



Dependent on Dad

A Father & Child study on solo fathers with young children

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*“I want to make people understand that I can do a
good job!”*

Solo father of an 18 month old boy

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Contents

1. Executive Summary.....	3
2. Introduction	5
3. Methodology.....	6
4. Results.....	7
4.1. Fathers' Socio-Economic Background	7
4.2. Opinions About Fatherhood and Self-Care	7
4.3. The Parents' Social Environment	10
4.4. The Children	10
4.5. Support Needs.....	13
4.6. Support People and Agencies	14
5. Conclusions	16
6. Recommendations.....	17
7. References	18

1. Executive Summary

Many solo fathers present to the Father & Child Trust as having high social and health needs, and some raise very young children. Yet they appear to be absent from any public discourse on family, parenting and social policy.

The 13 solo fathers in this study were selected from clients of the Father & Child Trust where mother involvement was particularly low (less than a day per week) and children young (eight years or younger) to capture those families where children are very dependent on their parents but support cannot be provided through avenues targeting the mother. As such, solo fathers can be seen as an 'indicator family' when it comes to the effectiveness of the reach of family services, while at the same time they may have some support needs specific to their situation.

The study asked detailed questions from respondents about how they felt as solo dads, what they saw as issues for themselves and their children, where they got their support from and what else would help, and about their own background.

Most of the respondents came from socio-economic backgrounds that have many of the indicators defining an 'at-risk' family: they had a low income, left school early, had low educational achievement, were generally young (24 years on average), tended to come from single-parent homes themselves and have experienced sometimes problematic upbringings, and were more likely to have a criminal conviction. Seven of the 13 fathers had children three years of age or under. The children had also often experienced significant adversity before they came into their fathers' care, which in five cases (38%) occurred after Child Youth and Family intervention.

The fathers were moderately positive about their capability as male solo parents, but a significant proportion was somewhat unhappy with the situation. Half of them 'would not want to be a single dad if there was another way' and the same number felt that their children 'miss out because I don't earn as much money as a father should'. For both these statements fathers with older children (4-8) were significantly unhappier than those with younger ones (0-3).

Work, and hence money, loomed large in the minds of the respondents. 'Helpful employers' ranked second in support needs only to 'more money', and 85% (or 11 dads) believed that it is important to have a good income to provide children with opportunities. This was seen as more important than, for example, a 'mother figure' in the child's life (important for 54%, or seven dads). Overall, the dads were not looking to the government to provide them with an income, and while not thrilled with Inland Revenue or Work & Income they were not particularly unhappy with these agencies either.

The isolation of the fathers and, therefore, their children stood out. All but one father indicated isolation and/or depression and a majority did not engage in social activities such as having children's friends over, going to the library with the children, or parent-helping at school or pre-school. Eight (61%) felt they were 'missing out on a lot of social opportunities'. At the same time many fathers told the interviewer about a significant amount of stress they found themselves under.

But, perhaps staunchly, the dads did not seem to believe that this significantly impacted on the children: seven (54%) thought they got 'enough breaks' from them, all but one believed their children are 'happy', and most fathers did not think their children were not spending enough time with friends or outdoors.

The fathers drew support primarily from their own parents, especially their mothers, perhaps a result of their young average age. The maternal grandmothers also often stayed involved, although their influence was not always seen as helpful. Support persons from the rest of the family mentioned by the fathers tended to be male, which correlated with a finding from the Supporting Kiwi Dads study (Luketina et al, 2009), which indicated that solo fathers are more likely than average to talk to other male family members about fathering.

Solo fathers with children three and under generally rated support needs much higher than those with older children. Overall they seemed more focused on the children and placed a higher value on their role as

caregivers. They were happier to be solo fathers than dads with older children, somewhat less focused on money and more on parenting information. 'Someone to talk to' was identified as one of the most important support needs, well ahead of a support group, which was a more popular option for dads with older children. However, they also felt more supported than the fathers with the older children. Where an early intervention service, such as Early Start, reached them, they felt this was very useful.

The fathers were asked to differentiate how useful a given service was for themselves as opposed to the 'family'. All services were generally considered less useful for fathers than for the family overall, but the difference was small and there was no indication that they were any less effective or appropriate than they would be for mothers. However, ratings were overall quite low. Plunket in particular was not seen as useful for fathers and was the lowest ranking agency for this, even below Child Youth and Family – a disappointing result considering that Plunket nurses are the key referrers for a number of services. Unlike many other professionals – midwives, parent educators or social workers – no Plunket staff was seen to have made a real difference for any particular father or child in this study.

In addition, services targeted at young children did not seem to reach fathers when they were either still in a relationship with the mother, or were separated and did not have sole care of the children at the time. Where fathers were not connected with services at this time, it appears to be more difficult for them to access them later when they and their children need them more. This provides a strong case for father inclusion in early childhood services regardless of the care arrangements at the time.

From the results it must be concluded that solo father families with young children should be a target group for government social programmes. Additionally, a number of factors were identified as risk indicators, particularly social isolation and parenting stress. Yet there is little evidence that the social service sector at present has enough capability of reaching and working with men who are caregivers of children.

The results indicate that more research is needed about how men become solo fathers, how children develop in their care, and what experiences they have had with social and health services for themselves and their children.

2. Introduction

This study came about as a result of Father & Child's work with fathers. Ever since Father & Child was established in Christchurch in 1997 we have been seeing men raising young children in very isolated and often very difficult circumstances. At the same time they seemed to be almost completely missing from government-funded socially targeted services such as Family Start or Parents as First Teachers.

The purpose of this study was to get a better picture about what social needs both solo fathers and their children have and whether they are sufficiently connected with services or other support. We limited ourselves to solo fathers with children up to eight years of age for which there is very little or no care provided by the mother, as we suspected that a mother focus in social service provision means that children not in the care of their mother will be less connected. Ultimately, we wanted to find out which types of support will work best for solo fathers.

We also wanted to know if there were any discernible patterns in what the fathers saw as issues for the children. Do 'motherless' children perceive themselves as 'different'? Do they do okay at school? Are they socially connected or are they as isolated as their fathers appear to be? Patterns like this would enable us to better support solo fathers by being able to ask the right questions.

How confident the fathers are in themselves is another important factor that impacts on parenting. Do they think they are doing a good job? Do they feel supported by society overall or looked down upon? Do they believe their parenting is less (or more?) effective because they are male?

A full literature review was not part of this study, but research about this type of family is very scarce. There appears to be only one study on solo fathers done in New Zealand, a review of Census data between 1981 and 1999 by Judith Davey (Davey, 1999). Davey found that while the number of single parents had grown rapidly in that period, the proportion of solo parents that are male had remained almost constant between 15 and 17%. There were about 5,500 children under five living in solo father households at the time of the 1999 Census. Other trends from her analysis were:

- Children in sole father households are more likely to be boys
- Maori and Pacific Island fathers are over-represented, and their children tended to be younger than children living with Pakeha fathers.
- Workforce participation of solo fathers declined between 1981 and 1999.

In the 2006 Census, 17% of solo parent households were classified as male-headed, making up 4.7% of families overall (MSD,2008). However, the Census questionnaire is not set up to accurately measure family type, and the actual involvement of separated parents cannot be deduced from Census data. Both 'single mother' and 'single father' households in the Census would include a large number of children who effectively have two homes and for whom both parents have substantial involvement in their care.

Fairly recent literature reviews about fathering in general have been conducted by the Families Commission (Luketina et al, 2009) and the Maxim Institute (Lees, 2007). The Families Commission study ("Supporting Kiwi Fathers") involved canvassing the views of almost 2,000 fathers on a range of issues and experiences through telephone interviews, and included 91 single fathers. They found that the responses of the single fathers differed from the average in these respects:

- Between 70-80% identified "support needs" compared to 54% overall. Only 7% of the solo fathers thought they did not need any support at the moment;
- 'Work' was less likely to be cited as a barrier for involvement with children;
- 'Fathering courses' were considered less useful than by other fathers;
- They were more likely to talk about 'fathering' with other male relatives.

The small research body on solo fathers is frustrating and a little puzzling as their welfare impacts so directly on children. It was no less frustrating to find that we were unable to obtain funding for this, or preferably a somewhat larger study, even from sources that were set up to support community-based and –initiated research rather than more university-driven research. All three Families Commission funds declined our funding applications at least once, as did the Lottery Community Research Fund.

3. Methodology

The absence of funding limited the size of the study as it competed with other projects for the Trust's small resources. Although it was intended to continue interviewing solo fathers through 2010 to a sample size of 30, this had to be deprioritised as demand for the Trust's services increased to unprecedented levels.

13 solo fathers were interviewed throughout the second half of 2009 in Christchurch and Auckland. They had to meet the following criteria:

- The father must have at least one child eight years or under in their full care;
- 'Full care' was defined as the child living with the father for at least five continuous days per week, including any term breaks. None of the children in the study had any regular overnight access to their mothers and all were fully dependent on their fathers;
- They could not be 'high priority' clients of Father & Child Trust and receive an intensive individual service from the Trust.

All of the interviewees were selected from the Father & Child Trust's client base as lack of funding prevented us from casting our net wider. This creates a systemic bias in the following ways:

- Respondents are more likely to have an identified and reasonably high support and/or social need;
- Respondents have been exposed to Father & Child philosophies and resources which may influence opinions and answers in some sections;
- Respondents may have felt compelled to give answers that were consistent with what they have previously told a Father & Child support worker, even if it was not accurate.

Interviews were held on the basis of a questionnaire which contained a mix of qualitative questions and rateable statements. The fathers were also given some lists with rateable statements to fill out by themselves during the interview, after they had been asked a relevant qualitative question.

The questionnaire was divided into two parts. Part A gathered background information including

- Exact care arrangements for the children;
- Socio- economic factors;
- Father's own childhood circumstances;
- Circumstances surrounding the father's assuming full care of the child(ren).

Part B focused on their present situation and support, such as

- Support people amongst family and friends (including rating their level of support);
- Issues for children (qualitative question and sheet with rateable suggestions);
- Issues for the father (qualitative question and sheet with rateable statements);
- Support from agencies (divided in how helpful they thought this was for the 'family' and for the 'father');
- Parenting (strengths, weaknesses, information; qualitative questions and rateable sheet on how often they performed certain parenting and social actions);
- Support methods (qualitative question and rateable suggestion sheet).

Interviews generally took about 90 minutes although there was considerable variation in this.

4. Results

4.1. Fathers' Socio-Economic Background

The fathers in our study tended to come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Most were quite young when their first child was born: the average age of the fathers was 24 at the time, and four of the 13 had been teenagers. This would suggest that specialised services for young parents would do well to make sure they include the fathers, even if – or especially if – the relationship with the mother of the child is compromised.

On average, the fathers were 16 years old when leaving school, but six left school before this age. Only two continued to age 18. Three of the nine fathers who answered this question disclosed a criminal conviction, and most were on below-average incomes even before they took sole care of their children (\$550 per week on average). None of the fathers who disclosed their educational background had tertiary education, and the majority were tradesmen or had worked as unskilled labourers.

Five of the fathers came from homes where the two natural parents lived together at least into their sons' teenage years. Five others grew up primarily with their mothers, while two spent at least part of their childhood in state care. Five described their upbringing in quite positive terms, while an equal number had serious misgivings (including the two who grew up in state care). Some of the comments dads made were:

“Sometimes I went to school in pyjamas with no lunch or breakfast”

“Mum would beat me. She was better when she worked”

“I had a pretty normal upbringing. My father was president of [local gang]”

“Mum was strict, dad soft and relaxed. I got into some trouble as a child”

“Dad was authoritarian, mum relaxed.”

“I didn't feel happy at school, was chased and bullied.”

“Not much money”

Two fathers identified themselves as Maori.

4.2. Opinions About Fatherhood and Self-Care

This part of the questionnaire asked about indicators of the father's confidence and emotional wellbeing, such as how he thought he was perceived by those around him, whether he thought he was doing a good job with his children, and whether he was looking after himself.

Respondents strongly felt that a child is not disadvantaged by being raised mainly by their father. Only two of the fathers felt that there is a disadvantage, but nine disagreed, mostly even strongly disagreed. Both the fathers who felt a disadvantage came from two-parent homes themselves.

All but one father thought that a solo father can do the job as well as a mother and that they were doing a good job with their children.

Curiously, however, half of respondents agreed with the statement 'I would not want to be a single dad if there was another way', with three strongly agreeing with that statement. There was a marked difference in responses from fathers with a youngest child under three compared to the others. Five of the six solo dads with a child under three who answered this question were happy to be just that and only one would choose another way, while the ratio was exactly reversed for solo dads with a youngest child aged three and over. Fathers who grew up in two-parent natural families (i.e. both biological parents cohabiting) were also more likely to be happy to be solo dads, while fathers from solo mother households tended to be unhappy with it.

Statement	Weighted Average (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree)	Number agree/ strongly agree	Number disagree / strongly disagree
I can do my job as a solo parent as good as a mother	4.5	12	1
I'm doing a good job with my children	4.2	11	1
It is important to have a good income to provide my kids with opportunities	4	11	2
It is hard to find good information for single fathers	3.5	8	4
I don't think single fathers are very accepted in society	3.4	9	4
It is important for me to have a partner who can act as a mother figure for my child	3.4	7	5
My children miss out because I'm not earning as much money as a father should	3.2	6	5
I would not want to be a single dad if there was another way	2.9	6	6
It is hard to find good information about parenting	2.9	5	6
People often patronise me about parenting	2.7	4	6
A child is disadvantaged if they are raised mainly by their father	2.1	2	9

Table 1: Opinions about solo fatherhood

Dads with very young children were generally more comfortable on a number of indicators. Although, like the fathers with 'older' children, they strongly believed that 'It is important to have a good income to provide my children with opportunities' (11 out of 13 agreed) they were much less likely to feel that their children are missing out because they weren't earning as much money 'as a father should'. More of the under-three fathers disagreed than agreed, while the ratio was reversed for the over-threes.

Likewise, solo fathers of under threes felt less patronised, were happier with how many breaks they were getting, and found it easier to find information for solo fathers than the fathers of over-threes. The difference was particularly marked for the statement 'I don't think single dads are very accepted in society'. **All** of the fathers with over-threes agreed with this statement, but a majority of fathers with under-threes disagreed.

Statement	Children under 3		Children 3+	
	Agree/Str Ag	Disagree/Str Dis	Agree /Strongly Agr	Disagree/Str Dis
I don't think single fathers are very accepted in Society	2	4	6	0
I would not want to be a single dad if there was another way	1	5	5	1
My children miss out because I'm not earning as much money as a father should	1	3	4	2
It is hard to find good information for single fathers	3	3	5	1
It is hard to find good information about parenting	2	5	3	1

Table 2: Number of fathers who agree or disagree with a given statement according to youngest child's age.

The fathers were about evenly divided as to whether or not it is important to have a female partner who can act as a 'mother figure' for the child (seven agreed, five disagreed). However, all of the fathers who grew up living with their mother only either agreed or were undecided that there should be a 'mother figure' in children's lives, whereas fathers who grew up in a two-parent natural family agreed and disagreed evenly with this statement.

When it came to self-care, about two thirds of fathers thought that they generally ate healthily, looked after their health, exercised enough and didn't drink too much alcohol. All of the fathers of under-threes thought they generally ate healthy food. They were less sure about smoking, with five of the 13 dads saying that they felt they smoked too much. Fathers who grew up in two-parent natural families themselves were more likely to say that they looked after themselves than other fathers.

Statement	Weighted Average (1=strongly disagree; 5=strongly agree)	Number agree/strongly agree	Number disagree /strongly disagree
Generally I eat healthily	3.5	10	2
I am looking after my health	3.7	11	1
I often feel isolated	3.5	8	3
I'm missing out on a lot of social opportunities	3.6	8	2
I exercise enough	3.5	8	2
I'm getting enough breaks	3.2	7	4
Depression is an issue for me	3.1	5	5
I smoke too much	2.6	5	8
I drink too much alcohol	2	1	9

Table 3: Number of fathers agreeing and disagreeing with given statements.

Depression was 'an issue' for about half the dads, and a majority said they felt isolated. There was no correlation between the two questions; fathers were equally likely to indicate isolation whether or not they indicated depression. In fact, only one of the 13 fathers neither felt isolated nor was depression an issue for him.

4.3. The Parents' Social Environment

Although Census data consistently puts the number of solo fathers at 15-18% of solo parents overall, they do not appear to be a common sight in the community. The fathers in our study were somewhat removed from many of the social interactions you would expect from parents with young children.

Eight out of the 13 dads (62%) said they felt isolated, and three of those 'strongly agreed' that they felt isolated (Table 3). Three of the dads said they often had friends of the child over, but six (60%) 'never' or 'hardly ever' had other children around their house (Table 4). Despite most dads not being in full or even part-time employment, only two of them regularly got involved in their child's pre-school or school as parent helpers. Only one father used the library often with his child, compared to five who did so 'never' or 'hardly ever'. The fathers did not see this lack of social engagement as an issue, however. On a scale from 1 to 10, they picked a '4' on average for the statement 'he/she spends too much time with me and too little with other children'. They picked a '7' on average for the statement 'he/she is popular with other children' (Table 5, pg 11).

It is possible that fathers considered the time at school/pre-school as being enough time with other children, or that their children went over to friends' places and just did not have them over at their own place very often. There is also a possibility that the fathers were not considered safe by the friends' parents, or that the fathers wanted to keep themselves safe by not being alone with other people's children. These questions have not been investigated within this study.

	Often/All the time	Sometimes	Never/Hardly Ever
Parent Help at pre-school/kindy/school during session	2	0	7
Use the library with child	1	3	5
Have child's friends over	3	1	6

Table 4: Number of participants who engaged in child-related community activities by frequency

If such low community engagement is typical for solo fathers as a group it would explain why they are so invisible to the wider community. They simply do not get involved. Given the dearth of males in the early childhood sector this is truly a missed opportunity.

4.4. The Children

At the time of the interview, seven of the fathers had at least one child aged under three in their care, while the other six had a youngest child five or over. Two of the children were under one year old.

For the majority of children in the study there were safety concerns about the mother. These ranged from physical and verbal abuse to drinking and drugs as well as having inappropriate people around. In five cases intervention by Child Youth and Family played a role in the father taking full care of the child. Diagnosed mental health issues for the mother were cited by two fathers. A quarter of the fathers reported having been physically abused by the mother themselves, and Protection Orders were in place in two cases. In all but one instance there was also a Parenting Order in place.

These statistics reflect some of the common support needs fathers approach Father & Child with, but in the absence of other research on New Zealand solo fathers we do not know if this is indicative of solo fathers as a group. However, they do indicate that a significant portion of solo fathers have very high social needs.

	Average Rating	Number of ratings 8-10	Number of ratings 1-3
Seems to be a happy child	8.3	12	1
Is popular with other children	6.8	7	3
Has a lot of self-esteem	6.1	7	5
There are not enough female role models in his/her life	5.6	2	4
Is underachieving	5.5	5	5
Misses Mum a lot	4.7	2	5
Spends too much time with me and too little with other children	4	1	6
Not doing enough outdoors	3.9	3	9
Is angry or destructive	3.4	2	10

Table 5: Ratings for given children's 'issues'. The average is given as well as the number of fathers who found this not very important (1-3) or very important (8-10)

Almost all the fathers agreed, or strongly agreed, that they are 'doing a good job with their kids'. None said he often 'lost it', but three said this happens 'sometimes'. 'Telling off' was used a bit, with three fathers saying they told their children off 'often' (all of these had children five or over), and five more doing so 'sometimes' (Table 6).

Smacking was the least popular negative discipline option, while 'time out in a separate room' was used 'often' by all but one father with an older child. All fathers with older children used 'loss of privileges' often, sometimes or all the time, but grounding (not being allowed to see friends) was rarely used by any father. Negative discipline was overall not favoured by fathers with under-threes who answered 'never' or 'hardly ever' to all of them. This attitude is consistent with Father & Child experience in working with solo fathers.

In terms of positive re-enforcement, 'activity with dad as a reward' was most popular for children of all ages (except babies). Only one father said he 'never' gave sweets as a reward, and toys were also sometimes used as rewards. Only one father of an older child 'hardly ever' tried to reason, while all others did so 'often' or 'sometimes'. All fathers played with their children 'all the time' or 'often', and seven out of 12 (58%) read to their children 'all the time'.

There was a somewhat grudging admittance by all fathers that TV was occasionally used as a babysitter, with no-one saying they 'never' used it this way, and two admitting they did so often. All but two fathers with a child older than one said they played video games together 'sometimes' or 'often', only one did so 'never'.

Although painting an overall positive picture, there was still plenty of evidence in the comments that solo parenting is not all plain sailing. When asked what fathers "see as an issue for yourself at the moment" and what "is most challenging for you", some of the answers were:

"Not having someone to help me when I need it"

"Finding time for myself, or doing things for me even with him"

"Having time out"

"It's 24/7, she doesn't stop"

And when asked what they thought they did particularly well:

“Not yelling or flying off the handle”

“Keeping my emotions in check”

	Often/All The Time	Sometimes	Never/Hardly Ever
Read to Child	8	3	1
Activity with Dad ad a reward	7	4	0
Have a Meal Together	5	7	0
Reasoning	5	3	1
Time Out (Separate Room)	5	1	4
Loss of Privileges	4	5	1
Telling Off	3	5	2
Using TV as Babysitter	2	4	4
Playing Video Games Together	1	6	2
Toys as a Reward	1	4	5
Drink Alcohol While Around Child	1	1	10
Losing It	0	3	8
Have Takeaways	0	3	9
Smacking	0	1	9
Time Out (Same Room)	0	2	7
Sweets as Reward	0	2	8

Table 6: Day-to-day parenting. Number of fathers indicating they engaged in the named parenting activities or practices.

When it comes to food, all fathers said they fed their children healthy food ‘all the time’ or ‘often’. However, the fathers’ own nutrition came out a whole mark lower on average, even though most fathers still thought they generally ate ‘healthily’. Takeaways were had with the children ‘sometimes’ by all fathers with children one and over. Four fathers stated that they had alcohol while the child is present ‘sometimes’ or ‘hardly ever’.

When asked about issues for their children (Table 5, pg 11), fathers believed their child(ren) were ‘happy’ (average rating: 8.3). They were a little less sure about ‘self esteem’, which was rated somewhat lower than their ‘happiness’ by the fathers (average: 6.1). None of the fathers of the ‘older’ children identified issues with ‘anger’ or ‘destruction’ for the children, but ‘underachieving’ was rated as a quite important issue for five fathers. This includes some with children under 2 years of age, indicating that some of the fathers had concerns about developmental milestones.

On the issue of female involvement, fathers considered ‘missing Mum a lot’ and ‘not enough female role models’ as fairly important issues for their children, although most ratings for these questions were still below the halfway mark (5.5). Admitting that a child ‘misses mum’ can be a somewhat conscientious issue and some may see this as admitting inadequacy, since in other parts of the interview fathers had stated very clearly that they thought they could do the job as well as a mother. Fathers were more likely to state that there is an absence of female role models in their children’s lives (5.6 compared to 4.7 for ‘missing Mum’). There was no pattern in the answers when analysing for gender or age of the child.

4.5. Support Needs

A key purpose of the study was to find out whether solo fathers are supported well enough by the 'mainstream' system and what kind of support helps most.

The fathers in the study have all approached, or been referred to, the Father & Child Trust, which makes the sample biased towards those fathers where mainstream support has at least not been sufficient.

Again, the theme of not having enough time for things other than the child came through strongly, scoring an average 8.2 on a scale of 1-10 when asked how helpful it would be to 'somehow have more time to do the things I like'. But the highest scoring item of all (except for 'more money' at 10.0) was 'helpful employers' at an average 9.3.

When given a list of ways that they could be supported, none of the listed items was seen as not helpful. Overall, fathers with children up to three scored higher on most items and had slightly different preferences. The highest identified need (9.0) was 'someone to talk to', which was quite a bit further down the list for fathers with older children. 'Help with job/career' and 'parenting courses' also both scored very high with 8.4 and 8.3 respectively. No item scored under 7.

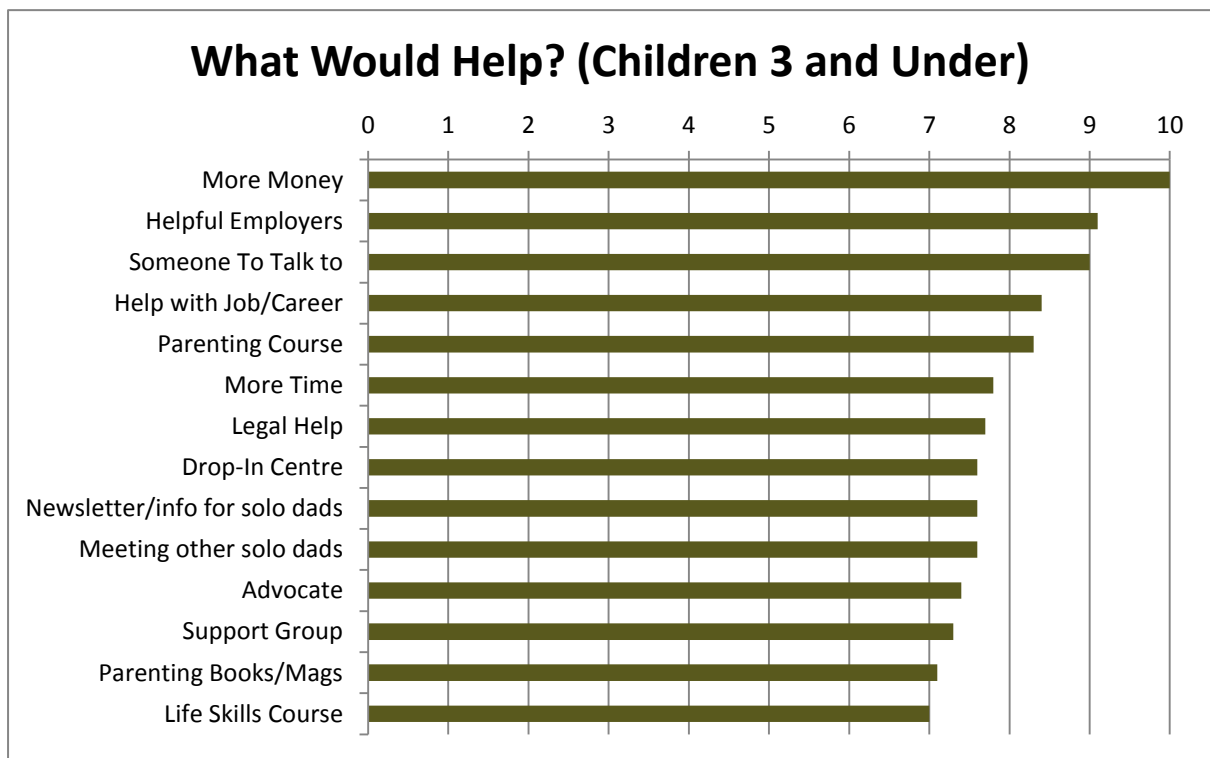


Figure 1: Average ratings for given items on a scale from 1-10 by fathers with at least one child 3 years and under.

For fathers with older children, a newsletter for solo fathers was the highest-scoring item at 8.3, followed by a drop-in centre and a support group. Least popular were 'life skills course' with 4.8, 'help with job/career' at 5.4 and 'personal support person/advocate' at 5.5 (7.4 for under-threes). Fathers with children of all ages felt that 'meeting other solo dads' would be quite useful (7.5 on average).

Before being given a list with suggestions, fathers were asked what the 'ideal' support service would look like. Drop-in places were mentioned often, especially if they included 'everything' and offered an opportunity to meet other dads and kids. Several fathers mentioned how much they appreciated the support given through Father & Child.

“Three or four drop in centres that do everything, so that no matter where you are in Canterbury you wouldn’t be far from one, a place that does everything from Winz stuff to child care to lawyer stuff to counsellors”

“Visible, easily contacted 24/7. In the public eye a lot. Drop-in centre. Activities for solo parents to do. BBQs, walks, sports days.”

“Like what the women have. Unlimited access to any service.”

“Help for dad. A place to stop in and have a talk and drink and get info if you need it.”

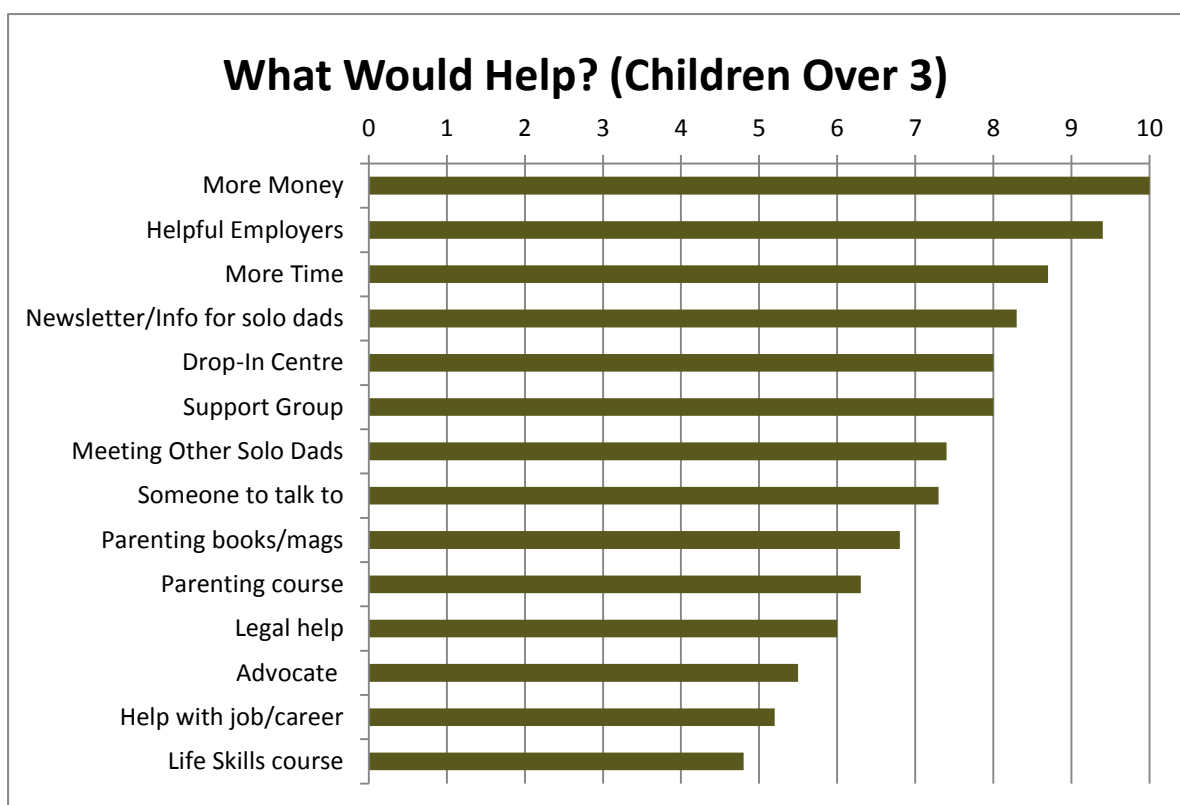


Figure 2: Average ratings for given items by fathers with children over 3.

4.6. Support People and Agencies

By far the most important support people identified were the fathers’ own parents. Ten fathers scored their own mother’s support between 8 and 10, and seven fathers did so for their own fathers. There was no correlation between the family type the fathers grew up in and the person they drew most support from. A number of men who grew up living with their mothers only from an early age rated the support of their own fathers very highly, while some men from two-parent families did not. However, fathers who grew up living mainly with their mothers all valued her support highly in their own situation as solo dads – even if they were critical of their mother’s parenting when they were children!

A number of other members of the father’s family were mentioned as being supportive, such as stepfathers, cousins, uncles or siblings. These other family members were mostly male, and did not rate as high as the father’s biological parents. Moreover, those fathers who rated support from their biological parents lower also did not mention any other family members as being supportive. It appeared that, for the fathers in our study, support from other family members did not ‘make up’ for lack of support from parents; on the contrary, those with a good relationship to their parents were also more likely to get support from other family members.

Support from the mother of the child was consistently rated very low, which is not surprising given that the separation (or change in day-to-day care of the child) was usually the result of an antagonistic process.

However, in seven cases the mother's own mother was stated as maintaining an involvement and this involvement was generally (but not always) rated positively. Two more fathers said 'her whole family' was involved. Again, those fathers who did not get much support from their own families also did not get any from the family of the mother.

Professional support services gave a mixed picture and there was no particular pattern in the answers. Respondents were asked to rate how useful they found a particular service 'for the family' and 'for the father'. This differentiation was made as a result of findings by Nelson-based research team Mitchell/Chapman (Mitchell et al, 2000) that fathers tend to answer questions about the usefulness of support services not from their own point of view but from that of their families. In many cases the service pre-dated the child's moving into the father's day-to-day care.

Midwifery services were either rated very high or very low, and their usefulness for the father was generally rated a little lower than their usefulness for the family. Those ratings were not correlated to the age of the child, and for most fathers contact with the midwife would lie a few years in the past. Yet they still held strong opinions about them. This is an indicator of the impact the midwifery service has on families and the key role midwives could play to help build initial parenting confidence in a father and shape his impression of support services overall.

Opinions were more reserved about the Plunket Society, which was more likely than midwives to draw low ratings, and which was seen as considerably less useful for fathers than for the family overall (average rating dropped from 5.2 to 3.9, compared to 6.3/5.5 for midwives). This is the reverse of how the two services see themselves: midwives see themselves as delivering a service primarily for women while Plunket promotes itself as a 'family' agency.

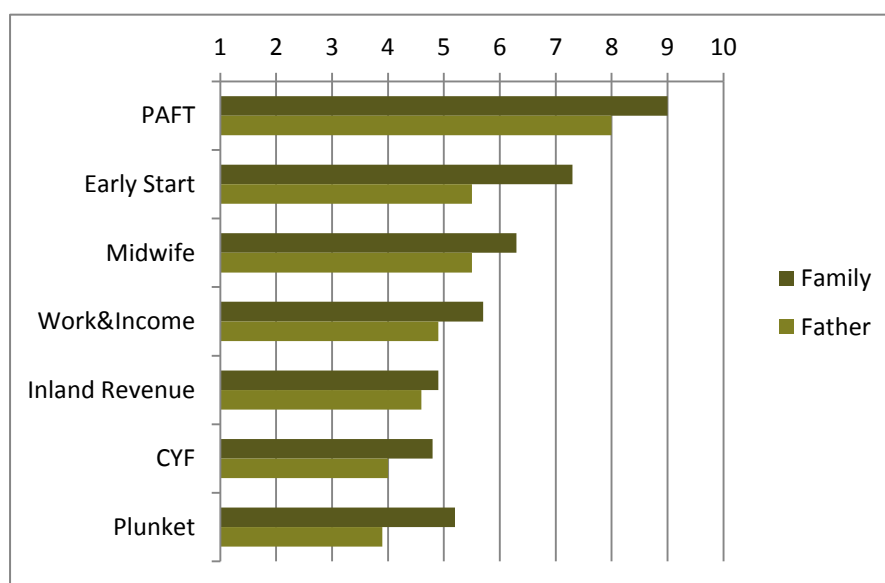


Figure 3: Average ratings of the 'usefulness' of these government-funded services for the family (dark) or the father (light).

Six of the 13 families had received a service from Early Start, an intensive early intervention service for vulnerable families. There was a marked difference between fathers with young children and those children over five. Fathers with young children who were seen by Early Start all rated the service very positively. The three fathers with older children, however, had not been made any contact with by the Early Start worker at the time, and the service was rated very low. It could also be

argued that it was ineffective for these children as it has not reached the parent who would come to be (or already might have been) the main caregiver.

Four fathers had experience with Parents as First Teachers and all rated the service very highly, although they picked slightly lower ratings for the usefulness for fathers.

Work and Income and Inland Revenue both drew some very negative responses, but in both cases seven out of the eleven fathers who gave a rating picked a number five or above. IRD, in fact, was the agency least seen as discriminating against fathers.

Child Youth and Family polarised opinions much less than some of the other agencies. Some fathers felt discriminated against as males, while others perceived the service as particularly positive and helpful to them, but overall there were few strong opinions.

5. Conclusions

The fathers in this study cannot be considered representative of solo fathers overall as they were drawn from clients of Father & Child Trust and as such are likely to have higher support and social needs than a 'typical' solo father may have. However, the study gives an insight into the lives of at least some men who do a job usually assumed to be done only by women: raising a young child by themselves.

The results compare well with those of the Supporting Kiwi Fathers study (Luketina, 2009) as far as they relate to solo fathers. In both studies solo fathers showed generally high confidence in their performance, 'work' was identified as the biggest barrier, and peer support or group support ranked high. These are some indicators that our group of solo fathers may not be substantially different from a more randomly chosen one.

The picture emerging from the dads in our study is one of a somewhat tense situation for many of them. There is low community involvement, feelings of isolation, a high incidence of depression issues, a certain unhappiness with the situation and a feeling that social services are not so keen on working with fathers. The dads indicated a certain amount of stress in that they wanted more time away and that sometimes they have to work hard to keep their emotions in check. Add to that some financial stress and the fact that some of the dads felt their children are missing out due to their fathers' low income, and you have a recipe for a high risk of impulsive negative reactions.

It does not help that all but two of the fathers gained care of their children through an antagonistic process, either the Family Court, Child Youth and Family or both. In this study, and our overall experience at Father & Child, full day-to-day care for the father of a very young child was generally only considered because of substantial problems with the mother. Their children therefore may come into the father's care with a history of neglect or abuse, and the fathers may be left with an impression of a 'system' that is unsympathetic to them.

The picture is not all bleak, however. All fathers in the study could point to at least one significant support person or agency, often the fathers' parents. Where social or parenting services such as Parents as First Teachers or Early Start did reach fathers they were highly appreciated and valued. There are also signs that fathers with very young children have better access to support and services than when the children are a little older. As so many services are directed at children in the first three years it appears that services in which the child is already enrolled are mostly able to adapt when day-to-day care changes. The main problem with access to services seems to be for those fathers whose children moved into their care after these very early years. It is a key reason why services should always try to involve a father even if they think they are dealing with a 'single mother' household. Our study also very strongly supports the idea that services reaching out to fathers is particularly crucial for vulnerable children, as these may have a higher likelihood to move into the care of their fathers, if not permanently then for long periods of time.

It is also encouraging to see that, in general, the fathers had high levels of confidence in their abilities and were at least trying to use generally accepted positive parenting practices (such as avoiding alcohol around children, using 'time out' rather than smacking, using activities rather than food as a reward etc). If nothing else the answers to these questions showed an awareness that positive (encouraging) parenting techniques are preferable to negative (punishing) ones.

The idea of a drop-in, one-stop place is popular with dads, but not so easy to realise. Open family centres generally attract more women than men and easily turn into 'mother centres', or are at least perceived that way. Even if a family centre was male-specific there are significant barriers. They would only be viable in reasonably large urban centres, because main-caregiver fathers are not likely to be common enough in any given 'neighbourhood' to attract a 'critical mass'. Solo fathers also seem to be doing more paid work than solo mothers which means they have less flexible time, especially during business hours. However, Father & Child is

trying to get as close as possible to this model in Auckland and Christchurch with very limited resources. Properly funded specific 'fathers centres' in most New Zealand cities could go a long way in reaching families and a number of very vulnerable children who at the moment are not visible at all.

It appeared that the fathers in our study prioritised the financial security of their children ahead of other needs. If this is typical for solo fathers overall then organisations that include help with tax returns, budgeting, financial entitlements from government and finding child-friendly jobs would be most attractive to solo fathers.

The low social connectedness of solo fathers, especially of very young children, is a concern. While schools and pre-schools offer ample opportunities for children to socialise and interact with each other, closer friendships between children tend to be formed if the parents are involved in the same networks, and if children have the opportunity of one-to-one interactions. Children of isolated parents run the risk of missing out on important lessons on all kinds of relationships and concepts related to, for example, friendship and loyalty. Low social connectedness also increases stress and the risk of depression. The solo fathers of very young children in our study rated 'someone to talk to' amongst the highest support needs, indicating that suitable outlets for frustration and stress may not be available to them.

The limited engagement of fathers with their local communities also means that the community-based response model that the government currently favours is likely to be ineffective for them. Men may be more effectively reached at or near their workplace than where they live, and they are less tied to geographical communities. This study along with our practice at Father & Child indicates that solo fathers are motivated to go where they can provide the best financial situation for their children, i.e. where the jobs are. Although they may present with high social needs, they may not live in the high-needs communities that government prioritises for funding. The current practice of allocating funding based on geographically quite small communities especially in Auckland is probably the main obstacle to the establishment of an effective service for fathers there.

Solo fathers could also be an important resource for the community: they could help providing more male faces in pre-schools, where they are so desperately needed, or volunteers in organisations that help other fathers or parents in general. At the moment this resource is not utilised, and our society is the poorer for it.

6. Recommendations

While this is only a small study it raises concerns significant enough to recommend that government give father inclusion in services a high priority to ensure that children, particularly those with very high social needs, do not lose access to services when they move into the care of their fathers. At the moment it is left to the organisations themselves to decide whether they reach out to fathers.

We therefore recommend that:

1. Providers of government-funded socially targeted services are required to have a number of solo fathers on their rolls that is consistent with the incidence of solo fathers in the region in which they operate.
2. Government seriously consider funding an agency which trains providers in engaging fathers, as the UK government does with the London-based Fatherhood Institute.
3. Greater emphasis is put on enabling services working with minority groups such as solo fathers with young children, to operate in larger geographical areas.
4. Research into if and how fathers, especially those who shoulder a major share of their children's primary care, engage with their communities, and into the needs of their children.

7. References

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