Fatherhood and fatherlessness

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Summary

A national debate about families and parenting is gathering momentum in Australia, with fathers and fathering at its centre. Fatherhood is changing as the social, economic and cultural conditions which sustained traditional meanings of fatherhood have shifted or been challenged, and in recent decades debates over fathers, mothers and family life have been a staple feature of the news. This debate has intensified in 2003, due to the Howard Government's consideration of the introduction of a rebuttable presumption of joint custody following family breakdown.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have reached a pivotal moment in terms of fathers' roles in families and communities. There is, at present, a significant opportunity for fathers to develop stronger, more intimate bonds with their children and to enhance their roles within their families. Indeed a growing number of fathers are embracing this situation. But the opportunity is in danger of being lost. The unhelpful agendas of some participants in fatherhood debates, and continuing economic and cultural obstacles to paternal involvement in child-rearing, threaten to limit men's positive involvement in parenting.

Fathers, and mothers, are important to the well-being of children, families and communities. Supporting fathers' positive involvement in their children's lives is a vital element in the maintenance of healthy families and communities. However, current proposals to change family law do not represent either an appropriate or effective means to enhance fathers' positive involvement in families.

A rebuttable presumption of joint custody would apply to the five per cent of divorcing couples with children whose cases are decided in the Family Court. The Family Court would assume that children will physically reside with both separated parents for equal periods, living one week with the mother and the next with the father for example, unless there were good reasons to do otherwise. Changing family law in this way will not enhance shared parenting. Instead, it has the potential to diminish the well-being of children. Furthermore, it is a far less effective way to encourage paternal involvement than other measures which address the real obstacles to active fathering both in couple families and after divorce or separation.

The best and worst of times

Fatherhood in Australia has been undergoing contradictory trends in recent years with growing numbers of fathers becoming actively involved with their children *and* growing numbers withdrawing or being excluded from paternal involvement.

Over the past century, fatherhood has been shaped by profound shifts in family structure, the circumstances and timing of fertility, norms regarding marriage, childbearing, sexuality and gender, and images of fathering. There has been an overall tendency for fatherhood to move out of the domain of stable marriage, with a decline in rates of marriage, an increase in non-marital cohabitation, an increase in divorce, and an increase in non-marital childbearing.

Of children aged 0 to 17 years, just under four-fifths live in two parent families. One in six children live in one-parent families, mostly headed by mothers. After separation and divorce, more than one-third of Australian children have no face-to-face contact with their fathers, and one in six children has contact only during the day.

Perceptions of fathering have shifted, and the image of the nurturant and involved father now exerts a powerful influence on popular perceptions. However, the culture of fatherhood has changed much faster than the conduct. Fathers share physical care of children equally in only 1-2 per cent of families, and are highly involved in day-to-day care in only 5-10 per cent of families. Many fathers aspire to do more fathering than they actually perform, yet they face important economic, policy and cultural constraints to their involvement.

Fatherlessness and divorce

Fathers' absence from families is said to cause a wide range of social problems, from crime and delinquency to poor school achievement. The research evidence shows that, in general, children raised in two-parent families do better on measures of educational achievement and psychological adjustment than children raised in single-parent families. But the research also shows that neither fatherlessness nor divorce by themselves determine children's well-being. The quality of parenting and the nature of parents' relationships with each other and their children are the critical factors in shaping the impact of father absence upon children.

One of the most significant influences on children's well-being, whether in dual-parent or single-parent families, is the quality of parenting and family relationships. Conflictual and unhappy relationships are damaging to children, in both 'intact' marriages and between separated parents. In situations where children do not live with their fathers, paternal contact is not by itself a good predictor of their well-being. Instead, the most consistent predictor is fathers' 'authoritative' parenting – that is, parental encouragement and support and non-coercive rule-setting and monitoring.

Selection effects also help explain negative outcomes among children who grow up without their fathers or after divorce. Some families are characterised by parental conflict, drug abuse, mental illness or violence. Couples in these circumstances are more likely to divorce, *and* their children are more likely to show behaviour problems, both before and after divorce. The association between father absence and poor outcomes among children is shaped by the changes which accompany divorce or separation, particularly economic insecurity and loss of access to social networks and communities. Poverty is both a cause and an effect of single parenthood, and post-divorce economic hardship is associated with negative outcomes among children. While children experience their parents' separation and divorce as traumatic, three-quarters of children show no resulting negative effects or long-term problems in adjustment.

Fathers' presence has diverse effects on children, and in some cases these are negative. Because of drug abuse, violence, crime, and other forms of anti-social behaviour, a minority of fathers are not in a position to engage in positive ways with their families or provide authoritative parenting. When fathers are abusive, dishonest, or irresponsible,

and reside with their children, their children suffer. Fathers dealing with such issues must be supported, but not at the expense of children or mothers.

Public claims that fatherlessness causes a host of social problems have sometimes been based on a confusion of correlation and causation, the selective use of research evidence, and even the repetition of fictional statistics. For example, the claim that 'Boys from a fatherless home are 14 times more likely to commit rape' received widespread coverage when it was released in the National Fatherhood Forum's '12 Point Plan' in June 2003, yet investigation of the origins of the statistic reveals that this 'fact' is both misleading and invented.

Fatherlessness and male role models

A second common argument in contemporary debates about fatherlessness is that children, and boys in particular, require male role models in the form of a biological father to ensure their healthy development. While there is no doubt that boys, and girls, benefit from the presence in their lives of positive and involved fathers, the research evidence again tells a more complicated story than that allowed by simplistic assumptions about male role models.

Positive and nurturant parenting by mothers *or* fathers (and ideally both) makes more difference to children's outcomes than the simple presence of a father *per se*. In terms of boys learning 'how to be men' from their fathers, the research finds that fathers' masculinity and other individual characteristics are far less important formatively than the warmth and closeness of their relationships with their sons. The characteristics of fathers as parents, rather than their characteristics as men, influence children's development, and there is no evidence that fathers' involvement is more beneficial for boys than it is for girls.

Boys (and girls) raised only by women, whether single mothers or lesbian couples, are no more likely than other children to adopt an unconventional gender identity or homosexual sexual orientation. Mothers have long been blamed for outcomes among children, from schizophrenia in the 1950s to boys' emasculation in the 1990s, but mother-blaming is both inaccurate and unhelpful.

Fathers' involvement in families is highly desirable. When fathers are actively involved, they expand the practical, emotional and social resources available for parenting. With two parents rather than one, children are likely to receive more emotional support, supervision, and to have greater access to wider networks and material resources. Fathers' involvement is also important because of the distinctive, but not unique, contribution to parenting made by male parents. Mothers and fathers typically interact with children in different, although overlapping, ways. Gender differences in parenting can be positive, exposing children to the richness and complexity of gender diversity. But stereotypes of mothering and fathering also constrain women's and men's parenting. Fathers and mothers are equally capable of parenting: highly involved fathers become sensitive to, and in tune with, their children, just as involved mothers do.

Fathering politics

Fatherhood is now very much on the mainstream political agenda. Important shifts in men's gender roles, and growing policy attention to men's issues, are generating new possibilities for men's parenting. However, some of the most vocal advocates for fathers seem to wish to turn back the clock, reasserting men's traditional paternal authority rather than fostering shared and positive parenting.

There have been profound shifts in gender relations in every sphere of society, from the bedroom to the boardroom. Many men are flourishing because of the opening up of gender roles, enjoying egalitarian relations with women and being involved fathers to their new babies and children. Yet other men are struggling. Separation and divorce represent key times of crisis, and one response among men to personal crises or wider changes in gender relations is 'fathers' rights'.

Fathers' rights groups typically represent an anti-feminist backlash, focused on men as victims of injustice in family law, education, health, and other realms. Such groups overlap with 'men's rights' groups, and they have worked in alliance with conservative Christian organisations to lobby for changes in child custody and child support policies. Fathers' rights groups have achieved significant changes in both the practice and popular perceptions of family law over the last eight years. Yet there has been no increase in shared parenting among separated partners. The widespread assumption that children must have contact with both their parents has meant in practice that children's best interests at times have been compromised through heightened exposure to violence and parental conflict.

A rebuttable presumption of joint custody following family breakdown, a long-standing goal of fathers' rights groups in Australia, is now on the policy agenda. The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs is conducting an inquiry into 'child custody' arrangements in the event of family separation, including the question of 'whether there should be a presumption that children will spend equal time with each parent and, if so, in what circumstances such a presumption could be rebutted'. The proposed presumption of joint residence will, ostensibly, enhance shared parenting of children after divorce and separation, a goal with which few could argue. However, in practice it is likely that the changes will do little to encourage shared parenting. There are at least five problems with the presumption.

First, the proposed rebuttable presumption of joint custody is unnecessary: there are no formal legal obstacles to parents sharing the care of children after separation and divorce. Family law already endorses the principle of shared parenting, stressing that children have the right to know and be cared for by both their parents and that parents are jointly responsible for their children. Separating parents can make arrangements for shared residence, and small numbers do.

Second, the parents to whom this legal change would apply are those least able to set up shared parenting. The small minority of separating parents who reach the courtroom are often experiencing the most intractable and bitter conflicts, face issues of violence and abuse, and are the least likely to be in a position to share residence and parenting of their children.

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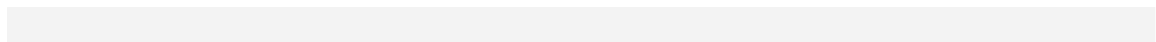
role to play in fostering fathers' involvement in families. Family-related services require dedicated funding and policy support for this goal. In addition, the activities, atmosphere and staffing of family-related agencies must be father-friendly, and family-related services should develop forms of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

3. The significance and impact of fatherlessness

In popular and academic discussions of fathering and fatherhood, one of the key issues is the significance of father absence or fatherlessness and its impact on children. The absence of fathers from children's lives is widely seen to have a range of negative consequences for those children and for communities more broadly. Overlapping with this view is the common belief that children, and boys in particular, require male role models in the form of a biological father to ensure their healthy development. The following discussion will assess both assumptions, after first outlining the extent of father absence in Australia.

3.1 Father absence in Australia

The vast majority of children (94 per cent) aged 0-17 live with at least one of their parents.[8] 'Parent' here includes both biological parents and individuals with no biological relationship to the children in question, although in most cases the adults who live with and care for children are also biologically related to them. Looking at the living arrangements of children aged 0 to 17 in 1996, we find that 78.2 per cent live with both parents[9] and 16.1 per cent live in one-parent families[10] (ABS 1999b, pp. 1, 21). In other words, 80 per cent of children live with their father, and in the vast majority of cases also with their mother.

To put these proportions into numbers, in 1997 3.8 million children lived in couple families. A further 363,800 children lived in step and blended families: seven out of ten lived with one of their biological parents and a step-parent, and the remainder lived with both their biological parents and a step-sibling. There were 845,700 children in one-parent families, of whom nine out of ten lived with their mother (ABS 1999b, pp. 22-23). Among the children who had one natural parent living outside their household, two-thirds visited that parent at least once every six months. Forty-one per cent were in a sole care arrangement but saw the other parent at least once per fortnight (ABS 1999b, p. 23).

Recent Australian data suggests that after separation and divorce, more than one-third of Australian children do not see their fathers, while 17 per cent have day-only contact (Parkinson and Smyth 2003).[11] Forty-eight per cent of separated fathers have overnight care of their children, 17 per cent see their children only during the day, and 36 per cent have no face-to-face contact with their children (Parkinson and Smyth 2003, p. 6).

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[8] The remainder live with grandparents, with other relatives, or in non-private dwellings such as boarding schools and residential colleages, and a small number of young people aged 15-17 live independently.

[9] Of children aged 0 to 17, 72.1 per cent live with with parents in a registered marriage, and 6.1 per cent live with parents in a de facto marriage.

[10] Of children aged 0 to 17, 14.4 per cent live with a lone mother, and 1.8 per cent live with a lone father.

[11] Parkinson and Smyth's study is based on a representative sample of 1041 parents with at least one natural or adopted child under 18 years but who were not living with that child's other parent.

Separated parents were more likely to have contact with their children if they had not repartnered and if they had been married to the child's other parent.

A recent representative survey of 650 divorced men and women (who had not been married to each other) found that close to three-quarters of non-resident fathers reported seeing their children at least fortnightly. However, a markedly lower proportion of resident mothers, 44 per cent, reported at least fortnightly contact between fathers and children (Fehlberg and Smyth 2000, p. 22).[12] Only three per cent of children were in shared care where the other parent played a major caring role (ABS 1999b, p. 28).

A survey of 237 divorced parents in Australia by Smyth *et al.* (2001) finds that most children's living arrangements are finalised without the need for a Family Court order. Consistent with overseas research, most arrangements are established at the point of parental separation and do not change afterwards.

At the same time, there is a significant degree of dissatisfaction among post-separation parents about their levels of residence and contact, particularly among non-resident fathers. From a 2001 study of 1025 separated non-resident fathers and resident mothers in Australia, 40 per cent of resident mothers, but 75 per cent of non-resident fathers, would like to see more contact occurring (AIFS 2003, p. 8). Similarly, a 1997 study found that only three per cent of resident mothers wanted children's living arrangements to change, compared to 41 per cent of non-resident fathers (AIFS 2003, p. 8).

3.2 The significance of fatherlessness

Fathers' rights groups and conservative social commentators frequently assert that father absence in families causes a wide range of social problems such as crime, delinquency, drug abuse and mental health problems. The National Fatherhood Forum's '12 Point Plan' launched in June 2003 at Parliament House, for example, states that 'Fatherlessness and family breakdown are the major social problems of our society.' Steve Biddulph in his best-selling book *Raising Boys* (1997, p. 80) writes, 'Boys with absent fathers are statistically more likely to be violent, get hurt, do poorly in schools and be members of teenage gangs in adolescence.'

There is solid empirical evidence of a correlation between children growing up in single-parent families (usually headed by a mother rather than a father) and such problems (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, pp. 7-15). The research finds general support for the notion that 'children do best when raised by their two married, biological parents who have low-conflict relationships' (Parke 2003, p. 1). Surveys of family structure and children's outcomes consistently find that children raised in two-parent families do better on measures of educational achievement and psychological adjustment than children raised in single-parent families (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 109). However, a vast body of research has established that neither divorce nor fatherlessness by themselves determine children's well-being. As Stacey (1998, p. 68) summarises;

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[12] Smyth *et al.* (2001, p. 62) note elsewhere that their survey of divorced parents may have had a sample bias, with telephone sampling producing a greater proportion of higher income fathers who are more likely to exercise regular contact with their children than fathers on lower incomes.

Most of the harms that divorce appears to inflict on children derive not from subsequent 'fatherlessness' but from negative circumstances that too often precede or follow a divorce — most significantly, parental hostility, parental stress, and economic decline.

In both two-parent and single-mother families, it is not the presence or absence of fathers which is fundamental in shaping children's well-being but the extent to which fathers are involved in positive parenting. The discussion below elaborates on this, offering five points regarding the complex relationships among divorce, fatherlessness and children's well-being.

Proponents of the claim that fatherlessness causes a host of social problems often conflate and misconstrue research on at least three distinct forms of fatherless families: those produced through divorce and separation; those due to unwed, and usually young, single motherhood; and those arising from intentional lesbian parenthood (Stacey 1998, p. 66). The focus of this discussion is on the first and second forms, and particularly on claims that divorce and separation represent disastrous outcomes for children. A review of fatherless families comprised of lesbian couples and their children is contained in the following section.

Most children of divorce show no negative effects

The evidence shows that the majority of children whose parents have divorced grow up without serious problems, especially after a period of adjustment to the divorce (Anderson *et al.* 2002, p. 1). Three-quarters of children from divorced families show no resulting negative effects. Summarising a wide range of studies on the size of divorce effects, Hetherington *et al.* (1998, pp. 169-170) note the following:[13]

> Some researchers report that these effects are relatively modest, have become smaller as marital transitions have become more common, and are considerably reduced when the adjustment of children preceding the marital transition is controlled. However, others note that approximately 20%-25% of children in divorced and remarried families, in contrast to 10% of children in non-divorced families, have these problems [in adjustment], which is a notable twofold increase. … [T]he vast majority of children from divorced families and step-families do not have these problems and eventually develop into reasonably competent individuals functioning within the normal range of adjustment. This argument is not intended to minimize the importance of the increase in adjustment problems associated with divorce and remarriage nor to belittle the fact that children often report their parents' marital transitions to be their most painful life experience. It is intended to underscore the research evidence supporting the ability of most children to cope with their parents' divorce and remarriage and to counter the position that children are permanently blighted by their parents' marital transitions.

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[13] Citations to other works within this text have been omitted to aid readability.

While most children of divorce show no negative effects, it remains true that there is a small but consistent gap between the well-being of children with divorced parents and that of children with continuously married parents. Amato and Keith's (1991) meta-analysis of 92 studies found that children whose parents are divorced score significantly lower on such outcomes as academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept and social competence, although the differences are generally small. For some outcomes, studies in the 1980s reveal a smaller discrepancy than earlier studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s, suggesting that the gap between children in divorced and married families may be narrowing. However, research in the 1990s implies that this gap has not continued to close with a wide range of studies continuing to find that children with divorced parents score slightly lower on a range of measures than children with continuously married parents (Amato 2000, p. 1278).

Selection effects

The negative outcomes among children who grow up without their biological fathers are explained in part by selection effects, by systematic differences between the people who divorce or never marry and those who marry once and stay married. For example, high parental conflict, substance abuse, violence, mental illness and other forms of anti-social behaviour are associated with divorce *and* with poor outcomes in children. Divorce and separation are more common among lower socio-economic groups, and children from such groups are less successful in adulthood (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, p. 16). Amato's (2000) review of 1990s empirical studies on the consequences of divorce for adults and children notes that at least some child problems evident during and after divorce were present during the marriage, possibly the result of marital discord or inept parenting by distressed and anti-social parents. Longitudinal and other studies find that children from maritally disrupted families displayed more post-divorce behaviour problems than children from non-disrupted families, but also that these differences were apparent several years prior to divorce (Amato 2000). If studies control for pre-divorce circumstances, they find that statistical associations between family disruption and child outcomes become smaller, and in some instances they become statistically insignificant (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, p. 17).

Nevertheless, selection is not the only process shaping children's well-being after divorce and there is also evidence that divorce itself has causal effects. Amato's (2000, p. 1278) review notes other longitudinal studies which suggest that many post-divorce child problems did not exist prior to divorce or are significantly elevated after divorce. For example, Hanson (1999) found that differences in behaviour and well-being between children in divorced and non-divorced families continued to be significant even after controlling for children's pre-divorce levels of problem behaviour. As Amato (2000, p. 1279) summarises, 'even if predivorce family factors… predispose children to certain emotional and behavioral problems, divorce itself brings about new conditions that exacerbate these differences'.

The influence of poverty, social capital and economic support

The association between father absence and poor outcomes among children is also shaped by changes which accompany divorce or separation, particularly economic insecurity and loss of social capital[14]. There is a two-way relationship between poverty and single parenthood, with poverty both a cause and an effect of single parenthood (Parke 2003, p. 8). Single-mother households are more likely to have inadequate economic resources, and many mothers face a significant drop in income after divorce or separation. Female wage-earners typically have lower paid, lower status and less secure jobs than male wage-earners, and it is harder to self-insure against unemployment or illness by having a second adult take up paid work (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, pp. 27-28). This affects children's access to educational resources such as books and computers, and socio-economically disadvantaged mothers are more likely to live in deprived areas with poorer quality schools. The Australian evidence is that being a female sole parent continues to provide the greatest likelihood of economic disadvantage (Fehlberg and Smyth 2000, p. 24). Reviews of empirical studies on divorce find that post-divorce economic hardship is associated with negative outcomes among children (Amato 2000, p. 1280).

There is substantial evidence that differences between children in single-mother and two-parent families are far less pronounced once income discrepancies are taken into account (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, p. 32). Comparing the degrees of risk for children in single-parent families versus those in two-parent biological families or step-families, up to half the higher risk for negative educational outcomes is due to living with a significantly reduced household income (Parke 2003, p. 3, citing McLanahan and Sandefur 1994). Summarising a range of studies, Jaffee *et al.* (2003, p. 109) report that:

> [T]hese differences arise because children in single-parent versus two-biological-parent families grow up in vastly different socio-economic contexts and because single mothers have lower educational attainment, less social support, and poorer psychological well-being.

In fact, there is evidence that children reared by highly educated, affluent unwed mothers typically do better emotionally, economically and socially than children reared by two married parents with lesser educational and economic resources (Stacey 1998, p. 70). However, income differentials do not entirely account for the differences between children in families with married biological parents and children in other situations. Children in step-families with incomes equivalent to those of two-biological-parent families are also at risk for a range of adverse outcomes (Parke 2003, p. 6; Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 110, citing McLanahan and Sanderfur 1994). On the other hand, Amato's (2000, p. 1281) review finds mixed results on the significance of parental remarriage. Earlier research tended to imply that children from step-families were no better off than children living in single-parent families, while several recent studies find that children with remarried custodial parents had fewer interpersonal problems.

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[14] 'Social capital' refers to individuals' access to social networks and communities, that provide such benefits as mutual support, access to information, and wider opportunities.

The levels of support provided to single-parent families influence children's outcomes. This is demonstrated in comparisons of children in families receiving differing levels of child support, and in comparisons of countries with differing levels of support for sole parents. The negative effect of living in a single-parent family varies substantially by country, and is greatest in countries which provide the least support to single-mother families (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, p. 33). From a meta-analysis of 63 studies published between 1970 and 1998 on non-resident fathers and children's well-being, most studies find a link between children's well-being and fathers' payment of child support. Across all studies children's academic success is positively related to fathers' payment of child support (Amato and Gilbreth 1999, pp. 563-564).

Parental harmony and positive parenting

The quality of parenting and family relationships has a profound impact on children's well-being and mediates the influence of father absence. Children with parents in intact, but high-conflict, marriages have lower emotional well-being than children with parents in intact, but low-conflict, marriages (Anderson *et al.* 2002, p. 2). Children growing up in married families with high conflict may experience as many problems as children of divorced or never-married parents. In fact, a range of studies finds that if their parents are experiencing chronic conflict, children are better off when their parents divorce (Amato 2000, p. 1278). As Amato (2000, p. 1278) comments, '(w)hen conflict is intense, chronic, and overt, divorce represents an escape from an aversive home environment for children.' To summarise:

> Parental conflict before, during, and subsequent to a divorce or separation often accounts for a substantial portion of the relationship between father absence and children's behavior, psychological adjustment, and academic performance (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, p. 36).

Amato (2000, p. 1278) comments that only a minority of divorces are preceded by high levels of chronic marital conflict so divorce 'probably helps fewer children than it hurts'. However, non-conflictual but nevertheless unhappy relationships between parents are also damaging to children. Children are aware of, and adversely affected by, emotionally 'frozen' parental relationships and relationships characterised by 'contemptuous disengagement' and poor quality marital relationships can threaten children's developing sense of emotional security and later life adjustment (Kinnear 2002, p. 31).

The presence or absence of authoritative parenting is a key influence on children's well-being in both intact and separated families. Authoritative parenting involves parental support reflected in such behaviours as responsiveness, encouragement, instruction and everyday assistance, and parental control, reflected in rule formulation, monitoring and discipline (but not coercive punishment such as hitting). In other words, it combines a high level of support with a moderately high level of non-coercive control (Amato and Gilbreth 1999, p. 559). Research on two-parent families finds that 'it is not the presence of fathers that is critical for children's well-being, but the extent to which fathers engage in authoritative parenting' (Amato and Gilbreth 1999, p. 559). Similarly, Amato and Gilbreth's meta-analysis of studies on non-resident fathers and children's well-being documents that fathers' authoritative parenting is associated with all the positive child

outcomes measured, including children's higher academic achievement, fewer externalising problems (including misbehaviour at home or school, aggression and delinquency), and fewer internalising problems (depression, anxiety and low self-esteem).

Of the four dimensions of non-resident fathering assessed in Amato and Gilbreth's meta-analysis (payment of child support, frequency of contact, feelings of closeness, and authoritative parenting), authoritative parenting is the most consistent predictor of child outcomes (Amato and Gilbreth 1999, p. 565). In contrast, the meta-analysis finds that non-resident fathers' contact with children is not in itself a good predictor of children's well-being. Children benefit little from frequent contact *per se* with fathers; the nature of fathers' parenting makes much more of a difference. In assessing the relationships between non-resident fathers and children's well-being, Amato and Gilbreth (1999, p. 568) also note that it is possible that the effect runs the other way: 'Competent and well-behaved children may elicit authoritative parenting from non-resident fathers'.

In addition to the presence or absence of selection effects, economic hardship, parental conflict and non-authoritative parenting, other factors mediate the influence of divorce on children. For example, a consistent predictor of children's divorce adjustment is the number of negative life events to which they are exposed such as moving house or changing schools (Amato 2000, p. 1280). Children's personal resources also make a difference. Children adjust more quickly and positively to divorce if they use active coping skills (such as gathering social support) rather than avoidance or distraction, receive social support from peers, and have access to therapeutic interventions (such as school-based support programs for children with divorced parents). Cognitive factors are also influential. For example, children who blame themselves are more likely to experience problems such as depression and lowered feelings of self-competence (Amato 2000, p. 1281).

Absence and presence

Finally, father absence and presence are not necessarily simple variables. Studies of divorced fathers indicate that relationships between absent fathers and their children can vary widely from regular and prolonged contact to none at all. So fathers can be present even if they are not residing with their children. In contrast, fathers may be absent when they do reside with their children (Silverstein and Auerbach 1999, p. 403). Nor is divorce a monolithic experience. For some children, staying with, or being parented primarily by, their fathers brings greater contact and involvement with fathers through more focused parenting. For other children, divorce liberates them from destructive relationships, such that fatherlessness in fact can be a welcome relief (Stacey 1998, p. 69).[15]

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[15] Recognising this does not diminish the general point that fathers' positive involvement has many benefits for their children's lives.

3.3 The potential costs of father presence

While 'responsible fatherhood' policies, for example in the US, have been based on the assumption that the effects of fathers' presence are uniform across families, recent research finds instead that fathers' presence has diverse effects on children, and that in some cases these are negative. Some fathers, particularly some unmarried and non-resident fathers, have difficulty in providing positive parenting experiences for their children. In addition, a minority of fathers engage in high levels of anti-social behaviour, and to the extent that they are present in their children's lives, their children's well-being suffers in significant ways. In other words, in the case of some fathers their presence in fact has a harmful effect on children while their absence is beneficial.[16]

Both points suggest that the uncritical promotion of father presence can have unintended negative effects on women, children and families. Despite this, on the basis of the finding that children of two-biological-parent families do better in general than children in single-parent families, some researchers and policymakers in the US have come to the conclusion that children will benefit if their parents are encouraged to get married and stay married (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 110). They emphasise marriage rather than mere cohabitation and have enacted a series of pro-marriage policies via welfare reform especially. These include removing regulations that potentially discourage marriage, funding programs to promote marriage, and providing further incentives such as cash rewards to couples who get married.

However, among the American parents and families typically addressed in such policies, a substantial share of the targeted fathers exhibit characteristics which are not conducive to increased engagement with families including negative behaviours such as violence, drug abuse and other criminal activity (Waller and Bailey 2002, p. 1). Moreover, such negative characteristics were also displayed by fathers who were married either at or after the birth, so marriage may not encourage men to change their behaviours (Waller and Bailey 2002, p. 37). American research also finds that while the economic benefits of marriage are especially strong among women from disadvantaged families, among women who marry but later divorce, poverty rates exceed those of never-married women (Lichter *et al.* 2003, p. 60). The authors emphasise that, 'Marriage alone will not offset the long-term deleterious effects associated with unwed childbearing, nor will it eliminate the existing disparity in poverty and welfare receipt among various racial and ethnic groups.' (Lichter *et al.* 2003, p. 60)

The US Fragile Families Study follows a birth cohort of 4700 children, three quarters of whom were born to unmarried parents. Compared to married fathers, unmarried fathers had higher rates of illicit drug use, partner violence and depression (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 111). Compared to resident young fathers (and controlling for marital status), non-resident young fathers were poorer, more likely to be unemployed, revealed lower thresholds for fear, anxiety and anger, had more drug and alcohol problems, and engaged in more crime and abusive behaviour towards women. These involvements

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[16] Anti-social behaviour by mothers is likely to have similar effects.

compromise such men's ability to be reliable sources of emotional and financial support. As to whether unwed fathers' social, economic and psychological prospects would improve if they were married to the mothers of their children, the evidence is inconclusive (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 111).

Research among a representative sample of 1100 families in England and Wales found that about one in seven fathers engages in high levels of anti-social behaviour, as defined by symptoms of Anti-social Personality Disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (IV)* of the American Psychiatric Association. These fathers are involved in criminal behaviour, lie to their partners, get into fights, are irresponsible and impulsive, and do not feel remorse for their actions (Jaffee *et al.* 2003). Parents' anti-social behaviours are significant risk factors for the development of children's conduct problems, the strongest predictor of a range of negative outcomes in adolescence and adulthood, such as dropping out of school, teenage childbearing, unemployment and crime.

The majority of fathers in the British study by Jaffee *et al* (2003) demonstrated low or average levels of anti-social behaviour, and their presence in the family was negatively associated with children's anti-social behaviour. That is, the longer such a father resided with his child, the less anti-social behaviour the child displayed. But the presence of fathers with high levels of anti-social behaviour was positively associated with child anti-social behaviour. In other words, the longer an anti-social father resided with his child, the more anti-social behaviour the child developed (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 116-117). When a fathers' anti-social behaviour was high, his children were almost twice as likely to have severe behaviour problems or a conduct disorder if the father had always lived with the family than if he had never lived with the family. Similarly, children cared for on a daily basis by fathers with high anti-social behaviour had the worst behaviour problems along with children who were never cared for by their fathers even when the fathers' anti-social behaviour was low (Jaffee *et al.* p. 118). As the authors summarise:

> In families in which fathers engage in very high levels of anti-social behavior, children have the worst behavior problems when the father resides in the home. Under these circumstances, children's behavior problems reach clinically significant levels and their behavior is significantly worse than among their peers whose fathers also engage in high levels of anti-social behavior but do not reside with their children (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 120).

Fathers who engage in high levels of anti-social behaviour are in the minority, about 14 per cent of fathers in this study. But there are at least two important reasons to pay attention to them. First, their presence is linked to children's clinically significance conduct problems (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 122). In terms of protecting children and promoting healthy child development, it is particularly important therefore to address fathers (and mothers) who engage in high levels of anti-social behaviour and who reside with the family. Second, while fathers who engage in high levels of anti-social behaviour are a small proportion of fathers, they are responsible for a disproportionate number of births. For example, in one study such men comprised ten per cent of a birth cohort, but fathered 27 per cent of the babies born by the time the men were aged 26 (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 122).

There are good reasons, therefore, to be wary of the simplistic promotion of father presence and marriage as ways to improve children's well-being. It is dangerous to advocate that all non-resident fathers be enticed or pushed into residing with their children and that unmarried fathers marry the mothers of their children without addressing such issues. Efforts at marriage promotion must consider the real and legitimate concerns which inform some low-income single mothers' perceptions of non-marriage as a better alternative to marriage (Jaffee *et al.* 2003, p. 121). Some fathers (and mothers) are in no position to provide quality parenting and their presence in families will, in fact, do more harm than good. Of course this does not mean that such people should be abandoned. Fathers dealing with issues of drug abuse and violence, mental health, and unemployment and poverty must be supported. But the promotion of their involvement in families should not be at the expense of children or women.

3.4 Dodgy methods and bogus statistics

This paper has critiqued simplistic claims about the relationships between fatherlessness and social problems, particularly claims about family structure, divorce and children's well-being. But there is a broader problem in much of the rhetoric about fatherlessness: its flawed methodology. In populist texts such as Popenoe's *Life Without Father* (1996) and in public statements and materials by some fathers' advocates, discussions of fatherlessness are characterised by the confusion of correlation and causation, the reduction of multiple social variables to bivariate associations, the highly selective use of research evidence, neglect of contradictory or competing evidence, and treatment of small differences as if they were gross and absolute (Coltrane 1997, p. 8). Bogus statistics, with no factual basis, are used by some advocates for fathers' rights in asserting their political agendas.

To give one detailed example, the claim that 'Boys from a fatherless home are 14 times more likely to commit rape' was part of the '12 Point Plan' released by the National Fatherhood Forum in June 2003. The assertion was highlighted in media coverage of the Fatherhood Forum[17] and it is one of the claims commonly made by those who argue for the destructive effects of father absence on families and society. Yet this statistic is an invention. And although it has no basis in fact, it is regularly repeated on the websites of men's and fathers' rights, child custody and conservative Christian groups such as the Australian Men's Network.[18]

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[17] See for example, 'Boys with absent fathers 'more likely to rape',' *The Age*, 26 June 2003.

[18] See the following websites for some uses of this 'statistic': the Australian Men's Network (http://www.amn.com.au/news.html); a New Zealand fathers' rights website (http://www.massey.ac.nz/~kbirks/gender/econ/nodad.htm); an Irish website on separation (http://homepage.tinet.ie/~seperationcrisis/effect.htm), a US Male Initiative Program (http://trfn.clpgh.org/hspgh/MIP.html); US fathers' rights websites (http://www.bennett.com/gender/childsupport.htm; http://www.jail4judges.net/cfdocs/50fl.cfm; http://www.njccr.org/articles/fatherless%20kids.htm); a British fathers' rights website (http://www.njccr.org/articles/fatherless%20kids.htm); an American news story on the fathers' movement (http://users.rcn.com/baskerville/fathers_movement_taking_off.htm); and so on.

To assess the claim's accuracy, its origin must first be determined. The National Fatherhood Forum's '12 Point Plan' cites Rex McCann's *On Their Own: Boys growing up underfathered* (2000, p. 47). McCann cites a fathers' rights newsletter on the Internet. The relevant article in this newsletter[19] cites an American men's newsletter, *Getting Men Involved: The Newsletter of the Bay Area Male Involvement Network* (Spring 1997). The statistics themselves are attributed to a 1994 email message by Marty Dart.[20] It is here finally that we see how this 'statistic' was constructed. The text states, '80% of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes (Source: Criminal Justice and Behavior, Vol 14, p. 403-26, 1978.)' It then goes on to state, 'These statistics translate to mean that children from a fatherless home are: … 14 times more likely to commit rape'.

The 'boys are 14 times more likely' statistic was thus constructed from the finding in a 1987[21] journal article on typologies of rape that 80 per cent of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes. There are six problems with the statistical extrapolation being performed here.

(1) First, '80 per cent of rapists' does not translate into boys being '14 times more likely'. In 1985, approximately 20 per cent of children aged 0-17 in the US lived with a single mother (Sigle-Rushton and McLanahan 2002, p. 54). If children from fatherless homes were proportionately represented among rapists, then they should be 20 per cent of the population of rapists. So if 80 per cent of rapists motivated with displaced anger come from fatherless homes, then children from fatherless homes are four, not 14, times more likely to commit (this type of) rape. In e-mail correspondence, Marty Dart, the author of the original figures, himself acknowledged that the numbers appear faulty.[22]

(2) The statistic shows correlation, not causation. Both the absence of a father in a household and children's rates of rape perpetration may be shaped by other factors, such as poverty, violence and drug use. Marty Dart does not note, for example, that half to three-quarters of the 108 convicted and imprisoned rapists in the study were physically abused as children and many were neglected (Knight and Prentky 1987, pp. 414-415).

(3) A study among 108 convicted prisoners in Massachusetts cannot be extrapolated to the population at large.

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[19] http://www.fathermag.com/news/2778-stats.shtml

[20] http://www.menweb.org/throop/nofather/dart.html

[21] The text of this material incorrectly cites the article as published in 1978, not 1987 (Knight and Prentky 1987).

[22] Dart, Marty (2003) Re: Children from fatherless homes. E-mail, 6 August.

(4) Even if this extrapolation were plausible, the claim takes no notice of changes over time in fatherlessness, rape and a host of other social factors. Contemporary repetitions of the alleged statistic rely on material which is 16 years old.

(5) According to the text, it is not 80 per cent of all rapists, but 80 per cent of rapists with a particular motivation (and again it is not clear how this translates into the '14 times' figure).

(6) While the 1997 text states that *children*, not *boys*, are 14 times more likely to commit rape, commit suicide, suffer behavioural disorders and so on, 'children' becomes 'boys' in most repetitions of these claims.

Thus, the source for an alleged statistic regularly circulated in 2003 turns out to be an inaccurate and misleading extrapolation of a figure from an article written a decade and a half ago.

In contrast to such simplistic accounts of rape's causality, contemporary scholarship assumes that violence is 'a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in an interplay among personal, situational, and socio-cultural factors' (Heise 1998, pp. 263-264). The perpetration of sexual assault by men and boys is shaped by attitudes and norms related to gender and sexuality, definitions of masculinity as dominant and aggressive, unequal power relations in families and communities, and economic and social marginalisation.

3.5 Fathers, sons and male role models

There is a widespread belief that children, and boys in particular, need a father's presence for their successful personal and emotional development. This is often expressed in the notion that boys require male role models, in the form of a (biological) father present in the family. In other words, the best interests of the male child are protected most by the presence of the biological father. In announcing the parliamentary inquiry into child custody laws, Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, stated, 'One of the regrettable features of society at the present time is that far too many young boys are growing up without proper male role models'. He is reported to have said that it is in the interests of children, and indeed their right, to have the opportunity of care and affection from a father (as well as a mother) (Rickard 2002, p. 2). There is no doubt that boys, and girls, benefit from the presence in their lives of positive, involved fathers. However, the research itself does not substantiate the assumption that boys growing up without fathers are necessarily harmed by this absence.

Rather than assuming that there is a single male role model for boys, it is important to ask *what kind* of male role models are healthy for boys. Some boys and young men suffer not from an absence of male role models, but from an *excess* of destructive male role models. They grow up in the company of adult men who are neglectful or abusive. And more widely, boys are routinely exposed to movies, television, video games and other aspects of popular culture which celebrate violent and dominating images of manhood (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998; Miedzian 1991). Both experiences shape boys' perceptions of their own identities in destructive unhealthy ways. There is no evidence to suggest that we should assume that *any* male role model is better than none.

Positive and nurturant parenting by mothers *or* fathers (and ideally both) makes more difference to children's outcomes than the simple presence of a father *per se*. A review of fatherhood research finds that many boys without fathers develop normally in terms of gender role development and masculine identity (Lamb 1995, pp. 31-32). Factors other than father absence *per se* are as important, if not more important, in explaining some boys' (and girls') negative outcomes. These include the absence of a co-parent (to assist with child care, step in when one parent needs a break, and supplement one parent's resources); the economic stress of single parenthood; the emotional stress associated with social isolation and social disapproval of single mothers; and pre- and post-divorce marital conflict. In other words, father absence is harmful because many aspects of the roles fathers can play as parents – economic, social and emotional – go unfilled or inappropriately filled (Lamb 1995, p. 32).

It is the characteristics of fathers as parents, rather than as men, which are important with respect to their influence on their sons' development. A series of studies over the 1940s to 1960s found no consistent correlation between the masculinity of fathers (measured in terms of adherence to stereotypical traits or attitudes) and the masculinity of their sons (Lamb 1995, p. 29). Boys are more likely to want to resemble fathers whom they like and respect and with whom they have a warm and positive relationship. In other words, the *quality* of father-son relationships is a crucial mediating variable. More recent research on the masculinity of fathers and sons found that 'boys seemed to conform to the gender-role standards of their culture when their relationships with their fathers were warm, regardless of how 'masculine' the fathers were' (Lamb 1995, p. 29).

Across a range of studies of paternal influences on gender-role development, achievement, psychosocial adjustment and other outcomes, the consistent finding is that fathers' masculinity and other individual characteristics are far less important formatively than the warmth and closeness of fathers' relationships with their sons (Lamb 1995, p. 29). Of course, the gendered attitudes and identities of fathers, such as their own commitment to and capacity for parenting, influence their involvements with their sons. But it is the quality of fathers' relationships with children which appears critical in shaping sons' development. Ironically then, stereotypically feminine characteristics in a father, such as closeness and intimacy, are associated with better gender adjustment in sons. Similar findings apply to mothers and children.

> As far as influence on children is concerned, very little about the gender of the parent seems to be distinctly important. The characteristics of the father as a parent rather than the characteristics of the father as a man appear to influence child development (Lamb 1995, p. 30).

Fathers and mothers influence their children in similar rather than dissimilar ways according to Lamb's (1995) overview of paternal influence. The characteristics of individual fathers are much less important in children's development than the characteristics of the relationships fathers establish with their children. At the same time, individual relationships are less influential than the family context; the absence of familial hostility is the most consistent correlate of child adjustment, while marital conflict is a consistent correlate of children's maladjustment (Russell *et al.* 1999, p. 22, citing Lamb 1997).

There is no evidence that fathers' involvement is more beneficial for boys than it is for girls. Amato and Gilbreth (1999, pp. 567-568) conducted a meta-analysis of 63 studies published between 1970 and 1998 on non-resident fathers and children's well-being. They found no evidence that boys benefit more than girls from paternal involvement. Nor do the effects of non-resident fathers' involvement vary consistently with child age or race, the reason for father absence, or mothers' marital status. Very few fathers themselves believe that they are more important to their sons than to their daughters, and in general they do not perceive themselves to be closer to their sons than to their daughters, instead perceiving this closeness as very similar for both (Russell *et al.* 1999, pp. 29-34).

One aspect of community concern about the absence of male role models is that boys raised only by women, especially if by lesbian mothers, will become homosexual, adopt an unconventional gender identity or orientation, or experience other kinds of behavioural and social maladjustment and dysfunction (Rickard 2002, p. 1). Boys' adoption of appropriate forms of masculinity and (hetero)sexuality has been said to be in special danger if they are parented by lesbian couples. Instead, the research finds that children of lesbian parents are no more likely than those of heterosexual parents to develop confused or unconventional gender identity or behaviour or a homosexual orientation. There are no differences in self-esteem and emotional well-being, nor in social development (in confidence, positive peer relationships, or the likelihood of being teased or bullied). There is some evidence though of developmental differences. Children of lesbian parents are *more* likely to be affectionate and responsive and to have a greater sense of well-being, but also to perceive themselves as less competent (Rickard 2002, p. 2).[23] Recent reviews find that children in same-sex couple families are no more likely to show poor educational or emotional outcomes than children raised by divorced heterosexual parents (Parke 2003, p. 6; Fitzgerald 1999).[24]

The anxiety embedded in the concern that some boys and young men will be overly feminised or homosexualised by being parented by single mothers or same-sex couples should be questioned. As Rickard (2002, p. 2) notes, why do unconventional gender or sexual orientations necessarily count as adverse outcomes? This concern is based on a hostility to stereotypically feminine qualities, anxiety about changing gender relations, and homophobic discomfort with, or blunt discrimination against, homosexuality. There is no doubt that gay, lesbian and transgender youth face difficulties, including verbal and physical harassment and social marginalisation, with such consequences as isolation, stress, lowered self-esteem, poor school performance, and drug and alcohol abuse (Nickson 1996). Parents of such youth therefore face difficulties themselves. Yet such potential negative outcomes are not the intrinsic result of homosexuality or transgenderism but the product of cultural stigma and prejudice. Whether a heterosexual child is growing up with gay or lesbian parents or a homosexual child is growing up with heterosexual parents, that child should not be subject to coercion, punishment,

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[23] See also Stacy and Biblarz (2001).

[24] Since many children raised by gay or lesbian parents have undergone the divorce of their parents, researchers have considered the most appropriate comparison group to be children of heterosexual divorced parents.

shaming or silencing with regard to, or in response to, their sexual orientation.

Concerns about mothers raising sons reflect longstanding patterns of mother-blaming, particularly the cultural tendency to blame mothers for outcomes among children. Mothers were blamed for autism, schizophrenia and homosexuality in the 1940s and 1950s, youth rebellion, drug use and rock 'n' roll in the 1960s, and now boys' emasculation in the 1990s (Garey and Arendell 1999, p. 1; Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, p. 87). Ironically, in the 1940s and 1950s assault on 'momism' or the feminisation of American families, for example by Wylie in his best-selling *Generation of Vipers* (1942), it was full-time motherhood which was seen as the threat, with feminised child-rearing threatening male virility and national strength (Stacey 1998, pp. 58-59).

This is not to claim that all forms of mothering are desirable or that mothers never have negative impacts on their children. But the problem with mother-blaming is that it 'assumes that mothers are impaired or inadequate in their child rearing and that their influences on children are determinative and damaging' (Garey and Arendell 1999, p. 2). Some recent popular guides to raising boys, such as Don and Jean Elium's *Raising a Son* (1992), see little role for women past the early years of toilet training and nursing. Parenting guides such as *Raising a Son* assume that mothers have a negative and oppressive influence on sons; women cannot provide appropriate parenting for them and are to blame if a son fails to become a successful male (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998, pp. 84-87).

On the other hand, guides such as *The Courage to Raise Good Men* by Silverstein and Rashbaum (1994, pp. 75-105) and *Mothers and Sons* by Howard (2001, pp. 156-162) stress that mothers have important and positive roles to play in raising sons. Silverstein and Auerbach (1999, p. 403) speculate that 'the larger cultural context of male dominance and negative attitudes toward women may interfere with the ability of many single mothers to establish an authoritative parenting style with male children.' That is, this context may undermine the authority and respect granted by sons to their single mothers.

3.6 What fathers bring to families

Fathers' involvement in families is highly desirable for two broad reasons: the increased capacity for parenting represented by fathers' involvement, and the distinctive contribution fathers make as men to parenting. Beyond this, biological fathers are important also in terms of their significance for children's sense of self and family.

An extra pair of hands

Fathers' involvement is important primarily because it increases the material, emotional and social resources available for parenting. In families with two parents rather than one, there are simply more adults available to do the everyday work of nurturance, supervision and care-taking. The parents can share the load, supplement each others' economic and emotional resources, pool the social capital embedded in their social and occupational networks, and work together to improve their parenting. This is an ideal at least, one which only some two-parent families reach and to which only some parents aspire.

In Australia at present most sole-parent families are headed by women. Of all families with children aged 0 to 17, lone mother families comprise 18.1 per cent and lone father families comprise 2.7 per cent (ABS 1999b, p. 22). In sole parent families the absence of a 'second pair of hands' is an important factor in children's outcomes, alongside other critical factors such as economic insecurity and lack of social support. Summarising a range of studies, Jaffee *et al.* (2003, p. 110) note that compared with children in two-biological-parent families:

> [T]hose [children] in single-parent families have more conflictual relationships with their parents; receive less emotional support, cognitive stimulation, and supervision, and have less involved parents.

Perhaps because of the stress of divorce and single parenting, divorced custodial parents 'invest less time, are less supportive, have fewer rules, dispense harsher discipline, provide less supervision, and engage in more conflict with their children' than married parents (Amato 2000, p. 1279). As Amato (p. 1280) summarises, 'either a conflicted relationship with the custodial parent or inept parenting on the part of the custodial parent are linked with a variety of negative child outcomes'.

The simple presence of two parents is not the whole story for children's well-being. Section 3.2 outlined the evidence that in both one-parent and two-parent families, economic resources, social support, and above all the quality of parenting and family relationships have a substantial impact on children's well-being. Thus, it is not the presence of fathers as such, but the quality of parenting they offer which makes the difference. In addition, while this paper has focused on the benefits to children of fathers' involvement, it should be noted that men's active involvement in parenting also has real benefits for women and for men themselves, as addressed below in Section 5.5.

Men's distinctive contributions to parenting

Fathers' involvement is also important because of the distinctive, but not unique, contribution to parenting made by male parents. While mothers and fathers influence their children in similar ways, they also typically parent in different ways. There is consistent evidence that fathers and mothers interact differently with children from as early as the first few months of children's lives. Observational and survey data find that mothers' interactions with their children involve more caretaking and fathers' interactions involve more play (Lamb 1995, p. 27). Fathers have a stronger preference than mothers for rough-and-tumble play (Haight *et al.* 1997). Research in the 1970s documented that with one- to six-month old infants, fathers tend to provide bursts of physical and social stimulation, while mothers are more rhythmic and soothing, and while fathers touch babies with rhythmic pats, mothers address babies with soft, repetitive, imitative sounds. With seven- to 13-month-old infants, fathers are more likely to hold them in the course of playing with them or in response to their requests, while mothers are likely to hold them in the course of caretaking (Lamb 1981, pp. 469-470).

Gender differences in parenting are not the inevitable result of 'hardwired' features of female and male biology, but social differences which emerge in response to societal pressures and expectations (Lamb 1981, p. 471). Fathers are no less capable of child

care than mothers; put in the same social situations, both mothers and fathers can learn the same parenting skills and can be equally competent (or incompetent). Parenting skills are usually acquired 'on the job', but because mothers typically are on the job more than fathers, they develop greater sensitivity to, and skills with, their children and gender differences emerge. Highly involved fathers, like involved mothers, 'become more sensitive to their children, more in tune with them, and more aware of each child's characteristics and needs' (Lamb 1995, p. 27). The evidence is that fathers respond to infant signals such as crying or smiling in similar ways to mothers (Lamb 1981, pp. 461-462). Infants can form attachments equally to mothers and fathers, but mothers typically become the preferred attachment figures because of their primary caretaking role (Lamb 1981, pp. 466-468). A large body of research demonstrates that fathers 'can be just as nurturing, affectionate, responsive, and active with their children as mothers are' (Doucet 2001, p. 168). As Lamb (1981, p. 479) summarises, 'With the exception of lactation, there is no evidence that women are biologically predisposed to be better parents than men are.'

Divisions of caretaking labour in families will also continue to influence men's and women's assumptions about biology and parenting. In Coltrane's (1996, pp. 80-81) study, dual-earner couples with a female 'manager' and male 'helper' were more likely to understand their divisions of labour in terms of essential gender differences. In contrast, couples sharing the responsibility for direct and indirect child care were more likely to see their parenting skills as similar, to report that children were 'close to' and could be nurtured by either parent, and to claim that men can nurture like women. Thus there is a relationship between people's perceptions of gendered parenting capacities and their own parenting practices, with directions of influence likely to operate in both directions (Coltrane 1996, p. 82).

Despite their shared capacity for parenting, women and men will continue to be involved with children in differing although overlapping ways. Gender differences in parenting are very likely to persist in Australian society, given the differential socialisation of males and females, typical divisions of labour in families, and economic and cultural obstacles to shared parenting.

Some aspects of gender differences in parenting are positive. Fathers make distinctive and positive contributions to parenting that mothers are less likely to make, and the reverse is also true. Children therefore can benefit from the diversity, complexity and emotional richness afforded by interaction with both a mother and a father rather than with only one parent. In other words, children of either sex benefit from sustained exposure to gender diversity.

Yet gendered patterns of parenting are also a constraint on men's and women's interactions with children. The notion of biologically determined parenting roles exclusive to males and females constrains men's involvement in parenting by suggesting that there are some forms of involvement with children (such as nurturance and intimacy) which men simply cannot learn. Breaking down narrow and rigid definitions of men's and women's parenting roles would allow both mothers and fathers to practise the valuable forms of parenting which are the traditional domain of the other sex. More mothers could learn to play games and 'rough-house' with children, while more fathers could learn to cuddle and soothe children.

In order to argue that the distinctive contribution of fathers is desirable and valuable, one does not have to make the further claim that this contribution is *unique* and *exclusive* to men. For example, Shapiro *et al*. (1995, p. 8) argue that mothers and fathers each bring 'their unique and complementary styles' to parenting. Popenoe (1996, pp. 139-163) argues that universal differences between the sexes mean that there are certain tasks which are essentially the domain of fathers, including being role models for sons and protectors of and providers for families. Fletcher and Willoughby (2002, p. 24) note that perceptions of fathers' unique role are under threat, suggesting that this therefore diminishes the argument that father involvement benefits children. Reflecting on such emphases, Stacey (1998, p. 57) detects in much of the new fatherlessness literature a 'profound male gender anxiety about the erosion of received definitions of masculinity, and particularly fear of emasculation'.

This concern that we identify some dimension of parenting activity that is exclusively men's domain is misplaced. By virtue of their presence as parents, rather than their status as the biological fathers of their children, fathers can make a positive difference to their children's lives.[25] Similarly, other adult men, such as step-fathers, uncles, grand-fathers, male friends, older brothers and others, can and do contribute to children's well-being in parenting or quasi-parenting roles. In support of this position, Silverstein and Auerbach (1999, pp. 397-398) conclude from their research that:

> [N]either a mother nor a father is essential… a wide variety of family structures can support positive family outcomes… [C]hildren need at least one responsible, caretaking adult who has a positive emotional connection to them, and with whom they have a consistent relationship. Because of the emotional and practical stress involved in childrearing, a family structure that includes more than one such adult is more likely to contribute to positive child outcomes. Neither the sex of the adult(s), nor the biological relationship to the child has emerged as a significant variable in predicting positive developments… We have found that the stability of the emotional connection and the predictability of the caretaking relationship are the significant variables that predict positive child adjustment.

Whether children grow up in two-parent, single-mother, single-father or other family arrangements, it is not the presence or absence of fathers which is fundamental in shaping children's well-being but the extent to which fathers and mothers are involved in positive parenting. Developmental research consistently finds that it is the quality of family *processes*, rather than the nature of family structures, which is most important to the child's adjustment (Rickard 2002, p. 2). Mothers and fathers are equally capable of providing loving and supportive family environments for boys, and this ability is shaped less by their biological sex than by their own parenting skills and their social and economic resources. It is good parenting in general rather than father parenting in particular which is most relevant to children's well-being.

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[25] The same argument could be made were this discussion to be centred on 'motherlessness'.

Fathers' contribution to children's sense of self and family

So far, this discussion has emphasised fathers' significance in terms of their instrumental contributions to parenting and families. However, biological fathers are significant for a third reason, grounded in their biological relationship to children. Males and females are involved of course in the biological conception of children, and in Australia, as in most societies, the figures of the biological father and mother have powerful significance in cultural understandings of family, kinship and community. This means that biological fathers have a personal significance for children, in shaping children's senses of identity or self and children's understandings of who is 'in' their family.[26] Research among children raised by adoptive parents and children conceived by sperm donation suggests that knowing the identities of one's biological parents is an important element in children's psychological well-being.[27] Not knowing 'who my parents are' can be deeply disabling for some children. In addition, children may make symbolic distinctions between their (biological) 'father' and 'father figures', even where step-fathers have been involved in their parenting since infancy.[28] Thus, a third contribution made by fathers, in this case made exclusively by the fathers who are (or who are perceived to be) the biological fathers of children, concerns their significance for children's sense of self and family.

Fathers' positive involvement in parenting and families is highly desirable. Both children and mothers benefit from the increased capacity for caretaking symbolised by this involvement, and from the distinctive although not unique contributions men make to parenting. Boys and girls benefit equally from paternal involvement. In addition, men themselves experience benefits from involvement with their children. At the same time, because of the diversity of fathers' circumstances and parenting practices, fathers' presence (like mothers' presence) can have positive or negative effects on children.

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[26] pers. comm., Adrienne Burgess, 13 November 2003.

[27] 'Best to hear early about fathers, say donor children,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 June 2002.

[28] pers. comm., Adrienne Burgess, 13 November 2003.

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