

ACPP Conference

The Role of Fathers

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ACPP Conference – The Role of Fathers

On behalf of the SACP I attended a one-day conference organised by the Association of Child Psychology and Psychiatry (ACPP) entitled **The Role of Fathers**. It was held at Strathclyde University, Glasgow on Thursday 12th June 2003. The conference looked at the role of fatherhood from a number of different perspectives.

The first presentation was by Dr Paul Barrows, Principal Child Psychotherapist at the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) in Bristol. It was entitled:

Infants, Fathers and Families.

Dr Barrows began his talk by citing numerous examples of parenting books available in local bookshops and papers on parenting published in the scientific literature. Although the subject is parenting the reality is that it is almost always *mothering* where the emphasis is on the relationship between mother and child – the so-called dyadic relationship.

However it was the contention of Dr Barrows that not only was the father's individual role as a parent important for a child's development but the relationship of the parents *as a couple* was critical. How the parents interacted as a couple would determine the 'internal' picture of parenting the child would develop and apply in later life when he/she became a parent. Therefore in therapeutic interventions the focus of work should be on the couple rather than just the mother. A case study was presented to illustrate this point.

A couple had problems with their 18 month old son, Peter. He would awaken several times a night. The couple had latterly resorted to bringing Peter into bed with them so they could get some sleep. Prior to this, whenever Peter awoke and started crying, one of them would go through to Peter's room and stand by his bed until he fell back asleep. It was pointed out that this action of constantly attending to Peter was depriving the child of the chance to develop its own resources ie the ability to fall back to sleep without the need for parental intervention. It was the father in the main who went through to attend to Peter since he could not stand to hear his son's distress. During discussions with the couple it transpired that the father had deep seated feelings of guilt at the way he had upset his own mother when he had decided to leave home at a fairly early age. His mother had recently died. Subconsciously, according to Dr Barrows, the child was replacing a *need* the father had because he was missing his own mother. By tending to the child he was gently assuaging his own guilt. (In light of this the child's sleep problem was eventually solved by application of a carefully worked out strategy).

The point made here by Dr Barrows was that in many therapeutic interventions only the mother tends to be involved. Either the father is working or is otherwise unavailable yet unless the father's "ghosts" as well as the mother's are investigated the root of the problem may be missed.

Dr Barrows concluded his talk by emphasising the role both fathers and mothers play in the development of emotional self-regulation in children – fathers are particularly good with boys - so that they learn to interact with and respond to others in an appropriate manner. Finally and perhaps unsurprisingly, the single most important determinant in deciding whether a father stays around or not is the relationship between the father and the mother.

The second talk came from an entirely different perspective. Presented by Duncan McGougan and Norrie Gardiner, prison officers from HMP Shotts, their presentation was entitled:

Parenting from Prison.

The questions posed at the start of the talk were “Is it possible to be an effective parent from prison?” and “Can I still be a good father?” The immediate reaction to the second question is often that if they were interested in being a good father why are they in jail? However, as was pointed out, this response is not particularly helpful. The situation is as it is and therefore any help has to be focussed on allowing the prisoner and his children to have some kind of productive relationship.

To this end a scheme – Parenting from Prison – has been running for the last few years from HMP Shotts. The criteria for entry to the scheme are

- Prisoners to be long term inmates
- Sentences to be 8 years or over
- Prisoners to be male.

There is a rigorous screening process for applicants to the scheme. This takes the form of a one to one interview during which the motivation for joining the scheme is assessed and social work background checks are made to see if there is any history of domestic violence or court orders restricting access. Successful applicants then attend the National Induction Centre at Shotts prison for twelve 2-hour sessions spread over two weeks. Issues addressed include:

- how to deal with a long sentence
- fathers are asked to consider who they are, why they are the way they are and how can they become better fathers?
- acceptance of responsibility for their current situation

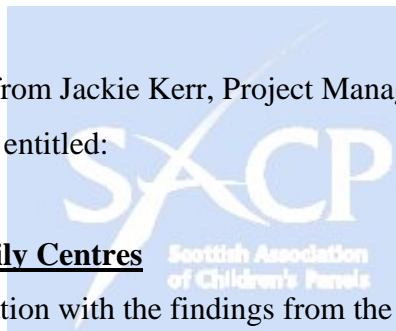
- what to tell their kids and when to tell them
- ways of communicating by letter, telephone or during visits and developing the skills to ask open as opposed to closed questions
- their legal role as a parent

Finally they are encouraged to make a 15 minute video for their children which can be highly effective.

While serving their sentences at various institutions it is obviously up to each prisoner to maintain the momentum of relationship building with their kids although there will be help available and people to discuss problems with. The parting thought of this very effective and thought provoking presentation is that while prisoners have been deprived of their liberty through their own actions children have also been deprived of their fathers through no fault of their own. Anything that can be done to mitigate that should be welcomed.

After lunch the third talk was from Jackie Kerr, Project Manager, Primrosehill Family Centre, Aberdeen. Her presentation was entitled:

Working with Fathers in Family Centres



Jackie Kerr began her presentation with the findings from the Joseph Rowntree Trust in 2000 which highlighted the problems that fathers encounter with family support services. In general, fathers are not well catered for either in terms of family support or as parents in their own right. To attempt to address this, the Primrosehill Family Centre was set up by the Aberlour Trust to offer a facility for both men and women.

As a first step potential barriers preventing fathers attending family centres were identified. These included:

- cultural perceptions that child care was “woman’s work”
- presentation of materials and approaches tended to be from a woman’s perspective
- male reluctance to open up and discuss emotional issues.

In addition, many family centres had few if any male workers and some female workers were apprehensive about working with fathers due to the potential for physical violence.

Jackie Kerr went on to say that the Primrosehill Centre having identified these concerns then took steps to overcome them. These steps included the introduction of male workers, having men only groups and developing a holistic approach to working with families ie working with mum, dad and the kids together as well as separately.

The approach used in the men's group is based on a training programme called Mellow Parenting* devised by the ACCP. It is essentially an approach focussing on relationship problems between parents and children under five and includes groupwork and personal video and diary work.

Initially, one "dads group" was set up consisting of six members. They were monitored for a period of 13 weeks by various means including videoing the group and having one to one interviews. Feedback was very positive with the fathers reporting both an increase in their own self esteem and in their abilities to be better parents.

The final talk was from Mary Glasgow and George Potter from the Quarriers Family Resource Centre, Glasgow. Their presentation was entitled:

Improving Outcomes for Children by Supporting Dads

The Quarriers Family Resource Centre is a purpose built resource in the Greater Easterhouse area of Glasgow. In essence its remit is the same as the Primrosehill Centre mentioned earlier. The emphasis is once again in supporting the dads and to that end a male parent development worker (George Potter) was put in place and funded by Children in Need.

In working with fathers the specific aims are

- provide a range of practical and emotional supports to dads
- to build on and affirm existing parenting skills
- to prevent/reduce the level of statutory intervention.

The key guiding principles are that

- engaging with dads will benefit children
- dads are an untapped resource
- all dads have individual needs and strengths.

Areas of focus in the dads group include

- alcohol and drug issues
- mental health issues
- domestic violence issues

As in the case of Primrosehill fathers reported positively on their experiences at the centre.

Overall, it was a very interesting day especially the presentation from the prison service. The presentations from the Aberlour Trust (Primrosehill) and Quarriers were inevitably very similar given the focus and approaches. However it was nice to observe that both projects, working completely independently, were able to report the same positive results.

*Anyone wishing more information on the Mellow Parenting Training Programme should contact the ACCP. Their e-mail address is given below.

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