

Support for Mum When Dad Works Away
 Department for Communities
 Perth, Western Australia: Author
 Available from: <http://www.community.wa.gov.au/DFC/Resources/Parenting/>

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I was pleased to receive the invitation to review this booklet because it is a topic I am personally interested in and affected by. My partner is currently part of the FIFO workforce based on a mine site in the North West. His current work context involves a regular roster of 2 weeks on and 1 week off which allows the opportunity for greater structure and planning of family functions and events. However, in the past he has also spent much of his working life in construction in South East Asia, resulting in long irregular periods of time away from the family. Both formats present opportunities and challenges for the FIFO worker and his or her family. Throughout this review I use the term FIFO to represent any form of working away from home – the more commonly understood form of ‘fly-in-fly-out’ in the mining sector; defence force personnel; truck drivers; and others whose occupations take them away from home on a regular or irregular basis for short or extended periods.

Having positioned myself in relation to the issue of FIFO work/lifestyle, my first impressions of the booklet were conflicted. On one hand I was pleased to see some recognition by the Department of the factors relating to FIFO work choices and yet at the same time I was disappointed that this opportunity to support families and to challenge the myths surrounding FIFO was lost. In addition, the booklet reinforces many socially constructed gendered norms associated with work life and parenting roles.

The title of the booklet is “*Support for mum when dad works away*” and this was the first instance of dissonance for me in that it is not only dads who work away from their families. There is a growing percentage of mums who work away from home both in the mining sector and in the defence force and other occupations yet this section of the FIFO community is rendered invisible by this title and the content of the booklet. There is some recognition of this fact on page 2 when the text box at the top of the page argues that the booklet “...provides families with practical support *when one parent works away*” (emphasis added). This is however, the only mention that it might in fact be mum who is away from the family and the very next line reverts to the stereotypical norm by saying “...where dad works away from home” consequently the underlying assumptions on which the booklet is based reinforce the position that it is dad who is absent and mum who holds the family together during this absence. Implicitly and sometimes explicitly this booklet is aimed at the traditional stay at home mum with pre or primary school aged children.

In terms of discourse the booklet makes for an interesting piece of analysis. The images and text all contribute to the notion that mum is the caring nurturing parent while dad earns the money; mum needs support while dad manages the lifestyle without difficulty; mum needs to create the structures and systems that support the family while dad is subject to these; and that that FIFO is a lifestyle choice that requires ‘managing’. All lifestyle choices require some degree of planning and structure in order for the participants to achieve individual and collective goals associated with the lifestyle choice that is made and yet FIFO is often singled out as being significantly different and requiring the assistance of professionals to help members of the community to ‘cope’. While I acknowledge that some people and some families do not cope with the absence of one partner there is no evidence that the lifestyle per se *causes*

significant trauma to those who embrace it. Furthermore, while the booklet does not explicitly refer to the mining sector there is an implicit assumption that it is mine workers to whom the text speaks and therefore the diversity of modes of working away is neglected. Many of the suggestions contained in the booklet are aimed at those workers who have a regular roster of home and away time. For example, encouraging children to count down the days until dad (sic) comes home. Consequently, those workers who have irregular periods of time away from home are not catered for because these suggestions are rendered meaningless due to the nature of their employment. It would be difficult for example, for defence force personnel to use this particular strategy because although the parent might be *scheduled* to return home on a particular date, national or international imperatives might cause a change of plans at a moment's notice. Similarly, those who travel for business reasons might have to respond to a crisis in another part of the company and plans change instantly.

To return to the booklet...it purports to offer *practical tips* and includes a few short quotes from FIFO families derived from a research project conducted by the Centre for Social Research at Murdoch University (2006). To some degree it succeeds in this by suggesting strategies such as 'accepting support from family and friends', 'counting down the days with children until dad (sic) returns', 'self care', and 'journaling' to record emotions and other responses in order to understand fluctuations. These are excellent ideas not only for FIFO families but for everyone. What I found missing from the booklet though was the actual advice on *how* to create the structures it was suggesting. For example, families are encouraged to plan their lifestyle by "...pictur[ing] what it will look like" (p.8) but if families have no experience of separation or of managing the reconnection then it is very difficult to 'picture' what the issues might be. Having more detailed quotes from the previous research and a range of different and *explicit* strategies and responses would provide a

starting point for families that might allow them to imagine the opportunities and challenges that they might experience.

In essence I found the booklet somewhat superficial but I realise that this could be a function of my experience with FIFO – perhaps as a new member of the FIFO community I would not recognise the gaps and omissions in this resource quite so readily. I also feel that the list of resources provided at the end of the booklet implies a negative response to the FIFO experience because they are all 'counselling style' support services (Relationships Australia, beyondblue, Kinway Red Cross etc). Therefore the assumption is that it is only this type of resource that is required by families involved in FIFO. The following page offers 'parenting support' resources which is excellent but again it reinforces the negative connotations of FIFO as well as the gendered parenting roles because it is accompanied by an image of a mum and young child; all families could benefit at various times from access support and advice on parenting and it is mums *and* dads who parent.

The booklet also includes a number of suggestions for sporting activities for children but these is limited to the boy/girl scouts and boys/girls brigade and the Department of Sport and Recreation. There is no mention of Community centres or the local Police and Citizens Club or other various activities that might be accessed through local government offices or libraries.

Perhaps one of my greatest criticisms though is that the only genuine mention that dads have in the booklet is towards the end (page 10), in fact it is a column included to one side of the first resource page and is titled '*Tips to keep dad connected while he is away*' with suggestions such as providing children with work related toys such as trucks ships and helicopters; communication via phone and e-mail; and planning fun activities from when dad returns. Not only do these suggestions fail to capture the breadth of occupations or roles they fail to recognise that dad might also struggle

with the separation from family and be challenged by how to reconnect on his return; and again it reinforces that it is only dad who works away!

What might have been more beneficial and what I would have liked the booklet to provide is advice for parents on how to connect with other FIFO parents, how to form a playgroup with other FIFO mums and dads, support strategies for families with older children, mechanisms for teen and pre-teen children to connect with peers, suggestions for the absent parent on how to reconnect with the family and opportunities to share the success stories and the positives aspects of FIFO instead of focussing on the challenges that this lifestyle can present. Perhaps the Department for Communities intends to develop these additional resources at some later date.....or perhaps it will be left to others to fill this void and to address the myths and stereotypes that are so entrenched in relation to FIFO.