

Notes from a presentation at the 2nd Annual Early Childhood Research Symposium, Dec 1998. Printed with the permission of the presenter.

Developing a Parenting Programme for Dads

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INTRODUCTION

The Dunedin Early Childhood Development (ECD) became interested in developing parenting courses that encourage fathers to attend and participate. This interest has been stimulated by observations from coordinators that usually fathers do not attend parenting courses, or if they do, very few ever complete a course. There has also been a call from the late Commissioner for Children, Laurie O'Reilly for organisations that support parents to focus on fathering issues and deliver services appropriate to fathers. To enable the Dunedin ECD staff team to develop parenting programmes more appropriate for fathers it was decided that first information should be collected on the views of fathers participating in programmes.

GATHERING INFORMATION

Our team contacted early childhood organisations which provide services to parents. The services were asked to approach fathers and see if they would be willing for an ECD coordinator to interview them. The service that supplied most of the contacts was the one that had the resources to approach fathers personally and "sell" the idea that taking part in research is important and that their input would be valuable.

Finding 26 fathers who were willing to participate took two months. Most of these fathers at some point during the interview said things like, "I hope this is helpful", "I don't think I've been very helpful", "this is only my opinion", "really, is this the stuff you want?" Although I gave the fathers the choice of being interviewed face to face or by phone, all chose to be interviewed by phone. Perhaps this gave them a sense of anonymity and also many mentioned having very little free time. Some fathers had thought a lot about the topic and had much to say. Two fathers talked for over an hour. They asked me in-depth about what parenting courses were and what you do at them. Questions they asked included "where do you sit?", "do you have to talk?",

“can you say nothing?”, “do people just whinge about their kids?”, “are parenting courses helpful?”, “what does the facilitator do?”, “does the facilitator sit up the front?”, “do you have tests?”.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The interview questions were as follows:

- Have you ever attended a parenting course?
- What puts you, or other men, off attending a parenting course?
- What would attract you to attending a parenting course?
- What do you think of the idea of a parenting course for dads only?
- What qualities do you think the person running the course should have?
- What topics would you like to see covered in a parenting course?
- How could the Early Childhood Development promote fathering?
- Do you think a “dads and kids” day is a good idea?
- Do you think a prominent dad (talking about fathering) evening is a good idea?

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE STUDY

The sample was restricted by the fact that only fathers whose children attended an early childhood service and had a telephone connected were interviewed. No Maori or Pacific Islanders participated in the study. The quality of information I gathered has enabled us to develop a parenting programme that has attracted a lot of interest from fathers in the region. The method of interviewing fathers by telephone allowed me to work from home in the evening, and if I called at an inconvenient time I was able to call back at a more convenient time. The telephone allowed the fathers to maintain a degree of anonymity and security to ask basic questions about parenting courses.

RESULTS

Most fathers (21 out of 26) answered that they had not attended a parenting course, although six of these fathers mentioned they had attended antenatal classes. A large number of reasons were given for themselves or other men not wanting to attend parenting course. The main reasons were: a belief that child rearing is the role of women (13 fathers), not having enough time (9 fathers), not knowing what parenting courses were or even knowing that parenting courses existed (9 fathers). Fathers would more likely attend parenting courses if: they were held in the weekend (4 fathers), information was provided prior to the course so they knew what to expect (4

fathers), good practical information was provided on the course (4 fathers), and the facilitator allowed time to talk individually with them (3 fathers).

Fathers were mixed in their opinion as to whether a parenting course should be provided for men only. While nine fathers liked the idea, ten said that courses should be for mothers and fathers, and five fathers did not express an opinion.

Fourteen fathers mentioned personal qualities that a facilitator should have, for example: “not touchy feely”, “friendly”, “open to new ideas”, “not judgmental”, “has done it before”, “does not let people go on and on”. Seven fathers mentioned that facilitators should be parents. Six fathers expressed a preference for a male facilitator, two preferred a female facilitator, and two thought there should be both a male and a female facilitator running a course.

Topics that they wanted covered in a parenting course included: the normal development of children (13 fathers), behaviour management (12 fathers), self-development e.g. stress management and how to make time for yourself (8 fathers), playing with children (5 fathers), how to manage sibling rivalry (3 fathers), transition to school issues (3 fathers), how to be a good dad and what is special about being a father (3 fathers).

Suggestions from the fathers as to how the ECD could promote fathering included: having a team building day, getting older fathers to support their sons in fathering, displaying “fathering is fun” posters, talking with kindergarten teachers about how to welcome and include fathers, encouraging kindergartens to think of having a father day on a Saturday, organising playgroups for fathers and children, linking in with antenatal courses and offering follow-ups.

As to whether fathers thought that having a dad and kids’ day was a good idea the majority (24) answered that it was. A comment from one father was to make sure activities were provided that fathers would feel comfortable doing such as kite flying, slot cars and duplo. The majority of fathers (22) also thought that having a prominent father talking about fathering at an evening event was a good idea. Additional comments made about this included: to make sure the talk was held at a venue where fathers felt comfortable such as a rugby club in contrast to the Plunket rooms, and to not just have sportsmen speaking.

DEVELOPING AND PROVIDING AN APPROPRIATE PARENTING PROGRAMME

After the data was analysed a discussion paper was written and circulated for comment amongst the Dunedin ECD team. The paper was discussed at a staff meeting and the content of the “Focus on Fathering” Parenting Programme was decided on. The programme consisted of:

- Developing a fathers play group;
- Prominent fathers evening;
- Parenting courses for fathers;
- Fathering column;
- Posters celebrating fathering;
- Information sharing through a male professional group;
- Professional development course for early childhood service staff focusing on how to help fathers feel comfortable and included;
- A fathers’ and children’s day.

The first six components have been completed. The last two components are being planned.

The fathers’ playgroup is now running weekly. A prominent dads’ evening was held and five fathers spoke about their experiences of fathering. This was a very successful evening and we have been asked to organise another evening.

Three “Focus on Fathering” courses were held. Based on the interview data we decided that the following principles and activities were essential for the success of the courses:

- Advertising must attract men’s attention and appeal to them;
- One course should be for men only and this course should have a male facilitator;
- One course should be for men and their partners and this course should have a male and a female facilitator;
- Before the course starts men should be called by the facilitator and told whether they are to bring anything or not, told what will happen during the first session, and given the opportunity to ask any questions;
- The facilitator should be a parent and experienced in working with groups;
- The facilitator should try to build an atmosphere of respect amongst the group rather than an atmosphere of intimacy;
- The facilitator would work in a way that minimises the risk of men “loosing face” with other members of the group;

- The facilitator would supply a range of answers to parenting problems and employ a more formal teaching style than usually used in group situations (e.g. Giving out homework, using a white-board, being directive, giving answers to questions rather than exploring options, doing more than 50 percent of the talking to the whole group);
- During the course the facilitator should acknowledge that expectations of fathers have changed over the years and that often fathers of young children do not have access to role models. Men were not expected in the past to change nappies, push pushchairs, feed children, let alone be the main caregiver. Men are now developing a different fathering tradition;
- Facilitators should ask participants what they would like the course to cover. It would be safe to plan on including normal child development, behaviour management, and some self-development topics, such as, stress management, anger management, and how to make time for yourself.

A popular magazine for men has agreed to run the “Focus on Fathering” column. ECD is negotiating with a sponsor to enable this project to proceed.

Copies of the report “Parenting Programme for Dads” have been distributed to organisations that provide services for fathers. An information pack for fathers is available from the ECD Dunedin office. Copies of this pack were given to participants at an early childhood education liaison meeting at Dunedin College of Education. The availability of this pack was advertised through the local and national newsletter “Right from the Start.” Once the evaluation of the Focus on Fathering course was complete, the Community Funding Agency was given the information and matched to the local branch of the Father and Child Trust who were willing to run a course using information for this study.

“Fathering is Fun” posters were circulated to all ECD offices and early childhood services in Otago and Southland. Copies are available from the ECD Dunedin Office. Men working in early childhood education now meet every six months in Dunedin to discuss issues important to them as a group and for peer support.

A professional development course is planned to look at how to make early childhood services more father friendly. A dads’ and kids’ day will be run on a Saturday at a kindergarten. We will be inviting prominent dads and local celebrities to come and staff activities set up at the kindergarten.