

What makes generative fathering work?

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The generative stage, developed by Erik Erikson (1982) as part of his eight life stages of development, is when people focus on the greater impact they have on their immediate world (family, work, community) and their key relationships (FaHSCIA 2009). The generative approach is still relevant today and especially relevant when working with men. Generativity involves the capacity to care for the next generation and demands the ability to give something of you to another person. It includes community building and is historically reflected in the strong support that people give to Service Clubs, Lifeline, SES and the Rural Fire Service. Generativity can involve societal expressions where people instruct apprentices, act as a guide, mentor or coach kids, young people or adults.

Research indicates that between 30 to 45 years, our need for achievement decreases and our need for influence or impact on some community increases (Vaillant 2002). Besides being applied to human development for men, women and fathering, generativity has had a significant contribution to understanding aging. The Harvard Study of Adult Development reviewed societal trends in the last 50 years and concluded that generativity is the best indicator for healthy aging. The study concluded that “the old were put on the earth to nurture the young” (Vaillant 2002:115). However this learning is not about just giving to others but is found also in the receiving. In a matched study, Pagano et al (2004) identified that similar generative impacts existed in research about recovery from alcohol addiction using the Alcoholics Anonymous approach. Their research indicated that people thrived most when they invested something of themselves into helping someone else (being a sponsor) independent of how many AA meetings were attended. Generativity is powered by the motivation to “invest one’s substance in forms of life and work that will outlive the self” (Vaillant 2002:115).

Generativity uses the concept of forces where ego strengths are developed through life in response to challenges experienced. The development of strengths (hopes and dreams) and tensions (fears and anxieties) complement other strength based and resilience approaches that are used today in community services/health practice.

When working with men, motivation to change is best mobilised when the focus is **not primarily** on inner self reflections but on generative reflections.

Generativity is 'caring for something outside of yourself' or involves taking care of the next generation. Generativity is best understood as a response to perceived vulnerability. While children are often the strongest expression of generativity in people's lives, it has other expressions throughout a lifetime. Some of these connections are:

- children
- partner (however this is often minimised when partners are viewed as being more powerful)
- service clubs - Service Clubs, Lifeline, SES and the Rural Fire Service
- sport – if your involvement provides rewards beyond the immediate reward of competition and exercise
- employment context (if you identify the importance of making a difference in your job)
- gardening
- mates (other people they identify with in a similar situation)
- other key relationships (particularly where vulnerability may exist) i.e. a sibling with a disability
- wider community interests
- dogs/animals/pets.

To use generative connections in people's lives, focus on increasing the insight and response people have to the perceived vulnerability of something else. This response may be:

- Negative- The vulnerability in others is rejected and actively minimized or abused
- Neutral – the vulnerability has little impact or interest and often ignored
- Positive – The vulnerability is recognized as a concern, some response is desired and people may need assistance in sorting through the most appropriate action they may take.

The following story outlines how one father put generativity into practice:

David (not his real name) is a father who has not had much meaningful contact with his two sons throughout their 12 years of life. Having experienced a great deal of trauma in his younger years, he has a limited ability to socialize or play with his children. His great desire is to be a better father than his father was to him. He finds this difficult as he has survived intense violence all his life and has resorted to violence many times to deal with any conflict in his adult years. During his participation in the group David was enduring an ongoing Court drama with the Department of Community Services, in order to have a meaningful role in the life of his children. The children were being removed from their mother and he was struggling to put

a case forward to become their full-time carer. David desperately wanted their life to be better than his own.

One of the educational sessions covered a concept outlining the limitations of what we can control, as compared to what we can influence, and letting go of what is outside our control and influence.

David left the group that night enthusiastic about how he could use this idea at his next Court date. The following week, he returned to the group a very different man: wearing cleaner clothes, holding his body more erect, taking more pride in his appearance and being much happier. He told the group the story of attending the Court the preceding week. The mother of his children had attempted to engage him in a conflict in the Court grounds by being verbally abusive and aggressive and he had refused to engage with her. He had acknowledged to himself that he could not control her, or what she was saying, so he had walked away. This was an achievement. When Court was sitting, the mother again attempted to engage him in conflict by staring and mouthing swear words at him. He continued to ignore her. When the Court proceedings were not going his way and inaccurate information about him was being put forward, he did not react as he had in the past - trying to use threats and loud language to control the Court. Rather, he decided to let it go (as best he could) as he could not control it and instead attempted to influence the Court by his 'good' behaviour.

Although quite proud of himself for the change in his behaviour in a very stressful situation, the best for David was yet to come. The case was adjourned. Before he left the Court, David approached the Solicitor acting for his children and said, "I know you do not like me and that is OK". He then added, "I've been watching and listening to you and you seem like a good person who has the best interests of my sons at heart. I just want to let you know I appreciate what you are trying to do for my boys". The solicitor, in a spontaneous gesture, offered David the opportunity to spend a short time with his eldest son. Not having seen his son in over four weekends, David accepted enthusiastically. He spent 20 minutes with his boy which he otherwise would not have had. David was ecstatic at this good fortune. This generous gesture by the solicitor continues to have a positive impact on David's life as he has experienced the rewards of learning new ways of dealing with conflict.

The generative framework and men

The generative approach is relevant for men, women and young people. However it is valuable for understanding male behaviour as they tend to define their experience in life by a narrower set of roles. These roles often involve having an impact on the world around them through work, sport, their family or friends. The framework is easily applied to fathering (Fleming 2002; King 2000, 2001, 2005; King, Sweeney & Fletcher 2004).

Erik Erikson (1975) considered parenthood to be the primary developmental task of adulthood that includes both the moral obligation to attend to the needs of the next generation and the recognition that caring for children is central to personal and societal well being. The non-deficit perspective, an approach to understanding and working with fathers (King 2000, 2001, 2005; King, Sweeney & Fletcher 2004), suggests that most fathers are interested in family life and that their engagement with support services is influenced by a variety of relationship challenges. These challenges can impact in a phenomenon called 'generative chill' that is discussed in other articles (King 2001). The main concepts in the generative framework are based on two core ideas. The first is that the human context creates needs in the next generation that fathers have an ethical responsibility to meet, and the second is that fathers and their children both benefit and develop from this process of interaction" (Fleming 2007:16). Generative fathering involves the next generation and also recognises that it is beneficial both to the child and the father (biological or social fathers).

The generative framework involves caring for or influencing someone external to you or supporting the development of the next generation. Hawkins and Dollahite believe that practicing generativity is central to men's own sense of self esteem and growth (Fleming, 2007).

Connection to child focused approach

The generative approach mirrors the framework and skills when using a child focused approach in working with family separation. Child focused practice occurs when professionals actively give the child a voice by helping the parent(s) to develop their understanding and awareness of their child's needs to encourage the parent(s) to keep this as a focus. McIntosh (2007) outlines a model of child-focused practice to:

- create an environment that supports disputing parents in actively considering the unique needs of each of their children
- facilitate a parenting agreement that preserves significant relationships and supports children's psychological adjustment to the separation, including recovery from parental acrimony and protection from further conflict
- support parents to leave the dispute resolution forum on higher rather than diminished ground with respect to their post-separation parenting
- ensure that the ongoing mediation/litigation process and the agreements or decisions reached reflect the basic psycho-developmental needs of each child, to the extent that they can be known without the involvement of the children.

Generative questions checklist for working with fathers

Practitioners who use the generative perspective are likely to be better at engaging men, reduce their suspicion about community welfare/health organisations and increase their helping seeking behaviour and motivation. The following table outlines a useful set of questions that maximise the power of generativity.

Questions are very powerful tool but they are a guide that should not be religiously followed.

<p>Build a relevant connection</p>	<p>Find out the man's preferred name and introduce yourself. Find out how many children they have, their age and special interests of the children. Build a connection around how your work context is relevant to him and the context of their children (remember they are not likely to express a need for support, help etc).</p>
<p>Focus on active choices they make in their life to influence key relationships.</p>	<p>Assume (and discuss with the men how they show it in their responses) that they have the desire and the ability to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commit - The physical and ongoing support that a father provides and his awareness and involvement with the child throughout their lifetime. • Choose - The capacity to make day to day decisions for the children that meet the child's needs. • Care - the ability to attend to the important transitions in a child's life and provide the optimal conditions that maximise their growth. • Change - the ability to adapt as children grow older and the father matures in his relationship with the children. • Create - the creation of resources for material comfort and the resolution of problems that allow opportunities for the development of emotional well being. • Connect - the ability to form lasting and healthy attachments with their children. These attachments will change over time to meet the child's evolving needs. • Communicate - the capacity to relate with children by sharing meaningfully with them, both verbally and non-verbally.
<p>Build greater depth into the exploration of these choices. Acknowledge tensions around positive expressions or challenges where they may be over or under used.</p>	<p>Discover the men's way of expressing his connection with their children (using the above abilities). Explore opposites or tensions – what helps/ blocks and what is valuable or a distraction to achieving the above? Normalise experiences they have and validate the strengths men bring to parenting. Amplify the significance of positive choices they make in their child's life. Discuss what the role of fathering means today? What parts of the role are important to them?</p>

<p>Build depth by reflections on the choices and consequences that occur in specific stories and experiences.</p>	<p>If appropriate ask the following questions (Brotherson, Dollahite & Hawkins 2005):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I would like to find out about some of your experiences with Sam and what those experiences mean to you. • Can you tell me about the most enjoyable experience you ever had with Sam? What meaning does that experience have for you now? • Can you tell me about an experience when you felt especially close emotionally to Sam? What meaning does that experience have for you now? • Can you tell me about an experience when you cared for and nurtured Sam? What did you learn about nurturing children from that experience? • Can you tell me about an experience when you felt especially distant emotionally from Sam when he/she needed you to be there for him/her? What meaning does that experience have for you now? • What was the most painful experience you ever had with Sam? What meaning does that experience have for you now? • Are there any particular things that help you to be the kind of father to Sam that he/she needs you to be? • Are there any particular things that prevent you from being the kind of father to Sam that he/she needs you to be? • Can you tell me about any important sacrifices you have made in your life that demonstrate how much you care about Sam?
<p>Discuss, if required, 'when do actions cross the line'. These decisions in men's lives are often not discussed with other people.</p>	<p>If relevant the following questions...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who or how do you protect others in your life? • Who do you keep safe? • What happens when the protection of others is misused? • What is the difference between keeping someone safe and controlling them? • When does protecting someone become abusive? • How do you keep yourself safe?

Generative questioning has a powerful impact working with men and women. However a central role for men are often defined by active generative responses such as involvement in sporting groups, community service, the workplace or connection with their children. These questions build on the impact of the generative role such as the story below:

Ahab (not his real name) has a significant criminal background and has had significant involvement with the criminal system and Probation and Parole (P&P). He has had a poor response to P&P supervision, with many Orders resulting in breach action. His current offence is DV related. When the client

was transferred to another P&P Officer, they were having a very busy and frustrating day. Despite the file being three lever arch files thick, she had only enough time to read through the recent material. She noticed that he was a dad of two children and the only positive comments from other P&P officers several comments on case notes that indicated he was a 'good dad'. Ahab was a large man with tattoos all over his arms. When the interview commenced that morning, the P&P Officer commenced with her usual welcome and introduction.

*Ahab's first words were 'well I ain't f***** happy to be here'. His body was so tense it was shaking. The P&P Officer simply gathered all his files up and indicated that she did not have the time for games and should he choose, he can leave now. His breach matter would come up in court in a few weeks time. Just before she left the room she turned and said to him "it was a shame to put so much at risk - given his history he could well be looking at doing time again". She stated "it would be a shame, because what I have read indicated he is a great dad, and he was risking important special times with his children". His whole demeanour changed instantly - she could physically see it - his face, body and hands. His tone softened. They started the interview all over, with much better results. It was the first time this client had seriously addressed the Orders and went on to complete most of them.*

Our child's development exercise and connection exercise

Context:

This exercise is excellent for connecting parents to their child's significant developmental milestones and how close they felt in that relationship. The exercise identifies two important things about child development:

1. Different ages when significant events occur
2. Emotional closeness to children varies due to significant events.

When to use:

This exercise is valuable for mothers, fathers or other care givers to complete. It is useful when parents have periodic contact with their children (i.e. they are separated or their children are in care).

Conducting the exercise:

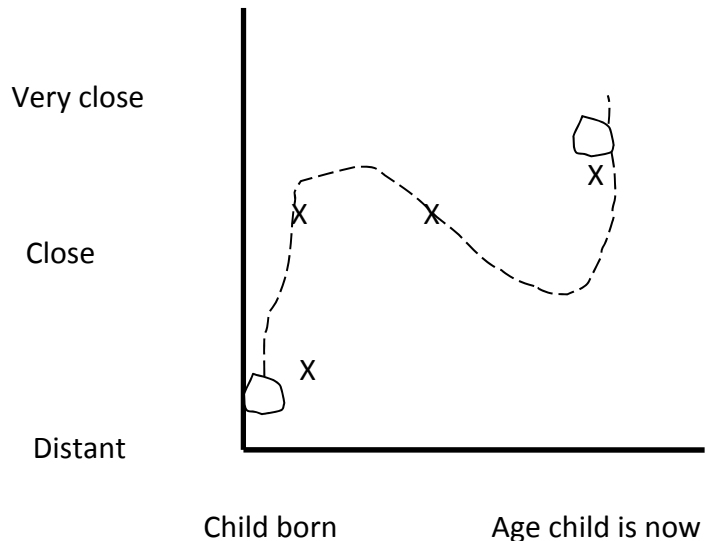
Ask each participant to choose one of their children and write their **child's name** in the top right hand corner. This exercise can be done without participants needing to write words but by using symbols instead. **Explain** that the horizontal line represents the child's age. On the right hand side of the page, the child's **current age** is written on the dotted line. Have everyone mark **the horizontal** age line in five different places representing **5 important events** in that child's life which they remember. **Explain** that the vertical line represents how close or far away the father feels to that child at the five significant ages that they have marked.

Everyone circles on their sheet:

- The age where the child changed the most physically
- The age where the child showed their greatest independence
- The age where that child was the hardest to get on with

Participants are asked to discuss their sheet and what they learnt from this exercise. If in a group, other people may also comment on the patterns they see.

An example of a completed sheet



Extension questions:

1. What did your child need most from you over this time?
2. How did you handle the periods of closeness and distance between you and your child?
3. Who did you learn this life skill from? What did they teach you?
4. How did you respond to your child's developmental changes (need for independence and emotional difficulties)?

Conclusion

Practitioners need to use a variety of theoretical approaches to understand child protection issues due to the complexity and variation of issues experienced. A key theory for understanding the motivations, actions and responses used by many men is best captured by the generative perspective. Reviewing men's behaviour through generative care and not the other common traditional roles such as being a breadwinner, a companion, a moral guide, a protector, a disciplinarian and a co-parent, provides a strengths-based and child focussed approach to working with men.

The generative perspective supports the definition of 'social fathering' as a key point for engaging and working alongside a wider range of men in the child's life. Adopting a social view of fathering is important not only because the term is inclusive, but

because its use implies recognition of the diversity of roles men as fathers play in the lives of children in contemporary families today (Sullivan & Howard 2000). The more men are responsive to their child's needs, the more they will be involved in social expressions of generative care within their local community. This paper has attempted through the linking of some current local research with practice to address the complex issue of working with men as fathers.

Since contemporary fathering specifically is increasingly diverse and more complex than it was three decades ago, family based and community services would benefit greatly by focussing on father presence and its benefit. In particular, there is a further need for practice-based research into successful interventions with fathers such as the one described in this paper, in particular men who have perpetrated family violence and are still involved with their family. Until such time, the idea that it is 'cool to be a dad' (Brown et al 2009) will remain missing from our thinking and practice in family based services.

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