

## ***Developing the practice of working with men in family relationships: future directions for practice***

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### **Bio**

Andrew King is the UnitingCare Burnside Training Coordinator based in NSW. He was, until recently, the Coordinator of a Fathers' Centre in Western Sydney. He is a specialist trainer in group work and trains professionals throughout Australia. He has written about the use of non-deficit approaches in working with men.

### **Abstract**

This article reviews the development of men and family relationship services in Australia. Significant milestones in increasing the range and diversity of services for men have been achieved since 1998, when the first National Men and Family Relationships Conference was held in Canberra. Eight principles for successful practice in working with men are identified, along with challenges faced by the sector.

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### **The current situation**

This paper reviews the current context experienced by programs that focus on working with men and family relationship issues and the significant milestones in learning that have been achieved.

The number of programs supporting men in family relationships has increased since the first Men and Family Relationship Conference in 1998. The National Men and Family Relationships Forum, held in Sydney in October 2004, showcased the range of services that have developed across Australia. The question has changed from asking if men are interested in accessing family relationship and parenting services, to how organisations can best cater for men's needs. It is now recognised that 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 situation.

The Final Report for the Evaluation of the Commonwealth Government's Men and Family Relationships (M&FR) Initiative (O'Brien & Rich, 2002) identified a high demand by men for programs that have experience 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 in understanding male involvement in families. There is a strong demand for men and family relationship services across Australia (O'Brien & Rich, 2002; Nixon, 1999).

The M&FR Initiative is a sub-program of the Australian Commonwealth Government Family Relationship Services Program where forty-four organisations are federally funded to provide services to assist men. These services are in more than 80 locations across Australia. During the 2002-03 financial year, over 8,000 people received assistance from projects funded under this program.

Besides the M&FR programs, there are a large number of other programs that are funded through either State Government, or are self-funded and operate volunteer self-help programs. These programs target separated fathers, school or community based mentoring programs and indigenous programs.

The West Australian Report of the Committee Reviewing Family and Parent Support Services for Men (1999), identified that best practice for working with men involves:

- local determination regarding the manner in which services are delivered
- the inclusion of men in all aspects of service delivery (as well as seeking their advice in needs analysis)
- flexible, solution focused, information giving services
- effective local coordination

- the development of local men's resource centres
- encouragement and training of volunteers (particularly men)

## **The significance of the non-deficit perspective**

Amongst the many and varied descriptions of masculinity, the non-deficit perspective identifies that within many men, their relationship with their children is a very significant connection. This connection can be viewed as 'the quiet place within' that Australian men talk about least. It is a personal space that is rarely shared. One or two generations ago, this quiet place was only spoken about as men approached the end of their life, regretting that they spent more time at work and not enough with their family. Today, many men start talking about the importance of family relationships only after a crisis occurs in their life, 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 currently occurring is the quiet men's revolution. It is not as vocal as the women's movement, but you notice it as you walk down the street and visit the neighbourhood parks. The change is seen by how men behave differently. They walk hand-in-hand with children of all ages, and the proud role they play in pushing the pram. The birth of a child is now a 'wake-up call' for many men. It is an opportunity for them to review the choices they are making in life and re-evaluate their focus.

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 to make 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, the challenge is still enormous. We know that men have major health problems as is recorded in official statistics. They have high rates of depression, suicide, violence, drug and alcohol use and fatal motor vehicle accidents.

The belief that men do not ask for help but fix themselves, is still very strong. There is a great need to improve the promotion of men and family relationship services as many men still view the word 'counselling' as a punitive response for workplace misdemeanours. 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. External pressures as well as internal factors also encourage men to seek help only after a crisis has occurred.

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.

Regular advertisements in national and local newspapers have been placed by Mensline, the Australian national men's phone counselling service. 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**

I have identified eight principles when 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. Strong community development approach
7. Solution focused approach
8. Local area coordination

### **1. Importance of perceived equality**

When a man makes an initial contact with a program, the immediate environment and openness of staff towards him, will influence his level of trust. Most men enter new situations with suspicion about what will be expected of them and they rely on visual cues that suggest they can relax (King, Sweeney & Fletcher, 2004).

When there is a significant power difference between the service providers and the fathers, men will be more cautious and wary of engagement. This is why programs that have a high level of service user participation are more effective in engaging men. This emphasis on equality, is reflected in the notion of 'mateship' and has been a defining feature of male culture since the settlement of Australia (Colling, 1992).

UnitingCare Burnside's NEWPIN Fathers' Program in Mt Druitt, began a structured evening group program seven years ago when the NEWPIN model was first introduced in Australia. The primary aim of NEWPIN is to support parents who are wishing to create safer and stronger family relationships.

All the NEWPIN centres emphasise the use of the four core values: support, respect, equality and empathy. Service users are encouraged to have an active part in the program's operation. NEWPIN has found that many fathers

appreciate the opportunity to influence and support the development of NEWPIN. This is important, as the men often feel they have little control or influence in many aspects of their lives.

## **2. Existence of 'window periods' where men access support**

When some men experience problems in their lives, there is sometimes a 'window period' where they are more likely to access services for assistance. If men experience high levels of frustration and are unable to access services because of long waiting lists or complicated referral procedures, they are likely to give up trying and find other solutions to deal with their problems. These solutions frequently include ignoring the problem, or reacting in more aggressive ways because of their pent up feelings.

Some organisations have attempted to make intake procedures and personal information forms more user-friendly as men have a higher level of frustration when they do not understand those processes. The high levels of male illiteracy that exist within the community needs to be addressed by the use of appropriate procedures.

## **3. The need for fathering services to be distinguished from general parenting services**

Programs for men need to have a strong branding about being male focused or for fathers. Unless the word *fathers* or *men* are used in the program title, men assume that the program is not relevant to them. There was a significant increase in men accessing Early Childhood Centres when they used specific fliers that used the word 'dads' and indicated the relevance of the program to fathers.

## **4. The value of personal recommendation about services**

When they initially begin, many programs for men stumble along with low numbers of referrals and participants. This needs to be expected so that professionals are not disappointed when the initial response to a program, by the male community, is not as high as anticipated.

It is only after a period of time, that programs develop a routine and consistency in service provision. This may include ongoing support groups, regular educational groups or even 1-day workshops that are run every 6 months. It is the consistency over a long period, which builds a program's reputation as being effective and worthwhile. Many men will attend programs because of the recommendation of friends, 'mates' or family members.

## **5. The importance of flexible service delivery**

The fathers' services that UnitingCare Burnside provide, offer a range of group programs that offer choice in order to respond to fathers' needs. The services include:

- intensive fathers' groups and emotional support groups where participants attend for six to fifteen months (mid-week evening)

- educational groups that have a duration of six to eight weeks (mid-week evening)
- information based, one-day workshops (weekend)
- father/child playgroups (midweek or weekend)

Many other organisations have developed effective programs for working with men that use the eight principles in this article.

Programs, developed by other Australian organisations, include:

- afternoon/evening programs for fathers and their children held in primary schools that involve activities and a shared meal
- support groups for separated fathers on Sunday evenings after contact with their children finishes, such as those offered by Dads in Distress in various locations across New South Wales
- psychoeducational groups such as the Hey, Dad! series of programs, Fathering after Separation, and domestic violence programs
- the range of programs (one-off workshops or psychoeducational groups) and information booklets that have been developed by the Australian Commonwealth Government's Child Support Agency
- counselling and emotional support groups – where men explore a range of experiences
- individual counselling services provided out of normal working hours
- programs accessed through the workplace
- programs accessed by new fathers before they leave the hospital with their first baby
- task groups – The Shed located in northern NSW, where retired men repair broken toys
- camp/adventure programs for fathers or for men and their children
- music festivals that promote messages of fathering and masculinity
- 'Pitstop' men's health checkup evenings provided in regional Club facilities throughout regional areas of Australia
- family farm gatherings in rural communities where 6-7 families meet to discuss issues affecting drought affected communities
- telephone group counselling sessions
- telephone counselling and support programs for individuals

## **6. Strong community development approach**

It is important for service providers to involve their male clients in shaping and determining the most effective strategies to achieve program outcomes. When services are developing new programs or groups for men, it is vital to establish local reference groups that involve the target group of men. These reference groups can provide important feedback about program direction, marketing; and ambassadors who can personally recommend the program to other men.

One of the strongest forms of marketing to men occurs when someone whom a man trusts, recommends they access a particular program. This referral is more effective when the client is given a direct telephone number and a specific name of a contact person at the service. Men may stop seeking help

when they feel frustrated by their difficulties in contacting someone or accessing support.

Some men, who receive valuable support from a community program, have a strong interest in volunteering and supporting the program's further development. This energy is a tremendous resource and added to this, adequate training and mentoring, can result in positive outcomes for both the men and the service. New generations of men are emerging who have the experience to engage and support men whom are not presently accessing men and family relationship programs.

### **7. Solution focused approach**

Men prefer solution focused activities rather than counselling sessions (Nixon, 1999). The focus is not on feelings but improved relationships with significant people in the men's lives. A key factor in the use of solution focused frameworks is the adoption of a non-deficit approach to working with men. (King, 2000) The non-deficit approach is an invaluable model that does not condone inappropriate behaviour but emphasises the importance of the relationship between the father and the child.

### **8. Local area coordination**

A defining feature of the past six years for M&FR programs has been the development of state based support networks. These networks have reduced the isolation of many fathers' workers, provided opportunities for sharing information and allow for the development of forums to explore issues in greater depth.

There is still the need to further support the sharing of knowledge through the writing of journal articles and the provision of supervision groups that involve a small group of local workers, meeting on a regular basis, to reflect on and learn from working with men.

### **Challenges for the sector**

Challenges at the local level include:

- Access to long term funding
- improved supervision standards and practices
- improved use of information obtained from evaluation processes
- development of more strategic alliances and partnerships with other organisations
- training, encouragement and mentoring of service users

Since the Men and Family Relationship sector is often driven by a group of passionate individuals (male and female) who are dispersed throughout Australia, we need to continue to support each other. What is being built on today, is the foundation for the next generation of people working with men.

## Conclusion

Over the next ten years, a larger pool of professionals will be needed to deliver programs that offer welfare and support services for men. This pool includes male and female professionals who have a commitment to working with men. Access to specific training is required to ensure the development of leading edge practice skills and knowledge. This includes the provision of TAFE and university courses that focus on working with men.

A national forum needs to be provided every two to three years to explore current developments in men and family relationship issues. These forums can be rotated, through the sharing of organisation responsibilities and the location, by involving different state-based networks. The continual support of these forums by the national Industry Representative Bodies (Catholic Welfare Australia, Family Services Australia and Relationships Australia) is strongly encouraged.

The use of men as mentors will expand as they have a strong motivation to support others once their own situation has stabilised. This process requires proper training, supervision, and evaluation.

A quiet men's revolution is unfolding. This revolution has required the voice of feminism to initiate social change. It is now recognised that men are intuitive, even if this is different to the intuition that women demonstrate. The intuition is shown through:

- being conscious of the need for safety of themselves and others
- focusing on the lifelong wellbeing and care for family members
- supporting the notion of equality and mateship
- valuing role models and mentoring of others
- quickly assessing the comfort level of new environments and whether these places will meet their particular needs

Men value relationships as a central feature of their life. This value is shown through:

- accessing programs when a relationship crisis occurs in their life
- the loss of identity after family separation occurs, especially in relation to the children
- fathers viewing the birth of their child as a 'wake up call' to be more responsible
- trusting and responding to the recommendations of important people in their lives rather than responding to less personal media
- being easily frustrated by bureaucracy, especially when they see themselves as part of a impersonal system
- valuing learning from peers where the emphasis is on equality rather than power based relationships
- placing a greater importance on self-care (and not believing they are indestructible) when they reflect on their lifelong responsibilities to other significant people in their life

It is now recognised within the community welfare/health sector that many men, regardless of whether they are in a family relationship or are separated, identify fathering as something which is active, challenging, creative, irreplaceable, hard work and a central part of their life .

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