

Fathering the Future

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Fatherhood is a term that describes the role and actions of a father with his children. This is seen as a different role from that of motherhood and different again from the notion of parenthood. Recognising this difference was probably the most important parenting issue of the 1990's in New Zealand and other parts of the world. In New Zealand the late Laurie O'Reilly (Commissioner for Children) led the interest and promotion of fathering with his research on and interest in emotionally absent fathers and the role of fathering (O'Reilly, 1997). Fathering is about fathers being emotionally present with their children and fatherlessness means being physically or emotionally absent from children even though the father may live in the same house. Fathering has been and is, an issue for a number of other writers too and it could be said that it was an issue whose time had come. Articles in prominent magazines and journals indicate current interest. On a visit to Atlanta and Melbourne five years ago I was struck by the number of parenting magazines with articles about the involvement of fathers with children (Badie, 2001, Yates, 2001, White, 2001, Phillips, 2001)). This shows me that fathering is of interest beyond New Zealand shores. This paper will explore the concept of fatherlessness and where it emerged from, by visiting the principles of Fathering the Future Trust, some history of fathering in New Zealand, the role of fathering and the development and work of Fathering the Future Trust.

Principles of Fathering the Future Trust

- An investment in children is the best investment a society can make,
- The family plays a central role in child-rearing, whatever form that family may take
- Fathers have a different and important role to play in the lives of their children, from that of mothers

There are a number of extra stressors on families today and times have changed. This means that the role of mothers and fathers has changed too. The late Laurie O'Reilly was particularly interested in absent fathers, whether they were physically absent or emotionally absent or both. There are plenty of articles and papers outlining fathers and children's regrets about the relationship they had with fathers. For example, 'It's hard being a dad because so often our own fathers weren't there in the way we wanted them to be, and there are so few role models' (Pollack, 1999, p.124).

Not all absenteeism is deliberate or intentional. O'Reilly constantly advocated for fathering, not adhering to any particular style of family or parenting but merely keeping to his principle that children need two different sorts of parents in their lives – if not parents, then other people who have an 'irrational attachment' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to the child. Urie Bronfenbrenner was also an innovator for New Zealand a decade before O'Reilly actioned his ideas. Bronfenbrenner was Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, at Cornell University, New York. He presented an opening address to the Second Early Childhood Convention, called 'Who Cares for Children?' (1979). There he discussed the family, changes to families and how families, whatever

their definition, was the best place to bring up children. The basis of his research and his delivery was to look at the ecological environment for children and the statement that lives on is:

'In order to develop physiologically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and morally, a child requires for all of them the same thing: the enduring, irrational involvement of one or more adults in care and joint activity with the child' (1979).

Irrational involvement meant 'someone who was crazy about the kid'. He saw this as becoming an increasingly complex relationship best achieved by the adult and child being in an environment with a third person to share the workload of domestic life and the relationship, though this person did not need to be a parent. This set of circumstances he called a family. It is obvious that O'Reilly knew about this model and would have had other reasons too, in forming the three underlying principles of his advocacy for children as stated above.

This address by Bronfenbrenner and his views on families, environment and ecological discourse forms the basis for New Zealand's Early Childhood Curriculum, Te Whāriki (Ministry of Education, 1996) and has an enduring impact on licensed early childhood services in New Zealand, teacher education training and the delivery of Te Whāriki.

Development of Fathering the Future Trust.

As the Commissioner for Children in New Zealand, O'Reilly held a position of national advocacy for children and was highly guided by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989. He was inspired by attending *The Fathering the Future Forum* in Sydney 1997. In conjunction with Save the Children Fund, O'Reilly launched a research project called 'Fathers who care – Partners in Parenting'. The project aimed to create a large building block of knowledge and commitment to the concept of caring fathers who are equal partners in the parenting of their children. It also aimed to identify the core messages and behaviours of quality fathering and coparenting and to develop resources that encourage fathers to have a more active role (Youth Forum Report 1998) with their children.

A forum was planned in Christchurch to raise awareness about the importance of quality fathering and coparenting and was based on the Sydney one that O'Reilly and others had attended. There was one major difference. Three separate but complementary forums were held on March 27th with an all-day main forum held on the 28th March 1998 of over 500 participants. The three topics were:

- Family Law Forum
- Father in different Cultures
- and a Youth Forum.

The rationale for the Youth Forum was that it was important to hear from young people if any solutions could be found to make changes in society. The morning was structured round ten different topics and young people chose two to attend for one hour each, with an experienced facilitator present. The ten topics were: teenage fathers, father/child relationship, fathers in sport, fathers and children's health, the image of fathers in the media, a female perspective on fathering, responsible relationships, fathers in the workplace and absentee fathers. This shows some of the wide range of influences there can be on fathers or for fathers.

The Forum is reported to have been ‘inspiring and challenging. It opened up a topic of immense interest to young people. They laughed and cried. There was an amazing absence of cynicism and a wonderful level of self-reflection. Responses were insightful and thoughtful’ (Youth Forum Report, 1998).

The Youth Forum indicated some things long suspected. Themes that emerged from the young people attending included these general issues:

- Young people want to be fathered. Fathers are more important than they realise.
- Men are not greatly encouraged or supported as fathers in New Zealand society.
- Many men do not own up to their responsibilities as fathers and commit to their families. Families need the commitment.
- Young people do not get enough time with their dads. They want more.
- Fathers too often let work and other interests take priority over family time. Children want to be number one
- Fathers do not tend to listen, show great interest or communicate well with their children.
- Fathers are caught in the cycle of having poor role models and being poor role models.
- Fathers stereotype their children in sport, discipline and the way they relate – but the stereotypes don’t fit
- Expectations of fathers are different than in previous generations – they expect more involvement with children. Relationships with partners are less clear cut, more interchangeable. Parent’s roles are up for negotiation

Young people had a day to express their views on fathering and fathers. The results from the Christchurch Children’s Advocate’s office provide sobering reading. These young people are very astute about fathers and know that the family often is not fathers’ first priority. What they want from fathers is ‘good times together, trust, communication, listening.’

Fathering the Future Trust

Fathering the Future Trust was a charitable trust set up in 1998, following on quickly after the Youth Forum. The aims were to raise the profile of fathers in society and to encourage fathers to be actively involved in their children’s lives and to uphold the three principles talked about earlier. The Trust was to be the body that continued the production and distribution of resources.

Achievements of the Trust

The first event of the Trust, called Sideline Dads, was organised in the year 2000, as an awareness raising exercise. The Trust contacted all sports clubs in Christchurch and publicised the need to have dads on the sideline supporting their children in sport. It was thought that work may have taken Dads away from their children and this was something they could do to be with their children. Three prominent male celebrities all wrote articles for the paper and car stickers were issued. The campaign was very well supported although it was not seen as highly successful by the Trust as it appeared to have no ongoing results. However, people still associate Fathering the Future Trust with sport so people talk about this aspect of fathering and it certainly had long-lasting results.

The Trust has produced a quarterly newsletter right up to now, which goes out nationally to subscribing individuals and relevant organizations such as the Family and District Courts,

members of Parliament, early childhood services and the Commissioner for Children. It contains current items of interest to fathers, matters of the law, e.g. changes in parental leave, book reviews, interesting paper articles about fathers or their interests, information about children, notices of websites and events (e.g. conferences) and any other items that come the way of Trust members.

Another early achievement of the Trust was the production of a booklet known as the *Newborn Kit for Fathers* (2000). This introduces new fathers to some ideas about being a father and what to expect, whether the man is the father of a new baby or has acquired children through a new relationship. There are stories from other first-time fathers, ideas for things dads can do with children, reassurance that he can do it too, balancing work and home, sleepless nights, parental leave and photos of dads and infants. This booklet is currently being revised and will be called “*Revving up to fatherhood*”.

In 2005 the Trust developed a course for fathers to be run by fathers for fathers. After some initial trials the course was revised from a six-week to a three-week course. Dominic Flatly, now working as a Family Court judge, and I, wrote the Dadskills Course. In the course fathers can explore their role as fathers, learn about child development and gain some skills in guiding children’s behaviour. So far, the course has been run with small groups and has been enjoyed by attendees.

Over the last year fathering the Future Trust has funded a research project undertaken by Bruce Ellis, Senior Fellow, department of Psychology, University of Canterbury called, ‘*Why are girls from early father-absent families at special risk for teenage pregnancy: Distinguishing between causal and compounding explanations?*’ Fathering the Future Trust chose to support this research after an article appeared in the Canterbury newspaper discussing the hypothesis. Regular reports to the Trust have been made. The research was carried out on the

‘Data collection of 73 pairs of sisters who grew up in biologically intact, father-present families and 66 pairs of sisters who experienced the dissolution of their biological families while growing up has been collected. If the two sisters are 7 years apart in age, experience family dissolution, then live with their mother, the result is that the older sister spends 7 more years in a biologically intact family while the younger sister spends 7 more years in a disrupted family without the birth father in the home. Our research is investigating the effects of this differential dosage of father presence-absence within families on sibling differences in timing of puberty and adolescent sexual risk behaviours’ (Fathering the Future Trust newsletter, No 22.).

At the present time the data has been collected and the results will be presented at the Annual Meeting of the Human Behaviour and Evolution Society in Philadelphia, in June 2006.

History of fathering

Since the issues listed by the young people at the Forum are the gaps in fathering then conversely the presence of these qualities would make successful fathering. A group of children aged about 9-10 years were asked to describe a father in preparation for the Forum and described him as someone who;

- is a good listener
- will spend time with you
- prepares you for the ‘real’ world

- is generous
- gives you money without strings
- respects family members
- is willing to be there in times of need
- is special because he helps
- doesn't ask too many questions
- provides transport
- is interested in the things you do, will encourage you to do well.

Just because children thought fathers ought to be this way does not mean that fathers must be seen this way or they are unsuccessful! It is easy to see where some of the role models described as 'poor' came from by tracing some historical changes. Some years ago I carried out a small piece of research about parenting skills by interviewing four generations of a New Zealand family.

I asked the grandparents who had lived on a farm in the 1930-40's and raised five children, what parenting skills they needed and where did they get them from. The answer was that children tagged along on the farm helping with the chores and doing farmwork. Grandfather was the fun figure and grandmother was the person who made and kept the rules. The children were involved with both parents through work and life was about survival. From the children's perspective they described several incidents showing that they were often unsupervised and older children took care of younger ones. For example some of them did not like wearing shoes to school so they took their shoes off outside the farm gate, left them under a bush and put them on before they arrived home after school. At that stage they rode a pony to school, several miles away.

I asked the daughter of these people (Elizabeth) as an adult, the same questions. When she was growing up on the farm, education in schools had become equal for boys and girls – girls could now take domestic science to train them to manage families and children. Elizabeth (and a sister) won a scholarship to go on to Technical School but was needed back on the farm for work and priority went to the boys being freer to train for apprenticeships. She did not attend high school, though later she left home and did go to a Technical Institute to study home economics. Her sister never took up the scholarship.

Elizabeth's husband Charles was a motor mechanic and went off to war leaving a pregnant wife and a baby. When he came home the youngest child was 18 months old. Elizabeth went back to the farm for the duration of the war and for the birth of the second baby so the children had their grandfather as a male figure in their lives. When they did settle as a family after the war, the father was an authoritarian figure who meted out punishment for misdeeds after he got home from work. His daughter Margaret remembers him saying 'this hurts me more than it hurts you' as he administered the razor strop for something that had happened during the day, already forgotten by her. A razor strop was a thick leather belt used for sharpening a cutthroat razor in the days before electric razor and was a common form of punishment. Presumably being the authoritarian figure was not how he saw himself as a father as he constantly talked about how important the family was. He involved himself with family events and both parents wanted to ensure their children had the chance for education. Charles died young leaving her with four children in the 1950-60's. Widowhood or solo parenting was unusual amongst the young families in the district where they lived and she did not know any others in a similar position.

Margaret (the baby when her father went to war) married Henry in the 1960's and considered that she was expected to 'marry and live happily ever after', that is after having an average of 2.5 children, caring for children and being kept by her husband who saw himself as the breadwinner. She was not encouraged or expected to have work as well and was expected to know how to raise children. She relied heavily on another woman she met in the nursing home who was having her third baby, for advice. Henry expected children to be involved in work and tasks around the home and the family was very involved in a large extended family.

Times had changed when her sister, born post-war and 8 years younger trained as a schoolteacher. She worked up until marriage. It was acceptable for her to have a part-time job outside the home while raising the children. Her husband still held the traditional role of work and they had three children.

By the time the Margaret's daughter was eighteen in the late 1970's and she was answering the same questions in advance of marriage and children, her response was 'first of all I have to decide if I want to have children'. By now thanks to the birth control pill, it was a choice that she was in control of. Interesting enough she is now 40 years old and married. She and her husband had three children as older parents and they share equally the care of their children and they both work outside the home.

This scenario reflects many New Zealand families over the last decades. Fathers because they were working or absent for other reasons could become distant fathers by simply not having time with their children and not being involved in the daily care of children (e.g. changing nappies). In a way women held the reins – notice how Margaret looked to another woman for advice rather than work it out with the children's father or three generations back when the grandmother made the rules.

The provision of childcare in New Zealand moved from welfare to education in 1986 a highly significant event as until then care of children outside the family was seen to be for the poor or needy. The move of childcare to education promoted a wider acceptance of childcare, with care and education being considered inseparable. The development of childcare services blossomed in the 1980's leaving the way free for today's world where parents are more likely to have a wider range of support options in raising children.

Fathering today.

The work scene is different today with many people either working part-time or are unemployed. More women have returned to the workplace while their children are young. Both Biddulph (1995) and Pudney (1998) talk about how work now isolates fathers from children and how we need to make work places be more 'family friendly'. Pudney says that 'work is the greatest destroyer of fatherhood' and takes fathers away mentally as well as physically from their children.

The age of parents has changed. A generation ago parents were in their early to mid-twenties. Today parents are in their teens or wait until they are older, that is 30-40 years, when they become parents. New Zealand has a high rate of teenage pregnancy compared to international standards based on research that was published last year (Rouch, 2005).

The structure of families has changed. Many parents do not live together and many men do not live with their children. It is harder to be present for children when a big effort has to be made to be physically present with them. However, there are also a large number of fathers who are their children's sole carer. This can be a double difficulty if the mother had been the main caregiver before the separation. Now the father has to learn how to care for the children and possibly keep house and work, when he may not have been used to this. Others become step-fathers to their partner's children. According to Newman (2004) the rate of failure of second and subsequent marriages is higher than that of first-time marriages, attributable to the difficulties of step-parenting, though this may not be the only factor.

In Christchurch the effects of a sexual abuse case in a childcare centre (The Ellis case) has had profound effects on males in our society. The numbers of male teachers in early childhood services dropped dramatically. Men are more cautious with other people's children and even with their own children for fear of how it is construed. The positive side to the case has been that early childhood services now have more open-plan venues and policies in place regarding who is permitted, for example, to change children, signing in of visitors and guidelines for visitors and students. The anxiety this case created is now waning and male students are on the increase again.

There are grandparents raising children in higher numbers and culture plays a part in how children are viewed and raised as can be seen by a review of Te Timahanga Hou (A New Beginning) presented at the men's prison (Penrose, 2004). Inmates (mostly Maori) described how as children just being present made them targets of violence. The movie 'Once were Warriors' set in the 1940's, graphically showed the Maori cultural attitude towards children at that time. A Maori colleague came away from the movie crying, saying, 'that was the story of my life'.

Father roles

Demographic changes have affected the way parents obtain knowledge about raising children. As families became smaller and with both partners working, knowledge gained by being part of an extended family disappeared. Parents began to look more towards 'experts' for information. As a parent educator I have noticed there is a desire to 'get it right' and for quick solutions. Parents stopped coming to ten-week courses, then they stopped coming to six-week courses and then they would only come to one-off workshops. However things were happening that are encouraging. There is a much higher involvement rate of fathers in parenting classes and I believe this is a result of being involved in the pregnancy and birth. Fathers generally gain a closer bond with their baby with this early involvement.

Birthing services such as the Avonlea Birthing Centre in my local area and Parent's Centre, a national group offering help and support to antenatal and postnatal parents, expect and encourage fathers to come along too. This involvement from pregnancy makes a big difference in the relationship fathers have with their children. It is more likely they will have an ongoing relationship with their children if they have been involved from the start. Pollock (1999, p.119) discusses 'the Lasting Daddy Effect' as when men are actively involved in their son's early lives, the boys grow up being less aggressive, less competitive, and observe their fathers handling situations so they can handle them too. These boys do not have to prove themselves and they show empathy. Pruet (1987) talks about fathers being pursued by the child as a parent who is already

seen as novel and having a unique handling style. Biddulph (2003) believes this too. The rough and tumble of the fathers' play teaches boys to control their bodies and emotions.

Fathers have an important role to play in the healthy sex-role and relationship development of daughters. Biddulph (1995) describes this as girls practicing mutual admiration and confidence with fathers, and gain a sense of self, which stand them in good stead when they gain a boyfriend. The father teaches them about maleness, in a safe relationship. This is why Fathering the Future Trust is supporting the Bruce Ellis research.

Many situations occur that can lead to physical and emotional absence; couples split up and have to make decisions about the children, long hours of work, two parents working and not much time, teenage pregnancy where parents are still learning about themselves as well as having to care for an infant and possibly gaining a qualification and employment as well. This will not be new information. Growing up without a father or male role model leaves its mark. Pollack (1999) calls it 'father hunger'. When discussing fathering it is important to realise that fathers do not necessarily plan to be absent, physically or emotionally. There have always been times in history when fathers were absent, in this case physically.

I well remember the day my father came home from war. He had left when I was 18 months old and came back when I was four years old. His memory had been kept alive with photos and postcards, (which I still have), across the distance and I was confident I knew him. I went to the railway station to meet him along with hundreds of other people. I was sitting on my uncle's shoulder seeing a sea of lemon squeezer hats bobbing up and down in front of me. Suddenly this man stopped in front of us and I shrunk inside as I saw in front of me a total stranger. The family say that I refused to have anything to do with him for weeks. It must have been hard for him. His letters home (I still have these too) were always about how much he looked forward to seeing and being with his family.

Some fathers are emotionally unable to touch, nurture, comfort their child or remain remote from them, perhaps because they grew up believing that this was not how a man should be or because his father role modelled that behaviour for him. Women have a role in this too. Fathers raising children are becoming more prevalent but they do not always feel comfortable in places where women dominate. For example, a small study carried out in an early childhood centre showed that very few fathers were involved. Those who stayed were only involved with their own child, stayed a short time, had fleeting interactions with staff and were often unsure what to do. If they did not feel comfortable it was because they felt it was a woman's domain (Easterbrook, 1992. Levine, Murphy & Wilson, 1993).

Sometimes it requires women to let go of their traditional role for men to be able to take up their role. We know a lot more about how men have a different role with children. If mothers insist it ought to be done 'their way' they inhibit his unique ways of being with the children. Celia Lashlie was previously a prison officer in a men's prison. She has written a new book called 'He'll Be Ok' (2005). She encourages mothers of teenagers to let young men go, say less, and merely nod, instead of wanting to know all the detail, trying to fix things and offer advice. She says women ask too many questions and it is men's business to guide them (boys in this case) through adolescence.

There are many useful insights in her research about how boys operate and what their parental needs are.

Recently a friend came to a weekend course I was at. She said she had left her five month old twin boys with their dad. I really admired her when she said ‘how will he get to know them if I am always there?’ He was learning to be present by being present, which is how mothers learn too. Bronfenbrenner says that a family is a place where people learn to live and work with other members of the same species, that is, human beings are learning to be human (1979).

Fathers are different

Steve Biddulph in ‘Raising boys’ (2003) and William Pollock in ‘Real Boys’ (1999) have alerted us to the uniqueness of a fathering role.

- Babies do not fit into lifestyles, they change them’. This could be used as a slogan! Parents often say that the child will have to fit in with their lifestyle and this is not the reality. There has to be a commitment to the family. In the process of intensive parenting, fathers and mothers learn important skills for caring and how to care.
- Infants can detect the different smell of fathers within a few hours of birth. They quickly learn about being handled differently and enjoy the variation in styles. They learn that while some things stay the same (i.e. the routines) they may be handled differently.
- Biddulph and Pudney emphasise the need for fathers to bond with the child early that is, before, at and following the birth. It is also important to say that it is never too late to bond with a child. Bonding can be influenced by the relationship a father had with his own father and it is important to understand this and deal with it if the man wants to be a different father to his children. Having a poor father oneself can be an incentive to do it differently. It is useful to remember that our fathers lived in a different world and most did their best.
- Spending time with the child early on in the child’s life helps a father continue to desire this. If the theory of maternal or paternal instinct was true we would not still have to promote, for example, breast-feeding or make an effort to be with our children. The plain fact of the matter is that parenting skills are learnt within our cultural context.
- Fathers enjoy rough and tumble, Mothers do not – just ask any group of mothers and you will hear ‘why do they have to wind them up?’. In doing rough and tumble fathers teach children how to control themselves.
- Fathers often make more fun and deal with what mothers might consider serious behaviour, with humour.
- Fathers will share things that women do not always enjoy, like engines for example, or very detailed factual information.
- Writers and researchers all agree you have to be physically present for the children, which takes time. It is taking the time to spend with children that creates good relationships.

- It is harder to do ordinary things if they have to be organised.
- Work is not the only cause of absenteeism. Separation makes seeing the children a planned event and less of an on the spot spontaneous one. Kicking a ball around in the park becomes a major outing. It was interesting to see in a television documentary recently where children without fathers were involved in a 'buddy system'. An umbrella organization matched men who wants to be a 'father' was buddied with a child who needed a father and they could get around together doing ordinary manly things.
- There is growing support for fatherhood and men may need to learn skills of fathering from their peers or prominent role models, for example, in the media. Having a male support system is gathering momentum. Grandparents and father-in-laws can be part of the support teams but men can find men who are fathers from being part of the birthing process or by joining a father's group.
- 'A great father is interested in you as a person'.
- Being absent says 'they don't care', being present says 'he loves me'.
- Children want dads to be valued and dads to be available. They want fathers who can express feelings and communicate well and they said there was a big gap between authority and guidance. 'They don't know how to let us make decisions'. This takes practice and time.
- Steve Biddulph (2003, p.14) offers some fathering essentials; start early (baby care from the start), make time (out of the busy week), be demonstrative (hugging is necessary, so is wrestling), lighten up (enjoy and have fun with your children) and heavy down (help make the major decisions).

For a moment think back to your own upbringing. What part did your father or a father figure play in your life? What are your memories of his presence, his role and his contact with you? Did he play games with you? Take you fishing? Did he show you his work place or were you involved in his activities? How has he influenced your life? What is your lasting impression of him? How would you describe him as a father? What will you do from here on to help fathers be the greatest dad?

This paper has been an opportunity to bring together a number of ideas about fathering and absent fathers. It has been useful to trace the cultural ideals of fatherhood and the changing times in society and family life. The underlying principles of family life being suitable for raising children has been explored without defining how that family ought to be. Families are a lot more varied these days and there is a chance to change the way fathers perhaps once were emotionally absent. Valuing the role and fathers more may help. Children benefit from fathers or males in their lives and these effects are different for boys and for girls. Girls can prepare for adulthood and being a in a relationship by learning about maleness from their fathers. Boys can learn to tame their energy

and find their connectedness to others. Women may need to learn to let go some of the thinking about 'they know best' and let fathers do things their way, knowing their way will be different. Fathering the Future Trust has been traced from before its beginnings, to the influence of Laurie O'Reilly and his vision regarding fathers. As well there is the earlier long lasting influence of Urie Bronfenbrenner in this country, linked to Te Whariki, the early childhood curriculum. A number of research projects have been referred to, to help see the issues more clearly and trace the path. The future path involves men as they get more involved with their children at an earlier time in their child's life and as they assume responsibility for their place in each child's life. At the same time we can applaud the many, many fathers who already do a great job in raising their children without having the theory behind them.

On the death of his father recently Tiger Woods said;

'My dad was my best friend and greatest role model, and I will miss him deeply. He was an amazing dad, coach, mentor, soldier, husband and friend. I wouldn't be where I am today without him and I'm honoured to continue his legacy of sharing and caring' (The Press, 5/5/06).

An awesome tribute!

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