

# C'mon Guys!

## A program to facilitate father involvement in the primary school environment

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**Abstract:** This article is written to provide a case study example of a program developed to encourage fathers' engagement with their children in the primary school environment. C'mon Guys! was delivered in a Primary School in Victoria, Australia (unnamed to protect the privacy of the participants). The article begins by first describing the community in which C'mon Guys! was offered and goes on to outline the literature related to aspects pertinent to the program such as father involvement in the lives of children at school, and the role of the social worker in facilitating this type of groupwork in the school setting. Next, the aims of the program are discussed with particular reference to its design, social learning theory, systems theory and groupwork principles and processes. The outcomes of C'mon Guys! are then discussed noting the limitations of the program as well as identifying the extrinsic and intrinsic benefits for the children, their fathers and the community.

**Key words:** fathers; school; children; groupwork; social learning theory; systems theory

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## **Introduction**

The primary school is situated in one of the suburbs of an industrial town in Victoria. The local unemployment rate, at 17%, is over twice the city average, so this particular suburb has a disproportionate number of people receiving parenting support and other forms of income maintenance compared with the rest of the city (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Data from the Australian Early Childhood Index (AEDI, 2005) reveals significant levels of disadvantage, with with one of the highest proportions of young mothers (aged 10-24 years) in the region. Of the children who attend the primary school, 30% live in single parent households, the majority residing with female caregivers. One of the principal reasons for the developing C'mon Guys! was to encourage additional father involvement with their children and in the life of the school. The social worker located within the school environment took up the challenge to facilitate the program, with this article being co-written with an academic partner to promote groupwork with men and fathers in the academic social work literature.

## **Father involvement in the lives of their children**

Research on father involvement in the lives of their children has identified that fathers generally spend less time in their children's educational institutions, at pre-school, primary and secondary school levels than other caregivers. In addition, those children living in single parent families who have non-resident fathers are even less likely to have significant father involvement in their schooling (Baker & McMurray, 1998; Rimm-Kaufman & Zhang, 2005). A host of intersecting personal and structural dimensions have been identified as contributing to the lack of paternal involvement with children in school post-separation. These factors include: compromised communication between schools and non-resident parents (Baker & McMurray, 1998); lack of flexibility in the workplace to allow for father attendance at schools; a sense of awkwardness and lack of confidence by fathers in interacting with their children (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004); a gender 'mismatch' between school teaching staff and fathers, along with stress related

to constrained financial circumstances (Rimm-Kaufman & Zang, 2005). More specifically, non resident fathers may be relocated at a geographical distance from their children, have repartnered and/or experience poor relations with the children's mother (Smyth, 2004). Each of these conditions impacts significantly upon the degree to which fathers feel able to engage with their children and the staff in the school setting.

In terms of understanding fathering from the perspective of gender relations it is argued that intimacy with children is in direct conflict with traditional forms of masculinity (Pease, 2002, p.78), with men experiencing significantly more difficulty in expressing their thoughts and feelings than women, especially to other men (McGill, 1985). While family and societal functions based upon notions of patriarchy support the dominant and competitive nature of male relationships, these norms counter attempts to develop emotional literacy between men, their male or female partners, and with their children (Pease, 2002). This dynamic raised the question of whether the 'significant male' participants in *C'mon Guys!* would be able to develop sufficient levels of trust with both their child host and the other male guests to enable meaningful participation in the groupwork program.

Even so, we were mindful of the benefits of positive paternal involvement in the lives of children (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004, p.8). For these reasons promoting active engagement between children and their fathers was seen to be of primary importance to the school staff. However, in recognition that many of the children had fathers who were absent from the household, for the purpose of program delivery children were encouraged to invite a 'significant male figure' with whom they had a positive relationship, that is father, older brother, uncle, grandfather, or stepfather. Thus, although at first the program was to be called *C'mon Dad!*, this was changed to '*C'mon Guys!*' after consideration of the potential pool of participants that might be invited to attend by the children.

## **The role of a school social worker in program delivery**

While social workers in Australian schools are routinely involved in delivering a range of group programs for both students and parents, no

systematic research has been carried out in this country to identify the nature of groupwork theories, processes or activities used to guide group interventions in schools. The social worker within the school initiated C'mon Guys! which necessitated working and negotiating between multiple stakeholders, including the children, parents, the school staff and people from agencies outside the school who contributed resources and expertise.

Current literature about school social work is largely derived from the North American context (Franklin, Harris & Allen-Meares, 2006; Allen-Meares, 2004; Constable, 1999). This material emphasizes direct practice tasks, particularly case management as being the primary role of the social worker in the school setting (Woody, 2006). However, recently the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) School Social Work Special Interest Group (SSWSIG) has developed draft *Guidelines for School Social Workers* in this country. This document is based upon the Australian Association of Social Workers *Practice Standards for Social Workers: Achieving Outcomes* (2003). These draft guidelines outline six domains encompassed by school social work practice, which are similar to those identified in the American literature. These domains include Direct Practice; Service Management; Organisational Development and Systems Change; Policy; Research; Educational and Professional Development. The C'mon Guys! program related to two of these domains in particular, 'direct practice', using groupwork as the specific intervention strategy, and 'organisational development and system change'. The system change agenda was adopted in particular to address the social barriers between the significant male participants and the school as an institution, encouraging the men to engage with the teaching staff on a level that was different from their own past experiences in the school setting.

The program facilitated the building of relationships between the significant males and their children as well as with the teaching staff, within the milieu of a collaborative learning environment. Part of the role of the social worker was to design C'mon Guys! to address the above agendas, while co-ordinating the planning and running of the program between all participating stakeholders. Much of this work could be seen as taking on a community development role.

There is little mention in the literature on school social work of the facilitation of community development, supporting capacity building

and generating social connectedness. This may be due to the fact that some commentators deem social work and community development roles to be radically different.

... it is usually argued that community development with its central philosophy of empowerment, must maintain its integrity and separateness as a philosophy, a critique, a distinct set of processes and practices, a discipline and an occupation. Yet it is still a part of the social and community services industry, which is the title for all human service work; community development and traditional social work comprise different philosophies and practices within this industry. (Kenny, 1999, pp.37-38)

Despite the above claim, the role of social worker within the school setting includes addressing macro community concerns which impact upon the wellbeing of children, their caregivers and the wider school and local communities. With this in mind, notions of building parental and community capacity and promoting social connectedness underpinned the delivery of C'mon Guys!.

## **Aims of the program**

C'mon Guys! aimed to:

- encourage the fostering of relationships between students and their significant male
- provide opportunities for the men to develop and enhance their parenting skills
- enable the men to develop rapport and build a relationship with their child's teacher
- facilitate opportunities for the men to feel more comfortable within the school environment and to promote further school involvement
- facilitate rapport building and social connectedness between the adult male participants

## **Program Design**

The organizing framework used to plan C'mon Guys! was based upon the integration of social learning theory, drawing strongly from ecological systems perspective using groupwork process.

### **Social learning theory**

The curriculum design for the program was embedded within an understanding of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), where the children and their fathers (or significant male) were encouraged to engage in play, negotiation and 'teamwork' efforts. Within this framework the social and groupwork opportunities in the program were used to promote positive fathering behaviors and attitudes (McBride & Lutz, 2004). The principles of social learning theory embedded within the design of C'mon Guys! included use of observation, modeling and copying of behavior, giving and receiving feedback, experiencing response consequences, and using positive reinforcement. Being aware of the ongoing interaction between the children, their male guest and the school environment informed the choice of adopting social learning theory to shape the program design. To this end the whole of the school premises was used in a range of different ways to create new learning, facilitate social connectedness between children and their guest and between the men, as well as to promote diverse physical, social and sporting activities. The active engagement of the fathers/significant male with the physical school environment was an important component of the program, in terms of reorienting the men to an environment that was for this cohort mainly foreign, forgotten or unfamiliar to them.

Examples of other programs which have used social learning theory to guide interventions for encouraging parent/child interaction and education include the father-son project (Bowman, 1993), healthful eating programs (Macpherson, Haggans & Reicks, 2000), and paired reading curriculum to promote child and parent literacy (Miller, 1995).

Using social learning theory and groupwork process knowledge for planning and facilitating C'mon Guys! also closely reflected the 'Tribes' philosophy adopted by the school in 2005. The 'Tribes' program has emerged from North American initiatives to develop a

different kind of school culture using a blend of group process and cooperative learning approaches to promote learning and positive peer interaction within the school environment. This 'whole of school approach' involves teachers, students and other school related staff proactively adopting and working together to demonstrate a series of expectations aimed at:

- re-culturing and restructuring the whole school as a learning community
- developing collegiality, reflective practice and collaborative planning
- focusing on the socialization of students as well as intellectual development, and
- raising levels of academic achievement.

'Tribes' is not a curriculum, not a program or list of activities. It is a process – a way to establish a positive culture for leaning and human development throughout a school community' (Gibbs, 2001, p.11).

Activities within the 'Tribes' school program are predominately group focused and as such most of the children attending the primary school are familiar with standard groupwork process and procedure. This factor enabled the young people to hold the position of 'expert' in orienting the fathers or 'significant males' to the groupwork techniques used within the C'mon Guys! program.

### **Groupwork Process**

Groupwork was used extensively in facilitating C'mon Guys!, the rationale for which is closely linked with the use of social learning theory as an approach to work with the children and their fathers. We were also mindful of the literature about establishing friendship connections; men, unlike women, prefer to 'do' things together rather than just 'be' together (Rubin, 1985).

Examples of the activities used in the program to stimulate individual parent/child play and relationship building included card games and completion of computer oriented tasks. Other activities, necessitating all participants planning and working together, included a range of small group energizers and team sports, such as basketball.

Table 1

C'mon Guys! Group Program

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Session Activities	Program Objectives
<i>One</i>	
Whole group energizer	Introduction to groupwork process and getting to know other group participants
<i>Great Games!</i>	
Board games to encourage literacy and numeric skills in the classroom setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Development of one to one relationship between student and their significant male in school environment</li><li>• Orientation of significant male to child's classroom environment</li><li>• Fostering teacher engagement with significant male</li><li>• Providing significant male with opportunity to develop their parenting role</li></ul>
Input from Regional Parenting Service	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Information giving about parenting support services and resources available in community to male participants</li></ul>
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<i>Two</i>	
Whole group energizer	
Computer Capers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Orientation of significant male to school computer facilities and programs</li><li>• Further opportunities for children and their significant male to complete puzzles and tasks together</li></ul>
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<i>Three</i>	
Whole group energiser	
Sports Indoor and outdoor team and individual sports activities eg Twister, handball basketball	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fostering of cooperative teamwork processes</li><li>• Encouragement of social connectedness between significant males</li></ul>
Barbeque evening meal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Facilitation of closure process for C'mon Guys!</li></ul>

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As outlined in Table 1, the plan included both small and large group activities. The timing and selection of activities was planned to draw upon the diverse skills and interests of both children and adults, while catering for the limited attention span of the children who were aged between six and eight years.

While social learning theory and groupwork process were the central organizing tenets for developing the program, a third perspective was also relevant to the planning and delivery. This was ecological systems theory, where the seemingly disengaged relationship between male participants and their social and physical school and community environment informed the need to develop such a group in the first place.

## **Ecological systems theory**

Working towards enhancing the relationships between the individual stakeholders and the wider social institutions including the school and general community provided a foundation for planning and delivering the group. In adopting this position we were mindful that all levels of the system could then be viewed dynamically and as potential targets for intervention (Shulman, 1999). In the first instance we were aware of some life course stressors and structural barriers experienced by the male participants (Germain, 1979), including low levels of formal education and income.

Given these circumstances, the program aims were designed to focus intervention on building and strengthening the links between the significant males and the school teaching staff and school environment, while also providing opportunities for children and their male guests to spend quality time together engaged in constructive activities. Input in the form of an information session on parenting was also provided by staff from a local family services agency during Session One of the group. This short seminar was developed to provide the men with additional resources and contact people from outside of the school environment to draw upon in the future if needed. This session also enabled workers from the external agency to establish connections with a potential client group with whom it had been hard to make contact.

Establishing and strengthening both formal and informal networks

and support systems between the male participants, and between the school staff and the male participants was central to the delivery of the program (Payne, 2005). Most of the men who attended C'mon Guys! were socially isolated or geographically removed from the local community and school as a whole.

At a macro system level we were also interested in promoting a cultural shift, in terms of how both teaching staff and the local community viewed and experienced the role of the school and its environment (Jack & Jack, 2000). C'mon Guys! threw the school doors open in the evenings to welcome and engage with the children and male visitors. Rather than viewing the school as an institution open from 8.30am to 4.00pm and the 'property' of the Ministry of Education, this program was designed to foster participant familiarity and connectedness in order to build a sense of ownership of the school environment. Much of the literature on ecological systems theory has focused on the 'level of fit' between the person and their environment (O'Donoghue & Maidment, 2005; Gitterman, 1996), and investigated ways of using a systems approach to guide intervention where there is a lack of 'fit'. For the purposes of this project we hoped to inspire a greater degree of connectedness between the local community, the male participants the educational institution, and the people who work there.

## **C'mon Guys! Program**

The first hurdle for the program was to get the men through the school doors. In keeping with the literature about getting fathers involved in their children's activities (Fletcher, 2004), we discovered they were more likely to respond to a personal invitation from their own child than a notice from the school. The class of children who specifically made invitations for the men to attend C'mon Guys! initially had a much greater level of participation from the 'significant males' than the class that sent a school notice home.

The program was developed to include three different types of activities over a series of three weeks, with an additional week providing an opportunity for whole family attendance at a local basketball game if they wished. The activities and timeframes needed to be carefully considered as the school social worker was dealing with four different

participating groups – the students, the significant males, the teachers and external agencies.

The activities needed to cover a broad range of interest and skill level to cater for the needs of both the students and their significant males, while also being mindful of maintaining the energy and interest levels of all participants. Deciding upon a time to hold the program was one of the more problematic aspects of the group to organize. In order to maximize the potential for male involvement in the program it was decided to run each session on a weekday evening from 5.30 pm to 7.00 pm. This time slot was selected to encourage employed fathers or 'significant males' to attend after work. However program delivery was also dependent upon input from teaching staff. As such, using this time slot required the social worker to negotiate with teaching staff to stay at school after the end of the normal school day. There was a mixed response from teaching staff about being involved in the program after school hours.

It was considered that the following program of three sessions of 1.5 hours per session covered the range of activities and processes needed to achieve the aims of the program.

The plan for each session and the program as a whole was informed by an understanding of the stages of group development (Northern & Kurland, 2001).

Each session commenced with a whole group energizer. The energizers were intended to initially include little risk-taking, but progressing on to higher risk-taking activities as the program developed. Energizers were selected on the basis that they were appropriate for large groups and familiar to the child participants. This selection enabled the children to be cast as the 'experts' in demonstrating the activities and assisting their significant male guest. Each energizer was demonstrated by students first before whole group participation occurred. One of the energizer activities included 'Three Ball Pass!', a mini group juggle. Using 3 soft balls, the facilitator calls someone's name and tosses them the ball, they choose another person, say that person's name, and toss the ball; continuing in this manner until each person has caught and tossed the ball once. When each energizer session was complete, small group activities were introduced where children and their significant male worked in pairs or in groups of 4 or 6 to complete a task or play a game related to literacy or numeracy, computers or sports.

The groupwork literature indicates that it is typical to experience some type of conflict within the group setting (Corey and Corey, 2006). C'mon Guys! was unusual in this regard as there was no overt evidence of conflict in any of the sessions. This may be due to the fact that it was a short term program running over just three sessions; the program involved a good deal of dyad work between children and their significant male; and the program was not focusing on addressing contentious issues.

The closure/termination of C'mon Guys! was marked by sharing a barbeque meal together on the school premises at the end of session three.

### **Group Rules**

The group rules for C'mon Guys! were derived from the 'Tribes' school philosophy discussed earlier. The 'Tribes' agreements are caring social contracts implemented within the school to encourage student responsibility for creating positive relationships. The focus of the agreements is on appreciation and commitment to peers and others in the school environment. The four agreements are:

#### *Attentive listening*

To pay close attention to one another's expression of ideas, opinions and feelings; to check for understanding; and let others know that they have been heard.

#### *Appreciation/no put-down*

To treat others kindly; to state appreciation for unique qualities, gifts, skills and contributions; to avoid negative remarks, name-calling, hurtful gestures and behaviors.

#### *Right to pass*

To have the right to choose when and to what extent one will participate in a group activity; to observe quietly if not participating actively; and to choose whether to offer observations later to a group when asked to do so.

### *Mutual respect*

To affirm the value and uniqueness of each person; to recognize and appreciate individual and cultural differences; and offer feedback that encourages personal growth. (Gibbs, 2001, p.74).

The primary school has added one further agreement to this list, which is known as '*Personal Best*'. School staff felt that this value needed to be included in the agreements to encourage students to give things a go, and not necessarily rely upon the 'right to pass'. As such the group rules reflected those that the children were very familiar with in their school environment and set down expectations that facilitators would normally seek to establish early on in the running of a group program (Douglas, 2000: 79).

## **Outcomes from C'mon Guys!**

It is the ability to intervene in ways that positively influence the course of events that lies at the heart of effective social work practice, and the effectiveness of groupwork interventions. (Trevithick, 2005, p.25)

With reference to this touchstone provided by Trevithick for effective intervention we have returned to the initial aims of C'mon Guys! One of the principal aims for conducting this program was to encourage father/significant male involvement in the lives and work of the children within the school environment. The program was run with three classes involving a total of 75 students. Students invited 'significant males' to attend the program over the four week period and attendance remained stable at 68 male adult participants throughout. Approximately 85% of this group had not previously engaged with school activities in the past. Qualitative feedback from adult participants noted they felt more familiar and comfortable with the school environment at the end of the program. The children readily volunteered that they enjoyed spending time with their significant male, and were pleased that they were able to show off their school environment. It was also evident from the feedback that the children had a great deal of fun and could not wait for the next program to be developed.

The program was also conducted with the aim of enhancing social

connectedness and capacity building for adult participants and the wider school community. This was a deliberate strategy to counter the current social and economic discourse with its emphasis upon notions of independence and individualism and the competitive nature of dominant patriarchal relations. Employment, education and income statistics for people residing in the suburb reflect a population that is disenfranchised on many levels. The program was designed to actively promote the rebuilding of support networks within and between family groups and the school community. This appears to have happened on a number of different fronts resulting in two significant changes. The first of these was a significant upsurge in the number of men volunteering in the school environment, along with a marked increase in participation from fathers attending school parent-teacher meetings. These developments run counter to the normative ideals commonly associated with hegemonic masculinity discussed earlier in the article, where men consciously and unconsciously absent themselves from tasks associated with the care of children in order to maintain a position of power.

We have identified two main limitations of the current C'mon Guys! program. The most significant of these is the lack of systematized participant evaluation and feedback procedures. This will be addressed when the program is next offered by creating a process to gather both quantitative and qualitative feedback from all stakeholders. The second limitation which is perhaps more difficult to address is the lack of committed engagement in the program by some school staff. Given that the best time to run the program is out of school hours this does impinge upon the private time of teachers, who do not necessarily share the same micro and macro social objectives as the social worker. As the social worker is in the minority in the school environment much of the current delivery of the program rests upon teachers' goodwill and capacity to see the school as a milieu for building individual and community social capital. This is however not a philosophy shared by all staff at the school, hence there remains a tension about the degree of input that can be expected from staff outside of school hours.

During our reflections on the group process we were struck by the abundance of literature about different types of groupwork with discrete cohorts of people clustered around a particular age and stage or issue such as mental health or offending (Greif & Ephross, 2005; Salmon

& Graziano, 2004). We would have found research and more general literature on cross generational groupwork facilitation useful to refer to when planning C'mon Guys! Considerations we would like to offer readers planning a group for participants across diverse age cohorts would be to:

- draw on the notion of capacity building as being central to the intergenerational exchange in the group process;
- include activities that do not require concentrated attention span from younger participants;
- careful selection of the day and time for running the group to ensure maximum participation

In addition we would like to encourage further social work-academic coauthoring partnerships like the one we have developed to write up this practice initiative. The process of research, reflection and writing has been particularly energizing for us both. The groupwork practice teaching at the university has been updated and reviewed as a result, with our discussions about C'mon Guys! serving to remind us of how praxis is integral to the development of new ways for understanding and doing our work. This practitioner-academic partnership has also enabled just one example of the many innovations being carried out in groupwork to be written up for the benefit of a wider audience.

## **Conclusion**

C'mon Guys! was created out of recognition of the importance of fathering in the lives of children, and included an agenda to enhance social connectedness between stakeholders on a number of different levels. The program was designed to bridge the gaps between the school as an institution and a group of disenfranchised parents, between children and the significant adult male in their lives, between the men themselves and between the teaching staff and the male participants. Guided and informed by social learning theory and systems theory the program was delivered using a groupwork process. It was a successful program on a number of fronts. Both adults and children had fun. The children, their male guests and the teaching staff got to know each other a whole lot better, and some long held beliefs about what school and

teachers were like were challenged. It is over a year since C'mon Guys! was run. Adult male participation in school activities such as parent teacher meetings and volunteering has increased. The children keep asking, 'When will C'mon Guys! be happening?' We intend to run it again soon, this time with formal evaluation!

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