

All Assistance Short of Actual Help

An alternative response to family and community dysfunction

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Abstract

This paper will challenge the capacity of current operating frameworks to respond appropriately to the fundamental needs of families, children and young people. Initially we will describe an innovative development in Goulburn, a small rural city in the south of the state of New South Wales, Australia, which is successfully assisting families deal with issues around abuse, violence, general dysfunction, poor parenting and parental separation.

We will then explore implications of this work against the background of the general impoverishment of current responses. In doing so we will describe how our developing model of service delivery provides us with a resource that **works** in terms of improved outcomes for clients.

The model provides a method of engaging clients in a meaningful way to discover what **help** looks like for them. It is inclusive, participatory and in a significant way moves practice beyond what is currently available. Our day-to-day practice engages clients to establish their wants and needs and works **with** them to move from harmful to wholesome behaviors. This practice we suggest, is significantly different from that of many other social welfare agencies that focus around what they can provide **for** or need to do **to** the client.

An important supplementary outcome of this practice is the improved staff morale stemming from an ability to better manage the very difficult and challenging situations presenting around clients.

Introduction

Celina loves her husband Michael and she knows he loves her and their three children, but!! In their life together he has needed to be in control, he is very grumpy with her and the kids, he has hit her a couple of times and he has little patience with the twins Simon and Carol who are nearly fourteen. Last night however was the worst of her life when after a barbeque she heard Michael complaining to one of their close friends about her lack of sexual performance.

Near hysterical with shame she challenged Michael when their guests had left and he grabbed her, shook her and told her to 'wake up to herself'. That was it a terrible scene everyone upset crying and she and the children got in the car and went. Then the trouble really started.

- When she went to the Police Station for advice they indicated Michael would be charged with assaulting her. Celina didn't want that to happen.
- The refuge could take Celina and Carol but Simon was thirteen so he could not stay with them.
- Emergency accommodation would be available for the family but it was almost conditional on an

- apprehended violence order to prevent Michael contacting them.
- Celina sought further assistance. There were no programs that she thought Michael would attend, for a start she was told; Michael first needs to understand that he is a criminal. There was a range of help to leave the relationship, but no help for her and Michael to work together to repair their relationship. In fact one agency told her it would be a conflict of interest to work with both her and Michael.
- Celina and her children went back home to Michael hoping to put what had happened behind them.

All Celina wanted was for the abuse/violence to end and the relationship to improve, but that was the only thing that was not it appeared on any agenda other than her own. Celina was well and truly trapped in the very common victim's dilemma.

During the year 2000 the Goulburn Family Support Service began a project funded by the Department for Women around the development of Safety Plans as a means of assisting women deal with violence and abuse. Planning the project raised some fundamental questions on the agency's existing practices.

- What are these practices?
- What is their rationale?
- What would good outcomes look like for all affected by family violence?
- How do these practices meet the needs of those seeking our assistance?
- What would need to change in the agency's practices to better meet those needs?

Responding to these questions a cultural change program began so as an ongoing understanding of safety planning would continue upon cessation of the Department for Women's funding. This resulted in the Service adopting an agreed principles behavior framework based on a restorative or relational approach. This is now the approach taken by staff when relating to each other and how they relate to service users.

Further review of the current community response to domestic violence highlighted the difficulties encountered by those affected by abuse, violence or dysfunction, specifically:

- No single agency involved victims and perpetrators;
- The emphasis was on disrupting the behaviour and ending the relationship;
- There were no perpetrator programs
- There was almost total reliance on the formal criminal justice system to deal with and influence perpetrator behaviour.

The Service found increasing evidence that many victims of family violence simply wanted the abuse to stop and the relationship to improve, a result that current responses have almost no capacity to deliver. Our research indicated that many perpetrators were initially remorseful but that criminal justice interventions alone, without appropriate support or other involvement, were most likely to impose upon perpetrators the very same experience they themselves subject victims to, domination and isolation. Perpetrators are almost forced into the role of the victim with little encouragement and no requirement for them to reflect on or take responsibility for their behaviour.

In response to these findings the Service proposed, as a more effective response, practices which rather than merely apportioning blame, explored the harm had been occasioned through abusive, inappropriate or violent behaviour, and encouraged perpetrators to take responsibility for their behaviour and its impact on others.

AN IMPROVED RESPONSE

The focus was on the engagement of those affected by the harm and stressing the importance of allowing those seeking assistance to 'tell their stories' by asking simple open questions;

- What happened?
- What did you think when this happened?
- What have you thought about since?
- Who has been effected by what has happened and how?
- What has been the hardest thing for you?
- What do you think will make a difference for you or for others?
- What would you like to happen from here?"

(O'Connell et al 1999,pp.58)

Victims are able to describe how at the most fundamental level abuse has impacted them and their family. Because the Service works with all the parties workers are able to challenge perpetrators around the broad range of their behaviour and its impact on their families and support them to take responsibility for that. Typically workers ask perpetrators:

- "What happened?
- What were you thinking about at the time?
- What have you thought since?
- Who has been effected by your actions and how?
- What do you think needs to happen now? "

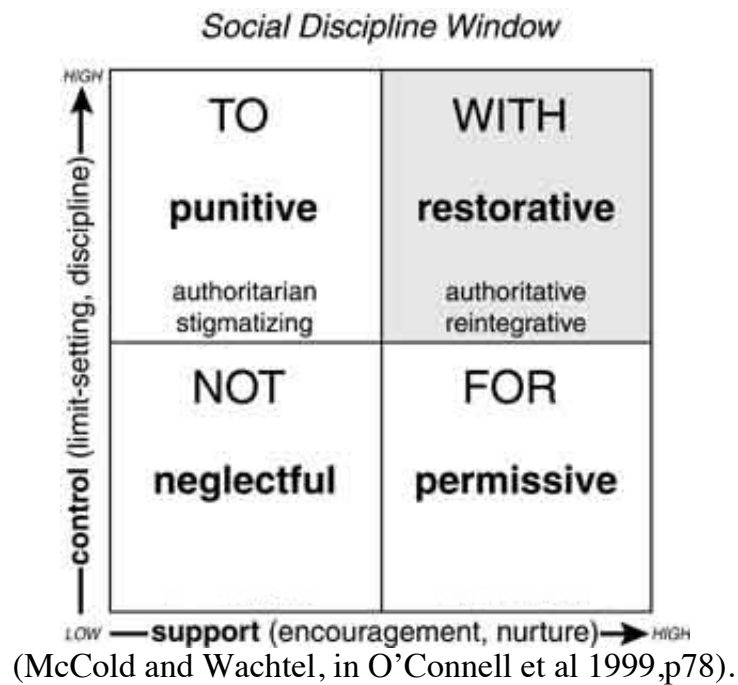
(O'Connell et al 1999)

It is our experience that this approach creates a very different experience for those involved and importantly can break the cycle of family violence and dysfunction.

PRESSURE AND SUPPORT

Earlier in this document we remarked on the almost exclusive use of punitive responses in terms of dealing with perpetrators of abusive or violent behaviour. The response around victims is almost the opposite in terms of the support and empathy that is offered. There is no doubt, offending behaviour must be sanctioned and victims must be supported. It is our proposition that at both ends of this spectrum we fail to engage with the people involved. Perhaps the greatest failing is the assumption that sanctioning the perpetrator is an effective means of ensuring he/she is therefore held accountable for their behaviour. It is our proposition that throughout such a process the perpetrator is never required to be anything other than passive.

This is equally true for the victims; empathy and support are offered within the limitations imposed by the current operating framework. In neither instance is there any effective engagement around what will make a difference for the individuals involved. A more appropriate response is framed within the following diagram;



We propose that the current response around perpetrators is contained in the upper left of Figure 1, high on control but low on support or assistance. The lower right of the diagram describes the current approach around victims, high on support but low in limit setting.

Both responses shortchange those involved, particularly victims. A more effective response is to provide both high levels of support and limit setting. This response confronts and disapproves of wrongdoing while supporting and valuing the intrinsic worth of the wrongdoer.

Around victims the model provides an environment that is nurturing valuing and encouraging while applying appropriate pressure to enable people to take responsibility for deciding what will make a difference. Clients whatever their presenting issues can be engaged to consider;

- “What can you do that will make a difference?”
- “Where do you see yourself in five years or ten years?”

This script both engages and challenges people to move beyond victim status and take control of their future. Importantly while ever people see themselves as defined by their victim status they are almost by definition helpless. In considering what will make a difference people are helped to consider what has been worthwhile and wholesome about their relationships and what has not by simple asking;

- “Were there good times?”
- “What were they like?”

Conversely people are then asked to describe what has been harmful and damaging by asking:

- “When were the bad times?”
- “What were the bad times like?”

This process enables people to reflect on their past experience consider the parts of the relationship, if any, which they cherish and are beneficial and what needs to happen to move beyond the harmful and destructive behaviour and either repair the relationship or move on.

Why is this important? Often it is necessary and appropriate for people to move on from a relationship, however where there are children involved the couple need to acknowledge the fact that they will have a connection for the rest of their lives through their children. There will be birthdays, graduations and the many other important events of life. Parents are challenged to consider the fact children have the right to know their parents. Importantly we argue that children also have the right to love their parents and to feel good about doing so. Within this framework of fair process we assist families establish normative behaviors within a framework where what is inappropriate can be challenged on every occasion.

What is Fair Process?

“Individuals are most likely to trust and cooperate freely with systems – whether they themselves win or lose by those systems – when fair proves is observed”

(Cahn, K and Mauborgne R, 1999).

There are three principles to fair process:

“Engagement

Involving individuals in decisions that affect them by asking for their input and allowing them to refute the merit of one another’s ideas and assumptions.

Explanation

Everyone involved and affected should understand why final decisions are made as they are. Creates a powerful feedback loop that enhances learning.

Expectation Clarity

Once decisions are made, new rules are clearly stated so that all involved understand the new standards and the consequences of failure. “ (Chan et al 1999).

The application of this principle, at the core of practice, through the use of the restorative script enables a relationship to develop between agency caseworker and client within which support can be provided and pressure brought to bear in appropriate measure and proportion to achieve an improved outcome. The process creates a learning experience for clients through insights on the impact of behaviour on others, why that impact occurs and importantly what for them is likely to make a difference in the future.

The affective framework described in the Social Control Window, the application of Fair Process and the restorative script has enabled this Service to develop a theoretically sound and robust model of practice to work *with* clients. Workers expertise is to ask the right questions to enable clients to achieve the their best outcome rather than merely providing the formulaic responses of an expert model. While often therapeutic this model provides an ideal basis and opportunity for collaboration with other health and welfare professionals.

The following case studies describe the model’s application at a very practical level.

CASE STUDY A.

John and Corrine

John and Corrine separated because of John’s long-standing abusive and violent behaviour. John was referred from the Community Health Centre due to a perceived conflict of interest around the fact that his estranged wife was receiving counseling there for anxiety and depression bought on by John’s behaviour. Additionally

it was perceived that John's behaviour had something to do with his inability to control his anger and no other agency in Goulburn will work with such clients.

John was devastated about the split and was dumbfounded about what to do. He was invited to tell his story over a few sessions using the questions described above as themes to invite discussion. John described the pressure of his job, the fast pace of life and his impatience with Corrine and their small children. He described his behaviour around Corrine, how he had continually put her down and the continual arguments at home front of their young children. He admitted assaulting Corinne, including choking her and often pressured her into unwanted sex. John was remorseful but despairing of his ability to make changes and improve things between Corrine and himself.

After two sessions John was asked about the possibility of involving Corinne. John raised the possibility with her. She was at first guarded as her counselor had advised her against any involvement. Corinne was engaged through simple affective statements and invited to tell her story and she agreed to attend the Service. In discussion Corrine described how she absolutely loved John but could no longer stand his abusive, uncaring and unthinking behaviour. When asked what she wanted to happen Corinne's reply, I want his behaviour to change and our relationship to improve.

Corrine and John were brought together and through the use of the restorative questions both allowed to tell their story. John described his behaviour as at times violent, controlling, unfair and just plain nasty. He acknowledged how much he had hurt Corinne and the impact this had on their children. Corrine explained to John what it had been like to her at an emotional level and how his abusive behaviour had affected her. When asked what was the hardest thing for her, Corinne described her utter despair that someone she loved so much could hurt her so deeply.

We also discussed the impact this had on their extended family and John acknowledged the need for other to be made aware of that the origins of Corinne's current illness rested in John's appalling behaviour. Both John and Corinne realized that the support of their extended families would be a vital ingredient in their recovery.

To assist this recovery and enable John to be supported in his awakening around his behaviour his parents were invited to attend the Service with John and he described his behaviour in excruciating detail. Needless to say both of them were pretty devastated. Both of them were then able to describe how the entire affair had impacted on them and others and agreed to wholeheartedly support Corinne, John and their children as they worked to repair the harm John's behaviour had caused.

Corrine and John are now together; quite frankly they are both just glowing with joy. We think that is pretty special.

Case Study B.

Brian and Lola

Lola first presented at family support to collect a divorce kit so as she could apply for a divorce and work out her children's access arrangement without attending court. It was obvious that Lola was very upset and angry at her predicament. She and Brian had separated and her life had been turned upside down. Lola had previously held down a part-time job but had to leave that after the separation. She had left the family home and was renting a flat with her two young children

In discussions Lola disclosed years of emotional abuse in terms of controlling and manipulative behaviour including threats to kill himself during arguments and constant put downs. Prior to leaving the relationship Lola had felt that she had no existence other than that defined by Brian and felt trapped without any control

over her own destiny. Leaving the relationship presented other difficulties due to the confusion and hurt caused to both extended families and Brian's portrayal of himself as the wounded victim. The situation was compounded by Lola's own deep sense of shame at the failure of her relationship, which was reflected in estrangement from her parents and eleven siblings who all lived in distant parts of the state.

Brian was contacted and invited to tell his story around the marriage and break up. He disclosed his confusion and hurt at Lola's behaviour, his determination to obtain shared custody of the children and his outrage at the way he was victimized by Lola and the Child Support Agency which was insisting of payment of what he considered excessive payments for child support. He blamed the break-up almost entirely on Lola.

Communication between the two, which was already difficult and counter productive was exacerbated when Lola accepted advice to seek an AVO against Brian. At this stage child access also became problematic.

In a number of discussions Brian was supported through acknowledgement of the difficult and traumatic situation in which he was now placed and invited to describe what a good outcome would be for him. At the same time he was invited to reflect on his own behaviour and challenged heavily around its impact on Lola and his children. He was also challenged to reflect on what he could do which would make a difference to the situation.

Support was provided to Lola including reflection on what a good outcome would be for her, she was also challenged to reflect on her role in the evolving crisis and what she could do to make a difference to her life.

Eventually the two were brought together and each given the opportunity to tell their story. For Lola this proved a wonderful opportunity to confront Brian around his ongoing behaviour and its impact, her distress and the current situation and what she wanted for the future. For Brian for the first time ever he had to accept unconditional responsibility around his behaviour. He was able to indicate in a very heartfelt way that much of his behaviour was thoughtless rather than vindictive but acknowledged the resulting harm regardless of his intention.

There is no possibility of this couple ever being able to get back together. What has been established is a common understanding of the harm that has occurred and a joint commitment to their obligations in terms of the ongoing parenting.

Lola has been able to reconnect with her family and Brian is working towards being able to acknowledge his role in the break up to his and her extended families.

Case Study C

Theo

Theo presented at the Family support Service seeking assistance to gain unsupervised access to his children. Arrangements had previously been made for supervised access to occur with his four children at his parents' home in a distant city. After a number of unhappy confrontations Theo's former wife had broken off all contact and moved her children to Goulburn. Theo had taken some time to discover their address and had then moved to Goulburn himself. After protracted and unhappy legal process access was re-established at his parents' home requiring all to make monthly visits to the distant centre.

Upon presentation Theo was a very angry man placing all the blame for the current turmoil round access on his wife and saw himself very much as a victim of the system that favoured women over men. Using the

restorative script as a framework Theo was asked to tell his story including the break up of the marriage and subsequent events. What emerged was pretty ugly, Theo described a range of behaviours on his part including substance and alcohol addiction, he had regularly stayed away from home overnight while using drugs, drank heavily at home and invited his friends home to do the same. On occasions he had physically, verbally and emotionally abused his wife, who eventually left with the children.

Theo now wanted to concentrate on the present but was strongly challenged about owning his inappropriate behaviour and its impact on his wife and family. Initially he found this experience very difficult, he had a deep sense of shame around his behaviour and was concerned that any mention of it would place in jeopardy his chances of ever re-establishing a relationship with his children. In fact he asked to be assigned to another worker who had previously been “really nice” to him. Theo was assured that he was regarded as a worthwhile person but that his behaviour was outrageous and simply could not be excused. He agreed to think on this but remained of the opinion that what he really needed was someone who would “be nice” to him.

He took the time to reflect on the situation and returned a few days describing his interview at Family Support as being the first time in his life he felt that he was personally valued in spite of his appalling behaviour. Over the next few months Theo was able to reflect in great detail on his past behaviours. He joined Alcoholics Anonymous started voluntary work with a local charitable organisation and made significant changes to his general behaviour.

Attempts were made to contact Theo’s former wife but she indicated that she wanted nothing more to do with him in fact she absolutely hated him. Given Theo’s behaviour during and after their marriage this is hardly surprising.

Based on Theo’s acknowledgement of his behaviour and the evidence that he has rejected and significantly changed his behaviour Theo has now been granted unsupervised access with his children and on all the indicators he is proving a loving, supportive father and a very appropriate role model for his children.

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About the Authors

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Anne Burton has been Goulburn Family Support Service’s Co-ordinator the past for three and a half years leading a small group of family workers to provide services to families and individuals in crisis and chronically dysfunctional situations. This includes the case management of issues for families through trauma such as abuse, domestic violence, mental health issues, parents with developmental delay, basic budgeting to name a few. The service carries a caseload of up to 60 cases per month with referrals from Government and

non-government agencies.

Anne was formerly in Western Sydney in the area of community development following completion of her Degree as a mature age student. Over the past two years she has played a pivotal role in the development of the restorative practice model used by the Service in Goulburn.

Matt Casey

Matt Casey is a consultant with Real Justice and was formerly a Detective Inspector with almost twenty-eight years experience in the NSW Police. He is widely experienced in the investigation of child abuse and sexual assault and is a former head of the School of the Investigation and Intelligence at the NSW Police College. In later years Matt has been closely involved in reform of policing and was a key contributor to the development of the successful Behavioural Change Program.

Since 2000 Matt has led a project developing a more appropriate and effective approach to issues of family violence and the emergent restorative practice model used at the Family Support Service. Along with a busy relationship counseling practice Matt currently consults with schools, social welfare organisations, businesses, government and Police agencies in the areas of relationships, behaviour management and modification, policing reform and organisational change.

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Charles Smith is a consultant psychologist with over 20 years experience as a clinician and educator. He has post-graduate qualifications in counseling and coaching psychology. Charles has a particular interest in the role of work in people's lives, and works with both individuals and organisations on matters such as workplace conflict, and career development and transition. For some time he has been using restorative justice principles to assist in the resolution of workplace difficulties and disputes.

Charles has worked with the Goulburn Family Support Service for two years providing clinical supervision to case workers