Non-residential fathers and their support needs

Damian Killeen with Jennifer Lehmann

This study, undertaken for the qualification of BSW(Hons), explored the nature of supports used by non-residential fathers after separating from their children. It was designed to address the perspectives of men who were separated from their children and to explore the supports they used to cope with this separation experience. It acknowledges the complexity and changing nature of the fathering role in Australia today.

Data was obtained from semi-structured interviews with men who were encouraged to share experiences in relation to their roles as non-residential fathers. An interpretive perspective and descriptive method used in the design allowed for a deeper understanding of what men experience when separated from their children.

The findings demonstrated that the nature and use of supports employed by fathers related to how they experienced separation and managed relationships and contacts with their children. Men used a range of informal and formal supports to manage the often difficult post-separation period and maintain relationships with their children. These findings have implications for social work practice, particularly for understanding the support needs of men when separating from their children. It points also to the need for an increased emphasis on the importance of supports for non-residential fathers.

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This research project was conducted for the qualification of Bachelor of Social Work (Honours) and explored the nature of supports used by fathers who reside in regional and rural areas and are separated from their children. Its specific focus was on investigation of the experiences of men and their contexts during the early phase of separation from their children, rather than from their partner. It was Damian's experience of being a non-residential father, and the apparent lack of exploration of the nature of supports used by this group of people, that led to interest in this topic.

According to an American study by Dudley and Stone (2001), by far the largest group of divorced or separated fathers are classed as non-residential. These fathers live separately from their children, have limited parental rights as fathers by comparison with mothers, and experience widely varying parental involvement. Some fathers see their children regularly, while others have little or no contact at all (Dudley & Stone, 2001). Much of the research on divorce has focussed on child and parenting outcomes (Campbell & Pike, 1998), rather than on the effects of marital separation on men or the supports used or needed by non-residential fathers. Nicholls and Pike (1998) state that research on Australian non-residential fathers' perspectives is scarce and there is a need to rely on anecdotal evidence. Many professionals rely on practice experience (experiential and observational evidence) in the field.

There has been a steady increase in the number of non-residential fathers in Australia over the past two decades and the implications and effects of this increase are significant. According to Dudley and Stone (2001):

> The decline of the male role of fathering is one of the most serious social problems currently facing our society (p. 4).

While national statistics on the number of non-residential fathers in each State are unavailable, we can get an idea of the prevalence of non-residential fathers in society by looking at family structures, social trends and national figures on children who live in families in which a biological parent is absent. It is more likely to be the father who is the non-residential parent (88% of the time) than the mother (Campbell & Pike, 1988).

According to Vogel (2000), there are some 558,000 non-residential fathers in Australia, with the unemployment rate amongst separated fathers roughly triple the national average. About 1,000,000 children do not live with both

parents, with 300,000 children seeing their father less than once a year. Young, separated men are 10 times more likely to die by suicide than through road accident with an average of at least one separated man committing suicide every day (Vogel, 2000).

According to a Family Court of Australia study by Jordan (1996), many separated men suffer unrelenting grief over loss of regular contact with their children. This may be compounded by financial difficulties due to property settlement, child support payments and legal bills. Depression, which typically afflicts separated men, is also linked to an increase in tobacco and other drug abuse associated with an increased risk of heart disease and hypertension. However, the limited research indicates that, after separation from their children, men are likely to have little or no emotional support (Vogel, 2000). Vogel also points out that employers as a source of support go largely unrecognised.

This study sought to contribute to the growing recognition and knowledge that separated fathers are affected physically, emotionally, socially and in terms of practical living problems, especially during the early stages of separation. Jordan (1996) emphasised the need for services for men to focus on this particular phase before men opt to 'shut down' hurt by suppressing or externalising it. An improved understanding of the experiences and needs for support of non-residential fathers contributes to knowledge of this particular phase in the life of many men in contemporary Australia.

Being a father in contemporary Australia is a challenge (Department of Family and Community Services, 1999, p. vii). Cultural images of fathers include both stereotypes and ideal images (Marsiglio, 1995). Many of the different images of fathers are portrayed through persuasive media such as television, newspapers and magazines. News reports, for example, often reveal the tragic consequences of desperate men reacting violently to the breakdown of relationships (Sullivan, 2001). Tanfer and Mott (1997) suggest there are conflicting trends which need consideration when developing an understanding of contemporary fathering. Images of fatherhood are also tainted by increasing awareness of domestic violence and of the incidence of fathers' sexual abuse of children (Marsiglio, 1995). Conversely, there are men who emphasise the importance of relationships with children as a source of meaning and happiness (Tanfer & Mott, 1997). Sullivan (2001) states that it is not an easy task to develop programs that support men as fathers, and suggests that programs should acknowledge the range of ways that men function in their fathering role.

Most Australians are aware of the high rates of divorce and separation. However, it appears that fathers are left out of much of the program planning and development aimed at

helping families. Dudley and Stone (2001) suggest that for many in the community the term 'families' is synonymous with 'mothers and children,' and that non-residential fathers are often unnoticed or invisible family members, even when they are active parents (Dudley & Stone, 2001, p. 164).

When parenthood is factored in to the separation experience, additional stresses exist. There is not only the loss of marriage itself, but also the extra stress of raising children during the time of transition. There may be feelings of guilt associated with subjecting a child to a single parent experience, as well as the ongoing emotional, financial and physical strains that accompany separation (Marsiglio, 1995). According to Jordan's (1985,1996) findings, men's sense of losing their children was the most powerfully expressed feeling and most men who participated in these studies wanted their fathering role to continue.

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Social work practice with men includes anger management, domestic violence programs, alcohol and drug counselling, parenting groups, mediation and other men's counselling, and the development of support networks. Recently more recognition has been given to the role of fathers and the benefits for children derived from maintaining a positive relationship with their father following separation.

Specific studies on support for non-residential fathers when separated from their children are few, with Lehr and MacMillan (2000), Nicholls and Pike (1998) and Jordan (1985, 1996) being those who have addressed issues relating to the plight of the non-residential father with consideration of the non-residential father's perspective.

Gregg (1994) states that 'single fathers need other single fathers' (p. 97). Groups for men provide them with the opportunity for support, role models and solace. This finding in relation to single fathers is likely to apply to non-residential fathers as well. Jordan (1985) states that a significant factor in adjustment is the nature of the support networks that are available and, more importantly, the availability and responsiveness of these networks to fathers' needs:

> Consistent with the research, we have found that for these men there are often limited or no sympathetic support networks available (cited in Campbell & Pike, 1998, p. 6).

The intent of this study was to contribute to knowledge through adding the voices and experiences of non-residential fathers and exploring the supports used by them when

separated from their children. The research question that formed the basis of this project was: *What is the nature of the supports used by men during the first 18 months of separation from their children?*

STUDY DESIGN

The qualitative methodology used in this study drew on the descriptive data collected from the participants using an interpretive perspective. Marlow (2001) states that the interpretive approach lends itself very well to descriptive research, often using words to produce rich descriptions of phenomena. 'Qualitative descriptive studies offer a comprehensive summary of an event in the everyday terms of those events' (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 336) aiming to describe social systems, relations, or social events, providing background information about the issue in question as well as stimulating explanations (Sarantakos, 1995). Sandelowski (2000) suggests researchers using this method stay closer to their data and to the surface of words and events than researchers conducting grounded theory, phenomenological, ethnographic, or narrative studies. However, the term *surface* should not be taken to imply failure to go beyond the words and delve into the meanings of men's accounts (Sandelowski, 2000).

The aim of the research was not only to describe in more specific detail the supports used by non-residential fathers, but also to explore and interpret meanings, experiences and responses that emerged and how these might inform social work practice (Alston & Bowles, 1998). The research was concerned with both the support 'events' and the meaning attributed by the men to issues of support. This approach is associated with Erickson's (1989) interpretive reasoning with understanding central to interpretive research which seeks to comprehend phenomena from participants' perspectives (cited in Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 48).

The approach used also sought to explore ways in which people interpret the world and their place within it by listening to their stories. Lawler (2002) refers to this as the 'narrative' dimensions of people's accounts within qualitative research. He further states that the narratives are part of the fabric of the social world. The narratives told by the men in this study were partial and fragmented as Lawler (2002) suggests is usually the case, but nevertheless tell us a great deal about the person and the social world they inhabit. This type of research is interpretivist by nature.

The men chosen for this study were consenting adults over 18 years of age, living within Bendigo, Victoria, and district, providing an opportunity for voices of rural men to be heard in a locally based study. The men had been separated for a minimum of 3 months, but no longer than 18 months, as this time frame was considered appropriate given the men needed to make adjustments after the separation crisis. The men needed to have children from the relationship subject to

separation who were under the age of 18 years, and they needed to have contact with their children.

A combination of purposive and snowball strategies was used on the basis that in qualitative studies 'the ultimate goal of purposeful sampling is to obtain cases deemed information-rich for the purposes of the study' (Sandelowski, 2000, p.338). Snowball sampling is particularly useful when members of the population are difficult to identify and locate (Grinnell, 1997).

> *Most of the men appeared to have been very uncertain as to what supports were available in the community.*

The method used for collecting data was semi-structured interviews focusing on 'the issues that are central to the research question, but the type of questioning and discussion allow for greater flexibility than does the survey-style interview' (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995, p. 65). Communication and basic counselling skills of reflective listening, empathy, clarifying and probing techniques were used to access information and encourage dialogue. The participants were allowed to tell their own story, using their language. It was the intention to create a relationship that would allow for openness and willingness to discuss sensitive issues of separation from children. Yegidis and Weinbach (1996) suggest that the relationship between the researcher and the participant may be openly supportive and therapeutic at times and that feelings of trust and equality in the knowledge-building process help with understanding. As part of this process, the researcher allowed himself to become an insider by sharing with all the men prior to the interview that he had also experienced being a non-residential father.

As a social work researcher, it was important to think through the ethical issues concerned (AASW, 1999) and the study had Human Research Ethics approval from La Trobe University as a Social Work Honours Project. The men who participated chose pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity.

The recruitment strategy resulted in seven participants, ranging in age from 29 to 47 years. All had been married and separated, and one had divorced. The length of their relationships before separation varied from 4 to 15 years and the length of separation ranged from 3 to 18 months. Three participants had a stepchild as well as biological children with their ex-partner. The children's ages ranged from 12 months to 14 years, with the stepchildren's ages being 13, 15 and 20 years. A total of 17 children were involved in the separations of the participants, including the stepchildren.

All children lived with their biological mother, except the eldest stepchild, who was independent.

A set of closed questions was asked of the participants to begin the interview. This included questions about occupation, length of time separated, access to children, the number of children involved, their ages and their living situation, which were followed by more open-ended questions which allowed the researcher to guide the interview (Minichiello et al., 1995). Each participant was interviewed once and all interviews were transcribed for the purpose of analysis.

Thematic analysis was used to continually identify themes within the data. Identifying themes, concepts and ideas from the participants' points of view was the basis of coding the data. A process of data reduction was used that involved selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting, and transforming the data which appeared in the notes and transcripts. One of the important goals of using data reduction was to identify the main themes that emerged and to categorise the information as it was collected (Alston & Bowles, 1998). Further to this process, a modified form of iterative process (Grbich, 1999) was used. This occurred after the first interview whilst transcribing and examining the field notes, and the information was used to form part of the remaining interviews. This process involved noting major themes as well as the researcher's own interpretations. On completion of the thematic analysis there were 3 core themes, 2 of which had sub-themes or distinct categories.

STUDY FINDINGS

Analysis of the data obtained from interviewing suggested three core themes:

- the nature of the separation experience in relation to children — three sub-themes being:
  i) contact with children,
  ii) relationships with children and stepchildren, and
  iii) physical and emotional effects of separation;

- the nature of supports used by the men — two sub-themes being:
  i) formal services and support, and
  ii) informal supports;

- men's reflections on social, formal and informal supports.

THE NATURE OF THE SEPARATION EXPERIENCE IN RELATION TO CHILDREN

Contact with children

The men reported experiencing mixed reactions to their separation, ranging from being shocked to acknowledging some relationship changes had been needed, but the men indicated that they wanted to see their children on a regular

basis and had established varying contact arrangements. They were all employed and made child support payments; and all had been able to maintain a relationship with their biological children, in spite of some difficulties. These were associated with mediation and court processes, long distance travelling and living arrangements. All stepfather participants reported that relationships with their stepchildren had deteriorated, or broken down completely.

Factors that impeded contact with children included the long hours worked by some of the men and their ex-partners, shift work and weekend work. Bill commented on the extensive travelling required to maintain contact saying:

> That's one of the reasons I only have them once every three weeks because I have a four day break every third weekend ... which suits with shiftwork.

Several of the men expressed concern about not having daily contact with their children. John commented:

> Just not having the daily input, not having the daily physical contact ... is hard.

He lived in a caravan and felt this also had an unfavourable effect on his contact, commenting:

> I feel inadequate because I'm not providing her with a room and that sort of stuff.

Where contact with children had been determined through mediation and court process, less flexible arrangements for contact were in place and had not been fully resolved. Tony was typical, commenting:

> I'm only allowed at the moment four days a month, or two days a fortnight.

The data indicated that while mostly the men had accepted contact arrangements, this was generally less than they would have liked and was impacted on by employment, proximity, housing and decisions emerging from mediation or court processes.

Relationships with children and stepchildren

Continuing the relationship with their children was important to the men, with those who were still experiencing the early effects of separation being more emotional about this issue during interviews. Mark was filled with emotion, commenting:

> It's very important ... he ah ... he's the first thing I think of probably ... of a morning ... [referring to his five-year-old son].

Bill's involvement as a full time carer for his children for the first six months after his separation from his ex-partner impacted significantly on his relationship with his children. His loss of the carer/nurturer role and daily contact with his children was heightened by the young ages of his children. He commented:

It's up and down ... not being around the children, having that fatherly role. That's the hardest thing to cope with ... the children back there with their mother and she's with another person. The kids look to him as a father figure ... that was my role, and it's just something that I find hard to cope with.

Those who had been separated for a longer period believed they had got through the worst part of the separation experience, but stressed the importance of continuing relationships with their children. However, separation also had an impact on the relationship with stepchildren, with whom there had previously been a close bond, with these relationships deteriorating to the point of breakdown. As Tom said:

It was excellent ... yeah [before separation]. It's broken down basically. We have no regular contact [after separation].

Laurie concurred, commenting:

She was one year old, and I loved her as my own daughter, and we were exceptionally close. No, I've got no relationship now. She won't even talk to me. She hasn't talked to me for seven months.

Loss of daily contact, losing their daily role of fathering, and someone else taking over that role, appeared to have the biggest impacts. The stepchild/father relationship appeared to be more vulnerable than the biological child/father relationship.

Physical and emotional effects of separation

The physical and emotional impacts of the separation experience on the men varied with most describing the first six months as particularly hard. Tom and Mark were still going through that period.

Trying to breath and trying to cry and trying to deal with the pain. I've never had that before. (Mark)

The first six months were hell, the last nine months have been a bit easier, but I still think I've got a long way to go to return to my sort of ... former psychological state. (Tom)

Mark and John talked openly about having had suicidal thoughts and described how they almost succumbed to those thoughts. Mark admitted:

I drank two bottles of alcohol ... and that virtually threw me over the edge and I wrote myself a note ... it wasn't really a note, it was a suicidal thing ... and I ... had a knife handy and I was sitting over there and ...

Both had suffered from degrees of insomnia.

My sleep habits changed completely, I became an insomniac. I hated going to bed because I didn't want to wake up at three in the morning again and not to be able to go back to sleep. (John)

Others, like Laurie, had experienced poor sleep patterns, but had overcome this. However, several of the men were still

working through anger issues using different ways to defuse frustrations. Anger was generated by the nature of the relationship with their ex-partner; the 'system' not allowing them to have more contact with their children; or their ex-partner being unwilling to discuss issues of importance.

THE NATURE OF SUPPORTS USED BY THE MEN

Though they had similarities, the nature of supports used by the men varied depending on their specific circumstances and divided into two core categories: formal services and support, and informal supports. Access to support depended on a number of factors including: knowledge of support networks available in the community; decisions about what was, or was not, useful; the range and accessibility of personal support networks; and the men's emotional states and personal styles. Most of the men appeared to have been very uncertain as to what supports were available in the community.

Formal services and support

The men accessed legal advice about property settlement issues, future settlements and contact issues with their children, with the majority having resolved both property and child contact issues. Using legal services was a necessary part of the separation process and the men shared their difficulties, reluctance, and frustrations in dealing with solicitors. Generalist counselling as well as couple counselling was accessed by the participants, though Dave found compulsory couple counselling through the court system frustrating, commenting:

They're good ... they're good, but there is no consequence from them as a result ... if your ex-partner doesn't choose to see reason then you walk out with nothing.

Tony and Mark accessed parenting programs and a men's support group through a local agency. They both found this helpful and supportive. Mark also accessed individual counselling, commenting:

The one on one helped me quite a lot with my feelings ... The agency [group sessions] helped me a whole lot more with relationships.

Laurie said his mediation experience was useless and laughingly commented:

Crap ... absolute crap ... there was nothing right in it. There's dodgy advice, they're not professional some of those people ... really poor. Look I knew more of the Family Court Act than they did I think ...

In analysing formal service supports, the data suggested that those who attended compulsory court counselling with their ex-partner and mediation counselling, either through the court system or at the suggestion of their solicitors, found it difficult to resolve issues in this setting. Eventually most men attempted to resolve matters outside this process, either

because of the costs involved in counselling or the realisation that they had to resolve these matters.

The two men who volunteered to attend men's support groups were advised to do so by solicitors or mediators, because it would increase their chances of more contact with their children. In doing so, they discovered the men's group very supportive. Talking to other men about their situation enabled them to realise that they were not alone. It also provided a learning environment in which to become a better father and to achieve personal development. It allowed access to valuable information about their situation through books, handouts and other information on the Internet.

Informal supports

Informal supports were those accessed in the first instance, and having access to family members who lived close by and with whom they had good relationships seemed an advantage. The other informal supports existing in the men's communities included their work colleagues, management and bosses, neighbours, friends and men who had had a similar separation experience to their own. For instance Bill commented:

> There was a husband and wife that owned the childcare centre and they'd been through separation. The man who was one of the partners in the child care centre, he just was a great support in that way, you know, I could talk to him.

The initial support usually came from friends, family members, siblings and parents, but the extent to which support was received varied considerably.

Friends and neighbours also played supportive roles to most of the participants. Some of the men's friends lived some distance away, but provided support through phone contact. Mark and Tony emphasised the importance their neighbours had played.

The men were all employed and their work contexts emerged as a common source of strong support as well as being a distraction from personal events. For some of the men the support came from colleagues as a form of mateship because many of them worked in predominantly male environments. As Tony commented:

> You go to work and they ask you how do you feel today? Give us a number between one to ten ... and you say, 'I feel like a five today' and they go 'Oh ... that's good ... so what's happened?'

MEN'S REFLECTIONS ON SOCIAL, FORMAL AND INFORMAL SUPPORTS

Having some free time and knowing what to do with it was an issue for some of the men, particularly earlier on during the separation. Laurie stated:

> I read a lot now. Never had a chance to read before ... don't watch the TV at all.

Others liked to get away for the occasional weekend for recreational activities. All activities coincided with what the men were experiencing and what supports they were using in dealing with their grief. Dave commented on the issue of support regarding his friends:

> I don't like to burden them with my issues. So I just accept their friendship and enjoy their company and that sort of stuff.

Others commented how their social lives changed in the initial separation period. Tom stated:

> Yeah, I socialise a lot less now, actually, than I did in that first six months. It distracted me from my miserable feelings.

Only John mentioned his increased alcohol consumption as a support stating:

> I guess it was out of just frustration, wanting to relax, wanting to sort of shut out the world ...

All the men commented on the lack of support for men in the separation process. Tom commented on what he thought was lacking in formal supports for men:

> I think there's this black hole ... there are general sort of parenting services, but this is a very special need I think ... It's part of just a general lack of services for men full stop. We are really only just beginning to provide you know community service or welfare structure for men's needs.

On reflection, the men considered going to work as important, not only as a distraction and for financial reasons, but also because of the support and camaraderie they received from their workmates. Generally speaking, the nature of supports used varied as much as the nature of the personalities of the men, their attitude, psychological state, contact with their children, co-operation with their ex-partner, knowledge of formal supports and what family and friends they had around them as supports. The first six months of separation appeared to be a critical time for the men to receive continued support in all of the areas mentioned.

DISCUSSION

Contact with their children was important to the men in this study, but was affected by a number of factors including: the cooperation of their ex-partner; legal processes; employment arrangements; geographical location; and living conditions. This was commensurate with research indicating the importance of maintaining contact between fathers and their children after separation, which increases fathers' sense of well being and lessens levels of anxiety, depression and stress (Dudley & Stone, 2001). In addition, fathers who report positive relationships with ex-partners generally report more positive experiences with their children and fewer court-related issues (Lehr & MacMillan 2000).

Conversely, this study found that uncertainty about contact with their children affected the men's sense of well being, and created anxiety and emotional turmoil. Some men spent more quality time with their children on an individual basis after separation, supporting the finding of Maccoby, Buchanan, Mnookin & Dornbusch (1993) that non-residential fathers could maintain close relationships with their children, even with limited contact. Such positive experiences in the separation process can assist men in moving forward.

Of importance to social workers is awareness of the positive effects of maintaining contact between children and fathers, and the factors that impede or enhance contact between them. Encouraging and promoting ways fathers can maintain contact is important. In addition, the value of informal supports should not be underestimated. This study found that informal supports were used by all the men and were generally useful.

It is recognised that relationships between fathers and children following separation can become very disrupted and the men in this study commented that the initial separation and the subsequent six month period was the most difficult (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980; Jordan, 1996; Campbell & Pike, 1998). This period can be a particularly stressful and vulnerable one for non-residential fathers if support networks are limited or non-existent.

A focus on this six month period is required in order that fathers receive the necessary assistance whilst they are at their most vulnerable. Fathers newly separated from their children need to be made aware of the supports available, and linked into them where necessary, by those working with them in the legal, health and social welfare systems. It is these people also who are in a position to advocate on behalf of fathers for improved supports. However, the development of programs that focus on specific needs and target men who are at risk during the early phases of separation from their children needs further investigation as research suggests that men place a higher priority on being self reliant than do women, because of not wanting to burden others (Miller & Golden, 1998; Jordan, 1996).

An unexpected finding in this study was the impact of losing close relationships with stepchildren which was distressing for the men. Stepfamilies are complex and dealing with this complexity in itself creates problems (Barnes et al, 1998). This study highlighted the need to further investigate the supports needed for stepfathers separating from their stepchildren, which has implications for both family law and social support services. Social workers need to be aware of the impact separation has on fathers from their biological children *as well as stepchildren* as this could have important implications for how these issues are addressed and understood.

The loss of the fathering role was a major concern to the men in this study, even more so if another male had taken over that role; and the value men placed on their fathering role was also significant. This finding concurs with that of McMurray and Blackmore (1993) who found the most difficult aspect of divorce for non-residential fathers was the loss of daily interaction with their children – a symbol of 'family life' (p. 156). In addition, men in this study expressed fathering as a continuing role, having lost their role as husband/partner. Creating awareness and promoting positive views of ongoing fathering is important.

> *If we have a better understanding of how non-residential fathers are affected by separation from their children, then we are in a better position both to provide appropriate supports and to educate service providers about their needs.*

Of interest in this study was the value of being employed and the importance the men placed on continuing on with their work. The routine that it imposed, and the distraction that it provided from what was perceived as a life consumed with the emotion of separation, together with the support of work colleagues who could offer practical and emotional supports, proved invaluable. As most men need to continue working for financial reasons, it is important that employers also understand the impacts of the separation experience. They can play an important role in terms of offering flexibility and understanding when men separate from their children. The men in this study believed that continuing to work allowed them to move forward through their situations with hope of resolution of personal issues.

The formal supports used by the men in this study included solicitors, mediators, counsellors, men's support group, Centrelink, and the Child Support Agency. However, the men generally felt unsupported and frustrated when dealing with these services. Campbell and Pike (1998) discuss these difficulties, finding that most men expressed a negative attitude towards structures currently in place to deal with legal aspects, believing they fail to consider men's financial situations or understand separation experiences. Equally concerning to the men was the lack of recognition of them as responsible fathers. Some of the men, because of criticisms of their behaviour by their former partners, were obliged to prove that they were capable fathers by attending parenting courses in order to secure contact with their children. They felt this undermined their identity as fathers since they believed that they were already caring and loving fathers.

However, paradoxically, they found these courses to be a supportive and positive experience.

CONCLUSION

The men in this study identified their needs for support and assistance during the early phase of separation from their children, but most indicated that they were not sure what was available to them. Apart from the immediate informal supports initiated by the men themselves, other forms of support had to be sought out. Supports were accessed through a range of mechanisms though some of the men indicated that awareness of these supports and access to more information would have helped their situation sooner. Dealing with legal structures was viewed by most men as a 'painful', often unsupportive process, while individual counselling and men's support groups were considered beneficial by those men who accessed them.

The reasons for separation are complex. However, when men separate from their children there appears to be a greater need to recognise and understand the relationship between fathers and their children, and the benefits of maintaining that relationship. If we have a better understanding of how non-residential fathers are affected by separation from their children, then we are in a better position both to provide appropriate supports and to educate service providers about their needs. This may assist non-residential fathers to re-establish themselves post-separation and maintain positive and continuing relationships with their children. □

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