

## JOSEPH FLEMING

Joseph Fleming (MSW) has worked as a Social Worker for 16 years, mostly in child protection and family welfare. He has completed post-graduate studies in social work.

Joseph has an interest in the ways in which social work can engage fathers and father's figures more constructively and is currently completing a PhD in the area of father absence in child and welfare practice.



## ANDREW KING

Andrew King is the Men's Services Manager for MensLine Australia (Crisis Support Services). He is also a consultant trainer for group work, working with men and program development for various organisations. He is the Chairperson for the Institute of Group Leaders and a specialist trainer in group work and trains professionals throughout Australia in 'working with men'. He is also an experienced practitioner and has published a range of professional articles.

Andrew's work career has involved working with teenagers who have drug and alcohol problems, young people with a mental health issues, parenting education, coordinating a fathers' centre and managing training for professionals interested in group work or working with men.

He holds a Bachelor of Arts in Welfare Studies and a Master of Adult Education.



# A ROAD LESS TRAVELLED: WORKING WITH MEN AS FATHERS IN FAMILY BASED SERVICES

**BY JOSEPH FLEMING**

PhD Candidate, Monash University

**ANDREW KING**

MensLine Australia

## Introduction

The nature and shape of Australian families has changed significantly in recent decades (Smit 2005; Berlyn et al., 2008). Even with these changes, there have been many contested understandings about what constitutes fatherhood (Fletcher et al., 2008; BBC, 2000). There has been an emerging trend internationally to understand fatherhood (Scourfield, 2006; Milner, 1993; O'Hagan, 1997; Featherstone, 2003; 2006; Daniel et al., 2005). Despite this interest, there is still more need for research to be undertaken in Australia about the attitudes of professionals towards fathers, male input into family life and, in particular, the experiences of fathers who are described as being absent from family based services. This will result in a greater understanding and application of 'father inclusive practice' (Berlyn et al., 2008; King, 2009).

This paper will firstly report upon some preliminary research findings from a qualitative data study undertaken for a doctoral degree in social work. It introduces how generative fathering can be applied as a possible way to engage with fathers more constructively in family based services here in Australia.

## What does it mean to be a father today?

The role of a father involves a relationship with a child or children and embraces the biological, psychological and economic needs of their children. Fatherhood, like motherhood, is also a social construct which, in Western society has traditionally been built around the marriage contract and other cultural expectations.

The literature about fathers' involvement in family based services (Fleming, 2007) is not complimentary to fathers and does not provide enough difference within the experiences of being a father. The fathering role over time has changed significantly in society with greater variation. The role includes a breadwinner, a companion, a moral guide, a protector, a disciplinarian and a co-parent (Pleck & Pleck, 1997; Collier & Sheldon, 2009). However, the dominant ideology of fatherhood still continues to be defined by a father's relationship with his children in the context of the bond with the mother (Silverstein, 1996; Collier & Sheldon, 2009). Whereas, for mothers, their roles have been described as less culturally scripted and automatically assumed and valued (Peterson & Steinmetz, 2000).

Research studies over the last decade show that fathers commonly define their family responsibilities in terms of the breadwinner's role (Grbich, 1987; Edgar, 2000; Donaldson, 2006). Today there is decreasing clarity about the boundaries of work and male identity. Women and men both participate equally in the workforce and men are no longer necessarily seen or defined by work (Popay et al., 1998; Featherstone et al., 2007; Dermott, 2008). Despite these changes, there are still significant gaps between women and men, mothers and fathers in their involvement in family life. This includes an over-representation of women in part-time or casual employment, women performing most of the household tasks as well as childcare and the impact of long work hours and paid parental leave upon parenting (Austen & Birch, 2000; Donaldson, 2006; Berlyn et al., 2008).

These changes have also brought dramatic new challenges and issues with things such as current debates about equal pay, paid maternity leave and work choices not seen in the previous three decades. Relationships between men and women have also changed over the last three decades. The result is more diversity, which includes post-divorce parenting, step parenting, de-facto parenting, gay parenting and sole-parent households (Featherstone et al., 2007; Lewis & Lamb, 2007). This has led to greater emphasis on the importance of male role models and social fathering (Fletcher & Visser, 2008).

### **Father absence and inclusion in family based services**

At one time or another, many parents can be absent from their children. This can be a result of illness, absent through work commitments, divorce or family discord, death, incarceration or institutionalisation.

Parents may be physically present but absent due to emotional disinterest or neglect (Phares, 1993).

The term 'parent' is often used to describe both male and female caregivers, usually in a cohabitating relationship. However, the term often does not adequately capture the role of the father in this relationship as well as that of a mother. This is because parenting is premised upon nurturing, which in turn is equated with mothering (Daniel & Taylor, 2001). Thus, in attempting to define the term 'father', father involvement and father absence has also been influenced by many factors. In reviewing the literature, father absence refers to those fathers that are both physically distant and emotionally distant, usually resulting in social problems in the development of children and adolescents (Sullivan & Howard, 2000; Lamb, 2004).

### **Professional practice within child and family based services remains gendered, with a focus on mothering and an avoidance of fathers**

Practitioners often reported a hesitation and ambivalence in their conversations with fathers and even reported being overwhelmed with the idea of engaging fathers. They demonstrated more confidence when speaking about mothers than about fathers. These discussions highlighted that family based service practitioners:

- Had different perceptions of mothers and fathers parenting responsibilities.
- Used the term 'parent' to describe the primary caretaker for bringing up children, but their focus was primarily on the mother's actions with little significant reference to the father.
- Viewed the mother's role as more 'responsible' for child care than for the father's role.

- Expected mothers to be responsible for addressing and resolving problems in the family, despite the existence of a father.

All the family based service practitioners who participated in the study held formal tertiary qualifications in child welfare or child health. They also had many years of direct practice experience, some with 10 or more years. However, their practice focused strongly on the mother-child dyad. As a result it led to a demonstrated lack of understanding of a father's ability to parent. Their practice was gender biased and failed to take into consideration constructs of fatherhood beyond the biological connection to the mother. An example of 'gender bias' (Daniel & Taylor, 2002) in their practice included inviting mothers to attend clinic appointments with children, as it was assumed and accepted that the father would not be available due to work commitments or being disinterested. It was perceived by the family based practitioners that involving fathers was complex and that their previous attempts to engage the fathers had not been successful.

The challenge in engaging fathers was often dismissed by the family based service practitioners as something that was external and out of their control, for example, appointments for the family did not coincide with their agencies' operational hours. However, these same assessments were not applied to their relationship with the mother, even when situations were similar. The failure of professional to involve men in family based service interventions has the effect both of absolving them from responsibility and of excluding them from discussion of the welfare of their children.

### **Fathers more likely to be involved in practice if their child's mother is involved**

Family based services have historically focused on mothering rather than parenting (O'Hagan & Dillenburg, 1995; Popay et al., 1998). Central to the understanding about how professionals involve fathers was the type of relationship that the mother has with the father. The father's presentation at a family based service was dependent upon the mother's views of the father. In the study, fathers were more likely to be included in a worker's practice if the mother had a 'good relationship' with the father. A 'good relationship' would consist of stability within the adult relationship, a high degree of emotional support and the absence of intimate partner violence or other undesirable behavioural issues such as alcohol or drug abuse. The further a father was physically unavailable or distant, the less likely he would be included in case planning or clinical appointments for the family. Although there is no doubt that a father's physical presence in a family can have some benefits, it is not necessarily a pre-requisite to emotional wellbeing for children and families (Pringle, 1998; Featherstone, 1999; Lloyd 2001; Dubowitz, 2006).

### **Fathers often viewed by professionals as risks rather than seen as resources for the family**

Even though contemporary research supports the importance of a father's input in family life, the professionals viewed them more as a risk than a resource to their family. This finding supports the literature on how fathers are viewed by professionals (Smyth, 2002; Scourfield, 2008; Fletcher & Visser, 2008) and how they are primarily confident in engaging the mothers. This is a process that operates in direct contradiction to the significant societal changes that have

taken place over the last three decades in regard to family life (Daniel & Taylor, 2001; Scourfield, 2008; Featherstone, 2009). Research has also shown that although fathers face less scrutiny by child welfare professions in practice when identified as a risk (Swift, 1995; Scourfield, 2003; Milner, 2004; Featherstone & Peckover 2007), they are also likely to be avoided when they may be a potential resource for the family (O'Hagan, 1997; Trotter, 1997; Daniel & Taylor, 1999; Featherstone, 2006; Strega et al., 2008).

### **How can we move forward?**

Professionals need to 'widen their theoretical base' to incorporate feminist perspectives (O'Hagan, 1997) and stop avoiding engaging men in child protection practice. One theory alone cannot capture fully the diversity of gender identity and power that operates within child family based services. This ultimately creates a burdening expectation upon mothers and little utilisation of the father's character and his ability to impact on family dynamics over time.

This results in a skewed view that further alienates men from the world of parenting (Scourfield, 2002). The generative approach to fathering (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997) offers a useful way for family based services practitioners to engage with men as fathers more constructively.

### **The significance of the generative approach**

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).

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 socialise 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 the 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 wellbeing. 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 help seeking behaviour and motivation. The following table outlines a useful set of questions that maximise the power of generativity.

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

### ***Generative questions checklist for working with fathers***

<p><b>Build a relevant connection</b></p>	<p>Find out the man's preferred name and introduce yourself.</p> <p>Find out how many children they have, their age and special interests of the children.</p> <p>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><b>Focus on active choices they make in their life to influence key relationships.</b></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"> <li>• Commit - the physical and ongoing support that a father provides and his awareness and involvement with the child throughout their lifetime.</li> <li>• Choose - the capacity to make day to day decisions for the children that meet the child's needs.</li> <li>• Care - the ability to attend to the important transitions in a child's life and provide the optimal conditions that maximise their growth.</li> <li>• Change - the ability to adapt as children grow older and the father matures in his relationship with the children.</li> <li>• Create - the creation of resources for material comfort and the resolution of problems that allow opportunities for the development of emotional wellbeing.</li> <li>• 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.</li> <li>• Communicate - the capacity to relate with children by sharing meaningfully with them, both verbally and non-verbally.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Build greater depth into the exploration of these choices. Acknowledge tensions around positive expressions or challenges where they may be over or under used.</b></p>	<p>Discover the men's way of expressing his connection with their children (using the above abilities).</p> <p>Explore opposites or tensions – what helps/ blocks and what is valuable or a distraction to achieving the above?</p> <p>Normalise experiences they have and validate the strengths men bring to parenting.</p> <p>Amplify the significance of positive choices they make in their child's life.</p> <p>Discuss what the role of fathering means today? What parts of the role are important to them?</p>

**Generative questions checklist for working with fathers (cont.)**

<p><b>Build depth using specific stories and experiences.</b></p>	<p>If appropriate ask the following questions (Brotherson, Dollahite &amp; Hawkins, 2005):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I would like to find out about some of your experiences with Sam and what those experiences mean to you.</li> <li>• Can you tell me about the most enjoyable experience you ever had with Sam? What meaning does that experience have for you now?</li> <li>• Can you tell me about an experience when you felt especially close emotionally to Sam? What meaning does that experience have for you now?</li> <li>• Can you tell me about an experience when you cared for and nurtured Sam? What did you learn about nurturing children from that experience?</li> <li>• 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?</li> <li>• What was the most painful experience you ever had with Sam? What meaning does that experience have for you now?</li> <li>• Are there any particular things that help you to be the kind of father to Sam that he/she needs you to be?</li> <li>• Are there any particular things that prevent you from being the kind of father to Sam that he/she needs you to be?</li> <li>• Can you tell me about any important sacrifices you have made in your life that demonstrate how much you care about Sam?</li> </ul>
	<p>If relevant the following questions...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Who or how do you protect others in your life?</li> <li>• Who do you keep safe?</li> <li>• What happens when the protection of others is misused?</li> <li>• What is the difference between keeping someone safe and controlling them?</li> <li>• When does protecting someone become abusive?</li> <li>• How do you keep yourself safe?</li> </ul>

Generative questioning has a powerful impact working with men and women. However, a central role for men is 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 that follows:

*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 Domestic Violence 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 in the case notes 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 told him it was a shame to put so much at risk, that given his history he could well be looking at doing time again. She stated, "It would be a shame, because what I have read indicates you are a great dad, and you are risking important special times with your 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.*

## **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 focused 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 focusing 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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