

PERSPECTIVES ON FATHERING

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INTRODUCTION

This collection of papers presents a range of perspectives and viewpoints on fathers, the part they play in raising children, and the policy issues that affect them. Major issues are the challenges and barriers faced by some New Zealand fathers in being positive and involved parents, and the recognition that many fathers are, in fact, taking on new roles in parenting. We hope this collection will help by stimulating further debate.

We wish to pay particular tribute to Laurie O'Reilly who raised the profile of fathers and children while Commissioner of Children from September 1994 to January 1998. Laurie was committed to helping children and believed strongly in the importance of fathering. It is largely due to his efforts that the Fathering the Future project came into being in 1997, resulting in a Forum in Christchurch in March 1998 and another in Auckland in September 1998. The papers from other contributors to this collection were written or have evolved from work done for those fora, or were prepared for the Wellington forum and the associated Social Policy Forum in April 1999. We are grateful to Laurie's widow, Kay O'Reilly, who provided us with a paper that he wrote, *"Advocacy on Behalf of Children"*, for inclusion in this collection.

There are many perspectives that can be taken when considering the role and importance of fathers. We have deliberately attempted to present a mix of views on the basis that there is no single, definitive formula to be applied. Wise policymaking and implementation can only come from an awareness of the complexity of the issues, a critical evaluation of the arguments and supporting evidence, and a synthesis of the substantiated interpretations.

Laurie's paper addresses the importance of good fathering. The papers by Ian Pool and Sarah Hillcoat-Nallétamby, and Paul Callister present a broad overview and identify trends in family structure and father involvement. Rex McCann, Warwick Pudney and Harald Breiding-Buss consider a range of perspectives on the role of fathers. Pam Hutton and Trudy McNaughton address the issue of "family-friendly" workplaces, and Keith Rankin considers the part played by tax and welfare policies. Felicity Goodyear-Smith looks at the sensitive area of child maltreatment. Mark Henaghan's paper focuses on the processes of Family Court, proposing an alternative approach which might provide speedier and more consistent resolution of disputes. Stuart Birks then looks at some of the less supportive attitudes towards fathers that are sometimes observed.

Inevitably, this collection of papers is incomplete. Not only are ideas and circumstances always changing, but it takes time for an understanding of the issues to develop. There are many policy areas which impact on fathers, not only the direct ones of family law, custody, child support and domestic violence, but also policies about taxation and benefits, education, and the workplace. If we are to look in detail at policies and their implications, appropriate background information is needed.

Research on fathers, particularly New Zealand research, is only in its infancy. More research is needed, using a variety of methodologies including the exploration of both quantitative and qualitative data sources. Such research also needs to draw on a range of research disciplines. In our opinion, more investigation is needed in such areas as: the part played by fathers in the past and the contribution that fathers can and/or do make now; the different parenting needs of children as they grow and mature; the changing nature of the family; the significance of and pressures on the extended family; people's self-perception and their need to have relationships with both their parents; parenting when parents live apart; parental alienation; the importance of parenting relationships with adult children; and the role of men in the community.

Given the increasing interest in these issues, research is likely to be undertaken in these areas. This collection will then be a small part of a growing body of relevant literature.

Stuart Birks and Paul Callister
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