

Working with men: The non-deficit perspective

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This paper was written by Andrew King as a reflection of the work of UnitingCare Burnside Fathers' Support Service in Western Sydney, NSW. It is a service running centre based and community based support groups for fathers.

*"Heavenly Father up above,
Please protect the ones I love.
Let them know and see,
their importance and specialness to me.
Sometimes things get snappy,
All I want is to be happy.
As I stand high on a trestle,
Let our love grow and be special.
From all the people for me to choose,
My wife and children are ones I would hate to lose."*

This poem was written by a twenty nine-year-old father called Tom, who at present is struggling to stop his three children from being removed by the Department of Community Services. Considering his current reactions, it is hard to understand the level of love that he feels towards his family. He acknowledges that at present he feels like giving up, but something small in him keeps trying. You can only understand his battle when you discover that he was a street kid at the age of ten and in prison by the age of eighteen. Today, at his workplace, he is a proud worker who is recognised as very hard working. He has resigned and been reappointed four times in the past three months and is known by the management as being volatile. His employer identifies with his strength. His last encounter with the Department of Community Services resulted in him being arrested for kicking in the front door of the building. However, three weeks later he received a written apology concerning the triggering event that led to his emotional outburst.

It is very easy to focus on Tom's deficits, as there are many aspects of his life that are less than ideal. However, if any agency is to work with Tom and his family, an alternative perspective needs to be generated that values his strengths and the motivation he expresses in the above poem. The motivation may rarely be acknowledged, but they are the basic forces that keep Tom trying again. My focus in working with Tom, has been to allow him to experience, more fully, the significance of this basic motivating force and how it can change his relationships.

When working with men, Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) argue that fathering is often seen from a deficit perspective. The deficit perspective assumes that men are largely uninvolved and uninterested in the lives of their children and unwilling to change. This assumption is supported by many images of separated fathers not supporting their children financially and uninterested in being involved with their children. Some people are suspicious of young men caring for young children, and assume that

fathers are incapable of adequately caring for the basic needs of young children. In community services, workers may view men as inadequate with parenting due to the special needs target group that they work. However the recent national research completed by Russell, Barclay, Edgcombe, Donovan, Habib, Callaghan, Pawson (1999), found that the majority of community service professionals/workers believed that mothers and fathers should share parenting tasks and activities equally.

How the deficit perspective assumption is expressed.

Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) highlight that *deficit assumptions* are expressed in a variety of contexts.

The 'Abusing' Father

Russell et al (1999) identified that 48% of community welfare professionals believe that up to 24% of fathers physically abuse their children and 31% of professionals believed that 24% of fathers sexually abused their children. These figures are higher than the national statistics on child abuse and neglect and could influence how professionals develop a trusting relationship with most fathers (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997).

The 'Emotionally Challenged' Father.

Many labels used formally and informally to describe fathers include: incompetent, unaware, fear of intimacy, emotionally constricted, emotionally constipated etc.

"Clinicians are divided on whether these emotionally challenged fathers are in need of a strong, adult male mentors or a skilled and patient therapist who can guide them through their dangerous inner journeys to healthy, responsible manhood. But there is wide agreement that most men are emotionally and relational deficient and in need of therapy" (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997, p5).

Fathers under involvement in household activities.

Russell et al (1999), found that men are spending a similar proportion of time on household activities as they did ten years ago. While this statistic is regrettable, it suggests that men are uninvolved, selfishly resisting change and greater involvement (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). This tension is better understood by recognising that a gender based difference in perception can exist concerning the timing and standards surrounding household duties. It needs to be recognised that men and women often have different perceptions of the timing and standards that surround household tasks. This is also accompanied with long travelling times to and from work.

Fathers have little interest in professional feedback about their children.

When health/community welfare professionals provide feedback to families regarding issues that affect their children, they often favour delivering this information to the mother. This assumption reinforces other assumptions that fathers are deficient in their interest in their knowledge concerning the basic health needs of their children.

One articulate father, in a community workshop stated that in thirteen years of having a child with a disability, they have never been approached or had the opportunity to discuss this issue with a professional.

There are many reasons that fathers play a secondary role in health/ community welfare relationships. Most significantly, appointment times are during the day when it is difficult for men or women to have time off from work. However men can question and be wary of family involvement with external community welfare agencies. In the author's experience, men have a strong suspicion about people who influence their family life. Besides trusting family members, many men can have little trust and question the relevance of new ideas about the relationships in their life. From boyhood, a competitiveness is nurtured that teaches young men not 'be walked over by other people'. This process continues as the child grows into a man, entrenching values of independence and autonomy. For many men, a suggestion that they need to change what they are thinking or doing is met by a high degree of resistance. Especially when a suggestion contains a deficit assumption like 'men should show more of their feelings.' This assumption is that something needs to be fixed; the father has to learn to act differently. Due to this, professionals need to work hard at the pre-

engagement stage (this will be discussed further in the paper) when working with fathers to find an alternative way to dealing with the defensiveness.

All these assumptions highlight the deficiencies of men at the expense of acknowledging that the basic motivational force for many men is a deep love for their family and the desire to be a good dad. While the deficit assumption may adequately describe the behaviour of many dads, it lacks the potential for engaging men and creating life change. Deficit assumptions create little change in fathers because (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997):

1. They have little recognition of growth and development.
2. They misconstrue the motives, feelings, attitudes and hopes of most fathers.
3. They create barriers to change rather than its promotion.
4. They have a narrow standard of good parenting.

The following case study highlights how deficit assumptions either encourage men to give up or to try twice as hard.

Case Study

George is 43 years old and his two-year-old daughter is currently in foster care with a child welfare organisation. Sally, the mother of the child, lives with a new boyfriend who is periodically violent towards Sally. The mother is still a poly drug user with two older children residing with Sally were at risk of being removed by the child welfare agency. When George joined a Fathers Group, he was angry, resentful and very distrustful of the system. He wanted his daughter to be safe, and since living with the mother would not ensure her safety, he wanted to be the primary caregiver. He was resentful that the child welfare agency would not take seriously his commitment to be the resident father. George had ceased his heroine use several years previously.

Early in the group, it became apparent that George loved his daughter and that throughout his life he had always been under appreciated by key people in his life. The group provided an environment to validate the important role he wanted to play as a father, and to gain recognition and support. The group leaders support gave George one of the few times in his life he had experienced someone supporting him. The group learnt about how George had ceased his poly drug use once he became a father (he referred to the birth of his daughter as a wake up call). During the group, he also ceased all alcohol use and played a very important support role in the group for other members. By the time George went to court, the independent clinical psychologist stated that in 25 years of practice he had never see anyone else make such a change to their life. This change has continued to be sustained with the basic motivation for George being his love for his daughter.

An alternative perspective of fathering:

If alternative assumptions were adopted, fathering would be seen in a different light. The new picture recognises that fathers often want to father differently from how they were fathered and that good fathering is something which is necessary to their own well being (fundamental motivation). It also suggests that a father's care for his children is a "central feature of his life's work and you would expect him to strive for competence in this arena." (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997, p10).

The adoption of a non-deficit perceptive influences program development. Instead of instructing fathers about their shortcomings and the things they are not doing, the fathering program validates different aspects of what fathers already do well. It is at this point, that greater freedom is generated in the group to explore the barriers that prevent men from achieving what they desire.

In the author's experience of working with fathers, many men identify fathering as something which is active, challenging, creative, irreplaceable, hard work and a central part of their life, regardless of their family relationships. This is the cornerstone of understanding fathering as a generative experience, where men often re-evaluate their life and work towards the care and protection of their children throughout their whole lifetime.

Case Study

Peter is a father in an intact relationship, where he has two children. His first child died as a toddler from a respiratory problem, before Peter commenced attending the fathers group. He had loved the little girl so much he was heart broken. He and his partner attended only one session of grief counselling. Throughout the following years, the stress of fathering other children through the toddler years and his fear for their safety took its toll on his relationship with his wife. This was also exacerbated by his imminent retrenchment from work. By being in a fathers' group, Peter was able to talk for the first time about his grief about his first child. He was also able to remove much of the pressure that had been building inside of him. Over six months, Peter successfully moved back home and continued to play the vital role in the family that he had played previously.

Developing a Non-deficit Perspective of Fathering

An alternative framework is the use of non-deficit assumptions regarding fathering. A non-deficit assumption views fathers as having a basic motivation for the best care and protection of their children. Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) argue that most fathers value moral, productive, mature and loving relationships. These responsibilities and capabilities represent "essential things that fathers *should do, want to do, can do and actually do* for their children. We believe that the needs of children call fathers to use their fathering capabilities to meet those needs". (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997, p30). This perspective assumes that fathers are able to choose (in certain constraints and contexts) to live these assumptions.

Burnside Fathers' Support Service operates a variety of groups for fathers who face major transition points in their life. A range of monthly groups have been run for fathers who have a disabled child. Many men in this situation cope the best they can by working long hours, thereby ensuring the family has adequate finances. Besides their partner, men with a disabled child often have few people to talk with regarding the impact of the disability. When a professional with deficit assumptions deals with a father, they focus on the man's isolation, the working of long hours and his lack of communication. Alternatively, the non-deficit perspective would focus on valuing the underlying motivation the father experiences, namely, the care and protection of their children and family. This allows a much richer discussion and more opportunities to discuss the impact of the decisions the men are making.

Non-deficit assumptions recognise (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997) that fathers have the desire and the ability:

1. To commit - The physical and ongoing support that a father provides and his awareness and involvement with the child throughout their lifetime.
2. To choose - The capacity to make day to day decisions for the children that meet the child's needs.
3. To care - the ability to attend to the important transitions in a child's life and provide the optimal conditions that maximise their growth.
4. To change - the ability to adapt as children grow older and the father matures in his relationship with the children.
5. To create - the creation of resources for material comfort and the resolution of problems that allow opportunities for the development of emotional well being.
6. To 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.
7. To communicate - the capacity to relate with children by sharing meaningfully with them, both verbally and non-verbally.

However men are more likely to engage and access community agencies when they are likely to feel safe and valued. This is done through the use of non-deficit approaches and recognises that families and their children are a central motivation in most fathers' lives. Instead of men resisting the feeling that 'they need to be fixed or changed', a practitioner can work beside the father, thereby creating a mutual change process.

Strengthening families through working with men.

Research undertaken by the Family Resource Coalition in the USA (Hawkins and Dollahite, 1997) identified key points for working with fathers. Five of these points that build on non-deficit assumptions are:

- **Build on the father's motivation to develop a close relationship with his child.**

Case Study

Sam is an eighteen-year-old young Dad who lived in detention centres and been involved with the police since the age of twelve. At the birth of his first son, he decided to stop stealing cars and break and enters. The birth of his child had a profound effect on him. However, his troubled childhood and pent up anger, negatively affected his partner and himself. A child welfare agency ended up removing the baby. Throughout the past six months, Sam has been committed to developing new ways of dealing with old situations. At present he is walking away when tensions are high and he is able to recognise the impact that violence has on children. Through ceasing to use marijuana, he is discovering a greater motivation for creating stability in his life and is arguing less with his partner. Instead of bottling everything up in side, he sits down and talks problems through.

Sam still has many things to learn, but one thing is sure. His commitment to his child has been a fundamental motivation for many life style changes. The significant factor in working effectively with fathers like Sam, is the use of non-deficit assumptions.

- **Practice active outreach on an individual level.**

Burnside Fathers' Support Service uses many different techniques for engaging fathers. While it is important to use local newspapers to promote positive aspects of fathering, it primarily informs the wider community and extended family members about available programs. Men are generally cautious and suspicious of fliers promoting programs and activities. They are more likely to respond to recommendations and prompts from trusted family members. It is important to encourage other professionals in your area to speak directly to fathers they know about forthcoming group activities.

Phone contact is very important. Separated fathers can talk over the phone non-stop for hours to a professional who is prepared to listen for hours, as they have such a limited number of supports which to turn. Without strong relationships being established early on, men will have a limited engagement with a service.

Case study

Dennis was very tentative about coming to the group. In the end he was encouraged to attend the first session and to tell the group leader their honest opinion about if the group was interesting or boring. Dennis is still attending the group nine months later. It was very different than he expected. "I thought it would be just a lecture".

- **Listen carefully to the unique stories, needs and strengths of fathers.**

Stories are a more familiar and safer way of communicating with men. They provide a context where respect and mutual concerns can be developed. Since men do not often have the opportunity to tell a significant story about their life, it generates a lot of interest and curiosity to hear other men talking about their life. The art of working with stories, is the movement from the known to the unknown. This is generated through critical questioning that reviews a story in a different shape and form.

Burns (1999) explores the creative use of critical questioning in the training environment. It can easily be applied to the context of group work with fathers. It is significant because it involves *being specific* - relate questions to events, situations, people, and actions. It *works from the particular to the general* - that is what learning can be generalised to other life experiences. It is *conversational* - describing ideas and experiences in an informal way. It *challenges and extends* - through the reflection of other

stories or examining the same story in a different way. It works from a *place of equality* where no insight is necessarily better than another.

Case Study

Bob is a very loud and brash person. Besides struggling through his second separation, and a court case regarding his behaviour at the last break-up, he also experiences depression. Silence is difficult for Bob, so he fills the time with much of his own talk. In the group the challenge for Bob is to slow down and hear what other people are saying. This is immensely difficult, but Bob's involvement in the group has vital as he has been able to apply his learning from the group to other relationships.

- **Acknowledge some of the positive characteristics (strengths) that men bring to parenting.**

Men parent in different ways to women. A male way of parenting is often very active and involves being out and about in the world. When men are primary care givers of young children, they often identify childcare as their main task. Because of this, they may spend less time around the home and are more mobile going on excursions, trips to the parks and walking with children. Their identity is not based on the house or completion of household tasks.

Many fathers are focused on the big picture issues in life. Men focus more on issues affecting life long role of caring and protecting their children. They spend more time in forward planning and preparing for forthcoming years. This may mean that they will need some coaching in how to deal with immediate issues. However, the father's focus on their children is a central motivation in their life.

- **Respect the issues that women have worked hard to change.**

Women have worked very hard to receive the recognition that they deserve. Not only are many women in full time employment but they still play the primary roles for parenting and maintaining the household. To ensure appropriate changes occur for both parents, old stereotypes have been let go and new non-deficit images of competence and confidence have been adopted. It is important that programs do not focus on men's rights or women's rights, but what is in the best interest of the children. It is in this context that children, mothers and fathers can prosper mutually.

Summary

A significant feature of engaging men and running fathering programs is the use of non-deficit assumptions. Deficit assumptions are quite widespread throughout the community and amongst health/community welfare professionals. As these assumptions are challenged, more men's lives will embrace the importance of fathering programs because most men recognise that family and children are a fundamental motivation in their life. They also recognise that fathering today is very different from how they were fathered and through working alongside professionals they can be encouraged to reflect on their life and the necessary changes.