



Knowledge into Action!

Effective Practice for Child and Family Services

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'Is Strengthening Men and Boys strengthening families?' Stephen Fisher
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Hi. I'm Steve. Steve Fisher. I really appreciate the opportunity to speak here today. I know I'm in good company as we are all people who are committed to improving the lives of families and children. With that in mind I want to examine some of the issues arising in relation to programmes being devised for men and boys. But first let me introduce myself and explain why I feel equipped to present on this important issue.

First of all I am a father myself. Of two lovely kids, 7yo Daisy and 4yo Luca. They wanted me to show this photo of them displaying their braids. Secondly, I am a qualified Early Childhood Teacher, a Kindergarten Teacher. I also teach in a course about Men & Masculinities at RMIT University. This gave me the exciting opportunity last year to travel to Fiji to spend a week training Men to be advocates for the elimination of violence against women.

So let me tell you up front about my biases. One bias is best explained with a story. Early last year I decided to go for a walk in the local parkland before I started by 6pm night class. The air was balmy and as I walked I passed a couple of sets of people walking their dogs. I saw some young people kicking a soccer ball around and then I witness another who was flying a terrifying large remote control helicopter, having a great time. I then heard a strange whirring sound come over the hills. When I looked up there were two people flying in powered paragliders! Wow, what a wonderful time we were all having. And then it dawned on men, it was 5.30pm on a Tuesday night and all these people were men! What were the women doing?

I've read many stats showing the inequalities between men & women but this experience confirmed for me that men as a group are privileged.

I have another bias however, and that is that I know that many men are also hurting in some way and they need help. A man I know, John, has a dark secret in his past that he won't talk about, but means he regularly finds it difficult to get out of bed in the morning.

Ok, so now I want to do a couple of things in the short time I have. I want to describe some of the claims that are currently being made about men and boys and show how some programs are reinforcing these claims in ways that I think are potentially harmful to families. These are claims that may in fact

weaken families. I then want to highlight a couple of programs aimed at fathers that I think **are** about strengthening families. And end with a set of standards that I believe must underpin effective programs.

But first we must define what we mean by a strong family.

- Where there is emotional openness, trust, respect and cooperation
- Where there is a sharing of responsibilities
- –Better work/family balance
- Where there is an ability and willingness to solve conflicts amicably
- Where the needs of the family unit are as important as individual needs
- Where there is a sense of mutuality not ownership
- Where there are adequate material resources
- Where children's safety and wellbeing is paramount

OK, I don't think I have any disagreement there, let's now move to something more controversial and look at claims made about men & boys which are either informing program design or are being reinforced by programs.

There are five that I want to examine: (And let me say that I have taken the material directly from the organisations themselves)

- Boys In Schools Program - Family Action Centre
- Engaging Fathers Project - Family Action Centre
- Manhood online – resources for working with men.
- Mensline – national men's telephone service
- *Working with my kids* – father's program

The boys in schools program makes the following claim:

"Schools, communities and families all over Australia are grappling with the issues of how best to educate boys. Boys' low levels of literacy, poor academic achievement, aggression and harmful risk-taking are seen as serious problems in our community."

And on the website it provides the following **Ideas for working with Boys in Schools.**

- * **Don't forget the fun!**
- * **Reward questioning students – critical thinking is a skill**
- * **Bring your personality to class**
- * **Keep positive and remind students of their strengths**
- * **Go for goals**
- * **Commit to it together**
- * **Get moving – make use of boys' energy and physicality as much as possible**

My concern is that while it may be true that boys experience these issues the solution seems to miss a key point. That is that many boys' issues due to adherence to a sort of macho masculinity.

–"Real men take risks"

–"Real men are not school loving nerds"

–"Real men stand up and fight"

So called 'boys' strategies mentioned do not address this aspect of masculinity. In fact they are simply good educational practice for both genders.

I am particularly worried about the last suggestion to encourage activity. Girls need activity too – they are generally less physically confident than boys, and often experience boys' dominating playground space.

In spite of teachers' awareness of the need for equality boys still take a disproportionate amount of teacher/welfare officer time, and school resources.

Girls learn better free of boys' disruption & harassment Inappropriate focus on boys' disadvantage

Perhaps the other thing to point out here is that there is far greater difference in educational outcomes between postcodes than genders. So by politicians focussing on boys' Literacy or yr12 scores they can avoid the harder issue of class disadvantage.

Let's move on now to claims about 'under-fathering'.

- 558,000 non-custodial fathers are denied as much contact with their children as they would like
- Fathers are missing out on time with their children due to family court rulings.
- It is natural and healthy for families to have both a mother and a father
- Fathers are becoming an optional extra in families.
- Boys are missing out on fathering due to separation.

It is these claims that have spawned the introduction of many new programs for fathers, for example, The engaging fathers project.

This project has the goal of having fathers involved with children, resulting in the wellbeing of children. Surely I agree with this?

Well, yes I agree if it means fathers taking more responsibility for the shared care of their children, but not if it's just about 'involvement'.

What sort of involvement with children do we mean?

–Sometimes a father's involvement is damaging.

–Women often cite marital inequality and abuse as prime reasons for separation. In those cases children's lives are much improved when father contact is reduced.

Another more challenging idea is that boys (& girls) don't need father involvement at all, they need a certain type of parental skill. There is now a wealth of early childhood research demonstrating that:

"A parent's gender is far less important in affecting child development than broader qualities such as warmth and kindness."

And we note that these qualities are not those valued by traditional, macho masculinity in our society.

There are some other important ways that claims of under-fathering must be questioned.

- * It is the Family Court (not mothers) that decide the amount of contact based on:

THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD

Fathers' rights activists have been very effective in attempting to demonise the family court.

- * Most fathers don't want to spend equal time doing childcare. Father's like doing the fun stuff with kids but avoid the long hours of the more drudgery aspects.
- * Most fathers don't want children to live with them after separation (and do not contest).
- * But - Most single mothers actually want more involvement of fathers. They complain of fathers not fulfilling agreements to care for the children.

When you look at Australian websites designed to support men you'll find many references to resources available at Manhood online. This is a website inspired by the writings of Steve Biddulph. Here is an example of the advice provided:

In the first of a series of extracts from his book Manhood, Steve Biddulph looks at the need for men to stand up to their partners, to value the warrior that protects their emotional castle and to set rules to their passion.

There are three things men need to understand if they are to get it right with women.

1. "Standing up to" your wife or partner as an equal without intimidating her or being intimidated by her;
2. Knowing the essential differences in male and female sexuality and so mastering "the art of the chase";
3. Realizing your partner is not your mother and so making it through "the long dark night".

I don't know what that refers to, but I think you would agree this is not the best way to approach strengthening families. Particularly, given that domestic violence is one of the key factors leading to the destruction of families.

I was please to see the federal govt. addressing this issue in the recent campaign, Violence Against Women. Australia Says NO. The campaign is supported by a national, Australian Government-funded, 24-hour confidential helpline. You may not know that one telephone counselling service, Mensline, is going to offer some of the support.

Out of interest I went to the Mensline homepage and this is what I found. Then I clicked on the reading room. It has a range of sections, but I was interested in the statistics and facts link. This section will contain the most recent findings from research & studies conducted on issues of relevance to the target group. I found only one article there and this is what it said:
Violence Toward Men: Fact or Fiction?
American Medical Association report indicating that men are victims of women's violence about as much as the opposite, and that other organizations should recognize this fact.

Can you imagine a man feeling some remorse about his violence towards his wife, going to the website for guidance and then reading this? These false

claims are usually perpetuated by angry, fringe lobby groups, not presented on a federally funded national service.

Now I want to quickly look at The Claim of inadequate services for men which is driving a funding imbalance.

- * For every female suicide there are four male suicides
- * Men don't cope well with relationship break-up and so need special resources.
- * Too many services are geared towards the needs of women not men.

The first two claims are true but it is also true that twice as many women & girls attempt suicide. Their mental health issues are therefore possibly more acute.

It is true that men generally don't cope well with relationship break up but I believe this is largely due to men's desire to be in control and prove their masculinity. This means they resist disclosure of their issues. ... and reluctance to seek help from one of the countless free services available.

And in response to the claim that too many services are geared to women. There is no free national helpline designed for mothers & women in relationships but there is "Mensline".

And now there is ... ***Working with my Kids***

This Federally funded fathers program appears to have some worthwhile aims but I don't know a lot about the content. I want to show you a comparison.

When you see this data it is hard to see how anyone can claim fathers are missing out.

Finally let me describe 2 fathers programs that I think are doing some work to strengthen families. The first is from the ACTU. At last years' Congress the ACTU made the following resolution:

Bargaining for Work and Family

... to ensure bargaining is relevant to union members, affiliates will support the work and family test cases by bargaining for:

- (a) Improved employees' say over the way in which their working day, working week or working year is arranged, in order to meet their caring responsibilities.
- (b) Improved access to paid and unpaid leave in order to meet caring responsibilities.

Making sure that workplaces provide the opportunity for all working fathers to share the care of their children is crucial.

Another program that has done well in assisting fathers in taking responsibility for their kids is the child support agency. This chart shows the weekly payments that separated fathers are required to pay to mothers. 40% are

required to pay only \$5 or less a week. But still there has been a chronic problem of non-payment.

I am please to see the CSA has introduced its New policy measures
Enhanced Child Support Compliance - Intensive Debt Collection

Q. What does this change mean?

A. A significant number of paying parents with long-term debts will be encouraged to make arrangements to resolve their debts. If this approach fails, then appropriate enforcement action will be taken.

Now this is a very practical fathers program that is strengthening families.

Let me end by summarising what I believe to be the key criteria if programs are to be effective in strengthening families.

- Must encourage men to develop cooperative, empathic and open ways of relating.
- Must help increase sharing positive parenting
- Must avoid reinforcing the idea that there are *natural* gender behaviours
- Must consciously redress the power and material inequalities between men and women.
- Must help men to deal with emotional distress in ways that do not harm themselves or others.
- **Therefore must challenge the dominant forms of masculinity**

Thank you for your time. I have copies of the presentation and other articles with me if you are interested.