

A checklist for organisations working with men

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The landscape for supporting men in family relationships has modified significantly during the last decade. The questions have changed from asking if men are interested in accessing family relationship and parenting services to how organisations can best cater for men's needs.

The Final Report for the Evaluation of the Commonwealth Government's Men and Family Relationships Initiative (O'Brien & Rich, 2002) identified that there was a high demand by men for programs that have experience in working with men. Many community welfare, family relationship and health programs are currently reviewing how they can best deliver programs to men and are moving from deficit to non-deficit approaches for understanding male involvement in families.

The shift from deficit to non-deficit perspectives of fathering (King, 2000) emerged from the research of Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) in the United States of America. The non-deficit perspective of fathering assumes that men have the ability and interest in relationships to:

- commit - the physical and ongoing support that a father provides and involvement with the child/ren throughout their lifetime.
- choose - the capacity to make day to day decisions for the child/ren that meet the children's needs.
- care - the ability to attend to the important transitions in a child's life and work to provide the optimal conditions that maximises 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 well-being and the resolution of problems that allow opportunities for emotional well-being to develop.
- connect - the ability to form lasting and healthy attachments with the children and partner. 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 (King, 2000).

The delivery of services to men is more successful and effective when a non-deficit approach is adopted. The 'Checklist for Organisations Working with Men' developed by King, Fletcher and Sweeney (2002) was built on the experience of the establishment and operation of two fathers' centres in the western suburbs of Sydney. The Checklist provides organisations with

a tool to appraise their own context for delivering programs to men in family relationships. The assumptions embedded in the Checklist reflect the non-deficit perspective and identify:

- men as intuitive – they quickly tune into feelings of safety and comfort. They will make quick assessments about whether a program/service seems friendly, useful or judgemental and critical
- most men place a considerable importance on their relationships with their children
- men appreciate clear rules and expectations that they can rely on and trust that other people will do what they promise
- men respect and value feedback that is delivered in a non-threatening respectful manner
- men can use anger as a defense to protect themselves or others they care for or to maintain or regain control of a perceived unsafe or threatening situation

The Checklist contains four key areas that need to be addressed for the effective delivery of services for men. These areas are:

- Environment
- Language
- Initial contact and marketing
- Service provision

The remainder of this article discusses these key areas and how organisations can improve their capacity to work with men in family relationships.

Environment

When a man makes initial contact with a program, the immediate environment and openness of staff towards him will influence his level of trust. Men enter new situations with suspicion about what will be expected of them and rely on visual cues to relax. They notice if other men are visible, either entering or leaving the centre or are shown in positive images on posters. Some environmental factors that will increase engagement with men include:

- using positive images of men in posters and having suitable reading material in the waiting rooms that may interest men. This includes booklets like 'Kids Need Dads Who¹...' that provide an easy read and positive reflection on fathering. Display photographs of events that especially feature images of men and children
- employing male staff to work directly with male service users
- using premises that are easily accessible with car parking space or access to public transport. Men can tolerate a low level of frustration, so they will give up accessing a program if it seems too hard
- focusing on engaging the male service users at the initial telephone contact. Men use the telephone as the first point of contact to reach out for support. They may ring a large number of agencies to locate an organisation that will be helpful to them. This can result in confusion when professional staff return phone calls, as the male service user may not immediately remember the organisation that they had called.
- providing services outside normal working hours. Many men find it difficult to access community programs while working part time or full time. It is easier for male service users to access programs when they are offered on weekends or in the evenings.
- building on the equal sharing of power. When large power differences exist between professional workers and the service users, men are harder to engage.

¹ A small 20 page booklet called 'Kids needs dads who...?' that highlights the important role fathers play with children. It is available from UnitingCare Burnside by emailing: aking@burnside.org.au

Language

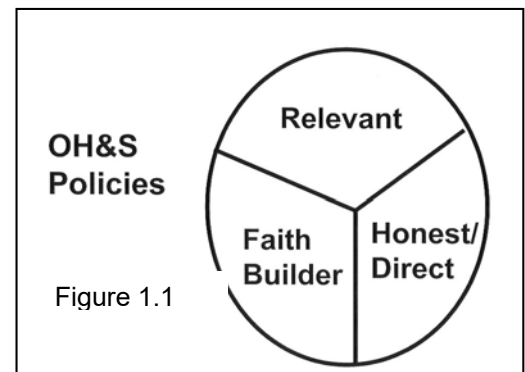
Language has a significant influence on engaging men. If the language used by the professional worker is deficit based, it will increase the male service user's level of suspicion and they are less likely to access the program. Some of the deficit based assumptions (King, 2000) view most men as:

- 'abusing' fathers
- 'emotionally challenged' fathers
- under involved in household activities
- having little interest in professional feedback about their children

When working with men, effective language involves three key components as illustrated in Figure 1. These three key components are contained in the organisational context and Occupational, Health and Safety policies and the specific context for service delivery.

The three key components for developing father-friendly language are:

- **relevance** – the discussion needs to be relevant to the service users needs
- **faith building** – the worker needs to convey the belief that the male service user has the ability to commit, choose, care, change, create, connect and communicate.
- **honest/direct** – Male service users respect people who honestly and respectfully discuss with them the important issues in their life.



For example, at UnitingCare Burnside Fathers' Support Service in Western Sydney, a large number of separated fathers regularly access the program. The use of direct and relevant language is important in creating a positive direction for dealing with family separation. The staff encourage men to refer to their 'ex-partners' as the 'mother of their children', rather than their 'ex...'. The word "ex" conjures up images of someone who is 'no longer important' or is a 'has-been'. This simple change of language is well received by the men as it reinforces a new and positive direction towards family separation, their child/ren, their previous relationship and themselves.

Some strategies that increase engagement with men include:

- remembering that body language is powerful. Develop strong and comfortable body language around male service users regardless of any height or size differences. Men quickly tune into how comfortable other people are around them and this will influence their level of respect. The simple act of shaking hands for many men can symbolise a higher level of respect and mutual connection. In different cultural groups and age brackets, a 'high five' will achieve the same effect.
- using non-deficit language to demonstrate a respect for the importance of the family relationships in men's lives
- allowing time for male service users to reflect on a discussion after you have been honest and direct with them. Men can become frustrated and will need an opportunity to ventilate their feelings and time to consider the importance of what has been said. However no form of intimidation or threat of violence or aggression is acceptable.
- being comfortable with the male approach. This is very different from the average female interaction. Men can be, for a variety of reasons, naturally more boisterous,

louder, and have a stronger presence in social situations. Generally this is not intended as threatening, yet can be perceived as such.

- Being child focused with men who are fathers. The child focused approach cuts through all other situations affecting the men's lives and helps them to redirect their focus to the child/ren, eg "How do you think that will affect your child?"

*For example, the use of creating **relevance** is clearly illustrated with a service user named ²Terry who has been attending an intensive fathers' group³. In a recent group session he gave feedback to the group on the positive effect the group has had on his life since he was released from a correctional centre. During his last time in gaol, someone recommended he join a fathers' group to make a smooth transition back into his large family. Terry reflected on what the group meant to him and concluded that it "focused on my kids, and me" and this was vital in establishing relevance.*

It is quite a challenge for any parent to move from such a highly controlled environment as a prison to the chaos of living in a family with many children. The children had not seen their father for a significant part of their lives. Terry began his involvement with the fathers' group four months prior to release and continued for over a year thereafter. He now credits the support from the group as the major factor in him staying with the family and not re-offending.

Being a **faith builder** demands perseverance and the belief that a father has the capacity to make appropriate choices. *For example, Adrian has been a member of an intensive fathers' group for over 18 months. When he commenced attending, Adrian was experiencing regular conflict at home with parent/teenager power issues. Adrian struggled to express himself in the group and would resist any encouragement to speak. After a while in the group he often became vocal about his own experience and supported men in dealing with their own issues. He was less reactive with his own teenage children and developed a stronger and more supportive relationship with his partner.*

While being **honest and direct** with men is challenging, it creates a greater respect and a focus for change. *For example, Graham is a father with two children and a partner. The Department of Community Services has informed him he has a limited time to make significant changes in his approach to parenting or run the risk of having the children taken into out of home care.*

Worker: "Graham, it is time to deal with these issues or your children will be removed. You cannot afford to continue down the path you have used over the last few months. We want to support you and we have to keep the welfare of the children as the priority. We need to work together on this. Does this make sense?"

The worker has created a direct focus for change that provides Graham with a few choices:

- *he can sit with his anger and resentment and continue not to change, with the risk that his children will be taken into care*
- *he can engage fully with the worker/program, accept feedback about his behaviour even though it is difficult. This demands a willingness to trust the worker and recognise that they have his and his children's best interest at heart.*

² All examples in this article are based on true stories with the service user's names being changed to protect confidentiality.

³ Men attend intensive father's groups for 3-18 months. The groups focus on personal and parenting, relationship and educational issues. These groups at UnitingCare Burnside usually have two leaders, involve 8-11 participants who live in low socio-economic communities and parent about 40 children.

Initial contact and marketing

Men will respond more positively when a range of different programs are offered such as telephone counselling, face-to-face counselling and group work. Some men will favour informal environments that have little structure, while others will desire a context where their concerns are specifically addressed. Other men will feel more comfortable in groups and others in face-to-face counselling. It is important for organisations to provide the widest range of contexts for working with men that are possible within their budget.

The best approach for promoting programs to men is by word of mouth recommendation. Due to the high level of initial suspicion, men often ignore fliers and newspaper advertisements unless they are experiencing and wish to address a current life crisis. When the crisis has not reached its crest, men respond best to the recommendation of a program by someone they trust. 'Gatekeepers' who have the respect of and can influence men are friends, family members, partners, colleagues, human resource workers, doctors, other professionals and 'mates'. At least seventy five percent of referrals at UnitingCare Burnside Fathers' Support Service in Sydney rely on some form of recommendation by a respected 'gatekeeper'.

When a program for men commences, it is important to initially advertise it newspapers or fliers to create interest amongst the 'gatekeepers'. Other important inclusions in written promotions is the clear identification of what will be gained by attending the program. Use 'doing' words or 'active' words and for group programs emphasise that there will be an opportunity to hear other men's ideas.

Service provision

Men appreciate a basic structure that helps to reduce their concerns about what will be expected from them. Clearly identify what the service user desires and what is expected of them when they use the program. Regularly review what is achieved and obtain feedback about the male client's opinions and reactions to their learning.

Men appreciate a context where they feel valued, and can have input into some of the decisions that affect their life. Without this level of regard men quickly identify what they need to do to 'play the game' and may use programs briefly to get what they want while holding themselves back from true involvement and commitment. When male service users need to make critical decisions, outline the available options with the belief that they can make an adequate choice.

When men are confronted by a family crisis, they are more likely to reach out for support. Separated fathers are the single largest group of men who are known for their 'help seeking' behaviour and will actively look for support from services. During these crises, a 'short window period' occurs where men are likely to accept help and support. If the crisis passes without obtaining support they may not engage again until the next crisis occurs, if at all. This is why when working with men, phone calls need to be answered or returned promptly.

Useful questions to engage separated fathers over the phone include:

- when were they separated?
- age and gender of the children?
- with whom do the children live?
- the locations where the father and mother live since the separation?
- current arrangements regarding contact?
- are there any court orders or Apprehended Violence Orders?

These questions allow the worker to understand what the service user needs and how they can respond. If the worker starts suggesting solutions that have already been unsuccessful, the service user can easily become frustrated. Using a solution focused approach to counselling, the worker may explore a range of options that include the service user obtaining legal advice, or mediation etc. Self-care options may include visiting a General Practitioner, the local Community Health Centre or phoning Mensline Australia etc.

Many men respond favourably when involved in a group program with other separated fathers. Their level of motivation and the availability of time will ultimately influence their attendance. It is important during the initial telephone engagement, to support the development of positive motivation. This is achieved by remaining child focused, emphasising that involvement in the program will allow them to learn from the situations that other men experience and enable them to manage the separation in a better way. Most men who attend Burnside Fathers' Support Service report that the group involvement has been a unique and rewarding experience. The length of group programs may vary from one day information workshops, to three hours a week for ten evenings. The range of groups includes information based workshops, emotional support groups, group counselling and psychoeducational groups.

The Working with Men Checklist

The Working with Men Checklist captures the key issues discussed in this article and contains four key areas that allow organisations to assess and improve the programs they offer to men. These areas are:

- Environment
- Language
- Initial contact and marketing
- Service provision

These questions have been generalised to create relevance for as many organisations as possible.

Scoring

At the end of the Working with Men Checklist, there is a scoring system that allows organisations to measure their result. The Checklist Scale converts answers into a score by multiplying the number of 'sometimes' responses by two; the number of 'regularly' responses by three and number of 'not often' responses remain the same. These numbers are tallied to create a final score. The scoring guide suggests:

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 within 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 within your agency. It may be useful to consult 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 further 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.

Conclusion

Engaging men constructively in social welfare services can be challenging and very rewarding. Often, when men engage with a service that they perceive as supportive, respectful, non-judgemental and validating of their experiences, they will bring enthusiasm and energy to make changes and grow. Men will have a greater interest for contacting a program when someone they trust has personally recommended it to them.

Many men enter new situations with a significant level of suspicion. These suspicions need to be alleviated by workers building trust and creating a relaxed environment which contains positive images of males and providing services relevant to men's lives.

The Working with Men Checklist is a useful tool for organisations to appraise their working with men practice by reviewing their environment, language, initial contact, marketing and service provision.

References

Hawkins, A.J. & Dollahite, D.C. (1997). *Generative Fathering: Beyond Deficit Perspectives*. Sage: Thousand Oaks.

King, A. (2000). *Working with fathers: The non-deficit perspective*. Children Australia, Vol 25, No.3.

O'Brien, C. & Rich, K. (2002). *Evaluation of the Men and Family Relationships Initiative – Final and Supplementary Report*, Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

Checklist for organisations working with men

	Not often	Sometimes	Regularly
Environment			
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 (ie 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 of 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 clearly identified policies that identify when men are excluded from receiving services from your organisation			
▪ Employ male workers who have time to work directly with male clients			

	Not often	Sometimes	Regularly
Language			
How often does your program....?			
▪ Provide direct 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 ...eg Shake hands (positive body contact, non-threatening and validating)			
▪ Use intermittent eye contact especially when the client has 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
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use non-deficit language in fliers and other promotional material <i>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 the children/ partner.</i> 			
Initial Contact and Marketing			
How often does your program....?			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Identify clear purposes for having barbeques, meetings, counselling sessions, gatherings and groups in your advertising 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use 'doing' language and 'active' words in your promotion 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Have clients recommending your program to other men 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Use the local media to promote your program 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Give clients choices about services available with clear explanations about their options at point of intake 			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 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, 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 it 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 =	
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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 within your service.
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