

## INTRODUCTION

The original *Perspectives on Fathering* was published in April 1999. In the same month, a Social Policy Forum was held in Wellington, New Zealand, with addresses from many of the contributors. It was clear to us at the time that we were just scratching the surface of a large number of important issues, and the forum showed that several people had additional useful information that merited a wider audience. Our hope has been to generate informed debate, and the present publication is another step towards that objective. Included in this collection are papers arising from some of the additional material at the forum, plus other ongoing research and commissioned papers to give a broad coverage of the issues.

The papers contain a range of perspectives. Some of them are background research, others are "position papers" which demonstrate the current thinking guiding practitioners whose work affects fathers and families. Societies continuously adjust to changing circumstances, aspirations and values. It is therefore necessary to have in place frameworks for reflection and reassessment, with channels for the results to flow on into policymaking and implementation. This is our aim here. We have deliberately avoided presenting a particular philosophy, choosing rather to present and consider the available information, and to juxtapose alternative viewpoints. This is particularly important because research itself plays a part in shaping views.

One major concern of ours is the fragmented approach currently being taken to social issues. The World Health Organisation definition of health makes reference to "complete ... social well-being". Similarly, relative deprivation concepts of poverty emphasise participation in the activities of a society. The health of a society depends on how well it hangs together and includes its members. Fragmented approaches can result in separating out the target groups for special attention and losing sight of the wider society to which they belong. Gender analysis as defined by New Zealand's Ministry of Women's Affairs treats men and women quite differently, with no mention in the consultation guidelines on consultation with men. Such an exclusive approach results in an incomplete picture and is unlikely to produce balanced policy suggestions. Public sector research and policy advice of this kind can be very damaging if there are no counterbalancing influences. The State Services Commission's project, "Improving the Quality of Policy Advice"<sup>1</sup>, indicates that there is a problem.

Participation in policy formulation and implementation has also been recognised in some circles as important. We see this in health, for example:

*"... long term gains may be achievable with limited funds in programmes which ... involve members of the target group from the very outset of the programme and are sensitive to their needs".<sup>2</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.ssc.govt.nz/documents/Occ\\_Papers\\_Contents\\_Screen.htm](http://www.ssc.govt.nz/documents/Occ_Papers_Contents_Screen.htm)

<sup>2</sup> National Health Committee (1998) *Active for Life: A Call for Action*, Wellington (p.38)

There are also examples in education:

*"... schools and parents/caregivers together are best placed to decide how the special education needs of individual students should be met ... Such decisions are more likely to be understood and supported if carried out with full consultation."*<sup>3</sup>;

and:

*"You need to develop the experience for NESB [non-English speaking background] students right from their first contact with the school. If that moment isn't inclusive then you will struggle with the subgroup levels."* and quoting Jannie van Hees, *"I think in many ways schools are leading society in their attitude change and their willingness to see it as an obligation to be inclusive and relishing it."*<sup>4</sup>

Given the generally co-operative nature of parenting, a study focusing only on fathers and fathers' views would be incomplete, just as a study would be if it only considered mothers. We have therefore attempted to draw on the views of both men and women. By taking an inclusive rather than an exclusive approach, we hope to foster a greater general understanding and to avoid some of the more divisive consequences associated with one-sided advocacy research.

We are also aware of a set of views about men and domestic violence which sees men as the sole perpetrators of domestic and women and children the only victims. In addition to shaping policies to address domestic violence itself, this view has had a significant effect on legal thinking and approaches to relationships, marriage, marriage breakup, counselling, custody and access, and even ideas about child support and matrimonial property. For this volume of *Perspectives on Fathering* we especially sought a contribution explaining this position on violence, but none was forthcoming.

The previous volume contained a paper presenting an alternative position. It is by Felicity Goodyear-Smith and, in our opinion, is well researched. It presents a complex picture of domestic violence, with both men and women being perpetrators. We are aware that, privately, some people expressed disquiet about this paper being published, yet no critical research response was offered by these groups. We consider it most important that more debate take place about domestic violence, especially as there appears to be much contradictory evidence. It is most disappointing and a cause of great concern to us that once again nothing has been provided.

There is increasing debate in the international literature about the role of fathers in families and the impact of fathers on their children's wellbeing. Questions are being

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<sup>3</sup> "Special Education 2000: What's Happening in Term 1", *Education Gazette*, 77(3), 23 February 1998, pp.1-2 (p.1)

<sup>4</sup> "Richness and Diversity", *Education Gazette* 78(7), 3 May 1999, pp.1-5

asked about how children are affected by divorce or living in sole parent families, what elements of father involvement are important, how biological fathers are different from social fathers and even whether mothers or fathers are essential. In publications such as the *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, there is now a regular section on research on fathers. This literature increasingly points to complex relationships within families and within wider society. There are many alternative views put forward and much critical debate about research methodology and research conclusions. We would welcome such debate in New Zealand, not only about the issue of domestic violence, but also about other papers published in our first two volumes of Perspectives on Fathering.

As researchers, policy advisors, politicians, judges, parents, and, in short, the people who are instrumental in shaping our current and future society, we have a responsibility to seek and use the best and most balanced information we can find. We have to ensure that the structures are in place to foster this information, to disseminate it, and to put it to good, practical use.

This collection of papers begins with an overview by Ian Shirley of policy thinking of successive governments as it affects the families. It is followed by a summary of some of the research on fathers undertaken by the Office of the Commissioner for Children. Approaches to support fathers are then considered in contributions from the Equal Employment Opportunities Trust and Harald Breiding-Buss of the Father and Child Society. A position paper by Sue Hine for Relationship Services leads in to three papers on family law. The first two of these, written by Robert Ludbrook and Mark Henaghan, are from a legal perspective. The third, by Stuart Birks, applies economic thinking to parenting and Family Court processes. Unfortunately there is no position paper from a representative of the Family Court to describe the Court's view of its approach to fathers. The economics angle is also addressed in the paper by Simon Chapple, who gives some perspectives on the decision to become a father. Jill Chrisp follows with a study of mothers' and sons' attitudes towards fathers. The collection rounds off with papers by Judith Davey and Paul Callister giving demographic information on fathers and families in New Zealand, considering changing structures and roles.

We hope that you find this collection informative and thought-provoking.

Stuart Birks and Paul Callister  
October 1999