



# Fathers in Families

'Strengthening & Supporting Fathers and  
Turning the Tide of Fatherlessness in Australia'



- The 12pt Plan
- National Strategic Conference on Fatherhood  
- Strategic Summary
- Facts on Fatherlessness



## Introduction

**F***athers in Families* is an accurate documentation of the progress of the fatherhood movement in Australia over recent years. Twenty-eight years ago, child psychologist Michael Lamb accurately described fathers as the 'forgotten contributors to child development'. To quote from the *Father Facts*, 4th edition, 'Indeed, for much of the twentieth century, psychologists, childrearing experts and popular culture largely assumed that when it came to child development, fathers were of secondary importance to mothers and perhaps even unnecessary. Increased rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing over the past four decades

marginalised fathers even further, as unprecedented numbers of children grew up in father absent homes'. Dr Wade Horn, the editor of the *Father Facts* book and probably the most well researched social scientist on the issues surrounding fatherhood, says that a family without a father is a lot like a car without one of the front wheels. It can still be driven, but it is pretty hard to steer. The same analogy can be given in the importance of mothers. A mother's contribution to family life is vital and irreplaceable. In study after study around the world it is shown that children do best with a warm continuous relationship with both their biological mother and father.

However fathers are no longer being ignored. Family scholars the world over have produced a large body of evidence from thousands of independent studies on the important contribution that fathers make to children and to the success of the family unit.

The Fatherhood Foundation was officially incorporated in May 2002 and has been privileged to play an important role in the process of cultural change in Australia regarding fathering. The vision of the Fatherhood Foundation is to inspire men to a greater level of excellence as fathers. The goal of the Fatherhood Foundation is to encourage more committed, involved, responsible

and loving fathers, who are connected to their children in a positive way. Over the last decade, authors such as Steve Biddulph, Daniel Petrie and Dr Bruce Robinson have laid the foundation for the restoration of manhood and fatherhood in Australia. Father-friendly publishers such as Finch publishing and others have led the way by publishing books about our society's masculinity crisis, father-friendly parenting and the need for change. The Prime Minister, John Howard, in June 2003, called for the restoration of fatherhood. Both Mark Latham and the Minister for Children, Hon Larry Anthony, helped launch The 12pt Plan on 26th June 2003. In February 2004, Mark Latham, Opposition Leader, in a speech to the National Press Club, addressed the crisis in masculinity in Australia and stressed the importance of fathers. This bi-partisan approach to the restoration of fatherhood in Australia by the leaders of the major political

million dollars. In 2004 the Fatherhood Foundation successfully completed the first 'Good to Great' Fatherhood Mentoring Course for the 21st Century. The Fatherhood Foundation also put together a proposal to make this available on a national basis with government assistance. Over this time the Fatherhood Foundation has inaugurated groundbreaking research compilations on the effects and cost of fatherlessness to the nation of Australia. Fathersonline, a weekly inspirational email for fathers has grown exponentially since its inception in August 2002. This weekly email ezine for busy dads is available by signing on at [www.fathersonline.org](http://www.fathersonline.org). In February 2003 the Fatherhood Foundation organised the first Fatherhood Forum at Parliament House, Canberra. *The 12pt Plan* was birthed at that forum and became the foundational document for the 'responsible fatherhood movement' of Australia. The preamble of *The 12pt Plan* identified

with keynote speaker Adrienne Burgess, author of *Fatherhood Reclaimed* ©1997. Both *The 12pt Plan* and the strategic summary of the NSCF are printed here with corrections and minor editing to facilitate readability. Also included in *Fathers in Families*, is the updated *Facts on Fatherlessness* by Australian fatherhood researcher, Bill Muehlenberg.

The Fatherhood Foundation, whilst having the privilege of playing an important part in the restoration of fatherhood in Australia wishes to acknowledge the hundreds of men's, fatherhood and family groups around Australia which have played a key role in that change. We would like to honour the many politicians who remained strong and steadfast despite the enormous pressure to bow to political correctness in the area of fatherhood. The process of healing has been accelerated by brave journalists within the media world who have also made a stand for truth and the renewal of family in our fragmented society. Many men and women too numerous to name have shown great courage in supporting the restoration of fatherhood in Australia. It is to you that we dedicate the '*Fathers in Families*' publication.

Federal and state governments, along with local councils, must form concrete policies that support involved fathering and healthy marriages. Fathers must join mothers in asking, "How can we balance work and family?" We need to start teaching young people in our schools how to have a successful marriage relationship and avoid the pain and dislocation that comes with divorce. We must provide training and mentoring for men and fathers to advance the cause of 'fathering excellence'. The future of fatherhood in Australia as stated in *The 12pt Plan* 'depends on all sectors of society including government, business, church, community, faith based and secular charities, social service providers, and many others working together', to promote responsible, involved fatherhood. Together we can make a difference.

**Warwick and Alison Marsh**  
**Fatherhood Foundation**



parties has hastened the process of change, especially in the last few years.

Beginning in 2002 the Fatherhood Foundation has produced annual public service TV advertisements promoting the importance of fatherhood and has achieved wide airplay on the majority of Australian television stations. The total value of television campaigns and billboard advertising over the last few years organised by the Fatherhood Foundation with the kind help of advertisers would approximate to over 3

that the quality of relationships between Australian mothers and fathers will determine the destiny of Australia, hence the need to support and revitalise marital relationships and secure marriage in Australia as an institution that provides a greater social good for the benefit of the whole community. Marriage has been shown to be the foundation link for involved and committed fatherhood. In August 2003 the inaugural National Strategic Conference on Fatherhood (NSCF) was held at Parliament House, Canberra



# National Fathering Forum

Turning the Tide of Fatherlessness in Australia

## The 12pt Plan

Strengthening  
and Supporting  
Australian Fathers

The greatest resource this country possesses lies in the families of our nation. At the same time, the strength of our families depends on the quality of the relationships between our nations mothers and fathers. The quality of the relationships between mothers and fathers and their children will determine the destiny of Australia. The future of Australia lies in the character of her children. Equipping and supporting fathers and mothers in their relationships helps ensure that our children have the best possible future.

The National Fathering Forum believes that every child has the fundamental right to both a mother and a father.

The best way to secure this right is to establish a loving and stable marriage between a man and a woman for life. This long-term relationship facilitates the rights of grandmothers and grandfathers to continued access and valuable input into their grandchildren.

The overwhelming conclusion of current social science research has shown that the best environment for children is a two heterosexual-parent household. The best way to ensure strong families is to support strong marriages. This traditional family unit - a loving father, mother and their children - is the best way to nurture, educate and protect children. This is the best social security system

the world has ever known.

However for a variety of different reasons, many fathers do not find themselves in a marriage relationship. Therefore irrespective of their marital status, we want to support all dads to fulfil their role as effective fathers.

Fatherlessness can be defined as the absence of an active, positive father-influence in the lives of children. Fatherlessness is both a natural and spiritual problem. It needs strategic and synergistic partnerships that should involve government, business, church, community, faith-based and secular charities and many others working together to strengthen and support Australian fathers.

## History

On 10th February 2003, over 35 people gathered for the inaugural National Fathering Forum at Parliament House Canberra. Twenty-five delegates spoke at the Forum. The delegates represented a wide range of Men's Groups, Family Law Reform Groups, Education & Training Institutions, Academics, Social Researchers and Psychologists, Drug Rehabilitation Organisations, Prison Charities, Social Reform Networks, Church Groups, Journalists and Media, Family Focused Charitable Organisations and Fatherhood Institutions. All came at their own cost with the common goal to strengthen and support Australian fathers and 'to turn the tide of fatherlessness' that exists in Australia.

The forum delegates who presented papers are united by the common belief that fatherlessness and family breakdown are major social problems in Australian society. The following Twelve Point Plan was agreed upon by a consensus of the delegates. This policy document puts forward some key recommendations to address these problems.

The National Fathering Forum does not see this Twelve Point Plan as a final document. Rather we see it as the first of many proposals to promote discussion and contribute to a coordinated national solution to turn the tide of fatherlessness and strengthen Australian fathers.

We commend the Parliamentarians from the different parties in both Houses who supported the National Fathering Forum Open Session by their attendance and input on 10th February 2002. We invite further comment and look forward to the National Fatherhood Conference to be held on 18th & 19th August 2003 in Federal Parliament with a National Fatherhood Summit to be held in August 2004. *Editors Note: This National Fatherhood Summit has yet to take place.*

## The Social Problem

One of the greatest challenges facing our nation is the social problems caused as a result of Fatherlessness. Australia's current birth rate of 1.75 births per female has fallen below the minimum population replacement rate of 2.1 births per female. Fatherlessness is a direct factor in this decline.<sup>1, 2 & 3.</sup>

The problem of Fatherlessness has been estimated to cost Australia over \$13 billion per year<sup>4</sup>. Bill Muehlenberg in his article titled "*The Facts on Fatherlessness*" (refer Appendix) has identified the following social and psychological problems which fatherless children face.

- Poverty
- Lower educational performance
- Increased crime
- Increased drug abuse
- Increased sexual problems
- Increased mental health problems
- Increased physical and sexual abuse of children

While not every child who grows up in a fatherless situation will experience either one or any of these problems, there is a much greater statistical likelihood that he or she would.

Studies into the potential impact of growing up without a father in the United States have produced the following statistics in relation to boys.<sup>5</sup>

Boys from a fatherless home are:

- more likely to commit suicide;
- more likely to commit rape;
- more likely to commit violent crime;
- more likely to drop out of high school;

- more likely to abuse chemicals;
- more likely to end up in a state-operated institution;
- more likely to end up in prison.

## The Socio-Economic Problem

While affirmative action programs have helped women overcome past unemployment problems, there is now a growing crisis in male unemployment. This is particularly prevalent among young and middle-aged men<sup>6</sup>. Male unemployment has two main socio-economic impacts on fatherhood. viz.

- Fathers, and therefore families, are put under severe pressures when dads are unemployed or under-employed.
- Many men in low socio-economic circumstances will not marry and will not have children.

All levels of government need to further address this problem. This can be achieved by removing any inequalities in current male/female employment opportunities and policies that may occur through affirmative action. The best person for the job should be given the employment opportunity regardless of gender.

## A Challenge to Fathers

The National Fathering Forum calls on men everywhere to offer their commitment to the ideals of fatherhood. We exhort fathers to make their primary goal in life the care and nurture of their families. We applaud the fathers of our nation who are caring for their families and urge them to become 'the best dads in the word' for the sake of their children.

The National Fathering Forum also encourages fathers who are our political, civic, community and church leaders and all those in the public arena to work towards becoming fathers of excellence. We acknowledge that we need a change in some of our laws and an increased government focus on fathers and families as contained in this Twelve Point Plan.

Through a systematic sporting development programme, Australia has produced some of the best sportsmen and women in the world. We have the best sportsmen in the world, why not the best fathers?

# The 12pt Plan

The National Fathering Forum has formulated a Twelve Point Plan to strengthen and support fatherhood and turn the tide of fatherlessness in Australia. This is divided into 3 major categories:

## I. Government

That all levels of government:

1. Acknowledge the importance of fatherhood by establishing an official body to support and strengthen Australian fathers, such as an Office of the Status of Fatherhood or a Ministry of Fatherhood.

2. Increase funding for father-based family initiatives. The focus of government funding needs to be on prevention rather than on cure in order to achieve long-term cost effective benefits.

3. Address the gross inequity in funding for men's issues compared to that currently available for women's issues.<sup>7</sup>

4. Recommend that a national campaign be initiated to promote fathers and fathering, that is to be run annually.

5. Reduce inequality for low socio-economic fathers by increasing their

employment opportunities.<sup>6</sup>

6. Acknowledge that after divorce or parental separation, every child has a fundamental right to equal contact with both the mother and the father, unless there are proven mitigating circumstances.

7. Examine all current and future legislation both federal and state in terms of how it impacts on fathers, marriages, families and children and make adjustments accordingly. This includes such things as the Family Law Act, Tax reform for families, Child Support legislation and much more.

8. Include the word 'father' in government department language along with the word 'mother' – bringing a resultant positive change of attitude within governmental bureaucracy towards fathers<sup>8</sup>. When the word 'parenting' is being defined, it should be emphasised that the word means both mothers and fathers.

## II. Education & Training

9. Education of Boys and Male Adults

The National Fathering Forum affirmed the view of a recent report<sup>9</sup> to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training that:

- While at school, more attention must be paid to the differing needs of boys and girls and their tendency to favour different learning styles. One should not be pursued at the expense of the other.

- From primary school through

to tertiary education, the nature and importance of fathering should be recognised (and if needed, introduced) within the relevant curriculum standards framework.

- Boys need male role models and mentors who may be both (a) teachers/lecturers, and (b) peers. To facilitate this, there is a need to increase the participation rates of males as educators.

10. Education of Fathers.

Fathers, at various stages, need to be equipped and empowered through education programmes that will enable them to acquire the relevant knowledge and skills that they need to be effective parents.

The National Fathering Forum believes that:

- Just as boys benefit by men positively modelling appropriate behaviour and respectful relationships with other men and women, fathers also benefit from the support they can receive from mentors in their communities.<sup>10</sup>

- There is a need for education programmes that focus on strengthening the father/mother relationship due to the effects of marital quality on fathering and child adjustment.<sup>8</sup>

## III. Fathers' Health and Well-Being

11. Being male is associated with a number of health disadvantages.<sup>11,12</sup> For males, this results in higher rates of:

- Hospital admissions for most injuries and illnesses
- Death by unnatural causes such as suicides and accidents
- Undiagnosed mental illnesses
- Higher rates of suicide
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Addictive anti-social behaviours
- Addictive gambling problems

The National Fathering Forum seeks to promote fathers' health and well-being and to reduce the health disadvantage of being male. This needs the assistance of the Government through increased government-funded initiatives.

12. The National Fathering Forum emphasised that a large number of deaths, injuries and illnesses that men experience are preventable. In addition, the health and well-being of men and fathers is closely associated with social



and economic disadvantage such as unemployment. This requires responses from both the government and non-government sectors.

The National Fathering Forum supports the national strategies for the prevention of: suicide, accidents, substance misuse and gambling addictions. We urge that these strategies be implemented with greater emphasis to the unique needs of men and fathers.

## Forward Programme

The National Strategic Conference on Fatherhood was held on August 18th & 19th, 2003 in the Federal Parliament, Canberra. We had hoped to hold, in August 2004, a National Fatherhood Summit at Parliament House to further promote public discussion and positive change. We need government assistance to bring together key stakeholders at a national fatherhood summit and until that is forthcoming we are unable to complete this much needed project. Letters of support for a national summit would be welcomed.

All enquiries should be directed to the Fatherhood Foundation, PO Box 440 Wollongong, NSW. 2520 or [info@fathersonline.org](mailto:info@fathersonline.org)

## References

1. Malcolm Turnbull, The Crisis is Fertility not Ageing, article in Options No 14, August 2002.
2. Kerry-Anne Walsh, Is Australia running out of children, article in The Sunday Telegraph, Sydney, 20th May 2001, page 103.
3. Michelle Grattan, Message to men, go forth and multiply, article in the Sydney Morning Herald, 11th June 2002, News page 3.
4. Private research by Dr Bruce Robinson, author of "Fathering from the Fast Lane", Finch Publishing, Sydney, 2001.
5. Wade F Horn & Tom Sylvester, Father Facts, 4th edition, 2002 and recent research by the National Fatherhood Initiative, Washington, USA.
6. Alan Barron, Crisis in Male Unemployment linked to Australia's Affirmative Action Policy, research paper Memucan Institute of Men's Studies, Melbourne, June 2003.
7. Alan Barron, Gender Funding Inequity, policy research paper Memucan Institute of Men's Studies, Melbourne, June 2003.
8. Richard Fletcher – Head Researcher, Engaging Fathers FAC, Newcastle University, NSW, report for Hunter Families First, Father's Access to Family Related Services.
9. House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, Boys: Getting It Right. Report on the Inquiry into Education of Boys, October 2002.
10. Michael E. Lamb, The Role of the Father in Child Development, John Wiley and Sons, New York. 1997.
11. Department of Human Service, The Health & Well-being of Men in South Australia, 2000.
12. Ian Cuthbertson, Men: Inside Out – A Look at their Hidden Emotional & Physical Lives, Choice Books, 2003.

## Special Thanks

The National Fathering forum and NSCF Conveners would like to thank all the delegates and speakers who attended the National Fathering Forum and NSCF. Each travelled at their own cost, many over long distances to contribute to the success of the first National Fathering Forum and NSCF at Parliament House, Canberra. The Twelve Point Plan and NSCF strategies are a reflection of their thoughts both from their presentations and also directly from their own research. We honour them for their sacrifice and passion for the cause of strengthening and supporting Australian fathers and working to 'turn the tide of fatherlessness' in our nation.

In particular we would like to especially thank the following members of the Fatherhood Sub-Committee for their efforts: Dr Russell Roberts, Bill Muehlenberg, Glenn Williams, John Flanagan, Paul Whyte, Alasdair Webster, Chris Miles, Barry Williams and Barbara Wellesley. Without their many hours of extra work The 12pt Plan would not be available.

The National Fathering Forum and NSCF could not have been convened at Parliament House, Canberra without Senator Paul Calvert's kind support. Senator Paul Calvert, President of the Senate, is passionate to encourage fathers and mothers in their important calling of raising children.

The National Fathering Forum would also like to thank all parliamentarians who attended the Open Forum, representing the Liberal, National, Green and Labor Members of Parliament. Your contribution was vital, open and forthright. We dedicate this document to you as Members of Parliament serving Australia, often without much thanks, and under extreme pressure. We honour you and hope you can find the time to be fathers of excellence for your children amidst your hectic schedule. To your children may you always be 'the best dad in the world'.

Yours faithfully

**Warwick Marsh & Richard Yiap**

**National Fathering Forum and National Strategic Conference  
on Fatherhood Conveners**

The National Fathering Forum Twelve Point Plan and NSCF have been published, second edition © June 2005 by the Fatherhood Foundation. For a full list of all the participants and contributors please go to: [www.fathersonline.org](http://www.fathersonline.org).

### Fatherhood Foundation

**PO Box 440, Wollongong NSW 2520 Ph: 02 4272 6677**

**Fax: 02 4272 9100, Website: [www.fathersonline.org](http://www.fathersonline.org), Email: [info@fathersonline.org](mailto:info@fathersonline.org)**

We wish to also thank the following businesses and organisations for their kind sponsorship: BCH Printing, Wollongong, NSW, Alexander Moir & Co Pty Ltd, Erskineville, NSW, Cover-All Roofing, Berkeley, NSW, Harback Joinery, Hobart, TAS, GA & PL Jasper, Moama, NSW, Woodenboy Graphics, Wollongong, NSW, Bicycling Australia, Family Life International, Family Training Institute and Men of Integrity.

## Thank you to the following Fatherhood Groups

**Lone Fathers** was established in 1973 by Barry Williams. Lone Fathers Association (Australia) Incorporated is a national peak body with a national network of branches. The organisation joins with other groups in promoting the status of family, maintaining family values as a priority in community welfare programs and promoting family as the foundational building block in our society. Lone Fathers is devoted to serving the fathers, mothers and children of Australia as a welfare and educational charitable organisation.

### Lone Fathers Association

**PO Box 492, Canberra ACT 2600**

**Ph: 02 6258 4216, Fax: 02 6259 2947**

**Email: [president@lonefathers.com.au](mailto:president@lonefathers.com.au)**

**Website: [www.lonefathers.com.au](http://www.lonefathers.com.au)**

**Dads in Distress** was started in 2000 by Tony Miller, the father of three children. Since its inception Dads in Distress has helped thousands of fathers and saved many lives. Dads in Distress have recently opened a Men's Survival Centre in Coffs Harbour and are working towards opening similar centres all over Australia. The goal of Dads in Distress is to be a support group for men and to help stem the present trend of male suicide due to the trauma of divorce or separation.

### Dads in Distress Inc

**PO Box J395, Coffs Harbour Jetty NSW 2450**

**Ph: 1300 853 437**

**Email: [dids@nor.com.au](mailto:dids@nor.com.au)**

**Website: [www.dadsindistress.asn.au](http://www.dadsindistress.asn.au)**



# National Strategic Conference on Fatherhood

Parliament House  
Canberra  
18-19 August 2003



On 18th & 19th August 2003, men and father's groups, family law reform groups, pro-family charity groups, government agencies and service providers, leaders and representatives from women and mother's groups and many, many others gathered in Parliament House. The total number of delegates represented a wide cross-section of the Australian community. The speakers included Adrienne Burgess from the UK, Hon Larry Anthony, Minister for Children, Hon Paul Calvert, President of the Senate, Robert Kelso, Brendan Sullivan, Bettina Arndt, Pru Goward, John Hogg, Mark Latham, later to

become leader of the Opposition, Hon John Anderson, Deputy Prime Minister, Richard Fletcher, Ron Williams, aboriginal leader, Hon Ross Cameron, Paul Bartlett, Warwick Marsh and Richard Yiap. Many others, too numerous to mention, contributed significantly to the strategic policy summary as listed below. It might be noted that all these recommendations received an 80% voting approval that on many points was much higher. Almost everyone who came to the conference agreed that the restoration of fatherhood in Australia was one of Australia's most pressing social problems.



## Strategies

**1. Mentoring for Men & Boys** – to resource, develop and improve national mentoring programs using existing and new groups for men and boys. Systematic research is needed to evaluate and disseminate the information already learned from existing men and fatherhood groups.

**2. Transitions to Manhood** – to recognise the importance of transitional stages in the life of men and the need to honour these stages. To develop ways of teaching these transitions to all males starting at the primary school level, throughout the course of life.

**3. Honouring Fathers & Promoting Fatherhood** – to recognise, empower and encourage Australian fatherhood by creating positive images of men as fathers and highlighting the importance of their vital role in society.

**4. Legislate for a Rebuttable Presumption** – of joint physical custody and equal parenting with 50:50 residence as the starting point. This can be rebutted on the basis of proven mitigating circumstances.

**5. Marriage & Relationship Training** – to establish a continuum of formal education and training and support mechanisms across personal relationships from early childhood to adulthood including equipping people to deal with crisis in their relationships. The starting focus of this process is that we look at the marriage/relationship breakdown processes.

**6. Child Support Scheme Reform** – to replace or modify the current Child Support Scheme with a fairer, more equitable and flexible family support arrangement. Investigate the fundamental premise of the CSA.

**7. Funding for Fatherhood Services** – to obtain funding to establish a

national information exchange focused on fatherhood services, programs and resources.

**8. Media & Community Partnerships** – to encourage, at the grass roots level, individuals and organisations to promote a positive image of fatherhood utilising media and community partnerships. This will require long term national coordination.

**9. Positive Education on Fatherhood** – to review all curriculum approaches/materials used in all schools and teaching/training institutions to ensure that they present positive fathering images.

**10. Tax Deductibility for Fatherhood Support Groups**

**a.** to petition the Government to provide tax deductibility for non-profit charitable organisations that are carrying out preventive & support programs educating men and boys in fathering and fatherhood.

**b.** to establish Australian Fatherhood Initiative as a tax deductible trust to support programs for mentoring men & boys in fathering and fatherhood

**11. Increase Level of Male Teachers** - Each state education body to have a target of 40% male teachers in each government school and childcare centre by 2010.

**12. Prioritise Men's Health & Wellbeing Services** – to provide specific health and wellbeing services appropriate to men and fathers.

**13. Education Services for Men's Health & Wellbeing** – to establish early intervention and education programs to promote men's health and wellbeing.

## 14. Policy, Planning & Practice

We commend the Australian governments and all members of parliament for taking leadership with initiatives that support and strengthen families. We recommend that knowledge and understanding from programs such as Men and Family relationships be used to influence policy, planning and practice in mainstream services.

Personal commendation and recommendation from NSCF Delegates to Parliamentarians.

We would commend the parliamentarians for their service and sacrifice for the people of Australia and recommend that they take one extra day a month off to spend with their families. This could be called the **Parliamentarians' Family Day** and could be a way of encouraging other high pressure professions to do the same.

For more information contact:

Fatherhood Foundation

PO Box 440

Wollongong NSW 2520

Ph: 02 4272 6677 Fax: 02 4272 9100

Email: [info@fathersonline.org](mailto:info@fathersonline.org) Web:

[www.fathersonline.org](http://www.fathersonline.org)





# The Facts of Fatherlessness

Bill Muehlenberg  
Revised, June 2005

Fatherlessness is a growing problem in Australia and the Western world. Whether caused by divorce and broken families, or by deliberate single parenting, uninvolved or uncommitted fathering, more and more children grow up without fathers. Indeed, 85 per cent of single parent families are fatherless families. Father absence has been shown to be a major disadvantage to the well being of children. The following is a summary of the evidence for the importance of fathers and the need for traditional two-parent families.

One expert from Harvard medical school who has studied over 40 years of research on the question of parental

absence and children's well-being said this: "What has been shown over and over again to contribute most to the emotional development of the child is a close, warm, sustained and continuous relationship with both parents."<sup>1</sup> Or as David Blankenhorn has stated in *Fatherless America*: "Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation."<sup>2</sup>

Another expert puts it this way: "There exists today no greater single threat to the long-term well-being of children, our communities, or our nation, than the increasing number of children being raised without a committed, responsible, and loving father."<sup>3</sup>

Bryan Rodgers of the Australian National University has recently re-examined the Australian research. Says Rodgers: "Australian studies with adequate samples have shown parental divorce to be a risk factor for a wide range of social and psychological problems in adolescence and adulthood, including poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, psychological distress, delinquency and recidivism, substance use and abuse, sexual precocity, adult criminal offending, depression, and suicidal behaviour." He concludes: "There is no scientific justification for disregarding the public health significance of marital dissolution in Australia, especially with respect to mental health."<sup>4</sup>

And the importance of fathers is neither a recent nor a merely Western truth. The need and importance of fathers is an historical and universal given. As anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski put it, "The most important moral and legal rule concerning the physiological site of kinship is that no child should be brought into the world without a man – and one man at that. . . . I think that this generalization amounts to a universal sociological law." There may be cultural variations, yet "through all the variations there runs the rule that the father is indispensable for the full sociological status of the child as well of its mother, that the group consisting of a woman and her offspring is sociologically incomplete and illegitimate."<sup>5</sup>

Here then is a sampling of the evidence:

### Fatherlessness increases poverty

- In America, among families with dependent children, only 8.3 per cent of married couples were living below the poverty line, compared to 47.1 percent of female-headed households.<sup>6</sup>

- In Australia, a recent study of 500 divorcees with children five to eight years after the separation found that four in five divorced mothers were dependent on social security after their marriages dissolved.<sup>7</sup>

- Figures from Monash University's Centre for Population and Urban Research show that family break-up, rather than unemployment, is the main cause of the rise in poverty levels in Australia.<sup>8</sup>

- A joint report from AMP Life and Canberra University's National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling says that divorce leaves both partners worse off economically, but women tend to experience the biggest fall in disposable income.<sup>9</sup>

### Fatherlessness lowers educational performance

- American children from intact families have a 21 per cent chance of dropping out of high school whereas children from broken families have a 46 per cent chance.<sup>10</sup>

- American school children who became father-absent early in life generally scored significantly lower on measures of IQ and achievement tests.<sup>11</sup>

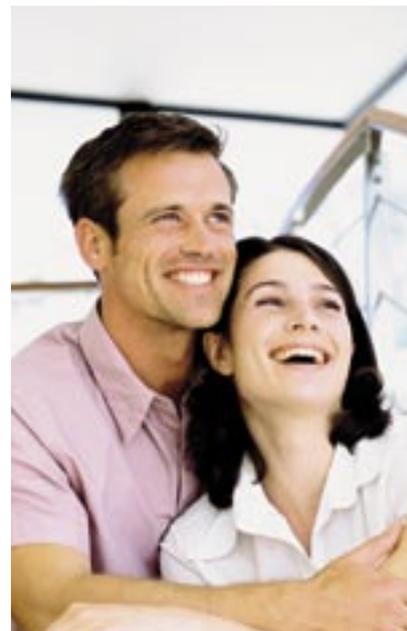
- A study of Australian primary school children from three family types (married heterosexual couples, cohabiting heterosexual couples and homosexual couples) found that in every area of educational endeavour (language; mathematics; social studies; sport; class work, sociability and popularity; and attitudes to learning), children from married heterosexual couples performed better than the other two groups. The study concludes with these words: "Married couples seem to offer the best environment for a child's social and educational development".<sup>12</sup>

- A Melbourne University study of 212 children found that fathers, even more than mothers, had a major beneficial influence on children in their first year of school. The study found that kids with regular father involvement were more cooperative and self-reliant in school than kids who did not have father involvement. The more regular involvement the father has with the child, the study's author said, the better the child does in his or her first year of school.<sup>13</sup>

### Fatherlessness increases crime

- A British study found a direct statistical link between single parenthood and virtually every major type of crime, including mugging, violence against strangers, car theft and burglary.<sup>14</sup>

- One American study even arrived at this startling conclusion: the proportion of single-parent households in a community predicts its rates of violent



**“Married couples seem to offer the best environment for a child’s social and educational development”**



**“There seems to be something special about the role of fathers in regulating daughters sexual development”**

crime and burglary, but the community's poverty level does not. Neither poverty nor race seem to account very much for the crime rate, compared to the proportion of single parent families.<sup>15</sup>

- In Australia, a recent book noted the connection between broken families and crime. In a discussion of rising crime rates in Western Australia, the book reported that “family breakdown in the form of divorce and separation is the main cause of the crime wave”.<sup>16</sup>

### **Fatherlessness increases drug abuse**

- A UCLA study pointed out that inadequate family structure makes children more susceptible to drug use “as a coping mechanism to relieve depression and anxiety.”<sup>17</sup>

- Another US study found that among the homes with strict fathers, only 18 per cent had children who used alcohol or drugs at all. In contrast, among mother-dominated homes, 35 per cent had children who used drugs frequently.<sup>18</sup>

- A New Zealand study of nearly 1000 children observed over a period of 15 years found that children who have watched their parents separate are more likely to use illegal drugs than those whose parents stay together.<sup>19</sup>

### **Fatherlessness increases sexual problems**

- Studies from many different cultures have found that girls raised without fathers are more likely to be sexually active, and to start early sexual activity. Father-deprived girls “show precocious sexual interest, derogation of masculinity and males, and poor ability to maintain sexual and emotional adjustment with one male”.<sup>20</sup>

- A US study found that girls who grow up without fathers were “53 percent more likely to marry as teenagers, 111 percent more likely to have children as teenagers, 164 percent more likely to have a premarital birth, and 92 percent more likely to dissolve their own marriages.”<sup>21</sup>

- New Zealand research has found that the absence of a father is a major factor in the early onset of puberty and

teenage pregnancy. Dr Bruce Ellis, Psychologist in Sexual Development at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch found that one of the most important factors in determining early menarche is the father: “There seems to be something special about the role of fathers in regulating daughters sexual development”.<sup>22</sup>

- A British study found that girls brought up by lone parents were twice as likely to leave home by the age of 18 as the daughters of intact homes; were three times as likely to be cohabiting by the age of 20; and almost three times as likely to have a birth out of wedlock.<sup>23</sup>

### **Fatherlessness increases physical & mental health problems**

- From nations as diverse as Finland and South Africa, a number of studies have reported that anywhere from 50 to 80 per cent of psychiatric patients come from broken homes.<sup>24</sup>

- A Canadian study of teenagers discharged from psychiatric hospitals found that only 16 per cent were living with both parents when they were admitted.<sup>25</sup>

- A study of nearly 14,000 Dutch adolescents between the ages of 12 to 19 found that, “In general, children from one parent and stepparent families reported lower self-esteem, more symptoms of anxiety and loneliness, more depressed mood and more suicidal thoughts than children from intact families.”<sup>26</sup>

- A massive longitudinal study undertaken in Sweden involving over one million children found that children from single parents showed increased risks of psychiatric disease, suicide or suicide attempt, injury and addiction. The authors, writing in *The Lancet*, concluded that growing up in “a single-parent family has disadvantages to the health of the child”. Bear in mind that Sweden is one of the most highly advanced welfare states on earth. Thus even with a comprehensive welfare net, children still suffer when not in two-parent families.<sup>27</sup>

- A researcher from the University of South Australia's School of Health Sciences found that children from single families do less well than those from married families because they are less active and do not have as much opportunity for physical activity.<sup>28</sup>

## Fatherlessness and family breakdown cost Australia 13 billion dollars per year

- Dr Bruce Robinson, University of Western Australia, and author of *Fathering from the Fast Lane*, has estimated the cost of fatherlessness in Australia to be over 13 billion dollars per year.<sup>30</sup>

- In Australia it has been estimated that marriage breakdown costs \$2.5 billion annually. Each separation is estimated to cost society some \$12,000.<sup>29</sup>

- Also, Australian industry is reported to lose production of more than \$1 billion a year due to problems of family breakdown.<sup>31</sup>

- Homelessness is also closely linked with family breakdown. A recent Australian study conducted at two Melbourne universities has found that children whose biological parents stay together are about three times less likely to become homeless than those from other family types.<sup>32</sup>

## Fatherlessness increases physical and sexual child abuse

- A 1994 study of 52,000 children found that those who are most at risk of being abused are those who are not living with both parents.<sup>33</sup>

- A Finnish study of nearly 4,000 ninth-grade girls found that “stepfather-daughter incest was about 15 times as common as father-daughter incest”,<sup>34</sup>

- In Australia, former Human Rights Commissioner Mr Brian Burdekin has reported a 500 to 600 per cent increase in sexual abuse of girls in families where the adult male was not the natural father.<sup>35</sup>

- A recent study by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that “a relatively high proportion of substantiations [of child abuse] involved children living in female-headed one-parent families and in two-parent step or blended families.”<sup>36</sup>

## Fatherlessness and family breakdown are the major social problems of our society

The evidence of the harmful effects of father absence could fill many pages. The above is just a small sampling of a very large body of research findings on the issue. The social science research



on the need for children to be raised by both a biological mother and father, preferably cemented by marriage, is vast and growing.

Indeed, the evidence is so overwhelming that the reader is advised to look at recent summaries of the data.<sup>37</sup> However, several recent academic studies can be mentioned here, which demonstrate the importance of children growing up with their married biological mother and father.

One American study of 19,000 young people conducted by the Bowling Green State University (Ohio) found that teens fare best when living with two married biological parents: “Adolescents in married, two-biological-parent families generally fare better than children in any of the family types examined here, including single-mother, cohabiting stepfather, and married stepfather families. The

advantage of marriage appears to exist primarily when the child is the biological offspring of both parents. Our findings are consistent with previous work, which demonstrates children in cohabiting stepparent families fare worse than children living with two married, biological parents.”<sup>38</sup>

Another large-scale American study found that there are “overall disadvantages” in not living with both biological parents.<sup>39</sup> The author concludes, “My analyses have clearly demonstrated some overall disadvantages of living with neither parent. Among adolescents from all six family types, those in non-biological-parent appear to rank the lowest in academic performance, educational aspiration, and locus of control. Further, they appear to fare less well in the remaining outcome areas (self-esteem, behavior problems, and cigarette smok-



**With the rise of fatherlessness Australia and the Western world has also experienced a marked rise in social problems. And the brunt of these problems have been borne by children. We owe it to our children to do better.**

ing).<sup>40</sup>

Cornell University Professor Urie Bronfenbrenner, a leading expert in developmental psychology, summarises the evidence in this fashion:

Controlling for associated factors such as low income, children growing up in [single-parent] households are at greater risk for experiencing a variety of behavioral and educational problems, including extremes of hyperactivity or withdrawal; lack of attentiveness in the classroom; difficulty in deferring gratification; impaired academic achievement; school misbehavior; absenteeism; dropping out; involvement in socially alienated peer groups; and, especially, the so-called 'teenage syndrome' of behaviors that tend to hang together - smoking, drinking, early and frequent sexual experience, a cynical attitude to work, adolescent pregnancy, and in the more extreme cases, drugs, suicide, vandalism, violence, and criminal acts.<sup>41</sup>

Similar comments can be made about the situation in Britain. After amassing a wealth of data on the negative effects of fatherless in the UK, Rebecca O'Neil makes this concluding remark:

The weight of evidence indicates that the traditional family based upon a married father and mother is still the best environment for raising children, and it forms the soundest basis for the wider society. For many mothers, fathers and children, the 'fatherless family' has meant poverty, emotional heartache, ill

health, lost opportunities, and a lack of stability. The social fabric – once considered flexible enough to incorporate all types of lifestyles – has been stretched and strained. Although a good society should tolerate people's rights to live as they wish, it must also hold adults responsible for the consequences of their actions. To do this, society must not shrink from the evaluation of the results of these actions. As J.S. Mill argued, a good society must share the lessons learnt from its experience and hold up ideals to which all can aspire.<sup>42</sup>

Wade Horn, the head of the National Fatherhood Initiative in the USA offers this concluding word: "The news is not good when large numbers of children are growing up disconnected from their fathers. It's not that every child who grows up in a fatherless household is going to have these kinds of difficulties. But it is true that there's an increased risk of these negative outcomes when kids grow up without fathers."<sup>43</sup>

With the rise of fatherlessness Australia and the Western world has also experienced a marked rise in social problems. And the brunt of these problems have been borne by children. We owe it to our children to do better. We urgently need to address the twin problems of fatherlessness and family breakdown. Public policy must begin to address these crucial areas. Until we tackle these problems, our children and our societies will continue to suffer.





## References

(Endnotes)

1. Armand Nicholi, "The Impact of Parental Absence on Childhood Development: An Overview of the Literature," *Journal of Family and Culture*, v. 1, n. 3, Autumn 1985.
2. David Blankenhorn, *Fatherless America*. New York: Basic Books, 1995, p. 1.
3. Wade Horn, "Fathers and welfare reform," *Public Interest*, no. 129, Fall 1997, pp. 38-49, p. 49.
4. Bryan Rodgers, "Social and Psychological Wellbeing of Children from Divorced Families: Australian Research Findings," *Australian Psychologist*, vol. 31, no. 3, November 1995, pp. 174-182.
5. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Sex, Culture, and Myth*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962, p. 63.
6. U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991
7. Kate Funder, et. al., *Settling Down - Pathways of Parents After Divorce*. Melbourne, Australian Institute of Family Studies, 1993.
8. Bob Birrell and Virginia Rapson, "More single parents equals more poverty," *News Weekly*, 18 October 1997, p. 8.
9. "Divorce shrinks income," *The Herald Sun*, 6 April 2005, p. 29.

10. Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing up with a Single Parent*. Harvard University Press, 1994.
11. Cited in Nicholas Davidson, "Life Without Father: America's Greatest Social Catastrophe." *Policy Review*, Winter 1990.
12. Sarantakos, Sotirios, "Children in Three Contexts," *Children Australia*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1996, pp. 23-31.
13. Caroline Milburn, "Fathers key to success," *The Age*, 5 October 2002, p. 11.
14. Robert Sampson and Byron Groves, "Community Structure and Crime: Testing Social-Disorganization Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 94, Jan. 1989.
15. Douglas Smith and Roger Jarjoura, "Social Structure and Criminal Victimization." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 25, Feb. 1988.
16. Alan Tapper, "Welfare and Juvenile Crime" in Mike Nahan and Tony Rutherford, eds., *Reform and Recovery*. Institute of Public Affairs, 1993.
17. Cited in Bryce Christensen, *When Families Fail . . . The Social Costs*. University Press of America, 1991.
18. Cited in Nicholas Davidson, "Life Without Father: America's Greatest Social Catastrophe."

*Policy Review*, Winter 1990.

19. David Fergusson, et. al., "Parental Separation, Adolescent Psychopathology, and Problem Behaviors," *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 33, 1944, pp. 1122-1131.
20. Patricia Draper and Henry Harpending, "Father absence and reproductive strategy: an evolutionary perspective," *Journal of Anthropological Research*, 38(3), 1982, pp. 255-273, p. 258.
21. Irwin Garfinkel and Sara S. McLanahan, *Single Mothers and Their Children: A New American Dilemma*. Washington: Urban Institute, 1986, pp. 30-31.
22. Cited in "Early Menarche Catalyst," ABC TV, 2 October 2003.
23. Kathleen Kiernan, cited in "The Bargain Breaks," *The Economist*, 26 Dec. 1992 - 8 Jan. 1993.
24. Cited in Nicholas Davidson, "Life Without Father: America's Greatest Social Catastrophe." *Policy Review*, Winter 1990.
25. Cited in Nicholas Davidson, "Life Without Father: America's Greatest Social Catastrophe." *Policy Review*, Winter 1990.
26. Nadia Garnefski and Rene Diekstra, "Adolescents from one parent, stepparent and intact families; emotional problems and suicide attempts," *Journal of Adolescence* 20, 1997, pp. 201-208.
27. Weitoft, Gunilla R., et. al., "Mortality, severe morbidity, and injury in children living with single parents in Sweden: a population-based study," *The Lancet*, 9354, 25 January 2003, pp. 289-295.
28. Carol Nader, "Children with sole parent 'less active'," *The Age*, 2 September 2004, p. 8.
29. Kevin Andrews, "The family, marriage and divorce," *The Australian Family* 13(4), Dec. 1992.
30. Robinson, Bruce, private research paper by author of "Fathering from the Fast Lane," Finch Publishing, Sydney, 2001
31. Milburn, Caroline, "Industry told family splits cost \$1b a year," *The Age*, 2 August 1990.
32. Pegler, Tim, "Homeless link to families," *The Age*, 29 October 1997, p. 9.
33. Catherine Malkin and Michael Lamb, "Child maltreatment: a test of sociobiological theory," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 25, 1994, pp. 121-130.
34. Keikki Sariola and Antti Uetela, "The Prevalence and Context of Incest Abuse in Finland," *Child Abuse and Neglect*, vol. 20, no. 9, 1996, pp. 843-850.
35. Michael Pirrie, "Child Abuse Law Alert." *The Herald-Sun*, 28 August 1993.
36. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, *Child Protection Australia 2002-03*. Canberra 2004, p. 22.
37. See for example my two research papers, "The Benefits of Marriage" (Melbourne, 2004), and "The Case for the Two-Parent Family" (Melbourne 2004).
38. Wendy Manning and Kathleen Lamb, "Adolescent well-being in cohabiting, married, and single-parent families," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 65, no. 4, November 2003, pp. 876-893, at p. 890.
39. Yongmin Sun, "The well-being of adolescents in households with no biological parents," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 65, no. 4, November 2003, pp. 894-909, at p. 894.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 905.
41. Urie Bronfenbrenner, "Discovering what families do," in David Blankenhorn, Steven Bayme and Jean Bethke Elshstain, eds. *Rebuilding the Nest*, pp. 27-38, p. 34.
42. Rebecca O'Neill, "experiments in living: The fatherless family," London: Civitas, September 2002, p. 14.
43. Wade Horn, in Katherine Anderson, Don Browning and Brian Boyer, eds, *Marriage: Just a Piece of Paper?* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002, p. 295.

# Fatherhood Foundation

PO Box 440, Wollongong NSW 2520

Ph: 02 4272 6677 Fax: 02 4272 9100

Website: [www.fathersonline.org](http://www.fathersonline.org)

Email: [info@fathersonline.org](mailto:info@fathersonline.org)

