Fatherhood and fatherlessness

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Summary

A national debate about families and parenting is gathering momentum in Australia, with fathers and fathering at its centre. Fatherhood is changing as the social, economic and cultural conditions which sustained traditional meanings of fatherhood have shifted or been challenged, and in recent decades debates over fathers, mothers and family life have been a staple feature of the news. This debate has intensified in 2003, due to the Howard Government's consideration of the introduction of a rebuttable presumption of joint custody following family breakdown.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have reached a pivotal moment in terms of fathers' roles in families and communities. There is, at present, a significant opportunity for fathers to develop stronger, more intimate bonds with their children and to enhance their roles within their families. Indeed a growing number of fathers are embracing this situation. But the opportunity is in danger of being lost. The unhelpful agendas of some participants in fatherhood debates, and continuing economic and cultural obstacles to paternal involvement in child-rearing, threaten to limit men's positive involvement in parenting.

Fathers, and mothers, are important to the well-being of children, families and communities. Supporting fathers' positive involvement in their children's lives is a vital element in the maintenance of healthy families and communities. However, current proposals to change family law do not represent either an appropriate or effective means to enhance fathers' positive involvement in families.

A rebuttable presumption of joint custody would apply to the five per cent of divorcing couples with children whose cases are decided in the Family Court. The Family Court would assume that children will physically reside with both separated parents for equal periods, living one week with the mother and the next with the father for example, unless there were good reasons to do otherwise. Changing family law in this way will not enhance shared parenting. Instead, it has the potential to diminish the well-being of children. Furthermore, it is a far less effective way to encourage paternal involvement than other measures which address the real obstacles to active fathering both in couple families and after divorce or separation.

The best and worst of times

Fatherhood in Australia has been undergoing contradictory trends in recent years with growing numbers of fathers becoming actively involved with their children *and* growing numbers withdrawing or being excluded from paternal involvement.

Over the past century, fatherhood has been shaped by profound shifts in family structure, the circumstances and timing of fertility, norms regarding marriage, childbearing, sexuality and gender, and images of fathering. There has been an overall tendency for fatherhood to move out of the domain of stable marriage, with a decline in rates of marriage, an increase in non-marital cohabitation, an increase in divorce, and an increase in non-marital childbearing.

Of children aged 0 to 17 years, just under four-fifths live in two parent families. One in six children live in one-parent families, mostly headed by mothers. After separation and divorce, more than one-third of Australian children have no face-to-face contact with their fathers, and one in six children has contact only during the day.

Perceptions of fathering have shifted, and the image of the nurturant and involved father now exerts a powerful influence on popular perceptions. However, the culture of fatherhood has changed much faster than the conduct. Fathers share physical care of children equally in only 1-2 per cent of families, and are highly involved in day-to-day care in only 5-10 per cent of families. Many fathers aspire to do more fathering than they actually perform, yet they face important economic, policy and cultural constraints to their involvement.

Fatherlessness and divorce

Fathers' absence from families is said to cause a wide range of social problems, from crime and delinquency to poor school achievement. The research evidence shows that, in general, children raised in two-parent families do better on measures of educational achievement and psychological adjustment than children raised in single-parent families. But the research also shows that neither fatherlessness nor divorce by themselves determine children's well-being. The quality of parenting and the nature of parents' relationships with each other and their children are the critical factors in shaping the impact of father absence upon children.

One of the most significant influences on children's well-being, whether in dual-parent or single-parent families, is the quality of parenting and family relationships. Conflictual and unhappy relationships are damaging to children, in both 'intact' marriages and between separated parents. In situations where children do not live with their fathers, paternal contact is not by itself a good predictor of their well-being. Instead, the most consistent predictor is fathers' 'authoritative' parenting – that is, parental encouragement and support and non-coercive rule-setting and monitoring.

Selection effects also help explain negative outcomes among children who grow up without their fathers or after divorce. Some families are characterised by parental conflict, drug abuse, mental illness or violence. Couples in these circumstances are more likely to divorce, *and* their children are more likely to show behaviour problems, both before and after divorce. The association between father absence and poor outcomes among children is shaped by the changes which accompany divorce or separation, particularly economic insecurity and loss of access to social networks and communities. Poverty is both a cause and an effect of single parenthood, and post-divorce economic hardship is associated with negative outcomes among children. While children experience their parents' separation and divorce as traumatic, three-quarters of children show no resulting negative effects or long-term problems in adjustment.

Fathers' presence has diverse effects on children, and in some cases these are negative. Because of drug abuse, violence, crime, and other forms of anti-social behaviour, a minority of fathers are not in a position to engage in positive ways with their families or provide authoritative parenting. When fathers are abusive, dishonest, or irresponsible,

and reside with their children, their children suffer. Fathers dealing with such issues must be supported, but not at the expense of children or mothers.

Public claims that fatherlessness causes a host of social problems have sometimes been based on a confusion of correlation and causation, the selective use of research evidence, and even the repetition of fictional statistics. For example, the claim that 'Boys from a fatherless home are 14 times more likely to commit rape' received widespread coverage when it was released in the National Fatherhood Forum's '12 Point Plan' in June 2003, yet investigation of the origins of the statistic reveals that this 'fact' is both misleading and invented.

Fatherlessness and male role models

A second common argument in contemporary debates about fatherlessness is that children, and boys in particular, require male role models in the form of a biological father to ensure their healthy development. While there is no doubt that boys, and girls, benefit from the presence in their lives of positive and involved fathers, the research evidence again tells a more complicated story than that allowed by simplistic assumptions about male role models.

Positive and nurturant parenting by mothers *or* fathers (and ideally both) makes more difference to children's outcomes than the simple presence of a father *per se*. In terms of boys learning 'how to be men' from their fathers, the research finds that fathers' masculinity and other individual characteristics are far less important formatively than the warmth and closeness of their relationships with their sons. The characteristics of fathers as parents, rather than their characteristics as men, influence children's development, and there is no evidence that fathers' involvement is more beneficial for boys than it is for girls.

Boys (and girls) raised only by women, whether single mothers or lesbian couples, are no more likely than other children to adopt an unconventional gender identity or homosexual sexual orientation. Mothers have long been blamed for outcomes among children, from schizophrenia in the 1950s to boys' emasculation in the 1990s, but mother-blaming is both inaccurate and unhelpful.

Fathers' involvement in families is highly desirable. When fathers are actively involved, they expand the practical, emotional and social resources available for parenting. With two parents rather than one, children are likely to receive more emotional support, supervision, and to have greater access to wider networks and material resources. Fathers' involvement is also important because of the distinctive, but not unique, contribution to parenting made by male parents. Mothers and fathers typically interact with children in different, although overlapping, ways. Gender differences in parenting can be positive, exposing children to the richness and complexity of gender diversity. But stereotypes of mothering and fathering also constrain women's and men's parenting. Fathers and mothers are equally capable of parenting: highly involved fathers become sensitive to, and in tune with, their children, just as involved mothers do.

Fathering politics

Fatherhood is now very much on the mainstream political agenda. Important shifts in men's gender roles, and growing policy attention to men's issues, are generating new possibilities for men's parenting. However, some of the most vocal advocates for fathers seem to wish to turn back the clock, reasserting men's traditional paternal authority rather than fostering shared and positive parenting.

There have been profound shifts in gender relations in every sphere of society, from the bedroom to the boardroom. Many men are flourishing because of the opening up of gender roles, enjoying egalitarian relations with women and being involved fathers to their new babies and children. Yet other men are struggling. Separation and divorce represent key times of crisis, and one response among men to personal crises or wider changes in gender relations is 'fathers' rights'.

Fathers' rights groups typically represent an anti-feminist backlash, focused on men as victims of injustice in family law, education, health, and other realms. Such groups overlap with 'men's rights' groups, and they have worked in alliance with conservative Christian organisations to lobby for changes in child custody and child support policies. Fathers' rights groups have achieved significant changes in both the practice and popular perceptions of family law over the last eight years. Yet there has been no increase in shared parenting among separated partners. The widespread assumption that children must have contact with both their parents has meant in practice that children's best interests at times have been compromised through heightened exposure to violence and parental conflict.

A rebuttable presumption of joint custody following family breakdown, a long-standing goal of fathers' rights groups in Australia, is now on the policy agenda. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs is conducting an inquiry into 'child custody' arrangements in the event of family separation, including the question of 'whether there should be a presumption that children will spend equal time with each parent and, if so, in what circumstances such a presumption could be rebutted'. The proposed presumption of joint residence will, ostensibly, enhance shared parenting of children after divorce and separation, a goal with which few could argue. However, in practice it is likely that the changes will do little to encourage shared parenting. There are at least five problems with the presumption.

First, the proposed rebuttable presumption of joint custody is unnecessary: there are no formal legal obstacles to parents sharing the care of children after separation and divorce. Family law already endorses the principle of shared parenting, stressing that children have the right to know and be cared for by both their parents and that parents are jointly responsible for their children. Separating parents can make arrangements for shared residence, and small numbers do.

Second, the parents to whom this legal change would apply are those least able to set up shared parenting. The small minority of separating parents who reach the courtroom are often experiencing the most intractable and bitter conflicts, face issues of violence and abuse, and are the least likely to be in a position to share residence and parenting of their children.

Third, one size does not fit all. The best interests of the child, a key principle in family law, would be compromised by *any* presumption of a specific type of custody arrangement. The proposed law would undermine the ability and flexibility families need in order to develop parenting arrangements which best fit their children.

Fourth, the introduction of a presumption of joint custody is likely to increase the use of litigation to rebut the presumption, stretching the resources of the Courts and government.

Finally, a legal presumption of joint custody is likely to expose women, children and men to higher levels of violence. This prospect is particularly troubling given that there are already cases where the practice of family law privileges parental contact with children over children's safety.

While there is positive potential in contemporary discussions of fatherlessness, it is currently a long way from being realised. Promoting fathers' positive involvement with children is a laudable goal. But it will not be achieved by ill-considered changes in family law. If a rebuttable presumption of joint custody is neither an appropriate nor an effective way to effect this goal, what is?

Promoting the positive role of fathers

The most important obstacle to fathers' parenting after separation is the absence of fathers' parenting *before* separation. Workplace relations, policy barriers, practical disincentives and social obstacles limit men's involvement in parenting, both before and after separation and divorce.

To promote fathers' involvements with their children, five strategies are vital.

First, establishing father-friendly (parent-friendly) workplace practices and cultures will make the most difference to men's opportunities for fathering. Fathers perceive the major barrier to their involvement in parenting to be their involvement in paid work, and their patterns of working make it difficult to be involved parents. In a labour market characterised by gender inequality, many couples make pragmatic decisions that the mother will work part-time or take time off while the father will continue to do paid work. Two institutional strategies have the potential to make a significant difference to men's parenting opportunities. Employers, with governmental support, must create more flexible workplaces free of penalties for involved parents of either sex, and must promote equal economic opportunities for women.

The second strategy is to remove policy barriers to shared care. Family policy in Australia currently discourages shared care of children, both in couple families and between separated parents, by rewarding a homemaker/breadwinner split in couple families and penalising single-parent families which share care of the child with the other parent.

The third strategy is to support fathers through family and parenting services. Family-related services, including antenatal and postnatal services, community-based services for families with children, and early childhood education services, have an important

role to play in fostering fathers' involvement in families. Family-related services require dedicated funding and policy support for this goal. In addition, the activities, atmosphere and staffing of family-related agencies must be father-friendly, and family-related services should develop forms of service delivery which are effective in engaging fathers.

The fourth strategy addresses the cultural obstacles to paternal involvement. Common cultural norms in Australian society, including a culture of work and materialism, the absence of a culture of fatherhood, a culture of maternalism, and suspicion towards fathers, are unsupportive of men as parents. At the same time, many men have managed, despite these obstacles, to create and sustain an experience of involved fathering.

The final strategy in this five-point plan is the most general yet it will have practical impacts on men's involvement in parenting. Fostering fathers' active involvement with children requires cultural change in gender norms, particularly those norms which define manhood as non-nurturant and unemotional and which stifle boys' and men's parenting and relationship skills and commitments.

Men's positive involvement with children will also be fostered by improving men's relations with women. Non-conflictual and cooperative relationships between parents, whether in relationships or separated, are the bedrock of their positive involvements with children. When men share equally in the care of children with women, their marriages and relationships also improve. Thus both men and women benefit from men's involvement in parenting.

Fathers in Australia face a real moment of opportunity. Shifting social and economic conditions have both intensified the obstacles to, and created new possibilities for, involved fathering. In order to capitalise on this opportunity, however, both the Government and the community must adopt a much more sophisticated approach to analysing the causes and consequences of fatherlessness. Australian fathers need policies that help them connect with their children at all stages of life, not simplistic laws that fail to address the real obstacles to involved fathering.
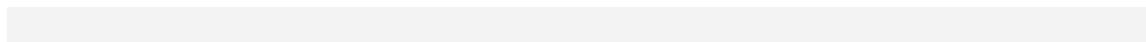
Introduction

A national debate about families and parenting is gathering momentum in Australia, with fathers and fathering at its centre. Fatherhood is changing as the social, economic and cultural conditions which sustained traditional meanings of fatherhood have shifted or been challenged (Williams 1998, p. 63). Debates over fathers, mothers and family life have been a staple feature of the news over the past three decades, prompted by profound changes in both the organisation of families and interpersonal life and the social norms and values which give these meaning. Yet there are also particular moments of heightened debate, and now is one such moment.

The Howard Government is currently considering the introduction of a rebuttable presumption of joint custody following family breakdown. This would mean that physical residence of children would be awarded to mothers and fathers on a half-half basis, with children living one week with the mother and the next with the father for example, unless there were good reasons to do otherwise. Currently, children's residence is determined primarily on the basis of the best interests of the child. A Committee of the House of Representatives is investigating the proposal and will report to the Parliament in December 2003.[1]

There is significant interest in the proposal to change family law. Over 1100 submissions were lodged with the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs in early August 2003, and volatile exchanges over child custody, fatherhood and families are frequent in the national papers.

We are at a pivotal moment in terms of fathers' roles in families and communities. There is, at present, a significant opportunity for fathers to develop stronger and more intimate bonds with their children and to enhance their roles within their families. Indeed growing numbers of fathers are embracing this situation. Yet, as this paper will show, the opportunity is in danger of being thwarted by the unhelpful agendas of some participants in fatherhood debates and by continuing economic and cultural obstacles to paternal involvement in child-rearing.

This discussion paper outlines the moment of opportunity available to fathers. It takes as given the fact that fathers and mothers are important to the well-being of children, families and communities. It assumes that supporting fathers' positive involvement in their children's lives is a vital element in the maintenance of healthy families and communities.

The paper argues that current proposals to change family law do not represent either appropriate or effective means to enhance fathers' positive involvement in families. A rebuttable presumption of joint custody will not enhance shared parenting; instead it has

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[1] On 25 June 2003 the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, the Hon Larry Anthony MP, and the Attorney-General, the Hon Daryl Williams AM QC MP, asked the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs to commence the inquiry, titled the 'Inquiry into child custody arrangements in the event of family separation'. See http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/fca/childcustody/index.htm.

the potential to diminish the well-being of children and is a far less effective way to encourage paternal involvement than other measures which address the real obstacles to active fathering both in couple families and after divorce or separation.

This paper begins by observing that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, fatherhood in Australia is undergoing both the best of times and the worst of times. On the one hand, there are growing numbers of men taking an active role in parenting, and on the other there are growing numbers who are withdrawing or being pushed away from paternal involvement. The contexts, practice and imagery of fatherhood have all changed in significant ways in recent decades.

Popular discussions of, and political agendas for, fathering, families and family law are often based on assumptions about fathering which are not supported by the research evidence. This paper offers an assessment of two prominent assumptions that are frequently made without qualification, namely that father absence in families, or fatherlessness, has a wide range of disastrous social consequences and that what boys need most is the presence of a male role model in the form of a biological father. The paper stresses that fathers, like mothers, are beneficial to families and to children because of the positive parenting they can provide.

The paper then outlines the policy context for debates over fatherhood and families. It locates these debates within the wider shifts in gender relations that have destabilised traditional ideas of manhood and generated both challenges and opportunities for men. One response to such shifts is the emergence of fathers' rights groups which have been instrumental in changing the practice and perception of family law. Yet the agendas of fathers' rights groups are sometimes misinformed and can be harmful to both women and men.

The paper concludes by offering a five-point strategy with which to promote the positive role of fathers. It argues that the proposed changes to family law will not foster better parenting by men. Instead a genuine program for encouraging fathers' involvement in their children's lives must address the policy barriers, practical disincentives and social obstacles to fathering.

2. Fatherhood: The best and worst of times

Fatherhood in Australia has been undergoing contradictory trends in recent years with growing numbers of fathers becoming actively involved with their children *and* growing numbers withdrawing or being excluded from paternal involvement. The last three decades have witnessed important challenges to the economic, legal, moral and biological conditions of fatherhood and the forms of masculinity with which they are interrelated (Williams 1998, p. 67). Before outlining such trends, however, it is first necessary to define fathers and fatherhood.

2.1 Defining fatherhood

As commonly understood, a father is any man who is the biological father of a child and fatherhood simply refers to the state of being a father. Yet recent shifts in family formation and structure have complicated these simple assumptions. There is a growing diversity of relationships between adult men and children. More men are living separately from their biological children, fathering outside of marriage, having parenting relationships with children who are not biologically theirs, being custodial single fathers (Sullivan 2001, p. 47), and parenting children in gay male relationships.[2]

It is useful, therefore, to distinguish between *biological* fatherhood and *social* fatherhood. Most obviously, a man may have sexual intercourse with a woman which leads to conception, pregnancy and birth, and yet have no relationship with the child who is born. While he is a biological father, he is not a social father. Biological fatherhood in the vast majority of cases begins with male-female sexual intercourse leading to conception, but it may also begin through the use of assisted reproductive technologies such as in vitro fertilization, artificial insemination and embryo transfer. Sperm donors include another cluster of men who are biological but not social fathers. The distinction between biological and social fatherhood is enshrined in law, for example in legislation governing artificial insemination and adoption (Fletcher and Willoughby 2002, pp. 13-14).

Social fatherhood refers to men's actual relationships, involvements and activities with respect to children, whether with children who are biologically 'theirs' or with children who are socially 'theirs' because of an intimate relationship with the child's mother (as step-fathers) or primary responsibility for parenting the child (as adoptive, gay or single fathers). As Bachrach and Sonenstein (1998, p. 5) state, 'Social fatherhood, which is often referred to as *fathering,* includes all the child rearing roles, activities, duties, and responsibilities that fathers are expected to perform and fulfil.' Just as biological fatherhood does not always lead to social fatherhood, social fatherhood is not always based on biological fatherhood. Fertility is the most common pathway through which men can become social fathers, but not the only one (Bachrach and Sonenstein 1998, p. 5). Men may also become social (and non-biological) fathers through unions with

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[2] See for example, 'Father figures: gay men go overseas for surrogate babies,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 August 2003.

women who are mothers, adoption, or taking on father-like roles for children of relatives or friends (Bachrach and Sonenstein 1998, p. 5).

Men's biological fatherhood is an unchanging and immutable fact, 'a status that is fixed regardless of how paternal responsibilities are defined or carried out, and revocable only through death of the child' (Bachrach and Sonenstein 1998, p. 5). Social fatherhood, in contrast, changes over the course of a man's life and is shaped by his relationships and community.

Both biological and social fatherhood take shape and meaning only in particular social contexts. A series of shifting social, cultural and economic conditions informs the contemporary re-working of fathering images and fathering practice. As Williams (1998, pp. 66-67) summarises:

> [T]he decline of the industrial base and increasing male unemployment have undermined the capacity of many men to act as breadwinners; men's economic power has also, to some extent, been dented by their wives' earning power; claims for women's autonomy, especially through lone motherhood, cohabitation, separation, divorce and same-sex relationships and parenting, along with moves towards the democratization of child-parent relations have challenged men's assumptions about their natural authority over women and children. The naming of domestic violence and child sexual abuse has also overshadowed the representation of fathers as protectors. Finally, reproductive technologies have made possible the separation of sexuality not only from reproduction, but also from paternity (although to date they have often been used to reinforce paternity).

2.2 Shifts in the images and practices of fathering

The following discussion outlines relevant changes in the contexts and practices of fathering, including changes in family structure, the circumstances and timing of fertility, norms regarding marriage, childbearing, sexuality and gender, and in images of fathering.

Shifts in family structure and patterns of fertility

Shifts in both family structure and the circumstances and timing of fertility over the course of the twentieth century have transformed the circumstances of fathering. Aspects of these shifts have been well documented, see for example Kinnear (2002). In general, there has been in Western countries including Australia, an overall tendency for fatherhood to move out of the domain of stable marriage (Bachrach and Sonenstein 1998, pp. 1-2). Key changes in the formation and dissolution of unions (stable sexual relationships, whether married or cohabiting) include a decline in marriage, an increase in non-marital cohabitation, and an increase in divorce.

In Australia rates of marriage among men were at their lowest at the beginning of the 1900s, with 76.3 per cent of men (and 90.2 per cent of women) aged 45-49 years having ever married. The proportions of men and women who had married climbed through to the mid-1980s and then fell, with 89.1 per cent of men and 92.8 per cent of women in

2000 having ever married (Weston *et al.* 2001, pp. 15-16). Overall rates of marriage are declining; in 2001 there were 103,100 marriages registered in Australia, the lowest number recorded since 1978 (ABS 2002). The age profile of marriage has changed over the last century. In the 1990s the timing of first marriage became more diverse, with a 'flatter' age distribution than in earlier periods. In 2001, the median age at first marriage for men was 29 years, and for women 27 years. Rates of remarriage increased steadily throughout most of the last century, levelling out more recently. About one-third of marriages in 2000 involved remarriage for one or both partners (Weston *et al.* 2001, p. 20).

The proportion of heterosexual couples who live in unmarried cohabitation has risen, from less than one per cent in 1971 to ten per cent in 1996, although cohabitation was also common, for example, among the working classes during the convict era. The great majority of heterosexual couples who live together are married, but cohabitation is now the typical pathway to marriage. In 2000, 71 per cent of people who married had been cohabiting (Weston *et al.* 2001, pp. 15-16).

There were 55,300 divorces granted in Australia in 2001. Seventeen per cent of divorcing couples had divorced within the first five years of marriage, and a further 26 per cent had divorced in the following five-year period (ABS 2002). Depending on the calculation method used, either 32 or 46 per cent of marriages will end in divorce. The lower figure is based on current levels of marriage, divorce, remarriage, widowing and mortality, while the higher figure is based on past levels of first marriages and remarriages (Weston *et al.* 2001, p. 20). In 2000, 53 per cent of divorces involved children, a drop from 61 per cent in 1980, although the total number of children involved increased slightly from 46,800 in 1980 to 49,600 in 2000.

During the second half of the twentieth century the rate of premarital sex increased, the proportion of sexually active teenagers rose, and the interval between the initiation of sexual activity and marriage lengthened (Bachrach and Sonenstein 1998, p. 2). Unmarried childbearing has risen, sustained by rising rates of non-marital pregnancy and declining proportions of premaritally pregnant couples opting for marriage (Bachrach and Sonenstein 1998, p. 2). Like many Western countries, Australia has seen a fall in total fertility rates (the number of babies a woman can expect to have in her lifetime). Over the last century, fertility rates were higher in the early 1900s (at close to four babies per woman), fell to 2.1 during the Great Depression, increased in the 1940s and 50s, and climbed to 3.5 babies per woman in 1961. But by 1975, fertility rates had fallen below the replacement level of 2.1 babies per woman, reaching their lowest level of under 1.8 babies per woman in 1999 and 2000 (Weston *et al.* 2001, pp. 16-17).

Men are becoming fathers at older ages. The median age of men who fathered a child registered in 2001 was 32 years, increasing from 30 years in 1981 (ABS 2003). Women too are having their first children at progressively older ages, are having fewer children in total, and about 20 per cent of women now in their early child-bearing years will never have children despite only 6-7 per cent actually intending to remain childless (Weston *et al.* 2001, pp. 18). Twenty-four per cent of men aged 18 to 54 will never have

children, compared to 13 per cent of women.[3] While the total fertility rate has declined, the proportions of children born outside marriage have increased, especially in the last two decades, reaching 29 per cent in 1999 and 2000 (Weston *et al.* 2001, pp. 17-18).

Such transformations have had a profound impact on the circumstances of fathering. Writing in the American context, Bachrach and Sonenstein (1998, p. 2) note a decline in the proportion of family groups with children that include two parents, an increased number of female-headed households, and an increase in the proportion of children in single-parent families living with a never-married parent. They conclude that 'Declines in marriage, increased marital instability, and increased out-of-wedlock childbearing have acted as demographic wedges, tending toward the separation of men from their children' (Bachrach and Sonenstein 1998, p. 2).

Such shifts have also changed the living arrangements in which children grow up and the settings in which they are nurtured. For example, between 1986 and 1996 in Australia, the proportion of children under 18 in one-parent families rose from 11 per cent to 16 per cent. There was a doubling in the numbers of children whose parents were in a de facto relationship, from three per cent to six per cent (ABS 1999b, p. 21). (See Section 3.1 for further discussion of children's living arrangements.) Families consisting of couples with dependent children have been in the minority since the mid-1970s, and represented 41 per cent of family households in 1996.[4] Partly reflecting the ageing of the population, the number of households with children has decreased, from 44 per cent in 1976 to 36 per cent in 1997. By 2016, couple households without children are projected to become more prevalent than those with children (Weston *et al.* 2001, p. 21).

Other social developments are also significant for family structures and processes. Sanson and Lewis (2001, p. 4) and Weston *et al.* (2001) note a range of shifts which affected family structure in the late twentieth century in Australia, including an increase in the labour force participation of mothers, the increased dependency of children on their parents, increased unemployment and an ageing population.

Family breakdown and family decline?

For some conservative elements, shifts such as those outlined above suggest 'family breakdown' and 'family decline', and they envision a need for the restoration of a nuclear family structure imagined as once universal. However, as Kinnear points out:

> [T]here is in fact no stable, ideal traditional family to which we can return…
> not only was the family model that conservatives wish to restore the product
> of a particular social and economic era that has passed, but it is also an

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[3] 'Dear old Dad isn't as young as he used to be,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 January 2003; 'A case of the reluctant male,' Editorial, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 January 2003.

[4] Here the ABS defines 'families' as 'two or more persons, one of whom is at least 15 years of age, who are related by blood, marriage (registered or de facto), adoption, step or fostering, and who are usually resident in the same household' (Weston *et al.* 2001, p. 21).

> idealised view of the past which minimises or ignores the internal strains
> that have always existed inside family life (Kinnear 2002, pp. 14-15).

In fact the traditional family, with a household comprised of a male breadwinner, female homemaker and children was dominant for a brief historical period, during the 1950s in Western countries. The most consistent data on family change commences in the 1950s with a result that the nuclear family has become a benchmark. But this contributes to an exaggerated and misleading picture of recent decline and instability. For example, due to increased life expectancy, contemporary marriages and couples stay together longer than their counterparts in nineteenth century Australia and the US (Kinnear 2002, pp. 15-17).

Idealisations of the 1950s nuclear family often neglect the inequalities and tensions which characterised those families. These included the economic exploitation and limited life choices of women, authoritarian and harsh notions of parenting, and domestic violence and sexual abuse (Kinnear 2002, pp. 19-21).

Cultural shifts in norms and attitudes

There have also been changes in values and attitudes regarding marriage, sex, childbearing and gender relations. These include a decline in normative proscriptions against premarital sex, non-marital cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbearing; the establishment of widespread support for contraception; and widespread approval of abortion (Bachrach and Sonenstein 1998, p. 2; Weston *et al.* 2001, p. 16). In Australia, a representative national survey of 20,000 people aged 16 – 59 years found that more than three quarters of respondents agree that 'sex before marriage is acceptable', fewer than one in five agree that 'abortion is always wrong', and only one-quarter agree that 'sex between two adult women [or two adult men] is always wrong' (Rissel *et al.* 2003, pp. 120-121)

Shifts in images of fathering

Images of fathering and definitions of the 'good father' have changed significantly over time. Taking a long view, Pleck (1984) argues that over the last two centuries in North America there has been a progression through four dominant motifs of what defines fatherhood. There is the *moral* father, the father as responsible for moral oversight and moral teaching. There is the *breadwinner*, a motif which arrived with industrialisation. There is the *gender-role model*, the father as a role model particularly for his sons. And more recently we have seen the emergence of the motif of the *nurturant* father (Pleck 1984, cited in Lamb 1995, pp. 20-21).

Images of the nurturant or 'new' father, the father as an active, nurturing and caretaking parent, began to appear in the mid to late 1970s in the US (Lamb 1995, p. 21; Coltrane and Parke 1998, pp. 7-8), and Australia is likely to show similar trends. The image of the new father, the man highly involved with his children and sharing the parenting with his female partner, now exerts a powerful influence on popular perceptions. Many people believe that fathers are now more involved with their children and with domestic

work,[5] and images of men with children have blossomed in popular culture. Yet, as discussed in more detail below, while the culture of fatherhood has changed radically, the conduct has not, and traditional divisions of labour often persist in both parenting and domestic work.

Alongside images of the new father in Western countries, one also finds images of absent and irresponsible fathers. Such images are particularly common in the American media reports and rhetoric of 'deadbeat dads' who fail to pay child support. This is a racialised and class-based rhetoric in that it refers particularly to black and poor fathers and complements a widespread demonisation of black, poor single mothers (Williams 1998, p. 75). While far less pervasive, similar stories of absent and neglectful fathers appear in the Australian press as well.[6]

A related discourse of absent fathers is evident especially in mythopoetic men's groups and such works as Robert Bly's *Iron John* (1990). The experience of father absence and father hunger is seen as critical in explaining the pain, confusion and anger felt by modern men. Men have been robbed of an ancient father-son bond, particularly by the industrial revolution, and there is no initiation for boys into the world of adult men. The mythopoetic solution is to develop rites and rituals that allow men to rage at and grieve for their absent fathers, be initiated into manhood and find male mentors and leaders. In the US in particular, further mobilisations among men in the name of the father include the Christian Promise Keepers movement, the 1995 African-American Million Man March and related activities (Stacey 1998, p. 52).

Men in different situations may develop diverse interpretations of fathering. For example, UK research finds that young, unemployed fathers who are neither economic providers for, nor living with, their children emphasise 'being there for their children' in other ways (Featherstone 2003, p. 241). And, of course, fathers themselves are diverse in their relations and practices with children. For example, in an American study of 69 intact middle-class white families raising their infant first-born male child, two-thirds of fathers could be described either as 'disciplinarians', engaged mainly in controlling and socialising, or 'disengaged', remaining aloof. But other fathers were 'caretakers', involved mainly in basic care activities, or 'playmates/teachers', spending more time engaged in play and demonstrating things to the child (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 4).

Shifts and stabilities in fathering practice

The culture of fatherhood has changed much faster than the conduct. While there has been a noticeable shift in our images and ideas about fatherhood and the role of men in

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[5] See for example, 'New generation of men who share the load,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 July 2002; 'Home alone with Mr Mum,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 October 2002.

[6] See for example: 'Warning to serial dad – one more child and it's jail,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 July 2001; 'Dozens held for child support debts in blitz on runaway dads,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 20 August 2002; 'Parents ordered to pay up or stay put,' *The Age*, 25 August 2003; 'Many absent fathers pay only $5 maintenance,' The *Age*, 19 September 2003; 'When it comes to child access, many men just don't want to know,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 September 2003; 'Runaway parents face chase from children,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18-19 October 2003.

families, this has not been matched by a significant shift in the amount of men's child care and domestic work. Women continue to have the overwhelming responsibility for child care and domestic work (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 3). While the surge in the workforce participation of married women has placed pressure on husbands to play a greater role in non-financial aspects of homemaking, fathers' overall involvement in domestic tasks has changed little. Indeed, employed mothers themselves are doing less family work, facilitated by non-parental child care, labour-saving devices, pre-prepared meals and cleaning services (Weston *et al.* 2002, pp. 18-19).

Fathers share physical care of children equally in only 1-2 per cent of families, and are highly involved in day-to-day care in only 5-10 per cent of families (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 3). In fact, fathers of young children work a greater number of hours than other employed men across all age groups (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 3). Among parents with dependent children, fathers are more likely than mothers to be in the labour force, less likely to work part-time when in the labour force, and far less likely to give a family reason for working part-time. Women perform about 90 per cent of child care tasks and 70 per cent of all family work (measured in terms of time spent). In dual earner families, mothers are more likely than fathers to adjust their jobs and personal lives to accommodate family commitments, less likely to work overtime, and more likely to take time off work to attend to children's needs (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 3).

The time men spend on domestic work is still markedly less than women spend. Married women spend an average of one hour and 47 minutes per day more on domestic work as a main activity than their husbands (ABS 1999a). This pattern remains the same even if we compare heterosexual couples where the man and woman do similar amounts of paid work. The difference is smaller than among heterosexual couples in general, but women still average one hour and 16 minutes more than their partners (ABS 1999a).

The ideal of men and women sharing parenting is widely accepted in Australia (Craig 2003, p. 1), yet there are profound differences in the ways in which men and women spend time with children. Craig's analysis of ABS time use data for couple-headed families with at least one child under 12 shows this clearly. First, fathers spend far less time than mothers engaged in child care or being with children: one hour a day doing child care as a primary activity compared to women's three hours a day, and two hours a day in child care as a main or simultaneous activity compared to women's over six hours a day. When fathers care for children as a main activity, they spend twice as much time as mothers talking or playing with children but a greater proportion of their leisure time involves no simultaneous child care. Men are much more likely than women to do child care or be around children with their spouse present. Fathers spend under one-fifth of their time while mothers spend nearly half their time with children alone, meaning that fathers are more often helping out with child care than taking responsibility for it (Craig 2003).

Figure 1 Comparison of male and female time commitment to children
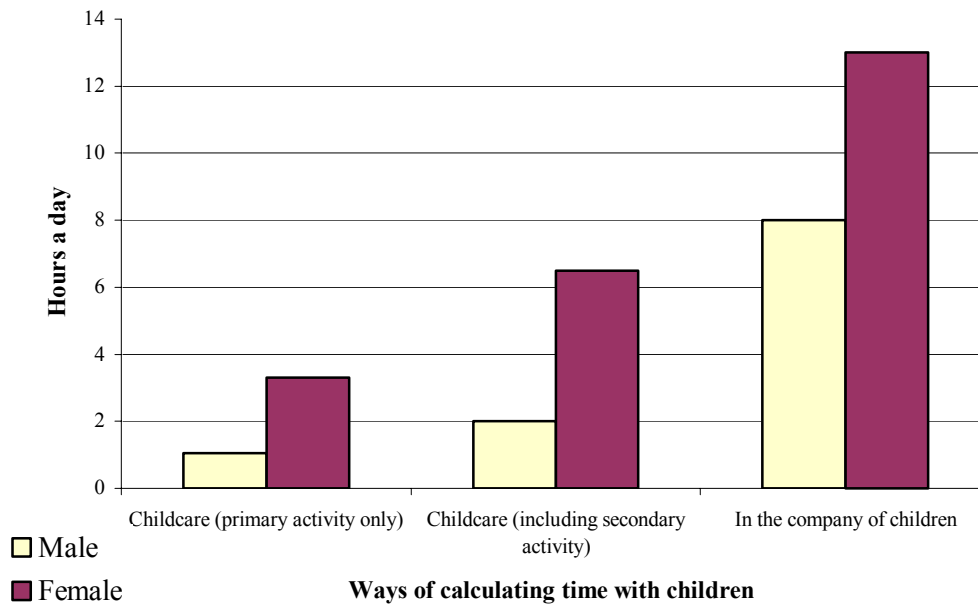
Adapted from Craig 2003, p.3.

Nevertheless, the current generation of fathers 'both expect to be, and are more involved than previous generations of fathers' (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 4). There may, however, be a gap between the expectations and the experience of fathering. Fathers aspire to do more fathering than they actually perform and the resulting gap increases as the size of their families grows: 'Fathers' performance on infant care-taking tasks lagged behind expectations of both the fathers themselves and the mothers and this lag increased with multiple fathering experience' (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 8)

2.3 The best and worst of times?

Given these shifts, some have described the state of contemporary fatherhood as 'both better than ever and worse than ever' (Doherty 1997, p. 218). There is a rise in the numbers of fathers interested in playing an active role *and* a rise in those who are disengaging or being pushed away from paternal responsibilities (Emig and Greene 1998, p. 4).

On the one hand, fatherhood is enjoying the best of times among the families with positive parental relationships and stable, committed father-child bonds and among the growing number of post-divorce families with custodial fathers or positive involvement by non-custodial fathers. Being an involved parent is increasingly important to Australian fathers (Hand and Lewis 2002, p. 26). For example, a recent Australian study of 27 fathers, 80 per cent from couple families, found that the fathers emphasised the importance of spending time with their children both for the child's benefit and their own enjoyment, and were strongly motivated to be involved in their children's lives (Hand and Lewis 2002, p. 29). The results of two national surveys conducted in 1983 and 1999 show that fathers in the later survey placed less emphasis on their role as

breadwinners and more emphasis on their role as providers of emotional support to their children than had fathers in the earlier survey (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 32-33).

On the other hand, fatherhood is undergoing the worst of times. Doherty's (1997, p. 221) American summary is also appropriate for Australia: 'more children do not live with their fathers, relate to their fathers on a regular basis, or enjoy the economic support of their fathers.' In Australia in 1996, there were 659,100 children aged 0 to 17 living with their mother in a one-parent family.[7] Children living with a lone mother comprised 14.4 per cent of all children in 1996, up from 9.8 per cent in 1986. In most cases non-resident fathers are not involved on a sustained basis either psychologically or socially with the child. Following divorce, most non-custodial fathers move into a distant relationship with their children, their involvement generally dropping off with time after separation (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 11). Father-child relationships tend to fare worse after divorce than mother-child relationships and relationships between parents and children of the other sex are more affected than relationships between parents and children of the same sex (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 11-12). At the same time, at least in the US, recent cohorts of non-resident fathers maintain more frequent contact with their children than earlier cohorts, and fathers are increasingly likely to seek and gain shared residence of children (Amato and Gilbreth 1999, p. 560).

In addition, large numbers of non-resident fathers do not provide adequate economic support for their children after a divorce. A national survey of Australian child support clients in 2000 found that only 28 per cent of payees reported always receiving payments on time, 40 per cent of payees reported that payment was never received, and 21 per cent of payers reported that they never paid child support (Wolffs and Shallcross 2000, p. 29). It is important to note that there are significant reporting differences in relation to child support payments. According to both Australian and overseas research, payers appear to greatly over-estimate their compliance with child support, while resident parents appear to slightly under-estimate actual payments (Fehlberg and Smyth 2000, p. 22).

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[7] Only 1.8 per cent of children (81,300 in total) live with a lone father, up from 1.3 per cent in 1986. Most children, 78.2 per cent or 3,588,300 children, live with both parents, while 83.1 per cent did so in 1986 (ABS 1999B, p. 21).

3. The significance and impact of fatherlessness

In popular and academic discussions of fathering and fatherhood, one of the key issues is the significance of father absence or fatherlessness and its impact on children. The absence of fathers from children's lives is widely seen to have a range of negative consequences for those children and for communities more broadly. Overlapping with this view is the common belief that children, and boys in particular, require male role models in the form of a biological father to ensure their healthy development. The following discussion will assess both assumptions, after first outlining the extent of father absence in Australia.

3.1 Father absence in Australia

The vast majority of children (94 per cent) aged 0-17 live with at least one of their parents.[8] 'Parent' here includes both biological parents and individuals with no biological relationship to the children in question, although in most cases the adults who live with and care for children are also biologically related to them. Looking at the living arrangements of children aged 0 to 17 in 1996, we find that 78.2 per cent live with both parents[9] and 16.1 per cent live in one-parent families[10] (ABS 1999b, pp. 1, 21). In other words, 80 per cent of children live with their father, and in the vast majority of cases also with their mother.

To put these proportions into numbers, in 1997 3.8 million children lived in couple families. A further 363,800 children lived in step and blended families: seven out of ten lived with one of their biological parents and a step-parent, and the remainder lived with both their biological parents and a step-sibling. There were 845,700 children in one-parent families, of whom nine out of ten lived with their mother (ABS 1999b, pp. 22-23). Among the children who had one natural parent living outside their household, two-thirds visited that parent at least once every six months. Forty-one per cent were in a sole care arrangement but saw the other parent at least once per fortnight (ABS 1999b, p. 23).

Recent Australian data suggests that after separation and divorce, more than one-third of Australian children do not see their fathers, while 17 per cent have day-only contact (Parkinson and Smyth 2003).[11] Forty-eight per cent of separated fathers have overnight care of their children, 17 per cent see their children only during the day, and 36 per cent have no face-to-face contact with their children (Parkinson and Smyth 2003, p. 6).

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[8] The remainder live with grandparents, with other relatives, or in non-private dwellings such as boarding schools and residential colleages, and a small number of young people aged 15-17 live independently.

[9] Of children aged 0 to 17, 72.1 per cent live with with parents in a registered marriage, and 6.1 per cent live with parents in a de facto marriage.

[10] Of children aged 0 to 17, 14.4 per cent live with a lone mother, and 1.8 per cent live with a lone father.

[11] Parkinson and Smyth's study is based on a representative sample of 1041 parents with at least one natural or adopted child under 18 years but who were not living with that child's other parent.

Separated parents were more likely to have contact with their children if they had not repartnered and if they had been married to the child's other parent.

A recent representative survey of 650 divorced men and women (who had not been married to each other) found that close to three-quarters of non-resident fathers reported seeing their children at least fortnightly. However, a markedly lower proportion of resident mothers, 44 per cent, reported at least fortnightly contact between fathers and children (Fehlberg and Smyth 2000, p. 22).[12] Only three per cent of children were in shared care where the other parent played a major caring role (ABS 1999b, p. 28).

A survey of 237 divorced parents in Australia by Smyth *et al.* (2001) finds that most children's living arrangements are finalised without the need for a Family Court order. Consistent with overseas research, most arrangements are established at the point of parental separation and do not change afterwards.

At the same time, there is a significant degree of dissatisfaction among post-separation parents about their levels of residence and contact, particularly among non-resident fathers. From a 2001 study of 1025 separated non-resident fathers and resident mothers in Australia, 40 per cent of resident mothers, but 75 per cent of non-resident fathers, would like to see more contact occurring (AIFS 2003, p. 8). Similarly, a 1997 study found that only three per cent of resident mothers wanted children's living arrangements to change, compared to 41 per cent of non-resident fathers (AIFS 2003, p. 8).

3.2 The significance of fatherlessness

Fathers' rights groups and conservative social commentators frequently assert that father absence in families causes a wide range of social problems such as crime, delinquency, drug abuse and mental health problems. The National Fatherhood Forum's '12 Point Plan' launched in June 2003 at Parliament House, for example, states that 'Fatherlessness and family breakdown are the major social problems of our society.' Steve Biddulph in his best-selling book *Raising Boys* (1997, p. 80) writes, 'Boys with absent fathers are statistically more likely to be violent, get hurt, do poorly in schools and be members of teenage gangs in adolescence.'

There is solid empirical evidence of a correlation between children growing up in single-parent families (usually headed by a mother rather than a father) and such problems (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, pp. 7-15). The research finds general support for the notion that 'children do best when raised by their two married, biological parents who have low-conflict relationships' (Parke 2003, p. 1). Surveys of family structure and children's outcomes consistently find that children raised in two-parent families do better on measures of educational achievement and psychological adjustment than children raised in single-parent families (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 109). However, a vast body of research has established that neither divorce nor fatherlessness by themselves determine children's well-being. As Stacey (1998, p. 68) summarises;

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[12] Smyth *et al.* (2001, p. 62) note elsewhere that their survey of divorced parents may have had a sample bias, with telephone sampling producing a greater proportion of higher income fathers who are more likely to exercise regular contact with their children than fathers on lower incomes.

> Most of the harms that divorce appears to inflict on children derive not from subsequent 'fatherlessness' but from negative circumstances that too often precede or follow a divorce — most significantly, parental hostility, parental stress, and economic decline.

In both two-parent and single-mother families, it is not the presence or absence of fathers which is fundamental in shaping children's well-being but the extent to which fathers are involved in positive parenting. The discussion below elaborates on this, offering five points regarding the complex relationships among divorce, fatherlessness and children's well-being.

Proponents of the claim that fatherlessness causes a host of social problems often conflate and misconstrue research on at least three distinct forms of fatherless families: those produced through divorce and separation; those due to unwed, and usually young, single motherhood; and those arising from intentional lesbian parenthood (Stacey 1998, p. 66). The focus of this discussion is on the first and second forms, and particularly on claims that divorce and separation represent disastrous outcomes for children. A review of fatherless families comprised of lesbian couples and their children is contained in the following section.

Most children of divorce show no negative effects

The evidence shows that the majority of children whose parents have divorced grow up without serious problems, especially after a period of adjustment to the divorce (Anderson *et al.* 2002, p. 1). Three-quarters of children from divorced families show no resulting negative effects. Summarising a wide range of studies on the size of divorce effects, Hetherington *et al.* (1998, pp. 169-170) note the following:[13]

> Some researchers report that these effects are relatively modest, have become smaller as marital transitions have become more common, and are considerably reduced when the adjustment of children preceding the marital transition is controlled. However, others note that approximately 20%-25% of children in divorced and remarried families, in contrast to 10% of children in non-divorced families, have these problems [in adjustment], which is a notable twofold increase. … [T]he vast majority of children from divorced families and step-families do not have these problems and eventually develop into reasonably competent individuals functioning within the normal range of adjustment. This argument is not intended to minimize the importance of the increase in adjustment problems associated with divorce and remarriage nor to belittle the fact that children often report their parents' marital transitions to be their most painful life experience. It is intended to underscore the research evidence supporting the ability of most children to cope with their parents' divorce and remarriage and to counter the position that children are permanently blighted by their parents' marital transitions.

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[13] Citations to other works within this text have been omitted to aid readability.

While most children of divorce show no negative effects, it remains true that there is a small but consistent gap between the well-being of children with divorced parents and that of children with continuously married parents. Amato and Keith's (1991) meta-analysis of 92 studies found that children whose parents are divorced score significantly lower on such outcomes as academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept and social competence, although the differences are generally small. For some outcomes, studies in the 1980s reveal a smaller discrepancy than earlier studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, suggesting that the gap between children in divorced and married families may be narrowing. However, research in the 1990s implies that this gap has not continued to close with a wide range of studies continuing to find that children with divorced parents score slightly lower on a range of measures than children with continuously married parents (Amato 2000, p. 1278).

Selection effects

The negative outcomes among children who grow up without their biological fathers are explained in part by selection effects, by systematic differences between the people who divorce or never marry and those who marry once and stay married. For example, high parental conflict, substance abuse, violence, mental illness and other forms of anti-social behaviour are associated with divorce *and* with poor outcomes in children. Divorce and separation are more common among lower socio-economic groups, and children from such groups are less successful in adulthood (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, p. 16). Amato's (2000) review of 1990s empirical studies on the consequences of divorce for adults and children notes that at least some child problems evident during and after divorce were present during the marriage, possibly the result of marital discord or inept parenting by distressed and anti-social parents. Longitudinal and other studies find that children from maritally disrupted families displayed more post-divorce behaviour problems than children from non-disrupted families, but also that these differences were apparent several years prior to divorce (Amato 2000). If studies control for pre-divorce circumstances, they find that statistical associations between family disruption and child outcomes become smaller, and in some instances they become statistically insignificant (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, p. 17).

Nevertheless, selection is not the only process shaping children's well-being after divorce and there is also evidence that divorce itself has causal effects. Amato's (2000, p. 1278) review notes other longitudinal studies which suggest that many post-divorce child problems did not exist prior to divorce or are significantly elevated after divorce. For example, Hanson (1999) found that differences in behaviour and well-being between children in divorced and non-divorced families continued to be significant even after controlling for children's pre-divorce levels of problem behaviour. As Amato (2000, p. 1279) summarises, 'even if predivorce family factors… predispose children to certain emotional and behavioral problems, divorce itself brings about new conditions that exacerbate these differences'.

The influence of poverty, social capital and economic support

The association between father absence and poor outcomes among children is also shaped by changes which accompany divorce or separation, particularly economic insecurity and loss of social capital[14]. There is a two-way relationship between poverty and single parenthood, with poverty both a cause and an effect of single parenthood (Parke 2003, p. 8). Single-mother households are more likely to have inadequate economic resources, and many mothers face a significant drop in income after divorce or separation. Female wage-earners typically have lower paid, lower status and less secure jobs than male wage-earners, and it is harder to self-insure against unemployment or illness by having a second adult take up paid work (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, pp. 27-28). This affects children's access to educational resources such as books and computers, and socio-economically disadvantaged mothers are more likely to live in deprived areas with poorer quality schools. The Australian evidence is that being a female sole parent continues to provide the greatest likelihood of economic disadvantage (Fehlberg and Smyth 2000, p. 24). Reviews of empirical studies on divorce find that post-divorce economic hardship is associated with negative outcomes among children (Amato 2000, p. 1280).

There is substantial evidence that differences between children in single-mother and two-parent families are far less pronounced once income discrepancies are taken into account (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, p. 32). Comparing the degrees of risk for children in single-parent families versus those in two-parent biological families or step-families, up to half the higher risk for negative educational outcomes is due to living with a significantly reduced household income (Parke 2003, p. 3, citing McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Summarising a range of studies, Jaffee *et al.* (2003, p. 109) report that:

> [T]hese differences arise because children in single-parent versus two-biological-parent families grow up in vastly different socio-economic contexts and because single mothers have lower educational attainment, less social support, and poorer psychological well-being.

In fact, there is evidence that children reared by highly educated, affluent unwed mothers typically do better emotionally, economically and socially than children reared by two married parents with lesser educational and economic resources (Stacey 1998, p. 70). However, income differentials do not entirely account for the differences between children in families with married biological parents and children in other situations. Children in step-families with incomes equivalent to those of two-biological-parent families are also at risk for a range of adverse outcomes (Parke 2003, p. 6; Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 110, citing McLanahan and Sanderfur 1994). On the other hand, Amato's (2000, p. 1281) review finds mixed results on the significance of parental remarriage. Earlier research tended to imply that children from step-families were no better off than children living in single-parent families, while several recent studies find that children with remarried custodial parents had fewer interpersonal problems.

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[14] 'Social capital' refers to individuals' access to social networks and communities, that provide such benefits as mutual support, access to information, and wider opportunities.

The levels of support provided to single-parent families influence children's outcomes. This is demonstrated in comparisons of children in families receiving differing levels of child support, and in comparisons of countries with differing levels of support for sole parents. The negative effect of living in a single-parent family varies substantially by country, and is greatest in countries which provide the least support to single-mother families (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, p. 33). From a meta-analysis of 63 studies published between 1970 and 1998 on non-resident fathers and children's well-being, most studies find a link between children's well-being and fathers' payment of child support. Across all studies children's academic success is positively related to fathers' payment of child support (Amato and Gilbreth 1999, pp. 563-564).

Parental harmony and positive parenting

The quality of parenting and family relationships has a profound impact on children's well-being and mediates the influence of father absence. Children with parents in intact, but high-conflict, marriages have lower emotional well-being than children with parents in intact, but low-conflict, marriages (Anderson *et al.* 2002, p. 2). Children growing up in married families with high conflict may experience as many problems as children of divorced or never-married parents. In fact, a range of studies finds that if their parents are experiencing chronic conflict, children are better off when their parents divorce (Amato 2000, p. 1278). As Amato (2000, p. 1278) comments, '(w)hen conflict is intense, chronic, and overt, divorce represents an escape from an aversive home environment for children.' To summarise:

> Parental conflict before, during, and subsequent to a divorce or separation often accounts for a substantial portion of the relationship between father absence and children's behavior, psychological adjustment, and academic performance (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, p. 36).

Amato (2000, p. 1278) comments that only a minority of divorces are preceded by high levels of chronic marital conflict so divorce 'probably helps fewer children than it hurts'. However, non-conflictual but nevertheless unhappy relationships between parents are also damaging to children. Children are aware of, and adversely affected by, emotionally 'frozen' parental relationships and relationships characterised by 'contemptuous disengagement' and poor quality marital relationships can threaten children's developing sense of emotional security and later life adjustment (Kinnear 2002, p. 31).

The presence or absence of authoritative parenting is a key influence on children's well-being in both intact and separated families. Authoritative parenting involves parental support reflected in such behaviours as responsiveness, encouragement, instruction and everyday assistance, and parental control, reflected in rule formulation, monitoring and discipline (but not coercive punishment such as hitting). In other words, it combines a high level of support with a moderately high level of non-coercive control (Amato and Gilbreth 1999, p. 559). Research on two-parent families finds that 'it is not the presence of fathers that is critical for children's well-being, but the extent to which fathers engage in authoritative parenting' (Amato and Gilbreth 1999, p. 559). Similarly, Amato and Gilbreth's meta-analysis of studies on non-resident fathers and children's well-being documents that fathers' authoritative parenting is associated with all the positive child

outcomes measured, including children's higher academic achievement, fewer externalising problems (including misbehaviour at home or school, aggression and delinquency), and fewer internalising problems (depression, anxiety and low self-esteem).

Of the four dimensions of non-resident fathering assessed in Amato and Gilbreth's meta-analysis (payment of child support, frequency of contact, feelings of closeness, and authoritative parenting), authoritative parenting is the most consistent predictor of child outcomes (Amato and Gilbreth 1999, p. 565). In contrast, the meta-analysis finds that non-resident fathers' contact with children is not in itself a good predictor of children's well-being. Children benefit little from frequent contact *per se* with fathers; the nature of fathers' parenting makes much more of a difference. In assessing the relationships between non-resident fathers and children's well-being, Amato and Gilbreth (1999, p. 568) also note that it is possible that the effect runs the other way: 'Competent and well-behaved children may elicit authoritative parenting from non-resident fathers'.

In addition to the presence or absence of selection effects, economic hardship, parental conflict and non-authoritative parenting, other factors mediate the influence of divorce on children. For example, a consistent predictor of children's divorce adjustment is the number of negative life events to which they are exposed such as moving house or changing schools (Amato 2000, p. 1280). Children's personal resources also make a difference. Children adjust more quickly and positively to divorce if they use active coping skills (such as gathering social support) rather than avoidance or distraction, receive social support from peers, and have access to therapeutic interventions (such as school-based support programs for children with divorced parents). Cognitive factors are also influential. For example, children who blame themselves are more likely to experience problems such as depression and lowered feelings of self-competence (Amato 2000, p. 1281).

Absence and presence

Finally, father absence and presence are not necessarily simple variables. Studies of divorced fathers indicate that relationships between absent fathers and their children can vary widely from regular and prolonged contact to none at all. So fathers can be present even if they are not residing with their children. In contrast, fathers may be absent when they do reside with their children (Silverstein and Auerbach 1999, p. 403). Nor is divorce a monolithic experience. For some children, staying with, or being parented primarily by, their fathers brings greater contact and involvement with fathers through more focused parenting. For other children, divorce liberates them from destructive relationships, such that fatherlessness in fact can be a welcome relief (Stacey 1998, p. 69).[15]

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[15] Recognising this does not diminish the general point that fathers' positive involvement has many benefits for their children's lives.

3.3 The potential costs of father presence

While 'responsible fatherhood' policies, for example in the US, have been based on the assumption that the effects of fathers' presence are uniform across families, recent research finds instead that fathers' presence has diverse effects on children, and that in some cases these are negative. Some fathers, particularly some unmarried and non-resident fathers, have difficulty in providing positive parenting experiences for their children. In addition, a minority of fathers engage in high levels of anti-social behaviour, and to the extent that they are present in their children's lives, their children's well-being suffers in significant ways. In other words, in the case of some fathers their presence in fact has a harmful effect on children while their absence is beneficial.[16]

Both points suggest that the uncritical promotion of father presence can have unintended negative effects on women, children and families. Despite this, on the basis of the finding that children of two-biological-parent families do better in general than children in single-parent families, some researchers and policymakers in the US have come to the conclusion that children will benefit if their parents are encouraged to get married and stay married (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 110). They emphasise marriage rather than mere cohabitation and have enacted a series of pro-marriage policies via welfare reform especially. These include removing regulations that potentially discourage marriage, funding programs to promote marriage, and providing further incentives such as cash rewards to couples who get married.

However, among the American parents and families typically addressed in such policies, a substantial share of the targeted fathers exhibit characteristics which are not conducive to increased engagement with families including negative behaviours such as violence, drug abuse and other criminal activity (Waller and Bailey 2002, p. 1). Moreover, such negative characteristics were also displayed by fathers who were married either at or after the birth, so marriage may not encourage men to change their behaviours (Waller and Bailey 2002, p. 37). American research also finds that while the economic benefits of marriage are especially strong among women from disadvantaged families, among women who marry but later divorce, poverty rates exceed those of never-married women (Lichter *et al.* 2003, p. 60). The authors emphasise that, 'Marriage alone will not offset the long-term deleterious effects associated with unwed childbearing, nor will it eliminate the existing disparity in poverty and welfare receipt among various racial and ethnic groups.' (Lichter *et al.* 2003, p. 60)

The US Fragile Families Study follows a birth cohort of 4700 children, three quarters of whom were born to unmarried parents. Compared to married fathers, unmarried fathers had higher rates of illicit drug use, partner violence and depression (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 111). Compared to resident young fathers (and controlling for marital status), non-resident young fathers were poorer, more likely to be unemployed, revealed lower thresholds for fear, anxiety and anger, had more drug and alcohol problems, and engaged in more crime and abusive behaviour towards women. These involvements

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[16] Anti-social behaviour by mothers is likely to have similar effects.

compromise such men's ability to be reliable sources of emotional and financial support. As to whether unwed fathers' social, economic and psychological prospects would improve if they were married to the mothers of their children, the evidence is inconclusive (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 111).

Research among a representative sample of 1100 families in England and Wales found that about one in seven fathers engages in high levels of anti-social behaviour, as defined by symptoms of Anti-social Personality Disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (IV)* of the American Psychiatric Association. These fathers are involved in criminal behaviour, lie to their partners, get into fights, are irresponsible and impulsive, and do not feel remorse for their actions (Jaffee *et al.* 2003). Parents' anti-social behaviours are significant risk factors for the development of children's conduct problems, the strongest predictor of a range of negative outcomes in adolescence and adulthood, such as dropping out of school, teenage childbearing, unemployment and crime.

The majority of fathers in the British study by Jaffee *et al* (2003) demonstrated low or average levels of anti-social behaviour, and their presence in the family was negatively associated with children's anti-social behaviour. That is, the longer such a father resided with his child, the less anti-social behaviour the child displayed. But the presence of fathers with high levels of anti-social behaviour was positively associated with child anti-social behaviour. In other words, the longer an anti-social father resided with his child, the more anti-social behaviour the child developed (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 116-117). When a fathers' anti-social behaviour was high, his children were almost twice as likely to have severe behaviour problems or a conduct disorder if the father had always lived with the family than if he had never lived with the family. Similarly, children cared for on a daily basis by fathers with high anti-social behaviour had the worst behaviour problems along with children who were never cared for by their fathers even when the fathers' anti-social behaviour was low (Jaffee *et al.* p. 118). As the authors summarise:

> In families in which fathers engage in very high levels of anti-social behavior, children have the worst behavior problems when the father resides in the home. Under these circumstances, children's behavior problems reach clinically significant levels and their behavior is significantly worse than among their peers whose fathers also engage in high levels of anti-social behavior but do not reside with their children (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 120).

Fathers who engage in high levels of anti-social behaviour are in the minority, about 14 per cent of fathers in this study. But there are at least two important reasons to pay attention to them. First, their presence is linked to children's clinically significance conduct problems (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 122). In terms of protecting children and promoting healthy child development, it is particularly important therefore to address fathers (and mothers) who engage in high levels of anti-social behaviour and who reside with the family. Second, while fathers who engage in high levels of anti-social behaviour are a small proportion of fathers, they are responsible for a disproportionate number of births. For example, in one study such men comprised ten per cent of a birth cohort, but fathered 27 per cent of the babies born by the time the men were aged 26 (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 122).

There are good reasons, therefore, to be wary of the simplistic promotion of father presence and marriage as ways to improve children's well-being. It is dangerous to advocate that all non-resident fathers be enticed or pushed into residing with their children and that unmarried fathers marry the mothers of their children without addressing such issues. Efforts at marriage promotion must consider the real and legitimate concerns which inform some low-income single mothers' perceptions of non-marriage as a better alternative to marriage (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 121). Some fathers (and mothers) are in no position to provide quality parenting and their presence in families will, in fact, do more harm than good. Of course this does not mean that such people should be abandoned. Fathers dealing with issues of drug abuse and violence, mental health, and unemployment and poverty must be supported. But the promotion of their involvement in families should not be at the expense of children or women.

3.4 Dodgy methods and bogus statistics

This paper has critiqued simplistic claims about the relationships between fatherlessness and social problems, particularly claims about family structure, divorce and children's well-being. But there is a broader problem in much of the rhetoric about fatherlessness: its flawed methodology. In populist texts such as Popenoe's *Life Without Father* (1996) and in public statements and materials by some fathers' advocates, discussions of fatherlessness are characterised by the confusion of correlation and causation, the reduction of multiple social variables to bivariate associations, the highly selective use of research evidence, neglect of contradictory or competing evidence, and treatment of small differences as if they were gross and absolute (Coltrane 1997, p. 8). Bogus statistics, with no factual basis, are used by some advocates for fathers' rights in asserting their political agendas.

To give one detailed example, the claim that 'Boys from a fatherless home are 14 times more likely to commit rape' was part of the '12 Point Plan' released by the National Fatherhood Forum in June 2003. The assertion was highlighted in media coverage of the Fatherhood Forum[17] and it is one of the claims commonly made by those who argue for the destructive effects of father absence on families and society. Yet this statistic is an invention. And although it has no basis in fact, it is regularly repeated on the websites of men's and fathers' rights, child custody and conservative Christian groups such as the Australian Men's Network.[18]

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[17] See for example, 'Boys with absent fathers 'more likely to rape',' *The Age*, 26 June 2003.

[18] See the following websites for some uses of this 'statistic': the Australian Men's Network (http://www.amn.com.au/news.html); a New Zealand fathers' rights website (http://www.massey.ac.nz/~kbirks/gender/econ/nodad.htm); an Irish website on separation (http://homepage.tinet.ie/~seperationcrisis/effect.htm), a US Male Initiative Program (http://trfn.clpgh.org/hspgh/MIP.html); US fathers' rights websites (http://www.bennett.com/gender/childsupport.htm; http://www.jail4judges.net/cfdocs/50fl.cfm; http://www.njccr.org/articles/fatherless%20kids.htm); a British fathers' rights website (http://www.njccr.org/articles/fatherless%20kids.htm); an American news story on the fathers' movement (http://users.rcn.com/baskerville/fathers_movement_taking_off.htm); and so on.

To assess the claim's accuracy, its origin must first be determined. The National Fatherhood Forum's '12 Point Plan' cites Rex McCann's *On Their Own: Boys growing up underfathered* (2000, p. 47). McCann cites a fathers' rights newsletter on the Internet. The relevant article in this newsletter[19] cites an American men's newsletter, *Getting Men Involved: The Newsletter of the Bay Area Male Involvement Network* (Spring 1997). The statistics themselves are attributed to a 1994 email message by Marty Dart.[20] It is here finally that we see how this 'statistic' was constructed. The text states, '80% of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes (Source: Criminal Justice and Behavior, Vol 14, p. 403-26, 1978.)' It then goes on to state, 'These statistics translate to mean that children from a fatherless home are: … 14 times more likely to commit rape'.

The 'boys are 14 times more likely' statistic was thus constructed from the finding in a 1987[21] journal article on typologies of rape that 80 per cent of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes. There are six problems with the statistical extrapolation being performed here.

(1) First, '80 per cent of rapists' does not translate into boys being '14 times more likely'. In 1985, approximately 20 per cent of children aged 0-17 in the US lived with a single mother (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, p. 54). If children from fatherless homes were proportionately represented among rapists, then they should be 20 per cent of the population of rapists. So if 80 per cent of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes, then children from fatherless homes are four, not 14, times more likely to commit (this type of) rape. In e-mail correspondence, Marty Dart, the author of the original figures, himself acknowledged that the numbers appear faulty.[22]

(2) The statistic shows correlation, not causation. Both the absence of a father in a household and children's rates of rape perpetration may be shaped by other factors, such as poverty, violence and drug use. Marty Dart does not note, for example, that half to three-quarters of the 108 convicted and imprisoned rapists in the study were physically abused as children and many were neglected (Knight and Prentky 1987, pp. 414-415).

(3) A study among 108 convicted prisoners in Massachusetts cannot be extrapolated to the population at large.

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[19] http://www.fathermag.com/news/2778-stats.shtml

[20] http://www.menweb.org/throop/nofather/dart.html

[21] The text of this material incorrectly cites the article as published in 1978, not 1987 (Knight and Prentky 1987).

[22] Dart, Marty (2003) Re: Children from fatherless homes. E-mail, 6 August.

(4) Even if this extrapolation were plausible, the claim takes no notice of changes over time in fatherlessness, rape and a host of other social factors. Contemporary repetitions of the alleged statistic rely on material which is 16 years old.

(5) According to the text, it is not 80 per cent of all rapists, but 80 per cent of rapists with a particular motivation (and again it is not clear how this translates into the '14 times' figure).

(6) While the 1997 text states that *children*, not *boys*, are 14 times more likely to commit rape, commit suicide, suffer behavioural disorders and so on, 'children' becomes 'boys' in most repetitions of these claims.

Thus, the source for an alleged statistic regularly circulated in 2003 turns out to be an inaccurate and misleading extrapolation of a figure from an article written a decade and a half ago.

In contrast to such simplistic accounts of rape's causality, contemporary scholarship assumes that violence is 'a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in an interplay among personal, situational, and socio-cultural factors' (Heise 1998, pp. 263-264). The perpetration of sexual assault by men and boys is shaped by attitudes and norms related to gender and sexuality, definitions of masculinity as dominant and aggressive, unequal power relations in families and communities, and economic and social marginalisation.

3.5 Fathers, sons and male role models

There is a widespread belief that children, and boys in particular, need a father's presence for their successful personal and emotional development. This is often expressed in the notion that boys require male role models, in the form of a (biological) father present in the family. In other words, the best interests of the male child are protected most by the presence of the biological father. In announcing the parliamentary inquiry into child custody laws, Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, stated, 'One of the regrettable features of society at the present time is that far too many young boys are growing up without proper male role models'. He is reported to have said that it is in the interests of children, and indeed their right, to have the opportunity of care and affection from a father (as well as a mother) (Rickard 2002, p. 2). There is no doubt that boys, and girls, benefit from the presence in their lives of positive, involved fathers. However, the research itself does not substantiate the assumption that boys growing up without fathers are necessarily harmed by this absence.

Rather than assuming that there is a single male role model for boys, it is important to ask *what kind* of male role models are healthy for boys. Some boys and young men suffer not from an absence of male role models, but from an *excess* of destructive male role models. They grow up in the company of adult men who are neglectful or abusive. And more widely, boys are routinely exposed to movies, television, video games and other aspects of popular culture which celebrate violent and dominating images of manhood (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Miedzian 1991). Both experiences shape boys' perceptions of their own identities in destructive unhealthy ways. There is no evidence to suggest that we should assume that *any* male role model is better than none.

Positive and nurturant parenting by mothers *or* fathers (and ideally both) makes more difference to children's outcomes than the simple presence of a father *per se*. A review of fatherhood research finds that many boys without fathers develop normally in terms of gender role development and masculine identity (Lamb 1995, pp. 31-32). Factors other than father absence *per se* are as important, if not more important, in explaining some boys' (and girls') negative outcomes. These include the absence of a co-parent (to assist with child care, step in when one parent needs a break, and supplement one parent's resources); the economic stress of single parenthood; the emotional stress associated with social isolation and social disapproval of single mothers; and pre- and post-divorce marital conflict. In other words, father absence is harmful because many aspects of the roles fathers can play as parents – economic, social and emotional – go unfilled or inappropriately filled (Lamb 1995, p. 32).

It is the characteristics of fathers as parents, rather than as men, which are important with respect to their influence on their sons' development. A series of studies over the 1940s to 1960s found no consistent correlation between the masculinity of fathers (measured in terms of adherence to stereotypical traits or attitudes) and the masculinity of their sons (Lamb 1995, p. 29). Boys are more likely to want to resemble fathers whom they like and respect and with whom they have a warm and positive relationship. In other words, the *quality* of father-son relationships is a crucial mediating variable. More recent research on the masculinity of fathers and sons found that 'boys seemed to conform to the gender-role standards of their culture when their relationships with their fathers were warm, regardless of how 'masculine' the fathers were' (Lamb 1995, p. 29).

Across a range of studies of paternal influences on gender-role development, achievement, psychosocial adjustment and other outcomes, the consistent finding is that fathers' masculinity and other individual characteristics are far less important formatively than the warmth and closeness of fathers' relationships with their sons (Lamb 1995, p. 29). Of course, the gendered attitudes and identities of fathers, such as their own commitment to and capacity for parenting, influence their involvements with their sons. But it is the quality of fathers' relationships with children which appears critical in shaping sons' development. Ironically then, stereotypically feminine characteristics in a father, such as closeness and intimacy, are associated with better gender adjustment in sons. Similar findings apply to mothers and children.

> As far as influence on children is concerned, very little about the gender of the parent seems to be distinctly important. The characteristics of the father as a parent rather than the characteristics of the father as a man appear to influence child development (Lamb 1995, p. 30).

Fathers and mothers influence their children in similar rather than dissimilar ways according to Lamb's (1995) overview of paternal influence. The characteristics of individual fathers are much less important in children's development than the characteristics of the relationships fathers establish with their children. At the same time, individual relationships are less influential than the family context; the absence of familial hostility is the most consistent correlate of child adjustment, while marital conflict is a consistent correlate of children's maladjustment (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 22, citing Lamb 1997).

There is no evidence that fathers' involvement is more beneficial for boys than it is for girls. Amato and Gilbreth (1999, pp. 567-568) conducted a meta-analysis of 63 studies published between 1970 and 1998 on non-resident fathers and children's well-being. They found no evidence that boys benefit more than girls from paternal involvement. Nor do the effects of non-resident fathers' involvement vary consistently with child age or race, the reason for father absence, or mothers' marital status. Very few fathers themselves believe that they are more important to their sons than to their daughters, and in general they do not perceive themselves to be closer to their sons than to their daughters, instead perceiving this closeness as very similar for both (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 29-34).

One aspect of community concern about the absence of male role models is that boys raised only by women, especially if by lesbian mothers, will become homosexual, adopt an unconventional gender identity or orientation, or experience other kinds of behavioural and social maladjustment and dysfunction (Rickard 2002, p. 1). Boys' adoption of appropriate forms of masculinity and (hetero)sexuality has been said to be in special danger if they are parented by lesbian couples. Instead, the research finds that children of lesbian parents are no more likely than those of heterosexual parents to develop confused or unconventional gender identity or behaviour or a homosexual orientation. There are no differences in self-esteem and emotional well-being, nor in social development (in confidence, positive peer relationships, or the likelihood of being teased or bullied). There is some evidence though of developmental differences. Children of lesbian parents are *more* likely to be affectionate and responsive and to have a greater sense of well-being, but also to perceive themselves as less competent (Rickard 2002, p. 2).[23] Recent reviews find that children in same-sex couple families are no more likely to show poor educational or emotional outcomes than children raised by divorced heterosexual parents (Parke 2003, p. 6; Fitzgerald 1999).[24]

The anxiety embedded in the concern that some boys and young men will be overly feminised or homosexualised by being parented by single mothers or same-sex couples should be questioned. As Rickard (2002, p. 2) notes, why do unconventional gender or sexual orientations necessarily count as adverse outcomes? This concern is based on a hostility to stereotypically feminine qualities, anxiety about changing gender relations, and homophobic discomfort with, or blunt discrimination against, homosexuality. There is no doubt that gay, lesbian and transgender youth face difficulties, including verbal and physical harassment and social marginalisation, with such consequences as isolation, stress, lowered self-esteem, poor school performance, and drug and alcohol abuse (Nickson 1996). Parents of such youth therefore face difficulties themselves. Yet such potential negative outcomes are not the intrinsic result of homosexuality or transgenderism but the product of cultural stigma and prejudice. Whether a heterosexual child is growing up with gay or lesbian parents or a homosexual child is growing up with heterosexual parents, that child should not be subject to coercion, punishment,

[23] See also Stacy and Biblarz (2001).

[24] Since many children raised by gay or lesbian parents have undergone the divorce of their parents, researchers have considered the most appropriate comparison group to be children of heterosexual divorced parents.

shaming or silencing with regard to, or in response to, their sexual orientation.

Concerns about mothers raising sons reflect longstanding patterns of mother-blaming, particularly the cultural tendency to blame mothers for outcomes among children. Mothers were blamed for autism, schizophrenia and homosexuality in the 1940s and 1950s, youth rebellion, drug use and rock 'n' roll in the 1960s, and now boys' emasculation in the 1990s (Garey and Arendell 1999, p. 1; Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, p. 87). Ironically, in the 1940s and 1950s assault on 'momism' or the feminisation of American families, for example by Wylie in his best-selling *Generation of Vipers* (1942), it was full-time motherhood which was seen as the threat, with feminised child-rearing threatening male virility and national strength (Stacey 1998, pp. 58-59).

This is not to claim that all forms of mothering are desirable or that mothers never have negative impacts on their children. But the problem with mother-blaming is that it 'assumes that mothers are impaired or inadequate in their child rearing and that their influences on children are determinative and damaging' (Garey and Arendell 1999, p. 2). Some recent popular guides to raising boys, such as Don and Jean Elium's *Raising a Son* (1992), see little role for women past the early years of toilet training and nursing. Parenting guides such as *Raising a Son* assume that mothers have a negative and oppressive influence on sons; women cannot provide appropriate parenting for them and are to blame if a son fails to become a successful male (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, pp. 84-87).

On the other hand, guides such as *The Courage to Raise Good Men* by Silverstein and Rashbaum (1994, pp. 75-105) and *Mothers and Sons* by Howard (2001, pp. 156-162) stress that mothers have important and positive roles to play in raising sons. Silverstein and Auerbach (1999, p. 403) speculate that 'the larger cultural context of male dominance and negative attitudes toward women may interfere with the ability of many single mothers to establish an authoritative parenting style with male children.' That is, this context may undermine the authority and respect granted by sons to their single mothers.

3.6 What fathers bring to families

Fathers' involvement in families is highly desirable for two broad reasons: the increased capacity for parenting represented by fathers' involvement, and the distinctive contribution fathers make as men to parenting. Beyond this, biological fathers are important also in terms of their significance for children's sense of self and family.

An extra pair of hands

Fathers' involvement is important primarily because it increases the material, emotional and social resources available for parenting. In families with two parents rather than one, there are simply more adults available to do the everyday work of nurturance, supervision and care-taking. The parents can share the load, supplement each others' economic and emotional resources, pool the social capital embedded in their social and occupational networks, and work together to improve their parenting. This is an ideal at least, one which only some two-parent families reach and to which only some parents aspire.

In Australia at present most sole-parent families are headed by women. Of all families with children aged 0 to 17, lone mother families comprise 18.1 per cent and lone father families comprise 2.7 per cent (ABS 1999b, p. 22). In sole parent families the absence of a 'second pair of hands' is an important factor in children's outcomes, alongside other critical factors such as economic insecurity and lack of social support. Summarising a range of studies, Jaffee *et al.* (2003, p. 110) note that compared with children in two-biological-parent families:

> [T]hose [children] in single-parent families have more conflictual relationships with their parents; receive less emotional support, cognitive stimulation, and supervision, and have less involved parents.

Perhaps because of the stress of divorce and single parenting, divorced custodial parents 'invest less time, are less supportive, have fewer rules, dispense harsher discipline, provide less supervision, and engage in more conflict with their children' than married parents (Amato 2000, p. 1279). As Amato (p. 1280) summarises, 'either a conflicted relationship with the custodial parent or inept parenting on the part of the custodial parent are linked with a variety of negative child outcomes'.

The simple presence of two parents is not the whole story for children's well-being. Section 3.2 outlined the evidence that in both one-parent and two-parent families, economic resources, social support, and above all the quality of parenting and family relationships have a substantial impact on children's well-being. Thus, it is not the presence of fathers as such, but the quality of parenting they offer which makes the difference. In addition, while this paper has focused on the benefits to children of fathers' involvement, it should be noted that men's active involvement in parenting also has real benefits for women and for men themselves, as addressed below in Section 5.5.

Men's distinctive contributions to parenting

Fathers' involvement is also important because of the distinctive, but not unique, contribution to parenting made by male parents. While mothers and fathers influence their children in similar ways, they also typically parent in different ways. There is consistent evidence that fathers and mothers interact differently with children from as early as the first few months of children's lives. Observational and survey data find that mothers' interactions with their children involve more caretaking and fathers' interactions involve more play (Lamb 1995, p. 27). Fathers have a stronger preference than mothers for rough-and-tumble play (Haight *et al.* 1997). Research in the 1970s documented that with one- to six-month old infants, fathers tend to provide bursts of physical and social stimulation, while mothers are more rhythmic and soothing, and while fathers touch babies with rhythmic pats, mothers address babies with soft, repetitive, imitative sounds. With seven- to 13-month-old infants, fathers are more likely to hold them in the course of playing with them or in response to their requests, while mothers are likely to hold them in the course of caretaking (Lamb 1981, pp. 469-470).

Gender differences in parenting are not the inevitable result of 'hardwired' features of female and male biology, but social differences which emerge in response to societal pressures and expectations (Lamb 1981, p. 471). Fathers are no less capable of child

care than mothers; put in the same social situations, both mothers and fathers can learn the same parenting skills and can be equally competent (or incompetent). Parenting skills are usually acquired 'on the job', but because mothers typically are on the job more than fathers, they develop greater sensitivity to, and skills with, their children and gender differences emerge. Highly involved fathers, like involved mothers, 'become more sensitive to their children, more in tune with them, and more aware of each child's characteristics and needs' (Lamb 1995, p. 27). The evidence is that fathers respond to infant signals such as crying or smiling in similar ways to mothers (Lamb 1981, pp. 461-462). Infants can form attachments equally to mothers and fathers, but mothers typically become the preferred attachment figures because of their primary caretaking role (Lamb 1981, pp. 466-468). A large body of research demonstrates that fathers 'can be just as nurturing, affectionate, responsive, and active with their children as mothers are' (Doucet 2001, p. 168). As Lamb (1981, p. 479) summarises, 'With the exception of lactation, there is no evidence that women are biologically predisposed to be better parents than men are.'

Divisions of caretaking labour in families will also continue to influence men's and women's assumptions about biology and parenting. In Coltrane's (1996, pp. 80-81) study, dual-earner couples with a female 'manager' and male 'helper' were more likely to understand their divisions of labour in terms of essential gender differences. In contrast, couples sharing the responsibility for direct and indirect child care were more likely to see their parenting skills as similar, to report that children were 'close to' and could be nurtured by either parent, and to claim that men can nurture like women. Thus there is a relationship between people's perceptions of gendered parenting capacities and their own parenting practices, with directions of influence likely to operate in both directions (Coltrane 1996, p. 82).

Despite their shared capacity for parenting, women and men will continue to be involved with children in differing although overlapping ways. Gender differences in parenting are very likely to persist in Australian society, given the differential socialisation of males and females, typical divisions of labour in families, and economic and cultural obstacles to shared parenting.

Some aspects of gender differences in parenting are positive. Fathers make distinctive and positive contributions to parenting that mothers are less likely to make, and the reverse is also true. Children therefore can benefit from the diversity, complexity and emotional richness afforded by interaction with both a mother and a father rather than with only one parent. In other words, children of either sex benefit from sustained exposure to gender diversity.

Yet gendered patterns of parenting are also a constraint on men's and women's interactions with children. The notion of biologically determined parenting roles exclusive to males and females constrains men's involvement in parenting by suggesting that there are some forms of involvement with children (such as nurturance and intimacy) which men simply cannot learn. Breaking down narrow and rigid definitions of men's and women's parenting roles would allow both mothers and fathers to practise the valuable forms of parenting which are the traditional domain of the other sex. More mothers could learn to play games and 'rough-house' with children, while more fathers could learn to cuddle and soothe children.

In order to argue that the distinctive contribution of fathers is desirable and valuable, one does not have to make the further claim that this contribution is *unique* and *exclusive* to men. For example, Shapiro *et al*. (1995, p. 8) argue that mothers and fathers each bring 'their unique and complementary styles' to parenting. Popenoe (1996, pp. 139-163) argues that universal differences between the sexes mean that there are certain tasks which are essentially the domain of fathers, including being role models for sons and protectors of and providers for families. Fletcher and Willoughby (2002, p. 24) note that perceptions of fathers' unique role are under threat, suggesting that this therefore diminishes the argument that father involvement benefits children. Reflecting on such emphases, Stacey (1998, p. 57) detects in much of the new fatherlessness literature a 'profound male gender anxiety about the erosion of received definitions of masculinity, and particularly fear of emasculation'.

This concern that we identify some dimension of parenting activity that is exclusively men's domain is misplaced. By virtue of their presence as parents, rather than their status as the biological fathers of their children, fathers can make a positive difference to their children's lives.[25] Similarly, other adult men, such as step-fathers, uncles, grand-fathers, male friends, older brothers and others, can and do contribute to children's well-being in parenting or quasi-parenting roles. In support of this position, Silverstein and Auerbach (1999, pp. 397-398) conclude from their research that:

> [N]either a mother nor a father is essential… a wide variety of family structures can support positive family outcomes… [C]hildren need at least one responsible, caretaking adult who has a positive emotional connection to them, and with whom they have a consistent relationship. Because of the emotional and practical stress involved in childrearing, a family structure that includes more than one such adult is more likely to contribute to positive child outcomes. Neither the sex of the adult(s), nor the biological relationship to the child has emerged as a significant variable in predicting positive developments… We have found that the stability of the emotional connection and the predictability of the caretaking relationship are the significant variables that predict positive child adjustment.

Whether children grow up in two-parent, single-mother, single-father or other family arrangements, it is not the presence or absence of fathers which is fundamental in shaping children's well-being but the extent to which fathers and mothers are involved in positive parenting. Developmental research consistently finds that it is the quality of family *processes*, rather than the nature of family structures, which is most important to the child's adjustment (Rickard 2002, p. 2). Mothers and fathers are equally capable of providing loving and supportive family environments for boys, and this ability is shaped less by their biological sex than by their own parenting skills and their social and economic resources. It is good parenting in general rather than father parenting in particular which is most relevant to children's well-being.

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[25] The same argument could be made were this discussion to be centred on 'motherlessness'.

Fathers' contribution to children's sense of self and family

So far, this discussion has emphasised fathers' significance in terms of their instrumental contributions to parenting and families. However, biological fathers are significant for a third reason, grounded in their biological relationship to children. Males and females are involved of course in the biological conception of children, and in Australia, as in most societies, the figures of the biological father and mother have powerful significance in cultural understandings of family, kinship and community. This means that biological fathers have a personal significance for children, in shaping children's senses of identity or self and children's understandings of who is 'in' their family.[26] Research among children raised by adoptive parents and children conceived by sperm donation suggests that knowing the identities of one's biological parents is an important element in children's psychological well-being.[27] Not knowing 'who my parents are' can be deeply disabling for some children. In addition, children may make symbolic distinctions between their (biological) 'father' and 'father figures', even where step-fathers have been involved in their parenting since infancy.[28] Thus, a third contribution made by fathers, in this case made exclusively by the fathers who are (or who are perceived to be) the biological fathers of children, concerns their significance for children's sense of self and family.

Fathers' positive involvement in parenting and families is highly desirable. Both children and mothers benefit from the increased capacity for caretaking symbolised by this involvement, and from the distinctive although not unique contributions men make to parenting. Boys and girls benefit equally from paternal involvement. In addition, men themselves experience benefits from involvement with their children. At the same time, because of the diversity of fathers' circumstances and parenting practices, fathers' presence (like mothers' presence) can have positive or negative effects on children.

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[26] pers. comm., Adrienne Burgess, 13 November 2003.

[27] 'Best to hear early about fathers, say donor children,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 2002.

[28] pers. comm., Adrienne Burgess, 13 November 2003.

4. Fathering politics and policies: The destabilisation of fatherhood

Fatherhood is now on the mainstream political agenda, and there is widespread support for the promotion of fathers' positive and responsible involvement in families. Important shifts in men's gender roles, plus growing policy attention to men's issues, are generating new possibilities for men's parenting. However, some of the most vocal advocates for fathers seem to wish to turn back the clock, reasserting men's traditional paternal authority rather than fostering shared and positive parenting.

4.1 The policy context

The immediate political context for debates over fatherhood and families is the Howard Government's consideration of the introduction of a rebuttable presumption of joint custody following family breakdown.[29] Yet such debates have preoccupied the popular imagination for decades. Debates over fathers both revive old areas of controversy and create new ones, not only over parenting, families, marital and divorce law, child custody, and family structure, but also over sexuality, reproductive law, and welfare and poverty policy (Daniels 1998, pp. 1-6; Stacey 1998, pp. 61-62).

Contemporary discussions of the role of fathers in families come from across the political spectrum, although when they began in the 1970s they were associated with social conservatism. Political campaigns in the name of 'The Family', organised by 'New Right' and primarily evangelical Christian constituencies in the 1970s, represented a backlash against the sexual revolution, feminism and gay liberation, and the politics of motherhood were central to their assertion (Stacey 1998, pp. 54-55). In Western countries such as Australia, the US and UK there have been three shifts in family politics over the last two decades. First, by the late 1980s, family values rhetoric had proliferated across a broad ideological spectrum (Stacey 1998, p. 55). Second, while public attention has often focused on single motherhood, in the mid-1990s there was a growing emphasis on the place of *fathers* in the lives and homes of women and children (Daniels 1998, p. 1). Particularly in the US, as debates over family values became more widespread in the 1990s, their focus shifted from the social hazards caused by single mothers to those caused by missing fathers (Stacey 1998, p. 51). Commentaries critical of mothers are still pervasive however, whether of teenage mothers, welfare mothers, single mothers, or single and married career women (Stacey 1998, p. 54).

The third shift is the growing policy interest in the need to promote fathers' involvement in families, particularly since the late 1990s. This is most developed in the US, where 'Responsible Fatherhood' initiatives began under the Clinton Administration in 1995 and continue today under President Bush. In the US there has been bipartisan support for new fatherhood initiatives promoting responsible fatherhood aimed at increasing fathers' contact and co-residence with their children and strengthening marriage (Waller and Bailey 2002, p. 2). In the UK, in 1998, the Home Office began

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[29] Details of the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs 'Inquiry into child custody arrangements in the event of family separation' can be found here: http://www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/fca/childcustody/index.htm.

developing family policy aimed at encouraging fathers' positive role in their children's upbringing and provided funding to such agencies as FathersDirect (Featherstone 2003, pp. 245-246).

In Australia since the mid-1990s, state and federal governments have shown an increased willingness to fund services directed specifically at men, in the context of growing community and governmental attention to men's issues. In 1997 the Federal Government allocated $6 million to services intended to 'assist men manage a range of relationship difficulties with partners and ex-partners, children and step-children and to help organisations develop more sensitive and responsive approaches to working with male clients'.[30] A major conference in 1998, focused on men and relationships, was sponsored by the Commonwealth Department of the Attorney General. The Men and Family Relationships initiative now has $22 million in funding over five years from 1998 to 2003. Government support for strengthening the roles of fathers in families and their children's lives is reflected in the booklet 'Supporting Fathers in Families' (2002) which states:

> The Commonwealth Government is working hard to ensure fathers are supported to be the best parents they can. … Regardless of the structure of a family, fathers have an invaluable role to play in the development of their children. They have the capacity to make a difference to the quality and happiness of their children's lives.

Early policy initiatives in the UK focused on men's parenting practices *after* divorce or separation, stressing the importance of maintaining contact between fathers and children in the name of children's welfare. More recent efforts have attempted to shift men's involvement in parenting during existing relationships (Collier 2001, pp. 529-531). In Australia, initiatives intended to 'support fathers in families' cover both. They include programs for non-resident parents (usually fathers) and assistance for separated parents in negotiating child contact, as well as groups for first-time fathers, programs promoting fathers' involvement in their sons' or daughters' schools, and workplace programs addressing work/family balance. On the other hand, since the joint custody inquiry commenced in June 2003, media commentary has often focused on fathering after divorce or separation.[31] This prompted Federal Sex Discrimination Commissioner, Pru

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[30] Men and Family Relationships Services website, Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS). URL: http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/family/mfr-men_family_relationships.htm. Last modified 13 October 2003.

[31] See for example: Metherell, Mark (2003) Divided by child access details. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 June; ; Arndt, Bettina (2003) To care for the kids, keep dad in the picture. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 19 June; Bagnall, Diana (2003) Family repair. *The Bulletin*, 2 July; Arndt, Bettina (2003) If courts won't change custody parents should. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 29 August; Arndt, Bettina (2003) After divorce, kids need both parents. *The Australian*, 29 August; Tanner, Lindsay (2003) Hands in pockets won't buy them love. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 1 September; Jackman, Christine (2003) Parents rage at custody inquiry. *The Australian*, 13 September; Arndt, Bettina (2003) Teen pregnancy more likely for fatherless girls. *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 September.

Goward, to comment that if fathers wish to be involved in parenting after divorce, they must start earlier, sharing parenting in intact relationships and marriages.[32]

Promoting fathers' positive involvement in families is also an increasingly visible aspect of the practices and perspectives of health and welfare agencies in Australia (see Section 5.3 below for an overview of their efforts). Why have father-inclusive and father-specific services emerged at this time?

Service agencies perceive that the women's movement has prompted greater interest in and discussion of men's lives. Around Australia there are many examples of female practitioners advocating and initiating programs for fathers, and of programs initially for women later being extended to men (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 96). Men's movement activity, including men's groups and male practitioners within workplaces, has also been influential. The development of programs for fathers has been influenced by the emergence of other services which are inclusive of or specific to men, and by the greater political will at government, service and agency levels to recognise the role of fathers in parenting. Research and popular publications on fathers have helped shape agency practice, policy-making and funding. Finally, there has been growing demand for services from fathers themselves. Many fathers desire more active involvement with their children, 'wish to father differently to their parents', and give greater emphasis to being a parent as an important and desirable aspect of self (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 96-98).

4.2 The social and political context: gender and fathering

The wider context for debates about fathers and families is the profound shifts in gender relations which have so unsettled and changed women's and men's lives over the last three decades. In every sphere of society, from the bedroom to the boardroom, women's and men's positions and interactions have shifted, been questioned and re-negotiated. Connell (1995) identifies disruptions to, and contestations of, the social organisation of gender in at least three realms – power relations, labour relations and sexual relations.

In power relations, the legitimacy of men's domination has weakened dramatically, in particular under the influence of feminism. Work and economic relations in Western capitalist countries have undergone fundamental changes since World War II, including married women's increased entry into paid employment and the decline of traditionally male areas such as primary industry. There have been important shifts in sexual relations, in particular with the emergence and stabilisation of lesbian and gay sexualities as public alternatives to heterosexuality (Connell 1995, pp. 84–85).

A fourth shift is cultural, the emergence of new images and accounts of alternative masculinity identity such as the 'New Man' and the 'Sensitive New Age Guy' or 'SNAG,' gay, bisexual and queer men, the 'New Lad,' and 'Wussy boys', and 'metrosexual'. To varying degrees, these open up new spaces for rethinking what it means to be a man. At the same time, they jostle for space with images which celebrate

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[32] 'Shape up, fathers told,' *The Courier Mail*, 25 July 2003; 'Fathers must also be parents,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 11 August 2003.

the virtues of a more traditional masculinity, including films which represent men's violence against other men or against women as normal, legitimate, exciting and even sexy, pornography which teaches boys and men to see women only as sexual objects, and so on.

These historical processes, in tandem with the efforts of new social movements such as the women's movement, have disrupted traditional constructions of masculinity. Beginning in the 1970s in advanced capitalist countries, men's lives have been questioned and debated with passion.[33] Men have been examined 'as a sex, in a way until recently reserved for women - as a problem' (Segal 1993, p. x). This attention to masculinity and men's issues has opened up new possibilities for men, including new possibilities for men's relations with women, children and other men.

Changing gender relations have shifted 'the landscape in which men and women meet' (Featherstone 2003, p. 244). This paper has already identified changes in the social organisation of fathering and families (see Section 2.2 above.) In addition to new arrangements of work and money, the sexual and emotional contracts between women and men are being rewritten. Traditional gender stereotypes are breaking down; women are no longer seen as necessarily dependent and vulnerable while there is greater recognition of male emotional vulnerability. These ruptures have produced contradictory developments in terms of what women want from men and from the fathers of their children. Some women want men to share in the nurturing and economic work equally, while others want men to be the economic providers. Some emphasise the desirable qualities that parents of either sex should have, while others call for distinct roles for each sex (Featherstone 2003, pp. 244-245).

Some men are flourishing because of the opening up of gender roles generated by the women's movements and other changes. They are enjoying having more trusting, respectful and egalitarian relationships with their wives and partners, developing greater connections with female and male friends, and being involved fathers to their new babies and children. Thus some men are finding both relief and exhilaration in the new forms of intimate life and public life available to them. Some men are delighted to see some of the bonds of traditional manhood loosening, some of the rigid divisions between stereotypically feminine and stereotypically masculine behaviours and identities crumbling apart. There are various signs of positive change among men. Men show increased support for women's paid work outside the home; young men are taking greater responsibility for contraception and safe sex (Lindsay *et al.* 1997, pp. 29-30; NCHSR 1999); there is a decline in men's agreement with myths about domestic violence (Office of the Status of Women 1995); and there is increased attention to the quality of fathering.

Yet other men are struggling. Some men are confused, lost, troubled and angered by the uncertainties of contemporary gender relations. While it is an exaggeration to claim that

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[33] Periods of intensified struggle over the dominant definitions of manhood are far from unique according to Michael Kimmel, and he identifies other periods of destabilisation in dominant notions of masculinity (Kimmel 1987).

in general men are in crisis, at least one form of heterosexual masculinity is increasingly felt to be obsolete - one that is stoic, work-obsessed, focused on power over others, rigid and emotionally limited (Carrigan *et al.* 1987). In terms of fatherhood, perhaps the clearest examples of male crisis are among fathers who have undergone divorce and separation. To illustrate, consider a typical story of one such man.

A 40-year-old heterosexual husband and father who has just been left by his wife is most likely in crisis. The models of manhood with which he grew up probably gave him few resources with which to deal with grief, loss and anger, and possibly not even the skills to sustain a healthy relationship in the first place. He was taught that being a real man means not expressing emotions (except anger), avoiding feminine and vulnerable emotions like love, fear and compassion, and being psychologically and emotionally isolated. He probably depended on his wife as the main source of his experience of love, affection and nurturance, and he relied on her emotional work to sustain the relationship. He probably did not see the divorce coming, and he is poorly equipped to deal with it. He loves his children, and he has tried to be a good father to them. He has done far less of the direct parenting than has his wife because of his heavy involvement in paid work. His wife works too, but she has sometimes worked part-time and taken more time off. This father and his ex-wife have agreed that it's best that the children live with her. Nevertheless, he is grieving the loss of both his relationship and his resident fathering role.

This father's story is only one version of the diverse processes and situations experienced by men around Australia. Of course, the dimensions of such experiences are shaped by other aspects of men's and women's lives, such as poverty or financial security, social isolation or connection, the presence or absence of conflict and violence, and physical and mental health.

Research among divorced men finds that some respond to divorce by making a priority of relationships with their children, setting aside differences with their ex-wives to ensure good co-parenting. However, other men respond to the stresses and turmoil of divorce by focusing on their 'rights' and their victimisation; they attempt to retain control over their former wives, and respond to the undermining of their paternal authority with strategies of parental and financial withdrawal (Arendell 1995). More widely, among both men and women, one response to recent and profound shifts in gender relations and family lives is the attempt to reassert patriarchal gender roles and the 'traditional' nuclear family. The most visible examples of this response are fathers' rights groups, and these often overlap with men's rights and conservative Christian mobilisations.

There are two further reasons why appeals to an 'essential' father and a nuclear family structure are attractive; these involve an authentic concern for children's welfare on the one hand and a backlash against new forms of power sharing and role sharing, particularly among men, on the other. First, family life has changed rapidly over the past three decades, and there is a widespread social anxiety about 'who will raise the children' (Silverstein and Auerbach 1999, p. 404). Second, changes in gender and sexual relations have:

> [R]equired heterosexual men to relinquish certain aspects of power and privilege that they enjoyed in the context of the traditional nuclear family. Most men no longer have sole economic power over their families. Similarly, most men must accept some degree of responsibility for child care and household tasks. The majority of heterosexual men no longer have full-time wives to buffer the stress of balancing work and family roles (Silverstein and Auerbach 1999, p. 404).

This shifting landscape is deeply unsettling for a number of men, and some have responded by reasserting traditional values of biologically determined gender roles and male power.

While most men (and women) find the processes of divorce and separation to be hurtful, only a minority subscribes to the conservative agendas of anti-feminist men's groups. In addition, there are other fathers' organisations which promote positive and collaborative visions of men's relations with women and children, such as Dads and Daughters in the US and FathersDirect in the UK However, the agendas of fathers' rights groups have a significant influence on media and governmental visions of family policy. It is therefore important to assess these agendas.

4.3 Fathers' rights groups

Fathers' rights groups in Australia include the Lone Fathers Association, the Men's Rights Agency, the Men's Confraternity, Fathers Without Rights, the Shared Parenting Council, Dads Against Discrimination, and many others. There is an overlap between men's rights groups, fathers' rights groups and non-custodial parents' groups where members are often fathers. These groups sometimes have female members and even co-founders, including second wives and other family members of men who have had some engagement with family law (Kaye and Tolmie 1998a, p. 22). The men in the fathers' rights movement[34] are typically in their forties and fifties, often divorced or separated, and nearly always heterosexual. Participants are frequently angry, bitter and hurting, and they have often gone through deeply painful marriage breakups and custody battles (Bertoia and Drakich 1993; Cosic 1999; Maddison 1999; Milburn 1998; Wilson 1997). Members of men's rights and fathers' rights groups focus on service provision, lobbying and activism. They offer self-help meetings, provide support for men undergoing separation, divorce and family law proceedings, lobby local and national governments to change policies and laws, and promote their views through newsletters, websites and media campaigns.

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[34] Cornell (1998) and some other authors refer to the 'fathers' movement'. Here the phrase 'fathers' *rights* movement' is used to distinguish this from other advocates and organisations promoting fathers' involvement in families which do not share the agendas and worldviews of fathers' rights groups such as those listed above. Nevertheless, fathers' rights perspectives do have a wide currency across the political spectrum. Also the term 'movement' is used cautiously, given that many fathers' rights groups have only a small active membership.

Some fathers' rights and men's groups represent an organised backlash to feminism.[35] They focus on the costs and destructiveness to men of masculine roles, claiming that both women and men are equally oppressed or limited or even that men are oppressed by women. These groups consider that males have been displaced from the labour market, schools and universities, deprived of their role as fathers, and are now regarded only as 'gene pool and cash machine' (Bouchard, Boily and Proulx 2003, pp. 5-7, 26-33). As far as rights are concerned, such groups believe that men's right to a fair negotiation in child custody settlements, to a fair trial in domestic violence cases, and to fair treatment in the media have all been lost. Responsibility and blame for these problems is attributed to women, the women's movements and feminism (Kaye and Tolmie 1998a, pp. 62-65).

Several men's rights and fathers' rights groups have links to conservative Christian organisations and support a traditional patriarchal family as the only legitimate and natural form of family (Kaye and Tolmie 1998b, pp. 182-184). One of the key groups in Australia currently lobbying for a rebuttable presumption of joint custody is the Shared Parenting Council of Australia, a new coalition between fathers' rights groups and such conservative Christian groups as the Festival of Light.[36] Another, the National Fatherhood Forum, has close links to the Australian Family Association, a conservative Christian and 'pro-family' organisation.[37]

Fathers' rights groups represent one form of masculinity politics - 'those mobilizations and struggles where the meaning of masculine gender is at issue, and, with it, men's position in gender relations' (Connell 1995, p. 205). Three other forms of masculinity politics currently visible include men's groups and networks focused on men's liberation or masculinity therapy, spiritual or mythopoetic concerns, and pro-feminist

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[35] For example, DADs Australia describes itself as 'concerned with the deliberate degrading of families and marginalising of Fathers in children's lives by the feminist movement and unreasonable interference by Government Departments in our personal lives' (http://www.dadsaustralia.com/). The website of the Men's Confraternity asks, 'Why is it that the FAMILY COURT has become so anti-male and anti-father, all to [sic] eager to accept notions of political correctness, feminist ideology and a social dogma which demands acceptance and obedience?' (http://www.mensconfraternity.org.au/). OzyDads describes itself as 'dedicated to promoting shared parenting and to correcting the false stereotype images while exposing the Anti-Father gender bias in the Family Law arena and putting the fathers back in to families.' (http://www.geocities.com/ozydads/). An open letter to Prime Minister Howard from Barry Williams, President of the Lone Fathers Association (Australia), complains that 'Excessive funds are put into socially divisive programs, instigated by or hijacked by radical feminists' (http://www.lonefathers.com.au/augsep03/page7html). Another open letter to Prime Minister Howard from the Fatherhood Foundation states, 'For too long Aussie dads have been libeled by the media, vilified by feminists, and denied justice by our court system.' (http://www.lonefathers.com.au/augsep03/page16html).

[36] Shared Parenting Council (2002) A New Force in Family Law. Media Release, 21 October. David Phillips, the National President of the Festival of Light, commended the legal initiatives of the Shared Parenting Council, as reported in the Shared Parenting Council News Update, 1(2), 30 Nov. 2002.

[37] For example, Bill Muehlenberg of the Australian Family Association is the author of 'The Facts on Fatherlessness', the document that provides an important basis for the National Fatherhood Forum's agenda on fatherlessness and that is included in its '12 point plan'.

and anti-patriarchal activism. These four forms have been collectively described as 'the men's movement' (Flood 1998), but this term is problematic insofar as it includes groups and agendas involving both the defence of men's privilege and efforts to undo it.

Changing the practice and perception of family law

Fathers' rights groups have achieved significant changes in both the practices and popular perceptions of family law. Changes in family law made in 1995, particularly the enshrining of children's right to contact with both parents, were influenced by the lobbying of fathers' rights groups. There have been policy shifts in the distribution of family tax benefits for shared care which advantage non-resident/access parents (usually fathers) at direct cost to the resident parents (usually mothers) (Keebaugh 2003, p. 154). Similarly, major changes to the child support system have disadvantaged resident parents and increased the control exerted by the non-resident parent (Keebaugh 2003, p. 175).

Research into the operation of the *Family Law Reform Act* 1995 from the time it came into effect in June 1996 to the end of 1999 finds that since the 1995 changes, there has been no increase in shared parenting among separated partners (Rhoades *et al.* 2002, p. 1). The studies have shown that those parents who do enter into workable and flexible shared residence arrangements after separation are doing so without legal assistance and without any knowledge of the *Family Law Reform Act* 1995. Parents who share parenting had voluntarily agreed to the arrangement, had a history of co-operation, and men had taken an active caregiving role. On the other hand, the reforms have created greater scope for abusive non-resident parents to harass or interfere in the life of the child's primary caregiver (Rhoades *et al.* 2002, pp. 2, 55).

An uncritical assumption that children's contact with both parents is necessary pervades the courts and the media. Among legal practitioners a *de facto* 'presumption' in favour of contact with the non-resident parent is widespread, although the legislation makes it clear that children's 'right' to contact with both parents only operates to the extent that such contact is found to be in the child's best interests (Rhoades *et al.* 2002, p. 6). In practice the presumption of parental contact has meant that the interests and welfare of children are being compromised as a result of more frequent awards of joint custody orders in the context of distrust and hostility between ex-partners and the consequent potential of heightened exposure to violence.

While the Family Court must see the best interests of the child as its paramount consideration in deciding whether and how to make an order in relation to a child, children's welfare has been compromised in the approaches to making residence and contact orders and responding to allegations of violence at interim hearings (Rhoades *et al.* 2002, p. 4). Between 1996 and 1999, a greater number of orders for unsupervised contact were made at interim hearings in cases involving domestic violence or child abuse. There has been an increase in the numbers of joint residence orders made in contested proceedings in circumstances where there is a high level of conflict between the separated parents and one parent strongly objects to shared residence (Rhoades *et al.* 2002, pp. 6-8). In other words, orders for children's joint residence are being made in the absence of the mutual trust and cooperation between parents previously seen in legal judgments as necessary for shared parenting.

In a more recent Australian study among 40 women negotiating child residence and contact arrangements with ex-partners who had been violent towards them, 13 children had been the targets of physical violence by their fathers. In half these cases, fathers had unsupervised contact with the children, and fathers had residence in four cases (Kaye *et al.* 2003, p. x). In 25 cases children had witnessed violence against their mother and fathers had been granted unsupervised contact with children in 17 of these cases and residence in four. Half the women in the survey felt that the contact and residence arrangements compromised either their own safety or that of their children. Children witnessed high levels of violence during contact and contact changeover. Being subject to domestic violence, and witnessing domestic violence, are both highly detrimental to children's well-being (Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre 2003, p. 8). Yet the legal system and legal professionals placed enormous pressure on women to consent to contact and gave insufficient attention to the issue of their safety or that of their children (Kaye *et al.* 2003, pp. 149-150).

The legal changes have also intensified the pressure for shared residence arrangements motivated in part by some non-custodial parents' desire to reduce child support liabilities (Rhoades *et al.* 2002, p. 8). Under changes to child support laws in 1993, the amount of child support payable is reduced where a parent has contact with a child for at least 30 per cent of the nights in a child support year ('the 109 nights requirement').

The political influence of fathers' rights groups appears to have been boosted by their ostensible compatibility with the policy agenda of the Coalition Government. The Federal Coalition Government has adopted tax, child support and other policies making participation in the paid workforce more difficult for women and providing incentives for them to stay at home full-time and raise children (Summers 2003a). It has removed subsidies for community-based child care centres and frozen child care assistance (Summers 2003a), and its recent pronouncements supportive of work and family issues have not been matched by action (Summers 2003b). Fathers' rights advocates have also been able to take advantage of the symbolic capital generated by images of the nurturant father or new dad, as well as the backlash against 'political correctness' and efforts at social justice.

A brief critique

Fathers' rights advocates have adopted the liberal feminist language of gender equality and rights but show more concern with equality in their legal status than in their everyday parenting. Their claims of discrimination in child custody decisions exaggerate the disparity in awards of custody to women versus men, neglect the ways in which custody decisions are shaped by divisions of labour prior to divorce and separation, and ignore the fact that in the vast majority of cases mothers end up with responsibility for children by private arrangement with the father (Kaye and Tolmie 1998a, p. 36; Pease 2002, p. 36). The claims of fathers' rights groups also:

> tend to ignore how work and family institutional relations benefit them, both before and after divorce [and] focus entirely on the economic and institutional costs that are attached to these masculine privileges (Messner 1997, p. 47).

When it comes to bias in custody decisions, for example, fathers' rights groups often claim that in Family Court decisions only five per cent of fathers are granted sole custody of children (Kaye and Tolmie 1998a, p. 35), yet Australian studies document rates anywhere from three to six times as high.[38] Moloney (2001, p. 366) summarises the evidence. A 1983 study of family court orders in which both parties consented to the outcome found that 18 per cent resulted in custody going to fathers; another 1983 study of fully defended hearings found that 31 per cent were decided in favour of fathers compared to 54 per cent in favour of mothers. Eleven years later, a 1994 study of fully defended hearings again found that 31 per cent of fathers were successful in their applications, compared to 60 per cent of mothers (Moloney 2001, p. 366). Finally, a Family Court survey in 2003 of 850 cases across Australia found that mothers retain custody in 78 per cent of cases in which parents agreed not to proceed through the court system. That reduces to 69 per cent if the case proceeds to trial, when fathers then have a 22 per cent success rate of receiving custody – up from nine per cent in pre-court agreements (Macdonald 2003). The fact that fathers are roughly twice as successful in litigation as they are when negotiating on their own behalf has been seen as evidence that men do not have grounds for complaint about Family Court bias (Rhoades 2000, cited in Moloney 2001, p. 366).

Patterns of custody decisions must be seen in the context of parenting divisions of labour. Women continue to be the primary caretakers in most families prior to separation and divorce, and family courts tend to decide in favour of the parenting status quo in judging the 'best interests of the child' (Pease 2002, p. 36). Family Courts are not gender-neutral in their decision-making and, like many social institutions, they are influenced not only by divisions of labour but also by wider assumptions of mothers as caretakers and fathers as breadwinners (Pease 2002, p. 36). A recent Australian study examined closely contested parenting cases in the Family Court between 1988 and 2000.[39] It found that:

> [M]others were likely to be successful if they appeared to conform to a maternal stereotype of self-sacrifice on behalf of their children. Generally, fathers were successful when mothers were judged to be in some way inadequate – that is, fathers tended to be successful by default… there is also evidence of judicial scepticism concerning their capacity to parent without the assistance of a mother figure, and/or scepticism about fathers' plans to reduce their commitment to the paid work force. (Moloney 2001, p. 363)

[38] While around 30 per cent of contested custody decisions go to fathers, a far smaller proportion of children are being raised by sole fathers. Of children aged 0 to 17, 1.8 per cent live with a lone father, while 14.4 per cent live with a lone mother (ABS 1999b, pp. 1, 21). This disparity reflects the fact that the great majority of decisions regarding children's living arrangements after separation and divorce are made privately by parents, not in contested hearings in Family Courts.

[39] Moloney (2001) focused on cases in which men and women appeared to be functioning as good or at least as adequate parents, excluding cases involving violence, abuse or abduction of children. Moloney also focused on cases described by judges as 'closely contested' or similar. This resulted in 25 cases, involving between 18 and 25 judges, and delivering roughly equal awards of child residence to mothers and fathers.

Although Family Courts are not gender-neutral, neither are they anti-male or feminist-dominated as groups such as the Men's Confraternity and OzyDads contend.[40] Instead, judges' assumptions about 'incapable' fathers and properly 'self-sacrificing' mothers reflect the traditional gender stereotypes which feminists have worked to undo.

Fathers' rights advocates in Australia use the language of shared parenting, offering an ideal few could dispute, but this goal is undermined by their acrimony towards the female custodial parent and their commitments to a patriarchal family structure (Kaye and Tolmie 1998a, pp. 33-34; Kaye and Tolmie 1998b, pp. 188-189). In addition, their proposed solutions to child support and contact issues often show insensitivity to children's welfare and involve one-sided restrictions on the custodial parent (Kaye and Tolmie 1998a, pp. 36-42). A Canadian study of fathers' rights groups found that while members portrayed themselves as caring, loving fathers who had been denied their rights to equal custody and access to their children, they did not want a larger role in the day-to-day caregiving but rather in the decision-making related to their children and ex-spouses' lives (Bertoia and Drakich 1993).

Fathers' rights perspectives tend to conflate the interests of children and fathers and ignore the possibility of conflict between them. At times, they appear to compromise children's interests by giving priority to the prevention of false allegations of child abuse over safeguards for genuine victims of abuse. At the extreme, some fathers' rights advocates have expressed sympathy for men 'who are so distressed by their loss of access to the children they purportedly love that they *murder* the objects of their affection' (Kaye and Tolmie 1998b, pp. 178-181).

Finally, fathers' rights strategies can, in fact, be harmful to men themselves. Men's rights advocates have attacked women-oriented policy bodies, women's refuges, and women's health centres while simultaneously calling for either parallel services for men (refuges, health centres, even an Office for the Status of Men and Their Families) or services for both men and women. For example, in his 2001 'Men's Manifesto', Melbourne advocate Alan Barron calls for the abolition of the Office of the Status of Women, all equal opportunity and affirmative action laws, and all special programs and funding for women and girls in education, health and employment (Barron 2001, p. 13). The National Fatherhood Forum's '12 point plan' (2003) offers similar proposals. Attacking services primarily for women is an ineffective way to gain services for men. Such strategies focus on the wrong target, they antagonise potential supporters, they taint as backlash the need to address such men's issues, and they appear to be motivated more by a simplistic logic of equality than by an informed appraisal of the kinds of services men are going to use and like.

4.4 What is wrong with a 'presumption of joint custody'?

The goal of a rebuttable presumption of joint custody following family breakdown is shared among a range of fathers' rights groups in Australia.[41] In alliance with

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[40] See respectively http://www.mensconfraternity.org.au/ and http://www.geocities.com/ozydads/.

[41] For example, the national peak body for lone fathers' associations, the Lone Fathers Association (Australia), has been lobbying for 'a presumption for shared parenting' since 1980. The LFA resolved at

conservative Christian and other organisations, these groups have been instrumental in pressing for legal reform. Backbench politicians in the Coalition Government have also heavily lobbied Prime Minister Howard, repeatedly raising family law and custody issues at party meetings (Schubert 2003). The current inquiry into 'child custody' arrangements in the event of family separation has put a presumption of joint custody on the policy agenda. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs is required to:

> [I]nquire into, report on and make recommendations for action:
>
> (a) given that the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration:
>
>> (i) what other factors should be taken into account in deciding the respective time each parent should spend with their children post separation, in particular whether there should be a presumption that children will spend equal time with each parent and, if so, in what circumstances such a presumption could be rebutted.
>>
>> (ii) in what circumstances a court should order that children of separated parents have contact with other persons, including their grandparents.
>
> (b) whether the existing child support formula works fairly for both parents in relation to their care of, and contact with, their children.

While Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, has not publicly committed himself to any action until the inquiry concludes on December 31, he is reported to have given the impression that he genuinely wants to have the law changed. It is claimed that he has already asked for legislation to be introduced into Parliament early in 2004 (Tippet *et al*. 2003).

This discussion focuses only on (a) (i) above, the 'presumption that children will spend equal time with each parent'. This is a presumption of joint *physical* custody – that children will physically reside with both separated parents for equal periods, living one week with the mother and the next with the father for example. The phrase 'joint custody' has been used more broadly, particularly in the US where it originates, to signal that both parents have legal responsibility for the child and should be involved in the child's upbringing after separation. In that sense,

> the Family Law Act in Australia gives parents 'joint custody' automatically, although it may be necessary for a court to modify that position, and to restrict or prevent contact, if it is necessary for the safety and wellbeing of a child. (Parkinson 2003, p. 16)

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its 2002 annual conference that, 'The starting point for discussions about custody after separation should be custody shared between the parents on the basis of equal time.'
(http://www.lonefathers.com.au/augnov02/page3.html ;
http://www.lonefathers.com.au/augnov02/page14.html, Accessed 14 August 2003)

In the Australian context however, 'joint custody' commonly refers to joint *physical* residence. Parkinson (2003, p. 17) notes further confusion between the American and Australian family law systems which inform some Australian advocates' mistaken claim that joint custody operates widely in the US[42]

The changes in the *Family Law Reform Act* 1995 did away with the language of 'custody' and 'access', replacing them with 'residence' and 'contact' respectively. But the old terminology persists in media accounts, among family court staff and among the general public (Rhoades *et al.* 2002, p. 3). Its use in the current government inquiry is old-fashioned, inaccurate, and misleading (Rodgers 2003, p. 2; Parkinson 2003, p. 16). Nevertheless, this discussion will use interchangeably the terms 'custody' or 'residence', and 'access' or 'contact', to reflect both the terms of the inquiry and contemporary legal language.

The proposed presumption of joint residence will, ostensibly, enhance shared parenting of children after divorce and separation, a goal with which few could argue. However, in practice it is likely that the changes will do little to encourage shared parenting and may even threaten the safety and well-being of some family members.

Legal endorsement of shared parenting

The first problem with the proposed rebuttable presumption of joint custody is that it is unnecessary: there are no formal legal obstacles to parents sharing the care of children after separation and divorce. Family law in Australia already endorses the principle of shared parenting, stressing that children have the right to know and be cared for by both their parents and that parents are jointly responsible for their children. Separating parents can make arrangements for shared residence, and small numbers do. Situations where fathers do not see their children after divorce are far less often the product of a Family Court order and far more often the reflection of patterns of parenting prior to divorce and decisions by the parents themselves (Family Court of Australia 1999; Pease 2002, p. 36). Research into the operation of the *Family Law Reform Act* 1995 finds that parents who share parenting did so without legal assistance, had voluntarily agreed to the arrangement, had a history of co-operation, and men had taken an active caregiving role (Rhoades *et al.* 2002, pp. 1-2).

The Australian proposal for a presumption of joint physical custody of children based on equal time with each parent has been tried elsewhere in the world only rarely. Parkinson (2003, p. 17) suggests that 'there is not a single jurisdiction in the world which has a *presumption* in favour of equal time arrangements.' The Families, Law and Social Policy Research Centre (2003, p. 4) submission to the custody inquiry describes only two states in the US where a presumption of joint physical custody exists, and notes that there is no evidence yet as to the impact on children's wellbeing.

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[42] A joint custody order in America generally indicates only that both parents will continue to have substantial involvement in children's lives, and in most cases one parent is still designated as the primary caregiver. Even orders for joint *physical* custody in the US do not necessarily provide for an equal time arrangement: if a non-resident parent has the child stay for at least 30 per cent of nights, then this is classified as 'shared parenting' or 'joint physical custody' (Parkinson 2003, p. 17).

Of all couples who separate, 50 per cent go to the Family Court to settle property or child issues or both with only five per cent of couples proceeding to a final defended hearing decided by a judge (Family Court of Australia 1999). Couples commonly settle on parenting arrangements through alternative channels, and residency arrangements are reached most commonly by agreement between parents without a legal determination. Thus the proposed amendment applies only to a minority of couples who are unable to reach an agreement over parenting.

When sharing parenting is difficult

The second problem with the proposed rebuttable presumption of joint custody is that the parents to whom it applies are least able to set up shared parenting arrangements. Those who reach the courtroom are often experiencing the most intractable and bitter conflicts, face issues of violence and abuse, and are the least likely to be in a position to share residence and parenting of their children.

Many separated and divorced families simply do not have the capacity to establish and maintain equal time shared care. Parents who have set up shared parenting arrangements after separation and divorce are a relatively small and select group, with particular characteristics and resources. Shared care after separation is rare in Australia: only three per cent of children residing in one-parent households are in shared care arrangements where the other parent plays a major caring role (ABS 1999b, p. 28). Studies among separated couples who have set up joint (physical) custody arrangements find that a cooperative and smoothly running co-parenting relationship is critical to their success. Such parents are motivated to sustain a child-centred orientation to parenting. They focus on the children's needs, contain their own anger and hostility, respect the other parent's privacy and autonomy, and are flexible and accommodating (AIFS 2003, pp. 15-17; Families, Law and Social Policy Research Centre 2003, pp. 1-3).

Separated mothers and fathers who have established arrangements of shared parenting typically have made mutual decisions to end the relationship and to choose shared parenting. They have higher-than-average incomes, the ability to set up two households that can work as residences for the children, and access to family-friendly workplaces. As the AIFS (2003, p. 17) submission summarises,

> Socio-economic resources (as reflected in education, home ownership, and mothers' income and employment) thus appears to be a critical facilitator of shared parenting arrangements.

Yet separation often represents a financial crisis. A significant minority of families have their assets tied up in the family home and superannuation, have substantial debts, and simply do not possess the material resources to establish a shared care arrangement (Families, Law and Social Policy Research Centre 2003, pp. 2-3). Separated parents in shared care are also more likely to live near each other and less likely to have re-partnered, and such arrangements are more likely with children aged five to 11 than with younger or older children (AIFS 2003, pp. 17-18).

Shared parenting is 'logistically complex' and places great demands on parents, both personally and materially (AIFS 2003, p. 23). A rebuttable presumption of joint

physical custody 'would make shared-care the default parenting arrangement post-separation and divorce – causing considerable hardship for parents and children who lack the capacity to sustain it' (Families, Law and Social Policy Research Centre 2003, p. 1). As the HREOC (2003, p. 12) submission emphasises, 'Successful shared parenting cannot be legislated and joint residence arrangements work best when they are by consent not coercion.'

A second reason that the cooperative relationship required for shared parenting is likely to be beyond many parents, at least in the short-term, is the presence of conflict and violence. Separation and divorce also represent interpersonal crises, and a significant proportion of separating partners experience violence (Families, Law and Social Policy Research Centre 2003, p. 2). From a national random sample in Australia, 30 per cent of divorced women and five per cent of divorced men report having been the victim of severe and ongoing violence during the marriage and/or after separation. And a majority (65 per cent of women and 55 per cent of men) report experiencing some form of physically abusive or threatening behaviour (Families, Law and Social Policy Research Centre 2003, p. 2).

While a rebuttable presumption of joint residence after separation is the goal of many fathers' rights groups, its imposition in fact may be unfair for many fathers. Some fathers 'view their parental responsibilities as being predominantly met by financially providing for their families' (HREOC 2003, p. 15). A presumption of 50:50 shared care after separation may place unfair pressure on fathers to enter into working arrangements they do not desire, and may encourage the perception that fathers who focus on financial provision for their children rather than shared care are inadequate or less worthy parents (HREOC 2003, pp. 15-16).

One size doesn't fit all

The third problem with rebuttable presumption of joint custody lies precisely in the fact that it is a *presumption*. The best interests of the child, a key principle in family law, would be compromised by *any* presumption of a specific type of custody arrangement. A 'one-size-fits-all' law would undermine the ability and authority of families to develop parenting arrangements which reflect parenting capacities, work arrangements, location and housing according to the best interests of the child (ACOSS 2003, p. 4; HREOC 2003, p. 12). As the submission to the joint custody inquiry by the Families, Law and Social Policy Research Centre (2003, p. 3) stresses, a 'child focused parenting model must be sensitive and flexible, not rigid and imposed by law'. Parents should be able to change arrangements at different times to suit children's needs at particular ages or in particular circumstances. The presumption of a particular parenting arrangement is excessively prescriptive and would impede the flexibility that separated parents require.

Reviews of the evidence on sole and joint custody do not find that any particular post-separation parenting arrangement is more advantageous than another for children (AIFS 2003, p. 15). Certainly, after separation and divorce the equal participation of fathers and mothers in parenting is the ideal. The research evidence suggests that, 'the best interests of children post-divorce are best served when children can maintain ongoing and frequent contact with both parents who co-operate and communicate with low levels of conflict.' (AIFS 2003, p. 25) This finding does not mean that joint physical

custody is necessarily the best arrangement for children's well-being. A review of the evidence

> does not reveal any particular post-divorce residential schedule to be the most beneficial for children… [T]he weight of evidence does not support the view that higher levels of child-nonresidential father contact are automatically or always beneficial to children. (Lye 1999, pp. 4-14 – 4-17).

For example, the relationship between post-divorce parenting and children's well-being is complicated by the levels of conflict between parents and non-residential parents' payment of child support (Lye 1999, pp. 4-17 – 4-19). Given such findings, ''One size fits all' approaches, such as legal presumptions in favor of certain specified arrangements, are likely to be harmful to some families' (Lye 1999, p. 4-20).

See you in court

In addition to making it harder for parents to negotiate alternative agreements, the introduction of a presumption of joint custody is likely to increase the use of litigation to rebut the presumption (Families, Law and Social Policy Research Centre 2003, p. 4). The Australian Institute of Family Studies submission to the joint custody inquiry notes that this would be in contradiction to the family law principle that the use of non-adversarial dispute resolution processes to resolve children's matters be a priority (AIFS 2003, p. 3).

Increased litigation would stretch the resources of the Courts and create pressure on governments to increase funding. Furthermore, any increase in family law litigation would affect demand for legal aid. Such aid is already scarce, and more litigants would be forced to represent themselves, compromising their ability to pursue their cases effectively (Families, Law and Social Policy Research Centre 2003, pp. 4-5).

Compromising safety

Finally, a legal presumption of joint custody is likely to expose women, children and men to higher levels of violence. The belief that the proposed changes to family law will place victims of family violence and child abuse at further risk of harm is shared among a range of family law, fathering and domestic violence agencies in their submissions to the joint custody inquiry (CANFACS 2003, p. 7; Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre 2003, pp. 5-6; Families, Law and Social Policy Research Centre 2003, p. 5). It was also echoed in recent comments by the Family Court's Chief Justice Alastair Nicholson (Crabb 2003).

The proposed legislation is based on a notion of presumed shared residency. This means that separated parents would be required to prove why shared residency should not occur in cases where an ex-partner has been or continues to be violent. This arrangement would be at odds with measures being taken in Australia and overseas to work from a presumption of no contact for a perpetrator of violence (Kaye *et al.* 2003, p. 149). Women or men subject to violence in relationships may be further discouraged from leaving the relationship for fear of their children's safety should joint residency be enforced (Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre 2003, p. 5). Most victims of

domestic violence do not report it, and may find it difficult to demonstrate clearly why a perpetrator should not have shared residency of children. The legal presumption is likely to create further avenues through which perpetrators of domestic violence can threaten and harass ex-partners and children (CANFACS 2003, p. 7; Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre 2003, p. 7).

These possibilities are particularly troubling given that there are already cases where the practice of family law privileges parental contact with children over children's safety. In recent years, the workings of family law have given weight to children's ongoing contact with both parents even in cases where there is clear evidence that one parent is perpetrating violence against the other partner or against a child (Kaye *et al.* 2003, p. 149). Instead, priority should continue to be given to determining what is in the best interests of the child in deciding residence and contact arrangements for the children of separated parents (ACOSS 2003, p. 4; CANFACS 2003, p. 7; Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre 2003, p. 10).

4.5 Progress or regress?

The new politics of fatherlessness has the potential to enhance men's positive involvement in parenting and families. With family politics and family values debate now focusing on fathers, there may be more room to change narrow and oppressive definitions of fatherhood and masculinity (Stacey 1998, p. 55). The belief that it is desirable for men to play an active role in parenting is shared across the fathers' rights movement and feminism (Cornell 1998, pp. 185-186). Yet there are deep divisions between the fathers' rights movement and feminism over what this means and over families and parenting more broadly.

Early 'second-wave' feminism argued for breaking down sexual divisions of labour in both the home and paid work. Feminists called for women's and men's shared parenting, as well as shorter and more flexible working days, parental leave, and the public provision of child care. In other words, they imagined 'creating the material conditions in which opportunities would exist for men and women to care equally' (Williams 1998, p. 80). But in contrast to feminist interest in dissolving the rigidity and inequality of traditional gender divisions in families, the fathers' rights movements typically insist on rigid gender codes within the family and the re-establishment of paternal authority (Cornell 1998, p. 185; Stacey 1998, p. 56). In the writing of prominent fathers' advocate Wade Horn for example, there is a scornful rejection of the 'New Father ideal' in which men adopt nurturant forms of parenting involvement (Stacey 1998, p. 57).

According to Cornell (1998, p. 187), the fathers' rights movement does *not* aim to encourage men to parent. Instead, it wants men to *father*. To be a father is to have paternal authority in a family structured by rigid gender divides. It is for men to be kings in their domains of the family, reminiscent of the saying, 'A man's home is his castle'.

The gulf between the fathers' rights movements and feminism is constituted not only by these diametrically opposed visions of ideal family relations, but also by the perception

of fathers' movements that women and feminism are the causes of fatherlessness. As Stacey (1998, pp. 55-56) notes:

> Much talk about fatherlessness portrays feminism as leading women selfishly to deny children the benefits of paternal investment - by choosing to have children outside of marriage and even outside of heterosexual coupling; by deserting or ejecting husbands and fathers they deem unsatisfactory and then taking unfair advantage of maternal child custody preferences; or, alternatively, by driving men away from marriage and paternity through the unreasonable, excessive demand that men embrace a 'new fatherhood' whose responsibilities strike many as uncomfortably similar to those of motherhood.

While in contemporary discussions of fatherlessness there is positive potential, it has yet to be realised. Promoting fathers' positive involvement with children is a laudable goal. But it will not be achieved by ill-considered changes in family law. If a rebuttable presumption of joint custody is neither an appropriate nor effective way to effect this goal, what is?

5. Promoting the positive role of fathers

Promoting fathers' involvement with their children is part of building healthier families and healthier communities. Fathers' active participation in parenting is desirable not because mothers are inadequate, nor because fathers bring something unique to parenting, nor even because every family must have a father at its head. Instead, fathers' participation is desirable because fathers, like mothers and other parenting figures, can and do make valuable contributions to the emotional, material and social well-being of children and families.

The proposed rebuttable presumption of joint custody in family law has been framed by some advocates as a means of increasing fathers' participation in parenting after separation. This paper has already argued that the lack of such a legal presumption is not a significant barrier to men's involvement in post-divorce fathering. In fact, the most important obstacle to fathers' parenting after separation is the absence of fathers' parenting *before* separation. At the point of relationship dissolution, many fathers 'have not established patterns of shared care, nor do they necessarily have the kind of relationships with their children that allow a smooth transition to a significant caring role' (HREOC 2003, p. 12). Given this, it is mothers who are often nominated as the primary carer. Thus, the best way to increase fathers' participation in parenting after separation is to promote greater involvement in parenting by fathers in couple families. Sharing care of children in couple families is desirable in itself, and will also lead to greater sharing of the care of children of separated parents.

A five-point strategy with which to promote the positive role of fathers is outlined below. This strategy is applicable to fathers in a variety of parenting situations, whether in couple families, after divorce, as primary carers or in other situations. In other words, while joint custody proposals focus on parenting after divorce and separation, this five-point strategy addresses parenting in this *and* other contexts. The discussion outlines the policy barriers, practical disincentives and social obstacles which limit men's involvement in parenting, and offers strategies in response to each.

5.1 Establish father-friendly workplace practices and cultures

Shifting the practices and cultures of the workplace and their interrelationships with gender will make the most difference to men's opportunities for fathering. Public discussions of work and family so far have focused on the impact of women's workforce participation on children, but there has been little attention to the impact of men's workforce participation (Hand and Lewis 2002, p. 26). Yet in most families with children, both mothers and fathers are in paid work. In June 1999, in 59 per cent of Australian couple families with children aged less than 15 years, both parents worked in the labour force (Weston *et al.* 2001, p. 19). In June 2003, 84 per cent of husbands or partners with children under 15 years were employed full-time and six per cent were employed part-time (ABS 2003).

While there is a growing awareness of family-friendly workplace policies, hours spent working in fact have become *less* family-friendly, with an increase in the hours of full-time workers, especially among men (Weston *et al.* 2002, p. 19). Other workplace trends are further limiting women's and men's parenting opportunities, increasing

pressure on families and making it harder to maintain quality intimate relationships, including job insecurity, working at unsocial times, frequent short-term travel and expectations about 24-hour availability (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 1-2). On the other hand, a small number of organisations and workplaces in Australia have adopted innovative work-family practices, and family-friendly provisions are an increasing aspect of certified agreements and Australian workplace agreements (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 27-37).

Fathers in Australia perceive the major barrier to their involvement in parenting to be their involvement in paid work. A national survey by Russell *et al.* (1999) found that fathers on average would prefer to work ten hours fewer per week than they currently do. They experience more difficulty in balancing work and family lives than do their employed female partners, and they report lower levels of support from their workplaces (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 35-36). A more recent study further documents the ways in which fathers' paid work constrains their ability to spend time with their children. Fathers spoke of the demands of establishing and maintaining a career, the need to work longer hours for financial reasons, and the perception that their workplaces or working conditions do not support them in taking time out for their families (Hand and Lewis 2002, pp. 28-29). Many fathers are committed to their careers, but resent the fact that their employers expect them to choose between work and family. In addition, the stresses of work affect their abilities to be a good parent.

Significant numbers of fathers have tried to change their involvements in paid work to find time for parenting and family. Russell *et al.* (1999, p. 36) report that 64 per cent of fathers surveyed had made changes in their work life in the last five years to improve the quality of their personal or family life, including reducing their hours, increasing their work flexibility or changing to less demanding jobs. Other studies find that some fathers adjust their hours, move away from shift work, or take advantage of workplace flexibility and family-friendly policies (Hand and Lewis 2002, pp. 28-29). Another study of dual-earner couples documents the use of three strategies; placing limits on careers, having a one-job one-career marriage, and trading off. However, women are far more likely than men to use one strategy for finding time for parenting, that of leaving the work force. This strategy is not always possible or desirable for fathers because of their enjoyment of paid work, financial constraints, or feeling compelled to fulfil a traditional male breadwinner role (Hand and Lewis 2002, p. 28). In addition, only 30 per cent of employed fathers (in June 2002) with children aged under 12 years made use of family-friendly work arrangements to care for their children, up from 24 per cent in 1993 (ABS 2003).

Unequal parenting in heterosexual couples, where the mother does most, is the 'path of least resistance' for many parents. Fathers and mothers assess their relative earnings, and make pragmatic decisions that the mother will work part-time or take time off while the father will continue to do paid work. Such decisions make most sense in a labour market distinguished by persistent gender inequality. The paid labour market is still characterised by both horizontal and vertical segmentation by gender (Heiler *et al.*

1999).[43] Women's employment is concentrated in lower status and poorer paid industries, and within any one sector men dominate managerial, administrative and executive positions. In a context where men are typically paid more than women and are more likely to be in jobs with rigid and demanding working weeks, fathers and mothers end up reproducing such patterns of gender inequality in their individual decisions about parenting.

Women's rates of labour force participation are affected more than men's by the presence of children. In June 1999, of wives with children under 15 years old, 61 per cent were in the labour force as opposed to 94 per cent of husbands. The same holds for single parents, with 52 per cent of sole mothers and 65 per cent of sole fathers in the labour force (Weston *et al.* 2001, p. 19). Thus for men to be equal parents, they must overcome or reverse both the costs and benefits which lead to maternal primacy in parenting (Gerson 1997, p. 46).

There has been little research on the effects of fathers' employment demands on children. But a recent Australian study found that long and 'unreasonable' hours meant that working parents, fathers included, went days without seeing their children and missed key events in their lives.[44] Fathers' work hours and job stress also can have an indirect negative effect by increasing the burden of child rearing shouldered by mothers. A recent American study found that job-related variables among fathers such as job satisfaction, negative mood and job-related tension impacted on fathers' authoritative parenting, which in turn affected children's behaviour such as school achievement, acting out and shyness (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 17-18).

More is known about the impact of workplace demands on intimate relationships. This is a key issue for the question of fathering in two ways. First, men's intimate relationships with women are often the context for men's fathering and a critical mediator of the nature and quality of that fathering. Second, to the extent that men's intimate relationships with women break down, the outcomes of separation and divorce have a profound influence on men's parenting. The evidence is that workplace demands have a pivotal impact on the quality of intimate relationships. Work/family conflict, unsociable hours (such as in shift work), and other work-related stresses are associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction, reduced marital quality and a higher likelihood of divorce (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 24-25). Workplace demands make it harder for couples to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts and sustain their relationships.

Evidence that men's participation in paid work is critical in shaping their fathering opportunities and commitments also comes from research into the paths through which men become involved fathers. Gerson (1997) finds that men's adult experiences and opportunities influence both the *desire* to be an involved father and the *ability* to fulfil that desire. Three social conditions are especially important in nourishing men's interest

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[43] Also see; 'Women (not) on top,' *The Australian*, 26-27 April 2003. 'Boardroom still a man's world where connections are crucial,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 January 2001; 'Still more toys for boys in top jobs,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 May 2000.

[44] 'Culture of work, stress and no play,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 September 2001.

in and commitment to caring for children (although only some such men will become equal parents). One of these is where a man's paid work provides or generates space for other avenues of personal fulfilment and expression, in two contrasting ways. Men faced with limiting and frustrated work opportunities may look for other sources of fulfilment and meaning. And men may opt for more intrinsically satisfying work rather than more highly paid jobs, choosing time over money (Gerson 1997, pp. 41-42). In every case of men's equal parenting Gerson studied, she found at least one of three circumstances present, and one key circumstance was the option to choose flexible work arrangements. Men were more likely to be involved fathers if they had the flexibility and autonomy at work to create time and space for parenting (Gerson 1997, p. 47).

At a personal level, two other experiences help build men's commitment to caring for children. One is becoming committed to an egalitarian relationship, particularly where the female partner has strong ties for example to work outside the home. For some men in this situation, involved fathering also comes to represent a moral commitment to fairness and gender justice. Another is having opportunities to develop satisfying relationships with children. Men who have early and intensive involvement in nurturing their own or other people's children are more likely to discover parenting skills and to seek ways in which to express them (Gerson 1997, pp. 41-43). Of the three circumstances noted by Gerson in cases of men's equal involvement in shared parenting, the other two comprised the mother's work commitments (including having even better work opportunities than the father), *and* her offer of economic and emotional support for the father's involvement (Gerson 1997, p. 46).

It is clear that two institutional strategies have the potential to make a significant difference to men's parenting opportunities. The first is to create more flexible workplaces free of penalties for involved parents of either sex. Contemporary thinking on family-friendly policies suggests that they must be guided by flexibility, and may include 'flexible hours such as control over start and finish times, flexi-time, regular part-time work, allowing workers to work total weekly hours and creative solutions to *ad hoc* family needs' (Russell and Bowman 2000, p. 27). Other family-friendly policies include:

> [R]elocation assistance, child care (centres and referral, emergency), family support (youth clubs, family leave, parenting seminars, respite care for people who have family members with disabilities), care for dependent adults (elder care resource and referral services), flexible work and leave arrangements (flexible hours, flexible working year, career breaks, job-sharing, permanent part-time work, home based work), [and] other family-friendly measures (flexible salary packages, work and family information) (Russell and Bowman 2000, p. 28).

Further innovative strategies adopted by Australian companies include challenges to the culture of long hours at work, campaigns such as 'Go Home on Time Days', and encouragement to work smarter not harder.

Swedish research finds that in the organisations most supportive of men taking parental leave, leadership comes from the top, from younger male managers who are fathers and older men concerned that younger men should have more contact with their children

than they themselves had. Innovative organisations have recognised the benefits both to employees and business of addressing work and family issues, and have considered work practices and organisational culture in making change (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 33-34). There is a growing consensus in the work-family literature that real advances can only be achieved through altering the culture and structure of the workplace. A detailed Australian case study documents that change is facilitated by high-level endorsement, integration with business, addressing barriers such as traditional assumptions about gender roles, using research and data collection, involving employees at every stage, and including the full range of issues at stake (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 35-37).

The second institutional strategy with the potential to boost men's parenting opportunities is the promotion of equal economic opportunities for women (Gerson 1997, p. 51). Several Australian organisations have aligned their work/family strategies with other efforts aimed at enhancing gender equity, such as reducing hierarchical and occupational segregation, improving pay equity, running awareness programs for management and adopting affirmative action programs, and this has been especially effective (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 32-33).

Some fatherhood advocates are ostensibly committed to increasing fathers' involvement in parenting but they undermine this by arguing for actually reducing women's economic opportunities. In the National Fatherhood Forum's '12 Point Plan', released in June 2003 at Parliament House, one point stresses the need 'to reassess the relevance of outdated affirmative action policies and consider a return to merit based selection where only the best person for the job is offered employment'. This statement demonstrates a misunderstanding of affirmative action, given that its aim is to enhance merit-based selection rather than contradict it. But if this strategy succeeded in limiting women's participation in the (paid) labour force, it would also limit men's participation in parenting. Similarly, in a December 2002 press release, the Shared Parenting Council of Australia (a coalition of fathers' rights, family law and church groups) rejected recommendations for paid maternity leave put forward by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward, describing them as 'discriminating against single income (male provided) families'.[45] Genuine advocates for involved fatherhood should be lobbying for further efforts to improve women's economic opportunities, not arguing for winding them back.

Recognising that employees also live in wider communities, Russell and Bowman (2000, pp. 28-40) emphasise that communities too must be family-friendly. Too many everyday services and institutions continue to act as if all families have a full-time homemaker present. Workplace strategies will be limited unless they are complemented by community resources in such areas as child care and elder care, school based after-school programs and counselling, and activities for youth.

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[45] Shared Parenting Council (2002) Maternity Leave Proposal by Sex Discrimination Commissioner – A Blatant Act of 'Sex Discrimination'. Media Release, 11 December.

5.2 Remove policy barriers to shared care

Family policy in Australia currently discourages shared care of children both in couple families and between separated parents. Current policies reward a homemaker/breadwinner split in couple families, and penalise single-parent families which share care of the child with the other parent (National Council of Single Mothers and their Children 2003). Changing such policies therefore is a second important means of increasing fathers' involvement in their children's lives.[46]

There are at least three ways in which family policy acts as a disincentive to fathers' shared parenting with mothers. The first concerns family support policies associated with the Baby Bonus and Family Tax Benefit, which penalise couple families with young children if both parents are in the paid workforce. The penalties are summarised by the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children in response to a question on notice at the Adelaide hearings of the inquiry into child custody arrangements;

> Currently the Baby Bonus and Family Tax Benefit B provide the highest returns to single-income couple families with children aged 0-5. The withdrawal rates of these two payments are so high if both parents undertake paid work that the family loses money unless both parents are high income earners. The practical effect of the eligibility criteria for the Baby Bonus and FTB B is to force one parent to work longer hours to increase family income, in preference to sharing the earnings activity with the other parent. In most families it is fathers who stay in the workforce because they usually attract a higher hourly rate of pay and can pursue higher earning career options compared to mothers. Mothers' withdrawal from paid work to give birth and their role in breastfeeding also tends to establish patterns of maternal care for children, which when combined with the financial penalties of current family support payments if they return to work, tend to underpin a pattern of lower father involvement in direct care provision. (National Council of Single Mothers and their Children 2003, p. 4)

Instead, family support policies should foster parents' choices regarding involvements in parenting and paid work by offering the same level of financial support to couple families within similar income levels regardless of how earning and parenting work is divided between parents.

Second, single parents are discouraged from sharing care of their child(ren) under current Family Tax Benefit (FTB) arrangements. If a heterosexual couple with children have separated and try to share care of the children, the children effectively live in two households. Both households have costs associated with that care, resulting in an overall cost that is higher than that for a single household with children. Yet FTB payments are divided proportionately across households, thus not acknowledging this higher cost. The

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[46] For reasons of space, this discussion addresses only three key policy obstacles to shared parenting, and does not consider further questions regarding the operations for example of policies of child residence and contact.

National Council of Single Mothers and their Children (2003, p. 4) recommends increasing FTB as follows:

> The costs of sharing care indicate a need for a 20 per cent increase in FTB payments for children in each household. When care is between 30-70 per cent in each household, payment rates for Family Tax Benefit A and B should be increased by 40 per cent overall for each child and proportionately distributed to reflect the limits on parental earnings, and the higher needs of the child and costs of providing care across two households. Parents providing 70-100% care are typically meeting ongoing costs, such as education, health, clothing and recreation needs, for the child and should receive 100% of FTB payments, whilst low-income contact parents with 10-29% care should be able to claim a Contact Allowance to meet the costs of contact. This would increase the adequacy of family support and reduce parental conflict when children live across two households.

A further discouragement to shared parenting by separated couples is represented by income support policies. At present, the Parenting Payment can only be claimed by one parent of a child while the other parent is forced to claim Newstart. Newstart is a smaller payment, is reduced more quickly as earnings increase, and involves a high level of mutual obligation activities and a harsher compliance regime. Sole parents on Newstart are forced to comply with onerous requirements, and if they cannot cope with both these and the demands of parenting they may be 'breached' and subject to severe penalties. In other words, the conditions of Newstart are inconsistent with the care needs of children. In an income support system more supportive of shared parenting, parents providing substantial care to children (for example at 40 per cent or more of the child's care) would be able to claim a Parenting Payment, as both the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children (2003) and ACOSS (2003, p. 8) recommend.

5.3 Support fathers through family and parenting services

Family-related services, including antenatal and postnatal services, community-based services for families with children, and early childhood education services, have an important role to play in fostering fathers' involvement in families. Among agencies that provide support to families with children, there is general attitudinal support for fathers' involvement. However, fathers are a tiny minority of the parents who access such services, and thus far there has not been a sustained or systematic effort among family services to engage men. Writing in 1999, Russell *et al.* noted that the majority of programs and services targeting fathers have been small-scale, locally initiated and lack a broad policy base and funding. Nevertheless, among community and government agencies there is growing commitment to providing and improving services for men and fathers. Father-specific and father-inclusive programs and content are emerging within organisations, there is increasing knowledge and experience regarding how to effectively engage fathers, and interagency collaborations to improve services and access for fathers are beginning to develop (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. viii-ix).

Dedicated funding and policy support are necessary to facilitate service provision to fathers. A survey of agencies conducted by Russell *et al.* in 1999 found that only minimal and unstable levels of funding are available for services or programs including

fathers, and few health and welfare agencies receive dedicated funding targeting fathers. Moreover, some agencies already struggle to meet adequately the existing needs of mothers, or are concerned about father-oriented services being funded at the expense of those for mothers. In supporting fathers through family and parenting services, one priority therefore is a policy-oriented one, the provision to fathers of stable and dedicated funding for service provision which has proven to be effective (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 105-106).

A recent New South Wales study by Fletcher (2001) documents the barriers that inhibit fathers and male carers from accessing family-related support services. The study included a survey of such services in the Hunter Valley. Out of 82 services invited, 36 agencies responded and while the majority offered services for fathers and male carers, only five per cent of their total service users were men. At present, fathers are unlikely to utilise family-related services. This finding accords with other research on men's under-utilisation of neighbourhood and community centres and health services. However, 13 agencies in the Hunter Valley study had implemented strategies to improve accessibility and/or increase uptake by fathers and male carers, and six agencies offered specific services for fathers or male carers. In addition, surveys of new fathers who had attended antenatal classes found that these were beneficial and effective (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, p. 32).

How can family-related services increase fathers' access to parenting support and involvement in services? First, the activities, atmosphere and staffing of family-related agencies must be father-friendly. One barrier to fathers' involvement is their invisibility. Examinations by services of the needs of families or parents may focus solely on mothers, implying that fathers' roles are unimportant or irrelevant.[47] Health professionals, educators and agency staff can sometimes be ambivalent about increasing fathers' involvement, unaware of fathers' positive influence on child development, suspicious of men around children, and possessed of traditional views on the role of men in families. Another barrier is lack of knowledge. Staff should be aware of the issues men face during the antenatal to postnatal period and be sensitive to gendered differences in parenting styles. Little is known about the role and experience of fathers during their partners' labour and childbirth, although existing research documents some men's feelings of anxiety, helplessness and confusion. Service language should be inclusive rather than solely mother-centered (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, pp. 5-14).

Second, family-related services should actively promote the involvement of fathers. For example, American hospital-based classes titled 'Boot Camps for New Dads' teach both practical and theoretical baby care to expectant fathers. Services can provide opportunities for men to relate to other men, for example through contact with more experienced fathers and men who are comfortable in nurturant roles with children. The literature suggests that male-only programs and sessions can help, although surveys among men themselves find that they do not seem to prefer these. Another hindrance to be addressed with respect to fathers' involvement is the absence of information and

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[47] Regional and state policies and procedures can embody the same assumption, for example in collecting health data focused on mothers while ignoring fathers (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, pp. 34-35).

resource materials, with few items offering parenting information to men or encouraging their greater involvement with their children (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, pp. 6-9).

Third, family-related services should develop forms of service delivery which are effective in engaging fathers. Fletcher, Siberberg, and Baxter (2001, p. 38) call for developing the capacity of family-related services to utilise male staff and volunteers in the engagement of fathers. The effectiveness of this strategy is demonstrated in surveys of those attending male-only 'Fathertime' sessions as part of antenatal classes. But given that female staff are likely to continue to provide the majority of services to males within families, all staff need skill at engaging male clients. Antenatal and parenting education should go beyond a focus on the medical issues associated with childbirth to address changes to the couple's relationship and lifestyle brought about by new parenting. It should explore issues of particular importance to fathers (and mothers), such as the place of paid work and careers, work choices, the expectations of men in families, and fathers' postnatal depression. Child care and parenting classes should be timed so that fathers can attend, and some could involve experienced fathers as educators. Agencies' home visits can be expanded to address fathers as well as mothers (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, pp. 10-18).

Forms of father-inclusive practice and culture are starting to develop among some agencies, according to the audit conducted by Russell *et al.* (1999). This study notes that in developing strategies to access and engage fathers, the assumptions of practitioners can make a significant difference. According to services themselves, their engagement with fathers has been improved by practitioners adopting a range of assumptions including a 'strengths' rather than 'deficit' approach to men as parents, recognising a diversity of fathering, assuming that fathers can be competent and deeply caring parents, and emphasising to fathers the benefits to children and themselves (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 98-99). Agencies that actively engage fathers are also re-working their organisational assumptions and developing new models of practice, emphasising that fathers are welcome, reaching out to men through workplaces and other contexts, and building innovative alliances with other services.

Fathers' under-utilisation of family services is likely to be shaped by factors other than those services themselves. While there is little data on or investigation of men's use of support services, the Hunter Valley study finds that some fathers do not participate in antenatal classes because of a perception that it is the mother's role, their own embarrassment, clashes with paid work, and masculine beliefs in self-sufficiency (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, pp. 11-12). This discussion has already identified work and policy barriers to fathers' involvement in families, but further barriers are constituted by widespread attitudes and understandings, among fathers, mothers and others who can make a difference to fathers' involvement.

5.4 Address cultural obstacles to paternal involvement.

Common cultural norms in Australian society, in tandem with the local cultures of men's workplaces, interpersonal relations, leisure circles and families, can act as powerful obstacles to men's involvement in parenting. This discussion identifies four key cultural obstacles: a culture of work and materialism; the absence of a culture of fatherhood; a culture of maternalism; and suspicion towards fathers. It is important to

note that many men have managed, despite these obstacles, to create and sustain an experience of involved fathering.

A culture of work and materialism

A recent text on fathering edited by Hawkins and Dollahite (1997, pp. xiii-ix) aims to explore and encourage 'generative fathering', fathering that meets the needs of the next generation across time and context, where generativity refers to caring for and contributing to the life of the next generation. Yet for these and other fatherhood scholars, our cultural environment is nongenerative. Ours is 'a culture wherein accomplishment, status, and material acquisition are hegemonic and care for children and family, the primary developmental tasks of adulthood, are subordinate' (Dienhart and Daly 1997, p. 147). Such cultural values are unsupportive of men in their parenting work. There is a paradox in our culture between the ideological exaltation of family and an intensifying work ethos (Dienhart and Daly 1997, pp. 147-149). The material barriers which economic and labour arrangements represent to shared parenting and fathers' involvement, identified in Section 5.1, are complemented and sustained by cultural constructions of work and identity. Given gendered patterns of workforce participation in which men dominate higher pay and higher status positions, a culture of work and materialism is particularly constraining of men's parenting opportunities.

There are powerful interrelationships between work, status and male identity. Many men's identities are closely bound up with paid work, and work is a key way in which they define their value and their worth. Men therefore face internal psychological barriers to taking full advantage of available leave, as well as informal sanctions from male peers. However, while mature manhood was often defined in the 1950s and 1960s in terms of men's roles as breadwinners and providers, these days very few men are the sole providers for their families. In addition, relationships between work and masculinity are more complex. For example, among working-class men in manual jobs, physically demanding and dangerous work can provide a way to affirm one's masculinity, but the typical conditions of such work, the fragmentation of industrial tasks, and the experiences of unemployment and disability can all undermine this as well (Pease 2002, pp. 97-100).

Masculine workplace cultures themselves contribute to the suppression of men's nurturant potential. In corporate management for example, men's (and women's) emotional illiteracy is encouraged by norms of rugged individualism, ruthlessness and aggression (Pease 2002, pp. 100-101). Male workers may bring such habits home, stifling the possibilities for intimacy with partners and children. As far as fathering goes, constructions of the male breadwinner are compatible only with a model of the father as 'distant provider'. Indeed, many men in contemporary Western societies experience a tension between the still dominant discourse of 'father as provider' and an increasingly influential ideal of the emotionally and practically involved father (Collier 2001, p. 531).

The absence of a culture of fatherhood

A second cultural obstacle is represented by both the absence of significant models and the existence of contradictory images of fatherhood. There are few clear images of what

a father should be, and there continue to be 'cultural hold-overs' from older notions, for example of men as breadwinners. Thus some men are torn between providing for the family economically and being with the family as an involved parent (Dienhart and Daly 1997, pp. 154-155). In addition, everyday discussions of fatherhood are quiet in comparison to those of motherhood; men talk only rarely to each other about their day-to-day experiences as fathers and fathering is less of a salient identity for men (Dienhart and Daly 1997, p. 157). Some men find it difficult to be involved parents because of how they think they will be viewed by other men in their kin networks, social networks, and local communities. Men in a Canadian study of couples sharing parenting spoke of their concerns about being seen as 'unmanly' or 'sissies' (Doucet 2001, pp. 171-172).

Some fathers, however, are able to move around or beyond such hindrances. In a qualitative study of 18 couples committed to shared parenting responsibilities and activities (all in a first family with biological children), men spoke of their deliberate commitments to partnership and emphasised cooperation and negotiation. They made conscious choices not to take entitlements to male power and privilege, for example in valuing their partners' opportunity to take up work and other options. They made links between caring for their children and caring for the children's mother. These fathers also dealt with the absence of a culture of fatherhood by dismissing unsupportive responses, sharing experiences of generative fathering only with supportive others, adopting an individualist stance in which 'I don't care what others think', and so on (Dienhart and Daly 1997, pp. 156-158).

A culture of maternalism

The role of mothers in raising children is widely exalted as indispensable and natural. This is a double-edged sword for women though, as its corollary is that mothers are blamed for family troubles (see the discussion of mother-blaming in relation to male role models and the raising of sons in Section 3.4.) The role of fathers on the other hand has been seen as more dispensable. Mothers have a taken-for-granted role in families, while that of fathers is more problematic (Dienhart and Daly 1997, p. 150). In addition, men face difficulties in being involved parents because they are outside the predominantly female networks which surround child rearing (Doucet 2001, pp. 170-171). However, cultural acceptance of the relative unimportance of fathers appears to have diminished in recent decades as evidenced by the widespread rhetoric of the ills of fatherlessness. And in the late 1990s there was a proliferation of fathering networks and support groups for young fathers, single fathers and primary caregiving fathers.

In Dienhart and Daly's (1997) study of families characterised by shared parenting, couples jointly created greater father involvement by accepting and valuing that fathers may do things differently from mothers. Fathers took responsibility for learning parenting skills themselves rather than relying on women to teach them. They were willing to challenge their partner's expertise, while balancing this with respect for their partners' experience and knowledge. In turn, mothers let go of a maternal entitlement to set the standards of parenting. Some mothers found this difficult. They felt relieved of the total responsibility but also displaced, and some experienced guilt and resentment at not necessarily being the first point of contact for their children (Dienhart and Daly 1997, pp. 151-153).

Some women are unwilling to allow their male partners to be directly involved in parenting. Fletcher *et al*. (2001, p. 8) cite a range of studies documenting that some mothers are reluctant to allow fathers to assume greater responsibilities for child care, question men's competence, and resist what they perceive as intrusions into their territory and authority. But this maternal gate keeping does not appear to be a common or significant obstacle to men's involvement as fathers. When asked about the barriers they perceive to being involved as fathers during a national survey of Australian fathers in 1999, only three per cent of respondents identified women such as spouses acting as gatekeepers (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 39).

Suspicion towards fathers

Images of fatherhood have been tainted by the growing awareness of some fathers' sexual abuse of children, as well as their sexual and physical abuse of their partners and ex-partners. Media reports, political activism and community education campaigns have highlighted the harms which some men perpetrate on children (as well as on women and other men). Fletcher and Willoughby (2002, p. 39) go so far as to argue that all this has made 'the risk of harm to children a core feature in the public construction of fatherhood,' such that there is now a 'climate of negativity' surrounding fathers and father-figures. In short, men are under suspicion (Fletcher and Willoughby 2002, p. 38).

This description is exaggerated. Public constructions of fatherhood are shaped at least as much by the widespread assumption that father involvement is positive for children; one could even call this a motherhood statement. In both media and policy accounts, men's and fathers' presence in families, schools, child care centres and elsewhere is taken to be desirable and indeed essential. This is the case even though the research evidence tells a more complicated story about the significance of fatherhood and fatherlessness, as Section 3 attests. At the same time, there is no doubt that some female workers and mothers in early childhood programs are suspicious or distrustful of fathers and male child care staff (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, p. 14). To the degree that men are under suspicion, this suspicion is centred on those who work with children rather than on fathers who care for them. More widely, public attention to child abuse, sexual assault and domestic violence has meant that women and men alike are more open to considering the threat to children posed by some fathers and other men.

The naming and community recognition of child abuse is a significant achievement and ongoing efforts to publicise, respond to and prevent this crime should be supported. This stance is entirely compatible with the rejection of what Fletcher and Willoughby (2002, p. 42) describe as any 'pathologising view of fatherhood as inherently dangerous'. At the same time, the issue of violence must be dealt with directly. At a policy level, it is troubling that agendas aimed at engaging fathers have little or no relation to those aimed at tackling domestic violence, although those individuals who are violent are often fathers and mostly men (Featherstone 2003, p. 248). As Featherstone asks, are they the same fathers whose involvement is to be encouraged, or are they different?

At the coalface at least, there are encouraging signs of an emerging dialogue between those who work with notions of fathers as risks and those who work with notions of fathers as resources (Featherstone 2003, p. 251). In Australia, the UK and elsewhere,

there are some initiatives focused on developing collaborative policies and practices across domestic violence and fatherhood services (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, pp. 14-15). For example, some Australian fathers' services provide crisis accommodation and outreach support services to homeless fathers with accompanying children and to fathers who have regular contact with and care of their children. Where domestic violence issues are involved, they work closely with domestic violence services (as well as other agencies), prioritising the safety of all family members while working with fathers in a sensitive, respectful and accountable manner.

5.5. Foster boys' and men's parenting and relationship skills and commitments

The final strategy in this five-point plan is the most general, addressing men's skills at and interest in caring for children and men's relations with women. Yet making changes in these realms will have practical impacts on men's involvement in parenting.

Why are we surprised that many men are not actively involved in the care of their children, when we tell boys not to play with dolls and punish them if they do? Boys and young men are routinely discouraged from nurturant and care-taking forms of play and activity. Toy companies sell boys 'action figures' bristling with weapons and games centred on aggressive competition (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, pp. 57-58), while girls are encouraged to rock their dolls to sleep or play house. Boys who do adopt stereotypically feminine behaviours are ridiculed and harassed, called 'sissies' or 'wimps', 'girls' or 'gay'.

Such patterns are an aspect of the broader organisation of gender relations. Dominant constructions of masculinity are said to emphasise emotional inexpressiveness as a prerequisite for assuming adult male roles of power whether in marriage or the workplace (Sattel 1992). Masculinity is defined as not-feminine; troublesome emotions which leave a person open and vulnerable to others (such as love and compassion) are represented as feminine, and therefore these qualities are denigrated and avoided in oneself and in other men (Doyle 1989, pp. 148-160). Thus men come to learn and display both emotional incompetence and emotional constipation, to distrust and feel discomfort with women's expression of emotions, and to be psychologically and emotionally isolated (Doyle 1989, p. 158).

Such constructions of gender play themselves out in the typical emotional division of labour and the unequal emotional contract of traditional heterosexual relationships. The female partner provides both emotional and sexual servicing to her male partner and is the primary source of his experience of love, affection and nurturance, and he withholds emotional openness simultaneously while relying on her emotional work (Duncombe and Marsden 1995, p. 246; Hite and Colleran 1989, p. 30; Kaufman 1993, p. 241). Women are more likely than men to stage and perform romantic roles for their partners and themselves, while men are ignorant of or resist such cultural scripts (Duncombe and Marsden 1995).

There is no doubt that men have the same potential as women to establish highly involved and intimate relations with children, to experience the same profound closeness with their children that many parents report. But there are few resources for this potential in dominant constructions of manhood and traditional masculine culture.

Men's roles have not kept pace with changing understandings of the desirability of involved fathering:

> [M]en are often trapped within narrow gender roles that emphasise work and business, money making, public status and success. It remains difficult for men to genuinely embrace home-making and child care without being judged or disapproved of for stepping outside the narrow bounds of masculinity. (HREOC 2003, p. 18)

Fostering fathers' active involvement with children therefore requires cultural change in gender norms. There are immediate and simple ways in which this can be effected, such as offering and promoting parenting classes to men and addressing parenting issues with boys in schools and elsewhere.

Men's positive involvement with children will also be fostered by improving men's relations with *women*. Mothers' and fathers' levels of support for each others' parenting roles, and the quality of the relationship between them, are important influences on fathers' involvement. For example, mothers can support fathers in their role as parents, while fathers can support mothers in their role in employment (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 17-18). Just and egalitarian relations between men and women are the ideal foundations upon which fathers and mothers can negotiate their parenting and work choices.

The evidence is that positive paternal influences are more likely to occur when there is a supportive father-child relationship *and* a positive relationship between the father and mother:

> The absence of hostility is the most consistent correlate of child adjustment, whereas partner conflict is the most consistent and reliable correlate of child maladjustment. (Featherstone 2003, p. 244).

After separation and divorce, the quality of the relationship with the ex-spouse and the degree of conflict are significant predictors of father involvement (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 12).

Men themselves benefit from their involvement in parenting; an equal involvement in child care has rewards for them as well as for women. Among heterosexual couples who share care of children and domestic work, men report being closer to their children, feeling a sense of accomplishment as parents, having a bond with their partner as parents, and valuing the sharing of the economic load (Pease 2002, pp. 92-93). In Coltrane's study of dual-earner couples, the men who genuinely shared parenting described significant personal changes that were brought about by becoming active fathers. Men said they became more sensitive to their children and more competent with them, often learning from their wives how to be nurturing parents (Coltrane 1996, pp. 76-78). Involved fathers rate themselves as more competent than do traditional fathers, and form stronger emotional bonds with both sons and daughters (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 7-9).

There are broader ways in which fatherhood appears to be good for fathers, particularly for fathers who live with their children. Men with co-resident children (either biological, adopted or step-children) participate more in civic and service-oriented organisations

(and participate less in adult socialising) than non-fathers and fathers who do not reside with their children (Eggebeen and Knoester 2001, p. 390). Co-resident fathers are more likely to be involved in intergenerational family relations, and less likely to have had a period of unemployment in the last three years. However, these contrasts between fathers and non-fathers or nonresident fathers may be due to selection effects, rather than the effects of fathering involvement itself (Eggebeen and Knoester 2001, p. 391).

When men are active and positive parents in heterosexual couple families, their relationships with their wives and partners also improve. Although meta-analysis of American studies finds that in general parents report lower marital satisfaction compared with non-parents (Twenge *et al.* 2003, p. 574), at the same time there is evidence that marital relationships improve with men's and women's shared parenting. Among the active fathers in Coltrane's (1996) research, their marital relationships improved as their emotional sensitivity and communication skills developed and as they and their wives sustained a mutual interest in and commitment to parenting. Marital solidarity was also enhanced as both mothers and fathers understood the toll of balancing paid and family work and the hassles and drudgery of daily caretaking. Men who did more child care also did more housework, as they became aware of what it takes to sustain a household (Coltrane 1996, pp. 78-79). Recent research among 200 first-time fathers finds that those who immerse themselves in the pregnancy process are less likely to suffer pre- or postnatal depression, insomnia or anxiety, are likely to have higher levels of sexual satisfaction and better emotional and sexual relationships with their partners.[48] Finally, there is evidence that the more domestic work a husband does, the lower the chances are that his wife has considered divorce (Pease 2002, p. 93, citing Goodnow and Bowes 1994).

Men's healthy relations with women are crucial to the well-being of children and families. This five-point plan offers a way to increase fathers' involvement in families from day one. But if implemented, it also lessens men's risk of undergoing separation and divorce, and it increases the likelihood that men will continue to be involved with their children should these occur.

These five strategies are inter-related and dependent for their success on each other to varying degrees. For example, neither the first strategy of establishing father-friendly workplaces, nor the third strategy of supporting fathers through family and parenting services, will be possible without strong policy support. The strategy of addressing cultural obstacles to paternal involvement, for example by fostering a culture of fathers' and shared parental involvement, will be ineffective if strong financial disincentives to shared parenting continue to be built into family and income support policies. Finally, many men themselves will continue to be unwilling or unable to nurture and care for children if such behaviour is defined as unmanly and if their relations with the mothers of these children are unjust and conflictual.

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[48] 'How dads nurse a happier home.' *The Australian*, 15 October 2003.

6. Conclusion

Fathers in Australia face a real moment of opportunity at present. Shifting social and economic conditions have both intensified the obstacles to, and created new possibilities for, involved fathering. Public images and perceptions of fathers' involvement with children are well ahead of fathers' actual practice but images of the nurturant father symbolise an ideal to which a growing number of men aspire.

Contemporary debates over fatherhood are one aspect of wider and longstanding struggles over families, gender and sexuality. While the research evidence is complex and plagued by disagreement, it does suggest that fatherlessness in and of itself is not the powerful or primary social problem it has been represented to be. Pre-divorce factors, economic insecurity and above all the quality of parenting and family relationships are important mediators of the impact of divorce and separation on children. Fathers' involvement makes a positive difference to children's lives. And it does so less because of some uniquely male quality to fathers' parenting and more because of the fact of that positive parenting itself.
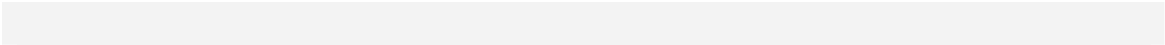
Some men are struggling to find their feet in the wake of a series of profound shifts in gender relations. Many have responded in positive ways, taking up the opportunities represented by the loosening of traditional gender roles. On the other hand, a minority of men (and women) have sought to turn back the clock, to reverse the gains of the women's movements and paint men as the new victims. The proposed rewriting of family law to adopt a rebuttable presumption of joint custody is the most recent expression of this reaction. Certainly parents who go through painful processes of divorce and separation deserve compassionate, constructive and accountable responses. But neither fathers nor mothers are well served by the misdirected strategies and ill-informed analyses of some fathers' rights groups.

There are better ways to support fathers' positive involvement in their children's lives. Fathers' parenting after separation is constrained above all by fathers' absence from parenting *before* separation. Post-divorce patterns of parenting and children's residence reflect pre-divorce patterns of parenting. Strategies to promote men's involvement in families must address the workplace relations, policy barriers, economic disincentives and cultural norms which limit men's involvement in parenting, both before and after separation and divorce.

Five strategies are vital. First, establishing father-friendly workplace practices and cultures will make the most difference to men's opportunities for fathering. Employers, with governmental support, must create more flexible workplaces which do not penalise involved parents of either sex, and must promote equal economic opportunities for women. Second, governments must remove policy barriers which discourage shared care both in couple families and between separated parents. Third, family and parenting services must intensify their efforts to foster fathers' involvement in families, and they require dedicated funding and policy support to do so. Fourth, a culture of positive fathering must be promoted, one that values men's and women's parenting work and celebrates more than single-minded materialism. Finally, changes in gender norms and relations are required. Men's involvement in parenting depends on the encouragement

of boys' and men's parenting and relationship skills and commitments, more diverse notions of manhood, and cooperative and egalitarian relations between men and women in families and elsewhere.

Fathers in Australia face a real moment of opportunity. Shifting social and economic conditions have both intensified the obstacles to, and created new possibilities for, involved fathering. In order to capitalise on this opportunity, however, the Government and the community must adopt a much more sophisticated approach to analysing both the causes and consequences of fatherlessness. Australian fathers need policies that help them connect with their children at all stages of life, not simplistic laws that fail to address the real obstacles to involved fathering.

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