

# THE SINGLE PARENT FAMILY:

## A Review of the Literature



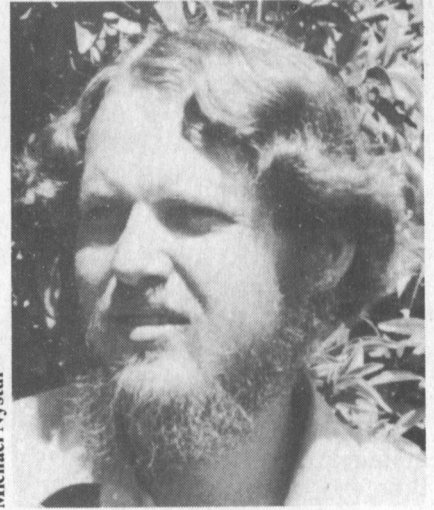
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At least 160,000 Australian men and women are single parents as the result of separation, divorce, death of the spouse, or birth out of wedlock (Social Welfare Commission, 1976). With the custody, care and control of approximately 282,000 children, these single parents can face an array of social problems and, as Schlesinger (1972) observed, warrant greater attention from the helping professions.

Research on single-parent families in Australia has been limited. However, many researchers, particularly in America, have tried to ascertain the outcome for the single-parent children's social, emotional and intellectual development. After reviewing such research, several writers (e.g. Billingsley & Giovannoni, 1971; Herzog & Sudia, 1968; Kirkpatrick, 1968) have noted its often inconclusive nature.



### A New Focus for Single-Parent Research

Apart from problems of measurement, much of the research on single-parent children has been found wanting in its expectation of direct relationships between parental absence and child development. Herzog and Sudia (1968) suggested that researchers broaden the scope

of their investigations. In order to comprehend the single-parent family, Herzog and Sudia believed a deeper knowledge of individual roles, interactions and family processes is required. Limiting their concern to single-mother families, Herzog and Sudia advocated study of the mothers in such families, how they cope with the children, the kinds of supervision and discipline experienced, the expectations imparted, and the effects of the mothers' behaviours and attitudes on the children. Since a single father's life can be just as child-centred as that of a single mother, similar studies could be made of single-father families.

### INTERACTIONS

The single parent's interactions and relationships with his or her children can be conceived of as an intervening variable between the single-parent family structure and the outcome for the child. Tiller (1958) suggested that when differences between single-mother and two-parent children occur, they are not due to the direct effect of father-absence on the children. Rather, Tiller saw them as resulting from the mother's reactions to her husband's absence, as reflected in her treatment of the children. Dager (1964) and Koch (1961) also recognized the importance of the single-parent child relationship in affecting the child.

To understand the precise familial influences of single-parenthood on

children, then, it would be worthwhile to look at the dynamics of the parent-child relationship, particularly the contribution of the single parent. In this way it may be possible to see how some single parents, as Burchinal (1964) suggested, minimize possible trauma for their children and help them to adapt, while others do not cope. This kind of investigation seems to satisfy the criteria specified by Bronfenbrenner in a recent critique of family research (Schaar, 1975). Bronfenbrenner stressed the importance of studying the real environment within which children, including single-parent children, live and develop. The parent-child relationship is surely a very relevant aspect of that environment.



### **Parental attitudes and child development.**

The present writers believe that one of the most important aspects of the single-parent's relationship with the children is his or her parental, or child-rearing, attitudes. Abel and Gingles (1966) noted that between a child's action and a parent's reaction is an undisclosed mechanism that determines how the parent reacts. Abel and Gingles believed that this intervening variable, the parent's attitude, looms as an important aspect of the parent-child interaction, for it provides the framework for explaining why the behaviour occurs. Moreover, children would be influenced by their parents' attitudes by direct teaching, or indirectly as their attitudes are perceived by the children in their verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Research by Coopersmith (1967); Gildea, Glidewell, and Kantor (1961); Peter-

son, Becker, Shoemaker, Hellmer, and Hellmer (1962); Read (1945); and Schaefer and Bell (1958) also supports the notion that parental attitudes are related to child development.

Allport (1967) noted that although attitudes are relatively stable, they are most prone to change during periods of emotional disorganization. One such period could be after a divorce or death of a spouse. The focus of the next section will therefore shift to situational factors that may influence the single-parent's attitudes and thereby influence the parent-child relationship.

### **Situational Factors of Single-Parenthood**

As Glasser and Navarre (1965) observed, the single parent is limited in the time, physical energy and skills he or she can apply to domestic, child-rearing and financial responsibilities previously fulfilled by the absent parent. Thus the single parent experiences role strain, that is, the problem of performing the roles of both parents (George & Wilding, 1972; Ilgenfritz, 1961; Marsden, 1969). The financial burden can be particularly great if government relief is unavailable or insufficient (Darbyshire, 1975). The single parent, in response, might be expected to alter values, expectations and aspirations for the children — either realistically, based on the personal and financial resources available and the needs of the children; or in maladaptive ways as a result of excess psychological strain.

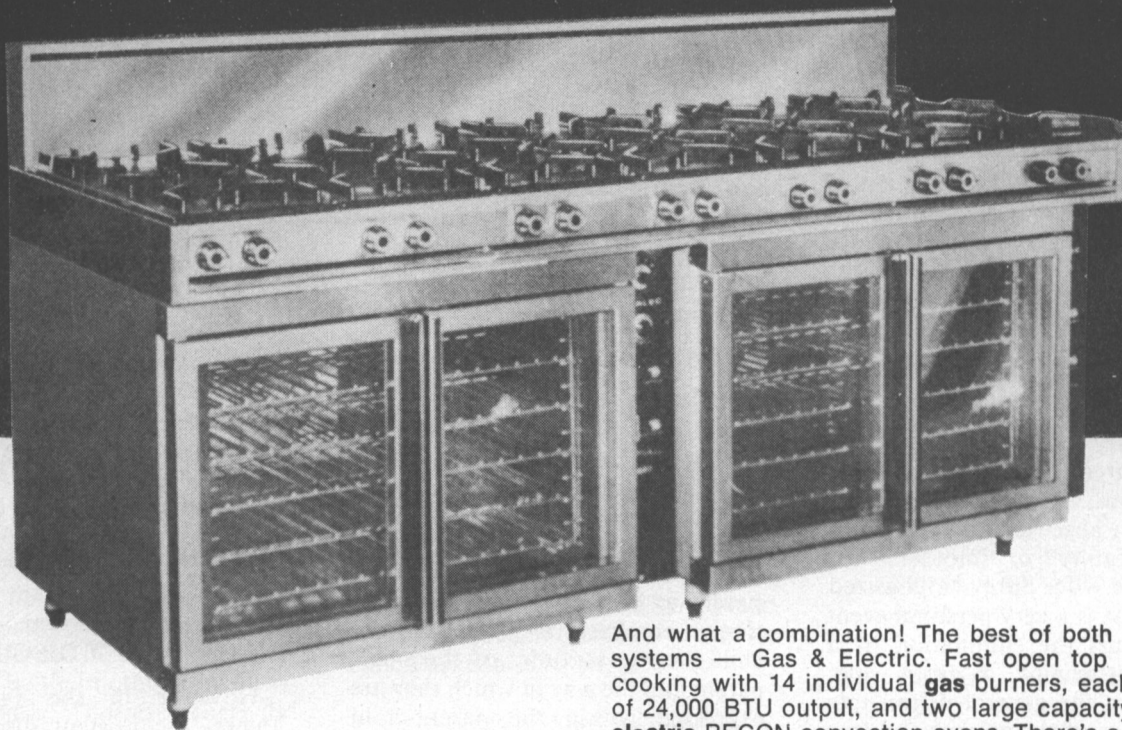
In addition to the practical and financial strains of single-parenthood, emotional changes may be experienced. The single parent loses the opportunity to exchange love and support with the spouse. Perhaps more significant in the

case of unhappy marriages is the loss of tension and conflict noted by Hunt (1968). The single parent's emotions may also be affected by guilt or a sense of failure about the marriage breakdown (Freudenthal, 1959) or anger about the spouse's departure (Family Welfare Bureau, Sydney, 1965). Other feelings reported by researchers (e.g. George & Wilding, 1972; Schlesinger, 1970) have been grief, loneliness, fear, anxiety, confusion, depression, or in some cases, relief. The single parent not only has to handle his or her own emotions, but also help the children adjust to the new situation. Thus the single parent may experience emotional strain. Marris (1968) became convinced from a study of widowhood that emotional reactions to the loss of the spouse must profoundly affect the widow's attitude to all her problems. While the types of emotions experienced by other single parents may differ from those of widows, their impact on the single parent's attitudes could be just as great.

### **SOCIAL CONTACTS**

The single parent may also lose social contacts (Glasser & Navarre, 1965). Some social contacts are lost because they were initiated by the now-absent parent, or because the single parent has had to change residence. Other contacts are lost because the single parent feels out of place socially, is no longer interested, has not the finance or is too busy (Barclay, 1958; George & Wilding, 1972). The single parent may be less often invited out than previously, either because of friends' embarrassment, or because of the stigma attached to a broken marriage. George and Wilding (1972) noted that single fathers often felt people behaved differently towards them. Thus the single parent may be missing out on the stimulation, support and ideas that would normally come from others, and may become discouraged in the face of some people's attitudes. On the other hand, friends and relatives

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may feel sympathy and increase contacts with the single parent, while new contacts may be made with welfare workers and other single parents.

According to Kriesberg (1970) any such contacts are likely to have greater influence on the single parent's attitudes, without the competing influence of the spouse's ideas. While observing that not all attitudes are equally susceptible to change, Kriesberg suggested that at least some may change in directions related to both past and present experiences.

### **EXPERIENCES VARY CONSIDERABLY**

It is apparent that the experiences will vary considerably from one single parent to another. Adams (1971) observed with regard to family crises, that reactions depend on the type of crisis — permanent or temporary, voluntary or involuntary; predictability and origin of the crisis; degree of family isolation from kin; organization and adaptability of the family; and the family's own definition of the stressful event.

In the crisis of single parenthood, a particularly relevant variable is the absent parent. As Sprey (1967) pointed out, single-parenthood is not just the absence of a parent, but of the father or mother, the husband or wife. Sprey emphasized that the loss is a very personal event and not just the elimination of a person performing a given role. Apart from the general differences between loss of the mother and loss of the father, the extent to which the loss affects the single parent depends on the personal qualities of the spouse; and the particular contributions he or she made to the family's social, financial, emotional, domestic and child-rearing responsibilities.

### **SUMMARY**

In summary, it appears that many factors may be related to the at-

titudes of the single parent. Specifically, it appears that the single parent's situation may involve strains on his or her time, energy, emotions and skills; and a lack of stimulation and support from the absent parent and from other social contacts.

In response to this type of family crisis, the single parent may be expected to alter some of his or her child-rearing attitudes. The direction in which the attitudes change may depend on past and present experiences. The nature and degree of the parent's responses may also depend on the severity of the crisis, as determined by the lost one's personal characteristics and contributions to the family; the type of loss; the single parent's and the family's definition of the loss; their ability to cope with it; and the possibility of help from kin.



### **Single Parent's Attitudes towards Child Rearing**

In this section, an attempt is made to summarize those studies of single parents which provide some insight into the responses of the single parent to his or her situation. Particular emphasis is placed on the child-rearing attitudes of the single parent and the way in which they are expressed within the parent-child relationship. Studies of single mothers are discussed first, followed by a consideration of aspects which are relevant to single fathers.

#### **Single mothers' attitudes**

At the outset, it is important to note that most of the studies mentioned in this section were not intended to indicate overall patterns in single parents' child-rearing attitudes. Now were some of the

studies intended to represent psychological research, thus methods of collecting and interpreting data may seem of doubtful reliability. However the studies do still provide some useful insights.

Tiller (1958) compared Norwegian sailors' families in which fathers were often absent at least two years, with appropriate father-present controls. According to Lynn and Sawrey (1959), Tiller found that a larger proportion of father-absent than father-present mothers tended to be overprotective, and to stress obedience and politeness rather than happiness and self-realization for their children. Also, a smaller proportion of the father-absent mothers led active social lives or worked outside the home.

Koch (1961) studied the homes of 11 day-nursery children from father-absent families broken by divorce, and those of 11 children from unbroken homes. The pairs of children were matched according to IQ and chronological age. From a clinical appraisal of home interviews, Koch observed that the major differences between the father-absent and father-present mothers in her study seemed to be in the subtle attitudes underlying handling of the child. Both types of homes showed a "high incidence of inadequate methods of handling the children."

### **INCONSISTENT DISCIPLINE**

However in the father-absent homes, inconsistent discipline was perceived by Koch as probably due to rejection, while in the father-present homes it was based on other factors such as lack of agreement between parents. Koch inferred from the mothers' interviews that the single mothers were likely to resent and reject their children because of dissatisfaction with the burdens of child-rearing, the fact that the children were reminders of marriage disintegration, and because of social and sexual frustra-

tions. Koch suggested that some mothers who seem to feel guilty about the resentment, may have tried to ease the guilt by over-indulgence. Koch perceived that the single mothers also tended to feel insecure in response to the father's absence, the children's need for reassurance and the financial and child-rearing responsibilities to be borne alone. Aware of the problems of child-rearing, the single mothers attempted to share the responsibilities, even if with an older child. Koch's study is limited by the fact that the observations are based on the researchers' subjective interpretations, and Tiller's by the sampling of only a small aspect of the children's behaviour. However, other researchers have also suggested that single mothers may show the strictness and protectiveness observed by Tiller, or the feelings of insecurity, rejection or resentment, and the tendency to lean on an older child, as observed by Koch.

## QUESTIONNAIRE

The Family Welfare Bureau, Sydney (1965), administered its own questionnaire to 37 divorced, deserted or separated mothers. The researchers noted that less than 67 per cent of the mothers experienced conflict in being both mother and father, possibly because of personal factors or the father's low involvement when present. The main difficulty in terms of child discipline seemed to be the mother's inconsistent standards. The researchers did not find evidence that the inconsistency resulted directly from the absence of the father, and again suggested the importance of personal and individual factors. However some of the mothers' behaviours did seem to be the result of father-absence: a number expressed their aggressive reaction to desertion by slapping the children; and at least one mother saw the father's characteristics in her son and reacted with "fear and subter-

fuge". It appeared that in most cases the mothers directed their emotional reactions to marital breakdown away from themselves, and 67 per cent leaned heavily on their children for emotional support. From 67 to 75 per cent of the mothers were estimated to be unstable or dependent prior to the breakdown, thus their child-rearing attitudes and practices were likely to have shown some undesirable trends whether the father was absent or not. The researchers noted evidence that what they as welfare workers considered undesirable child-rearing was not necessarily perceived as such by the mothers. The difference in norms and standards therefore needed to be kept in mind.

## PSYCHIATRIC REPORTS

Wylie and Delgado (1959), using psychiatric reports, also noted aggressive, hostile relationships between single mothers and their sons. The mothers often viewed their sons as bad and like their absent fathers, and the boys assumed some of their fathers' roles at home.

## NOT ALL STUDIES DISCUSSED

Unfortunately, the present paper cannot discuss all the other studies that relate to the single mothers' attitudes towards their children. Some of those studies include Adams (1968); Barclay (1958); Blood (1972); Freudenthal (1959); Hunt (1968); Kriesberg (1970); Lyman (1971); Marsden (1969); Nye (1957); and Parker and Kleiner (1966).

## ATTITUDES

Summarizing the studies of the single mothers, it appears that the following attitudes may occur:

1. Fathers should discipline the children, with mothers supplying comfort and affection.
2. A mother needs help in bearing the responsibilities of child-rearing and decision-making.

3. The mother needs to stay in control to prevent delinquency in the children. Control may involve use of harsh physical punishment, temper outburst, or reliance on another person, perhaps an older child.
4. The children should be able to question the mother's decisions.
5. The children should be protected from hurt, possibly by being given a great deal of affection, possibly in being required to obey parental rules, and be polite.
6. The children should not be expected to take on responsibilities or the children should share the responsibilities of the mother.
7. Children should provide the mother with love.
8. The children are more like brothers or sisters than sons and daughters.
9. The parent is not the most important factor affecting children's futures.
10. Children should get good marks, a good job and high income.
11. Children are a burden, or are bad.
12. The single mother's life is frustrating and full of dissatisfaction.

## DIFFERENT ATTITUDES

However, it is apparent that any two single mothers may hold completely different attitudes, and that any one mother may have ambivalent feelings. The twelve at-

itudes mentioned are based largely on inference, and should not be accepted as fact. Most of the studies from which they were taken did not look specifically at child-rearing attitudes. Moreover the studies considered only particular groups of single mothers, some groups consisting of those who had sought help; others, of those in poverty. The reliability of mothers' reports of their relationships with their children may be questioned, since some mothers may give socially acceptable responses, and deny the existence of problems, while others may exaggerate the problems. Marsden (1969) did note, however, that in order to understand the experience of single-motherhood, the best sources of information are the mothers' own perceptions.

### DIVERSITY OF RESPONSES

Possibly the main point to be noted from the single-mother studies is the diversity of responses shown by the single mothers. Because none of the studies involved comparisons of before and after, one cannot be certain that all the aspects of the mother-child relationships were the result of father-absence. However it appears that a number of factors can be listed as modifying the effect of the father's absence per se:

1. The personal qualities of the father; the particular contributions he made to family life, including child-rearing tasks; and the mother's perceptions of him.
2. The personality or psychological characteristics of the mother, her perception of the situation, and her skills and child-rearing knowledge.
3. The family structure, in terms of the number of children their ages and sex.
4. The reason for father-absence and the length of absence.
5. The area in which the family lives.

6. Family income.
7. Availability of outside help, advice and emotional support.
8. Mother's socio-economic background.
9. Current employment status of mother.
10. Mother's friendships with other men.

It is possible that single fathers experience many of the same problems and reactions as do single mothers. However, the proposed differences in initial child-rearing involvement, plus other biological or learned parental differences, may result in reactions which differ in kind and in degree. Factors modifying the reactions might be similar to those listed for single mothers. Consideration of the literature available on single fathers does provide some answers to these questions.



### Single fathers' attitudes

The final section of the literature review looks at those studies which have focused on single fathers. George and Wilding (1972) conducted the first comprehensive survey of the feelings, reactions and coping methods of single fathers. An extensive search to locate such fathers in the East Midlands of England resulted in a sample of 588 fathers. These fathers had lost their wives through divorce, desertion, death, imprisonment or hospitalization and were not living with another woman. The authors believed that a close study of the feelings and reactions of the single father was necessary in order to understand the family situation created by loss of the mother. The problems of the study, similar to those of single-mother studies, were noted: the difficulty of obtaining a representative

sample; relying on fathers' perceptions and recollections; asking meaningful questions; and inflicting a painful situation on the fathers interviewed. From the point of view of the present discussion, a further problem is that child-rearing attitudes were again not specifically studied. However, the study does provide a useful picture of the single father's views of his situation and his interactions with his children.

### MAIN ATTITUDES

One of the main attitudes which appeared to be held by the fathers was that the children should suffer as little as possible. Divorced and separated men reported that the wife's action in leaving the children was the most painful aspect of their situation. These fathers regarded it as grossly unfair to be left with sole responsibility for the children. Virtually all the fathers showed concern about their ability to provide adequately for the children: 61.7 per cent thought a mother was necessary for her special qualities (e.g. gentleness, patience), or because one person could not be both disciplinarian and comforter. A further 12.8 per cent were less uncertain of the single father's ability to cope, saying that this depended on his skills, demands of his job, his love for the children, income and the availability of relatives. The remaining 24.5 per cent believed single fathers were quite able to provide children with affection and to cope on their own. Commenting on their personal situations, 77.4 per cent thought the children were worse off because of the lack of a mother's love and affection. Many longed for reassurance that they were caring properly for their children.

### IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY

However, despite the difficulties many felt in coping, their belief in the importance of the family to the children, and to themselves, made giving up the children unthinkable. Most (92 per cent) reported no regrets about their decision to care

for their children by themselves. George and Wilding (1972) examined the relationship of these attitudes to social class, and to reason for mother-absence. Widowers were more likely than separated or divorced fathers to believe that fathers could not cope by themselves. As no class differences were found, the authors attributed the differences between widowers and separated or divorced fathers to the quality of life prior to mother-absence.

#### **FULL-TIME WORK**

Most fathers (71.3 per cent) thought that a single father should combine full-time work with child care; work was seen as important for a man. The lower the social class, the greater the willingness to stay home and receive a government benefit. However, lower-class fathers may hold this view because they are more likely to lose or have to give up their jobs in the face of the domestic and child-rearing demands. Most families (69.1 per cent) attempted to overcome these demands by allotting increased responsibility to the children for looking after themselves and helping with the domestic tasks. Although young children were not usually expected to help, the age at which they were expected to do so varied greatly. Older children, particularly teenage girls, were required to help, and sometimes to act as substitute mothers. Those who did so were highly praised, those who did not, resented. The fathers' attitudes to their children's increased responsibilities varied. Some thought the experience would make the children more independent, and would stand them in good stead.

#### **SCHOOL WORK**

Others felt the children suffered by having less time for schoolwork, play, and other interests. The 4.7 per cent of the single fathers who thought the children were helping less attributed the reduction to the previous effects of the mother's

laziness or her higher expectations. George and Wilding noted that discipline was not a major problem for the fathers. The authors suggested that fathers are possibly more able than mothers to enforce discipline, and children are more willing to accept it from father than mother.

#### **MOTHERS ABSENCE**

Most of the fathers (81.4 per cent) said that the mother's absence had brought them closer to some or all of the children. Social class and reason for mother-absence did not differentiate between the fathers; those who thought they had not come closer had always been involved with their children, either because of the closeness of the whole family, or because of the mother's lack of interest in caring for the children. The deeper involvement between fathers and children was two-way: the fathers were more likely to discuss day to day household duties, and their own problems and feelings; the children in turn relied more on their fathers. A group of fathers, reacting to emotional strains, relied heavily on the eldest daughter for emotional support as well as for the care of house and children.

#### **ANXIETIES**

An article by Fallon (1975a) again highlighted the anxieties felt by single fathers about their children. Fallon pointed out that the single father may have doubts about keeping his children. Yet, like George and Wilding (1972), Fallon expressed the single father's overriding concern for his children. Attitudes revealed in the article were that the single father has a responsibility to train and guide the children; the father can provide love just as well as the mother; and the parent's love is natural and unique, and should be available when the children need it. A related point made by Fallon (1975b) was that most single fathers feel they are unable to spend as

much time with their children as they would like. Fallon (1975b) suggested that as a result, the children are less likely to listen to their fathers. However, as Fallon (1975b) also noted, each single-parent family has a different set of problems, which do not occur in any predictable pattern.

#### **PARENTAL ATTITUDES**

Summarizing the studies and observations about single fathers therefore reveals the possibility of the following parental attitudes:

1. A mother has qualities such as patience and gentleness which a father cannot provide; or a father is just as able to express love and affection to the children as is a mother.
2. A father cannot be both comforter and disciplinarian; a single father may need help and reassurance in rearing the children; or, fathers vary in their ability to raise their children alone; or, fathers are able to raise their children alone.
3. The family is important to the children and to the father.
4. The parent's love is natural and unique.
5. The children should not suffer, and the parent's love should be available when the children need it.
6. Older children should help with the household duties.
7. Increased responsibility makes the children more independent, and stands them in good stead eventually; or, increased responsibility is not good for the children because they have less time for other activities.
8. The single father has a responsibility to train and guide his children.

A comparison of the present summary with the summary of the single-mother studies reveals that the attitudes numbered 1, 2, 5 and 6 deal with similar issues — those of parental roles, ability of the single parent to cope alone, concern for the children, and the problem of whether the children should bear some of the household responsibilities. However, as George and Wilding (1972) cautioned, a systematic presentation of this sort may impose order where it does not really exist. It is apparent that neither single-motherhood nor single-fatherhood are uniform situations. The single-father studies illustrate the importance of the following factors:

1. The personal qualities of the mother; her contributions to the previous family situation.
2. The father's skills, his love for the children and his perceptions of the situation.
3. Family structure, in terms of the ages and sexes of the children.
4. Reason for mother-absence, length of absence, and the family's previous experiences of absence.
5. Previous state of marital stability and of family relationships.
6. Income.
7. Availability of outside emotional, financial, domestic and child-care help.
8. Social class.
9. The demands made by the father's job.
10. Father's perceptions of social attitudes.

#### FACTORS SIMILAR

Many of these factors are again similar to those which appear to mediate single mothers' reactions to their situations. The list could be expanded by considering specific examples of single-parent families. However, the present list is sufficient to illustrate the fact that single-fatherhood and single-

motherhood must be considered in the context of the father's or mother's overall familial, occupational and social environment.




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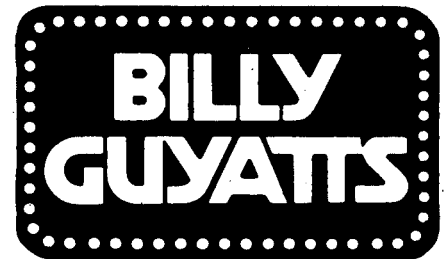
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The rest . . . two thirds of the world . . . some three billion human beings . . . living lives plagued by hunger and disease and deprived of basic necessities.

**The have's and the have-not's. On a global scale.**

## You can help restore the balance.

Through Foster Parents Plan you can do something. No, you will not change the world. But you will be assisting a family towards the self sufficiency that is their due as human persons.

We have no political or religious affiliations. Our sole purpose is to help people in the developing nations to help themselves . . . **through the support of those who care.**

### Do you care? Enough to help?

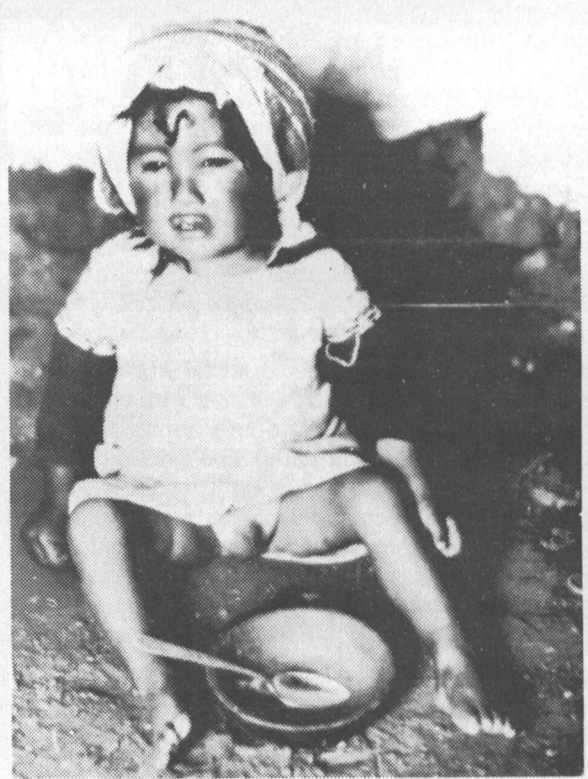
You can sponsor a family in Latin America, Asia or Africa. It will cost you \$14.50 a month. This contribution provides the family with vital counselling, guidance and encouragement from an indigenous social worker. It provides some financial support, medical care, health education and vocational training.

It is small assistance by our standards. Yet it lays a foundation for future progress by the family's own efforts.

**Our objective: not dependency, but initiative and self-reliance.**

### Person to person help.

You will be put in touch with the family and kept informed of its progress. One of the children (the "Foster Child") will



write to you regularly. It need not be just a matter of dollars and cents.

### There can be personal interest and personal involvement.

Perhaps you cannot commit yourself to full sponsorship. Then just send what you can. It will be put to good use in family, community self-help projects and co-operatives.

Foster Parents Plan of Australia is currently at work in Ethiopia, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Haiti, Peru, Indonesia (Bali & Yogyakarta), Republic of Korea and the Philippines.

## Please sign here . . . and help restore the balance.



### Foster Parents Plan of Australia

*Established internationally in 1937*

36 Park St., South Melbourne, Vic., 3205. Phone 699 1200 (STD 03)  
N.S.W. Office—P.O. Box 250, Randwick, N.S.W., 2031.

I/We wish to sponsor a child and family for one year or more.

Country preferred (if any) \_\_\_\_\_ Foster Child  
should be a boy/girl.

Payment will be made \$14.50 \$43.50 \$87.00 \$174.00  
Monthly Quarterly Half-yearly Yearly

Enclosed \$ \_\_\_\_\_

I/We would like to know more about sponsorship.

I/We cannot 'sponsor' a foster family but would like to help.

Contribution enclosed for \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Name (Individual or Group) \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Postcode \_\_\_\_\_

Phone No. \_\_\_\_\_

CAM/FPP 4