

# ***The 'quiet revolution' amongst men. Developing the practice of working with men in family relationships***

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## **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.

## **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 that funds forty-four organisations to provide services that assist men in family relationships. These services are delivered in more than 80 locations across Australia. During the 2002-03 financial year, over 8,000 people received assistance from the funded programs.

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.

### **What is successful practice?**

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 (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

#### **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) and pre-existed in Indigenous Australia.

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**

For some men experiencing problems in their lives, there is the potential for a 'window period' during which 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 exists in 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 (Fletcher, 2002). When invited by their children, men attended special events in such large numbers, that the early childhood centres or schools struggled to cope with the demand.

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

In the initial stages of operation, many men's programs experience low numbers of referrals and participants. In this start-up period, professionals need to persevere when the initial response by men to a program is not as high as anticipated. This is an experience that occurs in all community programs, however when low client numbers occur in male focused programs it is easily interpreted as an indicator of male disinterest.

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.

One of the strongest forms of marketing 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.

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

Fathers' services need to provide a range of group programs that offer choice. Men have a higher level of commitment when they can choose their level of involvement. Some of those choices include men accessing:

- 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 delivered on the weekend
- father/child playgroups provided midweek or on the weekend
- counselling
- telephone support

From the beginning, the Men and Family Relationships Initiative supported the development of a diverse range of local initiatives that responded to men's needs (O'Brien & Rich, 2002). Avoiding the 'one-size fits all' approach to service delivery, a wide range of programs for men emerged throughout 1998 to 2004:

- 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
- specialised programs for Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse men
- 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 and the development of Men's Sheds where a range of activities are provided
- 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

Men approach community organisations to meet their specific and immediate needs. When agencies provide a number of the above programs, they are more likely to cater for the diverse range of men's needs. Men often decide if a community program is relevant to their needs in the first few minutes of initial contact, when they are either talking on the telephone or walking in the front entrance of an agency.

## **6. Client involvement in program development**

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.

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 (King, 2000; King, 2001; King, Sweeney & Fletcher, 2004; Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997) is an invaluable model that does not condone inappropriate behaviour but emphasises the importance of the relationship between men and their children.

## **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. Due to the low number of men employed in community welfare/health programs, worker isolation was a key issue discussed at the 2004 National Men and Family Relationships Forum. The state based networks have been an essential support for these fathers' workers. The network meetings have provided opportunities for sharing information and allowed for the exploration of 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**

The challenges experienced by men's programs are shared with other community services. These challenges 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
- training and development of more male workers

Since the Men and Family Relationship sector is often driven by a group of passionate individuals (male and female) who are dispersed throughout Australia,

there is a need for continual support. What is being developed 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. It is important for the national Industry Representative Bodies (Catholic Welfare Australia, Family Services Australia and Relationships Australia) to continue to support the development of future forums.

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.

Change amongst men is occurring. A quiet men's revolution is unfolding. This revolution has been built on the social change initiated by feminism. It is now recognised that older men, male carers and many fathers 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 the way men access programs when a relationship crisis occurs in their life. It is also demonstrated through the loss of identity after family separation occurs, especially in relation to their involvement with their children. Some fathers view the birth of their child as a 'wake up call' to be more responsible. Men trust and respond to the recommendations of important people in their lives rather than less personal media.

Men are easily frustrated by bureaucracy, especially when they see themselves as part of an impersonal system. Men value learning from peers where the emphasis is on equality rather than power based relationships. They are more likely to place 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 in 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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