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# pathways through parental separation: the experiences of a group of non-resident fathers

DAVID MITCHELL AND PHILIP CHAPMAN  
C & M ASSOCIATES (2006) LTD

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>2</b>		
<b>1. Project overview</b>	<b>5</b>		
1.1 Process	5		
1.2 Themes	5		
1.3 Conclusions	5		
<b>2. Overview</b>	<b>7</b>		
2.1 Background	7		
2.1.1 Separation/divorce	7		
2.1.2 Effects on parents/children	7		
2.1.3 'Staying connected' – an Australian initiative	8		
<b>3. Aims</b>	<b>10</b>		
<b>4. Ethical considerations</b>	<b>11</b>		
<b>5. The research process</b>	<b>12</b>		
5.1 Methodology and method	12		
<b>6. The participants</b>	<b>14</b>		
<b>7. Findings and discussion</b>	<b>15</b>		
7.1 A tense and stressful environment	16		
7.1.1 The participants described a lack of preparedness as they moved through the process of separation from their partners	16		
7.1.2 The participants described the need to be prepared for what they saw as a lack of awareness, understanding and respect (by agencies and others) of their particular experiences during separation	16		
7.2 The negative impact of separation on health and wellbeing	18		
7.2.1 The participants described the need to be prepared to manage the negative impact on health and wellbeing both personally and interpersonally	18		
7.2.2 The participants described the need to rethink and reorganise priorities during the process of separation	19		
		7.2.3 The participants also pointed out the importance of fathers being aware of the potential for positive outcomes	19
		7.3 The need for support	21
		7.3.1 The participants identified the difficulty in accessing informal and formal support	21
		7.4 Managing a changed relationship with the ex partner	22
		7.4.1 The participants identified the need to accept a changed but continuing relationship with the children's mother	23
		7.4.2 The need to support the ex partner	23
		<b>8. Conclusions</b>	<b>25</b>
		8.1 The limitations of the project	25
		8.2 An unexpected outcome	25
		8.3 The findings	25
		8.4 Reframing negative stereotypes	26
		<b>9. Implications arising from the project</b>	<b>27</b>
		9.1 The need for existing family support services to build their capacity in attracting and engaging with fathers	27
		9.2 The need for services dedicated to supporting men	27
		9.3 The need for development and/or strengthening of referral pathways	28
		9.4 The need for verification of the project results	28
		<b>References</b>	<b>29</b>



## 1. PROJECT OVERVIEW

This report details a research project supported by the Families Commission through its Innovative Practice Fund. Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the Upper South B Regional Ethics Committee.

The project utilised a qualitative research process to uncover New Zealand non-resident fathers' perspectives on managing a constructive pathway through separation from their ex partner. Initially the project aimed to use this information to develop a workbook similar to an Australian initiative. However, initial analysis revealed that the research participants believed there were more fundamental factors that needed to be addressed before developing a workbook. Because of this, it was decided to develop suggestions for strategies to provide support for fathers moving through the process of separation.

### 1.1 Process

The project drew on theoretical perspectives of transition and group process to assist in generating, organising and understanding the data as it emerged throughout the project.

Twenty fathers agreed to participate in the project (eight in Christchurch and 12 in Nelson). Each participant attended two focus group sessions where they were asked to reflect on their personal experiences during separation. They discussed what assisted (or could have assisted) a more positive process of separation from the mother of their children, as well as maintaining continued contact with their children.

### 1.2 Themes

The following themes evolved from the group discussions:

- > The reality of a tense and stressful environment. The participants described a lack of preparedness for this as they moved through the process of separation.
- > The negative impact on health and wellbeing. The participants described the need to be prepared to manage the negative impact on health and wellbeing both personally and interpersonally.
- > The need for support. The participants identified difficulty with accessing support, both informal and formal, rating the need for support as the most important of all themes and subthemes. The importance of this theme increased markedly between the first and second focus group sessions, validating the research design whereby repeated sessions allow participants time to reflect on the group discussion, as well as to move through a process of reflecting on their experience of separation.
- > Managing a changed relationship with the children's mother. This included the need to develop strategies aimed at accepting, supporting and maintaining this changed relationship.
- > Redefined and fulfilling parental role. The participants believed that non-resident fathers need to be aware that although the process of separation is a major life transition, this can lead to a redefined and fulfilling parental role.

It should be understood that the findings from this project cannot be generalised to a wider population as the participants cannot be considered representative of separated fathers generally.

### 1.3 Conclusions

The project concluded that:

- > Due to a variety of factors the participants were generally unprepared for the separation process. This lack of preparedness resulted in a wide range of often negative outcomes that were experienced personally and interpersonally.
- > The participants' experience of a lack of support created a volatile situation (personally and interpersonally) at a time when the participants were least likely to develop or plan effective coping strategies.
- > There is an urgent need for male-friendly services to support fathers moving through the process of separation.
- > Maintaining a connection with their children required a more equitable base from which to begin negotiating access arrangements than that which exists at present.

Wider implications arising from the project were:

- > The need for existing family support services to build their capacity in attracting and engaging with fathers.
- > The need for services dedicated to the support of men. Participants voiced that services specifically reaching out to and meeting the needs of men needed to be identified and/or developed. Suggestions included a 'Ministry of Men's Affairs', the advertising of current services and the development of Men's Centres. It was also suggested that services should concentrate on the availability of male-facilitated separation coaching (counselling was a concept/practice that most participants found unhelpful), support groups and/or mentoring services. The issues raised here by the participants reflect a problem central to this project and to the support of fathers in general. The problem is grounded in a contradiction between how fathers requiring support view agencies to be, and how agencies involved in family support view their preparedness to support fathers. The fathers in this project consistently voiced dissatisfaction with the ability of services to respect and respond

to their needs. Conversely, service providers identify themselves as being present for all family members. Potentially, existing support agencies are best placed to support both parents through the process of separation. However, in order for this to occur the contradictory positions outlined above need to be reconciled.

- > The need for development and/or strengthening of referral pathways. The isolation and lack of support experienced by all the participants point to the need for referral pathways between existing services to be strengthened. This is especially important in the early, more critical stages of separation.
- > The need for verification of the project results. The project results need to be verified to establish if the findings are consistent across non-resident fathers, generally. Further broader-based research needs to be carried out and any future research needs to view 'one-off' data collection methods with caution. Participants can enter a deeper, more meaningful discourse, providing richer insights into their situation, when given the opportunity for facilitated reflection over time.



## 2. OVERVIEW

### 2.1 Background

#### 2.1.1 Separation/divorce

In New Zealand, as in other Western countries, parents separating is relatively common. In 2005 the Family Court granted 9,972 marriage dissolution orders. The divorce rate<sup>1</sup> (divorces per 1,000 existing marriages) was 12.4 in 2005 with the rate fluctuating around 12.5 during the late 1990s. New Zealand's divorce rate is comparable with Australia (13.1 in 2001) and England and Wales (14.0 in 2003) (Statistics New Zealand, 2006).

A rise in age at divorce is continuing. This partly reflects the increased duration of marriage as well as the trend towards later marriages which started in the early 1970s. The median age at divorce in 2002 was 42.4 years for men and 39.8 years for women. Divorcees were, on average, three years older than those whose marriages dissolved a decade ago, when the median ages were 39.2 years for males and 36.5 years for females. Approximately half of all divorces involve those with children (Statistics New Zealand, 2006).

#### 2.1.2 Effects on parents/children

While there is continuing debate about the medium- to long-term effects of divorce, there is general agreement that the early stages of separation cause marked disruption in functioning for both adults and children (Dowling & Barnes, 2000; Spillman, Deschamps, & Crews, 2004; Williams & Dunne-Bryant, 2006). With the wide range of personal and contextual factors involved, divorced adults also experience a wide range of health problems and a greater risk of mortality as compared to married adults (Amato, 2000). More recently the focus of research has shifted to that of the effects of parental separation on children, again with the effects of stress evident especially in the early stages of separation (Goldson, 2006; Hetherington & Hagen-Stanley, 1999; Pryor & Rogers, 2001).

In regard to gender differences in the effects of separation, Amato (2000), in his comprehensive review of the literature on this topic, found the literature to be inconclusive. Some studies show more severe effects for women, some show more severe effects for

men and some show no difference. However, a point that forms the impetus for this paper is that previous research either focuses on the negative experiences of separation for couples generically or on mothers and/or children. Unequal attention has been given to the consequences of separation for fathers (Nielson, 1999; Spillman et al, 2004) with little understood about post-separation fatherhood (Flood, 2003; Hawthorne, 2006; Smyth, 2004). In addition, it was observed that the limited amount of research material on paternal involvement draws data mainly from the mother, with one author commenting that she "provides less biased responses than fathers when reporting about fathers' visitation" (Spillman et al, 2004, p 266).

Focusing on who fares worst in separation inevitably leads towards rather entrenched positions and a climate of acrimony, accusation and blame. An assumption of this paper is that all who experience separation experience stress. However, the focus of this paper is looking specifically at the experience of fathers, initially identifying points of difference that generally affect non-resident fathers. A non-resident father<sup>2</sup> is defined as "a parent who does not live in the same household as his child" (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2000).

It should be noted that significant points of difference exist in fathers' experience of separation as compared to mothers and/or children. These include:

- > He is generally less prepared than the mother for separation. His marriage will most likely end against his wishes. It is reported that the mother, often to the surprise of the father, initiates the majority of separations (Green, 1998; Nielson, 1999; Owen, 2003; Smyth, 2004).
- > His children will not live with him. Internationally, following parental separation, most children live with their mother (Amato, 2000; Hetherington, 2003; Nielson, 1999). Smyth (2004), citing Australian figures, observed that for children living with one parent, 88 percent lived with the mother. Spillman et al, in a review of the international literature on separated parents, observed that "[most] mothers are awarded full custody, while most fathers are restricted to two weekend 'visits' each month and scattered vacation days" (2004, p 265).

<sup>1</sup> The international literature frequently uses the term 'divorce' when exploring the effects of separation on parents, this most likely being a consequence of collecting base data from statistics on marriage dissolutions. It should be understood that with the growth in de facto unions, the trend towards delayed marriage, the wide range of family types that do not include children, relying solely on divorce rates is a poor guide to parental separation figures overall. However, for the purposes of this paper, the terms 'divorce' and 'separation' will be used interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> While the term 'non-resident father' is referred to in the literature, the researchers acknowledge the concern of several of the participants in this project. These being that this term positions them as absent fathers and does not adequately reflect the wide range of living and contracted arrangements that exist and that change over time.

- > He has a high likelihood of being separated from his children by a significant geographical distance (Hallman, Dienhart, & Beaton, 2007; Hawthorne, 2006). Again citing Australian figures, Smyth (2004) observed that 41 percent of separated parents lived more than 100 kms apart from their children.
- > As the non-resident parent there is usually a decrease in involvement with his children (Matthijs, 2007; Pryor & Rogers, 2001; Spillman et al, 2004).
- > Hawthorne (2006) reported that in his study most non-resident fathers “had frequent contact with children but limited involvement with them. They reported having little scope to share in parental decision making or to be involved in children’s schooling” (p 14). In addition, the father has a risk of losing contact with his children altogether (Amato, 2000).
- > He will likely experience profound grief associated with separation from his children. Non-resident fathers commonly experience a pervasive sense of loss because they lose not only partners, their identities as husbands and fathers, their access to the family home and dreams of happy, life-long relationships, but also daily contact with their children (Hawthorne, 2006; Owen, 2003; Spillman et al, 2004). Owen goes further in describing fathers’ grief as being ‘disenfranchised’ in that “social norms do not permit public acknowledgement of [non-resident fathers’] grieving (2003, p 79). Owen suggests that this leads on to a grief process that is best understood as ‘chronic sorrow’ in that it does not conform to the usual expectations surrounding the grief process. It is also suggested that fathers are particularly at risk of depression following separation (Spector, 2006). Owen (2003), citing Australian figures, points out that separated fathers are around three times more at risk of suicide than separated women.
- > There are fewer services available for fathers, and men generally are understood to be reluctant to access the services that are available (Crawford & MacDonald, 2002; Owen, 2003). Conversely it may be that services fail to attract and effectively engage with fathers (Mitchell & Chapman, 2006). Fletcher (2008) elaborates on this point, suggesting that the methods currently employed by service providers are more conducive to engaging with females.

Further, that these ‘methods’ may effectively deny permission for men to discuss their feelings and reactions to separation (Spillman et al, 2004).

- > He is not prepared for the social criticism and negativity that many non-resident fathers attract. As Hawthorne (2003, p 1) states, “[they] rarely enjoy a positive press”. In relation to non or reluctant payment of child support there is a commonly held view of the uninvolved father avoiding or completely neglecting their parental responsibilities, being primarily concerned with matters of self-interest. However, another perspective emerges from recent Australian research. In one project 260 non-resident fathers responded to a survey asking details of their frequency and level of contact with their children (Hawthorne, 2006). The results indicated that most non-resident fathers in fact want to continue to be active in the lives of their children and do continue to play an active and meaningful role. Citing previous research as a baseline, the author further observed that there was a substantial increase in fathers’ contact with their children post-separation over the past two decades. However, while many participants went to great lengths to maintain some parental relevancy for their children, social and legal systems tended to impede them from meeting parental responsibilities and caring for their children (Hawthorne, 2006). This suggests that rather than being a group focusing on self-interest, fathers who move through the process of separation experience isolation, a negative public image and difficulty accessing support.

### **2.1.3 ‘Staying connected’ – an Australian initiative**

Social and legal agencies are frequently called upon to provide support for parents around the time of separation. For agencies to provide effective support it is important that professional practice is guided by the principles of best practice. It would seem reasonable to assume one essential element in establishing best practice guidelines is an understanding and appreciation of the experiences of all those involved in the separation process. In relation to understanding the experiences of non-resident fathers, the research base informing practice appears to be limited.

In response to what was identified as the vulnerable status of many non-resident fathers in Australia, the

Australian Child Support Agency (ACSA), developed an initiative entitled 'Staying Connected: A Roadmap for Separated Dads'. The Agency recognised that as 42 percent of Australian marriages end in divorce, a man entering into marriage and having children faces a significant risk of his marriage ending before his children are adults, the marriage ending against his wishes, his not living with his children and also living a significant (geographical) distance from his children (ACSA, nd).

This initiative resulted in a number of ongoing projects including a work-based training programme aimed at assisting fathers to better support themselves, better manage the changed relationship with their ex partner and to remain connected with their children. One project

more relevant to this paper was the development of self-paced workbooks aimed again at non-resident fathers. The workbooks, 'Me, my kids and my Ex', contain information and a range of exercises aimed at strengthening fathers' ability to similarly manage themselves, assisting them in adapting to a changed relationship with their ex partner and helping them maintain connection with their children. The workbooks are well designed and easy to follow. The information is very comprehensive and detailed. However, while the workbooks appear to be an extremely valuable and timely resource, given the differing nature of New Zealand society, a question exists about how readily transferable the content and processes would be to non-resident fathers in this country.

### 3. AIMS

Initially this project, supported by the Families Commission through its Innovative Practice Fund, aimed to:

Utilise an inductive, qualitative research process to uncover New Zealand fathers' perspectives on what assisted, or could have assisted, a more positive process of separation from the mother of their children, as well as maintaining continued contact with their children. The themes of the Australian Child Support Agency's 'Staying Connected' initiative would be used as a basis for focus group discussions.

The participants were asked what advice they would give to men moving through the process of separation from their partner to best manage:

- > themselves
- > the changed relationship with the children's mother
- > maintaining connection with their children.

(These points were the main themes of the Australian 'Staying Connected' package.)

Secondly, the project aimed to utilise the information gathered from the focus groups to develop a workbook similar to the Australian initiative.

It was anticipated that many, if not all, of the participants would be severely distressed by the process of separation. In recognition of this the research design allowed for an extended period of time whereby participants could express and share their experiences before moving on to the research question(s). However, analysis of the focus groups' discussions revealed that the participants believed there were more fundamental factors that needed to be addressed before developing a workbook. That is, the participants emphasised the need for better systems to be in place to provide person-centred support rather than a priority need for a written resource. (This point is further explained in 'Findings and discussion' and in 'Conclusions'.)

Because of this finding, the second aim (the development of a workbook) was replaced with the aim of:

Developing conclusions and implications for fathers and services supporting fathers through parental separation.

## 4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical approval was obtained from the Upper South B Regional Ethics Committee.

It was recognised that group discussion, by its very nature, would cause the research participants to revisit the trauma they had experienced, through the process of separation from their partners and/or by reduced contact with their children. Therefore the following selection criterion and planning procedures were used to minimise the risk of participant harm:

- > Participants must have been separated from their ex partner for at least six months.
- > Written (informed) consent was obtained from all participants.
- > The participants made a commitment to respect the privacy of others in the focus groups. (Anonymity is always compromised in focus groups.)
- > Opportunity and time were provided for participants to reflect on and share their more negative experiences before moving on to address the aims of the project.
- > Questions were framed and discussed in the positive, eg What would have helped?
- > Protocols were in place to rest the group if any participant(s) experienced distress.
- > The participants were reassured that they needed to share only what they felt was safe for themselves.
- > A list of support services was available if required.
- > A phone call was made to each participant following completion of data gathering and initial analysis to effect closure and/or referral (if necessary).

## 5. THE RESEARCH PROCESS

### 5.1 Methodology and method

The project utilised a qualitative research process. Qualitative research investigates the why and how of a phenomena with the aim of description and understanding. In contrast, quantitative research typically looks at the relationships between a number of clearly defined variables with the aim of confirmation, prediction and/or control. Qualitative research is aimed at exploring more fundamental questions on a topic about which little is known. In this project, the questions were primarily aimed at uncovering knowledge about non-resident fathers' experiences and thoughts around separation, an area where there is limited knowledge available.

It is noted that unlike quantitative research, there is no aim of generalising the results of qualitative research to a wider population. The aim of this exploratory project was to provide information that was authentic, credible and represented the considered perspectives of a convenience sample of non-resident fathers. In this context, 'convenience' means a group familiar with and experienced in the phenomena under study (that of separation and a non-resident status as a parent) but without any particular 'expertise'. Their views cannot be considered representative of non-resident fathers in general. In this project, focus groups were used as the method of data collection and initial analysis. Focus groups are commonly used where there is limited information on a particular topic and where researchers need to explore the lived experience of the participants. The point of difference with focus groups is that they provide the opportunity for participants to share and co-construct meaning, what has been described as a 'synergistic' effect (Morgan, 1997). This effect could not be achieved by individual interviews. Thematic analysis is commonly used to summarise and organise data as it emerges, in this case from the group discussions. With this project, the design allows the participants themselves to manage the first stage of thematic analysis, that of prioritising the raw data (this is discussed in more detail later in this section).

It is important to appreciate that this research process is about uncovering and summarising a variety of

opinion, clarifying and refining the main themes and having the participants rank these themes in order of importance. Another important aspect of the process is that the participants return for a second group. This allows for a period of reflection on the initial findings. This process provides a depth of insight and authenticity unlikely to be uncovered otherwise. Group discussion, combined with reflection over time, can produce insights that would not be uncovered through any other research process, especially 'one off' or 'snapshot' approaches to data collection such as in surveys or interviews.

Two focus group sessions, each of 90-120 minutes duration, were held in Nelson and Christchurch. The intention was to compare and contrast information from two areas with differing ranges of support services. Each participant attended two focus group sessions, purposely scheduled six weeks apart. This was so participants would have the opportunity to read a transcript and initial analysis of their first focus group discussion, and reflect on their experiences overall in preparation for the following focus group session.

Participants were asked to discuss what advice they would give to fathers moving through the process of separation from their partner to best manage:

- > themselves
- > the changed relationship with the children's mother
- > maintaining connection with their children.

(These points were the main themes of the Australian 'Staying Connected' package.)

The researchers' role was to facilitate group introductions, clarify the question(s) and refocus group discussion on the question(s) if discussion appeared to be moving off topic. Otherwise the facilitators did not take any active part in the discussions.

The group discussions were audiotaped and transcribed in the usual manner with summaries forwarded to the participants for critique. As well as being audiotaped, the main points arising from the group discussions were summarised on newsprint placed in a position so that the participants could view what was being written as they talked. They were encouraged to add or change anything that didn't accurately reflect the discussion.

When discussion ceased, each participant was given a number of graded tokens (differing coloured stickers worth 1, 2 or 3 points). Each participant was allocated 10 points; one token worth 3 points, two worth 2 points and three worth 1 point. They were asked to allocate these tokens, without discussion, to the summarised points they considered most important on the newsprint. This had the effect of minimising the bias often present with group discussion, where the more vocal members control the nature and course of the discussion.

Initial analysis involved looking at where the tokens were more concentrated, with those summarised points that received the most tokens becoming the main themes. It is important to note that the participants undertook this first stage of data analysis themselves.

Further analysis involved collating the themes initially identified. Then, through a process similar to constant comparative analysis, these were collapsed into more broadly defined themes and subthemes, supported by quotations from the group discussions.

## 6. THE PARTICIPANTS

Before being included in the project, participants were required to:

- > be English speaking
- > have no personal or professional relationship with either of the researchers
- > have been through the process of separation from the mother of their child(ren) for at least six months
- > be 'non-resident' fathers (as defined by themselves) at some stage through the process of separation
- > be committed to respecting the privacy of others in the group.

A convenience sample, eight participants in Christchurch and 12 in Nelson, was selected through a snowballing technique. This technique asks existing participants/interested parties to suggest others who may be interested in participating. It has the advantage of accessing people well experienced in the topic under study and those who are difficult to find. However, this technique may result in recruiting people with similar views. This could be seen as an advantage or a disadvantage in research, depending on the nature and purpose of the study (see 'Conclusions: The limitations of the project').

The participants' ages ranged from 32-56 years, with a median age of 44 years. They were mostly employed in semi-professional or skilled positions. They were separated from the children's mother for between one and 10 years, with a median separation time of five years. The number of children per parent ranged from one to four, with a median of two ( $m = 2$ ) with the children's ages ranging from one to 26 years.

Consistent with the international literature, the children's mother initiated separation in 14 cases, the father in five and a mutual agreement in one case. Again consistent with the international literature, the children's mother had custody during the first year of separation in 12 cases, the father (at some stage) in two and a shared-care arrangement in four cases. Nine fathers had their children with them between 25 and 50 percent of the time, and nine had their children between zero and 25 percent of the time. Of these nine fathers, seven had contact with their children 10 percent of the time or less. (Note: Two fathers did not respond to the request for this information.)

The figures relating to informal and formal parenting arrangements, and initiation of separation, are relatively consistent with the literature.



## 7. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

As mentioned previously, the participants did not engage with the initial questions in a manner consistent with both the structure and content of the Australian ‘Staying Connected’ package. Instead, the participants responded to the questions at a level more in keeping with people experiencing a particularly vulnerable and traumatised status. This means they initially searched for a shared recognition of this status within the group, then moved on to express their frustration at what they saw as a general lack of understanding, respect and advocacy for their experiences and needs during separation. Participants were asked to discuss what advice they would give to fathers moving through the process of separation from their partner to best manage:

- > themselves
- > the changed relationship with the children’s mother
- > maintaining connection with their children.

The participants identified four main themes in their discussion responses:

- > a tense and stressful environment
- > the negative impact on health and wellbeing
- > the need for support
- > managing a changed relationship with the children’s mother.

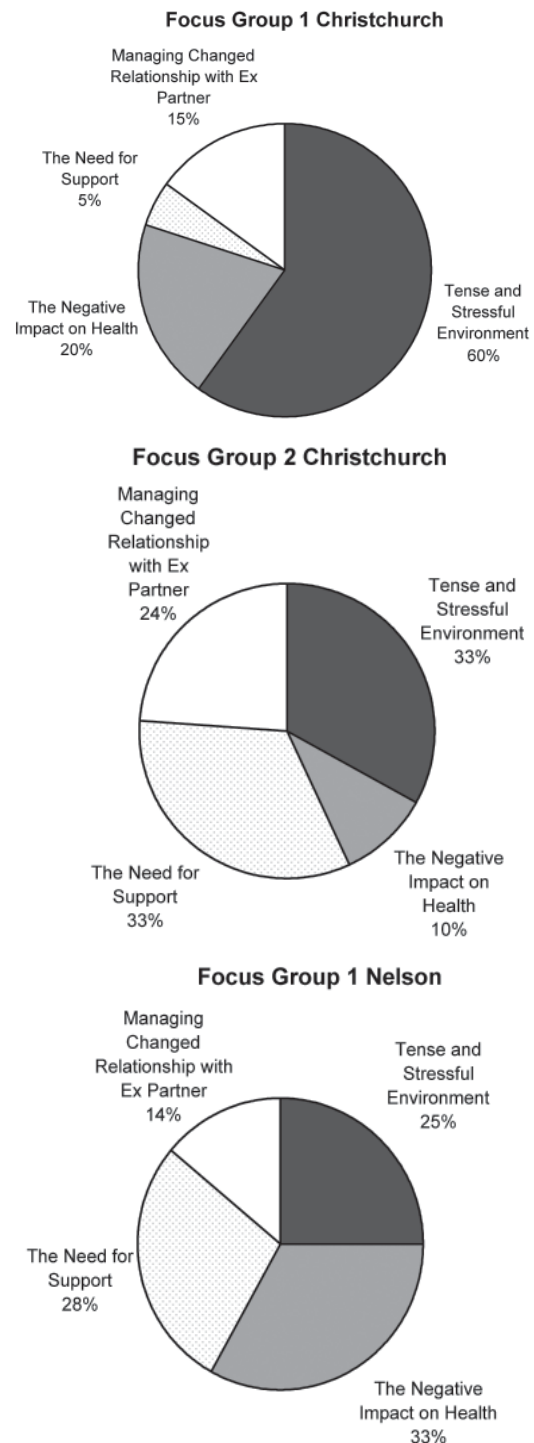
(Note: Maintaining contact with their children wasn’t specifically mentioned because the participants believed these factors (themes) needed to be well managed before a constructive relationship could be maintained with their children.)

These themes were consistent between all groups both in Nelson and Christchurch, the only difference being in the relative importance attached to each theme.

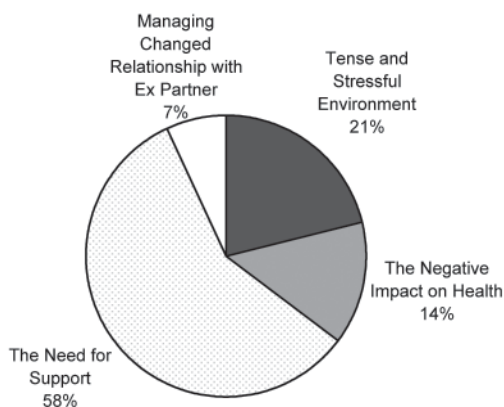
The weightings applied by participants for each theme can be seen in Figure 1. Note that the weighting given to the need for support theme increased markedly between the first and second focus group sessions. Apart from a small weighting increase in the Christchurch group on the fourth theme, other themes’ weighting decreased over this time. These changes suggest that between the first and second focus group sessions, participants were able to reflect on their

experiences and moved from a focus on self to that of engaging with the research questions.

**Figure 1: The weighting of themes**



### Focus Group 2 Nelson



The following sections present the four main themes with each subdivided into subthemes. These subthemes are supported with quotations from the focus groups.

## 7.1 A tense and stressful environment

### 7.1.1 The participants described a lack of preparedness as they moved through the process of separation from their partners.

Here the participants talked of the confusion, powerlessness and vulnerability they experienced.

I think the most difficult thing for me in this whole process was experiencing being a second rate citizen. I'm white, middle class, I'm educated so I've never had to deal with being [regarded as less able] than somebody else. When we split up I suddenly realised, and very quickly, that I didn't have equal rights. Ostensibly it's equality, but I learnt early on to operate defensively and not to rock the boat.

In that whole period I was in it was incredibly intense. I was walking around on egg shells and I noticed that whenever there was conflict or difficulty I didn't feel I had any purchase to stick up for my rights. So it was like all or nothing. I still feel [powerless] when I'm negotiating with her mother, it's interesting. It's a real experience, you go through life and you don't come across this situation.

I still thought about making decisions for [my family]. I always considered what I was doing was for their future even though there was a separation. So I was still living some kind of a concept of my family unit when I didn't even have that.

The participants believed that the importance of managing the initial stages of separation well was paramount; however, a range of factors compromised achieving this. These factors included the point of 'who initiates the process'. As mentioned previously, the female partner, often to the surprise of the male, initiates around 65 percent of separations.

It just all collapsed in the end. When she left I was in absolute shock at this. I had no idea whatsoever. She came through and said 'I'm leaving now' and I thought she meant a friend was waiting outside and they were going off for a coffee! We'd been married for 25 years, an absolutely fabulous marriage and everything.

The participants emphasised their lack of skills and preparedness for separation.

[Men] don't know the system and what happens is that women usually, instinctively or whatever reason, are more familiar with the processes and how to conduct themselves in that kind of environment. Women generally play it better than men do. Men often make simple mistakes, which can often make them not look so good.

Generally as guys we have the naïve trust that the right thing will be done. We're hopeful that the right thing will be done. The State will [be fair].

I found that by leaving, I mean I left, it was my wife's idea to separate but I left the family home. That's what made a huge disadvantage when it came to the next step of actually who got custody. I was immediately on the back foot.

The participants pointed out that their lack of preparedness resulted in poor decision making at an early and critical stage of separation. This frequently resulted in a rapidly compounding cascade of problems with implications not only for themselves but for all involved.

### 7.1.2 The participants described the need to be prepared for what they saw as a lack of awareness, understanding and respect (by agencies and others) of their particular experiences during separation

Be prepared because there's not a lot of respect and not a lot of opportunity to actually be heard. Just to have the father's issues and the father's concerns expressed and be understood and heard [would be good]. So advice I would give to someone is be prepared for that and find ways of coping with that.

What is interesting is that my partner [xxx] had a history of working in [women's] organisations so she's seeing situations where women have been abused. So for me to then say to her I'm going to a [group] to look at what men need and her initial thing was 'What?!' She has no concept that there's an unaddressed issue here and to me this isn't negative about what women are getting we're just saying, 'Hey, men also need stuff too.'

The negative environment surrounding non-resident fathers mentioned in the introduction to this paper was discussed in relation to the participants' perception of their invisibility as a parent.

There can be several nasty shocks. For me one of them was for several years there officially I wasn't a parent. My ex-wife was but I was deemed to be the non-custodial parent so therefore even though my boys were staying with me for half a week for the first few years I didn't exist officially as a parent.

This reported negative environment also included the language surrounding their status.

Another thing I want to say is the topic talked about non-residential fathers and I can't let the evening go without challenging that because I object to that title. What is a non-residential father? Is that a father without a residence? I just draw attention to the fact that there's a whole lot of language around this, it sets us up as being something that we're not or something that we're without. I've never been a non-residential father, I've always had a residence and maybe some language around ... I'm a father and my children's parents have two residences, independent residences if you must.

The participants also talked of their experience of what they saw as an acrimonious legal system. The

participants were concerned that in the event of a more difficult separation, the current legal process tended to further exacerbate an adversarial situation, thus creating difficulties in maintaining effective connection with their children.

As somebody said, there is so much to be gained by increasing conflict and by finding fault with the other partner. There is so much to be gained with that. I wonder whether the system couldn't be adjusted so that it's not so black and white and it's not encouraged.

While a range of models of (separated) parent-child contact are in existence internationally (Jenkins & Lyons, 2006) a discussion of these is beyond the scope of this paper. What is pertinent here is the participants' belief that current practices are based in outmoded assumptions about gender roles in parenting and their strong belief that this situation could and should be improved. The participants were clear that one major improvement urgently needed was to institute more equitable care arrangements as the basis for negotiations.

We tend to give away a lot right at the very beginning and we also tend to give away the shared care thing, we don't always insist on that. To agree to get into just the every second weekend [isn't good]. At the very outset insist on 50:50.

The participants' comments about 'equitable care' related to all agencies that support couples through the process of separation in relation to child support.

It shouldn't be a fight between who gets on the DPB first, it should be negotiated from a 50/50 base. Not a 'first in first served' [situation] because often the male will leave or walk out or he'll get a protection order on him and so he's automatically lost the race and that doesn't necessarily mean that the mother is a better parent.

The point of a more equitable care arrangement being a basis (rather than an end point) for negotiation is important. As Smart (2004, p 484) notes, "A rigid arrangement in the fluid context of a young person ... can be very problematic". While referring to adolescents, the research this author drew on identified the need for flexibility of care arrangements. It is notable that despite the time since separation (an average of five years) the majority of participants still held deep concerns about what they believed to be serious injustices. For most participants their level of

emotional arousal remained high and this was evident throughout the groups. Owen (2003, p 79), referring to Jordan's (1996) longitudinal study with 158 fathers, observed that "even after 10 years, fathers still had unresolved feelings".

In summary, separation from a partner can be understood as a transitional experience. Meleis, Sawyer, Im, Messias, and Schumacher (2000) talk of the transition process as being complex and multidimensional: a central element being that transition involves critical times. These critical times are described as "periods of disruption and disconnectedness in which both emotional stress and uncertainty [occur]" (Meleis, 2006, p 223). Successful negotiation of these times can lead to connection and developing confidence in new role(s). Unsuccessful negotiation leads to marginalisation and a loss of sense of self. In this project, the participants were clear that for them the initial stage of separation was such a critical time. However in their case, unsuccessful and/or compromised negotiation of this phase left them in a particularly vulnerable state. These results are consistent with the points made earlier about the experiences of many fathers during the process of separation. What these results also add is that the participants' lack of preparedness and naivety at a critical point immediately placed them in a disadvantaged and vulnerable position from which it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to problem solve in a constructive and effective manner. This is compounded by what the participants described as an environment, both formal and informal, that was lacking in empathy and understanding of the specific issues most fathers face during the process of separation.

## **7.2 The negative impact of separation on health and wellbeing**

This theme, although initially focusing on reduced health and well being, also included suggestions about managing health and wellbeing issues.

### **7.2.1 The participants described the need to be prepared to manage the negative impact on health and wellbeing both personally and interpersonally**

Consistent with the loss of a sense of self involved in transitional experience, the participants identified a

range of factors that influenced this situation. These included a huge sense of failure.

I allowed myself to wallow in self-pity, which was good for a while, but it was pointless after about nine months with hangovers and all that sort of carry on. I think if I hadn't tried a few hangovers on I'd never have known where I was anyway, so I allowed myself that. You still have to go through the self-pity.

I didn't really realise then but I couldn't laugh any more for three-quarters of a year.

Negativity breeds negativity. I just wore myself down because everything was negative. And the thing is, it sounds f\*\*\*ing new age bullshit, but when you start doing things and feeling a bit better about yourself it does breed a bit of positivity.

We feel like we are the victim totally but you've got to know in yourself that you are not like that and you've just got to somehow let it wash over. Because taking it on and being scared about it and the consequences, you don't think straight.

As Price (1998, p 1) observes, "When separation occurs many men are taken by surprise – they just don't see it coming... Initial disbelief and shock gives way to an inner numbness and despair. An overwhelming sense of loss develops as they face the harsh reality that their future roles in the lives of their children will most likely be on a part-time basis only." Transition theory suggests that transition should not be considered merely a change but as a major life event. Transition theory further suggests that, during this process, individuals lose their sense of self, effectively entering a liminal 'in-between' place in their psyche. Support in the form of guidance, advice, empathy and understanding is essential (Meleis et al, 2000). All the participants found the availability of these forms of support lacking. Most considered effective support, either formal or informal, was not available especially at the initial, more critical stages of separation. Whether this was a reluctance to access support on their part or that support was unavailable or inappropriate to their needs will be considered later in the report.

The participants described their profound sense of loss and associated grief and the impact this had on their health and relationships.

I think it's just the depression, blackness. But [suicide is] something I'm uncomfortable talking about so I'll sort of admit to it and it's at times through your life, break-ups, work, death in the family, I think there's a fleeting thought there.

I was thinking of male suicide. The critical time for guys is that separation. I don't know what to say about that. I don't know how much advice you can give to a guy who's about to top himself but I am thinking of leading up to it, providing support before it blows up.

The thing is you have to really sometimes sit back and look at it from the outside. The biggest problem I had is just being such a pain in the arse for the people I knew, just feeling so sorry for myself, even though I was the one that walked.

You are worrying about your kids, you're worrying about your wife and you are worrying about the relationship and how much money you are going to lose but you've got to start worrying about yourself. This negativity just f\*\*\*ing breeds it and the thing is, I know it's hard, but sometimes you've got to take that backwards step and look from the outside in because it's so easy to get really personal and twisted with the whole f\*\*\*ing bullshit of it that you get totally lost and that's why your friends don't want to have anything to do with you because you're such a f\*\*\*ing sad loser anyway.

Spillman et al (2004), in discussing grief during the process of separation, observed that non-resident fathers are particularly vulnerable to severe grief reactions and/or depression. Owen (2003) further suggests this process is best considered more as a continued 'chronic sorrow'. One point being that non-resident fathers, in order to maintain contact with their children, continually revisit their loss with the possibility of no effective closure.

### **7.2.2 The participants described the need to rethink and reorganise priorities during the process of separation**

Here they described how an understanding of the need for personal change developed. This included the need to manage emotion in appropriate and safe ways.

The other thing I found good is initially I'd argue; now I just don't. It's easier to put the phone down or just walk away than to actually try to discuss it.

As soon as you [vent your anger] it's bye bye, you're history. So you want to be able to say all this irrational stuff and beat the crap out of a beanbag or something and get rid of the aggro and then come to terms with the issues but as soon as you start verbalising anything like that you are on a hiding to nothing. So even just being aware of the rules of the game [is important].

The participants were clear that their level of health was directly correlated with their connectedness with their children.

The best connection [I have with my children] is when I'm healthy and balanced.

They are connected, looking after yourself and keeping in touch with your children because when you are looking after your children you are thinking of yourself. It's hand in hand and you've got a reason to do those things. Once that separation is out there and the days go by ... why do you go to work? Why are you putting money away in the bank? Why are you [getting more education]? For your children! That's the reason.

The best thing I can give my [child] is to be balanced, which means living a balanced life. That is the best thing I can do. Whether I get to see them once a year or once a week, to be healthy is the best thing I can give them.

Pare your life down, make parenting your priority, work less. If you can find a way to parent more and work less even if it's cutting back on your lifestyle, do it. Create as much space in your life as you can to do that, make it a priority.

### **7.2.3 The participants also pointed out the importance of fathers being aware of the potential for positive outcomes**

While the participants concentrated on their personal difficulties and distress during this process they did move on to explore their experience of positive outcomes. This included their gaining a new perspective on the process of separation. Rather than

talking about a range of changes that signalled an easing of the tensions described above, the participants described this easing of tension in terms of regaining their sense of humour.

Eventually getting a sense of humour or finding a sense of humour. Trying to get some perspective.

The thing is just finding that sense of humour again actually goes a long way towards it. I think in the end I've come through now, I just say 'Oh f\*\*\* it, it's only money' and that's been a big thing for me, gives you more of a sense of power. It takes the sting out of it and it takes that power.

The thing is just finding that sense of humour again actually goes a long way towards [recovery].

Participants also talked about the potential for enjoyment as a single parent.

Having [initially] struggled, I have created another life and actually I'm now really comfortable with the amount of time I have with my child.

I actually say I like being a single parent. I like the set up, I like having my daughter sometime and I like being a bachelor for a few days. I think my life is pretty rich. I guess I'm lucky. There's something in me as a man that quite likes this set up.

I feel very fortunate now that I see my son pretty much every weekend [although] it cost me dearly. I pick him up, take him to sports, I have him for the whole weekend. I have no weekends to myself but it's pretty good, it's pure fun I've had for the last couple of years with my son. That's as good as we'll get. I feel pretty fortunate though I'd never go through it again, it would probably kill me.

I'm looking forward to the day when ... I know that the next 10 years is going to be pretty messy, it's going to be pretty tough. I hadn't really [any] expectations. But I'm looking forward to the day when they can make their own choices of where they want to live, and I don't actually want to colour that.

The participants recognised that fathering roles are changing and these changes are an integral part of their lives, providing a range of opportunities for fathering not available in times past.

I used to love my babies and when they couldn't talk and shit like that, and you would talk to them

and they couldn't talk to you back. Now they torture me at 17. But the fact is I think at two and one or whatever, you are a parent, you are not a f\*\*\*ing part-time parent, you are a parent and it is 50/50. It should be.

It used to be being very much about the mother and bonding and nurturing but I think it's shifted in the last two years. It's even at a very early age little babies can go 50/50 with the proviso that breast milk is a bit of an issue but then people can express milk.

A lot of blokes that I know say you can't do anything with the kids until they are six [years old] or seven or eight and it's bullshit, you can do heaps. They learn so much between zero to five and that's the most important time for the kids, that's the growing time of their brain, the growing time of the kids, that's the time they should have their fathers around.

The results presented in this section are consistent with the points made earlier about the experiences of many fathers during the process of separation. While serious health concerns are well reported for mothers and children as well as fathers there is a significant point of difference for non-resident fathers because of the isolation and loss that are experienced. This was certainly the experience of the participants. What this project adds to the literature is to emphasise the grief associated with these losses. This grief, often of a profound nature, was continuing and very evident throughout the groups. The expression of this grief led to a range of personal and interpersonal difficulties, often of an extreme nature. With some participants these tensions were still current. Given that tensions were still evident, most participants described a level of resiliency in the way they managed their situations. Resiliency, understood as the capacity of people to cope with stress and trauma and developing strength through this process, was evident in the participants' description of their experience of separation. However, it should be noted that the participants also demonstrated and described the behaviours and experiences of a marginalised group, including those of isolation, exhaustion, a lack of voice, powerlessness and compromised personal integrity (Hall, 1999). It was also evident that these fathers had moved through a traumatising process to the point of finding some degree of resolution, emphasising the opportunity for positive outcomes.

Amato (2000) suggests that, simply put, there are two contrasting perspectives on parental separation. The first perspective is that this process frequently leads to a range of problems for all involved. The second perspective is that separation provides an opportunity for growth and fulfilment that is not being experienced at the time. In general, recent literature around divorce mostly focuses on the negative outcomes (Kalmijn & Monden, 2006), with only a small number of studies identifying positive outcomes (Amato, 2000). The participants in this project echoed both these perspectives.

## 7.3 The need for support

### 7.3.1 The participants identified the difficulty in accessing informal and formal support

The participants rated this theme as the most important of all. As can be seen from the weightings detailed in Figure 1, the importance of this theme increased markedly between the first and second focus group sessions. This validates the research design whereby a follow-up focus group session allowed the participants time to reflect on the discussion from the initial session prior to the second one. The reflection opportunity enabled the participants to revisit their previous thinking, then move on to considering the study questions in a deeper and more constructive manner.

The participants talked of the growth of awareness and positive response to women's issues and needs over the past decades. They linked these initiatives to what they believed was needed for men.

I think women, especially in New Zealand, have got so much support and what I learned now as a man is we don't have really any [constructive support].

I would have really liked to have the advice [my ex partner had] just to be able to look after myself a bit more.

I worked with couples and young children and families and quite often with relationship break ups. I had so many places to refer women to. There were so many [more] supports out in the community for women than for men, where do you start? Where do you start? Because the funding is like that too. On the funding forms, women and children, lots of people to fund [women and children] – men not so much.

Participants were concerned about the lack of well-organised, well-funded and well-advertised Men's Centres. This weighting given to this theme is consistent with the known negative effects of transition and marginalisation where, in many respects, the resultant isolation and confusion make it difficult, if not impossible, for individuals to constructively manage this new situation by themselves. In these situations people need the guidance and support of others.

For the first three months when I split up I just didn't know how to look after myself. I felt really isolated because I didn't want to talk to anybody. Any time I saw a man with a kid I'd hide my face because I thought I'd be real upset but then finally I just looked up men in the phonebook, under 'm' and I was lucky. I found that there was a men's group here. That led on to meeting lots of people who had been [through separation]. I reckon that's the best thing that happened for me and then that led to living where I do. It meant I could prioritise being a dad.

I had a quick flick through the notes earlier and one of the first things that was up there was there's a Women's Affairs, Children's Affairs, no Men's Affairs. Ideally I would like to be able to say to men currently going through separation is go to [a Men's Centre]. Hopefully that's in the process of changing.

The participants preferred that guidance provided to men in their situation be by men who have 'been there, done that'. By this they meant that guidance should be provided by those who were aware of the tensions involved for fathers but were not experiencing these tensions themselves; were respectful of their position and were prepared to advocate for them. It seemed that as the groups progressed, the participants were effectively identifying and using the focus groups as a form of support they had not experienced.

[About] looking after themselves, if there was a group like this in the first two weeks of most separations that you could come along to and hear everyone's stories and get advice then that would have been really good. It would have saved me a lot of money and would have settled me down.

Looking after themselves, that's got to be in week one of their separation.

[What's been discussed when] breaking up is anger. It stops you from sleeping, it stops you from working. It's frustration. It's okay to be angry at the right time and the right place and the thing is if you had somebody to talk about it. A lot of anger is just really frustration, we yell and we scream and we throw things around because we're frustrated. Because you can't get the f\*\*\*ing sense that you want to get. So if you actually had somebody to talk to at that time, rather than your mates, but somewhere to go it would be really helpful.

Talk, reach out, find some men around you who are or have been in that situation or have gone through it or are doing it. Get together with them on a regular basis to talk, talk as much as you can. Find a way of getting together regularly with men in similar situations supporting each other and talking. And I'm not talking about going down the pub and sitting with the winos on the barstool. I'm talking about people who are actually doing it and some are doing it tough and some are doing it less tough but you've got to connect yourself with the wider community of men. It doesn't mean you have to sit around in circles and hug each other and all that kind of stuff. It's just about connecting in as many ways and with as many men as you can.

It's really important to talk to other men. There are a lot of guys out there [experiencing this] and if you can have a few of them in your life to get together and talk about this stuff. I don't mean just moan about the injustice, of which there is a lot, but that you hear the good stories, you support each other. I can't imagine myself having come through this alone or isolated.

Aligned with the previous subtheme, but weighted less strongly, the participants further addressed the issue of isolation, identifying the need for good network of male friends.

No-one to talk to – you usually find that your friends are all couples and families and they don't really want to talk to you at that time so much because they might feel like they're taking sides.

You've been involved with people through the family and all of a sudden to be kicked out and all of a sudden all of these friends ... a lot of them don't know exactly how to treat you. They all back off

because they're all freaking out at the same time. It's really hard. I'm lucky I've got probably two or three guys around and some others that are around that are really good but it doesn't take the sting out of it that's for sure.

What drove me [to] looking after myself was having a good network of male friends, not so much women friends but male friends. I knew lots of women who separate [who] have got really good networks. Lots of guys can be isolated, so I made sure I had a good network.

What this project adds here is related to the research design. It was mentioned earlier that the design deliberately gave the participants the opportunity to reflect on their experiences over time as well as with others, thus providing for a level of critical reflection not available through one-off forms of data collection. It is important to note that it was in the second group sessions that this theme of 'the need for support' emerged so strongly. If there was only one group session, rather than respond in this manner, the participants would have focused on the isolation and lack of support they had experienced (and many were still experiencing). In effect, they would risk being viewed as being primarily concerned with matters of self-interest.

Here, rather than reinforcing the negative perspective, the participants moved on to considering the situation more constructively, clearly articulating an urgent need for support at local and national levels. As one participant succinctly observed, "There's obviously a problem here, do something about it!" It was also clear that as the groups progressed, the participants began to use the research process and the focus groups as a support strategy for themselves. In effect, the research process effectively became an example of the support the participants were requesting.

## 7.4 Managing a changed relationship with the ex partner

The participants described a wide range of feelings, experiences and behaviours in regard to the process of separation from their partner. These ranged from a reasonably positive and ongoing relationship to one fraught with difficulty, especially when the ex partner began another relationship.



#### 7.4.1 The participants identified the need to accept a changed but continuing relationship with the children's mother

Even 10 years on, there's emotional stuff that goes on, me assuming that there's hidden agendas maybe when there's not but maybe there is. My advice would be to really do the best to grow this new relationship with your ex partner.

I had to learn to manage my attraction to her because I was still attracted to her. I had to learn a whole heap of skills that I just wasn't prepared to do in the relationship. I'm still working on it. That's the other thing, it changes over time.

The hardest one for me was managing the changed relationship with my partner and the difficulty was I didn't know what I wanted. I didn't give myself a space to work out what I wanted. What was happening there?

Worrying for a man isn't it? I have felt so much pain when there has been another man in the relationship. I only see my son twice a week and there's a new man there. It's just so painful.

One point that emerged was the realisation that, despite the nature of the separation, the participants and their ex partner were related for life.

I still believe that things are improving, in terms of my extended family, which includes my ex wife. I just have to have the best relationship with her as I can. We are related for life.

Managing the relationship with my daughter's mum was difficult. I didn't want to live with the woman but I actually had to sort my shit out with her to the extent where we could actually negotiate. So in a paradoxical way I had to work on our relationship, which I didn't want to do, in order to be able to parent.

It's the hardest thing I found. You have separated with [your child's] mother, because when you've separated, when you've walked away, there's still that connection between the three of you. It's like that relationship [is carrying] on.

#### 7.4.2 The need to support the ex partner

While there was a strong feeling that their ex partner 'held all the cards', the participants also talked about the concept of "the better she is, the better for all".

I always considered myself to have had some really good advice from friends and family at the time and one of them was, remember that the better she is, the better mother she'll be for your kids. So although I wanted to be angry and blaming, at the end of the day it was important and it's paid off now that the better she was [in herself] then the better she would be for the children.

At the beginning I always thought if [she's] happy then the kids will be happy and then we're all happy. Once we split up I still went by that. I'll do whatever within reason to keep her happy because the better it is for my son. It seems to work for us both.

I'm willing to go down that line [reconciliation] and probably make a bit of a rod for myself to help her through because of that. Not just her, it's for the kids as well. They need mum and dad at least talking about each other nicely rather than beating a rod for each other's back. It's a time thing at the moment, just wait and see. That's the hard part about it, not knowing.

I knew the research is really clear that separated parents who have a good relationship with each other and are communicating and discussing, the outcomes for the kids are a lot better than kids who are in separated relations where there is a lot of conflict between the two parties. So I was prepared to make a lot of compromises around that so when we separated I moved out, I took a bit of a hit from the financial side of things. I didn't realise that until this meeting! I did all those things. I was motivated to do it because I knew it would benefit my daughter and I was determined to keep a good relationship with my partner.

That's part of supporting your partner as well as jealous and bitter as you might be. If you're fully supportive of them encourage [the children] to have fun, go out, share in the fun if she has a partner or boyfriend.

Telling my daughter 'I know you love your mother, I think that's great.' Supporting your child's love for the other parent even if they are real b\*\*\*\* or b\*\*\*\*; supporting your child's love for the other parent is supporting your child. That's so critical to me, not putting down my ex in front of my daughter.

Spillman et al (2004), citing several papers, observed that the "children's mother is the primary obstacle

to increased involvement with children” (p 266). It seemed that rather than focusing on the relationship with the children’s mother for its own sake, it was considered vital to maintain contact with her in order to maintain contact with the children. It was seen that access was effectively controlled by the mother. As one author stated, “non-resident fathers depended on the resident mothers’ willingness to involve them in the parental role. Without an invitation to be involved,

they are generally powerless in offering parental support, guidance or discipline because separation provides resident mothers with an even greater opportunity to act as gatekeepers with respect to children” (Seltzer & Brandeth, 1994, cited in Hawthorne,2006). It is of note that although the participants recognised these tensions, they had moved on to address them in very pragmatic ways, as indicated in the above quotations.

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

### 8.1 The limitations of the project

The findings from this project cannot be generalised to a wider population because the sample of participants is not representative of the wider population. Also the data collection and process of analysis, while following an accepted qualitative procedure, deal with the fathers' perceptions only. However, the aim of this exploratory project was never to provide widely generalised and statistically significant findings. The aim was to provide information that was authentic and credible, and represented the considered perspectives of a small number of participants familiar with and experienced in the phenomena under study, that of parental separation and a non-resident status as a parent.

### 8.2 An unexpected outcome

In the first focus group sessions, in both Nelson and Christchurch, the participants recounted the difficulties they experienced during the process of separation from their partner. These were major and were commonly experienced over a prolonged period of time. Indeed, for many, these experiences were ongoing. Several participants stated that participation in this project provided their first opportunity to meet and share their experiences with other fathers. Despite this, they quickly found ways to share their experiences and support each other.

Although the researchers were experienced in working with groups, particularly groups of men, it was clear that the research vision and design did not allow for the degree of distress and isolation the participants experienced, and/or were currently experiencing. Many, if not all the participants, recounted the isolation and emotional volatility of a severely marginalised group lacking in formal and informal support at all levels. This mix indicates a volatile personal and interpersonal situation at a time when the individual is least likely to be able to support themselves and develop or plan effective coping strategies.

While the Australian 'Staying Connected' initiative is a well-developed and attractive package that addresses a number of very relevant issues, the participants' inability to engage consistently with the main features of the project (the themes of the workbooks) indicates that there are other, more fundamental, factors that need to

be considered. That is, rather than the development of workbooks and similar packages, the participants were adamant that face-to-face support with experienced and skilled people is vital at the early and critical stages of parental separation. For example, to provide an individual who is griefstricken with a workbook and no other forms of support would seem odd at best, totally inappropriate at worst. For many of the participants in this project, grief was a central factor.

### 8.3 The findings

The research design, one of repeated focus groups, gave the participants the opportunity to critically reflect on their experiences over time, as well as with others. This is an opportunity not commonly available through one-off data collection methods such as surveys or single interviews. Because of this, the participants were able to enter a deeper level of discussion.

The participants indicated a range of factors that they believed were important to a father effectively managing the process of separation. The themes and subthemes in the previous section were presented as though they were of equal weighting. However, two subthemes were weighted considerably higher than others.

#### **There is an urgent need for male-friendly services to support fathers moving through the process of separation**

There are several facets to this finding. While there is a considerable range of family services available in New Zealand, the participants were not aware of them. Perhaps more importantly, the participants considered them to be either 'unfriendly' towards males, or at the very least lacking in empathy and understanding towards the reality and points of difference many fathers experience with separation, as well as the manner in which they expressed their distress. There were no obvious differences between the Christchurch and Nelson groups in this regard.

#### **Maintaining a connection with their children requires a more equitable base from which to begin negotiating access arrangements than the one that exists at present**

As mentioned previously, detailed discussion on this point is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the participants believed that best outcomes, including those for the child, could not be achieved while fathers

moving through separation experienced the isolation, grief and lack of professional awareness and support discussed in this report. The participants agreed that progress within New Zealand on this point was fundamental to effective separation agreements.

Weighted less heavily were:

- > Due to a variety of factors the participants were generally unprepared for the separation process. This lack of preparedness resulted in a wide range of often seriously negative outcomes personally and interpersonally.
- > Non-resident fathers needed to be aware of the changed relationship with the children's mother. This included the need to develop strategies aimed at accepting, supporting and maintaining this changed relationship.
- > The participants believed that non-resident fathers need to be aware that although the process of separation is a major life transition, this can lead to a redefined and fulfilling parental role.

#### **8.4 Reframing negative stereotypes**

Rather than addressing the research questions, the focus of the discussion in all groups consistently related to personal experiences, especially those of a negative nature. This perspective could be viewed as evidence of

the self-serving nature of fathers and their lack of appreciation of the situation for their ex partners and children. However, when viewed through the lens of transitional theory, it can be seen that these fathers related experiences of an extremely marginalised group. Their experiences were consistent with a group experiencing isolation and a perceived lack of support at all levels. This in turn left them feeling bereft, frustrated and despairing. Their perspective is largely absent from the literature, both lay and professional. Despite this, the participants engaged with the group discussions in a positive manner displaying humour, although often of a particularly 'black' nature, empathy and a high degree of respect for each other.

Given the isolation, grief and emotional turmoil experienced by non-resident fathers in general and the participants in particular, especially at the early and critical stage of separation, it seems odd that support service delivery is not specifically targeting fathers as a matter of urgency. As Mitchell and Chapman (2006, p 1) observed, "Fathers today are considerably more committed to the principle of 'Partners in Parenting' than has been the case in the past. They want to share the parenting role with their partners [even when separated]. They have an expectation that they should be regarded as a parent in their own right." The results of this study suggest that many non-resident fathers struggle to achieve this vision.

## 9. IMPLICATIONS ARISING FROM THE PROJECT

### 9.1 The need for existing family support services to build their capacity in attracting and engaging with fathers

As previously mentioned, Fletcher (2008) suggests that the methods currently employed by service providers are more conducive to engaging with females. This perspective was certainly evident from the discussions in this project. As was previously mentioned, there is a wide range of services available (including legal, counselling and family support) aimed at supporting stressed parents. This project found that, in the main, these services did not meet the needs of the participants. Essentially, the participants did not experience a sense of value from service providers, as a parent in their own right. These values, attitudes and behaviours need to be embedded and transparent in existing services.

### 9.2 The need for services dedicated to supporting men

There was a clear signal from the participants that services specifically targeting men need to be identified and/or developed. The participants believe that there needs to be a range of services similar to those that exist for women, but specifically aligned with the needs of men and more specifically, fathers.

The participants suggested a range of services including:

- > A government agency focused on representing men's interests. It appears that participants were indicating that funding and policy development needs to be initiated and monitored at national level.
- > Existing regional and national services that specifically target support for men generally, and fathers in particular, need to lift their profile and advertise.
- > The participants were clear that there is an urgent need for the resource and development of well-publicised men's centres at regional or local levels. They were also clear that these centres should be managed and staffed mainly by men who were

aware of issues affecting men, and were respectful of this client group.

- > Services that concentrated on male-facilitated:
  - support groups and/or mentoring services
  - web- and telephone-based contact
  - separation coaching.

The participants defined separation coaching as guidance, a listening ear and practical advice about constructive pathways through the process of separation. Although not identified within the themes, counselling was a concept/practice that most participants found unhelpful.

The participants' focus on a call for the development of services dedicated to the needs of fathers reflects a problem central to this project, and to the support of fathers in general. This problem is grounded in a contradiction between how fathers needing support view agencies to be, and how agencies involved in family support view their preparedness to support fathers, particularly those in a stressed parental relationship. The fathers in this project consistently voiced dissatisfaction with the ability, both anticipated and experienced, of counselling/support services to respect and respond to their needs. They perceived an empathy, connection and advocacy for the mother that wasn't forthcoming for them. This finding echoes the results from a range of projects involving fathers, conducted by the authors.

Conversely, the agencies the authors have worked and researched with consistently identify themselves as being present for all family members. They insist they are prepared to support and advocate for all family members equally, and are able to cite a range of cases where this has occurred. They also voice their belief that despite their availability and openness for fathers, fathers are reluctant to seek support. This view generally positions fathers as being reluctant to seek help.

Given these intentions, existing support agencies are arguably best placed to support both parents through the process of separation. However, in order for support to occur, the contradictory positions outlined above need to be reconciled. It appears an external review/audit of the support agencies' ability to attract and engage with fathers is necessary.

### **9.3 The need for development and/or strengthening of referral pathways**

The isolation and lack of support experienced by all the participants points to the need for strengthening of referral pathways between existing services. This is especially important in the early, more critical stages of separation. An initiative such as this could also help identify gaps in service provision specifically targeted at supporting men.

### **9.4 The need for verification of the project results**

More broadly based research is needed to establish if the findings from this project are generally consistent

across all non-resident fathers. Variables such as ethnicity, age – particularly younger fathers and socio-economic status should be taken into account. Future research should use sampling techniques that ensure a better representation of non-resident fathers as a whole.

Any future research needs to view 'one-off' data collection methods with caution. This project clearly demonstrates that groups of people who have not had the opportunity to reflect on their experiences over time are in danger of reinforcing dominant stereotypes. As the participants demonstrated in the first focus group session, it was difficult for them to see beyond their own distress. Providing facilitated reflection over time allowed the participants to enter a deeper, more meaningful discourse, thus providing richer insights into their situation.

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