

THE AUSTRALIA INSTITUTE

Fatherhood and fatherlessness

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Discussion Paper Number 59
November 2003

ISSN 1322-5421

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Third, one size does not fit all. The best interests of the child, a key principle in family law, would be compromised by *any* presumption of a specific type of custody arrangement. The proposed law would undermine the ability and flexibility families need in order to develop parenting arrangements which best fit their children.

Fourth, the introduction of a presumption of joint custody is likely to increase the use of litigation to rebut the presumption, stretching the resources of the Courts and government.

Finally, a legal presumption of joint custody is likely to expose women, children and men to higher levels of violence. This prospect is particularly troubling given that there are already cases where the practice of family law privileges parental contact with children over children's safety.

While there is positive potential in contemporary discussions of fatherlessness, it is currently a long way from being realised. Promoting fathers' positive involvement with children is a laudable goal. But it will not be achieved by ill-considered changes in family law. If a rebuttable presumption of joint custody is neither an appropriate nor an effective way to effect this goal, what is?

Promoting the positive role of fathers

The most important obstacle to fathers' parenting after separation is the absence of fathers' parenting *before* separation. Workplace relations, policy barriers, practical disincentives and social obstacles limit men's involvement in parenting, both before and after separation and divorce.

To promote fathers' involvements with their children, five strategies are vital.

First, establishing father-friendly (parent-friendly) workplace practices and cultures will make the most difference to men's opportunities for fathering. Fathers perceive the major barrier to their involvement in parenting to be their involvement in paid work, and their patterns of working make it difficult to be involved parents. In a labour market characterised by gender inequality, many couples make pragmatic decisions that the mother will work part-time or take time off while the father will continue to do paid work. Two institutional strategies have the potential to make a significant difference to men's parenting opportunities. Employers, with governmental support, must create more flexible workplaces free of penalties for involved parents of either sex, and must promote equal economic opportunities for women.

The second strategy is to remove policy barriers to shared care. Family policy in Australia currently discourages shared care of children, both in couple families and between separated parents, by rewarding a homemaker/breadwinner split in couple families and penalising single-parent families which share care of the child with the other parent.

The third strategy is to support fathers through family and parenting services. Family-related services, including antenatal and postnatal services, community-based services for families with children, and early childhood education services, have an important

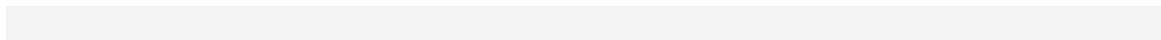
role to play in fostering fathers' involvement in families. Family-related services require dedicated funding and policy support for this goal. In addition, the activities, atmosphere and staffing of family-related agencies must be father-friendly, and family-related services should develop forms of service delivery which are effective in engaging fathers.

The fourth strategy addresses the cultural obstacles to paternal involvement. Common cultural norms in Australian society, including a culture of work and materialism, the absence of a culture of fatherhood, a culture of maternalism, and suspicion towards fathers, are unsupportive of men as parents. At the same time, many men have managed, despite these obstacles, to create and sustain an experience of involved fathering.

The final strategy in this five-point plan is the most general yet it will have practical impacts on men's involvement in parenting. Fostering fathers' active involvement with children requires cultural change in gender norms, particularly those norms which define manhood as non-nurturant and unemotional and which stifle boys' and men's parenting and relationship skills and commitments.

Men's positive involvement with children will also be fostered by improving men's relations with women. Non-conflictual and cooperative relationships between parents, whether in relationships or separated, are the bedrock of their positive involvements with children. When men share equally in the care of children with women, their marriages and relationships also improve. Thus both men and women benefit from men's involvement in parenting.

Fathers in Australia face a real moment of opportunity. Shifting social and economic conditions have both intensified the obstacles to, and created new possibilities for, involved fathering. In order to capitalise on this opportunity, however, both the Government and the community must adopt a much more sophisticated approach to analysing the causes and consequences of fatherlessness. Australian fathers need policies that help them connect with their children at all stages of life, not simplistic laws that fail to address the real obstacles to involved fathering.



5. Promoting the positive role of fathers

Promoting fathers' involvement with their children is part of building healthier families and healthier communities. Fathers' active participation in parenting is desirable not because mothers are inadequate, nor because fathers bring something unique to parenting, nor even because every family must have a father at its head. Instead, fathers' participation is desirable because fathers, like mothers and other parenting figures, can and do make valuable contributions to the emotional, material and social well-being of children and families.

The proposed rebuttable presumption of joint custody in family law has been framed by some advocates as a means of increasing fathers' participation in parenting after separation. This paper has already argued that the lack of such a legal presumption is not a significant barrier to men's involvement in post-divorce fathering. In fact, the most important obstacle to fathers' parenting after separation is the absence of fathers' parenting *before* separation. At the point of relationship dissolution, many fathers 'have not established patterns of shared care, nor do they necessarily have the kind of relationships with their children that allow a smooth transition to a significant caring role' (HREOC 2003, p. 12). Given this, it is mothers who are often nominated as the primary carer. Thus, the best way to increase fathers' participation in parenting after separation is to promote greater involvement in parenting by fathers in couple families. Sharing care of children in couple families is desirable in itself, and will also lead to greater sharing of the care of children of separated parents.

A five-point strategy with which to promote the positive role of fathers is outlined below. This strategy is applicable to fathers in a variety of parenting situations, whether in couple families, after divorce, as primary carers or in other situations. In other words, while joint custody proposals focus on parenting after divorce and separation, this five-point strategy addresses parenting in this *and* other contexts. The discussion outlines the policy barriers, practical disincentives and social obstacles which limit men's involvement in parenting, and offers strategies in response to each.

5.1 Establish father-friendly workplace practices and cultures

Shifting the practices and cultures of the workplace and their interrelationships with gender will make the most difference to men's opportunities for fathering. Public discussions of work and family so far have focused on the impact of women's workforce participation on children, but there has been little attention to the impact of men's workforce participation (Hand and Lewis 2002, p. 26). Yet in most families with children, both mothers and fathers are in paid work. In June 1999, in 59 per cent of Australian couple families with children aged less than 15 years, both parents worked in the labour force (Weston *et al.* 2001, p. 19). In June 2003, 84 per cent of husbands or partners with children under 15 years were employed full-time and six per cent were employed part-time (ABS 2003).

While there is a growing awareness of family-friendly workplace policies, hours spent working in fact have become *less* family-friendly, with an increase in the hours of full-time workers, especially among men (Weston *et al.* 2002, p. 19). Other workplace trends are further limiting women's and men's parenting opportunities, increasing

pressure on families and making it harder to maintain quality intimate relationships, including job insecurity, working at unsocial times, frequent short-term travel and expectations about 24-hour availability (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 1-2). On the other hand, a small number of organisations and workplaces in Australia have adopted innovative work-family practices, and family-friendly provisions are an increasing aspect of certified agreements and Australian workplace agreements (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 27-37).

Fathers in Australia perceive the major barrier to their involvement in parenting to be their involvement in paid work. A national survey by Russell *et al.* (1999) found that fathers on average would prefer to work ten hours fewer per week than they currently do. They experience more difficulty in balancing work and family lives than do their employed female partners, and they report lower levels of support from their workplaces (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 35-36). A more recent study further documents the ways in which fathers' paid work constrains their ability to spend time with their children. Fathers spoke of the demands of establishing and maintaining a career, the need to work longer hours for financial reasons, and the perception that their workplaces or working conditions do not support them in taking time out for their families (Hand and Lewis 2002, pp. 28-29). Many fathers are committed to their careers, but resent the fact that their employers expect them to choose between work and family. In addition, the stresses of work affect their abilities to be a good parent.

Significant numbers of fathers have tried to change their involvements in paid work to find time for parenting and family. Russell *et al.* (1999, p. 36) report that 64 per cent of fathers surveyed had made changes in their work life in the last five years to improve the quality of their personal or family life, including reducing their hours, increasing their work flexibility or changing to less demanding jobs. Other studies find that some fathers adjust their hours, move away from shift work, or take advantage of workplace flexibility and family-friendly policies (Hand and Lewis 2002, pp. 28-29). Another study of dual-earner couples documents the use of three strategies; placing limits on careers, having a one-job one-career marriage, and trading off. However, women are far more likely than men to use one strategy for finding time for parenting, that of leaving the work force. This strategy is not always possible or desirable for fathers because of their enjoyment of paid work, financial constraints, or feeling compelled to fulfil a traditional male breadwinner role (Hand and Lewis 2002, p. 28). In addition, only 30 per cent of employed fathers (in June 2002) with children aged under 12 years made use of family-friendly work arrangements to care for their children, up from 24 per cent in 1993 (ABS 2003).

Unequal parenting in heterosexual couples, where the mother does most, is the 'path of least resistance' for many parents. Fathers and mothers assess their relative earnings, and make pragmatic decisions that the mother will work part-time or take time off while the father will continue to do paid work. Such decisions make most sense in a labour market distinguished by persistent gender inequality. The paid labour market is still characterised by both horizontal and vertical segmentation by gender (Heiler *et al.*

1999).⁴³ Women's employment is concentrated in lower status and poorer paid industries, and within any one sector men dominate managerial, administrative and executive positions. In a context where men are typically paid more than women and are more likely to be in jobs with rigid and demanding working weeks, fathers and mothers end up reproducing such patterns of gender inequality in their individual decisions about parenting.

Women's rates of labour force participation are affected more than men's by the presence of children. In June 1999, of wives with children under 15 years old, 61 per cent were in the labour force as opposed to 94 per cent of husbands. The same holds for single parents, with 52 per cent of sole mothers and 65 per cent of sole fathers in the labour force (Weston *et al.* 2001, p. 19). Thus for men to be equal parents, they must overcome or reverse both the costs and benefits which lead to maternal primacy in parenting (Gerson 1997, p. 46).

There has been little research on the effects of fathers' employment demands on children. But a recent Australian study found that long and 'unreasonable' hours meant that working parents, fathers included, went days without seeing their children and missed key events in their lives.⁴⁴ Fathers' work hours and job stress also can have an indirect negative effect by increasing the burden of child rearing shouldered by mothers. A recent American study found that job-related variables among fathers such as job satisfaction, negative mood and job-related tension impacted on fathers' authoritative parenting, which in turn affected children's behaviour such as school achievement, acting out and shyness (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 17-18).

More is known about the impact of workplace demands on intimate relationships. This is a key issue for the question of fathering in two ways. First, men's intimate relationships with women are often the context for men's fathering and a critical mediator of the nature and quality of that fathering. Second, to the extent that men's intimate relationships with women break down, the outcomes of separation and divorce have a profound influence on men's parenting. The evidence is that workplace demands have a pivotal impact on the quality of intimate relationships. Work/family conflict, unsociable hours (such as in shift work), and other work-related stresses are associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction, reduced marital quality and a higher likelihood of divorce (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 24-25). Workplace demands make it harder for couples to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts and sustain their relationships.

Evidence that men's participation in paid work is critical in shaping their fathering opportunities and commitments also comes from research into the paths through which men become involved fathers. Gerson (1997) finds that men's adult experiences and opportunities influence both the *desire* to be an involved father and the *ability* to fulfil that desire. Three social conditions are especially important in nourishing men's interest

⁴³ Also see; 'Women (not) on top,' *The Australian*, 26-27 April 2003. 'Boardroom still a man's world where connections are crucial,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 January 2001; 'Still more toys for boys in top jobs,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 May 2000.

⁴⁴ 'Culture of work, stress and no play,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 September 2001.

in and commitment to caring for children (although only some such men will become equal parents). One of these is where a man's paid work provides or generates space for other avenues of personal fulfilment and expression, in two contrasting ways. Men faced with limiting and frustrated work opportunities may look for other sources of fulfilment and meaning. And men may opt for more intrinsically satisfying work rather than more highly paid jobs, choosing time over money (Gerson 1997, pp. 41-42). In every case of men's equal parenting Gerson studied, she found at least one of three circumstances present, and one key circumstance was the option to choose flexible work arrangements. Men were more likely to be involved fathers if they had the flexibility and autonomy at work to create time and space for parenting (Gerson 1997, p. 47).

At a personal level, two other experiences help build men's commitment to caring for children. One is becoming committed to an egalitarian relationship, particularly where the female partner has strong ties for example to work outside the home. For some men in this situation, involved fathering also comes to represent a moral commitment to fairness and gender justice. Another is having opportunities to develop satisfying relationships with children. Men who have early and intensive involvement in nurturing their own or other people's children are more likely to discover parenting skills and to seek ways in which to express them (Gerson 1997, pp. 41-43). Of the three circumstances noted by Gerson in cases of men's equal involvement in shared parenting, the other two comprised the mother's work commitments (including having even better work opportunities than the father), *and* her offer of economic and emotional support for the father's involvement (Gerson 1997, p. 46).

It is clear that two institutional strategies have the potential to make a significant difference to men's parenting opportunities. The first is to create more flexible workplaces free of penalties for involved parents of either sex. Contemporary thinking on family-friendly policies suggests that they must be guided by flexibility, and may include 'flexible hours such as control over start and finish times, flexi-time, regular part-time work, allowing workers to work total weekly hours and creative solutions to *ad hoc* family needs' (Russell and Bowman 2000, p. 27). Other family-friendly policies include:

[R]elocation assistance, child care (centres and referral, emergency), family support (youth clubs, family leave, parenting seminars, respite care for people who have family members with disabilities), care for dependent adults (elder care resource and referral services), flexible work and leave arrangements (flexible hours, flexible working year, career breaks, job-sharing, permanent part-time work, home based work), [and] other family-friendly measures (flexible salary packages, work and family information) (Russell and Bowman 2000, p. 28).

Further innovative strategies adopted by Australian companies include challenges to the culture of long hours at work, campaigns such as 'Go Home on Time Days', and encouragement to work smarter not harder.

Swedish research finds that in the organisations most supportive of men taking parental leave, leadership comes from the top, from younger male managers who are fathers and older men concerned that younger men should have more contact with their children

than they themselves had. Innovative organisations have recognised the benefits both to employees and business of addressing work and family issues, and have considered work practices and organisational culture in making change (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 33-34). There is a growing consensus in the work-family literature that real advances can only be achieved through altering the culture and structure of the workplace. A detailed Australian case study documents that change is facilitated by high-level endorsement, integration with business, addressing barriers such as traditional assumptions about gender roles, using research and data collection, involving employees at every stage, and including the full range of issues at stake (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 35-37).

The second institutional strategy with the potential to boost men's parenting opportunities is the promotion of equal economic opportunities for women (Gerson 1997, p. 51). Several Australian organisations have aligned their work/family strategies with other efforts aimed at enhancing gender equity, such as reducing hierarchical and occupational segregation, improving pay equity, running awareness programs for management and adopting affirmative action programs, and this has been especially effective (Russell and Bowman 2000, pp. 32-33).

Some fatherhood advocates are ostensibly committed to increasing fathers' involvement in parenting but they undermine this by arguing for actually reducing women's economic opportunities. In the National Fatherhood Forum's '12 Point Plan', released in June 2003 at Parliament House, one point stresses the need 'to reassess the relevance of outdated affirmative action policies and consider a return to merit based selection where only the best person for the job is offered employment'. This statement demonstrates a misunderstanding of affirmative action, given that its aim is to enhance merit-based selection rather than contradict it. But if this strategy succeeded in limiting women's participation in the (paid) labour force, it would also limit men's participation in parenting. Similarly, in a December 2002 press release, the Shared Parenting Council of Australia (a coalition of fathers' rights, family law and church groups) rejected recommendations for paid maternity leave put forward by the Sex Discrimination Commissioner Pru Goward, describing them as 'discriminating against single income (male provided) families'.⁴⁵ Genuine advocates for involved fatherhood should be lobbying for further efforts to improve women's economic opportunities, not arguing for winding them back.

Recognising that employees also live in wider communities, Russell and Bowman (2000, pp. 28-40) emphasise that communities too must be family-friendly. Too many everyday services and institutions continue to act as if all families have a full-time homemaker present. Workplace strategies will be limited unless they are complemented by community resources in such areas as child care and elder care, school based after-school programs and counselling, and activities for youth.

⁴⁵ Shared Parenting Council (2002) Maternity Leave Proposal by Sex Discrimination Commissioner – A Blatant Act of 'Sex Discrimination'. Media Release, 11 December.

5.2 Remove policy barriers to shared care

Family policy in Australia currently discourages shared care of children both in couple families and between separated parents. Current policies reward a homemaker/breadwinner split in couple families, and penalise single-parent families which share care of the child with the other parent (National Council of Single Mothers and their Children 2003). Changing such policies therefore is a second important means of increasing fathers' involvement in their children's lives.⁴⁶

There are at least three ways in which family policy acts as a disincentive to fathers' shared parenting with mothers. The first concerns family support policies associated with the Baby Bonus and Family Tax Benefit, which penalise couple families with young children if both parents are in the paid workforce. The penalties are summarised by the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children in response to a question on notice at the Adelaide hearings of the inquiry into child custody arrangements;

Currently the Baby Bonus and Family Tax Benefit B provide the highest returns to single-income couple families with children aged 0-5. The withdrawal rates of these two payments are so high if both parents undertake paid work that the family loses money unless both parents are high income earners. The practical effect of the eligibility criteria for the Baby Bonus and FTB B is to force one parent to work longer hours to increase family income, in preference to sharing the earnings activity with the other parent. In most families it is fathers who stay in the workforce because they usually attract a higher hourly rate of pay and can pursue higher earning career options compared to mothers. Mothers' withdrawal from paid work to give birth and their role in breastfeeding also tends to establish patterns of maternal care for children, which when combined with the financial penalties of current family support payments if they return to work, tend to underpin a pattern of lower father involvement in direct care provision. (National Council of Single Mothers and their Children 2003, p. 4)

Instead, family support policies should foster parents' choices regarding involvements in parenting and paid work by offering the same level of financial support to couple families within similar income levels regardless of how earning and parenting work is divided between parents.

Second, single parents are discouraged from sharing care of their child(ren) under current Family Tax Benefit (FTB) arrangements. If a heterosexual couple with children have separated and try to share care of the children, the children effectively live in two households. Both households have costs associated with that care, resulting in an overall cost that is higher than that for a single household with children. Yet FTB payments are divided proportionately across households, thus not acknowledging this higher cost. The

⁴⁶ For reasons of space, this discussion addresses only three key policy obstacles to shared parenting, and does not consider further questions regarding the operations for example of policies of child residence and contact.

National Council of Single Mothers and their Children (2003, p. 4) recommends increasing FTB as follows:

The costs of sharing care indicate a need for a 20 per cent increase in FTB payments for children in each household. When care is between 30-70 per cent in each household, payment rates for Family Tax Benefit A and B should be increased by 40 per cent overall for each child and proportionately distributed to reflect the limits on parental earnings, and the higher needs of the child and costs of providing care across two households. Parents providing 70-100% care are typically meeting ongoing costs, such as education, health, clothing and recreation needs, for the child and should receive 100% of FTB payments, whilst low-income contact parents with 10-29% care should be able to claim a Contact Allowance to meet the costs of contact. This would increase the adequacy of family support and reduce parental conflict when children live across two households.

A further discouragement to shared parenting by separated couples is represented by income support policies. At present, the Parenting Payment can only be claimed by one parent of a child while the other parent is forced to claim Newstart. Newstart is a smaller payment, is reduced more quickly as earnings increase, and involves a high level of mutual obligation activities and a harsher compliance regime. Sole parents on Newstart are forced to comply with onerous requirements, and if they cannot cope with both these and the demands of parenting they may be 'breached' and subject to severe penalties. In other words, the conditions of Newstart are inconsistent with the care needs of children. In an income support system more supportive of shared parenting, parents providing substantial care to children (for example at 40 per cent or more of the child's care) would be able to claim a Parenting Payment, as both the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children (2003) and ACOSS (2003, p. 8) recommend.

5.3 Support fathers through family and parenting services

Family-related services, including antenatal and postnatal services, community-based services for families with children, and early childhood education services, have an important role to play in fostering fathers' involvement in families. Among agencies that provide support to families with children, there is general attitudinal support for fathers' involvement. However, fathers are a tiny minority of the parents who access such services, and thus far there has not been a sustained or systematic effort among family services to engage men. Writing in 1999, Russell *et al.* noted that the majority of programs and services targeting fathers have been small-scale, locally initiated and lack a broad policy base and funding. Nevertheless, among community and government agencies there is growing commitment to providing and improving services for men and fathers. Father-specific and father-inclusive programs and content are emerging within organisations, there is increasing knowledge and experience regarding how to effectively engage fathers, and interagency collaborations to improve services and access for fathers are beginning to develop (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. viii-ix).

Dedicated funding and policy support are necessary to facilitate service provision to fathers. A survey of agencies conducted by Russell *et al.* in 1999 found that only minimal and unstable levels of funding are available for services or programs including

fathers, and few health and welfare agencies receive dedicated funding targeting fathers. Moreover, some agencies already struggle to meet adequately the existing needs of mothers, or are concerned about father-oriented services being funded at the expense of those for mothers. In supporting fathers through family and parenting services, one priority therefore is a policy-oriented one, the provision to fathers of stable and dedicated funding for service provision which has proven to be effective (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 105-106).

A recent New South Wales study by Fletcher (2001) documents the barriers that inhibit fathers and male carers from accessing family-related support services. The study included a survey of such services in the Hunter Valley. Out of 82 services invited, 36 agencies responded and while the majority offered services for fathers and male carers, only five per cent of their total service users were men. At present, fathers are unlikely to utilise family-related services. This finding accords with other research on men's under-utilisation of neighbourhood and community centres and health services. However, 13 agencies in the Hunter Valley study had implemented strategies to improve accessibility and/or increase uptake by fathers and male carers, and six agencies offered specific services for fathers or male carers. In addition, surveys of new fathers who had attended antenatal classes found that these were beneficial and effective (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, p. 32).

How can family-related services increase fathers' access to parenting support and involvement in services? First, the activities, atmosphere and staffing of family-related agencies must be father-friendly. One barrier to fathers' involvement is their invisibility. Examinations by services of the needs of families or parents may focus solely on mothers, implying that fathers' roles are unimportant or irrelevant.⁴⁷ Health professionals, educators and agency staff can sometimes be ambivalent about increasing fathers' involvement, unaware of fathers' positive influence on child development, suspicious of men around children, and possessed of traditional views on the role of men in families. Another barrier is lack of knowledge. Staff should be aware of the issues men face during the antenatal to postnatal period and be sensitive to gendered differences in parenting styles. Little is known about the role and experience of fathers during their partners' labour and childbirth, although existing research documents some men's feelings of anxiety, helplessness and confusion. Service language should be inclusive rather than solely mother-centered (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, pp. 5-14).

Second, family-related services should actively promote the involvement of fathers. For example, American hospital-based classes titled 'Boot Camps for New Dads' teach both practical and theoretical baby care to expectant fathers. Services can provide opportunities for men to relate to other men, for example through contact with more experienced fathers and men who are comfortable in nurturant roles with children. The literature suggests that male-only programs and sessions can help, although surveys among men themselves find that they do not seem to prefer these. Another hindrance to be addressed with respect to fathers' involvement is the absence of information and

⁴⁷ Regional and state policies and procedures can embody the same assumption, for example in collecting health data focused on mothers while ignoring fathers (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, pp. 34-35).

resource materials, with few items offering parenting information to men or encouraging their greater involvement with their children (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, pp. 6-9).

Third, family-related services should develop forms of service delivery which are effective in engaging fathers. Fletcher, Siberberg, and Baxter (2001, p. 38) call for developing the capacity of family-related services to utilise male staff and volunteers in the engagement of fathers. The effectiveness of this strategy is demonstrated in surveys of those attending male-only 'Fathertime' sessions as part of antenatal classes. But given that female staff are likely to continue to provide the majority of services to males within families, all staff need skill at engaging male clients. Antenatal and parenting education should go beyond a focus on the medical issues associated with childbirth to address changes to the couple's relationship and lifestyle brought about by new parenting. It should explore issues of particular importance to fathers (and mothers), such as the place of paid work and careers, work choices, the expectations of men in families, and fathers' postnatal depression. Child care and parenting classes should be timed so that fathers can attend, and some could involve experienced fathers as educators. Agencies' home visits can be expanded to address fathers as well as mothers (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, pp. 10-18).

Forms of father-inclusive practice and culture are starting to develop among some agencies, according to the audit conducted by Russell *et al.* (1999). This study notes that in developing strategies to access and engage fathers, the assumptions of practitioners can make a significant difference. According to services themselves, their engagement with fathers has been improved by practitioners adopting a range of assumptions including a 'strengths' rather than 'deficit' approach to men as parents, recognising a diversity of fathering, assuming that fathers can be competent and deeply caring parents, and emphasising to fathers the benefits to children and themselves (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 98-99). Agencies that actively engage fathers are also re-working their organisational assumptions and developing new models of practice, emphasising that fathers are welcome, reaching out to men through workplaces and other contexts, and building innovative alliances with other services.

Fathers' under-utilisation of family services is likely to be shaped by factors other than those services themselves. While there is little data on or investigation of men's use of support services, the Hunter Valley study finds that some fathers do not participate in antenatal classes because of a perception that it is the mother's role, their own embarrassment, clashes with paid work, and masculine beliefs in self-sufficiency (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, pp. 11-12). This discussion has already identified work and policy barriers to fathers' involvement in families, but further barriers are constituted by widespread attitudes and understandings, among fathers, mothers and others who can make a difference to fathers' involvement.

5.4 Address cultural obstacles to paternal involvement.

Common cultural norms in Australian society, in tandem with the local cultures of men's workplaces, interpersonal relations, leisure circles and families, can act as powerful obstacles to men's involvement in parenting. This discussion identifies four key cultural obstacles: a culture of work and materialism; the absence of a culture of fatherhood; a culture of maternalism; and suspicion towards fathers. It is important to

note that many men have managed, despite these obstacles, to create and sustain an experience of involved fathering.

A culture of work and materialism

A recent text on fathering edited by Hawkins and Dollahite (1997, pp. xiii-ix) aims to explore and encourage ‘generative fathering’, fathering that meets the needs of the next generation across time and context, where generativity refers to caring for and contributing to the life of the next generation. Yet for these and other fatherhood scholars, our cultural environment is nongenerative. Ours is ‘a culture wherein accomplishment, status, and material acquisition are hegemonic and care for children and family, the primary developmental tasks of adulthood, are subordinate’ (Dienhart and Daly 1997, p. 147). Such cultural values are unsupportive of men in their parenting work. There is a paradox in our culture between the ideological exaltation of family and an intensifying work ethos (Dienhart and Daly 1997, pp. 147-149). The material barriers which economic and labour arrangements represent to shared parenting and fathers’ involvement, identified in Section 5.1, are complemented and sustained by cultural constructions of work and identity. Given gendered patterns of workforce participation in which men dominate higher pay and higher status positions, a culture of work and materialism is particularly constraining of men’s parenting opportunities.

There are powerful interrelationships between work, status and male identity. Many men’s identities are closely bound up with paid work, and work is a key way in which they define their value and their worth. Men therefore face internal psychological barriers to taking full advantage of available leave, as well as informal sanctions from male peers. However, while mature manhood was often defined in the 1950s and 1960s in terms of men’s roles as breadwinners and providers, these days very few men are the sole providers for their families. In addition, relationships between work and masculinity are more complex. For example, among working-class men in manual jobs, physically demanding and dangerous work can provide a way to affirm one’s masculinity, but the typical conditions of such work, the fragmentation of industrial tasks, and the experiences of unemployment and disability can all undermine this as well (Pease 2002, pp. 97-100).

Masculine workplace cultures themselves contribute to the suppression of men’s nurturant potential. In corporate management for example, men’s (and women’s) emotional illiteracy is encouraged by norms of rugged individualism, ruthlessness and aggression (Pease 2002, pp. 100-101). Male workers may bring such habits home, stifling the possibilities for intimacy with partners and children. As far as fathering goes, constructions of the male breadwinner are compatible only with a model of the father as ‘distant provider’. Indeed, many men in contemporary Western societies experience a tension between the still dominant discourse of ‘father as provider’ and an increasingly influential ideal of the emotionally and practically involved father (Collier 2001, p. 531).

The absence of a culture of fatherhood

A second cultural obstacle is represented by both the absence of significant models and the existence of contradictory images of fatherhood. There are few clear images of what

a father should be, and there continue to be ‘cultural hold-overs’ from older notions, for example of men as breadwinners. Thus some men are torn between providing for the family economically and being with the family as an involved parent (Dienhart and Daly 1997, pp. 154-155). In addition, everyday discussions of fatherhood are quiet in comparison to those of motherhood; men talk only rarely to each other about their day-to-day experiences as fathers and fathering is less of a salient identity for men (Dienhart and Daly 1997, p. 157). Some men find it difficult to be involved parents because of how they think they will be viewed by other men in their kin networks, social networks, and local communities. Men in a Canadian study of couples sharing parenting spoke of their concerns about being seen as ‘unmanly’ or ‘sissies’ (Doucet 2001, pp. 171-172).

Some fathers, however, are able to move around or beyond such hindrances. In a qualitative study of 18 couples committed to shared parenting responsibilities and activities (all in a first family with biological children), men spoke of their deliberate commitments to partnership and emphasised cooperation and negotiation. They made conscious choices not to take entitlements to male power and privilege, for example in valuing their partners’ opportunity to take up work and other options. They made links between caring for their children and caring for the children’s mother. These fathers also dealt with the absence of a culture of fatherhood by dismissing unsupportive responses, sharing experiences of generative fathering only with supportive others, adopting an individualist stance in which ‘I don’t care what others think’, and so on (Dienhart and Daly 1997, pp. 156-158).

A culture of maternalism

The role of mothers in raising children is widely exalted as indispensable and natural. This is a double-edged sword for women though, as its corollary is that mothers are blamed for family troubles (see the discussion of mother-blaming in relation to male role models and the raising of sons in Section 3.4.) The role of fathers on the other hand has been seen as more dispensable. Mothers have a taken-for-granted role in families, while that of fathers is more problematic (Dienhart and Daly 1997, p. 150). In addition, men face difficulties in being involved parents because they are outside the predominantly female networks which surround child rearing (Doucet 2001, pp. 170-171). However, cultural acceptance of the relative unimportance of fathers appears to have diminished in recent decades as evidenced by the widespread rhetoric of the ills of fatherlessness. And in the late 1990s there was a proliferation of fathering networks and support groups for young fathers, single fathers and primary caregiving fathers.

In Dienhart and Daly’s (1997) study of families characterised by shared parenting, couples jointly created greater father involvement by accepting and valuing that fathers may do things differently from mothers. Fathers took responsibility for learning parenting skills themselves rather than relying on women to teach them. They were willing to challenge their partner’s expertise, while balancing this with respect for their partners’ experience and knowledge. In turn, mothers let go of a maternal entitlement to set the standards of parenting. Some mothers found this difficult. They felt relieved of the total responsibility but also displaced, and some experienced guilt and resentment at not necessarily being the first point of contact for their children (Dienhart and Daly 1997, pp. 151-153).

Some women are unwilling to allow their male partners to be directly involved in parenting. Fletcher *et al.* (2001, p. 8) cite a range of studies documenting that some mothers are reluctant to allow fathers to assume greater responsibilities for child care, question men's competence, and resist what they perceive as intrusions into their territory and authority. But this maternal gate keeping does not appear to be a common or significant obstacle to men's involvement as fathers. When asked about the barriers they perceive to being involved as fathers during a national survey of Australian fathers in 1999, only three per cent of respondents identified women such as spouses acting as gatekeepers (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 39).

Suspicion towards fathers

Images of fatherhood have been tainted by the growing awareness of some fathers' sexual abuse of children, as well as their sexual and physical abuse of their partners and ex-partners. Media reports, political activism and community education campaigns have highlighted the harms which some men perpetrate on children (as well as on women and other men). Fletcher and Willoughby (2002, p. 39) go so far as to argue that all this has made 'the risk of harm to children a core feature in the public construction of fatherhood,' such that there is now a 'climate of negativity' surrounding fathers and father-figures. In short, men are under suspicion (Fletcher and Willoughby 2002, p. 38).

This description is exaggerated. Public constructions of fatherhood are shaped at least as much by the widespread assumption that father involvement is positive for children; one could even call this a motherhood statement. In both media and policy accounts, men's and fathers' presence in families, schools, child care centres and elsewhere is taken to be desirable and indeed essential. This is the case even though the research evidence tells a more complicated story about the significance of fatherhood and fatherlessness, as Section 3 attests. At the same time, there is no doubt that some female workers and mothers in early childhood programs are suspicious or distrustful of fathers and male child care staff (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, p. 14). To the degree that men are under suspicion, this suspicion is centred on those who work with children rather than on fathers who care for them. More widely, public attention to child abuse, sexual assault and domestic violence has meant that women and men alike are more open to considering the threat to children posed by some fathers and other men.

The naming and community recognition of child abuse is a significant achievement and ongoing efforts to publicise, respond to and prevent this crime should be supported. This stance is entirely compatible with the rejection of what Fletcher and Willoughby (2002, p. 42) describe as any 'pathologising view of fatherhood as inherently dangerous'. At the same time, the issue of violence must be dealt with directly. At a policy level, it is troubling that agendas aimed at engaging fathers have little or no relation to those aimed at tackling domestic violence, although those individuals who are violent are often fathers and mostly men (Featherstone 2003, p. 248). As Featherstone asks, are they the same fathers whose involvement is to be encouraged, or are they different?

At the coalface at least, there are encouraging signs of an emerging dialogue between those who work with notions of fathers as risks and those who work with notions of fathers as resources (Featherstone 2003, p. 251). In Australia, the UK and elsewhere,

there are some initiatives focused on developing collaborative policies and practices across domestic violence and fatherhood services (Fletcher *et al.* 2001, pp. 14-15). For example, some Australian fathers' services provide crisis accommodation and outreach support services to homeless fathers with accompanying children and to fathers who have regular contact with and care of their children. Where domestic violence issues are involved, they work closely with domestic violence services (as well as other agencies), prioritising the safety of all family members while working with fathers in a sensitive, respectful and accountable manner.

5.5. Foster boys' and men's parenting and relationship skills and commitments

The final strategy in this five-point plan is the most general, addressing men's skills at and interest in caring for children and men's relations with women. Yet making changes in these realms will have practical impacts on men's involvement in parenting.

Why are we surprised that many men are not actively involved in the care of their children, when we tell boys not to play with dolls and punish them if they do? Boys and young men are routinely discouraged from nurturant and care-taking forms of play and activity. Toy companies sell boys 'action figures' bristling with weapons and games centred on aggressive competition (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, pp. 57-58), while girls are encouraged to rock their dolls to sleep or play house. Boys who do adopt stereotypically feminine behaviours are ridiculed and harassed, called 'sissies' or 'wimps', 'girls' or 'gay'.

Such patterns are an aspect of the broader organisation of gender relations. Dominant constructions of masculinity are said to emphasise emotional inexpressiveness as a prerequisite for assuming adult male roles of power whether in marriage or the workplace (Sattel 1992). Masculinity is defined as not-feminine; troublesome emotions which leave a person open and vulnerable to others (such as love and compassion) are represented as feminine, and therefore these qualities are denigrated and avoided in oneself and in other men (Doyle 1989, pp. 148-160). Thus men come to learn and display both emotional incompetence and emotional constipation, to distrust and feel discomfort with women's expression of emotions, and to be psychologically and emotionally isolated (Doyle 1989, p. 158).

Such constructions of gender play themselves out in the typical emotional division of labour and the unequal emotional contract of traditional heterosexual relationships. The female partner provides both emotional and sexual servicing to her male partner and is the primary source of his experience of love, affection and nurturance, and he withholds emotional openness simultaneously while relying on her emotional work (Duncombe and Marsden 1995, p. 246; Hite and Colleran 1989, p. 30; Kaufman 1993, p. 241). Women are more likely than men to stage and perform romantic roles for their partners and themselves, while men are ignorant of or resist such cultural scripts (Duncombe and Marsden 1995).

There is no doubt that men have the same potential as women to establish highly involved and intimate relations with children, to experience the same profound closeness with their children that many parents report. But there are few resources for this potential in dominant constructions of manhood and traditional masculine culture.

Men's roles have not kept pace with changing understandings of the desirability of involved fathering:

[M]en are often trapped within narrow gender roles that emphasise work and business, money making, public status and success. It remains difficult for men to genuinely embrace home-making and child care without being judged or disapproved of for stepping outside the narrow bounds of masculinity. (HREOC 2003, p. 18)

Fostering fathers' active involvement with children therefore requires cultural change in gender norms. There are immediate and simple ways in which this can be effected, such as offering and promoting parenting classes to men and addressing parenting issues with boys in schools and elsewhere.

Men's positive involvement with children will also be fostered by improving men's relations with *women*. Mothers' and fathers' levels of support for each others' parenting roles, and the quality of the relationship between them, are important influences on fathers' involvement. For example, mothers can support fathers in their role as parents, while fathers can support mothers in their role in employment (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 17-18). Just and egalitarian relations between men and women are the ideal foundations upon which fathers and mothers can negotiate their parenting and work choices.

The evidence is that positive paternal influences are more likely to occur when there is a supportive father-child relationship *and* a positive relationship between the father and mother:

The absence of hostility is the most consistent correlate of child adjustment, whereas partner conflict is the most consistent and reliable correlate of child maladjustment. (Featherstone 2003, p. 244).

After separation and divorce, the quality of the relationship with the ex-spouse and the degree of conflict are significant predictors of father involvement (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 12).

Men themselves benefit from their involvement in parenting; an equal involvement in child care has rewards for them as well as for women. Among heterosexual couples who share care of children and domestic work, men report being closer to their children, feeling a sense of accomplishment as parents, having a bond with their partner as parents, and valuing the sharing of the economic load (Pease 2002, pp. 92-93). In Coltrane's study of dual-earner couples, the men who genuinely shared parenting described significant personal changes that were brought about by becoming active fathers. Men said they became more sensitive to their children and more competent with them, often learning from their wives how to be nurturing parents (Coltrane 1996, pp. 76-78). Involved fathers rate themselves as more competent than do traditional fathers, and form stronger emotional bonds with both sons and daughters (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 7-9).

There are broader ways in which fatherhood appears to be good for fathers, particularly for fathers who live with their children. Men with co-resident children (either biological, adopted or step-children) participate more in civic and service-oriented organisations

(and participate less in adult socialising) than non-fathers and fathers who do not reside with their children (Eggebeen and Knoester 2001, p. 390). Co-resident fathers are more likely to be involved in intergenerational family relations, and less likely to have had a period of unemployment in the last three years. However, these contrasts between fathers and non-fathers or nonresident fathers may be due to selection effects, rather than the effects of fathering involvement itself (Eggebeen and Knoester 2001, p. 391).

When men are active and positive parents in heterosexual couple families, their relationships with their wives and partners also improve. Although meta-analysis of American studies finds that in general parents report lower marital satisfaction compared with non-parents (Twenge *et al.* 2003, p. 574), at the same time there is evidence that marital relationships improve with men's and women's shared parenting. Among the active fathers in Coltrane's (1996) research, their marital relationships improved as their emotional sensitivity and communication skills developed and as they and their wives sustained a mutual interest in and commitment to parenting. Marital solidarity was also enhanced as both mothers and fathers understood the toll of balancing paid and family work and the hassles and drudgery of daily caretaking. Men who did more child care also did more housework, as they became aware of what it takes to sustain a household (Coltrane 1996, pp. 78-79). Recent research among 200 first-time fathers finds that those who immerse themselves in the pregnancy process are less likely to suffer pre- or postnatal depression, insomnia or anxiety, are likely to have higher levels of sexual satisfaction and better emotional and sexual relationships with their partners.⁴⁸ Finally, there is evidence that the more domestic work a husband does, the lower the chances are that his wife has considered divorce (Pease 2002, p. 93, citing Goodnow and Bowes 1994).

Men's healthy relations with women are crucial to the well-being of children and families. This five-point plan offers a way to increase fathers' involvement in families from day one. But if implemented, it also lessens men's risk of undergoing separation and divorce, and it increases the likelihood that men will continue to be involved with their children should these occur.

These five strategies are inter-related and dependent for their success on each other to varying degrees. For example, neither the first strategy of establishing father-friendly workplaces, nor the third strategy of supporting fathers through family and parenting services, will be possible without strong policy support. The strategy of addressing cultural obstacles to paternal involvement, for example by fostering a culture of fathers' and shared parental involvement, will be ineffective if strong financial disincentives to shared parenting continue to be built into family and income support policies. Finally, many men themselves will continue to be unwilling or unable to nurture and care for children if such behaviour is defined as unmanly and if their relations with the mothers of these children are unjust and conflictual.

⁴⁸ 'How dads nurse a happier home.' *The Australian*, 15 October 2003.

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