

Supporting male sole parents

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As the number of male sole parents in the community increases, it is not uncommon for professionals to be faced with requests for counselling and parenting support from men who are single fathers. Issues and challenges that face sole fathers are many and varied, including cultural aspects, gender issues, age and personal factors such as the capacity as a father to be there for the child.

Many issues which need to be addressed when working with single fathers are not dissimilar to those experienced by single mothers. However, there are salient issues which appear unique to the sole father population. These include the lack of support for male sole parents and the father's self concept. A dilemma that may confront professionals is how to be mindful of the protective needs of children in these families (in order to prevent the emergence of 'high risk' concerns), while providing effective and innovative support.

Case studies will be drawn upon to illustrate the issues confronting sole fathers, and the kinds of outcomes that may result from providing counselling and support to this target group. (Names and identifying features have been changed to ensure client confidentiality.)

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The Australian Bureau of Statistics (1997) found that the number of male sole parents, whether in part-time or full-time employment, totalled 43,500. Of all unemployed males, 1.4% were single parents. According to the Council of Single Mothers and their Children, men account for 11% of all sole parents. As the incidence of single fatherhood increases in the Western world, however, there are many who still hold the view that the daily care of the child is the primary role of the mother. Greif (1995a) depicts the quandary that faces single fathers. How does a father balance conflicting roles, that of the traditional view of manhood versus the parent who provides full-time nurturing?

It is also not uncommon for professionals to be faced with requests for support from men who are sole parents. The issues which face these families are many and varied, with professionals confronted with the dilemma of providing effective and innovative support to vulnerable fathers and being mindful of the protective concerns of children in these families.

Two cases will be used to illustrate some of the pertinent issues for male sole parents. These cases will be discussed under the following headings:

- How / why did the referral occur?
- Assessment process
- Intervention
- Difficulties encountered
- Strengths of the case

The section on Linking Theory and Practice further explores the issues which arise for male sole parents, as depicted in the case studies and the literature. The topics highlight areas to be explored with this population when providing professional support to them and their families. The conclusion

provides an overview of the paper and notes the importance of agencies and the community needing to become 'single father friendly'.

CASE 1 – ANTHONY

How / why did the referral occur?

Anthony referred his young teenage daughter, Rebecca, due to concerns about her moods and suicidal ideation. During sessions designed to assist Rebecca, both Anthony and Rebecca revealed that there had been a physically volatile situation between the two of them. An assessment of risk was made, and the incident appeared primarily related to the current living circumstances, with Rebecca saying that she refused to live anywhere except with Dad. Thus, a decision was made to engage Anthony in counselling separately with another therapist as Rebecca refused to have joint counselling with her father.

Assessment process

Several sessions were held with Anthony to identify the main issues surrounding the conflict with his daughter. Issues identified by Anthony included: disagreement with Rebecca on acceptable standards of tidiness and hygiene, which contributed to a deterioration in his relationship with Rebecca; deterioration in his relationship with his former spouse and confusion in his feelings towards her; ongoing disputation over property settlement issues; lack of support in carrying out parenting responsibilities; and, coming to terms with a new sense of family and style of parenting.

Worker observations included the incongruence between Anthony's expectations of his daughter and Rebecca's need for privacy. Anthony recounted a number of situations which

culminated in heated confrontations. Anthony's parenting style saw him lecture Rebecca about what were morally appropriate behaviours. Variations in Anthony's willingness to accept responsibility occurred across sessions.

Intervention

The intervention was designed to provide support to both Anthony and Rebecca on an individual level. Both workers believed that at some stage it would be important to have a family therapy session with Rebecca and Anthony. This would then provide them with a chance to discuss their concerns in a neutral and co-operative problem solving environment.

To assist Anthony in his understanding of Rebecca's behaviour, the intervention aimed to provide Anthony with education about the needs of adolescents and to explore Anthony's parenting style. It was also viewed as important to explore Anthony's feelings towards his former spouse, and provide anger management strategies to enhance the relationship between Anthony and Rebecca.

Difficulties encountered

Cultural factors were an issue for Anthony (a migrant from Europe) in trying to bring up a teenager in Australian society. The rights and expectations of teenagers in Australia are often very different from those expected by other cultures. Secondly, Rebecca was an only child with a father who was not working, thus she had very much become the sole focus of his world. Thirdly, the two workers were receiving conflicting accounts from father and daughter about events and situations. Finally, there was absolute refusal by Rebecca to have a joint session with her father.

Positives

There were many positives in this case, including the acceptance by Anthony that his daughter wanted to live with him, Anthony's recognition that he needed support, his acceptance of counselling and support services, his willingness to reassess his parenting strategies and try different strategies, and his acceptance that the relationship with his former spouse was over.

CASE 2 – JOHN

How / why did the referral occur?

John presented to the duty worker at the health centre with concerns about his pre-school son's temper tantrums, sleeping patterns, and nightmares. The duty worker referred the child, James, for assessment.

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Assessment process

The first assessment session took the form of a home visit. It became apparent in this session that John's main concerns were regarding his son's temper tantrums. John explained that he too reacted to frustration by becoming verbally aggressive and that he had learnt this response from his father. John reported that he was seeking assistance for his verbal aggressiveness.

The second session involved a developmental history being taken. James' language development had reportedly been progressing well until the separation of his parents approximately 8 months earlier. Since then, James reportedly talked far less frequently. During this session it became known that James had a younger sibling with a severe disability. Discussions were also held with workers at the child care centre which James attended. This assessment indicated that James had settled in well at child care and the workers had no concerns about his behaviour or language development.

The following session saw James engaged in free play activities at Springvale Community Health Service.

James' play appeared age appropriate and he co-operated well with the two workers involved in the case. Thus, it was decided that the most appropriate intervention would be to provide parenting strategies and support for John.

Intervention

The intervention was initially designed to provide John with parenting skills to help him manage his son's behaviour. These interventions included the use of planned ignoring, consequences, and the appropriate use of time out.

During the intervention, John's concerns and needs became apparent. These included feeling trapped about the manner in which he had initially become a father, and now a sole father; feeling the need to find a mother for his children; exploring his own sexual desires; living with his mother in her home while he saved for his own home; his desire for freedom to travel whenever the urge arose; his desire to work and to be financially independent; his desire to be somebody who had made a difference in the world; issues surrounding grief regarding his child with a disability; and the demands required to parent a child with severe disabilities.

While the intervention involved discussing parenting issues and supporting John with his parenting, these other issues needed to be addressed. Thus, as the individual parenting work came to a close, a decision was made to involve another worker to work with John on his personal issues. John arrived for only a few of these appointments. Six months later, John re-accessed services at the health centre to request assistance in managing his personal issues and children. John again failed to arrive for regular appointments, but the family has continued to present in crisis many times since the initial referral. This case highlights the need for support and assistance for some single father families where there are multiple issues.

Difficulties encountered

During the presentation of this case at the case allocation meeting, another team member identified John as the husband of her client, who was attending the health centre for issues

surrounding domestic violence. This initially led to questions being raised as to whether the children's basic needs were being met, eg, physically and/or emotionally. It also meant that the worker had information about the client which he had not disclosed.

Gender issues were also important in this case. It was perceived by both the worker and the duty worker that John appeared to present himself in a positive light to the female workers who had contact with him on an individual basis.

Positives

There were a number of positives from this case, including: John accessing counselling and consistently arriving; John trying to implement parenting strategies; and, John actively trying to change his aggressive tendencies.

LINKING THEORY & PRACTICE

The following describes a number of issues which have been documented in the literature and/or observed in our cases. Many of these issues are important factors to bear in mind when working with sole parents, whether male or female, although some of these appear unique to male sole parents. The final two topic headings covered in this section explore these unique issues, namely, father's self-concept/personal worth and the lack of support for male sole parents. It is hoped that awareness of the issues that may face single fathers enables a comprehensive assessment and ensures these families receive appropriate assistance.

1. Relationship with children

The relationship between the father and his children may be influenced by the emotional needs of the father. For example, he may have a need to be liked, or feel the need to be rigid and controlling in order to prove to family members, friends and peers that he can manage. To manage this, Greif and DeMaris (1990) suggest that fathers and children should be helped to recognise that single fatherhood is a unique position. Furthermore, these inherent emotional needs must be explored to help ensure the relationship between the father and children is not

compromised. In the case studies presented, the relationship between father and child needed to be addressed for both Anthony and John in individual sessions.

2. Father's social life

Men who are sole parents often talk of feeling socially isolated and cut off from peers. Wilson (1988) found that friendship patterns and leisure activities change for many single fathers and have isolating consequences. Wilson (1988) also found that loneliness was cited as the most difficult aspect of being a single father.

Single fathers also often disclose the need for intimacy. Establishing new relationships with women is frequently viewed as extremely difficult. Often there is confusion as to what their needs are; for example, is it a friend, a sexual partner, or a mother for their children? (DeMaris & Greif, 1997). There are concerns about the new rules for dating, financial and time constraints, difficulties for women adjusting to a relationship where the man is a sole parent, difficulty blending families, and fears about their children's reactions to a new partner. These issues are echoed both in the literature (for example, Greif & DeMaris, 1990; Gregg, 1994; Wilson, 1988) and in the cases outlined above, as well as others seen at Springvale Community Health Service. When working with single fathers these issues need to be explored and, if appropriate, addressed.

Unresolved anger and hostility can make it difficult for (parents) to make the children's best interest a primary concern

3. Cultural and spiritual beliefs

These areas need to be investigated and addressed. Counsellors need to be sensitive to the diverse cultural needs of clients. The involvement of children in these beliefs may also be an issue, and the age of the child may have a bearing

on this. It is not possible to have expert knowledge on all cultures. What can be achieved, however, is empathy and a willingness to explore cultural aspects with clients so that the work engaged in can be mindful of these issues. In the case of Anthony, it was extremely important to be culturally sensitive, while also highlighting some of the differences in culturally acceptable behaviours for children and adolescents in Australia.

4. Balancing home and work

Greif, DeMaris and Hood (1993) found that the more support that single fathers receive from their place of employment and work colleagues, the fewer changes they have to make in work routines. This then had an impact on these fathers' perceptions of their relationships with their children. Fathers who had to make fewer changes in work routines had positive attitudes towards their children. Furthermore, only 17% of their sample reported that it had not been difficult to manage work and child care. John found this aspect particularly difficult to manage. Work arrangements were often affected because his children were sick. It was difficult for him to commit to contracts when there was uncertainty about his children's well-being. Anthony, on the other hand, was no longer working. This then had another consequence in that he had too much time to focus on Rebecca, when in fact she needed space to develop her independence.

A sense of worth for men can be tied into whether or not they are working or earning money. Men may also feel judged in today's society by their success at work (Greif, 1995b). Having primary responsibility for their children may mean that single fathers need to make adjustments to work arrangements. These may include seeking work environments that have provision for flexible hours, and accepting that their employee may not be available for business trips. Gregg (1994) suggests that this may lead to re-negotiation of what it means to have work and a career. Awareness and sensitivity to the difficulty often experienced in balancing home and work is clearly needed when working with this population.

5. Relationship with the children's mother

Greif (1995b) notes that when relationships are going well between ex-partners, there is often an easier transition for single parent families. The availability of the mother can also have an impact on the children's well-being. There may be unresolved issues for the children which need to be addressed, for example, feelings of abandonment, grief or self-blame at the loss of their mother. These were clearly issues which faced Rebecca and needed to be worked through.

If there is hostility between the children's father and mother, these issues need to be addressed. Partners often remain emotionally tied to one another after separating. Unresolved anger and hostility can make it difficult for them to make the children's best interest a primary concern (DeMaris & Greif, 1997). Both fathers in the case studies had unresolved issues and feelings towards their ex-partners which needed to be worked through. Greif and DeMaris (1990) suggest that fathers need help to separate their role of ex-spouse from that of parent. DeMaris and Greif (1997) provide useful strategies for working through this conflict.

6. How men have come into the position of sole parent

Mendes (1976) coined the term 'seekers' versus 'assenters'. Seekers were deemed to be men who actively sought out custody of their children while assenters were those who were forced to care for their children. It was proposed that parenting styles of single fathers can be influenced by the manner in which they came by this role. Mendes (1976) claimed that fathers in her study who were seekers were better adjusted than the fathers who were assenters. More recent literature has been divided in this area, which perhaps reflects the complexity of the situation.

In the above cases, Anthony did not actively seek out the parenting role, however he did believe that he was the most appropriate person to parent Rebecca. John actively sought sole custody. These two cases would not support Mendes' claim, rather they highlight the numerous issues which

can affect the parenting capabilities of a sole parent.

7. Fathers' self-concept / personal worth

The father's self-concept will be based on the usual interactions a person has, for example, with friends and peers, and also his appraisal of himself as a father (Greif and DeMaris 1990; Gregg, 1994).

Greif and DeMaris (1990) suggest that when their children are doing well, sole fathers will feel confident. However, sole fathers may receive contradictory or less supportive feedback from family and/or friends about having custody. Alternatively, help offered by others may be misconstrued by sole fathers as suggesting they are not competent.

Agencies which make their services more available to male sole parents, and perhaps provide assertive outreach in this area, may also decrease the risk for children in these families.

In a study investigating self-expectations of performance effectiveness for male single parents, there was an overwhelming belief by these men that they could perform well enough to meet the needs of their children. Anecdotally, however, they reveal a high degree of anxiety about their own expectations of their performance (Nieto, 1990).

Employment can also have an impact on single fathers and their concept of self-worth. If fathers place significance upon being a breadwinner, then they may experience the dilemma of managing work and caring for their children. This is more of a problem for men who place high values upon being a breadwinner, and when their perceptions of self-worth are based on this. This was the case for John and the reason why he was referred for individual work in this area. Wilson (1988) found that many single fathers in

his study viewed their work as an important source of self-affirmation and self-fulfilment. Thus, for single fathers who are unable to find supportive work environments that are sensitive to their needs as single fathers, the likelihood of a negative impact on their perceptions of self-worth is increased. This could not come at a worse time for many of these men, particularly if they are still recovering from the loss of a relationship.

Attention needs to be paid to sole fathers' concept of self-worth and the support networks available to them.

8. Lack of support for male sole parents

From anecdotal accounts and from the literature, it would appear that male sole parents are often not socially supported by their friends in a parenting capacity (Gregg, 1994). Men often discuss their children in a general way, such as what their children are doing at school and in sport. Sole fathers may find it difficult to broach more sensitive parenting issues around which they require information, such as a teenage daughter's need for privacy or her developing sexuality (as seen in the case of Anthony). There may also be fears around the possible misinterpretation of this information. This may leave some sole fathers feeling alone and confused about their parenting role.

Gregg (1994) states that 'single fathers need other single fathers' (p.97). Groups for men provide them with the opportunity for support, role models and solace. However, unlike sole mothers' groups which are more widely supported by agencies, there appears to be a lack of similar group support for sole fathers. If support is offered, what is the impact of male sole parents having female facilitators or therapists? Will men listen and interpret information provided to them differently than if the therapist was male? These are issues which clearly need further exploration to ensure that services offered provide the most benefit to this population.

The unique issues which face male sole parents (self concept/personal worth and lack of support) may place further strains on the resources these families

have when they are already confronting a number of other difficult issues (for example, serious financial difficulties, a lack of adult role models for the children, fathers who do not want to be the custodial parent, fathers with unresolved and consuming personal issues). This may lead single fathers to feel frustrated, confused, angry and resentful, and may increase the likelihood of them lapsing into parenting styles which are emotionally charged, controlling, and/or punitive, giving rise to protective concerns.

CONCLUSION

With any family, consideration should be given to all factors which influence their functioning. These can include school, work, relatives, friends, peers, employers, and cultural and spiritual beliefs. For those who are single parents, there are further issues that may impact on the family unit. These can include balancing home duties and work (eg. relying on one income and needing to be flexible with work hours), relationships with the non-custodial parent, how they have come into the position of sole parent, and investing time in a new relationship.

As mentioned in the previous section, two further issues may influence single fathers and their families and perhaps increase the likelihood of risk for their children. These are the father's self-concept/ personal worth and the lack of

support for single fathers, both socially and often from welfare services.

While many single fathers capably manage in the role of primary carer, there are those who require assistance (Greif, 1995b). To be effective this assistance needs to be perceived as genuinely helpful (Wilson, 1988).

The issues outlined in the section Linking Theory and Practice are useful guides for investigating how best welfare workers can assist these families and hopefully decrease the likelihood of risk for children in these families. Clearly, there is every indication that the number of single father families will continue to increase. Agencies which make their services more available to male sole parents, and perhaps provide assertive outreach in this area, may also decrease the risk for children in these families. This is particularly important when the literature indicates that single fathers show significant resistance to seeking assistance due to concerns about being stereotyped (Wilson, 1988). An increase in knowledge about the issues facing these families goes some distance towards making agencies 'single father friendly'. It is hoped that in the not too distant future, employment agencies and the general community will also follow in this process. □

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