

### **Outline of Author**

Andrew King is the Coordinator of UnitingCare Burnside Fathers' Support Service in Western Sydney that provides a range of support groups to separated fathers, fathers who have a child with a disability and fathers experiencing relationship/ parenting difficulties.

## **Engaging men – creating cooperative environments.**

The generative fathering framework is a model for understanding the non-deficit approach to fathering. **Generative fathering** has been described as "... fathering that meets the needs of children by working to create and maintain a developing ethical relationship with them." (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997, p.18). Erikson (1975) considered parenthood to be the primary developmental task of adulthood which includes both the moral obligation to attend to the needs of the next generation and the recognition in the adult, that caring for children is central to personal and societal well-being.

The non-deficit perspective suggests that most men take an active interest in their children's lives (King, 2000). For many fathers, their concern and commitment to the lifelong development of their children can become a primary motivation for making significant changes in their family relationships.

During transitional periods, men are accessible and interested in support services. The use of therapeutic/educational groups can provide an opportunity for fathers to explore alternative ideas and apply these concepts to the multi-dimensional problems that they experience.

This paper develops the non-deficit perspective (King, 1999) that suggests that fathers are interested in family life, and that their engagement with support services is influenced by a variety of pressures in their life. These pressures include "generative chill" (see below), life crises such as separation/divorce and juggling life demands. This paper is based on the experiences at a Fathers' Centre in Western Sydney where 250 fathers per annum access crisis counselling or group programs. While most attended at first because of some outside pressure, they now attend to meet their own identified needs. They recognise that the honest discussion, the relevance of the issues and the impact of a common set of group values, are what they need most at this time in their life. Stories in this paper have been adapted to protect the identity of the individual.

### **Utilising transitional periods**

Men may resist accessing support services due to their lack of knowledge about the possible benefits they could receive. However they are more likely to overcome this resistance when they face transitional experiences that differ from the predicted path in their life. It is during transitional periods that men

are more likely to overcome a suspicion of being judged and access support services. These transitional periods include:

1. when the family is experiencing relationship difficulties
2. when the father desires to be the primary carer of a child who is currently in care
3. when the father has experienced family separation
4. when a child has a disability
5. when the father wishes to father differently from how he was fathered

It is the author's experience that men have increased motivation and interest in family counselling programs when service provision is linked with the father's underlying desire to have a closer relationship with his children.

During these transitional periods many other factors will ultimately determine if fathers engage with support services. Table 1 identifies four stages of father involvement in community/family services, the key processes and difficulties that men face and the supportive steps that community welfare/health professionals can utilise.

**Table 1: Processes in engaging fathers**

Stages	Key processes and issues	Supportive steps for fathers workers
Pre-involvement	Barriers/pressures are likely to exist. Fathers want to access services when inner conflict/turmoil is very high.	Regular accessible advertising to inform fathers and other family members about the existence of relevant services.
Initial contact	Can be either in person or over the phone. The father is likely to have many questions and be suspicious of being judged. <b>Key processes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reduce suspicion.</li> <li>▪ Create initial engagement.</li> <li>▪ Some basic information and problem solving may be helpful.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Easy access.</li> <li>▪ Inform fathers of available choices and options.</li> <li>▪ Provide clear information and description of the support agency.</li> </ul>

Decision making about further involvement	<b>Factors that can prohibit further involvement</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Generative Chill. (See below)</li> <li>▪ Other life crises (e.g. addictions)</li> <li>▪ Juggling multiple demands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Meeting face to face</li> <li>▪ Follow-up phone call</li> <li>▪ Have other workers or family members encourage the person's choice</li> </ul>
Ongoing involvement – attending counselling/groups.	<b>Key processes</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Clear purpose</li> <li>▪ Reflection on life long learning</li> <li>▪ Exploring of challenges</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Mean what you say</li> <li>▪ Follow through with commitments</li> <li>▪ Connect key values – respect, support, empathy and equity to their family &amp; work life</li> </ul>

(King & Fletcher, 1999)

## Stage 1 Pre-involvement

Many agencies working with men have found that it is difficult to promote early intervention services as men usually seek help during a crisis, rather than before it occurs. Some of the effective strategies to deal with these difficulties include:

1. Having regular advertising and promotional articles in local newspapers. Other gatekeepers in men's lives such as family members and friends will then be aware of what support services are available. They can encourage fathers to access services as issues arise.
2. Ensuring that the service becomes well known among other organisations that may have contact with men. Many services have little knowledge of where they can access appropriate support services for fathers.
3. Developing a strong image of good practice. Word of mouth promotion between men who are participants and their friends or work mates, is one of the best forms of validation and promotion. This can account for one third of new referrals.
4. Ensure that fathers' groups are run regularly. It may take six months to develop the necessary awareness to make the first group happen, but subsequent groups are more viable when people know they can be easily accessed. Working in partnership with other agencies can provide a stronger infrastructure to maintain fathers' groups in the area.

## Stage 2

### Initial Contact

When fathers contact a service, they may look for immediate answers to their problems. Many fathers will have a degree of suspicion and concern about the organisation that they have contacted. They will ask themselves questions such as: “Will I be lectured?”; “Will I be told how to be a good father because they will think I am inadequate?” etc. These concerns need to be appropriately addressed for successful engagement. If they are interested in participating in a fathers’ group, they need to know when and where it will be. If the wait for a group is too long, they will disengage and the window of opportunity to engage will pass.

A father’s decision to access a men and family relationship service will be initially affected by age, socio-economic and cultural and language differences between themselves and the service. Professionals need to focus on these following points:

- as a majority of first contact occasions will be over the telephone, ensure that calls are returned promptly
- tackle these initial concerns or questions with a simple explanation about what your organisation provides, and what is involved when men access the service
- provide men with a variety of options. Making choices regarding the type of services available is likely to enhance a father’s motivation as he will have more control
- ensure that you mean what you say, as it will reduce suspicion
- recognise possible strengths or attempted solutions that the father has already used

## Stage 3

### Decision making about further involvement

During stage 3, the father will process the information and ideas he has received and make a decision about further involvement. Life experiences can create difficulties for their on-going involvement in programs such as including “generative chill”, life crises, and the need to juggle multiple demands.

### Generative Chill

Extreme threats to an adult’s parental generativity will result in “generative chill”, a type of anxiety resulting from a perceived or real danger of losing the child or children one has helped to create (Snarey, 1993). “It seems likely that brief or extended threats to generativity will have a significant impact on a father’s selfhood...”. (Snarey,1993,p.23-24). Family breakdown presents separated fathers with a threat that often results in depression.

#### *Case Study*

*Mike is a separated father in his early 40’s who came very close to throwing himself in front of a train due to his depression. He recognised that the relationship problems in his life and the lack of contact with his*

*children were a continual struggle for him. He battled between giving in to the depression and his inability to change the situation. He ended up attending the Fathers' Group for 34 sessions out of 38. He spoke about the group being a vital place where he could be himself regardless of how the week had gone.*

*He stated "It has been a good 12 months. I have received good support over the past year as it has helped me to keep sane while I battle to see my son. Attending the group has turned around my whole relationship with my older son. I still play the memory game with my boy, he loves it. I feel a lot closer emotionally to him. I now understand why he reacts that way". He also added, "The kids are my main priority. I now accept that Sue and I have finished our relationship. I am sleeping a lot better now." He changed his employment and moved to a new area where he values all the child contact opportunities that are possible.*

### **Other life crises (e.g. addiction issues)**

Mental health and/or addiction problems have a significant effect on men's motivation to be involved in support services. Some fathers will drop out of a group due to these issues, while others use the group experience as part of their recovery program.

In order to meet the challenge of supporting a participant's recovery program, fathers' groups need to be flexible enough to allow longer term involvement. Instead of running psychoeducational groups that are limited to 8 weeks, therapeutic/educational groups can be provided that allow some fathers to engage for 12-18 months. Some of the participants will be at different stages of recovery from their addiction. Three major tools for dealing with addiction issues in these groups are:

- the development of a group culture that allows participants to challenge each other regarding lifestyle and D&A issues.
- the reinforcement of relapse prevention strategies in the group.
- the adoption of basic core values, such as respect, empathy, support and equality, for the participant's family and work life.

#### *Case Study*

*Peter is a young stepfather with a dependence on marijuana. Peter stated one week, "I gave up pot for 3 days. But I have had a challenging week. I'm trying to do the right things but no one gives me any credit." He talked about the challenge of the family and social context in which he lives, "I want to say 'f... it' and leave. But the love you have stops you. The kids really love me."*

*“It’s been my life, smoke a few cones, drink beer and watch TV. I cannot get a job, as I need to learn to cope first with hassles at home. Dad overdosed last year – since then things have gone down hill.” He went on to talk about the daily battle he has regarding his choices, “I don’t want to walk out of the front door as the neighbours will say, ‘come and have a smoke (dope)’”. After 4 months, Peter still resisted seeing a drug and alcohol counsellor and he recently left his relationship. This is the tragedy that often impacts on families where there are addiction issues. It is important for groups to be able to work simultaneously with recovery issues, relationship and child protection issues.*

## **Juggling multiple demands**

Fathers, like mothers, often juggle a variety of roles and pressures in the normal course of the day. Fathers may choose not to access support services due to time constraints. The only real solution is to provide choices in the range of groups/services that are provided. Some groups may be intensive, some may be psychoeducational groups and some may be 1-day workshops. Professionals may then discuss with men these choices and the possible outcomes for them.

## **Stage 4**

### **Ongoing involvement attending group work program or counselling**

Four fathers’ groups in Western Sydney meet one night per week for roughly nine weeks each term. At the end of each term, some participants leave the group and other participants commit themselves to attending for another 9 weeks the following term. During the daytime, programs for mothers are provided which the fathers’ program compliments.

The ongoing nature of the group ensures that there is usually capacity for new referrals to join the group, instead of waiting for very long. It is also valuable for ensuring that men have enough time to make significant changes.

The initial meeting between the group facilitator and the referred father plays a vital role in creating early engagement with the men. In the intensive fathering groups, nearly all the men attend at least 90% of the sessions with many men attending 95% of the time. Some of the men who are committed to attending fathers’ groups are interested in becoming the primary carer of their child.

When child protection issues occur with the mother of the children and her current partner, it is worthwhile considering the biological father as a possible placement option. These fathers may have left the relationship years earlier and will need additional support to deal with their own feelings and ‘generative chill’ issues to present themselves as an appropriate primary carer.

### Case Study

*Tim is one such father who is 38 years old. He had to battle with DoCS to become the primary carer of his child. The DoCS appointed psychologist completed two psychological reports over a 12-month period, and stated that “in 20 years of clinical experience he had never seen anyone change as much as Tim did”. Tim reflected, just prior to becoming the full time carer of his child, “Taking my daughter home will be the best experience in my whole life. It’s like winning the world cup. Everything else in life has always been taken away from me – that’s why I’m paranoid. I have had to learn patience”.*

*Tim also added about the Fathers’ Group, “Thanks for your help. I don’t think I would have made it without the group. This group has impacted on me; it speaks about life the way it is. It wasn’t pen or paper stuff. My dream has come true. It is achievable if you are determined. At lots of times you can’t see the end of the road, but you just have to keep going.”*

Fathers’ groups that combine psychoeducational and therapeutic sessions in the group format allow for the development of new ideas as well as ensuring that the individual explores his own life challenges. It is in this combination of sessions that learning with men is maximised. This blend of group work format allows for:

1. the better integration of psychoeducational material to the real life situation of the participants. Greater opportunities exist for the discussion of difficulties and achievements especially when multiple problems exist in the participant’s life
2. a non-competitive environment in the group, that allows men to relax and engage in the group and with new areas of learning
3. time to use story-telling to validate new ways of talking about life experiences and discussing other options for managing real situations. Story-telling is used significantly by men in a wide range of environment; in the workplace, at pubs and clubs. It allows a culture of equality and open communication that is important because of the difficulties that are created by the competitiveness men experience as they grow up.
4. the modeling of cooperative responses in family communication and the development of confidence in using different solutions to problems
5. the participants to develop a culture that validates appropriate actions and responses in families

## Conclusion

Therapeutic/educational groups for fathers allow men to have more time to focus on the multiple problems in their lives. These complex issues are not often dealt with adequately in straight psychoeducational groups due to inadequate time and content limitations. When groups for men embrace the real situations and issues, men are more likely to regularly attend and also inform other men about the suitability of the service. It is in this context, that peer support emerges with men demonstrating that their relationship with their

children are a primary motivation in their life and that they can respond with concern and empathy to the issues that other people face.

Organisations that provide services for men need to recognise that successful service provision is a long-term commitment and challenge. The provision of long term fathering groups is valuable, as it allows fathers to access sustained support over a longer period and allows new participants to join the group at regular intervals. Peer mentoring, the development of a strong group culture, and the reinforcement of new responses to relationship challenges, ensure that this commitment is worthwhile.

Regular groups in the same geographical areas, need to operate so that fathers and other agencies become familiar with accessing these services. Providing fathers' groups intermittently, is likely to increase the frustration level of potential clients and the service provider. It is helpful for organisations to work in partnership with other organisations to ensure that regular groups can be provided.

Partnerships developed between fathers' programs and women's programs, which can work together collaboratively for the best interest of the children. Ideally, fathers' services and mothers' services can operate at the same location, but during different timeslots. In Western Sydney, this has been achieved in two contexts: where services target single parents and where families are at risk of child abuse or neglect.