

## **‘Learning to be a better man’: insights from a fathering program for incarcerated Indigenous men**

### **Abstract**

This paper reports a qualitative study of incarcerated Indigenous fathers in Australia, using a framework of generative fathering. Researchers interviewed 28 imprisoned Indigenous men about their experiences of parenting and their responses to a parenting program. The findings contribute new knowledge about support for incarcerated Australian Indigenous men as parents, given the limited availability of parenting support – especially programs targeted to the rising numbers of Indigenous men in custody. Participants indicated that the program was relevant to their experience as Indigenous fathers and that it supported their learning and their capacity to embrace the role of parenting the next generation. It facilitated their growth as individuals, parents and as community members by acknowledging their cultural identity and roles. This study offers insights to organisations seeking to support the development of parenting knowledge amongst incarcerated Indigenous fathers.

*Keywords:* Children, fatherhood, incarcerated fathers, Indigenous fathers, parenting education

## **Introduction**

Parental imprisonment has devastating effects on families (Dawson, Jackson & Nyamathi 2012). It is often associated with patterns of poverty, abuse, mental illness, disrupted parenting, substance dependence and other disadvantage, with distressing consequences across multiple generations (Dawson et al. 2013). For Australian Indigenous communities, this cycle is compounded by the legacy of colonisation and forced separation of families (Sherwood & Kendall 2013).

Recognising that a majority of adults in custody are parents, often with poor experiences of being parented themselves, many correctional authorities provide programs to support inmates in their parenting role. This paper explores the experiences of men participating in a parenting program for Indigenous fathers in correctional facilities in New South Wales (NSW), Australia.

## **Background**

In 2015, there were 10,933 men in NSW correctional facilities, including 2,549 Indigenous men (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015). Indigenous people are significantly over-represented in NSW prisoner populations: 2,138 per 100,000 Indigenous adults in the state were imprisoned in 2015, compared with 155 per 100,000 non-Indigenous adults (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2015).

Between 1910 and 1970, Australian government policy saw at least 100,000 Indigenous children forcibly removed from their families, creating ‘The Stolen Generations’ (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997). This mass familial disruption has damaged the intergenerational transmission of parenting skills and cultural knowledge for generations of Indigenous people (Ryan 2011). This has resulted in a lack of positive role models to teach young men about their culture and the fathering role (Dennison et al. 2014). The ongoing legacy of the Stolen Generations means many men are unable to fulfil their social and cultural obligations, resulting in self-doubt, frustration, feelings of powerlessness and emotional distress that can lead to substance misuse and behavioural issues (Adams 2006;

Brown et al. 2012). High incarceration rates, relationship breakdown and higher mortality have further reduced men's involvement in family life (Ryan 2011).

In NSW, 56% of incarcerated Indigenous men had children under 16, as did 37.3% of non-Indigenous men (Indig et al. 2010), although not all lived with their children prior to incarceration (17.1% and 15.6% respectively) (Corrective Services NSW 2014). Paternal incarceration can be associated with feelings of isolation, shame, psychological distress and low self-esteem. Secret (2012) identified psychological and adjustment problems amongst incarcerated fathers, potentially affecting their parenting practice, regardless of their parenting intentions. Furthermore, paternal identity may deteriorate during incarceration, constraining men's ability to be, and feel, effective fathers (Arditti, Smock & Parkman 2005).

Incarcerated parents have often been subjected to inappropriate parenting themselves and may have limited experience of effective and nurturing parenting styles (Perry et al. 2011). Incarcerated Indigenous men report experiencing parental incarceration and out-of-home care as children (30.8% and 46% respectively) more frequently than non-Indigenous counterparts (11.7% and 21.7%) (Indig et al. 2010). Paternal incarceration amongst Indigenous Australians further exacerbates the ongoing impact of colonisation and the Stolen Generations by affecting men's relationships with their children and their communities (Dennison et al. 2014).

Research highlights the value of facilitating fathers' contact with children during incarceration (Meek 2007; Secret 2012; Dennison et al. 2014); the quality of parent-child relationships maintained during incarceration may help parolees adjust to life outside (Bahr et al. 2005). Prison-based programs aim to strengthen these bonds by increasing participants' confidence, skills and resourcefulness as parents, enhancing relationships with their children during custody, and supporting their re-entry into a functional parental role after release (Newman, Fowler & Cashin 2011). Reviews of research indicate that most participants in prison-based programs report improved parenting attitudes, skills and confidence and greater understanding of child development and appropriate discipline, at least in the short-term (Buston et al. 2012; Newman, Fowler & Cashin 2011). However, methodological limitations of these studies mean that the impact of these programs cannot be firmly established,

especially over time (Loper & Tuerk 2006). A review of fatherhood programs for non-incarcerated groups similarly reported that the evidence-base on ‘what really works’ is often limited (Bronte-Tinkew, Burkhauser & Metz 2012).

Parenting is strongly influenced by cultural roles and relationships. Given high rates of incarceration among Indigenous fathers, understanding cultural attitudes and approaches to parenting is essential to providing prison-based programs. Although there is substantial literature about education and support for incarcerated parents, little has examined the impact of programs specifically for Indigenous parents. Hammond (2011) describes an eight-session fathering workshop, focused on skills to support incarcerated Indigenous Australian men take an active role in their families and communities, while in custody and after release. Given the devastating impact of colonisation on traditional roles and culture, it is important to explore how parenting programs are experienced by incarcerated Indigenous men.

### **The Babiin-Miyagang program**

This paper examines the experience of fathers participating in a parenting program for Indigenous fathers in 2014. It is drawn from a larger mixed-methods research study, *Breaking the Cycle (BTC)*, which explored the support and learning needs of incarcerated parents, to assist in the development of programs to promote pro-social parenting practices. The wider BTC study specifically focused on participants’ experience of parenting programs while in custody. Half the incarcerated mothers and fathers interviewed (64 out of 129) had participated in a parenting program.

Originally called *Hey Dad! for Indigenous Dads, Uncles and Pops*, the program was developed in 2006 to enhance capacity amongst Indigenous communities in several parts of NSW, including some correctional settings (Beatty & Doran 2007). Initial evaluation identified positive reactions from participants and facilitators about its contribution to enhancing communication, parenting, conflict resolution, social connection and relationship skills – both for individuals and wider Aboriginal communities. These effects were attributed to its strength-based, action-oriented focus and respect for Indigenous culture, and the involvement of Indigenous Elders. The evaluation also highlighted the value of specific

acknowledgement of the situation of Indigenous men, children, families and communities (Beatty & Doran 2007).

The program was funded by the NSW correctional authority in 2011, through the Keep Them Safe framework, to help strengthen the fathering roles and leadership skills of Indigenous inmates. It caters to Indigenous men with responsibility for children, recognising important obligations that male kin share for raising children. Contrary to Euro-Western assumptions about what constitutes fatherhood (Ball 2010), the paternal relationship is assumed for any close Indigenous man who cares for a younger man or child in a nurturing way (Ryan 2011). The terms Uncle, Father and Brother can be applied to other kin or non-related men in a person's community with the expectation of social responsibility carried by those titles (Dennison et al. 2014). Uncles in particular are expected to have a close responsibility for nephews (Adams 2006).

In 2014, the program was renamed to denote its Indigenous focus. *Babiin-Miyagang* means 'Dad' and 'Family' in the Wiradjuri Aboriginal language from Central Western NSW. Up to 2014, 363 incarcerated men participated in the program.

The program aims to give incarcerated fathers/carers 'greater understanding of their role and the opportunity to develop an enriched relationship with their children' (Corrective Services NSW 2013, p. 51). It is facilitated by a male Indigenous Elder at correctional facilities across NSW, with an emphasis on yarning (story-telling), music and other learning methods that are culturally appropriate and suited to participants with limited literacy. It consists of five 3-hour sessions, addressing the following topics: Being a Dad today; Understanding our kids; Yarning; Keeping our kids safe; and Coaching our kids. The only exclusions are inmates with current convictions for sexual offences or child protection orders, or serious mental health issues.

Prior to the program being run at a facility, correctional staff, especially Aboriginal program officers, promote it to Indigenous inmates and invite them to attend. Men with stepchildren or

planning to have children are welcome if vacancies permit, as are non-Indigenous participants, especially if fathering Indigenous children.

## **Methods**

### **Aims**

This study aimed to contribute new knowledge about the parenting experience of incarcerated Indigenous fathers through exploring men's learning within the Babiin-Miyagang program, within a framework of generative fathering. We used a qualitative approach to foreground the richness of the incarcerated fathers' stories and to explore the how, when, and why of the participants' experience (Sandelowski 2004). We aimed to extend the results of previous studies of parenting programs, which quantify changes in participants' knowledge or attitudes, with greater understanding of what contributed to such changes for Indigenous fathers.

### **Approach**

The wider BTC study consisted of semi-structured interviews informed by an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach, primarily focusing on participants' strengths (Cooperrider & Whitney 2005). AI seeks to accept and understand the complexity of people's lives and their situations, and has been used previously within correctional situations (Liebling, Price & Elliott 1999).

This strengths-based approach aligns with the conceptual framework of generative fathering adopted in the study, based on development challenges first articulated by Erikson (1950). This non-deficit approach argues that fathers have an 'ethical obligation to meet the needs of the next generation' (Dollahite, Hawkins & Brotherson 1997) and acknowledges the motivation and capacity of fathers for personal transformation, development and improved parenting. Support for the conceptual ethic of fathering as generative work can be found in studies examining the narratives of fathers (Brotherson, Dollahite & Hawkins 2005) including those from First Nations peoples in North America (Borrows 1996; White, Godfrey & Moccasin 2006), although data is limited.

The semi-structured interviews sought to examine the development of fathers' capacity to parent and to identify their stories of contributing meaningfully to their children's growth, therefore demonstrating generative fathering. We aimed to explore fathers' capabilities and responsibilities including their commitment, responsiveness, involvement in their children's lives, and how they shared with and guided their children. The questions addressed participants' family background, experience of parenting (both during and before incarceration), plans post-release and their experience of parenting support while in custody. Data reported here derive from responses to the following questions: *Why did you sign up for the parenting program? What did you learn in the program? What are the main challenges you face as a parent? and What are your strengths as a parent?*

## **Recruitment**

Researchers recruited parents of children aged 0-18 willing for interview, assisted by non-custodial staff at several correctional facilities, including counsellors, Aboriginal support staff and the Babiin-Miyagang facilitator. This generated a convenience sample of parents who agreed to be interviewed at the times we had permission to attend.

Of 129 parents interviewed in the wider study, 28 were fathers who had attended the Babiin-Miyagang program, located in three medium-to-maximum security correctional facilities. Their responses form the basis for this paper, which includes verbatim excerpts from interviews with 17 individual fathers. Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the sample.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

## **Data collection**

Four researchers interviewed the 28 fathers during 2014. One researcher was male, one Indigenous, all were parents. We interviewed in common areas of the facilities. The semi-structured interviews lasted 20-90 minutes; one interview finished prematurely. Most participants agreed for interviews to be audio-recorded. Two did not consent to audio-recording and one interview took place in an area where recording devices were not permitted. Researchers hand-wrote responses on semi-structured interview questionnaire forms and Researcher 1 subsequently transcribed the audio-recorded interviews.

## **Data analysis**

This paper used thematic analysis to work with fathers' responses to open-ended questions. Analysis consisted of reading and re-reading transcripts, using inductive reasoning to sort through the data and make sense of patterns (Borbasi & Jackson 2015). Two researchers independently reduced and hand-coded the data to develop categories; these proved very similar. We then evaluated data categories, to find similarities or differences; like data were described and defined as themes (Borbasi & Jackson 2015). The wider team discussed emerging themes to achieve consensus on a final list of themes and associated sub-themes (Figure 1).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

## **Ethical issues**

The study was approved by the Ethics Committees of both Corrective Services NSW and the University of Technology Sydney. We verbally explained the study to potential participants, reiterating that participation was voluntary and would not affect their treatment in custody or their access to their children. We advised potential participants of our obligation to report any children-at-risk concerns or any previously undisclosed criminal activity to authorities. We also noted that talking about their children may prove distressing. Although we reiterated to the fathers that they could refuse to answer any questions, none did so. The program facilitator, a respected Indigenous Elder, also provided potential participants with information about the research. All participants gave informed consent. The paper uses pseudonyms to preserve anonymity.

## **Results**

### **Sample**

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the sample and compares them, where possible, with all fathers in custody in NSW. Most participants were Indigenous, as per program objectives. Compared to incarcerated fathers on average, study participants had similar schooling, but fewer post-school qualifications; they were serving longer sentences and had more previous sentences. Many participants had left home young and 42% had experienced



parental incarceration. Only one-quarter reported receiving regular visits; some had limited or no contact with their children. Three participants did not attend all five Babiin-Miyagang sessions.

## **Themes**

The fathers described their motivations for enrolment and how Babiin-Miyagang had influenced them. Their responses to the open-ended questions fell into five main themes (Figure 1), illustrated by the quotes below. No participants made negative comments about the program in the interviews, although five participants made few comments, either positive or negative.

### **Understanding my culture – being an Aboriginal man**

#### Recognising cultural heritage

A specific component of Babiin-Miyagang is its focus on Indigenous masculinity and fatherhood. Several participants recalled learning about cultural heritage and tradition, and the impact of colonisation and dispossession for Indigenous communities. Some gained new insights about Indigenous culture and history. For instance, Jason grew up with a single mother because his own father was in custody.

I've learnt how back in the early days, living off the land and in the 60s families were split up. I learnt how the father went out to provide for the family, so they could survive. *(Jason)*

Robert recognised how Indigenous people are often dislocated from their own culture and discussed how Babiin-Miyagang helped forge better connections.

I can relate a lot to the things he is teaching me – especially about the background. A lot of us have forgotten where we come from, our background, we don't speak our language. Doing this course has opened our eyes about how it used to be. *(Robert)*

For other participants the program brought back powerful memories of growing up in an Aboriginal family.

It brought up a lot of old memories ... about my childhood, where I come from, and when I was younger. We all experienced what [facilitator] was talking about – growing up on missions, having nothing and Dad going out of his way in providing for us, working and bringing stuff home. It still happens today but we just can't get out and support our families because drugs are influencing us – and outside friends.  
*(Ben)*

Some participants specifically discussed learning to recognise the strength of their community and values. Jeff demonstrated his understanding of responsibility and inter-relationships within that culture.

I learned a lot about myself as an Indigenous person, how my ancestors and Elders raised their kids. Stories from when [facilitator] was a kid, and his parents. That gave me an insight into how our parents grew up. When I was a kid, I didn't know why my parents did certain things, until I became a parent ... I learned about our culture and my responsibility as a man – not just with my kids, but within the community. The different roles. Being Aboriginal I was always taught to share things when we were kids. If Mum didn't have any flour, she'd say to go next door to ask for some and next week they'd need some onions, and we'd give them onions. It's ingrained in me. If I see someone in need or something ... even if I've got nothing, I'll still share. That's what I'm going to pass on to my kids. *(Jeff)*

### Valuing the facilitator

The need for positive role models for Indigenous fathers was evident. Many men spoke enthusiastically about having an Indigenous Elder as the program facilitator. Participants admired his qualities of warmth, integrity and honesty. Dave expressed how much the facilitator taught him, unlike the legacy of his own father figures.

Here's a man that is faced with the same problems that we're faced with but he doesn't go and do the wrong thing. He does the right thing. ... I never had a Dad – and the stepfather that I had, I had a gun to my head when I was a kid and that's something I can't even imagine my babies going through ... I hope that he [facilitator] knows that he's turned a man around in five little sessions...He had the gumption to sit here, on our level and explain what being a man and what being a Dad was all about. I can't

thank him enough. He is a beautiful man – he drives a long way. He does hundreds of thousands of kilometres every year (*Dave*)

Robert emphasised the fundamental role of Elders within Indigenous communities and the participants' respect for this role within Babiin-Miyagang.

I heard that there was an Aboriginal Elder and knowing that I could get something from the program [I signed up]. I was curious about what I can learn. As Kooris [Aboriginal people] we do have a lot of respect for our Elders, do actually listen and take in a lot. That's something that's ingrained in us ... The reason I like the course is that the person who is running the course is helping us understand. He is an Elder Aboriginal person. Whether we choose to listen or not is up to the individual... Him coming here helping us, I feel it's building my confidence as a father. There's a bit of light at the end of the tunnel. I can relate a lot to the things he is teaching me (*Robert*)

### Taking on leadership

Some fathers felt inspired to take on a leadership role in their own communities. Victor described taking steps to becoming an active leader:

I've actually filled out the forms for being Koori Delegate in the gaol – to mentor a lot of younger fellas in the system and show them what not to do and who to hang around with and show them the right way and try and keep them away from trouble and drugs and stuff ... I've ended up talking a few of the boys into signing up for this course... I stood up with the boys and took some leadership and showed them that they can achieve what they want to achieve, be a better person and be a better parent. Pass it on to the next generation and show them that there's other things in life than coming in here. (*Victor*)

### **Understanding my children**

#### Learning about child development

The fathers affirmed how the program had taught them more about their children. They discussed learning about child development, often for the first time.

I didn't do any parenting programs or anything like that. I didn't know about all the little steps [child development] and all the stuff I've learnt on this course. *(Scott)*

While many parenting courses focus on infants, Terry's comment showed his understanding that children's needs change over time. This insight may be particularly relevant to fathers with only intermittent contact with their children.

I liked the child development stuff - that was good. Every couple of years [you have to] watch out for this and this [developmental stages]. We talked about older children too ... they get very demanding and you have to show them a bit of attention. *(Terry)*

### Connecting with children

The fathers valued the program's emphasis on building connection with their children. They discussed communicating with their children and listening more attentively. Dave highlighted learning to understand the child's perspective in their conversations, and to prioritise time spent communicating together.

I try to make time every day just to speak to them. I get back from work at 7 or 7.30, so I give them a ring before bedtime. I say 'what have you done today? How was your day? How was school? Have you got anything you want to tell Daddy? Is there anything important?' They come out with – whatever ... Whatever's important to them is important to me now. *(Dave)*

Ben learnt to recognise his son's individual qualities and communication style.

My younger fella is real quiet. He doesn't talk. He's always been like that. I thought something was wrong with him. Then – he'll come to me and talk and he's the happiest kid in the world ... It's got to be the right time. He opens up when he comes to visit. He tells me everything. He does know I love him. When I got here – we talk, get to the details. He has a cry with me. *(Ben)*

Some fathers described the unfamiliar experience of translating strong feelings for their children into words and deeds, and of moving beyond superficial 'chat':

I don't just mean little [things]... I mean talking seriously, especially to the ones who are old enough to understand. *(Scott)*

Robert understood the complexity of re-connecting with his children and planned to use his new knowledge to re-establish contact sensitively.

I didn't want to just bounce into my children's lives again – I'm not sure what's happening in the future, so I need to get to know them again. But look what's happened now I'm back inside and that I've hurt the children [by being incarcerated]. That's another thing I learnt in the course – get to know them gradually. *(Robert)*

### Being a role model

Some fathers discussed realising their own potential as role models for their children. They clearly recognised their influence as fathers and mentors – both positive and negative – and the potential impact across generations.

The course is really worthwhile. I have learnt about family and how to be a role model to my kids. I have learnt that you are the teacher ... I tell them they are loved. I didn't have that. You can't buy love. *(Joshua)*

Andy explicitly linked his understanding of his influence on his children to his aspirations to improve himself.

The one thing you don't want to rub off on your kids is violence and crime. You try to show your kids a manner way of growing up. Kids only repeat what they see and hear. If you go on like a bad person, the kids will act like that. If you go on like a good person, the kids will pick that up and act like a good person. *(Andy)*

Some men contrasted their positive intentions with their own childhood experiences with absent or abusive fathers. Adam recognised that parenthood is more than mere biology.

It taught me about being a positive role model for my son. I want to be a better Dad than my own father was. I want to be there for him ... Doing the course opened my eyes. I see more opportunities now. I want to be a Dad and not just a father. *(Adam)*

## **The experience of learning**

### Learning life skills

Participants reported their sense of achievement at discovering new skills and practical information through the program, relevant to their lives and their families. Adam contrasted Babiin-Miyagang with other education experiences during his long incarceration:

I've got about 50 certificates. But [this program] is the one about reality. It's more like real life *(Adam)*

### Learning together

Several fathers appreciated learning in community with other Indigenous men, sharing thoughts and emotions safely.

This gives us a chance to all get together in the room. We like that. There's a couple of old heads in the group and some young fellas - but we're all parents. Everyone had something to say and [the course] was bringing us out – because we're not communicating ... But courses like this – this is communication skills for us. *(Ben)*

## **Improving myself**

### Being a better man

In addition to the frequently-cited desire to be 'a better father' and to 'be there' for their children, some participants spoke broadly about their desire to be 'a better man' in terms of personal goals and relationships.

I've got to become a better man, become more sincere and honest and I've got to embrace what's important to my kids because that's what's important. If I can do that, my children won't have to be in prison, my children will know that they get an honest day's pay for an honest day's work ... It will make me a better man and the snowball effect of that is massive, for me and my family ... To become a better man. To be the man that I want my children to become. *(Dave)*

Others felt encouraged to redress the impact of past criminality. Zack had attended the program previously with some positive impact, but had returned several years later:

It helped giving me some strategies to put in place when I got out, identifying situations ... I'd got myself in that would not only affect me but that would hurt the family too. I remembered the strategies – I got out and I stayed out for about five years. A lot of the stuff I'd learnt from that course that I had to put into practice. Because I was still young at that time and still associating with the people I used to.  
*(Zack)*

### Challenging myself

Some participants specifically recounted the challenge of addressing strong feelings.

It's helped me deal with some of my emotions ... feelings that I've had and locked away - talk about them once in a while. It gives you that weight lifted off your chest. Also we're not the only ones with that problem – everyone has them. We're not the only ones dealing with it. Obviously the classroom was full and all of us had problems. It was good to hear. *(Neville)*

It's not just a fathering course, it's a life skills course. Things that we – men – don't really... You didn't show weakness, you didn't show your feelings and that's not right. It's been proven. It's not a healthy way. *(Dave)*

### Confronting shame

Some fathers stated that the program helped them confront their sense of shame about the impact of their criminality or substance abuse on their families. Robert described learning to overcome his reluctance to ask for assistance, potentially helping him to seek support following release.

With parole sometimes it's a barrier – you don't have the confidence. I'm used to doing this while I'm in here. But when you step outside, you might slip up with drinking. I'm very hesitant to say that to my parole officer, I'm afraid they're going to

judge me and send me back in. Over a period of time if you don't ask for help, things get out of hand. *(Robert)*

## **Looking to the future**

### Setting goals

Several fathers discussed how the program had helped them set goals. They described wishing to ameliorate the impact of their separation from their children, to overcome substance dependence and ongoing contact with the criminal justice system.

Try and look at a positive way of staying out of prison and spending more time with them *(Tom)*

### Breaking the cycle

Fathers felt that attending Babiin-Miyagang was an investment in a better future – through being better parents and being better equipped to remain in their community and out of custody.

I know within myself how to be – but this gave me more insight into how to better yourself – for the kids' sake. Because they're the future ... I want to better myself and my partner doesn't. She doesn't see the real picture, what's happening to the boys ... If you're going to have kids, they're your responsibility. I'm not blaming it all on her – it's me too. But I'm sick of coming to jail, I'm over it. Especially before my parents pass away. They did the right thing, why can't I? I've got to stay away from them bad eggs – don't get caught up with that. *(Peter)*

Some specifically discussed their desire to break the cycle of incarceration and the distress it caused themselves and their families. They demonstrated understanding their role in passing on behaviour and attitudes to their children.

My two boys are locked up now ... I blame myself. I've been thinking I've got to fix myself up before going back to a relationship ... The kids are going to be in the cycle too. Got passed around from different family members. I haven't lived at home since they were little. I want to better myself so that I can talk positive to my boys and give



them an outlook ... I'd like to advise them in case they do something real bad, before it gets to that stage ... I like to talk to them. I'm fed up with it and it's just caught up with me. I don't want to see them in the system. *(Peter)*

Several fathers focused on their hopes for their children, to achieve what they missed out on or to be spared the pain that they had encountered. Sam's reflection on his mother illustrates a growing awareness of the intergenerational links within families and communities and the forces that can undermine them.

I've done bad things. I went down the wrong path because of drugs. I don't want that kind of thing for my children. I know my Mum definitely didn't want that for us. But I took that path. Most of my other brothers and sisters, they've never been to gaol in their life. I'm the only one. *(Sam)*

Dave emphasised his aspirations for his children in terms of personal qualities and resilience.

I just want my children to be honest, I want them to be reliable, I want them to have integrity. I want them to have all the things I didn't have ... I want them to know love and to know that if things are bad, things are going to get better. I just want them to be the best they can possibly be. *(Dave)*

Mitch also reflected a determination to maintain bonds with his children, as well as a (less optimistic) desire to re-connect with their mother. He recognised that her reaction would influence his chances of reconciliation with his children.

I plan to get custody when I get out – get back with my missus. Getting custody depends on her response to a relationship when I'm released. But even if it doesn't work, she won't keep me away from them. *(Mitch)*

Victor aspired to be a youth worker, not only to mentor young Indigenous men, but also to gain his children's respect:

I should achieve something in life. I just want to make them [children] proud. I want them one day to go to school and one day see me on TV or see something written

about me and say 'That's my Dad there' ... In a way I'm happy that I've come back to gaol to clean myself up a bit and straighten my head out and open my eyes up. It's going to be big doing that on my own. (*Victor*)

Robert attributed his sense of confidence to Babiin-Miyagang, which altered his world view as well as his potential as a father:

This doesn't work – sending us in prison doesn't work. Building up our confidence does work ... Doing this course has opened our eyes about how it used to be ... and doing it properly. It makes me feel like a human being. Doing this course makes me feel like I've got a chance. It makes me feel good and that I can be a father again. (*Robert*)

## **Discussion**

### **What it means to be a father**

Given high imprisonment rates amongst Indigenous fathers, paternal incarceration can have profound consequences for Indigenous communities and their capacity to transfer knowledge about parenting and culture (Ball 2009; Dennison et al. 2014). This constrains the mentoring work encapsulated in the conceptual ethic of generative fathering, preventing them from imparting ideas, traditions and stories or from supporting their own children to impart this wisdom to future generations (Dollahite, Hawkins & Brotherson 1997). Babiin-Miyagang participants voiced aspirations to develop their capabilities as fathers consistent with the generative framework. Several comments reflected a perspective on parenthood and families that embraced several generations – the men's parents and siblings as well as their children – and their role in a wider Indigenous community.

The findings shed light on the development of the men's identity as fathers, their practical parenting skills and their understanding of their children's needs. Their growing capacity to love and care for others reflects generative fathering. They identified what they hoped for their children but also what they needed to do, including expressing their love for their children and demonstrating positive behaviours. The participants regarded parenting as important and wished to be more effective fathers, but also recognised the challenges. They

articulated visions for the future that identified their children's happiness and fulfilment alongside their own, demonstrating awareness of the emotional interdependence and attachment that is central to generative fathering.

### **Not just a father, but an Aboriginal father**

Responses illustrate how incarceration may offer the opportunity for fathers to reflect on and potentially alter their attitudes, identity and behaviour (Buston et al. 2012). Participants' determination to be 'better fathers' confirms other studies where fathers often resolve to re-engage with their children after the dormancy of incarceration (Arditti, Smock & Parkman 2005). These fathers demonstrated responsiveness to their children's needs and their own deeply-held beliefs about parenting that are embedded in Indigenous culture. As well as considering their own families, the fathers also recognised the importance of the socio-cultural environment, particularly their community, cultural knowledge and important life skills. This focus provides useful insight into how participants understood father-child relationships in the context of Indigenous parenting in custody. It also demonstrates the need for parenting programs to consider the capabilities and responsibilities of fathering arising from the generative framework. Parenting programs can foster men's capacity to care more deeply for the next generation, providing a sense of fulfilment and meaning in their lives. A strength-based generative ethic in programs therefore provides fathers with insight into how their interpersonal and emotional well-being is deeply connected with that of their children.

The participants spoke enthusiastically about the support and knowledge Babiin-Miyagang offered, and their deeper understanding of parenthood, the impact of their actions on their children and communities, and their determination to connect more meaningfully. They responded to the program's use of art, music and yarning, valuable for working with Indigenous participants (Towney 2005). Their responses demonstrate the central importance of Indigenous culture within the program's content and methods. Reflecting on their experiences of absence, several discussed their displacement from traditional roles as Indigenous men and their limited experience with positive role models of Indigenous fatherhood. By focusing on their role within extended families and communities, the program encouraged these fathers to find concrete ways to 'meet the needs of the next generation' (Dollahite, Hawkins & Brotherson 1997).

### **The irreplaceable Elder**

Many participants clearly valued the role of the Indigenous facilitator. They admired his cultural knowledge, integrity, tolerance and honesty, calling him Uncle in recognition of his standing in the community. He provided a powerful model of Indigenous fatherhood and manhood that few had experienced as children or men.

Mentors are crucial to inspire and support fathers as they re-engage with their children and families, by modelling fathering behaviours and challenging inappropriate parenting practices and beliefs inconsistent with Indigenous culture. Ideally this support would be continued on release, building on the fathers' learning, to replicate and expand insights from the program into their wider community. Parenting programs alone cannot sustain behaviour change without additional strategies to support transition into life outside of prison. To re-establish their parenting role, these men need appropriate emotional support, employment and housing environments suitable for children.

### **The potential of fathering programs**

Alone, the findings do not demonstrate that Babiin-Miyagang has effectively improved participants' parenting skills and resources. Given these men's experiences – as fathers and as (adult) children themselves – it is optimistic to expect a short program to counteract years, if not generations, of disadvantage. There are many potent familial, social and psychological pressures on fathers reintegrating with their families (Bahr et al. 2005), especially for Indigenous men. Most participants had substantial time before release; some had irregular or no contact with their children (Table 1), limiting opportunities to put their learning into practice. This study did not assess men's interactions with their children from prison; neither did Babiin-Miyagang itself. However, participants stressed that the program offered them the opportunity to be more reflective and to grow as parents, individuals, and members of their Indigenous communities.

Rather than measuring impact, this study explored how Babiin-Miyagang assisted participants' learning and its relevance to them as Indigenous fathers. The study identified elements which other authors have attributed to effective parenting interventions for incarcerated fathers (Loper & Tuerk 2006; Buston et al. 2012): recognition of the specific circumstances of parents in custody; focus on communication, contact and constructive engagement with children; attention to post-release issues; improved interpersonal skills; support for participants' emotional issues, such as guilt, grief and past trauma; acknowledgement of limited education and literacy; peer support; and provision of alternate models of masculinity and fatherhood.

Moreover, participants illustrated how Babiin-Miyagang was meaningful to them as Indigenous men and fathers: understanding their cultural values and heritage, and supporting their knowledge of traditions; embracing their past experiences; enhancing their capacity to care for and communicate with their children; and forging supportive links with other Indigenous fathers. Another study of 41 incarcerated Indigenous fathers found that only two had attended a parenting program, although most desired to do so. They identified a role for male Elders, both within and outside prison, to support younger men to become better fathers and role models for their children (Dennison et al. 2014), findings confirmed by the current study and the previous program evaluation (Beatty & Doran 2007).

Many Babiin-Miyagang participants acknowledged minimal contact with men who could nurture them as children, provide a safe family environment, or teach them about culturally-important roles and responsibilities. Embedding programs such as Babiin-Miyagang into both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities will enhance preventative interventions to help reduce risk and support the development of parenting skills. Ongoing mentoring and support to develop culturally-appropriate parenting attitudes and skills are also essential to break the cycle of incarceration.

## **Limitations**

This paper draws on incarcerated Indigenous men's accounts of their experience of one parenting program. We interviewed most fathers shortly after they completed Babiin-

Miyagang, potentially affecting how strongly they responded and recalled its content. The sample size is relatively small (28 participants of the 114 who commenced the program during 2014) and self-selected. Three had not attended all sessions. Their responses may not be generalisable to other participants or to Indigenous men without access to Babiin-Miyagang (operating in only one Australian state). Further, we were unable to contact participants for follow-up to ascertain whether their new knowledge was sustained over time, or its impact after release.

## **Conclusions**

The findings contribute new knowledge about support for incarcerated Australian Indigenous men as parents in the context of a scarcity of parenting programs – especially programs targeted to the rising numbers of Indigenous men in custody. Overall the men interviewed found the education and support from Babiin-Miyagang offered a novel learning experience, and developed new understandings of what fatherhood meant for themselves, their children and communities. Elements of the program and the framework of generative fathering may provide valuable guidance for organisations developing support for incarcerated fathers in general and Indigenous fathers in particular.

The study highlights the importance of providing opportunities for incarcerated men to reflect on and explore both their culture and their fathering to connect meaningfully with their children, within the socio-cultural context of family and community. Unlike parenting programs focused predominantly on child development and strengthening the parent-child dyad, Babiin-Miyagang locates fatherhood in the specific context of Indigenous culture. It supports participants to examine themselves with a deep understanding of the role of fathers and men in Aboriginal communities, both traditionally and in contemporary Australian society. The program acknowledges the adverse impact of colonisation and a history of removing and institutionalising Indigenous people on men and their relationships with their children (Ball 2009).

Babiin-Miyagang supports fathers not only to develop their own parenting knowledge and skills, but also offers the opportunity to reflect on their roles as men and as members of Indigenous communities. The findings emphasise the importance of examining parenting support from more than the individuals' standpoint and looking forward to the next generation.

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Table 1: Babiin-Miyagang participants and fathers in custody in NSW

	<b>Sample (N=28)</b>	<b>Fathers in custody<sup>1</sup> (N=4061)</b>
Mean age (range)	31.6 (21 – 50)	34.8 (16 – 72)
Indigenous	92.9%	28.7%
Finished Year 10 school	53.6%	55.6%
Post-school qualification	28.6%	44.0%
Mean age left family home (range)	14.5 (10 – 20)	-
<i>Main caregiver during childhood</i>		
Both parents	32.1%	
Mother	39.3%	
Grandparent/s	14.3%	
Foster parent/s	3.6%	
Other	10.7%	
<i>Own parents incarcerated during childhood</i>		
Neither	57.1%	
Mother	7.1%	
Father	25.0%	
Both parents	10.7%	
Out-of-home care during childhood	28.6%	
Mean number of children (range)	3.0 (1 – 7)	
<i>Visits from children</i>		
None	26.7%	
Occasional	23.3%	
Regular	26.7%	

Used to have visits but no longer	23.3%	
<i>Contact at least weekly<sup>2</sup></i>		
Phone	79.2%	
Letters	45.8%	
Mean sentence length (months) (range)	58.0 (12 – 126)	42.8 (0.7 – 540)
Mean number of prior sentences (range)	6.4 (0 – 21)	5.7 (0 – 37)

1. Source: departmental data on male inmates identified as having 1+ children <18, at December 2013
2. N=24. Four fathers did not answer these questions

Figure 1: Themes and Sub-themes

