



Language has a significant influence on the successful engagement of men. If the language used by the professional worker is deficit based, it will increase the male service user's level of suspicion and they are less likely to access the program. Some of the deficit based assumptions (King, 2000) view most men as:

- abusing fathers
- emotionally challenged fathers
- under involved in household activities
- having little interest in professional feedback about their children

When working with men, effective language involves three key components as illustrated in Figure 1. These three key components are contained in the organisational context and Occupational, Health and Safety policies and the specific context for service delivery. For example each organisation has policies about safe work practices when providing after hours counselling services.

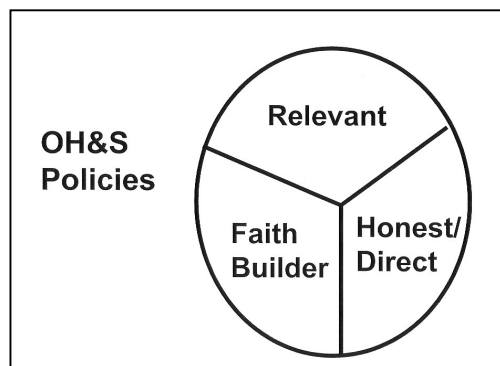


Figure 1.1

The three key components for developing father-friendly language are:

- **relevance** – the discussion needs to be relevant to the service user's needs
- **faith building** – the worker needs to convey the belief that the male service user has the ability to commit, choose, care, change, create, connect and communicate.
- **honest/direct** – Male service users respect people who honestly and respectfully discuss with them the important issues in their life.

For example, at UnitingCare Burnside Fathers' Support Service in Western Sydney, a large number of separated fathers regularly access the program. The use of direct and relevant language is important in creating a positive direction for managing family separation. The staff encourage men to refer to their 'ex-partners' as the 'mother of their children', rather than their 'ex...'. The word 'ex' conjures up images of someone who is 'no longer important' or is a 'has-been'. This simple change of language is well received by the men as it reinforces a new and positive attitude towards family separation, their child/ren, their previous relationship and themselves.

Some strategies that increase engagement with men include:

- remembering that body language is powerful. Develop strong and comfortable body language around male service users regardless of any height or size differences. Men quickly tune into how comfortable other people are around them and this will influence their level of respect. The simple act of shaking hands, for many men, can symbolise a higher level of respect and mutual connection. In different cultural groups and age brackets, a 'high five' will achieve the same effect.
- using non-deficit language to demonstrate a respect for the importance of family relationships in men's lives
- allowing time for male service users to reflect on a discussion after you have been honest and direct with them. Men can become frustrated and will need an opportunity to vent their feelings and time to consider the importance of what has been said. However, no form of intimidation or threat of violence or aggression is acceptable.
- being comfortable with the male approach. This is very different from the average female interaction. Men can be, for a variety of reasons, naturally more boisterous, louder, and have a stronger presence in social situations. Generally this is not intended as threatening, yet can be perceived as such.
- being child focused with men who are fathers. The child focused approach cuts through all other situations affecting the men's lives and helps them to redirect their focus to the child/ren, eg " How do you think that will affect your child?"

*For example, creating **relevance** with service users is clearly illustrated with a service user named ¹Terry who has been attending an intensive fathers' group². In a recent group session, he gave feedback to the group on the positive effect the group has had on his life since he was released from a correctional centre. During his last time in gaol, someone recommended he join a fathers' group to make a smooth transition back into his large family. Terry reflected on what the group meant to him and concluded that it "focused on my kids, and me" and this was vital in establishing relevance.*

It is quite a challenge for any parent to move from such a highly controlled environment as a prison, to the chaos of living in a family with many children. The children had not seen their father for a significant part of their lives. Terry began his involvement with the fathers' group four months prior to release and continued for over a year thereafter. He now credits the support from the group as the major factor in him staying with the family and not re-offending.

*Being a **faith builder** demands perseverance and the belief that a father has the capacity to make appropriate choices. For example, Adrian has been a member of an intensive fathers' group for over 18 months. When he commenced attending, Adrian was experiencing regular conflict at home with parent/teenager power issues. Adrian struggled to express himself in the group and would resist any encouragement to speak.*

¹ All examples in this article are based on true stories with the service users' names being changed for confidentiality.

² Men attend intensive fathers' groups for 3-18 months. The groups focus on personal, parenting, and relationship issues. These groups, at UnitingCare Burnside, usually have two leaders, involve 8-11 participants who live in low socio-economic communities and parent about 40 children between them.

After some weeks he began to be vocal about his own experience and supported men in dealing with their own issues. He was less reactive with his own teenage children and developed a stronger and more supportive relationship with his partner.

While being **honest and direct** with men is challenging, it creates a greater respect and a focus for change. *For example, Graham is a father with two children and a partner. The Department of Community Services has informed him he has a limited time to make significant changes in his approach to parenting or run the risk of having the children taken into out of home care.*

Worker: "Graham, it is time to deal with these issues or your children will be removed. You cannot afford to continue down the path you have used over the last few months. We want to support you and we have to keep the welfare of the children as the priority. We need to work together on this. Does this make sense?"

The worker has focused the discussion on change and this provides Graham with choices:

- *he can sit with his anger and resentment and continue not to change, with the risk that his children will be taken into care*
- *he can engage fully with the worker/program, accept feedback about his behaviour even though it is difficult. This demands a willingness to trust the worker and recognise that they have his and his children's best interest at heart.*