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# Separated fathers and the 'Fathers' Rights' Movement

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# Separated Fathers and the 'Fathers' Rights' Movement

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## **Separated Fathers and the 'Fathers' Rights' Movement**

### **ABSTRACT**

Separated fathers often feel profound grief, distress, and anger at the end of their relationships with their partners and their children. Some participate in 'fathers' rights' groups, a movement which claims to advocate on behalf of men and fathers who are the victims of discrimination and injustice in the Family Court and elsewhere. Yet such groups may do little to help fathers heal or to build or maintain ongoing and positive relationships with their children. Some men do find support in these groups, but they also may be incited into anger, blame, and destructive strategies of litigation. Using a framework of three domains of impact – fathers' responses to and recovery from separation, fathers' relations with children, and fathers' relations with their ex-partners – this paper proposes that fathers' rights groups are detrimental for fathers themselves. However, other responses to separated fathers are more constructive.

### **KEYWORDS**

Fathers; Fathering; Separation; Divorce; Fathers' rights

## INTRODUCTION

The fathers' rights movement comprises groups or networks of fathers (and others) who act in support of the collective interests of fathers, especially separated fathers whose children do not reside with them. A critique of fathers' rights groups and their harmful impacts on family law is already visible in scholarship (Crowley, 2006a; Dragiewicz, 2008; Flood, 2010; Kaye and Tolmie, 199a, 1998b; Rhoades, 2006). This critique notes the significant harms experienced by women and children, especially those living with domestic violence or abuse, as a result of 'reforms' encouraged by the fathers' rights movement. This paper proposes that fathers' rights groups may be vulnerable to a further critique, that they are harmful *for fathers themselves*. Using a simple framework of three domains of impact – fathers' responses to and recovery from separation, fathers' relations with children, and fathers' relations with their ex-partners – I draw on public sources of fathers' rights discourse to suggest that such groups are detrimental for fathers themselves.

## THE FATHERS' RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The fathers' rights movement is defined by the claim that fathers are deprived of their 'rights' and subjected to systematic discrimination as fathers and as men, in a system biased towards women and dominated by feminists. Fathers' rights groups overlap with men's rights groups and both represent an organised backlash to feminism. Fathers' rights groups can be seen as the anti-feminist wing of a range of men's and fathers' groups which have emerged in recent years, in the context of profound shifts in gender, intimate and familial relations over the past four decades (Flood, 2010).

While fathers' rights groups share common themes, there are also diversities – in their degree of opposition to feminism, their involvements in political advocacy, their reliance on Christian frameworks, and so on.

Three experiences in particular bring men into the fathers' rights movement. Painful experiences of divorce and separation, as well as accompanying experiences of family law and the loss of contact with one's children, produce a steady stream of men who can be recruited into fathers' rights groups.

### **Separation and divorce**

Among heterosexual men, separation and divorce represent highly traumatic experiences with both short- and long-term negative effects. From two Australian studies, men who have undergone divorce and separation feel acute distress at and soon after the time of separation, reactions of guilt and depression are common, some experience long-term impairment of their psychological well-being, and health problems are worst among men who do not repartner (Hawthorne, 2005; Jordan, 1998). American studies corroborate that separated fathers experience considerable emotional and practical difficulties in the wake of separation (Braver *et al.*, 2005b; Lehr and MacMillan, 2001). Negative effects are exacerbated by poverty, social isolation, conflict and violence, and physical and mental ill-health.

Feelings of anger and blame directed at ex-partners and the 'system' are relatively common among men who have undergone separation and divorce, and it is not surprising that they also characterise many fathers' rights groups (Collier and Sheldon

2006, 16). Australian research suggests that significant proportions of men feel angry at their ex-wives, this anger lasts for years, and blaming of their ex-partners intensifies over time (Jordan 1998). Hawthorne (2005) found widespread, although not universal, agreement that 'the system' makes it difficult for non-resident fathers. Perceptions of bias and discrimination also are common among separated fathers in US research. For example, three-quarter of fathers in Braver and Griffin's (2000) examination thought that the legal system favoured mothers. Most of 25 participants in a program for non-resident fathers believed that the legal system was biased against them, for example because their ex-partners were granted custody despite being drug-using, violent, or unfaithful (Laakso and Adams, 2006). In focus groups with young noncustodial fathers, there was a perception that the justice system discriminates against fathers and 'a general sense of frustration, anger, and helplessness' in relation to the judicial system (Lehr and MacMillan, 2001: 376).

Still, divorce does not produce inevitably a willing recruit for fathers' rights. Some men respond to divorce by making a priority of relationships with their children, setting aside differences with their ex-wives to ensure good co-parenting (Arendell, 1995).

### **Dissatisfaction with loss of contact with children**

Separated fathers' dissatisfaction with loss of contact with their children provides a second, related source of entry into fathers' rights groups. Among divorced parents in Australia, most children's living arrangements are finalised without the need for a Family Court order (Smyth *et al.*, 2001). Most arrangements are established at the

point of parental separation and do not change afterwards. At the same time though, there is significant dissatisfaction among post-separation parents about their levels of residence and contact, particularly among non-resident fathers. In a 2001 study, 40 per cent of resident mothers, but 75 per cent of non-resident fathers, wanted to see more contact occurring (AIFS, 2003). In another, while only three per cent of resident mothers wanted any change in children's living arrangements, 41 per cent of non-resident fathers did so (Smyth *et al.*, 2001).

### **Reassertion of traditional gender roles and backlash**

More widely, men's entry into fathers' rights and men's rights groups can be understood as one aspect of a backlash among men (and women) to profound shifts in gender relations and family lives. Writing in the US context, Crowley (2006a) suggests that contemporary fathers' rights groups emerged from the convergence of three earlier strands of men's activism: the divorce reform movement in the 1960s, anti-feminist men's activism which began in the 1990s, and conservative religious groups such as the Promise Keepers. The Australian context is similar. Modern fathers' rights groups such as the Lone Fathers' Association and the Men's Rights Agency have historical links to divorce-related advocacy groups, and overlap with Christian pro-marriage groups such as the Fatherhood Foundation.

It has been suggested that the fathers' rights movement represents an effort to re-establish masculine and paternal authority over women and children (Flood 2010). Fathers' rights groups typically seek an equality concerned with fathers' 'rights' and status rather than the actual care of children (Rhoades 2000). Rather than a struggle

for a power they do not have, theirs is a defensive struggle against *losing* power (Crowley 2006a). Their efforts take place in the context of, and are bolstered by, wider community and political anxieties regarding gender and sexual relations and a backlash against feminist and sexual liberation movements (Rosen *et al.* 2009).

Understanding the fathers' rights movement only in terms of anti-feminist backlash may, however, miss other factors shaping such collective mobilisations. Collier (2009) and Collier and Sheldon (2006) link the activities of fathers' rights groups to the wider socio-cultural contexts which shape men's responses to divorce and separation, norms of a 'new fatherhood', changes in the legal regulation of post-divorce family life, and shifting discourses in law and wider society regarding parenting and equality.

Given that fathers' rights groups claim to support separated fathers, why is this valuable, and what evidence is there that participation in such groups is beneficial for fathers?

Fathers' active participation in parenting is desirable not because mothers are inadequate, nor because fathers bring something unique to parenting, nor even because every family must have a father at its head (Flood 2003). Instead, fathers' participation is desirable because fathers, like mothers and other parenting figures, can and do make valuable contributions to the emotional, material and social well-being of children and families.

It is desirable for children, at least in most cases, to have ongoing contact with their fathers after their parents' separation or divorce. At the same time, non-resident

fathers' contact with children is not in itself a good predictor of children's well-being. Of four dimensions of non-resident fathering assessed in Amato and Gilbreth's meta-analysis (payment of child support, frequency of contact, feelings of closeness, and authoritative parenting), authoritative parenting is the most consistent predictor of child outcomes (Amato and Gilbreth, 1999). Children benefit little from frequent contact *per se* with fathers; the nature of fathers' parenting makes much more of a difference.

### **ASSESSING FATHERS' RIGHTS GROUPS' SUPPORT FOR SEPARATED FATHERS**

There are three obvious reasons to provide support to separated fathers:

- To assist them in healing from the negative effects of separation and divorce;
- 
- To support them in maintaining or building ongoing relationships with their children, and related to this;
- 
- To help them to manage an ongoing and positive relationship with their ex-partners.
-

Given that some separated fathers join community-based fathers' rights groups, do fathers' rights groups help separated fathers to achieve the three goals above? There is reason to think that participants in these groups find emotional and practical support and intensify their commitments to parenting. On the other hand, there also is reason to think that at least some groups stifle separated fathers' healing processes, constrain and harm their relations with their children, and worsen their relations with their ex-partners. This assessment is speculative, for two reasons. First, there is almost no research on fathers' rights groups' influences on their members. A search of published literature could not find a single empirical examination, and approaches to fathers' rights groups around Australia did not generate any evaluation evidence. This assessment relies instead on examination of fathers' rights groups' public discourses and existing research on these groups' perspectives and agendas, extrapolating from these to their likely impact on their participants, but its claims should be tested by research directly on this issue. Second, the paper's sources regarding fathers' rights discourse (in scholarship, public submissions, and media commentary) are drawn largely from the 1990s and early 2000s, and such discourses may have changed. Nevertheless, this paper establishes that there may be important ways in which fathers' rights groups are harmful for fathers themselves. It does so using a simple framework of three domains or dimensions of fathering: fathers' own responses to and recovery from separation, fathers' relations with children, and fathers' relations with their ex-partners.

## **HEALING AFTER SEPARATION**

Fathers' emotional and material wellbeing shapes their fathering capacities and

involvements, as various theories of post-divorce fathering predict (Braver *et al.*, 2005b). Do fathers' rights groups assist separated fathers in healing from the negative effects of separation and divorce? Undoubtedly, some men find solace and support in these groups. One of the most substantial pieces of research among fathers' rights groups is represented by Crowley's interviews with 158 members of such groups in the US. She finds that a significant motivation for joining such groups is to seek emotional support, in response to isolation and grief (Crowley, 2006b). Members sought support in response to the isolation they felt during separation and divorce, or after this when constructing new lives.

Fathers' rights groups also may help fathers to deal with the practical aspects of non-resident parenting: setting up a new residence, engaging in parenting, dealing with community agencies and the Family Courts, and so on. Crowley's (2006b) research among US fathers' rights groups finds that the most common motivation for joining these groups was personal case management. Many men joined to get help with their own child support and custody issues – to make sense of complex and overwhelming family laws, or when they no longer had the financial resources to pay lawyers to advocate on their behalf. Leaders and other group members offered general information, strategies for handling particular problems, and resources with which to move forward with their child support and custody processes.

While Crowley's research assesses motivations for participation rather than its actual impact, it is likely that some participants find what they seek, that is, both practical and emotional support.

At the same time, there may be ways in which fathers' rights groups constrain the healing processes of separated fathers. Fathers' rights groups typically position men and fathers as victims, downplaying men's or non-resident parents' agency, making analogies with oppressed groups such as Aborigines, and painting their opponents as possessing enormous power (Kaye and Tolmie, 1998b; Collier and Sheldon, 2006, 15). Two studies among Australian men's rights and fathers' rights groups document the limited identities and discourses encouraged in these contexts. Maddison (1999: 42) found that participants had adopted a collective identity in which they are 'wounded by an aggressive feminism and the loss of [their] place in the world, yearning for a 'true' masculinity in which [they are] both in touch with [their] feelings *and* in control.' Winchester (1999: 94), drawing on interviews with members of the Newcastle branch of the Lone Fathers' Association, found that the Association 'defines, defends and reproduces a hegemonic construction of masculinity through discussion and reiteration'. While participation allows the discussion of intense emotional matters, it also fosters and intensifies misogynist discourses which intersect with 'commonsense' sexist understandings.

Many fathers' rights groups – particularly those characterised by greater ideological hostility to feminism – thus may offer their members subject positions based in victimhood, and centred on hostility towards and blame of the legal system and their ex-partners. Such approaches may fix men in positions of anger and resentment and thus limit their capacity to heal. Of course, fathers' rights advocates may argue that feelings of victimisation and blame are the legitimate responses to genuine grievances, and empowering rather than paralysing.

In addition, fathers' rights groups may encourage their members to engage in malicious, destructive, and unproductive legal strategies. In the wake of changes to family law in 1995, there was a large increase in the numbers of contravention applications by non-resident parents (largely fathers) alleging breaches of contact orders, and many were being pursued as a way of harassing the resident parent rather than a genuine grievance about missed contact (Rhoades *et al.*, 2002). Such efforts of course are harmful for the resident mother and for the children, but they are also harmful for the non-resident father. They take time and money, and they represent investments in campaigns of harassment and revenge rather than more constructive parenting projects. To the extent that fathers' rights groups emphasise men's 'rights' to see their children and women's malicious denial of contact (Dragiewicz, 2008) and oppose lawyers' and other professionals' involvement (Rhoades, 2006), they may contribute to separated fathers' unproductive and vexatious legal strategies.

### **INVOLVEMENT IN PARENTING**

There is no data regarding the impact of fathers' rights groups on fathers' involvement in parenting, including such dimensions as the degree or quality of their contact with children or their financial support. Fathers' rights groups certainly emphasise that they are focused on encouraging fathers' involvement in children's lives and that their members are motivated by love for their children, and there is no doubt that many of the individual men in fathers' rights groups want greater involvement. Commitment to the parenting role is an important predictor of fathers' involvement with children (Braver *et al.*, 2005b). Given that fathers' rights groups routinely emphasise that 'children need fathers', participants may be encouraged by their peers and their

involvement to maintain their contact with children or to improve their parenting practices.

At the same time, there are other ways in which fathers' rights groups have done little to foster fathers' positive involvement in children's lives, whether before or after separation and divorce. In particular, many groups have not addressed the structural and institutional conditions in which men father in ways which will increase men's parenting.

#### **A focus on formal rights, equality, or status**

The fathers' rights movement focuses on gaining an equality concerned with fathers' 'rights' and status rather than the actual care of children, what some have called a quest for 'equality with a vengeance' (Rhoades, 2000, 155-156). There have been important shifts in the discursive strategies adopted by fathers' rights groups over the past two decades, but throughout, such groups have been consistent in their lack of substantive attention to the actual shared care of children. Rhoades' (2006) work provides a useful analysis of fathers' rights discourse, particularly in groups' submissions to the 2003 House of Representatives inquiry into a rebuttable presumption of children's joint residence after separation (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, 2003) and their responses to its report and recommendations.

In their public rhetoric throughout the 1990s, fathers' rights groups had emphasised issues of 'rights' and discrimination, presenting separated fathers as the angry and

disenfranchised victims of an anti-male and anti-father system (Rhoades, 2006). However, by the 2003 House of Representatives inquiry, fathers' rights groups had shifted their rhetorical strategies (Rhoades, 2006). In their submissions, they focused on the need for 'equal parenting', emphasising that this is what is best for children. Fathers' rights advocates thus framed separated fathers as good and responsible parents, concerned above all with children's wellbeing. Fathers' rights groups also offered a secondary argument regarding 'parental fairness', centred on the claim that the legal recognition of equal parental status is of symbolic importance. Their arguments for equality had shifted therefore from notions of fathers' 'rights' to notions of parental 'fairness', although they continued to make other rhetorical claims regarding violence, custody, and other issues which have long characterised the fathers' rights movement (Rhoades, 2006). As Collier (2009, 359) points out, the fathers' rights movement's focus on formal equality itself was responsive in some ways to shifts in law towards gender neutrality and equality.

While fathers' rights groups adopted the language of 'equal' or 'shared' parenting, they continued to neglect the issue of *actual* shared parenting. They ignored or denied actual gendered divisions of labour in households and families prior to divorce and separation (Crowley 2006a), and gave no attention to the practical realities of shared care after separation and how these may be realised. It was clear from the submissions of fathers' rights groups during the Committee hearings that 'equal parenting was an important symbolic issue for fathers, rather than a description of how children would actually be parented' (Rhoades, 2006).

### **Paternal authority, not shared parenting**

Related to this focus on formal rights, some fathers' rights groups seem more concerned with re-establishing paternal authority and fathers' decision-making related to their children's and ex-partners' lives than with actual involvements with children.

The belief that it is desirable for men to play an active role in parenting is shared across the fathers' rights movement and feminism (Cornell, 1998). Yet there are deep divisions between the fathers' rights movement and feminism over what this means and over families and parenting more broadly. Early 'second-wave' feminism argued for dissolving the rigidity and inequality of traditional gender divisions of labour in both the home and paid work and imagined 'creating the material conditions in which opportunities would exist for men and women to care equally' (Williams, 1998, p. 80). In contrast, the fathers' rights movements typically insist on rigid gender codes within the family and the re-establishment of paternal authority (Cornell, 1998; Stacey, 1998). In addition, solutions to child support and contact issues proposed by fathers' groups often show insensitivity to children's welfare and involve one-sided restrictions on the custodial parent (Kaye and Tolmie, 1998a). According to Cornell (1998), the fathers' rights movement does *not* aim to encourage men to parent. Instead, it wants men to *father* – to have paternal authority in a family structured by rigid gender divides.

### **Ignoring the real obstacles to fathering**

By focusing on the re-establishment of paternal authority and fathers' decision-making, the fathers' rights movement has neglected the real obstacles to shared parenting, both in couple families and after separation or divorce. The most important

obstacle to fathers' parenting after separation is the absence of fathers' parenting *before* separation. At the point of relationship dissolution, many fathers 'have not established patterns of shared care, nor do they necessarily have the kind of relationships with their children that allow a smooth transition to a significant caring role' (HREOC, 2003: 12). Given this, it is mothers who are often nominated as the primary carer. Thus, the best way to increase fathers' participation in parenting after separation is to promote greater involvement in parenting by fathers in couple families.

Fathers' rights groups have not taken up the political, cultural, and community strategies which would facilitate fathers' positive engagement in parenting before separation and divorce (Flood, 2003). In fact, because of their wider anti-feminist agendas, some fathers' rights groups have opposed the very measures that would facilitate greater sharing of parenting. For example, a 2002 press release by the Shared Parenting Council of Australia (2002) (a coalition of fathers' rights, family law and church groups) rejected recommendations for paid maternity leave, while the National Fathering Forum's '12 Point Plan', released in June 2003 at Parliament House, argued against affirmative action. Both would have the effect of limiting women's economic opportunities and participation in paid labour, and thus also limiting men's participation in parenting.

### **Neglecting the challenges of shared parenting**

The fathers' rights movement also neglects the real obstacles to shared parenting after separation and divorce. First, its political advocacy has focused on achieving a rebuttable presumption of joint residence in family law, but the lack of such a legal

presumption is not a significant barrier to men's involvement in post-divorce fathering. There are no formal legal obstacles to parents sharing the care of children after separation and divorce. Situations where fathers do not see their children after divorce are far less often the product of a Family Court order and far more often the reflection of patterns of parenting prior to divorce and decisions by the parents themselves (Flood 2003; Rhoades *et al.*, 2002).

Second, the fathers' rights movement ignores what is actually required to set up shared parenting after separation and divorce. Parents who have agreed mutually to establish shared parenting arrangements after separation and divorce are a relatively small and select group, with particular characteristics: 'having further education, being socio-economically well-resourced, having some flexibility in working hours, living near each other and fathers who have been involved in children's daily care prior to separation and children of primary school age' (Fehlberg and Smyth, 2011). Studies among separated couples who have set up joint (physical) residence arrangements find that a cooperative co-parenting relationship and a child-centred orientation to parenting are critical to their success (AIFS, 2003).

Fathers' rights groups, particularly through their preferred legal presumption of joint residence, may force separating parents into arrangements of shared care that are unworkable for some and dangerous for others (Fehlberg and Smyth, 2011). Indeed, this presumption may be particularly unfair for many fathers: placing pressure on fathers to enter into undesirable working arrangements, and making those fathers who focus on financial provision for their children feel less worthy as parents.

Two other strategies on which fathers' rights groups have focused ostensibly to unite separated fathers and their children are tying nonresident parents' provision of child support to their contact with children, and strengthening the ways in which resident parents (mothers) can be compelled to facilitate contact with the nonresident parent; however, assessing these is beyond the scope of this article.

The discussion in this section has focused on the extent to which fathers' rights groups address the structural obstacles to men's parenting before and after separation. If men's involvement in parenting is of value partly for the benefits it confers among children, then it should also be noted that policy changes proposed or achieved by fathers' rights groups can compromise children's wellbeing.

### **Compromising children's wellbeing**

Fathers' rights groups in Australia have had a notable impact on family law, policies and processes (Graycar, 2012), with three sets of repercussions for children. First, these groups' efforts have increased children's (and mothers') vulnerabilities to violence. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, fathers' rights groups contributed to the shift in family law such that fathers' contact with children was privileged over children's safety from violence, with children facing a greater requirement to have contact with abusive or violent parents (Flood, 2010). Fathers' rights groups have discredited the adult and child victims of violence, particularly by spreading the inaccurate claim that women routinely make false allegations of child abuse and domestic violence. They have sought to wind back the protections available to victims of violence, and to lessen the legal sanctions applied to perpetrators (Dragiewicz, 2008;

Flood, 2010). Second, fathers' rights groups have worked to reduce the obligations of non-resident fathers to provide child support, leaving children and their resident parents with fewer financial and material resources (Fogarty and Augoustinos, 2008, 553). At the same time, it is true that aspects of the existing child support system have imposed excessive and unjust financial penalties on some non-resident parents. Third, by fuelling non-resident fathers' hostility towards resident mothers, fathers rights groups are likely to have intensified interparental conflict, with negative impacts on children's wellbeing.

### **RELATIONS WITH EX-PARTNERS**

Of the three goals above that could guide the provision of support to separated fathers, the third is to help separated fathers to manage an ongoing and positive relationship with their ex-partners. This is valuable in its own right, but also valuable for its relationship to fathers' involvement with children. As a range of studies have found, non-resident fathers' involvement with their children is shaped in important ways by their relationships with those children's mothers (Hawthorne, 2005). Do fathers' rights groups help separated fathers to achieve this goal?

Several ways in which fathers' rights agendas are likely to harm separated fathers' relationships with their ex-partners have already been identified: imposing greater constraints on resident mothers' management of child contact, seeking greater control over resident mothers' management of everyday household decisions and child-rearing, reducing the financial support paid to them, and limiting their ability to protect themselves or their children from violence and abuse. These efforts are likely

to fuel resident mothers' hostility to their ex-partners and their reluctance to facilitate contact. However, there is a more general way in which fathers' rights groups damage the relationships between separated fathers and mothers.

Negative and hostile depictions of women in general and single mothers in particular are the bread and butter of fathers' rights discourse. Fathers' rights literature routinely depicts women as parasitical, mendacious, and vindictive (Kaye and Tolmie, 1998b). Interviews with members of the Newcastle branch of the Lone Fathers' Association found that they consistently overestimated single mothers' financial well-being, underestimated the costs and expenses of caring for resident children, and undervalued their ex-partners' domestic work (Winchester 1999). Mothers are portrayed as dishonest and vindictive, prone to making false allegations of domestic violence or child abuse, and arbitrarily and unilaterally denying nonresident fathers' contact with children (Dragiewicz, 2008; Kaye and Tolmie, 1998b). Members of fathers' rights groups also portray their ex-partners as 'tramps', 'whores', 'sluts', 'bitches' and 'adulterers' (Winchester 1999: 90-91).

Recent public submissions by fathers' rights groups e.g. to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs (2003) have emphasised their commitment to respecting mothers, and focused on lawyers, judges, and the 'system' as the main oppressors rather than mothers (Rhoades, 2006).

However, hostile and anti-feminist discourses regarding single mothers, women, and/or feminism continue to be readily apparent in the newsletters, email lists, and websites of fathers' rights groups, for example with groups calling for the reassertion of patriarchy and justifying men's violence (Dragiewicz, 2008).

The worldviews of fathers' rights groups will do little to encourage nonresident fathers' engagement in constructive and respectful relationships with their ex-partners. To the extent that fathers' rights groups fuel interparental hostility and conflict, they may have two negative impacts. First, they may lessen fathers' contact with children and increase fathers' use of the courts to enforce contact. An Australian study finds a negative association between interparental hostility and the frequency of fathers' contact and involvement with children (Hawthorne, 2005). An American study finds that fathers with greater conflict and poorer relationships with their ex-partners also are the ones who report difficulties with visitation and more frequent resort to the courts (Lehr and MacMillan, 2001).

Second, because of their impact on interparental conflict, fathers' rights groups may lessen children's wellbeing. Interparental conflict is a leading stressor for children after divorce, and a powerful predictor of child maladjustment (Braver *et al.*, 2005a; Marsiglio *et al.*, 2000). Indeed, shared care arrangements involving ongoing levels of high parental conflict are more damaging for children than other arrangements with high conflict (Fehlberg and Smyth, 2011).

The fathers' rights movement is unlikely to assist separated fathers achieve the three goals identified early in this paper, but there are other ways in which the movement does advance fathers' interests. One can already see from the preceding analysis the ways in which fathers' rights groups promote the collective interests of fathers, particularly their patriarchal interests. These groups may assist their members, and fathers in general, to intensify their authority and control over ex-partners and

children, lessen their financial obligations, and avoid or defend themselves against allegations of violence and their legal and other repercussions. While this paper has focused on the extent to which fathers' rights groups assist their members to achieve goals which are widely held (healing from divorce, involvement in parenting, and so on), a full stocktake of impact also would assess their achievement of more patriarchal interests.

### **POSITIVE RESPONSES TO SEPARATED FATHERS**

If there is limited evidence that fathers' rights groups are beneficial to fathers themselves in the ways described, do other kinds of responses have salutary effects? There is some evidence that fathers' support groups, education programs, and other interventions can play a constructive role in fostering separated fathers' wellbeing and fathers' positive relationships with their children and their children's mothers. First, there is evidence that parent education programs directed at fathers in general have positive effects. Programs for divorcing parents generally have positive effects according to a recent meta-analysis (Fackrell *et al.*, 2011), although some have little or no positive impact on fathers or indeed mothers (Douglas, 2004). Another recent meta-analysis of 16 studies regarding educational programs for resident fathers suggests that they increase father's day-to-day care for children, improve coparenting, improve the quality of the father-child relationship, and lessen child behaviour problems (Holmes *et al.*, 2010). What about efforts among non-resident fathers in particular?

A range of preventive interventions have been developed specifically for non-residential fathers. Participants in an American education program improved their

perceptions of their performance as parents and their effectiveness in talking and listening to their children, and their satisfaction with parenting remained steady over time, in contrast to patterns among a control group (Devlin *et al.*, 1992). Non-custodial fathers in an outreach program for single fathers stressed that the program gave them 'more understanding and respect for relationships', a more positive and optimistic outlook, and helped them to become better parents. The men reported benefits in sharing with other men, helping others deal with their problems, and finding emotional support and parenting support (Lehr and MacMillan, 2001). Fathers in a professionally run support group for divorcing men reported that they learned techniques to deal with the stress generated by divorce; positive ways to deal with their children; and how to heal and resume their lives (Frieman, 2002). Children of non-resident fathers who participated in the Dads For Life program showed beneficial effects, especially if they were relatively impaired when the program began (Braver *et al.*, 2005a). In a more recent trial of Dads For Life, both the fathers who participated and their ex-partners reported a decline in interparental conflict (Cookston *et al.*, 2006).

The effectiveness of support groups and other interventions for separated fathers is likely to depend on both content and process. In terms of content, support groups for separated fathers should teach fathers motivations and skills with which to maintain constructive relationships with the mothers of their children, manage conflict, and maximise interparental respect and cooperation (Braver and Griffin, 2000; Braver *et al.*, 2005b). In terms of process, support groups should prioritise the wellbeing and safety of children and others, be run by trained facilitators, and work in tandem with other relevant programs and groups.

There are in Australia some inspiring models of service provision to fathers. The Canberra Fathers and Children's Service (CANFaCS) provides accommodation and support to homeless fathers with accompanying children. Its statement of values emphasises that the 'client' in fact is the *relationship* between fathers and their children. The service recognises that the interests of fathers and children can be in conflict, prioritises children's needs, and uses strong protocols regarding domestic violence (CANFaCS, 2004).

Ironically, the Canberra Fathers and Children's Service had its origins in a service run by a fathers' rights group, the Lone Fathers' Association. The LFA received a grant in 1999 to provide an accommodation service for single men and men with accompanying children, although early supporting documents also framed the service as a refuge for men fleeing domestic violence. After an evaluation that was so damning that it was suppressed, management of the service was put out to tender, and the service was transferred to a group which had first been set up by a feminist domestic violence service (CANFaCS, 2004).

## **CONCLUSION**

While no formal evaluations have been conducted, an examination of the values of fathers' rights groups suggest that they may be harmful not only for women and children but for separated fathers themselves and for their relations with children. This critical assessment is relevant to the development of appropriate service responses to separated fathers. We should be working to respond in appropriate ways

to separated fathers, not only because of the emotional and practical needs they have, and not only to encourage their ongoing and positive involvements with children, but also because doing so will lessen the recruitment of separated fathers into the fathers' rights movement. Providing constructive services for separated fathers is important in part because it diverts them from participation in fathers' rights networks. This critique should inform the issue of what kind of service response is made to separated fathers: one which fixes them in anger or blame, or one which helps them to heal, to have positive and ongoing involvements with children, and to maintain cooperative relationships with their former partners.

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