

The Nuts and

Richard Fletcher

The Engaging Fathers Project is part of an international initiative to improve children's well being by involving their fathers in all aspects of their upbringing. The project in Australia is based at the University of Newcastle in the Family Action Centre. During 2001, project staff worked in partnership with schools to attract fathers (and father figures) from low-income areas to participate in enjoyable, father-friendly activities in schools. As part of their work, the Engaging Fathers Project team has developed a course for dads: The Nuts & Bolts of Kids & Schools.

In order to determine what fathers needed to become involved in the school and with the children, Ken and Craig, community workers from the Engaging Fathers Project (EFP), ran a series of 'smokos' with fathers. Communicating with children came out on top. The resulting seven week TAFE Outreach course covered communication skills, parenting and partnerships, child development, confidence building and safety measures for children.

Each week a presenter covered the main topic area while Ken facilitated. Craig attended most sessions to ensure that the links were maintained with the Aboriginal men in the group. The presenters were strongly advised to make the sessions interactive and to leave plenty of time for discussion. Particular care was taken to build a respectful atmosphere where different (even unpopular) notions could be openly discussed. The men were not pressured into speaking on each topic, but there was no shortage of conversation. Getting men to talk about all aspects of parenting was easy. The challenging part was managing a group of men who were not used to 'group discussion'.

What the dads said about being in the course

"I didn't really know what to expect so it was a plus for me. I don't think anyone really knew what it was going to be all about. I've never been in this situation before, as far as a bunch of blokes who are talking their own problems."

"Everyone is in the same situation, you're not just the only one sitting out there on a limb; I also met a few top blokes in the course in the last five to six weeks. It's been interesting."

"There's nothing out there that teaches parenting. I mean, when I had a kid I was hoping that the wife – because she's a girl – would know it all, but in fact she didn't. In fact I think I knew a little bit more than her, which is really nothing, but there's no course for parenting. You have the kids and then it's all trial and error and flying by the seat of your pants, so it's good to get some information on parenting."

"It helps clarify your own feelings on parenting, because you're doing things and you're wondering, 'Am I going about it the right way or the wrong way?', and then you come here and there's a lot of feedback. So you think, 'Oh, am I doing it right or not? Should I pull up on that and change?' So it's giving you a larger view of parenting from a lot more people and it's also good to understand there are other people going through the same difficulties as yourself. You're not Robinson Crusoe."

Comments from dads on the effect of the course

"I just seem to be more relaxed, I feel, in explaining things now. Rather than jumping down their throats I think about it first."

"I've relaxed in my situation around my children and all that. The way I speak to them. Instead of jumping down their throat I'm talking to them on their level and it has calmed me right down."

Bolts of Kids and School



"The funny thing is with the whole situation, if I was sitting at home I'd say something. Obviously it was noticeable, but not to me. I'd say something and Vicki would say, 'Oh, that's the course coming out of you.' So she noticed a difference there, and she said that to me probably about three times over the course of this course we've been doing, so obviously there is a difference and you don't really notice your difference till it's pointed out to you."

"I'm relating to adults even different than what I was before, but it's good. It's a good course and I'd recommend it."

"Yeah, it teaches tolerance and acceptability of other people as well. It's just not dealing with kids and that, it's a whole communal thing. It's how to be tolerant and accept everybody in your community."

"My nine-year-old daughter said to me, 'You don't shout as much dad'."

"I have also noticed it in the school. When I was at the other school and I had a conflict I really jumped down their throats. And then at this school I was called to the office because my boy had done something; I went in and just talked about it. It came out a lot better because I just talked and didn't go in angry. It wasn't the different school principal, it was me. I knew that principal when she was at the other school. And I would get so worked up, my wife wouldn't come in with me, she stayed outside behind me, and so it must be different 'cause she went right in there with me."

"I take time for things. Now I have two nights a week playing darts, she has Friday and Saturday nights playing Housie. I used to go five nights a week and didn't let her go out. Also, I used to get migraines two or three times a week and now I haven't had one in seven weeks. Its because I don't get stressed now."

"My wife was in Melbourne and I was getting a bit stressed and my little fella, I told him to get out of the car and he just ignores me so I grab him by the shirt front to get him out of the car and I was a little bit stressed and I don't hit but I yelled at him and he went into his bedroom

and didn't come out, normally he'd be out on his bike. And that night as I went to bed I saw he was still lying awake. So I went in and apologized. He said that he didn't hear me telling him to get out that he was playing Nintendo. So I apologized and kissed him goodnight . . . I felt relieved to tell you the truth. Normally I'd sit there stewing about how to tell him and still be the boss and I'd go over it in my mind and then I'd say it but still be the one up here, and then still think about it a lot afterwards. So after I apologized this time I felt better and went to sleep."

"We've got to let kids be kids. My girl and boy were having milk and the girl spilt the milk and she looked at me like she was expecting something, like me to blow my top, and I said, 'You'd better go and get a cloth', and she did. As soon as we'd done that the boy spilt his Milo right beside where her milk had gone. They were both looking at me and I could see this fear and they were waiting for me to blow up. And I just couldn't do it. And I think my wife's changed too. She doesn't go at them so much."

"I have learnt to step back a little. My kids say, 'He's going schitzo', and now I step back. The kids don't want to hear the lecture again from me."

Other spin-offs from the course

Every indicator from this course comes up positive. Feedback from the teachers, the principal, the community worker, the fathers, their kids and partners all attest to the changes this course has made. Significantly, the improvements in the way the fathers relate to their children has had positive repercussions in their family life but has also impacted on their children at school. Fathers have become more interactive not only with their own children but also interested in helping other children at school. They have discovered that they have something unique to offer.

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