Focus on practice

A checklist for organisations working with fathers using the non-deficit approach

Andrew King, Steve Sweeney and Ross Fletcher

Following on from the article appearing in Children Australia *Vol 30 No 2 (King 2005), this short paper develops a checklist for organisations working with fathers for assessing the programs they provide to men. The checklist uses four categories – environment, language, initial contact and marketing, and service provision – to assess their programs' strengths and weaknesses.*

The paper provides an opportunity for organisations to benchmark their approach in working with male service users and provides guidance on how program delivery can be improved.

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Andrew King
Steve Sweeney
Ross Fletcher

UnitingCare Burnside
PO Box 6866, Parramatta NSW 2150
Email: aking@burnside.org.au

The landscape for supporting men in family relationships has modified significantly during the last decade. The question has changed from asking if men are interested in accessing family relationship and parenting services, to how organisations might best cater for men's needs.

The Final Report of the Evaluation of the Commonwealth Government's Men and Family Relationships Initiative (O'Brien & Rich 2002) identified that there was a high demand by men for programs that have experience in working specifically 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 for understanding male involvement in families.

The shift from deficit to non-deficit perspectives of fathering (King 2000; King 2005) emerged from the research of Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) in the United States of America. The non-deficit perspective of fathering assumes that men have the ability and interest in relationships to:

- commit – the physical and ongoing support that a father provides and involvement with the child/ren throughout their lifetime
- choose – the capacity to make day to day decisions for the child/ren that meet their needs
- care – the ability to attend to the important transitions in a child's life and to work to provide the optimal conditions that maximise their growth
- change – the ability to adapt as children grow older and the father matures in his relationship with the children
- create – the creation of resources for material well being and the resolution of problems that allow opportunities for the development of emotional well being
- connect – the ability to form lasting and healthy attachments with the children and partner. These attachments will change over time to meet the child's evolving needs
- communicate – the capacity to relate with children by sharing meaningfully with them, both verbally and non-verbally (King 2000).

The delivery of services to men is more successful and effective when a non-deficit approach is adopted. The

Checklist for organisations working with men is based on the experience gained from the establishment and operation of two fathers' centres in the western suburbs of Sydney. The Checklist provides organisations with a tool to appraise their own context for delivering programs to men in family relationships. The assumptions embedded in the Checklist reflect the non-deficit perspective and identify that:

- men are intuitive – they quickly tune into feelings of safety and comfort. They will make rapid assessments about whether a program/service seems friendly and useful or judgemental and critical
- most men place a considerable importance on their relationships with their children
- men appreciate clear rules and expectations on which they can rely, and they trust that other people will do what they promise
- men respect and value feedback that is delivered in a non-threatening and respectful manner
- men can use anger as a defence to protect themselves or others whom they care for, or to maintain or regain control of a perceived unsafe or threatening situation.

The Checklist contains four key areas that need to be addressed for the effective delivery of services for men:

- environment
- language
- initial contact and marketing
- service provision.

Discussion follows on these key areas which underpin the effective delivery of services to men, with suggestions on how improvements can be made to program delivery.

Environment

When a man makes initial contact with a program, the immediate environment and attitude of staff towards him will influence his level of trust. Men may enter new situations with suspicion about what will be expected of them and rely on visual cues to relax. They notice the presence of other men, either entering or leaving the centre or shown in positive images on posters. Some environmental factors that will increase engagement with men include:

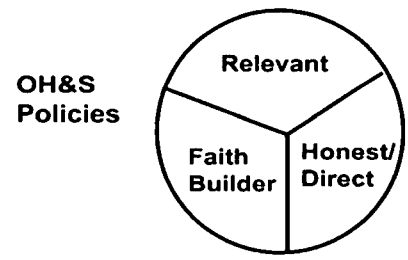
- the use of positive images of men in posters and having suitable reading material in the waiting rooms that may interest men. This includes booklets such as 'Kids Need Dads Who[1]...' that provide an easy read and positive reflection on fathering, and display photographs of events that especially feature images of men and children
- the employment of male staff to work directly with male service users
- the use of premises that are easily accessible, with car parking space or access to public transport. Men may have a low tolerance level, so they might give up trying to access a program if it seems too difficult
- a focus on engaging the male service users at the initial telephone contact. Men use the telephone as the first point of contact to reach out for support. They may ring a large number of agencies to locate an organisation that will be helpful to them. This can result in confusion when professional staff return phone calls, as the male service user may not immediately remember the organisation that they had called
- the provision of services outside normal working hours. Many men find it difficult to access community programs while working part time or full time. It is easier for male service users to access programs when they are offered on weekends or in the evenings.
- ensuring that power differences between professional workers and the service users are minimised and not made explicit.

Language

Language has a significant influence on the successful engagement of men. If the language used by the professional worker is deficit based, it will increase the male service user's level of suspicion and they are less likely to access the program. Some deficit based assumptions include viewing most men as:

- abusing fathers
- emotionally challenged fathers
- under involved in household activities
- having little interest in professional feedback about their children (King 2000).

Figure 1



[1] A small 20 page booklet called 'Kids needs dads who...?' that highlights the important role fathers play with children. It is available from Uniting*Care* Burnside by emailing: aking@burnside.org.au

When working with men, effective language involves three key components as illustrated in Figure 1. These three key components are often reflected in other organisational policies, such as within an Occupational, Health and Safety policy that promotes safe work practice. For example, an organisation may have policies about safe work practices when providing after hours counselling services. Most policies are developed with reference to such core components, making them relevant to the development of father-friendly language. The core components are:

relevance – the discussion needs to be relevant to the service user's needs

faith building – the worker needs to convey the belief that the male service user has the ability to commit, choose, care, change, create, connect and communicate.

honest/direct – Male service users respect people who honestly and respectfully discuss with them the important issues in their life.

CASE EXAMPLE 1

At UnitingCare Burnside Fathers' Support Service in Western Sydney, a large number of separated fathers regularly access the program. The use of direct and relevant language is important in creating a positive direction for managing family separation. The staff encourage men to refer to their 'ex-partners' as the 'mother of their children', rather than their 'ex...'. The word 'ex' conjures up images of someone who is 'no longer important' or is a 'has-been'. This simple change of language is well received by the men as it reinforces a new and positive attitude towards family separation, their child/ren, their previous relationship and themselves.

Some strategies around language that increase engagement with men include:

- remembering that body language is powerful. Develop strong and comfortable body language around male service users regardless of any height or size differences. Men quickly tune into how comfortable other people are around them and this will influence their level of respect. The simple act of shaking hands, for many men, can symbolise a higher level of respect and mutual connection. In different cultural groups and age brackets, a 'high five' will achieve the same effect.
- using non-deficit language to demonstrate a respect for the importance of family relationships in men's lives

CASE EXAMPLE 2 : RELEVANT

*Creating **relevance** with service users is clearly illustrated with a service user, Terry, who has been attending an intensive fathers' group. In recent group session, he gave feedback to the group on the positive effect the group has had on his life since he was released from a correctional centre. During his last time in gaol, someone recommended that he join a fathers' group to help make a smooth transition back into his large family. Terry reflected on what the group meant to him and concluded that it 'focused on my kids, and me', and this was vital in establishing relevance.*

It is quite a challenge for any parent to move from such a highly controlled environment as a prison to the chaos of living in a family with many children. The children had not seen their father for a significant part of their lives. Terry began his involvement with the fathers' group four months prior to release and continued for over a year thereafter. He now credits the support from the group as the major factor in him staying with the family and not re-offending.

- allowing time for male service users to reflect on a discussion after you have been honest and direct with them. Men can become frustrated and will need an opportunity to vent their feelings and time to consider the importance of what has been said. However, no form of intimidation or threat of violence or aggression is acceptable.
- being comfortable with the range of approaches used by men in relating to others. This is very different from the average female interaction. Men can be, for a variety of reasons, more boisterous, louder, and have a stronger presence in social situations. Generally this is not intended as threatening, yet can be perceived as such.
- being child focused with men who are fathers. The child focused approach cuts through all other situations affecting the men's lives and helps them to redirect their focus to the child/ren, eg, 'How do you think that will affect your child?'

INITIAL CONTACT AND MARKETING

Men will respond more positively when a range of different programs are offered such as telephone counselling, face-to-face counselling and group work. Some men will favour informal environments that have little structure, while others will desire a context where their concerns are specifically addressed. Some men will feel more comfortable in groups and others in face-to-face counselling. It is important for

CASE EXAMPLE 3 : FAITH BUILDER

*Being a **faith builder** demands perseverance and the belief that a father has the capacity to make appropriate choices. For example, Adrian has been a member of an intensive fathers' group for over 18 months. At the beginning, Adrian was experiencing regular conflict at home with parent/teenager power issues. Adrian struggled to express himself in the group and would resist any encouragement to speak. After some weeks he began to be vocal about his own experience and supported men in dealing with their own issues. He became less reactive with his own teenage children and developed a stronger and more supportive relationship with his partner.*

organisations to provide the widest range of responses for working with men that is financially possible.

The best approach for promoting programs to men is by word of mouth. Due to the high level of initial suspicion, men often ignore fliers and newspaper advertisements unless they are experiencing, and wish to address, a current life crisis. When the crisis has not reached its crescendo, men respond best to the recommendation of a program by someone they trust. Friends, family members, partners, colleagues, human resource workers, doctors, other professionals and 'mates' can be respected 'gatekeepers' who can influence men. At least 75 per cent of referrals at Uniting*Care* Burnside Fathers' Support Service in Sydney rely on some form of recommendation by a respected 'gatekeeper'.

When a program for men commences, it is initially important to advertise in newspapers or fliers that create interest amongst these 'gatekeepers', as well as appealing to men. Written promotions should clearly identify what will be gained by attending the program. It is recommended to use 'doing' words or 'active' words and, for group programs, to emphasise that there will be an opportunity to hear other men's ideas.

SERVICE PROVISION

It appears that men appreciate a basic structure that helps to reduce their concerns about what will be expected from them. It is important to clearly identify what the service user needs and what is expected of them when they use the program. It is suggested that there should be regular reviews of what has been achieved and feedback should be obtained about the clients' opinions and reactions to their learning.

Men appreciate a context where they feel valued, and where they can have input into some of the decisions that affect their life. Without this level of regard, men quickly identify

CASE EXAMPLE 4 : HONEST AND DIRECT

*While being **honest and direct** with men is challenging, it creates a greater respect and a focus for change. For example, Graham is a father with two children and a partner. The Department of Community Services has informed him he has a limited time to make significant changes in his approach to parenting or run the risk of having the children taken into out-of-home care.*

Worker: 'Graham, it is time to deal with these issues or your children will be removed. You cannot afford to continue down the path you have used over the last few months. We want to support you and we have to keep the welfare of the children as the priority. We need to work together on this. Does this make sense?'

The worker has focused the discussion on change and this provides Graham with choices:

- *he can sit with his anger and resentment and continue not to change, with the risk that his children will be taken into care, or*
- *he can engage fully with the worker/program, and accept feedback about his behaviour even though it is difficult. This demands a willingness to trust the worker and recognise that they have his and his children's best interest at heart.*

how to 'play the game' and may briefly use programs to get what they want while holding themselves back from true involvement and commitment. When male service users need to make critical decisions, the available options should be outlined in the belief that they can make an adequate choice.

It is at the time that men are confronted by a family crisis that they are more likely to reach out for support. Separated fathers are the single largest group of men who are known for their 'help seeking' behaviour and who will actively look for support from services. During these crises, a short 'window period' occurs during which men are most likely to accept help and support (King 2005). If the crisis passes without obtaining support, they may not engage again until the next crisis occurs, if at all. This is why when working with men, phone calls need to be answered or returned promptly.

Useful questions to engage separated fathers over the phone include:

- When did the separation occur?
- What are the ages and genders of your children?
- With whom do the children live?

- Where do you and the mother of your children live since separating?
- What are the current arrangements regarding contact?
- Are there any court orders or Apprehended Violence Orders?

These questions allow the worker to understand what the service user needs and how the worker can respond. If the worker suggests solutions that have already been unsuccessful, the service user can easily become frustrated. Using a solution focused approach to counselling, the worker may propose a range of options that include the service user obtaining legal advice, or attending mediation, etc. Self care options may include visiting a General Practitioner, the local Community Health Centre, or contacting Mensline.

Many separated fathers respond favourably when involved in a group program with other men who have experienced separation. Their level of motivation and the availability of time will ultimately influence their attendance. It is important during the initial telephone engagement to support the development of positive motivation. This is achieved by remaining child focused, emphasising that involvement in the program will allow them to learn from the situations that other men experience and enable them to manage the separation in a better way. Most of the men attending Burnside Fathers' Support Service report that group involvement has been a unique and rewarding experience. The length of group programs varies from one day workshops to a series of ten weekly evening sessions of three hours each. The range of groups includes information based workshops, emotional support groups, group counselling and psychoeducational groups.

THE WORKING WITH MEN CHECKLIST

The Working with Men Checklist, which appears at the end of this paper, captures the key issues discussed in this paper and contains the four key areas that allow organisations to assess and improve the programs they offer to men: environment, language, initial contact and marketing, and service provision.

The questions in the Checklist have been generalised to create relevance for as many organisations as possible.

SCORING

At the end of the Working with Men Checklist, there is a scoring system that allows organisations to measure their results. The Checklist Scale converts answers into a weighted score by multiplying the number of 'sometimes' responses by two, and the number of 'regularly' responses by three, while the number of 'not often' responses remains the same. These numbers are tallied to create a final score. Suggested responses to final scores appear at the end of the checklist.

SUMMARY

Engaging men constructively in social welfare services can be challenging, but also very rewarding. Often, when men engage with a service that they perceive as supportive, respectful, non-judgemental and validating of their experiences, they will bring enthusiasm and energy to make changes and grow. Men will have a greater interest in contacting a program when someone they trust has personally recommended it to them.

Many men enter new situations with a significant level of suspicion. These suspicions need to be alleviated by workers building trust and creating a relaxed environment which contains positive images of males, as well as providing services relevant to men's lives.

The Working with Men Checklist is a useful tool for organisations to appraise their working with men practice by reviewing their environment, language, initial contact, marketing and service provision. ❖

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