

# Working with fathers

## The non-deficit perspective .

**Andrew King**

*One of the highlights of the 1990s has been the greater recognition of the role of fatherhood by government departments, media organisations and community services. However this apparent embrace of fathering also reveals an underlying tension. This paper reflects on Burnside's extensive experience in developing father-valuing programs that support children and families within disadvantaged communities.*

*As practitioners, the need for quick decision making may result in the resources which fathers (within separated or intact families) can offer being overlooked. Drawing on current USA research into non-deficit approaches to fathering, the paper recognises a variety of assumptions, which reduce the resources that fathers provide. Due to socialisation, Australian males often display a healthy dose of suspicion and mistrust of authority figures. Because of this, it is important for professionals to maximise the initial period of engagement when they have contact with a family. A variety of case studies are used to examine the challenge of engaging fathers in the process of strengthening family systems.*

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

This poem was written by a 29-year-old father called Tom, who at present is struggling to stop his three children from being removed by the Department of Community Services. To look at his current reactions, it is hard to identify the level of love that he feels towards his family. He acknowledges that at present he feels like giving up but something small within him keeps trying. You can only understand his battle when you discover that he was a street kid at the age of ten and in prison by the age of eighteen. Today, at his workplace, he is a proud worker who is recognised as very hard working. He has resigned and been reappointed four times in the past three months and is known by the management as being volatile. His employer identifies with his strength. His last encounter with the Department of Community Services saw him being arrested for kicking in the front door of the building. However, three weeks later he received a written apology concerning the instigating circumstance.

To understand Tom, it is very easy to focus on his deficits, as there are many aspects of his life that are less than ideal. However, if any agency is to work with Tom and his family, an alternative perspective needs to be generated that values his strengths and the basic motivation he expresses in the above

poem. These motivations may rarely be seen, but they are the basic forces that keep Tom trying again. My focus in working with Tom has been to allow him to experience more fully the significance of this basic motivating force and how it can change his relationships.

In working with men, Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) argue that fathering is often seen from a deficit perspective. The deficit perspective would assume that men are largely seen as uninvolved and uninterested in the lives of their children and as unwilling to change. This assumption is supported by many images of separated fathers as not supporting their children financially and disinterested in being involved with their children. Some people are suspicious of young men caring for young children, and assume that fathers inadequately care for the basic needs of young children. Within community services, workers can have a heightened sense of male inadequacies in parenting due to the special target group that they work with. However the recent national research completed by Russell et al (1999) found that the majority of community service professionals/workers believed that mothers and fathers should share parenting tasks and activities equally.

### HOW THE DEFICIT PERSPECTIVE ASSUMPTION IS EXPRESSED

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

#### ■ The 'abusing' father

Russell et al (1999) identified that 48% of community welfare workers/professionals believe that up to 24% of fathers physically abuse their children, and 31% of professionals believe that

24% of fathers sexually abuse their children. These figures are higher than the national statistics on child abuse and neglect and would have a negative influence on how professionals develop a trusting relationship with most fathers. This level of abuse is then traced back to the abusive fathering actions of the previous generation (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997).

■ **The 'emotionally challenged' father**

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

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

■ **Fathers' under-involvement in household activities**

Russell et al (1999) found that men are spending a similar proportion of time on household activities as they did ten years ago. Whilst this may be regrettable, it is sometimes used as a basis to infer that men are uninvolved and stubbornly/selfishly resist change and greater involvement (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997). This tension is better understood by recognising that a gender based difference in perception can exist concerning the timing and standards surrounding household duties, men and women often have different perceptions about household tasks. This may also be accompanied by long travelling times to and from work, and attitudes to household activity can be difficult for anyone to change.

■ **Fathers have little interest in professional feedback about their children**

When health/community welfare professionals provide feedback to families regarding issues that affect their children, they often favour delivering this information to the

mother. This assumption reinforces other assumptions that fathers are deficient in their interest in knowing and their knowledge concerning the basic health needs of their children.

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

There are many reasons that fathers play a secondary role in health/community welfare professional relationships. Most significantly, appointment times are during the day when it is difficult for men to have time off from work.

However men can be questioning and wary in the early stages of family engagement. In the author's experience, men have a strong suspicion of external people who influence their family life. Many men have difficulty trusting people outside the family and question the relevance of new ideas concerning the relationships in their life. From boyhood, a competitiveness exists that teaches young men not to 'be walked over by other people'. This process continues as the child grows into a man, entrenching values of independence and autonomy. For many men, a suggestion that they need to change what they are thinking or doing is met by a high degree of resistance, especially when a suggestion contains a deficit assumption like 'men should show more of their feelings.' This assumption contains a strong image of 'something needs to be fixed', ie, 'the father has to learn to act differently'. Due to this, professionals need to work hard at the pre-engagement stage when working with fathers to find an alternative way of dealing with the defensiveness (this will be discussed further in the paper).

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

- They have little recognition of growth and development.
  - They misconstrue the motives, feelings, attitudes and hopes of most fathers.
  - They create barriers to change rather than its promotion.
  - They have a narrow standard of good parenting.
- (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997)

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

**GEORGE**

George is 43 years old and his two-year-old daughter is currently in foster care with the NSW Department of Community Services. The mother of the child lives with a new boyfriend who is periodically violent. The mother is still a poly drug user with two older children residing with her continually at risk. When George joined a Burnside Fathers' Group, he was angry, resentful and very distrustful of the system. He wanted his daughter to be safe primarily, and since living with the mother would not ensure her safety, he desired to be the primary caregiver. He was resentful that the Department would not take seriously his commitment to be the resident father. The authorities would do anything to enable the mother to demonstrate her ability to change but, as a father, although he had ceased his heroin use several years previously, he needed to do drug urine testing two or three times more than the mother. This was also true for attending counselling sessions and obtaining psychological reports.

Early in the group, it became apparent that George loved his daughter and that throughout his life he had always been under-appreciated. The group provided an environment to validate the important role he wanted to play as a father, and to gain recognition and support. This was one of the few times in his life he had experienced a professional being on his side. The group learned how George had ceased his poly drug use once he became a father (he referred

of children call fathers to use their fathering capabilities to meet those needs' (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997, p30).

This perspective assumes that fathers are able to choose (within certain constraints and contexts) to live these assumptions.

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

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

- To commit: the physical and ongoing support that a father provides and his mental awareness and involvement with the child throughout their lifetime.
- To choose: the capacity to make day-to-day decisions for the children that meet their needs.
- To care: the ability to attend to the important transitions in a child's life and working to provide the optimal conditions that maximise their growth.
- To change: the ability to adapt as children grow older and the father matures in his relationship to the children.
- To create: the creation of resources for material

well being and the resolution of problems that allow opportunities for emotional well being to develop.

- To connect: the ability to form lasting and healthy attachments with the children/partner. These attachments will change over time to meet the child's evolving needs.
- To communicate: the capacity to relate with children by sharing meaningfully with them, both verbally and non-verbally.

However, suggestions are more likely to be considered when professionals work in ways that create different responses within men. This involves engaging men through the use of non-deficit assumptions, recognising that 'families/children are a central motivation in most fathers' lives'. Instead of men resisting the feeling that 'they need to be fixed or changed', a practitioner can work beside the father, thereby creating a mutual change process.

### **STRENGTHENING FAMILIES THROUGH WORKING WITH MEN**

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

#### **Build on the male motivation to develop a close relationship with his child.**

##### **SAM**

Sam is an eighteen-year-old young Dad who has been involved with detention centres and the police since the age of twelve. At the birth of his first son, he decided to stop stealing cars and doing 'break and enters'. The birth of his child had a profound effect on him. However, his troubled childhood and pent up anger always got in the way of him and his partner. The Department of Community Services ended up removing the baby. Throughout the past six months, Sam has been committed to developing new ways of dealing with old situations. At present he is now walking away when tensions are high and he is able to recognise the impact that violence has on children. Through ceasing to use marijuana he

is discovering a greater motivation for life and is arguing less with his partner. Instead of bottling everything up inside himself, he sits down and talks problems through. His greatest excitement has been to experience that the above changes have worked effectively within his life.

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

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

Burnside Fathers' Support Service uses many different techniques for engaging fathers. Within the local community, local newspapers are encouraged to promote positive aspects of fathering. As flyers promoting programs and activities do not appear to be effective in engaging men, other professionals in the area are encouraged to speak directly to fathers they know about forthcoming group activities.

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

##### **DENNIS**

Dennis was very tentative about coming to the group. In the end he was encouraged to attend the first session and to give the group leader an honest reaction to what he found. Dennis is still attending the group nine months later. It was very different to what he expected: 'I thought it would be just a lecture'.

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

Stories are a more familiar and safer way of communicating with men. They provide a context where respect and mutual concerns can be developed. Since men do not often have the opportunity to tell a significant story of

their life, it can easily generate a curiosity and intensity that is important for learning to take place. The art in working with stories is the movement from the known to the unknown. This is generated through critical questioning that reviews a story in a different shape and form.

Burns (1999) explores the creative use of critical questioning in the training environment. It can easily be applied to the context of group work with fathers. It is significant because it involves being specific – relate questions to events, situations, people, and actions. It works from the particular to the general – what learning can be generalised to other life experiences. It is conversational – describing ideas and experiences in an informal way. It challenges and extends – through the reflection of other stories or examining the same story in a different way. It works from a place of equality where no one insight is necessarily better than another.

From the routine weekly basis of reflecting on stories of the week, the group leader can use different stories for different purposes.

#### **BOB**

Bob is a very loud and brash person. Besides struggling through his second separation experience, and a court case regarding his behaviour at the last break-up, he also regularly experiences depression. Silence is difficult for Bob, so he fills the time with much of his own talk. Within the group the challenge for Bob is to slow down and hear the quieter voice, the voice of the other person. This is immensely difficult, but Bob's involvement in the group has been a lifesaver and has had a direct

application to the other relationships in his life. Even after many participant changes, Bob is still a committed and keen group member.

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

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

Many fathers are focused on the big picture. This supports the idea that men respond more easily to the role of life long care and protection of their children. They spend more time in forward planning and preparing for forthcoming years. This may mean that they will need some coaching in needing to deal with immediate issues. However, these responses to challenges are still often driven by the central motivation of the children and family.

#### **Pay attention to the needs and unresolved issues for women.**

Women have worked very hard to receive the recognition that they deserve. Not only are many women in full-time employment but they still play the primary roles in parenting and maintaining the household. Like the steps taken by women in the context of the women's movement, so too for men, many changes occur as old stereotypical assumptions are abandoned and new

non-deficit images of competence and confidence are adopted. It is important that programs do not focus on men's rights or women's rights, but on what is in the best interest of the children. It is in this context that children, mothers and fathers can mutually prosper.

#### **CONCLUSION**

A significant feature of engaging men and running fathering programs is the use of non-deficit assumptions. Deficit assumptions are quite widespread throughout the community and amongst health and community welfare professionals. As these assumptions are challenged, a wider range of men will embrace the importance of fathering programs as most men widely recognise that family/children are a fundamental motivation to their life. They also recognise that fathering today is very different from their own experience of being fathered and, through working with a non-deficit professional approach, Burnside has found them prepared to reflect on their life and the necessary changes to be made. □

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