

Engaging fathers in programs

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Amongst the many and varied descriptions of masculinity, the non-deficit perspective (King, 2000; King, 2001; King, Sweeney & Fletcher, 2004; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997) identifies that in many men, their relationship with their children is a very significant connection. This connection with significant family relationships can be viewed as 'the quiet place within' that Australian men talk about least. It is a personal space that men rarely share. Until recently, it was not until men approached the end of their life, that they often expressed regret for spending too much time at work and not enough time with their family. This reflection is still experienced today, as many men only start talking about the importance of their family relationships after the crisis has occurred, such as family separation.

Australian men are becoming more vocal about this quiet place, i.e. the importance of their connection with their family, particularly their children. What is occurring is a quiet men's revolution. This men's revolution is not as vocal as the women's movement, but it is noticed as men talk about achieving a better balance between work and family demands. The change is seen by how men behave differently as they walk hand-in-hand with their children and proudly push the pram. Some men identify the reason for attend a fathering program, is because they want to father their children differently to how they were fathered. The birth of a child is now a 'wake-up call' for many men and an opportunity for them to review the choices they make in life and provides the motivation to develop stronger relationships.

The shadowy side of men's behaviour still exists. It is in this context that many men and family relationship services operate. The challenge for programs is to engage men in working with this 'quiet space'. The non-deficit perspective does not condone inappropriate male behaviours but harnesses the positive motivations that makes change a reality. Once this quiet space is entered and men are engaged in accessing M&FR programs, the skills used by professional workers in working with women can be applied to working with men.

Current challenges

While significant achievements have occurred in working with men (O'Brien & Rich, 2002), the challenge is still enormous. The Western Australian Report that reviewed Family and Parent Support Services for Men (Nixon, 1999) identified that men have major health problems. They have high rates of depression, suicide, violence, drug and alcohol use and fatal motor vehicle accidents.

The report recognises that there is still a strong belief that men do not ask for help but fix themselves. Promotion of men and family relationship services still needs improvement as many men view the word 'counselling' as a punitive response for workplace misdemeanours (Nixon, 1999). It is still common for men to remark "I never thought such services for men existed" when they first come into contact with M&FR programs. Men's health programs recognise that men visit their doctor less than women and only seek help only after a crisis has occurred (Nixon, 1999).

The inflexibility of the Australian workplace (at the shop, factory or self-employment level) and the widespread existence of family violence, are still significant issues that

confront programs as men usually access programs only when a crisis occurs. A variety of public awareness campaigns have been useful in promoting a responsive environment that encourages the proactive view that it is okay for men to seek help before the crisis occurs.

For instance, Mensline, the Australian national men's phone counselling service, has placed regular advertisements in national and local newspapers. The development of Mensline has been an opportunity to provide an initial assessment and counselling service for men. The men are referred to services in their local areas where they can continue to have their needs met in a more comprehensive way.

Principles for effective practice

Eight principles have been identified for working effectively with men:

1. Importance of perceived equality
2. Existence of 'window periods' where men access support
3. The need for fathering services to be distinguished from general parenting services
4. The value of personal recommendation about services
5. The importance of flexible service delivery
6. Client involvement in program development
7. Solution focused approach
8. Local area coordination

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' is based 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 rapid assessments about whether a program/service seems friendly and useful or judgemental and critical
- most men place a considerable importance on their relationships with their children
- men appreciate clear rules and expectations on which they can rely 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 for whom 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 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.
- Ensure that large power differences do not exist between professional workers and the service users.

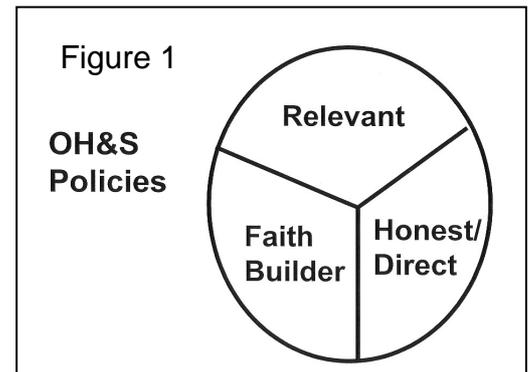
Language

Language has a significant influence on the successful engagement of 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

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

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. For example each organisation has policies about safe work practices when providing after hours counselling services.



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

- **relevance** – the discussion needs to be relevant to the service user’s 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 managing 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 attitude 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 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 vent 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, e.g. “How do you think that will affect your child?”

For example, creating **relevance** with service users 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 some weeks he began to be 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 focused the discussion on change and this provides Graham with 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 users' names being changed for confidentiality.

³ Men attend intensive fathers' groups for 3-18 months. The groups focus on personal, parenting, and relationship 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 between them.

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 in their budget.

The best approach for promoting programs to men is by word of mouth. 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 crescendo, men respond best to the recommendation of a program by someone they trust. Friends, family members, partners, colleagues, human resource workers, doctors, other professionals and 'mates' can be respected 'gatekeepers' who can influence men. 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 initially important to advertise in newspapers or fliers that create interest amongst the 'gatekeepers'. Written promotions should clearly identify 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 needs 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 how 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?
- 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 the worker can respond. If the worker suggests solutions that have already been unsuccessful, the service user can easily become frustrated. Using a solution focused approach to counselling, the worker may propose 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.

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