

Chapter Six

NON-STEREOTYPICAL FATHERS

by
Harald Breiding-Buss

The first image that often comes to mind when we think of a "good" father is a man with a satisfying, well-paid job, who pays attention to his wife's and also his children's needs. He is a man of duty, most of all, whose pride in his family is his main reward. This is the image that Hollywood movies and advertising like to create, but it is not the reality for many men and women of the 90's, which has been a decade where work and family arrangements have been negotiated much more flexibly between the partners. A small, but growing, proportion of New Zealand children now see a lot more of their father than of their mother, while in a larger number of families work and family duties are being shared much more equally.

While there has been more attention on the father's role in the media recently most of it has focussed on the specific contribution a working father makes in addition to the mother's role. This is quite different from a father taking on aspects of the parenting role that are considered very female: the comforting of a child in pain; feeding; and guiding a child through upsets, such as "accidents" during potty training or problems of settling into a childcare centre. This role is conveyed through advertising slogans such as "Ask Dr. Mom" or "Only Mum Knows" for which there is no male equivalent.

The trend towards a partnership in parenting is all but ignored by those publicly concerned about fathering. Fathers as primary caregivers were neither an issue at the "Fathering the Future" forum in Christchurch in March 1998, nor at a similar forum in Auckland in September of the same year. Posters, documentaries and other resources made in recent years commonly ignore these family types.

INCIDENCE OF NON-STEREOTYPICAL FAMILIES

Economic and social changes have encouraged women's advance into the workforce, and qualification levels of women are approaching similar levels to that of men. Also, men and women with a similar level of education are the most likely to form a couple. [1] This means that a couple of the late 90s is much more equal than a 60s couple, and the increasing educational status of these women undermines the formation of the stereotypical family with the father as the only income provider.

Not surprisingly the number of such stereotypical families has fallen sharply, declining from 56% of two-parent families with pre-schoolers in 1986 to 36% in 1996. Families where mother and father have roughly equal employment status have increased from 18% to 29%, and families where the mother's employment status is higher than the father's make up about 4% (up from 1.5%) [2].

This latter group of fathers would be considered primary caregivers due to their probably spending much more time with the children than the mother. However, many fathers with equal or higher employment status than the mother would also come into this category, if they work non-traditional hours and provide most of the childcare while the mother is at work. According to US research, 25-30% of fathers in dual-income families provide "daycare" for the children, and most of these (about 75%) are considered primary care providers. [3] If this was similar to New Zealand conditions, we would have to add 8-10 percentage points to the number of caregiver fathers.

In families where both parents are unemployed there is also often a clear division of roles, with the father being the main caregiver of the children in 26% of cases, according to British research. [4] On 1996 New Zealand census data this would increase the proportion of families, where the father is the primary caregiver, by 2 more percentage points. Therefore, in about 15% of two-parent families (with a pre-schooler) the father will spend significant amounts of time with the children alone and will undertake much or most of the unpaid work related to the children. How many of these would have to be considered "primary caregivers" is hard to estimate, but perhaps the concept of a primary caregiver is gradually becoming obsolete in a world where the primary provider role is slowly ceasing to exist.

"After I was laid off I had problems finding a new job, but Michael was on the way and I suppose I didn't look too hard [for a job]. This [Michael] was more important to me." Howard (33), father of 2.

"A few months after the twins were born I went bankrupt. I had been a successful businessman for more than 10 years, always running my own shops, sometimes 3 or 4 at a time. But after I became a dad I just couldn't focus on my business anymore." Michael (41), father of 3.

Among single parents, 8% of those with pre-schoolers, and 18% overall, are single fathers. [2] This gives 13% of fathers with pre-schoolers overall in primary, or significant, caregiver positions. Even this figure is only a snapshot. The number of fathers who, at some stage during their children's pre-school years, will be their main caregivers for at least a few months is much higher. Men change jobs, take a break for training or deliberately take time off work for staying home with the children for a limited time. Custody arrangements of separated parents also change sometimes. The likelihood for a man who becomes a father today that he will be a primary caregiver before his child starts school would be much higher.

The concept of primary caregiver may be becoming increasingly irrelevant, however. Studies researching fathers as primary caregivers tend to show a continuing high involvement of the mother (see, for example, Pruett [5]). In parent classes I am seeing a large number of parents who have achieved a high level of sharing of all duties, and are rewarded by children that are attached to both parents, instead of just one.

Where parents are separated, fathers often retain significant access. [6] Even if their role is reduced to the usual 2 days every fortnight, this means they may well be in sole charge of their children during those two days. So while they are seeing less of their children overall than a father living together with the mother, when they do, their involvement is much more like that of a primary caregiver. About 25% of fathers with pre-schoolers do not live with the mother. [2]

SOCIAL AGENCIES AND GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS IN A NEW WORLD

Our social service, family benefit and family law systems are geared towards the principle of a primary caregiver and a primary income earner. In a world where these roles change frequently between parents, and more and more often such a clear role division does not exist, these systems begin to struggle.

This is most obvious in the Family Court, which generally attempts to clearly divide the roles after separation into a primary caregiver (usually the mother) and a primary income earner (usually the father). It is clearly struggling with the concept of shared responsibilities, and even more with the concept of the father as the primary caregiver. Unlike a housewife, a househusband cannot expect to be automatically granted full custody of his children after separation.

The Domestic Purposes Benefit also cannot be split between the parents - only one is entitled to it after separation, even in the case of equally shared custody. Where custody is awarded to one parent only, the other has to pay child support calculated on his/her income, but without regard of the time spent with the child. A father who sees his children three full days each week pays the same amount of child support as a father on the same income who does not see them at all, provided they earn the same income. But the mother's government assistance remains the same, although in the case of the involved father her expenses for the children would be reduced significantly.

Family Assistance payments by the government, too, are applied for by, and paid to, the primary caregiver, regardless of the marital status. There is a Woman Alone benefit slightly above the level of the Community Wage, applying to women (and only women) over 50 who have spent at least 15 years primarily caring for someone else, including her children. The Widow's Benefit, also above the level of the Unemployment Benefit, cannot be paid to men. The conclusion from these examples must be that the government and the legal sector cling to a stereotypical division of roles. Through its financial assistance policies to families the government actively discourages shared parenting, and especially a reversal of the traditional roles of

primary caregiver and primary income provider of women and men. Given the increasing prevalence of such arrangements, however, the government and legal sector are remarkably out of touch with the community.

In the social service sector, services to parents are primarily targeted at mothers, although increasingly fathers are invited, too - provided they are the primary carers of their children. Baby CPR training is incorporated in "new mothers groups" run by the Plunket Society. Not surprisingly, attendance of fathers at formal parenting programmes drops well below that of mothers. [7] But working mothers also give these programmes a miss - many no longer see themselves as the type of full-time "primary caregiver" these programmes are geared at.

Of all parenting programmes, ante-natal classes get the highest attendance from parents of both sexes. Birthing providers and their ante-natal classes are the first contact of parents with the new world they are about to enter. If they are given the impression that this new world is mainly for the mother (while the father may be allowed to "help"), then the inexperienced couple is likely to follow this lead, unless economic circumstances are adverse to this arrangement. By addressing all their services primarily to the mother, not just those related to women's health, birthing providers foster and actively encourage the concept of a primary caregiver. I run a fatherhood module for some Christchurch ante-natal course providers. Not surprisingly, a disproportionate number of the couples who attend have firm plans to "swap roles". They are ignored throughout the rest of the programme.

Involvement of men as paid staff, or at decision-making level, in organisations concerned with the welfare of families is virtually non-existent. Of the 70 or so full-time and part-time Plunket staff in Christchurch, not one is male. There is recognition in most organisations that cultural advisors are necessary to avoid the development of an internal culture that excludes cultural minorities, but no such advisors are employed to avoid the development of a single-sex culture which excludes men.

An intriguing piece of as yet unpublished research, quoted by Adrienne Burgess [8], revealed that fathers' behaviour is vastly different when they are observed. In an experiment where researchers videotaped mothers and fathers interacting with their children independently, fathers stayed decidedly more distant and somewhat aloof towards their children. But once they were told the videotape was turned off (which it wasn't), their behaviour converged with mother's. This is a very strong indicator for the power of social and institutional factors in determining father involvement.

"We sometimes get fathers here, but they don't seem to be interested to get involved and rather do their own thing. They're not very outgoing." Playcentre supervisor

PROBLEMS OF SUPPORT FOR NON-STEREOTYPICAL FATHERS

While all parents, mothers and fathers, need support, non-stereotypical fathers are the least supported of all. This is not solely a result of gender-bias in institutions concerned with parent support. It is also a structural problem arising from the concept of primary caregiver.

Support for mothers generally starts at the hospital or birthing provider, where they have their babies. From there, the mums are passed on to Plunket nurses, who refer them to playgroups, coffee mornings, support groups and whatever is required. All these services tend to be accessible only for primary caregivers, because of the time of day they are run.

Fathers as primary caregivers for babies younger than 6 months are very rare - they make up only a few hundred families nationwide [9]. In general, the roles of mother and father are swapped later in the baby's life. But when a mother starts paid employment, she will have to drop out of these services. Mothers who at first do try to stay involved in them, report, that they find less and less common ground with the other, "full-time", mothers.

"There was a La Leche League group in my home town in the evenings that I attended at first, but they were all mothers, who only met in the evenings to get a break from their babies. But I wanted some quality time with her [my daughter] and the other mums." Monica, mother of one.

The father, on the other hand, would be a newcomer in these firmly established groups, with less experience and more likely than not the only male. Unlike the mother, who was "taken care of" from the moment her baby was born, he would actively have to go out and seek support services. This is even more true where parents are separated, and custody changes from one parent to the other. Where partnered fathers are welcome, or at least tolerated, at parenting services, separated and non-custodial fathers are not.

The Father&Child Trust has been setting up playgroups and informal support services, such as a drop-in centre, in Christchurch. There are other services targeted directly at fathers in specific situations, such as teenage fathers or fathers who have a Protection Order in force against them. Much of this work aims at building father's confidence in their own way of parenting in a society, where they are considered somewhat clumsy and lacking parenting skills (compared to mothers). The Trust's main work, however, is towards joint initiatives with well-established providers of services to parents, to achieve a co-parenting approach throughout the system.

The above-mentioned single sex culture in most parenting organisations is a major obstacle for these organisations to develop co-parenting, or father-specific, support services. Men are unlikely to get seriously involved if they are outnumbered in such order. Therefore, the Father&Child Trust serves another very important purpose: to get men involved in child-related community work and thus provide a stepping stone into this field.

SIGNIFICANCE OF NON-STEREOTYPICAL FATHERS IN THE CURRENT FATHERHOOD DISCUSSION

Fathers as primary caregivers are a small minority in our culture, and cultures with high father involvement are a minority worldwide. But there are exceptions. Babies of the Aka pygmies spend 40% of their time at no more than an arm's length away from their fathers and are given to their mothers mainly for nursing. [10] Babies and young children of the Colombian Wayuu Indians, too, spend most of their time with their fathers, as in this culture the mother traditionally goes out to work or to sell goods in nearby settlements. [11]

Famous anthropologist Margaret Mead, who compared the role of mothers and fathers in several different "primitive" cultures, found that the father's role is defined very differently by the different cultures. [12] The examples of the Aka pygmies and Wayuu Indians show that men can successfully be socialised as primary, or at least significant, caregivers of babies and young children. Biological predisposition, if it exists at all, can therefore not be an obstacle to high father involvement. Every society can make a conscious decision about what sort of fathers they want.

Does our society want more nurturing fathers? The discussion about "correct" fathering is in full swing throughout Western and many developing countries. David Blankenhorn [13] has been an outstanding advocate of a return to the traditional role of the father, with the provider role in a married relationship with the mother being central to the way a father sees himself, mixed with a bit of caring and nurturing, which is mainly the mother's domain, however. He sees this role of the father as paramount to our society's wellbeing and attributes poverty, youth crime and many other social ills to a lack of it.

There are two main flaws in this argument. Firstly, there is no evidence that the provider image of the father shows any sign of weakening - the notorious low self-esteem and isolation of fathers in primary caregiver roles is strong evidence that this pylon of traditional society is still held up. The poverty of single mother families is not always a result of desertion by a providing father - a father's lack of income could make him appear useless in the family under current stereotypes, causing him to leave or be kicked out by the mother.

Secondly, Blankenhorn avoids discussing the implications of his fatherhood model for the role of the mother. There are two options for her: either she returns to home and hearth, giving up the choices and options that women have fought so hard for since the early 60s, to concentrate solely on bringing up children. This would need to be encouraged by major legislative measures, violating international legislation and the constitutions of many countries, to make sure that a father's income and work opportunities will always be higher than a mother's.

Or women could continue to widen their options, which would leave men permanently disadvantaged. Young men would see themselves put into narrow straightjackets of stereotypes, while faced with female peers who have virtually limitless opportunities

and choices. While mothers would have the choice of working or staying home (or a mix of both), the father would be confined to the role of a dumb workhorse, whose contact with his children is limited to kicking a ball around at the weekends - more a coach than a dad. In case of separation he is bound to lose his children altogether.

Other authors, too, are trying to devise the ideal man. Steve Biddulph [14] has a not too different view from Blankenhorn about what the ideal man should look like, they only disagree on how to get there. Blankenhorn believes in an innate tendency of men to be aggressive, violent and sexually opportunistic, which needs to be harnessed in the institution of marriage and by full-time work, while Biddulph believes that bringing out the ideal father will only require bringing out the "natural" man inside every male through intensive socialisation by older males and initiation rites, somewhat reminiscent of those of the Australian Aborigines, only without the knocked-out teeth.

While Hollywood will always be keenly interested in such supermen, many men will resist any attempts to be formed into the desired shapes. For all men and women are different. Designing such shapes is a vain attempt to harness men's and women's natural diversity in the first place. Whatever stereotypes we devise, there will always be those unhappy creatures who just won't fit them.

In reality, there is only one answer to the feminist revolution: an equal widening of the male role to include the provider type as well as the primary caregiver, and all the other men in between. Men, like women, must be able to develop their potentials according to their personal preferences and capabilities. We don't need "boy-friendly" schools, we need schools where all children can develop their potential according to their personality. For some boys this may mean that 5 years is too early to start school, as Steve Biddulph believes, while others will already be able to read or write even before they enter the school building for the first time. And the same applies to girls.

In a world where a man is accepted as being just a father, there is no need for a teenage boy with limited earning potential to run away from his pregnant girlfriend or deny his fatherhood. There is no justification to kick an unemployed father out of the house, and no incentive for him to kill himself. In this world, work and family duties and joys are being negotiated between individual couples according to their personal preferences and abilities, and service providers will go along with parents' choices, instead of putting them into neat "primary caregiver" and "primary breadwinner" boxes.

Non-stereotypical fathers reinvent a fatherhood role that has become lost in the mists of history, and they also challenge women's current monopoly on parenting matters. They are the men who accumulate actual male parenting experience. They are the men we must listen to, if we want to get on our way to increase choices for men. If we do, young men of the future will truly have the whole world at their feet.

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