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Foundations

Developing Social & Emotional Wellbeing in Early Childhood

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

Happiness
AT WORK

Conversations
WITH PARENTS

Enhancing
social and
emotional learning

CHILDREN'S SERVICES MAGAZINE

Contents

- 3 **Saying the Hard Things**
- 8 **Happiness At Work**
- 12 **Enhancing Social and Emotional Learning**
- 16 **Engaging Fathers in Early Childhood**

“The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said.”
Peter Drucker

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FROM THE EDITOR

Welcome to the first issue of *Foundations* for 2012. This issue focuses on communication. Communication is an important aspect of our lives and can significantly impact on all areas of our lives including at work.

At the end of last year we welcomed Liz Blackford to the *Foundations* team. Liz brings with her a wealth of experience and a great deal of enthusiasm and we look forward to having her on the team during 2012.

Recently we conducted an evaluation of *Foundations* and the response was overwhelming. Nearly 250 individuals responded to the surveys. These responses have helped shaped our understanding of how *Foundations* is being utilised in the early childhood sector and what aspects readers find most useful. We have listened to the suggestions and we intend to feature topics that were recommended.

Many services who participated in the survey were provided with spring vegetable seeds. We trust that these proved to be a valuable resource and learning tool.

We wish to congratulate Newcastle University as their Masters of Early Childhood has recently been accredited as a fourth year pathway. Now anyone looking to upgrade a three year qualification can also gain their Masters qualification at the same time.

If you or your service are undertaking innovative practices in regards to social and emotional wellbeing then we would be interested in hearing from you. If you would like to contribute to *Foundations* or if you would like to share some ideas please feel free to contact me via email: everymind@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au

Ellen Newman

Ellen Newman
Everymind



Saying the Hard Things:

IT'S MORE THAN JUST "SAYING"

By Tania Ewin



When I was asked to write an article about having difficult conversations, I said "Sure, no problem" and set about researching some relevant articles to back up my years of clinical experience. When it came to actually writing the article however, I struggled to begin! It can be a similar hurdle when we are trying to begin difficult conversations with parents of the children at our service. We have the information, we've identified an issue, but we don't quite know where to go from there.

Difficult conversations, or saying the hard things, can mean different things for different people. Our experience, background, or even gender can impact on how comfortable we feel in raising an issue or answering a parent's questions. Unfortunately there is no one magic communication style that guarantees success. Building relationships with parents and their children takes time and achieving open and honest communication can be tricky but your efforts will ultimately benefit the children in your care.

There are pages upon pages written about communication, and it can all get a bit confusing and overwhelming. The basics of effective communication can be thought of as listening, talking and body language. Busy drop off and pick up times can get in the way of having conversations with parents because your ability to focus on how you *listen* and *talk* can be limited. When we feel *rushed* or distracted, we can say things we may later regret. It's okay to think and plan for a specific meeting time to confidently address a concern or issue.

Listening

Listening is a way of showing that you value parents' opinions and input. Think about conversations with family, friends or staff. How do you know when someone is listening to you? Usually it involves the person doing some, if not all, of the following:

- Looking at you while you are talking;
- Nodding or saying “uh huh” at times;
- Letting you finish what you are saying, without interruption;
- Asking questions to clarify or gain additional information about the issue or event.

Remember that listening is about hearing the other person's perspective. You do not have to agree with what they are saying (Raising Children Network {RCN}, 2011).



Talking

The way you speak with parents will either encourage further communication or create further problems. Be clear and specific about describing the situation and focus on finding a solution (RCN, 2011). If you feel nervous, you can often feel yourself talking faster than usual, or perhaps beginning to mumble. Try to slow down, and take a breath. Avoid using jargon or acronyms that parents may not be familiar with. Alternatively, you can describe the situation or behaviour, and then tell them what the official term is.

A simple but effective tool when having difficult conversations can be the use of *I statements*. Parents are less likely to feel blamed, and they can understand your clear statement about the next step. Using an open ended question will often follow easily from an *I statement*, giving parents an opportunity to offer additional information (RCN 2011). For example “I have noticed Milly has been involved in a few biting incidents recently. Biting other children is a common behaviour in children of Milly’s age. Can you tell me what happens at home or other places when she’s playing with other children?”



Body Language

What we actually say is clearly important, but words aren't everything. In fact in a conversation between 2 people, only 7% of the message comes from the words spoken, while the remaining 93% of the message that is received and understood comes from body language (55%) and tone of voice (38%) (Cole, 2001). The emphasis placed on non-verbal communication can be difficult to accept until we think about actual examples. Think of a time when someone tasted something and they didn't like it, but tried to pretend otherwise to be polite. Can you remember their facial expression? What else hinted they didn't like it?

Whether we mean to or not, we communicate with others through our body language, tone of voice and facial expressions. Our body posture, that is how straight we sit or stand, conveys how confident we feel; the speed, pitch, tone and volume of our voice tells others how important we think our message is, how committed we are to our message and how confident we feel about it (Cole, 2001). Imagine a time when you were really excited about something and you were telling a close friend about it. Did you talk a bit louder and faster? Did you move your arms and hands more than usual? Or think about a time when someone told you something serious and important. How did they look and sound?

It is really important that what we say and how we say it are consistent. If there isn't consistency between our words and non-verbal communication, others will believe the non-verbal communication over the words we're saying (Cole, 2001). An example might be where a child is standing in front of you, a little wide-eyed, and their hand is behind their back. When asked about what they are holding, the child says "Nothing!" Think about other times when this may not be so obvious, but you still had doubts about what someone had said to you. Could they maintain eye contact with you? Did they start to mumble? Could they answer your questions?

If we are to use our non-verbal communication to its best effect here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Sit or stand at right angles to each other as this is less confronting than sitting opposite someone;
- Keep an open body posture, don't cross your arms or legs as this can be perceived as defensive;
- Centre your attention on the other person;
- Avoid fiddling, fidgeting and other nervous mannerisms as this is also distracting and can be perceived as a lack of confidence;
- Lean slightly forward to show interest and attention;
- Make good eye contact – too much is over-powering and too little indicates lack of attention (Cole, 2001).

*“There is all the difference in the world
between having something to say
and having to say something.”*
John Dewey



Raising Concerns with Parents

In order to avoid concerns escalating into major problems which become more difficult to resolve, it can be useful to make an appointment with parents when issues arise. Be prepared for this meeting by having clear, accurate information on hand which explains the issue, for example fact sheets or printed information to give the parent, why it is a concern, and what you hope to achieve as a result from the meeting. It is useful to keep the child's welfare as the central issue, helping to avoid blame or defensiveness.

Take the time to think about how you will explain the situation prior to your meeting. What words can you use to describe the situation, behaviour or issue? How might a parent perceive what you are saying? You may like to talk to a trusted supervisor or experienced colleague to practice with or to discuss your notes. You could ask them if they have had to have conversation with a parent about a similar issue. What worked well for that situation, or what would they have done differently? Parents are more likely to hear what you say when you are clear about what you need to say and how you want to say it, otherwise you can be at risk of conflicting and confusing messages (Chronis, 1994). You might like to provide relevant information as a way of giving some context to the situation and the details of any relevant health professionals in the area. Ask open-ended questions to check out what parent's think, whether they have also been concerned, and to find out if they have been experiencing similar concerns at home.

Responding to Concerns Raised by Parents

Use your listening skills so that parents feel their concerns have been heard. Don't be too eager to jump in with justifications and explanations too soon (RCN, 2011). Take a mental note of what you'd like to come back to after the parent has finished talking. For simple concerns, simply acknowledging the issue then providing a range of alternatives is usually enough. For example "Yes I can see how important his special sleep toy is to Ben and I am sorry it is lost. We will have another look for it today and encourage him to put it back in his bag after each sleep".

However if you are unable to continue the conversation at the time, you can respectfully acknowledge the importance of the issue raised by the parent and then arrange another time to meet. eg "I can hear you are worried about Jacob. I think it would be helpful to have more time to discuss the situation properly and share our ideas to support Jacob. Is there a time we could get together this week?" If you feel stuck or aren't sure of the answer to their concern, it is okay to respond with "I am not sure about that, I'd like to think about it some more. Can we discuss this again later?" It is then important to remember to follow up with the parent as promised.

In some situations you may not be able to find a solution. In these circumstances keep trying to maintain effective communication. It can be very helpful for both staff and parents to simply be heard and feel supported when dealing with difficult situations. However if an issue remains unresolved and is causing conflict or anxiety, ensure parents understand your organisation's grievance procedure and know how to access it (RCN, 2011). Don't be afraid to let a grievance procedure happen – it often provides important lessons in communication for everyone.

On a final note, a quote from Benjamin Spock, an American paediatrician and author:

"Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do."

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Happiness *at work*

By Alexander Kjerulf



*“Communication leads to community, that is,
to understanding, intimacy and mutual valuing.”*
Rollo May

I want you to imagine waking up early on a Monday morning. Picture yourself as you turn off the alarm clock, and lie in bed for a moment before getting up. Your bed is comfortable and warm and you really want to enjoy that feeling a little bit longer, but just thinking about the workweek ahead is making you smile and get ready to jump out of bed.

You know it's going to be a wonderful week. You will do work you can be proud of. You look forward to having fun with your co-workers. You will help them whenever you can, and they will help you whenever you need it. You know you will be spending the day with people you like and can talk to. People who appreciate you for who you are and what you do.

You can't wait to interact with the children at your service. You can tell that your attitude of fun and competence is good for them.

You also can't wait to come home in the evening, all fired up. Though you spend your workdays focused and concentrated, you have so much fun doing your job that it actually leaves you with more energy than when the day started. You look forward to sharing that energy and positivity with your friends and family after another great workday.

IMAGINE FOR A MOMENT HOW IT WOULD FEEL TO LIE IN BED ON A MONDAY MORNING GOING “YES! I GET TO GO TO WORK THIS WEEK!”

Is it possible to be this happy at work in children's services? Can you be energized, have fun, do great work, enjoy the people you work with, be proud of what you do, and look forward to your Monday mornings as much as some people long for Friday afternoon?

Or must you simply accept that working with children is unpleasant and tough and that is why we get paid to do it? And what will it do to you, your co-workers and the children in your care if you give up on creating a happy workplace?

Changing the Situation

I once talked to Helle Schier, a soft-spoken, engaging woman in her mid-20s. She'd recently graduated from nursing school, and had already gotten her first job as a nurse at a Danish hospital.

But when she told a friend that she was going to work at H4, a children's ward, her friend's reaction was “Oh! I'm not sure if I should congratulate you.” It turned out that H4 had quite a reputation. The nurses rarely helped each other out. The doctors disliked the nurses and the feeling was very much mutual. The nurses disliked the administrative staff, who in turn didn't feel that their work was appreciated. There was also a lot of gossiping. It was not a happy place to work.

Helle still started working there with a positive attitude, but was soon forced to agree: It was a horrible place, and working there was getting her down. She didn't like her job at all, didn't feel productive, and started to question whether being a nurse was right for her at all.

But Helle wouldn't put up with it and she wouldn't quit. She decided she would do something about it. She got together with three other nurses from H4, all fresh out of nursing school, and they decided to do something about making their ward happy. They talked to the head nurse and got her to give them a day off to cook up some ideas. What they came up with was simple. First, a summer party for the staff at H4. Nothing fancy, just a garden barbecue and some silly hats. This let people meet each other outside of work and established some positive personal relations.

Next they focused on praise. They introduced The Order of the Elephant, a small elephant plush toy that they could pin to their uniforms. Whenever a co-worker deserves praise, that person is awarded the elephant, and they write in a journal what that person did to earn it. The journal contains entries like these:

“It makes a great difference whether Vibeke is at work or not. She makes sure everything is tidy in the office, which is a huge help for us nurses.”

“It’s difficult to pick one person to give the elephant to, but I’m giving it to Nina, because she is always calm, even in stressful situations, and because she is so competent.”

“I think everybody at H4 deserves an elephant, but today I’m giving it to Joan because she’s so great at playing with the children, big and small.”

As a result of the simple things Helle and her co-workers did, H4 is now a happy place to work, and the four nurses who got the ball rolling are teaching other departments at the hospital how to do the same. They’re known inside and outside of H4 as “the happy girls”.

The nurses are feeling a difference. The doctors have noticed it. And the children admitted to ward and their parents have noticed a huge difference in the mood and the quality of the care given.

Choosing Happiness

The path to happiness at work starts with a simple decision: You must want to be happy. If you don’t commit to being happy at work, you won’t be. You won’t make the choices that make you happy. You won’t take the actions needed to get there. You won’t change the things that need to change.

On the other hand, if you say, “Yes, I choose to be happy at work and to do what it takes to get there,” then things will start to happen. Just making that decision won’t magically make you happy – but it must be the starting point.

And something interesting happens when you decide on happiness: You take charge. When you decide to become happy at work and to do the things necessary to get there, you’re in charge of your career and your work situation. You’re no longer dependent upon the whims of your manager, co-workers or workplace. This is precisely what the nurses in the story above did.



What makes us Happy at Work?

Next you need to know what it is, that makes people happy at work. Is it a high salary, perks, massages and bonuses? If it is, most children's services workers are of course doomed to perpetual unhappiness at work, since no workplaces in this field can offer much of these things.

Fortunately, it turns out that happiness at work comes from something entirely different. It only takes two things to make us happy at work:



1. Results



2. Relationships

That's it! When we have those two things we're happy at work. When we only have one, we're more or less OK. When we have neither, we feel terrible at work.

Let's take a closer look at these two. First, results. We all want to get results. We all want to make a difference, know that our work is important, get appreciation and do work that we can be proud of.

One of our deepest psychological needs, is the need to control our environment. If we're placed in a situation where we have no control, where nothing we do matters, we feel terrible. On the other hand, we love to make a difference. Accomplishment *feels* great. As Franklin D. Roosevelt put it: "Happiness lies in the joy of achievement and the thrill of creative effort."

Some managers don't realize this about people. They think their staff must be pressured into performing. That when we're left alone, we choose to do nothing. In fact, the reverse is true and when given half a chance, we work our hearts out to accomplish results. Especially meaningful results - and what can be more meaningful than giving children the best possible care and foundation in life.

And secondly, there's relationships at work. When you ask people what makes them happy at work, they consistently rate these things highest:

- **Nice co-workers.**
- **A good manager.**
- **Good communication.**
- **A sense of humour in the workplace.**

Each of these is a sign of good relations, caring and, indeed, love – simple signs that people like each other and communicate well. These good relations don't have to stop with co-workers and managers, but can also apply to customers, suppliers, shareholders, and the company's wider community.

And relationships at work matter so much because we will be spending a *lot* of time with people at work. When you think about it, you'll be spending more of your waking hours with them, than with your friends and family *combined*.

So this is the secret to happiness at work: Results and relationships – doing work you're proud of with people you like.

Alexander is one of the world's leading experts on happiness at work and the author of three books including *Happy Hour is 9 to 5*. He is a speaker, consultant and author, presenting and conducting workshops on happiness at work at businesses and conferences all over the world. His previous clients include companies like Hilton, LEGO, IKEA, Shell, HP and IBM.

Learn more at: positivesharing.com/happyhouris9to5

Enhancing Social and Emotional Learning

By applying the Early Years Framework to the needs of refugee children under five

By **Saraswathi Griffiths-Chandran**,
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Charles Darwin University



“We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak.”

Epictetus

Many young child asylum seekers and their families have for more than a decade been subjected to periods of immigration detention in Australia. In recent times pressure from advocates has meant that their conditions have been monitored and to some extent improved whilst families with young children remain in the detention system. Currently child asylum seekers and their families are being moved out of secured detention facilities into community detention and this can provide greater opportunity for them to engage with the wider community. Families with children under five are particularly vulnerable because children are in the early years of development, have experienced huge upheaval and change in their lives and have lived in and to varying extents been impacted by the experience of the detention system and environment. These factors mean that the resilience of these children needs to be supported in a way that provides protective factors to enable them to recover and flourish in their learning and development. The current Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) (Australian Government, 2009) is a guiding document that can be applied to specifically assist the learning and development of young refugee children.

The issue of resilience and the assumption that children are not damaged by their plight as refugees and by their time in detention is a contentious one (Haight, Black, Ostler & Sheridan, 2006). Resilience itself is defined as “...the capacity to resist negative psychological consequences resulting from adverse events” (Cubis, 2011, 1) or as “a psycho sociological adversity or event that would be considered a stressor to most people and that may hinder normal functioning” (Betancourt & Khan, 2008, 317). The resilience of children is at risk by their exposure to traumas of war, conflict, violence and dislocation (Cubis, 2011; Betancourt & Khan, 2008; Lloyd & Penn, 2010). In the author’s experience this is further impacted by their time in detention and how they themselves feel and perceive their circumstance. The relationship between these experiences in early life and the development of mental illness or risks to resilience is not a straight forward one and many children will not be affected adversely long term (Haight, Black, Ostler & Sheridan, 2006).

The protective factors and protective processes that build resilience in children, particularly those likely to be traumatised by war and armed conflict, are not those of detention “protection” and isolation but connectedness to family, peers, school, community and in a healthy ecological social system (Betancourt & Khan, 2008, 318). However during this time of transition and recovery access to quality family friendly children’s services can be a critical factor in the process and challenging to families transitioning into community settings. Professionals working with families coming from these circumstances can make a difference. The openness of children’s service centres and the willingness of practitioners to apply the government frameworks like the Early Years Learning Framework (Australian Government, 2009) and to link with refugee centre support advice and services can make a very positive contribution.



By using the EYLF (Australian Government, 2009) this connectedness can only be developed if strong relationships are developed with the child and their families. There are key elements in the outcomes that need focus for these particular families. In an Outcome 1 component: Children have a strong sense of identity includes this focus that *“Children develop an emerging autonomy, inter-dependence, resilience and sense of agency”*. This component is of particular note given the circumstances in which children have been confined over time and still experience some detention restrictions in a community setting. In detention environments it is common for children and families to feel they have little say in even the day to day details of their lives and this means that systems that regulate movement and approaches to communication need to be considered carefully and sensitively.

In Outcome 2 component: Children are connected with and make a contribution to their world includes this focus that *“Children develop a sense of belonging to groups and communities and an understanding of the reciprocal rights and responsibly necessary for active community participation”* (Australian Government, 2009). A sense of belonging and connectedness has been seriously undermined in the system asylum seekers have experienced so this component is particularly important. Although families are well provided for when they reach community detention settings they still remain with restricted rights and can often be overwhelmed with language challenges, new environments to cope with and the exhaustion of everyday survival. Care is needed when giving information or assuming systems are understood, expectations need to be considered carefully and support given with patience and care.

In Outcome 3 component: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing includes this focus that *“Children become strong in their social and emotional wellbeing”* (Australian Government , 2009). This component is critical in three ways, firstly that the environment is developed for a secure and safe space. Secondly, that the program is developed so that aspects of pretend play and play based social and emotional learning and interactions are individually focused and do not include large group experiences. This will enable children to respond to their own interests and social emotional needs and for practitioners to be responsive to those needs. The learning stories approach for these children and the sensitive development of their own learning stories is vital. Thirdly, that advice and support from interpreter services and counselling services for refugees be accessed for advice and support, especially in the early building of relationships with families. These services can be integrated with play based early learning environments to develop rapport and responsiveness to children and families needs and circumstances.



In Outcome 4 component: Children are confident and involved learners includes this focus on “*Children resource their own learning through connecting with people, place, technologies and natural and processes materials*” (Australian Government, 2009). This connectedness is by no means assumed for children in these circumstances of prolonged isolation and possible lack of brain stimulation and social exclusion are risk factors for children’s dynamic development (Berk, 2009, 28). Children’s immediate ecological environment and their connectedness with the wider community are crucial for their holistic growth and wellbeing (Berk, 2009, 28-29). Their environment is a critical component; for example they need to access natural environments and materials as part of their connection with nature, learning and wellbeing. Because of their circumstances these natural experiences have been diminished and limited, therefore reconnecting with the natural world, people and spaces can function as part of developing wellbeing.

In Outcome 5 component: Children are effective communicators includes this focus on “*children interact verbally and nonverbally with others for a range of purposes*” (Australian Government, 2009). Children from refugee backgrounds are developing their bilingualism through their home language and the new language of English it is important to develop this verbal component that scaffolds this language acquisition in conjunction with other effective communication strategies. A play program with quality interactions with peers, and practitioners is crucial for strong language development. Play, in particular pretend play is an important component of social and emotional development for young children (Haight, Black, Ostler & Sheridan, 2006). There will be challenges in communication for educators because they will not necessarily fully understand the child’s dialogue and play in the same ways as first language English speakers. Care must be taken when interpreting and responding to children especially when physical interactions and emotional interactions are challenging. For example, when working with challenging behaviours common in young children, care must be taken to use appropriate strategies especially for children and families who have experienced trauma and social exclusion in their recent experience.

Considering the outcomes and their focus components in the EYLF (Australian Government, 2009) and applying this to particular social and emotional learning of needs new refugee children is the key to supporting their resilience and protective factors to enable and develop recovery into the future. If practitioners apply the Early Years Learning Framework in their reflective practice and make linkages with the wider support services and resources for refugees then the outcomes for these children and families will be enriched.

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Engaging fathers

in Early Childhood Services

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Community members and professionals agree that fathers are important and that they should be involved in all parts of children's lives. This is also the view from research on families: fathers, from Day One, have a big impact on how children develop. In the last issue of *Foundations* there was information about the important role fathers can play in children's development. This article explores the importance of engaging fathers in early childhood services, these partnerships can help children's services staff to support the social and emotional wellbeing of babies and young children and families.

What is not so clear is how to get fathers engaged. There was a time when fathers were simply blamed for not being involved. Recently though, there is more awareness that there are lots of unintentional barriers that prevent fathers from taking part when services see families. Professionals in Early Childhood Centres, Clinics, Schools and Family Support Services are beginning to make changes to their work with some positive results. However the progress in engaging fathers was patchy.

Taking Action

In 2005, a Father-Inclusive Practice Forum brought over 100 practitioners, managers and researchers from around Australia to develop a framework for including fathers that would be evidence-based and practical for services. The Forum was marked by goodwill, creativity and enthusiasm. When participants were asked how it would be different if fathers were fully engaged in every aspect of family-related services and activities, a woman with many years experience in welfare and family support services through the Islander community beamed a huge smile as she said “It would be just perfect”.

The Forum developed a set of principles to guide services wishing to involve fathers. Services were urged to work with fathers as partners in change with respect for their experience, gifts and capacities as fathers. Organisational policies, service information and advertising should be reviewed to include specific references to and engage fathers as important participants in their families and in the lives of their children. Without detracting from the importance of mothers and other carers, practitioners should aim to build on their knowledge, skills and abilities and to help fathers enhance their positive roles with their children and as part of families.

Something to think about...

Family structures are diverse and there are many other males that may play a large part in a child's life, children's services staff should also consider them when developing their policies and practices. These may include grandfathers, stepfathers, uncles and foster carers. Having a good relationship with the family will help staff to identify different opportunities to engage with the appropriate carers.



Jannelle's Story

In 1996, our son had begun kindergarten and struggled in a formal education setting, despite voicing my concerns several times I was reassured it was “normal behaviour for a boy”. I was unhappy with the response and began noticing what I was experiencing with our son was being replayed every day in preschool with others. I had discussions with many men, about their memories of school and soon discovered that in many cases what we were experiencing with our son transcended generations!!

I wanted change!

At our monthly management committee meeting, a representative from Cessnock Local Council spoke about grant opportunities available to preschools and community groups. I raised my concerns about lack of engagement with boys in educational settings, boys lack of achievement in external exams *ie* the higher school certificate, boys poor literacy levels, high male suicide *etc*. The council delegate in attendance suggested we apply for funding to explore this issue further. At the conclusion of the meeting the president remained, offering her support. With this encouragement together we began the application process.

Our application was successful, giving the preschool funds to explore the issues raised, hold public forums, workshops and to produce a DVD to support educators in the early childhood sector to work successfully with boys.

After many discussions with colleagues and parents on strategies to engage boys in education, I became aware of the Men and Boys Project being conducted at Newcastle University.

After several discussions we arranged for a community forum where a speaker from the Men and Boys placed our project in perspective; boys were not doing well in several areas and it was up to parents and professionals to do something about it. The response was phenomenal!!! Mums, dads and carers squashed into our classrooms and bathroom/ locker room to hear the talk. This provoked great discussion among mums and dads from our community. We were united with a common goal.

Meanwhile the preschool staff had listened very carefully to the ideas raised.

Questions which I had no answer to including:

- **“Where are the men in child care?”**
(We were an all-female staff as were probably most childcare centres at the time!)
- **“How do we engage dads when they come to the pre-school?”**
- **“Had we checked literacy level scores for boys in our local schools?”**
- **“How were we working toward addressing this?”**
- **“Did we have a place where men (or any adult) could sit comfortably to read or model reading to all children”**
(No big chairs in our centre!!)
- **“What type of reading material did we have available?”**
- **“What did our environment “say” to dads?”**
(We had lots of pretty things hanging from our ceilings!)
- **“How did staff interact with men when they came to drop off or collect their child?”**
(often we would wait till we saw mum before giving information)
- **“What format did we use for correspondence newsletters etc...?”**
- **“How did we engage both parents when the family wasn’t together?”**

The list went on and on...

Implementing Change

We began reflecting on our practices. We gathered information from any possible source! As a one off experience I even attended the first Male Childcare workers support group meeting!

We realised we needed to make substantial changes before we would be ready to employ a male childcare worker – but this formed part of our vision.

The Men and Boys Project ran workshops providing guidelines to assist us in working systematically toward becoming a father friendly centre.



The preschool purchased adult sized lounge chairs for indoors and out, while staff and parents scrutinized our environment - was it inviting and male friendly? The indoor and outdoor environments were refurbished. Newspapers were delivered daily with a variety of magazines and car manuals being added to our library area. A father friendly policy was drafted and finally accepted, which included a clause for male representation on our committee, we revised how to interact with dads and raised our expectations for father involvement in our program. Father participation in social activities, meetings was recorded... so we could monitor our progress. We informed families that copies of documentations were readily available to both mum and dad if required. Meetings were scheduled with work commitments in mind so as to enable both mum and dad to attend... and the preschool employed our first male child care trainee who was employed to work alongside us in educating the children, and not to fix the toilets or do the heavy work!!!! Correspondence became inclusive of both mum and dad with newsletters and notes sent individually to both parents where one parent wasn't living with the child.

While the staff and committee were very eager to implement change it was essential we acknowledged the great work mums did and continue to do for us, but we knew we could do better and needed to support both genders in their important roles.

Low wages for all early childhood staff impacted on our ability to attract male educators/ teachers to the sector. The pay was insufficient to support a family. This continues to be one of the most potentially damaging forces to the early childhood sector today.

We also continued our close association with the Men and Boys project who supported us by offering training and conferences to expand our knowledge.

The culmination of our funding ended with the production and distribution of the DVD "boys at work!", to childcare centres in the Hunter region.

However this was by no means the end of our journey.

In 2006, I was awarded an excellence in teaching for my work with men and boys in education.

The lessons learnt in those early days supported us to adopt best practice guidelines which are now firmly embedded in our centres philosophy and practices and are reflected throughout our program. This initiative has provided a solid foundation for our centre to meet Quality area 6 (collaborative partnerships with families and communities element 6.2.1) in the National quality standards and The Early years learning Framework (Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009).

And as for our son, well he is now 22 working in aviation.

Resources:

Centres can access the Newcastle guidelines at <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/research-centre/fac/research/fathers/involving-fathers/the-principles.html>

And there is an impressive report ENGAGING FATHERS about using the guidelines to involve fathers in South Australian Children's Centres available at <http://www.newcastle.edu.au/research-centre/fac/research/fathers/afm.html>

Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations. (2009). *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia*



During September, 2011 an evaluation of *Foundations* was undertaken.

Some of the key findings were:

- Over 75% of staff either agreed or strongly agreed that the information in *Foundations* had increased their knowledge of mental health
- *Foundations* is also being widely used with families. 63% of Directors and 41% of staff indicated that they used *Foundations* with parents or carers at their centre or preschool
- Over 80% of staff either agreed or strongly agree that *Foundations* is a useful professional development tool
- Article suggestions included information on the Early Years Learning Framework, behaviour management, supporting children with additional needs and staff mental health.

Thank you to everyone who participated in these surveys.

For more information please visit
www.everymind.org.au/foundations



EVERYMIND



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This magazine is produced for children's services staff, with children's services staff. If you would like to contribute to this magazine by sharing your experiences with us please contact the Institute at: everymind@hnehealth.nsw.gov.au

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