternal gate closing and levels of activity)

In the context of the mediation model depicted in Figure 5, Quantitative Hypothesis 9A hypothesised that there will be a direct effect upon the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Levels of Father Involvement as measured by Time. Furthermore, Hypothesis 9B posits that there will be an *indirect* mediating effect of Maternal Gate Closing through *fathers' attitudes* towards their roles that will influence Levels of Father Involvement as measured by Time. Hypothesis 9C indicates a total effect, combining both direct and indirect effects.

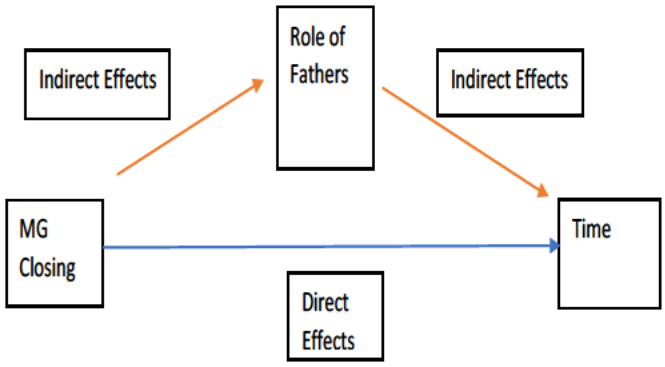

Figure 5 Mediation model for Hypothesis 9 with single variable M (Role of Fathers) causally located between X & Y (maternal gate closing and time)

In the context of the mediation model depicted in Figure 6, Quantitative Hypothesis 10A hypothesised that there will be a direct effect upon the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Levels of Father Involvement, as measured by Time. Furthermore, Hypothesis 10B posits that there will be an *indirect* mediating effect of Maternal Gate Closing through fathers' reports of levels of *coparenting conflict*, that will influence Levels of Father Involvement as measured by Time. Hypothesis 10C indicates a total effect, combining both direct and indirect effects.

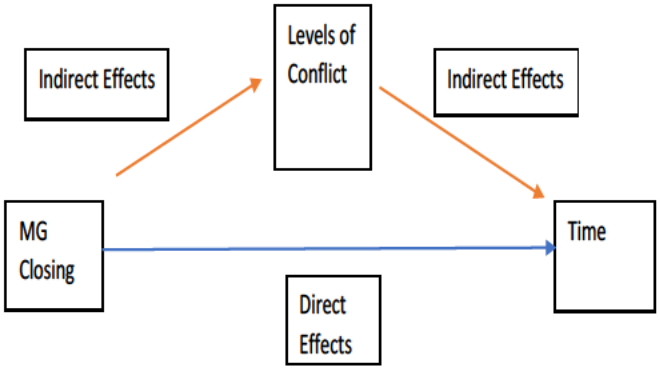

Figure 6 Mediation model for Hypothesis 10 with single variable M (Level of Conflict) causally located between X & Y (maternal gate closing and time)

In the context of the mediation model depicted in Figure 7, Quantitative Hypothesis 11A hypothesised that there will be a direct effect upon the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Levels of Father Involvement, as measured by Time. Furthermore, Hypothesis11B posits that there will be an *indirect* mediating effect of Maternal Gate Closing through fathers' reports of levels of self-efficacy, that will influence Levels of Father Involvement as measured by Time. Hypothesis11C indicates a total effect, combining both direct and indirect effects.

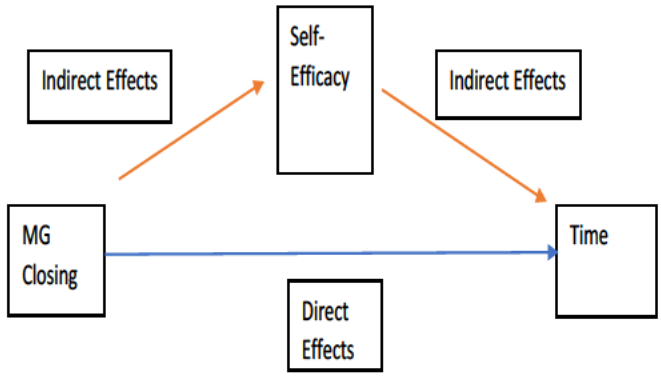

Figure 7 Mediation model for Hypothesis 11 with single variable M (Self-Efficacy) causally located between X & Y (maternal gate closing and time)

Method

Sample. Ethics approval (H18REA084) was obtained from the HREC of the University of Southern Queensland. This study chose to investigate a sample of fathers over the age of 18 years of age to ensure there was capacity for consent to participate. The sample included fathers who were recruited from the general population, through promotion of an online survey on social media, local media (radio and newspaper), and through personal and professional contacts of the researcher. The information sheet for the survey contained a link to an online cross-sectional survey, which was described as taking approximately 30 minutes

for participants to complete. At the beginning of the online survey was an informed consent page, which explained the details and purpose of the study, assurances around privacy, storage of data, etc. In the informed consent information fathers confirmed by selecting a tick box that they were themselves over the age of 18 years, and the biological father of a child between the ages of 2 and 12 years, before they were able to proceed to the survey (see Appendix B).

Participants. Participants were biological fathers (n=329) over the age of 18 years who resided with their children (age range 2 to 12). Of the 329 participants, seven were removed due to relationship status (separated) and thirteen were removed due to relationship status (divorced). A further six participants' data were removed due to living situation (living alone with biological children) and five other participants' data were removed due to living situation (other). The final dataset used for this research comprised 298 fathers who were married or de facto and reported to be cohabitating with the mother of their child or children. Mean age of the fathers was 41.32 years (*SD*=6.98 years) with the youngest father being 26 years old and the oldest father being 64 years of age. All fathers had a child or children aged between 2 and 12 years of age. Mean number of children was 2.13 children (*SD* = .78). A range of educational status was apparent (*N* = 298; 18% secondary education; 15.4% trade qualification; 35.9% bachelor's degree; 30.2% post-graduate education). Work hours and income status were also diverse, with hours worked averaging 40.87 hours worked per week (*SD*=11.10). Income also varied, however was more representative of a higher income bracket (*M*=$109,000 income per annum). The sample of fathers was geographically homogenous, with 217 (or 72%) of the sample being born in Australia, and of the remaining nearly 27% of the sample, 25 (8.4%) were born in the UK, and 14 (4.7%) in New Zealand, and all fathers were identified as living within Australia. English was the dominant language spoken at home with 264 (88.6%) reporting English as their first language.

Table 8 Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographic		
Age	Range 26min–64max	m = 41 years
Country of Birth	n	%
Australia	217	72.8
United Kingdom	25	8.4
New Zealand	14	4.7
Other	42	14.1
Language Spoken	n	%
English	264	88.6
Other	34	11.4
Relationship Status	n	%
Married	279	93.6
Cohabitate/Defacto	19	6.4
Number of Children	n	%
1	55	18.5
2	168	168
3	55	18.5
4	20	6.7
Living situation	n	%
Living with partner and biological children	283	95
Blended family	15	5

Education Status	n	%
Secondary	55	18.5
Tertiary	107	35.9
Post-Graduate	90	30.2
Trade	46	15.4
Hours worked per week	m = 40.87 hours (sd= 11.01)	
Employment Status		
Full-time	239	
Part-time	54	
Unemployed	5	
Income per annum	m = $109,000	

Materials

Demographics Survey. Participants completed a demographics form consisting of a 14 item self-report survey that was used to assess age, country of birth, language spoken, education level, employment status, income range, and hours worked per week. Information about the participants' relationships and family make-up was collected, including how many children live at home, along with the child's/children's age/s and gender/s. The participants' living situations were examined, whether married, divorced, single or living with partner.

Paternal mental health as measured by the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales (DASS-21) was included as a screener for the participant group. Although mental health was not a focus of this program of research, if high levels of depression, anxiety, or stress were found amongst the participants this may have had confounding effects on the factors in question. Paternal mental health needed to be considered first, to see if the sample was able to further analysed and the research questions able to be examined. The DASS 21 was chosen to measure fathers' levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. The DASS-21 (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995) is a 21-item questionnaire examining respondents' ratings of their mental health over the previous week. There are seven items for each of the subscales, with items rated from 0 (not at all) to 3 (most of the time). Example items include 'I was aware of dryness of my mouth' and 'I found it hard to wind down'. Scores are summed within each subscale and multiplied by two to produce totals for depression, anxiety, and stress symptom domains. Higher scores indicate more profound psychopathology. While it is possible to combine the three scales to produce a composite measure of negative emotional symptoms or distress, with higher total scale scores indicative of mental unwellness, the three subscales were maintained as a way of investigating the mental health of the fathers in this sample. The scale demonstrates high construct validity (Henry & Crawford, 2005) and reliability, with Cronbach's α = .82 to .91, .80 to .90, .84 to .93 for the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress

subscales, respectively (Henry & Crawford, 2005). Henry and Crawford report sound construct validity for the short-form (DASS 21), having tested the scale on a large non-clinical sample (2005). Reliability for the subscales using Cronbach's alpha were .88 for Depression, .82 for Anxiety, and .90 for Stress, representing good statistical reliability, and a valid brief tool for general psychological distress (Henry & Crawford, 2005).

Attitudes of fathers towards the *Role of fathers* were measured using an adapted version of The Role of Fathers Questionnaire (ROFQ; McBride & Rane, 1997; Palkovitz, 1984). The ROFQ is a 15 item self-report measure of parents' belief in the importance of the involvement of fathers and can be completed by both mothers and fathers. Responses are on a Likert scale ranging from *1 strongly disagree* to 5 *strongly agree*. Total scores on the ROFQ can range from 15 to 75. Higher scores indicate greater endorsement of the role of fathers in the lives of their children and reflect attitudes that fathers are capable and should be involved with and sensitive to their children, leading to positive development outcomes for their offspring. The ROFQ was found to have sound psychometric properties and has been used in a number of studies on father involvement (McBride et al., 2005; McBride & Rane, 1997; Palkovitz, 1984). Good internal consistency (α + .77) was reported by Lee and Doherty (2007). McBride and Rane (1997) reported a moderate level of reliability for the ROFQ, with alphas of .77 for fathers and .79 for mothers. It was deemed most appropriate for this study as the questions best captured respondents' attitudes to the role of fathers (Mallan et al., 2014). For example, *'A father should be as heavily involved in the care of a young child as the mother is'.* In particular, questions tapped into factors such as maternal essentialism, i.e., *'Mothers are naturally more sensitive caregivers than fathers are'.*

Father Involvement was measured using two constructs; fathering activities and time spent fathering. This is consistent with investigations of father involvement and well established in the literature (see Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). Father involvement has been

measured in both qualitative and quantitative terms, however, as the methodological rationale provided in Chapter 2 has indicated, Study 2 of this project will focus on quantitative measures of father involvement, in particular behavioural measures of involvement. Behavioural involvement is normally considered in terms of frequency of fathers' participation in activities with their children (Flouri, 2005). Fathering *activities* consisted of two further subscales, caregiving activities and play, which were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale incorporating items from father involvement and coparenting behaviour scale (Buckley & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010). Fathers responded to the question, *'In the past month, how often did you and your child...'*, followed by a list of 24 items on the father activity scale that included items such as, *'prepare food together?'; 'build or repair something together?'*; *'play a sport?'*. Fathers recorded their response on the Likert-type scale as follows: 1 = *not in the past month*, 2 = *a few times a week*; 3 = *once a week*; 4 = *several times a week*; 5 = *every day*. Higher ratings of involvement in various activities are seen as a measure of father involvement from a behavioural perspective. *Time* spent fathering was measured using a scale adapted from the father survey included in the early childhood longitudinal study (see Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015) and was recorded on a six-point Likert-type scale. Fathers were asked to respond to the question, *'In the past 30 days, how often have you spent one or more hours a day with your child/children?',* followed by the response from fathers recorded as follows: 6 = every day; 5 = a few times a week; 4 = a few times a month; 3 = once or twice; 2 = never; 1 = do not know. Higher self-reports of time spent with children, and types of activities engaged in, is a behavioural measure and indicative of higher levels of father involvement.

Fathers' sense of competence was investigated using the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC). The Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC) is a common tool used in parenting research and was chosen to assess fathers' sense of their own abilities

and self-efficacy regarding their parenting skills. The PSOC (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978) is a 16-item questionnaire assessing confidence and satisfaction regarding participants' parenting abilities. Items are rated on a Likert scale (1–6) from '*strongly agree'* to *'strongly disagree*'. Example items include *'Even though being a parent could be rewarding, I am frustrated now while my child is at his/her present age'* and *'My parent was better prepared to be a good parent'*. After appropriate reverse coding, responses are summed to produce totals in two subscales: Satisfaction and Efficacy (Johnston & Mash, 1989). Satisfaction is essentially the extent to which parents are frustrated, anxious, and poorly motivated, while Efficacy is the extent to which the parent feels competent, capable, and familiar with parenting. Higher scores indicate greater perceived self-efficacy. The scale demonstrates good validity and reliability (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978; Johnston & Mash, 1989) and adequate internal consistency with Cronbach's $\alpha = .75$ to .82 and .70 to .76 for the Satisfaction scale and Efficacy scale respectively (Gibaud-Wallston & Wandersman, 1978; Johnston & Mash, 1989). Rogers and Matthews (2004) investigated the factor structure of the PSOC with an Australian sample of 849 mothers and 329 fathers. They found the two-factor structure to be consistent with previous research, and the two factors of Satisfaction and Efficacy to account for 28.2% and 14.6% of the variance, respectively (Rogers & Matthews, 2004). A third factor called Interest accounted for 8.8% of the variance, however this was not consistent with previous samples, and not pertinent to the current study, so the two-factor structure was maintained. Rogers and Matthews (2004) also reported internal consistency for the Satisfaction and Efficacy subscales, with alpha coefficients of .77 for Satisfaction and .58 for Efficacy for mothers, and .80 for Satisfaction and .82 for Efficacy for fathers.

Maternal Gatekeeping was measured by The Parental Regulation Inventory (PRI). The Parental Regulation Inventory (PRI; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015; Van Egeren, 2000) is an 18-item self-report questionnaire which examines the behaviours of mothers to either

encourage or discourage partner involvement in childrearing based on a revision of the original PRI developed by Van Egeren (2000). The PRI has been used extensively in the study of maternal gatekeeping from the perspectives of both mothers and fathers (Lee et al., 2019). The PRI also includes two subscales: mothers' self-reported gatekeeping behaviour and fathers' reports of mothers' gatekeeping behaviour. It is the latter subscale that has been used to examine fathers' perceived maternal gate closing behaviours and fathers' perceived maternal gate opening behaviours in this research (Van Egeren, 2000). The PRI examines maternal gatekeeping in terms of gate opening (i.e., encouragement/compliments) and gate closing (i.e., criticism). Fathers were asked the question, 'How often does your child's mother…'. Fathers indicated their responses to questions on a six-point Likert-type scale (1 = *never* to 6 = *several times a day*). Examples of items on the subscale relating to fathers' reports of maternal gatekeeping behaviour are as follows: *'Take over and do it her own way'* (gate closing behaviour) and *'Let you know she appreciates your contributions'* (gate opening behaviour). Internal consistency reliability is adequate with Cronbach's α = .88, and high construct and criterion validity (Van Egeren, 2000 ; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008).

Coparenting Relationship and *Coparenting Conflict* was measured using the Coparenting Relationship Survey (CRS). The Coparenting Relationship Survey (CRS) (Feinberg, Brown, & Kan, 2012) is a 35-item questionnaire which assesses the way the father and his partner function together as parents. The CRS was selected in order to determine the extent to which fathers believe their coparenting partner holds similar views, goals and beliefs regarding parenting to themselves. Items are rated from 0 (not true of us) to 6 (very true of us). Example items include 'My partner and I have the same goals for our child' and 'My partner does not trust my abilities as a parent (reversed)'. There are seven subscales, which include Coparenting Agreement, Coparenting Support, Endorsement of Partner's Parenting, Coparenting Undermining, Exposure to Conflict, Division of Labour, and

Coparenting Closeness. Scores are summed to reveal totals within each subscale, and higher scores indicate higher-quality parenting relationships. Internal consistency is excellent with Cronbach's α = .91 to .94 for overall total scores, and adequate for subscale scores with Cronbach's α =.61 to .90 (Feinberg et al., 2012). The Coparenting Brief Measure is a way of measure overall coparenting quality derived from a subscale of items from the CRS. *Coparenting conflict* was measured also using the Coparenting Relationship Survey (CRS) as described above. Specifically, the Exposure to Conflict items form a subscale for this purpose.

Analytic Strategy

To answer the research questions, and to test the hypotheses for relationships which were predicted to exist between the factors identified, several steps were taken. First, all variables were checked for missing values and examined for parametric assumptions, and descriptive statistics were calculated. Second, a bivariate correlation matrix was produced for all variables (see Table 10). Finally, mediation analyses were conducted separately for Hypotheses 6 through 11, which posited complex effects.

Results

Data Analysis

The statistical analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS (Version 27). The data was screened and corrected for missing or incorrectly entered values. Missing entries occurred mainly in the demographic information, where for example, participants had either neglected or chose not to enter information for annual salary. These were corrected by entering the mean for all participant salaries. In terms of the measures, data screening found no missing or incorrectly entered values. Variables were then checked for normality and homoscedasticity, identified outliers were addressed by use of the mean, and variables were computed into continuous scales.

Descriptive Statistics

Although paternal mental health was not a primary aim for investigation of this study, the DASS was included so that the sample could be screened for any high levels of depression, anxiety or stress, which may confound the relationships of interest. Results for the DASS-21 for this participant sample indicated that average scores for depression fell within a mild range (M=11.13, SD=7.25), anxiety within a severe range (M=17.87, SD=5.07), and stress within a moderate range (M=25.95, SD=8.00). These results indicate that many of the fathers were in non-clinical ranges for depression and stress, however many were reporting levels of generalised anxiety that may be impacting on their everyday functioning. However, these results were not considered clinically significant, and the sample of fathers was seen as representative of most fathers and analysis was able to proceed.

Father involvement was measured using the Time and Activity scales. Given the emphasis on Father Involvement in this program of research, it was important to first note the reports by fathers in this sample of the amount of time they were involved with their children. This sample of fathers reported high levels of involvement with their children as indicated by time spent, with the mean score being 5.66 (SD=.658) indicating that fathers are spending considerable time with their children every day. Data was gathered from fathers on the type and frequency of activities that they were engaged in with their children. Based on fathers' responses, the top five activities they reported being involved in with their children were 'Talk about things he/she were doing at school', 'Talk about family', 'Look at books together or talk about books he/she has read', 'Played a sport or outdoor activity', 'Preparing Food Together'. Other activities also frequently engaged in were 'Going to the Store', and 'Going Shopping', although there may be some overlap.

The ROFQ measured fathers' endorsement of the role of fathers in the lives of their children and reflected attitudes that fathers are capable and should be involved with and

sensitive to their children, leading to positive development outcomes for their offspring. Total scores on the ROFQ can range from 15 to 75, with higher scores indicating a more favourable belief towards the role of fathers in the lives of children. This sample of fathers in fact scored high on this scale (M=61.68, SD= 7.14) with the scores ranging between 26 and 75.

Father's Parenting Sense of Competence was measured using the PSOC scale, and subscales of Satisfaction and Efficacy (Johnston & Mash, 1989). Fathers indicated moderately high levels of both perceived levels of satisfaction (M=35.58, SD= 7.34, minimum score 9, maximum score 54) and self-efficacy (M=32.86, SD=4.42, minimum score 8, maximum score 42) and overall their sense of competence in their parenting was moderately high (M=68.44, SD=9.99, maximum score 96).

Fathers' experiences of *Maternal Gatekeeping* in the coparenting relationship were measured using the PRI. The PRI found that fathers reported that the behaviours of mothers to encourage their involvement was moderately high (M=33.30, SD=9.30, range minimum 9 to maximum 54), whereas fathers reported gatekeeping behaviours of mothers such as discouragement of their involvement with their children to be moderate to low (M=21.98, SD=8.14, range minimum 9 to maximum 54).

The *Coparenting Relationship* and *Coparenting Conflict* were measured using the Coparenting Relationship Survey (CRS). The Coparenting Brief Measure was obtained from the overall CRS measure and gave insight into fathers' reports of overall coparenting quality. The CRS Brief Measure indicated that this sample of fathers were experiencing good quality coparenting relationships (M=4.2, SD= .522) with scores ranging from as low as 2.29 and as high as 5.43. Fathers also reported their experiences of *Coparenting conflict* using the Coparenting Relationship Survey (CRS). Fathers reported low levels of coparenting conflict (M=1.9, SD=.96). This would indicate reasonable levels of conflict over matters relating to

their children, but certainly these do not indicate that these fathers come from high conflict relationships.

Table 9 Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables of Fathers' (N=298)

Variable	Range	Min	Max	M	SD
Role of Fathers	49	26	75	61.68	7.138
Father Involvement Time	5	1	6	5.66	.658
Father Involvement Activity	3	1	4	2.59	.547
Parenting Satisfaction	43	11	54	35.58	7.397
Parenting Self-Efficacy	22	21	43	32.86	4.420
Parenting Sense of Competency (Total)	52.50	44.67	97.17	68.4402	9.99562
Maternal Gate Closing	38	10	48	21.98	8.137
Maternal Gate Opening	44	10	54	33.30	9.301
Coparenting Quality	3.14	2.29	5.43	4.2069	.52203
Coparenting Conflict	4.80	1.00	5.80	1.9409	.95741

Correlation Analyses

Bivariate correlations studies were conducted to test hypotheses 1 through 5, and a comprehensive correlation matrix was produced and are displayed in Table 10. Evidence was found supporting a relationship between gate opening behaviours and higher levels of father involvement. Further, evidence was also found to support a relationship between gate closing behaviours and lower levels of father involvement as measured by Time, however not for Activity. Regarding each of the specific hypotheses, the following is reported.

For hypothesis 1A., Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – was negatively associated with fathers' involvement in parenting as measured by *Level of Activity,* (r=.077, p=.185). However, this was not a significant finding.

For hypothesis 1B., Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – displayed a negative association with fathers' involvement in parenting as measured by *Total Time Spent,* (r=-.133*, p=.022), although this was only a small correlation.

For hypothesis 1C., Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – displayed a positive association with fathers' involvement in parenting as measured by *Level of Activity* (r=.222** p<.000), again this was only a small correlation.

For hypothesis 1D., Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – displayed a positive association with fathers' involvement in parenting as measured by *Total Time Spent (r=.218**, p=.000).* This was a small to moderate correlation.

A significant relationship was found between higher levels of positive attitudes towards their roles as fathers and maternal gatekeeping, with gate opening leading to higher levels of fathers' positive attitudes towards their role, and in the opposite direction for gate closing. In regard to each of the specific hypotheses, the following is reported.

For Hypothesis 2A., Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – displayed a negative association with fathers' attitudes towards their roles as fathers, as measured by the *ROFQ*, (r=-201**, p<.000), although only a small correlation.

For Hypothesis 2B., Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – displayed a positive association with fathers' attitudes towards their roles as fathers, as measured by the ROFQ, (r=-.215**, p<000), again this was only a small correlation.

Evidence was found of a significant relationship existing between higher levels of parenting competence (measured by the subscales of satisfaction and self-efficacy) and maternal gatekeeping, with gate opening related to higher levels of fathers' sense of competence in parenting, and in the opposite direction for gate closing. In regard to each of the specific hypotheses, the following is reported.

For Hypothesis 3A., Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – was negatively associated with fathers' sense of competence in their parenting as measured by *Level of Satisfaction (r=-.317**, p<.001)*. This was a moderately significant correlation.

For Hypothesis 3B., Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – was negatively associated with fathers' sense of competence in their parenting as measured by *Level of Self-efficacy (r=-.194**, p<.001),* although this was a small correlation.

For Hypothesis 3C., Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – was positively associated with fathers' sense of competence in their parenting as measured by *Level of Satisfaction (r=.170**, p=.003),* again this was only a small correlation.

For Hypothesis 3D., Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – was positively associated with fathers' sense of competence in their parenting as measured by *Level of Self-efficacy (r=.267**, p>.000).* This was a small to moderate correlation.

Evidence was found to support that maternal gate closing behaviour has a detrimental effect on coparenting quality and is related to higher levels of interparental conflict (as reported from the father's perspective). In contrast, higher levels of maternal gate opening behaviour seems to positively contribute to the coparenting relationship and is related to lower levels of relationship conflict. In regard to each of the specific hypotheses, the following is reported.

For Hypothesis 4A., Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – was positively associated with fathers' reports of coparenting conflict as measured by *Level of Coparenting Conflict (r=*.500**, p<.001). This was a strong correlation.

For Hypothesis 4B., Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – was negatively associated with fathers' reports of coparenting conflict as measured by *Level of Coparenting Conflict (r=-330**, p<.001).* This was a moderate correlation.

Evidence was found to show that maternal gatekeeping has an overall effect on fathers' perception of the coparenting relationship quality. Fathers reported higher levels of coparenting quality when there are higher levels of gate opening from mothers, and again, the opposite was found with higher reports of gate closing behaviours from mothers. Regarding each of the specific hypotheses, the following is reported.

For Hypothesis 5A., Maternal gatekeeping – *Opening Behaviours* – was positively associated with fathers' reports of overall coparenting quality as measure by *Level of Coparenting Quality (r=.473**, p<.001)*. This was a moderate to strong correlation.

For Hypothesis 5B., Maternal gatekeeping – *Closing Behaviours* – was negatively associated with fathers' reports of overall coparenting quality *Level of Coparenting Quality (r=-.354**. P.000).* This was a moderate correlation.

In summary, gate opening was associated with higher levels of father involvement, as reported by fathers in this sample. This was mainly demonstrated in amounts of time; however, no discernible variances were noted for the types of activities performed by fathers. Further, there was an association with mothers' gate opening behaviours and fathers' reports of positive expectations of their roles as fathers. Fathers also reported higher levels of parenting competence, as measured by the subscales of satisfaction and efficacy in coparenting relationships, where they also reported higher levels of gate opening behaviours of mothers. In addition, fathers reported higher levels of conflict in their relationship when there were increased levels of gate closing behaviours of mothers. Fathers also reported that their perceptions of the overall coparenting relationship quality were more positive in environments where there was less gate closing by mothers. Fathers reported having more satisfying coparenting relationships where there are facilitative and encouraging behaviours of mothers that foster father involvement.

Table 10 Bivariate Correlations for Maternal Gatekeeping (Opening and Closing Behaviours)

	Maternal Gate Closing	Maternal Gate Opening	Level of Activity	Total Time Spent	ROFQ	Satisfaction	Self-Efficacy	Level of Conflict	Coparent Quality
Maternal Gate Closing	1	-.338**	-.077	-.133*	-.201**	-.317**	-.194**	.500**	-.354**
Maternal Gate Opening	-.338**	1	.222**	.218**	.215**	.170**	.267**	-.330**	.473**
Level of Activity	-.077	.222**	1	.285**	.288**	.164**	.242**	-.154**	.161**
Total Time Spent	-.133*	.218**	.285**	1	.379**	.183**	.281**	-.144*	.153**
ROFQ	-.201**	.215**	.288**	.379**	1	.310**	.314**	-.275**	.331**
Satisfaction	-.317**	.170**	.164**	.183**	.310**	1	.393**	-.270**	.325**
Self-efficacy	-.194**	.267**	.242**	.281**	.314**	.393**	1	-.170**	.291**
Level of Conflict	.500**	-.330**	-.154**	-.144*	-.275**	-.270**	-.170**	1	-.244**
Coparent Quality	-.354**	.473**	.161**	.153**	.331**	.325**	.291**	-.244**	1

**. Correlation is significant at the p<0.01 level (2-tailed).
*. Correlation is significant at the p<0.05 level (2-tailed).

Mediation Analyses

To test more complex relationships between the variables, including possible mediating effects on Father Involvement, we examined hypotheses in the context of complex effects, with one variable designated as a primary path (e.g., an 'X' variable related to a 'Y' variable outcome) and a third variable modelled as a mediating variable 'M'. In these cases, which we illustrate in Hypotheses 6 through 11, we divide the hypotheses between direct effects, which capture the direct path or the primary path (e.g., an 'X' variable related to a 'Y' variable outcome), and indirect effects, which account for the interaction between the 'X' variable and mediating variable 'M' on the outcome 'Y'. Furthermore, there is a total effect, which combines both the direct and indirect effects. These models were tested using the Process Macro Version 3.5 in SPSS as described by Hayes (2018).

In reference to Hypothesis 6, and as shown in Figure 2, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine the mediating effect of Role of Fathers on the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Father Involvement as measured by Level of Activity. No statistically significant direct effect was found, b=0.00, t=-0.35, B*Ca CI* [-.01, 0.00], $p > .05$. In addition, no statistically significant indirect effect was found, b=0.00, BCa CI [-0.01, 0.00]. The total effect of the model was found to be insignificant, b=-0.01, t=-1.33, BCa CI [-0.01, 0.00], p>0.05. These results showed no mediating relationship for the of Role of Fathers between Maternal Gate Closing and Father Involvement (Level of Activity). The overall model was not statistically significant R=0.08, $F(1,296)$=1.76, p>0.05, R^2=0.01.

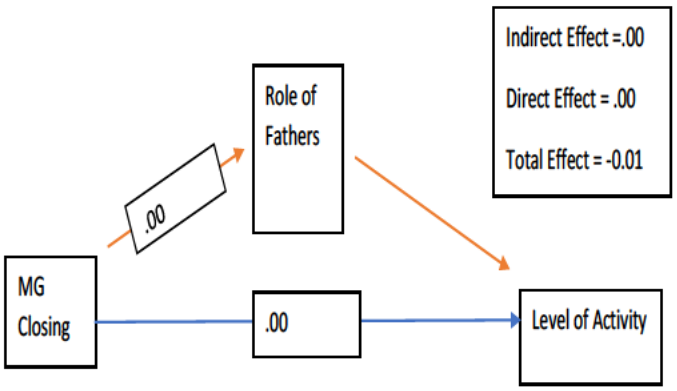

Figure 7. Mediation results for Role of Fathers causally located between Maternal Gate closing and Levels of Activity, showing direct and indirect effects.

In reference to Hypothesis 7, and as shown in Figure 3, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine the mediating effect of Coparenting Conflict on the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Father Involvement as measured by level of activity. This relationship is displayed in Figure 8. No statistically significant direct effect was found, b=0.00, t=0.00, BCa CI [-0.01, 0.01], p>.05. No statistically significant indirect effect was found, b=-0.01, BCa CI [-0.01, 0.00]. The total effect of the model was found to be insignificant, b=-0.01, t=-1.33, BCa CI [-0.01, 0.00], p>0.05. These results suggest that Coparenting Conflict has no mediating relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Father Involvement (level of activity). The overall model was not statistically significant, R=0.08, $F(1,296)$=1.76, p<0.05, R^2=0.01.

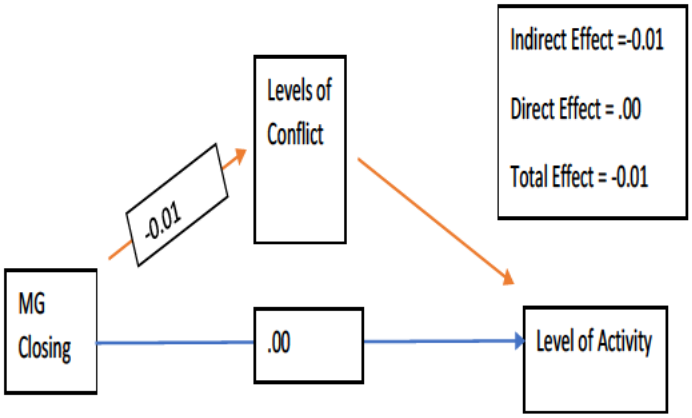

Figure 8 Mediation results for Levels of Conflict causally located between maternal gate closing and levels of activity, showing direct and indirect effects

In reference to Hypothesis 8, as shown in Figure 4, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine the mediating effect of Fathers' Self-Efficacy on the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Father Involvement as measured by level of activity. These effects are displayed in Figure 9. No statistically significant direct effect was found, b=-0.00, t=-0.07, BCa CI [-0.01, 0.01], p>0.05. However, a statistically significant indirect effect was found, b=-0.005, BCa CI [-0.086, 0.002]. The total effect of the model was found to be insignificant, b=-0.01, t=-1.33, BCa CI [-0.013, 0.003], p>0.05. These results suggest that Fathers Self-Efficacy mediates the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Father Involvement (level of activity). However, the overall model was not statistically significant R=0.08, $F(1, 296)$=1.76, p.>0.05, R^2=0.01.

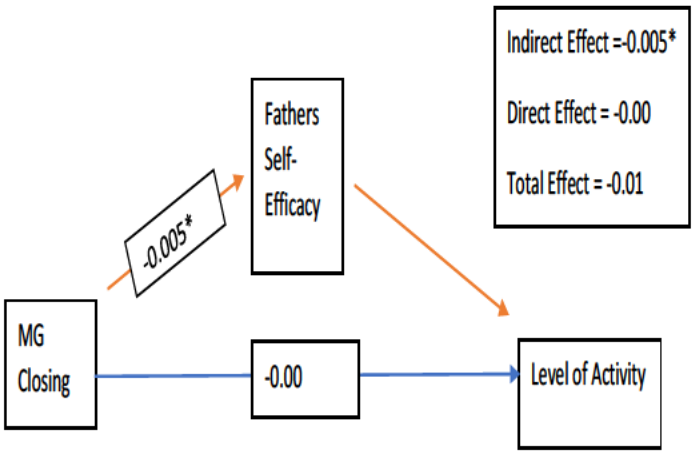

Figure 9 Mediation results for fathers' self-efficacy causally located between maternal gate closing and levels of activity, showing direct and indirect effects. * indicates significant

In reference to Hypothesis 9, as shown in Figure 5, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine the mediating effect of Role of Fathers on the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Father Involvement as measured by Time. These effects are displayed in Figure 10. No statistically significant direct effect was found, b=-0.005, t=-1.07, BCa CI [-0.0135, -0.0040], p>0.05. However, a statistically significant indirect effect was found, b=-0.006, BCa CI [-0.0112, -0.0018]. The total effect of the model was found to be significant, b=-0.01, t=-2.30, BCa CI [-0.0199, -0.0016], p<.0.05. These results suggest that Role of Fathers mediated the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Father Involvement (Time). The overall model achieved statistical significance at R=0.13, $F(1,296)$=5.30, p<0.05, R^2=0.02.

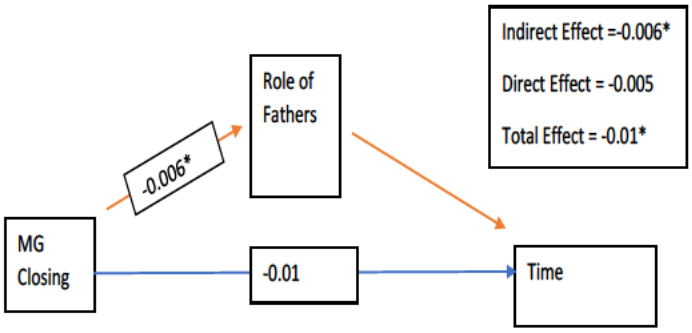

Figure 10 Mediation results for role of fathers causally located between maternal gate closing and time, showing direct and indirect effects. * indicates significant

In reference to Hypothesis 10, as shown in Figure 6, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine the mediating effect of Coparenting Conflict on the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Father Involvement as measured by Time. These effects are displayed in Figure 11. No statistically significant direct effect was found, b=-0.01, t=-1.22, BCa CI [0.00, -0.00], p>0.05. No statistically significant indirect effect was found, b=-0.004, BCa CI [-0.01, 0.00]. However, the total effect of the model was found to be significant, b=-0.01, t=-2.30, BCa CI [-0.02, 0.00], p<0.05. These results suggest that Coparenting Conflict mediated the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Father Involvement (Time). The overall model achieved statistical significance at R=0.13, F(1, 296)=5.30, p<0.05, R^2=0.02.

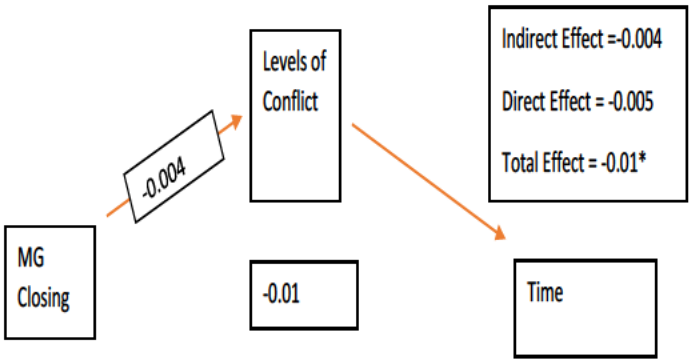

Figure 11 Mediation results for levels of coparenting conflict causally located between maternal gate closing and time, showing direct and indirect effects. * indicates significant

In reference to Hypothesis 11, as shown in Figure 7, a mediation analysis was conducted to examine the mediating effect of Fathers' Self-Efficacy on the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Father Involvement as measured by Time. These effects are displayed in Figure 12. It was found that there was a statistically significant direct effect, b=-0.00, t=-0.93, BCa CI [-0.01, 0.00], p>0.05. A statistically significant indirect effect was also found, b=-0.01, BCa CI [-0.012, -0.00]. The total effect of the model was found to be significant, b=-0.01, t=-2.30, BCa CI [-0.02, -0.00], p<0.05. These results suggest that Fathers' Self-Efficacy mediated the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Father Involvement (Time). The overall model achieved statistical significance at R=0.13, F(1, 296)=5.30, p<0.05, R^2=0.02.

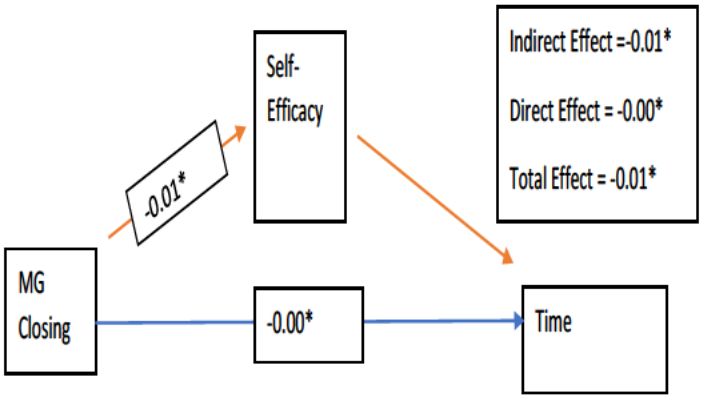

Figure 12 Mediation results for fathers' self-efficacy causally located between maternal gate closing and time, showing direct and indirect effects. * indicates significant

In summary, Role of Fathers, Levels of Coparenting Conflict, and Fathers' Self-Efficacy were not found to have any indirect or direct mediating effects on the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Fathers' Level of Activity with their children, with one exception. Self-efficacy was found to indirectly mediate the relationship between Gate Closing and Level of Activity. When considering the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Fathers Time with their children, indirect effects were found for Role of Fathers and Self-Efficacy. Further, direct effects were also found for Self-Efficacy. No indirect or direct effects were found for Levels of Conflict on the relationship between Maternal Gate Closing and Fathers' Time.

Summary of Hypotheses Support

The findings from this quantitative study showed support for the positive and negative impacts of Maternal Gatekeeping on Father Involvement. Relationships were also found to exist with other variables of interest to Father Involvement, and the influences of mediating factors such as coparenting conflict and attitudes of fathers towards their roles. The following table provides a summation of the hypotheses tested in Study 2.

Table 11 Summary of Hypotheses Tested in Study 2

Hypothesis	Factor	Hypothesised Direction	Supported	Effect Size
1a	Closing and Level of Activity	Negative	No	Not significant
1b	Closing and Time	Negative	Yes	Small
1c	Opening and Level of Activity	Positive	Yes	Small
1d	Opening and Time	Positive	Yes	Small
2a	Closing and ROF	Negative	Yes	Small
2b	Opening and ROF	Positive	Yes	Small
3a	Closing and Satisfaction	Negative	Yes	Moderate
3b	Closing and Self-efficacy	Negative	Yes	Small
3c	Opening and Satisfaction	Positive	Yes	Small
3d	Opening and Self-efficacy	Positive	Yes	Small
4a	Closing and Conflict	Positive	Yes	Strong
4b	Opening and Conflict	Negative	Yes	Moderate
5a	Opening and Quality	Positive	Yes	Strong
5**b**	Closing and Quality	Negative	Yes	Moderate
6a	Closing via ROF on Level of Activity	Direct	No	Not significant
6**b**	Closing via ROF on Level of Activity	Indirect	No	Not significant
7a	Closing via Conflict on Level of activity	Direct	No	Not significant
7**b**	Closing via Conflict on Level of Activity	Indirect	No	Not Significant
8a	Closing via Self-Efficacy on	Direct	No	Not Significant

	Level of Activity			
8b	Closing via Self-Efficacy on Level of Activity	Indirect	Yes	Significant
9a	Closing via ROF on Time	Direct	Yes	Not Significant
9b	Closing via ROF on Time	Indirect	Yes	Significant
10a	Closing via Conflict on Time	Direct	No	Not Significant
10b	Closing via Conflict on Time	Indirect	No	Not Significant
11a	Closing via Self-Efficacy on Time	Direct	Yes	Significant
11b	Closing via Self-Efficacy on Time	Indirect	Yes	Significant

Discussion

The literature on father involvement has been found to be lacking in reporting on data from fathers, and less is known specifically about the experiences of fathers of older children as opposed to pre-natal to early infancy periods. There is a lack of research on the effects of factors within the coparenting relationship, such as maternal gate keeping, and the impacts of fathers involvement from their own perspective. Therefore, it was an aim of this program of research to bring greater awareness to the experiences of fathers in their parenting, to improve the understanding of father involvement, and to address barriers observed. It was the intention of Study 2 to investigate the effect of factors within the coparenting relationship such as coparenting satisfaction or quality and levels of conflict, and maternal gatekeeping, as experienced by fathers, and the impact of these factors on father involvement. Further, it was the aim of this study to look at internal factors of fathers themselves and whether these mediate the effects of maternal gatekeeping on their involvement. Specific hypotheses were developed, which were assessed using a series of correlational and mediation studies. This section will entail a discussion of the findings, in response to the aims and research questions of Study 2. Strengths and limitations, and recommendations made for further research, will be included in Chapter 10, General Discussion.

Study 2 was designed to meet objectives 3 and 4 of the program of research, which were; to identify themes of barriers and facilitators of father involvement in the coparenting relationship, that may impact on father involvement and fathers' experiences of parenting generally. And, to construct a study that would investigate how factors within the coparenting relationship might be acting on fathers generally in their experiences of parenting.

The following quantitative research questions were outlined:

1. What role may maternal gatekeeping play in fathers' involvement in parenting (from the fathers' perspective)?

2. What role may maternal gatekeeping play in fathers' attitude towards their role as fathers (from the fathers' perspective)?
3. What effect does maternal gatekeeping have on fathers' sense of parenting confidence (satisfaction and efficacy)?
4. How does maternal gatekeeping affect fathers' experience of coparenting relationship satisfaction?
5. What effect does maternal gatekeeping have on fathers' experience of coparenting relationship conflict?

Regarding the aims of this program of research to bring focus to the experiences of fathers, Study 2 provided valuable insight into the lives of a sample of Australian fathers. These findings are an additional contribution to the father involvement data as they provide an indication of the levels of involvement of a sample of Australian fathers of older children aged between 2 and 12 years. A typical father in this sample was born in Australia, 41 years of age, married with two children, tertiary educated and working in a professional role earning about $109,000 per annum. It is noted that the majority of fathers in the sample were married, living with their children and the children's biological mother, enjoyed moderately high incomes, and were well educated or trade qualified. These findings are consistent with the literature as being conducive to higher levels of father involvement (Baxter & Smart, 2010).

In respect to descriptive statistics, this sample of fathers reported high levels of involvement in the day-to-day lives of their children as indicated by time spent. It was found in the sample that most fathers were reporting high levels of involvement in the lives of their children in terms of time and were engaged in caregiving and play activities. Many of the highly rated activities in terms of frequency revolved around more caring, nurturing aspects of fathering, such as talking about family matters, reading, or discussing books, and sharing

an interest in things like school. Engaging in sport and outdoor activities are in alignment with what is more commonly known about fathers' involvement in activities with their children, and these were also frequently engaged in by these fathers. While fathers' in this sample may enjoy the classic activities of sport and playing in the back yard with their children, they are also willing to do the grocery shopping with their children, and follow up on schoolwork and reading. Fathers also reported feeling that their involvement was encouraged by their partners. It is possible that most fathers in this sample have been able to maintain a quality level of involvement in the lives of their children since the transition to parenthood period and, given the indicators of the quality of the coparenting relationship, it is likely that this involvement has been fostered through high quality coparenting relationships with positive expectations of the fathers of the importance of their role to their children.

The fathers in Study 2 were found to hold strong views on the importance of the role of fathers in the lives of children, as represented by their high scores on the Role of Fathers Questionnaire. This, coupled with their relatively high endorsement of their own sense of competency in their parenting, and both their sense of satisfaction and self-efficacy, would be conducive to higher levels of father involvement (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). Therefore, the analysis of scales assessing the view the fathers' have on the importance of the role of fathers in the lives of children, their sense of self-efficacy in their parenting, coupled with the levels of their self-reported involvement in the care of their children, creates a profile for this sample as befitting the 'new father' ideal as described by Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan (2015).. This sample of fathers perhaps captures a group of fathers who are more involved in the care of their children and have incorporated a nurturing identity in their fathering role as described by Schoppe-Sullivan et al., (2021). This is promising in light of the literature reported in Chapter 2 showing that levels father involvement had not been progressing at rates in alignment with societal expectations. Although a small sample of Australian fathers, these

findings are encouraging, and may be taken as indicative of slow, but increasingly improving conditions in the homes of Australian families, with more involved fathering and equitable coparenting becoming a reality for some.

In regard to Quantitative Research question 1, fathers in this sample did report experiencing maternal gate keeping. Fathers reported moderate to low levels of mothers' gate closing, and moderate to high levels of mothers' gate opening, which when these scores are considered together, relay that the fathers in the sample indicated that they were experiencing far more encouragement and facilitation, than restriction and criticism, of their involvement with their children by mothers. The strength of the correlations was unfortunately small, but nonetheless significant. Fathers in this sample are reporting that when mothers engage in gate opening behaviours that this is enabling their involvement as fathers, as indicated by the amount of time spent with their children. In regard to Quantitative Research Question 2, fathers attitudes towards their role as fathers did have a relationship with their experience of maternal gatekeeping. A relationship was found between higher levels of fathers' positive attitudes towards their roles as fathers and maternal gatekeeping, with gate opening related to higher levels of fathers' positive attitudes towards their role, and in the opposite direction for gate closing. In regard to Quantitative Research Question 3, a significant relationship was found between higher levels of fathers' parenting competence and maternal gatekeeping, with gate opening related to higher levels of fathers' sense of competence in parenting, and in the opposite direction for gate closing. The findings in response to quantitative research questions one through three were consistent with what was as predicted, and with the literature on maternal gatekeeping and father involvement (Jones & Prinz, 2005; Schuengel & Osterman, 2019). Of note is that fathers expressing positive attitudes towards their roles as fathers, and higher levels of self-efficacy, reported more gate opening behaviours. However, it is impossible to say from this data whether fathers' positive attitudes towards the role, and

higher self-efficacy, elicit more gate opening from their partners or vice versa. This would be a potential investigation for future research. Nonetheless, it shows that they are important factors that interact and contribute to a more thorough understanding of father involvement as per Cabrera et al.'s (2014) model. These findings demonstrate what was advocated in Cabrera et al.'s model of 'feed-back and feed-forward' interactions between factors. These findings add weight to the idea that certainly maternal gate keeping is better understood when characteristics of fathers, in this case their attitudes and self-efficacy, are incorporated in models and theories, and then put under more rigorous investigation in research.

In regard to Quantitative Research Question 4, fathers in the sample reported that maternal gate keeping did effect their experience of the coparenting relationship. It was found that maternal gatekeeping had an overall effect on fathers' perception of the coparenting relationship quality. Fathers reported higher levels of coparenting quality when there were higher levels of gate opening from mothers, and again, the opposite was found with higher reports of gate closing behaviours from mothers. Further, in regard to Quantitative Research Question 5, similar it was found that fathers reported a relationship between their experience of maternal gatekeeping and coparenting conflict. There was evidence found that maternal gate closing behaviour had a detrimental effect on coparenting relationship and was related to higher levels of interparental conflict, as reported from the father's perspective. In contrast, higher levels of maternal gate opening behaviours seems to positively contribute to the coparenting relationship and are related to lower levels of relationship conflict. Consequently, when taken together, this sample of fathers reported that coparenting quality and satisfaction was relatively high, and there were minimal levels of coparenting conflict.

These are encouraging results and indicate that the high levels of father involvement have perhaps been facilitated through a more equitable model of coparenting for this sample, and is consistent with what would be expected according to the literature on coparenting,

gatekeeping and father involvement (Fagan & Cherson, 2017; Feinberg et al., 2014; Lee, et al., 2019).

Of note was that a comparison of effect sizes, although moderate, reveals that maternal gate closing has more strength in these relationships than maternal gate opening. For example, for gate closing and fathers' levels of satisfaction with their role the effect size was .10 and for gate closing and fathers' sense of parenting self-efficacy the effect size was .04. There is no previous literature that is known to the researcher to have found varying impacts of gate closing over gate opening. This is of interest as it indicates that gate closing is more resistant to influences of fathers' characteristics and thus more detrimental to father involvement. These findings strengthen the argument for further investigation of gate closing more specifically as it may appear to have greater influence in impeding father involvement. In alignment with Schoppe-Sullivan and colleagues (2015), detection of gate closing of mothers propensity in expectant mothers, and subsequent intervention, may prove a more powerful intervention for the benefit of fathers' involvement in the long term.

The differences noted in gate closing over gate opening lead to the decision to focus on closing in models to be tested. The mediation analyses found mainly indirect effects for various mediators and the relationship between maternal gate closing and father involvement as measured by time. In terms of the models tested, any effect of gate closing was found to be mediated by fathers' sense of parental conflict, fathering self-efficacy, and their positive expectations of the role that fathers play in the lives of children. However, the mediation effects for Hypotheses 9, 10, and 11 were very small effects and would not be practically significant to target in a clinical setting, as indicated earlier in the correlation analyses. Thus, the findings supported mediation relationships for fathers' role, fathers' experience of coparenting conflict, and fathers' self-efficacy, with father involvement as measured by time. This may be due to the robustness of the use of the variable of time as a way of assessing

these interactions. In this study, time seems to have better validity than activity and to be a superior measure of father involvement. Future research may benefit by focusing on using Time as a measure of father involvement as it seems to be most sensitive when testing the interaction between variables that impact in mediation analyses.

In practical settings, while it may be possible to increase fathers' sense of self-efficacy or belief in the importance of the role of fathers, the strength of gate closing may be such that it will override such endeavours. Further, different cohorts of fathers may see different effects. Study 2 is from a sample of fathers of children between 2 and 12 years of age. These findings may vary with a sample of new fathers, of for that matter, fathers of adolescents. Higher self-efficacy and belief in a fathers' role may be more important to a new father to counteract effects of maternal gate closing but may be less so for fathers of older children who have established patterns of involvement and coparenting.

Practitioners may be more impactful by working on interventions that ameliorate the influence of maternal gate closing. The models tested are simplistic and do not include other variables known to impact on father involvement, as expressed in the Cabrera et al. (2014) model, however they are a useful starting point to looking at the interplay of factors and the strength of such relationships. Future studies may expand on these models and test the interaction of other factors. Additional mediators may interact with father's role or self-efficacy and provide a better explanation for interactions that buffer against gate closing.

In sum, the sample of Australian fathers investigated in Study 2 were found to be very involved and engaged in the lives of their children. These fathers expressed positive beliefs in the importance of the roles of fathers in the lives of children, and a sense of competence in their ability as fathers. The fathers did report to be experiencing moderate levels of gate closing and gate opening by their partners, and these factors were influencing the level of involvement with their children. However, there were reasonable levels of coparenting

conflict, and therefore the fathers in the sample were found to be in fairly good quality coparenting relationships conducive to a cooperative model of coparenting. The mediating impacts of fathers' self-efficacy and expectations of their role were found to have influence on the relationship between gate closing and the quantity of father involvement as indicated by time, but quality indicators such as measured by the types of acidity and involvement. These attempts at investigating the influences of mediating variables were promising and further investigation and expansion of the model is advocated. Further discussion, strengths and limitations, and recommendations for further research will follow in the final chapter.

CHAPTER 10: GENERAL DISCUSSION

Father involvement remains of primary concern to researchers, practitioners, and policy makers due to the clear benefits to the social, psychological, and cognitive outcomes for children (Sarkadi et al., 2008). This program of research endeavoured to contribute to the literature base on what barriers may be identified and contested to best improve the facilitation of father involvement in the lives of their children. The analysis of data from Study 1 revealed that dynamics within the coparenting relationship, such as gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours, may be acting at the executive subsystem of the family. Such gatekeeping may be the result of social and cultural influences, such as traditional gender norms, that persist within Australian society. It was also highlighted in the analysis that the patterns of behaviour surrounding unpaid caring work in the home may become established and perpetuate throughout the course of the coparenting relationship. A significant finding was the complicity of fathers in maternal gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours. This allows for a fuller view of gatekeeping behaviour and the dynamics between mothers and fathers. Further, much maternal gatekeeping research to date has focused on fathers of children in the pre-natal to early infancy stages. Study 2 contributed to the literature on the experiences of fathers of older children and their levels of involvement with their children as reported by the types of activities they engaged in, and self-reports on amounts of time per day and week. These fathers also reported that gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours of the mothers were impacting on levels of their involvement with their children. Factors within the coparenting relationship such as relationship quality and levels of conflict, and the presence of maternal gatekeeping, displayed a similar relationship with levels of father involvement, with fathers who reported better-quality coparenting dynamics also reporting increased levels of involvement with their children, in contrast to their peers who reported less than ideal coparenting circumstances. Internal factors relevant to fathers, such as their beliefs relevant to

the importance of father involvement in the lives of children, and their sense of competence and satisfaction with their parenting, acted as mediators in the relationship between maternal gate closing and father involvement.

This chapter will review the overall findings from both Study 1 and Study 2, including discussion of the strengths and limitations of this contribution to the scholarly work on fathering. Recommendations will be made regarding increasing fathers' participation in parenting programs, as well as for further research endeavours. Proposals will be made for how the current research, in combination with the knowledge reservoir on fathering, may be best utilised to make greater headway in improving father involvement in the lives of children. A reflexive statement will be included to show consideration to how biases that may have influenced this project were acknowledged and addressed before final recommendations and concluding remarks are made.

It was an aim of this program of research to advance involved fathering, in general terms and in the specific context of parenting interventions, for the collective benefit of children and their long-term success. It was a further aim to contribute to the conversation on a more egalitarian approach to modern parenting. Last, this program of research endeavoured to bring focus on fathers' experiences of parenting, to improve understanding of father involvement and address barriers observed and make recommendations for future research and practice. The following table maps out the program of research objectives, studies, and associated research questions:

Table 12 Program of research objectives, studies, and associated research questions

Research Objective	Study	Research Questions	Summary of Results
1. To construct a study that allowed for the observation and exploration of couples' decision-making processes when seeking help for their children.	1	1. What barriers and facilitators to fathers' involvement in parenting programs are evident in the couples' decision-making discussions? 2. What barriers and facilitators to father involvement in parenting programs bear similarity to fathers' experiences generally?	External factors such as work demands. Design and delivery. Gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours, largely based on maternal essentialism resulting in fathers taking a secondary parent role.
2. To use an analytic method that allowed for the identification of factors that are acting within the coparenting relationship as facilitators or barriers to father involvement when parents seek help for their children.	1	3. What are the decision-making processes of couples when deliberating whether to attend a parenting program?	Work demands. Lack of flexible work arrangement for fathers. Gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours, as noted above. Initially coalitions evident, however decision-making process resulting in fathers not attending, based on mothers assuming lead parent role and fathers' collusion.
3. To idenifty themes of barriers and facilitators of father involvement in the coparenting relationship, that may impact on father involvement and fathers' experiences of parenting generally.	2	1. What role may maternal gatekeeping play in fathers' involvement in parenting (from the fathers' perspective)? 2. What role may maternal gatekeeping play in fathers' attitude towards their role as fathers (from the fathers' perspective)?	Fathers acknowledged experiencing maternal gatekeeping (both opening and closing) in their coparenting. Closing had more impact than opening. Fathers with firm beliefs in their role, and sense of self-efficacy, were likely to be involved, despite presence of gate closing. Gate opening further enhanced father involvement.
4. To construct a study that would investigate how factors within the coparenting relationship might be acting on fathers generally in their experiences of parenting.	2	3. What effect does maternal gatekeeping have on fathers' sense of parenting confidence (satisfaction and efficacy)? 4. How does maternal gatekeeping affect the coparenting relationship? 5. What effect does maternal gatekeeping have on fathers' experience of relationship conflict?	Only moderate levels of coparenting conflict were evident. Relationship satisfaction was moderate to high.

Contributions to Improving Father Participation in Parenting Programs

It was aim of this program of research to contribute to the advancement of father involvement in parenting interventions. As noted in Chapters 1 and 2, my professional experience in running parenting programs raised my concern around the absence of fathers in an important activity relating to their children's wellbeing. Extensive research has been summarised in the preceding chapters regarding this issue, and relevant recommendations for research and practice have been highlighted, such as those by Fletcher et al. (2014) and Panter-Brick et al. (2014). The findings in this program of research give weight to the recommendation that the coparenting relationship should be a focus to those involved in the design and delivery of such programs (Fletcher et al., 2014; Panter-Brick et al., 2014). Stakeholders especially need to give credence to the possibility that the decision to attend such programs is housed with an established pattern of coparenting behaviour, including decision-making processes regarding the caregiving of children. The results from Study 1 clearly indicate that simply having a 'father friendly design', or a male facilitator, are by no means sufficient to counteract this. When all factors were considered by the participating couples, including the design and delivery of the program, mothers were identified as the preferred attendee should any barrier to both parents' participation appear, for all but one couple. Stakeholders are best to adhere to Panter-Brick and colleagues' (2014) recommendation of 'engaging unequivocally with coparents' (2014, p. 1205). In other words, if there are mothers and fathers presenting for assistance, then the participation of both should be a requirement. At a practical level this might mean that if only one parent registers to attend when they are two parents available, program providers might ask the parents to wait until another offering suits so that both are able to attend. This would, of course, be variable in light of the severity of the situation and the needs of the child. Other considerations, such as incentivising both parents attending, for example a reduced cost for both attending, may

also be consistent with this recommendation. Practitioners offering programs who receive registrations only including mothers, may choose to personally invite the father to attend. This may allow early intervention in the couples' decision making to address any gate keeping attitudes or behaviours present, remember of course that this may be for either parent. The practitioner may also be able to assist the couple with problem solving certain barriers such as timing and childcare, to encourage both to attend. Given the early promise of internet-based delivery options (Enebrink et al., 2012; Fletcher, 2008), a mixed model might also be trialled if both coparents cannot attend. The offering of an internet-based delivery of the same program in conjunction with the face-to-face delivery might prove to be useful.

Program providers may also consider experimenting with varying venues that engage with father's more directly as a way to remedy the issue of low attendance. As noted, parenting programs are often run at venues such as kindergartens, schools, and community health centres. For many fathers, these venues may be perceived as environments more engaging for mothers (King et a., 2014). Other services for men, such as preventative health care, have found success in engaging with men where they are most often located, such as gyms, sporting clubs, pubs and employment settings (King, et al., 2014). As this evidence base grows for this service delivery model in men's health services, it may prove advantageous to conduct trials of this approach to parenting programs. Assuming that this approach is found to continue to be inclusive of mothers, and better targets coparents as participants. Program providers and researchers may be able to test whether running programs in such locations increases father participation.

The overall findings of this program of research, which will be further discussed below, highlight the importance of the transition to parenting period, and how patterns of behaviour established in the coparenting relationship persist throughout the coparenting journey of mothers and fathers. This program of research makes the argument that the low

participation rates of fathers in parenting programs are symptomatic of problematic experiences of fathers generally, which has its genesis in the formation of the coparenting relationship in the transition to parenthood phase. Therefore, to return to the original dilemma of how to better involve fathers in parenting programs, practitioners and researchers must assist with improving these formative experiences for fathers. The emphasis of all stakeholders would be best focused on this period in a father's life.

The Experiences of Fathers in Focus

As stated, an aim of this program of research was to bring attention to the experiences of fathers in their parenting. A key contribution of Study 2 was the focus given to the experiences of Australian fathers, and the impacts that coparenting factors are having on their fathering. Some fathers in the Study 2 sample were still acknowledging experiencing attitudes and behaviours that caused them to feel obstructed in their ambition to be involved with their children. Given that the sample of fathers were those of older children, one may imagine that enduring such gate closing coparenting environments is something that has been endured since many first became fathers. Coparenting research generally indicates that gate closing would be expected to produce heightened levels of conflict, as well as reducing relationship quality and satisfaction (Feinberg et al., 2014). Yet, this sample were fortunate that the levels of coparenting conflict were moderate. Analytical methods such as correlational studies have been used, as is the case in many studies, and indicated that certain variables either induce or reduce father involvement. Study 2 went further by applying more advanced mediation analyses to assess how factors may interact in father involvement. Although a simple model was tested, significant findings of indirect factors were revealed. Further attempts to test more complex models of father involvement and confirm which factors have more influence in these dynamics may require more subtle ways of measuring different factors, to assist with the development of models that explain father involvement.

Practitioners may find these models useful in confirming where emphasis might be given with interventions on issues such as father absenteeism. At a macrosystemic level, social policy development may be better directed towards initiatives that will have most impact for expenditure for increasing father involvement in child rearing.

The data from this sample of Australian fathers gives valuable insight into the workings of family life from the view of fathers, something that has not received sufficient interest in parenting literature. Future endeavours could expand on this research program through the addition of enhancements to the data gathering methods, amongst other things, which will be discussed further in the recommendations section. Regardless of the limitations acknowledged below, this program of research achieved its aim of amplifying fathers' voices in the parenting arena to provide a better understanding of what facilitates and what inhibits their vital involvement. Given that fathers are reporting experiencing maternal gate closing, particularly in latter parts of the fathering journey, it is imperative that more effort is made to counteract this, and more importantly, to prevent this in the first place. An obvious period to target is the pre-natal period, where early childhood practitioners, midwives, et cetera, may be more observant of the early signs of notions such as maternal essentialism that may foreshadow future gate closing attitudes and behaviours or mothers, and also collusion by fathers. Practitioners and services providers can address this through good education and advocation for the importance of the role of fathers.

It is therefore reasonable to re-affirm the importance of the transition to parenthood period, and that interventions aimed at couples and fathers during this period are likely to have more long-lasting effect than those that are offered well into the coparenting journey such as when children are school aged, which is often the case with parenting programs. Noteworthy from Study 2 was the impact that gate closing attitudes and behaviours can have on the interaction of factors that affect father involvement. Even if fathers hold positive

expectations of their role, this may be counteracted by the presence of gate closing. Therefore, early intervention to address the emergence of any gate closing and to foster an egalitarian approach to coparenting in this early transition period is likely to prove most beneficial and improve fathers involvement in child rearing globally.

Gatekeeping Is Not One-Directional

It was an aim of this program of research to contribute towards a more egalitarian approach to coparenting. There has been growing awareness of the phenomenon of parental gatekeeping in the literature, and how this affects father involvement and the sharing of childrearing responsibilities. Much of the research thus far has explored the phenomenon of gatekeeping from a maternal perspective, hence the more commonly used term *maternal* gatekeeping. Researchers have demonstrated its presence and influence in the coparenting relationship, and the effect this has on father involvement. Characteristics of mothers such as education level, socioeconomic status, personality traits, and mental health, have been isolated in those who tend to engage in gatekeeping, particularly gate closing, more commonly (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). Research had concluded, as summarised by Trinder (2008), that mothers are the managers of the parental gate. However, the father's participation in the opening and closing of the parental gate is something that has been less considered in the literature. An outcome from this program of research was the observation of fathers engaging in gatekeeping behaviour, particularly facilitating gate closing by mothers. As noted in this program of research, fathers may behave in such a way that colludes with this gatekeeping behaviour of mothers, if not in fact entirely encouraging the gate closing of the mothers by the fathers. It was evident in this program of research that fathers were behaviourally active in this interchange, and it seems justified to refer to this behaviour as paternal gatekeeping as there was sufficient evidence of such occurring in these exchanges. When fathers collude with maternal gatekeeping, they potentially limit their own involvement

in parenting activities. This potential has not yet had sufficient attention in the literature and is a significant shortcoming in the understanding of gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours. In addition, the current one-dimensional view doesn't assist in a fuller comprehension of how gatekeeping limits father involvement. When gatekeeping is seen as something that both coparents may be engaging in, and the fathers are more fully considered, we will better understand this dynamic. Consistent with family systems theory and approaches, gatekeeping should not be considered one-dimensionally, i.e., the attitudes and behaviours of mothers only, but as consisting of a complex interplay of multiple factors in the coparenting relationship. Or to use the colloquial expression; it takes two to tango! This program of research adds to the weight of argument for a gender-neutral framework for understanding gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours of parents (Austin et al., 2013; Trinder, 2008).

Further, as highlighted in Study 1, reasons given for fathers either eliciting or colluding with gatekeeping behaviours of mothers, often cited attitudes consistent with maternal essentialism. Of concern to fathers is that if they participate in the perpetuation of the idea of the prominence of mothers and the triviality of their role as fathers, they may unwittingly find themselves relegated to a position of secondary parent, which in the long term may cause them significant challenges. First, fathers' sense of satisfaction in their parenting and relationships with their children may diminish. Subsequent lack of involvement by fathers may ensue, with all the attributable concerns previously noted. Second, fathers may find it hard to change this coparenting dimension as time continues, with such roles becoming habituated. Third, fathers who assume the right of maternal essentialism may suffer worse problems than just dissatisfaction in their family life, especially in the event of divorce or separation. Fathers that have felt resigned to a secondary parent role may find that their rights to involvement in the life of their children in such difficult circumstances as separation may need to be hard fought for. Gatekeeping patterns in the coparenting relationship

established prior to separation may only intensify following. Evidence suggests that maternal gate closing in intact relationships becomes more evident and at times conflict heightens in the case of separation (Saini et al., 2017). Fathers would be wise to refute the idea of maternal essentialism, and advocate for coparenting equality, from the beginning of the coparenting journey, putting them in better stead to argue for their importance in the lives of their children should the unforeseen worst-case scenario of separation and divorce eventuate.

It was a privilege to have met the mothers in Study 1, who on most occasions intended to swing the parental gate wide open, fully embracing the rights of fathers to be involved and active in the coparenting space. Most mothers in Study 1 were the embodiment of the best of what is known as gate opening. It was a disappointment to them that the social conditions were not always supportive of their endeavours, as evident in such instances as parental leave and childcare. There were times that the mothers reported feeling the burden of a lead parent role that they were not always enthusiastic about. It was also frustrating to some of them to be met with attitudes and behaviours of fathers that invited mothers to take this role, when they otherwise would have preferred a more egalitarian model of coparenting. Mothers may also be best to dispute the notion of maternal essentialism, which may also be contributing to the perpetuation of many taking on the 'lion's share' in the domestic life of Australian families.

Gender Liberation

Issues around gender roles, or 'doing gender' were not pre-contemplated at the outset of this program of research, but in retrospect were inevitable, and imperative to be given consideration (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Study 1 and Study 2 highlighted fathers experiencing gatekeeping of their involvement with their children, in which attitudes and behaviours are often predicated based on traditional gender roles and notions of maternal essentialism (Berrigan et al., 2020). Fathers are reporting barriers to their involvement that

are based on stereotypical gender roles, which seems obvious to say, and is not a unique position of this discussion. Mothers are also reporting similar limitations, based on gender, maintained in a position of the primary carer of children and limiting their rights to equality in the workplace. Some of the fathers in Study 1 expressed a desire to take a non-traditional path and be the primary carer of their young children, welcomed by the mothers, only to meet with resistance in the workplace. Further, many couples in the sample had aspirations of a more shared model of coparenting in the transition to parenthood era and in fact a few fathers would have embraced the opportunity to take leave in order to care for their infants. There was evidence of a 'new age father' ideal with some of the fathers in Study 1, and certainly in Study 2 consistent with the description by Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan (2015). However, social and institutional barriers obstructed some of these couples, and subsequently they went down a fairly traditional coparenting road. Sadly, there is still a great deal of work required to combat the traditional stereotypes that are holding back progress towards equality in Australian family life.

The road to gender equality in all domains of life is a pursuit worth the effort so that all may benefit. Glass ceilings exist and still need to be shattered, but just as well, apron strings have too long been tied exclusively between mother and child, reducing fathers' involvement and importance, or worse yet, contributing to his complete absence. Fathers will undoubtedly feel sceptical of such efforts towards liberation from gender roles, and equality in the home, if they do not foresee that positive changes will also occur for them. Fathers will feel more enamoured towards equality in coparenting if they perceive that the ways they engage in fathering, through things like rough and tumble play, exploration, adventure and risk taking, amongst other things, are welcomed and celebrated rather than managed and monitored. Researchers and practitioners, and even fathers themselves, need to advocate for fathers' style of parenting as being beneficial to children, and that the experience for children

created by slightly different approaches is beneficial. Further, young men may see the hope of becoming a father as more aspirational if they perceive that it is valued by society. This may influence young couples to share the coparenting journey more willingly, if both unpaid and paid work are of equal worth and importance, which is consistent with recommendations in the Grattan report referred to in Chapter 1 (Wood et al., 2021).

In view of this observation, and linking to the literature on contemporary Australian households, it is evident that further progress needs to be made in the lives of Australian homes to foster a more egalitarian model of coparenting, whereby mothers have opportunity to remain connected to their workplace and fathers have a greater place in domestic life within their homes in caring for children. Coparents would be best assisted in the pre-natal to early infancy period if they were encouraged to abandon any notions of maternal essentialism or 'mother as lead parent' ideologies and embrace an egalitarian model of coparenting. This could be achieved through providers of pre-natal education programs and health services interventions if this were to be detected by health professionals. Such early intervention would encourage coparenting equality, which would have long-lasting influence on the experiences of coparents across the lifespan of their childrearing together.

Flexible Work Arrangement Policies Should Target Fathers

As stated, patterns established in the coparenting relationship in the transition to parenting period, including couples' early deliberations on their coparenting roles and relationship, lead to an establish way of traversing the path of child raising together. Influences such as employers, families of origin, friends, as well as macrosystemic influences such as society attitudes and culture, also have impact. While the reading of this dissertation has benefit to the parenting program arena, its appeal is broader, and relevant to assisting with improving the involvement of fathers in the lives of their children, which has profound

benefit to their children. The overall results from the program of research give unequivocal support for improving paid parental leave as a direct way of increasing father involvement in the lives of their children. Berrigan et al., (2020) reported that a factor in the uptake of paid parenting leave by fathers was a lower endorsement of the ideal of maternal essentialism. Therefore, education efforts by policy makers could further impact on this and enhance the importance of father involvement in parallel with the diminishment of the idea of maternal essentialism to improve the attraction of fathers to paid parenting leave policies. Directly focusing on fathers through the effective use of public policy to increase their levels of involvement in the lives of children in this early developmental period will produce a 'shadow effect' whereby fathers' involvement is likely to increase in the early infancy period and be maintained through the course of fathers' coparenting journey (Wood et al., 2021). Based on the father involvement literature, this 'shadow effect' implicates the benefits to child development and their long-term physical and emotional wellbeing, the wellbeing of fathers and mothers, and general benefits to society in such things as reduced anti-social behaviour due to father absence. Further, in thinking of parenting programs, hypothetically, if faced with a dilemma of seeking parenting assistance for a child of 4 years or 8 years of age, a father who had utilised paid parental leave in the transition to parenthood period would be more likely do so later in their parenting journey in order to participate in a parenting program. As an aside, this may also prove to be an interesting research topic to pursue: are fathers who take paid parental leave more likely to participate in parenting interventions?

Other flexible work arrangements follow on from this notion and provide support for working families. This program of research has highlighted that work demands continues to be an impediment to father involvement, more so due to the perpetuation of the idea that flexible work arrangements more enable mothers to manage unpaid and paid work, and less for fathers. Fathers still report to be working full time, and the main flexible work

arrangement that may be utilised is working from home (Chapman et al., 2014). This program of research found that fathers experienced barriers to the utilisation of flexible work arrangements, such as the revelations in Study 1 that employers were reluctant to allow such provisions, in contrast to mothers who more readily managed their family responsibilities due to flexible work arrangements. While fathers in Study 2 reported high levels of involvement, including domestic activities relating to the care of their children, much of these was in addition to full-time working hours. Policies relating to such employment offerings need to go further to address this divide. Employers must consider this as part of their social responsibility to insist upon fathers utilising flexible work arrangements and could be rewarded and acknowledged for such efforts. Employers themselves could be celebrated for being father friendly. Such policies and advocacy may foster support for equitable sharing of childcare and effective coparenting.

Strengths and Limitations

First, to the author's knowledge, this study is one of a few that have investigated fathers' experiences of maternal gatekeeping, independent of and separate to mothers, as was the case with the cross-sectional survey in Study 2. Second, these experiences were of fathers in later parenting life, being that the sample consisted of fathers with older children ranging from 2 to 12 years of age, and the impacts of maternal gatekeeping on their experiences of fathering. To the author's knowledge, there are few in the literature that have explored this period of fathering, and even fewer that have investigated the impacts of maternal gatekeeping on father involvement. Additionally, few studies have specifically investigated the experiences of Australian fathers, and therefore this study contributes positively to the research literature on understanding fathering in Australia. Third, a novel aspect of this program of research was investigating the coparenting relationship as a separate entity, as was done with the interviews conducted in Study 1. The decision to interview couples

together, using a hypothetical scenario, proved to be a useful contribution to the literature. While some research has interviewed couples together, this has normally been on the premise of obtaining data or to make observations of behavioural interactions solely. To my knowledge, there are no similar studies in the parenting program literature where couples were interviewed, and the interactions of their decision-making process analysed as a combined piece of data as opposed to separately. The decision to do so was informed by family systems theory, which clearly views the coparenting relationship as having its own identity, dynamics, with beginnings, and in some cases, endings. The outcome was revealing and provided needful information that makes a positive contribution to the literature base, which has been reviewed. This specific methodology would prove useful if replicated in a number of coparenting research situations, and especially to further explore the phenomenon of paternal gatekeeping.

Several limitations to this research program are acknowledged. The sample for Study 1 was obtained through advertising amongst multiple networks. However, the demographics of those couples obtained in the sample tended to represent well-educated, middle class, white Australia, and are not representative of the general population. While many of the findings may be transferrable to those from different social, economic, or cultural backgrounds, they cannot be considered generalisable, as is often the case with qualitative methods. Similarly, the fathers in the sample expressed themes that may relate to the experiences of other fathers but can only be considered as a small subsection of a much larger issue. The sample for Study 2 was drawn based on convenience, and as a result is not particularly diverse, and consists primarily of fathers with relatively high socioeconomic status. Most were from dual-income intact couples, which is very relevant to this study, but not representative of the general population. However, although small, the sample size was large enough to make meaningful contributions to the literature on father involvement. It is

noted that the strength of the correlations for those found to be significant were only small to moderate, however these were supportive of the hypotheses and make important contributions to the understanding of fathering by addressing gaps in the literature. A further limitation of Study 2 was the cross-sectional nature of the data collection at one point in time. More robust methods might include data collection across three points in time. This would allow findings to be more interpretable in terms of the relationships found, rather than potentially only explaining particular relationships at one point in time. In addition to the limitations already mentioned, it is important to note that although moderate support was found in this sample for the hypotheses, causal claims must not be made. Further, the relationships tested only accounted for a few variables, and if possible, a comprehension of all variables as per Cabrera et al.'s (2014) model may more fully account for predictors of father involvement. Other studies are acknowledged for their more comprehensive attempts.

Recommendations for Further Research

Future research on measuring time as an indicator of father involvement would benefit from utilising some form of time reporting measure where fathers report using a device such as responding to SMS prompts to record a daily tally, over time, that can be captured over a specified period in addition to self-report measures as used in Study 2. Corroborating evidence from mothers or children may also be an interesting addition to further research on father involvement, where reports of fathers' time and activity are made by multiple reporters, which are then analysed for convergence on actual time spent and in what particular activities. Father involvement could also be operationalised using multiple measures in addition to time spent and activity type, to account for the quality of father involvement. Regarding fathers' experiences of maternal gatekeeping, consistent with the idea put forward in this study of focusing on fathers' perspectives, it would be insightful to conduct a qualitative project obtaining more detailed descriptions of fathers' experiences. If

Study 1 were to be replicated, follow-up interviews with the fathers would be insightful and allow for further investigation to determine whether the fathers' agreement to the negotiated outcome was a reticence, reluctance, or regretted outcome on the fathers' part.

Future research may profit from the noted learning in Study 2 around the limitation of not exploring fathers' reports of their own gatekeeping behaviours in the cross-sectional survey. It is recommended that developing and validating a specific measure that enables better reports of fathers' own gatekeeping behaviours, or variations to current measures such as the parental regulation index (PRI) to suit such purposes, would be beneficial, allowing for further exploration of this phenomenon through further quantitative studies. It would also be worthwhile to gain mothers' perspectives on fathers' gatekeeping behaviours through qualitative studies. Corroborating data of mothers on the presence of fathers' gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours would add further insight and discussion on the bi-directional nature of gatekeeping in the coparenting relationship. Father involvement research that employed longitudinal studies would also be greatly beneficial, as changes over the fatherhood journey would be better examined. For example, fathers' attitudes to their role, the presence of gatekeeping behaviours, and their levels of involvement with their children, would be examined at different points of child development to investigate how such factors change or have influence over time. If cross-sectional surveys are to be deployed, it would be preferrable if these might capture multiple time points across time. In addition, Study 2 might be designed to be truly longitudinal in design by examining the relationship between father involvement and gate keeping across the fathering lifespan.

Interventions that particularly target fathers and aim to enhance their role and their sense of the important impact they can have in the lives of their children, are of particular interest, especially in the pre-natal and post-natal period through to early infancy. Programs aimed at fathers in this period have the potential to address ideas they may have of maternal

essentialism. Couple's decision-making regarding the care of their children may also be a topic covered by such programs, which would have long-lasting impact. It is recommended that such interventions have accompanying research projects that conduct longitudinal studies to see if this can be changed over time, with influencers focused on developing a more egalitarian model of coparenting during the pre-natal to post-partum period, and to see if this persists over time through to later years of child development.

Reflexive Statement

It would be wrong to pretend that this thesis was purely an academic exercise. It was a very personal expedition. I therefore consider it reasonable to include my own personal reflections at this point, in alignment particularly with Braun and Clarke (2019). I view my own journey into fatherhood as somewhat stereotypical for my era. When my spouse, Michelle, and I discussed having a family together we considered how we would navigate this both financially and practically. Our initial period of parenting was traditional, being that Michelle wanted to be a stay-at-home mum while our children were young, and I was comfortable being the main breadwinner during that period. When Michelle wanted to return to the workforce after about 10 years, initially part-time, we made accommodations together to make this possible and manage our home life equitably. In terms of the practicalities, we have navigated each of the transition periods following the arrival of each of our four children with the usual challenges and sometimes conflicts and competing demands like many parents do. These adjustments have been difficult and have required much communication and decision-making. In terms of our approach to coparenting, I would consider ourselves very malleable, depending on the stage. In the early years, with Michelle being a stay-at-home mother, many of the day-to-day decisions regarding the children were made by her. Yet we always conferred about the more important matters. What was a challenge for us was that I came to the coparenting arena with a very different expectation of

my own role. I very much wanted to be involved. I had come to expect that I could be equally capable in rearing children as a mother. This was in part due to the influence of my own father, who although very involved as a traditional father figure, also displayed a willingness to assist with my emotional and social development. Other influences also shaped my expectations.

My father was in the military for much of my childhood. One message that I heard repeated by my own father many times, was a quote that he liked, 'no success can compensate for failure in the home'. My dad lived by this quote. In fact, when he reached a particular point that upward advancement in the military would mean more time away from his children, he decided that it was time to leave the army to take another job, being a bus driver, so that he could be more available to his kids. My pop, his father, was very involved in our lives, attending our sporting matches and schooling events. Pop wanted to be remembered by the saying 'missed greatness, greatly missed'. Not only was he an excellent cook, and participated with Nan with most domestic chores like shopping and cleaning, I also learned from my pop that father figures can be emotionally and psychologically significant in children's lives, by being compassionate and nurturing. Pop helped me at one point in my life when I was about nine years of age when I was experiencing anxiety. Every night he would come into my bedroom, and he would talk to me, and listen to what was worrying me. He offered me empathy and support, and he offered good reason and to alleviate my fears. He also helped me to sleep by teaching me how to relax using breathing techniques. My Pop wasn't an educated man. He left school at 14. Yet by his simple willingness to be present and to listen to me, and offer me some support, he had a powerful influence on me. In fact, that was probably one of the reasons that I later decided to go on to study to become a psychologist.

Another interesting influence was that I was regularly asked to babysit other families' children. The first experience was my neighbours' children, and then as a teenager a few families would regularly ask me to look after their children, sometimes when they were quite young. I learned to change nappies and to bottle feed infants, and I loved playing with the older children. This was my first venture into 'rough and tumble' play. I remember feeling so pleased with myself that I had the ability to help a young baby get off to sleep. I remember how the children would make me feel so special and they were excited to see me and spend time with me. The parents also encouraged my abilities with caring for their children and gave me a sense of responsibility. By my late teens there was a particular family who would have me look after their children for an overnight stay, which would include the full range of childcare activities. Thus, my confidence in my capacity to care for children was further increased, impacting on my future sense of self-efficacy as a father.

Regular meetings with my supervisors allowed for discussion and processing of my observations during the analytic stages of the program of research, and to address how any bias from my own experiences may be impacting. In reflecting on these influences, I undoubtedly have biases towards seeing fathers as equally capable in the coparenting arena. Coming to this research project, I probably considered that many fathers were working in opposition to barriers that restricted their full engagement, and perhaps perceived society as not holding a positive perspective of fathering. I have since come to see that this is, by and large, not the full picture. While stereotypes and obstacles persist, much of the momentum is in favour of the ideal of the 'new age father 'as described. Something I think I was most confronted by when considering gatekeeping was the collusion of fathers. This was not consistent with my own attitudes and behaviours towards fathering. It was somewhat alarming to observe it in the analysis, and then to be more cognisant of it in everyday life. It

was probably always there, but I hadn't fully considered it as part of the problem that I was engaged in contributing to help solve.

In further reflection regarding gatekeeping behaviour, what was uncomfortable for me to sit with was the burdensome experience of mothers carrying the load of lead parent. When I first started to explore the literature surrounding maternal gatekeeping, I was probably more drawn to the negative closing behaviours and attitudes and connected this literature with many of the client experiences I have encountered over the years, of fathers feeling alienated from their children in their family life. I hadn't contemplated that in fact some mothers feel compelled due to societal expectations to take this lead role, and guilty for the times that they delegate it. It is probably truer to say that neither mother nor father are experiencing the full measure of satisfaction in their family life while the status quo endures. I came to this project with a view that increasing father involvement will benefit the lives of children. I still hold this opinion; however, I see this as part of a larger problem to solve, which is to foster conditions that support greater equality in the share of unpaid and paid labour in the lives of Australian couples.

As a practitioner, my focus on how to increase fathers' participation in parenting programs, and fathering generally, was to think like a practitioner and wonder about how interventions might be devised to better engage with fathers. The past six years have caused me to think more systemically and wonder about macrosystemic influences on the lives of families. I am more fascinated with the idea of social policy initiatives having the greater potential impact. While there will always be a need for intervention, such as in clinical psychology settings, the findings of both studies have highlighted that policy initiatives that set fathers on the right path of equitable coparenting at the outset, are likely to have the most impact on father involvement into the future.

Conclusions

This program of research aimed to make positive contributions to the literature on father involvement in childrearing. An area of investigation arose out of a review of the literature, with fathers' involvement in parenting programs having been identified as an area of concern. The focus of the first study was on couples' interactions around their decision-making processes of seeking help for their children, which found that when all factors were weighed, such as costs, conveniences to enable attending, et cetera, mothers were taking a lead role and attending, and fathers were opting out. Reasons were often based on a false notion of maternal essentialism and were deemed evident of maternal gate closing behaviour. However, it was observed that fathers were complicit in this gate closing, often colluding with mothers taking the lead parent role, indicating that a bi-directional nature exists regarding the phenomenon of gatekeeping.

Study 2 followed, and investigated fathers' experiences of their parenting, and whether aspects of the coparenting relationship identified through Study 1, such as conflict, relationship quality and satisfaction, had impacts on their involvement. In addition, internal factors of fathers, being their self-efficacy in their parenting, and expectations of their own roles, were explored and found to be mediating factors between mothers' maternal gatekeeping behaviours and fathers' levels of involvement.

Strengths and limitations have been sufficiently acknowledged, with recommendations for future research endeavours. A significant implication from this program of research was the emphasis noted on the transition to parenthood period as a key time for early intervention to foster more egalitarian models of coparenting. In addition, paid parenting leave was highlighted as the intervention more likely to bring about the needed social change for greater equity amongst fathers and mothers in Australian family life, and to turn the tide on father absenteeism in the lives of their children.

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APPENDIX A: STUDY 1 INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Scenario:

One of your children has been experiencing emotional and/or behavioural difficulties to the extent that it has been causing you strain and distress. You receive a flyer through your community (i.e. School) offering attendance at a parenting program.

1. In considering the above scenario, would you please describe how you and your partner would decide whether you would attend this program?
2. What resources (i.e. time, money etc) would you consider in deciding to attend this program?
3. What importance would you place on attending this program?
4. What rewards would you consider as benefits of attending this program?
5. What costs (i.e. time, money, energy) would you consider as the result of attending this program?
6. What potential conflicts might arise in your discussions regarding attending this program?
7. How would you resolve these conflicts?
8. What if only one of you could attend? How would you decide which of you would go?
9. How would this decision-making process be similar to others that you have previously made in real life?
10. Would you be able to give an example?
11. Let's go back to the beginning? Tell me about your experiences of becoming parents. (Allow for elaboration).
12. When you think of your own experiences growing up, what was similar or different about your parents style of parenting you? (Allow for elaboration)

APPENDIX B: STUDY 2 ONLINE SURVEY

Appendix B: Study 2 Survey

School of Psychology and Counselling Faculty of Health, Engineering & Sciences University of Southern Queensland

Before starting the survey, close down any menu bars or other programs that may be reducing your screen size. You should be able to readthe information on the screen without having to scroll from left to right.

Barriers and Facilitators of Father Involvement in Parenting

This project is being undertaken as part of a PhD Project.

The purpose of this project is to explore the barriers and facilitators of father involvement in parenting. Participants in the study will be asked to complete an online survey

Fathers report experiencing barriers to full participation in raising their children, even as mothers continue to contribute the most hours to child rearing. Further exploration and discussion of father involvement in the lives of children is crucial. The research team requests your assistance because this study aims to collect information on how fathers can more equally share the responsibilities of parenting with their partners.

Participation

Your participation will involve completion of a questionnaire that will take approximately 30 minutes of your time. Questions will includethose relating to general demographic information, and then more specifically, relating to your co-parenting experiences as a father.

Your participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to take part you are not obliged to. Please note, that if you wish to withdraw from the project after you have submitted your responses, the Research Team are unable to remove your data from the project because the data are collected and stored in unidentifiable form.

Your decision whether you take part, or do not take part, will in no way impact your current or future relationship with the University of Southern Queensland.

Expected Benefits

It is expected that this project will indirectly benefit you by enabling research of fathers experiences in effectively co-parenting their children. However, more broadly, it may benefit other researchers and service providers in best assisting fathers in being involved with their children, which in turn will have benefits for the health and well-being of children.

Risks

There are no anticipated risks beyond normal day-to-day living associated with your participation in this project.

Sometimes thinking about the sorts of issues raised in the questionnaire can create some uncomfortable or distressing feelings. If you need to talk to someone about this immediately please contact Lifeline on 13 11 14. You may also wish to consider consulting your General Practitioner (GP) for additional support. If you wish to seek help for relationship or parenting difficulties, then the following options are recommended:

Relationships Australia - https://www.relationships.org.au/

Triple P Positive Parenting Program - https://www.triplep-parenting.net.au

Australian Psychological Society (APS) - https://www.psychology.org.au/Find-a-Psychologist

Privacy and Confidentiality

All comments and responses will be treated confidentially unless required by law. The names of individual persons are not required in any of the responses.

All data collected as a part of this project will be stored securely as per University of Southern Queensland's Research Data Management policy (without your name) and may be used for research publications and in future research projects.

Consent to Participate

Clicking on the 'Submit' button at the conclusion of the questionnaire is accepted as an indication of your consent to participate in this project.

Questions or Further Information about the Project

Please refer to the Research Team Contact Details at the top of the form to have any questions answered or to request further information about this project.

Concerns or Complaints Regarding the Conduct of the Project

If you have any concerns or complaints about the ethical conduct of the project you may contact the University of Southern Queensland Ethics

Coordinator on (07) 4631 2690 or email ethics@usq.edu.au. The Ethics Coordinator is not connected with the research project andcan facilitate a resolution to your concern in an unbiased manner.

Thank you for taking the time to help with this research project.

If you have any questions about the study please contact James Brown on [redacted] or email [redacted]. For technical

Parental Mental Health

Progress Modern life can be stressful for many fathers. The following questions ask you to consider your own mental health in the last week. Pleaseread each statement and indicate how much the statement applied to you over the past week. There are no right or wrong answers. Do not spend too much time on any statement.

	0 Not at all	1 Sometimes	
1 I found it hard to wind down	○	○	○ ○
2 I was aware of dryness of my mouth	○	○	○ ○
3 I couldn't seem to experience any positive feeling at all	○	○	○ ○
4 I experienced breathing difficulty (eg, excessively rapid breathing, breathlessness in the absence of physicalexertion)	○	○	○ ○
5 I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things	○	○	○ ○
6 I tended to over-react to situations	○	○	○ ○
7 I experienced trembling (eg, in the hands)	○	○	○ ○
8 I felt that I was using a lot of nervous energy	○	○	○ ○
9 I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself	○	○	○ ○
10 I felt that I had nothing to look forward to	○	○	○ ○
11 I found myself getting agitated	○	○	○ ○
12 I found it difficult to relax	○	○	○ ○
13 I felt down-hearted and blue	○	○	○ ○
14 I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing	○	○	○ ○
15 I felt I was close to panic	○	○	○ ○
16 I was unable to become enthusiastic about anything	○	○	○ ○
17 I felt I wasn't worth much as a person	○	○	○ ○
18 I felt that I was rather touchy	○	○	○ ○
19 I was aware of the action of my heart in the absence of physical exertion (eg, sense of heart rate increase,heart missing a beat)	○	○	○ ○
20 I felt scared without any good reason	○	○	○ ○
21 I felt that life was meaningless	○	○	○ ○

Role of the father

Pr

ogress

The following questions ask you to consider what you think about the role of fathers in the lives of their children. For the following items use the scale provided.

	Agree strongly	Agree moderately	Neither	Disagree moderately
1. It is essential for the child's wellbeing that fathers spend time interacting and playing with their children.	○	○	○	○	○
2. It is difficult for men to express tender and affectionate feelings toward babies.	○	○	○	○	○
3. Fathers play a central role 'in the child's personality development.	○	○	○	○	○
4. The responsibilities of fatherhood never overshadow the joys.	○	○	○	○	○
5. Fathers are able to enjoy children more when the children are older and don't require so much care.	○	○	○	○	○
6. Very young babies are generally able to sense an adult's moods and feelings. For example, a baby cantell when you are angry.	○	○	○	○	○
7. Very young babies are affected by adults' moods and feelings. For example, if you are angry with a babyhe/she may feel hurt.	○	○	○	○	○
8. The most important thing a man can invest time and energy into his family.	○	○	○	○	○
9. A father should be as heavily involved in the care of a baby as the mother is.	○	○	○	○	○
10. Mothers are naturally more sensitive caregivers than fathers are.	○	○	○	○	○
11. Even when a baby is very young it is important for a father to set a good example for his baby.	○	○	○	○	○
12. It is as important for a father to meet a baby's psychological needs as it is for the mother to do so.	○	○	○	○	○
13. It is important to respond quickly to a young a baby each time it cries.	○	○	○	○	○
14. The way a father treats his baby in the first six months has important life-long effects on the child.	○	○	○	○	○
15. All things considered, fatherhood is a highly rewarding experience.	○	○	○	○	○

Parental Regulation Inventory

Progress

The following questions ask you to consider how supportive your partner is of your role as a father in parenting your child [ren].

How often does YOUR CHILD'S MOTHER

		(1 =never)	(2)	(3)	(4)	
Tell you the right way to handle the situation	○	○	○	○	○	○
Show you that she is angry or irritated	○	○	○	○	○	○
Tell you what she thinks you did wrong	○	○	○	○	○	○
Criticise you	○	○	○	○	○	○
Look exasperated and roll her eyes	○	○	○	○	○	○
Tell other people about the things she doesn't like in the way you parent your child	○	○	○	○	○	○
Take over and do it her own way	○	○	○	○	○	○
Tell you what you did wrong by "talking through" the child	○	○	○	○	○	○
Not mention anything, but redo things after you are gone	○	○	○	○	○	○
Compliment you	○	○	○	○	○	○
Invite you to help	○	○	○	○	○	○
Let you know she appreciates your contributions	○	○	○	○	○	○
Tell you what a good parent you are	○	○	○	○	○	○
Ask for your opinion						
Tell other people what a good parent you are at a time when you can hear her	○	○	○	○	○	○
Tell you how happy you make your child	○	○	○	○	○	○
Encourage you to spend time alone with your child	○	○	○	○	○	○
Arrange activities for you and your child to do together		○	○	○	○	

○ ○

Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC)

Progress **The following questions ask you to consider how confident and satisfied you feel about your parenting. Please rate the extent to which you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.**

		Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree
1. The problems of taking care of a child are easy to solve once you know how your actions affectyour child, an understanding I have acquired	○	○	○	○	○	○
2. Even though being a parent could be rewarding, I am frustrated now while my child is at his/herpresent age	○	○	○	○	○	○
3. I go to bed the same way I wake up in the morning, feeling I have not accomplished a wholelot	○	○	○	○	○	○
4. I do not know why it is, but sometimes when I'm supposed to be in control, I feel more like theone being manipulated	○	○	○	○	○	○
5. My parent was better prepared to be a good parent than I am	○	○	○	○	○	○
6. I would make a fine model for a new parent to follow in order to learn what he/she would need toknow in order to be a good parent	○	○	○	○	○	○
7. Being a parent is manageable, and any problems are easily solved	○	○	○	○	○	○
8. A difficult problem in being a parent is not knowing whether you're doing a good job or a badone.....	○	○	○	○	○	○
9. Sometimes I feel like I'm not getting anything done	○	○	○	○	○	○
10. I meet my own personal expectations for expertise in caring for my child	○	○	○	○	○	○
11. If anyone can find the answer to what is troubling my child, I am the one	○	○	○	○	○	○
12. My talents and interests are in other areas, not being a parent	○	○	○	○	○	○
13. Considering how long I've been a parent, I feel thoroughly familiar with this role	○	○	○	○	○	○
14. If being a parent of a child were only more interesting, I would be motivated to do a better jobas a parent	○	○	○	○	○	○
15. I honestly believe I have all the skills necessary to be a good parent to my child	○	○	○	○	○	○
16. Being a parent makes me tense and anxious	○	○	○	○	○	○

The Coparenting Relationship Scale

Progress

For each item, select the response that best describes the way you and your partner work together as parents:

	(0) Not True	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6) Very True
1 I believe my partner is a good parent.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
2 My relationship with my partner is stronger now than before we had a child.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
3 My partner asks my opinion on issues related to parenting.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
4 My partner pays a great deal of attention to our child.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
5 My partner likes to play with our child and then leave dirty work to me. (R)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
6 My partner and I have the same goals for our child.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
7 My partner still wants to do his or her own thing instead of being a responsible parent. (R)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
8 It is easier and more fun to play with the child alone than it is when my partner is present too.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
9 My partner and I have different ideas about how to raise our child. (R)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
10 My partner tells me I am doing a good job or otherwise lets me know I am being a good parent.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
11 My partner and I have different ideas regarding our child's eating, sleeping, and other routines. (R)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
12 My partner sometimes makes jokes or sarcastic comments about the way I am as aparent.							
13 My partner does not trust my abilities as a parent.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
14 My partner is sensitive to our child's feelings and needs.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
15 My partner and I have different standards for our child's behavior. (R)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
16 My partner tries to show that she or he is better than me at caring for our child.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
17 I feel close to my partner when I see him or her play with our child.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
18 My partner has a lot of patience with our child.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
19 We often discuss the best way to meet our child's needs.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
20 My partner does not carry his or her fair share of the parenting work. (R)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
21 When all three of us are together, my partner sometimes competes with me for our child'sattention.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
22 My partner undermines my parenting.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
23 My partner is willing to make personal sacrifices to help take care of our child.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
24 We are growing and maturing together through experiences as parents.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
25 My partner appreciates how hard I work at being a good parent.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
26 When I'm at my wits end as a parent, partner gives me extra support I need.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
27 My partner makes me feel like I'm best possible parent for our child.	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
28 The stress of parenthood has caused my partner and me to grow apart. (R)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
29 My partner doesn't like to be bothered by our child. (R)	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
30 Parenting has given us a focus for the future.	○	○	○	○	○		

The Coparenting Relationship Scale 2

Progress

These questions ask you to describe things you do when both you and your partner are physically present together with your child[ren] (i.e.in the same room, in the car, on outings). **Count only times when all of you** are actually within the company of one another (even if this is just a few hours per week).

How often in a typical week, when all of you are together, do you:	Never	Sometimes often	Very Often	Once a day	Twice a day	Several times a week
31 Find yourself in a mildly tense or sarcastic interchange with your partner?	○	○	○	○	○	○
32 Argue with your partner about your child, in the child's presence?	○	○	○	○	○	○
33 Argue about your relationship or marital issues unrelated to your child, in the child's presence?	○	○	○	○	○	○
34 One or both of you say cruel or hurtful things to each other in front of the child?	○	○	○	○	○	○
35 Yell at each other within earshot of the child?	○	○	○	○	○	○

Father involvement

Fatherin01-14

Progress

In the past month, how often did you and your child

Scale 1-5

	Not in the past month 1	A few times a week	once a week	Several times a week	Every day 5
1 Wash or fold clothes?	○	○	○	○	○
2 Do dishes together?	○	○	○	○	○
3 Go to the store together?	○	○	○	○	○
4 Do yard work or gardening?	○	○	○	○	○
5 Talk about your family?	○	○	○	○	○
6 Prepare food together?	○	○	○	○	○
7 Do arts and crafts together?	○	○	○	○	○
8 Play sport or do outdoor activities together?	○	○	○	○	○
9 Clean the house together?	○	○	○	○	○
10 Build or repair something together?	○	○	○	○	○
11 Work or play on a computer or play video games together?	○	○	○	○	○
12 Work on homework together?	○	○	○	○	○
13 Play a board game or card game or do puzzles together?	○	○	○	○	○
14 Look at books together or talk about books he/she has read?					

Father involvement

Pro

gress

Fatherin15-24

In the past month, how often did you and your child

	Not in the past month	A few times a month	About once a week	Several times a week	Every day
15Go shopping?	○	○	○	○	○
16Play a sport?	○	○	○	○	○
17Go to a religious service or church -related event?	○	○	○	○	○
18Talk about someone he/she is dating or a party he /she went to?	○	○	○	○	○
19 Go to a movie, play, museum, concert, or sport event?	○	○	○	○	○
20Have a serious talk about a personal problem he/she was having?	○	○	○	○	○
21Have a serious argument about his/her behavior?	○	○	○	○	○
22Talk about schoolwork or grades?	○	○	○	○	○
23Work on a project for school?	○	○	○	○	○
24 Talk about things he/she is doing in school? ○		○	○	○	○

Father involvement

Progress

Fatheri

n25

		Everyday	A few times a week	A few times a month	Once or twice	Never
In the past 30 days, how often have you spent one or more hours a day with your child/children?	○	○	○	○	○	○

Demographics

This information helps us deduct accurate conclusions from the data collected. Please fill in the information to your best knowledge. This information is covered by the consent form signed at the beggining.

How old are you in years?

In which country were you born?

What is your first language?

What is your highest educational level?

- ◯ Primary
- ◯ Secondary
- ◯ Bachelor Degree
- ◯ Post Graduate Degree
- ◯ Trade

What is your employment status? (you may select more than one response)

- ☐ Casual
- ☐ Part time
- ☐ Full time
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Unemployed
- ☐ other (specify)

What is the average number of hours you work per week?

What is your annual gross income in dollars? (income before tax)

How many children reside in your home?

What are the gender and age of your children?

(for example, Male (8yrs), Female (6yrs), Female (3yrs)

What is your relationship status?

- ◯ Married
- ◯ Separated
- ◯ Cohabitating with partner
- ◯ Divorced
- ◯ Single

Which statement best describes your living sitaution?

- ◯ a) Living alone with biological children
- ◯ b) Living with partner with biological children
- ◯ c) Living with partner and step-children
- ◯ d) Blended family, living with partner and your children and step childen
- ◯ e) Other (specify)

If married or cohabitating what is your partners annual gross income in dollars? (income before tax)

If married or cohabitating what is your partners highest level of education?

- ◯ Primary
- ◯ Secondary
- ◯ Bachelor Degree
- ◯ Post Graduate Degree
- ◯ Trade

If married or cohabitating what is your partners employment status? (you may select more than one response)

- ☐ Casual
- ☐ Part-time
- ☐ Full-time
- ☐ Student
- ☐ Unemployed
- ☐ Other (specify)

APPENDIX C: ETHICS APPROVAL

OFFICE OF RESEARCH

Human Research Ethics Committee

PHONE +61 7 4687 5703| FAX +61 7 4631 5555

EMAIL human.ethics@usq.edu.au

18 August 2017

Mr James Brown
c/- School of Psychology, Counselling & Community
Faculty of Health, Engineering & Sciences
University of Southern Queensland TOOWOOMBA
QLD 4350

Dear James

The USQ Human Research Ethics Committee has recently reviewed your responses to the conditions placed upon the ethical approval for the project outlined below. Your proposal isnow deemed to meet the requirements of the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)* and full ethical approval has been granted.

Approval No.	**H17REA173**
Project Title	Barriers and facilitators of father involvement in parentinginterventions
Approval date	18 August 2017
Expiry date	18 August 2020
HREC Decision	**Approved**

The standard conditions of this approval are:

(a) Conduct the project strictly in accordance with the proposal submitted and granted ethics approval, including any amendments made to the proposal required by the HREC
(b) Advise (email: human.ethics@usq.edu.au) immediately of any complaints or other issues in relation to the project which may warrant review of the ethical approval of the project
(c) Make submission for approval of amendments to the approved project before implementing such changes
(d) Provide a 'progress report' for every year of approval
(e) Provide a 'final report' when the project is complete
(f) Advise in writing if the project has been discontinued, using a 'final report'

For (c) to (f) forms are available on the USQ ethics website:
http://www.usq.edu.au/research/support-development/research-services/research- integrity-ethics/human/forms

Samantha Davis
Ethics Officer

OFFICE OF RESEARCH
Human Research Ethics Committee
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UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

18 November 2021

Mr James Brown
TOOWOOMBA
4350

Dear James

The USQ Human Research Ethics Committee has recently reviewed your responses to the conditions placed upon the ethical approval for the project outlined below. Your proposal is now deemed to meet the requirements of the ***National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)*** and full ethical approval has been granted.

Approval No.	H18REA084
Project Title	Barriers and facilitators of father involvement in parenting interventions (Study 2)
Approval date	06 June 2018
Expiry date	06 June 2021
Status	**Approved with standard conditions**

The standard conditions of this approval are:

(a) responsibly conduct the project strictly in accordance with the proposal submitted and granted ethics approval, including any amendments made to the proposal;
(b) advise the University (email: ResearchIntegrity@usq.edu.au) immediately of any complaint pertaining to the conduct of the research or any other issues in relation to the project which may warrant review of the ethical approval of the project;
(c) promptly report any adverse events or unexpected outcomes to the University (email: ResearchIntegrity@usq.edu.au) and take prompt action to deal with any unexpected risks;
(d) make submission for any amendments to the project and obtain approval prior to implementing such changes;
(e) provide a progress 'milestone report' when requested and at least for every year of approval;
(f) provide a final 'milestone report' when the project is complete;
(g) promptly advise the University if the project has been discontinued, using a final 'milestone report'.

APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPATION

University of Southern Queensland

Consent Form for USQ Research Project Interview

Project Details

Title of Project: Barriers and Facilitators of Father Involvement in Parenting Interventions

Human Research Ethics Approval Number: **H17REA173**

Research Team Contact Details

Principal Investigator Details

James Brown
Email: [redacted]
Telephone: [redacted]
Mobile: [redacted]

Supervisor Details

Dr. Erich Fein
Email: [redacted]
Telephone: [redacted]

Statement of Consent

By signing below, you are indicating that you:

- Have read and understood the information document regarding this project, and had any questions answered to your satisfaction.
- Understand that if you have any additional questions you can contact the research team.
- Understand that the interview will be audio recorded.
- Understand that I will not be provided with a copy of the transcript of the interview for my perusal and endorsement prior to inclusion of this data in the project, and that the de-identified transcripts (without my name) may be used for research publications and in future research projects.
- Understand that you are free to withdraw at any time, without comment or penalty.
- Understand that you can contact the University of Southern Queensland Ethics Coordinator on (07) 4631 2690 or email ethics@usq.edu.au if you do have any concern or complaint about the ethical conduct of this project.
- Are over 18 years of age.
- Agree to participate in the project.

Participant Name	
Participant Signature	
Date	

Please return this sheet to a Research Team member prior to undertaking the interview.