

Strengthening & Supporting Australian Fathers

The **12**pt Plan

National Fathering Forum



Turning the Tide of Fatherlessness in Australia

12 Point Plan

Strengthening and Supporting Australian Fathers

Preamble

The greatest resource this country possesses lies in the families of our nation. At the same time, the strength of our families depends on the quality of the relationships between its mothers and fathers.

The quality of the relationships between mothers and fathers and their children will determine the destiny of Australia.

The future of Australia lies in the character of her children. Equipping and supporting fathers and mothers in their relationships helps ensure that our children have the best possible future.

The National Fathering Forum believes that every child has the fundamental right to both a mother and a father. The best way to secure this right is to establish a loving and stable marriage between a man and a woman for life. This long-term relationship facilitates the rights of grandmothers and grandfathers to continued access and valuable input into their grandchildren.

The overwhelming conclusion of current social science research has shown that the best environment for children is a close, warm, sustained and continuous relationship with both biological parents. The best way to ensure strong families is to support strong marriages. This traditional family unit -

a loving father, mother and their children - is the best way to nurture, educate and protect children.

This is the best social security system the world has ever known.

However for a variety of different reasons, many fathers do not find themselves in a marriage relationship. Therefore irrespective of their marital status, we want to support all dads to fulfil their role as effective fathers.

Fatherlessness can be defined as the absence of an active, positive father-influence in the lives of children. Fatherlessness is both a natural and spiritual problem. It needs

strategic and synergistic partnerships

that should involve government, business, church, community, faith-based and secular charities and many others working together to strengthen and support Australian fathers.

History

On 10th February 2003, over 35 people gathered for the inaugural National Fathering Forum at Parliament House Canberra. Twenty-five delegates spoke at the Forum. The delegates represented a wide range of Men's Groups, Family Law Reform Groups, Education & Training Institutions, Academics, Social Researchers and Psychologists, Drug Rehabilitation Organisations, Prison Charities, Social Reform Networks, Church Groups, Journalists and Media, Family Focused Charitable Organisations and Fatherhood Institutions. All came at their own cost with the common goal to strengthen and support Australian fathers and 'to turn the tide of fatherlessness' that exists in Australia.



The forum delegates who presented papers are united by the common belief that fatherlessness and family breakdown are major social problems in Australian society. The following Twelve Point Plan was agreed upon by a consensus of the delegates. This policy document puts forward some key recommendations to address these problems.

The National Fathering Forum does not see this Twelve Point Plan as a final document. Rather we see it

as the first of many proposals to promote discussion and contribute to a coordinated national solution to turn the tide of fatherlessness and strengthen Australian fathers.

We commend the Parliamentarians from the different parties in both Houses who supported the National Fathering Forum Open Session by their attendance and input on 10th February 2002.

We invite further comment and look forward to the National Fatherhood Conference to be held on 18th & 19th August 2003 in Federal Parliament with a National Fatherhood Summit to be held in August 2004.

The Social Problem

One of the greatest challenges facing our nation is the social problems caused as a result of Fatherlessness. Australia's current birth rate of 1.75 births per female has fallen below the minimum population replacement rate of 2.1 births per female. Fatherlessness is a direct factor in this decline.^{1, 2 & 3.}



The problem of Fatherlessness has been estimated to cost Australia over \$13 billion per year⁴. Bill Muehlenberg in his article titled "*The Facts on Fatherlessness*" (refer Appendix) has identified the following social and psychological problems

- Poverty.
- Lower educational performance.
- Increased crime.
- Increased drug abuse.
- Increased mental health problems.
- Increased child abuse.

While not every child who grows up in a fatherless situation will experience either one or any of these problems, there is a much greater statistical likelihood that he or she would.

Studies into the potential impact of growing up without a father in the United States have produced the following statistics in relation to boys.⁵

Boys from a fatherless home are:

- 5 times more likely to commit suicide;
- 14 times more likely to commit rape;
- 9 times more likely to drop out of high school;
- 10 times more likely to abuse chemicals;

- 9 times more likely to end up in a state-operated institution;
- 20 times more likely to end up in prison.

The Socio-Economic Problem

While affirmative action programs have helped women overcome past unemployment problems, there is now a growing crisis in male unemployment. This is particularly prevalent among young and middle-aged men⁶. Male unemployment has several related unwanted socio-economic impacts:



- Fathers, and therefore families, are put under severe pressures when dads are unemployed or under-employed.
- Many men in low socio-economic circumstances will not marry and will not have children.
- Unemployed younger men are not attractive potential marriage partners amongst their female peers.

The enormous dimensions of the problem require the engagement of all 3 tiers of government with the Commonwealth leading the way. For over two decades Government rightly has looked to overcome barriers to employment so that marginalised groups would have equality of employment opportunity. Gender, race, disability, cultural and ethnic identity are no longer the opportunity barriers they once were. Inadvertently however, from these proactive policies, a new disadvantaged group has emerged.

It is now time to reassess the relevance of outdated affirmative action policies and consider a return to merit based selection where only the best person for the job is offered employment.

A Challenge to Fathers

The National Fathering Forum calls on men everywhere to offer their commitment to the ideals of fatherhood. We exhort fathers to make their primary goal in life the care and nurture of their families.

We applaud the fathers of our nation who are caring for their families and urge them to become 'the best dads in the world' for the sake of their children.



The National Fathering Forum also encourages fathers who are our political, civic, community and church leaders and all those in the public arena to work towards becoming fathers of excellence. We acknowledge that we need a change in some of our laws and an increased government focus on fathers and families as contained in this Twelve Point Plan. Through a systematic sporting development programme, Australia has produced some of the best sportsmen and women in the world. We have the best sportsmen in the world, why not the best fathers?

The 12^{pt} Plan

The National Fathering Forum has formulated a Twelve Point Plan to strengthen and support fatherhood and turn the tide of fatherlessness in Australia. This is divided into 3 major categories:

I. Government

That all levels of government:

1. Acknowledge the importance of fatherhood by establishing an official body to support and strengthen Australian fathers, such as an Office of

the Status of Fatherhood or a Ministry of Fatherhood.

2. Increase funding for father-based family initiatives. The focus of government funding needs

to be on prevention rather than on cure in order to achieve long-term cost effective benefits.

3. Address the gross inequity in funding for men's issues compared to that currently available for women's issues.⁷
4. Recommend that a national campaign be initiated to promote fathers and fathering, that is to be run annually.
5. Reduce inequality for low socio-economic fathers by increasing their employment opportunities.⁶

6. Acknowledge that after divorce or parental separation, every child has a fundamental right to equal contact with both the mother and the father, unless there are proven mitigating circumstances.



7. Examine all current and future legislation both federal and state in terms of how it impacts on fathers, marriages, families and children and make adjustments accordingly. This includes such things as the Family Law Act, Tax reform for families, Child Support legislation and much more.
8. Include the word 'father' in government department language along with the word 'mother' – bringing a resultant positive change of attitude within governmental bureaucracy

towards fathers⁸. When the word ‘parenting’ is defined, it must state clearly that it means parental care by both mothers and fathers.

and skills that they need to be effective parents.

The National Fathering Forum believes that:

II. Education & Training

9. Education of Boys and Male Adults

The National Fathering Forum affirmed the view of a recent report⁹ to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training that:

- While at school, more attention must be paid to the differing needs of boys and girls and their tendency to favour different learning styles. One should not be pursued at the expense of the other.
- From primary school through to tertiary education, the nature and importance of fathering should be recognised (and if needed, introduced) within the relevant curriculum standards framework.
- Boys need male role models and mentors who may be both (a) teachers/lecturers, and (b) peers. To facilitate this, there is a need to increase the participation rates of males as educators.



- Just as boys and girls benefit by men positively modelling appropriate behaviour and respectful relationships with other men and women, fathers also benefit from the support they can receive from mentors in their communities.¹⁰

- There is a need for education programmes that focus on strengthening the father/mother relationship due to the effects of marital quality on fathering and child adjustment.⁸

III. Fathers’ Health and Well-Being.

11. Being male is associated with a number of health disadvantages.^{11,12} For

males, this results in higher rates of:

- Hospital admissions for most injuries and illnesses
- Premature death by unnatural causes such as suicides and accidents
- Undiagnosed mental illnesses
- Suicide
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Addictive anti-social behaviours
- Addictive gambling problems

The National Fathering Forum seeks to promote fathers’ health and well-being

10. Education of Fathers.

Fathers, at various stages, need to be equipped and empowered through education programmes that will enable them to acquire the relevant knowledge

and to reduce the health disadvantage of being male. This needs the assistance of the Government through increased government-funded initiatives.

12. The National Fathering Forum emphasised that a large number of deaths, injuries and illnesses that men experience are preventable. In addition, the health and well-being disadvantages^{11,12} of men and fathers is closely associated with social and economic disadvantage such as unemployment. Men of Aboriginal and Torres Strait descent are particularly vulnerable to these health disadvantages. These issues require an urgent response from both the government and non-government sectors.

The National Fathering Forum supports the national strategies for the prevention of: suicide, accidents, substance misuse and gambling addictions. We urge that these strategies be implemented with greater emphasis to the unique needs of men and fathers.

Forward Programme

The National Strategic Conference on Fatherhood is to be held on August 18th & 19th, 2003 in the Federal Parliament, Canberra. In August 2004 there are plans for a National Fatherhood Summit at Parliament House to further promote public discussion and positive change.

All enquiries should be directed to the Fatherhood Foundation, PO Box 440 Wollongong, NSW. 2520 or info@fathersonline.org



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APPENDIX

THE FACTS ON FATHERLESSNESS

Prepared for the Fatherhood Foundation by Bill Muehlenberg, Australian Family Association

Revised, March 2003

Fatherlessness is a growing problem in Australia and the Western world. Fatherlessness can be defined as the absence of an active, positive father-influence in the lives of children. Whether caused by divorce and broken families, or by deliberate single parenting, more and more children grow up without fathers. Indeed, 85 per cent of single parent families are fatherless families. Father absence has been shown to be a major disadvantage to the well being of children. The following is a summary of the evidence for the importance of fathers and the need for two-parent families.

One expert from Harvard medical school who has studied over 40 years of research on the question of parental absence and children's well-being said this: "What has been shown over and over again to contribute most to the emotional development of the child is a close, warm, sustained and continuous relationship with both parents."¹

Or as David Blankenhorn has stated in *Fatherless America*: "Fatherlessness is the most harmful demographic trend of this generation."²

Bryan Rodgers of the Australian National University has recently re-examined the Australian research. Says Rodgers: "Australian studies with adequate

samples have shown parental divorce to be a risk factor for a wide range of social and psychological problems in adolescence and adulthood, including poor academic achievement, low self-esteem, psychological distress, delinquency

and recidivism, substance use and abuse, sexual precocity, adult criminal offending, depression, and suicidal behaviour." He concludes: "There is no scientific justification for disregarding the public health significance of marital dissolution in Australia, especially with respect to mental health."³ Here then is a sampling of the evidence:

Fatherlessness increases poverty

- In America, among families with dependent children, only 8.3 per cent of married couples were living below the poverty line, compared to 47.1 percent of female-headed households.⁴
- In Australia, a recent study of 500 divorcees with children five to eight years after the separation found that four in five divorced mothers were dependent on social security after their marriages dissolved.⁵
- Figures from Monash University's Centre for Population and Urban Research show that family break-up, rather than unemployment, is the main cause of the rise in poverty levels in Australia.⁶



Fatherlessness lowers educational performance

- American children from intact families have a 21 per cent chance of dropping out of high school whereas children from broken families have a 46 per cent chance.⁷
- American school children who became father-absent early in life generally scored significantly lower on measures of IQ and achievement tests.⁸
- A study of Australian primary school children from three family types (married heterosexual couples, cohabiting heterosexual couples and homosexual couples) found that in every area of educational endeavour (language; mathematics; social studies; sport; class work, sociability and popularity; and attitudes to learning), children

from married heterosexual couples performed better than the other two groups. The study concludes with these words: “Married couples seem to offer the best environment for a child’s social and educational development”.⁹

- A Melbourne University study of 212 children found that fathers, even more than mothers, had a major beneficial influence on children in their first year of school. The study found that kids with regular father involvement were more cooperative and self-reliant in school than kids who did not have father involvement. The more regular involvement the father has with the child, the study’s author said, the better the child does in his or her first year of school.¹⁰

Fatherlessness increases crime

- A British study found a direct statistical link between single parenthood and virtually every major type of crime, including mugging, violence against strangers, car theft and burglary.¹¹
- One American study even arrived at this startling conclusion: the proportion of single-parent households in a community predicts its rates of violent crime and burglary, but the community’s poverty level does not. Neither poverty nor race seem to account very much for the crime rate, compared to the proportion of single parent families.¹²
- In Australia, a recent book noted the connection between broken families and crime. In a discussion of rising crime rates in Western Australia, the book reported that “family breakdown in the form of divorce and separation is the main cause of the crime wave”.¹³

Fatherlessness increases drug abuse

- An UCLA study pointed out that inadequate family structure makes children more susceptible to drug use “as a coping mechanism to relieve depression and anxiety.”¹⁴
- Another US study found that among the homes with strict fathers, only 18 per cent had children used alcohol or drugs at all. In contrast, among mother-dominated homes, 35 per cent had children who used drugs frequently.¹⁵
- A New Zealand study of nearly 1000 children observed over a period of 15 years found that children who have watched their parents separate are more likely to use illegal drugs than those whose parents stay together.¹⁶

Fatherlessness increases mental health problems

- From nations as diverse as Finland and South Africa, a number of studies have reported that anywhere from 50 to 80 per cent of psychiatric patients come from broken homes.¹⁷
- A Canadian study of teenagers discharged from



psychiatric hospitals found that only 16 per cent were living with both parents when they were admitted.¹⁸

- A study of nearly 14,000 Dutch adolescents between the ages of 12 to 19 found that, “In general, children from one parent and stepparent families reported lower self-esteem, more symptoms of anxiety and loneliness, more depressed mood and more suicidal thoughts than children from intact families.”¹⁹
- A massive longitudinal study undertaken in Sweden involving over one million children found that children from single parents showed increased risks of psychiatric disease, suicide or suicide attempt, injury and addiction. The authors, writing in *The Lancet*, concluded that



growing up in “a single-parent family has disadvantages to the health of the child”. Bear in mind that Sweden is one of the most highly advanced welfare states on earth. Thus even with a comprehensive welfare net, children still suffer when not in two-parent families.²⁰

to 600 per cent increase in sexual abuse of girls in families where the adult male was not the natural father.²⁷

Fatherlessness and family breakdown cost Australia 13 billion dollars per year

- In Australia it has been estimated that marriage breakdown costs \$2.5 billion annually. Each separation is estimated to cost society some \$12,000.²¹
 - Dr Bruce Robinson, University of Western Australia, and author of ‘Fathering from the Fast Lane’, has estimated the cost of fatherlessness in Australia to be over \$13 billion per year.²²
 - Also, Australian industry is reported to lose production of more than \$1 billion a year due to problems of family breakdown.²³
- Homelessness is also closely linked with family breakdown. A recent Australian study conducted at two Melbourne universities has found that children whose biological parents stay together are about three times less likely to become homeless than those from other family types.²⁴

Fatherlessness increases child abuse

- A 1994 study of 52,000 children found that those who are most at risk of being abused are those who are not living with both parents.²⁵
- A Finnish study of nearly 4,000 ninth-grade girls found that “stepfather-daughter incest was about 15 times as common as father-daughter incest”.²⁶
- In Australia, former Human Rights Commissioner Mr Brian Burdekin has reported a 500



Fatherlessness and family breakdown are the major social problems of our society

Wade Horn, the head of the National Fatherhood Initiative in the USA summarises the evidence in this fashion: “The news is not good when large numbers of children are growing up disconnected from their fathers. It’s not that every child who grows up in a fatherless household is going to have these kinds of difficulties. But it is true that there’s an increased



risk of these negative outcomes when children grow up without fathers.”²⁸

With the rise of fatherlessness Australia and the Western world has also experienced a marked rise in social problems. And the brunt of these problems has been borne by children. We owe it to our children to do better. We urgently need to address the twin problems of fatherlessness and family breakdown. Public policy must begin to address these crucial areas. Until we tackle these problems, our children and our nation will continue to suffer.

(Note: For further evidence of the harmful effects of fatherlessness & family breakdown, contact the AFA on 03 9326 5757 or email: freedom@connexus.net.au)

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Yours faithfully
Warwick Marsh & Richard Yiap
National Fathering Forum Conveners

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