

CENTRE FOR CHILD & FAMILY DEVELOPMENT

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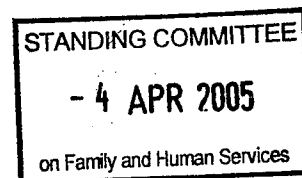
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James Catchpole
Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
30 March, 2005



Dear Mr. Catchpole,

Commonwealth Parliamentary Inquiry Into Balancing Work and Family

Thank you for inviting me to make a submission to the above Parliamentary Inquiry. I would like to focus particularly on the problems contained within balancing work and family responsibilities. From the perspective of my clinical work over many years I believe that a crucial but often neglected area is that of the pressure placed on fathers in the work place which makes it at times impossible for them to fulfil their commitments to the family. In my experience this has a significant impact on all aspects of family dynamics as well as on the mental health of families.

The main problem appears to be that the workplace in general does not place a value on family life. Beyond providing the odd child care facility, the majority of workplaces could be described as being family hostile as opposed to family friendly. The ethos of the workplace with its focus on competition and the 'bottom line' does not favour an ethic in which families or family life is considered to have relevance. Family responsibility is typically considered to be a distraction from productivity, instead of being perceived as being able to make a contribution.

A dangerous corollary to this position is what is termed the 'user pays' mentality towards people who are deemed to have 'chosen' to have children. The 'user pays' mentality not only fosters a view of parenting and child rearing as a commodity, but also creates a split between those people who make a decision to have children and those who choose against having children. This split undermines the recognition that parenting is in fact a community responsibility.

In my clinical practice I observe fathers who are the main breadwinners of the family who dare not take time off from work to attend to the needs of their children. In many cases they are expected to put in extra hours particularly at the start and end of each day to demonstrate their loyalty and commitment to the work enterprise. The work place thus subsumes the family in its demand for loyalty and commitment.

In the article "Sacrificial Families" by Emily Ross in the Business Review Weekly (January 20-February 16 2005) I pointed out the common scenario of the father who asks his family to be patient for 'just a few more years' while he consolidates his position in the company or establishes his business. The difficulty of course is that children cannot wait and be put on hold. Often by the time the father "re-enters" the family, the children and in many cases the partners have moved on themselves, having experienced what amounts to years of neglect. In this regard it is relevant to note that many women who bring up children in such circumstances find themselves of necessity occupying a quasi single parent role. It comes as no surprise therefore that women are somewhat cautious about becoming parents when this may mean that they could be left literally 'holding the baby'.

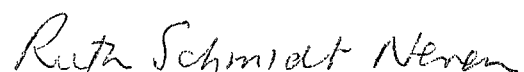
The role of both parents in developing a parenting partnership is of the utmost importance in promoting the mental health of their children and it is vital for this to be supported by the workplace. Clinical and research evidence points to the importance of critical periods of development, particularly for infants and young children. A core feature of critical periods is that children learn not only cognitive skills at these times but also emotional and relational skills. The place of the parenting relationship in promoting these areas of development in their child. is extensively researched and documented. As I state in the BRW article, these skills require the interaction of both parents and cannot be outsourced, managed or traded off.

From a clinical perspective we are also made aware of the particular needs and vulnerability of boys. Their failing in the school system and their extraordinarily high representation in all child and family mental health services and the juvenile justice system indicates the urgent need for a review of how they can be best supported. The absence of fathers and of fathering in this regard is certainly perceived as a significant factor. In order for fathers to be able to act as role models and mentors for their sons (and of course their daughters) they need to be present in the family. In other words new and different ways need to be found to manage work and family life in order to release fathers from rigid and inflexible work settings into their families.

At its most fundamental, we need to recognize that the children of today become the work force of tomorrow. The challenge is to provide a sufficiently nurturing and supportive environment for this younger generation to ensure their future commitment as well as their skill capacity. This task cannot be carried out by parents and families alone but requires a major attitude shift on the part of leaders within government, industry, the business community and trade unions.

I would be glad to discuss any of these points further with you or the members of your Committee.

Yours sincerely,



RUTH SCHMIDT NEVEN
DIRECTOR