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Dads at Toddlers Day Out

A Survey of Fathers

April 2010

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The Survey

Fathers attending the Waitakere Toddlers Day Out in April 2010 were approached by Father & Child volunteers and asked to fill in a one-page survey about father support. As a 'reward' they were given a Father & Child magazine to take home.

The Toddlers Day Out was attended by an estimated 17,000 people, mostly parents with pre-school children. Survey respondents can probably be assumed to be more motivated than average to actively seek information about parenting and child development, but a significant proportion of visitors would have attended simply for a good time.

Approaching fathers rather than waiting to be approached ensured that amongst visitors there was a good range of respondents. A total of 124 fathers filled out the survey.

Results

Respondents

Respondents were asked about the age of their children and the living arrangement of their children only. Between the 122 respondents who disclosed age and number of their children there were 178 children.

| Age of child | Number | % | Living with mum and dad |
|--------------|--------|----|-------------------------|
| < 1 | 35 | 28 | 88% |
| 1-3 | 93 | 75 | 82% |
| >3 | 48 | 39 | 84% |

Face-to-Face Contact

Respondents were asked to circle from a list of organisations or facilities whether they have had face-to-face contact with them. Not surprisingly, Plunket as the predominant provider of Well Child Health Services tops the list, but only 47% of fathers have had face-to-face contact with them. This is followed by Playcentres and Kindergartens with 34% and 32% respectively.

About a quarter of dads with children 3 or over reported having had face-to-face contact with a sports club. This group (n=13) is much more likely than any other group of dads to also having engaged with Playcentre

(77% have) and feeling encouraged to participate as dads (88%). All of these dads lives with the mother of their children. It seems the traditional role of fathers in providing physical entertainment for children is more supported than other roles.

Support

The survey asked whether respondents “think that your needs as a dad are well catered for in Waitakere” and followed with a list of suggestions that respondents could circle Yes or No. There were high non-response rates for some of the suggestions.

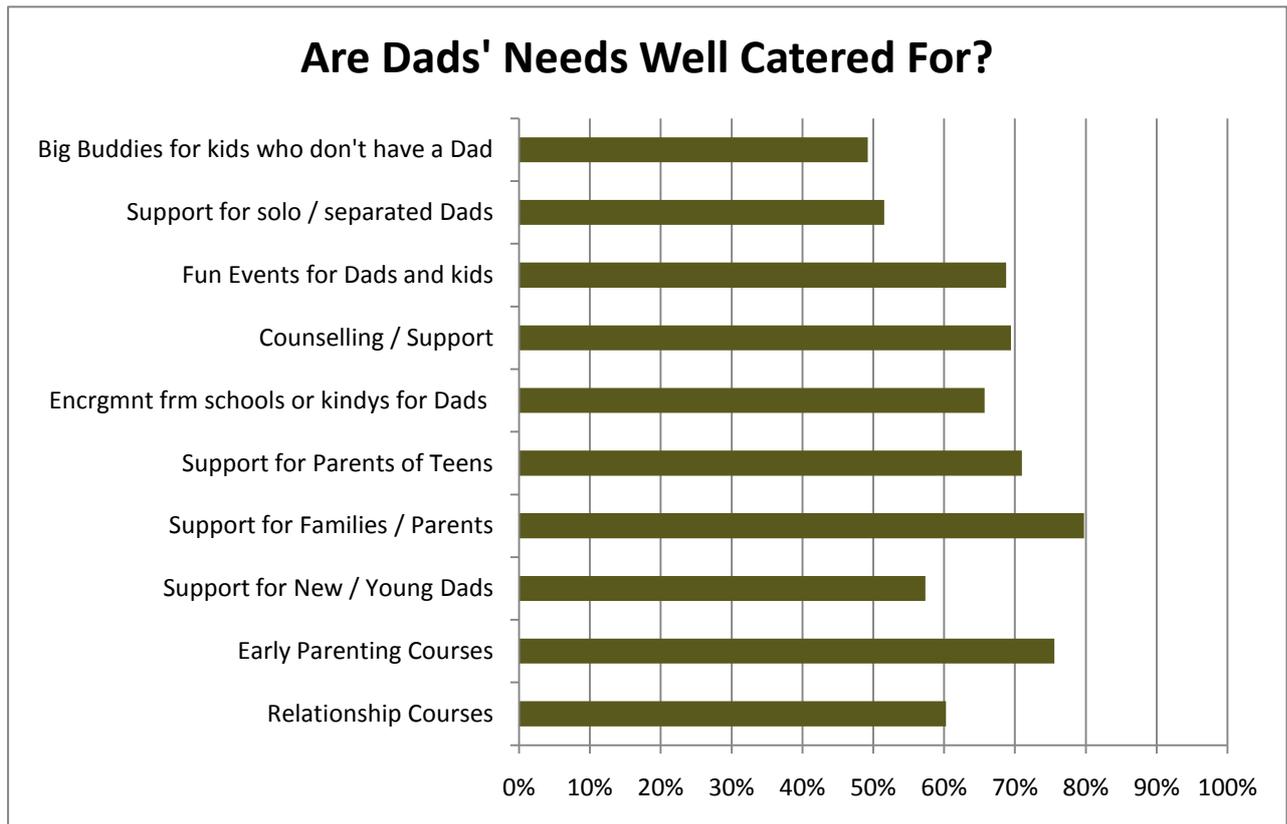


Fig 1: Percentage of dads who circled ‘yes’ for these options under the question “Do you think dads’ needs are well catered for in Waitakere?” Non-response/Don’t know excluded.

A majority of dads felt that fathers are well supported in Waitakere with all of the things we asked about, with the exception of support for solo/separated fathers. A significantly higher number thought ‘families/parents’ are well supported than young or new dads are.

Trends emerged when looking at specific groups of fathers. Dads with an only child under one (n=17) felt significantly less supported as dads than average (50% felt **not** well supported), but rated support for ‘family’ higher than average, indicating that many felt left out of the services available for families. The figures also show a fair amount of insecurity amongst those new fathers, who felt less well supplied with information about early parenting, and less encouraged to participate in education than the average dad.

If non-response rates are considered the gap widens ever further. 35% of all new dads surveyed felt not well supported as new dads (plus 30% non-response), compared to the average of 22%. 24% felt there are not enough early parenting courses (plus 18% non-response), compared to 17% overall. New dads were more definite about these things than those with older children.

On the other end of the spectrum were separated dads, who felt better supported overall than any other group. 65% of partnered fathers answered 'yes' to any of the questions, compared to 77% of separated fathers. This may partly be a result of the Family Court fully funding relationship counselling and 'parenting after separation' courses. This is in contrast to fathers overall believing separated dads are not well supported: about half of respondents overall felt so.

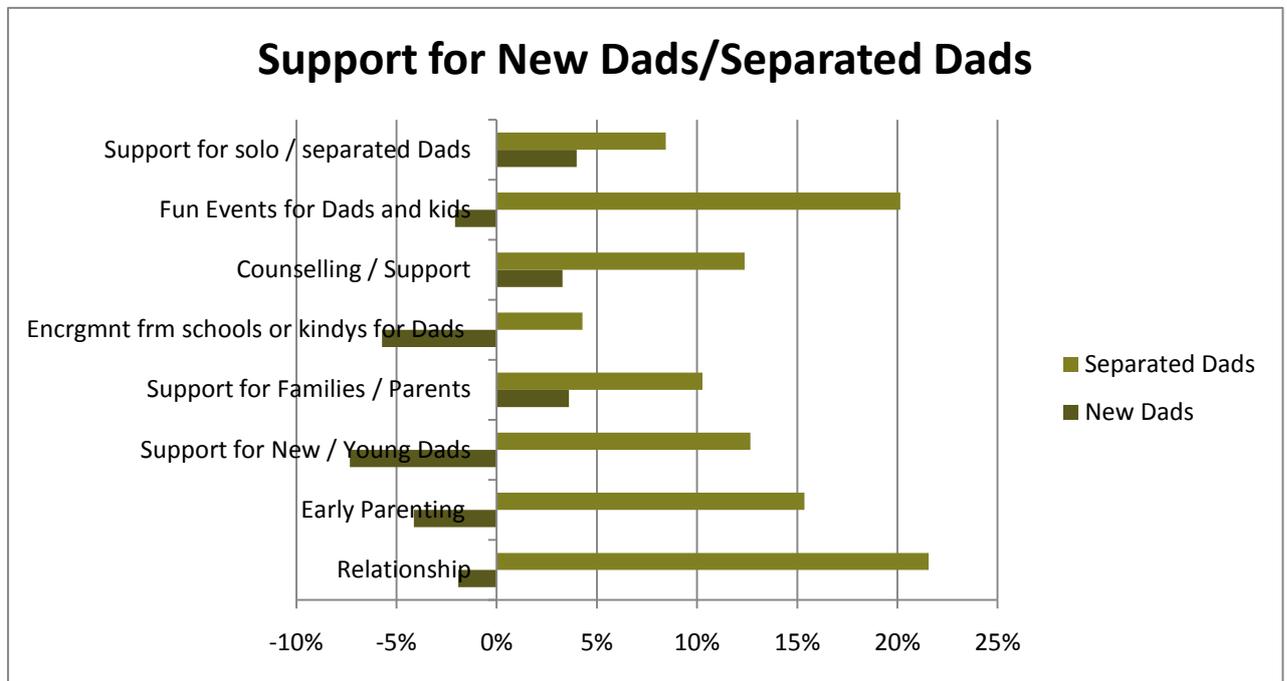


Fig 2: Differences in responses from new dads and separated dads, compared to the average response (=0%). Separated dads felt more supported than average in all areas, while new dads felt less supported in five out of eight.

There were marked differences between fathers with only one child (n=77) and fathers with several children (n=43), who had trends directly opposite from each other. Fig 3 compared the differences in responses to the average for the two types of fathers. Where fathers with several children felt better supported than average, fathers with one child felt almost equally less supported. The difference was particularly pronounced for relationship courses and support/counselling. Fathers with several children may be more likely to be exposed to relationship counselling or courses and may therefore feel better looked after in this respect. It is notable, however, that they were significantly more critical about support for families, parents and separated fathers.

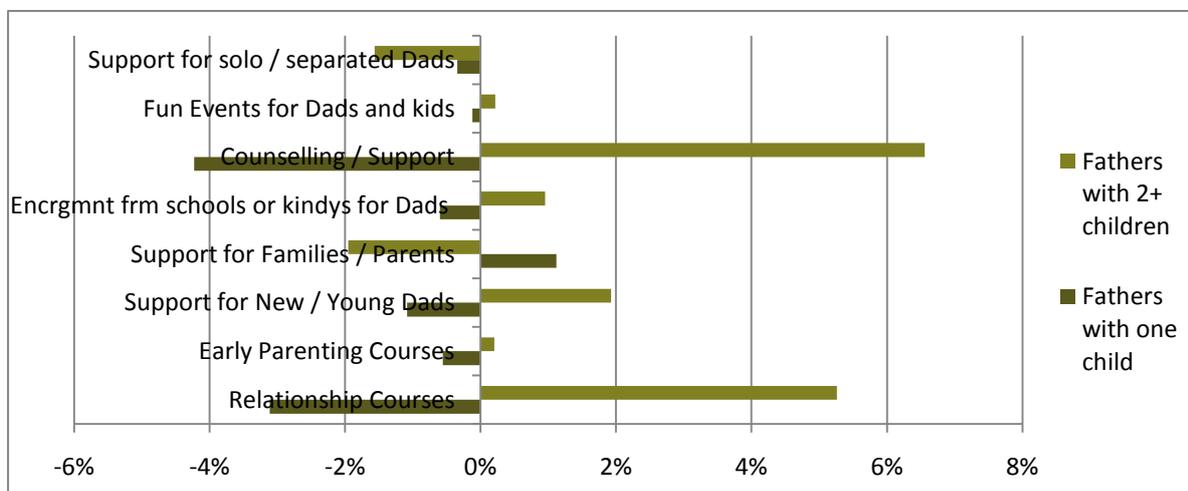


Fig 3: Differences in responses from new fathers with one vs several children compared to the average respondent. Trends are opposite in all but one field.

There were similar differences between fathers whose oldest child was under (n=57) or over (n=32) 3 years of age. As the children grow older, the fathers became more sceptical about the support for families and for new or young dads. More than half of the latter group also had another child under one and were experiencing father/family support (or lack of it) for at least the second time. They were much more positive about relationship support, such as counselling or relationship courses, and also felt more encouraged to participate in pre-schools or schools.

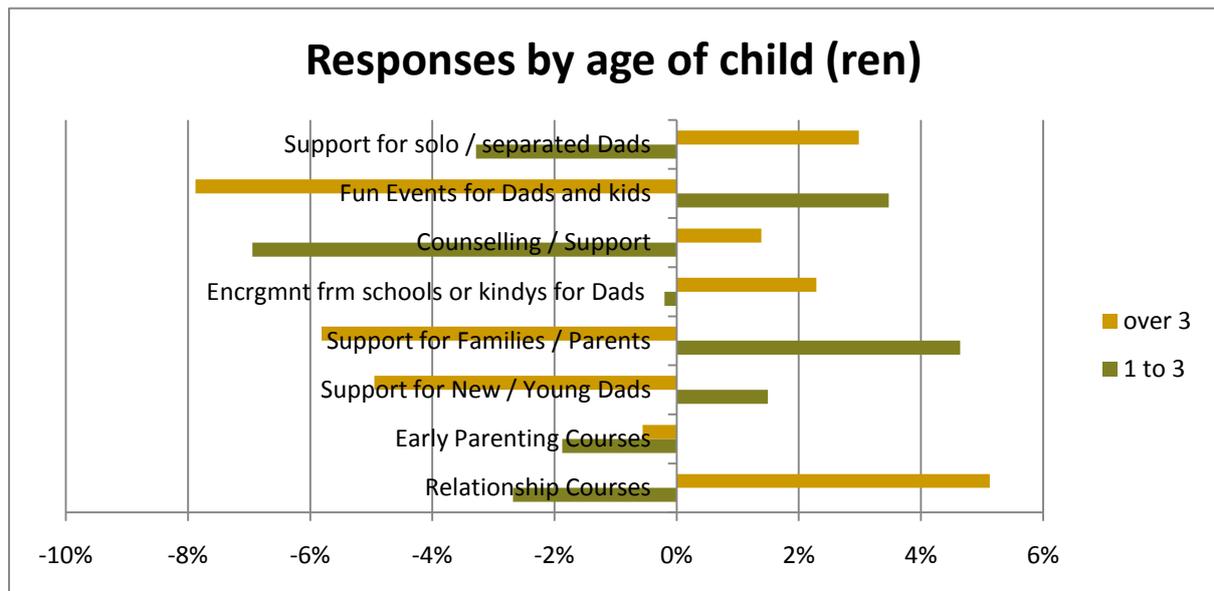


Fig 4: Differences in responses from fathers with children under and over 3.

Conclusions

Fathers of pre-schoolers do not enjoy the same level of face-to-face contact with support or education providers that mothers enjoy, but the numbers are overall quite encouraging. Plunket, the lead provider of Well Child Health services which sees more than 90% of new babies in the area, has had face-to-face contact with almost half the respondents. While this is still quite a poor figure, especially since almost half the fathers had several children and therefore several opportunities, it is probably significantly higher than it would have been, say, 20 years ago. Fathers with a child under one were also more likely to have seen Plunket face-to-face (59%) than fathers with older children (34%), indicating either forgetfulness on behalf of the fathers or improvements in reaching out to fathers on behalf of Plunket.

The number of fathers who feel well supported in most areas appears high, but non-response is also high for many of the questions. The results presented here are given as a percentage of respondents who gave an answer to the respective question. If non-responses are taken into consideration, only 35% thought there is good support for new or young dads, and 48% thought families/parents are well supported. In either case it is no cause for celebration if 40% or more of dads say they feel not well supported.

The difference between satisfaction with support for “families/parents” and “new/young dads” is also rather significant, and it is highest amongst new dads. This indicates that men are well aware that they are not generally the focus of parent support provision, or at least much less so than the mother of the children.

The fact that 40% of fathers felt that they are not well catered for in terms of relationship courses is important in the context of research by Mitchell and Chapman in Nelson that has identified relationship concerns as one of the three main areas of importance for men in the transition to fatherhood. It was particularly new dads, partnered dads and those with an only child that were more unhappy than average with relationship support, indicating that many fathers are feeling a strain in their relationship in the early days.

It was also evident that fathers who have had face-to-face contact with agencies felt better supported than their counterparts in almost every respect. Combined with the other results, the picture emerges that direct support for dads in the context of support for the family and/or the children overall significantly reduces the stress involved with looking after young children, and/or provides opportunities and avenues for parents to resolve problems along the way. Where parents are supported as a partnership, and fathers are invited to participate, relationships seem to become more stable.

It is perhaps somewhat surprising that separated fathers felt much better supported than partnered ones. The survey sample of separated dads was inevitably skewed towards men who actively engaged with their children and their lives – those that didn't, or did not have access to their children for other reasons, would not have come to the Toddlers Day Out.

In Father& Child experience (we are not aware of any research in this area), separated fathers are much more likely than partnered ones to actively seek information and approach services. As they do so, they will become more aware of the services that are out there. Where such contact occurs it is usually positive, as recent Families Commission research has shown, and this survey also indicates. Some services are available for free through the Family Court, such as counselling and 'parenting through separation' seminars, which themselves can be a gateway to further information and services from elsewhere. These information avenues seem to work much better for separated than partnered fathers.

In contrast, new dads felt much less supported despite the fact that they are the most likely people in our survey to actually have come in contact with a service provider. One part of an explanation may be the probably inevitable insecurity felt in the face of this massive life change and therefore a particularly high support need. However the fathers in our survey felt that the very highly rated support given to the 'family' is not extended to them, and they also felt more than any other group that there is not enough information about early parenting.

Interestingly, it was fathers who have engaged with a sports club who were amongst the happiest of all. The dads clearly appreciate to be able to actively participate and engage with their children in a predominantly male environment. Almost 90% of these dads felt encouraged to participate in schools and kindies as well, and felt well supplied with parenting or relationship courses. All of those 13 fathers lived with the mother of their children. While we do not normally associate sports clubs with parental support, they appear to be a place where men share information about their children and family support. Environment makes a big difference.

More research is needed how contact with service organisations affects not just parenting by the father, but also stability in the relationship with the mother. Our survey indicates that such contact increases a feeling of being supported and therefore acknowledged, and it also indicates that even traditionally mother-focused organisations have a positive impact when engaging more with fathers. Given the large share that today's fathers have in day-to-day caregiving, father support is becoming an increasingly important issue for children's wellbeing.