

***AIFS Conference January 2003 Workshop Paper***

***Gary Dornau Dip Ed, B Ed, Grad Dip Ed Admin***

***Children, Father and Families***

Ring! Ring! Ring!

It was five thirty pm on a Friday evening. I was having a relaxing read when my mobile telephone rang. I was wondering who would ring at this time. I picked up the phone with interest.

'Hi it's Darren here. I've been attending the first time fathers groups in Altona facilitated by Relationships Australia (Victoria) on a Saturday morning and am wondering when the next session is on. I have enjoyed meeting other dads and would hate to miss the next one.'

'Thanks for ringing Darren, the next one is on July 27th. See you there.'

Imagine the following: one screaming baby, a set of twins pulling toys out of a basket, babies being soothed to sleep by massage, a dad reading to his baby, endless cooing and gaaing and lots of testosterone.

If you guessed that we are talking about a program for first time dads and their babies you are correct.

Recently, we have been coordinating programs for first time fathers and their babies and primary school children and their fathers in the western suburbs of Melbourne, an area that over time has been identified with cultural diversity and a working class ethos. At first it was in great trepidation that we set off with the hope of getting dads to come along on Saturdays, but the progress has been great. At our most recent programs we have up to 25 dads attend the sessions!

As a lead up to the program we run a general parenting session for both mums and dads focusing on the role of dads in the family. Four Saturday mornings followed covering areas such as CPR and rescuing your baby, child massage, playing with your baby and work/life balance.

Based upon their feedback we have continued the Saturday's on an informal basis. The dads are continuing to come along to share what happens with their babies, talk about their life and keep up to date with current research.

We have also been facilitating programs in primary schools. To get the dads to come along we have had to discover a different formula. Pizza and Hot Dogs have been the perfect combination to attract families to a dad's evening. Well, not exactly the edible hot dogs, but the players from the Western Bulldogs. The staff of the Men and Family Relationships Program from Relationships Australia (Victoria) has just facilitated information evenings at Altona and Wembley Primary Schools for dads, mums and children.

We were delighted when in excess of 100 attended our Altona Primary School evening to listen to Tony Liberatore and Daniel Gianciracusa, eat pizza, play games, have their faces painted, win a football signed by the Western Bulldogs and hear about the up and coming program. 22 dads signed up for the program.

When over 180 booked into the next evening at Wembley Primary School we were astounded! The highlight was hearing Scott West and Shane Birss from the Western Bulldogs speaking from the heart. Over 50 pizzas and lots of fun later, Relationships Australia (Victoria) staff went home exhausted. Not to be outdone 25 dads from Wembley

signed for the next three weeks. We could not include Number 26 – It said ‘Dad’s Name – Dad - Child’s name – Josh from Prep’.

### **Key Research Behind our Project**

You are probably wondering why there is such a need for the program. More and more research is pointing to the importance of mothers and fathers in a child’s developmental health.

The following points demonstrate the key transition stages in the causal pathways underpinning our project:

- Children’s lifelong learning and behaviour is connected to their early brain development
  - Evidence from neuroscience shows that most of the ‘wiring’ in the human brain that supports lifelong learning and behaviour is in place by the age of six. Children’s earliest experiences and interactions with adults and other children - especially during the first three years of life - are far more important for brain development than previously realised (McCain/Mustard, 1999).
- Children’s behaviour is connected to a father’s involvement in their family
  - A study of 17,000 children who were born in 1958 and who have been followed at ages 7,11, 16, 23 and 33 shows that father involvement at age seven is strongly related to children’s later educational attainment (Buchanan, 2002).
- Young people’s problem behaviours are connected to risk and protective factors
  - A 1999 survey of 9,000 students across Victoria’s Year 7, 9 and 11 students found that a strong link exists between the number of risk and protective factors to which our young people are exposed within the communities, families, schools, and peer/individual groups, and their involvement in problem behaviours.
- Parents want positive outcomes for their families
  - Our research (Relationships Australia (Vic) Community Consultative Strategy, 2000) indicates that ‘making the most of family relationships is a key aspiration for parents’. They want to make their relationship with their children work and have positive outcomes for their children.
- Fathers learn about parenting from informal networks
  - Only 1% of fathers seek out a parenting group. 80 % of the sources of fathering skills and knowledge come from informal neighbourhood networks, friends and family (Fitting Fathers into Families 1999; Relationships Australia Indicators 2001).
- Community based programs for parents are cost effective
  - Community based group education programs for parents produce more changes in children’s behaviour and are more cost effective and user friendly than individual clinic-based programs. (Barlow 1997)
  - US studies show that parenting programs and graduation incentives emerge as clear winners in crime prevention. California’s ‘three strike law is estimated at achieving a 21% reduction in crime (crimes that cannot occur while people are in jail) at a cost of (US)\$5 billion a year. For less than an additional billion dollars, parenting training and graduation incentives could roughly double that crime reduction, if they are as effective as our analysis suggests’. (Greenwood 1996) -

### **Feedback from the program**

We have been very pleasantly surprised by the positive feedback from the dads about the program.

95% of fathers indicated that they found it helpful sharing experiences and inter-acting with other fathers. They valued being given the opportunity to discuss solutions to problems that they previously had not thought of. They appreciated meeting other local fathers and getting to know them. One dad summed this up well, 'It is so rare to discuss similar issues with men.'

96% found that they developed a better understanding of fathering and families.

They enjoyed the chance to present their children to the group, as well as learning how to relate to them in a less judgemental manner. During the time together they dads could reflect upon different aspects of fathering and their relationship with their own father. The dads also took ideas home as to maximise their relationship with their partner such as learning the skills of how to respond to conflict.

It was the feedback from the children that told us that the program had been a success. They loved playing the games, smashing the anger tubes, eating the pizza and listening to the footballers. Above all, the children enjoyed spending time with dad. This comment just sums this up perfectly, 'Seeing dad being human was cool!'

The program is continuing to grow and develop. Since February 2002, 215 families, 320 fathers, 250 children, 135 babies and 80 couples have attended Relationships Australia's (Victoria) program. We have liaised with key community stakeholders in the western suburbs of Melbourne to provide supportive intervention and preventative parenting strategies focusing upon dads and their children. Dads are starting to develop their own networks and meeting outside the program. We are looking forward to 2003 where we can continue to expand the program throughout Victoria's most needy communities.

Dads do make a difference. Just look around and see all of the dad's playing with their children. It's great.

Gary Dornau is currently employed as Marketing Coordinator for the Men and Family Relationships Program at Relationships Australia (Victoria). He has also written two books - 'Men! Stirring Stories for the Soul!' (Crown Content) and 'Helping Young Men Understand their Soul' (self published). Gary can be contacted via his web site [www.wordswillwork.com](http://www.wordswillwork.com) or (03) 9835 7509.

#### References

- Barlow (1999) *A review of early childhood literature* [Centre for Community Child Health, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra]
- Buchanan Ann (2002) Department of Social Policy and Social Work, [University of Oxford]
- Fitting Fathers into Families: Men and the fatherhood role in contemporary Australia* (1999) Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra
- Greenwood (1996) *Pathways to Prevention: Developmental and Early Intervention Approaches to Crime in Australia* National Crime Prevention, Commonwealth of Australia
- McCain/Mustard (1999) *Reversing the Real Brain Drain* [Ontario Children's Secretariat, Toronto]
- Relationship Indicators (2001) Relationships Australia Incorporated