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Fletcher, Richard, Hammond, Craig, Faulkner, Darren, Turner, Nicole, Shipley, Lisa, Read, Donna & Gwynn, Josephine. "Stayin' on track: the feasibility of developing internet and mobile phone-based resources to support young Aboriginal fathers" Published in Australian Journal of Primary Health, Vol. 23, Issue 4, Pages 329-334, (2017)

Available from: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1071/PY16151>

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Accessed from: <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.13/1386430>

Stayin' on Track: the feasibility of developing Internet and mobile phone-based resources to support young Aboriginal fathers

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ABSTRACT

Young Aboriginal fathers face social and emotional challenges in the transition to fatherhood yet culturally appropriate support mechanisms are lacking. Peer mentoring to develop online and mobile-phone based resources and support may be a viable approach to successfully engage these young men. This feasibility study engaged two trusted Aboriginal mentors and researchers to partner with one regional and two rural Aboriginal communities in New South Wales. Early in the research process, twenty young Aboriginal fathers were recruited as co-investigators. These fathers were integral in the development of web-based resources, and testing of mobile phone-based text-messaging and mood tracking programs tailored to provide fathering and mental health support. Overwhelmingly positive feedback from evaluations reinforced community pride in and ownership of the outcomes. The young men's involvement was instrumental in not only developing culturally appropriate support, but in building their capacity as role models for other fathers in the community. The positive results from this feasibility study support the adoption of participatory approaches to the development of resources for Aboriginal communities.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

What is known about the topic?

- Young Aboriginal men often face significant social and emotional disadvantage, yet do not have access to culturally relevant support in the transition to fatherhood.

What does this paper add?

- Internet and mobile-phone based resources developed in close partnership with the Aboriginal community offer viable, acceptable and sustainable support mechanisms for young fathers.

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal men may face significant hurdles in the transition to fatherhood. They are more likely to become a father at an early age, be unprepared for fatherhood, and to lack positive parenting role models (Hammond 2010). Traditionally, young Aboriginal men have been educated about Aboriginal Law (lore) and culture by older male relatives, however, many contemporary Aboriginal men have been left unsupported in the transition to adulthood, lacking guidance on how to lead healthy lives and take responsibility for fatherhood (Brooks 2011; McCoy 2014).

Aboriginal men also face poorer physical and mental health compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts, as well as lower incomes, employment and educational outcomes (Wenitong 2002; McCalman *et al.* 2010; AIHW 2015). These factors not only impact on Aboriginal men, but also have broader implications for families and communities.

There is scant research investigating how young Aboriginal men can be supported in their role as fathers, even though they have been identified as an at-risk group (Wenitong 2002; Larkins *et al.* 2009). Fathers in general are difficult to engage in parenting interventions (Panter-Brick *et al.* 2014). Nevertheless, there is evidence to suggest that Aboriginal fathers will respond to a strengths-based approach facilitated by respected Aboriginal mentors, the establishment of a culturally-welcoming environment, that provides networking opportunities for fathers, and where participant ownership of the program is cultivated (Fletcher *et al.* 2014; Tsey *et al.* 2014; Stuart *et al.* 2015). Peer mentoring has been used successfully in addressing educational and employment disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal young people (Paasse and Adams 2011) and may assist young Aboriginal men to seek advice and support (Larkins *et al.* 2009).

Mobile phones are integral in the everyday lives of young Aboriginal people and have become a popular means by which Aboriginal people negotiate and reinforce their cultural identity and enhance their sense of wellbeing (Edmonds *et al.* 2012; Carlson 2013). Young men are more likely to seek mental health information or support from the internet than from a health professional (Ellis *et al.* 2013); suggesting that internet and mobile telephone based interventions have a high possibility of offering an acceptable and accessible format for delivering information and support to young Aboriginal fathers. Mobile telephone-based mood tracking applications have also been developed to enable users to monitor their emotional wellbeing and to follow up support services when needed, thereby reducing the possible stigma associated with conventional means of seeking help (Foreman *et al.* 2011; Luxton *et al.* 2011). Therefore, the aims of the *Stayin' on Track* study were, in partnership with the Aboriginal community, to: i) test the acceptability and feasibility of developing a website offering tailored support and information to young Aboriginal fathers, and ii) to adapt and test a mobile-phone based text-messaging and mood-tracker program that provided

ongoing social, cultural and emotional support to the fathers to address issues in relation to mental health and wellbeing.

METHOD

This qualitative study applied a young Aboriginal fathers-centred participatory design approach. Participatory research has been shown to be very effective in social and health research with young people and Aboriginal communities (Trzesinski 2014), including for online health and mental health services (Tsey *et al.* 2014). A research team with experience in Indigenous-appropriate methodologies was formed guided by two Aboriginal male mentors with previous research experience and strong connections to Aboriginal communities through long-standing participation in local sporting and representative organisations. Commencing in 2014 discussions with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) in one regional city and two rural towns in NSW were held to identify young Aboriginal fathers who were invited to participate in the project and to pass on the invitation to other young fathers. As word spread about the project, a number of other fathers sought out the mentors and asked to be included in the research.

Participants

Twenty young Aboriginal fathers were invited to participate in the project as co-investigators and collaborators and were paid fees dependent on their level of involvement in the project. The fathers were recruited through the ACCHS staff and through community networks from the three locations (regional city n=7; large rural town n=8; small rural town n=5). Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 years, with all fathers having at least one young child at the time of enrolment.

‘Yarn up’ sessions

A series of ‘Yarn up’ discussions with the fathers and community members were held at the three locations. These discussions were to evaluate a range of websites that could be included in the *Stayin’ on Track* web page and to explore how these young men seek help for family-related matters. Sessions were audio recorded and transcribed.

Filming the young fathers’ stories

It was explained to the young fathers that the researchers wanted to film them talking about their experiences of fatherhood; they were provided with only a few general prompts such as: "Tell us about what it was like before the birth?", or "What were you doing while she was pregnant". The young fathers were filmed individually in a studio with only the mentor and cameraman present. The focus was on facilitating a relaxed, informal atmosphere for the young men during filming.

The two mentors and the lead author reviewed the footage from the interviews, and selected excerpts to illustrate the young fathers’ experience in the transition to fatherhood. The young

fathers involved reviewed and approved their own film clips, advised on the accompanying music, and approved the final design of the *Stayin' on Track* website.

Testing *Stayin' on Track* SMS4dads

This project also aimed to test the feasibility of sending brief text messages and using a mood-tracking application to provide information and support to young Aboriginal fathers. The project is an adaptation of SMS4dads which has been described in detail elsewhere (Fletcher *et al.* 2016). The topics of the text messages address the father-infant bond, fathers' support of their partner and co-parenting and fathers' self-care. SMS4dads includes a Mood Tracker (MT) which sends regular texts to fathers asking them to monitor their level of stress; a fathers' response indicating distress triggers a phone call from a mentor to check on the fathers' wellbeing and facilitate any follow up.

For the current project, the SMS4dads messages were reviewed and modified by the two Aboriginal mentors. Examples of adapted messages in the three topic areas include: "*If your baby could talk he/she would say 'I like your big strong hands holding me'*", "*It can be tough to leave your partner and baby to go to work. Maybe texting can keep you in touch*" and "*Do you feel ok about asking a health worker for help? As all new fathers need support at some stage*".

These messages were forwarded to the young Aboriginal fathers over a period of six weeks from August to October 2015. Five of the messages contained links to websites providing fathering information and support.

Mood Tracker (MT) messages

On a weekly basis, participants were also asked to monitor their mood and to indicate how they were feeling using the following 5-point scale constructed for this study ranging from high to low: *solid, deadly, OK, mad* or *low*. For all responses other than 'low', an encouraging message was sent in response. However, if participants responded with 'low' to the Mood Tracker, a mentor would contact him to offer support, and to direct him to other services if warranted.

Community feedback & evaluation

The young fathers' films were presented at community events in each of the three locations. Elders, members of men's group, professionals working in Aboriginal services and members of the local community were invited to provide feedback on the films. Approximately 170 people viewed the films across the three locations. Notes of comments were made by the researchers during these events.

Website dissemination

Initially, the *Stayin' on Track* website was promoted through community links and social media by the young fathers who were co-investigators. In addition, staff from the ACCHSs in the three locations offered the *Stayin' on Track* website to young Aboriginal fathers. The website was also

promoted at several conferences. As part of the evaluation, visits to the website were tracked, with visitors being asked to provide their Australian postcode or country of origin throughout 2015 and 2016.

Ethics

The *Stayin' on Track* SMS4dads arm of the project received approval from the NSW Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council Ethics Committee and the University of Newcastle Human Research Ethics Committee.

RESULTS

Evaluation of Websites by young fathers

Facilitated by the mentors, the young fathers were seated in pairs at a computer and were asked to explore the internet for information relevant to them using the following search terms: 'being a young dad', 'Aboriginal dads', and 'being overwhelmed or stressed'. This process prompted more general discussion about how these young men seek help, with a number of key themes emerging. Firstly, these young men had not used the internet as a mechanism for searching for information on family or health related matters. Secondly, web content that was text dense, or did not have appealing images or design, did not engage them, and they quickly clicked to the next web page. Thirdly, the young men did not expect to see web content that was directly relevant to them as Aboriginal fathers, and would not exclude non-Aboriginal websites if they were searching for information. Nonetheless, websites with Aboriginal styling and content did spark their interest. As a result of these discussions, nine websites were selected to be included as content in the *Stayin' on Track* website (see <https://www.stayinontrack.com/>). These websites provided information and support on parenting, mental health and Aboriginal culture.

Information seeking

The young fathers and community members discussed information seeking in the context of the transition to fatherhood during each of the 'yarn up' sessions. Family members were highlighted as a key information source for the young men:

Well supporting it, well me and [my partner] we live on our own, or lived on our own so we really had each, you know and as much as I helped her she helped me. So it was all, and then our families also come in, and all black fella's are like, got the biggest mob, everyone help, everyone pitches in so help where they can (Young father – regional city).

I get a lot of support from my family. It's good like that – Aboriginal families are very supportive. They're very connected to one another. It's good to have support from my mum and the rest of our family (Community member – small rural town).

Although some community members stressed the need for men to provide support to one another “Men gotta talk up to each other. We shoot ourselves in the foot if we don't talk. Men gotta talk to men” (Community member – small rural town), others suggested that young men did not seek out peers for advice and support about fathering:

In this town there's not many young dads that are willing to get help and sit down in a group like this and get to know new people and start doing things that would benefit their fatherhood with their child (Young father – large rural town).

Of particular note, was the absence of evidence that young men would seek out advice or support outside their community, from the internet, or from health professionals.

Responses to Stayin on Track text messaging

Links

The 20 young Aboriginal fathers were sent 25 messages over the course of the project (approximately four per week), with 5 of those messages containing links to websites providing additional parenting information and support.

Frequency of response was determined by the number of times that participants clicked on the links. The most popular link, *Routines: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents*, received more than half of all clicks (55.6%). Ten of the fathers clicked on this link a total of 15 times. The second most popular link was *Baby talk – You Tube Video*, which received 40.7% of all responses. The link *Crying*, was clicked on once and the remaining links, *The bonding for dads – video* and *Postnatal depression (PND) and women*, received no clicks.

Mood Tracker message responses

Between four and ten MT messages were forwarded to the participants, depending on the father's registration date. A total of 141 MT messages were forwarded during the six-week period, with 18 (90%) of the fathers responding to a least one of the MT messages.

Of the total 106 responses received from the fathers, 97 (91.5%) indicated 1 (Solid) or 2 (Deadly). Only 3 (2.8%) of the responses indicated 4 (Mad), with none of the fathers selecting 5 (Low) as an

option. Since the mentors were well known to several of the young fathers they nevertheless had frequent contact with them as support over the period of the project.

Detailed information regarding the MT responses is provided in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Community feedback & evaluation

The consensus view was overwhelmingly positive with many senior community members commenting that the professionalism of the films reflected the respect shown towards the fathers involved, and to the broader Aboriginal community:

In a town that needs some advice, we thank you for coming and look forward to the positive effects of Stayin' on Track.

The boys told their stories and expressed them with emotion, with spirit, with courage.

I've seen the trauma that our young people have been through. There's a lot of heartache in this town. I applaud your program. It's awe-inspiring. And I can only see good things coming out of it.

Additionally, the project had provided the young fathers with opportunities to network with other fathers and to discuss their common issues; the project was also instrumental in their development as mentors for other young men in the community:

When I did the interview my daughter was only 2 months old. It was good to talk to other people about what they were going through (Young father – small rural town.)

We've become vulnerable, we've shown a raw state of emotion in these videos and so hopefully we can get it out there and other young fathers and even older fathers can see "Oh that's exactly what I'm going through" and they can come to us as mentors and ask us about these questions. We may not have the answers for them but I suppose just someone to talk to if they don't feel comfortable speaking to someone else I suppose (Young father – large rural town).

I think from the start, when we had our first kid we became leaders. We're doing it now. Some of us have got more than one child – we've got to lead by example anyways (Young father – regional city).

DISCUSSION

The results from the *Stayin' on Track* project add to the body of evidence that participatory approaches using a strengths approach and investing time and resources in community consultations can be effective in engaging Aboriginal young people (Stewart *et al.* 2011). The responses to the website and video presentations provide promising evidence of the feasibility and acceptability of providing tailored online resources to support young Aboriginal men in their fathering role. Key to the success of the project was the close research partnership that was developed with the Aboriginal communities, and the involvement of the two Aboriginal mentors who supported the young Aboriginal fathers. These young men had an integral role in developing the website content and ensuring that it would be culturally relevant to others experiencing the challenges of fatherhood.

Health promotion programs and initiatives developed for the general population may lack relevance for Indigenous people (Paasse and Adams 2011). In their search for online fathering resources, the young men in our project did not expect to find information that was culturally relevant to them, or cognisant of the particular challenges that Aboriginal men face. While some of the fathers in the project had the benefit of extended families for support, they did not necessarily look to their peers, nor did they seek information outside their community or from health professionals. Notably, culturally-relevant parenting information proved to be of most interest to the young fathers involved in our study. The most accessed link from the text messages was: *Routines: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander parents*. This reinforces the need for young Aboriginal fathers to have to access culturally appropriate information and support.

To date, health promotion activities aimed at engaging Aboriginal communities have been limited in their efficacy and sustainability, as there has been insufficient attention given to capacity building, empowerment and community ownership (Demaio *et al.* 2012). It is promising that the young Aboriginal fathers and community members expressed unanimous support and pride in the project outcomes. Community feedback highlighted the need for Aboriginal men to provide each other with support, while the young men saw great value in networking with other fathers, and began to view themselves as mentors and role models within the community. Through the process of being mentored and being involved in the research, the young fathers enhanced their knowledge, learnt the value in sharing their concerns, and were empowered themselves to act as mentors, thereby enhancing the sustainability of the intervention.

In addition, the project offers preliminary support for the feasibility of providing support to young Aboriginal fathers through mobile-phone based text-messaging and mood tracking programs to assist them in the transition to fatherhood. This study demonstrated a high level of engagement

with the MT messages, suggesting that this was an acceptable mechanism for these young men to monitor their emotional health and coping. Although this group did not report signs of distress via the MT, it is likely that they were not representative of the broader Aboriginal community as they received continued guidance and support from the mentors throughout the course of the project. The promising results of SMS4dads reported elsewhere (Fletcher *et al.* in press), and the need to promote help seeking to address the high rates of mental ill health experienced by Aboriginal men (ABS & AIHW 2008; Isaacs *et al.* 2013), point to the potential for this program to be adopted in other Aboriginal communities.

CONCLUSION

This feasibility study provides a viable template for better supporting young Aboriginal fathers in the transition to fatherhood. The strengths of the intervention include involvement of the Aboriginal mentors and young men as researchers and the strong community partnership that developed. In particular, the intervention enhanced the skills and the confidence of the young fathers in presenting their views. In some cases the young men were linked to existing ‘men’s groups’ of older Aboriginal men. The intervention also reinforces the potential of using internet sources and text-messaging as mechanisms for engaging young Aboriginal fathers, and overcoming some of the barriers to these fathers sourcing culturally appropriate information and managing their mental health.

There are a number of potential areas that could be explored in future research. Firstly, the partnership and mentoring model could be refined and adapted for urban and remote communities, with the aim of including a broader range of fathers’ stories on the website. In this study the initiative for the project arose from discussions among the researchers and mentors. The existence of respectful relationships between the mentors and the ACCHS’s and other community members ensured community support for the project. Future studies could begin with the needs identified by the ACCHS staff and develop the project from there. Secondly, to support a process of continuous improvement there is a need to evaluate the number of views per video on the website, and the number of clicks on the links to other websites. Finally, although the Aboriginal mentors reviewed and refined the text and MT messages in order to improve their cultural relevance, there is a need for a range of young fathers to be involved in reviewing and evaluating their efficacy.

TABLES

Table 1: Number of MT messages received, responded to and options selected by participant

Participant	No. of messages received	No. of responses selected	Number of times selected				
			'Solid'	'Deadly'	'OK'	'Mad'	'Low'
1	9	9	6	3	0	0	0
2	6	3	0	2	1	0	0
3	6	2	2	0	0	0	0
4	6	4	1	3	0	0	0
5	7	5	5	0	0	0	0
6	7	7	7	0	0	0	0
7	6	5	3	2	0	0	0
8	9	9	2	6	1	0	0
9	7	6	6	0	0	0	0
10	10	9	8	1	0	0	0
11	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
12	7	5	0	1	2	2	0
13	7	6	5	1	0	0	0
14	7	7	2	4	1	0	0
15	10	10	8	1	0	1	0
16	6	5	1	4	0	0	0
17	6	0	0	0	0	0	0
18	7	7	4	2	1	0	0
19	6	5	4	1	0	0	0
20	6	2	1	1	0	0	0
Total	141	106	65	32	6	3	0

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