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31 August 2015

Stayin' on Track: New website helps young Aboriginal men transition to fatherhood

"I would never have thought that I would've been a dad. But now that I am a dad, it's the only thing that I want to do."

It is statements like this from young Aboriginal fathers that are so compelling to viewers of the Stayin' on Track video clips; the upfront nature and authenticity of the stories told by these young dads is extremely powerful.

Stayin' on Track is a program designed to help transition young Aboriginal men to fatherhood through a user-developed website, providing advice and links to services. The website speaks to young Indigenous men from around Australia with 'warts-and-all' accounts of life before and after the big day, and provides links to parenting information and support around father-child relationships, relationships with their children's mothers, as well as self-care.

"The men on the screen look to be, and are, just blokes from the community. They go to work, play football, drink, smoke (some of them) and joke around; and they all have babies that they care deeply about," said lead researcher Dr Richard Fletcher, from The University of Newcastle.

A joint venture between the University of Newcastle and the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre (CRC), the project engaged the young Indigenous men as co-creators of the website, to ensure that it meets the needs of other young fathers-to-be.

Dr Fletcher explained that the issues young Aboriginal men face in becoming fathers are well known, including substance abuse and relationship breakdown: "We also know it can be difficult for them to access resources, but we know they use mobile phones, so this use of technology takes the support to the new dads."

Young and Well CRC CEO, Associate Professor Jane Burns, praised the project for working with young Indigenous dads, and the community, to use technology to access support in an engaging and culturally appropriate way.

"These personal, inspiring videos are important in building a peer-to-peer network and provide a catalyst for sharing stories to support each other. Having these supportive, encouraging real-life stories delivered right into the hand of the participants' peers via their mobile phones will have true impact."

The clips, titled simply 'Before the Birth', 'After the Birth' and 'The Big Day', were shot with dads from Newcastle, Tamworth and Moree. Each dad was filmed individually with a respected Aboriginal mentor asking questions. With no prompting and nobody to impress, the men spoke of uncertainty – "I didn't know what I was doing" – being scared of the unknown, and the responsibility of a being a father to their own baby.

A follow-on 'Mood Tracker' project will send dads SMS texts over six weeks with information and tips on infant care, supporting your partner and taking care of yourself. The texts are sent every day and once a week a Mood Tracker message asks "How are you doing?" with five possible answers. If the dad clicks one of the 'I'm OK' level responses he gets an encouraging text back. If not, the system alerts one of the mentors and he gets a call.

This pilot research will be the first time that Aboriginal men have had their mood 'tracked'. The results from the Stayin' on Track website and Mood Tracker will help to inform how these dads can be linked into services through something that they all carry – a mobile phone.

www.stayinontrack.com

This project is part of our young men's research agenda, supported by beyondblue and Movember.

– ENDS –

About the Young and Well CRC // youngandwellcrc.org.au

The Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre is an Australian-based, international research centre that unites young people with researchers, practitioners, innovators and policy-makers from over 70 partner organisations. Together, we explore the role of technology in young people's lives, and how it can be used to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 12 to 25. The Young and Well CRC is established under the Australian Government's Cooperative Research Centres Programme.

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