

Submission to the PRODUCTIVITY COMMISSION INQUIRY INTO PAID MATERNITY, PATERNITY AND PARENTAL LEAVE

Richard Fletcher, Lecturer, Leader, Fathers and Families Research Program,
The Family Action Centre, Faculty of Health, The University of Newcastle

The submission below rests on two areas of expertise: leadership of the five-year Engaging Fathers Project working with human services to engage fathers; and, research into the assessment and support of new fathers (including a PhD submitted for examination in 2007).

The Engaging Fathers Project

The Engaging Fathers Project, based at The University of Newcastle, NSW, was funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation of the Netherlands to develop models of father-inclusive practice. We worked alongside service providers (mostly women) in antenatal, postnatal, education, health and welfare services to involve fathers for the benefit of children.

Research on Fathers

As part of my research I examined the evidence surrounding father-infant attachment (bonding), and investigated how new fathers approached the birth and how information and support might affect fathers' behaviour in the postpartum period. I am currently Leader of the Fathers and Families Research Program of the Family Action Centre in the Faculty of Health. I am chief investigator on 10 research projects relating to fathers including a review of the evidence of the effect of father involvement on children's wellbeing and a study of fathers' help seeking behaviour following separation.

I have conducted regular antenatal groups for fathers over several years and I currently conduct groups with fathers whose wives or partners have postnatal depression. (1)

Part A. Contextual factors in the public discussion of parental leave:

1. Fathers as a group lack representation in public discussion of family-related issues.

There are numerous organizations that have a specific role in articulating the views of women on family matters. In her presentation to this Commission Ms Coleman of the National Foundation for Australian Women referred to the national meeting of women's organisations last June involving 65 national women's organisations. There are no comparable group of organizations that could be called together to represent the interests of fathers.

There are various interpretations of what this lack signifies. One view is that fathers, as men, need no special groups because men are overrepresented in all the powerful organizations, such as the judiciary, politics and business and that these men will, consciously or unconsciously, promote men's interests over women. There is an extensive sociological literature built on this assumption, and it is an assumption, albeit a popular one. A second interpretation assumes that fathers must have their own advocacy group and so any group, however small or unrepresentative, who gain media coverage on fathers' issues is taken to speak for all fathers. Fathers' rights groups for example are regularly credited with voicing fathers' desires and exerting considerable influence on government policy. (2)

My experience of intensively working with services and fathers for many years is that fathers are not linked into the world of children. Fathers do wish to be close to their own children and to form warm and long-lasting relationships with them but, from the antenatal period onward they receive countless messages to the effect that babies and children are women's business and that their role is to be a "support person". As a result fathers see children, especially young children, as "women's business". Fathers do not see the need to have advocates because working out their fathering role is taken to be a private matter which will come naturally, which will be facilitated by their wife or partner, and which will probably not require discussion or explicit negotiation.

For this inquiry

The lack of organizational representation for fathers should not be taken to mean that fathers have no views or concerns about what is being debated in this inquiry and care should be taken when interpreting the evidence of fathers' level of concern as judged by submissions to the inquiry

2. Fathers are not well informed of the issues surrounding birth and new parenthood

The following scenario, which appeared in the 2006 Medical Journal of Australia, illustrates how fathers can be disconnected from sources of information relating to their baby.

The new father's role — usual arrangements

When Michelle and Anthony attend Michelle's general practitioner after a positive pregnancy test, Anthony expresses his support but asks few questions. When asked about the couple's intentions for pregnancy care, Anthony's quick glance towards Michelle flags his uncertainty. For the following visits, Michelle attends the clinic alone. Anthony does participate in the ultrasound consultation and he joins in when prompted during the antenatal classes, but he accepts that the emphasis throughout is appropriately on the mother and ensuring a successful birth. During the birth, he wonders if he is in the way and is grateful in the end that the mother and baby are healthy. After the birth, when the home visiting nurse arrives, Anthony goes to make coffee and misses most of the discussion. His return to work precludes him attending the doctor's checkups for mother and baby.

Anthony's minimal involvement with health professionals is mirrored at home and in social settings. Michelle reads the books, brochures and magazines and tells Anthony about popular names, baby

development, and the dangers of SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome). Anthony is affectionately ribbed by workmates about sleep deprivation and nappy changing, and although one of his mates has also just become a father, Anthony has little chance to learn about the business of fathering. Social time with the new baby is dominated by eager mothers or girlfriends and there are few opportunities for Anthony to try out “holding the new baby” without drawing unwanted attention to himself.(3)

For this inquiry

For fathers to seriously consider taking up paternity leave they will need to be informed not only of the financial and administrative arrangements but also of the parental purposes of taking the leave. There is no evidence that I am aware of which shows that couples’ discussions surrounding post birth arrangements hinge purely on financial considerations, but fathers are unlikely to be informed of the influence that they have on infant development.

3. We know little about fathers’ motivations

Fathers’ lack of involvement in their children’s school-based activities is well known. Our research, the first study of its kind in Australia, which assessed fathers’ and mothers’ involvement in primary schools, found that fathers accounted for only 20% of volunteer hours. Schoolteachers who wanted to have fathers involved with the children at the school had many explanations of why the fathers failed to get involved. Two of the most common ideas were that fathers’ working hours prevented involvement and that the fathers lacked the motivation or interest to be involved. However, when we worked with schools to make clear a) how important fathers were to children’s school success and b) exactly how the fathers could be involved, we achieved record numbers of fathers attending and participating in school-based activities. (4)

For this inquiry

Fathers' motivation to be involved is influenced by their understanding of the purpose of an activity. It is not surprising that simply making paternity leave available, even if it is well remunerated, does not automatically lead fathers to stop work and take up a more involved fathering role.

Part B. The scientific basis for parental leave – father-infant attachment (bonding), as well as mother-infant attachment (bonding)

“Family health and wellbeing” is a broader concept than simply breastfeeding and children's IQ. Over the last 50 years there have been two major shifts in our understanding of child development. The first was to recognise that abilities are not fixed at birth but are influenced by the child's physical and social environment. The second was to recognize the role of early relationships in brain development and emotional and social maturity leading to success later in life. In particular the role of a ‘secure’ attachment relationship built on sensitive, reciprocal interaction has been recognised as fundamental to healthy development. (In this submission I am not addressing the economic aspects of social competence but I draw the Commission's attention to the work of Heckman, in explicating the link between early development of children and economic well-being.) A third major shift is now unfolding: the recognition of father-infant relationships as another key factor in children's development. (5)

The field of attachment research was initially premised on the notion that the mother-infant dyad provided the template for all consequent attachment relationships. Meta analysis of numerous studies of mother-infant and father-infant attachment has shown that the infant's attachment to the father is separate to that formed with the mother. As well, father-infant attachment has different antecedents to the mother-infant attachment and in some studies father-infant attachment is a stronger predictor of child well being than is mother infant attachment. (6)

An example of the recent shift to recognize the importance of father-infant relationships is the examination of fathers' role in postnatal depression. In 2005 Ramchandani and colleagues published the results of a longitudinal study of following over 10, 0000 fathers and their children from birth until the children were 3.5 years of age. Children whose fathers were depressed at 8 weeks after the birth had twice the rate of emotional and behavioural problems as children with non-depressed fathers. This result was independent of mothers' depression or fathers' later depression. Boys in the study were three times as likely to have conduct problems if their father was depressed postnatally. (7)

These findings have important implications for our understanding of infant attachment. One of the reasons that we pay close attention to mothers' depression is that it may have deleterious impact on their infants' development. Depressed mothers' early parenting, specifically their insensitivity to infant cues and inability to provide effective emotional regulation, has been suggested as an important mechanism in the development of insecure or disorganised infant-mother attachment and subsequent reduced social competence and increased behaviour disorders. (8) We now know that depressed fathers can have a similar effect which strongly suggests that the father-infant bond is also important.

As well, postnatal depression is a key issue for family well being after the birth. Systematic reviews of maternal depression in the perinatal period have reported point prevalence for major and minor depression of up to 12.9% during pregnancy and up to 19.2% in the three months following the birth. (9) That means that up to 20% of fathers when they return to work are leaving a mother who is not coping too well, who is doubting her ability to mother and who may not get into synch with her new baby. This is precisely when paternity leave is particularly helpful because paternal involvement can ameliorate the effects of PND on the mother and on the baby. (10)

For this inquiry

Infant attachment is a key determinant of well being and having a secure attachment to both mother and father offers the best chance of healthy development. Providing opportunities for fathers to spend time with their infants should not be on the

presumption that their role is fundamentally to 'help' the mother with her parenting. Fathers develop their own attachment relationships which are important for their children's healthy development. It should not be assumed, for example, that the best model of parental leave is one which recognizes only the 'primary carer' and precludes mothers and fathers taking time together. Indeed, when up to one in five mothers may be experiencing postnatal depression it will be important to allow families to choose an arrangement which allows a father to support the mother and at the same time, form a crucial secure attachment with his infant.

On the other hand, due to the disconnection between fathers and knowledge of infancy (described above) any provision of paternity leave will be a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for men to spend time in positive interaction with their new baby.

Notes

1. The Engaging Fathers Project and current research is described on the Family Action Centre web site
<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/centre/fac/efp/index.html>
2. Fletcher, R., & Willoughby, P. (n.d.) *Fatherhood: legal, biological and social definitions. Research Paper No1*. The Engaging Fathers Project, Family Action Centre, the University of Newcastle, NSW. (for a discussion of the unacknowledged assumptions within these views.)
3. Fletcher, R., Matthey, S., & Marley, C. G. (2006). Addressing depression and anxiety among new fathers. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 185, 461-463.
4. Fletcher, R., & Silberberg, S. (2006) Involvement of fathers in primary school activities. *Australian Journal of Education*. 50, 29-39 and Fletcher R., (2004) *Bringing fathers in handbook : how to engage with men for the benefit of everyone in the family*. University of Newcastle. (for examples of services pro-actively informing fathers of their importance and of avenues to support their child).
5. NIFTeY (National Institute for the Early Years) has promoted awareness of recent research in early development in Australia. Their website <http://www.niftey.cyh.com/webpages/conferences/conferenceframe.htm> also hosts a presentation by James Heckman on *The Economics of investing in early childhood*, but see also

Heckman, J.J. (2006) Skill formation and the economics of investing in disadvantaged children. *Science* 312, 1900-02

6. Bowlby, J., (1971) Attachment and loss. Harmondsworth : Penguin. (For a clear description of attachment based on mother-infant dyads.)
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7. Ramchandani, P., Stein, A., Evans, J., & O'Connor, T.G. (2005) Paternal depression in the postnatal period and child development : a prospective population study. *The Lancet*, 365 (9478), 2201-2205.
8. Braungart-Rieker, J., Garwood, M., Powers, B., & Wang, X. (2001). Parental sensitivity, infant affect, and affect regulation : predictors of later attachment. *Child Development*, 72 (1), 252-270.
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9. Gavin, N. I., Gaynes, B. N., Lohr, K. N., Meltzer-Brody, S., Gartlehner, G., & Swinson, T. (2005). Perinatal depression : a systematic review of prevalence and incidence. *Obstetrics and Gynecology*, 106, 1071-1083.
10. Mezulis, A. H., Hyde, J. S., & Clark, R. (2004). Father involvement moderates the effect of maternal depression during a child's infancy on child behavior problems in kindergarten. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 18, 575-588.
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