Real Dads – Real Men.

A study of fathers' experiences of child and family services in the Nelson/Tasman region and their suggestions for "father friendly services"

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Executive Summary

This report presents the results of a research project designed to build on a number of initiatives involving men's health and fathering that have been introduced in the Nelson/Tasman region over the past 3 years. Specifically, this research aims to gain information from fathers about their experiences of child and family services. It is hoped this information will prove valuable in assisting the development of services so that they can better meet the needs of fathers. In addition, suggestions for new services that will target men as their clients will be sought.

It should be noted that the term "child and family services" is defined generally and includes such areas as health, educational and social services.

The literature review found that while the roles of men in families are changing with men becoming increasingly more involved in caring for children, an information base to guide how services should adapt to this change is noticeably lacking. This lack of information only adds to the invisibility of men's contribution to parenting. Indeed, there was a suggestion that the voice of fathers is becoming increasingly silent in literature generally and in research in particular.

The research design was quite exploratory in nature, mostly due to the lack of available information. However, because of a strongly held belief by the research team in the ability of fathers to explore and create innovative solutions to their own needs, a critical approach was chosen to inform and guide the research. By critical, it is meant that the research aimed to uncover existing social inequalities as well as having a focus on empowerment and change for those people involved. It was believed that the voices of fathers are largely unheard and also that fathers have quite distinct needs that are largely unknown. It was felt that this project would, in some way, be a catalyst for positive change for fathers and fathering.

The research involved a survey and focus groups. The survey involved 150 questionnaires being distributed which were aimed at providing a range of information related to:

- demographic details of the participants (eg. age, income, location, family status)
- frequency of use of child and family services
- perceived usefulness of these services
- barriers that were experienced in the use of services
- feedback about the usefulness of possible services
- suggestions for local and national initiatives to support fathering

Information gained from the survey was also designed to provide a baseline for more detailed exploration in 3 focus groups. One group was open to fathers generally; one to fathers from rural settings and one to single fathers. Each group was limited to no more than 12 members. Focus group participants were asked to respond to one question only, "What needs to happen to make child and family services more father friendly?"

Findings from the survey and focus groups were collated into the following common themes.

a. *Awareness raising.* Firstly to reduce the negative stereotypes and myths surrounding fathering with a focus on the reality of life for fathers. Secondly, to provide a sound education base for fathers themselves. There was a strong feeling (voiced especially in the focus groups) that this education and awareness raising should be carried out primarily by fathers themselves.

It is of note that while the researchers attempted to move the groups on from these points to focus on specific initiatives that service providers could implement, the fathers insisted on returning to them. Clearly they believed that before services providers (and others) could begin to respond to and/or respect the needs of fathers they needed to be aware of the impact of stereotypes and myths as well as hear something of the real life experiences of this group of people.

b. **Issues re service provision.** The survey showed a high degree of involvement and satisfaction by fathers was evident in the environments prior to birth and during preschool. This wasn't supported by opinion expressed in the focus groups. It may well be that the men answered the survey thinking of how services supported their partners and children. When in the focus groups, they were able to consider the issues of service provision and how it supported them; that is, they framed the situation differently. They talked about being frequently present, they were there to be of help (but generally didn't know how to be of help) and they found it difficult to communicate their sense of isolation and difference, feeling as though services were unable to assist them in this area. It was felt that, because of this continuing sense of isolation and difference while they were with these services, their involvement as a parent interacting with these services diminished, as the children grew.

c. **Specific initiatives**. There was a distinct need voiced both in the survey and in the focus groups for improved access to information about parenting that focused on fathers. It is evident from the review of the literature that the current research focus, in New Zealand at least, is primarily exploring issues to do with "parenting" as a generic skill. There is concern that most of this work is primarily looking at the lived experiences of women. What is clear is that, when the needs of fathers are looked at, their needs are indeed quite distinct to that of mothers.

While the research team framed the issues to do with fathering directly in relation to the provision of child and family services, the fathers saw this as but one of several issues that impacted on their lives.

Recommendations covered 2 main areas.
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a. **Reducing the effect of myths and negative stereotypes about fathers and fathering by:**

- Expanding the current focus in the Nelson/Tasman area on men and fathering to include awareness raising to reduce the negative stereotypes and myths surrounding fathering. Responses from the participants in this project indicate that these initiatives have been timely, welcomed and extremely useful.

b. Supporting and developing services for fathers by

- Supporting further research activity on identifying specific skills and processes that would enable service providers to best meet the needs of Dads. This project has identified that the needs of Dads are, in many ways, unique yet we know little about them. Developing a sound and valid information base is vital. It is also vital that men are involved in all aspects of this research.

- Developing educational programs that focus on the needs of fathers. This was an area that was considered most important, from both the survey and the focus groups. Again, it was emphasised that the processes that are followed as well as the content need to be considered carefully. The involvement of males is vital. Initially this package could focus on antenatal and preschool services

- Supporting the development of an advocacy service for Dads. The need for information and the problems with accessing this was a common theme. An extensive database of "Dad friendly" services needs to be developed and maintained as well as an advisory service.

- Continue and further develop support groups for Dads. Responses indicate that these are very useful but need more effective promotion on an ongoing basis

In conclusion it seems that far from being the silent and distant people who find considerable difficulty in expressing emotion, these Dads shared their experiences openly and enthusiastically. They talked with considerable interest and passion for their parenting role and they shared stories of vulnerability and pain. They also demonstrated an ability to work together in developing new insights into their world as well as creating solutions to complex problems.

The Dads typically communicated in a very direct manner that many may consider blunt. The use of humour, often rather pointed, was another feature. The challenge for the researchers was to provide an environment and a process where the Dads felt safe, supported and valued in expressing their thoughts. The process that was followed clearly enabled the Dads to collaborate and develop creative ways of addressing problems as they defined them.

1. Introduction

Overview

New Zealand families are changing and men are becoming more involved in child rearing. The reasons for this are varied. They include voluntary choices, changes in employment status, changes in family make-up from 2 parenting to custodial or non-custodial parenting and shared parenting arrangements. Much is being written and promoted at present about the importance of fathers in their children's lives, but as with all social change in our society, not all the conditions to support this movement are ever in place at one time. For example, services that work with families, while welcoming more father involvement, are unsure of how to make their services more attractive or accessible to fathers.

To support the increase of fathers in the role of caring for their children, we may have to make some changes to the way child and family services are presented to this group. To assist with determining what these changes may be, this project sought to ask men involved in part or full-time care of their children what they would like from child and family services.

It should be noted that the term "child and family services" is defined generally and includes such areas as health, educational and social services of the project.

This project is built on a range of successful initiatives in the Nelson/Tasman region. These began in 1997 with a promotion built around Fathers' Day. The promotion included interviews, newspaper articles, radio advertising as well as bumper stickers and booklets titled "Kids need Dads". The booklet included an invitation for fathers to join a "Real Dads, Real Men" group (essentially a support group for Dads). From this promotion a group was formed and continues to meet to this day with 10 fathers attending regularly and a mailing list of 30. Since then the "Real Dads, Real Men" project has kept a high profile in the community through newspaper, radio and television coverage. During this time one of the organisers, Philip Chapman, was elected inaugural president of the New Zealand Father and Child society.

Currently, the "Real Dads, Real Men" group continues to meet on a regular basis, and attracts Dads from all walks of life. A "Dads and Kids" group also runs one morning a week. The continuing aim is to promote and support how Dads can and do make positive contributions to the development of their children.

It should also be noted that the term "Dad" is used throughout this paper rather than that of "father". This was a clear preference voiced by many of the men.

The Research Question

This project aimed to build on the initiatives mentioned above and gain information from Dads about their experiences of child and family services in the Nelson/Tasman region, with the aim of enhancing their use of these services. In addition, it was hoped to identify suggestions for new services that would target Dads as their clients.

The project intended to look at the experiences and ideas of Dads generally, then to look more specifically at Dads who live in rural settings as well as single fathers. The rural and single Dads were considered to be potentially more isolated than others.

> *"There's no use expecting a whole pile of people to change when they probably don't know the difficulties that [Fathers] experience."*
>
> Nelson Dad

The project team

The project team involved three people from quite distinct yet complementary areas. Carol McIntosh from Nelson Marlborough Health Ltd., Philip Chapman from the Nelson Dad's support network and David Mitchell from the Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology. This collaborative approach was considered advantageous in several ways. Firstly, it brought together 3 people with quite differing expertise and experience, as well as the support offered by 3 different organisations. Carol McIntosh kept the team on track with her vision of the more broad and long-term issues related to health promotion for Dads. Philip Chapman brought skills and a talent for developing and supporting men's networks both locally and nationally. His energy and ability to "get alongside" Dads proved immensely valuable. David Mitchell brought experience in research in the area of men's health, especially with research that promotes collaboration with and a degree of ownership for the participants.

More importantly, all three team members brought to the project a commitment and history of involvement in men's health in general and to fathering in particular. This blend of skills and empathy went a considerable way to ensuring the success of the project.

2. The literature review

The traditional roles of men in families are changing. Between the years 1986 and 1996 the number of solo parent families where a male is the sole parent grew by around 49% from 19083 to 28491 with 17% of solo parent families headed by men. (Statistics New Zealand, 1998, as cited in Julian, 1998). Put another way, there are around 349,000 men engaged in child rearing in New Zealand. Of this number, around 28,000 are the principal caregiver (ibid).

One writer, in analysing the changing lives of New Zealand fathers, noted various changes in the labour market and family type over the last two decades. These included a dramatic decline in the 'traditional' two-parent family, a significant number of men actively choosing to spend more time with their children and a further group of men who have the opportunity to spend more time with their children through the growth in male unemployment (Callister, 1999; cited in Birks & Callister, 1999).

Overall, it was concluded that these changes have resulted in some Dads having a lot more involvement in the day to day care of their children. Alongside these changes there have been other changes that affect the manner in which our society is coming to view parenting and the contribution of people to this task.

Over the past few decades there has been a move away from a focus on gender differences being related to biological sex (in this case parenting differences). This change is generally supportive of the position that differences related to gender are more to do with the impact of socialisation processes rather than biology. As one researcher stated when talking about trends in childrearing, "[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" (Julian, 1999, p2). This perspective has been referred to as a more androgynous approach to how we regard gender (Grady, 2000). The replacing of the terms mothering and fathering with the generic term "parenting" is an example of language that supports this position.

While there are more moderate views, such as the point that "gender roles are a complex, but still uncertain mixture of social construct and biology" (Callister & Birks, 1999, p34), this changing perspective does seem to provide for an environment where the abilities of people, regardless of gender, can be recognised. An idea that seems to have many exciting possibilities as we enter the 21st century.

However, this move has some important implications in regard to the provision of parenting services. In order to recognise the abilities of all, we need to be aware of contributions to parenting that may differ between groups, including those related to gender. In regard to fathering, awareness of abilities that may be specific to Dads is lacking in the literature. There is a danger that, by focussing on a more androgynous approach to parenting the "lack of voice" of Dads may worsen. Indeed, in a recent report regrading service provision for families by a national service provider, males accounted for 4.9% of the participants yet the findings were applied to families in general (Sander, Munford & Richards-Ward; 1999). Put another way, by using

generic terms (such as parenting) the danger is that those without a significant voice become even more invisible.

A focus group project asked 14 groups of men and women "What is the role of fathers in New Zealand" and "What are the obstacles which prevent men from carrying out the fathering role the way they would like to". (Julian, 1998, p9). Results showed a general agreement that one of the main barriers to men becoming good fathers was stereotypes fostered through attitudes and conditioning and supported through the media. The focus groups also commented that the fathers who met the ideals were often unrecognised outside of the immediate circle. They often felt unsupported, and sometimes experienced discrimination in their role.

It has also been suggested that, contrary to the generally accepted belief that men are reluctant, perhaps unable to share experiences of emotion and vulnerability, when men are asked for their opinion they give of their views freely (Dye, 1998).

As one researcher noted, it seems that

> *Given the changes in society with women returning to the workforce, the rise in [the] number of single parent families, and particularly the rise in the number of single fathers taking primary responsibility for the raising of their children, it is essential to try to understand the father's role and how this can be best enhanced to the benefit of children.*
>
> (Julian, 1999, p8).

The belief that Dads are distant from the more direct aspects of childrearing is common in our society, and it seems, internationally (in western countries at least). However there are other ways of framing this view. As one writer suggests, it may well be that while the more direct, home based, care is the more obvious contribution, there are other approaches to care that are less visible; that the contribution of Dads is less visible but an equally committed labour (Burgess, 1997; cited in Dye, 1998). Put another way, "men who feel supported by their wives in finding their own ways of doing things …. soon develop a strong connection with their infants." (Burgess, 1997, p138).

When working with families, service providers often overlook the needs of the Dad and interact almost exclusively with the mother (Griffith, 1997; Julian, 1999). Compounding this situation, is the suggestion that Dads need to be supported in a manner that differs from that generally used in service provision (Brickell, 1998; Gamble & Morse, 1992). Overall, it is suggested that the experience of parenting for men is quite distinct from that of women and that service providers need to recognise and support this. As one writer suggests, "Services supporting parents have to find ways of helping Dads forge their new role in society" (Brickell, 1998, p8).

It is encouraging that a representative of a national organisation involved in relationship services has indicated that designing services to meet the needs of fathers is an initiative they plan for the year 2000. (Hine, cited in Birks & Callister, 1999).

Perhaps in recognition of this situation, there are a number of people who have written guides to fathering (Sears, 1988; Gould & Gunther, 1993; Guiness, 1996). However, this information is usually written from personal experience. The amount of information that has been collected and analysed more rigorously, such as more research based inquiry, is meagre.

"I'm here, I'm a Dad … listen to me."

Nelson Dad

3. Research Methods

Methodology

From the literature review on fathering it was found that there is a noticeable lack of information to assist in understanding the reality of life for Dads. This lack of information suggested the project should be considered quite exploratory in nature. A critical social approach was chosen to inform and guide the project. Critical social theory has been described as a perspective that seeks to uncover existing social inequalities focussing on empowerment and change for those people affected by these injustices (Berman, Ford-Gilboe & Campbell, 1998; Smith, 1998). It was a shared belief, held by the project team, that change was most likely necessary in the area of service provision and support generally for Dads. It was believed that the voices of Dads are largely unheard and also that they have quite distinct needs that are largely unknown. In addition, supporting Dads requires a range of skills that are poorly recognised, taught and practiced.

It was felt that this project could, in some way, be a catalyst for positive change for Dads. It should be noted that critical social perspectives expect the research to be (at least in part) guided by the beliefs and assumptions of the researchers. This approach can be considered quite contrary to other, more traditional forms of inquiry where considerable effort is extended in protecting the research process from the bias of the researcher. Here, in critical social inquiry, the process is considered to be dynamic, evolving and changing as the research progresses. In a sense, this report is a record of this evolvement and change.

The project intended to "give voice" to the experiences of Dads, with the researchers providing an environment and process where this dialogue was able to occur. Here, the researchers act as interpreters of the information that is shared.

It should be noted that because of the subjective nature of this form of inquiry any attempt to generalise the findings of this project to a wider population should be treated with caution, however the process itself could be used anywhere. The project team believed that the approach they planned to take would prove the most effective in providing suggestions for local initiatives that best reflected the needs of local people.

Research Process

As the project was exploratory in nature, it was decided to use a blend of quantitative and qualitative approaches to data gathering to give as broad an information base as possible. To this end, a survey as well as focus groups were planned, with the survey providing baseline information that could be explored in more depth in the focus groups.

The survey involved 150 questionnaires being distributed (with 134 returned). The questionnaires were constructed to gather quantitative information in 4 general areas. These being:

- demographic details of the participants
  (eg. age, income, location, family status)
- frequency of use of a range of child and family services
- perceived usefulness of these services
- barriers that were experienced in the use of services
  (Possible barriers were listed)
- feedback about the usefulness of possible services
  (A range of possible services were listed)

The survey form was piloted to ensure that it was understandable and able to be used by the participants as well as the researchers. Several changes were made to the format in response to feedback. For example, it became obvious that the Dads preferred to respond to scales and direct questions rather than open questions.

Inclusion criteria for participants were that they defined themselves as Dads who were caring for their children on a full or part-time basis. Participants were recruited by a range of methods. Distributing information at a parenting seminar as well as a Dads group proved very successful as did informal approaches. The Dads seemed to much prefer a face to face encounter. Newspaper ads and posters were used with only limited success.

Survey participants were also asked if they wished to be involved in one of three focus groups, one group open to Dads generally, one to Dads from rural settings and one for single Dads. Each group was limited to no more than 12 members. The number of men wanting to be part of the focus groups meant that they were heavily over subscribed. This meant that many men had to be excluded form being part of these groups as we choose participants on a "first come first served" basis. (Copies of the survey are available from Carol McIntosh).

Focus groups have a number of advantages over other forms of data collection. These include the ability to provide rich data quickly and also, perhaps most importantly, they are able to provide information of greater depth than what could be achievable through individual interviews. A process that has been referred to as a "synergistic" effect (Morgan, 1995). To be consistent with the aims of the Dads having a sense of ownership of the project, focus group participants were asked to respond to one question only - "What needs to happen to make child and family services more father friendly?" Facilitation of the group was then aimed at keeping participants on track with this question. A "brainstorming" approach was encouraged where group members were asked to support contributions positively and consciously avoid critique and criticism of ideas. After identifying a range of suggestions on newsprint and discussing these so that there was as close to a consensus of understanding as possible, participants were asked to rank the most important suggestions. Essentially, the participants did the first two levels of data analysis themselves; those of identifying and ranking themes in order of importance. The focus groups were audiotaped.

Each focus group had a summary of the dialogue and priority areas drafted. The draft summary was presented back to the participants individually to ensure that it was an accurate record of the group's discussion and suggestions.

Ethical and methodological considerations

The project obtained ethical approval from the Nelson-Marlborough Ethics Committee.

Many of the Dads, when first presented with the survey were unable to respond to the questions as was intended. In particular, many of the participants were unable to understand that the survey was about *their* experiences of services. They answered for their partners and children. It was as though they were quite unused to considering themselves as a valid recipient of support from child and family services. Perhaps the survey should have started with a more fundamental question that assisted the Dads in shifting their thinking to consider their own needs.

When these Dads began to make a shift to that of considering their own needs, many found this a new experience. During both the survey and the focus groups, many Dads commented that they had never considered parenting issues from the perspective of a Dad, having always considered parenting from the perspective of supporting the mother and child(ren). Thinking of their own needs as a parent, as well as how these needs could be supported, was a completely new experience for them.

These observations suggested to the project team that researching the experiences of men, particularly research of a critical social nature, requires a great deal of attention to supporting the participants through (and after) the process.

Initially the project team had considerable difficulty defining a number of key terms. For example, who is a Dad? Is it the biological parent? What about step-parents? What about grandparents? It was finally decided that for the purposes of this project a Dad is whoever defines themselves as a Dad. The team acknowledges that this is a contentious issue, and many may not agree with this position.

Similarly, definition proved difficult with the term "family status". It was decided to categorise family status in 5 categories from a "single Dad" to a Dad with "limited access". Again the team acknowledges the wide variety of family responsibilities that men experience and that limiting this variety to 5 categories was a quite arbitrary decision.

> *"I believe the high level of interest and response rate was in some part due to our ability to meet the Dads in places and at times that suited them."*
>
> Field worker

4. Results of the survey

150 survey forms were distributed. Of the 134 that were returned 16 were not included for varying reasons (eg. lateness, indecipherable), leaving 118 respondents or a 78% response rate. As mentioned in the previous section, the inability of the Dads to frame their responses as being related to *their* needs as a parent was a continuing issue. Nevertheless, the project team considered that the survey gave a number of useful insights that would be further explored in the focus groups.

(i) Demographic details

- **Age range of participants**

It can be seen that the ages of the participants is predominantly within the 31-50 year old age group.

The inability to attract a stronger representation from younger Dads, despite special effort, was noticeable.

Age of participants
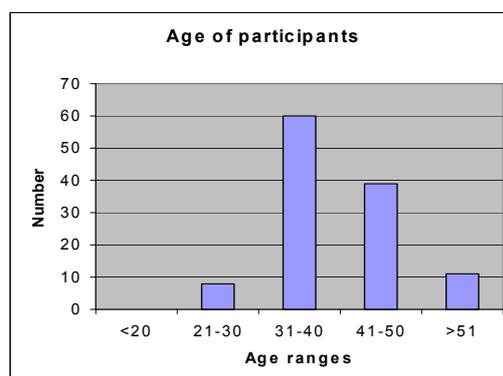
- **Income of participants**

As with the previous section, while the income ranges were something of a surprise, there was some consistency with statistical data from the Nelson/Tasman region which indicates that incomes are less than for the national average. (CWTAS, 2000).

Income of participants
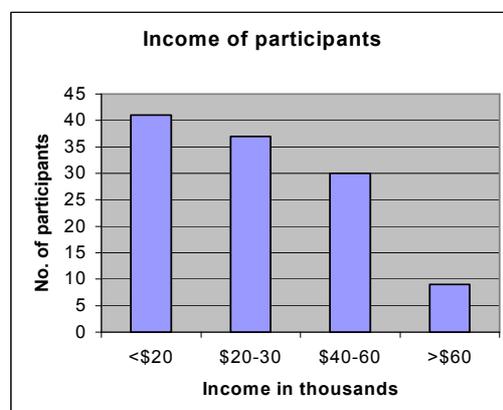
- **Family status**

Family status was defined as

a. Total responsibility (eg. solo parent)
b. As the main caregiver (ie. partner working)
c. With a regular, ongoing role (eg. shared care)
d. Working outside home
e. With limited access

Family status
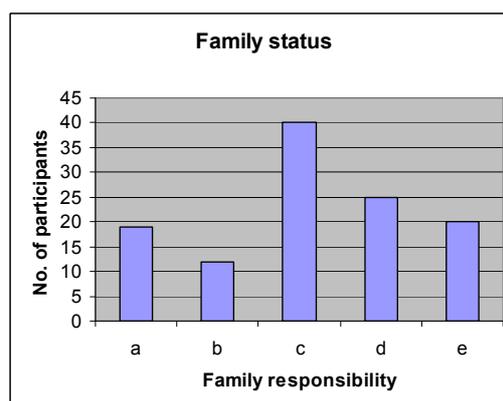
(ii) Frequency of use and perceived usefulness of services

- **Health related services**

The participants were asked their experiences of general practitioners, medical specialists, alternative health specialists, antenatal/postnatal services and counselling services.

GPs were, predictably, the most frequently used service and were also considered the most useful service. Obviously, something is happening here that the Dads find supportive and helpful.

Antenatal/postnatal services were the next most frequently used service but their perceived usefulness was of a lower ranking. However, with single dads, there was an exception. Single Dads found antenatal/postnatal services the most useful service in this category. It seems that when males visit these services as partners, they find the service less supportive.

- **Educational services**

The participants were asked their experiences of early childhood centres, schools, after school/holiday programmes and parent education services.

Early childhood services were, again predictably, the most frequently used service by the Dads and these were also considered the most useful.

Schools were the next most used service but here the opinion was that schools were the least useful in regard to providing support for fathers.

Parent education classes were considered the second most useful service.

- **Government and legal services.**

These included government agencies (eg. WINZ, CYF), the courts, legal services (eg. lawyers) and the police.

Here agencies and lawyers were found to be the most frequently used services, with lawyers found to be the most useful.

- **Social services**

These included agencies (eg. Barnardo's, Presbyterian Support), recreational/sporting groups, church groups, mens/Dads support groups and budget advice services.

Recreational and sporting groups were found to be the most frequently used service and also the most useful. The next most used and most useful were mens/Dads support groups.

(iii) Barriers that were experienced with service provision

The participants were given a list of 15 possible barriers that Dads could meet in the provision of services. From those prompts the following 5 areas were identified as the most problematic.

Barriers to support

e = understanding and respecting your needs as a dad
a = the service is not available at convenient times
d = the notice that people take of what you have to say
b = the accuracy of the information about what the
    service can offer you
c = the level of friendliness and co-operation
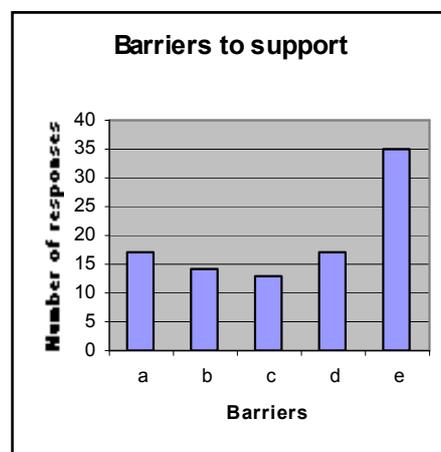
As it can be seen, understanding and respecting the men's needs as a Dad was the area considered most neglected.

(iv) Suggestions for local and national initiatives

Respondents were asked if they could think of any improvements that could be made for Dads locally and nationally.

Locally, the respondents voiced a need for education about services that are available, especially those that have an educational element

> *Days out for Dads ... more courses for Dads. Learning how to be a better Dad to their kids.*

As well as greater access to support groups. For example, as some participants noted,

> *Men's health/support Centre. Workshops. Information on importance of Dads and suggestions on how to be an effective Dad – handouts, pamphlets.*

> *Accessible time and place for men/dads to meet (other than the pub). Campaign for decent communication between men. Days out with kids.*

> *Encouraging fathers to get together postnatally. Especially for first time Dads. The peer feedback and reassurance is important to encourage positive role models and attitudes toward fatherhood.*

Nationally, the respondents consistently voiced a need for awareness raising about the realities of life for Dads and parenting. Again, as participants noted,

Raise the profile of fathers' positive qualities.

Be made more widely known that men are just as important in the parenting role and solo Dads are given the same respect as solo mums.

A deeper understanding of what it is to be a Dad.

Government funding for consciousness raising for men. Pressure applied to advertisers/media to be more positive about images portrayed of fathers and men.

(v) Feedback about the usefulness of possible services.

The survey included a section that listed a number of possible services for Dads and asked the respondents to indicate their preference for each services on a 5 point scale. The men's preferences did not differ markedly (Standard deviation = 0.26). However, the most preferred options (in order of preference were):

- Advisory services for Dads run by men
- Childcare education for Dads
- TV documentaries focussing on Dads

The least preferred options were:

- Fatherhood sessions at workplaces
- An internet website for Dads

5. Results of the focus groups

The 3 focus groups consisted of those representing Dads generally, Dads who lived in rural settings and single Dads. The groups met for around 3 hours each and were asked to respond to the question "What needs to happen to make child and family services more father friendly*?"* As the process of discussion was relatively unstructured, the Dads in each group had a considerable impact on the direction of the dialogue. What follows may seem to depart somewhat from the original question but it was felt important to balance the need for specific data with a trust that the Dads would themselves identify and explore those areas that were of importance to them in relation to the topic. As mentioned earlier the project was aimed at the Dads themselves having a sense of "ownership" of the project.

There were a number of general themes that emerged that were common to each group.

(i) Awareness raising

This was the first area identified as requiring attention, and included:

- **Exposing stereotypes and myths related to Dads and parenting**

The role of the media in perpetuating negative images of Dads was strongly emphasised in each of the 3 groups, especially in regard to the wider issue of the general contribution of men in society. As one participant noted,

> *Men are often portrayed (in the media) as the village idiot.*

There was prolonged and energetic discussion in relation to this area. Discussion then moved on to a similar topic, that of

- **Education about the real-life experiences of Dads**

Again, this area was considered vital with all 3 groups with the belief expressed that experiences of Dads were largely untold. That there was ignorance in society about the realities of parenting for Dads. As one participant noted,

> *We need more input from fathers that have been there…done that.*
> *(Service providers) needed to address what the husband went through.*

and another,

> *Possibly giving service providers more knowledge on what Dads want,*
> *to be able to respect the needs of Dads …(that is) recognise and*
> *appreciate Dads.*

Further, it was felt important to,

- **Promote positive images of Dads as being vitally interested and involved in the lives of their children**

Several national and local initiatives were mentioned but the group lamented that these were few and were vastly outweighed by negative images, and a perceived lack of value of the role of Dads. As one participant noted,

> *(There needs to be) a belief that there is somebody else involved in the upbringing of a child (and) similar to that is to value the role of fathers and men.*

and

> *Some decent public education in terms of roles that fathers play and, perhaps more generally, the roles that men have to counter some of the culture of suspicion and fear that's out there. Why are we (society) so suspicious?*

The second area common to each group was that of,

(ii) Accessible periods

Each group talked of times when Dads were more present within services. It was noticeable that these times were also talked of as times of vulnerability when support was needed. The times when Dads were more present in the lives of their families were identified as

- antenatally,
- during the process of birth
- during the preschool years

In addition there were other times when Dads were particularly vulnerable and unsupported, such as at the time of

- separation and initially with
- step parenting

During the antenatal period and also the preschool years were described as being times when Dads were perhaps the most accessible. The group identified:

- **The importance of supporting Dads at these times.**

As one participant noted,

> *There's some point in every Dad's life - they're open, before the door gets closed. That's the time to put other Dad's (and not professionals) alongside them. The key is knowing what their needs are and what the entry points are.*

In particular, contact with agencies was more noticeable earlier in the life of the child.

> *By the time the kids get to 5 years of age, the men fall off somewhere along the line. How can we keep Dads involved? How can we keep Dads interested and not falling through the cracks?*

The group felt that education of service providers and Dads during these times was vitally important and that there was a real opportunity here to support Dads in a direct, positive and productive manner.

Parallel to the idea of supporting Dads in this was the idea of:

- **The vulnerability of Dads at these times.**

This theme differs markedly from the often-cited perspective that men are detached, stolid and unemotional. The Dads found no difficulty at all in sharing a variety of stories and insights. Many of these describing situations of vulnerability and confusion. This point was made in relation to the experiences of Dads generally however the time of childbirth came in for particular mention.

> *Childbirth was one of the most traumatic experiences of my life ... that (perspective) is never portrayed. Seeing your partner in so much pain – the baby afterwards and all the emotions around it. Are you supposed to feel so helpless???*

and with a reconstituted family,

> *I could bungle my way through biological parenting. Step parenting was a completely different ballgame. I didn't believe that til I discovered it. Really needing to grapple for some positive replacement .. some more information, some more acknowledgment that the role of a step parent is different.*

These quotes portrays something of the sense of confusion and even fear that accompanies Dads at various stages of their life.

A third theme that developed through each group was that of :

(iii) Getting alongside Dads

Initially this dialogue started with descriptions of service provision that were unsupportive of the Dads then moving on to describe those that were supportive.

There was some interesting discussion here. For example, in relation to language

> *What the hell does "Ante-natal" mean to a bloke? I mean ... if I went to work and said "ante-natal" amongst (my workmates) straight away it's a funny word that doesn't mean anything. Plunket's another funny word.*

However, discussion invariably moved on to

- **How best to support Dads**

There were a number of suggestions here including, having services provided at more appropriate times.

> *Respecting needs to be an interactive thing ...for example, having Services open at appropriate times, things like that. Parent-teacher interviews when you don't have to leave work to be there for example.*

> *This also applies to medical aspects as well, appointments, things like that. Speech therapists, social workers ...right across the board.*

Combined with the need for employers to be more supportive of the needs of Dads.

> *Perhaps employers need to be more flexible to accommodate Dads. For example, overtime, weekend work. I suppose you'd call that "glide time".*

The need for "Dad friendly" services to be well publicised. A "Hot List" of these services was suggested.

> *Women's organisations have made quite a point of organising a "hot list" of (support people) ...For example that there are good lawyers for women, there are good counsellors. They understand the issues from a woman's perspective but at that time there was nothing (no information) for me. Why isn't that information out there? In terms of separation, Dad friendly lawyers are essential.*

As well as a range of other suggestions including, the need to involve other Dads

> *If a Dad gets alongside a Dad (especially with at risk families) and helps them develop skills on a 1:1 basis, that would be more effective in meeting ... goals.*

The value of men/dads groups.

> *(When I went to a Dad's group) it wasn't that in any sense I got anything concrete or material, but, on the other hand, what was noticeable, was that there was a place where other Dads were. There was no agenda. Just to talk of those sorts of things was really uplifting, really positive. Just that there were (other) people, it existed.*

The provision of "safe houses".

> *I'd like to see some sort of refuge for men. When I first came back from (name) there was nothing. It took me weeks and weeks to get any help. (My money) didn't cover anything. I was bludging on (name). I needed support, somewhere to stay, referrals.*

There was one theme that emerged from the group of single dads. That of

(iv) Issues related to separation and custody

There was one area that prompted considerable discussion. That of

- **gaining effective representation**

There were several points made in relation to where support could be accessed.

> *It would be good if you knew who to go to … not just any old jack sprat lawyer … you just waste your money.*

As well as questions about gaining support that was appropriate and respectful of their needs.

> *This lawyer said, "you're just wasting your time. I've got custody for women with needles hanging out their arm." So that's what we don't want. We want dedicated people that believe males are worth representing.*

6. Discussion

It should be remembered that, while this project aimed to gain information from Dads about their experiences of child and family services in the Nelson/Tasman region, another aim was to "give voice" to the experiences of Dads and to give them the opportunity to help direct the progress of the project.

While the research design framed the issues to do with fathering directly in relation to provision of child and family services, the Dads saw this as but one of several issues that impacted on their lives.

One obvious example was the manner in which, during the focus groups, the Dads focussed on supporting each other even to the extent of developing a support group. Another was that the Dads saw the provision of services being affected by wider issues such as, the lack of awareness generally of the reality of life for Dads. Indeed, there was a sense that it was vital to address the perceived negativity in myths and stereotypes towards men and fathering in society *before* working with service providers.

The process the project followed resulted in a great deal of data being collected. Rather than attempting to sift, collate and analyse all of this information, this section will look at commonalities and contrasts in the information gathered.

As mentioned, the Dads saw the major barriers to their role in parenting as being directly related to negative stereotypes and myths in society today. When this perspective is considered alongside the promotion of a more androgynous approach to parenting in more recent research, the invisibility of fathering becomes a compounding factor. In essence, the lack of "understanding and respecting the men's needs as a Dad" that was a finding of the survey can be seen as directly related to these developments. The Dads saw this situation as very serious, requiring redress in society in general and with service providers in particular.

In particular the Dads' perspectives could be summarised as being related to:

a. Awareness raising

There was particular support, both through the survey and in the focus groups, for seminars and other promotions focussing on Dads and their children – both at a national level and a local level. There were two distinct aims. Firstly to reduce the negative stereotypes and myths surrounding fathering with a focus on the reality of life for Dads. Secondly, to provide a sound education base for Dads themselves. There was a strong feeling voiced, especially in the focus groups, that this education and awareness raising should be carried out primarily by Dads themselves.

It is of note that while the researchers attempted to move the groups on from these points to focus on specific initiatives that service providers could implement, the Dads insisted on returning to them. Clearly they believed that before services providers (and others) could begin to respond to and/or respect the needs of Dads they needed to

be aware of the impact of stereotypes and myths as well as hear something of the real life experiences of this group of people.

b. Issues re service provision

The survey indicated that Dads experienced a high degree of involvement and satisfaction in the antenatal and preschool environments. This wasn't supported by opinion expressed in the focus groups. This may well be that the survey participants were often unable to identify their needs before those of their partners and children (as previously mentioned), whereas in the focus group they were able to frame their position differently. However, the focus group participants described their presence in the lives of their partners and children as being more noticeable at these times. They talked about being frequently there (or thereabouts), they were there to be of help (but generally didn't know how to be of help) and they found it difficult to communicate their sense of isolation and difference, feeling as though services were unable to assist them in this area. It was consistently voiced that, because of this continuing sense of isolation and difference while they were with these services, their presence diminished as the children aged. One suggestion was that, because of the difficulties Dads experienced in being involved with services during these times, their energy and enthusiasm waned.

c. Specific initiatives

There was a distinct need voiced both in the survey and in the focus groups for improved access to information about parenting that focused on Dads.   It is evident from the review of the literature that the current research focus, in New Zealand at least, is primarily exploring issues to do with "parenting" as a generic skill. What is clear is that, when the needs of Dads are explored, they are quite distinct to that of mothers. However, the research that looks specifically at the needs of Dads is noticeably lacking. Generally we do not know what these specific needs are let alone how services can address them.

7. Recommendations

It is clear that there is an environment of neglect in issues related to men in general and Dads in particular. This neglect is even more noticeable when it is overlaid with a prevailing attitude that men find it difficult to express emotion and share their concerns with others. When one considers these tensions, it makes it extremely important that service providers, advocates as well as researchers are able to deconstruct these myths and stereotypes and work with and for Dads in a manner that is respectful, sensitive and supportive of their unique way of "expressing self." The Dads in this project have made it obvious that, given a supportive environment, they are quite able, even eager, to share their concerns and hopes. It is the provision of this supportive environment that is so obviously lacking.

Recommendations included 2 main areas.

b. Reducing the effect of myths and negative stereotypes about fathers and fathering by:

- Expanding the current focus in the Nelson/Tasman area on men and fathering to include awareness raising to reduce the negative stereotypes and myths surrounding fathering. Responses from the participants in this project indicate that these initiatives have been timely, welcomed and extremely useful.

b. Supporting and developing services for fathers by

- Supporting further research activity on identifying specific skills and processes that would enable service providers to best meet the needs of Dads. This project has identified that the needs of Dads are, in many ways, unique yet we know little about them. Developing a sound and valid information base is vital. It is also vital that men are involved in all aspects of this research.

- Developing educational programs that focus on the needs of fathers. This was an area that was considered most important, from both the survey and the focus groups. Again, it was emphasised that the processes that are followed as well as the content need to be considered carefully. The involvement of males is vital. Initially this package could focus on antenatal and preschool services

- Supporting the development of an advocacy service for Dads. The need for information and the problems with accessing this was a common theme. An extensive database of "Dad friendly" services needs to be developed and maintained as well as an advisory service.

- Continue and further develop support groups for Dads. Responses indicate that these are very useful but need more effective promotion on an ongoing basis

8. Concluding thoughts

It seems that far from being the silent and distant people who find considerable difficulty in expressing emotion, these men shared their experiences openly and enthusiastically. They talked with considerable interest and passion for their parenting role and shared stories of vulnerability and pain. They also demonstrated an ability to collaborate with each other in developing new insights into their world as well as creating innovative solutions to complex problems.

The Dads typically communicated in a very direct manner that many may consider blunt. The use of humour, often rather pointed, was another feature. The challenge for the researchers was to provide an environment and a process where the Dads felt safe, supported and valued in expressing their thoughts. The process that was followed clearly enabled the Dads to collaborate and develop creative ways of addressing problems as they defined them.

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