

## Chapter Four

### DEVELOPING SUPPORT SERVICES TO FATHERS<sup>1</sup>

by  
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#### 1. COMMUNITY FATHERHOOD

In February 1999 the "Holmes" programme devoted a show to the IRD's treatment of people who had fallen behind in their tax payments. The story, which triggered an unprecedented deluge of mail into TV1's headquarters, was that of a man, whose debt was spiralling out of control - and who eventually killed himself. A few weeks later his 15 year old son also took his life. This was a boy who, according to his mother, didn't know what suicide meant before his father had died.

While the programme eventually caused an enquiry into the IRD I believe the real question were not asked. Why did this father not realise his importance to his son? And why did this father think that, just because he couldn't financially provide for his family anymore, his life had become useless? Is it so natural for a man to end his life when he gets into financial trouble that noone asks these basic questions? Apparently, giving men the feeling that they are important and needed as fathers is the key not only to involving them with their children, but to men's own wellbeing as well.

I conceived the idea for the Father&Child Trust on a day when I had the three children of a friend over to play with my two girls, all pre-schoolers, and I took them to the beach close to where we live. The five boys and girls were entertaining themselves quite well and I had some time to sit in the sand to enjoy the sun, when it suddenly occurred to me that an outsider would not be able to tell which of these children were mine. They were all coming up to me from time to time, needing clothes put on or taken off, or their noses wiped, and they were all hugging me at random. And at that moment I realised what a part of my life not only my own children, but also the children of other men had become for me. I realised how much my bond to my own children has been fostered through being together so often in small groups with other men and lots of young children, and how this has given me a sense of being part of a community, something bigger than just me, my wife and my children.

In socialising and working as men with children around us we may be reinventing an age-old model of fatherhood. But perhaps more importantly we are providing our children not only with fathers but with a community. We are providing them with not only one adult man in their lives but several. We are providing them with friends. At

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<sup>1</sup> Address to the Social Policy Forum on Fatherhood, April 19, 1999

the same time we are providing ourselves with parenting skills, without ever attending a parenting course. We are acquiring knowledge about children and confidence in ourselves. All of us have become entangled in a community web of men, women and children.

When a father ever only parents in his own home, one-on-one, he will have nothing to compare his own parenting experiences to, he will be unable to place what he does in a wider context of fatherhood. No matter how much effort he puts into it, he will still be left with a nagging feeling that he could be a *better* father because he may not really know what good fathers are like in *real* life. Networking is the key to good parenting.

Children do not need *one* perfect, providing, protecting parenting machine. They need a whole variety of men and women in their lives. No one man on its own will get it perfectly right no matter how good his support and his knowledge is. One man alone cannot shoulder the burden of teaching children all about the male roles by himself - telling them to do this only makes them feel bad about themselves, about their own inadequacies. A father who cannot be this "superdad" may just as well decide to abandon his family, in spirit or reality. But collectively, as a community, we can teach children all there is to learn about men and women and the rest of the world. Strong communities can cope with the occasional absent father or mother. Families isolated from such communities cannot. And our communities don't need just one fatherhood model for all men, but they need to reflect the real world: the househusband as well as the workaholic, and all the fathers in between.

Networking men and their children, rather than lecturing, educating or even changing men, is the underlying mission of the Father&Child Trust. I want to make men feel valued in their relationship with children, and to give children not just a father but a community. And it is in this spirit that we operate our magazine Father&Child, our drop-in centre in Christchurch, and develop our co-operation with other organisations.

## **2. PRIMARY CAREGIVERS VS PARTNERS IN PARENTING**

Institutions that dealing with parents as part of their normal business should always be conscious about what family model they base their operation on. Normally these institutions look for a primary caregiver to target their services to and generally simply assume that this primary caregiver is the mother.

How exactly do we determine what a primary caregiver is? If the standard of measure were the amount of time someone spends with a child, the primary caregiver would in many instances have to be a childcare centre or babysitter. But we never consider babysitters to be primary caregivers, because we know that there is a quality in the parent-child relationship that is independent of the time spent together. But if the time spent together does not determine a primary caregiver we have to abandon the idea that a stay-home mother is primary and a working, or separated father secondary, for example. Add to this a modern working environment, where people change jobs frequently, take time off for further training, work shifts or work from home, and the work status of a parent can no longer be reliably used to define "primary" caregivers.

The concept of a primary caregiver is flawed. It is a myth that conceals the fact that parents are a team. And as a team they need help and support, not just one of them. If only one person out of this team is provided with support, help, advice, information, expertise and practice, not only does the other person miss out, the power balance of the relationship is being shifted significantly, the team is being destabilised - and on the way to being destroyed as a team. When one person is set up as the "expert", the other becomes the "helper" or "babysitter". The "expert" will be more and more tempted not to listen to the "helper" for parenting decisions. The "helper" will withdraw in frustration, because parenting has become a job of duties without rewards, responsibilities without any opportunity to influence this child's upbringing. I firmly believe that the persisting focus of support services on the primary caregiver idea in times that have changed so dramatically socially and economically is a powerful factor in many relationship breakups.

Most modern parents prefer a "team concept" to a "primary caregiver concept" with all its consequences (see table 1), but at the same time all government-funded services of any kind that have anything to do with families at all support the "primary caregiver" concept. At the end of the 20th century, help for families is still announced as a "mother & baby" package by the government.

**Table 1**

<b>Option 1</b>	
<b>"Primary Caregiver" concept</b>	
<i>Primary Caregiver</i>	<i>Secondary Caregiver(s)</i>
<b>Receives</b>	<b>Receives</b>
- education	- some advice
- support	- old jokes
- financial assistance	- regular demands on wallet
- a sense of being needed	- a sense of being used
<b>Develops into:</b>	<b>Develops into:</b>
A "Parenting Expert" that	A "Secondary Parent" that
- makes all the decisions	- has nothing to say
- organises life around child	- works hard to avoid being home
- responds to child's needs	- is being given a list of duties
- seeks more information	- can't be bothered.
- "Superparent"	- "Absent Parent"

## Option 2

### "Team" Concept

#### *The parenting team makes decisions together about:*

- who works and how much
- who does how much and which house- and yardwork
- which childcare centre or school the child goes to
- whether throwing food in dad's face is acceptable for the toddler or not
- if separated, have a team parenting plan

#### ***BUT:***

- mum and dad build independent relationships with child and spend time alone with child ("family" time can feel to a working dad like Supervised Access).
- accept that they may have very different everyday experiences and different needs for themselves at the end of a day,
- accept that they do some things differently.
- may each have their own support and child-related networks.

### **3. INCLUDING FATHERS IN SUPPORT SERVICES**

Support for mothers starts at pregnancy. Ante-natal classes are in fact by far the most successful parent education courses of all. And they are hugely more successful in attracting fathers than any specific parenting programme for fathers I have seen. Why? Because parents at this stage still see themselves as a team - as yet no one has told them otherwise. During my talks in ante-natal classes expecting parents tell me how they see little difference in the roles of mothers and fathers, and how they both want to be involved pretty much equally in all aspects of their new lives, as much as possible.

But this changes as soon as the baby is born, if not before. While most ante-natal courses are conveniently held in the evenings, any post-natal information will be provided in the form of "morning teas". Plunket nurses will visit and give new mums information about their new mothers group. There is the "New Mother's Pack" given out at the hospital, and a smiling baby in mum's arms on the nappy pack in the supermarket.

I believe service providers are not listening to what parents want but tell them what to do. Instead of meeting the parents' desire for making a team approach work, professionals (unconsciously) sideline one of the parents at this crucial time.

All experience shows that parents' interest in parent education and other services is highest in those early months. Once they have disappeared from those mailing lists they will only come back if they run into specific problems. It is here, in those early months, where we have the biggest chance and where we have to make the biggest effort to support parents as a team and to build support for fathers. What professionals do in those early months has a big impact for the rest of the lives of these people as

parents. It will influence where and how they seek help, how they work together, what options they will consider. Deferring information about involved fatherhood and team parenting to when the baby can talk means losing the best opportunity we have.

The Christchurch Father & Child Trust is very active in this area. We provide father/co-parenting modules for ante-natal classes, and I have developed the resource "Dads in Ante-Natal Classes". We are also setting up a magazine for new fathers which will be delivered to hospitals free of charge through an existing distribution system. But let us have a look at some general structural problems with the current provision of services to parents, possible solutions, and how the Father & Child Trust could possibly help (see Table 2)

**Table 2**

<b><u>Structural Problems in Existing Parent Support Services</u></b>		
Problem	Possible Solution	How F&C Trust could help
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<b><u>Accessibility</u></b>		
Course times, Childcare etc.	Adjust times, provide childcare	Advice
<b><u>Image</u></b>		
Resources pitched at women (non-inclusive language, posters etc.)	Use inclusive language and imagery	Advice
<b><u>Management/Operation</u></b>		
Lack of male volunteers/staff/professionals	Review employment policies	"Joint ventures" between Trust and provider.
Lack of knowledge about male parenting and its significance	Resources about fathering/co-parenting. Training.	Resources "Father&Child" Workshops for staff.
Lack of male input at management level	"Fatherhood advisor"	External advisor
Hardened structures with female internal culture and external image	External Review	Partner in Review
<b><u>Funding</u></b>		
Women's projects a priority	For funding of parent services re-prioritise on co-parenting	

There are the obvious accessibility problems - parenting courses that are held at times when most fathers can't attend; newsletters that do not use gender-inclusive language and imagery; playgroups that are called "mum's groups"; lack of childcare which means that one parent has to babysit instead of both being able to attend. The solutions to these problems are obvious, and the Trust is happy to help any organisation wanting to tackle these problems.

But accessibility is only the most visible sign of a deeper problem that consists of a lack of male volunteers, staff or professionals, a lack of knowledge in the system about male parenting and its significance, especially a lack of male input at management level. For a very long time "parent" services have meant services by women for women. This has led to very female internal cultures that effectively exclude men. Too often the people working in these organisations blame the men for not using their services instead of analysing what could be wrong with the delivery of the service. Indeed, many such professionals believe trying to include men in their services is pointless, because they will not be interested anyway. That a service has worked well for women for 50 years does not mean it will also serve couples well, let alone fathers.

There are several possible solutions to this:

- Some services could be run as "joint ventures" with fathers' or men's groups. This is being tried in Christchurch especially in ante-natal and post-natal classes, with good success, but it still represents more of an add-on to an existing programme, rather than a concept that has been worked into the whole course;
- Every organisation dealing with parents should stock resources on fathering for both, staff and clients, and staff should be familiar with it;
- The Trust could provide father-awareness training for staff;
- Major organisation should also consider employing "father advisors" just as they employ cultural advisors. These advisors should have something to say in the organisation. Sometimes organisations employ men to deliver a service to men, but the service as such is still developed and conceived by women. It does not give men a feeling of being empowered as parents;
- Funding policies of parent services need to be looked at. Some funders, especially those administered or funded by the government, have a special emphasis on women's projects. This means that service providers in the parenting area are encouraged to develop projects that only target mothers, but not co-parenting or male employment in community services. Minorities such as single fathers, househusbands, teenage fathers are especially disadvantaged as a result. A solution could be to separate funding for parenting services from funding for other social services and develop different guidelines for the two areas.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The lack of recognition of fatherhood as a central part of a man's identity and, in fact, for his mental health leads to fathers that do not realise their importance for their children. Not education of fathers, but recognition of their role and contribution is the most important goal in developing support services. Service providers need to look beyond the traditional roles for mothers and fathers and develop services that encourage and enable team parenting. Parents must be able to make choices about their parenting arrangements themselves and to come to their own division or sharing of duties and responsibilities according to their particular situation. Our current services are ill-equipped to meet this challenge, largely because they operate on the myth of "primary caregivers". The set-up of a government taskforce reviewing all operations of the state sector that affect parents with a view of empowering mothers and fathers to parent together would be desirable.