Non-resident Parents and Service Use

Non-resident Parents and Service Use

Tony Eardley and Megan Griffiths

Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales

Tony Eardley and Megan Griffiths

Authors

Tony Eardley and Megan Griffiths

Contact details

Dr Tony Eardley, Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales, Sydney NSW 2052, ph 02 9385 7826, fax 02 9385 7838.

Contents

Executive Summary

Policy background

Non-resident parenthood has become a topic of growing interest in social policy in recent decades. This is mainly because of concern about the consequences for children of growth in divorce and separation, but also because of increasing interest from governments' in ensuring that both parents maintain responsibility for the support of children rather than one parent receiving additional support through family payments. Most non-resident parents are men and the new attention paid to non-resident fathers is linked to an upsurge of interest in fatherhood more widely.

This interest in fatherhood initially sprang from new ideas about gender roles and family structures emerging from the women's movement and from expanding female labour force participation. More recently, however, it has come from a body of research on child development challenging earlier assumptions that fathers' influence on child wellbeing was peripheral compared to that of mothers. Taken together with evidence of the adverse outcomes for many children in sole parent families, this has led to a focus on 'fatherlessness' as a key variable in child wellbeing.

Similar messages about family breakdown and child outcomes have emerged in a number of countries with cultures similar to that of Australia, including the US, the UK and Canada, but the policy debates have taken on different characteristics according to the national context. In the US, the fatherlessness debate has taken on a strongly ideological flavour, with controversial policies and programs to bolster the institution of marriage being officially funded as an element of welfare reform. While the ideological debate has been heated, the more sophisticated research in this area has moved beyond simple identification of the absence or presence of a non-resident father in children's lives, to systemic study of the nature and quality of the father-child relationship in the context of the whole family and of post-separation parental interactions.

The UK and Australia have not experienced the same level of ideological polarisation as in the US, even though the fathers' rights lobbies in the two countries have arguably increased their influence in public policy. Official reports have highlighted the importance of involving fathers in families, including non-resident fathers, but funding for specific fathers' projects has been patchy and short-term, with the key feature of policy an exhortation that services should 'engage' fathers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that in practice non-resident fathers who wish to play a significant role in their children's lives can face a number of barriers, while mainstream services have seldom been configured to meet the needs of children with non-resident parents. However, there has been little systematic evidence in Australia of how services are meeting the challenge of engaging these fathers.

The involvement of non-resident fathers in their children lives is becoming important because the direction of change in family law and child support is towards an increased level of shared parenting responsibility for children after separation. This not only has the potential to make the resident/non-resident parent dichotomy less relevant, but also places a new onus on services to recognise the importance of non-resident fathers in the ongoing life of children and to find ways to engage with them better.

Research aims and methods

The study aims to support FaHCSIA's interest in encouraging fathers to maintain involvement in their children's lives after separation. The main research questions are:

- How do mainstream public or non-governmental services address the needs of children who have a non-resident parent?

- What policies and practices facilitate or inhibit engagement with services by these parents?

This study involved a review of the literature that addresses policy and practice on this topic from the main English-speaking countries, along with a set of qualitative interviews with policy makers, service providers and experts to discuss issues raised in the review, to gain their perspectives on current policy arrangements and to identify further areas of good practice.

The social, legal and policy context for discussion of non-resident parenthood in Australia

In spite of this new interest we have relatively little detailed information about post-separation fathering in Australia, partly because of conceptual and methodological difficulties involved in researching this population. In particular we know little about specific sub-groups of fathers, such as those from cultural minorities, or fathers with second families, despite their policy relevance.

In 2003 there were just under half a million non-resident parents in Australia, making up 10 per cent of all parents with children aged under 18. Of the one million children in such families around 13 per cent had a non-resident mother. Non-resident fathers are more likely than non-resident mothers to live alone, while the latter are more likely to re-partner or to have another child of the relationship living with them.

On average, non-resident fathers tend to have both poorer labour market status and lower incomes than resident fathers, although it is not clear how far this precedes (and may contribute to) separation, or whether it is an effect of separation. Anecdote has suggested that separated fathers commonly reduce their work and incomes deliberately in order to avoid child support liability, but there is little systematic evidence to support this assertion.

Levels of contact between non-resident fathers and their children are influenced by a number of factors, including physical distance, the age and sex of the children, and the degree of continuing conflict between the separated parents. Contact also tends to become less frequent when either of the parents re-partners.

Recent changes in family law and child support arrangements are both underpinned by an assumption of continuing involvement by both parents in the lives of children following divorce and separation. The implications of these changes are that services will need to engage more effectively with non-resident parents.

The relationship between non-resident parents' involvement in their children's lives and child outcomes

There is a growing consensus that fathers are important for children's development and that their contributions complement those of mothers. Partly this contribution is

economic, because sole mother families are disproportionately likely to experience poverty. However, practical and emotional involvement is also crucial as well, both for children's overall wellbeing and in particular for their educational outcomes. This applies to non-resident fathers too, although the evidence is less certain on the difference their continuing involvement makes after separation, because of the complexity of the level and types of involvement, the impact of new relationships formed by the respective ex-partners and problems of continuing parental conflict.

Even so, it generally accepted that engaging non-resident fathers to improve their parenting skills and their ability to retain involvement is likely to benefit children, even in cases where parenting by the father was poor before separation. However, neither the amount nor the frequency of contact is in itself the main issue. Rather it is the quality of the father-child interaction and the extent to which this involves strong emotional ties and authoritative parenting which seem to make the difference.

Children's own voices on this question have largely been absent, but some limited evidence suggests that they tend both to favour greater levels of contact with non-resident fathers after separation and to have better relationships with their fathers where contact continues to be frequent and substantive.

Engaging non-resident fathers in services

There is a growing body of research and practice on how to engage fathers and how to address the needs of children with non-resident parents, but this is mainly restricted to the service areas of parenting, family support and education. There has been little work on other areas such as health care or housing, and only limited specific focus on non-resident fathers, much less on particular sub-groups of non-resident fathers.

The evidence suggests that there are a number of continuing and linked barriers to engagement. These include the difficulty of overcoming non-resident fathers' reluctance as men to approach services for help in their parenting role; a widespread 'deficit perspective' that views men negatively as fathers; a lack of recognition that men's responsibilities as workers can often conflict with their ability to parent effectively; and a gate-keeping role sometimes performed by mothers. Many services are also in transition from being primarily oriented towards mothers: even if they do not actively deter fathers from involvement they may put them off by not offering a father-inclusive environment or services that interest and engage fathers as men.

However, it is too simplistic just to blame services or service staff for this problem. The role of fathers in society is in a state of flux and until recently they have been largely invisible to services that have catered mainly for mothers. Issues of gender power and male violence are also ever present for services that deal with child welfare or assist sole mothers. Such a shift in orientation by services is also potentially problematic where there is competition for scarce public resources.

Nevertheless, many services are effectively re-orienting themselves to address the needs of non-resident fathers and their children, while programs working with fathers have been developing useful guidelines for effective father-inclusive practices. The key points from these are as follows.

- Services need to approach fathers positively, by making them 'visible' in family and child interactions. This does not imply that the damage that some men do to

children and in relationships should be ignored, but it involves recognising the possibility of mutually beneficial relationships between fathers and their children.

- This means working with men from a 'strengths approach' rather than a 'deficit perspective'.

- Service providers need to be clear about the purposes of the program or intervention and why it is considered important to involve fathers.

- Fathers are men first: their beliefs and attitudes about fatherhood will be influenced by their beliefs and attitudes towards being men, including, often, a reluctance to seek help for problems. It is necessary to be proactive and persistent in trying to engage fathers, as it takes time to build and sustain engagement.

- There need to be staff involved who are positively motivated towards working with fathers and knowledgeable about them, and have the capacity to work with issues of power and conflict between men and women.

- Having male staff can help to engage fathers, even though it is women who are more likely to express a need for same-sex staff.

- Services need routinely to ask about rather than assume what role fathers and father figures play in the family, and should collect information about them whether or not they are resident in the children's main home.

- Services need to display positive images of men and fathers to make them feel welcome.

- Discussion needs to be encouraged and supported amongst both mothers and fathers using services about issues such as domestic violence and child abuse.

- Services need to consult fathers about the kinds of activities they prefer and to offer a wide range of programs including practical activities, outdoor play and events, and opportunities for skills development, as well as sessions on child development and fathering.

- Such activities need to be offered outside work hours, in order to cater for men who are employed full-time, while information about services and activities need to be distributed and displayed in places where men are likely to see it or hear about it.

There remains a need for further Australian research into the roles that separated fathers play within families, the nature of these ongoing relationships with children, and particular issues that exist for sub-groups of families such as those from Indigenous or culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds. Such research would help inform future directions for child services and family centres in meeting the needs of both children and parents. There is also a need for further information about children's own perspectives and feelings on how best to foster and maintain their relationships with fathers after separation.

Finally, it is important to note that 10-15 per cent of non-resident parents are mothers and the proportion is growing: even though their circumstances are often quite different to those of non-resident fathers, the difficulties they may face in accessing services are rarely discussed in the literature or addressed in service delivery.

1 Introduction

1.1 Policy background

The growth of policy interest in fatherhood

Non-resident parenthood has become a topic of growing interest in social policy in recent years. Partly this has been driven by the perception that family change, including increasing divorce and separation, and the resulting growth in sole parenthood, has been bad for children. The disadvantages that children in one-parent families face tend to result at least partly from a greater likelihood of low income or poverty (Millar and Ridge, 2001; Moore et al., 2002). Sole mothers are also disproportionately likely to spend long periods of time receiving welfare payments (Gregory and Klug, 2003). Thus there has been a focus on attempting to maintain financial responsibility on the part of both parents by boosting the amounts of child support paid by non-resident parents. In practice most non-resident parents are men and the new attention paid to non-resident fathers is also connected with an upsurge of public policy interest in fatherhood more widely, particularly in the US (Doherty, Kouneski and Erickson, 1998; Marsiglio et al., 2000) and to a lesser extent in Australia (Russell et al., 1999), Canada (Lero et al., 2006), the UK and other European countries (Hobson, 2002; O'Brien, 2004).

There are several strands to this new interest in fathers. Scholarly work on fatherhood emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, mainly as a result of new sociological thinking about family forms and gender roles arising from the women's movement. These changes were themselves closely related to greater labour market participation by women (Furstenberg, 1988; Pleck and Pleck, 1997; Marsiglio, 1993; Marsiglio et al., 2000). La Rossa (1998), amongst others, has documented how ideas of fatherhood have changed over time as a result of shifting cultural norms. Thus the earlier work largely reflected both the material changes going on within families and the parallel shifts in the social construction of fatherhood.

The more recent policy interest, however, derives mainly from a different source - a body of research on child development dating from the early 1990s, challenging previous assumptions that fathers' involvement in the upbringing of children was peripheral to their wellbeing compared with that of mothers (Lamb, 1997). This research (which has been well reviewed and discussed by Doherty et al., 1998; Russell et al., 1999; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Lamb, 2004; Flouri, 2005, amongst others) has amassed considerable evidence to support conclusions that not only does positive, engaged fathering benefit children's cognitive, academic, social and emotional development, it can also improve men's own health and wellbeing, as well as that of mothers, and can foster more egalitarian relationships within families.

However, this research has not always been conclusive. In particular, what initially made the results of much fathering research ambiguous was the inclusion of samples of both children whose fathers lived with them and those whose fathers did not. Studies that separated out these two groups were more likely to find significant impacts for the former group but not for the latter. Alongside this was a growing body of statistical associations being found between divorce and separation and a range of adverse child outcomes (Amato, 2001). Increasingly this work focused on the absence of fathers and led to an identification of 'fatherlessness' as a key causal variable in these poor child outcomes. Picking up on this research, the media rapidly developed

enduring stereotypes of fatherhood – what Furstenberg (1988) called 'good dads' and 'bad dads' – with the latter group later becoming popularly known as 'deadbeat dads'. However, while the important role that resident fathers can play in child development has now been largely accepted, the role of non-resident fathers is still contested to some extent because not all studies find that their involvement makes a significant difference when other socio-economic or circumstantial factors are taken into account (see Amato and Gilbreth, 1999, for a meta-analysis of this evidence). Both the antecedents and impacts of non-resident father involvement appear highly contextual: they are influenced in particular by the age and gender of children and most of all by the quality and relationship with the ex-partner (Ahrons and Miller, 1993; Amato and Booth, 1997) It should also be noted that the outcomes of divorce and separation are complex and not always unidirectional – children in high conflict marriages can sometimes benefit significantly from a separation where this results in an end to the conflict (Kelly, 2003).

The 'fatherlessness' debate in the United States

While similar messages about family breakdown and child outcomes have emerged across countries, the ensuing policy debates have taken on somewhat different characteristics in particular national contexts. In the US, for example, where much of the influential child development research has been carried out, the 'fatherlessness' debate has been strongly linked to other public policy concerns about welfare reform – which mainly affects sole mothers. There, re-emphasising the role of fathers has also crucially been about increasing child support payments (from 'deadbeat dads'), attempting to prevent families becoming sole mother-headed in the first place or encouraging re-partnering amongst sole mothers as a way out of poverty.

As part of the major reform of welfare undertaken in the 1990s, President Clinton issued an executive order specifically calling on Government departments to focus on the role of fathers in families (Clinton, 1995). This gave rise to the establishment of a wide range of fatherhood programs, information websites, research and initiatives focused on low-income and marginalised families. Many of these programs emphasise heterosexual marriage as a bolster not only against poverty but also against other social problems such as crime and drug abuse. Thus a good deal of the debate around welfare in the US has been concerned with revalorising the institution of marriage (Haskins and Sawhill, 2003; Horn, 2005; US Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

The debate in the mid-1990s in the US also gave rise to the term 'responsible fathering', a concept that carries a powerful normative basis in the literature, and which Doherty et al. (1998) suggest 'reflects a recent shift by academics and professionals away from value-free language and towards a more explicit value-advocacy approach' (p 278). In the US, fatherhood studies are now an area of academic study caught up perhaps more than any other in ideology and advocacy.

Key proponents of 'responsible fatherhood', such as Blankenhorn (1995), Popenhoe (1996) and Horn and Sylvester (2006) (all of whom have been closely involved in federally-funded fatherhood organisations), have argued that the interest of children have been neglected through a weakening of traditional family values, driven by an over-concentration on women's rights and a mistaken assumption of neutrality in family formation. Critics of this view, on the other hand, have argued that the

'responsible fatherhood' perspective is based on an 'essentialist' view of gender characteristics which has not only generated official initiatives preferencing social support for fathers over mothers and heterosexual marriage over alternative family forms (Silverstein and Auerbach, 1999),[1] but also masks an attempt by men to re-establish lost patriarchal power within the family (Wilson, 1999). Wilson in particular argues that research purporting to show that fathers are essential for positive child outcomes has often been misinterpreted and distorted for this purpose. There are also many critics of the practical effectiveness of marriage promotion as an anti-poverty strategy for low-income families (eg, Berrick, 2005).

Middle ground in this ideological battleground has been hard to occupy, but there is a growing body of academic research that has tried systematically to identify what specific aspects of fathering, as opposed to simply fathers' presence or absence in the family, actually make a difference. One of the most influential contributors to this body of work has been Michael Lamb (Lamb, 1987, 1997, 2004; Lamb et al., 1985, 1987; Lamb and Lewis, 2004). The theoretical framework adopted by Lamb and his colleagues is one based on understanding 'the complexity of family relationships and the patterns of influence within the family system' (Lamb and Lewis, 2004, p 273). This systemic framework is one that Doherty et al. (1998) describe as viewing fathering -

> not primarily as a characteristic or behavioural set of individual men or even as a dyadic characteristic of a father-child relationship, but as a multilateral process involving fathers, mothers, children, extended family, and the broader community and its cultures and institutions. (p 278)

It is generally accepted that economic support is crucial and that many of the negative outcomes for children in one-parent families stem primarily from poverty – hence the policy focus both on increasing child support payments by fathers and on encouraging employment amongst sole mothers. However, what this more recent research has attempted to do, in line with the systemic framework referred to above, is look beyond both economic support and simplistic measures of the father's presence/absence or the quantitative level of contact, to qualitative aspects of the interaction between fathers and their children, the kinds of involvement that they maintain after divorce or separation, and how this involvement is mediated by the nature of continuing interactions with ex-partners. This has given rise to more nuanced discussion of the circumstances in which continuing involvement of non-resident parents (both men and women) in their children's lives after separation should be supported through public policy, and how this might best be done.

Policy development on fatherhood in the UK

In the UK, concern about growth in single parenthood, child poverty and non-payment of child support also led to new research and policies focused on fatherhood in the 1980s and 1990s (Lewis, C., 2000; Lewis, J., 2002). The Conservative Government legislated to increase parental responsibility in the Children Act (1989) and the Criminal Justice Act (1991), linking child support to a wider strategy of

---

[1] For an indication of the heated nature of the ideological debate on fatherhood, it is instructive to look at the vitriolic responses to Silverstein and Auerbach's paper available on the internet.

promoting private responsibility and reducing dependency by families on the state (Fox Harding, 1996). The murder in 1993 of toddler James Bulger by two other young boys crystallised public anxiety about the apparent decline of family life and the need to address perceived links between family breakdown, children's criminality and parental responsibility. However, it was not until the Blair Labour Government came to power in 1995 that fatherhood as a whole emerged as a specific topic of policy. Featherstone (2005) has described how at the time when New Labour was articulating its political identity 'an array of diverse constituencies had emerged bewailing the absence of fathers from families and the consequences, particularly for boys deprived of appropriate role models' (p 4). These constituencies included both feminists and the emerging fathers' rights movement, which, though it already existed, became more organised, more public and arguably more influential over this period.

In 1998 the Home Office issued *Supporting Families: a Consultation Document*. This highlighted the role of fathers, but presented a range of contradictory constructions of them: as potential role models, as suppliers of economic resources; and as dangerous and irresponsible. Featherstone (2005) argues that government initiatives on fatherhood in general have continued to bear the hallmark of these contradictory images of men as fathers and the different discourses of fatherhood they represent. Funding for fathers' projects has been patchy and short-term, with the key feature an exhortation that service providers must 'engage fathers'. Thus 'there is often slippage from a project which requires considerable structural and cultural changes in society to a moral project aimed at changing the attitudes of workers' (Featherstone, 2005, p 5).

On the other hand, the UK has not experienced the level of ideological polarisation on this topic that has occurred in the US. Although organisations campaigning around fathers' rights in court proceedings and child support (such as Fathers4Justice and Families Need Fathers) have continued to attract their share of anti-woman and anti-feminist extremists, the UK has also seen the emergence of influential mainstream organisations like Fathers Direct, which operates within an 'equality' framework and collaborates effectively with women's organisations and social services. Fathers Direct has been prominent amongst the organisations aiming for differentiation in practice within the so-called 'men's movement'. On the one side are those who are primarily concerned with advocacy on men's behalf within the legal and court systems or on child support, and on the other are those working with men to address problems such as violence and to build greater confidence and effectiveness amongst men as fathers, both within ongoing relationships and in the context of divorce and separation. This latter area of practice in particular has produced a growing body of useful demonstration work on methods for breaking down the barriers that often exist between fathers and engagement with a range of services. These practice issues are discussed below in Section 4.

Since 2000 a range of studies has appeared, many of them sponsored under a program of work by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, looking at different aspects of fatherhood, including cohabitation and separation (Lewis, Papacosta and Warin, 2002), the involvement of fathers in children's education (Walsh et al., 2004), the conflicts fathers face between work and family (O'Brien, 2005) and how family centres have been engaging with fathers (Ghate, Shaw and Hazel, 2005).

In 2004 the UK Government issued a *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services* (UK Department of Health, 2004). This made particular reference to changing the approach to fathers – 'The National Service Framework supports a cultural shift in all service provision, to include fathers in all aspects of a child's wellbeing' (Standard 2.2, 3.7, p 70). It also supports engaging fathers (whether resident or not) as early as possible in the life of children (Standard 11, 5.6, p11). In line with this, a specific study was mounted looking at how to involve fathers in the early intervention program SureStart, which is discussed below (Lloyd, O'Brien and Lewis, 2003).

Policy interest in fathers in Australia

In Australia, there has been a rise in the number of non-resident parents over a number of decades, but the policy questions relating to involvement in their children's lives have only recently become a major issue for policy makers. Groups advocating for fathers' rights (such as the Lone Fathers' Association and Dads in Distress) have raised the political profile of non-resident parents, focusing, as elsewhere, mainly on family court processes and on child support. Their arguments and methods have often been controversial, but it can be argued that they have won some ground in recent years through changes in family law on child custody arrangements and reforms to the child support system. Indeed, some have argued that they had a disproportionate level of influence on the Howard Government's policies in this area (Kaye and Tolmie, 2004), although officially the primary driver for family law and child support reform was the *Every Picture Tells a Story* report (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, 2003).

The role of fathers in general has become recognised as an important aspect of family policy since the late 1990s, and fathers include a significant number who do not live with their children. A number of official reports have drawn upon the growing body of research evidence relating to the importance of fathers in children's development and involvement of fathers in certain family support services (eg, Committee Reviewing Family and Support Services for Men, 1999; Russell et al., 1999; Sullivan and Howard, 2000; Department of Family and Community Services, 2002). An early review of FaHCSIA's Men and Family Relationships Program identified a strong demand for services that were clearly identified as being directed towards men and used innovative approaches to target men (O'Brien and Rich, 2002). However, as Russell et al. noted, while the demand for information and support for fathers increased substantially from the mid-1980s, relatively little research has been carried out into the impact of support or intervention programs for fathers. In particular, little policy attention has been paid to the role of services for children and families where there is a non-resident parent.

The argument, which underpinned the present study and which has informed a parallel study in the UK (Policy Research Bureau, 2005), is that non-resident fathers who wish to play a significant role in their children's lives may face a number of barriers.

- Many lack the skills and confidence to engage with services and are reluctant to seek help or support in doing this;

- Non-resident fathers often meet with hostility from the resident parent who may resent their continued involvement, particularly if this causes distress to the child;

- Some non-resident fathers are living in reconstituted families and may be divided between the needs of their biological children and their new family (which may also include biological children from the new partnership); and

- Many non-resident fathers are in conflict with their former partners and with the Child Support Agency or the Courts over child support and contact arrangements. This can inhibit their involvement in aspects of their children's lives, including education and health.

In addition to these well-recognised issues, there are also concerns that mainstream services such as schools, primary health services, housing and social services have seldom been well configured to meet the needs of children with non-resident parents. Anecdotal information suggests that these services tend to assume either that children are in nuclear families or that if not they should deal mostly with the resident parent (usually the mother). The non-resident parent is often excluded from discussions and decisions about the child unless the resident parent takes active steps to involve him (or her). Non-resident parents also tend to be treated by housing services as lone adults rather than as parents, and the needs of children to have residential contact with their non-resident parent is not always taken into account. However, there has been little systematic research on the housing situation of non-resident fathers or about homelessness amongst this group (one exception being that by Canberra Fathers and Childrens Service (CANFaCS), 2004). Beyond this mainly anecdotal information, there has been little systematic knowledge about barriers to the involvement of these parents in mainstream services, or about how policies and practices within services may inhibit or facilitate their participation in children's upbringing.

As in the UK, a number of service providers in Australia have developed specific practice methods aimed at engaging fathers, including non-resident fathers. The Newcastle University Family Action Centre has been particularly influential in this area and their work, along with others such as Uniting Care Burnside, is discussed further in Section 4 below.

Commonwealth Government departments, especially FaHCSIA, through its Men and Family Relationships program, the Attorney-General's Department, and the Child Support Agency, have also supported a number of projects and publications in recent years aimed at increasing involvement by fathers in their children's lives, at helping men and women deal with separation and divorce, and at assisting non-resident fathers to stay in contact with their children. Publications include guides and manuals on men and separation (Relationships Australia and Mensline, 2003), women and separation (Relationships Australia, undated), fathering after separation (Marymead Child and Family Centre, 2001; Child Support Agency; 2002), and sharing care of children after separation (Relationships Australia, 2005). The CSA has also piloted the Staying Connected program. Delivered in the workplace and in community seminars, this program aims to help separated fathers take care of themselves following separation, improve communication with their former partner and strengthen the relationship with their children.

One problem with these activities and programs is that they can be seen as fragmented, short-term and lacking in a clear sense of overall objective. A review of FaHCSIA's Family Relationships Services Program, for example, found that while it included a number of components which met real community needs and had high

levels of user satisfaction, the lack of a clear frame of reference and inadequate funding were undermining the capacity of service delivery agencies to use the scarce resources available to maximum effect (Urbis Keys Young, 2004). The review also found that the Program as a whole was not just fragmented, but also lacked effective linkages both across sub-components and between it and other relevant State and Territory agencies and services.

1.2   Research aims

This research was designed to support FaHCSIA's interest in encouraging fathers to maintain involvement in children's lives both within two-parent families and after separation (Committee Reviewing Family and Support Services for Men, 1999; Russell et al., 1999). The main objective was to study how the most significant mainstream services (including schools, primary health care, social housing and children's services) address the needs of children who have a non-resident parent, and to identify policies and practices which might facilitate or inhibit the involvement of these parents. The research is intended to inform policy development on improving the organisation and delivery of services, to help them adapt to the increasing diversity of family structures and, where appropriate, to make them more father-inclusive.

The key research questions, therefore, are as follows.

- How do mainstream public (or non-governmental) services address the needs of children who have a non-resident parent?

- What policies and practices facilitate or inhibit engagement in services by these parents?

1.3   Research methods

The research involved a mapping of the current state of play in the provision of services to families with non-resident parents. The first stage comprised a review of the Australian and international literature which addresses policy and practice relating to the productive involvement of non-resident parents in their children's development, including data on the circumstances of non-resident fathers. The review focused principally on Australia but also takes in literature from other countries such as the UK and the US, where there has been more research on this topic than in Australia.

Literature searches were carried out using on-line academic journal databases including the Social Sciences Index, Social Services Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, Sociological Abstract, and the Sociology Sage Full-text Collection; internet searches; and examination of key Departmental and service agency websites. The literature available, especially on service practice issues, is of such variable nature that it was not possible to carry out systematic review of it all. Also, because of the vast number of studies in the literature on fatherhood and child development, and the availability of good quality reviews and meta-analyses of data, these reviews were drawn on where possible.

The second stage of the research involved qualitative interviews (or in a few cases group discussions) with a range of relevant policy makers and service providers in three States in Australia (focusing mainly on Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane), as well as with other expert informants. The aim was to discuss issues arising from the

literature review, to gain their perspectives on current policy arrangements and to identify further areas of good practice.

The total number of individuals interviewed was 25. They came from 18 different organisations, including Federal and State community services, child protection and education departments; non-governmental family services, including self-help father support organisations; and university-based researchers. The interviews were carried out either face to face or on the telephone, and were recorded digitally for subsequent analysis. The analysis was carried out manually.

1.4   A note on terminology

The original terminology used in the proposal for this research was of 'non-resident parents', recognising that there are women who are non-resident parents as well as men. However, in Australia nearly 90 per cent of non-resident parents are men, and as shown below, the circumstances of non-resident mothers are often distinctly different from those of fathers. The reality is that public policy discussion of non-resident parenthood is principally concerned with fathers. The practice guides developed for working with fathers in services which are discussed below suggest that it may often be necessary to address fathers specifically as men – gender neutrality in this context potentially both avoids confronting issues such as male power and violence, and fails to speak to fathers' own particular gendered experience. For these reasons, the terminology used in the rest of this report is 'non-resident fathers', except where there is specific discussion of non-resident mothers – who are to a large extent absent as such in the literature (Stewart, 1999; Kielty, 2005).

1.5   Report structure

The next section sets out the context in which discussion of non-resident fatherhood in Australia takes place, in terms of statistics on family change, recent changes to family law and policy, and reforms of the child support system. Section 3 then reviews the literature on the importance of non-resident fathers' involvement for child wellbeing. Section 4 focuses on lessons from the literature on engagement of non-resident fathers in services. Section 5 reports on the analysis of the interview data. The final section draws together the key conclusions from the study as a whole.

2 The social, legal and policy context for discussion of non-resident parenthood in Australia

2.1 Family change and growth in non-resident parenthood

A 2004 review from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) noted that in spite of the flurry of interest in post-separation fathering in recent years, there were substantial gaps in our knowledge of this phenomenon in Australia (Smyth, 2004). Smyth also suggests that in Australia there has been little of the kind of advances in theory on paternal involvement that has taken place in the US. Much of what we do know comes from work by Smyth and others at AIFS, and this section draws substantially on their work.

Partly our lack of knowledge stems from conceptual and methodological issues that make research on this topic difficult (Smyth, 2004). Most studies of divorce and separation tend to focus on mothers, and information about fathers often comes second hand from them – a source that is likely to be incomplete and may be biased. Even defining 'fathers' in the context of increasing diversity in relationships and family life is problematic, not least since the line between biological and 'social' fatherhood may be blurred, especially in certain cultures. Perhaps most important for research purposes is the difficulty of obtaining representative samples of divorced and separated fathers. Non-resident fathers often have tenuous housing status or move frequently, and thus may not be picked up in standard household surveys. They are also less likely than women to be at home in the day time and are often more reluctant to take part in surveys, especially those concerned with relationship breakdown and child support. When it comes to special groups within the population of non-resident fathers, such as sole fathers, stepfathers, Indigenous separated fathers, unemployed or self-employed separated fathers, fathers with second families and so on, finding representative samples for meaningful exploration is particularly difficult. Thus little is known about such sub-groups of fathers despite their policy relevance (Smyth, 2004).

These difficulties are not restricted to Australia, although the relatively small but geographically dispersed population of this country tends to exacerbate the problem. In the UK too research on non-resident fathers has proved difficult because of survey sampling problems and poor responses amongst this population (Bradshaw et al., 1999), though the advent of large new surveys such as the Millenium Cohort Study of new parents and their children has allowed for more detailed examination of some aspects of their circumstances than was previously possible (Kiernan, 2006).

The ABS recently updated the information available from the main household surveys on the characteristics of children living apart from one of their parents in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). This provides a useful source of broad-brush empirical data on non-resident parents and also illustrates some of the complexities of the state of non-resident parenthood.

These data shows that in 2003, there were just over one million children aged 0-17 years living with one parent but with a natural parent living elsewhere. Eighty-seven per cent of these had a father living elsewhere and 13 per cent a mother elsewhere, so while non-resident parents are principally fathers, non-resident mothers are not

insignificant in themselves as a group – though, as shown below, their situations are often different from those of non-resident fathers.

Non-resident parents as a whole totalled 493,000 in 2003, making up just over 10 per cent of all parents with children aged 0-17. More than one-third (175,000) of these non-resident parents were also parents, guardians or main carers of other children aged under 18, either as step-parents in a new, reconstituted family, as biological parents of children of a new relationship, or as sole parents with another child of the original relationship living with them.

Non-resident mothers, however, were much more likely than non-resident fathers to live in a 'family household' – that is, with another adult or child with whom there was some relationship (as opposed to being just sharers). Nearly half lived with another partner in a new family (48 per cent), one-third were sole parents and only 10 per cent lived alone. By contrast, nearly one-third (32 per cent) of non-resident fathers lived alone, 40 per cent lived as a husband or partner in a new family, and six per cent were sole fathers. Eight per cent lived as dependent students and a further eight per cent as non-dependent 'children' in their own parents' home. The ABS suggest that these two latter groups may include both men who returned their parents' home after divorce or separation and fathers who have never lived with their child, though little is known about their situations.

Non-resident fathers also tend to have poorer labour market and employment status than their resident father equivalents. In 2003, the former were less likely to be in the labour force, more likely to be unemployed and if employed less likely to work full-time than the latter. However, because we have little information on life course transitions amongst non-resident parents, is not clear how far lower levels of employment reflect non-resident parents' situations before separation (and may perhaps be a precipitating factor in separation) or how far they are a consequence of divorce or separation. There is anecdotal evidence that separated fathers commonly reduce their labour market participation voluntarily to avoid child support obligations, but it has been difficult to test such evidence scientifically.

One study, using data from the Child Support Agency on changes in incomes by child support payers between 1997 and 2001, found that low incomes generally preceded separation and that changes in income following registration with the CSA mostly followed similar patterns to those experienced by other men with similar incomes (Silvey and Birrell (2004). The authors concluded that their findings did not support assumptions that separated fathers often tried to evade their obligations by reducing their engagement in the labour market after separation. Rather they saw it as supporting other research suggesting that poverty or ongoing financial pressures tend to drive separation.

Whether or not this is the case, there is no doubt that households with one parent living elsewhere tend to have much lower equivalent incomes than other families (including families with a non-resident parent) and are much more likely to rely substantially on government income support payments (ABS, 2006). However, as the ABS points out, while this suggests that children in one-parent families are at greater risk of disadvantage than those in other families where there is a non-resident parent, some of the income of many of the families with a non-resident parent may be needed

to pay child support, thus reducing the proportion of income available to support the resident children.

Types of contact between children and their non-resident parents, and the issues involved, have been thoroughly reviewed in Smyth et al. (2004) and are not rehearsed in detail here. Levels of contact seem to be influenced by a number of factors, including physical distance between the homes of the non-resident parent and the ex-partner, the age and sex of the children (so that, for example, daytime-only contact is most common when children are of pre-school age and 'shared care' becomes more frequent when children are of primary school age), and, perhaps most importantly, the relationship between the separated parents and the level of conflict involved. There is also evidence that contact tends to become less frequent when either of the parents re-partners (ABS, 2006; Headey, Warren and Harding, 2006). However, one of the issues that has received less detailed exploration in Australia is how continuing involvement by the non-resident parent can effectively be encouraged or facilitated. This is of increasing importance because of recent changes in family law that introduce an assumption of 'equal shared parental responsibility' after separation, along with compulsory participation in dispute resolution at a new network of Family Relationship Centres.

2.2 Recent changes in family law

In 2005, the Commonwealth Government announced changes to family law that are likely to have a significant impact on separating parents. The legislation is presented as being based on three main principles (Australian Government Attorney General's Department, 2007):

1. Children have a right to know both of their parents and be protected from harm;

2. Parenting is a responsibility that should be shared, provided this does not put children at risk of harm; and

3. Parents and children benefit when parenting arrangements after separation are resolved outside the court system.

The legislation took effect from 1 July 2006, with some aspects affecting families from April 2007 and 2008. The main details are as follows.

- For separating parents, there is a clear presumption of 'equal shared parental responsibility'. This means that both parents should make the major decisions about a child's life (such as education, religion, health issues and where they live). It will be a requirement that parents consult with one another before making decisions about major issues. Shared parental responsibility will be the starting point in most cases, though this does not necessarily mean shared care.

- Mediators, counsellors and legal advisers will be required to assist parents for whom the presumption of shared parenting responsibility is applicable to consider a starting point of equal time where practicable. There will be an obligation to consider whether it is in the best interests of the child and reasonably practical for a child to spend 'equal time', not just 'substantial' time, with both parents.

- In cases of family violence or child abuse, however, there will continue be a presumption against shared parental responsibility.

- Newly established Family Relationship Centres will provide dispute resolution services for separating parents, which will be mandatory unless there is family violence or child abuse. Accreditation standards for Family Relationship Centres, family dispute practitioners and contact centres will be developed.

- An allegation of family violence must be based on a 'reasonable' fear. Penalties can be applied if the Court finds that a false allegation was knowingly made about violence or abuse.

An assumption of shared parental responsibility is particularly relevant to this study, as it places increased obligation on services beyond just those dealing with relationship breakdown to find ways of engaging with non-resident parents.

The other key aspect of relationship breakdown where children are involved is financial support for children by both parents. Linked to the changes in family law has been a further significant reform of the child support system. In the past, access to and contact with children by non-resident parents was legally separated from the obligation to pay child support. Many separated fathers have found it difficult to understand or accept this distinction, resenting paying for children where, for any reason, they felt they were prevented from having sufficient contact with them. In recent years this legal distinction has been partially eroded by linkages made between payment liabilities and the amount of time children spend staying with the non-resident parent, in recognition that non-resident parents can incur significant costs during the time children spend with them (Henman and Mitchell, 2001). Now this linkage has been made even more explicit in a fundamental reform of the child support system.

2.3   Reform of the child support system

The child support system has been subject to considerable controversy since it was introduced in 1988. Women's and sole mothers' groups have argued that it has provided for insufficient support for children in sole parent families from non-custodial parents and that the Child Support Agency has failed to ensure compliance with the payment orders that do exist. Separated fathers' groups on the other hand have complained of excessive financial demands which amount to spousal as well as child maintenance, inadequate recognition of obligations to new families and children, and inability to enforce agreed contact arrangements with non-resident children.

The child support arrangements and payment formula have been subject to a number of changes over the years since it was introduced, most of which have failed fully to resolve the underlying problems. Following a report on child custody arrangements by the House of Representatives Committee on Family and Community Affairs (2003), the Government appointed a Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support, chaired by Professor Patrick Parkinson, which reported in June 2005 and recommended more fundamental reform. In line with the family law changes outlined above, the Taskforce highlighted the need for a greater emphasis on shared parental responsibility and a growing recognition of the importance of both parents remaining actively involved in their children's lives after separation.

The Government responded to the Taskforce in February 2006, accepting most of its recommendations and announcing a series of fundamental changes to the system. Under the new Scheme (FaHCSIA, 2007):

- child support payments are calculated according to the actual costs of children;

- the combined income of both parents are used to calculate child support payments, treating the income of both parents in the same way;

- both parents' contributions to the cost of their children through care and contact are recognised; and

- children of first and second families will be treated more equally.

In response to perceived problems with enforcement of payment liabilities, the CSA has also been given significant extra funding to improve its compliance mechanisms.

The reforms were introduced in three stages from July 2006 to July 2008, with the changes to the payment formula itself taking place in the final stage. The reforms have met with mixed reactions, as might be expected. Generally sole parent and women's groups have welcomed the additional compliance measures promised but criticised the changes to the formula, which they estimate are likely to lead to reduced payments for a majority of mothers, while fathers' groups mostly welcomed the changes.

A review by FaHCSIA of the initial impact of the changes[2] found that around 37 per cent of payees and 51 per cent of payers had net increases in income as a result of the reforms, taking into account both changes to child support and to Family Tax Benefit entitlements (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, 2008). Around 49 per cent of payees and 33 per cent of payers had decreases in net income, with around 13 per cent of payees and 16 per cent of payers had no change in net income. In the majority of cases, for both payees and payers, the changes were $20 per week or less.

The implications of an assumption that both parents will remain actively involved in their children's lives after separation are that mainstream services will need to be prepared to engage more effectively with the non-resident parent. Indeed the whole concept of 'non-residency' is likely to become less clear-cut and less relevant over time as the legal and child support changes take hold.

The next Section reviews the evidence on the impact of non-resident parents' involvement in their children's lives.

---

[2] Based on modelling which assumes full payment of child support entitlements.

3 The relationship between non-resident parents' involvement in their children's lives and child outcomes

3.1 Non-resident fathers and child wellbeing

There is now a large body of research that supports the idea that fathers in general play an important role in positive child development, though the processes by which this occurs are complex and still not fully understood (Russell et al., 1999). The extent to which post-separation involvement by non-resident fathers plays an ameliorating role in childhood disadvantage is somewhat more controversial, even though the general evidence of negative outcomes for children from divorce and separation is strong (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; Amato, 2000). It should also be noted that most of the evidence on paternal involvement and child wellbeing comes from studies of children of school age or of adolescents, mainly because outcomes are easier to measure for these age groups. Thus there is less evidence on outcomes of paternal involvement for younger children. A number of studies also group together children under 18 or 19 years without distinguishing outcomes for different age groups.

It is not the intention in this report to present a full-scale review of the evidence on the benefits of paternal involvement as this has been done elsewhere, but rather to present the broad conclusions and to highlight aspects that are particularly relevant to the question of service use by non-resident fathers.

In their review of recent US scholarship on fatherhood, Marsiglio et al. (2000) divided studies on father involvement into two main areas: 'economic support' and the 'father-child relationship'. Because so many of the negative outcomes experienced by children in sole parent families are linked to poverty, financial contributions from non-resident fathers play a major part in improving outcomes. Most of the US studies identified report positive and significant associations between the level of child support paid and aspects of child wellbeing, including years of educational attainment and school performance, and negative associations with 'externalising problems' – that is, aggression and behavioural or attention problems (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999). There is also some evidence from the US that fathers who pay more child support tend also to have greater contact with their children (Selzer, McLanahan and Hanson, 1998). The evidence therefore supports continuing effort to encourage non-resident fathers to contribute adequately to the upkeep of their children.

In the area of the father-child relationship, earlier research based mainly on the quantity of time spent with children or the frequency of contact, proved largely inconclusive in terms of child outcomes. Marsiglio et al. (2000) examined 38 studies published since 1990 and found that out of 24 of these that included data on the frequency of contact, only 10 significantly predicted aspects of child wellbeing. A further 10 studies focused not on contact but on how close children felt to their father: only three of these found significant positive associations with child outcomes. Where significant associations were more consistently found with child wellbeing was in studies focusing on the extent to which non-resident fathers demonstrated 'authoritative parenting' (for example, emotional support-giving, providing advice about important decisions, providing consistent discipline, praise for accomplishments and so on). Eight out of nine of these studies, in line with those in two-parent families, found significant positive associations with beneficial outcomes. A meta-analysis of these and other studies by Amato and Gilbreth (1999) similarly found that

authoritative parenting is generally the key to positive child outcomes in terms of non-resident fathers' involvement. The general conclusion therefore is that it is not frequency of contact as such, or even the amount of time that fathers spend with their children, that is important, but the content and the psychological quality of the interaction.

There is also some evidence that non-resident father involvement can be particularly important for more disadvantaged children (Dunn at al., 2004; Flouri, 2005). One recent US study, for example, involving 647 young people in poor African-American and Hispanic families, found that, holding other factors constant, where non-resident fathers were involved with the young people, they were significantly less likely to take part in delinquent behaviour, including crime, drug abuse and school truanting (Coley and Medeiros, 2007).

However, the ability to draw clear conclusions from studies in this area has often been restricted because of a number of methodological limitations, including small and unrepresentative sample sizes, reliance on mothers' reports of non-resident fathers' involvement with children, inability to examine effects for different groups of children, and exclusion of key groups such as children born outside marriage or those with little or no father involvement.

A recent US study by King and Sobolewski (2006) attempted to overcome these problems, using a national representative sample of adolescents. Their findings broadly supported the earlier conclusions of Amato and Gilbreth (1999) that having strong ties to non-resident fathers can benefit adolescent wellbeing, irrespective of both family backgrounds and mother-child relationships. Warm and supportive behaviours by non-resident fathers were particularly associated with lower levels of problem behaviour amongst children, and this applied to both boys and girls, except that only boys appeared to benefit in terms of better school grades and less 'acting out' at school. These effects were modest, as other studies have found, and the quality of the mother-child relationship had a consistently greater impact. Adolescents were worst off if they had poor relationships with both parents. Where relationships with the mother were poor, having strong ties to the non-resident father alone was associated with fewer internalising behaviours and less acting out at school than where ties to both parents were weak. Unlike Coley and Medeiros (2007), however, King and Sobolewski did not find a greater beneficial effect from non-resident fathers' involvement for more disadvantaged children.

As mentioned earlier, the majority of studies of non-resident fathers' involvement with children are based on samples of school-age or adolescent children. One recent US study used data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study to examine how involvement by both resident and non-resident fathers affected young children's behavioural outcomes. It used measures on multiple domains of father involvement, including spending time, engaging in activities, and sharing responsibility, and took account of a range of factors that may moderate the effect of father involvement on child wellbeing, including fathers' behavioural characteristics, the quality of parental relationships and marital status at birth (Carlson, McLanahan and Brooks-Gunn, 2008). The study found that greater involvement by co-residential fathers at children's age three was associated with fewer behavioural problems at age five across all measures of involvement. However, for non-resident fathers, involvement was not significantly associated with a reduction in behavioural problems for the sample

overall, regardless of which involvement measure was used. The benefits of non-residential father involvement for children appeared to depend on the extent of fathers' own anti-social behaviour: when the father had spent time in prison, his greater involvement produced no benefit for children, whereas greater involvement by fathers who had not been imprisoned was significantly linked to fewer child behavioural problems. The fact that such a difference could be detected in the study, however, emphasises the nature of the sample and its focus on highly disadvantaged families.

In summary, we can say that while the circumstances of families matter, the evidence points towards a general conclusion that continuing ties with non-resident fathers can benefit children. This, however, can present problems for many non-resident fathers because the form of contact they have with their children frequently tends to be recreational rather than instrumental. Both US and Australian research indicates that non-resident fathers tend to provide less help with homework, are less likely to set and enforce rules, and provide less monitoring and supervision than resident fathers (Furstenberg and Cherlin, 2001; Smyth 2004). To some extent, types of father involvement reflect the gendered nature of parenting more widely, as similar patterns have also been found in two-parent families, but these differences are exacerbated by the standard and most common model of contact (every other weekend and half of school holidays), which does not easily permit deeper forms of involvement and instead tends to favour leisure activities (Jenkins, 2006).

A further difficulty is that frequent contact also provides greater opportunities for conflict between partners if this already exists. This can potentially cancel any benefits accruing from the father-children interaction, because parental conflict is known to be one of the key factors in poor child outcomes (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999).

The likelihood of conflict arising from contact provisions, especially in the context of previous domestic violence, has led to a view that the disadvantages of continuing contact may outweigh any benefits arising from non-resident fathers' involvement. In some cases the negative developmental outcomes that arise from fathers' (or father-figures') poor parenting or psychopathology are likely to continue into post-separation contact. However, more recent research has tended to suggest that because of the depth and complexities of children's attachment to significant adults, severing poor father-child relationships altogether may not automatically bring benefits for children (Daniel and Taylor, 2001). This is because the impact of father absence is often negative, with absent fathers figuring unhealthily in children's imagination as 'heroes' or 'villains', leading to distress and self-doubt and sometimes adversely affecting future capacity for health relationships. Thus Burgess (2005, p3) argues that 'current thinking is moving away from the idea of severance of unconstructive father-child relationships as a simple solution'.

Overall, then, the research suggests that non-resident fathers' continuing involvement in their children's lives is likely to be beneficial in so far as they can offer authoritative parenting, especially if this happens with minimal parental conflict. However, because this is often not the pattern observed in many separated families, non-resident fathers can find it difficult to make a positive contribution to their children's development (Marsiglio et al., 2000). Achieving positive input of this kind may be particularly difficult where previous paternal involvement has been negative

or where levels of parental conflict are high. This emphasises the need for better engagement of non-resident fathers in services for families and children (O'Brien, 2004b; Burgess, 2005), but it also helps to explain why such engagement is often problematic. This paradox is discussed further below in Section 4.

3.2   Non-resident fathers involvement in their children's education

One specific area where considerable research has been carried out is on the links between fathers' involvement with their children's schooling and the children's educational outcomes. A digest of US research by Gadsden and Ray (2003) found that even where fathers themselves had limited schooling, their involvement in their children's schools and school lives had a powerful effect on children's educational attainment, but they concluded that more research was needed to define father and family involvement more precisely. Similar results have been found in the UK by Welsh et al. (2004) and Goldman (2005). In Australia, Fletcher and Daly (2002) have reviewed international evidence on fathers' involvement in children's literacy and found that men tend to be reluctant to participate in print-related activities. However, they argue that men still make important contributions to literacy through other means, and that differences between mothers' and fathers' roles in this area need to be understood.

One major US study that looked at mothers' and fathers' involvement individually also separately analysed non-resident fathers' involvement (Nord, Brimholl and West, 1997). This study, carried out for the US Department of Education and using a national sample of parents of almost 17,000 children, found that it was not contact with children *per se* that made a difference but active participation by non-resident fathers in the schools. Non-resident fathers were more likely to be involved if household incomes were higher, where the mothers' education and involvement was also higher, and if they paid more child support. Their involvement was associated with better attainment and fewer child behavioural problems at school, even controlling for the mother's involvement. In the UK, Goldman found little data on the particular nature of non-resident father involvement, but what there was showed that they were relatively unlikely to be involved with schools directly, partly because their engagement with children's learning tended to take place at weekends and to have a recreational focus. However, she suggests that schools and family learning programs have the potential to be a neutral space where non-resident fathers and their children can have positive time together. Such involvement is in practice likely to be difficult unless the resident parent facilitates it, as a number of studies have found that schools do not tend actively to encourage non-resident fathers' engagement in school activities (Baker and McMurray, 1998; Baker and Bishop, 2003).

3.3   Children's attitudes towards involvement with non-resident fathers

A notable absence in much of the literature on the influence of non-residential father involvement on child outcomes is the voice of children themselves: what is their experience of the presence or absence of their biological father, and how do they see this involvement as affecting their lives or meeting their needs?

This has been explored to a limited extent in the context of the impact of divorce and separation in studies from New Zealand, the US and the UK (eg., Prior, 2001; Anyan

and Prior, 2002; Fabricius, 2003; Dunn et al., 2004). These studies find that children and young people tend to have a broad and inclusive view about what constitutes a family (so that the non-resident father is generally seen as still part of it), and a majority tend to support significant contact with both parents after separation whether or not they themselves have experienced parental separation.

One UK study of 184 recently formed step-families also found that children who had frequent face-to-face contact with their non-resident father were the group most likely to think that those arrangements were about right (80 per cent), while nearly half (48 per cent) of those who had less frequent or irregular contact would have liked more (Smith, 2004). Similarly, those with frequent contact were more than twice as likely to report having good relations with their non-resident father as those with less frequent contact (84 per cent compared with 40 per cent). The statistical association also held irrespective of whether the father had formed a new partnership or had other children. As Smith (2004) points out, such an association is not necessarily causal and if it is the direction cannot be determined: non-resident fathers may have more contact with children because the relationship is already good rather than the reverse, or both features of the relationship may tend to reinforce each other. However, these findings are supported by other studies such as that by Fabricius (2003) of young adults who had grown up in separated families. He found significantly higher levels of anger and lack of closeness to non-resident fathers amongst those who had had minimal contact with them than amongst those who had frequent contact. One of the most important mediating factors seemed to be the extent to which the separated parents criticised each other or tried to interfere with contact: this tended to increase anger and reduce closeness to whichever parent young people saw as responsible.

We have been unable to locate any similar research directly canvassing the view of children themselves in Australia.

3.4   What about non-resident mothers?

As stated earlier, most of the literature on non-resident parents is actually about non-resident fathers. However, around 10-15 per cent of non-resident parents in the US, the UK and Australia are mothers and the proportion they make up is growing, as a result of increasingly gender-neutral legal decisions, high divorce rates and shifting gender stereotypes (Stewart, 1999). The Australian data cited above shows that circumstances of non-resident mothers and fathers are generally quite different, and the few studies that do exist suggest that non-resident motherhood is significantly different from non-resident fatherhood, in terms of the pathways into it, parenting practices and adult adjustment (Arditti and Madden-Derdrich, 1993; Greif, 1997; Kielty, 1999).

Kielty's UK study used narrative analysis of the stories of 20 mothers, some of whom had given up custody voluntarily and some who had lost custody through court orders, to examine whether role-reversal in parenting was accepted and what factors influenced mothers' views of children's needs when they were living outside mainstream normative culture. Virtually all of both groups in her study expressed the view that parenting by mothers and fathers was intrinsically different, and that father care could rarely be comparable to that of mother love, even though for some 'prioritising child welfare required laying aside cultural assumptions about mother and father roles and identities' (Kielty, 1999).

In the US, Stewart's (1999) review of the existing data on non-resident mothers found that it mainly consisted of small unrepresentative sample studies and that assumptions about greater social contact with children by mothers were largely unsubstantiated. She carried out a study of non-resident mothers' and fathers' contact patterns, using a representative national sample of households from the National Survey of Families and Households 1987-88, to test three alternative hypotheses: a) following gendered expectations, mothers would have greater contact with children irrespective of socio-demographic differences; b) they would have less contact because they tend to be negatively selected, being unlikely to lose custody unless they had particular problems; or c) they would have similar levels of contact to non-resident fathers as a result of encountering similar structural and emotional obstacles to staying involved. She found that holding other factors constant, mothers and fathers were similar in terms of the frequency of in-person contact, but that mothers tended to have higher levels of contact by phone and letter, and children spent longer periods staying with them. She concluded that while gender roles and assumptions may encourage greater contact of certain kinds between non-resident mothers and children, non-resident parents overall encounter the same kinds of difficulties that tend to make involvement hard to sustain.

Neither of these studies, nor others found in the literature search, looked in any detail at whether services tended to facilitate or militate against continuing involvement in the day-to-day care and upbringing of children for non-resident mothers. It is possible that in-line with gender differences overall, non-resident mothers have fewer difficulties than non-resident fathers in accessing or dealing with such services, but it is difficult to tell in the absence of studies specifically examining this issue.

The next Section therefore reviews the practice literature on engaging non-resident parents in services, focusing on fathers.

4 Engaging non-resident fathers in services

If the wellbeing of children is likely to be enhanced by maintaining strong ties with non-resident fathers, one way to foster these ties is to engage the fathers in services which either directly cater to their children's needs (such as education or childcare) or are aimed at improving parental interactions after separation or divorce. The latter is especially the case if, as the research suggests, poor outcomes for children can result from continuing conflict between parents after separation, particularly where violence is involved. However, the point was made earlier that in spite of the recent growth of social policy interest in fatherhood there has been relatively little specific focus on fathers by practitioners in public or social services. This Section reviews the evidence on why this is the case; why fathers (especially non-resident fathers) tend not to engage with services; and what service approaches have been found to be more effective in reaching fathers.

4.1 What are the barriers to fathers engaging with services?

The parenting 'deficit perspective'

The most widely held view on this question amongst people working within a 'men's movement' framework and in programs working directly with fathers seems to be that services commonly operate within what Hawkins and Dolahitte (1997) have termed a 'deficit perspective'. This assumes that men are at best largely uninvolved and uninterested in the lives of their children (and unwilling to change), or at worst dangerous to their children (Hawkins and Dolahitte, 1997; King, 2000; Lloyd, 2001; Scourfield, 2001; Hawthorne, 2005). Underpinning this perspective are the commonly reported statistics about the extent of male violence within families, the widespread nature of child abuse by fathers or father-figures, failure to pay child support; the low level of contact with children following marital breakdown; and the continuing under-involvement of men in housework and child care. Taken together these factors tend to create a generalised, negative image of fathers, and especially non-resident fathers, which is influential on service workers – the majority of whom are women and who tend to deal with more disadvantaged families. One consequence, for example, is that service staff in Australia surveyed by Russell et al (1999) tended to estimate the level of physical and sexual abuse of children by fathers as being significantly higher than that derived from national statistics.

What critics of the deficit perspective argue is that while it may accurately describe the actual behaviour of many fathers, it lacks the potential for engaging men; rather than fostering change in men's lives it and creates barriers to change (King, 2000). Hawthorne (1999) suggests that dismissal of non-resident fathers' complaints about their treatment by 'the system' as whinges from men whose patriarchal assumptions of power have been challenged, fails to recognise the genuine and unlegitimated grief many feel as a result of the loss of their children (Jordan, 1998). He also points to a confusion and ambiguity about the role of the non-resident father in society, and to the assumption (against much of the research evidence) that their parenting after separation should be equivalent and similar to that of the mother (even if it was not before separation). This, Hawthorne argues, adds to the frustration many fathers feel. From this point of view, the recognised disinclination many fathers feel to approach services for information or help in their role as fathers (Lloyd, 2001) is understandable. They often feel that professionals' attitudes towards them are

influenced by partial or outdated ideas of their role as fathers and that services are either lined up against them or, at least, are 'not for them'.

The other side of fathers' apparent lack of involvement with children and housework is that many are working increasingly long hours. There is growing recognition that this is a public policy issue both in the UK and Australia, and that while many fathers want to change their work/family balance this is not always easily done within current employment arrangements (O'Brien and Shermit, 2003; O'Brien, 2005; Squire and Tilly, 2007).

Mothers as 'gatekeepers'

There is both clinical and research evidence that non-resident fathers often blame their ex-partners for their disengagement from involvement with their children after divorce or separation, or for continuing difficulties with contact (Kruk, 1992). While this may often be a reflection of fathers' own attitudes or frustrations, there is some evidence that what has been described as 'maternal gate-keeping' can play a role in the difficulties they experience. Allen and Hawkins (1992) describe maternal gate-keeping as 'a collection of beliefs and behaviours that ultimately inhibit a collaborative effort between men and women in family work by limiting men's opportunities for learning and growing through caring for home and children' (p 200, cited in Hawthorne, 2005). In relation to post-separation arrangements, the suggestion here is that resident mothers may implicitly or explicitly block non-resident fathers from active involvement with their children, or even where this blocking is not explicit they may place children in positions of divided loyalties. Such obstacles may carry through to engagement with services, where mothers make it clear that they prefer fathers' involvement to be limited or where they give services negative information about the father.

Service barriers to fathers' engagement

A corollary of the deficit view of fathering is that services, from family support through to schools and primary health care, tend to be oriented more towards mothers. They are often designed with the involvement of mothers as primary carers in mind, and staff can be either uncertain about their role in involving fathers or even actively hostile in the case of non-resident fathers where there is ongoing parental conflict. Research on family centres in the UK has also found that while many were trying to engage with fathers, in line with public policy statements, the basic female orientation and the kinds of activities that many offered tended unintentionally to discourage fathers' involvement (Ghate, Shaw and Hazel, 2000). Similarly, Richardson (2002) has pointed to other features of family services that tend to create barriers to fathers' attendance, including a lack of male staff and activities being held during working hours. Ryan (2000) suggests that because many service staff are ambivalent about involving fathers, fathers themselves can sense how they are 'defined out of the childcare equation', which can reinforce a sense of marginalisation. Fletcher (2003) argues that it is not simply that family services are female-oriented or that they exhibit hostility to men, but rather that the invisibility of fathers is taken for granted. In his view the challenge for services is to recognise the needs and concerns of fathers, and to build these into more inclusive programming that is relevant and responsive to these needs.

We saw above that it is argued that schools do not tend to encourage non-resident fathers' engagement in educational activities (Baker and McMurray, 1998; Baker and Bishop, 2003), even though research evidence suggests that such involvement can be a protective force against poor educational achievement and behaviour. A regular complaint from fathers' groups in the UK is that they frequently do not receive information from schools on their children's progress or activities that would allow them to maintain involvement, even though Courts have ruled that non-resident parents have rights to receive reports and other information (see for example, Families Need Fathers UK, 2005). One US study surveyed the policies of school districts in one midwestern State to determine their stated or implied practices towards non-custodial parents (Austin, 1994). The results suggested that in almost half the 79 districts surveyed these parents were excluded from the educational process. Most districts did not collect identifying information on non-resident parents and a majority implemented their practices in these circumstances without written policy guidelines. More recently the US Department of Health and Human Services has issued a report that includes strategies for involving non-resident fathers in services (National Center for Fathering, 2000) and these are discussed below.

In the UK, in 2000, the Department for Education and Employment issued a guidance note for head teachers outlining the law on schools and parental responsibility (DfEE, 2000). This makes it clear that 'natural parents', and others who may acquire parental responsibility through a court order, have the right to participate in decisions about a child's education and to receive all relevant information from schools. It follows from this that schools need to ask parents and guardians for the names and contact details of all parents when pupils register, and that details of any court orders should also be recorded for when schools may need to make decisions about contacting parents for various permissions, or in the case of child illness or accident. The note also provides guidance for schools about how to deal with any disputes that may arise where the resident parent does not wish the non-resident parent to be involved. This illustrates the fact that provision of information to non-resident fathers and involvement by them in schooling is not always straightforward where there is any kind of inter-parental conflict, and schools are not always in a position to make informed decision about who should be informed or whose consent might be needed in particular circumstances.

Similar issues arise in relation to provision of information on medical treatment of children to non-residential fathers both in the UK and in Australia (Families Need Fathers UK, 2005; Hawthorne, 2005). Legislation and court rulings in the UK have determine that fathers should be able to have access to such information, but that the power to decide whether this in the best interest of the child normally resides with medical practitioners.

The perspectives outlined above tend to suggest that the fault in lack of engagement by fathers in family or other services often lies with the staff of such services. However, the reasons why fathers, and in particular non-resident fathers, are often disinclined to engage with services connected to their family, children or relationships are complex and need responses that match this complexity (Ashley et al., 2006). Featherstone (2005) has argued that a model of exhortation that service providers 'engage fathers', such as that in UK family policy statements, which assumes that service workers are the main problem, is unlikely to be effective. In child welfare

services especially, fear of male violence and construction of men as a threat are widespread - workers have little guidance on how to deal with men and few resources with which to carry out such work. Specialist work with fathers is often small-scale and with only short-term funding both in Australia and in the UK (Russell et al., 1999; Featherstone, 2005). The men who potentially cause the most problems for women and children are also likely to be the most difficult to engage, while resources and training for staff often refers to fathers and mothers rather than men and women, potentially sidestepping issues of masculinity and how this informs fathering practices. Overall, 'gendered anxieties and the space to reflect on such anxieties can be casualties of a broader climate which seems to discourage reflection on 'why' in a rush to engage with the 'how'' (Featherstone, 2005, p14).

This being said, a number of organisations have been developing experience and practice advice for services in engaging fathers that do address some of these issues of gendered dominance.

4.2   How can services improve access for non-resident fathers?

There is now a significant body of literature from the UK, the US and Australia concerned with the practices of working with fathers, mainly in family and children's services, parenting programs, child protection, and schools and early learning programs (see Richardson, 1998; Bartlett and Plows, 1999; Ghate, Shaw and Hazel, 2000; King, 2000, 2001; National Centre for Fathering, 2000; Lloyd, 2001; Fleming, 2002; Fletcher, Silberberg and Baxter, 2001; Silberberg, 2002; Hawthorne et al, 2003; Lloyd, O'Brien and Lewis, 2003; UnitingCare Burnside, 2003; Burgess and Bartlett, 2004; Clawley and Goldman, 2004; Burwick and Bellotti, 2005; Ashley et al., 2006, Burgess, 2006).

However, although most of this literature touches on the question of non-resident fathers, they are not usually the main focus. There is virtually no literature on non-resident fathers' access to areas such as health services or social housing as parents, though these are mentioned in other studies as areas of concern.

Most of the studies are based on practice settings that include family centres, parenting programs, child contact programs, or specific father-oriented programs run by community-based organisations, while a few come from work in schools and other educational settings and from child welfare and protection services.

Studies of the engagement of fathers in family centres are of particular relevance to Australia in the light of the current development of a national network of Family Relationship Centres. Although these are aimed specifically at relationship issues, including separation and child contact or custody, there is likely to be considerable similarity in ways of operating between these and more generalist family support centres. Interesting questions arise about the different models of working with fathers in such settings. In a UK study, Ghate, Shaw and Hazel (2000), for example, identified three main approaches in family centres, which had different implications for enabling men to participate.

- Centres that did not differentiate between men and women users tended to report fewer barriers and to be more enabling for fathers, but tended to attract men who already had a special orientation to fatherhood.

- Centres that saw men and women users as 'different' tended to be more conscious of the problems of working with men, but were more enabling because they actively engaged with the problems.

- Centres that took an 'agnostic' approach, with no clear view on this issue, tended to have the greatest level of barriers reported by staff and parents, and were the least enabling for fathers – they were the most 'feminised' and least father-friendly.

In the UK Sure Start early intervention program, which is aimed mainly at disadvantaged families, five main practice components were found that tended to differentiate programs with higher levels of father involvement from others (Lloyd, O'Brien and Lewis, 2003).

- Early identification of fathers as a priority;

- Program-wide commitment to father involvement;

- A clear strategy for father involvement;

- Provision of services specifically for fathers, building on men's own interests; and

- Presence of a dedicated staff member to encourage father involvement.

Similar points that arise from the work of a number of specific programs for fathers in Australia (King, 2000, 2001; Fletcher, Silberberg and Baxter, 2001; UnitingCare Burnside, 2003) and the UK (Bartlett and Plows, 1999; Lloyd, 2001; Ashley et al., 2006).

The Family Action Centre at Newcastle University has been central to the development of father-inclusive service approaches in family services, health services and schools in Australia (Fletcher, Silberberg and Baxter, 2001; Silberberg, 2002). The report of their 2001 parenting course for fathers (Silberberg, 2002), for example, showed how services carefully tailored to the needs and circumstances of fathers can successfully engage them, and can move them from initial apathy to both active involvement with their children's schools and increased personal confidence.

The US project on engaging non-resident fathers in children's learning (National Centre for Fathering, 2000) also had suggestions for effective practice, including:

- Inviting custodial parents to provide information on fathers and father figures for school records and providing report cards and other school documents to non-resident fathers;

- Training staff to work with fathers, and asking mothers for input and participation in outreach to fathers;

- Making father recruitment everyone's job, from mothers and children, to school bus drivers and leaders of civic and faith-based organisations;

- Proving opportunities for father-to-father support;

- Making fathers feel necessary by drawing on their skills in designing activities; and

- Making men visible amongst staff and volunteers, in publicity and program literature.

Similar recommendations are made in a booklet produced by the UK Department for Education and Science, which also points to the key leadership role of head teachers in making father-inclusive practices effective and sustained (Clawley and Goldman, 2003).

One further area of engagement that raises some particular difficulties is that of non-resident fathers' involvement with social services and child protection. This has been the subject of several studies in the UK and the US because of concerns that children who are taken into care may lose contact with non-resident fathers, where continuing involvement might help with both their emotional wellbeing and possibilities for long-term placement (Masson, Harrison and Pavlovic, 1997; Malm, Murray and Geen, 2006). It has also become an issue in the UK more recently because of a growing number of calls to family support hotlines from non-resident fathers and other paternal relatives complaining about their exclusion from the decision making process in child welfare (Ashley et al., 2006). While there are clearly issues of child safety to be taken into account, the studies all recommend that social services work to promote and maintain better contact and involvement with both parents where appropriate, and to develop models for constructive father involvement.

Overall, the literature from these different service settings discussed above provides broadly similar lessons, although there are some specific issues in areas such as child protection and schooling. The lessons may be summarised as follows.

- Services need to approach fathers positively, by making them 'visible' in family and child interactions. This does not mean ignoring the damage that some men do to children and in relationships, but it does require recognition of the possibility of mutually beneficial relationships between fathers and their children.

- This means working with men from a 'strengths approach' rather than a 'deficit perspective'.

- Fathers will undertake learning activities for themselves if they perceive that this will benefit the children.

- Service providers need to be clear about the purposes of the program or intervention and why it is considered important to involve fathers.

- Fathers are men first: it needs to be recognised that their beliefs and attitudes about fatherhood will be influenced by their beliefs and attitudes towards being a man, including, often, a reluctance to seek help for problems.

- Thus it is necessary to be proactive and persistent in trying to engage fathers, as it takes time to build and sustain engagement.

- There need to be staff involved who are positively motivated towards working with fathers and knowledgeable about them, and have the capacity to work with issues of power and conflict between men and women. If specific fatherhood staff are employed, they need to be integrated effectively into the wider work group to avoid isolation or suspicion from other staff.

- Having male staff can help to engage fathers, even though it is women who are more likely to express a need for same-sex staff. Fathers' groups may not always be the answer, though they can be beneficial particularly for men experiencing

isolation as lone fathers, desperation following marital breakdown, or child behavioural problems.

- Services need routinely to ask about what role fathers and father figures play in the family rather than assuming this, and should collect family information about fathers and father figures whether or not they are resident in the children's main home.

- Services need to display positive images of men and fathers, and to work to make fathers feel welcome.

- Discussion needs to be encouraged and supported amongst both mothers and fathers using services about issues such as domestic violence and child abuse.

- Fathers need to be consulted about what kinds of activities and group work they would like.

- Services need to be prepared to offer a wide range of activities and programs both for fathers only and for families or fathers on their own with their children, including; practical activities; outdoor play and events; opportunities for skills development; as well as sessions on child development and fathering.

- Such activities need to be offered during out of work hours in order to cater for men who are employed full-time.

- Information about services and activities need to be distributed and displayed in places where men are likely to see it. This might include workplaces, pubs, sports centres, radio programs and magazines, and other venues or places of contact frequently used by men.

Having reviewed the literature on non-resident fathers, their role in family life and their engagement with services, we now move on to present the analysis of a set of qualitative interviews carried out with policy makers, service practitioners and expert informants in this field.

5 Findings from interviews with policy makers, practitioners and expert informants

5.1 Interview process and methods

As described in Section 1, the second part of this research involved qualitative interviews with a range of relevant policy makers, service providers and expert informants. The aim was to discuss issues arising from the literature review, to gain respondents' perspectives on current policy arrangements and to identify further areas of good practice. The interviewees came from 18 different organisations, including Federal and State community services, child protection and education departments; non-governmental family services and specialist counselling organisations, Family Relationship Centres, self-help father support organisations; and university-based family researchers. The organisations and individuals approached for interview represented a cross-section of those likely to deal with the issue of non-resident parents' use of services at a policy or practice level. Some were identified in a 'snowballing' process of referral from previous respondents. Attempts were made to also include respondents from State health and housing departments but these were unsuccessful. We were referred either to other departments or to published policy documents.

All respondents received assurances that their comments would be treated as confidential and that no individuals or organisations would be identified in the report except in general terms, unless it was felt in the course of analysis that readers' understanding would be enhanced by providing information about specific programs or studies conducted by particular organisations. In this case respondents would be approached again to give permission for identification.

Topic guides for the interviews varied according to the nature of the organisation involved and its area of work, but typically they included the following lines of enquiry:

- the type of service or involvement with non-resident father issues;

- respondents' perspectives on non-resident fathers' involvement with their children and their engagement with services;

- whether this was commonly experienced as a problem and in what ways;

- whether the organisation had policies, guidelines and practices in relation to non-resident fathers and how these were implemented;

- what kinds of barriers existed in engaging non-resident fathers and what worked in overcoming these;

- whether they commonly dealt with non-resident mothers and if so how issues differed for this group;

- views on FaHCSIA's policy and program involvement in the area; and

- views on where resources for family support might best be directed.

5.2   Perspectives

There was no one settled perspective amongst respondents on the public policy importance of improving access to services for non-resident fathers. At a broad level, most of the participants working in family service and support agencies agreed that children were likely to benefit from continuing involvement with their biological fathers after separation, except in some circumstances of violence and abuse. There was also general agreement that there tended to be barriers to this happening in practice. However, some of those working in child protection and with sole mothers were either more cautious about or more directly critical of the recent increased policy emphasis on support for fathers. One perspective shared amongst all the agencies involved was that of a primary focus on the needs of children – it is through this focus that non-resident fathers are most likely to want to be engaged. As one family centre respondent put it, 'men more readily access services on behalf of their child, whereas they may not readily access the service for themselves'.

One of the other key points made by a number of interviewees was that engaging non-resident fathers should not be seen in isolation from wider questions of changing attitudes to fathers in general. Organisations need to have policies on fathers as a whole before being able to talk sensibly about non-resident fathers; many service organisations outside the small field of agencies with a particular interest in fathers currently held no administrative data about father involvement and had no goals or target for improving such involvement. It was also emphasised that fathers needed first of all to be addressed as men, with the particular characteristics associated with masculinity, rather than implicitly assuming that as 'parents' they shared the same characteristics and ways of operating as mothers, and had the same set of needs.

Several respondents also highlighted the particular difficulties faced by non-resident parents from Indigenous or other culturally diverse backgrounds.

> Indigenous fathers have more family pressure - It's harder to break out of their family influence and they are often reluctant to accept other parenting practices. In some cases they become ostracised.

We begin by discussing the perspectives offered by the various family support organisation representatives, why they found that men came to their services, what non-resident fathers needed, what obstacles existed to engaging them and how these could be overcome.

5.3   In what ways are non-resident fathers an issue for services?

Amongst the various family support services there was broad agreement that while there are still difficulties in engaging men, the demand from separated fathers has been increasing: in some services the balance between female and male clients is approaching 50-50. In a minority of cases men are referred to services as a part of court-directed violence counselling, or as part of compulsory mediation following a relationship breakdown. More often they approach services directly for help with reaching parenting agreements, dealing with child support demands, gaining contact with their children, because of conflict with their partner either after or in the lead-up to a separation, or because of personal distress or depression following a separation. Often the motivations are a combination of these and a common feeling is one of isolation and helplessness. As one interviewee put it,

> A lot of the fathers feel like they just provide child support – and they are not sure how to be fathers without living with the children. They feel kicked to the curb and disenfranchised.

One participant provided a different perspective – that of an organisation working with and advocating for sole parents, principally sole mothers. She challenged what she saw as the underlying assumptions in the research itself – that where there are difficult relations between parents after separation that this is a result of some neutral 'conflict'. Rather, the experiences of her organisation and its members were that violence and abuse is an overwhelming concern of women which does not receive proper recognition from either the courts or other parts of the social support system as legitimate. She pointed to recent research from the Australian Institute of Family Studies (Moloney et al., 2007) which found that allegations of violence and abuse saturate Family Court proceedings and that most allegations were likely to have some substance, but that these allegations mostly were left 'hanging in the breeze' and made no substantive difference to the contact arrangements that were ordered.

This respondent also expressed reservations about fathers' support services and the extent to which they tended to assist fathers in conflict with their ex-partners, the Family Court and the Child Support Agency.

> Well, my experience is that they train each other in how to stalk each other's ex-wives and I've often for some of them lamented how they tend to cement the victim identity in the minds of the men who come to them. They maximise the view of them as done-wrong, helpless, passive victims. There is no responsibility for the outcomes and in a sense this keeps them stuck in a place of blaming, anger, hostility where they share and promote their views.

She emphasised that she was thinking of some grassroots peer-led organisations and would not generalise this view to professional services or to groups specifically aimed at moving men towards taking responsibility for their behaviours. She saw a role for such groups, but emphasised that there was still a long way to go before the role of fathers as a whole, not just separated fathers, was open to discussion in public policy.

> I guess one observation is that behind the political smoke and mirrors and problematisation of non-resident fathers' position there are a whole lot of fathers who are simply getting on with it, with their children, with their ex-partners, and are not in crisis, are not having difficulty. Simply not in need of services and are engaging with their post-separation lives in a way that is positive and acceptable to all parties … It's whether or not they choose to do that and the circumstances which frame that choice.

Another respondent came from a grassroots service which had received support from a large welfare agency and later funding through the Men and Family Relationships Program. He expressed how while initially many of the men came to the service 'to have a whinge', his approach was to challenge this:

> … saying quite blatantly to the men who just wanted to have a whinge – this wasn't a victims' group. There was a lot of talk then about 'oh, women have got this and women have got that' and it's like through my training, which was largely in the feminist environment of welfare, I'd heard it all and was starting to get the gist of why there was so many women's services and that was

because women had a voice and said 'this is what I want', and also women were actively working to get this funding to set up services which were appropriate to women (which largely excluded men). So I said to them, 'you can sit around whingeing – which I'm not going to allow any way, or you can start to build something'.

Most respondents from family support services had no difficulty in seeing the positive gains to be made from greater engagement with non-resident fathers. Those working in community services and child protection, however, had more reservations about promoting the involvement of non-resident fathers in their children's lives. They recognised that their perspective was influenced by the fathers of the children they worked with often being seen as a threat, in terms of domestic violence, child abuse or other family problems, rather than as a potentially beneficial resource. They also had to take into account a consideration of risk to workers, the majority of whom in the social services sector are female. The policy of one community services department was expressed as being 'gender-neutral but with the safety of children as the number one priority'. It was also emphasised that care had to be taken not to 'go overboard' in encouraging fathers to become involved in children's lives, when some may not have the skills and may not necessarily want to be involved.

In spite of these reservations, the community services and child protection respondents cited a number of ways in which their departments worked to involve non-resident fathers. Officials in one department referred to their 'currently scoping out the problems and policies around engaging fathers'. They also talked about producing publications to encourage fathers to become more involved.

In another department, a child safety practice manual was provided and referred to in the course of the interview. The manual did not specifically refer to non-resident fathers, only to non-resident parents, even though respondents said that they rarely saw non-resident mothers. As one of the academic expert informants noted, the gender neutrality of language in policy documents can itself be an obstacle to engaging fathers because it makes it appear that policy is not about them and does not address them as men.

The basic procedures in both Departments were presented as follows. Where a child is removed from one parent, caseworkers have the option to make contact with a non-resident parent to see whether they have a relationship with the child and whether it would be possible for the child to live with them. In general, it was reported that caseworkers would consider non-resident fathers as a primary possibility because it is seen as preferable to place a child with one of their biological parents rather than with a foster family, and because foster parents are in short supply. Location is also often an issue - family members that live locally are likely to be contacted because the child can stay in their own environment, such as existing schools or childcare arrangements.

Where appropriate, case workers should seek the views of the children about whom they are in contact with and with whom they want to live. Assessment is carried out of the suitability of placement with both resident and non-resident fathers, and this also involves risk assessment based on factors such as domestic violence and the wider backgrounds of non-resident parents. When investigating concerns (in terms of the child), they are required by law to advise at least one of the parents of the child protection concerns and then once the investigation has finished they have to advise at

least one of the parents of the outcome of the investigation. When a child is under an order or has been removed from one parent the expectation is that they would find the other parent.

The Department does have the right to withhold this information from a non-resident parent if they believe there is some risk to the child or carer, but policy guidelines outline that reasons must be serious, including: a lack of contact with the other parent for a significant period of time; inability to locate the other parent; health, drug or alcohol issues that impact on the other parent's ability to engage with the department; domestic violence past and present; and situations where it is not clear who is the biological father.

5.4   What are the obstacles to engaging non-resident fathers in services?

The barriers respondents identified as inhibiting involvement by non-resident fathers were broadly similar to those identified in the literature.

- *Male reluctance to seek help with problems*: men tend to wait until there is a crisis before accessing support and often feel embarrassed by their situations.

   It's a generalisation, but women are much better at accessing services, so even if we came up with the best services around and the best information products around, how do we get blokes to take them up?

- *Male anger and aggression*: aggressive behaviour can make it difficult to gain sympathetic help from service staff. Frustration often stems from fathers not knowing what is happening to children when communication with an ex-partner is poor.

- *A perception that services are exclusionary*: an assumption of the primary role of mothers and that mothers know more about caring for children than fathers has resulted in services are that are mainly female oriented. Having a female dominated workplace also means that it is easier to have no contact with fathers. However, not all respondents agreed that the gender of staff was intrinsically a barrier.

   Some men will initially feel more comfortable engaging with a man, but it's more about how you engage than gender.

- *The perception of exclusion can extend beyond family services*: many stores, for example, primarily target mothers in their overall environment and only provide 'mothers' rooms' rather than 'parents' rooms', though this is changing.

- *Service opening times can exclude working fathers*: men find it difficult to adjust work hours to spend time with children and attend services. Community services caseworkers are also rarely available outside traditional business hours.

- *Lack of funding to meet the demand from non-resident fathers*: many programs run for a short period of time and then end without anything growing from them.

- *Lack of clear purpose in service programs*: some services are able to bring fathers in, but then do not know what to do with them: one fathers' support services respondent talked about providing training and consultancy to other local services in this position.

- *Lack of understanding about recent family law and child support changes*: men often have unrealistic expectations of 'shared' care and responsibility as automatically meaning 50/50 shared living arrangements.

- *Unrealistic expectations for problem solution*: some men also approach services with unrealistic expectations that they can solve all their problems – leading to further frustration and anger when this turns out not to be the case.

- *Conflict with ex-partners inhibits relationship with children*: some fathers find it hard to engage with their children if there have allegations of violence and are less likely to make contact with their children because they feel that the other partner 'has something over them'. Similar problems can be caused by disputes over paying child support. Parental conflict also risks drawing staff in on one side of a dispute.

There were also some specific barriers identified by child protection and community services respondents.

- *Complexity of family structure*: for their client population there may be multiple partners, who may come in and out of children's lives. Resident parents are also not always forthcoming with information about the father: sometimes there is no name on the birth certificate, or they may provide names other than that of the biological father, including that of the current boyfriend or de facto. In some cases the biological father might not actually know they have a child.

- *Challenge and risk in working with men*: in cases where there has been domestic violence, a perception of direct physical risks can as another deterrent to engagement where the workforce is mainly female.

- *Locating non-resident parents*: this can be difficult if there has been little contact over time or parents have moved interstate.

- *Pressure of time*: caseworkers are in high demand and there sometimes insufficient time to include all of the family surrounding the child in consultations about its future.

5.5　How can these obstacles be overcome?

> Being inclusive of dads, recognising that dads have a significant role to play – both parents do – understanding that men and women have different learning styles or are receptive to different language, but just recognising that dads have a significant role to play and working with them with what they need.

This quote from one of the respondents sums up well the core message from the interviews about what is needed to effectively engage fathers in services affecting them and their children. It involves three key elements:

- recognition of fathers' significance to their children;

- understanding that as men fathers need to be approached in different ways from women and using different language; and

- working with men on the basis of what they themselves identify as their needs (what one respondent referred to as 'groundedness').

Within these three key strategies, there were a number of more detailed policy and practice recommendations that arose from the interviews, but underlying them was a fundamental need for belief that fathers can change.

First, in terms of the way services are delivered, they need to be male friendly, have other men visibly using them, have male workers or female staff comfortable with and committed to working with men, and have easy access, including out of normal work hours. Father-friendly services also need to be based on sustained practices which affect not only specific fatherhood workers but permeate the service as a whole.

Having both men and women involved in running group sessions for fathers can be helpful: especially when male and female workers demonstrate respectful and cooperative relations in practice. Physical settings also need to avoid an institutional or authoritative feel.

There needs to be recognition that having men become workers in these services on the basis of their own experience can be a strength. However, it is important that they do not act to reinforce male victimhood but are able to challenge service users' behaviours and attitudes where these are counter-productive to the development of better relationships with their children and ex-partners. More specific training is needed for both men and women working in this area – one example is that provided by UnitingCare Burnside in western Sydney.

A range of different methods of providing access for fathers needs to be trialled. In some cases telephone helplines can be effective, providing 24-hour availability and involving confidentially and anonymity (such as the Mensline). Other methods of working may involve sessions linked to joint activities with their children, including sport, construction workshops and other physical engagement. In the use of advertising or other recruitment methods, there needs to be recognition that both language and literacy can be barriers: written documents may be hard to understand due to poor English language comprehension and lack of literacy, and other media such as community service information on radio may be more appropriate.

An important way into engaging non-resident fathers is to focus on the needs of their children and on the potential benefits involved, including better socialisation, improved educational outcomes and fewer behavioural problems. This helps to establish the relevance of what the service can offer. Counselling offered needs to be respectful of the way men think and behave, involve listening to their stories, being anonymous and confidential, solution focused and non-judgemental. It needs to help men identify how the people they care for feel, and how engaging in services is going to help them and these other people. This also involves an understanding of what is meant by 'safety', both for themselves and the people they care about. An important element concerns the language in which this counselling is grounded. As a fathers' support service worker put it,

> Using 'doing' words that men can recognise such as 'building', 'growing and 'producing' is a big part of how we work with the men. Saying, you know, do you want to be a victim? Your kids don't need victims, they need confident parents, energetic parents. You're a role model to your kids. How do you want them to view you? And when they're thrown that challenge they say, well yeah, I don't want them to see me as a whinger. I don't want them to see me as just a negative part of their live, as an enemy to their mother. So, well, look at how you want them to see you and look at how you get the support and skills that you need.

5.6   Other service areas

Education

Anecdotally, the picture is that non-resident fathers tend to find it difficult to become or stay involved in their children's schooling if they wish to, because schools and child care centres routinely communicate only with the resident parent, through newsletters, letters from teachers and principals, notification of special events or outings, student progress reports and so on.

Most respondents we spoke to had heard similar comments, but had little direct experience of how schools dealt with this issue. One community services respondent commented that non-resident parents did frequently complain about not getting enough information about their child. Another respondent referred to the situation at her own children's school.

> I guess I've observed that for example in my own case my school sends copies of everything to both parents, so there is, I suppose, a systems inhibitor on schools in terms of the doubling of postages or the doubling of communications to two different households.

Another respondent made a similar observation about conflict over numbers of tickets for school concerts, for example, where schools found themselves stuck in the middle of such disputes.

A respondent from a fathers' support service noted that public schools are generally quite good at providing extra information to non-resident parents, but that private schools can be much harder. If the mother is seen to be the paying parent, then she is likely to receive all of the information despite the father paying child support for schooling. His service recommends that non-resident fathers introduce themselves to

schools appropriately through a letter that outlines who they are, where they live and then arrange an appointment to discuss arrangements for being kept informed. They do not encourage fathers to use school as a way in which to see their children outside agreed contact times.

A respondent from the legal department of a State education department saw the issue as one based principally on legal responsibility and risk assessment, together with resources. The State had developed policy guidelines (originally in 1994) to deal with family issues. Since then the policy/guidelines have evolved and were recently updated in to take into account changes to legislation from 2006. When developing the policy/guidelines they engaged a range of organisations/ people involved in family law. The Family Law Reform Association were so happy with the policy/guidelines that they wanted to use them as the basis for a national system and are lobbying the federal authorities to have them implemented in all schools across Australia. The guidelines have since been adopted in three other States/Territories.

Any dispute within the family law context impacts on schools. Common issues include excursions, name changes, parents helping at schools, parents being able to talk to teachers about their children's progress, and so on. The guidelines lay down that unless there is a court order, schools should deal with both parents 'as best they can'. The Department's legal section provides a telephone advisory service for schools and most call relate to family law. Often the issue is that principals are unaware of the guidelines, are not aware of the other parent or do not see their situation as fitting within the guidelines.

The primary focus is inevitably on the residential parent for dealing with excursion notes, attendance issues and information about what is happening at schools, but if the non-resident parent wants a copy of any documents, schools should be prepared to provide them unless a court order dictates otherwise.

If the child lives between the two parents the obligation is on them to try to reach some agreement about who should be given school information, but if they both want the information then they should be sent it. The system relies on the non-resident parent contacting the school to say that they want information – schools do not contact the parents, they wait for parents to contact them and then attempt to engage them. Permission notes are accepted from both parents, though this can be problematic as there are often disputes.

Just because a parent has a court order against them, however, does not always means that they are barred from having anything to do with the school. Non-resident parents can be involved in school support activities such as working in the canteen and helping with reading as long as they are there for those reasons, and if they see their children at those times there is no problem. However, if it turns out they are just doing it to see their children then this is not allowed.

The overall view was that for education to be successful you need the engagement of parents. The respondent saw his Department as operating within a culture of engaging parents. However, in spite of the guidelines, he argued that these issues can be problematic for the schools at an operational level when parents cannot agree on anything. Schools can be caught between the two parents and the Department tries to

make decisions based on the best interests of the child. It is not always able to please both parents.

An academic respondent, however, disputed the idea of the legal framework really being the prime issue in schools. He saw it more as a question of the 'care framework'. He cited a number of examples where when the issue was raised with schools they instituted arrangements whereby copies of documents, children's paintings and other material was routinely sent to non-resident fathers in bulk-addressed manilla envelopes, but that other schools baulked at the relatively minor costs involved. Similarly, an example was given of the good results achieved at a local childcare centre by sending children's paintings to fathers who were in gaol.

Sometimes it appears that legal responsibilities can be used as an excuse for inaction by schools. The respondent cited evidence from an analysis of enrolment forms in some Tasmanian schools, where paternal details were blanked out allegedly because of Apprehended Violence Orders, but when checked turned out mostly not to be the case – mainly they simply reflected there having been some conflict.

> The problem is that one 'angry man' incident is remembered for a long time and colours staff responses to fathers.

Another view was that engaging with non-resident fathers is all about the relationship – 'hearing directly from the school about how their child is going is better for them than a piece of paper'. This respondent suggested that every school should ideally maintain a separated parents' liaison position, but he recognised that schools are already over-stretched and under-resourced.

Healthcare services

Again the question of whether doctors and other health professionals are insufficiently inclusive of non-resident fathers in relation to child health matters remains largely anecdotal, although Hawthorne (2006) suggests that it is a widespread issue. The problem is generally that for confidentiality reasons only the 'referring person' can be sent information on a child's health treatment and that person in normally the mother.

We were unable to gain interviews with officials in the health departments of the States in which the research took place. However, some of the other respondents reflected on this issue. One, the representative of a sole parent organisation, saw it partly as a systems issue, concerning confidentiality and GP protocols for the sharing of information, but also, and more importantly, a matter of how effective the communication was between the parents.

> In terms of health, again it tends to come back to my observation about the quality of the relationship between the ex-partners. If she is too afraid that he will assault her, she will not chat about the child's health state. You know, it's about safe communication, it's about do they speak civilly to each other … the problems that we get told of by mums are often to do with a disinterest or a disregard for the child's health needs, but then again we are like policemen - we get the people who come to us with problems ... So I think it really does go to both systems and also the capacity of the individuals concerned to communicate well and value the kind of post-separation co-parenting relationship that they can develop with their ex-partner.

Housing

Another area which has been identified as potentially problematic for non-resident fathers following separation is that of housing. The ABS (2006) data cited above indicate that non-resident fathers often have poorer labour market outcomes than their resident equivalents and those who were previously home owners with their ex-partners are more likely, initially at least, to return to renting following a separation. There is relatively little research evidence on homelessness amongst men who have some residential care of children, but a number of studies have identified this as an unrecognised problem, even though the numbers involved are relatively small (CANFaCS, 2004, Bui and Graham, 2006).

On the other hand, it is sole mothers who are one of the largest groups of people who become homeless and use SAAP services, generally as a result of domestic violence, and there is some evidence that fathers as a whole are more likely over time to improve their housing circumstances after divorce and separation than mothers (reference).

While there are inevitably financial difficulties for most low-income families after separation, in terms of formal rules of access to social housing, it appears that children's needs during residential contact are generally taken into account. We were not able to obtain interviews with housing officials as part of this study, but one State Housing Department states the following in its public housing access guidelines.

> Applicants who have access to children on a part-time basis, e.g. every second weekend or during school holidays, should have their bedroom entitlements assessed as per the above information regarding bedroom entitlements for children.

However, another State's guidelines make it clear that while extra bedrooms may be allowable for residential contact with children, the original assessment of eligibility for a non-residential father would be based only on his status as a single person, not as a family.

> An applicant who has weekend and school holiday access to children is assessed as a single applicant. Children who do not live with the applicant are not to be included on the application.

> If the applicant meets the eligibility criteria for public housing, they are entitled to 1 extra bedroom above their minimum entitlement to enable their children to visit. A child is entitled to a separate bedroom in cases where the Family Law Court or DoCS have confirmed that the child has been subject to sexual assault.

> Weekend access arrangements are demonstrated by any of the following:
>
> - Receipt of part payment of Family Tax Benefit A or B
> - Statutory Declaration signed by parent providing primary care
> - Family court papers stating access arrangements
> - Letter from support worker or advocate.

5.7   Non-resident mothers

The issue of non-resident mothers was also raised with interviewees for comment. The general view was services had relatively little experience of working with them, but when they did they tended to have very specific issues. One group amongst them tended to be women on a dedicated career or breadwinner track, while another included those with severe personal difficulties such as drug use or mental health

problems, which had resulted in loss of custody of their children. Overall there was a sense that they tend to be largely invisible in public policy, but that some services were looking to develop programs targeted them because their numbers were increasing. Their pathways into non-resident motherhood tend to be quite different from those of non-resident fathers and often challenge cultural norms of gender and motherhood. As such, more work is needed to identify where their service needs may be unmet.

5.8   The policy role of FaHCSIA and other Government departments

Most respondents were strongly positive about the leading role that FaHCSIA has taken in policy development in this area through the Family Relationships Services Program and, more specifically, the Men and Family Relationships Program. Several respondents wanted to commend FaHCSIA for its work in legitimising a policy area in which they had been working for many years with little recognition. It should be noted that a number of the organisations whose staff were interviewed had received funding through these programs, or had worked with FaHCSIA and the Attorney-General's Department on developing various father-focused initiatives.

There were three main areas of reservation about these programs. First, there was a concern that much of the funding allocated programs tended to be short-term, making it hard to sustain initiatives beyond pilots or demonstration projects. Respondents cited examples of NGOs losing funding for non-resident fathers' programs, which was a problem because these were a group unlikely to pay for services themselves. There was also concern that funding might in the future move away from 'grass-roots' services.

Secondly, there was a view that this father-inclusivity was not extending far into other government or non-governmental services beyond those within FaHCSIA's or AGD's policy scope. The area of health services was one cited in particular as needing to develop better approaches to father inclusiveness.

The third viewpoint concerned the role of the Child Support Agency in developing and sponsoring the 'Staying Connected' and 'Being Connected' programs. Staying Connected was a series of half-day programs provided in workplaces for non-resident fathers to address issues of self-care, relationships with the ex-partner, and how to be a good dad when not living with your children. Over 1000 men had participated in the program by late 2007 in workplaces including the Defence Force, the Fire Brigade, the Police Service, IBM and various firms within the construction industry. An internal evaluation has indicated that the program has been well received and successful. Being Connected is a follow-up to the earlier program, aimed at assisting separated fathers to focus on the needs of their children and on the impact of entrenched conflict on them.

The sole parent organisation representative questioned whether CSA should be devoting time and resources to these programs when its core business should be focusing on financial assessment and transfer of finances to support children with separated parents. While recognising that good relationships between ex-partners and their children influence whether child support is paid, she argued that there are many other organisations in the field with specific expertise in the promotion of positive family relationships.

> I can't for the life of me see why the agency is dedicating large lumps of its budget to relationship counselling rather than its core business … If you are responsible in your financial transactions you should also be responsible in your relationship transactions and those two things typically go together.

The counter argument, put by a respondent involved in the development of these CSA-sponsored programs, was that there has been a shift towards viewing non-resident fathers as major stakeholders, not just from the point of view of paying child support but also as integral to the wellbeing of their children. Practical and emotional support are then essential contributors towards child support compliance.

> Even from a pragmatic point of view you have to view the engagement of fathers as essential to paying child support. Our core business really at the end of the day is collecting child support, but the more support we can give our parents the better chance they have of paying child support privately between them without CSA or any bureaucracy intervening … These dads want to pay their child support, but often there are just so many issues in the way.

6   Conclusions

There is a growing consensus that fathers are important for children's development and that their contributions complement those which mothers bring but are not identical to them. Partly these contributions are economic, and are important as such because children in sole mother families are disproportionately likely to experience poverty or low incomes. However, practical and emotional involvement is also crucial as well, both for children's overall wellbeing, for their emotional development, and in particular for their educational outcomes. This applies to non-resident fathers too, although the evidence is less clear-cut on the difference their continuing involvement makes after separation, because of the complexity of the level and types of involvement, the impact of new relationships formed by the respective ex-partners, and problems of continuing parental conflict.

Even so, it generally accepted across all the main English-speaking countries that engaging non-resident fathers to improve their parenting skills and their ability to retain continuing involvement is likely to benefit children, even where their parenting may have been poor before the separation. However, the amount or frequency of contact is not in itself the main issue. It is the quality of the father-child interaction in the context of the whole family system and the extent to which this involves authoritative and effective parenting which seem to make the difference.

A notable absence from the literature on this topic is that of children's own voices. Nevertheless, some limited evidence mainly from the US, the UK and New Zealand, suggests that they tend both to favour greater levels of contact with non-resident fathers after separation and have better relationships with their non-resident fathers where contact continues to be frequent and substantive.

In Australia this is of growing importance because the direction of changes in family law and child support is towards an increased level of shared parenting responsibility for children after divorce and separation. This not only has the potential to weaken the resident/non-resident parent dichotomy, but also places a new onus on services, from family support to schools, child welfare, health services and housing, to recognise the importance of the non-resident father in the ongoing life of the child and to find ways to better engage with him.

There is a growing body of research and practice development on how to engage fathers in services, both from overseas and in Australia, but this is mainly restricted to the service areas of parenting and family support and to a lesser extent education. There has been little work on other areas such as healthcare or housing, although there is anecdotal evidence that these service areas have some way to go to become father-inclusive. There has also been only a limited specific focus on non-resident fathers, much less on non-resident fathers from special groups such as Indigenous fathers or those from other cultural and linguistic minorities.

In the last decade a plethora of programs aimed at fathers have been developed in Australia, many of them with support from FaHCSIA, the Attorney-General's Department and more recently the Child Support Agency. Many of these initiatives have achieved successful outcomes and are popular with service users and with service staff working in the field, but they tend to be small and local, and often with

only short-term funding. The development of a wider, societal shift towards greater involvement by fathers as a whole is constrained by a fragmentary approach to service delivery and a lack of clear links with other service delivery arms of government outside the family services. The gendered structure of employment and the continuing difficulties of developing 'work-life' balance also act to limit the ability of men as fathers to develop the kinds of relationships with their children that can easily be sustained in the event of relationship breakdown.

The evidence suggests that while demand for support from men is increasing, there are a number of continuing and linked barriers to engagement with non-resident fathers. These include the difficulty of overcoming their own reluctance as men to approach services or to ask for help in their parenting role; a widespread 'deficit' perspective that views men negatively as fathers; a lack of recognition that their responsibilities as workers can often conflict with their ability to parent effectively; and a gate-keeping role sometimes performed by mothers. It is also clear that many services are in transition from being primarily oriented towards mothers: even if they do not actively deter fathers from involvement they may unintentionally put them off by not offering either a father-inclusive environment or services that interest and engage fathers as men.

However, it is too simplistic just to blame services or service staff for this problem. Organisations such as schools or child protection services are operating within legal constraints established to ensure the safety of children in their care. The role of fathers in society is also in a state of flux and until recently they have been largely invisible to services that have catered mainly for mothers as primary carers of children. Issues of gender power and male violence are also ever present for services that deal with child welfare or assist sole mothers. These present realistic difficulties for many in dealing with non-resident fathers. Such a shift in orientation by services is also potentially problematic where there might be potential competition for scarce public resources. Sole mothers, for example, can justifiably feel some concern that a shift in focus towards fathers may come at the expense of their legitimate claim for recognition and support, particularly in view of the continuing and pervasive levels of domestic violence and the problems facing women attempting to escape it.

In spite of these potential difficulties, many services are effectively re-orienting themselves to address the needs of non-resident fathers and their children, while programs working with fathers across the countries looked at in this review have been developing useful guidelines for effective father-inclusive practices. The key points from these are as follows.

Services need to approach fathers positively, by making them visible in family and child interactions. This does not mean ignoring the damage that some men do to children and in relationships – indeed it can often mean explicitly addressing issues of gender power and violence, but it involves recognising the possibility of mutually beneficial relationships between fathers and their children. It means working with men from a 'strengths approach' rather than a 'deficit perspective'. Services need to display positive images of men and fathers to make them feel welcome.

Service providers also need to be clear about the purposes of the program or intervention, and why it is considered important to involve fathers. Fathers are men first of all and their beliefs and attitudes about fatherhood will be influenced by their

beliefs and attitudes towards being a man, including, often, a reluctance to seek help for problems. This means that services need to be proactive and persistent in trying to engage fathers, as it takes time to build and sustain engagement.

An important element involves employing staff who are positively motivated towards working with fathers and knowledgeable about them. These do not necessarily have always to be other men – the evidence is mixed on whether men find other men more approachable in this context and there need to be choices available. However, if fatherhood workers are employed specifically, they need to be integrated effectively into the wider work group to avoid isolation or suspicion from other staff. Services also need routinely to find out what role fathers and father figures play in the family and should collect information and contact details for them whether or not they are resident in the children's main home.

Services need to be prepared to offer a wide range of activities and programs both for fathers including; practical activities; outdoor play, sports and events; opportunities for skills development; as well as sessions on child development and fathering. Fathers also need to be consulted directly about what kinds of activities they would like. Such activities need to be offered during out of work hours, in order to cater for men who are employed full-time, while information about services and activities need to be distributed and displayed in places where men are likely to see it or through media with which they engage.

In spite of the considerable body of literature that exists on the impact of contact with non-resident fathers after separation or divorce, there is still a need for further Australian research into the roles that separated fathers play within families, the nature of these ongoing relationships with children, and particular issues that exist for sub-groups of families such as those from Indigenous or culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds. Such research would help inform future directions for child services and family centres in meeting the needs of both children and parents, including non-resident fathers. There is also a need for further information about children's own perspectives and feelings on how best to foster and maintain their relationships with fathers after separation, especially in an Australian context.

Finally, it is important to note that 10-15 per cent of non-resident parents are mothers and this proportion is growing. Their circumstances are often quite different to those of non-resident fathers, as are their pathways into non-resident parenthood, but the difficulties that they may face in accessing services is rarely discussed in the literature or specifically addressed in service provision. Some may face special problems because of the challenge to cultural norms of gender and motherhood that their situation represents. This is a topic also needing further research exploration.

References

Ahrons, R. and R. Miller (1993), 'The effect of the post-divorce relationship on paternal involvement: a longitudinal study', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 63 (3), 441-450.

Allen, S. and A. Hawkins (1992), 'Maternal gatekeeping: mothers' beliefs and behaviors that inhibit greater father involvement in family work', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 61, 199-212.

Amato, P. (2000), 'Consequences of divorce for adults and children', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62, 1269-1287.

Amato, P. (2001), 'Children of divorce in the 1990s: an update of the Amato and Keith (1991) meta-analysis', *Journal of Family Psychology*, 15 (3), 355-370.

Amato, P. and A. Booth (1997), *A Generation of Risk: Growing Up in an Era of Family Upheaval*, Harvard University Press, London.

Amato, P. and J. Gilbreth (1999), 'Nonresident fathers and children's well-being: a meta-analysis', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 61 (3), 557-573.

Anyan, S. and J. Prior (2002), 'What is in a family? Adolescent perceptions', *Children and Society*, 16, 1-12.

Arditti, J. and D. Madden-Derdrich (1993), 'Noncustodial mothers: developing strategies of support', *Family Relations*, 3, 305-315.

Ashley, C., B. Featherstone, C. Roskill, M. Ryan and S. White (2006), *Fathers Matter: research findings on fathers and their involvement with social care services*, Family Rights Group, London.

Austin, J. (1994), 'The impact of school policies on noncustodial parents', *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage,* 20(3/4), 153-170.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006), 'Children living apart from one parent', Australian Social Trends, Catalogue 4102.0, ABS, Canberra.

Australian Government Attorney General's Department (2007), 'Changes to the Family Law Act', http://www.familyrelationships.gov.au/www/agd/familyrelonline.nsf/Page/R WPD8B0796CCBE4B2CBCA25721900095239.

Baker, R. and A. McMurray (1998), 'Contact fathers' loss of school involvement, *Journal of Family Studies*, 4 (2), 201-214.

Baker, R. and B. Bishop (2003), 'Non-residential parents: the forgotten partners in children's education', *Nuance*, 4, 36-48.

Bartlett, D. and B. Plows (1999), *Report on NEWPIN's Fathers Support Group 1997-98*, National NEWPIN, London, http://www.europrofem.org/contri/2_04_en/en-masc/34en_mas.htm.

Berrick, J. (2005), Marriage, motherhood and welfare reform, *Social Policy and Society*, 4 (2), 133-145.

Blankenhorn, D. (1995), *Fatherless America: confronting or most urgent social problem*, Basic Books, New York.

Bradshaw, J., C. Stimson, C. Skinner and J. Williams (1999), *Absent Fathers?*, Routledge, London.

Bui, B-C and A. Graham (2006), *Support Issues for Homeless Single Fathers and Their Children*, Report for the SAAP National Coordination and Development Committee, Wombat Housing Services and Victoria University, Melbourne.

Burgess, A. (2005), 'Fathers and public services', in K. Stanley, ed., *Daddy Dearest? Active Fatherhood and Public Policy*, Institute for Public Policy Research, London.

Burgess, A. (2006), 'Engaging fathers in their children's learning: tips for practitioners', training document written for the *Step Into Learning* project, Fathers Direct, London, www.stepintolearning.org.

Burgess, A. and D. Bartlett (2005), *Working With Fathers: a Guide for Everyone Working With Families*, Fathers Direct, London.

Burwick, A. and J. Bellotti (2005), 'Creating paths to father involvement: lessons from Early Head Start', *Issue Brief No 1*, Mathematica Policy Research Inc., Washington DC, August.

Carlson, M., S. Mclanahan and J. Brooks-Gunn (2008), 'Fathers' involvement and young children's behavior in fragile families, paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, New Orleans, 18 April.

Canberra Fathers and Children Service (CANFaCS) (2004), *Dad, where are we going to live now? A report on sole father families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness*, CANFaCS, Canberra.

Child Support Agency (2001), *Staying Connected,* CSA, Canberra.

Child Support Agency (2006), Me and My Kids: Parenting From a Distance, CSA, Canberra

Clawley, J. and R. Goldman (2004), *Engaging Fathers: involving parents, raising achievement*, Department for Education and Skills, London.

Clinton, W. (1995), *Supporting the Role of Fathers in Families*, memorandum for the heads of executive departments and agencies, Washington DC, June 16.

Coley, R. and B. Medeiros (2007), 'Reciprocal longitudinal relations between non-resident father involvement and adolescent delinquency', *Child Development*, 78 (1).

Committee Reviewing Family and Support Services for Men (1999), *Report of The Committee Reviewing Family and Support Services for Men*, Department of Family and Community Services, Perth.

Daniel, B. and L. Taylor (2001), *Engaging With Fathers: Practice Issues for Health and Social Care*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London.

Department of Family and Community Services (2002), *Supporting Fathers in Families*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2007), *Reforming Australia's Child Support Scheme, Factsheet One: An Overview of the Reforms*, http://www.FaHCSIA.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/via/child_support_sche me/$file/fact1_child_support_overview_of_reforms-24jan.pdf.

Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (2008), *Stage Three of the Child Support Scheme Reforms, Improving the lives of Australians: Information on results of the report on the changes to the Child Support Scheme Reforms – Stage Three*, http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/childcare/$file/child_su pport_scheme_stage3_factsheet.pdf.

Doherty, W., E. Kouneski and M. Erickson (1998), 'Responsible fathering: an overview and conceptual framework', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 60(2), 277-292.

Dunn, J., H. Cheng, T. O'Conner and L. Bridges (2004), 'Children's perspectives on their relationships with their non-resident fathers: influences, outcomes and implications', *Journal of Child Psychology, Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, 45 (3), 553-566.

Fabricius, W. (2003), 'Listening to children of divorce: new findings that diverge from Wallerstean, Lewis, and Blakeslee', *Family Relations*, 52 (4), 385-396.

Families Need Fathers (2005), 'Schools and Doctors: access to information', www.fnf.org.uk/schools.htm.

Featherstone, B. (2005), 'Engaging fathers: the challenge for child welfare practices', paper for the CROCCS conference *Challenging Practices: 3rd Conference on International Research Perspectives on Child and Family Welfare*, Mackay, 5-7 July.

Fleming, J. (2002), 'From the rhetoric to reality: the importance of fathers in building stronger families', *Developing Practice*, 4, Winter.

Fletcher, R. (2003), 'Defining fatherhood', *8th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference Proceedings*, Melbourne, www.aifs.gov.au/institute/afrc8/papers.html

Fletcher, R. and K. Dally (2002), *Fathers' Involvement in their Children's Literacy*, Family Action Research Centre, University of Newcastle, Newcastle.

Fletcher R., S. Silberberg and R. Baxter (2001), *Fathers' Access to Family-Related Services,* Research Report, Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle, Newcastle.

Flouri, E. (2005), *Fathering and Child Outcomes*, Wiley, Chichester.

Fox Harding, L. (1996), *Family, State and Social Policy*, MacMillan, Basingstoke.

Furstenberg, F. (1988), 'Good dads - bad dads: two faces of fatherhood', in A. Cherlin, ed., *The Changing American Family and Public Policy*, Urban Institute, Washington DC, pp.193-217.

Furstenberg, F. and A. Cherlin (2001), Divided Families: What Happens To Children When Parents Part?, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.

Gadsden, V. and A. Ray (2003), 'Fathers' role in children's academic achievement and early literacy', *ERIC Digest*, Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, November, www.ceep.crc.uiuc.edu.

Ghate, D., C. Shaw and N. Hazel (2000), *Fathers and Family Centres: Engaging Fathers in Preventive Services*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.

Goldman, R. (2005), *Fathers' Involvement in their Children's Education*, National Family and Parenting Institute, London.

Gregory, R. and E. Klug (2003), 'A Picture Book Primer: Welfare Dependency and the Dynamics of Female Lone Parent Spells', Australian National University, http://econrsss.anu.edu.au/Staff/gregory/pdf/PictureBookPrimer_17_01_03_Facs.pdf.

Greif, G. (1997), 'Working with noncustodial mothers', *Families in Society*, January/February, 46-51.

Haskins, R. and I. Sawhill (2003), 'Work and marriage: the way to end poverty and welfare', *Policy Brief*, No. 28, Brookings Institution, Washington DC.

Hawkins, A. and D. Dollahite (1997), *Generative Fathering: Beyond Deficit Perspectives*, Sage, Thousand Oaks CA.

Hawthorne, B. (2005), 'Non-resident Fathers Struggle with the System', University of Western Sydney, Sydney, http://menshealth.uws.edu.au/documents/NONRES%20FATHERS.html, accessed 16 November 2006.

Hawthorne, J., J. Jessop, J. Pryor and M. Richards (2003), *Supporting Children Through Family Change: a review of interventions and services for children of divorcing and separating parents*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.

Headey, B., D. Warren and G. Harding (2006), *Families, Incomes and Jobs: a Statistical Report of the HILDA Survey*, Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.

Henman, P. and K. Mitchell (2001), 'Estimating the costs of contact for non-resident parents: a budget standards approach', *Journal of Social Policy*, 30 (3), 495-520.

Horn, W. (2005), 'Wedded to Marriage: invest now or pay later?', National Review Online, 9 August , http://www.nationalreview.com/comment/horn200508090806.asp.

Horn, W. and T. Sylvester (2006), 'Introduction', in Father Facts, 4th edition, National Fatherhood Initiative, www.fatherhood.org/fatherfacts_int.asp.

House of Representatives Committee on Family and Community Affairs (2003), Every Picture Tells a Story: Inquiry into Child Custody Arrangements in the Event of Family Separation, Canberra, 29 December.

Jenkins, J and K. Lyons (2006), 'Non-resident fathers' leisure with their children', *Leisure Studies*, 25 (2), 219-232.

Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2000), 'A man's place in the home: fathers and families in the UK', *Foundations*, April 2000, JRF, York.

Jordan P. (1998), 'The effects of marital separation on men ten years on, *National Forum on Men and Family Relationships*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra, June.

Kaye, M and J. Tolmie (2004), 'Fathers' rights groups in Australia and their engagement with issues in family law', *Sisyphe*, http:/sisyphe.org/article.php3?id_article+1309.

Kelly, J. (2003), 'Changing perspectives on children's adjustment following divorce: a view from the United States', *Childhood*, 10 (2), 237-254.

Kielty, S. (2005), 'Mothers are non-resident parents too: a consideration of mothers' perspective on non-residential parenthood', *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 27 (1), 1-16.

Kiernan, K. (2006), 'Non-residential fatherhood and child involvement: evidence from the Millenium Cohort Study*, Journal of Social Policy*, 35 (4), 651-669.

King, A. (2000), Working with fathers: the non-deficit perspective, *Children Australia*, 25 (3), 23-27.

King, A. (2001), 'Engaging fathers in Group Work', *Developing Practice: The Child, Youth and Family Work Journal*, 1, Winter, 30-37.

King, V. and J. Sobolewski (2006), 'Nonresident fathers' contribution to adolescent well-being', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 68 (3), 537-557.

Kruk, E. (1992), 'Psychological and structural factors contributing to the disengagement of noncustodial fathers after divorce', *Family and Conciliation Courts Review*, 30 (1), 81-101.

Kruk, E. (1994), 'The disengaged noncustodial father: implications for social work practice with the divorced family', *Social Work,* 39 (1), 15-25.

Lamb, M. (1986), 'The changing role of fathers', in M. Lamb, ed, *The Role of the Father in Child Development, 3rd edition*, Wiley, New York.

Lamb, M. (1997), 'Fathers and child development: an introductory overview', in M. Lamb, ed, *The Role of the Father in Child Development, 3th edition*, Wiley, Chichester.

Lamb, M. (2002), 'Nonresidential fathers', in C. Tamis-leMonda and N. Cabrera, eds., *Handbook of Father Involvement*, Lawrence Erlbaum, Mayway, New Jersey.

Lamb, M. (2004), ed., *The Role of the Father in Child Development, 4th edition*, John Wiley and Sons, New York.

Lamb. M and C. Lewis (2004), 'The development and significance of father-child relationships in two-parent families', in M. Lamb, ed., *The Role of the Father in Child Development, 4th edition*, Wiley, New York.

LaRossa, R. (1988), 'Fatherhood and social change', *Family Relations*, 37, 451-457.

Lero, D., L. Ashbourne and D. Whitehead (2006), *Inventory of Policies and Policy Areas Influencing Father Involvement*, Father Involvement Research Alliance, University of Guelph, Ontario.

Lewis, C. (2000), 'A man's place in the home: fathers and families in the UK, *Foundations,* Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York, April.

Lewis, C., A. and J. Warin, J. (2002), *Cohabitation, Separation and Fatherhood*, York Publishing Services, York .

Lewis, J. (2002), 'The problems of fathers: policy and behaviour in Britain', in B. Hobson, ed., *Making Men Into Fathers: Men, Masculinities and the Social Policies of Fatherhood*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 125-149.

Lloyd, T. (2001), *What Works With Fathers*, Working With Men, London.

Lloyd, N., M. O'Brien and C. Lewis (2003), *Fathers in Sure Start*, National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS), Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues, Birkbeck College, University of London, London.

Malm, K., J. Murray and R. Geen (2006), *What About the Dads? Child Welfare Agencies' Efforts to Identify, Locate, and Involve Nonresident Fathers*, Urban Institute, Washington DC.

Marsiglio, W. (1993), 'Contemporary scholarship on fatherhood: culture, identity and conduct', *Journal of Family Issues*, 14 (4), 484-509.

Marsiglio, W., P. Amato, R. Day and M. Lamb (2000), 'Scholarship on fatherhood in the 1990s and beyond', *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 62 (4), 1173-1191.

Marymead Child and Family Centre (2001), *Fathering After Separation: a Program for Separated Fathers*, Kingston, ACT.

Masson, J., C. Harrison and A. Pavlovic (1997), *Working with Children and 'Lost' Parents: Putting Partnership into Action*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, York.

McLanahan, S. and G. Sandefur (1994), *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.

Millar, J. and T. Ridge (2001), *Families, Poverty, Work and Care: A review of literature on lone parents and low income couple families*, Department for Work and Pensions (UK) Research Report No.153, CDS, Leeds.

Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support (2005), *In the Best Interests of Children - Reforming the Child Support Scheme - Report of the Ministerial Taskforce on Child Support*, Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Canberra, 14 June.

Moloney, L, B. Smyth, R. Weston, N. Richardson, L. Qu and M. Gray (2007), *Allegations of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Family Law Children's Proceedings: a pre-reform exploratory study*, Research Report No. 15, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Moore, K., D. Glei, A. Driscoll, M. Zaslow and Z. Redd (2002), 'Poverty and welfare patterns: implications for children', *Journal of Social Policy* 31(2), 207-27.

National Center for Fathering (2000), *Involving Non-resident Fathers in Children's Learning*, US Department of Health and Human Services, Washington DC, http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/invol-non-res00/index.htm.

Nord, C., D. Brimholl and J. West (1997), *Fathers' Involvement in their Children's School*, National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education, Washington DC.

O'Brien, M. (2004a), 'Social science and public policy perspectives on fatherhood in the European Union', in M. Lamb, ed., The Role of the Father in Child Development 4th edition, Wiley, New York, 121-145.

O'Brien, M. (2004b), *Fathers and Family Support Services: promoting involvement and evaluating impact*, National Family and Parenting Institute, London.

O'Brien, M. (2005), *Shared Caring: Bringing Fathers into the Frame*, Working Paper No. 18, Equal Opportunities Commission, Manchester.

O'Brien, C. and K. Rich (2002). *Evaluation of the Men and Family Relationships Initiative – Final and Supplementary Report*. Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

O'Brien, M. and I. Shermit (2003), *Working Fathers: Earning and Caring*, Research Discussion Series, Equal Opportunities Commission, Manchester

Pleck, E. and J. Pleck (1997), 'Fatherhood ideals in the United States: historical dimensions, in M. Lamb, ed., *The Role of the Father in Child Development, 3rd edition*, Wiley, New York.

Policy Research Bureau (2005), 'Separated Families: how mainstream services support disadvantaged children and their non-resident parents – project summary', Policy Research Bureau, London, www.prb.org.uk.

Popenhoe, D. (1996), *Life Without Father*, Free Press, New York.

Prior, J. (2001), 'Adolescent attitudes to living arrangements after divorce', *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, 13 (2), 1-13.

Relationships Australia (2005), *Share the Care: Parenting Plan - collaborative parenting apart*, Curtin, ACT.

Relationships Australia (undated), *Women and Separation: managing new horizons*, Curtin, ACT.

Relationships Australia (Victoria) and Mensline Australia (2003), *Men and Separation: Choices in Tough Times*, Kew, Victoria.

Richardson, A. (1998), *An Audit of Work with Fathers throughout the North East of England*, Children North East, Newcastle-upon-Tyne.

Russell, G., L. Barclay, G. Edgecombe, J. Donovan, G. Habib, H. Callaghan and Q. Pawson (1999), *Fitting Fathers Into Families: Men and the Fatherhood Role in Contemporary Australia*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

Ryan, M. (2000), *Working With Fathers*, Radcliffe Medical Press, Oxford.

Scourfield, J. (2001), 'Constructing men in child protection work', *Men and Masculinities*, 4, 70-89.

Selzer, J., S. McLanahan and T. Hanson (1998), 'Will child support enforcement increase father-child contact and parental conflict after separation?', in S. Garfinkel, S. McLanahan, D. Meyer and J. Selzer, eds., *Fathers Under Fire*, Russell Sage, New York.

Silverstein, L. and C. Auerbach (1999), 'Deconstructing the essential father', *American Psychologist*, June.

Silvey, J. and B. Burrell (2004), 'Financial outcomes for parents after separation', *People and Place*, 12 (1), 45-56.

Smith, M. (2004), 'Relationships of children in step-families with their non-resident fathers', *Family Matters,* 67, 28-35.

Smyth, B. (2004), Postseparation fathering: what does Australian research tell us?', *Journal of Family Studies*, 10 (1), 20-49.

Smyth B. (2004), ed., *Parent-child Contact and Post-separation Partnering Arrangements*, Research Report No. 9, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Smyth, B., G. Sheehan and B. Fehlberg (2001), 'Patterns of parenting after divorce: a pre-Reform Act benchmark study', *Australian Journal of Family Law, 15,* 114-128.

Squire, S. and J. Tilly (2007), *It's About Time: Women, Men, Work and Family*, Final Paper 2007, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Sydney

Stewart, S. (1999), 'Nonresident' mothers and fathers' social contact with children', Journal of Marriage and the Family, 61 (4), 894-907.

Sullivan, R. and S. Howard (2000), 'Focus on Fathering: a project of the Children's Commission of Queensland', paper presented to the 7th Australian Institute of Family Studies Conference, *Family Futures: Issues in Research and Policy*, Sydney, 24-26 July.

UK Department for Education and Employment (2000), 'Schools, "Parents" and "Parental Responsibility"': Guidance Note, DfEE, London, June.

UK Department of Health (2004), *National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services*, DoH, London.

Uniting*Care* Burnside (2003), *Fathers' Support Service Evaluation Report*, Parramatta.

Urbis Keys Young (2004), *Review of the Family Relationship Service Program*, Department of Family and Community Services, Canberra.

US Department of Health and Human Services (2005), Administration for Children: Healthy Marriage Initiative website, http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/Marriage/index.shtml.

Walsh, E., A. Buchanan, E. Flouri and J. Lewis (2004), *'Involved' Fathering and Child Well-being: Fathers' Involvement With Secondary School Age Children*, National Children's Bureau, London.

Whitehead, D. (2006), 'Non-resident fathers', Section J in D. Lero, L. Ashbourne and D. Whitehead (2006), *Inventory of Policies and Policy Areas Influencing Father Involvement*, Father Involvement Research Alliance, University of Guelph, Ontario.

Wilson, G., J. Gillies and G. Mayes (2004), *Fathers as Co-parents: How Non-resident Fathers Construe Family Situations*, Legal Studies Research Programme, Justice Department, Scottish Executive, Edinburgh.

Wilson, T. (1999), 'Deconstructing fatherhood propaganda', *Feminista!*, 3(4).