

Chapter Two

THE FATHERS WHO CARE: PARTNERS IN PARENTING PROJECT

by

The Office of the Commissioner for Children

The overall goal of the Fathers Who Care: Partners in Parenting research was to explore the role of fathers in relationship to their children in the New Zealand setting and to identify aspects of practical support needed to assist fathers in their parenting role. There are four parts to the project (Julian, 1998; Brickell, 1998; Kerslake Hendricks, 1999; and Julian, 1999). Each part addressed, in different ways, aspects of the same questions.

- *What is the present role of fathers in New Zealand society, as perceived by men, women and children?*
- *What are the obstacles that prevent men from carrying out their fathering role in the way that they, along with women and children, would like the role to be undertaken?*

The research reported in Julian (1999) and summarized here comes from a national survey of the general population to determine their views of the responsibilities of fathers compared to mothers, about the barriers to being a "good" father and on ways of supporting fathers. The results of the survey are compared with the findings of the other three studies in the project; the focus group and key informant research (Julian, 1998); the views of children (Kerslake Hendricks, 1999) and the review of current parenting programmes for fathers (Brickell, 1998).

METHODOLOGY

A telephone survey of 2002 people over the age of 15 years was carried out by ACNeilson as part of their regular omnibus polling. The respondents varied in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, occupation, educational level, geographic location and current parenting status. The questions followed a structured format, replicating to a large extent those used for the research with the focus groups and key informants (Julian, 1998). The questions were analysed by each of the demographic factors and the relevant significant results are reported.

RESULTS

The roles of fathers and mothers: same or different?

A large majority of the respondents thought that fathers and mothers should be equally responsible for a range of aspects of child rearing:

- discipline;
- showing affection;
- helping with problems, behaviour, school, health and personal;
- involvement with sons, and daughters;
- day to day care.

The percentages of those supporting equal responsibility in these areas ranged from 96% for discipline to 65% for day to day care. Those who thought that there should be differences considered that mothers should provide more of the day to day care, help with health and personal problems, and be more involved with daughters; while fathers should be more involved with sons. The people who thought that there should be differences tended to come from the same groups in each case; they were more likely to be either people over 65 years of age who were no longer actively parenting or had never been parents, and many of this latter group were teenagers. Men were also more likely than women to consider that there should be differentiated gender roles.

Barriers to Men Being "Good" Fathers

Respondents were asked their views about a number of possible barriers to men being able to carry out their fathering role as they would like, such as:

- men aren't taught fathering;
- women are better at looking after children;
- the Family Court discriminates against men;
- men do not have time to be fathers due to work ... or other activities;
- child rearing is not manly.

Most of the sample, particularly the younger people and those who are currently parents, rejected stereotypical views of fathering as unmanly and also the notion that work and other activities were a barrier to having the time to be a father.

The respondents were somewhat divided in their views about whether or not women were better parents, but again the younger sample and those currently parents were more inclined to reject the idea that women were better parents. Almost half of the respondents and significantly more men (52%) than women (38%) agreed with the statement.

Most of the sample agreed that men were not taught how to be fathers, and again it was the younger people and those currently parents who were most inclined to agree with this statement. Older respondents were also likely to consider that men are not taught fathering, possibly reflecting their own experience.

Concerns about the Family Court discriminating against men were shared by many respondents, especially men who were currently parents or no longer actively engaged in parenting. Almost half of the men agreed with the statement, compared with a third of the women. Only a quarter of the respondents did not agree that the Family Court was discriminatory against men. This suggests that some more information and debate about current practice is necessary.

Ways of Supporting Fathers

Most of the respondents agreed that changes to societal attitudes, more publicity about being a good father, parenting courses for fathers, paternity leave and flexible working hours were necessary in order for fathers to play a greater role in the upbringing of their children. In general, the highest level of agreement was from women, especially women at home with young families. On the other hand, those most likely to disagree were people unlikely to be directly affected by any changes: people over the age of 55 and those whose children no longer lived at home, or older single people.

Factors Affecting Attitudes

The results show that attitudes to the role of fathers appear to be changing. Egalitarian attitudes supporting the sharing of parental responsibilities are most common among those most actively involved in parenting at present. These people are also often younger and more likely to be women than men. Traditional attitudes favouring different roles for men and women are more likely to be held by those who were 65 years and over, and those for whom fathering is no longer a directly personal issue. Teenagers were also likely to have traditional views, but it seems likely that they will change their views when they become parents.

CONCLUSIONS

New and more egalitarian attitudes to fathering are clearly gaining ground. The results of this survey demonstrate that most people, especially current parents, want more equality in all aspects of parenting. They believe that fathers should be closely involved with their children, and should share responsibility for most aspects of parenting. No longer are fathers content to remain aloof and only intervene on request or in extreme situations; most of them want to help with the children's problems, to be involved with both sons and daughters, and to share their day to day care. Children also want a greater involvement of fathers in their lives.

It is now time for social institutions to support the new consensus by encouraging employers to promote greater flexibility in the workplace so that fathers can be with their children on special occasions, and through support for paid parental leave. A publicity campaign to show fathers engaged in a wide range of activities with their children, and the introduction of a wider choice of parenting programmes for fathers, which are also seen as important ways of enhancing the role of fathers, should be supported through official as well as community channels.

If the trends shown in this research continue, then it seems likely that we are moving towards a society where gender is not a major issue in parenting and where each parent performs those aspects of a parent's role for which they are best suited as individuals. The outcome of such changes should be positive for children; in future they could benefit from quality care from both parents, and both parents are more likely to be content with their respective roles.

REFERENCES

Brickell J (1998) *Fathers who care: Partners in parenting. An overview of parenting programmes for fathers*, Wellington: Office of the Commissioner for Children

Julian R (1998) *Fathers who care: Partners in parenting. Focus on fathers*, Wellington: Office of the Commissioner for Children

Julian R (1999) *Fathers who care: Partners in parenting. Fathering in the new millenium*, Wellington: Office of the Commissioner for Children

Kerslake Hendricks A (1999) *Fathers who care: Partners in parenting. Children's views on fathering*, Wellington: Office of the Commissioner for Children