

Engaging Fathers in Family Based Programs

For more information about generativity and ways to use it in practice, join the Working with men and generativity learning group visit www.groupworksolutions.com.au

Working with fathers

Situation

Write down a situation that has/ could occur in your work that involves working with fathers that is not necessarily the worst or easiest to deal with. **Do not include** how you dealt with the context.

- What is the father's hypothetical name?
- Who else (other key family members) are involved?
- What are the key background issues?
- What has just happened?

Checklist for organisations working with men

Environment	Not often	Sometimes	Regularly
How often does your centre...?			
Display posters that depict positive male images			
Have easy accessibility for car parking and public transport			
Have special events or groups that are held outdoors (i.e. parks, BBQ's)			
Has male friendly reading material (male friendly reading material and brochures promoting positive messages for men)			
Have male staff or other male clients, who could be noticed by other men entering your centre for the first time			
Display photos of centre activities (with men and children) in the centre?			
How often does your organisation...?			
Provide services and have events/groups outside normal working hours (After 5.00pm and on weekends)			
Actively support staff to work with male clients?			
Review policies that specifically identify positive ways of working with and better target male clients			
Review and change policies that identify when men are excluded from receiving services from your organisation			
Employ male workers to work directly with male clients			

	Not often	Sometimes	Regularly
Language			
Provide discussion of important issues			
Use clear and simple language rather than jargon			
Talk about issues honestly even when the client is emotional			
Link family issues with a child focused approach			
Challenge inappropriate language and behaviour without immediately withdrawing your service.			
Use <i>respectful language</i> such as 'mother of the child' rather than 'ex' when describing the mother			
Avoid stereotypes and generalisations that all men are violent or perpetrators of domestic violence or child abuse			
Affirm the role fathers play with their children and families			
Use open body language ...e.g. Shake hands (positive body contact, non-threatening and validating) Pre-COVID -19			
Use intermittent eye contact especially when the client has a high degree of anxiety or emotion			
Aware of male 'personal space' which may be different depending on the gender of the worker.			

	Not often	Sometimes	Regularly
Use non-deficit language in fliers and other promotional material Non-deficit language reinforces the ideas that men can commit, choose, capacity to relate with children, capacity to make day to day decisions, care, change, create, connect, communicate, and have the ability to form lasting and healthy attachments with their children/partner.			
Initial Contact and Marketing			
How often does your program....?			
Identify clear purposes for having barbeques, meetings, counselling sessions, gatherings and groups in your advertising			
Use 'doing' language and 'active' words in your promotion			
Have clients recommending your program to other men			
Use the local media to promote your program			
Give clients choices about available services with clear explanations about their options at point of intake			
Use appropriate informality at the beginning of meetings/groups/gatherings especially at initial contact			

Service provision			
How often does your program...?			
Have a clear context, guidelines, focus, and aim for your program			
Encourage interaction and connections between participants in group settings			
Separate behaviour and the person when dealing with male clients			
Allow clients to influence the group program content			
Have review points and clear ending points for clients involved in your service			
Present a variety of choices when working with men			
Model non-competitiveness and celebrate small successes, fairness, equity, cooperation, and equity			
Have clear rules and expectations that are relevant to client needs			
Talk with clients about challenging tasks they need to do and provide men with coaching about how they can be completed			
Recognise that male clients have something valuable to contribute			
Use appropriate techniques to reduce the suspicion and concerns that male clients sometimes have when they attend a program.			
Actively request feedback from male clients and members of the community about how approachable your service is.			

Sub-total of Points			
	Multiply by 1	Multiply by 2	Multiply by 3
New Total for Column, then add the columns together.			
Final Total i.e. Column 1+2+3 =			

Final Total	i.e. Column 1+2+3 =	
--------------------	----------------------------	--

Scoring

Calculate your final score using the above method

Final Score between...	Suggested response
40 - 65	Significant work needs to be done to improve the organisational support and range of service provision that attracts and retains men in your service.
66 - 80	Your organisation could spend more time in addressing key issues and policies that can allow for the further development and support of staff who work with men in your agency. It may be useful to consult with your existing staff about ways that your organisation can improve its services to men.
81 - 100	A good score that indicates your organisation has been working actively in becoming 'male friendly'. It might be useful to spend more time getting feedback from your current male clients and to improve your service delivery to men.
101 - 120	An excellent score that demonstrates that your agency is continually learning and developing its service provision that targets men in families.

Exercises for working with men

Control, influence and letting go circle

Context: This is an excellent exercise to use to review a situation and accept what we can control, influence, and need to let go of.

The small area is what can be controlled in life. It is in fact a limited area. Anyone can only control what they wear, where they go, who they spend time with and their own behaviour.

People do not have the right to control others!

In the larger circle is the area of influence. It is larger than the 'area of control' yet it is still limited. Conflict in life is increased when people try to control what they can only influence or attempt to influence what is outside their control or influence.

When attempting to control a situation or a person who is outside their influence and control, people have no choice but to use power. A person must force others to do what they want. This force is violence.

Mahatma Gandhi's definition of violence is as follows: Violence is any attempt to impose my will on another.

This misguided attempted to control issues in our lives often occurs in family separation when separated fathers are in conflict with the mother of their children. Unless the children are in actual or potential danger, each parent has the right to attempt persuasion and to influence the other parent and no right to try to force their view of 'how things should be' on the other. If it is not going the way you want, learn how to 'let it go'.

Outside of the larger ovoid shape write 'outside our area of influence and control'. There are now three distinct areas:

- Our Area of Control
- Our Area of Influence
- Outside our Control and Influence

It is of paramount importance for the wellbeing of relationships and oneself that people clearly differentiate between these three areas. Conflict results when one party attempts to control what is outside their control or influence.

To attempt to control a situation or someone that is outside someone's control and influence they must use some type of force or power i.e.

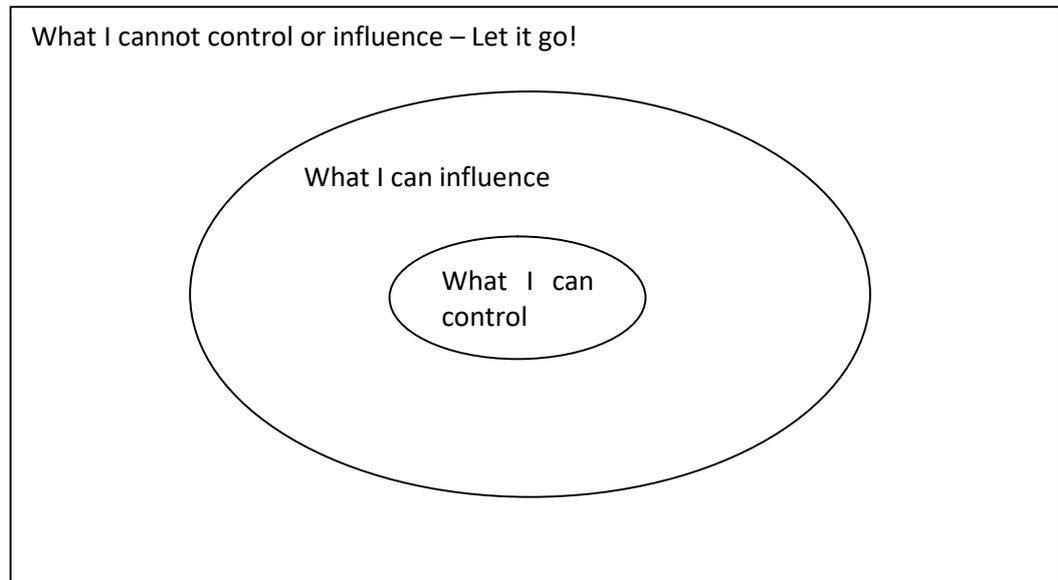
- Physical force – violence or the threat of
- Intimidation - creating fear
- Humiliation
- Threats to do something or withdraw love and attention
- Force of will

The more power/force used the greater the conflict and feelings of mistrust.

Although challenging, people must learn to let go what is outside of the areas of control and influence. A simple thing to say, yet it is very challenging to let go.

When to use: This exercise is used when practitioners work with men to improve cooperative ways to respond to situations. Men often overestimate the amount they can control situations and issues.

Conducting the exercise: Ask the man to think about an issue or concern. Draw two circles using the same centre - a smallish circle in the centre with a larger circle on the outside. There should be a wide space left on the outside of the circles before the edge of the paper.



Together, discuss and write down the things they can control in the situation (the answers should only refer to themselves - their feelings, actions, thoughts etc). Then, thinking of the same situation, write down all the things they can influence, but cannot control. In the outside area write down all the things they cannot control or influence. They need to let go of these things as they cannot have an impact on them.

The skill involved with letting go does not mean forgetting or ignoring. Some letting go techniques are:

- Focus on your control your breathing
- Acknowledge feelings but not treat them as a fact
- Acknowledge the important values and goals decided upon previously
- Hold on and remember significant connections in your life.

With the individual, or in the large group, discuss what is learnt.

Extension questions:

1. What situations in life do you misjudge the balance of control/ influence and letting go?
2. How do you let go of issues you feel strongly about?

Crossing the line

Context: The roles of being a 'protector' and 'provider' have a traditional impact on many men. Most men value some expression of these roles, but rarely discuss how they make decisions about appropriate responses. These roles are equally shared with women. It is the assumptions in these situations that encourage inappropriate choices and incubate abusive actions. The most important wisdom in life affirms that the decision to keep others safe needs to be negotiated with and agreed to by all parties, otherwise the protection starts crossing the line of control because it reflects only the man's insights and needs.

When to use: This exercise is used when working with men to deepen their understanding about the decision to protect others (or be caring towards) and when this becomes abusive or controlling. The worker's own self-reflection is valuable for modelling insight and providing wider perspectives.

Conducting the exercise

Paper version

On a sheet of A4 of paper, draw a line across the page and mark three positions. Write the word 'caring' in the left-hand position. Discuss what this word means in their situation. Then write 'controlling' in the middle and discuss what this word means in their situation. Then write 'abusive' at the other end and discuss what this word means in their situation. Give examples of what each position looks like as a behaviour.

Movement version

Alternatively, doing a physical version of this exercise whilst standing can be useful for some clients. Ask the client to stand up after you have discussed a situation they faced in their family. Using a continuum, highlight three different positions – being protective; being controlling; being abusive. Give examples of what each position looks like as a behaviour.

Points to highlight:

- Being caring, supportive, protective – these actions can be useful and honourable, but they ***need to be negotiated and not assumed.***
- Being controlled – less useful in relationships; not necessarily against the law, but viewed as unhealthy and an indicator of many other problems.
- Being abusive – an act of violence; against the law and very problematic.

Discuss what protecting others means. How they keep others safe and when it crosses the line to being abusive. Ask these questions:

- Who do you protect or keep safe in your life?
- How do you protect or keep others safe in your life?
- 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?

Applying the generative perspective to different groups of men (King, and Fletcher, 2009)

General fathers

- 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).
- Assume (and discuss with the men how they show it in their responses) that they have the desire and the ability to:
 - 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 wellbeing.
 - 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.
- 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?
- Build the metaphor of walking alongside them in the work you do. Find out how this may be helpful to them (use perceived equality) for guidance.
- If appropriate ask the following questions:
- I would like to find out about some of your experiences with Sam and what those experiences mean to you:
 1. Can you tell me about the most enjoyable experience you ever had with Sam? What meaning does that experience have for you now?
 2. Can you tell me about an experience when you felt especially close emotionally to Sam? What meaning does that experience have for you now?
 3. Can you tell me about an experience when you cared for and nurtured Sam? What did you learn about nurturing children from that experience?

4. 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?
 5. What was the most painful experience you ever had with Sam? What meaning does that experience have for you now?
 6. Are there any things that help you to be the kind of father to Sam that he/she needs you to be?
 7. Are there any things that prevent you from being the kind of father to Sam that he/she needs you to be?
 8. Can you tell me about any important sacrifices you have made in your life that demonstrate how much you care about Sam?
- If relevant the following questions...
 1. Who or how do you protect others in your life?
 2. Who do you keep safe?
 3. What happens when the protection of others is misused?
 4. What is the difference between keeping someone safe and controlling them?
 5. When does protecting someone become abusive?
 6. How do you keep yourself safe?

Separated fathers

- Find out the man's preferred name and introduce yourself.
- Find out how many children they have, their ages, when they were separated, what orders are in place and when they last had contact their children.
- Build a child focused connection as central to your relationship with the men.
- Build on language that values respect, '**being a reasonable man**', '**maintaining integrity**', providing what your children need (emphasising safety, security, connection etc). Until proven otherwise, believe that the men have a shared interest in these values.
- Acknowledge and normalise feelings if they see themselves **being treated unfairly** as a father and reaffirm the importance of how **fathers** are seen today.
- Build a strong metaphor of walking **with** them in the work you do. Find out how this may be helpful to them (use perceived equality) for guidance.
- Explore what they can control in their situation, what they can influence and what they cannot control or influence. Relate to specific examples in their life.
- Affirm the importance of **showing respect for the mother of the children**, regardless of what has happened, because the children **love her and will benefit from seeing this from their father**. This is central **to** the father respect **they seek to have** attributed to them.
- Explore the importance of timing – not being too impatient and also appreciating the **positive aspects** of what may already exist in **times spent** with their children.
- Support them to tune into the feelings and needs of their children and what is required **to help** make their life safe, nurturing and valuing.

- Encourage them to keep a diary and live the values that are important to them and his children. If his friends have children, encourage him to maintain some interest and understand how quickly children develop and change.
- Fathers who have rebuilt engagement with their children have identified a number of useful steps:
 1. Maintain a journal over several months **to monitor progress**
 2. Obtain current information about the child/ren
 3. Write a list of positive strengths about themselves **that are core to personal values**
 4. Identify a professional support person or mentor
 5. Access to a mediation service through a Family Relationship Centre
 6. Write a list of the key lessons they have learnt through their life
 7. Prepare for reconnecting with their children slowly, without having firm expectations of what will occur. Remembering that they must be openly responsive and supportive to the children no matter what reaction they may have.
 8. Show positive regard for the child's mother. It's not good enough to not mention her to the children.

Homeless men

- Find out the man's preferred name and introduce yourself.
- Value the importance of the little choices they have in life i.e. where they sleep at night, who they trust.
- Find out who they trust and are close to on the streets, at your centre and in their wider life. Safely discuss important relationships that have had or still are central in their life.
- Identify what they have learnt and continue to learn in those relationships.
- Build the metaphor of walking alongside them in the work you do. Find out how this may be helpful to them (use perceived equality) for guidance.
- How many children do they have, their ages, what orders are in place and when they last had contact their children.
- What would they like to change about those relationships?
- Discuss what roles they identify they play amongst the people they hang-out with. What roles are important to them? If applicable discuss:
 1. Who or how do you protect others in your life?
 2. Who do you keep safe?
 3. What happens when the protection of others is misused?
 4. What is the difference between keeping someone safe and controlling them?
 5. When does protecting someone become abusive?
 6. How do you keep yourself safe?

Young men

- Find out the man's preferred name and introduce yourself.
- Find out who they trust and are close to with immediate friends, girlfriends, at your centre and in their wider life. Safely discuss important relationships that have had or still are central in their life.

- Identify what they have learnt and continue to learn in those relationships.
- Build the metaphor of walking alongside them in the work you do. Find out how this may be helpful to them (use perceived equality) for guidance.
- How many children do they have, their ages, do they live with them? If not what orders are in place and when they last had contact with their children?
- What would they like to change about those relationships?
- Discuss what roles they identify they play amongst the people they hang-out with. What roles are important to them? If applicable discuss:
 1. Who or how do you protect others in your life?
 2. Who do you keep safe?
 3. What happens when the protection of others is misused?
 4. What is the difference between keeping someone safe and controlling them?
 5. When does protecting someone become abusive?
 6. How do you keep yourself safe?

Resources

Issue	Useful web sites or contacts
Community builders	http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au
Early Childhood issues	www.swsahs.nsw.gov.au/karitane
Training – working with men and group work	www.groupworksolutions.com.au
SNAICC Resources and projects	https://www.snaicc.org.au/product/youre-a-dad/
Men’s Group – The movie	http://www.mensgroupthemovie.com
Strong Men, Deadly Groups (Aboriginal Men’s Groups)	http://www.menshealthaustralia.net
Free Strength Cards for Men and Life Story Cards (download)	http://www.groupworksolutions.com.au/freedownloads
Renovate your Relationship Booklet – A manual for men	http://groupworksolutions.com.au/literature_96675/Renovate_your_relationship_Booklet
Strengths based resources for men, boys and everybody else as well!	www.innovativeresources.com.au
Working with men training – engagement, dealing with conflict, cooperative approaches to working with family separation	www.groupworksolutions.com.au
Men who have experienced child sexual abuse or sexual assault	www.livingwell.org.au
The Men's Bibliography: A comprehensive bibliography of writing on men, masculinities, gender, and sexualities (19th edition)	http://mensbiblio.xyonline.net
Young fathers Video – Family Planning NSW	https://youtu.be/4ky_p3O_xg