
“MAN BEING A FATHER”

Introduction

**Speech presented by Bernard Denner at the
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“Marketing Fatherhood”**

Men have the inherent belief that women (mothers) are responsible for parenting (nurturing) and have been discouraged through role modeling to leave it to the women. Men see their role as the provider and disciplinarian. Hugging their children, saying that they love their family (with a passion) and having meaningful conversations with their children or parenting partner would challenge a man's preconceived ideas of what it means to be a father.

The traditional role of men creates a big parenting gap for all fathers, especially those who become separated or divorced. Men (fathers) need to seek support in order to develop their fathering skills, learn parenting strategies and nurture their instincts. Men also need a safe environment to explore their boundaries, their innerself and the importance of being a father.

Man Being a Father, developed by the **Men's Awareness Network**, offers men a supportive and informal environment in which they can discuss issues of parenting centred around positive parenting methods and gives them an opportunity to support their parenting partner and get in touch with their children.

The parenting partnership is very important – more so since the Industrial Revolution and now in the stressful Post-Modern Information Age. The family structure has been through a revolution, families have gone from the extended family traditions to more insular two parenting, and the growing one parent (custody) family.

Parenting now relies on the role of the ever-busy mother and father, and the ever-growing numbers of divorced/separated parents, to deliver parenting responsibilities and values to children for life's journey.

Man Being a Father presents a commonsense approach to fathering. The responses from the fathers who have participated, and their partners, has clearly indicated that the course has been of great benefit not only to the men as fathers, but to their relationship and understanding of their partner and their children.

“I am more positive in my role and relationship with my wife and my children.”

“Improved relationship, generally, with partner. More love for kids, better relationship and communication with kids and more self esteem for all family members.”

“Greater understanding of the needs of myself, my partner and my children.”

“More time spent with each other and working together as a family.”

“The course gave him the confidence to face separation alone and positively. We are all much happier with these changes and our son lives happily with his father.”

(See Copy of Man Being a Father Resource - Course Evaluations – May 1998)

Children will benefit from the involvement of their father in sharing the parenting tasks, such as **nurturing, role modeling, teaching skills**, affection, playing, positive discipline, **becoming emotionally involved in the welfare of their children and having fun at their level and not just imposing adult activities.**

The question is asked why am I involved in developing parenting skills for men and, for that matter my work in men’s health promotion?

Because, my life’s journey and my professional background, helps me to develop and market the message of Men’s Health and Fathering to other men. I am also a man and a divorced father (8 years), with two lovely, beautiful, sensitive (most of the time), understanding and loving daughters, aged 12 and 14. **This background gives me a better understanding of men’s needs.**

When I married (for the first time) at 35 years – I believed that I loved their mother and this marriage was forever. I took on the role of step-parent and to my disappointment, I was unsuccessful. I acknowledge this as due to **my inexperience, inability to accept, and a lack of ‘parenting’ support** from my ex-wife and that I had issues of **my relationship with my father and my upbringing** that hadn’t been addressed. I also acknowledge the ability a “stepchild” has to reclaim their mother (or father).

I then became a father – something I approached with “great uncertainty” – especially being a Vietnam Veteran and coming from a dysfunctional family background.

The marriage, unfortunately, only lasted 7 years. It was not forever. But my daughters are forever.

Divorce – was a difficult time. But at all times I remembered that this was not the doing of our children. During these difficult times, we (especially men) need to accept that this is the case. This is a message we need to get across to men – that Divorce is an Adult Activity.

Divorce is difficult and we all have stories, but down the track, 8 years later, I have liberal access to my daughters and we share a very close relationship. I feel like a Father, act like a Father and feel good as a man. How come? **Because I never lost sight of the importance of being a father and how important a father is to his children.**

Points to Remember:

The Family Law Court supports the “primary carer” – in the best interests of the children involved

We read a lot about the problems associated with “Access” (Residential Orders) and men being denied “Access”. This issue is separate and must be dealt with harshly by the courts in fairness to the children and not the parents. But that means accepting that Fathers are important.

Maintenance is another highly debated and emotional issue – but again this is an adult issue and not the doing of the children.

The reason for the success of Man Being a Father is because it developed out of a need that came from other men who I associated with through work and socially. They reflected on my achievements as a father. They wanted to see their children happier, with that cheekiness and gleam in their eyes. They desperately wanted to be better dads and thus the roots of the Man Being a Father program developed from their interest – a Community Interest and Need – seeking a Best Practice approach.

We are yet to discover (through research) the percentage of families that split/divide or are conquered by parenting problems. Anecdotal evidence would suggest (and certainly in my experience) that at least half of marriages (with children) that separate, the issue of parenting contributes to part of the breakdown (especially prevalent in subsequent marriages and “step” families).

Men, who don’t embrace being a father, put their **Relationship at Risk**. Examples of putting a relationship at risk:

- Undermining responses from either parent
- Lack of fathering
- Uncontrolled and unfocused Discipline
- Absent Fathers
- Different values for children
- Not actively loving their children
- Dependant addictions and their consequent impact on the family
- Lack of support, appreciation and recognition for the Mother
- Different values

I don't want to put my relationship at risk with my daughters, so I work on my health, wellbeing and lifestyle and being a father, because I want to be around to share in the benefits of their upbringing – **I don't want that to ever change.**

All fathers should aim to achieve this goal.

I now believe that I am a better father, a more responsible father and a more active participating father because of divorce, but what a way to find out how to be a better dad. It can be achieved within a relationship with some lateral and commonsense approaches to parenting.

Being a father means you have to **Be There** and **Work At** being a father.

This is what the course offers men and the first two nights establishes this firmly.

The advertising and promotion of all our programs, targets women. It is designed so women will encourage their men to become involved.

Our programs are “bloke friendly” and take into account the circumstances of men's lifestyles, e.g. time, TV programs, work commitments, sports, harvest times, social and community events. We reduce the ability of men to have an excuse – **Not to attend.**

The women themselves have their own ways of “demanding” or “insisting” that it would be in their **Best Interests** to make a go of it.

Women desperately need their men to work on their health, wellbeing, sharing family responsibility and role modeling for their children, otherwise what's the use of having a husband or father for the children.

Man Being a Father has worked positively for men and has helped them reach their goals. It developed their skills to meet the challenge of being a Father. It develops their skills to work effectively with their parenting partner and offers preventative parenting skills to overcome the obstacles of parenting. It provides skills for separated/divorced men to recover from the demise of a broken relationship and focus on the importance of their children and being a father.

A section of our course also helps women meet the challenge of sharing the role of parenting with their partner. Women have freely admitted, although unknowingly, that they have undermined their partner in his endeavours to be a father.

Man Being a Father, and the opportunities men are given through other parenting groups and courses, offer simple solutions that help men to develop their skills to be a supportive parent. It also encourages their partners to understand that fathers have much to offer.

The program offers a safe environment to experiment with the facilitator and other (like) men.

Men rediscover what it is to be a man – what it is to be a father – and the qualities of maleness. This is an important aspect of keeping men on a 6-week program – **getting results**. We achieve this through – **homework**.

Men discover – their issues, the issues of their children, and explore what **values/hopes/ideals** they want their children to have in adulthood.

We ask men to sit down and ask their children what are their issues. We do this through our homework called “**The Good, The Bad and The Ugly**”. This is an opportunity for children to “get things off their chest”, without repercussions and fear of reprisal. This is an extremely revealing aspect of our course.

But it creates an opportunity for men to identify the problems and an opportunity for them to work on the problems – similar to programs that the MENDS organisation offer for separated men.

Men are problem solvers. They can only solve problems when they know what the problem is.

Men also get Permission from the numbers of other men doing the course and being involved in men’s health programs – it validates their involvement.

So what am I advocating? That all men should be given the opportunity to improve and develop their parenting skills in the best interests of their families.

Governments should offer and support organizations that will have a positive impact on the Problems of Parenting, Separation and Divorce of men. Our society and our workplace, our productivity would benefit from **Preventative and Intervention Programs** for men in their roles as fathers and partners.

As men we seek to perfect our golf swing or we offer loyalty to our football team and we are there - rain, hail or shine to support them. We tinker and fuss over our car, at work we take courses, go to seminars and burn the midnight oil to gain a better insight and improve our skills. **But do we put this same sort of effort into our partner and our children?**

As men we need to realise the importance of fatherhood.

What about the investment we make in our house – it can all be lost because we didn’t put the same effort into our family – **family is forever, houses come and go.**

We never give up on our golf swing, footy team, or aspiring to better our position at work, but we do tend to give up on what counts the most in our lives – **the family.**

This is even more so for men after separation, where due to; depression, bitterness, lack of skills or support, or financial hardship, men give up on their children. This is the tragedy of family breakdowns.

I believe that men’s health and wellbeing is about our Maleness.

We need to develop the “Bloke” to meet the needs of the 90’s and beyond. Our masculinity is important in creating balance, but we need to socialize it to today’s needs and share the role with women in the interests of our children.

*To achieve this Men need access to **good bloke friendly resources, health providers and trained facilitators who can relate to men and understand the benefits of meeting the needs of men.***

The value of upskilling health practitioners to be “bloke friendly” in meeting the needs of men is a concept that will benefit men, their families and their community.

Our MAN model programs have directly (and indirectly) addressed over 3,500 men in the last 2 years in partnership with health providers and community organisations.

Our research clearly indicates that men will meet the challenge – we just need to **offer the opportunity in an environment that is bloke friendly and takes into account the circumstances of men.**

We as health practitioners, organisations and community workers, need to promote men’s health and wellbeing programs in the community that will appeal to men and achieves outcomes. Programs with this appeal and community outcome will be, and should be, supported by Governments and other funding organisations. It is better to be PROACTIVE instead of REACTIVE.

One Hundred Years from Now
It will not matter what
My bank account was,
The sort of house I lived in
Or the kind of car I drove.

But the world may be better,
Because I was important
In the life of a child.

Author Unknown

MEN NEED TO TAKE THIS OPPORTUNITY

Points to Ponder -Discussion needed.

Points we need to ponder, in regard to the ability of the Family Law Court to achieve the objectives of safe guarding the children of the divorcing or separating parents, and creating an equal opportunity for a Parenting Partnership.

- **Family Law Court Act** was set up in an environment of the women's movement back in the 1970's and what was or seemed to be applicable then, may not be applicable now in the ever changing environment of our society fabric.
- The Court needs the ability to refer **Contempt of Order breaches** to a **Magistrates Court for effective and quick local enforcement.**
- **Orders of the Family Court are not Final** - variations of orders are common (sometimes years after the first order) because the circumstances of the parties frequently changes. However changes are often difficult to encompass in Orders.
- Ponder the benefits of a separate division within the Family Law Court that addresses just the **issues of children**- immediately there is irreconcilable difference and irreconcilable separation of the couple. During the interim period before the matter gets to the Family Law Court – **who is responsible for the welfare and wellbeing of the children?**
- A **Children's Department of the Family Law Court** could act promptly to set orders in the interim period prior to finalisation of Residential Orders and Property Division Orders in the best interests of the children.
- Changes to the **maintenance provision** announced by the Child Support Agency recently (Press Release 30th September 1997) should be adopted urgently in fairness to all parties.

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