

*'If we get the mums and kids in, we are doing well'*

## Father absence in the context of child welfare

### A review of the literature

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*This article looks at the area of father absence in child welfare, which is a growing topic of interest in Australia and elsewhere. Based on the author's PhD research undertaken so far, the article provides a brief overview of the literature surrounding the area of father absence in child welfare. This literature review is an attempt to highlight current key practice issues that workers and managers may face when delivering services to families.*

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The topic of 'absence of fathers' in child and family welfare is a complex and often emotionally charged one. It is also a topic that comprises many interrelated issues, variables and concerns that have been viewed from different perspectives over the last three decades. Further, the evidence suggests that it is not men who are usually engaged by workers, particularly in child and family welfare. Thus, this paper provides an overview of the literature regarding absent fathers in an attempt to highlight the background to some of the key issues faced by welfare professionals when working with fathers. It is written in the context of qualitative research for a PhD qualification offered by the Department of Social Work, Monash University, Victoria, Australia (Fleming 2002, 2004).

The quotation in the title of this paper – *If we get the mums and kids in, we are doing well* – came from a respondent who was interviewed by the author in relation to work being done with families in daily practice. This short quotation from the transcript illustrated that whilst the importance of including fathers in clinical work was acknowledged, in reality they were often excluded as fathers tended to be more difficult to engage – and this warrants further exploration.

Whilst undergraduate and many post-graduate courses offer important knowledge and insight into how to work with issues of gender, much still remains to be learned about how to engage and work with fathers in health and welfare. The author's study focuses on exploring the gaps in current knowledge surrounding father absence in child welfare (Christie 1998, 2006).

#### DEFINING FATHERS AND FATHERHOOD IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY

The role of father, in its most basic form, involves a relationship with a child that embraces the biological and the psychological, as well as the social and economic. Fatherhood, like motherhood, is also a social construct which, in Western society, has traditionally been built around marriage. The marriage contract has traditionally involved a division of labour between fathers and mothers such that fathers worked as breadwinners outside the home while mothers worked as carers inside the home (White 1994; Smit 2005). Thus, to fully understand the position of

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men within the practice of social work and child welfare, both as client and as workers, we need to recognise that the welfare state was predicated on the traditional roles of men and women in our society.

Changes in the labour market have accompanied changes in family formation reflecting a reduction in cohabitating couples with dependent children, higher rates of separation and divorce, lower rates of marriage and a rise in lone parent families (ABS 2006; Campbell & Charlesworth 2004). These changes in family types are what Beck-Gernsheim (2002) calls the 'post familial family', which have given rise to a set of ideas about the 'ideal family' from politicians and policy makers alike. This ideal family type is often configured as the father being the 'breadwinner' and the mother as the 'carer', despite recent data indicating that families today resemble something quite different.

Fatherhood is also clearly more a social construct than is motherhood (Moloney 2002) which is based firmly on the biological relationship between a woman and child, being so patently evident as to preclude any confusion about the identity of the mother.

The ideal family type is still quite a dominant construct, despite scientific advances, such as in-vitro fertilisation (IVF) and surrogate motherhood, which affect traditional concepts of motherhood (Bachrach & Sonenstein 1998; Dempsey 2006). Also, because nurturing and protection are almost universally recognised as core elements of mothering, the development of the mother role seems less problematic than that of the father role.

Fletcher and Willoughby (2002), in their research paper *Fatherhood: Legal, biological and social definitions*, provide a helpful summary of varying, as well as competing, conceptions of the term 'father' by exploring a range of understandings that currently exist within legal and social settings. They also challenge any simplistic notion of fatherhood being linked solely to biology, as often cited in the Commonwealth Family Law Act 1975, as an example of a legal definition. Their research paper offers a rethinking of fathering and the various types of fathers who are present, and those who are absent. Fletcher and Willoughby (2002) also outline that parenting, particularly fathering, can encompass broader parameters than these, with the line between biological and 'social' fatherhood being somewhat unclear at times. This is the case when a non-biological father has parented a child from a very young age. Furthermore, 'fatherhood' can also be located in a particular cultural context where, in Indigenous communities, men may define themselves as having 'fathering responsibilities', although not as a biological father (Flood 2003; Hammond et al. 2004).

## WHAT DO FATHERS DO?

Recent Australian data from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) research titled Longitudinal Study of Australian Children 2004 (LSAC 2004), looked specifically at Australia's unique social, economic and cultural environment on children growing up in today's world.

During 2004, over 10,000 children and their families were recruited for the study from the Health Insurance Commission's Medicare database. The data collected is to be followed up at two yearly intervals until 2010 (LSAC 2004, p.4). Significantly, the LSAC 2004 attempts to redress the neglect in much previous research of the role of fathers in children's lives, and in so doing has gathered data about a number of aspects of fathers' involvement.

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What was revealed, with regard to fathers and children, was that on average infants spent just under six hours per day with both father and mother present. In addition, just over seven hours was spent with the mother only. By comparison, on average infants spent less than one hour per day with the father alone and this increased only slightly by around thirteen minutes on weekends (p.24). According to the LSAC 2004 data, the time fathers spend with older children is similar and supports other Australian and international findings that fathers still spend relatively little time as the primary carer of their children (Craig 2003, 2006; Featherstone 2005). These results also indicate that, compared to fathering, mothering involves not only more overall time commitment, but more multitasking, more physical labour, a more rigid timetable, more time alone with children, and more overall responsibility for managing care (Craig 2006).

However, while there is some evidence that changes are taking place which will increase sharing of the caring and domestic work load, according to the literature much still remains to be achieved. There is also the issue that both men and women can become fixed into traditional gender roles by default, particularly when they become parents. For many women, being a mother in this situation can mean high levels of time 'poverty' and economic insecurity, particularly later in life. For men, on the other hand, being a father can mean less time to spend developing close relationships with their children, leading to physical and

emotional absence if their relationship with their partner is tenuous or breaks down.

Today's new family 'type', which is firmly based upon two incomes, career planning and formal child care, bears little resemblance to family structures as they were post-World War II (Dench 1996; Hawthorne 2005). According to Williams (2005), social, economic and cultural change has had a significant impact on the way fatherhood is defined. As a consequence men have been confronted with many challenges in their roles as fathers.

## NON-RESIDENT FATHERS

The term 'non-resident father' is used to denote the reality of those fathers who, for whatever reason, do not live with their children. Fathers in such circumstances typically experience more difficulty in being actively involved in parenting their children compared to resident fathers.

The term 'stepfamily' refers to families which are created when a parent takes a new partner, whether through marriage or cohabitation (Bornat et al. 1999). This term covers a wide range of situations in which a non-biological parent – usually a man – may have been a parent figure in a child's life since babyhood, through to situations involving a series of brief cohabitations over a number of years. This diversity draws attention to the heterogeneity of stepfamilies and has led one group of researchers to suggest:

any attempt to describe stepfamilies as if they were one single discrete and definable family form is highly misleading and limiting (Gorell Barnes et al. 1998).

The focus on fathers taking an active role in the care of their children has lately attracted many commentators, often leading to the publication of a book, or series of workshops. There is a wide range of books on offer about fathers as parents, including how to raise boys, men taking time to explore the 'warrior within', and ideas for busy dads (Biddulph 1998; Robinson 2001; White & Russell 2005). Although these popular texts and education sessions do contribute to a healthier view of fathers, we must exercise caution if we are to seek a deeper understanding of what it means to be a father in today's society.

In the literature, the subject matter of 'fatherhood' is seldom complimentary and frequently fails to give adequate attention to the elements of what it means to be a 'father'. For example, fathers are expected and encouraged to take an active role in the family, yet many workplaces do not offer the flexibility to undertake this task. This is particularly the case in 'fly-in/fly-out' careers and long-haul truck driving in which time spent with the family often occurs between periods of working away from home. As a consequence of contemporary social and employment policies, father absence is seen and accepted as an individual problem rather than a social issue.

Although there has been significant progress in the knowledge base surrounding absent fathers in child and family welfare, there are still many gaps within the subject matter that need further exploration. These gaps in the literature include issues concerning non-biological fathers and father figures, such as older brothers and foster fathers.

## FATHERS AS A 'SOCIAL PROBLEM'

Men as fathers are often regarded in the literature as problematic, particularly when they are absent from their families. Social problems in our society have also been linked to the 'absence of fathers in families', both physically as well as emotionally, which has led to 'moral panic' (Moore 2004). Moral panic occurs where the values and principles which society upholds are perceived to be in jeopardy. An example of such a moral panic with regard to fathers occurs in the case of single parent families whose social problems are perceived to be the result of fathers being absent from the family home (Moore 2004).

In the USA especially, fathers who abandon their 'parental responsibility' are not only tracked down for child support, but are also labelled as 'deadbeat dads' (Sullivan 2000). There are also many collections-oriented sites on the Internet that mention or highlight 'deadbeat dads', some even showing mug shots and marking the photos as 'found' in the style of the FBI's 'most wanted' list (Bender & Bender 2007).

## FATHERS AS RESOURCES

Fathers have also been seen as 'resources' in the literature, a view which has been greatly assisted by contributions from socialist and pro-feminist approaches. These have concerned themselves with how men, as fathers, are becoming more involved or engaged in family life (Bradshaw et al. 1999; Burgess & Ruxton 1996; Burghes, Clark & Cronin 1997; Ghate, Shaw & Hazel 2000; Kearney et al. 2000; Kiernan 1999; Lewis, Papacosta & Warin 2002; Oakley & Rigby 1998; Smart & Stevens 2000). Whilst this literature reveals that men, in general, are taking a more active part in the home than in previous times (Lewis 2000; Daniel & Taylor 1999), the reality is that women are still undertaking the majority of household tasks and child care (Kearney et al. 2000). However, it is not only the question of precisely who does what household tasks in the home that leads to differences within literature. Commentators from socialist feminist perspectives (Burgess & Ruxton 1996; Moss 1994; Owen, Cameron & Moss 1998) would argue that a man's role as a father is highly significant and has benefits for the men's partners, their children and for the men themselves, regardless of how much time they put into household tasks.

The value placed on fathering for families in contemporary society, whilst significant, is not a new phenomenon and has been under question for some time. Commentators' studies

of fathers in families, such as Hester and Hame (1999) and Pringle (2000, cited in Christie 2006), have drawn upon studies of children brought up in lesbian households (Golombok, Spencer & Rutter 1983) in order to suggest that the value of fathering, as opposed to parenting, may be over-rated. These commentators also suggest that the unspecified benefits to women arising from some men's greater child care participation are not inevitable and largely depend upon broader anti-sexist changes occurring in society (Pringle 1998a, 1998b).

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## IS THERE A THEORY ABOUT FATHERS?

Expectations of fathers have changed, and many fathers in Australia today are facing role confusion. Fatherhood, according to Lupton and Barklay (1997, p.9):

... is a phenomenon around which there currently exist many and often competing discourses.

The role of a father as a nurturer as well as a provider has gained increased prominence since the 1980s as researchers and other professionals recognised that men, as well as women, can be engaged in caring and healthy relationships with children (Pruett 1989). This is usually referred to as 'non-deficit perspectives' to fathering whereby men take an active role in the care of children and family life (King 2005). Whilst there is merit in recognising that fathers can play an active role in family life, the literature often reflects an opposite view of fathers.

In Greif and Bailey's (1990) review of five major social work journals over a 27-year span, it was found that mothers featured more frequently, and that fathers were often portrayed as missing, embattled, and perpetrators of maltreatment (Farmer 1997; Haskett, Marziano & Dover 1996; Phares 1996). Yet these views often do not represent the whole picture, and can create an unhealthy view of fathering and father types which can misconstrue the motives, feelings, attitudes and hopes of most fathers (Dubowitz 2006; Hawkins & Dollahite 1997; Scourfield 2001a).

As explanation for the lack of representation of fathers in research studies, it is often suggested that researchers

assume that men will either refuse to take part or be unavailable, so their inclusion is not even considered (Greif & Bailey 1990). Yet Phares (1996), in reviewing the literature on participation rates of mothers and fathers, concluded that there was no evidence that fathers were more difficult to recruit for research or less likely to participate (Haskett, Marziano & Dover 1996).

Theories about fathers extracted from the research (Ryan 2000) are often taken up by popular authors in an attempt to redress father absence. These theories are also included in projects such as books about 'how to be a good father' (Biddulph 1998; Robinson 2001). These popular books which promote fathering can be helpful. However, they often are not representative of all fathers. For example, books that give ideas to fathers about spending time with their children have merit, but often only to fathers who have flexible work arrangements, are not involved in 'fly in/fly-out' occupations such as those in the mining industry, and are not subject to a Family Court contact order. However, as Featherstone (2003) describes, these projects offer up both opportunities as well as constraints for effective practice. Featherstone (2003) concludes that the views held by workers about fathers as 'risks' and as 'resources' can be brought together in a dialogue which provides opportunities for moving beyond either/or thinking about fathers.

In a response to the many deficit theories surrounding absent fathers, few authors have taken up the challenge to unpack the construct of fathering from what is commonly referred to as a 'non-deficit perspective'. The idea of systematic theory building about fathers from a non-deficit perspective was originally developed by Hawkins and Dollahite (1997) and Dollahite (1998). These researchers conceptualise fathering as generative work as opposed to a socially constructed role.

## GENERATIVE FATHERING

The literature defines 'generative fathering' as paternal conduct that responds to the physical, emotional and cognitive needs of a child. This type of involved fathering implies that a father is significantly focused on nurturing his child and is actively seeking to improve the well being of his children. This is in contrast to popular ideas about fathers that view the role of fathering as merely conforming to what is stipulated by society and cultural norms (Smit 2005). According to Hawkins and Dollahite (1997), practicing generative fathering may also be crucial to a man's own sense of well being and personal growth. This is reflected in the ideals and lived experiences of fathers as they work towards contributing to the well being of their families.

The main concepts in the generative fathering framework are based on two core ideas. The first is that the human context creates needs in the next generation that fathers have an ethical responsibility to meet, and the second is that fathers and their children both benefit and develop in this

process of interaction (Hawkins & Dollahite 1997, p.4). In the framework on generative fathering, key concepts such as ethical work, stewardship work, developmental work and relationship work are integral.

Firstly, ethical work is the commitment to providing a secure, trustworthy environment, which is responsive to the needs of children. Secondly, stewardship work involves dedicated efforts in providing the resources for children and the family, and providing opportunities for children to develop and learn. Thirdly, developmental work involves caring effort to sustain healthy development and adaptability across time and circumstance. Finally, relationship work is the devotion to facilitating attachments and understandings between children and others; and to develop children's ability to understand the needs of others (Hawkins & Dollahite 1997, pp.27-29).

Reviewing the theories presented in the literature so far highlights that there are multiple discourses on the subject of fathers, and that these, in turn, have implications for how fathers and families are represented in child and family welfare practice. However, in reality, particularly in child welfare settings, many fathers are seen only in the context of their 'absence' from family life (Gillingham 2006; King 2005; O'Hagan 1997; Smit 2005).

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## ARE FATHERS REALLY ABSENT IN FAMILY AND CHILD WELFARE PRACTICE?

As has already been identified in the research literature, the representation of fathers in modern society is far from ideal. Furthermore, the tendency for child and family welfare practice to concentrate on mothers has been detailed and well documented (Christie 2006; Daniel & Taylor 1999; Dubowitz 2006; Farmer 1997; Fletcher, Silberberg & Baxter 2001; O'Hagan & Dillenberger 1995; Scourfield 2001b, 2003). A key theme that emerges from the literature is how services supporting families relate to male carers. This relationship is dependent on the varying attitudes, behaviours and discourses of social welfare professionals, as well as the concepts of 'fatherhood' in public policy discussion, and the legal framework and institutional

practices developed since the post-war decades of the 1950s and the 1960s (Fletcher & Willoughby 2002; Ghate, Shaw & Hazel 2000; Haskett, Marziano & Dover 1996).

This is particularly the case in child protection and family welfare settings where the abusers are fathers, as most workers would realise (Farmer & Owen 1998; Featherstone 2006; Milner 1993a, 1993b). It is here in the child protection system that fathers are most visible, yet even here it is not always clear how the system is managing them.

## FATHERS' ROLES IN VULNERABLE FAMILIES

Fathers can be most visible in child protection. However, as Farmer and Owen (1998) have highlighted, how the child protection system manages these fathers is not often clear. In a Department of Health study, Farmer and Owen (1998) found that child abuse committed by men tends to remain invisible unless there are efforts to bring it to public attention. They found that 60% of alleged perpetrators of sexual abuse leave the household compared to 14% of other alleged perpetrators. However, the focus of the intervention is primarily on advising and/or supporting the non-abusing mothers and constitutes a form of gender bias. The result is often that the father, the perpetrator of the abuse, moves into a 'new family' where the abuse is likely to re-occur (Dale et al. 1986; D'Cruz 2002; Dempster 1993; Dubowitz 2006; Farmer & Owen 1998; Pittman & Buckley 2006; Scourfield 2001a, 2001b). Peled (2000), using material from a number of countries, recently argued that, as professionals, we can no longer ignore the role of fathers' abusive behaviours. In this context, 'abusive men' are those who are physically violent to their partners. Furthermore, it is argued that holding such men accountable for their children's well being may, under certain conditions, contribute to the healthier emotional development of their children (Dubowitz 2006; Featherstone 2003).

In a recent Australian study on fathers involved with the Family Court, Brown (2003) takes up the issue of stereotyping fathers in the context of separation or divorce. While the two prevailing, but opposing, stereotypes of fathers' role in child abuse in this context were not confirmed, aspects of the stereotypes regarding fathers' views and mothers' views of each other were supported.

## TO ENGAGE OR NOT ENGAGE FATHERS?

In another study, Lloyd (2001), through conducting a series of in-depth interviews with ten already established fathers' projects in the UK, identifies that there is often a combination of factors that renders fathers invisible to child and family welfare practice. These include professionals' attitudes towards fathers which might be influenced by outdated notions of the father's role within the family; that

men are reluctant to look for information and assistance in their role as fathers; and, finally, that many people do not have a clear view of fathers' real roles and of their benefits to children. This view of men and fathers is a real issue that exists both in child and family welfare practice and also in the way professionals include men in their research.

Kosberg (2002) undertook a content analysis of the titles of articles, book reviews and publishers' advertising appearing since 1990 in two publications – *Social Work* (National Association of Social Workers) and the *Journal of Social Work Education* (Council of Social Work Education). From the hundreds of articles that were analysed, he found that some 25 were about heterosexual men, and even then they were mainly portrayed negatively, for example, as abusers or absent fathers. By comparison, there were hundreds of title references to females in social work literature (Kosberg 2002, p.6). Whilst the article by Kosberg (2002) may have some methodological problems such as the review being limited to two American journals, it raises further issues about how males are represented in the domain of child and family welfare. In concluding, Kosberg's (2000) article advocates for more in-depth awareness of the needs of heterosexual men in social work education and training.

According to O'Hagan (1997), two categories of avoidance can occur in working with males in child protection – psychological avoidance and physical avoidance. O'Hagan (1997) defines the term 'avoidance' as:

... making no effort to understand the significance of men in child protection work and/or the relationship which men have with mothers of children allegedly abused (O'Hagan 1997, p.28).

Whilst help-seeking by fathers is problematic for practitioners (Smith 2004), the theory of avoidance to which O'Hagan (1997) refers is increasingly becoming more relevant to any service in which children and families are involved; and this is not limited to statutory child protection. The difficulty for many professionals lies in the ability, firstly, to engage the father and, having done so, to keep him in the picture.

Avoidance of men by health and welfare services is not always a one-way process. The Australian Medical Association (2005), for instance, found that many men ignore their own health issues, often until it is too late. Furthermore, according to the Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health (BEACH), a lower percentage (76%) of Australian men attended their General Practitioner during a 12 month period compared to Australian women (87%) (Bayram et al. 2003). Barriers to men's help seeking behaviour can be further complicated by the traditional masculine view of their roles, as well as the ambivalence of mothers and by social welfare professionals towards them (Hawthorne 2005; Holland 1994).

The literature also suggests this notion of gender bias can lead to female social workers' inability to pay attention to, and become involved with, men's parental responsibility; and failure to see fathers as potential resources in child protective work rather than only as a risk (Kullberg 2005, p.374). As previously discussed, non-resident fathers regularly feature in the literature and also in media coverage about 'the system', which fathers maintain is often against them as they struggle to continue to be involved in their children's lives (Dudley 1996). Indeed, there are many active 'men's groups' that seek to oppose the threat of 'the system' against them, whether perceived or real (Dudley 1996; Funder & Smyth 1996; Howard 2003).

The literature identifies that men often express concern with the mixed messages about what fathering can mean and about what sorts of behaviour constitute good fathering (Featherstone 2006; Milner 2004; Pasley & Minton 1997). Many often have difficulty articulating the meaning of their paternal role (White 1989).

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## CONCLUSION

This paper has briefly examined some aspects of fathers in relation to their role and presence in welfare services. The literature highlights some of the main concerns emerging from recent research and scholarly studies, and calls for more analysis to explore the issues that face those working with fathers and father figures today. In addition, some of the issues that may need to be acknowledged by professionals working with fathers have been highlighted. The author's own research is attempting to focus more closely on the nature of the issues involved with father absence in child and family welfare.

In conclusion, the literature shows that, in spite of the progress in research on gender, fathers and family life, significant gaps still exist in practice. I have argued that while there is some discussion about how fathers can be included in child and family welfare services, the extent to which this is manifest in practice is less clear and requires further analysis. It is hoped that useful insights concerning work with fathers in child welfare will result and that we will move beyond doing well with just the mums and kids. ■

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