

***Dialogue with dads:
Fathers' perceptions of their roles***

Paper presented
by

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Introduction

We are in an era where what it means to be a father is being scrutinised, questioned, challenged and redefined. We constantly see reflections of this in the media. However, fathers and fathering are depicted in contradictory terms: as violent or as needing help; or as effective nurturers of children. The nature of this relationship between men and children is of interest to Queensland's Commission for Children and Young People.

Mindful of research that demonstrates the link between strong familial relationships and productive and fulfilling adult citizenship, the Commission has been carrying out a Focus on Fathering project aimed at raising awareness and informing public debate on contemporary fathering issues.

As part of this broader project, the Commission's Research unit designed a survey to explore the perceptions held by a group of fathers about fathering. This paper presents an analysis of the findings of this survey.

Research process

The study's rationale was that while much research, particularly in recent times, has discussed fathering issues, there is a significant gap in the literature in that little seeks the views of fathers themselves.

The Commission for Children and Young People therefore decided to conduct a survey similar to a New Zealand study on fathers, with a particular group of Queensland fathers. The goal was to gain greater awareness about their notions of fathering and their relationships with their children. At the end of the year 2000, the Commission invited fathers who were voluntarily attending men's support groups throughout Queensland to participate. These men had identified their own need for advice in relationship matters and had chosen to meet this need through a relevant counselling service.

These men are not meant to represent all Queensland fathers, and indeed this paper does not intend to suggest broader generalisations can be made about these survey findings, given the small number of respondents and the fact they were a specific group of fathers.

The participants

Of the 105 fathers who participated in the survey, 87% were biological fathers, 3% stepfathers, 7% adoptive fathers and 1% foster fathers. Of the remainder, 2% of men acted as fathers to the children of their defacto partner and 1% were in what they described as 'other' fathering roles.

While the context through which these men were located was specific, survey participants came from diverse socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds and geographic regions, and differed in age, educational qualification and types of employment as can be seen in Tables 1 – 4:

Table 1. Age groupings of participants

| 15 –19 | 20 –24 | 25-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55-64 | 65+ | Total |
|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-----|-------|
| 0 | 1 | 20 | 45 | 29 | 10 | 0 | 105 |

Table 2 Country of Origin

| Country of Birth | Number |
|-------------------------|---------------|
| Australia | 85 |
| New Zealand | 8 |
| United Kingdom | 5 |
| Belgium | 1 |
| China | 1 |
| Cyprus | 1 |
| Finland | 1 |
| Germany | 1 |
| Malta | 1 |
| USA | 1 |
| Total | 105 |

Table 3 Educational Qualifications

| Level Attained | Number |
|-----------------------|---------------|
| Less than Year 10 | 8 |
| Year 10 level | 21 |
| Year 12 level | 13 |
| Trade or Technical | 31 |
| Diploma or Degree | 25 |
| Other studies | 7 |
| Total | 105 |

Table 4 Employment Status

| Employment Status | Number |
|--------------------------|---------------|
| Tradesman, manual worker | 40 |
| Managerial, professional | 38 |
| Unemployed | 10 |
| Other | 9 |
| Home Duties | 4 |
| Retired from work | 2 |
| Full time student | 2 |
| Total | 105 |

The findings

Role responsibility

The survey asked participants who they thought should be responsible for a range of roles relating to raising children. The responses are summarised in Table 5.

Table 5 Role Responsibility*

| Parental responsibilities | Both mother and father | Primarily mother | Primarily father | Number |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|---------------|
| Discipline | 92 (88%) | 4 (4%) | 8 (8%) | 104 |
| Sport and recreation | 84 (81%) | 3 (3%) | 16 (16%) | 103 |
| Day-to-day care | 69 (67%) | 31 (30%) | 3 (3%) | 103 |
| Dealing with school behaviour | 90 (87%) | 8 (8%) | 5 (5%) | 103 |
| Dealing with behavioural problems | 97 (92%) | 3 (3%) | 5 (5%) | 105 |
| Dealing with health problems | 83 (79%) | 20 (19%) | 2 (2%) | 105 |
| Dealing with personal problems | 93 (89%) | 8 (8%) | 3 (3%) | 104 |
| Being involved with sons | 84 (81%) | 0 | 20 (19%) | 104 |
| Being involved with daughters | 85 (82%) | 15 (15%) | 3 (3%) | 103 |
| Showing affection | 98 (93%) | 5 (5%) | 2 (2%) | 105 |

(*Note, not all participants answered each of the questions)

Most respondents attributed these roles and responsibilities to both mother and father. However, as can be seen, in terms of day-to-day care, nearly a third of the respondents believed this to be the domain of the mother. A smaller group believed mothers should also be more involved than fathers in the areas of health and care of daughters. Not surprisingly, the complementary view was reflected in the care of sons - where it was perceived as either a joint responsibility or the sole responsibility of the father.

All fathers responded to the comment about 'Showing Affection', with 93% indicating that showing affection was a role and responsibility of both parents and no longer perceived as only part of the mother's nurturing care. Similarly, discipline and dealing with behavioural problems were seen as joint responsibilities.

These responses raise questions about the current role models for fathers and the extent to which these men's own experiences of being fathered continue to influence their perceptions of their roles.

Only 3% of fathers surveyed indicated that they were mainly responsible for daughters. However, 40% of the 25-34 year old group of participants nominated the mother as chief care-giver for daughters. Contrary to this view, none of the participants in the 55-64 year old age group nominated the mother.

Although the numbers surveyed were small, the results provide some indication that views on parental involvement with daughters changed for the different age cohorts.

This might suggest that daughters of the younger generation of fathers might be at risk developmentally and socially, if, as Amato (1998) claims, children's development is related to the quality of human, financial and social capital that parents provide. It also may support Amato's (1998) view that fathers' roles change throughout their children's lives, and older fathers, perhaps with older children, perceive their roles and responsibilities differently from the younger cohort of fathers. However,

considering the small numbers and the nature of the group surveyed, care must be taken in interpreting the results.

Fathers' open-ended comments regarding this issue highlighted the diverse investment these men offered their children, including emotional support and friendship, practical support, spiritual and philosophical support, and educational and financial support. Diversity was also obvious in the spread of roles and responsibilities that impacted on the amount of father-child involvement and subsequent social and human investment in children. For example, while some fathers did everything: "*I have been widowed for 14 months*", "*I'm a single father with full custody*", "*...washing, ironing, reading bedtime story, feeding and breakfast time, getting dressed, teeth brushing...*". Others did, as these men indicated, "*occasional babysitting*" or... "*only see her [daughter] on holidays*".

Some fathers described themselves as a "*friend to my child*", [having] "*a supportive listening role*", [being] a "*philosophical sage*", and engaged in "*peacekeeping between children and mother*".

Responses also showed that their paternal investment in children was multidimensional. For instance, some fathers engaged in "*repairing toys...*" while others in "*providing practical support for son who has recently married and is setting up house*" and had an "*economic function – what bills get paid when*".

Some fathers described their role as "*involving professional issues, higher education*", "*involvement with some aspects of children's education*" and, "*to help Michael find work*".

These fathers have identified an extensive variety of roles and responsibilities. It seems that patterns of activity by fathers with their children can be determined according to gender or types of engagement, but also according to the age, stage and developmental needs of the child.

Overall, the fathers in this survey presented a picture similar to one described by Jessor (1996, p. 78) where fathers were no longer only "expected to be the primary breadwinner". Most responses suggested that they expected, and indeed were motivated, to be actively involved fathers and very present in the upbringing of their children.

Barriers to 'good' fathering

Participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with each of the following statements:

- a. Men aren't formally taught to be fathers
- b. Men do not have the time to be good fathers due to work
- c. Men do not have time to be good fathers due to other activities
- d. Women are better at looking after children
- e. Looking after children is not manly
- f. Family Court decisions discriminate against men

They were then asked to provide additional comments to the open question: "Are there any other barriers to fathering that haven't been mentioned here?". Their responses, as seen in Table 6, indicate that a high proportion of participants supported the perception that there is a lack of services for men's education with regard to fathering, and that family courts discriminate against fathers. In other areas, a high percentage of survey participants disagreed and strongly disagreed with

perceptions that work commitments impede fathers' time spent with their children, and that looking after children is not manly.

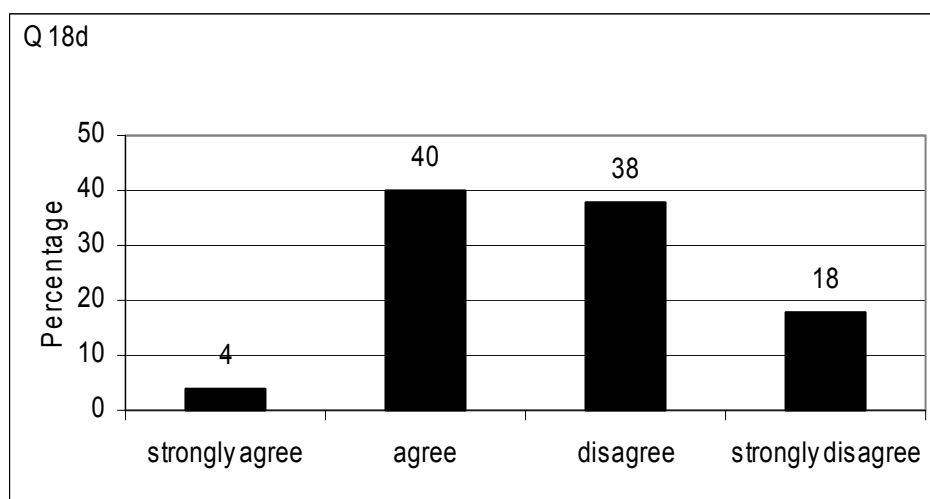
Table 6. Barriers to fathering*

| Barriers to fathering | Strongly Agree | Agree | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Total |
|---|----------------|----------|----------|-------------------|-------|
| Men are not formally taught to be fathers | 50 (48%) | 33 (31%) | 14 (13%) | 8 (8%) | 105 |
| Men do not have the time to be 'good' fathers due to work | 6 (6%) | 21 (21%) | 47 (46%) | 28 (27%) | 102 |
| Men do not have time to be 'good' fathers due to other activities | 0 | 9 (9%) | 58 (55%) | 38 (36%) | 105 |
| Women are better at looking after children | 4 (4%) | 41 (40%) | 39 (38%) | 19 (18%) | 103 |
| Looking after children is not manly | 2 (2%) | 1 (1%) | 47 (45%) | 54 (52%) | 104 |
| Family Court decisions discriminate against men | 45 (48%) | 39 (41%) | 7 (8%) | 4 (4%) | 95 |

(*Note, not all participants answered each of the questions)

The perception that mothers were better at looking after children was controversial, with 44% agreeing, compared to 56% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing (see Figure 1).

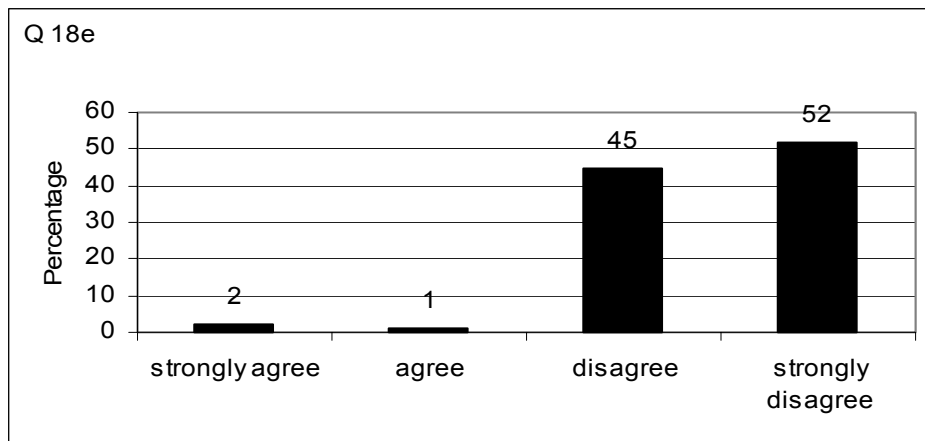
Figure 1. Women and caring for children – Women are better at looking after children.



It may be that some fathers (as one respondent stated) still believed the “*traditional role model that the father is the provider and the mother the carer*”.

In contrast, an overwhelming number of survey respondents (97%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that looking after children is not manly (see Figure 2).

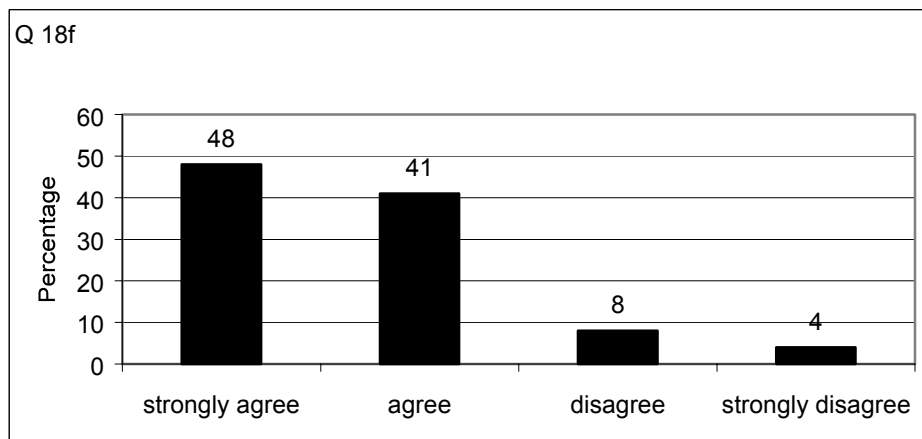
Figure 2. Caring for children and ‘manliness’ - *Looking after children is not manly.*



This finding is important, as it suggests that this group of fathers was unlikely to be deterred from looking after children due to fears that their masculinity would be questioned because of rigid, traditional views of what fathers should be like. Looking after children presents opportunities to develop a “closeness” that Amato (1994) describes as involving understanding, trust, respect, affection and fairness. This is particularly interesting given the range of fathers participating in the survey.

In the context of this survey, 88% of the respondents believed that Family Court decisions discriminate against men (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Family court decisions and fathers - *Family Court decisions discriminate against men.*



Dissatisfactions included court decisions on child support and access. One father stated that:

Child support system discriminates against men.

Another proposed that:

Fathers in separated marriages should have more rights to access and decisions on behalf of their children.

While for another father, the safety of the child was also important. His view was that:
Access following family break-up includes. safe supervised access for fathers who may be under court order. Restricting open access.

Others commented that there was a need to:

Change out-dated laws so father's have more legal rights.

And for:

Equal access, equal rights. Equal maintenance decisions to look after children.

In terms of identifying other barriers, some participants revealed that women's attitudes to parenting can be a problem:

Why do women think that it is their right to be the parent that knows what's good for the children?

Woman/mother often won't let me discipline.

Such statements suggest parenting tensions between partners which are in need of further exploration and study, and remind us that fatherhood is part of a complex web of relationships which includes more than just the relationship between father and child.

Certain suggestions indicate that frustration is based on not being considered and not having opportunities to contribute as a father. As one respondent states, people need to

Recognize men and really listen to what they say.

Tensions about responsibilities in child-rearing may also arise for fathers because of a deep-seated sense that women may be more influential in the lives of very young children. One participant suggested:

While I have answered questions indicating an equal role between mother and father, I recognise that often one partner's role may in fact be stronger because of individual capacity. Also, I believe a mother's role in caring for young and very young children to be one of deeper effect, though the father's role is essential, too.

There is a case to investigate these tensions, not least of all because unresolved tensions may be contributing factors to men reacting violently to the breakdown of relationships. In addition, unresolved tensions may prove costly to men, children, families and society in problematic relationships. As DeFrain (1999) and Wolcott (1999) suggest, healthy relationships are important for families and children within families, and such relationships are complex and multidimensional.

When asked to list other barriers to fathering, the surveyed fathers also cited

- *negative media publicity about men*
- *government policy*
- *community awareness/attitudes*
- *relationship issues*
- *lack of support*
- *employment/workplace*
- *financial.*

In the final section of the survey, participants were invited to contribute suggestions on how fathers might be better supported. A large number of these fathers (97%) agreed or strongly agreed that there is a need for fathering education - antenatal and postnatal and ongoing classes or workshops. This finding reinforced the participants' first noted barrier that, *'Men aren't formally taught to be fathers'*.

Greater access to men's support groups was also ranked highly as was a demand for increased literature about parenting directed at men, additional services and resources and fathering forums where men can learn from other men through discussion.

A high proportion of survey participants agreed or strongly agreed that there should be more publicity about good fathering, and that society should view fathers as equally responsible parents.

In addition respondents argued for:

Educating society that all fathers/males are not perpetrators of domestic violence or child abuse as television portrays.

Media articles offering ideas on how men can juggle responsibilities to be good fathers.

One respondent suggested educating children about fathers:

Expose school children to a variety of fathering styles.

An issue that may need further exploration is the notion of tensions between men and fathering and women and mothering in endeavouring to gain greater social recognition of the value of fathers. One participant claimed:

It is supposedly an equal opportunity society yet there are practically no support systems for men.

Others reinforced the sense of marginalisation of men by women, suggesting the need for:

Women to be educated on the importance of a good father in the family.

Some of the surveyed fathers indicated that they lived separately from their children and that court rulings, legislation and the relationship with their ex-spouse did not always enable fathers to be treated equally. As this father states:

If only I could have some control in my daughters upbringing. I would be a more satisfied father as well as my daughter would grow to be happier. But the way it is, the mother can move anywhere do virtually anything she likes (except become acholic or drug addict). My input/influence to my daughter is so minimal. IT SUXS.

Negative relationships when combined with legal situations and Family Court decisions can lead to frustration, disappointment and stress that, in turn, result in anger and powerlessness, as expressed above.

Summary

This survey has provided insights into the perceptions of these men about their roles and responsibilities, and the barriers they see to good fathering.

For some fathers, being in a position to invest in their children seemed difficult. The way they felt about being able to fulfil their perceived roles and responsibilities was affected where there was physical distance between where they were living, or a strained relationship with the child's mother.

Participants' mention of relationship issues is a reminder that fathering does not only concern the father and child. Mothers are part of the interactional and relationship equation. Some fathers in the survey mentioned their partners or former partners in negative ways. Some expressed dissatisfaction with personal role models of fathering, and 79% of survey fathers expressed an interest in knowing more about fathering.

So there is a demonstrated interest in fathers becoming more informed and educated about their roles, but also an explicit desire to play an active role in their children's wellbeing. Another reason to pursue education about fathering is to ensure that fathers understand their role and the influence they have on their children's development, especially in relation to being sensitive to and being able to evaluate a child's signals or needs and respond appropriately.

The fact that the fathers surveyed were involved in men's support groups suggests they were particularly concerned with their relationships, and possibly, fathering issues. They also identified a need for better knowledge about child development and fathering roles, as well as improved legislation, so they can be "good" fathers.

Overall, the survey has provided a range of insights into the perceptions and feelings of this group of fathers – and is of particular relevance to those who work with men seeking relationship counselling.

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