
Youth Forum: Fathering the Future

Summary of the Youth Forum Held at
Christchurch College of Education Friday,
March 27 1998



*Young Peoples' Views
on
Fathering and Fathers*



Introduction

The Recipe

Take 400 young people

including 300 High school students plus youth workers, teachers, some politicians and community representatives. Ensure a good mix of age, gender, ethnicity and social background

Ensure they're all there by choice

schools include a staff member with the skills to progress issues and momentum in their respective school communities

plenty of variety and creativity in the day's programme

And we have an exciting recipe for stimulating discussion, thought provoking comment and the potential for making a significant impact.

The background

The former Commissioner for Children, Laurie O'Reilly, cared passionately about children, young people and the role of fathers in their lives.

In partnership with Save the Children Fund, Laurie O'Reilly launched a research project - 'Fathers who Care - Partners in Parenting'. The project aimed to create a substantial building block in the quest for increased knowledge of and commitment to the concept of caring fathers who are equal partners in the parenting of their children. It also aimed to identify the core messages and behaviours of quality fathering and co-parenting and to develop and provide resource kits for fathers and agencies.

Details of the research report are available from the Office of the Commissioner for Children and copies of the report on the Fathering the Future forum are available from Janine Rogers Ph. 03 377 5758, e-mail 6A-lnc@clear.net.nz.

In 1997 planning began for a forum to raise awareness about the importance of caring, nurturing quality fathering and co-parenting. The Fathering the Future forum held in Sydney 1997 was an inspiring model upon which the Christchurch event was based. However, the Christchurch Fathering the Future forum included an added component in the form of 3 separate but complementary fora to be held on Friday 27 March prior to the main forum which was an all day event on Saturday 28 March. The fora were:

- Family Law Forum
- Father in Different Cultures

- and a Youth Forum.

The Youth Forum was a one day event held at the Christchurch College of Education in March 1998.

It was seen to be very important to hear from young people - their experiences, stories, perspectives, hopes and dreams, if any solutions are to be found which will bring societal change and make a positive difference.

Canterbury Schools and other youth groups were invited to send representative delegations. Some chose to send their youth council representative or prefects but most sent a group with a mix of young people – different in terms of race, age, gender, social-economic background, interests and strengths. Students from alternative educational programmes were included.

26 schools participated. Participants are listed at the conclusion of the report. 93 evaluations were received. All were very positive about the workshops with the only complaint being that they were not long enough.

The day's programme proceeded according to the order as shown on page 29.

Workshops aimed to identify issues from a **young person's perspective**. While some possible solutions were discussed the key emphasis was upon **'What are the issues?'**

The majority of the morning programme was structured around ten workshops. Each workshop had an experienced facilitator and ran for one hour. Young people chose two from:

- Teenage Fathers
- Fathers in the Parenting Role
- Fathers in Sport
- The Image of Fathering in the Media
- Fathers & Children's Health
- A Female Perspective on Fathering
- Responsible Relationships
- Fathers In the Workplace
- Fathers in Schools & Childcare
- Absentee Fathers

The Steering Group has since met to plan a critical path forward which will include a strategy for progressing what is essentially a community movement. This is seen as a long term strategy aimed at implementing programmes and projects to bring about societal change which will impact positively upon the quality of fathering both now and in the future.

The Forum was inspirational and challenging. It opened up a subject which proved to be of intense interest to young people. People laughed and cried. There was an

amazing absence of cynicism and a wonderful level of self-reflection.

Responses were insightful and thoughtful and proved that given the right stimulating environment, young people are capable of focussed, meaningful discussion. They **will** talk.

Enquiries to:

Lyn Campbell, Children's Advocate, Christchurch City Council
Chair, Steering Group
Christchurch Youth Forum

The Learning Points

- Workshops were not long enough
- Participants needed more time to process
- We had breakdowns in communication with the venue operators.
- Lecture rooms are not the best environment for small group discussion.
- The media were there in droves and bordered on being obtrusive
- More music would have set the scene
- It was a difficult subject and some of the young people had not been adequately briefed in their schools.
- The subject opened up deep emotional reactions for some young people. while many of the participants were skilled councillors, a dedicated space for people to talk, reflect or process some issues with experienced counsellors, would have been of added value
- The food was great for most adults - but it wasn't 'kid food'!
- 'At risk' students require special provision
- The graffiti wall was a powerful and useful tool for young people to express their feelings and thoughts (see cover)
- The programme had the 'right mix'
- Videos produced by young people with adult assistance were more relevant than video produced solely by adults (which tended to idealise the fathering role and be rather unbalanced.

- It is important to give coping mechanisms for those who are coming to terms with absentee fathers.
- A resource centre with plenty of freebies would be helpful.

Summary

Please note – the following are issues and solutions raised by young people not adults or ‘experts’.

The themes that emerged ...

The general issues were...

- Young people want to be fathered. Fathers are more important than they realise.
- Men are not greatly encouraged or supported as fathers. The fathering role is not hugely valued or esteemed in New Zealand society.
- Many men don't own up to their responsibilities as fathers and commit themselves to their families.. Families need their commitment.
- Young people don't get enough time with their dads. They want more.
- Fathers too often let work and other interests take priority over their family time. Children want to be number one.
- Fathers don't tend to listen, show great interest or communicate well with their children. Children want them to relate with more skill and interest.
- Fathers are caught in the cycle of having poor role models and being poor role models. Better role models are needed to break cycles of abuse, poor health and poor communication.
- Images of fathering in the media tend to be unrealistic, shallow and negative. They need to change.
- Fathers stereotype their sons and daughters in sport, discipline and the way they relate - but the stereotypes don't fit.
- Expectations of fathers are different than in previous generations – we expect more involvement with children. Relationships with partners are less clear cut, more interchangeable. Parents' roles are up for negotiation.

General solutions to the issues raised were:

- New Zealanders recognise and place much greater value on the importance of fathers/fathering.
- Fathers make their children/family priority number one – ahead of work, mates and other interests.
- Fathers spend more time with children and make it quality time.
- Fathers practice what they preach - no double standards.
- New Zealand communities develop strategies to 'father the fatherless' and provide great role models for children.
- Workplaces and employment contracts change to be more 'family friendly'.
- Young people are educated on communication and conflict resolution strategies to use with their dads. Dads are also educated and supported to be better at the same things.
- Young people receive education about childcare, relationships, lifeskills and parenting throughout their schooling.
- Child support and child custody legislation is revisited and reworked to be fairer to fathers.
- Positive, realistic and/or recognisable images of fathering are promoted in advertising, film, television and other forms of media.
- Children are enjoyed, supported and listened to no matter what their age, or gender. No favouritism shown.

Teenage Fathers

Questions asked...

What are the responsibilities, the pressures, the positive aspects and the difficulties? How does being a teenage father impact on a young man's social life, education, leisure and employment choices? What about his future? Can a teenager be an effective father? How might the age and maturity of a young Dad impact upon his child? What are the issues?

Issues raised...

"Youth haven't answered the "Who am I?" question. How can you teach a kid what to be."

"If contraception is used then the emotional, social, financial and commitment areas are not affected at all, because there's no product of the sexual act between the two people."

Many of the issues raised in Workshop One were in the form of questions or dilemmas teenage fathers face. Consequently the workshop was summarised as a series of questions. According to participants, becoming a teenage dad impacts on everything. However, the odds seem stacked against the teenage dad who wants to get involved with his baby. Society doesn't accept or support him the way they will the teenage mum. But the general verdict was that he should get involved and take responsibility. He should receive encouragement and support for doing so...

To get involved or not? Do I want this baby in the first place? Should we adopt? What about an abortion? Is there a way out of this responsibility? Should I commit to the mother even if I don't want to? What is responsible? Should I get involved or not? How will I cope with this father thing? Have I got what it takes to handle it?

Telling people. When should he tell people? How will his parents react? What will other family members think? What are the likely consequences of telling them? Will it mean more conflict in the respective families? What involvement will his parents want with the baby? What about hers? Will friends stick around him? What will happen with people at his church or his club? Will they disown or support him? How will he handle it?

Sorting out the relationship with Mum. Will her and I agree on the baby's future and the decisions we have to make now? Will we still have sex now she's pregnant? What will it be like? What if we break up? What if I get a new girlfriend - or she gets a new boyfriend? Will it muck things up with my child? Can we work together even if we're not together? Can we be honest with each other and do the right thing even if we hate each others guts?

Practical stuff. Who will baby live with? Who will care for him/her during the day? Where will they live - with parents or independently? How on earth will they survive? Should he leave school and get a job? No way can an unskilled, unqualified teenager support a family. Should he even try? Isn't it better to stay at school and get some qualification? If so, how to juggle parenthood and schoolwork? Who will care for baby if he/she gets sick? Where will the dollars come from?

If they do antenatal classes or go to functions for their child won't they always be the odd ones out. It will be difficult to relate to older, 'normal' parents. The likely consequences of involvement are constant anxiety, busyness and loss of status. His social life will probably go down the tubes because his friends are in such a different space. Life is no longer an open book. The choices are heaps fewer.

Lack of maturity or experience. Can I offer any positives - can I do it? Teenage mums have a greater role in a child's life. She gets greater recognition and acceptance from society than I ever will. If a guy does stick around, he gets a negative stereotype and no support - as opposed to anonymity if I split. And what about the consequences of single teenage parenthood on the baby? Will they grow up hating me?

Legal issues. There are legal issues to sort out - custody, child support and everyone's rights.

The positives. A lot more maturity and new experiences for one thing. Teenage dads may be more motivated to succeed due to their new identity than if they never got someone pregnant. It might help them get their act together. Being young they might relate better, adapt quicker and have more energy. They might be more of a 'big brother' type - which could also be a negative.

Some Solutions...

Teenage dads should get involved with their child. A child has a right to know their dad even if they are young. They should be responsible in some way. If you bring a child into the world you are responsible whether you like it or not. But you need support and encouragement from friends, family and society. Tell them they can - show them the positives.

Make sure there is good sex education at school. Use contraception knowledgeably and make it OK to say no to sex. Teach better morals and consequences to actions. Teach about abstinence, abortion and adoption as well as 'safe sex'. Religious or Catholic schools should be 'up front' about sexual stuff.

Teenage dads should continue their education. They need access to counselling, specialist programmes and facilities so they can attend school or tertiary training. Maybe they could change schools or do correspondence classes to fit around their new timetable and identity.

Teenage dads should get organised. They need to know what to expect as a parent. Go to antenatal classes and parent education courses. Find out the supports and resources available to teenage parents. Make it law for under 18's to attend parenting courses.

The parents have to clarify their values, sort out roles and work together. They must keep communicating for the sake of the baby. The child's best interests have to come first.

Teenage parents need to be honest with their respective families.

teenage fathers should try to provide for the baby. They could get part time work, or go on the DPB. Maybe get high paying shift work like at the freezing works.

Grow up. Stop bad habits like getting drunk and stealing. But also get time out from parenting responsibilities. Get a babysitter. Make sure life goes on.

Offer support and advice to the prospective grandparents - they didn't ask to be grandparents and for all that might go with it.

Don't glamorise teenage fathers or teenage sex on television.

Teenage dads need to be aware of legal issues early on and try to avoid custody battles.

Some observations from the Steering Group

To a large extent our society has acted as if the answer to unplanned teenage pregnancies lies with young women – as if it is a 'female problem'. There is a growing awareness that males have been overlooked in pregnancy prevention efforts and programmes – that in effect they have been 'let off the hook'. To change this pattern society must create strong clear messages about male responsibility.

For boys (and girls) who see no future on the horizon, risky sexual behaviour carries no risk. You can't lose the future you're never going to have.

The most powerful contraceptive is knowing one is valued and unique. This knowledge assists young people in reaching their potential and to make positive choices. We need a holistic approach ie. address sexual issues in the context of life choices, responsible relationships and being part of a community.

Connection to a significant adult who is capable of mentoring or coaching is another key factor – to raise awareness, build hope in a future. Life skills programmes which emphasise caring, responsible relationships are vital and need to begin at an early age – but a key factor is that programmes must be supportive to male participation.

We need to provide settings where young men can feel sufficiently secure to open up, be honest. Support from other fathers helps young men understand their role.

Fathers in the Parenting Role

Questions asked...

In your experience, what makes a father/child relationship special? What can make it horribly wrong? What do fathers do really well? Do most fathers relate well to their teenage children or do they miss the point? If you know what it takes to be a great father, or if you know heaps of things a father shouldn't be, come & share your thoughts at this workshop. What are the issues?

Issues raised...

"The things that make it special are good times together, trust, no arguing, communication, love and respect."

"Being too critical, not listening, bad communicators, not being there, having no role model themselves and not spending quality time."

"It's hard for fathers to relate to their daughters. They are too protective. They find it hard to make an effort to talk, express feelings and make time for us."

Workshop Two participants want family to come first in their Dad's priorities - before work, material possessions, mates, or other interests. They want fathering to be valued much more in New Zealand society. They find it very difficult that fathers are often unavailable or absent - whatever the reasons for absence. Young people want more time with their dads - but they're not getting it. They want this time to be good quality, fun, free from arguing, criticism and misunderstanding.

Communicating with fathers is generally tough going for these young people. But they want to relate to their Dads and to know what makes him tick. They need him to express how he feels about all sorts of things. They find it difficult when he doesn't.

Young people want patience, understanding, encouragement and support from their dads. They want flexibility and respect for their choices. They need to know their father knows what makes them tick and that he is interested in all of it. They also want fair discipline, clear boundaries and trust. They want to be listened to and understood. Dad has to practise what he preaches and model the behaviour he wants from them. No double standards - please.

Criticism hurts kids. So does the perception dad isn't listening. Neither do young people like it when they're made to feel small or inferior.

Young people felt strongly about some gender issues, especially those evidenced in the Dad-daughter relationship. They felt fathers find it difficult to relate to daughters the way daughters would like them to. Over-protectiveness, stereotypes or sexist

attitudes make daughters feel totally misunderstood. Having identified these issues, the young people also said daughters really need a good relationship with their fathers, and so do sons with their mums. It's where they learn the most about the opposite sex.

Dads can have some very unrealistic expectations of their children - which makes them feel under great pressure to measure up. They feel his love is conditional on their adequate performance.

Young people pointed out that dads need a good relationship with their own Dads - but they often don't. Or the relationship Dad had with his Dad is very different from the relationship his son or daughter wants with him.

Parents sometimes clash in their ideas about discipline, house rules and communication styles. It can make it very difficult for you to know where you stand and whose 'side' to take in a given situation.

Some Solutions...

Keep trying for a good relationship with Dad. Young people should make an effort/continue to make an effort to communicate their needs and opinions to fathers.

(Young people) talk to friends/friends' parents about their mistakes and successes. Learn from them.

Get fathers to read some good books or watch a video on parenting issues. Talk about it with him.

(Young people) learn some strategies on how to open a conversation on important matters and keep it going - even if Dad isn't keen or gets angry.

(Fathers) make children top priority - share culture, stories, experiences and whakapapa with them.

Value fatherhood identity above work identity, income earned or material possessions.

Change father's stupid expectations and gender stereotypes regarding children.

Parents communicate with each other and agree on key discipline issues and house rules.

Some observations from the Steering Group

There is no doubt that most young people and their fathers want to build more meaningful relationships eg a recent Parenting with Confidence seminar in Christchurch drew 450 attendees with over 200 being turned away.

Programmes need to empower parents. Community groups need to ensure their support programmes are welcoming to fathers. Women also have a key role as their attitudes can inhibit the building of relationship between young people and their fathers.

Fathers in Sport

Questions asked...

What is the right amount of support for a father to give when his children are playing sport? Some aren't interested and some are so pushy that they become an embarrassment! Then there are the fathers who play or coach sport (and the ones who watch it for hours on television) - how does this impact on the children? What are the issues?

Issues raised...

"Stereotyping in sport. Fathers think guys should play rugby and girls shouldn't."

"Fathers should learn that winning isn't the only thing."

"Accepting child's decisions about what sport they want to play."

"Balancing the pressure between non-supportive and too supportive."

Workshop Three participants had some tough criticisms of fathers' involvement in sport.

Fathers can put pressure on us to play sports when we may not want to participate at all, or they put pressure on us to only play the sports they are interested in. It gets to be about them living out their own sporting dreams and/or achievements. Not about what's important to us. Some Dads pressure children to succeed because they want recognition, for themselves or their kids.

There is often a lack of respect for our choice of sport, or about the level we play at, and when we want out. Fathers often lack knowledge of sporting codes outside the mainstream. There's rugby, cricket, netball and not much else. Fathers have most of the power and they can quickly use it if they disapprove of our choices or performance - like refusing to give any financial support or provide transport.

There's an issue with Dads who 'know it all' and give too much advice. There's also an issue with Dads who always focus on winning or demand standards of play that sucks all the fun out of it. They can push far too hard. Sometimes they are aggressive and abusive from the sideline. Or just overly competitive and directive. There's so much macho stuff. Like disapproval if you show 'weakness' or fail his standards. It's horrible if our coaches & parents disagree and get into conflict.

There are heaps of gender issues when it comes to sport. Like a lack of equity pursuits over their daughters'. Fathers tend to favour sons' sports with their time, energy and support. Dads often lack awareness, interest or knowledge of the sporting possibilities for daughters. There's heaps of stereotyping - thinking boys should only play certain sports, and girls should play others. Or that when girls play soccer or rugby, they are really playing 'boys sports'. It doesn't help that there is a lack of coverage in the media. The image given to girl's/women's sports sucks big time. There's also an issue around the age of the child as to how supportive and interested Dad is.

Some fathers might show too much interest and want to get too involved but some don't show any interest at all. They don't get involved, they don't encourage or support us. Heaps of fathers are too busy to support their children. Then there are absentee dads who can't or won't offer any support. It's all about striking a balance between totally pushy at one end of the scale and totally disinterested at the other.

Double standards are really frustrating - especially where Dad is a couch potato but makes us work really hard. Or, he doesn't spend time with us because he's watching or sometimes playing sport.

Fathers in a coaching role need to be really careful. Some are unfair or they show favouritism towards their own kids. Some push or model dirty tactics and poor sporting ethics - in order to win, win, win. It really stinks when Dad's who hold a grudge - as in club, school or personal rivalries - try to make their kids hold it too.

Some Solutions...

Provide education and strategies for developing good communication between fathers and children. Teach young people ways they can communicate their needs and feelings clearly so their fathers listen and understand. Develop programmes which use positive peer pressure on fathers.

Young people could approach supportive adults such as coaches to act as go-betweens, confidants or mediators with their fathers.

Encourage Dad's to respect and support their children's choice of sport. Encourage the whole family to get involved in some way.

Clubs need to find ways to recognise, reward and value the support parents give and encourage parental involvement. They could run parent or family days and demonstrations aimed at educating parents about a sport and the support roles that are needed. They could also give specific training and direction to dad's on appropriate 'support tactics' - teaching them how to support not pressurise

It could be useful to have an after match venue for parents to sort their issues out regarding a game.

There should be more choice in the sports young people can play. There should be information that portrays non-mainstream sports positively - so dad can't object to 'that wussy sport'. Funding of non mainstream sports should be more equitable. The media should give more coverage to non-mainstream sports.

There should be fines for swearing, sideline abuse or aggression and a system to report incidents.

Media campaigns to a) demonstrate the benefits of Dad's getting involved and sexism and encourage gender equity in support, media coverage and funding decisions.

Fathers/coaches should show no favouritism to individual children on the basis of relationship, age or gender.

Some Observations from the Steering Group

Imagine if sports clubs, promotional groups and the media combined to encourage responsible involvement of fathers with an incentives/reward system eg movie passes for the most supportive Dad on a Saturday. While some excellent initiatives are underway eg. Take a Kid to Footie etc. it was felt that these could be extended. Sports clubs could also be more proactive in establishing 'buddy-systems' and mentors especially for young sportspeople who do not have good make role models. Some criticism was also meted out to those adults, parents, clubs which rewarded players and teams inappropriately eg with alcohol and even marijuana! The macho image of some sporting codes was seen to be unsupportive of good healthy relationships.

Fathers and Children's Health

Questions asked...

How well do you think fathers understand the physical and mental health needs of their children? When looking after sick kids do they do pretty good 'Florence Nightingale impression, or are they the nurses from hell? Come & tell us how well you believe fathers understand the pressures facing young people. What do they need to know to be able to give you the support you need? How can fathers have a positive influence on the health of their children? What are the issues?

Issues raised...

"Fathers need to know how you tick, what you're like. They need to know what you're doing and what kind of pressure you're under. They need to give lots of comfort and talk to the children."

"Boys aren't all macho, and girls aren't all delicate."

"Love – give lots of it, show it."

"Fathers recognise physical needs, but emotional, mental, spiritual. Girls especially will always talk to their mothers about health problems, not dad. Fathers are taught not to cry or show emotion. They don't know what to do when children are sick."

Fathers don't tend to care for their children when they are physically unwell. They don't really know how to do it if they have to. Workplace culture, expectations or conditions in employment contracts make it difficult for men to use sick leave to care for their children. So the skills don't get fostered and the expectation that mum will do it doesn't get challenged. Young people tend to approach their Mums rather than Dads for advice and support in health and wellbeing. This is especially true for girls.

But children need their Dads (as well as their Mums) to demonstrate love, offer comfort, act as a carer and foster good communication. They need fathers to be role models and teach them how to look after themselves - exercise , nutrition, drug & alcohol use, managing anger and conflict, communicating clearly, nurturing healthy relationships.

Fathers recognise physical needs more readily than emotional or spiritual needs. Emotional and spiritual wellbeing mightn't get a look in - especially for sons. Fathers often lack awareness of their physical, emotional and spiritual health needs. They are often poor role models for physical health but especially for mental health. When it comes to communication, expressing emotions and conflict resolution, they don't have the skills .

Fathers tend to look after their daughters health or mental health needs more readily than their sons. They exercise stupid gender stereotypes - girls aren't all delicate and boys aren't all staunch. Boys need to be cared for and nurtured as much as girls.

Some Solutions...

The media should show more Dads who express a full range of feelings and emotions.

Integrate 'caring' across the school curriculum and implement it at all schools. Increase awareness about ways to care for boy's/men's emotional, spiritual and mental wellbeing as well as their physical health. Abolish single sex schools - they don't help young people learn how to communicate with the opposite sex.

Put family before work. Spend quality and quantity time with children. Employers should allow flexible hours and sick leave for fathers. Make it easier and more acceptable for fathers to care for their children.

Educate Dads to look after themselves and their families. Then practice what is preached. Model good healthy behaviour.

Some Observations from the Steering Group

Men want to be included in the care of their children but organisations do not always encourage this. When children and young people have special needs their fathers do too. Men worry about paying the bills, holding the family together, knowing what to do. There needs to be a supportive environment offered (by the hospital, etc) where men can talk. Social occasions where men feel comfortable and can gather to share experiences and relieve their isolation are also helpful.

Many young men expect now to be involved in shared responsibility for their offspring but some of those most at risk have neither the skills nor role models to help them take on a positive parenting role. Programmes need to identify and target young men and boys who are likely to fall into this category - long before they become addicts themselves. Our mental health system has failed to effectively address male mental health issues.

Workplaces need to enable men to care for the health of their children in a supportive role ie it should not be the expectation of the 'boss' that this is primarily a woman's role.

The Image of Fathering in the Media

Questions asked...

Television, magazines newspapers, radio, movies, billboards! What fathering images are portrayed and are they realistic. This workshop will give you the opportunity to examine some of the portrayals you are aware of, and have your say about how these impact upon us. What are the issues?

Issues raised...

Workshop Five participants agreed that the media does influence perspectives on fathering. But the extent of the influence exerted depends on the individual. It's also true that young people need to make an effort to get to know their fathers more as the media won't give many insights.

Images of fathering in the media tend to be extreme - either comic or violent, very good or very bad. They are neither balanced nor realistic images. So often they're images imported from other cultures (especially America) and New Zealand fathers have different style and ways of relating.

TV sidelines fathers. You can identify with some television shows or films - but very few. There is no real focus on the broad and varied nature of fathering. Usually only comic (or sentimental) elements are portrayed as in Tool Time of Father of the Bride. Father figures or images are in the background. It's never the main topic.

TV programmers probably think they need conflict for entertainment value and ratings. Some shows provide conflict resolutions for fathering but father-child problems are usually solved in a single or a couple of episodes/minutes. Untrue. Fathers often behave atrociously on TV - they're shown with lousy morals. Overall, mothers are portrayed as nicer, more responsible and accessible than fathers.

There is a need for good fathering images in advertising, especially television advertising.

Some Solutions...

Encourage and place greater value on value fathering in New Zealand society. Make it positive and a privilege for men to aspire to.

Advertisements and media campaigns should show fathers doing a better job, e.g. break the cycle ads. They should provide information educating people of the problems and where fathers can get help. Dads should be shown playing important, positive roles in children's lives.

Put more NZ material on screen - not overseas sitcoms with different values. Introduce realism and recognisable images and more depth to male TV characters. New Zealand talk shows should deal with real issues for New Zealand men.

The benefit or NZISS system should gear itself to men as well as women.

Some Observations from the Steering Committee

The Steering Group noted an appreciation of some excellent television and media coverage of life issues which educates and raises awareness. However it was felt that these men who most needed to receive positive messages would be unlikely to watch/read. The Steering Group would like to challenge the media to become much more proactive and responsible in advocating for children and young people and portraying positive images and providing keys to assist men in their fathering role.

This could include sporting magazines running features on fathers who are good role models eg in rugby and rugby league.

A positive reinforcement campaign- in language and images likely to capture men's attention would be helpful – especially if given a high public profile in places men tend to gather and at peak viewing times.

While the media tends to major on attention grabbing material it was felt that more needs to be done to 'emphasise the positive to eliminate the negative'. ie many fathers do a great job and this should be publicised. The media could do more to investigate why some families' relationships function really well.

A Female Perspective on Fathering

Questions asked...

How do young women define a great father? Do you have any advice for fathers who are finding it difficult to relate to their children? If you ever have children what qualities would you want their father to have? What are the issues?

Issues raised...

“Boys and girls do need fathers.”

“Advice for fathers ... remember what you liked and disliked about your own dad. Communicate, listen, and get to know them. Choose to be with your kids. Keep your promises.”

“A great father is caring, kind and understanding. They are there for you ...interested in you as a person. You know that no matter what you do, he will unconditionally love you.”

Boys and girls both need fathers to be there for them. Many fathers never face up to their responsibilities and commitments to partner and family. But there's a big issue about fathers not being there for us. Or just not being interested in us. When we do spend time together, it's not enough to really bond. They don't really know us and we don't really know them. They take us for granted. It's worse when both parents work. Dinner time can be the only together time we have.

We think that there's an issue about the way we were conceived. Like did they plan us? Did they want us in the first place? When there's an unplanned pregnancy, there's probably an unwillingness to be a parent, as well as immaturity and emotional instability. They're not prepared for the responsibility. It has repercussions all the way down the track for us and our relationships with our fathers. And women have the right to say “I don't want to have children yet”. They should be ready and willing mums when a baby is born.

Not many dads get the discipline and communication thing right. There's no balance struck between authority and guidance. Their style is to overpower. They don't know how to let us make decisions. They don't really listen. No trust. No respect. Not for us anyway. We see a lack of respect for our mums, or dad's new partner. Heaps of fathers have poor communication skills. They're really hard to talk to probably because fathers can't express emotion very well. Maybe anger but not much else. Hurting dads can't teach their children to be emotionally open. And their kids need to learn openness, especially sons.

Fathers often stuff up with their daughters and treat us differently. We're not different in some of the ways they think we are but we are different in some ways they don't always recognise, especially at certain times in our lives. They might show gender favouritism to us or our brothers. When you put that together with family violence, or drug and alcohol abuse the picture is pretty grim. So much for role models. Lots of fathers don't even recognise verbal abuse as a problem. And the fact is, the fathers that need most help don't/won't go to courses, or read a pamphlet anyway. So where can you go from there?

We think dads need to work on their relationships with our mums. There should be equality between parents. They should show love and respect to each other. And if there's not love anymore, there should still be respect. It's horrible when they fight. We get caught in the middle.

There are a lot of issues around financial pressures on families and financial expectations or obligations. Fathers should try to provide for their families but experience a lot of pressure on them to earn money. There's even more pressure on mum when dads are absent. Not just financial pressure. The income support system can make people dependent on the government and poor providers.

There's also the issue that our dads, who might be great dads, are too scared to show us affection in public out of fear people will think they're sexual abusers.

For those of us whose dads are absent there's an issue about feeling left out or envious of our friends who have a dad around. Fathers Day is a sick reminder.

We do know what makes a great dad and the qualities we'd like any future partner to have. A great dad:

- encourages us
- shows unconditional love
- listens and communicates well with us
- keeps his promises
- is honest
- enjoys children
- compromises, is fair and consistent in his discipline
- knows what is going on in our lives and wants to be involved
- is gentle, kind, caring, understanding
- prioritises us over all the other things in his life
- loves and respects his partner/wife
- acknowledges his faults and admits it when he's wrong
- respects our views
- accepts and supports us

- provides for our needs
- strong
- affectionate and able to express his feelings to others
- present rather than absent - spends quality time
- mature
- resolves conflict,
- works with his ex/our mums for our sake.

Some Solutions...

A lot of education such as:

- Fun, appealing courses that deal with the basics of fatherhood
- Night classes at high schools aimed at developing fathering skills
- Positive promotion of fatherhood in the media - good, realistic, positive characters on television and advertising campaigns
- Fatherhood education taught in primary, middle and high school. (Start early!)
- Target and eliminate all forms of abuse at school. Emphasise it is wrong.
- Provide more positive peer pressure and support to dads to get better at fathering
- Set up mentoring/buddy programmes based at community agencies.
- Initiate more fathering forums
- Set up more support groups for fathers
- Train/employ mediators to resolve father/child conflict.

Change work places and contracts to be 'family friendly'. Introduce better/paid paternity leave for dads, so they can form relationships with their young children. Fathers also need flexible work conditions so they can get time off work to go to children's functions. Businesses should shut on Sundays so people spend it as a family day.

Make custody and child support legislation work better. Protect fathers visitation and access rights so they can have one on one time with their kids.

Continue promotional advertising aimed at effective birth control. Young men having sex need to think about the consequences. Fatherhood is always a possibility when there's sperm and a female involved. Reinforce the message that fatherhood is difficult. It's a lifelong responsibility and something you need to prepare for. It's a 'privilege' not a 'mistake' or 'accident'.

Encourage fathers to independently provide for their children and give them financial support. Bring in the code of social responsibility if it will help.

Encourage fathers to communicate with their family at the dinner table - don't watch TV. Get involved, spend time with children. Maybe he should shut down TV for one night a week and spend time with the kids instead.

Make fathers aware children need unconditional love. Make it cool to cuddle and safe to demonstrate affection.

Introduce more realistic programs and father figures on TV. Change Fathers Day from being a commercial event to being practical/relational. Encourage fathers and children to spend time together.

Responsible Relationships

Questions asked...

What can young people do to foster mutual respect within relationships? What are your responsibilities to your partner? As a relationship develops, is there anything you can do to lay the foundations for positive and effective parenting later on, should you eventually have a child within the relationship? Is all talk about responsible relationships too much of a pressure? Do relationships within the family and with peers influence future parenting? Come and let us know what you think. What are the issues?

Issues raised...

Workshop Seven participants did not make written notes on responsible boy/girl relationships. They appeared to focus on responsible adult relationships and emerging social trends.

Fathers don't spend enough time spent with children. They have an important counselling and teaching role. But so many lack commitment and/or don't get involved in our lives. When they do spend time, they are often poor communicators.

They don't seem to think through the consequences of present actions and messages for our future. They lack a long-term focus. Do they care what our relationships will be like in twenty years? Will we want to know him? Will we just say, "Stuff him?"

There is a higher turnover of relationships in our society. Marriages are worth less in our society. People don't tend to get together or stick together as much as they did. There are different ideals and values around. The increased divorce and relationship breakdowns badly affect families. They usually lead to insecurity and instability for the kids. They also lead to custody battles. As a result there are many different kinds of family units and more children live in families without a marriage relationship between parents. Breakdowns reflect especially poorly on fathers.

Women are in a stronger position legally and financially than when our parents were our age. They have greater equality and more choices. They also have greater expectations of men, maybe of themselves too. As a result women's and men's roles are changing. Society expects more from fathers over parenting involvement, responsibilities and contribution to household chores. Some dads might also expect to be more involved with our lives and helping our mums. Roles are up for negotiation.

Some Solutions...

There needs to be more input from dads and more encouragement for their input from society. They should be more valued. There also needs to be greater stability in

parents' relationships. Roles should be talked through and clarified. Whole communities should get involved in supporting fathers and supporting families where fathers have opted out. Find men who will father the fatherless. Sports clubs, churches and community groups could organise father/child retreats.

Provide education for school students on good baby care and parenting - especially for boys. Provide courses for families on good communication and for fathers on good parenting skills.

Take another look at custody laws. Recognise the importance of both parents having access to the kids.

Some observations from the Steering Group

What can be done to promote responsible relationships without waiting for sweeping changes in either the moral climate or through government institutions, by the mediating institutions in our society that deal directly with fathers, families, children and young people ie schools, hospitals, religious and spiritual institutions, business and sporting organisations, neighbourhoods and community groups. These have the potential to strongly influence for good. They also have a key role in modelling responsible relationships.

At the end of the day – people want good relationships. Young people usually want meaningful relationships with their parents. No single institution or educational programme can do this alone. All adults have this responsibility to do what they can in their own place of influence.

Fathers in the Workplace

Questions asked...

How does Dad's workplace impact on children? How do fathers prioritise family issues versus workplace issues? Do they find it difficult to get time off work to attend events that are special to children or to look after sick children? How comfortable do young people feel phoning their fathers at work or popping in occasionally? If you have any ideas for workplace action that could improve father/child relationships this is your chance to have them heard. What are the issues?

Issues raised...

"I wouldn't see my self-employed dad until 8:10 at night. He would be away early in the morning. My parents split. Dad's now retired and I don't spend time with him a lot. I get on with my step-dad and go to his work. He takes me to matches and takes an interest in what I do. I'm a bit resentful that my father is unenthused about my life, my sport, my interests."

Workshop Eight participants feel unwelcome, or an intrusion at many workplaces. Workplace seniority can dictate how accessible fathers are to their children. It is usually easier if Dad is a manager; more difficult if he is a junior person. Access is even more difficult when Dad's working relationships are poor because he doesn't want to jeopardise his position by having us around.

Dads focus on work - the amount or it or the nature of it - means he doesn't get involved in school stuff, sports or other activities due to his 'commitments'. He misses the small but significant things in our lives. When work is his life, it dictates his home life - good times at work mean good times at home; stress at work means stress at home. Some fathers really make an effort to see more of us by consciously reducing workload, taking time off in school holidays and/or limiting the amount of work coming home after hours. In other cases work focus led to broken marriage and wrecked relationships. A redundancy left him totally shattered.

Different occupations affect the accessibility and quality of fathering. Farmers may be present more than some city fathers but their work is never done. Shift workers can be on totally different timetables to their family members and are absent at key times. Self employed Dads work really long hours and can become quite invisible.

Young people often don't have a clue what their Dads work involves.

Some Solutions...

“Show me I’m more important than work. Choose your priorities – money or your life. No-one ever died wishing they had spent more time at work.”

Employers (and dads themselves) need to recognise the importance of good fathering and family time. Bring in flexible contracts - allow for more part time work and flexible hours so fathers have more options. Encourage ‘family friendly’ workplaces which welcome children. Increase paternity leave to one month and pay maternity leave for up to twelve months.

Fathers put family relationships first; work second. Create family sharing times; develop good communication.

Fathers in Schools and Childcare

Questions asked...

This workshop will give you the opportunity to examine the role fathers take in childcare and in schools. What are the barriers to fathers having a major role in early childcare? Do many fathers participate in things like classroom help or school trips? Who helps with the homework? Is it true that fathers prefer to have a management role on the board of trustees rather than help out at school book-week or the end of year concert? Some young people have fathers who are teachers (sometimes at the school they attend). What are the pros and cons of having a teaching father?

Issues raised...

Lack of time spent with kids is a critical factor for young people in Workshop Nine. Some fathers are squeezed for time but many choose to use their time in a different way. A plea from many was for dads to make time for their kids a priority.

Dads characteristically tend to do things “with” their kids rather than “for” their kids.

The role and input of mums is very different to dads but ought to be equal. The best mum in the world cannot compensate for the lack of male role model and vice versa. Apart from obvious physiological constraints, men can take an equal share in most parenting tasks and should be encouraged and affirmed for doing so. Parents should aim for a more equal role in the area of discipline. Some mothers are possessive about some parenting roles, e.g. nurturer, and do not allow or encourage dads to have an equal share.

Dads should not underrate their importance in the family scheme of things. Many girls acknowledge that they learn how to relate to males in their life from their dad.

Many parenting programs and books mean that parents try too hard to do the right thing and it becomes artificial. Kids appreciate and want honesty and openness rather than mum and dad trying too hard to do the “right thing” according to the textbooks.

Some Solutions...

Childcare should be promoted as manly. Boys should be exposed to high quality parenting programs in schools facilitated by excellent male role models. Movies like “Three Men and a Baby” can have positive messages.

Mothers should allow and encourage fathers to be/become nurturers/comforters. Mothers and fathers should both do discipline.

Absentee Fathers

Questions asked...

One in four New Zealand children have absentee fathers. Some children never see their father at all. How does this situation impact on the children? It's easy to think this is an unhappy circumstance - but is it? What are the negatives? What are the positives? Are there some circumstances where young people with absent fathers need special consideration and support? What are the issues?

Issues raised...

"It affects all relationships – the way we relate to men. You learn to deal with it. It depends when the father left, and why, how it affects you."

"You look for male role models but where? Sometimes there are no male teachers until secondary school, and a lot of our mental and physical development has already happened."

"The positives – no abuse. The negatives – no financial support, no father figure."

"Dad lets me have more freedom than mum. I'm not seeing him as much as I'd like to ... he forgets when birthdays are and important days. Sometimes I find it hard to talk to him. I love his hugs."

Many issues around absenteeism depend on the reasons why dad is absent. There are essentially three: work, death, and/or a relationship split. Work commitments are a major cause for fathers' part-time absenteeism. It's also true that absence is not always a dad's choice and sometimes absent or 'part time' dads can sometimes do a better job than the ones who are full time, and live in the same house.

Partners and children are better off without a dad who is abusive or violent. There is no arguing, violence - the house is safe. Fathers pass on their positive and negative attitudes/habits to their children - will we end up in the cycle? There's all those negative statistics about kids from single parent families. The absence of an abusive father means you can choose a more positive role model.

Fathers often struggle to show love and find it difficult to communicate. It's even harder to establish communication when he's not around very often. Emotional absence or distance is as hard as physical absence. There is a lack of support given/felt.

Relationship splits can often lead to power plays between parents and pressure to take sides. But children should get to be children. They shouldn't have to be mentors or surrogate partners to their parents.

There are a lot of issues around the fact you don't know what your absent dad is/was like. You don't know what you're missing out on. If he died or left then you have some

“We need more Dads taking an interest in children who haven't got decent male role models. Like at sports clubs and schools”.

You miss out on his hugs and physical affection. It affects how we relate, or don't relate, to men. When fathers are absent, we need alternative male role models and father figures.

There is also only one person to turn to and mum gets overworked and tired. There are often discipline issues - you get away with more. You could say there is more freedom.

There is often conflict between anger and loyalty towards dad. Like when people say negative things about him, and you feel you have to defend him even if what they say is true. Or when mum gets a new boyfriend. You can get envious of other kids from two parent families, i.e. kids with dads.

It's also true that if a dad splits, or dies, there are usually money problems. There's usually constant financial difficulties and poverty. It hurts when he forgets birthdays and important events. There are rejection and anger issues to deal with which can leave you feeling worthless, unloved and suicidal. Then there's always the question, “Was it my fault?”

When parents split there are often differences - and more conflicts - between parents about discipline, income, freedom and values. Children aren't listened to in a split.

Peers treat kids from single parent families differently at school. It can hurt when people assume your dad is around...and he's not.

There are some issues with the proposed Code of Social Responsibility. For example, If single parents have to work when a child turns 14, who will supervise the kids after school. They will get into trouble.

Some Solutions...

Provide anger management programmes/handling rejection for young people. Break the cycle of abuse through generations. Teach kids to cope with negatives by using the positives. Don't judge children for their parents' decisions.

Encourage dad's input - raise awareness of the importance of fathering. Fathers need to make a real effort when their relationship splits or they have heavy workloads. Let kids know they're loved. Kids need to make an effort to see/get to know dad.

Parents should work together for the sake of the children despite differences.

Provide positive male role models outside the family. Provide support people who aren't related to family - someone to talk to who understands. Provide contact with families which function well and more support in schools. Set up more homes for children without parents.

Schools/Media should acknowledge the issues for children from families with absent dads, especially on Fathers' Day.

Some Observations from the Steering Group

Increasing and unprecedented numbers of children are growing up without their fathers actively involved in their lives.

New Zealand is seeing a significant increase in the presence of fathers as primary child-care providers. Growing up without a father does put children at increased risk for a variety of reasons but it does not necessarily cause problems. Growing up with a father, particularly a highly involved father, can optimise the likelihood of certain positive outcomes but it does not necessarily guarantee these outcomes. The key is the quality of the relationship and the amount of time spent. Research suggests that if we are concerned about optimising young people's health and development, we should be promoting and supporting both two parent families structure plus ways to involve fathers in a positive way in their children's lives – whatever the family form is the focus is on the wellbeing of the child.

Father absence is not the only or even major cause of poverty, truancy, and behavioural problems. Growing up with a single parent is just one, among many factors which place children and young people at risk. Low income or sudden divorce plus inadequate parental guidance and attention and a lack of ties to community resources contribute to disadvantage. Young people need to understand why a father is absent. Even when a father has been absent for a long time, reconnection can have a powerful affect upon sense of worth, place and motivation.

Resources

Youth Forum Programme

'Fathers who Care - Partners in Parenting'

FATHERING THE FUTURE

Time: Friday 27 March 1998

Venue: Christchurch College of Education

Steering Group: Chair Lyn Campbell, Chris Martin, John Harrington, Robyn Moore, Anthony Nihoniho, Kim Campbell, Liz Ellington.

| | |
|----------------|-------------------------------|
| 8.30 - 9.00 am | Registrations |
| 9.00 - 9.15 am | Welcome/Powhiri |
| 9.15 - 9.20 am | Video Presentation |
| 9.20 - 9.45 am | Keynote speaker - Matt Martin |
| 9.45 am | Housekeeping |

| | |
|------------------|---|
| 9.45 - 10.45 am | Workshops 1 A Youth Perspective on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">* Teenage Fathers* Fathers in the Parenting Role* Fathers in Sport* Image of Fathering in Media* Fathers and Children's Health* Fathers in Workplace* Fathers in Schools and Childcare* Responsible Relationships* Absentee Fathers* A Female Perspective on Fathering |
| 11.00 - 12.00 pm | Workshops 2 (repeat of Workshops 1) |

| | |
|-----------------|--|
| 12.00 - 1.00 pm | Lunch/Graffiti Wall/Music Entertainment |
| 1.00 - 1.15 pm | Awesome Event |
| 1.15 - 2.00 pm | Keynote Speaker - Matt Martin |
| 2.00 - 3.00 pm | Dreams, Schemes and the Future, a montage of music, drama, comment, interview and video. |

Youth Forum Participation

Youth Organisations

Te Whare Ora O Nga Tamariki Charitable Trust

Hebron Community Trust

Avonhead Baptist Church

Just Us Youth

Pregnancy Help Inc

Emergency Relief, Methodist Mission

Wai-Ora Trust

198 Youth Health Centre

Linwood Avenue Union church

Hoon Hay Youth Centre

City New Life Church

Te Kaupapa Whakaora

Living Water Christian Centre

Anglican Diocese of Christchurch

Schools

Papanui High School
Roncalli College
Burnside High School
Villa Maria College
St Bede's College
Christ's College
Linwood High School
Catholic Cathedral College
Darfield High School
Timaru Boys High School
Hillmorton High School
Lincoln High School
St Thomas of Canterbury College
Avonside Girl's High School
Rangiora High School
Shirley Boy's High School
Christchurch Girl's High School
Cashmere High School
Ellesmere College
Riccarton High School
Hornby High School
Aranui High School
Middleton Grange School
Hagley Community College
Christchurch Boy's High School