The concept of “father” today

“What is a father, a real father? What is the meaning of that great word? What is the immensely great idea behind that name?” Thus wrote Fyodor Dostoyevsky in his 1888 novel The Brothers Karamazov (quoted in Webb 1998: 43).

Today, the definition of “father”, like most aspects of fathering, is contested – on theoretical, pragmatic, and moral and ethical grounds. Such divergent views are an

Currently there is a public spotlight on men’s issues, as changes in gender relationships have led to a questioning of what it is to be a man and a father in contemporary Australia. We are seeing an increasing recognition of the importance of healthy relationships, of the effects of domestic and family violence on children (either as witnesses or victims), and of the costs to women, men, children, families and society of problematic relationships.

Changes in the composition of families and in the workforce, through increased unemployment for men and increasing rates of employment for women, have also been part of the public debate over the wellbeing of children. Rapid social change, which is affecting all aspects of our lives, includes an increase in the number of children who do not have a male figure consistently in their lives.

In the last few years, much has been written on the role of men in our society. Yet, men as fathers is a comparatively new area of study (Evans, undated). Changing concepts of fatherhood, and the implications for children, are currently embedded in a debate “fueled by the diverse interests of those associated with the feminist movements, men’s rights organisations, gay/lesbian organisations, and the new right” (Marsiglio 1995: 20). It is increasingly difficult to separate myth from reality, research from rhetoric.

This paper aims to clarify some of the main issues by exploring the concepts of “father” and “fathering” and the sources of information that impact on our construction of these concepts. It will discuss a range of recent research and writings in Australia and the United States which has been used to frame the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People’s Focus on Fathering project.

No amount of longing for the imagined “golden old days”, where family members had clearly defined roles, can make such a world happen. Boys and young men live in complex cultural contexts where experiences of what it means to be a male and a father are rich and diverse. Recent research has been used to frame the Focus on Fathering Project, conducted by the Queensland Commission for Children and Young People.
integral part of discussion in this area, and must be acknowledged as a starting point for any research project on fathering.

Tanfer and Mott (1997: 1) assert that: “A man becomes a father when he has his first child; [and] . . . once a man becomes a father he is always a father.” However, notions of biological fatherhood are problematic when some approaches to pregnancy, such as in-vitro fertilisation, are taken into account.

In trying to clarify terminology, Tanfer and Mott (1997) distinguish between “fatherhood” as a status attained by having a child, and “fathering” which includes the procreative act and all the child rearing roles that fathers may fulfil. However, later they acknowledge that changes in family structure have meant that these concepts now include non-biological fathers as well. As Bachrach and Sonenstein (1998: 1) point out: “Men are now more likely than ever before to live separately from their children and to father outside of marriage. Many men experience fatherhood as a sequence of relationships with children, some biologically theirs and some the children of spouses or partners.”

This growing diversity of relationships between men and children means that a decreasing proportion of children live with their biological fathers, many have stepfathers, and there is an increasing number of custodial single fathers (Day et al. 1998). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2000): 53 per cent of divorces in Australia involve children under 18 years of age; 19.3 per cent of all families with children under 15 are headed by a lone female; 1.9 per cent of all families with children under 15 years are headed by a lone male; and in 32.9 per cent of all marriages at least one partner has had a previous marriage.

It can be argued then that the concept of “social fatherhood” is more meaningful than “biological fatherhood”, where “social fatherhood . . . includes all the child rearing roles, activities, duties and responsibilities that fathers are expected to perform and fulfil” (Bachrach and Sonenstein...
1998: 3), and where this does not limit the relationship to one based on biology.

**Fathering today**

Being a father in contemporary Australia is a challenge (DFaCS 1999: vii), with many factors shaping the way fatherhood is perceived and the way fathers behave. Cultural images of fatherhood include both stereotypes and ideal images (Marsiglio 1995: 3), as well as some not-so-ideal images.

Many of these images are portrayed on that pervasive medium, television. As Zuel (1999) points out in an article in *The Sydney Morning Herald*: “Thirty years ago *Father Knows Best* was not just a title, it was a way of life.” For those too young to be familiar with this American program, it featured Robert Young as the “quintessential all-knowing father”. With shows like *My Three Sons*, *Bonanza*, and *The Beverly Hillbillies*, it was the mothers who were absent. Then in the 1970s there was *The Brady Bunch*, featuring a harmonious blended family, where the father, Mike Brady, calmly and effortlessly always had the answers.

But if we look at comparable television shows these days, we find images of “the dead-head dads, the ones setting a bad example through sloth, gluttony, lust, avarice and more” (Zuel 1999). Homer Simpson of course springs to mind – a funny figure, a weak man, a pitiful parent.

Some see the changing role of fathers as strongly associated with the women’s movement, a consequence of women moving into the workforce in great numbers and putting pressure on their partners to share the housework and child care. The absence of the father in television’s *Murphy Brown* reflected the notion that women do not need to be attached to a man to be valued, but can live full lives in their own right.

There are also shows such as *Party of Five* where there are children but no parents at all, a family circumstance they have in common with the highly popular character in children’s novels, Harry Potter. Increasingly we are seeing the emergence of shows that reflect a notion of family where there are no children and no parents – shows like *Friends* and *Suddenly Susan* in which friends form surrogate families.

Are these images of fathers a reflection of life today? Were the programs of the past a reflection of how it really was back then? Many of the new fathering books appear to be based on “a longing to return to a pre-feminist historical period: a mythological age where men were warriors and gods” (Gilbert and Gilbert 1998: 94). However, no amount of longing can make such a world happen, and such approaches offer little to help us understand contemporary gender and paternal relations. Boys and young men now live in complex cultural contexts where experiences of what it is to be a male and a father are rich and diverse.

There are conflicting trends to be considered in developing an understanding of contemporary fathering (Tanfer and Mott 1997) as the following comments would suggest:

“Once I had an assembly and I was a soloist and my dad was in the first row, and after my song I smiled at my dad and my dad smiled back and started crying. That was the best thing I ever saw.” (Sixth grader, Fathering Research website http://www.fathers.com/1999research/essays.html)

“If you’re upset, don’t take it out on us. We are not as strong as you think we are. If you’re yelling at us we might be acting tough on the outside, but inside, deep inside, we might be crying a river.” (Girl, 12, quoted in Erickson 2000, *Seeds of Change*)

**Commission for Children and Young People**

The Children’s Commission of Queensland was established in 1996. It was the first independent commission for children established anywhere in Australia, although South Australia had established their Children’s Interests Bureau in 1984.

The *Commission for Children and Young People Act 2000* provides for the re-establishment of the Children’s Commission with broadened scope, functions and powers. The new Commission seeks to promote and protect the rights, interests and wellbeing of all Queenslanders under 18 years of age.

The Commission for Children and Young People is an independent statutory body attached to the Premier’s portfolio. Its extended powers and functions include:

- advocating for the rights, interests and wellbeing of children and young people;
- administering a state-wide community visitor program to provide advocacy and support services to children and young people in detention centres, authorised mental health services, and out-of-home residential care facilities, including those for people with a disability;
- receiving, seeking to resolve and investigating complaints about the delivery of government and non-government services provided to children subject to the orders or intervention of Families, Youth and Community Care Queensland;
- establishing youth and other expert advisory committees to advise the Commissioner about specific issues related to children and young people;
- monitoring and reviewing laws, policies and practices relating to the delivery of services to children and young people or that otherwise affect them;
- administering employment screening for child-related employment; and
- conducting and coordinating research into issues affecting children and young people.
“I remember feeling very strongly that I had to be quiet – that everything I said kept getting my mother beaten . . . So, I shut down and stopped talking, stopped laughing, because periodically, out of the blue, mother would get beaten for, I don’t know what. So I learned to walk on eggs and I became a very sad child.” (Domestic Violence Resource Centre Factsheet, undated)

“Did you know for years I thought that I was protecting my little sisters. He would tell me if I let him do it to me then he wouldn’t touch my little sisters. I hated him . . . He used me from when I was eight until I was fifteen. Twenty years later I found he was doing it to all of us.” (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Task Force on Violence 2000)

When we try to pinpoint fathering behaviour, we find that there are men who increasingly view children and fatherhood as an unnecessary and unwanted responsibility, as evidenced in the absent fathers and those who offer no support to their children. Images of fatherhood are also tainted by an increasing public awareness of domestic violence and of the incidence of fathers’ sexual abuse of children (Marsiglio 1995:4). A film like Tim Roth’s The War Zone certainly would not have been made a decade ago.

On the other hand, there are men who emphasise the importance of relationships with children as a source of meaning and happiness (Tanfer and Mott 1997). The image of a child’s hand enclosed by that of a man from the promotional material supporting Queensland’s new Child Protection Act reflects this emphasis. This trend is evidenced in men’s groups advocating changes in law and work customs which would provide more opportunities for men to spend time with their children. It was also a strong theme at the Men and Family Relationships Forum held in Canberra in 1998 where, in his summary of the Forum’s themes, Bob Montgomery identified the importance of opportunities for men, women and children to learn relationship skills.

Considering how fathering is constructed in the literature, it is not surprising that a strong theme is the role confusion experienced by men today, caused by a lack of an adequate role model in their own lives (the “distant dad”), changes in the roles adopted by women through their increased participation in the workforce, and an increased expectation that men will be more involved in home and family life.

For example, in research involving 350 Australian men, Townsend (1994: 164) found that the term “head of the household” – the “patriarch and provider” role – has almost disappeared, but there is no term that has replaced it which captures the role of men in the family today.

How do men think they learn to be fathers? According to a recent study of 1000 Australian fathers by the Department of Family and Community Services (DFaCS 1999: 36), “observing and listening to his own father” was the most commonly mentioned source of learning how to be a father. In contrast, Daly (1995) found that the 32 fathers he interviewed identified their own fathers as deserving of their respect and “influential” in their own fathering behaviour – but this was through being the antithesis of who they wanted to be as fathers. Rather than specific figures or images that they wanted to emulate, these men identified actions or values as being influential on their own behaviour, and indicated that these came from fathering peers or the

Focus on fathering

The Commission is aware of the body of research which demonstrates the link between strong familial relationships experienced as a child and productive and fulfilling adult citizenship, and hence has a strong interest in parenting issues. As society undergoes rapid change, traditional ways of living and relating are challenged, and the difficulties in maintaining long-term healthy, positive relationships are evident. News reports, for example, too frequently reveal the tragic consequences of desperate men reacting violently to the breakdown of relationships.

It is only in recent years that men’s issues have started to gain legitimacy and their parenting role, beyond their financial contributions, taken seriously. The benefits of healthy family relationships, not just mother–child relationships, are now being identified, as are the costs of men not coping with family life.

There is much discussion about effective and not-so-effective parenting, and many parenting programs have been developed. However, until recently, it appears that these efforts were often

underpinned by an underlying assumption that the “parent” was the mother. Some of the more generic programs offered information and insights into effective parenting that could be employed by both mothers and fathers, but the different roles that fathers play were largely unacknowledged.

There are now a range of programs throughout Queensland that are addressing fathering issues. The Commission’s Focus on Fathering Project aimed to increase our understanding of fathering and actively value the role that fathers play in children’s lives, particularly at this time when an increasing number of children are growing up without a consistent male figure in their lives.

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advice of a mother or wife in a fragmented rather than an holistic way. Factors such as socioeconomic and ethnic background also affect the experiences that shape men's own behaviour as fathers.

So there is no simple and unequivocal answer to the question: What do we mean by “fathering” today? As roles and relationships are continually being negotiated and renegotiated, individual men need to explore their own understandings of what it means to be a father. This is not an easy task. It follows that any programs developed to support men as fathers should acknowledge the range of ways that men actually “father”.

**Fathers and children**

In recent years, the body of writing highlighting the crucial role that fathers play in their children’s lives has increased. Sometimes this is couched in alarmist terms, with strong images that appeal to our emotions – for example: “On almost every indicator of child well-being, children today fare worse than their counterparts just a generation ago. The reason: the dramatic rise, over the last thirty years, in the number of children living in fatherless households.” (National Fatherhood Initiative website: http://www.fatherhood.org/about-us.html).

Both points in this statement are open to question, but attention is drawn to this extract as it exemplifies how important it is to distinguish myth from reality, and to look to research to inform policy, practice and future research. In fact, reviews of research have fairly consistently stated: “While it would be a seemingly obvious proposition to most of us, that fathers’ consistent and substantial involvement in child care would benefit the child, this appears to have not been well established” (Tanner and Mott 1997: 4).

A danger lies in making assumptions about causal relationships, as the following extract tempts us to do: “The problem of father absence has been well documented, both in numbers that capture the scope of the problem and in a range of negative outcomes that reflect the deep psychological trauma experienced by the children – and the high cost to society. Father absence is strongly associated with high rates of school failure and drop-out, early sexual activity and teen pregnancy, youth suicide, juvenile delinquency and adult criminality” (Erickson 2000: 1).

What Erickson has failed to note here (though she does so later) is that father absence “has striking economic consequences for the children” (Erickson 2000: 2). Of course, poverty is strongly related to “high rates of school failure and drop-out” and the other negative outcomes for young people identified in the above quote. Is it the father absence that is the crucial factor for these negative outcomes, or is it the resulting economic hardship? Separating out these factors poses a challenge for researchers in this area, although the Father Presence Matters Library (2000) states that: “The consensus in the literature is that the economic hardship of many single mothers seriously restricts the educational, health, and occupational opportunities for their children.”

Can it be that the Responsible Fatherhood Act, introduced to the United States Congress in November 1999, was based on an understanding of this research finding? This Act was part of President Clinton’s Responsible Fatherhood initiative which has as one of its main objectives to “encourage” non-paying non-custodial fathers (referred to as “dead beat dads”) to pay child support. Initiatives include: “car booting”, which immobilises vehicles until owners begin to pay what they owe; intercepting gambling winnings; denying passports to parents who owe $2500 or more; prohibiting Medicare participation by providers – that is, doctors and other health providers owing child support; and requiring states to update more frequently child support orders (US Department of Health and Human Services 2000).

A recent Australian manifestation of this debate was evidenced in the media with both support for and criticism of Alison Rich’s monograph on sole-parent families and educational disadvantage (Rich 2000).

When Russell and colleagues (DFaCS 1999: 22) summarised key findings of research into the effects of father involvement, they found that there was no one set of positive behaviours that led to children’s wellbeing: “Rather, a successful father, as defined in terms of his children’s development, is one whose role performance matches the demands and prescriptions of his sociocultural and familial context.”

Unfortunately, there are many problems with research about fathering, including conceptualising, sampling and methodological issues. To focus on just one problem: whose views are being sought in the research? Marsiglio (1998: 13) points out that much of the sociological research has relied on mothers’ reports of fathers’ attitudes and behaviours, although there is a growing amount of research exploring the beliefs and perceptions of fathers themselves. Even fathers’ self-report data needs to be questioned as there is evidence, for example, that they report providing more financial support than mothers report receiving.

As research in the area becomes more sophisticated and extensive, it is likely that our views of the role that fathers play in the development of the child will change. Paul Amato, for example, who earlier in his career argued that children were not necessarily negatively affected by divorce, has in recent years completed research which has changed his mind. At the Men and Family Relationships Forum in Canberra in 1998, in his keynote address he reported on a meta-analysis he undertook of 54 existing studies of children and non-resident fathers. He found that children’s academic success was not linked to the amount or frequency of contact between the child and their father. But it was positively correlated with the amount of child support
the absent father gave, the emotional bonding between father and child, and an authoritative parenting style being adopted by the father. This analysis (Amato 1998) goes some way towards helping us understand the complexity of the effect of fathers on the wellbeing of the child.

Children’s voices
All too often, researchers or respondents speak for children. But as Mayall (1996: 1) questions: “If one is not a child, can one and should one attempt to understand and convey what children’s experiences are? . . . Researching children and childhood can look like and often has looked like the study of a strange tribe, of non-persons, on whom, however, great hopes are based, as the next generation of adults.”

Article 12 of the United Nation Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC 2000) identifies the need for children’s views to be heard: “State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child . . .”

Giving children a voice “means more than recording their views; it means attending to them and taking them seriously . . . until recently, children as reporters and witnesses have tended to be excluded from empirical research studies, which have instead used mothers as informants on their children” (Mayall 1996: 12-13).

There have, however, been two recent studies into the nature of fathering which have sought the views of children, one in Australia and one in New Zealand. In the Australian study, Russell and colleagues (DFaCS 1999) used children’s drawings to determine how fathers are constructed by their children in order to obtain a better picture of the “basic social arrangements” of families. This method was chosen as there is a strong tradition in families of visually recording family activities through photographs and videos, and also because it is recognised that children’s drawings reflect their experiences of the world to the point that they are sometimes used as diagnostic tools.

The New Zealand study, the Children’s Views on Fathering Project, used a range of methods including drawings, semi-structured interviews, story writing and focus group discussions to see how children of different ages see fathers’ roles and responsibilities (Hendricks 1998). Some children and young people identified “okay” and “not okay” characteristics of fathers, and children of all ages displayed an awareness of potential influences on fathers’ behaviour, including factors affecting fathers’ emotions and factors restricting fathers’ ability to spend more time with their children (Hendricks 1998).

In its work, the Commission for Children and Young People seeks to facilitate the voices of children. As part of its Focus on Fathering project, the Commission has worked with all schools in Queensland to explore the perceptions children hold of their fathers or those they consider a father figure. Through a state-wide competition, students were invited to share their ideas in words or in pictures. Analysis of the responses to this activity will help us understand more fully the roles of fathers in Queensland through this insight into the views of their children.

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The children’s drawings and poems are some of the many received as part of the Commission’s Fathers Day Competition.