

# Working with Single Fathers: Suggestions for Effective Practice

John Wilson

This article describes the author's recent study of Australian single fathers and reviews the evidence obtained from both this study and earlier studies so as to enhance the reader's understanding of the issues and difficulties facing this rapidly growing population of sole parents.

## INTRODUCTION

Single fathers (i.e. men rearing their children without support from a 'live-in' adult companion) have been termed an 'unnoticed group' in Australian society (Bain, 1973).

Apart from the author's own recently completed research (Wilson, 1988), only three previous Australian studies about single fathers have been undertaken. This evident lack of interest in single fathers needs to be understood within a broader context of traditional family research approaches, which denied the significance of the fathers' role in the socialisation and nurturance of children. Fathers have been termed the 'forgotten contributors to child development' (Lamb, 1975) since traditionally, social scientists have viewed fathers as aloof and distant from their own children, with little capacity to undertake core caretaking roles in families (Fein, 1978).

Recent years, however, have seen a burgeoning interest in fatherhood, with relatively high divorce rates being one important factor generating this interest. For with every divorce involving children, there is a chance that the father may become custodian of his children. It is estimated by the Australian Institute of Family Studies, that 40% of Australian marriages will end in divorce and that 60% of these involve dependent children. The number of one-parent families rose from 6.7% of all families with children in 1966 to 12.7% in 1981. In 1982, the estimated number of dependent children living in one-parent households was 427,000.

On the latest estimate (A.B.S. 1986), 14% of one-parent households are headed by men, representing approximately 45,000 family units, an increase of some 15,000 over the decade 1976-1986.

The number of male beneficiaries receiving Supporting Parents' Benefit has risen from 2,069 in 1978 (the first year in which males became eligible to apply for this benefit), to 10,251 in 1987. Clearly, increasing numbers of men are raising their children 'alone' and it is likely that this trend will continue for some time.

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Whilst welfare agencies, bureaucracies and individual workers are, therefore, more likely than ever before to encounter single fathers in the day to day provision of services, a paucity of information has existed about their life circumstances and needs.

## MYTHS ABOUT SINGLE FATHERS

Greif (1986) has suggested that, in the absence of reliable data, myths about single fathers commonly abound; myths which are fundamentally shaped by our traditional view of fathers as less interested and competent in the nurturance and socialisation of children than mothers are. These myths may include our perception of single fathers as especially heroic or praiseworthy individuals because they are *men* bringing up children alone; we may see them as requiring special or additional assistance and support to that we believe single mothers need; we may see them as victims abandoned by uncaring women and selfish mothers; we may see them as usurpers, claiming roles for which they are unsuited and which properly belong to women; or we may see them as morally deviant and their children as doomed to suffer psychological trauma.

The author's objective in the study described here was therefore to provide some current information about single fathers in Australia so as to suggest ways in which social service practice might become increasingly responsive to their needs.

## THE EARLIER RESEARCH

What general conclusions can be drawn about single fathers from earlier studies, which span the period 1964-1987? Drawing general conclusions from these studies is problematic because they are small in number and adopt a wide variety of methodologies. Nevertheless, the following tentative conclusions can, I believe, be drawn:

1. Becoming a single parent involves a double adjustment: it requires both becoming a single parent and becoming a single person again. Studies to date have often failed to distinguish between these separate yet interrelated processes. Most fathers studied to date do not initiate separation, report that they did not want the marriage to end, found the break-up of the relationship very stressful, and attributed the major proportion of the blame for this to their ex-spouse. It is clear that many fathers experience significant and prolonged feelings of loss, hurt, rejection or anger as well as feelings of loneliness and isolation following the break-up and that the process of dealing with these feelings will inevitably affect the manner in which they undertake their caretaking role.
2. The circumstances under which a man becomes a single father will vary considerably. These encompass death of a spouse, separation, divorce, prolonged absence of a spouse due to illness or incarceration, being left with a child though unmarried, and adoption. Furthermore, separation may occur in an

atmosphere of hostility, agreement, or considerable ambivalence on the part of one or both parties. There may be a long and protracted period of difficulty prior to separation, or this may come relatively suddenly or without warning. Similarly, in the case of widowhood, this may be sudden or anticipated with the new situation well-planned for. All of these factors are individually arranged within each family, as it were, and will considerably affect the fathers' experience.

3. Fathers do not in reality raise their children 'alone'. The kind, degree and quality of continued involvement of the children's mother in their lives will vary from family to family and within the same family over time. Extended family, informal friendship or neighbourhood networks, health, educational and welfare services may or may not become involved with these fathers and their children, and they can do so to varying degrees. Given all of the above, to consider single-fathering as a phenomenon which would realise itself in only one, unitary form, would be misleading.
4. Substantial evidence exists to suggest that single fathers can plan and organise an environment for themselves and their children which they consider to be satisfactory, at least according to their self-reported perceptions.
5. There is no support for the view that children raised in single-father families are any more advantaged or disadvantaged than children raised in single-mother families.
6. There is some evidence to suggest that the following characteristics are often present in families, where single fathers rate their level of satisfaction with their own role and their children's progress relatively highly:
  - they have actively sought the custody of their children;
  - their incomes are, relative to other single fathers, high;
  - their ex-wives are involved with the children on a regular basis and they communicate well with their ex-wives about the welfare of the children;
  - they describe themselves as more highly participant than other single fathers in housekeeping and childrearing tasks prior to becoming single parents.

Summarising the above conclusions, a not altogether surprising picture emerges; single fathers, who do report the highest levels of satisfaction with their roles, are those whose motivation to care for the children has been high from the outset, who demonstrated a high degree of involvement with the children prior to becoming single fathers, who have adequate levels of income security, and who relate with the children's mother in a manner which is supportive for the children.

## THE STUDY DESCRIBED

The author's study was exploratory and descriptive in nature. The study design involved two complementary data collection processes: a survey questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews. By these means, a mix of quantitative and qualitative data was collected. Causal relationships between particular variables were neither hypothesised nor sought. Rather, a picture of life as seen through the experience of one particular group of single fathers was sought, by analysing the quantitative and qualitative data in an interactive fashion.

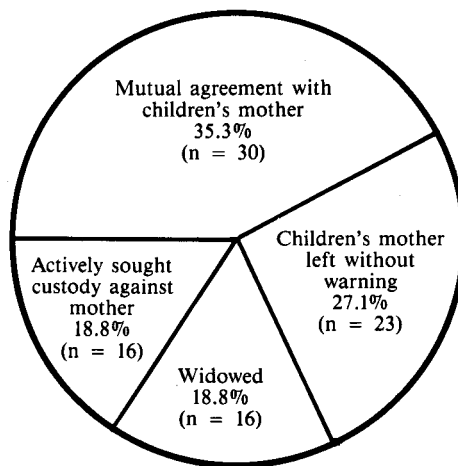
Single fathers were defined as fathers rearing at least one child more than half of the time, and who had no other adult companion, either related or unrelated, living with them at the time of the study.

Following a pilot, 335 single fathers who are members of Parents Without Partners Victoria were surveyed by means of a mail-out questionnaire; 86 valid returns were received and a statistical analysis, using a SPSS package, was undertaken. Semi-structured interviews followed with 12 of these fathers. The interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes by the author, each one lasting one-and-a-half to two hours. Following each interview a text was prepared summarising the discussion and this was sent to each person, inviting them to add or delete information.

## FINDINGS

These men had assumed their sole parenting role through several different sets of circumstances as the following figure shows:

**FIGURE 1**  
**FATHERS' REPORT OF HOW THEY BECAME SOLE PARENTS**



$N = 85$

These fathers were raising a total of 184 children, 94 males and 90 females, the average number of children per household being 2.24. Whilst nearly 60% of the children were 12 years of age or older, only 1.6% were below five years of age.

Whilst the range was from two to 239 months (or almost 20 years), 34.1% of all respondents had

been sole parents for more than five years, whilst a further 41.2% had been sole parents for between one and three years.

As commonly reported in earlier studies, these fathers were by their own account doing well:

- 79% rated themselves as 'excellent' or 'good' parents.
- 90.3% reported that they were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with how the children were going on most areas of their lives.
- 97.6% reported that they were either 'very satisfied' or 'satisfied' with their relationship with their children.

Whilst indicating a generally high degree of satisfaction with their performance as parents these figures cannot reflect the range or subtlety of perceptions or emotions experienced by these fathers in relation to their parenting role.

As one father, speaking obviously with a sense of real pride put it:

"I don't think I could have experienced a more satisfying life than that of raising my own children and now being able to relax a little, knowing that I have done my best and set them on the path to adulthood. I would go through the family court battle again for the same pleasure."

For the fathers in this study, bringing up the children generated a number of personal rewards. Many mentioned a sense of achievement and accomplishment, for as one father said, "there is a sense of satisfaction in bringing up the children in the way you think you want them brought up and having some success from time to time". For some, this sense of achievement was related in part to the acquisition of new house-keeping or childrearing skills, whilst others described the process of bringing up the children as a maturing process for them. Being a single father had, reported one man, made him "stronger as a person", adding that "I've been able to get myself back into the workforce after being out of it . . . it's made me think more of what I have to do and cope with situations".

Another father claimed that he had "matured a lot" through being a single father, describing himself as now "more positive" and "able to make decisions more quickly". He put these changes down to the fact that "you've got to mature if you've got a couple of kids".

A third personal benefit described by single fathers as resulting from their experience of raising the children was the independence their situation gave them to make parenting decisions without any reference to their ex-spouse.

A fourth major source of reward for fathers was the loving responses they claimed to receive from their children, along with a developing openness and trust between themselves and the children.

"On the positive side I have the love of my kids. I feel it — I know it's there . . . Seeing them grow up to be good people is so rewarding."

Alongside these findings, however, was the fact that many fathers experienced significant difficulties. When asked to indicate the most difficult aspect of being a single father, the following results were obtained.

**TABLE 1**  
**MOST DIFFICULT ASPECT OF BEING A SINGLE FATHER**

ASPECT	ABSOLUTE FREQUENCY
Personal loneliness	25
Balancing work/ domestic responsibilities	15
Adjusting to a new role	14
Financial problems	10
Time	9
Learning domestic skills	5
Learning social skills	5
Custody battle	4
Rearing a difficult child	3
Others' interference	3
Other	6
<b>TOTAL:</b>	<b>99</b>

These difficulties will be considered in more detail in the remainder of this article.

## FINANCIAL PROBLEMS

There is abundant evidence that single-parent status brings with it for many families a circumstance of relative poverty. Research shows the much reduced income in relation to family needs of the custodial parent and children following divorce. In Australia, 53% of single-parent families live below or marginally above the Henderson poverty line (Cass, 1986).

It is estimated that 19% of single-father families live below the poverty line (Cass, 1986) and that 39% of single-father families rely primarily upon Social Security pensions or benefits for income security (Raymond, 1987).

The economic circumstances of single parents, including those of single fathers, have deteriorated markedly over the decade from 1974 to 1984. Cass (1986) notes:

" . . . the salient issue over the decade has been the worsening of labour force involvement for single parents responsible for the care of dependent children, and their consequent much greater reliance on government pension or benefit.

(Cass, 1986)

During the decade, the employment ratio for single fathers declined from 91% to 70% and the unemployment rate rose from 4% to 10% (Cass, 1986). These figures need to be seen in the context of a deterioration in labour market opportunities and increased rates of unemployment generally since 1974.

Previous research about single fathers has pointed out the difficulties many face attempting to simultaneously work and rear their children. Job mobility, earning power, freedom to work late, job performance and job advancement are all negatively affected (Greif, 1986).

Whilst the mean gross annual income for fathers in this study was \$28,453, the range was from \$6,000 to \$100,000 with 18.0% of all fathers earning less than \$20,000 per annum. There were certainly severe financial penalties experienced by some fathers in this study consequent upon becoming single parents. When asked to indicate the most difficult aspect of being a single father, 10% of respondents nominated financial problems

and a further 16% cited the difficulty of balancing work and domestic responsibilities. At the time of the study, nine fathers or 10.5% of the total sample were unemployed whereas all fathers had been employed prior to becoming single fathers. The number of fathers in this study relying upon Social Security benefits as their primary income source rose from one to ten, or from 1.2% to 11.9% of the total sample, after assuming single-father status.

Difficulties of time and balancing work and domestic responsibilities were frequently mentioned by fathers in the interview group. One father, for example, saw lack of time as one of the biggest difficulties he faced, in particular, "justifying my work to myself" and "leaving the children alone".

The stigma associated with being a male recipient of social security benefits was keenly felt by several fathers who commented that "it's degrading when you have to live on the supporting parent benefit" and that "the most awkward situation being a single father is getting the family allowance and trying to process the cheque at the bank. The teller used to look me over". Several fathers expressed the view that it would be disadvantageous for them to tell prospective employers that they were single fathers. One stated that, when he went for his present job, he "played it very low that I was a single parent, because it would go against me". Another stated that he never offered information about his single-parent status to prospective employers, fearing they might worry about his potential to perform. Many fathers mentioned the restrictions that being a single father had placed upon their career options or income earning capacity, because of restrictions of time and the costs of child care.

Importantly, fathers in the interview group continued to see their work as an important source of self-affirmation as well as a means to financial security and independence in the longer term. Work was also viewed by some as a welcome relief or escape from the daily grind of domestic and childcare responsibilities, or as an important continuing source of self-fulfilment in the face of stressful and problematic relationships with their children.

## PARENTING ATTITUDES

Despite rating themselves highly as parents and reporting a good deal of satisfaction about their relationship with their children, many of the fathers subscribed to stereotypical notions of motherhood and believed that their single-parent families were now incomplete. This view, shared by ten of the twelve fathers in the interview group, was potently expressed by another father (not an interviewee himself), when he wrote:

"Marriage breakdown may afford the individual parents to start again but has ensured their children will be forever disadvantaged."

Others referred to the fact that their children would "always long for a feeling of completeness". As one man put it:

"... kids in two-parent families are always better off because the kids in a one-parent family miss a mother's love. A father still gives a lot of love but it's different to that of a mother."

Relating emotionally to their children is "very difficult for most fathers" and "mothers are naturally better at this" was another statement; as this respondent indicated: "dad repairs the bike" while "mother gives you a cuddle". He believed that "children have a natural affinity to the mother if they suffer pain or disappointment as a child".

Nearly all of the fathers interviewed in this study subscribed to the view that a two-parent family is the proper and necessary environment for the optimum socialisation of children. Mendes (1976) has called this the 'tyranny of the two-parent model', a model which assumes that:

"... being brought up in a one-parent family inevitably involves psychological stresses, which simmer slowly under the surface and are bound to erupt at some later point in the child's development."

In efforts to compensate for this assumed state of disadvantage, some of the fathers in this study were prepared to go to extreme lengths to ensure continued contact between the children and their mother, even if the children's or their mother's wishes in this matter were not clear. One father, living over 3,000 miles from his ex-spouse, reported that "over the last five years in my efforts to get my kids closer to their mum, I have spent close to \$60,000 on travel. It is important for children to grow up to know their mum." In this man's case, these costs had led him into bankruptcy and seriously affected the educational progress of his children as he moved himself and the children around so that access would be as easy as possible for his ex-spouse.

Other fathers were less extreme in their attempts to ensure regular contact between the children and their mother, but many expressed views similar to that expressed by one respondent who commented that he would prefer "warts and all for her (ex-spouse) to see the children on a regular basis" rather than not at all.

The *only* area in which a number of fathers did see that the children had benefited from being in a single-parent family, was that of increased self-reliance and independence, a perception supported by findings from an earlier study (Weiss, 1979). This advantage needs to be seen, however, in the context of what was perceived as the overwhelming state of disadvantage that the children would experience from being raised in a single father family.

## LONELINESS

The following quotation powerfully illustrates what was for many fathers the most significant difficulty they faced — the difficulty of personal loneliness.

"The only thing that I can add is, it's hard as other fathers would know bringing up two small children on your own, without the help or assistance of the opposite sex. Every man needs a companion, for company, to be looked after, to share their problems, to be loved."

Loneliness was most frequently mentioned as the most difficult aspect of being a single father, being cited by one in every four respondents. This difficulty, which related primarily to being a single father rather than a custodial father, was also the most frequently mentioned by the interview group.

The sense of loneliness was expressed in a number of different ways. One father put it as "the lack of companionship in a stable relationship where two adults work long-term towards common goals". Several others explained their loneliness in terms of the lack of any incentive to pursue domestic or recreational activities because of the absence of another adult to spur them on, encourage, or share in these projects or activities with them. Yet other fathers focused on the absence of emotional support or physical comfort:

"... the most difficult part is not having the love of a woman ... somebody to hold and touch and be with and share the evenings with."

Evidence from the interview group in this study tends to support Katz's (1979) claim regarding changing friendship patterns and leisure activities which have isolating consequences for many single fathers. A number of interconnected factors may be operating here, including the effects of reduced disposable income, pressures of time, changed priorities for fathers, and the changing attitudes of friends or family.

Financial and time pressures were major considerations for one father who stated that he "really doesn't have time" for social activities for himself and that they would be "too expensive anyway", preferring to allocate money for the children's recreational needs.

Another stated that "I don't do anything for myself now". He used to play golf and lead an active social life with male friends whom he claimed sought his company far less frequently now that he was a single father. One particular close male friend had ceased visiting: "He hasn't got any kids. We couldn't go out anyway".

Yet another interviewee made the following observation:

"... you don't get socially involved with workmates because they're married and it causes problems. They plan a night out, and bring their wives along but you don't have a wife and you're totally out of it. It's a different world. All the chit-chat is about families."

A highly significant area of difficulty, frustration and disappointment for many fathers was in regard to establishing new intimate relationships with women; a process fraught with difficulties and disappointments. The major difficulties, as perceived by these fathers, fell into four broad categories:

1. Constraints of time or finance.
2. Negative reactions and responses from the children.
3. Difficulties encountered by the women in adjusting to a relationship with a single father.
4. Difficulties in blending families, where both the father and his potential partner are custodial parents.

## PROVIDING SUPPORT

The three areas of difficulty considered above represented for the single fathers in this study their major areas of concern. Importantly, the tasks associated with the daily routines of housekeeping and childcare were not in themselves experienced as problematic by these men. What were most keenly felt, however, were social isolation, personal loneliness and the sense of guilt and failure which



these men attached to their single parent status. Indeed, they clearly saw their situations as inherently damaging for their children.

From whom and where did the fathers in this study seek assistance and how useful did they find the assistance offered? As the figure below illustrates, the evidence pointed to one quite outstanding conclusion: whatever the attitudes and experiences of these fathers regarding supportive services, "self-help" and "self-reliance" were the most highly regarded and valued sources of support for most respondents.

The value and efficacy of self-help continually emerged from both the questionnaire data and the in-depth interviews. "Nothing is achieved overnight", said one man, "but stick in there, for the rewards outweigh it all." A number mentioned the need to "just go on from one day to the other" and to remember that "there is always light at the end of the tunnel", "keep your chin up and fight for what you believe in" and, along the same lines, yet another respondent advised to "fight your own battles if you can and don't become reliant on other people". This 'stiff upper lip' mentality, which comes through so strongly in these comments, is a particularly male trait in our society, where men are socialised to prize self-reliance relatively highly and to view reliance on others and the seeking of assistance as an indication of weakness.

In terms of formal support services and networks, the experiences of the fathers in this study varied greatly. For example, 11% of all fathers rated 'seeing a counsellor' as "very helpful" whilst 20%

rated this form of potential support as "not helpful".

From discussions with fathers in the interview group, it was possible to tease out some of the elements of what constituted helpful or unhelpful responses from service providers. One father, discussing his experiences with his children's school, said:

"... at school, if the teacher finds the child is with a single parent the child is discriminated against ... The attitude I get is that the child is not being brought up right because there is no mother in the house. They don't seem willing to talk to me as if I was a mother."

Generally, fathers found service providers unhelpful if they felt that they responded towards them in ways which suggested stereotypical attitudes about fathers or single parents. Real estate agents came in for particular criticism in this regard, as the following comment illustrates:

"I had no idea the hardship involved in finding a house. The first few agents I went to I told them I was a single parent and they wouldn't help me. So I became a married person suddenly when I was looking for houses. I got my sister to stand in as my wife. I did the same for her."

On the other hand, service providers were seen to be helpful when they were able to accept these men

on their own terms, and did not assume that as men rearing their children they would necessarily have more difficulties or require more assistance than single mothers might. One father, for example, stated that a social worker from the local municipality had visited regularly in a supportive role and that he had found this very helpful as "she wasn't against me because I was a man."

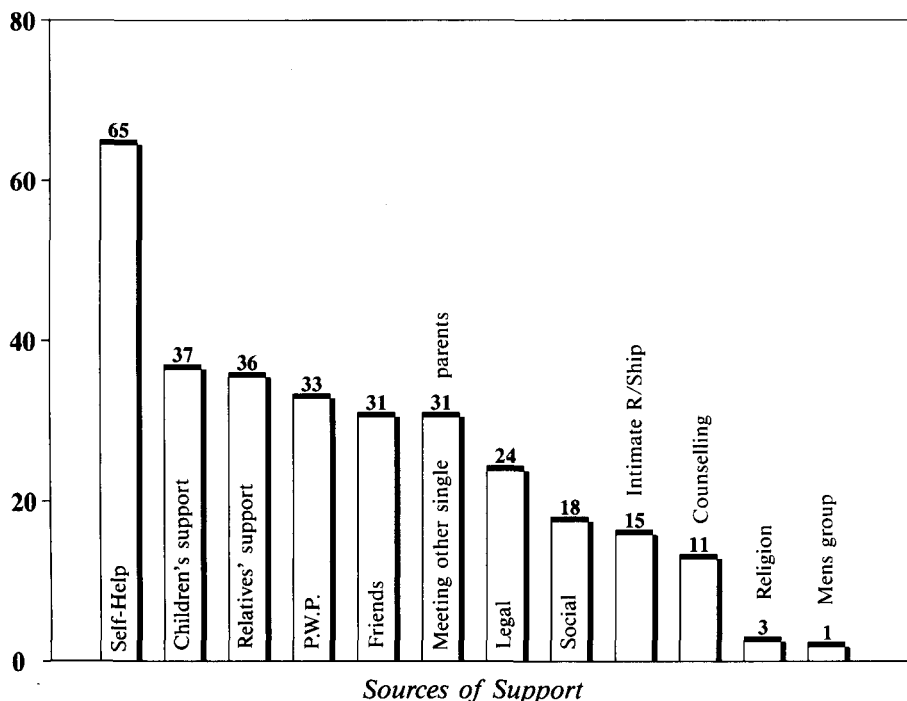
## CONCLUSION

It is hoped that the information presented, albeit sketchily, in this article will assist social service providers in so far as it enhances their understanding of the likely issues facing many of those single fathers with whom they come in contact. The author's research suggests that, to successfully establish relationships which are perceived as genuinely helpful, practitioners need to give particular attention both to the unresolved and negative feelings that burden many of these men, and to their particularly male sensitivity and resistance towards seeking assistance and sharing these feelings with others.

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**FIGURE 2**  
**FREQUENCY WITH WHICH SOURCES**  
**OF SUPPORT WERE RATED AS**  
**"VERY HELPFUL" BY FATHERS**



**The Bureau**  
**needs YOU-**  
**check about**  
**membership**



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