

STRENGTHENING FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS CONFERENCE

Anne Kerslake Hendricks
Ministry of Social Development

The Strengthening Family Relationships Conference,¹ held on 4 December 2003, provided a forum for a range of international and national speakers to discuss how emerging knowledge from social research could help to strengthen relationships within families. This review summarises the content of the keynote speeches and the panel comments.

The three keynote speakers were Professor Paul Amato (Pennsylvania State University), Professor Thomas Bradbury (University of California, Los Angeles) and Associate Professor Graeme Russell (Macquarie University, Sydney). They focused, respectively, on these dimensions of family relationships:

- how to help parents effectively through transitions such as separation and divorce
- how to help parents build effective and enduring partnerships
- fathering in families.

Following each keynote address, New Zealand-based speakers were invited to participate in a panel to share their perspectives. The main messages from each panel discussion are summarised in this paper.

PARENTING THROUGH TRANSITIONS

Paul Amato's address focused on parenting through transitions, and particularly the consequences for children when their parents separate and/or divorce.

Divorce can interfere with the quality of parenting, but there are better behavioural and academic outcomes for children whose parents use "authoritative parenting". This means providing affection, support and encouragement; providing firm control by setting and monitoring rules; and using non-coercive discipline by enforcing rules consistently and avoiding physical punishment. Authoritative parenting enables children to feel wanted and loved, and to internalise social rules so that they learn to self-regulate their behaviour.

1 The conference, chaired by Charles Waldegrave of the Family Centre, was jointly hosted and funded by the Centre for Social Research and Evaluation at the Ministry of Social Development, the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Committee, and the Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families (School of Government, Victoria University of Wellington). PowerPoint presentations from the three keynote speakers can be found on the Ministry of Social Development's website: www.msd.govt.nz/work-areas/social-research/strengthening-families-conference.html

It can be hard for divorced parents to have sufficient emotional energy to draw upon in their parenting roles, given the stress that they are under. Some children report being caught in the middle between hostile parents. Ideally, parents who have separated should be mutually supportive, with a unified authority structure. The same rules should be followed in the homes of both parents for the sake of consistency.

Children's relationships with non-resident parents will be affected by the frequency of visitation and the quality of contact. Amato noted a common pattern amongst non-resident fathers (in the United States) for the frequency of contact to drop off several years after the divorce. However, around one-third of fathers continued to see their children frequently. Non-resident fathers reported that it can be difficult to be both a visitor and a father.

Although some stepfamilies work very well, there are challenges when parents re-partner and stepfamilies evolve. Children may reject their parent's new partner because they are concerned that they are being disloyal to their biological parent, or see the new partner as competing for time. Research suggests that it is better for children if remarriage does not occur too soon after divorce.

Research has revealed risk factors for children of divorce, including decreased levels of psychological wellbeing, a decline in social support networks, lowered educational attainment, and increased levels of disruption within their own relationships. Amato noted that most of the effects are modest, and many children of divorce grow up to be healthy, well-functioning adults.

Policies and interventions that have worked well in the United States include: divorce mediation; court-introduced parenting courses for divorced parents (which require further evaluation); joint legal and physical custody; school-based programmes for children whose parents have divorced; relationship skills training for unmarried couples and couples planning to marry; and welfare reform (such as the Welfare-to-Work programme).

Amato briefly described the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which has been following a birth cohort of (mostly) unwed parents and their children over a five-year period. The study is designed to provide new information on the capabilities and relationships of unmarried parents, as well as the effects of policies on family formation and child wellbeing. The State of Oklahoma is seen as a leader in terms of the programmes it offers young couples, which include parenting skills, job training, employment opportunities, and resources to encourage fathers to stay involved with the mothers of their children.

In response to a question about whether girls and boys experience the effects of divorce differently, Amato noted that, although there seem to be very few gender effects overall, there has been a consistent finding that divorce weakens ties between daughters and fathers, with fathers being more likely to stay in touch with their sons. Otherwise, divorce is seen as a general risk factor, and effects are not necessarily specific to sons or daughters, or to children of a particular age.

Summary of Key Points from the Responding Panel

The panel responding to Amato comprised: Jan Rodwell, family therapist; Roku Mihinui, General Manager of Te Arawa Māori Trust Board; Principal Family Court Judge Patrick Mahony (since retired); and Cecelia Rooderkerk, minita-a-iwi, teacher and theology graduate.

- Re-partnered families tend to focus on the nuclear family as the ideal, yet may need to develop their own ideal by considering their own roles within and expectations of their new relationships.
- Most Family Court orders now involve shared parenting, month by month and year by year. Children need to be involved in mediation, so that parents can hear children's voices. Parents should trust their children and consult with them, but children must not be loaded with the responsibility for decision making.
- There is no template to follow to be a family and, for some people, personal understandings of families and stepfamilies do not differ.
- For many Māori, parenting is a responsibility shared by whānau. Within contemporary society, friends, neighbours and support groups are replacing whānau, hapū and iwi in many cases. The Māori view of family relationships allows flexibility of roles and relationships.
- There are concerns among Māori that legislation has had a major impact on Māori whānau structures, sometimes removing the rights of family members to raise children and have a positive input into children's lives. However, there is growing acknowledgement and appreciation of Māori values, particularly in relation to adoption practices and the role of grandparents.
- Māori were encouraged to develop awareness and understanding of wairua and other spiritual concepts. Conference participants were encouraged to move out of their comfort zone, to listen to and act upon what they hear from Māori, and to accept Māori as they are.

PARENTING PARTNERSHIPS

Thomas Bradbury said that at the centre of a strong family is a strong relationship between two partners. Keeping the partner relationship strong keeps the family strong. Today's adverse couple relationships are tomorrow's risk factors for family functioning.

Within the United States, there has been a strong emphasis on interpersonal processes generally, and problem solving specifically, across theories, studies, interventions and policies concerning families. Bradbury and his colleagues have sought to understand what can be learned from a deeper analysis of couple processes, and from a broader consideration of forces operating on families.

Couple processes and change are a puzzle – difficult to ignore, theoretically and practically, and difficult to establish empirically. The exact same event within different families will assume different significance, depending on existing stress levels. The balance between interior dynamics and exterior forces is crucial to understanding how families change. Programmes have been developed to work with couples to change how they understand and respond to stress. Bradbury likened parents to air-traffic controllers, managing their children's lives.

Studies from the United States have shown that aggression between couples is reasonably common, and relatively severe levels of violence foreshadow declines in couple functioning.

Partnerships will thrive to the extent that they are marked by: mutual support; low levels of anger, contempt and aggression; and humour, affection and positive engagement. Relationships are linked to the environment, and interventions in the following areas may be successful: safer neighbourhoods, better schools and increased literacy levels, decreased crime rates, more jobs, affordable housing, high-quality early childhood education and access to health care.

Bradbury posed two questions.

- If two individuals are reasonably competent as relationship partners, are they assured a stable and fulfilling relationship?
- What prevents people from engaging in behaviours that promote the wellbeing of their relationship?

To answer these questions, he noted that it is necessary to look outside the couple relationship, to consider partners' individual characteristics and the couple's context and niche. Influences on partnerships can include demographic, historical, personality

and experiential factors that each partner brings to the relationship. These may lead to fluctuations in behaviour and relationship satisfaction. Identifying and delivering services to “risky couples” can be beneficial.

Bradbury advised that interventions and policies that strengthen families today should yield benefits much later, when the children from these families form their own relationships as adults. To be successful, policies and interventions probably do need to change family processes. However, Bradbury warned that, in the absence of contextual change, behaviour change may be insufficient. He recommends working with couples to change how they understand and respond to stress.

Summary of Key Points from the Responding Panel

The panel responding to Bradbury comprised: Rhonda Pritchard, relationship counsellor and psychologist; Jan Pryor, Director of the Roy McKenzie Centre for the Study of Families; Bill Peace, social work trainer; Viv Maidaborn, Chief Executive, Relationship Services (since moved to CCS); and Bill Atkin, Faculty of Law, Victoria University of Wellington.

- In an ideal world, children are nurtured by at least two parents, and preferably by at least six or seven “adoring adults” who provide the children with a variety of experiences. The parents are authoritative and live under the same roof with humour and support – or, if they do not live under the same roof, there is low discord between them, they parent cooperatively, and both parents are continually engaged with the children. The ideal family-friendly workplace would allow parents to work reduced hours, enabling each parent to spend two weekend days and two weekdays with their children.
- The community is integral to Pacific families. From a Pacific perspective, it is important to mentor young people, to instil belief, integrity and trust. Parents must be involved in their children’s lives, share ideas with their children, and believe that their children can achieve.
- Each of us is fighting for a place to stand in the world. We must not fall into the trap of thinking that one family type is okay, whereas another is not. Family structures do not tell us a lot about what family relationships are like – the quality of the relationship is key. “My honouring of your way of being a family won’t detract from my own family.”

FATHERHOOD

Graeme Russell began with the “fundamental proposition” that fathers and fathering are critical components of healthy family functioning. He emphasised that fatherhood, like motherhood, is expressed in a diversity of ways, and a better understanding of this diversity is needed. We must take into account cultural diversity, family structure and patterns of connection (e.g., fathering at a distance).

Russell asked participants to consider what governments, institutions and practitioners could do to encourage and sustain father-inclusive research, policy making and practice, as he believes that (in some countries, at least) fathers are invisible to social policy makers. One of the greatest needs is for workplace flexibility and support. Better access to advice and education would also make a difference, and he strongly recommended working with fathers where they are, both physically (e.g., in the workplace) and psychologically. Although many Australian organisations have work–life programmes, few of these include fathering as a focus. Russell described one work-based programme that includes a module on fathering and mentoring, which has had positive outcomes for individuals and their families, as well as for the workplace itself.

Challenges faced by today’s fathers include the need to adjust to changing expectations (of themselves, as well as of others), the need to stay connected to their children, and the importance of balancing work/career and family. Increasing men’s motivation and their skills so that they could contribute positively to children’s wellbeing would yield advantages for all involved.

Citing research carried out by Michael Lamb, Russell pointed out that the family context is now seen to be more influential than individual relationships: “The absence of familial hostility is the most consistent correlate of child adjustment, whereas marital conflict is the most consistent and reliable correlate of child maladjustment”. Lamb has concluded that the nature of paternal influences may vary substantially depending on individual and cultural values, and thus there is no single “father’s role” to which all fathers should aspire.

How best to reach fathers? Antenatal education classes offer an excellent opportunity to engage men’s interest in fathering, although they traditionally focus primarily on childbirth. Russell also outlined a number of different ways for organisations to become more father-friendly: the introduction of flexible working conditions; “working-fathers forums” at which men could receive advice and information about fathering issues, as well as discuss personal issues; and consideration of the different needs of fathers at different stages of their careers.

Summary of Key Points from the Responding Panel

The panel responding to Russell comprised: Family Court Judge Ida Malosi; Rex McCann, men's group facilitator, researcher and author; and Paul Callister, economist and social researcher.

- In the Samoan culture, a woman is defined by who her father was, and who her mother's father was, and where these men came from. Traditionally, men hold the power in Samoan families. Fathers are often absent from the lives of the young Pacific men who appear in court. Fathers very rarely accompany their sons to court.
- Although there has been more attention paid to men in recent years, social policies often do not involve fathers; there is an ongoing need for good data to inform policy development. Family issues are often seen as the domain of the Ministry of Women's Affairs or the Ministry of Youth Development; women's issues are often seen as children's issues, and there has been little concentration on men. Men are becoming a larger part of the picture now that work-family balances are under the spotlight.
- There is a strong push for inclusive policies, although not all fathers can be involved. For example, under the current legislation, it is not possible for all men to be eligible for paid parental leave.
- The terminology used to describe families needs reconsideration. For example, a lone-parent family could mean a lone-parent household or a family that, in fact, has two parents with two homes.

SUMMARY

The Strengthening Family Relationships Conference provided an opportunity for participants to hear a range of stimulating national and international speakers. Many different perspectives were shared, including those of Māori, Pacific, lesbian and re-partnered families.

Those of us who work with, or for, families must continue to recognise New Zealand's cultural and ethnic diversity, and develop our awareness of the influence of changing contexts upon family relationships. Exploration of shifts in cultural values and attitudes, changes in family structures, and the experiences of new communities will enrich and inform our knowledge of family life in New Zealand.