# The importance of fathers in building stronger families

## Joe Fleming

*Fathers and father figures in child welfare and child development have often been neglected as a focus of interest and research, yet they are often recognised as being a key to the functioning of the family. In addition to this concept, parenting beliefs and practices inevitably influence those of child development and child rearing. By beginning to unravel the differences between role and gender and looking at the diverse dimensions of fatherhood, it is contended that there is no definitive discourse regarding fatherhood in the same way as it is suggested about motherhood.*

*Whoever these men are, and whichever ethnic group or culture that they may originate from, it is argued that they have often been ignored or avoided in child welfare work. It is hoped that by identifying some of the key concepts in this overlooked area, intervention can be planned to engage fathers more constructively.*

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> *What is a father, a real father? What is the meaning of that great word? What is the immensely great idea behind that name?*
>
> (Fyodor Dostoyevsky, 1880, *The Brothers Karamazov*, quoted in Webb 1998, p.43.)

Attention to fathering in general has become increasingly popular in Australia and elsewhere since the early 1990s (Daniel & Taylor 1999; O'Hagan 1997; Scourfield 2001a; Milner 1993; Burgess 1998; Howard 2003). In Australia we have seen funding at both the State and Federal level (Russell et al 1999; Pease & Pringle 2001) and the call to child welfare and health services to focus on fathers more pro-actively. But how much do we know about this homogenously defined group? More importantly, does this research match the reality for some, if not all, fathers?

A number of themes present themselves in the literature. For the purposes of this paper, I will briefly review the most recent research data on fathers in child development and welfare, as it applies mostly to the Australian context, with some reference to the literature from elsewhere.

## BECOMING A FATHER

In Australia, approximately 80% of first-time parents attend antenatal classes and parenting education classes (NSW Standing Committee on Social Issues 1998). Furthermore, there is growing recognition that the role of fathers in pregnancy, labour, childbirth and infancy is essential to children's development (Habib & Lancaster 2003).

As a consequence, there is not only a need to better understand the experiences of new fathers, but recognition that the needs and issues for these men during this period are separate and additional to those of mothers. While not overtly hostile to fathers, health care providers can occasionally marginalise or ignore this diverse and distinct population (Tiedje & Darling-Fisher 2003). Even today, there are still many fathers who can feel uncomfortable around systems that promote gender constructions based on traditional notions of childcare and gender roles (Scourfield 2002a; Brown 2003; Lamb 1997; Frey 1997).

For example, we still have some health departments using titles such as 'Women's and Child Health', rather than departments of 'Parental and Child Health'. Health care systems are also often designed to reinforce exclusion through subtle practices, such as sending out health care information (eg, appointments) to the mother (Lamb 1997; Parton & Parton 1989; Scourfield 2002b; Tiedje & Darling-Fisher 2003).

However, changes are gradually being made, and many new fathers involved with these changes report a positive outcome (Schmied, Myors & Cooke 2002; O'Brien & Rich 2002).

When it comes to becoming a new father, several studies indicate that the many new roles involved, such as provider, nurturer and housekeeper, can cause stress and can also strain relationships (Howard 2003; Hand & Lewis 2002; Gray 2000). Other reviews of the literature highlighted that:

- many fathers are less likely to be familiar with family related support services than are mothers, and they use less frequently those services with which they are familiar (Condon, Boyce & Corkindale 2004);
- fathers of pre-term babies often use different coping strategies than do mothers to deal with the birth (Lau & Morse 2001)

For these reasons, fathers need to be recognised as a unique group which is equally important to the care and protection of children as mothers. One of the key aspects to involving fathers more in the care of children is the combination of two factors. These are the number of hours spent at work, and the increased participation of women entering the workforce (Pocock 2002; Weston et al 2003; Russell & Bowman 2000). Despite these factors, Weston et al (2003), found that for some fathers and their families, long work hours did appear to be detrimental, but this did not necessarily reflect the reality for all fathers.

## FATHERS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Historically, most of the themes that have emerged from the literature about fathers can be placed on a continuum. At one end is what has been labelled the 'absent' or neglecting father (O'Hagan 1997), and at the other end is the 'abuser' or potential abuser (Peled 2000).

The literature suggests that fathers are often absent in relation to the care of children (O'Hagan 1997; Greif & Bailey 1990).It also suggests that they are abusive when present (Burke 1998; O'Hagan 1997; Daniel & Taylor 1999) and that fathers are a 'special group' that we need to target as professionals in the workplace (Daniel & Taylor 2001; Farmer & Owen 1998; Milner 1993).

However, recent research has demonstrated that when it comes to fathers in families, particularly in child protection, the construction of fathers is more complex (Scourfield 2002a; Featherstone 2003; Daniel & Taylor 1999). Despite the view that fathers can become 'underinvolved' when it comes to the care of children, fathers do play a special and major contribution to both the child's social and cognitive development between the ages of 0 and 3 years (Feeney et al 2001; Radojevic 1994).

## FATHERS AND WELFARE

In a recent and timely paper by Stanley and Kovacs (2003), the authors highlight many factors that can influence accessibility to prevention programs. One of these factors included difficulties in recruiting males to attend child abuse prevention programs.

They go on to make some useful recommendations, including the need to link individual programs with wider, community-based approaches that incorporate transport, childcare, substance abuse services and employment opportunities (Stanley & Kovacs 2003). There are many current initiatives which have taken some of this research on fathers and put it into practice.

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One such working model is a program called 'Mensplace' (www.mensplace.net.au) which is a new initiative of the Western Australian State Government (Department for Community Development). 'Mensplace' is a state-wide men's resource service and the target groups are organisations, agencies and groups offering supports to men in their role as fathers and other family roles, including stepfathers, fathers in blended families, non-resident fathers, grandfathers, young fathers and men about to become parents. 'Mensplace' does not provide direct services to men, but is essentially a sector capacity building initiative incorporating community development, social planning and policy analysis and development approaches in its work to support the sector.

'Mensplace' is primarily built on a partnership between Relationships Australia (WA) and Meerilinga Young Children's Services (a non-profit NGO). While the contract with the State Government sets out broad objectives and outcome measures, there is freedom to be truly responsive to the needs of the sector and to develop pro-active strategies (Fletcher, Fairbair & Pascoe 2003).

Whilst it is not possible to list here other father friendly services that operate, the message remains the same. If we are to ensure that children receive appropriate care and protection, then we must begin to unpack many of the ideas we have about fathers in families, both at the micro and macro levels.

## BEYOND THE RHETORIC

Characterisation of fathers in modern society is far from ideal (Brown 2003; Scourfield 2002a; Fleming 2003). Media and societal representations often dominate what a 'good father' should be, and if you do not fit this image, the alternatives are wide and varied (Webb 1998). For what does it mean to be a 'good father' for those who are not residing with all or some of their children, working away from the family home or indeed living in a household where the children have their own 'father'? As we begin to unravel some of these questions through interest in fathers at a practice and policy level, we are gaining greater insights into not only what fathers see as their role but also what children want in a father.

## WHAT DO CHILDREN WANT (OR NEED) IN A FATHER?

A study by Milligan and Dowie (1998) in which interviews were conducted with 43 boys and 24 girls in the city of Edinburgh from different age and socio-economic groups set out to answer this question. The children identified five key characteristics of fathers that they thought were important:

- supportive behaviour;
- quality time;
- expressions of love;
- physical contact;
- a role model.

From these five, the most dominant characteristic identified was that of positive role model through which fathers of children were active participants in a range of activities in and outside the house. Those fathers viewed as poor role models were by contrast lacking in domestic skills and failed to spend quality time with them on activities that they both enjoyed (Featherstone 2003).

Clearly then, positive child outcomes are associated with parental warmth and nurturance and the importance of the relationships that children have with a parent or adult, rather than gender related characteristics.

For fathers, being a 'bloke' and also establishing a positive relationship with their children is much more likely to result in their child being better psychologically adjusted than individuals whose relationships with a father or mother are much less satisfying (Featherstone 2003).

## SO WHERE ARE THE FATHERS?

The tendency for child and family welfare practice to concentrate on mothers has been well detailed and documented (O'Hagan & Dillenberger 1995; Daniel & Taylor 1999; Scourfield 2001a; Farmer 1997). Much of the literature concentrates upon fathers who are absent from intervention as well as from family life. This construction of men places them outside the client-worker relationship and can lead to failure to identify risks for children and mothers. It also places an increasing burden upon the mother to protect the child often underestimating the reality of the situation.

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## CAN FATHERS PROTECT CHILDREN?

In regard to men who abuse, there is growing evidence of the link between child protection and domestic violence (Ryan 2000). Peled (2000), using material from a number of countries, recently argued that we, as professionals, can no longer ignore the role of abusive men as fathers. In this context, 'abusive men' are those who are physically violent to their partners. It is argued by Ryan (2000) and others that holding such men accountable for their children's well being may, under certain conditions, contribute to the healthier emotional development of their children (Ryan 2000; Featherstone 1999; Stanley & Goddard 2002). Furthermore, research suggests that the child protection system tends to concentrate on intervention with mothers, regardless of who the alleged perpetrator, even though cases of physical abuse are equally perpetrated by fathers and mothers (Farmer & Owen 1998; Dempster 1993; Scourfield 2001b).

Therefore, depending upon many factors, including the degree to which the father is willing or unwilling to become involved at each stage of the intervention, inevitably the mother often holds the burden of responsibility. In addition, mothers are not seen as complex subjects in their own right due to the focus by professionals on mothers only in relation to their impact on children (Featherstone 1999, 2003; Parton, Thorpe & Wattam 1997).

If we are going to truly work towards building stronger families with the focus on children's welfare and development, we need to begin to move beyond simplified characterisations of fathers in families. For many child health and welfare professionals this may be the beginning, for others the journey may have already begun. In order to facilitate this journey, a brief outline of some key rules as ideas for engagement are offered.

## SOME KEY RULES AS IDEAS FOR ENGAGEMENT

Practice wisdom often brings with it many insights which we can harness and use in practical ways (Evans 1998; Fleming 1998; Turnell & Edwards 1999; Scott & O'Neil 1996). Some of these include:

***Inclusiveness:***
There need to be opportunities for men to meet and discuss their stories and this may require thinking about the venue (outdoors/indoors), staff (mix of female and male personnel) and most important what these men want from the service.

***Flexibility of service:***
The old adage that 'one size fits all' approach to family welfare does not apply to men (or to anyone for that matter!). Flexibility may require offering family counselling 'after work'. I have been privileged to undertake groupwork with men where standard attire is work clothes (boots and all!)

***Promote services that appeal to fathers as well as families:***
Services need to be holistic enough to engage every member of the family, yet tailored to individual needs of the family. Remember that for some men, even talking about their feelings may be a new experience.

***Clarify purpose (parenting? child protection?):***
What does the service offer and does it communicate this to these fathers? Clarify that the service is about promoting self-responsibility.

***Consider meeting fathers on their own turf:***
There are programs that currently meet with men in their own environment. The *PIT STOP* program, a series of standard men's health screening tests, housed within a mechanical metaphor (see Saltonstall 1993) is an example of taking men's health services to Agricultural Field days. Inviting men to come to the service may not always be the best approach.

***Look at alternate media for advertising services (clubs, sports newsletters, radio):***
Consider how fathers will be recruited to the service. This can involve local radio, newsletters at sporting clubs, and signs in workplaces.

***Identify which fathers are to be targeted (single, active, uninvolved?):***
Fathers come in all different sizes and recognising this fact is a key to unlocking what you are offering. Many fathers may not want to attend for 'a parenting course', but may be interested to attend a group for 'recently separated fathers'. Finally, respect that fathers, like some mothers, do not want services. It may be necessary to be creative in methods of engagement without necessarily having them attend groups. For example, sending printed material home can be a way to share the information (Sanders 2003). For statutory services, however, this option may not be available and it will be necessary to see the father where protective concerns are identified for the child (Stanley & Goddard 2002; Peled 2000; Evans 1998).

## CONCLUSION

Reasons for the lack of focus on fathers in child welfare and child development was reviewed through a brief look at the most current literature, and this revealed that very little has been done to include fathers in families. The consequences of avoiding fathers can be detrimental not only to the family in general but, most importantly, to the child. If we are to move beyond the rhetoric of strengthening families and make this a reality, we must take up the challenge to engage fathers more constructively in their role.

Most importantly, this should be undertaken in the context of the good work already being done by professionals because the greater involvement of fathers will benefit this work and keep the child-in-family focus on the welfare agenda. ☐

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