

Chapter Five

BEGINNING FATHERHOOD - THE GREATEST JOB A MAN CAN DO

by
Warwick Pudney¹

A number of years ago I was involved in the interviewing of applicants to become Lifeline counsellors. One of the questions asked on the application form is, "What was your happiest moment." The consistent overwhelming response was not, "When I got mags on my car", or, "When I landed a 20 pound schnapper". The consistent response from both men and women was, "The birth of my first child". I present to you that in the elusive and subjective search for happiness, the personal involvement with the first moments of your child's life are the most transforming and life-filled moments that we live. We enter a moment of magic as we witness the mystery of the creation of new life unfolding before us. Add to this the knowledge that the child is yours, is the product of your body, is partly you, and we have the potential for not just the happiest but the most spiritual, meaningful and wonder-filled moments that we will live. They are moments when new purpose comes to a man's life and bonds of attachment are generated that are rarely extinguished. I suggest to you that this is the beginning of the most important job a man can do for it extends beyond the moment of birth, beyond the embracing of your child, to the embracing of all children, to the embracing of all fathers, and to a new place of fathering all that is around you.

The shame is that many men miss it and that's not good for men, our children and the world at large.

I'd like to take you today through some of the reasons why that happens and make some suggestions as to what can be done. As you may know I have recently written a book with a midwife, Judy Cottrel, on beginning fatherhood. I chose to write in the area of ante-natal, birth and postnatal fathering because the more I looked at fatherhood it was clear that there were some definite patterns, and that those patterns started to become evident at the very beginning of fatherhood, around the birth of the first child. Those same patterns very often carry on for the next twenty years until the child leaves home.

In order to gain more information, I engaged in some qualitative research by interview and survey of men in N.Z. and Australia. I want to talk to you today about eight of the things that became apparent from that research.

¹ Address delivered to the Conference on Fathering, September 1998 – Organised by the Manukau Institute of Technology

From looking at early fatherhood we observed that:

1. We need to know that Fathering is IMPORTANT
2. We need to recreate the fathering map to overcome the disadvantage of poor father relationships.
3. We need to claim our place as fathers.
4. We need to overcome a learned helplessness around parenting and cease our dependence on women.
5. Women have claimed ownership of children. We need to share guardianship.
6. The birthing professionals need to deliberately include us.
7. We need to claim our emotional processes as important.
8. Many dads are doing a wonderful job.

1. Firstly we need to know that Fathering is IMPORTANT

It's clear that we don't seem to know that fathering is IMPORTANT. If we don't know that fathering is important then there isn't much incentive to do the job. I recall doing a fathering workshop at a parenting conference. I had 26 men who I had no doubt were good fathers. I asked them, "Why are fathers important?"

There was a slow silence and we struggled for about forty minutes to make a list of reasons. What reason does a dad have to come home early for quality time with his kids or send a ticket for his Auckland son to come down to Dunedin where he now lives with a new partner, if he doesn't believe that fathering is important? I ask you, "Why are dads important?" Some of the reasons are as follows.

Research indicates that it is vital in the first three years where gender identity is laid down. For boys, dad gives strong clues as to who a boy is and for girls who she isn't.

Dad is probably the most important parent in early adolescence as our children hit identity questions and the need to move beyond the home.

Young girls need to be able to practice having a loving non-sexual relationship with a man. Failure to do this may result in poor relationships with men including inability to establish strong healthy non-dependent partnerships. The pregnancy rate of adolescent girls who have not had father figures in their lives is higher than those who have, and there seems to be an inability to determine between sexual and non-sexual loving.

For boys a loving nonsexual, physical relationship is important to allow them affirming touch with other males.

Fatherless children especially boys are more likely to suffer from mental ill-health, depression, low achievement, be involved in antisocial behaviour, addictions and high risk activity.

The suicide rate is higher for fatherless adolescents especially boys.

Boys and girls learn how to relate to half the population, that is, men, by relating to their fathers. Boys also learn how to have trusting relationships with men and build support and social systems that involve men. The question of identity is one that is far easier to solve for the adolescent male who has had dad around affirming him because a boy's self esteem requires much confirmation from the same gender parent.

Fathers provide links with the wider structural society, the outdoors, physical tasks, risk-taking and hold a sense of aspiration and future.

This is not to say that women can't perform some of these tasks but it is to say that this is how reality is constructed at the moment. Apart from all this, kids need as many people to love them as possible and, no matter what it is that father is doing, it is important for children to know and experience a man doing it. There is a deep grief in a boy or man who hasn't been fathered adequately that allows entry for other less positive substitutes. Youth justice programmes and prisons are full of men who are unfathered. They either didn't know him or they hate him. The message to the community at large must be that fathering *is* important. Fathers must know this, mothers, lawmakers, judges, schools and our children must know this.

I put to you that a new baby has rights to a father.

It is important that a new baby is held by his or her father, hears his father's voice, feels secure and happy in her father's arms and hands, feels the vibrations of his fathers voice, sees her father's face, feels the muscle and hairiness of his father and smells his father's smell. She needs a father who plays with her, and a father who affirms not abuses. A new baby also has the right to a father who will give without expecting anything back, and an entitlement to be bathed, fed, and nursed by a man's hands. She needs to know that her father loves her. And a new baby has the right to a father who takes responsibility for being a father, because fathering is important.

2. We need to recreate the "fathering map" to overcome the disadvantage of poor father relationships

Somewhere over the last 2-300 years we seem to have lost the intergenerational information that allows us to father well. This seems to be particularly over the last 80 years. This is not to ignore the changes that have taken place that are part of the evolution of new roles. There has been a breakdown of positive male relationship and community.

How fathering got lost

There are several theories about how fathering has broken down. The two most popular are as follows. Before the industrial revolution fathers were much more involved with their families. They were around all day in a village-type community doing duties that were mainly outdoor but which children could be involved in. The work was mainly community trades, crafts or agricultural work and was set within the village or community. In fact all children had much more to do with all of the men in the community and they all took responsibility for the safety and growth of all the children. The roles were more mixed and while mothers still had more involvement with food and indoor life, father was also around the house and their activities overlapped. Everyone would go out into the fields to harvest and look after crops and do the business of the market places. When factories were built fathers went off to work, became unseen in their labour, did soulless production work, and lost links with the home and environment. Mothers were forced to look after the children more and the homemaker and provider tasks became separated to the disadvantage of both mothers and fathers. Time with children was reduced, as fathers were more used up and cities developed to take away some of the supporting community.

The other theory is that two world wars have interrupted fathering and switched men off. When a society goes to war, men, both consciously and unconsciously, slip into heavy protector mode. An enormous amount of switching off of emotions, switching off of empathy for others and switching off of life takes place. This is because men are preparing to kill other human beings and destroy people, places and property. The soul of the soldier is wounded before he ever gets to the war and is even more so after.

Even men who did not go, prepared internally as if to go. Men went off and killed and while they were away women took over many of their jobs and became separate and independent. Children grew and were born without contact with fathers. When the men returned they were not as necessary as they had been before. The women were doing their jobs and the children didn't know them. Worse still no one derided the men and gave them back their ability to relate deeply. Instead we left them with horrific memories that were not talked about, extreme hardships and deep emotional wounds. Our culture gave them cheap alcohol and a very unemotional generation of men distanced from children and everyone, including themselves, although they tried to re-engage and act normally. A generation of children grew up relatively unfathered after each war and in turn lacked the map to father their own children. They worked hard and mechanically to rebuild their countries and didn't know how to relate emotionally to others or themselves. They had numbed off. My own father never talked of the war. It was my mother who told me that he hated it.

Fix it with your dad

It is well documented that as impending fatherhood approaches issues of intergenerational passage arise. He is likely to wonder how it was for his father when he was born and a sense of connection is generated. It is reciprocated in many cases because the new child will also shift the man's father into grandfatherhood. This is a

great time to talk and an occasion when a number of things can take place.

The new father can sort out any differences between him and his dad. This is vital given the likelihood of a re-enactment of any negative fathering with the new child. Clearing the old issues out allows the new child a better chance of inheriting the quality of a whole healed relationship.

Whakapapa

The new dad can complete a sense of whakapapa by feeling the centre of a male lineage that is about to produce another generation. A stronger sense of masculinity can develop at this time as no other time demands such a clear male role as when a woman is going into vulnerability and requires support and protection.

The new father has the potential to feel supported by the man who did the job before him.

A sense of wider family or whanau is generated. The interaction of all of the above is part of reviving the map of fatherhood that has become so faint and hard to read.

The effort to fix it with our fathers repairs some of the damage of fatherlessness.

3. The third issue that follows from the first two is that we need to claim our place as fathers

Fathering has become a second hand parenting role. Even in homes where dad is doing well in enthusiasm and presence, he tends to be doing it under the advice and direction of the mother. So how come we're second-hand parents? In most homes the father often fails to initiate relationship with his family. It is his partner who organises him into parenthood. She does it gently with words such as, "Could you pick Ryan up from football practice?" "How about reading Rachel a story?" "It would be really great if you showed him how to do it." "The kids haven't seen you all week. How about..." "Here, you have a hold of her while I get some more milk."

She organises **him** into being a father. She organises his relationships with his children. Fathers are often too busy being the provider or detached as protectors who sit on the edge of the family.

He regards her as the expert on bringing up the children, waits for instructions and so prevents himself from being an equal parent. Instead he parents second-hand.

Have an opinion

The answer is, for fathers to take initiative and parent from a base of knowing what to do and having an opinion about what is happening. Decisions on the new baby need to be shared ones. During pregnancy is the very time when men are first likely to fall into

this abdication of parenthood by acting dumb or feeling that they have no say. Its women's business or a modelled, conditioned, learned helplessness switching in that leaves men in a place of feeling incompetent and non-assertive.

The new dad needs to claim a place without relying on the mother to involve him. An expectant father for instance could have thoughts and an opinion on:

The layout of the baby's room

The colour and decor

The furniture and equipment

Carseats

Cots

Pushchairs etc.

Highchairs

Professional agencies and services

Toys

The price of being a secondhand father is a man who feels on the edge of the family and not particularly internally powerful in relationship with the family. Additionally it means an overloaded mother who complains about her dependent partner and doesn't fully respect him.

A woman from a farming background told me a story of how her husband, who felt as if he had missed out on their first two children, claimed the third and last baby for himself:

IT'S BEEN A LONG WAIT

This one's for me

Mum

This one's for me

I worked my nuts off

for the last bloody two

and missed the whole show

Yeah this ones for me

she'll be my work mate

She'll sit in the cot

in the front of the ute

go up on the fence line

and the shepherd's route

The paddocks her nursery

the dogs her playmates

No more missing the kids

cos I'm coming home late

No this ones for me mum

Don't worry she's safe

the boys at the pub

*just think that she's great
and the vets got a note book
to make sure she gains weight
yeah this ones for me mum
it's been a long wait*

I suggest that fathers need to actively, proudly and considerately claim their fatherhood. This isn't about men being head of the house. It's about men participating fully in the privilege for the benefit of all including themselves.

I encourage new fathers to have an opinion on matters to do with the baby. Say what you want for the birthplan and baby names etc. Speak up and be assertive without being dominating. Do your homework. Know what you are talking about so that your opinion can be respected around baby decisions. You need to be able to do this with your partner, professionals and family. Speak up in ante-natal classes so that your feelings and experience are heard and respected. I urge men to claim their fatherhood right from conception.

4. It flows from the previous issues covered that we need to overcome a learned helplessness around parenting and cease our dependence on women

If a man is not connected to his father or a male community and if he still has issues with his father, and if he acts helpless around children, and if he has to have his parenting organised by the mother, and if he has few male friends that he can get genuine emotional support from, then he is left exposed to his own dependency on a woman partner just at the time when she most needs the support.

I believe that this is a major factor in domestic violence. If you are dependent on somebody then you are more likely to want to control them if they look like they are moving away from you. This may well be the reason that some domestic violence begins during pregnancy and why some men choose this time to have affairs.

It is my suggestion that the work of fixing it with your father, of having a good group of male friends, of feeling competent in fathering a new baby and initiating parenting, is the work that men, fathers and ante natal classes need to be doing for our new dads. Being clear and positive in ones manhood allows a man to meet a woman in equality and respect, not dependence.

5. It also follows that women have claimed ownership of children. We need to share guardianship

One of the consequences of fathers being taken out of the family has been the switch in ownership of the children. For the best part of the last thousand years children have been regarded as property of the father, as part of a patriarchal ownership system.

Since the industrial revolution there has been a move in ownership to the woman. Part of men's distancing and lack of involvement has meant that when deaths or splits have occurred it has been assumed that the children should be with the mother. After all, if he's out at the factory, he can't look after them anyway, even if he knew how. Consequently our legal system tends to assume that the children should be held within the mother's custody unless she can be proved a bad parent. Currently I believe that about half the men who are being prevented from seeing their children after partnership breakdown should still see their children unsupervised. The domestic Violence Act 1995 needs an overhaul. The victims of the abuse of this legislation are the children. They need to be consulted carefully so that they don't become instruments of revenge in the damaged feelings that accompany parental break-up.

Dear Judge,

My mum and dad split up about 8 years ago and they went to court to decide who should have custody of me. I want to know what the court decided at the time because my mum and dad are saying different things and I don't know what's right. That's why I'm writing to you.

My mum said that I am not allowed to see my dad without supervision of someone over 16 there and she has been making it hard for me to see him.

My dad said that he doesn't remember the court saying that I was not allowed to see him without supervision over 16 and that I was allowed to see him when ever.

Why I am writing to the judge is that it is hard to do it with one of my parents because my mum won't let me see the court decision because she might think that I will go back to him, and also she might think that I think that she is lying to me. I am scared of asking my dad because I never see him and I don't know him any more. Only seeing him every 5 months makes it hard to ask him if he could help me so I haven't asked him yet.

I want to see the court order because if I know what the court said it would make sense what to do, because I want to see more of my dad and going straight to the court is better because my mum is making it hard to see him as it is, and if mum is lying I can get to see him more often and get to know him.

Yours faithfully,

It is no fault of women that they are currently regarded as owners of children, though a father needs to speak up when he hears his partner talk of "my" children. The remedy for this is education of the legal community, judges and men, to take their place and claim their fatherhood as a treasure and a privilege.

I invite you to consider that the idea of ownership of children is ridiculous. Children are only with us for a short time and the task is not to own them but to help them own themselves. If we steal power from them in order to fight battles or feel better about ourselves by controlling them, then we are damaging them.

We need to operate from principles of guardianship, not ownership.

6. The birthing professionals need to deliberately include us

In recent history women have worked hard at claiming back control of the process from doctors within the medical model. Women now acknowledge the birth process as being "woman centred" and consumer [women] driven which is a good thing. Central to most midwives practice is the concept of being in partnership with women, which has resulted in thousands of women having wonderful, supportive relationships with their midwives. But where this model is deficient is that the man's role can be ignored or down-played. The woman can have a very intimate experience with her midwife or doctor. She trusts her life and the life of her baby to her midwife. There are vaginal examinations and discussions about some of the most intimate matters of life. It is not surprising that many new mothers report feelings of adoration for their care-giver and this can be very rewarding for the midwife. Also there may be some unique imprinting between the delivering mother and the person catching the baby at this peak moment in the woman's life. However it requires midwives to be very honest in examining their part in supporting this process. The midwife will disappear out of the couple's world six weeks after the birth and the deepening of intimacy which could have occurred between the parents is lost to a third person. I believe this ego involvement of the care giver contributes to excluding the father. The father often feels pushed out and unable to muscle in on the relationship. The message is that this is women's work or that men are just incompetent.

If men and midwives are serious about men beginning fatherhood from a feeling of empowerment, men need to attend the ante-natal visits. Men will need to negotiate with employers to have time off work and midwives will have to include them in the conversations and palpitations and pass him the sonic aid. Under-fathering begins during the ante-natal period and needs the efforts of men and midwives to change. Midwives need to look closely at their own subconscious needs to be "with" women. If this excludes the father, if it detracts from the possibility of deepening intimacy between the parents, then we need to ask ourselves some hard questions. If we are committed to launching the new parents off feeling that they have shared a wonderful experience midwives will need to learn some new skills.

Reflection from a midwife, Anne: My midwifery partner was saying how many fantastic couples she saw around the place. I was quite surprised. "Where?" I asked. I didn't see any enviable couples. "Most of the couples whose babies I deliver" she replied. I was gob-smacked. It hit me like a ton of bricks. I was so focused on the woman that I just lumped the husband in with the support people and suitcases.²

² I acknowledge this as observations by my co-author and midwife, Judy Cottrel.

We need changes for ante-natal courses

We suggest that these courses:

- a] be advertised for mothers and fathers;
- b] include continual checking out of the father's experience;
- c] have time where the fathers meet separately to talk "father stuff ";
- d] have men involved in taking them;
- e] have exercises and information that assists fathers specifically;
- f] have time to look at what happens in the couples relationship at this time.

And... fathers need to not just sit and feel that their experience is being ignored or devalued. They need to speak up.

I suggest that fathers need to bond with their children at the earliest opportunity and that the midwife needs to be a facilitator of this process not a monopolizer. That bonding is what gives confidence both with children and the world of relation, and that's what men need.

A new grandmother, Rita: The midwife was such a shrewdie. My daughter's partner was uncommitted in the relationship. They hadn't planned on having a child. They don't even live together. As soon as the baby was born the midwife ordered him to take off his shirt. He looked resistant and macho. "Take off your shirt" she ordered. He did what he was told and she put the new-born babe on his chest. Something happened then and at least the baby got the chance at a father that she deserved.

Here's some suggestions from men for making hospitals more father-friendly

- Accept that there are two clients mother and father.
- Have beds so that fathers can stay overnight.
- Have more male nurses.
- Alter all ante-natal courses to include fathering components and ensure that there are times when the fathers are alone together.
- Provide advice for couples in relationship change in ante-natal courses.
- Provide advice for fathers who have post-natally depressed partners.
- Provide places where Dads can eat, use the phone, talk.
- Don't have everything decorated in full feminine love-pastels.
- Put up posters of families, not just mystical pictures of women with big tummies.
- Re-name National Women's Hospital- National Birthing Hospital.
- Have advice to new fathers in leaflets around the place.

"I looked around the hospital that I had come into to have my baby and all I could see was bloody posters telling women how they could get benefits to be single parents"

Some attitude shifts would make a big difference for fathers

- The staff to acknowledge fathers as the primary caregiver and advocate of the mother.
- Invite men to participate. They don't want to be patronised and told to do some pathetic task that keeps them busy. Know that an appearance of detachment and uncaring may be a cover for fear and uncertainty.
- Encourage the father to have male support and provide a place for the support in the process.
- Accept that many men feel unconfident in hospitals and around blood and body fluids.
- Understand that the father is wired to protect his woman. If she is in pain, if someone else has their fingers in her vagina, if traumatic things are happening, he will be feeling helpless, powerless and in total contradiction to his instinct to protect.

Men need to be included in birthing processes.

7. We need to claim our emotional processes as important

There is such a focus on the mother in the whole childbirth experience that the experience of the father is often forgotten. There are two reasons for this. The first is that it's the mother and her experience that is crucial to the whole event. You can't have a baby without her and it is the mother who is going through the pain and discomfort.

The second is that we as a culture are used to not recognising men's emotional experience. He's supposed to have his emotions well managed or he's not supposed to have any at all, except anger when it's appropriate to defend himself or protect others. It's part of being able to treat men as protector or provider objects - by seeing them as strong, capable and knowledgeable. Even in modern gender conscious relationships this is powerful. The problem also is that when your partner is having a baby it's absolutely reasonable to expect that of a man. It's not his time to be vulnerable, indecisive, self-focused and weak.

Women want support and a sense of protection that they can rely on in their vulnerability. They need someone that they can trust to handle all circumstances. It's my consideration that at this time they're entitled to it. This leaves the man in what is a traditional position with unreal expectations of him.

For this reason I advocate the idea of men having a male support person present or handy to be there solely for him at this traumatic time. This friend, mate, supporter could either be at the birth, with the mother's blessing, or waiting outside. Wherever, he needs to be close at hand for support. So why should a man need such support? Given that men do have a powerful emotional experience, thank goodness, and given that it's inappropriate for him to go too deeply into it because the mother is the appropriate focus, the father needs to put as much as possible of his vulnerability on hold. The

father needs to hold, not repress, his process and deal with it at the first opportunity available. If he can't hold his process then he needs someone who he can talk to immediately. Many men report great difficulty at the birth.

One of the role contradictions at this time is the powerlessness of the protector. At a time when the male is most strongly in his protector role he is also often powerless in the birth process.

Powerlessness is created by:

1. the lack of knowledge about birthing;
2. the professional control of the process;
3. a lack of training in possible usefulness.

One man told me:

Simon: "I just had to get out. I left her there. I felt so powerless. I couldn't stand the woman I love dying in front of me. I thought she was dying."

Other smaller concerns occur along the way

Strange as it may seem, even in the most faithful partnerships the question, "Is it my child?" enters the mind of the father at some point. It appears about 60% of fathers have this doubt. We suspect it may be higher. It is often said that only the mother really knows. This touches on one of men's deepest fears and realms of powerlessness.

David: A father in his 50's with a son in his 20's: 'My partner just said, "We'll what do you think? Make your own mind up". I wish that I had pushed for a clear, definite answer. I'm still not sure and I'm afraid to ask.'

Most men worry. They worry about providing a home and they worry about the health and welfare of their partner. Most men forget themselves and their own processes. Fathers are entitled to feel fearful, get upset, feel tired, feel sexually frustrated, feel angry, feel inadequate, and feel powerless:

Men have powerful emotional processes. It is an emotional time and it is important that they experience them. The best place is often with male friends.

Story from a new Dad, Martin: "When I was driving Nina and our first daughter home from the hospital I felt as though there should be a police escort for the car; or at the very least I should drive with the horn or the hazard lights going. I felt really aggressive toward other drivers who seemed to be driving with no consideration for our precious bundle on the seat beside me."

A father reflects, Darryl: "I recall coming out of the delivery after the birth of my little girl at 4 am in the morning. The moon was full and the world was silent. I felt as if I had been on an emotional rack, pulled so many directions that I had lost shape. I wanted to shout, laugh and cry. Especially cry. Instead I drove alone in a weary silence back to my house to an empty bed. If I'd

known then what I know now I would have had my good mate with me. I could have had a coffee and done all that stuff with him, probably danced as well. I was so alone as a man that night."

Story from a new mother, Stephanie: "For my husband the provider role kicked in the morning I told him I was pregnant. After doing one of those urine tests which gives you a result straight away, I went for a walk to try to deal with the shock of it all, and went home with the expectation that we would have a cup of coffee and talk about it. After hearing the news we talked for about ten minutes and then Simon disappeared outside. I flopped around for half an hour or so then felt irritated with him Where on earth was he? We had our whole future to talk about. This would take hours." So I wandered outside looking for him. There he was out in a paddock, sweating profusely, digging. "What are you doing?" I asked. "Digging a vegetable garden, aren't I", he replied."

8. Many dads are doing a wonderful job.

I speak as if all men are struggling fathers. It was clear from talking with fathers that many were not, but it was clear that many men had learned the hard way. Much of what was told to me was as advice from men who had come through the system. They have enjoyed playing with their kids, singing to their kids, enjoyed a balanced and fulfilling parenting relationship where they participated fully, and they have great relationships with other men and their father. I salute you who have and are fathering well. You are fine examples and you know the rewards.

The task of fatherhood is I suggest a privilege. It is important that it be done well. The moment of a first birth is a transforming encounter. Not only does it call us to caring for our own child but it calls us to a new role in the world. It sensitises us to the condition of all children. Fathering is everywhere. It calls us to the principle of kaitiaki tanga the guardianship of living things around us. We are guardians of not only our tamariki but of the wider community. We are guardians of the environment that we live in. We cannot fail in that guardianship for fatherhood is the greatest job a man can do and the world and our children depend upon it.

Waiata

*and i shall have feathers and wool for warmth
and i shall have wood and mortar for strength
and i shall have thread and pattern for beauty
and i shall have stones to hold promises
and i shall have a mountain to name me
and i shall have a river to carry me
and i shall have my earth to call me back
and i shall have a fire to light my mauri
and i shall have a people to belong to*

*and i shall have a mother with an open womb
and i shall have a father with an open heart
and he will have a waiata to welcome me
and then, then i shall be born.*