

Dads: Delights, Desires and Difficulties

A Discussion of Changes over the Last 40 Years in Fathers' Roles, Attitudes and Practices

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In the early 1960's James Ritchie and I began the first of what became a series of studies of the attitudes and practices of parents of four year old children. In the early sixties, child rearing was clearly the role of mothers, and it simply never occurred to us to interview fathers as well as mothers. However, our interview schedule, based on that of Sears, Maccoby and Levin (1956) contained questions for the mothers about the fathers' role in child rearing. In the seventies, eighties and nineties fathers were interviewed directly.

In this paper I discuss changes over the last forty years in fathers' roles, attitudes and practices. In general, fathers are more positive about their role and spend more time with their infants and four year olds. They now talk more with their mates about being a father, and are more likely to give equal importance to their partner's job. However, job pressures mean that they have difficulty balancing their priorities between work and home. Clearly, fathering is being taken seriously by the nineties fathers who feel a conflict between earning a living and spending more time with their children.

Following Sears, Maccoby and Levin (1956) we have always interviewed mothers of four year olds. Four year olds are old enough to have interesting behaviours, yet are not as much away from the orbit and influence of the family as a school age child. Our 1960's interview followed closely that of the original, with changes only to the American idioms. In later studies more questions were added so that we could further explore areas of interest, or look at new social developments. For example, the original questionnaire had no questions on television viewing; later studies have looked at this, and more recently, videos and computer games. In the early 1960's we sought both urban and rural mothers. In Wellington, we obtained names and addresses from the birth register; four years later, only 30% of the Pakeha (and only three Maori) families lived at the same address. So we added to our sample by using kindergartens and by snowballing. The rural sample was obtained in a small Bay of Plenty town, Katikati, where we interviewed all but one of the available mothers of four year olds. I did most of the interviews, while James minded our own children.

Involvement in Caring

Since in the nineteen sixties we interviewed only mothers, our report on that study spends only four pages in discussing the father's role (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1970, pp115-118). I cringe a little now when I look back at what we wrote then:

'To read what we report may cause the more modest males some embarrassment and others a righteous masculine indignation. In

general we think that most men would prefer their role in child rearing to be left to silence. It is not thought of as a male preserve. We have known fathers who were reluctant to be seen wheeling a pram and the image of male toughness does not really accommodate ideas of tenderness, baby care and nappy-changing. Be that as it may what their wives told us of their role makes them no less adequate as males because they sometimes show these emotions or perform these actions. And however grudgingly they agree to walk the pram, or mind the toddlers while their wives do other things, we suspect that male pride and vanity being what they are, most men are not altogether unready to display publicly what is, after all, evidence of their own virility. They may grumble, but they are also rather pleased.' (pp115-116)

After more than thirty years, this statement appears rather ambivalent. We seemed to think that fathers would be embarrassed to be seen pushing a pram, or changing a nappy; on the other hand, we thought that fathers would be pleased to provide public evidence of their virility. In the year 2000, the balance has tipped away from embarrassment to a more pragmatic and accepted attitude of male involvement in the care of young children.

In 1970 we reported that the majority of the mothers (81 %) regarded the fathers as 'fun fathers', someone who played games, did interesting

things in the workshop, came home ready for fun, to take the children fishing, for outings or to sports. He related to the children at the end of the day, when his job at work was finished, but hers at home was not. Two percent were described as cold, distant and lacking in affection and the remaining 17/0 fell somewhere in between.

'But when it comes to help, the 'fun father' is not much use. He will play with the children and this may relieve things for the mother a little. By and large, he does not feed, bath, dress or bed the children.' (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1970, p117)

He did even less when the child was a baby, since 85% of the mothers reported that care of the infant was their sole responsibility.

As the child grew older, fathers seemed more willing to become involved in their care, Thirty six percent of the mothers expected and received very little help from their husbands, though 31 percent would do odd things when asked and 32 percent would readily accept equal care of the children as their task. 'The mothers did not complain about lack of help; most simply did not expect it.' (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1970; p 1 17).

We noted one exception: the fathers, the mothers said, were always ready to 'give their wives a break, to let them enjoy some outside interest or activity, or meet some necessary engagement.' (Ritchie and Ritchie, 1970, p117).

The mothers were asked about family authority and decision making. The father was reported to be the main authority in more than two thirds of the families; in about a quarter of the families decision making was shared and in seven percent of cases it lay mostly with the mother. Responsibility for the children rested with the mother (48%) or was shared equally (44%).

1970's Study

The second study was conducted in the late 1970's, the impetus coming from the students in our third year developmental psychology class who interviewed both mothers and fathers of four year olds in the wider Waikato area. They worked mainly through



kindergartens and also used snow-balling techniques.

Feminism had arrived, families were smaller, mothers were happier and a third of the mothers were working. Fathers were more involved with their children. A third were reported by the mothers to give considerable help with the baby, and a third were happy to reliably help when asked. Fifty one percent were reported by the mothers to regularly look after the four year old child, up from 32% in the 1960's. Mothers and fathers were generally in agreement on the father's role in the family.

And what did the 70's fathers, themselves, report about their involvement in parenting? A third told us that they helped a lot when the child was young, but only 14%, compared with the third reported by the mothers, said that they could be counted on to help when asked. On the other hand, 61%, up from the 51% reported by the mothers, said that they helped a great deal with the four year old. By the 80's and 90's, more than half the fathers told us that they helped a lot with the baby.

A new question, introduced in the 70's study, casts more light on father involvement with the baby. It asked how much time, other than that absolutely necessary, the father spent with the baby. In the 70's about half (54%) reported that they spent a lot of time, but by the 80's, this was up to 79% and the 90's fathers reported that 91% spent a lot of time with the infant.

Father involvement in caring for the four year old has also increased over the decades. From the 61% in the seventies, the percent of fathers who have helped a lot increased to 74% in the eighties and is up to 86% in the nineties.

However, when it comes to messy jobs, mothers are said to still have the responsibility. A new question in the 80's asked which parent would take responsibility for a messy job if both

parents were present. Of the 80's fathers, 41% reported that both would share in the task; this has dropped to 35% in the 1990's sample. Conversely, those who say such a job would be done by the mother has risen from 48% to 58%. Only 12 % in the 90's, very similar to the 10% in the 80's, said that the care of a sick child was equally shared; otherwise, the responsibility for the child rests with the mother (86%, no change since the 80's when the percentage was 87%)

Since the 70's about 40% of the fathers have said that they spent as much time as they would like with their child, around a third would like a little more time, and about a quarter would like a lot more time.

Of the 70's sample, 28% reported that they spent more than an hour each day simply enjoying their child's company; by the 90's, this figure has dropped to 14%. About a third take the child on an outing about once a week; this figure has been constant since the 80's.

Fathers in the 90's, compared with those in the 80's, reported more difficulty in juggling work commitments: only 25% reported no difficulty compared with 39% in the 80's; about a third found it very difficult indeed. This may be the reason for the drop in the amount of time that they spent *in* enjoying their child's company. Eighty six percent of the 90's fathers agreed with the statement that it was hard to be a parent in the current economic climate.

Decision-Making

In the 60's, forty three percent of the mothers reported that decisions about the children were made mostly by them, or else shared equally. By the 80's, the number of fathers reporting equal sharing of decisions about the children has risen to 55%, and this remained constant in the 90's. But it has also remained constant over the decades that if these decisions are not shared, they are made by the mother.

Where decisions about money are concerned, the percentage of equal sharing has risen from 57% in the 70's to 76% in the nineties. But if not shared equally, these decisions continue to be

mainly made by fathers (16%) a drop from 34% in the 70's.

Decisions about leisure have changed little over the decades. The fathers in the 70's reported that in 65% of families these were shared equally; in the 90's, the percentage is 76%. And when these are not shared equally, they are now mostly made by the mother.

When major decisions such as moving to a new house were concerned, the percentage of fathers reporting equal sharing has risen from 71% in the 70's to 83% in the 80's and 90's. When these are not shared, there is less likelihood for these to be made by the fathers, as happened in 26% of families in the 70's and 16% of the families in the 80's; in the 90's, this figure is now 11%.

Job Priorities

In the 1980's study we added in a couple of questions about job priorities; in the 80's, 78% of the fathers said that their job would take priority over that of the mother; this has dropped to 52% in the 90's study where 45% of the men say that the wife's job would have equal priority.

About a half (48%) of the 80's fathers had a wife or partner in paid employment. Analyses of the mother data had found some interesting differences in the attitudes and practices of mothers in paid employment, compared to full time mothers (Ritchie 1982, 1999) Working mothers were more positive about motherhood, were more likely to enjoy their babies, reported a stronger sense of identity apart from motherhood, had higher self esteem, had better relationships with their children, and their partner helped more with the child. It seemed clear that paid employment, though it added an extra commitment to a woman's life, could also bring added satisfaction and have positive effects on family relationships. I decided it would be interesting to compare the responses of men whose wife or partner worked outside the home, with those of the men whose partners were full time mothers.

Fathers whose wife or partner also worked were more likely to have got up in the night to attend to the baby, to help regularly to look after the child, to

want to spend more time with the child, to read a daily story, to share decisions about the children, to regard the wife's job as having equal priority, to be more likely to take the child to the doctor, to be rated warmer and to feel more positive about being a father. Again, this time from the fathers' point of view, it seems as if mother employment enhances family relationships.

In a question asked only in the 90's, three quarter of the men said they would consider looking after the children full time if their wife earned enough to maintain the family in an adequate lifestyle. They would do this so that they could spend more time with the children (43%), because the wife earned more money (32%) because they do not enjoy working (18%) and in order to spend time on more enjoyable activities (5%). Of those who did not approve of the option, 58% said that they did not want to look after the children, 29% preferred to work and 8% wanted both parents to work so that the family would enjoy a higher standard of living.

Enjoying the Role

The fathers have generally been pleased with fatherhood. Two thirds in the nineties, up from a half in the 70's, reported that they were pleased with the pregnancy. Two thirds, in the 90's, up from 48% in the 70's, said that the early months of the child's life were more pleasurable than not and 89% now (up from 78% in the 70's) say that being the father of a four year old is more pleasurable than not. Eighty five percent now (up from 75% in the 80's, said that being a father has fulfilled their expectations and 86% expressed wholehearted satisfaction with their role as a father. About a third of the men say that they often talk about being a father with their mates, up from only 16% in the seventies.



Sixty two percent said in the 90's that they felt that friends and family valued their role as a father, compared with 51% in the 80's. But the number who felt that society as a whole valued the father role is down to 41% from 56%. Society was not seen as providing help for fathers to deal with the stress of fatherhood: only 23% gave an affirmative answer to this question, compared to 42% in the 80's; family and friends were more helpful but the number reporting help from such sources in the nineties (76%) is well down on the 96% who gave this answer in the 80's. About 80% agreed that it was hard to be a parent in the current economic climate, and others noted the strain caused by the responsibilities of child rearing and lack of time for oneself. About half thought that parenting was more difficult than it had been five years previously while 13% thought it was easier.

The fathers were asked their views on the women's movement and its effects. In the 80's, only 23% thought it had had a positive effect, and the same number thought it had helped in some ways. Nobody thought that it had had no effect! By the 90's a half of the men thought it had had a very positive effect and a further 30% thought it had helped with some issues.

As with the 80's data, I conducted a comparison between those fathers whose wife or partner was in paid employment and those with wives full time at home. Fathers with working wives were more likely to spend time in child-focused activity, were more likely to take responsibility for messy jobs, were rated as having higher self esteem and as warmer to both baby and child. This is a different list of items from the 80's study, but both indicate positive effects where the mother is in paid employment.

As with the data from the mothers (Ritchie 1982, 1999) the effects of women's paid employment appears to be positive on the family and family relationships.

I can summarise these data by saying that, over the decades, fathers have become more involved with their children, and find more enjoyment in fatherhood. Families are now more egalitarian in their decision making. But

in most areas, particularly those involving children, if decisions are not shared, they continue to be made by the father.

The nineties fathers acknowledge that they have difficulty in juggling work and family commitments and a large number would be happy to give up work if their wife or partner could earn enough to maintain the family's standard of living.

New Zealand fathers have come a long way from their pioneering past. Jock Phillips (1996) describes a slow transition from the family man of the 1950's who cordoned off certain areas of domestic life as acceptable (the garden, but only the vegetable garden, the barbecue (but not the kitchen stove), repairs to car or washing machine (but not to clothes), cleaning the car (but not the floor). He describes the influence of feminism and notes that 'some men responded by allowing their wives to drive the car, or by offering to look after the children an afternoon each week, or by cooking the occasional meal.' (p274) My data suggest that men's family roles have expanded greatly in the thirty years since feminism arrived in New Zealand.

There has been very little research in New Zealand on father involvement in families. Rae Julian (1999) reports on a large scale survey commissioned by the late Commissioner for Children, Laurie O'Reilly. Telephone interviews were conducted by ACNeilson with 2002 people over the age of 15 years. The interview asked questions about parental roles, the barriers to male involvement and ways of supporting fathers.

A large majority of the respondents thought that mothers and fathers should be equally responsible for many aspects of child rearing such as discipline, showing affection, helping with problems, day to day care. Older respondents were more likely to favour differentiated roles and men were more likely than women to believe both that fathers should be more involved with sons and mothers should be more involved with daughters.

Societal Attitudes

Barriers to men carrying out their fathering role were identified as the failure to teach men how to father, a belief held across all age groups in the sample; women were believed by the older respondents to be naturally better at looking after children; men were more likely to note discrimination from the Family Court and there was a belief among the older respondents that child rearing is not manly. Those currently parenting had more egalitarian attitudes about the sharing of parental responsibilities than either the teenagers or the older respondents.

The respondents 'agreed that changes to societal attitudes, more publicity about being a good father, parenting courses for fathers, paternity leave and flexible working hours were necessary in order for fathers to play a greater role in the upbringing of their children.' (Julian, 1999, p 2). These are very sensible suggestions and the fact that those in the currently parenting age group have more egalitarian attitudes is encouraging. Many of these changes apply to women, too. Mothers need parenting courses and maternity leave and flexible working hours will benefit both genders.

It has always been my belief that women are more ready to accept the challenges of the working world than men are to play a full role in shared household responsibilities. The fathers in the recent child rearing study now seem more willing than ever before to play a more equal role in child rearing.

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Note

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