

STUDENT CONTRIBUTION

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This contribution is from DAMIEN HICKMAN. Damien Hickman is a graduate of the University of Wollongong, Bachelor of Science (Human Movement) Degree and is currently studying for the Bachelor of Social Work at the University of Newcastle. He is interested in the roles men play in relationship to their children and families, as well as the design and implementation of men's support services.



The role of fathers in the care and protection of children

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Fathers play a significant role in the care and protection of their children. As part of child protection, social work practice needs constantly to adjust to the changing context of fathers in Australian families. This requires social work agencies to be aware of men's needs and their perceptions of parenting to make support services accessible and attractive to fathers. Further to this, social work agency interventions must be structured around evidence-based practices that replace 'good intentions' with proven strategies. The involvement of fathers in the care and protection of their children demands that policies and programs are accessible, effective and relevant.

The importance of a father in providing childcare and protection is well documented (Biddulph 1997; Riach 1981; Sullivan 2000). If social work agencies are to support fathers in the care and protection of their children, the policies and programs implemented must be attractive to men and be based on cur-

rent Australian family needs. With the use of research-based evidence to inform intervention strategies, support services can 'hit the mark' with the diversity of Australian fathers and be of the utmost effectiveness. However, it has been argued by Kruk (1994) and Sullivan (2000) that social work agencies may be off-putting for men who feel irrelevant and tokenised within support services. A lack of research into men as fathers and program compatibility makes the responsibility of addressing this issue a practice of reflective social work. A reflection on social work practices demonstrates that female perceptions of fatherhood have influenced family support services. Actively seeking male perceptions of fatherhood and their views about where they believe support is needed will produce services that are more 'male friendly' and therefore are more likely to be accessed by greater numbers of men. It is only through relevant policies and proven practices that maximum care and protection can be given to children by the most number of fathers in the wide array of Australian 'families'.

Children need fathers

Regardless of family circumstances, a father's involvement in the care and protection of his children is a significant part of that child's development (Biddulph 1997; Sullivan 2000). Riach (1981) argued that sons need the care of a warm and nurturing father for cognitive development, sexual development, good peer relationships and feelings of self-esteem. Pre-school children of involved fathers display higher cognitive skills, empathy and reduced stereotypes. Boys behave less disruptively in school and girls have greater self-direction. Alternatively, children from abusive environments who witness domestic violence from fathers suffer fear, stress, withdrawal and increased emotional and social problems (Lamb 1997). The need for children to have emotional closeness with fathers is so strong, Biddulph (1997: 14) argued, 'If you work a fifty-five or sixty hour week, you just won't cut it as a dad'.

Male-friendly services

The challenge for social work agencies is to attract fathers to family centres where they can access support services. However, programs in family centres have been seen as female domains by fathers who need their differences as men acknowledged. Kruk (1994) argued that social work agencies were dismissive of fathers and their role with children. It was found men did not use social work services and felt shut out by a system designed to meet female needs (Kruk 1994). By developing services that appeal directly to men, social work agencies may be able to provide childcare education and skills to more fathers (Meyers 1993). However, the transfer of ideological acceptance into practical supports for fathers is low (Kruk 1994; Meyers 1993; Sullivan 2000). It was suggested by Meyers (1993) that including male discussion leaders as positive role models, weekend classes, 'male friendly' environments and being sensitive to low-income fathers were possible solutions to poor attendance by men at parenting education programs.

The impact of gender inequity in social work practice

As a profession that is predominately female, social work is influenced by gender perceptions. Attributes such as communication skills, empathy and emotional acuity are key strengths of social work practice that are stereotypically identified as female qualities. The reflective questioning of social work practice does not dismiss this but simply asks, 'Do female perceptions of fatherhood unwittingly fail to press the right buttons in fathers in parenting support policies and programs?'. Men and women through biology or conditioning perceive fatherhood differently, and it can be argued that if more men are to be attracted to programs and policy development, male perceptions of fatherhood will hold the key to greater success with men. Programs that are attractive to men enable children to enjoy greater contact, care and support from their fathers (Featherstone 2001; Meyers 1993). Reflective social work practice needs to be aware of any bias that may not derive the maximum potential of support programs and policies for Australian fathers.

Fathering in the Australian context

In the last fifty years, single mother families and step father families have reduced the presence of biological fathers in nuclear families (Lewis & O'Brien 1987). Increasingly, a

father's relationship with his children is occurring outside of the traditional 'nuclear family' (Walter 2000a). Also, growing numbers of non-custodial, single and unwed fathers add to the number of children who no longer live within a 'nuclear' situation. Despite this, evidence suggests that children need a father's positive contribution to parenting regardless of the circumstance of their relationship (Featherstone 2001; Kruk 1994; Walter 2000b). As 'family units' diversify, social policy and social work practice also need to diversify to care for children in all circumstances. Walter (2000a) found non-custodial unwed fathers do not consider their children to be their responsibility and fail to provide financial and emotional support. Therefore, all future policies and support programs must include fathers outside the nuclear family to accommodate the ever-changing context of fathers within Australian families.

Evidence-based practice

Social work practice that is relevant to the needs of Australian fathers and their children must be based on ongoing research that provides evidence of what works and what does not. Evidence-based social work practices allow agencies to create policies and programs for fathers based on proven effectiveness. The danger is that strategies built on 'good intentions' can create more problems than they solve and therefore must be tested through research to substantiate any claims. Without quantifiable measurement, strategies may be implemented that cannot assert they actually enhance childcare and protection. Interventions tested through research must drive evidence-based practice to minimise the risk of physical and psychosocial harm to children and maximise the potential benefits for families involved with social work agencies.



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Conclusion

Fathers in childcare have become a focus of social policy and the welfare agenda in contemporary Australia (Featherstone 2001; Walter 2000a). Ensuring the wellbeing of children requires an increased knowledge of Australian men in families to inform policy makers and social work practitioners of men in this role (Sullivan 2000). This way programs that are attractive and relevant to fathers can be delivered to greater numbers of men regardless of the circumstances of the relationship to their children. However, programs that specifically target men as fathers are too few, and some Australian men feel unappreciated and unsupported in their role (Truss 1998). Critical reflection of social work practices should encourage greater consultation with men to develop programs that 'press the right buttons' and increase the participation of fathers in support services. In addition, the knowledge gleaned from



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qualified research will create practices that are based on factual evidence and therefore make them more likely to be effective. This will allow social work agencies to expand fathering programs that involve more men so children can enjoy stronger connections with their fathers and thereby grow up in safer, more secure environments.

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