

Mothers and fathers accessing Family Relationship Centres

RICHARD FLETCHER

Family Relationship Centres (FRCs) offering dispute resolution sessions, child-focused group parenting programs and family counselling have recently been established as part of an ambitious plan to reduce the adversarial approach to family dissolution in Australia (Moloney, 2006). The first 15 centres were opened in July 2006 and a further 25 in July 2007. Twenty-four new centres opened on 1 July 2008, bringing the total number of centres operating throughout Australia to 64.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies is conducting an overall evaluation of the FRCs and associated legal reforms. However, since the central principles for the new services include every child's right to have a meaningful relationship with both parents and negotiation over parent-child contact as part of each parent's duty or "parental responsibility" (Attorney-General's Department, 2007), the manner in which the new services are utilised by mothers and fathers is of particular interest. An important aspect of the effectiveness of the new system will be the degree to which the two populations, mothers and fathers, are equally well served. The numbers of mothers and fathers making contact with the new services and the numbers progressing to dispute resolution will form two important indicators of the successful implementation of the FRC process. In addition, it will be important to recognise any differences in the help sought by mothers and by fathers or in the time taken to progress through each stage of the process. In a situation where parents are in conflict, the parent who has not initiated proceedings may be reluctant to attend or engage with dispute resolution services.

As a new service, data collection at the FRCs is still evolving and the type of data recorded and collated is yet to be finally decided. In this paper, questions surrounding mothers' and fathers' attendance at the FRCs are addressed through data retrieved from one metropolitan and one regional FRC.

Information on mothers and fathers from two services

The local picture

Data have been retrieved from FRC services at Sutherland and Newcastle, which are both operated by consortia, with Interrelate Family Centres as the lead agency. While these two centres may not be representative of all FRCs, they provide an indication of the way the mothers and fathers access the services available through the FRCs. Newcastle FRC was opened in July 2007 as part of the second wave of service establishment while Sutherland, in the southern suburbs of Sydney, was opened in the first wave in 2006. Data from the Newcastle service illustrates the most common issues identified by parents registering at the Centre while service use data from 100 mothers and 100 fathers contacting the Sutherland service allows time lapsing between each stage of the process to be compared.

Interrelate FRC service outline

As part of a national approach the Sutherland and Newcastle services include a standard intake system where clients may make contact through direct phone contact, as "walk-ins" at the FRC premises or through the Family Relationships Advice Line. For parents dealing with separation issues there are several sequential points of service provision.

Points of service for parents seeking assistance at the FRC

1. A parent contacts the service and is regarded as suitable for assistance. This parent registers and becomes Party A in the centre records. Party A provides contact details for their partner.
2. A letter is sent to the second parent (Party B) informing them of the request for assistance and asking them to contact the Dispute Resolution Practitioner and register.
3. Party A attends an Intake Interview.
4. Party B attends an Intake Interview.
5. Party A attends a "Building Connections" group session (a half-day psycho-educational seminar, aimed to encourage help-seeking behaviour and improved focus on the children).
6. Party B attends a "Building Connections" group session.
7. Party A attends a Pre- Family Dispute Resolution (FDR) session (an interview with a Relationship Specialist to check parenting goals and assess any changes in the level of conflict, for example if an Apprehended Violence Order is in place) to prepare for the session where the two parties negotiate over their child's future contact and activities with them.

8. Party B attends a Pre- FDR session.
9. Both parents attend up to three FDR sessions.

Male and female parents making contact and registering as clients

Figures for male and female contact and registration as clients are available for the first six weeks (46 days) of the Newcastle FRC service. Since 2% of clients are less than 22 years of age and 2% are over 49 years of age the numbers presented as male and female in Table 1 below include a small number of clients who may not be parents in dispute (e.g., grandparents or teenagers). The figures in Table 1 therefore provide approximate numbers of mothers and fathers seeking FRC services from the Newcastle FRC. Fathers are slightly more likely than mothers to walk into the FRC and less likely to telephone for assistance. Approximately 10% more fathers register for FDR assistance than mothers.

Table 1. Contact and registration at Newcastle FRC for males and females July–August 2007

Client	Combined (%)	Males (%)	Females (%)
Phone contact	575 (100)	269 (46.8)	306 (53.2)
Walk-in	380 (100)	194 (51.0)	186 (49.0)
Total potential clients	955 (100)	463 (48.5)	492 (51.5)
Registered	160 (100)	89 (55.6)	71 (44.4)

Presenting issues for males and females

Clients seeking assistance at an FRC indicate their presenting issues as part of the registration process. Clients may indicate as many needs on the registration form as they wish (47 needs are offered) and most indicate more than one. For the 160 clients registered at the Newcastle FRC in six weeks of data collection, 635 needs were identified (approximately four items per client). The five most common presenting needs are given in Table 2. The most common issues for the combined clients are included along with the number of male and female clients indicating each need. As discussed above, these figures are an approximation of the priority issues of mothers and fathers presenting to the centre.

Table 2. Most common presenting issues at Newcastle FRC for male and female registered clients July–August 2007

Need	Combined (% of 635)	Males (% of 352)	Females (% of 283)
Post-separation parenting	87 (13.7)	52 (14.8)	35 (12.4)
Parenting	52 (8.2)	28 (8.0)	24 (8.5)
Family separation	51 (8.0)	27 (7.7)	24 (8.5)
Relationship breakdown	43 (6.8)	31 (8.8)	12 (4.2)
Conflict	41 (6.5)	25 (7.1)	16 (5.7)

Of the most common presenting issues only the proportion of males and females indicating Relationship Breakdown was significantly different ($p = .02$) with more than twice as many men as women reporting this need. Other needs indicated but not presented in the table included: family violence or emotional abuse, 29 clients (19 female); child support payments, 27 clients (14 female); and breach of parenting agreements 15 (7 female) clients.

Assessing mothers' and fathers' progress through the FRC

While the numbers of males and females attending the Centre provide an indication of mothers' and fathers' participation, the length of time between registering and receiving FRC services may be an important indicator of the service quality for mothers and fathers. However, in assessing times it will be important to take account of which parent first approaches the service (Party A) and which parent is asked to attend (Party B) and to understand the progress of each group through the service.

Commencing on 4 September 2006, the first 100 mothers and 100 fathers (not children or grandparents) who registered for FDR services through the Sutherland FRC were identified by case number. The case numbers were retrieved from the Centre diaries and matched against those attending Building Connections or Dispute Resolution sessions within 12 months by Interrelate services staff. The de-identified data were provided to the Engaging Fathers Research Program for analysis. Mothers and fathers were designated Party A (the parent first contacting the FRC) or Party B (the parent who was requested to attend through the FRC after Party A had supplied their name and address). Numbers and percentages of those attending each step in the process are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Progress of 100 mothers and 100 fathers through the Sutherland FRC service

	Registered	Attended Building Connections N (%)	Attended Dispute Resolution (% of registrants)	Average no. days from Initial Interview to Building Connections	Average no. days from Building Connections to Dispute Resolution
Father Party A	63	36 (57)	17 (27)	26 (n=35)	78 (n=16)
Father Party B	37	30 (81)	21 (57)	28 (n=21)	38 (n=20)
Father Total	100	66 (66)	38 (38)	26.8	55.8
Mother Party A	59	41 (69)	29 (49)	29 (n=40)	55 (n=27)
Mother Party B	41	27 (66)	21 (51)	31 (n=25)	66 (n=20)
Mother Total	100	68 (68)	50 (50)	29.8	59.7

Notes: Percentages refer to percentages of initial registered sample. Sample "n" in Average days columns are lower than expected from the numbers attending due to missing values in data collection and transposition.

Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted comparing fathers and mothers in each group (e.g., Father Party A vs Mother Party A) with our two dependent variables: average time from Initial Interview to Building Connections; and average time from Building Connections to Dispute Resolution. There were no significant differences between mothers and fathers on any of the measures ($p > .05$) indicating that whichever parent initiates the dispute resolution process, the time taken for the second parent to attend is approximately the same.

Discussion

The figures presented in the above tables suggest that, in the two locations examined in this report, the FRCs set up to offer dispute resolution and assistance with family relationships are attracting approximately equal numbers of men and women with similar needs. In situations where mothers and fathers are seeking to resolve family conflict through initiating a dispute resolution process—involving attendance at an initial parenting seminar (Building Connections) and family mediation (Dispute Resolution)—the evidence from one metropolitan service, presented above, suggests that neither mothers nor fathers are disadvantaged in terms of time taken to access FRC services.

However, the information contained in the tables also raises questions about how the overall service effectiveness is to be judged. As illustrated in Table 3, only 38 out of 100 fathers and 50 out of 100 mothers had reached a dispute resolution session within 12 months after registering. Forty four fathers and 42 mothers did not attend the first compulsory parenting group session (Building Connections) intended to assist fathers and mothers to focus more clearly on the best interests of the children involved. While these numbers do not necessarily reflect any failure on the part of the service, they do suggest the existence of a large body of parents who have not addressed their conflicts through the FRCs. It will be important to inquire after these individuals to ascertain how and where they did obtain the assistance that they needed.

What is also clearly demonstrated in the information presented above is the need for a more sophisticated data collection system to enable efficient reporting of FRC activities. For example, the identification of presenting issues as shown in Table 2 is limited by the potential overlap between the categories of "presenting issues" offered to mothers and fathers when they register. Without knowing more clearly what clients mean by "Post-separation parenting", "Parenting", "Family separation" and "Conflict" among parents who are in dispute over children, the "presenting issues" information collected at registration provides little guidance in assessing and evaluating the FRC services. Furthermore, the compulsory data collection for FRCs to meet their contractual obligations needs to be tailored so that the data collected assists overall evaluation of the services. The data in each of the tables in this paper required manual transferring of information in Centre diaries and in dispersed data records before answers could be given to what are quite basic questions about the operation of FRCs.

References

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Richard Fletcher is Leader of the Fathers and Families Research Program at the Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle.