Improving rural men’s relationships and health: a collaborative approach

Michelle Hood, Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Nick Stathis, Child Support Agency

Introduction

The Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaCSIA) and the Child Support Agency (CSA) welcome the opportunity offered by The 9th National Rural Health Conference to outline the ways in which their collaborative relationship continues to produce positive and effective health outcomes for men, and in particular, separated fathers, in rural Australia.

Research has shown that separation increases the risk of mothers and fathers experiencing health problems, and that fathers in rural and remote areas often experience this alongside a range of other challenging issues particular to rural communities. There is also evidence that families that are supported during and following separation have better outcomes.

FaCSIA and CSA’s collaborative approach to assist families experiencing separation and rural fathers include the changes to the Child Support Scheme and developing resources such as Staying Connected. Also both portfolios have developed separate responses to assisting families including the FaCSIA funded Men and Family Relationships program, and Mensline Australia, and the CSA funded Being Connected program.

FaCSIA and CSA have complementary roles and responsibilities. FaCSIA is the Australian Government’s principal source of advice on social policy issues and is responsible for about a quarter of the government’s budgetary outlays. FaCSIA works in partnership with other government and non-government organisations in the management of a diverse range of programs and services which support and improve the lives of Australians. CSA’s role is to administer the Child Support Scheme and help separated parents take responsibility for the financial support of their children.

This paper discusses the connection between family relationships and health, CSA and FaCSIA activities to support fathers, and activity outcomes.

Relationships and health

Research findings indicate that separation increases the risk of mothers and fathers experiencing short and long-term mental health problems including depression and anxiety, with separated fathers being more likely than mothers to engage in risk-taking behaviour and substance abuse. There is also evidence that father’s parenting suffers and that this can be a key determinant in the next generations ability to form non-violent relationships. Fathers in rural and remote areas often experience these problems alongside a range of other challenging issues particular to rural communities. Drought, isolation, difficulties in attracting and retaining health and other professionals and the slow erosion of traditional support structures such as church and community groups can exacerbate the distress of, and contribute to, marital breakdown.

Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) (jointly funded by FaCSIA and Attorney General’s Department (AGD) and administered by FaCSIA) service providers report a sense of community breakdown and sliding “social capital” in rural communities that has a particular impact on men.

The Australian Government recognises the implications of circumstances faced by rural communities on the health of separated families. Government agencies work in partnership with community

* Gold Award, Prime Minister’s Awards for Excellence in Public Sector Management, 2004
organisations to provide services and support to families during the emotionally difficult time of separation.

It is important for a separated father to be able to link swiftly to support in the event of separation, as he faces the significant possibility that:

- his children may not live with him
- he may be physically separated from his children by considerable distances
- he may lose contact with his children
- he may experience a marked decline in his health and well-being.

Since the first national Men and Family Relationships Conference was held in 1998, significant milestones have been achieved in increasing the range and diversity of services for men. Some of these services will be presented in more detail below. Despite the development and implementation of numerous government-funded programs in recent years, there is ongoing concern that men in rural areas still experience poorer health and higher death rates than their counterparts in metropolitan areas and women generally. They are more likely to face social isolation and commit suicide, and men in rural and remote areas are less likely to seek help or visit a doctor.

**CSA and FaCSIA**

**FaCSIA and CSA working together**

Child support policy and legislation falls within the portfolio responsibility of the Minister for Family and Community Services while the Minister for Human Services is responsible for the delivery and administration of the Child Support Scheme by CSA.

At the broadest level, FaCSIA and CSA collaborate on the design and delivery of Australia’s child support scheme. However, FaCSIA is also responsible for the administration of Family Relationship Services Program (FRSP) which is funded by the Australian Government through AGD and FaCSIA. The FRSP aims to help all family members ensure their well-being by minimising the emotional, social and economic costs of disruptions to family relationships. Over 100 community organisations across Australia provide a range of support and specialised services.

This paper focuses on the interface between FRSP and products and services developed by CSA to support separated families. These have been developed in consultation with FaCSIA and other government agencies, academics and researchers, community service providers including FaCSIA funded FRSP organisations, parents and parenting groups. CSA’s vision is guided by the broad reforms to the family law system and is for children to be able to rely on their parents for the financial and emotional support necessary for their well-being.

Examples of collaboration in this area include the Staying Connected program, the Me and My series of booklets and the Taking Fathering Further project.

*Staying Connected* is underpinned by philosophies that support the welfare and best interest of children through positive interaction with their non-residential parent. Its emphasis on providing men with strategies for parenting from a distance makes it especially relevant for rural men, and an initial trial and a number of subsequent pilot programs were run in rural and regional centres. The program aims to provide support for fathers in the workplace and in doing so, help them develop tools to build and maintain a positive relationship with their children. The program also seeks to utilise the workplace to establish positive behavioural change in terms of help-seeking by separated men and to increase the knowledge of employers as to the cost of relationship breakdown to their bottom line.
A primary impetus for the development of *Staying Connected* was the findings and recommendations of an important FaCSIA research project, *Fitting Fathers into Families*. The report found that:

> fathers have a significant impact on child development outcomes for both boys and girls, especially for self-esteem, emotional well-being, capacity to love and be loved, and ability to participate in society. Being a father is challenging yet relatively unsupported in contemporary Australia. This means that policy frameworks and programs are insufficient.4

The report also found that men are often reluctant to seek support services within the community — partly a consequence of work demands — but generally feel they have benefitted when they do. Other evidence indicates that rural men are particularly disinclined to seek support from community services.2 *Staying Connected* was modelled from FaCSIA’s recommendation that generic services needed to be reoriented ‘to focus on working where men are — both physically (e.g. the workplace, service clubs) and psychologically (e.g. identifying their current needs).’ 4

The *Me and My Kids* component of *Staying Connected* developed into a ‘spin-off’ booklet with particular relevance for fathers in rural and remote areas. Helping non-resident fathers build strategies for connecting with their children was seen as a critical issue for engaging men. As no other relevant products existed, CSA, FaCSIA and the Family Court of Australia developed this strengths-based booklet in 2002. Demand for *Me and My Kids: Parenting from a Distance* has been high.

The Taking Fathering Further project is an innovative Call Back support service offered by Mensline Australia for rural and regional fathers who want to improve their relationship with their children. Mensline Australia is an FRSP funded service designed especially to meet the needs of men and to be readily accessible for all men, regardless of where they live. The information, counselling and support service provides a professional, confidential, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week service, for the cost of a local call. This model of service delivery is particularly effective for men living in rural and remote areas where the availability of specialist services can be limited.

As many callers to Mensline are separated fathers, the Taking Fathering Further project provides dads with counselling and parenting skills training in order to ensure positive outcomes for their children. Men who participate in the program must have a child under the age of twelve and will receive up to ten calls from the service in a six month period.

**Family Relationship Services Program**

FaCSIA’s Men and Family Relationship program services are funded through the FRSP and deliver family relationship counselling, skills training and education services to men to help them improve and better manage their relationships with their partners, ex-partners, children and stepchildren. They aim to increase men’s relationship skills and participation in family and community activities.

Other examples of FRSP services and products include:

- **The Working with Men at Risk of Suicide E-Learning Tool**, developed by Mensline Australia. It is a comprehensive, in-depth and targeted at family relationship service professionals with a wide range of backgrounds, skills, knowledge and qualifications. It is intended to provide a framework for effectively responding to men at risk of suicide, both for organisations that currently do not have specific skills for working with men and for those that do. The resource assists organisations to improve the early identification of men at risk and the effectiveness of responses that may reduce the suicide rate and the immeasurable impact of suicide on families. The suicide e-learning tool has been provided to all FRSP service providers.

- As a part of the Government’s broader drought response, the FRSP has been funded to deliver counselling support to drought affected families. In the 2006–07 financial year drought counselling funding has been committed to 21 local FRSP service providers to deliver assistance in 59 Emergency Condition declared statistical sub-divisions and for Centrelink to increase services in 22 statistical sub-divisions. Each organisation provides face-to-face counselling, community development activities, and other activities to support drought affected families and individuals.
Mental Health First Aid—Involves training selected FRSP practitioners from regional, rural and remote areas in Mental Health ‘First Aid’. The need for this training was identified during consultations with the FRSP sector. Expected outcomes of this initiative include:

- the FRSP sectors response to families who experience a mental illness will be enhanced;
- the identification and responses to clients experiencing mental illness will be improved; and
- local community health literacy will be increased.

Examples of Family Relationship Services Program practice

Regional and rural service providers regularly engage in collaborative innovative practice to deliver services that are inclusive of men and actively engage them. Examples from providers in central NSW are:

- As part of the service delivery within the Men and Family Relationships program, Centacare Wilcannia-Forbes planned and delivered the Fatherhood Festival on Father’s Day 2005 and 2006. Approximately 500 people attended these free family days. There were amusements for the children, and family-based games like the egg-and-spoon races and the 3-legged races. This was an opportunity to promote a range of services offered by the agency, for families and men specifically. Staff from Community Health joined Centacare staff in providing a men’s health pit stop, which offered free testing of blood pressure, health advice and counselling opportunities. The success of this day is due to the support of so many local businesses, local Council and other organisations.

- The Dads and Kids (DAKs) group, another Centacare Wilcannia-Forbes program, focused on building stronger relationships between fathers and their children. This involves a day of activities for dads and their children, held one Sunday each month, and a gathering of the dads one evening per month for review and planning of activities and deeper reflection on what it means to be a father.

- Centacare Wilcannia-Forbes has also developed an excellent inter-agency relationship with Centrelink and the Department of Primary Industry to co-present Farm Family Gatherings in their funded area. At these gatherings, Centacare counsellors give a talk on issues related to stress and the need for self-care, and make themselves available for one-on-one conversations with individuals or couples. This often leads to participants making appointments for further counselling.

- Centacare Bathurst made a short documentary film “Keeping Heart”. It introduces people living and working in rural Australia, who survived enduring crisis and found benefits of accessing help. A number of people self-referred to different services in rural and remote areas after watching this film.

Outcomes for clients

Staying Connected outcomes

Self-reports14 by 72 Australia Post participants in Staying Connected from urban and regional areas were analysed by Associate Professor Graeme Russell of Macquarie University. The participants took part in the program between February and May 2004 and the following early conclusions were drawn:

- Comparisons between pre- and post-program measures show that participants reported:
  - a greater capacity to cope with all the things they have to do
  - being more satisfied with their lives and with their relationships with their children and what they do as a father
  - being more satisfied in how well they are able to focus or concentrate on their jobs
that, at a self-reported behavioural level, the program has had a positive impact on both their physical well-being (e.g. less disruptive sleep), at an emotional level (e.g. less irritability), getting on with others at work (fewer disagreements) and having fewer sick days.

- Participants were overwhelmingly positive about the program:
  - 100% said that the program should be offered in other parts of the organisation
  - 100% said they would recommend the program to other men in Australia Post
  - 88% said that the program had had a positive impact on their work performance

Figure 1 on the following page attests to the program’s success by showing how participants rated their relationship with their children and the other parent before and after attending Staying Connected.

**Figure 1** Relationship with the other parent—Percentage of responses in the ‘often and very often’ categories pre-program and 3 months post-program

Do you feel committed to having a business like relationship with the other parent

Do you have the information and skills to work out what is best for your children with the other parent

Do you have the information and skills to have a business like relationship with the other parent

Are you working with the other parent to ensure priority is given to your children’s well-being

Source: Dr Graeme Russell, Staying Connected evaluation.

Participants’ comments add strength to the findings:

I must stress that I do believe that all men going through divorce/separation do need to attend this course. I have spoken to quite a few Australia Post men who are going through that and do understand what is happening. The course will open their eyes up and improve their own lifestyle. I will recommend this for anyone. (participant)

The Staying Connected program has made a huge difference to several of our separated firefighters in helping them maintain a great relationship with their children and a workable relationship with their ex spouse. This has led to less family related time off work and healthier relationships with colleagues. (Keith Adamson, Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Metropolitan Fire Brigade)

This session helped me to realise I need to take care of myself so I can be there for my son. (participant)

The stuff about body language knocked me sideways. I suddenly realised I’ve been fuelling the arguments. (participant)

**Family Relationship Services Program outcomes**

The Review of the FRSP commenced in October 2003 and was completed in February 2004.6 The Review gathered information to inform future directions of the Program and found that the FRSP:
• flexibly met a real community need
• had high levels of community acceptance, client satisfaction and addressed the family issues for which it was accessed
• had a diverse network of service providers that were effectively linked across the FRSP and with non-FRSP funded organisations.

As part of the review a client consultancy was conducted ‘to explore and identify the range of current and non-user experiences, perspectives and needs.’ It found that clients of the FRSP say that the services they have accessed have assisted in achieving:
• more effective communication with partners, ex partners and children
• increased parenting skills and a better understanding about the impacts their actions or inactions have on their children
• more effective family relationships (with step parents, new environments, relationships issues and abusive parents) and a decrease in family tensions
• better approaches to repairing and building relationships (practical ‘tools’ to help change responses to difficulties and/or overcome their own aggressive or retreating behaviour)
• agreements on custody or residence or contact orders, child support and other post-separation decisions where this was difficult before intervention
• calm and safe visitations for children, from the non-resident parent.

In terms of the Men and Family Relationship program, it was seen as a very positive initiative in that it is focused on men specifically. The strengths of the Men and Family Relationships sub-program included:
• it enables better understanding of personal behaviour as well as the triggers of behaviour
• the comfort of speaking with other men/male counsellor rather than a woman when discussing personal relationship issues one-on-one
• having a female facilitator (while using a male for one-on-one counselling), which helps to get across to users the female perspectives on the situation
• some staff who have personal understanding through experience
• that a combination of group and one-on-one therapy is used
• it develops skills for future conflict resolution and communication
• users don’t feel lectured or judged or blamed by the service or providers
• for some, it enables a greater ability to relate to the ex-partner and child after the break-up
• the use of visual aids (e.g. whiteboard) and the ability to take notes and reflect back on these
• the personalised focus of the service on each client’s unique needs and situation
• the creation of an environment where men look after each other.
Conclusion

Through collaborations between government agencies, researchers and community service providers to improve support for families, improved health and social outcomes can be achieved. The relationship between FaCSIA and CSA has facilitated opportunities for the establishment of services to support families, and has also enabled a pooling of resources to better understand the needs of fathers experiencing separation. A key priority for the future is to jointly engage and collaborate actively with stakeholder groups in the development of innovative, effective services to support parents and their children.

References


7. Department of Family and Community services and Attorney-General’s Department, Family Relationship Services Program- Client input Consultancy, 2004.


Presenters

Michelle Hood is a social worker with over 20 years’ experience working with children and their families in the community, court and school settings. She is currently a Manager in the Family Relationship Services Branch of the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, with responsibility for the implementation and development of early intervention relationship services within the new family law system. The team has a commitment to improving service delivery to rural and remote communities who experience unique challenges that impact on their personal relationships and well-being.

Nick Stathis is an Assistant Director in the Community and Industry Partnerships (CIP) team of the Child Support Agency. Amongst other things, he is responsible for managing the workplace program for separated fathers, Staying Connected. Nick joined CSA after 10 years with the Australian Bureau of Statistics, where he was recently involved in the 2006 Census campaign as Community Relations Manager working with multicultural, Indigenous, homeless, disabled and regional audiences. Nick has a sound understanding of rural issues from his community work with the ABS and from his background growing up in the small country town of Corowa, just 50 kilometres west of Albury, and attending the Wodonga Campus of La Trobe University.