

CHAPTER 3

FINDINGS: WHAT DID THE DADS AND MUMS SAY?

The qualitative data collection process consisted of asking six groups of people four questions, and recording, discussing, and verifying their expressed views and stories by circulating a draft report for comment and amendment. The six groups consisted of one group of fathers and one of mothers in each of three parenting structures. Groups 1 - 5 met on two nights with two facilitators for three hours on each occasion, using the process laid out in Chapter 2.

In each of Groups 1, 2 and 4, one or two participants were unable to come on the second evening. Group 1 had eleven on the first night and ten on the second, Group 2 had ten then eight, and Group 4 had five then four. These differences show up in the Groups' N (number of people present) in the Tables.

Only two mothers came to the first meeting of Group 6, which was scheduled during the day. So we changed the group process and asked each mother to tell her story biographically, addressing each of the four questions in her response. This made the second meeting unnecessary. On a subsequent occasion, we recruited another group of sole mothers, and again only two actually arrived. So we followed the same procedure as for the first group, and then integrated the four stories into the findings about sole mothers.

In reporting the research findings, we organise the material under the four objectives of the research, namely the dads' and mums' prior expectations, sources, current experiences, and future visions. For each objective, we report what each person had to say, organise their collective stories into themes, summarise the themes into one-page snapshots, and write reflective comments on similarities, differences and issues which arise from the discussion or in the literature.

In Chapter Four, we go on to discuss the meaning of the findings theoretically and in terms of family practice, social policy and directions for future research.

Underneath the reports stand the life situations of 41 participants, who poured out their stories in narratives that reveal their thinking, yearning and current assessments. In respect we listened to all, and now offer these life-stories on their behalf.

Not all the reflective comments are derived from the statements presented in the text. Much else was given and discussed in the sessions and the questionnaires, and some, apparently unsubstantiated comments rely on this information.

We start with Objective 1, Fathers' and Mothers' expectations. These are summarised in the snapshot of Table 3.

3.1 Objective 1: Fathers' and Mothers' Expectations

Table 3: Snapshot of Expectations
Expectations of Dad's Involvement in Parenting a Child Under Two, among Fathers and Mothers in Three Parenting Structures

Parenting Structure	Fathers	Mothers
Parenting Together	<p style="text-align: center;">Group 1 (N = 11)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ be hard-working, treat my kids with respect'. Give the best I can ▪ ensure wife can carry on her own life, spend time with child ▪ support wife during first 3 months ▪ build a solid structure for children ▪ bottles, nappies for first 12 months ▪ playing ball. Providing love, food ▪ singing to the kids, as my Dad did ▪ getting the routine going ▪ no real expectations. No idea ▪ no fixed roles ▪ what's best for baby 	<p style="text-align: center;">Group 2 (N = 10)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ supplement me with disciplining, cleaning, feeding, play with children ▪ he'd provide income, do nappies, be responsible. Share duties 50-50 ▪ physical, emotional support. Love baby ▪ security, protection, a safe household ▪ always have time for the kids, like Dad ▪ do fun things, let them be children ▪ communicate with me and child(ren) ▪ I couldn't have kids, so no expectatns ▪ in our marriage contract to have a child ▪ thought husb's life wouldn't change
Separated	<p style="text-align: center;">Group 3 (N = 4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I didn't think of it. Well, I'd be like my Dad, who worked three jobs ▪ I had set roles in my mind – I'd mow lawns, chop wood and do household maintenance ▪ I'd be a hard worker and provide. I wanted a good partnership with three or four kids ▪ I thought I'd do everything Mum does except breastfeed. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Group 4 (N = 5)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ My Dad didn't do much. I expected to do it all myself, but he'd be there ▪ He'd do his own thing - a bit distant - be loving, a good provider, be protective ▪ He'd be involved, excited, play with her and be home in time to bathe her ▪ He'd be the provider, we'd do things together. Family would come first ▪ To love and care for the children - be there for them. To be affectionate too
Alone	<p style="text-align: center;">Group 5 (N = 7)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ideas not clearly formed – no plan • expected kids – but no clarity • no concept of functional family until 37 when I became a Dad • be breadwinner and disciplinarian • be there for kids, the authority • go to work – pay the bills • be like his best mate 	<p style="text-align: center;">Group 6 (N = 4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 'Cinderella Complex.' Wonderful man to come and take me away from it all, provide protection and nurture forever. ▪ I always believed I'd never get married, and that's still my position. ▪ I didn't know much about fathers. He'd be kind, love us ▪ No huge expectation - be kind, patient.

3.1.1 Group 1: Eleven Partnered Dads Speak of their Prior Expectations

Before you became a Dad, what had you expected you'd do as Dad?

The eleven fathers responded in three ways:

Principles and intentions

- I expected to be hard-working, and never say to myself, 'this can't be done'.
- I expected to 'treat my kids as equals, with respect'.
- I asked myself, 'how do I ensure my wife can carry on her own life?'
- I'll 'give my son the best I can'.
- I thought 'I'll spend more time with my child' (a Dad who works away from home).
- I'll be supporting my wife, especially during the first three months.
- I expected to 'build a solid structure for my children, and be there. I always wanted to be Dad.
- I always felt I'd be a Dad. As the youngest of six, though, I wanted to improve on what my situation had been.'

Specific Father tasks or activities

- I'll be doing 'bottles and nappies for the first twelve months'.
- I saw myself playing ball, cricket.
- Providing 'love and food'.
- 'Singing to the kids (as my Dad did).'¹
- 'Getting the routine going, and supporting both wife and child through sleepless nights.'
- 'Supporting the kids, encouraging them. Being a friend.'

No clear expectations

- 'I had 'no real expectations'.
- 'I had no idea. I was the first in my generation to have kids.'
- 'No fixed roles - it would be "what is best for my baby".'
- 'I had some preconceived ideas - similar to my wife's - but I had to come up with my own ideas after the baby was born.'

Reflective Comments

The eleven married fathers clearly take their role as Dad seriously. They expressed high ideals and firm motivation to do what they take to be the best for their child. They emphasise the long-term influence they wish their parenting to have.

No-one mentioned Dad's authority, or discipline. Rather they expressed more contemporary, collaborative modes of child-focussed parenting.

¹ Warwick Pudney and Judy Cottrell encourage fathers to sing to their babies, even while still in the womb, and later to help them go to sleep or stop crying after they hurt themselves. 'Try it yourself', they say, 'it's amazing how it works', Pudney, Warwick, and Judy Cottrell, Beginning Fatherhood – A Guide for Expectant Fathers, Sydney, Finch Publishing, 1998.

The emphasis on specific tasks centered around the positive aspects of parenting roles. The men did not dwell on negative or undesired aspects. All seemed to accept these as part of the wider frame of building a young life.

The statements of those who had not specifically formed their ideas suggest that they see being a dad as a journey, not a static state. They seemed to express confidence that they would find appropriate and honourable ways of going forward.

The group discussion revealed a continuum of preparedness for parenting, from 'no expectations' through physical and financial preparation and planning, to full anticipatory socialisation, with pre- and post-natal classes, studying early child development and milestones, and developing parenting strategies scheduled to facilitate these micro-transitions.²

3.1.2 Group 2: Ten Partnered Mums Speak of their Prior Expectations

Before you became a Mum, what did you expect from the father of your child?

The ten mothers collectively expressed four themes:

Major and supplementary parents

- I'd be the major parent and he'd supplement this with doing the disciplining, cleaning, and feeding, and he'd play with the children. But I'd be SuperMum.
- I'd stay at home until school age, like my Mum did, and he'd provide.
- I'd be the main care-giver - he'd provide income, do nappy changes etc.
- I wanted to be Mum. He offered to stay home and I said, 'If you can breastfeed'.
- I always wanted children. I was a 'mothering child', yet I didn't have any until my 30s. He would have to be responsible, the primary breadwinner. I'd stay home like Mum did.
- I wanted sharing of domestic duties.
- I wanted a modern man - 50 -50.

He'd give us support, security and an environment of safety

- I expected physical and emotional support - love for me and the baby.
- I expected him to provide me with support. The support I got far exceeded my expectations.
- I wanted security, to be part of a family unit, and have a safe household. But I thought that if I had a child, I'd have to be willing to be a single parent, even though I came from a very stable family.
- He'd have to be the right man. My first husband was not really suitable as a father. I needed emotional support.

² As part of preparation for parenting, Warwick Pudney recommends 'sorting things out with your own father before your first baby is born'. Pudney, Warwick, 'Beginning Fatherhood - The Greatest Job A Man Can Do', in Birks, Stuart and Paul Callister, Perspectives on Fathering, Palmerston North, N. Z., Institute for Public Policy Evaluation, Massey University, 1999.

Being a communicative and involved Dad

- I expected a Dad like I had, who'd always have time for the kids.
- I wanted a Dad for my children - not so rigid as my Dad - one who'd do fun things, let them be children, communicate with them as individuals.
- I expected good communication, with me and with the child(ren)
- He didn't have a Dad, so he said he'd be there for his children. He wanted to be SuperDad.

No clear expectations

- We didn't talk about having kids. I was told that I couldn't have any, so I didn't have any expectations. Our child was not planned.
- He didn't want children - but it was in the marriage contract that we developed during pre-marital counselling that we would have a child after 5 - 10 years.
- I knew my life would change, but I didn't think my (millionaire) husband's would.

Reflective Comments

Table 2 shows the ten partnered mothers of two-year-olds to have the highest mean age of all six groups (38.0), over six years older than the means of the other two groups of women (31.8 and 31.5).

Though many of the mothers in this group were university-educated, professionally qualified and had career positions, they clearly regarded being Mum as their major identity at this stage of their lives. Identities are fed by the recurrent mental images people hold of themselves. Some expressed egalitarian expectations ('I wanted a modern man - 50-50'), but none spoke in terms of conflict between career and motherhood. Collectively, they were deeply committed and held clear expectations of their husbands/partner.

The theme of desired emotional support seemed somewhat wistfully expressed by some, though at least one woman's husband had surprised her ('..far exceeded my expectations..'). Similarly the desire for good communication pointed to an explicit, interactive relationship.

It seems that these women desired physical, financial and emotional security and communication in their spousal relationship, and considered that these would provide a platform for the optimum nurture of their child(ren). Put into one word, they had described the component elements of intimacy. In summary,

What we seek above all is a rich intimate relationship,
from which will flow fulfilling family life.

3.1.3 Group 3: Four Separated Dads Speak of Their Prior Expectations

Before you became a Dad, what had you expected you'd do as Dad?

Each man responded in his own way. As Group 3 had only four members, we considered that clustering the responses could violate their meaning, so we have presented each separately.

One father coalesced the father role with the adult male role of worker, one held set ideas of what dads and mums do, one saw Dad as a family man, and one saw the role in terms of partnership. Their words tell their stories:

Dad as worker

- I didn't expect to be there when the kids were little – I'd be like my Dad, who worked three jobs. I didn't really see him until high school. Dad's work. I had no expectations about being a dad. I was in the navy, only home three nights a month. I went to Vietnam for nine months, so I wasn't there. I didn't think of it. I was on call 24 hours a day.

Dad's set roles

- In my family, Mum did the inside, Dad the outside. So I had set roles in my mind – I'd mow the lawns, chop the wood and do household maintenance, not change the nappies. This was what I thought was right. But I did want to be there, to protect and to teach things like cricket and football. I liked that my Dad came from nothing then provided well, but not that he wasn't there. But, you know, I found myself being a workaholic too.

Dad as family man

- I wanted a good partnership with three or four kids. I'd be a big part of their lives, not just a week-end dad. I'd be a friend as well as a father-figure. I'd be a hard worker and provide for the family. I also saw myself taking the children out – to the zoo, to school etc. I wanted a family, not a part-time situation every second week-end.

Dad and Mum as partners

- I'd work three or four days a week and share the home with my partner and kids. I thought I'd do everything Mum does except breastfeed. Both of us would take care of the house and child. We'd work out what we were both comfortable with.

Reflective Comments

'Dads work.' expresses a perspective in two words. Two men seem to have organised their lives around this expected role, but are now thrust into the minutiae of child-rearing.

The realities of separation are also far from what the other two dads foresaw or desired.

3.1.4 Group 4: Five Separated Mums Speak of their Prior Expectations

Before you became a Mum, what had you expected from the father of your child?

We also present the expectations of the five Group 4 mothers individually.

I want him to be there for the children

- 'To love and care for the children when they're sick – be there for them. To be affectionate too – with lots of hugging. This was my life-long dream.'

We would do things together

- 'As a child I considered he'd be the provider, and I would do the family things – like take the kids on picnics. But as a teenager I started to want a modern man, who'd change nappies. We would do things together. Like my Dad, family would come first for him.'

We'd share the parenting

- 'I expected that he'd be involved, be excited about her life, be there for the milestones, play with her and be home in time to bathe her. I expected him to share the parenting.'

He'd become more involved as the children grew

- 'He'd do his own thing – be a bit distant – but be loving, and aware when something went wrong. He'd become more involved as the children grew, and be more fun. I expected him to be a good provider and to be protective, and not fight in front of the children. But actually, I wanted something closer.'

No real expectations

- 'I didn't have many expectations. My Dad didn't do much. It seems men aren't equipped emotionally – nor by their upbringing – to learn the skills of being a Dad. I expected to do it all myself, but he'd be there.'

Reflective Comments

Collectively, the five women who had first become mothers between 19 and 32, expected that the man would be there when it counted, share the parenting, provide, and become more participatory as time went on.

Yet most seemed to be yearning for something else – a closeness, a sharing, a partnership. Why is this dream so elusive?

3.1.5 Group 5: Seven Sole Dads Speak of Their Prior Expectations

Before you became a Dad, what had you expected you'd do as Dad?

Four men said that at that time of their lives, before they were plunged into its realities, parenting concepts were largely absent from their minds.

No real concept of being a Dad.

- 'I had no preconceptions, no plan for myself as a parent'.
- 'I didn't expect to be a Dad. It started at 34, when my wife became pregnant. I used the Parent Helpline for information.'
- 'I had no real concept of being Dad before being in a relationship. I was too busy. I could look after myself, and left home in a rural area when I was 17. But I did expect to have kids and live with one person forever.'
- 'I had no family model, no concept of the functional family. I had fear when I was growing up – fear of Dad, fear that I'd be like him (isolated, angry, scary), and fear that the world would be blown up, in those Cold War days. Just staying alive and coping took all my time. Also, Mum manipulated us to be on her side, and see Dad as the evil one. It wasn't a real partnership model. So I gave no consideration to me being a parent. But at 37 I became one.'

With further reflection, though, these and the other three men mentioned specific father roles or activities they had expected to undertake

Dad as worker and authority figure

- 'Dads go to work, provide the roof and pay the bills. Then they help out with the kids. But I didn't expect to be getting up at night. Mum stays home and is the major care-giver, especially for the first five years.'
- 'Being the breadwinner and disciplinarian.'
- 'Being an authority figure, doing the right thing. Dad was fair and reasonable.'

Support my wife

- 'I thought I'd be supporting my wife, backing her up with the children.'

Be there for the children

- 'Being there for them, especially at special moments, like the first time he rides without trainer wheels.'
- 'Be like his best mate – I thought he'd come to me with his problems.'
- 'Be the best Dad I can.'

Reflective Comments

The mean age of men in Group 5 (37.1) was higher than the means of men in Groups 1 (36.4) and 3 (32.5), and a greater proportion of the sole dads said they didn't have clear ideas about the dad role, compared with dads in the other groups.

Does being brought up earlier plus having less formed concepts suggest the paradigm of an older generation?

When asked to reflect further, the seven men tended to speak of dad roles drawn from conventional cultural concepts.

3.1.6 Group 6: Four Sole Mums Speak of Their Prior Expectations

Before you became a Mum, what had you expected from the father of your child?

The responses of this younger group (31.5 mean age) were given with only one other participant present. They tend to be the most detailed and biographical of all the groups.

Prince Charming

- The dominant paradigm for me' said a consciousness influenced by tertiary studies in comparative literature and feminism, 'was the Cinderella Complex.
- 'One day a wonderful man would come and take me away from it all, and provide protection and nurture forever. This is every woman's deep dream. That dream's still there, it's deep in there.'
- But reality turned out otherwise. I never thought I'd be a single Mum in Freo.

He'd be kind and love me and the children

- I always wanted a family. A husband is very important to me. But I didn't know much about what a good Dad was, except that he'd be kind and love me and the children. Not be a harsh man like my Dad. It's every woman's dream to have a loving father for the child, and for herself.

Dad's significant role

- The father plays a very significant role in the child's life, but where the situation is fragile, it doesn't always happen. If you have no father in your upbringing, you have no idea of how to handle the child.

A child changes my ideas

- I always believed I'd never get married, and that's still my position. But now that I've had a child, all my ideas have changed.

Reflective Comments

The sole mothers seemed to coalesce the roles of partner and dad. Perhaps for some it's all one undifferentiated family gestalt, a gestalt that hasn't yet arrived.

3.1.7 Making Sense of the six sets of Expectations

Two hazards caution us against interpreting too boldly the expressed prior expectations of the parenting together, parenting in separation, and parenting alone groups:

First, each group consists of small and unrepresentative numbers. This is particularly so for the Parenting in Separation and Parenting Alone groups of both fathers and mothers

Second, it is likely that different relationship experiences will have coloured what people have said. The memories of those who enjoy the momentum of continuity are likely to be different from those of people in the traumas of disruption, and different again from those who parent in relative isolation. Hindsight is a well-known reframer.

Even given these cautions, however, some clear differences seem to emerge from the participants' narratives.

Reading down the columns of Table 3 (Snapshot of Expectations), we notice an apparent gradient of declining clarity, specificity and realism in the expressed expectations of both fathers and mothers. Higher proportions of those parenting alone had 'no clear ideas', little or no planning for parenthood, and less inter-spousal communication than was the case for those parenting together. Also, a greater proportion of these parents appeared to have fallen into the relationship rather than having carefully chosen their partner or having made a decision to have a child. Only one of the four had been married to the father of her child.

The statements of the fathers and mothers in each of the three pairs of groups seem more comparable to each other than they are to same sex parents in other parenting structures.³

The sole dads' expectations seem more traditional than those of dads parenting with a partner. Their outlooks seem to fit an older conceptual world.

Despite differences between the groups, not all members fitted the group characterisation. Indeed each group overlapped the other in some ways, e.g. all groups had members who had 'no clear expectations', all had people favouring traditional roles, and all had those reaching out for something deeper.

Every member of every group spoke positively about their child.

³ Paul Callister maintains that 'Research has consistently found that there are much greater parenting differences between different couples than between the father and mother of the same family.' Callister, P., 'Fathers, Families and the Future: Fathering and Mentoring', *Father and Child*, 4, 1999.
Disparities in parenting style within a couple, where they occur, are worth attenuating.

What becomes clear throughout this whole research is that by being well-prepared and positively motivated, parents position themselves to bequeath to their children an enormous base of foundational assets.

3.2 Objective 2: Fathers' and Mothers' Sources of Expectations

We pursued the second objective by asking participants, 'Where did you get your expectations from? What influences shaped your understanding?'

As is reported throughout the world-wide literature, the first influencers, parents, strongly shape children's taken-for-granted worlds. Children tend to take the conditions and processes that prevail in their home situations as being 'normal'.

Grounded deep in this taken-for-granted world is the gender role division of labour between Dad and Mum. The ways the parent figure(s) acted tend to be carried along unconsciously, and the children are likely to reproduce these patterns automatically, if in their adulthood they encounter comparable conditions. A potent expression of this came in a mum's words

I wanted a man like my Dad.

In presenting the data on parents' sources of expectations, we shall compact the fathers' views into Table 4A, followed by a reflective discussion, then present the mothers' views in Table 4B.

Tables 4A and 4B subdivide the sources into those deriving directly from the modelling of the family of origin, and other family and non-family sources.

Table 4A: Where did you get your expectations from?

Fathers' Accounts of the Sources of their Expectations, by Theme and Parenting Structure

Theme	Dads Parenting Together Group 1, N = 11	Parenting Separately Group 3, N = 4	Dads Parenting Alone Group 5, N = 7
Parents' Marriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dad did his best, but had no strong model. Dads were excluded in Ireland in the 1950s 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My parents split when I was 6. I had no Dad from then on. Parents split when I was 13. Dad's parents split when he was 11
Own Father – Positive Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I have strong memories of Dad. He built things for us, played sport with us Dad taught me values, especially as a teenager 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mum and Dad had their own roles. He was my role model. I would do what he did 	
Own Father – Absent or Negative Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dad was never home, didn't do things with me. No expectations from home Dad was the farming father – always out, but we did things together on farm Dad was a hard person, who had a hard, separated farming dad. I have no childhood memories of Dad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My Dad was never home, so I decided to be home half the week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dad was a shiftworker 7 nights a week. Always working Dad was just not there. No role model Dad was alcoholic, erratic. I was terrified of him Dad didn't want kids
Mum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mum taught me to change nappies when I was a kid 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It was Mum who did the work at home
Other Family Members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My grandfather told me stories My grandfather influenced me as a teenager My uncle was important – lots of interests I got ideas from my sister and wife My brother-in-law and older sisters My wife has early childhood training, and she and her sisters helped me. My two older sisters; now wife and I talk things through 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> I learned from sister's boyfriend, and from other women – what they expected. They talked with me 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> My grandfather, though he said 'Children should be seen, not heard'. My Grandad – he took me fishing. He was Dad's Stepdad
Other Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TV programs: 'The Brady Bunch', 'Family Ties' We came from different backgrounds, I follow wife's lead Saw how other families treat child 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TV 'Partridge Family', 'My Three Sons', 'Brady Bunch'. I became aware of society changing – guys should be more hands-on. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> TV – Open Learning programs on Parenting Training course and books from Parent Leadership Institute I called the Parenting Line

3.2.1 Reflective Comments on Dads' Sources of Expectations

A significant proportion of the dads determined to take a different path from their own dads, and to be more supportively present to their child or children.

A number of men mentioned multiple sources that had contributed to their approach to being a parent, and those who came from integrated, multiple generation families seemed to have clearer notions about being a dad than did those from families with fewer adult role models.

The men's most cherished memories seemed to be of the things their dads had done with them. They told stories about Dad building things for them, doing things together on the farm, playing sport, going fishing. These participants seemed to have fathers who were engaged in their sons' lives. Other dads were absent. Silent vacuums in the boys' souls.

The long-term influence of this 'father-fullness' or 'father-emptiness' in the man's upbringing may provide a clue to his subsequent life in relationship and as a father.

Two dads in Group 1 mentioned their cultural backgrounds, Irish and Italian, both of which were strongly familistic when these men were growing up, and two mentioned 'the farming father'. Exploring cultural, rural, and occupational models of masculinity, relationships and parenting hold promise for extending this study appreciably.

The fathers Parenting in Separation and Parenting Alone expressed more negative memories of their families of origin than did those Parenting Together. Their dads, it seems, were less likely to be positively present. In addition, the prevailing mood of the family environment was unenjoyable.

Although the strongest source of expectations identified by the seven sole fathers was their family of origin, not one said they would use their own dad as a life model.

Three of the men mentioned TV shows as providing images of parenting. The role of the media in shaping identities and giving educative input in our changing environment is worthy of a fuller study. This is particularly the case with Australian television serials.

A surprising gap appears in Table 4A – a low level of tribute to Mum. Was this an oversight?

Table 4B: Where did you get your expectations from?

Mothers' Accounts of the Sources of their Expectations, by Theme and Parenting Structure

Theme	Mums Parenting Together Group 2, N = 10	Parenting Separately Group 4, N = 5	Mums Parenting Alone Group 6, N = 4
Family of Origin	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My parents stayed together, and all 5 of us chn partnered people whose parents were together. • My expectations came from my home family – including negative side • I got my ideas from home. Mum did everything, Dad provided. I wanted a man who'd be there, and have life experience in the workforce. I had to be able to trust the man. I married a man with a job like my Dad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My family was interactive, shared constructively in loving environmt. But his family was not involved with each other. They were silent, non-sharing. He got shunned if he did anything wrong. Perhaps that's because he was adopted, and the only child. We had very different life experiences and expectations. • I assumed from my family that I would be married with children. But I'd be of the new generation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Oldest of four in rural town. At 12, Mum left to marry lover, I became head of family – organised the home and Dad's business • I was in middle, Mum holding one arm, Dad the other. They almost pulled my arms out of their sockets. They split when I was 8. Brother's mates raped me when I was 10 • Oppressive home environment • Youngest of 4 in poor family. I was gang-raped as teenager
Mum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learned from wise Mum -her faith on rocky road-- • Mum looked after us mostly. When Dad came home, he told us stories. • I had the Italian cultural model of Mother. This gave me my ideas. • Mum had an unsafe house, had Postnatal Depression. Dad was not hands-on. I wanted safety 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mum is my light. Dad didn't deal with the conflict, Mum did. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mum brought up by 2 orphans. Was having affair all my life, sacrificed us. Rejected me 3 x, at 18 mo, 12, 16. • I don't want to be like Mum. • Depressed, catatonic. Split I was 15 • At 2, told Mum dead. At 14, I found her in hospital. Her sister, having affair with Dad, split her head open 12 years ago
Dad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dad influenced me. He worked to live; my white collar colleagues lived to work, got satisfaction from work. I wanted a man like my Dad. • I was influenced by both my family (of origin) and my work colleagues. Yet I married a man in the same type of job as Dad • As a child, I watched other dads with kids. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I got my ideas from my family – like my Dad always being there. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Truckie. I was 5 when I had to drive home when he was under influence • Dad made excuses not to be with me. At 16 he moved woman in, I shot thru. • Dad not happy with his own life. He resented his chn as financial burdens. • Dad = boxer. Used violence. Afraid.
Work Colleagues And Other Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I had other role models. I'd worked professionally with families and noted how parents interact. Also took parenting course. • I had unconscious expectations, having worked for so long in a male-dominated workplace. • My education and work with sick children and their parents helped. I could see what worked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I read teenage books – fantasy stuff. I got my ideas from them. • I got ideas from my friends' families – they were more affectionate • My Nanna – she was divorced and was cold and critical. I don't want to be like her. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Had 6 yr relationship with professional man– showed I didn't want suburban lifestyle. Uni, travel changed my ideas • Met man in Defence Forces, I was 21, he 18. Got pregnant. Bad time. • Married a man and thankfully got to Australia

3.2.2 Reflective Comments on Mums' Sources of Expectations

The women's stories were generally richer in imagery, detail, and memories than the men's.

While two groups of women spoke warmly of their own mothers' influence on their growing-up period, this was not so for the four participants who went on to become sole mums.

For the Parenting Alone mothers, life started out hard. Two of the four had been raped as children, and all four emerged from conflict and unhappiness. All four spoke unfavourably about their mothers, none of whom were emotionally there for their young daughters. They also spoke unfavourably of their fathers⁴.

Six of the ten Parenting Together mothers, who were generally older and better qualified than those in the other groups, spoke of how work experience had influenced their ideas on partnership, and their choice of partner. Three specifically said that they chose a man in a job similar to that of their father. These workforce-experienced women also cultivated the newer ideas and aspirations of their generation.

The relationship between occupational conditions and relationship, parenting, and family life again suggests itself as meriting further exploration, as it did in the men's stories.

Taken together, the sources of both women's and men's expectations are largely fashioned through early family experience, and are further developed by subsequent peer, workforce, media, and social involvement experience.

The family of origin influences children in hundreds of ways. Some of these are:

- by unobtrusively giving children their primary concepts of what the world is like, where its rewards and dangers lie, how it works, and how to operate within it
- by bestowing role modelling of what fathers and mothers do, their attachment styles, and notions of what is appropriate behaviour
- by installing a bank of memories that are resources for future life
- by delivering a toolkit of ways of adapting to change, managing conflict, and setting goals
- by giving direct experience of the parameters of intimacy and/or distance, of close living together and/or securing one's own space
- by modelling a routine and agenda for organising the day and year

⁴ For one of the Parenting Alone mothers, though, both Dad and Mum have been present to and supportive of her and her child as a sole parent. David H. Olson and Hamilton Mc Cubbin and Associates (*Families – What Makes Them Work*, Beverly Hills, Sage Publications, 1983) suggest that the teenage family stage in the family cycle stresses parents very heavily, and that empty-nesters often offer greater attentiveness to their adult children's needs than they did earlier in life.

The more adults there are in the family – in terms of multi-generational and laterally extended families – the more comprehensive the formative material. Similarly, families that are multiply connected with other families in community contexts have richer backgrounds from which to draw, and offer deeper veins of social capital. The more adults of both sexes children have close contact with, the more models of being and relating as an adult they have access to.

In addition, the prevailing climate or mood in the family flavours the recipient's taste for the type of family she or he experiences. Some find themselves richly rewarded. Many want something more. Others look to build something different.

Although the family of origin, through its early, pervasive, involuntary conditioning, powerfully influences children's consciousness, which is often uncritically carried forward into adulthood, it does not necessarily determine the family member's future. Both men and women in our groups reported that they had chosen to make changes. In that respect they were self-determining.

Some had done so because they experienced different environments, each with its own models and forces. Multiple conditioning heightens the awareness and possibility of change, of an evolution of the mind, of ferment in one's ways of acting, and the renewal of one's life chances. Mothers with significant experience in the workforce specifically spoke of the way they had modified their views via the different perspectives learned from their colleagues.

The third research objective of this study shifts the emphasis from the past sources of expectations prior to becoming a parent, to the present domain of fathers' and mothers' actual experiences as a parent.

3.3 Objective 3: Fathers' and Mothers' Experiences

We now move from the conditioning and formative experiences of the past to the present time.

In the group sessions, we asked the fathers: 'What do you actually do as a dad with and for your child?'

We asked the mothers: 'What does the father of your child actually do as a dad with and for your child?'

In their answers, each participant invites us through the front door of his or her home, into the living room, kitchen, bathroom, bedroom, and out into the garden. The photos and other symbols discussed in Chapter 2 introduced us to the young ones, and now we witness the interactions between Dad, Mum and Child.

Where separation has structured the living arrangement, we notice alongside the regular home routine children being taken to Mum's place or Dad's place, or Dad coming to visit. In families where there is only one functioning parent, we feel the dynamism of the homelife the Dad or Mum has created with and for the child.

We are privileged to make these home visits.

In Table 5's snapshot, we summarise 21 fathers' and 16 mothers' responses to the questions.

**Table 5. Snapshot of Experiences
Fathers and Mothers in Three Parenting Structures**

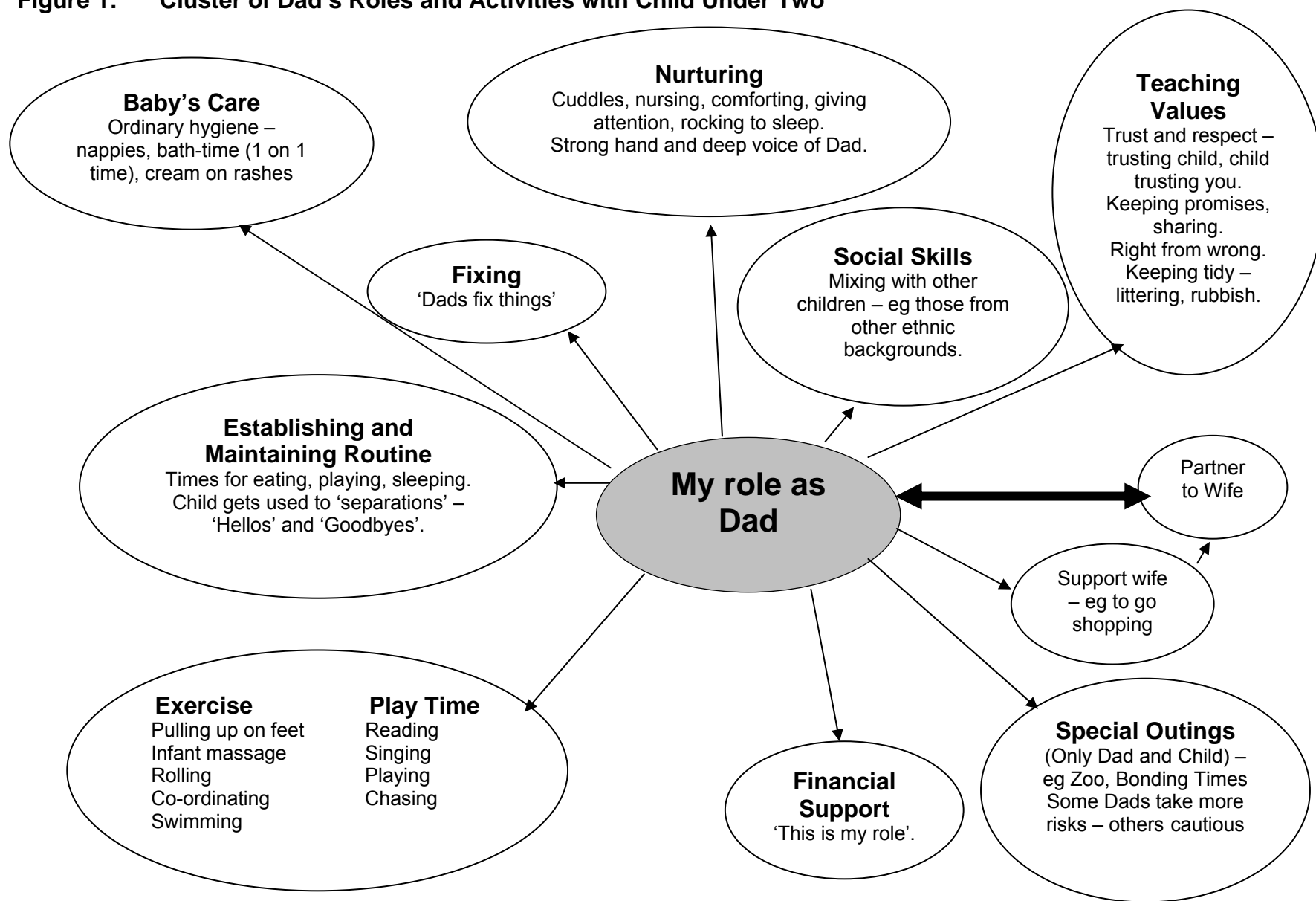
	Fathers	Mothers
Parenting Together	<p>Group 1 (N = 10)</p> <p>The men responded with a large number of tasks, activities and roles.</p> <p>Some activities are very specific - e.g. changing nappies, while some roles are more far-reaching and general - e.g. teaching values.</p> <p>The men's statements are grouped together in Figure 1, <u>Cluster of Dad's Roles and Activities with Children Under Two.</u></p>	<p>Group 2 (N = 8)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He feeds, bathes and plays with baby while I sleep for a further hour. Sings. • Not much mid-week, more on w/ends, Men's Playgroup, walks in park, shops • Bathed our first daughter + walks in pouch. But not as often for No. 2 • Works less, more for child, more reward he enjoys play - neighbourhood funman • Took TV out of sight-helps conversation • He falls asleep in front of TV. Damaging • He's tired on week-ends - just sleeps
Separated	<p>Group 3 (N = 4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I do everything from Friday to Sunday. 130 nights last year. • My daughter's 16 months. I have her from Wed pm to Sat each week. I do everything for her then. • Separated for 2 years. I work 2 days, 2 nights on, then 4 off. Court Orders fit my shiftwork roster. • I see my 3 y.o. every 2nd week-end, and do the normal things 	<p>Group 4 (N = 4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He's finding out what being a parent is. We're better off, even the dog's better • He has her 3 hrs/fortnight. Court Orders restrict him. His Mum does the work. • He comes weekends: TV, McDonalds, he's closer to girls now we're separated • He comes 24 hrs/wk, takes more responsibility, is more affectionate but still inconsistent, thoughtless.
Alone	<p>Group 5 (N = 7)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work gives the money, looking after the child is my real job. • Maintaining the household – doing Mum as well as Dad things • Bathing and caring for the child, being there when he cries • Getting up at night, cooking, laundry, organising the schedule • Talking, listening, making my ears and heart open to him • Coordinating with his Mum Creating 'special times' to bond 	<p>Group 6 (N = 4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He wanted me to terminate. At 36, I went ahead. I was on my own from the 2nd day. After violence I took out a Restraining Order. We'll leave town. • The 18 year old was too scared to hold baby. His violence hospitalised me. I took the baby and went. • He was violent, wanted abortion, saw me as financial burden, did nothing. We split. Hope kept me alive. • He was absent and violent, insulted me, didn't bond with our son, didn't pay any bills. I moved out.

3.3.1 Group 1: Ten Partnered Dads Express Their Experiences

What do you actually do as a Dad for and with your child?

The fathers responded to the question in a rich variety of ways. We collect, organise, summarise, and present what the Dads in Group 1 said they do with and for their child diagrammatically, in Figure 1, Cluster of Dad's Roles and Activities with Child Under Two.

Figure 1: Cluster of Dad's Roles and Activities with Child Under Two



Reflective Comments

Not all the fathers do all the things listed in Figure 1 all the time. Rather the Figure represents the range of parenting activities mentioned in the group. These items do not suffer the disadvantages of retrospective recall, but they could be influenced, in some cases, by 'social desirability elevations'.

The main difficulty interpreting information collected by this type of method is that many of the activities mentioned could be collaborative, or done more frequently by Mum. Indeed, a shortcoming of asking questions of one of a pair, without consulting the other, is that the contribution of the one asked could be, and indeed is likely to be, overstated.

Nevertheless the men appeared to accept what each of the others contributed, and we present Figure 1 as compacting ten married fathers' perceptions and statements of their parenting activities with their child or children under two.

In qualitative terms, the dads seemed to be very deeply engaged with their child's development. Many expressions of the importance of father's involvement in the formation of the child's mind and social competence reflect a deep awareness of long term issues.

Most of these dads seemed to have an 'investment consciousness', the time, energy and love they invest in their child being deposits that will reap long-term rewards in terms of child and family development, health and happiness.

It was clear from a number of statements that the men had found that doing more with and for their child strengthened two relationships, Dad with child, and husband with wife.

One dad said:

'I take the baby for a walk in the pouch for an hour and a half each morning. This helps bond me with the child, as she gets the feel and smell of me, and not of her breast-feeding Mum only. It also gives me some exercise, and gives my wife a chance to sleep undisturbed. When we get back I feel free to give the baby to her Mum and go off to work. This walk is very important to me - I look forward to it.'

Another dad had twins. The challenges of this more complex form of fatherhood included not only the increased energy and attentiveness demanded, but also issues of twin-twin relationship. He said:

'I spend quite a bit of time on the boys' social skills – how they learn to play with each other. Also how they mix with other children.'

Generally the fathers in this group were going forward in their lives and doing well occupationally. Their role as dads fitted into this pattern. They appeared to be coping well with fatherhood's demands and were keeping ahead of the child's development in terms of what to expect next.

There were no expressions of doom, disaster, regret or failure.

3.3.2 Group 2: Eight Partnered Mums Share Their Experiences

What does your partner actually do as a dad for and with your child?

The mothers mentioned tasks and contributions, and also some concerns

Dad likes to play with the Child(ren)

- He gets up about seven and feeds, bathes and plays with our daughter, while I sleep for a further hour. Then he goes to work. In the evenings he takes her for a walk, goes shopping or plays with her (swings her around). Then we all sing - including the dog.
- My husband is a child at heart - he enjoys playing. He sets up 'tea parties' with the animal toys. The kids in the neighbourhood know him as a fun man. Now he wants to get all the families to buy Scaletric sets (cars), so that they can put them all together in a mega set, and have competitions.
- Mine doesn't do much mid-week really, but on the week-ends he's there more. He takes our child to the Men's Playgroup, and for walks outside - in the park or shopping centre.

My partner's changed

- He always bathed our first daughter, and took her for walks in the pouch. But he doesn't do it as often for No. 2 as he did for No. 1.
- My husband took a job overseas to get more money. He seemed to lose his vision of supporting me emotionally. Anyway we didn't save much - I just spent more. Now he stays home with less money and we spend less and have more quality interaction. He's discovered that the more he puts into our child the greater the reward for him.

Common concerns

Participants mentioned two areas of discomfort for them. All eight agreed that their husband was over-tired, and the TV is problematic in at least four homes.⁵ In some cases, these are connected.

- When he comes home he usually wants to watch TV. The six o'clock news is often an issue. The TV and the children compete for his attention - he can watch and talk at the same time, but the kids notice it and feel less important.
- We've dealt with this at mealtimes by taking the TV out of sight of the table.
- My husband is going to buy our daughter her own TV, so he can watch his station.
- My husband watches TV too late into the night. He falls asleep in front of it. This affects him the next day. Also when he's so tired he's not as attentive and patient as a parent.
- My husband's tired out on week-ends - he just wants to sleep.

⁵ Robert Putnam's research has shown that 'television viewing is strongly and negatively related to social trust and group membership', and he sees the rise in viewing over the past half century as a cause of the decline in social capital in the USA. (Putnam, R., 'The strange disappearance of civic America', Policy, Autumn 1996,14.)

Reflective Comments

The women of Group 2 said their partners functioned relatively well as dads, one 'exceeding my expectations' and others meeting them. Some women put in more than a 50% share of the parenting, and received compensations.

The mothers were clearly supportive of their husbands'/partners' involvements with their children, yet wanted more. They seemed concerned that the workforce took too much energy, leaving the men tired. Men who invested more in their family lives benefited from greater responsiveness from their children, and closeness with their wives.

Many of the women benefited financially from their spouses' occupational commitment and their concerns were not strong enough for anyone to express a sense of foreboding. Perhaps they perceived this as an uneasy trade-off at this stage of life.

Looked at demographically, these women entered motherhood later in life than did the women of Groups 4 and 6. Their mean age when their first child was born, shown in Table 2, was 34.6 years, compared with 26.4 for Group 4 and 28.5 for Group 6. Our unrepresented data show that Group 2 mothers had spent more years in career positions, and more years in relationship before having the first child than was the case for the women of the other groups.

They also had relatively few children. Perhaps this is due to their older age when they started their families, but is possibly also a function of being recruited when they have a child under two.

These mothers' experiences are more differentiated than their expectations – possibly because of relatively comparable family of origin enculturation and wider post-modern diversity of experience.

In terms of the discomforts, 5.00 – 6.00 p.m. with its TV distractions seemed to be a difficult hour, but one mother said they had dealt with the problem. Generally, these parents seemed to have sufficient forward momentum to be able to deal with and settle problems and not be bogged down by them.

3.3.3 Group 3: Four Separated Dads Share Their Experiences

What do you actually do as a Dad for and with your child?

With only four men we decided to present their statements verbatim:

‘When my wife left, our daughter was 2 1/2 and the son was 14 months and still being breastfed. She came over once a day to feed him, and I did the rest from Friday to Sunday. Later my wife withdrew access, and as I considered myself the primary care-giver, I went to Court, and got the children on the week-ends again, but I don’t always know the times in advance. In reality, though, I’m getting them more. In the first year they were with me for 65 nights, in the second for 130. Sometimes I have them for a week and see the kids more than their mum does. I have a close bond with both of them.’

‘My daughter’s 16 months. I have her from Wednesday afternoon to Saturday each week. I do everything for her then. I do the housework when she goes to sleep for 1 1/2 hours about 10 in the morning. Then we go up to Kings Park, or we go shopping together – where I go, she goes. In the afternoons she sleeps from 3.00 – 5.30. Then we play Lego together or go outside. In the evenings I read her a story and she goes to bed at 8. We go to a dads only playgroup on Saturday mornings – also to the beach, which is her favourite, the zoo, picnics and shopping centre events. I’m not too serious with her – I’m trying to teach her happiness and self-confidence.’

‘Not a lot was expected of me in the baby stage, but my partner didn’t cope, so I did more and more. But this made her feel more inadequate. When I got home from nightshift, I fed and bathed the kids. When my partner woke up at 9 o’clock, she was angry with me.’

‘She had no dad, so didn’t really know what to expect from a man. Now we’ve been separated for two years. I work two days and two nights on, then four days off, so the Court Orders were framed around my shiftwork roster. We’ve got an advance plan for our 2 1/2 year old boy – I have him two nights a week, and when he’s 3 it will become three nights a week. Once a month I get him for an extra night and we can go down south. Having a definite system is better for me – it works well. When he’s not with me, I’m a workaholic’.

‘When we separated, my son was 15 months – now he’s 3. I see him every second week-end, and he won’t let me out of his sight. In terms of tasks – it’s the normal living things – cooking meals, bathing etc. I’ve been there for him through all the changes and have given him solid emotional support. We have a bond – it comes from spending time together. I’m his rock’.

The group voiced three additional points. A father in the navy said:

‘In uniform, you’re different – it frightens the kids. When the men went home in civvies, the domestic violence dropped.’

Some Mums prefer Daycare to Dad having the child:

‘The difficulty I find is switching on and off as a Dad. I live three lives – at work, with the child, and alone. Having support at work and from my family helps a lot’.

Reflective Comments

The main theme of Group 3 discussion was the arrangements under which they had the child(ren), rather than the tasks of being a dad. They accepted that when they had the child they would 'do everything'.

This differentiates these fathers from those Parenting Together in a most fundamental way. Parenting in Separation is a very different enterprise.

The separated dads in Group 3 prefer a regular weekly routine. Uncertainty, erratic arrangements, and switching on and off were unsettling and destructive, given parents', children's and the workforce's need for predictability.

3.3.4 Group 4: Four Separated Mums Share Their Experiences

What does the father of your child actually do as a dad?

The mothers responded in two ways: what he did while they were together, and what he does now they're separated. Table 6 tabulates their statements.

Table 6: Parenting Contributions by Partners of Separated Mums

While Together	After Separation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At the beginning, he raced home to see her, but he had no apparent strong bond. He wouldn't do tasks, even when I needed support. He did hardly anything, even when I was having a difficult pregnancy. He didn't want the baby. • He was very good when first born. He cried at the birth, was very gentle. He worked long hours, she waited excitedly for him. When it was good between us, he played with her at night, cuddled her, danced with her, changed a few nappies and took her for walks in the pram. When it was bad, he became very self-absorbed. He neither bathed nor fed her, but did yell at her on occasions. And he was violent with me. • When he came home, he used to put the TV on, cook, keep the house tidy and do things outside in the rockery. He got the children ready when I was away – bathed and dressed them. I felt they were in safe hands. But the responsibility weighed too heavily on him. Then he started taking them to the movies and dog races, where he went into gambling and got into debt. • He did a lot for the first baby – and the other two. He changed nappies and got up in the night. He took the three boys into the shower with him, watched TV, played computer games, pushed the pram and looked after them when I was at work. <p>He's 'a really good Dad when he's normal'. But when he's depressed it's different. He doesn't seem to enjoy the good times or even realise he's having them. He didn't want responsibility yet resented me taking control.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Now he's finding out what being a parent is. He has her once a fortnight. Because of his violence (and my Restraining Order), he doesn't know where I live. Our daughter doesn't want to visit him at our former home (160 km away), so we meet at a neutral point. We're much better off now – even the dog has improved. He used to wee on the floor, be hyperactive. • He's now much the same. His Mum goes to his home once a fortnight for the three hours when the child is there. She does the practical things. There are Court Orders – residency and 'no contact' (with me) out against him. • He comes for two hours every week-end and he's much the same. He puts the TV on, but I make him take them out – he watches the oldest play netball, and they go to McDonald's. <p>He's actually closer to the girls now we're separated.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • He comes about 24 hours a week, stays over on alternate Friday and Saturday nights, and comes Monday and Wednesday mornings. <p>He still does what he used to do, and sometimes takes more responsibility. He's also physically affectionate with the children but isn't consistent, and is just as thoughtless.</p>

Reflective Comments

All four mothers indicated that their menfolk had made big efforts at first, then flagged away.

Two of the four separated mums reported that the fathers of their children functioned reasonably well. Indeed one was 'closer to the girls now we're separated'. The other two felt better in separation. For all four, then, separation had positive effects.

Some couples seemed to have settled into a stable parenting pattern that was comfortable for the mother. Two, though, lived in fear and secrecy.

In most cases the father acted similarly when coupled and separated – the congenial were congenial and those who had been violent remained violent.

Some women who didn't expect the man to do much had their expectations confirmed, while those who wanted more collaboration and sharing seemed to experience it. Either way, these mothers were all separated.

Three themes emerged from the discussion:

- Whether the man wanted the child in the first place
- The patterns of leadership and control in the home, and
- The dynamics of depression in relationships, parenting and separation.

All of these merit more detailed study. They need a research process adapted to depth investigation, encompassing each partner's attribution and motivation processes.

So also does the way separation strains attachment bonds. For some children, a shadow appears in their emotional system when parents separate. It is a shadow cast by the fear of abandonment, which in turn, is ultimately an inchoate forerunner of the fear of death.⁶

⁶ See Cowie, H., 'Child Care and Attachment', in Barnes, P. (ed), Personal, Social and Emotional Development in Children, Milton Keynes, U.K., The Open University, 1995.

3.3.5 Group 5: Seven Sole Dads Share their Experiences

What do you do for and with your child?

The men mentioned specific tasks, communication and support issues.

Baby care and household management

'Bathing and caring for the child; being there when he cries, getting up at night; laundry and ironing; organising the schedule; and cooking,' – one confiding 'now I have a reason to cook – not just get takeaways'.

'Dealing with his tantrums; doing things together, such as hanging out washing; and coordinating with services and the child's mother when she was on the scene'.

'Doing Mum things as well as Dad things'

'Managing the household is more difficult than managing an organisation'

Communication

'We talk while we walk to school. I make my ears and heart available to her. When I listen during play, she brings up emotions and issues. This gives her the pretext to work through her feelings about things. I'm really committed to making this work'

Another man said:

'He helped the child to define the right thing to do by 'being a moral authority'.

Asking for support

Three of the men mentioned the sustaining influence of the child's grandparents, usually the dad's parents. One man mentioned his sister, another the Daycare:

'When my 4-year old wants to get the clothes she enjoys, I call on my sister. She helps.'

'When I have a problem I discuss it with the Daycare people – they understand. At Kindy you can smell the father-hunger in the room.'

Parent Leadership Institute courses supported one man, he used the material to frame his approach to being a dad, including 'Special times', where child-led activities build initiative and self-determination, and bond Dad and child.

Fathers without support:

'My family's over East. I find it hard to make connections here'.

'The single dad's the odd man out. He can't join the conversations. Services are oriented towards women and children'.

'My low income restricts what I can do in the network'.

What do you find the hardest aspect of being Dad to a child under two?

When asked this question, each dad nominated one difficulty.

Continuing separation dilemmas:

'My family's split. Some support me, some support her'.

'My daughter has difficulty with two households – she's with me during the week and with her Mum on weekends. When she comes home, I usually have to patch her up'.

'Now her Mum's out of hospital, my daughter wants her. They do fun things together. But we still have uncertainty over her sickness' (depression).

Relationships outside the home:

'Isolation from the wider support of my family (over East) is the hardest for me'.

'Losing my career to look after the children. But it's worth it. I can now tell my work when to get nicked'.

Day to day difficulties:

'Caring for him when he was a baby was the hardest. His Mum walked when he was 12 months old'.

'Getting enough time with my child'

Reflective Comments

The men aspired and determined to do well as a Dad.

A man whose children's mother chooses to have no contact with their 8 and 10 year-old sons said:

'Parenting (alone) is a challenge I really enjoy'.

Another said:

'I worked part-time as soon as my son was born. I'm really committed to making my parenting work.'

Some of the men, recently separated, were in emotional turmoil, Family Court disputes, and financial straits. Others had been separated for some years, had adapted to sole parenting and had rebuilt their lives around their new circumstances. A 45 year-old father, for example, said:

'I've looked after a wonderful little girl for 7 1/2 years. I know I'm her No. 1. When she hurts, it hurts me. I got over thoughts of suicide because of the rewards of this child, so my experience is bittersweet.'

Five of the seven dads mentioned relationship areas as being those of greatest difficulty. This suggests that collaborative partnering skills could position them well for getting on top of troublesome spots.

3.3.6 Group 6: Four Sole Mums Share their Experiences

What was your experience of the child's father?

We relate each mother's story as she told it.

Partner breaks promises and is violent - I take action.

'He said he'd support me if I became pregnant', Diamond whispered, 'but he flipped, and wanted me to terminate. I was 36 and decided to go ahead. I had a lot of ill health during the pregnancy, and they removed a 14cm abdominal cyst at 15 weeks. Eventually I had a home birth. Then, from the second day, I was on my own. When leaving, he threatened me if I put in a maintenance order'.

'He did come back later, with promises, and we tried again. But it ended in violence against the baby and me. After two months it was all over and I took out a Restraining Order. Now we'll leave town'.

'I'm a strong, independent woman. He's weak and dependent. He couldn't see that to support the baby a man has to support the mother. I bent over backwards to get him to see the child, but he can't separate the child from me, and it's me he wants.'

Immature partner becomes violent - I leave.

'Crimson's father was an immature eighteen when she was conceived, and not ready to be a father. He'd had a rough home-life. His father was a Vietnam veteran and had frequently been belittling and cruel, and permitted his two older brothers to bully him.⁷ My partner's mother had a disabling chronic condition. He seemed to know no other language than that needed for physical survival. Hardly the preparation for nurturing a baby and her mother'.

'The pregnancy was a difficult one. He became violent, and twice I was hospitalised. I developed a severe (stress-linked) bowel condition, which progressed into gangrene'.

"One more week," the doctor had confided, "and you'd have been dead."

'Crimson was born at 32 weeks, after I had had three operations on my bowel. The birth was medically and relationally complex. 'He didn't come to the hospital til she was a day old – he went to TAFE instead.' Things at home didn't improve'.

'I came home on 23rd December and he left the next day for twelve days' holiday'.

'He didn't get up at night, never fed her nor changed her nappy. He didn't even hold her, he was so scared. A relationship's supposed to be about supporting each other. I didn't get any of that. There's one thing that kept me alive – my child'.

'When his violence continued, despite my self-esteem being at an all-time low, I decided we were better off on our own. I took my baby and went.'

'I wanted motherhood, my indebted druggie became violent and left'.

⁷ Significant evidence from Australia and the USA reveals that both Vietnam veterans and their children tend to have behavioural, relationship, and parenting difficulties arising from the long-term effects of post-traumatic stress and the aftermath and implications of active military service in Vietnam (see Leslie-Adams, Adele, "I thought it was just me..." Melbourne, Vietnam Veterans Counselling Service, 1999).

'Through my 20s I had several relationships. Desperately I searched for the love my father hadn't shown me, ending up pregnant to someone who had similar oppressive ideas to my Dad. His dad had abandoned him, and his mother had sacrificed her children for another man'.

'He was a marijuana addict, already had a four-year old son, and had debts everywhere. He became verbally violent when I was pregnant, wanted me to abort – to kill the baby – and refused to see a counsellor. Like my Dad, he regarded me as a financial burden, and resented it. However much I did around the house, he wasn't satisfied'.

'I realised that my life was up to me. Becoming a mother was the greatest desire in my life. I had established a strong sense of my spirit, and I was going to have a child. It was hope that kept me alive'.⁸

'He felt trapped, but I was prepared to raise my child on my own. He wanted to be single again, he'd have a very different life than I would with the baby. He didn't do any work for the baby – never changed a nappy. When I pushed my child in the pram, I was ashamed I wasn't married, that he wouldn't commit to me or to the relationship'.

'I lived with the stigma of no wedding ring. I became distraught.'

'We split when my daughter was nine months old. He then got another woman. He comes and sees the baby most weeks and adores her – he's loving, protective and playful but doesn't want to deal with crying or upsets. He still gets stoned but is more generous. After leaving us without a dime he now gives me \$50 a week'.

'Actually, he's a better uncle than a father.'

Unsupportive husband becomes violent. I move out and file for divorce

'I was thirty when I made the decision to have our child. But my husband said 'That doesn't look like my son'. And he never took to him. A child needs bonding. They should be there every day of his life. But my husband wasn't'.

'He went away a lot with his real estate work, and abused me like my father did. My father said I was a whore and my husband said 'You're a good-timer.' That hurt. Also he didn't pay any bills, even though he's got a new Saab and a Harley Davidson'.

'One day when I was very afraid I called Ngala for help. "Move out" they urged, "go to a refuge." But I didn't, and it was my worst mistake. I ended up in hospital that night.'

'I feel a failure, but listening to you in this group helps me a lot. Others have had violence and trouble too, and have gotten out of it. Actually I still love my husband deep inside me. I never wanted to leave the marriage. My beliefs are, 'once married stay married'. But I've done my duty as a wife, and I'm a very good Mum. I do the best I can'.

'Now I'm out and staying with a friend. I'm also lodging papers for a divorce and child support. He says he'll come and visit our son, but often he doesn't pitch up. He changes the arrangements. Or he might suddenly ring up and say "I've got my other son now and I'm coming to pick up the boy." He's very unreliable'.

'I know I have to take charge of me from now on.'

⁸ Emile Durkheim showed that children preserve parents from suicide, and that as people generally tend to discharge voluntarily-undertaken obligations, a child and the attendant duties become a 'staff of life' (Durkheim, Emile, Suicide, translated by J. Spaulding and G. Simpson, Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1951:201)

Reflective Comments

The four sole mothers' stories have several commonalities. They all said their backgrounds were deficient in nurture, rich in neglect, and intermittently peppered with violence and abuse. They left or were ejected from home early in life.

Their relationships broadly paralleled their upbringing. Two of them said: 'My Dad..., and my partner did the same...'

They felt there had to be something more.

All came to turning points on this rock of degradation, and experiential bottom where they opted for change. Three left the relationship and switched their housing, two to addresses unknown to the partner. All seek a new life.

All four now feel better and are headed north. They feel confident, having passed through deep waters. They plan rather than dream, initiate rather than wait, and gain impetus from their child. Their stories narrate epic journeys.

3.3.7 Making Sense of Dad's and Mum's Experiences

The eighteen people parenting together gave a strong feeling of momentum. They were going places. They were experiencing a very important stage in their lives and the rewards were greater than the challenges.

The Separated and Sole parents, by contrast, mainly seemed to have stalled in their life journeys. Most had suffered massive relationship traumas and had deep disappointments, including the dashing of their dreams.

Four of the eight mothers had suffered violence and wanted to be permanently freed from the fathers of their children. Yet two types of post-separation structure were clearly evident. Half lived in fear, secrecy and State protection. The other half had relatively comfortable arrangements – some even affectionate – and their children seemed to accept and adapt to living with dad and mum in separate homes. Clearly a careful study of pathways to ongoing conflict and pathways to livable, yet collaborative, separation could be of value to couples and practitioners alike.

The separated and sole dads generally had difficulties adjusting to their landscapes of upheaval. Only when they could secure undisturbed aloneness, it seems, could they develop the routines that provide a basis for child nurturing. Most also faced inner battles with grief, the feeling-state consequent on loss. Like dense fog, grief does not dissipate by itself. Rather it needs the rising of a warm sun to absorb the condensed tears.

All the separated and sole dads had the children overnight. Many of the ex-partners of the separated mums, and all those of the sole mums, saw the child during the day only, if at all.⁹

And children? This study did not canvas children's views, nor focus on their experiences. Yet we have the ancient voices of the children that remain in their fathers' and mothers' souls, in their memories of home, in the joys and excitements that at times came over them in their groups, and in their dreams, yearnings and bitterness's.

When parents live collaboratively and work together, our stories show, children under two receive a predictable basis for sleeping, feeding, playing, and growing. When they are shuttled around, on the other hand, particularly on erratic schedules, their parents find themselves struggling uphill, against odds that can't always be counted.

I found myself quite profoundly moved by the stories of separated and sole dads and mums, as we sat together after pizza and coffee, telling it the way it is. I was moved by their creativity and courage in securing the best they could for their babies and themselves. Not one did not bear in him or herself the scars of conflict, disappointment, and the need to start again. But they are all rising and doing just that.

What might the future hold for fathers, mothers, and their children, living under these three parenting systems?

This question takes us into the fourth focus of our study, participants' visions of the future. Vision opens the world of possibility, of what could be. It arises in imagination, and builds on images that attract, fuelled by real-life models. It reaches towards desired goals, success, and high ideals.

Men are not born fathers. Can vision help them become better dads?

⁹ Bruce Smyth and Anna Ferro investigated the significance of this distinction in their 'When the difference is night and day: parent-child contact after separation', *Family Matters*, 63, 2002.

3.4 Objective 4: Fathers' and Mothers' Visions

Objective 4 shifts ground from today to tomorrow. We wanted to find out how dads and mums view the father's role and involvement as the child grows, and how they plan their family's futures.

When asking the men how they envisioned themselves as dads in the future, we framed it in these words: 'what legacy they would like to leave your children? For example, when your child is 15, what would you like her or him to say about you?'

We asked the women in Groups 2, 4, and 6 what role they saw for the father of their child in the future, how they saw him being involved. What would they like the child to say about their Dad when she or he was 15?

In our Table 7 snapshot of visions we summarise what the dads and mums said. Then we elaborate by giving the detail of each group's discussion and by making reflective comments.

Table 7: Snapshot of Visions
Fathers and Mothers in Three Parenting Structures

	Fathers	Mothers
Parenting Together	<p>Group 1 (N = 10)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • freedom to be herself, yet fit in • courage - allow child to live own life • understand each twin as individual • kids learn to set goal, achieve it • daughter able to discuss anything • I'll set the boundaries - where line is • kids to recognise I'm king of house • I'll be there for her major life events • child to be passionate about life • at 15 want him to see Dad as mate 	<p>Group 2 (N = 8)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • children recognise he put family first • I am first; they secure in our rel'ship • Dad not always agree but accept me • my Dad loves my Mum and me too • my Dad is passionate - not lukewarm • I want him to be open, dynamic • relationship between Dad and child to evolve • him to play,relax more – fun with kids • He encouraged children to achieve potential – not pressured into things
Separated	<p>Group 3 (N = 4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I'll support, encourage him in what he wants to do – he'll trust his Rock • I'll be there. We'll have a closeness. She'll know she's not on her own • my daughter will feel special, loved. In 5 years we'll reconfigure dream • Dad taught me life-skills – give me happiness, confidence, wisdom. 	<p>Group 4 (N = 4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hope he starts seeing her, under supervision, so she can know him • I want him to be a Dad, bond with child, not just be bitter towards me • I'd like my gambler ex-husband to have a life-changing experience. • I fear he'll meet someone who doesn't support close way we parent
Alone	<p>Group 5 (N = 7)</p> <p><u>I want</u> my child to remember me as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Being there' • 'Dependable' • 'Firm and fair' • 'Her Rock'. <p><u>I fear</u> losing my child(ren):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through Court action. • By her choosing her Mum over me • By him growing away from me. • Through depression like their Mum • That I won't be alive long enough to see her through 	<p>Group 6 (N = 4)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I want an ecosystem of support, an alternative family with other single mums and good men – not blood. • I want independence, freedom of speech to say what I'm feeling. My partner to be emotionally there. • I want more children, but any new relationship will be built on respect. • Dream of better future keeps me going. My life purpose – being Mum.

3.4.1 Group 1: Ten Partnered Dads Look Towards their Futures

- What are your visions for yourself as a Dad in the future?
- What legacy would you like to leave your children?
- When the child is 15, what would you like her or him to say about you?

The ten men dreamed their futures as dads, then shared how they would like to be remembered. Four themes emerged, and some dads shared their fears.

Dad's Dilemma

A father expressed the focal challenge of Dad's Dilemma this way:

'I want my daughter to have the freedom to be herself, yet fit into society. Getting the balance is the challenge'.

Some fathers focussed on freedoms, others on fitting in, on learning the ways of the culture. Dads who stressed the freedom side favoured individuality, personal choice, self-determination, and developing uniqueness. Examples are:

'I hope that I have the courage to allow my child to live her own life, make her own mistakes. I don't want to tie her up with 'don'ts'.

'I can provide, but she makes the decisions'.

'I want to understand each twin as an individual, and spend time with each separately'.

'I want my child to be passionate about life'.

Dads who direct their energies to equipping their child for life in society said:

'I'll be firm but fair. I'll set the boundaries – where the line is. How to enforce it is the question'.

'I'll be assertive, agreed boundaries will have to be kept'.

'I want the kids to recognise I'm the king of my house, with clear values and firm boundaries'.

'I'd like my kids to emulate me as a runner - learn how to set a goal, work out how to achieve it, work at it, and enjoy the satisfaction of achieving'.

One dad combined both sides of the dilemma with the statement:

At 15 I'd like my kid to say, "Dad's my hero, and I can be a hero too".

Desired Human Qualities and Outcomes

The second major category of responses concerned outcome qualities the fathers wanted their children to have. Dad's input and the realisation of these qualities in the children were seen as being connected by a range of parenting and family life processes. These are revealed by statements such as:

'I want my daughter to be able to discuss things with me – boyfriends, periods, experiences'.

'A part of my role is educational – how to help the children understand life's ups and downs'.

'In a word, I want to be remembered as a caring dad'.

'Dad as dependable'.

'Fun - "my Dad is fun".'

'I want a sense of fun in our home - kids laughing, enjoying themselves. I want to enjoy with them, and have empathy with them when they're 15'.

'In my vision I see myself playing with my children, hear myself encouraging them'.

'When he's 15, I want him to see his Dad as "a mate".'

'I want my kids to participate in sport. Sport is a rehearsal for life'.

'At 15, I'd like my kid to invite me to have coffee together'.

'I'd like my daughter to say, "Dad's wonderful".'

Being there for major events or life transitions

'I want to be there on her first day at school, be there on her birthday.'

'I see myself as being supportive – there for the major events.'

Dads' fears

'I'm scared of paedophiles - someone taking her innocence away.'

'I wouldn't like a lazy child - one who doesn't want to do anything, has no aspirations.'

'I'm scared that I'll hit my kid.'

'I want to be more patient. I'm scared of my bad temper - of hitting my kids.'

'I want my child not to be embarrassed by his parent.'

Reflective Comments

Dad's dilemma is focal in most contemporary family life. Between spouses, it is often expressed as the tension between autonomy and belonging. While it exists from the earliest years of parenting, it becomes most focal in the teenage years when adolescent children are choosing their life directions, friends, activities and lifestyle behaviours.

The desired qualities reflect these dads' values. Five mentioned communication issues, four sought an atmosphere of fun and playfulness, and two spoke of Dad – Child friendship. Putting these together, these fathers wanted their family life to develop into an interactive, close-bonded and durable set of connected relationships.

It seems to the researcher that, if these fathers can develop livable ways of managing Dad's Dilemma and containing their fears, then all the goals expressed in the vision statements are eminently achievable.

3.4.2 Group 2: Eight Partnered Mums Look Towards their Futures

What are your visions for Dad's role in your family's future? When your child is 15, what would you like her or him to say about Dad?

The mothers responded through three forward directions and some concerns:

He put family first

'I want the children to recognise that he put family first – that, compared with the outside world, children come first. He's really interested in them. He'll always be there for them'.

'To recognise that I am first, and they (the children) will have security in our relationship. I'd like them to say, 'My Dad thinks my Mum is really great.'

'I'd like them to say, 'My father loves my mother in depth and breadth, and he loves me too.'

He encouraged the children's development

'Dad always had time for me, and let me be myself'.

'He's available to me, and accepts who I am'.

'He encouraged us to achieve our potential and not be pressured into things'.

'My Dad had time for me – we had chats when he took me to karate. Small things like that'.

'Dad didn't always agree with me, but he accepted me'.

Desired Characteristics

'I'd like him to play more, relax more, and have fun with the kids.

'I'd like her to want to be with Dad, but he has to build the bond of common interest together'.

'It's important to set boundaries around oneself, to be robust in the face of peer pressure'.

'My Dad is passionate - not lukewarm'.

The role of father is not static – it changes as times change. I want him to be open, dynamic.

I'd like the relationship between Dad and child to evolve. He's happy to let go of control of the child, and the child keeps coming back.

I want him to be an active listener.

I want him to relate across a wide range of things – all kinds of things.

Mums' Concerns

Some mums expressed concerns about Dad, as their children grow up

That the child won't bond with Dad.

Physical abuse – or verbal – when he's at his breaking point.

Strangers – with my outgoing child.

Hate him to pass on his insecurities (from not having a dad).

That he'll put too much pressure on the child to achieve academically.

Teenage rebellion.

Husband could die.

One mother, though, said, 'I have no concerns.'

Reflective Comments

The eight mothers were very solid in wanting Dad to have family as his first priority. Let us recall that these mothers were unhappy with their spouses coming home tired, flopping down in front of the TV and, in some cases, going to sleep there. Within this, two stressed that the foundation of their desired happy families was a strong, supportive relationship between the spouses.

'When he puts me first', they seemed to be saying, 'he puts us first'.

Yet fostering the child's development is clearly seen as something over and above holding the family in positive relationship. It is, though, another form of investment in the family's future.

Again they expressed the themes of communication and 'more fun', two threads they have in common with the Group 1 men. Perhaps their homes currently are a bit serious, a bit work-oriented.

Mums' concerns reflect the social dialogues of today, fears associated with men inside and outside the family. As with the Group 1 fears, though, these can be contained by judicious life-styles, which these mothers are quite capable of creating.

3.4.3 Group 3: Four Separated Dads Look Towards their Futures

What are your visions for yourself as a Dad in the future? What would you like your child to say about you when she/he's 15?

The four fathers' responses are tabulated in two columns in Table 8.

Table 8: Visions of Four Separated Dads

<p>How I see myself as a parent 5 – 10 years ahead</p>	<p>What I would like him/her to say about me when he/she's 15</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I see myself involved in what he wants to achieve. I'll support and encourage him to do what he wants to do. I'd also like him to understand what's happened between his Mum and me. And I want him and I to understand each other. • I'm their role model, open to talking with them and their friends. I see myself as being there. We'll have a sense of closeness. She'll be comfortable with me – know she's not here on her own • I'm there for him when he needs me. I want to be his Rock – who he can come back to. He would feel it – it's an emotion. I'll love him for who he is – he can tell me who he is and what he does. When he's 18 I'd like to go drinking with him. • I'll have a house, with a bedroom for my daughter. She'll know that I'm there for her. She can come and go, and stay with me. I'll make my daughter feel special, feel loved. I'll preserve lines of communication, even though we're in different countries. Every five years we restructure, reconfigure the dream, have family gatherings, with grandparents. Both of us do this. My role is the mentor. We learn to renegotiate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can rely on my Dad. He's fun to be with, most of the time. I remember the trips we had away together. I trust him. • Dad always has time for us, he's involved in what we're doing. Dad's cool, hip, not an old fogey at all. He can talk about puberty, anything. My Dad's my biggest fan. He believed I could do it. He was my inspiration through difficult times. • My Dad is there for me, on the farm. He's cool, he's my friend. • We talk and laugh together all the time. We solve problems together, make decisions in hard situations. Dad taught me life-skills that get me through, and give me happiness, confidence, wisdom. He didn't abandon us. He's a straight-talker. He supported us in whatever we tried to do. He was there for me when I was in trouble.

After listing the visions, we asked the men to choose from all the words on the board what is most important in their linkage with their child. The four dads chose:

- Wisdom
- Trust
- Support
- Involved

Reflective Comments

When pondering the vision questions, the men seemed to draw from 'Dad images' deep within them. There's very little here about masculinity or their relationship hassles and hurts. Rather they seek to be significant in their child's lives, to be generative, giving, and fatherly towards them, to provide the best they can. They also yearn for their child's approval, to be held in high regard by she or he who carries his genes and will take the family name, honour and tradition into the next generation.

This archetypal connection between father and child exists underneath the dramas, disappointments, angers and disillusionment's of the separation process. It's a deep resource for connecting and giving. In some, it seems to exist as a reflected memory of what they've received. In others, a yearning for what wasn't there, for an ideal, that of the father who's there, who counts, and who values his son.¹⁰ The 'provider' role is expressed symbolically:

'I'll have a house...she can come and go', 'I'll be his Rock, who he can come back to', 'I can rely on my Dad...'

Some dads seemed to want friendship with their children, a sense of belonging together. Perhaps what they want for their children is also what they want for themselves:

'She can stay with me....I want (her) to feel special, feel loved.'
A further aspiration is for lightness of being – 'be fun', 'laugh together'.

As these men struggle with their life circumstances, their aspirations portray the landscape of the heart, who these dads want to be.

¹⁰ Beth Erickson explores this theme in some detail, see her [Longing for Dad: Father Loss and its Impact](#), Deerfield Beach, Fla, Health Communications Inc, 1998

3.4.4 Group 4: Four Separated Mums Look Towards their Futures

What are your visions for Dad’s role in your family’s future? What would you like your child to say about her/his Dad when she/he’s 15? And what do you fear?

The four mothers’ statements are tabulated in two columns in Table 9.

Table 9: Visions of Four Separated Mums

Desired Future	Feared Future
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hope he starts seeing her under supervised protected conditions, so she can get to know him, what he’s like. But I don’t want any contact with him again. I hope he finds a new partner. • That my daughter’s dad eventually understands that what I do is for the child’s best, not for me. I want him to be a Dad, not just bitter towards me. He still thinks we’re going to get together again, but because of his violence, we’re not. • To get through whatever happens and deal with it in the right way. I’d like my gambler ex-husband to have a life-changing experience. • I’d be happy for things to stay the same – he’s quite involved, actually. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I’m scared of what could happen to my two year old daughter. I want routine for her. • My fear is that he’ll take her away, and what he might do to her. Also I doubt if they’ll ever have a really strong bond. • I fear he’ll be jailed, or go back to the UK, or, worst, that when he’s depressed he’ll kill the three girls and suicide himself. • I fear that he’ll meet someone else who doesn’t support the close way we parent, or that I’ll get a new partner.

Reflective Comments

Of the four mothers who attended the second evening, two were living with their child amid the insecurities of domestic violence. The third, though now divorced, was managing herself and three girls under the shadow of the unpayable debts of a habitual gambler; and the fourth has a good system going (‘we have an amicable separation’) between herself, the three boys and their attentive father.

For all, separation with its stresses, uncertainties and impermanence, was an ongoing and evolving way of living. The desired futures are mainly short-term – to find a way through the current turmoil to a place of safety and stability. The fears reflect quite realistic worst-case scenarios.

The youngest three of the four mentioned the substantial support they were receiving from their parents.

One left a country town after the events of September 11, 2001 to go to her parents, a situation she described as being 'better for separation'. Perhaps the global climate of fear and insecurity reinforces individual uncertainties, and stimulates movement to safety. She said her father was 'great as a grandad.'

Another's parents shifted from a non-metropolitan town to Perth to be available to her, and a third's parents subdivided their block and are building a house for their daughter and her three children.

3.4.5 Group 5: Seven Sole Dads Look Towards their Futures

What are your visions for yourself as a Dad in the future? What, in one word, would you like your child to say of them when he/she's 15.

The seven fathers showed remarkable unanimity in their one-word statements. Four stressed a core component of the foundational father:

- 'Being there'
- 'Dependable'
- 'Firm and fair – kids know where I stand'
- 'Her Rock'

The other three chose an overarching outcome characteristic:

- 'Complete'
- 'Cool – being the best I can be'
- 'Communication – being an effective listener'

Fears for the Future

The group members were then asked to express in one word a fear they held for their futures with their child.

I was astonished at the strong commonality within the responses. Five of the seven feared a further loss – that of their child(ren). The loss had many faces:

- 'Losing my child through Court action. This would be a further rejection of me'
- 'Losing my child by her choosing her Mum over me – leaving me emotionally'
- 'Mum's in a new relationship and is spoiling him with toys. She looks good. I lose out'
- 'Losing them by their getting their own life – growing away from me'
- 'Losing them through depression, and that they'll be institutionalised like their Mum and have to go through what she's been through'
- A sixth man said simply,
- 'I fear further rejection'
- An older dad said:
- 'I fear that I won't be alive long enough (to see her through)'

Reflective Comments

The solid emphasis on the foundational father - the dependable Rock who's firmly there – reiterates a central concept in Western masculinity. Men and empires have been built on this concept. It connects with men's sense of integrity, with an objective beingness that, once committed, wavers not, but can be relied on; solid, like bricks and mortar. Perhaps it is this that many men have in mind when they commit themselves to becoming Dad.

A number of the mothers sought just such constancy, and indeed were injured by its absence, both from absent fathers and from inconsistent partners. They suffered in on/off situations, but developed a trust in the durability of the relationship when the man was 'there for me'.

Valuable though the foundational rockness is, many women and men seem to be seeking something more. One of the critiques of masculinity is its perceived brittleness, and in some cases commitment to a strong, stable identity can actually be a narrow base for family life today. When the cyclone comes, the bendy willow does better than the stiff oak, and there are many strong winds in the climate of modern relationships.

Some men feel this very keenly:

- Masculinity....
- Fixed formal functioning....
- Squeezing shut my heart

How can firmness and flexibility be combined? What is the emotional yoga that strengthens the ligaments, sinews and tendons needed for stretching the broad muscles in relationships?

On the issue of fearing further loss, the men had already suffered massive losses – of their love relationship, of their social status as a coupled father with a child, and of their connections with friendship networks and social institutions. They now fear the loss of their child. This would reduce them to individuals, a process which Robert Nisbet calls 'atomisation'¹¹. It would also marginalise them further from the mainstream currents of social life. The fear that arises as one contemplates this void is indeed a very primary and potent fear.

¹¹ Nisbet, Robert A., The Social Bond, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1970

This fear underscores the importance of parent-generation family support, men's support groups, and the availability of a raft of educational courses or services in:

- Identity, self-esteem and assertiveness
- Masculinity and flexibility
- Managing aloneness
- Loss, grief, anger, fear, depression and mental health in separation
- Human rights in relationship process
- Addressing and resolving conflicts without litigation
- Family and relationship dynamics
- Dad skills
- Child development and nurture
- Living and growing together
- Play, laughter, and 'being fun'
- Creating futures

Addressing the various faces of loss provides access points for engaging fathers more deeply in their own development and in their preparedness for fatherhood and competencies with their children. By building capacities, services designed to address the attendant issues also contribute to social capital formation and community development at the primary relationship level.

The seven single and separated fathers in this group are all on journeys towards greater competence as dads. Are there others out there whose experience has brought them less confidence and capability in father-tasks and roles? Evidence strongly suggests that there are. These and the children in their care could be significantly benefited were the society geared to reach out to them in more effective ways.

3.4.6 Group 6: Four Sole Mums Look Towards their Futures

What are your visions for Dad's role in your family's future?

The four sole mothers stories were collected in biographical format. As they are true gems, we label them accordingly and present them as we received them.

Diamond's expectations are a long way from Cinderella. 'As a single Mum, I want an ecosystem of support', she said.

'When I needed support, neither my family nor the community were there for me, I was on my own. It was up to me. This was my experience as a child, a teenager and an adult. Alice Miller says to honour your father and your mother, but how can I when they're so fucked up?'

'So now I'm building my own support network. It takes the form of an alternative family. My best support comes from other single mums. They know the score. My child's father's ex-wife is actually my best friend. She's had two kids from him and really understands why I took out the Restraining Order. We've both suffered the same thing. Now we're both planning to go interstate to get away from him'.

'But there are difficulties with alternate community. For one it's always changing. People move away, others have more children and don't grow with you, so I have to reconfigure my support group at each life stage. But I want autonomy and independence in a fluid alternative family system, not a square in the suburbs. My professional women friends haven't got a clue.

'I've had to learn to ask for help, it doesn't just arrive. I'm good at covering it up, am very proud. But I had to learn to ask. My goal is to give my daughter what I didn't get.'

When asked what role Diamond saw for a male figure in the life of her daughter, who is nearly three, she replied:

'When I was pregnant I took yoga classes. There I saw different men, supporting their partners and being very good to them. Her fathering, like mine, hasn't come from blood. So I've met good men, and Princess has these as memories of what a dad could be. Some include her in their families, take her out on picnics. These men and their families are good influences. I want more of these men, but we're very selective in who we have in our lives.'

'What I look for in a man is integrity, compassion and intelligence. Princess has child-care with a South Asian Islamic family, and is learning multicultural ways as natural. 'Within this', says her Mum, 'we can achieve peace and harmony.'

'When Father's Day was on TV, though, my daughter said, "I miss my Dad." I sort of know the feeling. I haven't seen or heard from my Dad for years.' Diamond and Princess moved East at the close of 2002.'

'I've now got a new partner', said Ruby. 'He's totally different. He helps me, boosts my self-esteem. He's got good values. He said he wanted me and Crimson, that he'd love us both and support us. Now he works two jobs, pays for Crimson's shoes and helps me. But we don't live together. I don't want to be hurt again.'

When asked what 'good values' are, Ruby said that:

'His dad, who ran the house and supported the children, had brought up her new partner. His dad was a strong-willed person who taught his children family values.'

Respect your woman, treat her right, be the man of the house and provide for them. Don't let Mum rule the roost and my new partner's like that. He's well mannered – he even puts the loo seat down! He respects the way I live in my home.'

Asked about what she wanted in a partner and father for Crimson for the future, Ruby expressed clear ideas:

'What do I want in a relationship? I want independence and freedom of speech, to be able to say what I'm feeling. I want my partner to be open to that. I want him to be emotionally there – not like my father, who wasn't there. If the relationship is strong, we can be open and not hide things. If this happens, he will treat Crimson similarly, and she will grow well.'

'In the end, I want to be happy, to be secure, to be stable. I'm sick of moving. I've wandered since I was twelve. I've shifted house four times since the birth, and now I've moved to a totally different area to get away from Crimson's father.'

'After being sick for 4 1/2 – 5 years, I'm well. I'm starting again. I've got a nice Homeswest house, quiet environment, decent and helpful neighbours, new furniture, no debts, a happy child and a promising relationship.

My life's going well.'

'I'll nurture my daughter positively, said Emerald, so she'll have a strong sense of morality and a network of supportive people. My mother's now being fantastic – it's 10 years since Dad released her from the marriage that had oppressed her for 27 years.'

'My daughter's father will continue to see her one day a week. But he won't change. He doesn't have the depth and courage to look at himself. He's stuck in his ego, unaware, and doesn't recognise the impact of his subtle actions.'

'I want more children, and I'd like a partner in my life – it's not natural to be everything for the child. But any new relationship will be built on respect. The dream of a better future keeps me going. Motherhood has given me purpose in life. I look after myself for my son's benefit' said Sapphire.

'I'm building a new future, and it will be beaut. From no education I'm now going to Uni and I'm going to get a degree, a job and a house. I love my life. A man is not a priority in my life. I've been there, done that. I do have a new man, with a good bond, but we're taking it very slowly. I have a list, and I'm ticking off the characteristics. We've been to a course on stepfamilies'. 'But it's my son's future that's important to me. Any man would have to fit in with that.'

Reflective Comments

The four stories come from mothers with very different backgrounds. Yet the commonalities in their stories are striking. And will become clearer if we survey their whole testimony at one glance. So Table 10 reveals in miniature the panorama of their lives, as told to the research team.

Table 10: Four Sole Mother’s Stories in Miniature

	Theme	Diamond	Ruby	Emerald	Sapphire
Family of Origin	Father Mother Relationship Status	Absent, uncaring, alcohol Long term public affair, rejected me 3x Parents divorce - I was 12	Absent. Bro’s mates raped me Not there for me. I don’t like her – harsh Parents divorced - I was 8	Oppressive, punitive resented kids Depressed 15 yrs then catatonic Parents divorced	Boxer, violent, affair with M’s sister Hospital when I was 2 Told she was dead Parents divorced -I was 2
Expectations Formed	Partner’s Family of Origin		F = Viet Vet, violent, punitive. M chronic illness Brothers bullies	F abandoned him M sacrificed chn – had another man	
	Circumstances of Relationship/Conception	Cinderella dream. Unexpected pregnancy at 36. I decided to have baby. Abdominal surgery	He 18, violent. Me 21, hospitalised (injuries). Also nearly died, had abdominal surgery	Wanted kind partner At 28, desperate, became pregnant to father of an 8 year old	Dreamed of kind partner. Got married. He had 3 previous chn. Baby at 30
Realities Experienced	Partner’s response to child	He wanted abortion. Got violent	He wanted abortion Not there at birth, after	He wanted abortion, wouldn’t marry me	He didn’t want, nor recognised our child
	Financial considerations	Threatened me if I applied for maintenance	No support for child or me	Had debts everywhere. Me as financial burden	He - bankrupt 3 X. Business enemies
	Circumstances of Separation	Violence. Left when baby 2 days old. I took out Restraining Order	Violence, belittling, abuse, neglect. I took baby, left	He violent, me depressed. Yoga gave strength. Sep when child 9 mo	Away a lot –work. Violent – I was hospitalised. I left, filed for divorce.
Visions for Future	Relationship Now	We’ll leave WA to get away. State support has been vital	We shifted suburb – address secret. State support = vital	Sees child weekly. ‘He’s a better uncle than a Dad’	He visits, but is unreliable, doesn’t pitch up regularly
	Self	Blood failed me. Want new alternate family in community	Now well, new home, no debts, new respectful relationship	Will parent well. Hope: new man, respect, more chn	Motherhood = my purpose. Taking degree, new man

All four women reported coming from homes that were disruptive, neglectful and lacking in nurture. All sets of parents divorced. All had 'grown themselves up' from a relatively early age. All had their babies 'on their own'. All reported having little support for their life-development from parents or other family members.

Two women had moved their living locations away from the tormenting influence of their child's father. One used a Restraining Order to establish a barrier of safety, the other keeps her address secret.

Is there an upside in this otherwise depressive situation?

Two outcomes can be considered. When parents fail to deliver the support their children need, children turn elsewhere – to themselves and to the community.¹² Diamond makes this explicit, and now builds an 'ecosystem of support' from like-minded people in the community.

In the first two stories there is an intriguing parallel: their relationships and bodies seemed to synchronise in experience. While relationship pressures were torturing their emotional 'insides', their abdomens developed dangerous conditions that necessitated surgery. Something noxious had grown within them and required cutting out. Was this coincidence, or is a psychosomatic connection between inner mind and inner body at work here?

These mothers had reflected deeply on their situations and used their intellectual resources to make sense of their experiences. Perhaps, threaded through the individual stories, there is a collective story of personal processes that achieve an effective and satisfying life in the midst of adversity.

All seemed to have left the aggro behind. They had plans, were going somewhere. As far as is possible, they were closing the door on their pasts, and opening new chapters in their lives.

In terms of support for these single mothers, the Government is making vital contributions that make life possible. In some ways, it is a surrogate husband. Homeswest provides the roof, Centrelink the income support, the Family Court (through Restraining Orders) the protection. These resources provide the possibility for a context in which the lives of young children can be nurtured, and their mothers supported in their solitary tasks. In Diamond's words:

'neither the family nor the community were with me through my hour of need, but the State was.'

¹² 'Although the breakdown of a family in itself constitutes a loss of social capital, this breakdown may actually lead some family members to greater levels of association with people and groups outside the family' Fukuyama, Francis, Social Capital and Civil Society, The Institute of Public Policy, George Mason University, Arlington VA, 1999: 117-118

3.4.7 Making Sense of Dad's and Mum's Visions

Fathers and Mothers

All groups' visions included desired human qualities parents would like their children to develop, and to be remembered by themselves. Men sought to leave legacies of being dependable, rock-like, caring dads who were there, especially for major events, and who communicated well. Mothers wanted their men to put family first, encourage children's growth, be reliable and be fun. Many of these are common to both dads and mums.

Other desired characteristics seemed to come from yearning, from the deep dreams that feed aspirations, even among those who had had damaging family experiences in their families of origin and in their adult partnering. Chief among these aspirations was a closeness, an intimacy that men and women saw as both the pathway to personal fulfilment and the signifier that things were going well.

In general, the women's visions are more elaborate than the men's. They seem to know more clearly what they want. Perhaps men's life visualisations are more channelled into career and externalities, while depending on their wives/partners to foresee and plan family futures. In some cases this could cross-buttruss the relationship framework synergistically. In others, an imbalance could arise in the longer term, precipitating discomfort and disjunction between the partners.

None of the parents mentioned their perceptions of the future their children were going into, apart from their fear of paedophiles. Cameron Stewart has compiled an assembly of contemporary trends, suggesting that many of our children under two will inherit a world where childhood shrinks into a few pre-primary years, technology replaces the magical imagination, pressures for extra-curricular skill development and life enhancement training in sports and the arts crowd the weekly schedule, and children's social communication patterns jump into an adult mode.¹³ Perhaps the parents recognised the situation described by Lebanese poet, Kahlil Gibran, when speaking of children:

*For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,
which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.*¹⁴

Similarly, few fathers and mothers expressed a strong understanding of the seasons men go through as their life course evolved. These issues have been mapped and described over the past thirty years by writers like Daniel Levinson and Gail Sheehy.¹⁵

¹³ Stewart, Cameron, '21st Century Child', The Weekend Australian Magazine, Jan. 25-26, 2003.

¹⁴ Gibran, Kahlil, The Prophet, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1961

¹⁵ Levinson, Daniel J. The Seasons of a Man's Life, New York, Random House, 1978;
Gail Sheehy Understanding Men's Passages: Discovering the New Map of Men's Lives, New York, Ballantine Books, 1999.

Variations in Visions across Parenting Structures

The visions of the Parenting Together Groups (1 and 2), showed how differently situated they are compared with those parenting separately or alone.

Both men and women Parenting Together seemed to have a momentum, to be moving forward with the life process through the stages of family development.

They spoke of longer-term visions with a focus on planning ahead – plans which they could actualise. And they appeared to do so from a base of personal security.

What the Parenting in Separation and Parenting Alone groups said they want (security, safety, stability), the Parenting Together participants seemed to take for granted. It was a base from which they proceeded. The clearest expression of this was the strongly stated fear of sole dads that they would in some way lose their child. All seven feared such loss, yet none of the ten dads Parenting Together even mentioned this. Presupposing continuity, none gave any indication that such a possibility had occurred to him.

Some parents expressed quite complex visions (e.g. a Parenting Together father said; 'I want to understand each twin as an individual, and spend time with each separately', and a mother said, 'I'd like the relationship between Dad and child to evolve'). By contrast, some of the Parenting in Separation visions were pitched at the very beginning of parenting, e.g. one mother said, 'I hope he starts seeing her, under supervision, so she can know him'.

The Parenting Together fathers also agreed that their task held a dilemma – on the one hand this and on the other that. Conceptualising dilemma requires a risk-aware and choice-aware consciousness, a weighing up process, and taking a path. Those who spent so much of their time and energy trying to stop their situations from eroding further do not have the luxury of being so far-sighted.

The dominant dream in the Parenting Alone group was to hold on to the child (dads) or to get away and build a secure, safe future (mums). In both cases, they seemed to be living in ambiguity, even a sort of limbo in which they couldn't plan properly as outcomes were not dependent on themselves alone, but on the often hostile actions of the other parent.

Living in limbo means treading water, spending time wishing, hoping and yearning, wondering whether their ex will be there at the appointed time, or seeking the space to plan, act and live for themselves and their child. All seven sole dads lived in the limbo land of fearing further loss, some almost waiting for it.

Ruby said 'I want freedom of speech'. This 21 year-old mother had to leave her relationship to achieve a basic freedom that all Australians take for granted. We may well ask how strong Western Australian domestic relationships are in basic human rights. No society can be stronger in rights than is the case within its families.

The variations in vision suggest an intriguing question: Do the Parenting Together dads and mums achieve their favourable outcomes because they live together, or is it because they act collaboratively? Perhaps combining both of these is the key. We shall address this question, and other possibilities, in the Discussion section of this Report.

All the women accepted the invitation to participate in the research at a stage in their lives when they had achieved a degree of equilibrium and settledness after the ups and downs of pregnancy, birth, trauma and separation. Indeed they indicated that had they still been in the throes of the drama, it is less likely that they would have come.

This suggests that, in the case of others who hadn't yet developed the same degree of resilience as these mothers, different stories might be told, stories that are less optimistic than these epic journeys. Is this a process from which all emerge eventually, or do some continue to suffer for years without achieving mastery of their situations?