Why don't fathers attend parent education programs?

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This article discusses the lack of attendance of fathers at parent education programs from both gender and personality perspectives. Some suggestions are made that may guide decisions so that father participation rates can be increased.

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At all levels of society, parents have long been offered advice on how to raise their children. Books and information have proliferated, for example, Dobson (1970), Guarendi (1985) and Lewis and Lewis (1989), and even the World Wide Web (Morris, Dollahite & Hawkins, 1999). Instruction on how to parent, defined by Fine (1980) as applying to organised programs that are systematically and conceptually based and intended to impart information, awareness or skills to groups of participants on aspects of parenting, has had an extensive development (O'Brien, 1993; Mellor & Storer, 1993; Taffel, 1992). Professionals have continued to devise such programs to 'enhance parent's overall competence and self-efficacy, knowledge of child development, and capacities to parent more effectively' (Kagan, 1995, p.2).

Group work effectiveness for parent education has been clearly documented (Auerbach, 1968; Curran, 1989; Wyckoff, 1980). The format, for six to ten weekly sessions of one to two hours' duration, typically includes the presentation of specific ideas, some discussion, sharing or processing of ideas and experiences, skill building exercises and homework exercises to consolidate the skills presented. Allan and Schultz (1987) described the status of parent education programs in Australia as diverse in theoretical orientations, emphases, topics and settings. Following the distribution of a number of reports (Rodd & Holland, 1989; Rodd, 1989a, 1989b) to Community Services Victoria (now Department of Human Services), the Pilot Parent Education and Skilling Networks Program (subsequently called Parent Help) was established and flexible programs were constructed to best balance family needs and agency resources (Mellor & Storer, 1993). Programs became available for a range of parents, including those with psychiatric illnesses, and for ethnic groups including Vietnamese, Samoan, Turkish and Koori. No single conceptual framework guides the development of such programs, and no one particular program has been found to be more effective than another (First & Way, 1995). Actually participating in a program to improve parenting, together with the style of the Parent Educator, are considered to be more important for the participant than the type of program attended (Curran, 1989; Dembo, 1992).

A problem related to parent education is that, compared with mothers, few fathers attend (Noller & Taylor, 1989), and

that the creation of parent education and support programs for fathers, along with research evaluating such programs, has been sparse (Matthews & Hudson, 2001; McBride, 1989). A study by Smith and Pugh (1996) in the UK reported that nationally about four per cent of parents attended group parent education programs at some time while their children were growing up. The majority of participants, however, were white, middle-class mothers, and few programs attracted fathers. It was suggested by Levant (1987) that attracting fathers to participate in parent education programs was a challenge.

Many men are considered to be basically unprepared to assume the active parental role being asked of them by new societal expectations, having deficits in such areas as knowledge of normal child development and parenting skills (McBride, 1989), and they would therefore benefit from attending parent education programs. Benefits identified by 20 participants in a 'Responsible Fatherhood' program included individual as well as relational benefits, emotional support, and contextual benefits such as discussing custody, visitation and child support issues (Anderson, Kohler & Letiecq, 2002).

Badinter (1995) notes that most fathers still have responsibility for their children even though many live outside the family home through divorce and separation, and they therefore need to learn the skills of fatherhood. Biddulph's (1995) book, *Manhood: An Action Plan for Changing Men's Lives*, was written to encourage fathers to take an active part in the childhood experiences of their boys, since it has been demonstrated that both girls and boys generally benefit from the contact and discipline of their fathers (Wright, 1989). The following considerations will provide a framework for reflecting on the difficulties fathers have in participating in parent education programs, and for providing some suggestions to change their perception of their roles as parents and parenting skill learners.

THE ROLE OF FATHER IN PARENTING HIS GROWING CHILDREN

The way in which parents raise their children has a significant impact on their development, yet researchers and educators have only recently acknowledged the important influence of fathers. The mother-child interaction and continuity of care were considered to be of most importance for the infant's emotional development, while the father's value was in the economic and emotional support of the mother (Bowlby, 1965). That is, there was a belief that mothers were almost solely responsible for the psychological, physical and emotional development of their children. When focus was placed on the father in early studies, it was on his absence due to desertion, divorce, death or vocational demands (Silcock, 1979).

Historically, a number of changes have occurred in the roles of mothers and fathers, linked to economic and cultural shifts. In the eighteenth century, families worked side by side in farms, shops, and market places. Roles were probably blurred, with mother, father and even children being the providers and nurturers (Kimmel, 2000; Mintz, 1998). Fathers were considered to be the primary parents because they legally owned the family's property, including the children (Cherlin, 1998). In the mid-nineteenth century, father and breadwinner worked outside of the home at a factory, mine or office. The woman, mother and housekeeper, governed the family home.

> This new organization of work engendered de facto a radical separation of the sexes and roles ... the world was divided into two heterogeneous spheres that scarcely communicated (Badinter, 1995, p.86).

The mother's role was defined as 'expressive'; she was the nurturer and homemaker, responsible for the household tasks and care, supervision and socialisation of the children. In contrast, the father's role in the family was defined as 'instrumental'; he was the sole economic provider (Simons, Whitbeck, Conger & Melby, 1990; Neubauer, 1996). Sections of society became concerned that boys were being raised almost solely by their mothers and would therefore be deficient in masculinity traits. So in the 1920s a more active fatherly role was encouraged for the father so that he would provide a model of masculine maturity to his sons.

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Since World War II in Australia, there has been a radical shift in the ideas about fatherhood, men's relationship to their children, and understanding of parenting (Grbich 1987; Woodworth, Belsky & Crnic, 1996). Evidence from more recent studies of fathers' contributions to child development supports the view that fathers may influence different aspects of a child's development, ranging from enhancing the child's cognitive development, to helping to shape sex-role identification (McBride, 1990). Arguments against this come from Palomba (1995) who claims that fatherhood has been diminished in terms of its social value and male identity, and a father's relationship with his children is no longer legally defined.

The role of the father as a parent has been a source of conflicting reports. Hawkins and Belsky (1989) identified that fathers decreased in self esteem across the transition to

parenthood. Badinter (1995) claims that fathers who participate actively in the care and upbringing of their children are happier with their fatherhood than those not involved. When 91% of parents responding to a South Australian survey about parenting needs were mothers, the authors (Hunt, Hawkins & Goodlet 1992) commented that:

> ... in this sample responding to a request from their school was obviously considered to be the responsibility of the mother (p.9).

Fletcher (1995), describing a school meeting he had organised for fathers, states:

> Since few fathers attend school functions, it has been assumed that most fathers have no thoughts on school issues, but at our meeting ... the breadth and strength of concerns left us floundering (p.117).

La Barbara and Lewis's study of children in therapy (cited in Noller & Taylor, 1989) showed that fathers seemed to play a pivotal role in determining whether their children actually received the treatment recommended by the clinician. Also, the likelihood of families completing treatment was significantly higher when fathers accompanied their families to the initial interview.

The actual role of fathers in parenting their children is still an area wide open for exploration, possibly because the main emphasis on research into the family has been placed on mothering, or mothers as parents.

The difference between both parents' actions with their children has been stressed, as well as similarities in the child's responses to either mother or father. Such reported differences have included:

- mothers spend more time than fathers with their children;

- fathers tend to play games that are more stimulating, vigorous and exciting than the mother's with a small baby;

- mothers prefer visual games that induce the child to focus its attention;

- fathers encourage physical activity, independence and exploration in an older male child, while stimulating gentleness, passivity and tranquility in a female child (Badinter, 1995; Neubauer, 1996);

- fathers see themselves in a supporting role, and are more likely to defer to their partners' beliefs about parenting as expert knowledge;

- fathers are more likely to be involved in constructive parenting when they believe parenting to be consequential for child development;

- mothers are able to prevent a depressed mood from interfering with parental role obligation, while economic strain causes fathers to become depressed and to perceive children as difficult (Simons et al, 1990).

The actual role of fathers in parenting their children is still an area wide open for exploration, possibly because the main emphasis on research into the family has been placed on mothering, or mothers as parents (Grbich, 1987; Molloy, 1980). Consequently, when studies have looked at parenting, mothers have usually been the targets for programs (Owen & Mulvihill, 1994) and little attention has been paid to the fathers (Devlin, Brown, Beebe & Parulls, 1992).

In support of this observation, it has been found that data have not been analysed separately when small numbers of fathers have attended parenting programs (for example, Mudaly, 1993; Spoth & Redmond, 1995; Thomas, 1996). Even though fathers were involved in the Thompson, Grow, Ruma, Daly and Burke (1993) study, only data from the mothers were used. Alternatively, when Tebes, Grady and Snow (1989) targeted both parents in their study, they concluded that fathers should be included in parent training. After surveying 1,132 single fathers, Greif and De Maris (1990) concluded that fathers are more likely to require skills training in the complex issues of parenting than mothers.

One could not, therefore, be criticised for assuming that men's non-attendance at parent education programs reflects the ambivalence that researchers and writers have about the role of fathers in parenting – that fathering is a non-role, that fathering either does not matter, or that it is so similar to mothering that separate (or any) education for the role is superfluous. The following extrapolates from the findings of some studies about masculinity. In the author's view, gender-role constructs are not simple, nor have they been fully explored. It is felt that some of the male characteristics proposed may provide clues to father non-attendance at parent education programs.

Males do not seek help easily

Attendance at parent education programs would be seen primarily as seeking help to be a better parent to one's children. Help seeking is an area of masculine behaviour that is viewed as weak. Boldero and Fallon (1995) reported less willingness in men than women to seek help from professionals or family. This may originate in early conditioning to hide weaknesses and not expose feelings. Consequently men are taught to ignore the signs of problems

as adults and may be less willing to seek help over matters that trouble them the most.

Hands (1996) found that men would internalise or deny problems rather than seek help regarding achievement and 'weakness-related' areas such as study, finances and depression. In interpersonal areas such as family and relationships, they would talk to a friend rather than a professional or family member. Seeking help from professionals was seen as a very last resort (Boldero & Fallon, 1995; Hands, 1996), even an unacceptable admission of failing. Perhaps talking to a parent educator, especially in the company of a partner and other parents, could be regarded as a sign of weakness and a threat to positive self-presentation. If this was detected (by others, one's friends ...) the father may feel emotionally weak and extremely vulnerable.

Males do not easily talk of feelings

In well facilitated groups formed to discuss topics such as parenting, it would be expected that feelings of frustration, joy, sadness, guilt, loneliness, fear or the like would be aroused and expressed. Snell (1986) reported that greater identification with the masculine role, in terms of suppression of feelings of tenderness and love, curtailment of emotions, and obsession with attaining a successful career, was associated with less willingness to reveal personal information.

Males are often discouraged in early childhood from the disclosure of such feelings, with messages such as 'big boys don't cry', 'don't show your anger here', 'take that frown off your face' (Freed, 1984). That is, despite feeling a range of emotions, men have learned not to express them. It is suggested that men over-compensate for deficits in other areas of emotional experience by identifying a range of feelings as anger, and expressing them as such (Hands, 1996).

In my practice as a psychologist, I have often found that when men wish to talk of their feelings, they would rather be counselled by a female than by a male. The reason for this may be two-fold. Firstly, men find it difficult to believe that fellow males will be able to understand their feelings, and secondly, they believe there is a higher possibility that women will understand and continue to respect them in their perceived weakness.

Males do not easily face inadequacies

By attending a parent education program there is a tacit agreement that the participants are acknowledging inadequacies about their parenting skill. Sometimes the very title of the program may suggest that parents prior to the program have little knowledge, but at the end will be all-knowing. *Parent Effectiveness Training* (Gordon, 1975), *Systematic Training for Effective Parenting* (Dinkmeyer &

McKay, 1976) and *Parenting Skills Program* (Paull, 1986) have all had this criticism levelled at their titles.

After deciding to attend the program, the very act of entering the group environment may be frightening for some fathers. They have identified and admitted inadequacy about their parenting ability, and they ask such questions as 'am I the only father who cannot do this job?' and 'will they laugh at my difficulties?' While mothers ask similar questions, they have different communication styles (Waters & Saunders, 1996), and do not appear to have such difficulty in accepting that it is all right to have inadequacies and to search for ways to overcome them. Waters and Saunders (1996) additionally claim that when males feel inadequate and challenged, they retreat to work, as it is the place where they can exercise the most control and experience the greatest sense of mastery.

Closely linked to feelings of inadequacy is self-esteem, which Hawkins and Belsky (1989) found decreased in fathers with increased involvement with their sons. They suggest that with perseverence their self-esteem will be enhanced, but that 'more preparation and training in the skills and attitudes required for effective parenting will undoubtedly quicken this process' (p.382).

> *It appears that separate groups for mothers and fathers are important, so that they can be involved in specifying their own needs, thus allowing them to raise, air and examine their own values, strengths and weaknesses in their parenting.*

Males do not visualise their expertise in parenting

When attending a parent education program, the discussion will, as expected, be about parenting, an area males have not been given preparation to know much about (McBride, 1989). Biddulph (1995) is concerned that fathers need to learn the art of fathering because at a deeper level of preparation, their role models for fatherhood have been defective. He tells fathers that:

> ... many elements you wish to bring to parenting your children – consistency, firmness, warmth and involvement – you may have never received from a male figure yourself (p.107).

Areas of knowledge seen to be affected by this lack of preparation include knowledge of normal child development, developmentally appropriate parenting skills and sensitivity to children's needs (McBride, 1990).

Pugh and De'Ath (1984), addressing the consequence of this lack of preparation for fatherhood, say that the majority of fathers:

> ... principally see themselves in terms of their work first and their families second, while even women who work full-time see their primary responsibility as being to their families (p. 21).

Waters and Saunders (1996), writing to males, agree, but explain this in terms of males tending to confuse what they do with what they are – either a good, hard, respected worker or a good husband and father.

Males do not talk easily in groups.

To talk out aloud in a group of strangers is daunting for many people. Small parent education discussion groups make this particularly so for fathers who, firstly, know they will need to express inadequacy to get help, and, secondly, find that the discussion leader is not a teacher or lecturer who will tell them how to fix their particular parenting problem. Because fathers in their focus group survey expressed little interest in parent education programs, Lengua, Roosa, Schupak-Neuberg, Michaels, Berg and Weschler (1992) say that if they are to be included, ' the program should initially provide information designed to convince fathers of the importance of parenting issues and of their involvement as parents' (p.167). Anderson et al (2002) found that one of the barriers to involvement in the fathers' program was that men felt reluctant to join the program, fearing their inability to communicate with other men.

That males do not talk easily in groups is not readily understood, especially when it has been found that males talk more than females. Meighan (1986) claims that adolescent boys in mixed-sex classrooms conform to expectations when they dominate the classroom discussion, whereas girls meet the expectations for their sex when they are quiet or accommodate male-directed talk. Spender (cited by Meighan, 1986) said that adult females, because of their position in society, have less right to talk and possess politeness as part of their successful feminine behaviour. They are therefore more polite than males, and they accommodate, listen to, and are supportive and encouraging to male speakers.

So, in the group there may be fathers who would normally talk more than the females, but may not because they feel inadequate; and mothers who would normally be polite and listen to the males in a group, may consequently be required to talk and express themselves more than in a usual social situation. In this context it would be the fathers who may drop out of the group because their basic needs of expression and expectation are not being met. Perhaps it would be important to have approximately equal numbers of mothers and fathers in the group to provide support. However, Lengua et al (1992) suggest strongly that:

> ... the views and concerns of mothers and fathers were so different that a program that either compromised between these perspectives or tried to satisfy each totally would likely be unsatisfactory to both! (p.167).

STRATEGIES FOR PARENT EDUCATION TO INCREASE FATHER PARTICIPATION

Parenting is stressful and complex, and parents generally report feeling more confident after attending a parent education program. However, very little is known about gender-related parent education program attendance and what keeps fathers away. Improved understanding may lead to the development, implementation and accessibility of parent education programs which can effectively increase father's parenting options – their involvement with their children, responsibility, interaction and competence.

The challenge for parent educators is to increase the participation rate of fathers so that it is seen as normal for both mothers and fathers to want to learn to be the best parents they can be.

A number of strategies have been suggested in the literature, but again, research validation is lacking. The time and energy spent by educators attracting fathers to parent education programs may have to be spent differently from that used to attract mothers. Anderson et al (2002) asked participants how the program could be made more effective for father involvement. Suggestions included making program promotion more visible, involving program graduates in assessment and recruitment, and holding programs over a number of days per week to provide more options for attendance. Because the attendance level of fathers in parent education programs was found to be low, Spoth and Redmond (1996) encouraged the development of strategies to improve this, since higher attendance levels were found to be positively associated with better child management outcomes. They said that minimising barriers to attendance such as the availability of child care, transportation and session scheduling needed attention. Other ideas included incentives such as gift certificates, coupons and free meals for participants. Currently, most parent education programs are held during the daytime when fathers (and mothers) are at work, so at the very least programs should be held at times when it is convenient for both parents to attend.

It appears that separate groups for mothers and fathers are important, so that they can be involved in specifying their own needs, thus allowing them to raise, air and examine

their own values, strengths and weaknesses in their parenting. Devlin et al (1992) described their workshops for divorced or separated fathers, finding that the fathers improved their perception of their performance as parents and increased their effectiveness in talking to and listening to their children. Biddulph (1995) talks of his men's groups where most of the men are fathers, and they foster discussion about what works for their families. McBride (1989) adds support for men-only groups that allow men to come together to discuss different aspects of fatherhood.

The idea of having fathers and children (or indeed, mothers and children) together in a parent education program is quite revolutionary, but it has merit. McBride (1990) found that a father and child parent education/play group program was successful in increasing fathers' competence in parenting skills. As part of this program there was a group discussion to encourage the men to share their feelings and desires about involvement in child rearing. The fathers actively participated in discussions on topics such as discipline, education, sibling rivalry, and ages and stages of development, and they also contributed their own personal feelings and experiences as parents.

It has also long been felt that adolescents should have access to programs on preparation for parenthood, and that they need to be presented with a realistic picture of parenthood, particularly as families now tend to be smaller and provide young people with little experience of what children and babies are really like. Harris (1980) claims that 'potential fathers are a captive audience *only* at school'.

Additionally, some focus needs to be placed on the Parent Educators themselves. They should be suitably qualified to lead groups, and be able to recognise the differing characteristics of male and female participants (Rodd, 1989b). An appropriate knowledge base, skills required to handle difficult and sensitive issues, the ability to respect attitudes which may be at variance with their own, and recognition that levels of parental awareness may be deeply ingrained by long patterns of interaction, are some of the suggested characteristics needed of Parent Educators who will be capable of attracting and maintaining the attention and interest of male as well as female participants of a program.

CONCLUSION

Much is known about mothering but little about fathering as it relates to parenting. Thus by default we know much about attracting mothers to parent education programs, but have been able to do little about attracting fathers to them. We know that active parenting by fathers is important for the emotional and cognitive development of both girls and boys, and that there has been a positive change in the participation of fathers in their children's lives. We know too that a small number of fathers (compared with mothers) currently attend parent education programs to assist them to gain further

skills to nurture and manage their children. The challenge for parent educators is to increase the participation rate of fathers so that it is seen as normal for both mothers and fathers to want to learn to be the best parents they can be.

Possibly, mothers and some fathers who do attend parent education programs do so for essentially similar reasons. But the reasons why more fathers do not attend may be found to be linked to their masculine characteristics that the current program strategies do not address adequately. Therefore, until research is directed to this area, the question of why fathers do not attend parent education programs will not be answered with confidence. In the meantime, Parent Educators will continue to pose the question and experiment with ways to attract fathers to their programs, without knowing why they do not come. ■

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