

PROFILE OF TWO CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION PROGRAMS



We are pleased to publish information about two child abuse prevention programs being run by UnitingCare Burnside, in New South Wales. One is the *Fathers' Support Service*, and the other the *Keeping Children Safe* program.

Fathers' support service

Andrew King

The Fathers' Support Service operates in Western Sydney. The Service aims to develop programs that support fathers in focusing on their child's needs and the development of stronger family relationships. The service aims to reduce the negative impact that relationship breakdown has on children, to provide crisis counselling for fathers and to support men in their awareness of, and capacity to access other appropriate services, networks and parenting resources.

The service also aims to develop group work and counselling services for fathers that aim to reduce the incidence of family conflict and reduce the incidence of depression and suicide within men's lives following family separation while also enabling fathers to recognise their strengths in parenting. Currently the service employs 1 full-time and 2 part-time staff plus several casual group facilitators.

These staff provide a minimum of 11 fathering/ relationship focused groups every school term, four times per year. Groups include one-day information workshops, emotional support groups and psycho-educational groups where a structured design is used to help participants develop knowledge and skills for coping with potential/ immediate problems, separation or other life transitions. Also group counselling programs are offered in a less structured format focusing on normal human relationship issues.

Issues concerning child protection are also regularly addressed within all the groups and a key motto for the program is 'keeping children safe'. To ensure this, three key principles are used together with mandatory reporting of child abuse and neglect. Firstly, fathers attending the programs need to take responsibility for their actions, Secondly they are encouraged to think about the connection between how they react in the family, amongst their friends and in the workplace. Thirdly, the men are encouraged to develop a greater empathy in understanding their children's needs which increases the safety of their children. However, this is difficult for non-resident fathers who feel they can no longer protect their children from a variety of a wider range of dangers.

The UnitingCare Burnside's program "Keeping Children Safe" (described below) is also used to help men teach their children protective behaviours. The men need support to manage crisis periods rather than letting the pressure build up. The Fathers' Support Service peer support and group programs encourage men to address proactively child protection issues by talking about them before they lose control.

The service also offers crisis telephone counselling, particularly for separated fathers, to at least 200 new service users per year. These calls range from 15 minutes to 60-75 minutes. As well as offering groups, a fathers and kids playgroup has proved to be popular on a Saturday morning. Weekend BBQ's are regularly run on weekends that allow fathers and their children time to interact together while being involved in the program.

The Father's Support Service program has been successful in developing and delivering models of counselling, education and skills training that support and assist fathers in improving their relationships with partners, ex-partners and children. Over the past two years the service has provided services to 580 men who are father to 1171 children. The program is based on a collaboration/ partnership model between UnitingCare Burnside, Lone Parent Family Support Service, Northcott Society, and Fathers' Resource Centre Inc. These organisations combined together several years ago to pool resources instead of working separately in providing services to fathers.

Feedback from service users

An external evaluation of the program is currently being completed which will provide important information about the effectiveness of the service. An interim report was available in July 2002 with the final report due in December 2002. As a snapshot for term 1 2002, the statistics are as follows:

Over 90 men attended 11 different groups that were facilitated by Fathers' Support Service. 96% of these service users stated that they benefitted from attending the various groups and 89% grasped two major ideas for each group. 98% of service users said that the service was worthwhile, while 78% of men said that the group covered what they expected. On many occasions, the men initially had a

Keeping children safe

negative image of what would happen in the group. This suspicion and hesitancy needs to be addressed before men can be engaged in family relationship/ support programs. In regards to interpersonal skills, at the end of the groups for that term, 93% of men felt more positive, 84% were more confident, 82% stated they were better at communicating and 93% of service users stated they understood all the material.

At least 50% of service users who attended Fathers' Support Service groups used the following words to describe the various men and family relationship groups: *relevant to my family, confidence building, enjoyable, informative, encouraging, supportive, and helpful*. Fathers' Support Service has found these words useful for advertising groups and in generating men's interest in attending subsequent group programs.

Reflection of the staff

A key element of the success of the program is the child-focused approach that the whole centre adopts. Many men express their appreciation when they contact the service saying, "It's great that you are not an angry men's group!" The centre uses solution-focused counselling and group work techniques to support the men in making changes. Men accessing the program can choose from a wide range of groups, selecting the most relevant one for their current needs and goals.

Providing a range of different groups for fathers has been effective in meeting the wide variety of needs of the service users. In a given school term, many of the groups have a full number of participants while often the newly developed groups have a lower number. This balance helps staff to attempt new initiatives without being despondent if there is initially little response from fathers booking into groups. It takes a while for an organisation to gain credibility amongst men and for men to recommend programs to other men.

The centre is currently funded for approximately \$135,000.00 per annum. The program is due for closure in June 2003 unless further funding for the Men and Family Relationship Programs is obtained.

For further information about UnitingCare Burnside Fathers' Support Service, please contact **Andrew King** on (02) 9806 0200, or via e-mail: aking@burnside.org.au

Jennifer Tung

"Keeping Children Safe" is a six-session course that discusses Child Protection in the context of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 and guides parents in the best ways to ensure their own children remain safe. It is suitable for caregivers of children of all ages.

The course examines the five types of abuse: physical, neglect, emotional, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. In each session there is a positive parenting section with strategies that parents can use to develop their own behaviour management skills. Protective behaviours are also discussed and are based on the child protection material that is taught in public schools. Parents are usually particularly interested in this section, as they are keen to know what their children are being taught and like to have activities they can do with their children at home.

History and context

"Keeping Children Safe" was launched on 6 November 2001 by the Commissioner for Children and Young People, Gillian Calvert who heartily endorsed the initiative. Parent groups have been run in three locations in NSW: Ermington, Shalvey and Wentworthville. One Train the Trainer has been run in Moree where more than one third of the participants were Aboriginal workers.

The program is suitable for all parents and caregivers including those who may struggle with low literacy, mild intellectual disability, difficulty managing their own or their children's behaviour, those who have faced abuse in their own or children's lives abuse or neglect from themselves and/or others.

Feedback from group facilitators

Facilitating the groups is a great experience as parent reactions to the course are so positive. However it is necessary to have two leaders facilitating the program because of the sensitive nature of the issues that are discussed. At one centre, during the session on sexual abuse, the emotional tension in the room was high, escalated by the fact that over one third of the participants had personal experience with sexual abuse. The

Train the Trainer program also requires two leaders as it may bring up issues or memories for many people.

Participant responses

Parents had very positive comments to make about the program. Some felt it would be suitable to be run in hospitals, pre-schools and elsewhere in the community.

Some of the comments made by parents are below:

- "The group has made me aware of all the different abuses, it has allowed me to overcome some of my fears and taught me that I as a parent can teach my children how to also be aware and to get help if needed."
- "I learnt different ways to discipline children and to ask them how they are feeling and what is happening."
- "I learnt how to keep my child safe."
- "It made me more aware of what I say to my kids."
- "I enjoyed learning how to be a better parent, listening to other people."
- "It opened my eyes a lot."

Based on pre and post evaluations completed by two of the groups there was a notable increase in parents knowledge of abuse and neglect and the New South Wales Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998 and also in how comfortable they feel talking with their children about safety issues. Most parents stated that they now have the knowledge to protect their children more adequately.

A groupwork manual is available for purchase from UnitingCare Burnside for \$60 (including GST and postage). This is all that is needed to run the course, however, for those in New South Wales, Train the Trainer in "Keeping Children Safe" will be run in various locations around the state. This course provides tips on running the course effectively and enhances group leadership skills. Assistance in running "Keeping Children Safe" groups for families in your NSW community may also be available from Burnside.

For further information or to purchase the manual, please contact **Jennifer Tung**, Project Worker, Keeping Children Safe, Family Work Program, Western Sydney, UnitingCare Burnside. Phone: (02) 9768 6866, Fax: (02) 9630 0664. Or PO Box 6866, Parramatta. Via email: jtung@burnside.org.au