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## **Media Release**

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### **Solo Fathers - Forgotten Parents**

Father & Child Trust has released New Zealand's first-ever study involving interviews with fathers raising children by themselves, titled "Dependent on Dad".

The small study focused on 13 solo fathers with children under eight years of age, where there is no or very little mother involvement. Census data shows that in 16% of solo parent households the parent is male, yet virtually no attention is paid to this family type in the social debate or in social services. The Trust hopes to change this and challenges social providers and decision-makers to pay better attention to these children and their parents.

Fathers were interviewed on a range of questions involving their own as well as their children's welfare and living circumstances.

While almost all the fathers thought they were doing a good job, at least as good as a solo mother, a surprisingly high number said that they would not want to be solo dads if there was another way.

Amongst the results that stood out from the study was the fathers' – and hence children's – isolation: all but one of the fathers felt either isolated or depressed, or both. Only very few engaged in 'typical' at-home parent situations with their children, such as taking them to the library or helping at kindy or school. Almost half the dads 'never' or 'hardly ever' had their children's friends over.

The low community involvement of solo dads is not only a disadvantage for their children, it is also a missed opportunity given how very rare males are in the early childhood education sector.

The study participants were drawn from clients of the Father & Child Trust and therefore were more likely to have higher needs than average. Even so, the low socio-economic background, young average age (24) and the high incidence of abuse or neglect by the mother of the child was surprising. A significant proportion of solo fathers had criminal convictions.

Despite those high needs, the response of family support agencies to this family type was very patchy. It seemed to work best for solo fathers with very young children (under two), most of which reported to have had good contact with at least one family support worker. However where fathers took full care of their children after those first few years they were almost completely cut off from any such services as the fathers had been neglected by family support services while the mother was still around. Plunket was the service getting particularly low marks from solo dads, being even less popular than Child Youth and Family or Inland Revenue!

*"New Zealand communities where fathers and mothers are supported equally and have access to the resources and help they need to work together for the welfare of their children."*

Although apparently better connected to services, solo fathers with children under three also presented as the neediest. "Someone to talk to" was a support need outranked only by 'helpful employers' and 'more money' for those dads, further emphasising the relative isolation of these fathers and children.

Where do solo fathers turn for help? For the fathers in our study it was overwhelmingly their own parents, especially their mothers. Fathers also ranked highly for their support, but in some cases have not been around. Other important support people tended to be other male relatives, such as uncles or brothers, but rarely a female partner.

One reason why solo fathers are not on the political agenda may be because they are much less likely than solo mothers to receive a benefit. Even in our study the father's emphasis on earning money was evident, although the majority was not in fulltime paid employment. 'Helpful employers' were at the top of the list of identified support needs and almost all the fathers agreed that it is 'important to have a good income to provide my kids with opportunities' – a statement outranked only by their belief that they are overall doing a good job. A majority of the fathers in our study even believed that their children were 'missing out because I am not earning as much money as a father should'.

While the fathers believed their children were happy, there were also concerns about them 'underachieving'. Some fathers were also concerned about a lack of close female role models. Interestingly, the view that a child needs a 'mother figure' in their lives was held most strongly by fathers who themselves grew up in solo mother households.

More research on solo father families in New Zealand is urgently needed, especially addressing the question how many of them are vulnerable families with high needs, and what barriers exist to get help.

Father & Child Trust had been unable to obtain any funding for conducting this study, which was paid for from its own resources.