

THE ROLE OF FATHERS

Aligning biblical wisdom and research

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In this article Trevor Cairney considers how closely research evidence and biblical wisdom are aligned and concludes that there is much that they have in common.



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I have always been interested in the role of fathers. As a young teacher, then academic researcher I became interested in the role that fathers and mothers play in children's learning and development. In my mid 20s I became a father of two daughters and had the chance to work out first hand what it means to be a father. More recently, in my 50s I have had the joy of discovering what it means to be a grandfather of four delightful grandchildren. As well as being a father and grandfather, I am also a Christian and as such recognise that I am part of a wider family in which God is my Father. As someone who identifies God as the ultimate example of what it means to be a father, what God has to say on the topic has also shaped my reflections on this topic.

In my work as an academic researching the role that families play in their children's learning and development, I have often observed how the results of my research were well aligned (although

not identical) with the wisdom of God in his Word. This article explores one aspect of my work; what research teaches about the role of fathers in families. Furthermore, how do research findings align with the Bible's teaching on families and fathers?

What does research teach about fathers and their roles in families?

Research on families¹ and large-scale demographic research have demonstrated a number of significant trends in families and parental practices in recent decades. These can be summarised under four headings:

- Family structures are changing.
- Changing employment structures are having an impact on families.
- Fathers and mothers have different roles and levels of engagement as parents.
- Fathers have a significant impact on their children's learning and behaviour.

a) Family structures are changing

We know from demographic research that families have been changing significantly over the last 20 years in Australia². There is insufficient space to go into full details here, but the nature of these changes can be grasped in the following statistics:

- Between 1986 and 2001 the number of one-parent families increased by 53%, while the number of couple families increased by 3%. Women made up 83% of lone parents. The percentage of children 0-14 years living in sole parent homes is expected to rise from 19% in 2001 to as much as 33% in 2026. It reached 20% in the 2006 census.³
- The nature of couple families has also changed with an increasing proportion of couple families comprising partners in de facto relationships. In 2001 12% of all couple families were de facto couples (up from 6% in 1986).
- The marriage rate continues to decline with 5.4 marriages per 1,000 in 2005, down from 7.2 per 1000 in 1986. It was 12.0 in 1942.
- Divorce rates continue to rise with a rate of 2.6 divorces per 1000 in 2005. Over 40% of children experience parental divorce before 16 years.

b) Changing employment structures are having an impact on families

There have been many changes in employment structures in the last two decades. First, many men are now working longer and 'different' hours.⁴ While there has been a slight decrease in the total hours of work for all workers, reflecting a rise in part-time employment for both men and women, there has been an increase in the hours of work of those in full-time employment. Average weekly hours increased from 40.2 hours to 41.9 hours between 1985 and 2005. This trend has been similar for both male and female full-time workers, with men's hours increasing 1.9 hours per week (to 43.2 hours) over the period, and women's increasing 1.7 hours per week (to 39.3 hours). Very long hours of work (50 hours or more per week) have become more common since 1985, particularly for men. In 2005, 30% of men working full-time worked 50 hours or more per week, up from 22% in 1985.

As well, more mothers are working



than ever before. The 2005 ABS Pregnancy and Employment Transitions Survey⁵ showed that of the 467,000 mothers whose youngest child was under two years of age, 39% (181,000) had been in paid employment since the birth of the child. From 1996 to August 2006, the proportion of mothers aged 25-34 years (with children under 15 years) who were employed increased from 46% to 52%. A similar trend has occurred for mothers aged 35-44 years (with children under 15 years), with employment increasing from 64% to 68%.

An even more worrying trend for families is that many parents increasingly work in multiple jobs in non-family-friendly hours. The Relationships Forum (2007)⁶ has recently published the results of research that suggests that changing working patterns are having many adverse effects on families. In particular, they identify atypical hours of work as problematic with negative impacts on health, relationships, families and children's well being. Research suggests that atypical work hours are becoming the norm rather than the exception. La Valle et al⁷ found in a British study that many parents had a 24 hour work cycle, with 40% of fathers in dual income families working early mornings, 45% evenings, 17% night shift, and 33% at least one Sunday per month. Similar trends appear to be occurring in Australia.

The above trends also appear to have a relationship to the tendency for men and women to become parents later in life. Just as marriage has been delayed, so too has parenting.⁸ In 1992 about

35% of fathers with children 0-14 years old were aged less than 35 years. But by 2003 this had dropped to 26% while the proportion aged over 45 years increased from 19% to 25%.

c) Fathers and mothers have different roles and levels of engagement as parents

Mothers and fathers have always assumed different roles within families. And while some things have not changed much (eg, mothers still do more of the housework and caring for children) there have been some shifts in parental involvement that reflect other social changes.

While mothers still provide more of the hands-on care for children in the home, they are less likely to be stay-at-home mothers caring for children in the preschool years. A greater proportion of

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children under three are now in childcare, after school care, or in the care of people other than their parents. Over 65% of children under three have formal or informal care for part of the week.⁹ School aged children also receive regular care by people other than parents, including grandparents (39%), brothers and sisters (7%), other relatives (20%) and before and after school care (12%).¹⁰

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are spending a little more time with their children, but they still spend much less time than mothers, and there appear to be qualitative differences in the time spent with them. Fathers spend on average less than half the hours in direct caring for children under the age of 14 years.¹¹ But it is the differences in the type of involvement of fathers with their children that is interesting.

To understand the issue of involvement it is useful to differentiate between different forms of involvement. Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004)¹² have developed a classification that includes three descriptive categories to describe the form of involvement that they observed in research on African American fathers:

Engagement – direct interactions with their children and joint activities.

Accessibility – being available for possible interaction in the house or by phone.

Responsibility – being responsible for childcare and the resources their children need.

What research shows is that not only do fathers have less involvement with their children, they also have less involvement of the type that Pleck and Masciadrelli term 'engagement'. Rebecca Goldman's review (2005)¹³ of a variety of research studies concerned with fathers'

involvement offers support for this view. The following is a summary of some of the key findings:

- When asked who they would turn to for emotional support 23% of boys with low self esteem said they would go to their fathers, while 44% said they would turn to their mothers. In the case of high self esteem boys, 61% would turn to fathers and 76% to their mothers. As an aside, it is



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worth reflecting on the fact that children are frequently seeking out friends and people other than their parents, for this type of support.

- When 11 to 16 year olds were asked who they would turn to when trying to make decisions about what to do with their lives after the age of 16 years, 10% said they would turn to their fathers and 33% indicated they would talk to their mothers.
- In a USA study of parents with children aged 3-12 years, 39% of fathers were found to read books with their children at least once per week, compared to 55% for mothers.
- One interesting divergence from these trends is the finding in a USA study that fathers were more likely to be involved with sporting activities with their children than mothers (49% compared to 22%).

What studies like the above show is that more mothers than fathers engage in experiences with their children, and particularly with their sons, that promote physical and emotional intimacy. Such intimacy for mothers often flows out of “collaborative, structured activities around reading” rather than activities requiring guidance or instruction.¹⁴

d) Fathers have a significant impact on their children’s learning and behaviour

Research within the fields as diverse as education, psychology and sociology shows that parent involvement has a significant impact on children’s learning and development.¹⁵ In fact, parental involvement in out-of-school learning has a more significant impact on children’s learning than involvement in children’s schools.

In a synthesis of five key UK studies Goldman (2005)¹⁶ concluded that higher involvement of fathers in their children’s learning alone is associated with:

- better class and exam results;
- higher educational expectations and qualifications;
- better attitude to school, attendance and behaviour;
- less delinquent and criminal behaviour;
- higher quality family relationships; and
- better mental health.

But of course the influence of fathers and family structures flows well beyond children’s learning. Qu and Soriano (2004)¹⁷ conclude that family formation has important implications for individuals and society in relation to health and wellbeing, financial security, life outcomes

for children and population growth.

One interesting finding is that the quality and content of fathers’ involvement with their children, and the type of role that fathers play, is more critical than the quantity of time spent with them. Fathers who show affection, give support and yet offer an authoritative parenting style, have a more significant impact on their children, when compared with fathers who adopt a more authoritarian and detached style. Other research shows that who the father is and what he does in life makes a difference. For example, high levels of antisocial behaviour (eg, not paying bills, aggressiveness and so on) in fathers were associated with sons displaying more difficult behaviour at home and school.¹⁸

The above also relates to research findings that the quality of the father-son relationship can influence whether boys see and use their fathers as role models. Lamb and Tamis-Lemoinda (2004)¹⁹ conclude that boys want to model themselves on fathers who they respect and like, and with whom they have a warm and positive relationship.

In summary, what many research studies show is that fathers have a significant influence on the cognitive, emotional and social development of their children and that this is even more significant for boys.

What does the Bible say about fathers and families?

Having looked at the research, we need to consider what the Bible teaches us about families and fathers. The first thing to say about this is that families and the important role of fathers are seen throughout the Bible. As Kirsten Birkett (2004) points out, a biblical understanding of fatherhood requires more than a sampling of texts that refer to families. The concept of family is central to God’s redemptive plan. The family is:

“... part of the fabric of the universe, a concept that involves relationships which last into eternity and fulfil God’s plans since the beginning of time ... he

(God) is himself, a family, a Father with a son. God is the essence of family.”²⁰

The Bible teaches that God created family as he fashioned man from the dust and a woman from Adam’s flesh, and called them to “be fruitful and increase in number” (Genesis 1). While relationships, like creation itself, were later disrupted and dislocated by sin in the Garden, God sustained his people in families and sought to redeem them, and adopt them into his own family (Eph 1:4-5). He continues to do so in spite of the curse that has been placed on marriage as a result of sin, and the struggle that ensues between men and women (Gen 3:16). God’s plan to rescue his people ultimately involves family—his family!

Throughout the pages of the Old and New Testaments, family is important. The nation of Israel was one family, descended from Abraham. Within the nation that would rise up as a result of God’s promise to Abraham, there would be tribes defined around family lines and ultimately families within the family, all linked through fathers. Fathers are central to families in the Bible. Marriage in turn is seen as necessary to create a nuclear family—a man and woman, committed to each other in a covenant relationship, that seek to have and raise godly children (Mal 2:14-15).

The New Testament picture of the family is consistent with that which the Old Testament paints. A father in Ephesians is described as the head, the source of his family, the one who holds it together and assures it of a future (Eph 5:22–6:4). The father is to be one who lovingly, under God and with Christ as his example, takes responsibility for the physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the family. A father:

- is to have authority over his children and be deserving of honour (Eph 6:1-4);
- is to teach and encourage his children and love, serve and lead his wife (Ephesians 5);
- is encouraged not to exasperate his children, but instead train and

instruct them so that they might know God (Eph 6:4);

- is not to be afraid to discipline his children if necessary for their good as one with authority (Heb 12:7);
- is to be a godly man who “walk[s] in a manner worthy of God” (1 Thess 2:11-12);
- is to stay with his wife and family (Matt 5:32; 19:1-12; Luke 16:18).

Marriage and the family are not just useful social structures; they reflect the reality of our relationship with God. Ephesians 5 and 6 show us that the family is a reflection of the relationship between Christ and the church and that marriage is the metaphor that God uses to describe his relationship with his redeemed people. In short, families are precious to God and fathers have a key role within them.

What’s common in the findings of research and the Bible?

Remarkably, there is much that is common to the Bible’s picture of fatherhood and families and the findings of research. Both affirm:

- the importance of families;
- the importance of fathers;
- that men and women fulfil different roles and have different relationships with their children;
- that significant loving relationships are important within families;
- the need for fathers to be role models;
- the need for male authority figures and for fathers to be respected by their children;
- the need for structure, strong relationships and discipline;
- that children learn what we live;
- that most beliefs and values are learned within the home from parents;
- that good parenting is important to the quality of children’s lives;
- that children need the emotional and physical support of parents;
- that fathers are important and when absent the family and the lives of children are affected.

In stating the above, I do not want to brush over the exceptions to these general statements. The truth is that there are fewer children who are able to live within a family with both biological parents than ever before, and even fewer



who experience the support of loving, caring and available parents. The purpose of this article is not to suggest that only in the traditional family structure can children survive and grow. Children are resilient and God in his sovereignty can bless and 'grow' children in spite of family circumstances – this is the prayer of many godly single parents struggling to do the best they can on their own and with limited resources. Part of the function of the church is to be family to its members.

The response of Christians will at times need to be similar to that of the many secular agencies that try to support families, and those who seek to devise social policies to support families in crisis. God reveals to the prophet Isaiah (1:17) in a vision that Israel was to:

Learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

We are to do likewise and this should be our starting point. But we must also declare the sound teaching of the Bible and commend to those who know God

as well as those who do not, that there is wisdom in God's teachings that if followed will change lives for the better as families are strengthened.

What are the points of divergence?

While there are many things common to research on families and biblical teaching on families and fathers, there are key and fundamental differences that ultimately relate to the belief of Christians based on the teachings of the Bible. The key differences would seem to be that in the Bible:

- Marriage is seen as a requirement for families and the stability that comes from such covenant relationships is important for children.
- Men and women are different and will inevitably exercise different roles and relationships within and outside the family—this means that Christians might well support some differentiation in roles based on gender to the extent that this reflects the Bible's teaching about the respective

roles of fathers and mothers.²¹

- Faith and obedience to God is part of his plan for our families that will give them purpose and added meaning and will lead to a priority on matters of faith not just love and support.
- Researchers operating within non-Christian frameworks often fail to acknowledge that parents have a special responsibility to care directly for their own children, hence Christians will place greater priority on parenting and less on work, careers, financial gain and so on.

Our faith in God and our acknowledgement of the wisdom of God's word will also lead Christians to seek to promote biblical understanding of:

- the role of the father within the family;
- the priorities of fatherhood;
- the importance of two parents to families;
- the characteristics of effective fatherhood;
- the priorities that fathers and mothers have for their children.



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Where the rubber hits the road

Given all that has been outlined in this article so far about research on families and biblical priorities for fatherhood, what might the practical implications be for fathers?

There are many places I could turn to try to answer this question. But there can be no better place than the advice that God gave to Moses to pass on to the Israelites in the desert before they enter the Promised Land. Having exhorted them to fear God and obey his commandments and to take care how they live (Deut 6:1-3), God gives instructions on how this is to be done within their families.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” (Deut 6:4-9)

God expected the men of Israel to obey his commandments and to love him with all of their being – heart, soul and strength. He also expected them to teach God’s commands and expectations to their children in the ‘everydayness’ of life. To talk about God when they sat together at home, when they walked from place to place, when they were preparing for bed and rest, and when they rose in the morning. They were to speak of God’s ways, to wear the words of God’s law on their foreheads, and write them on the doorposts and entrances to their houses, so that they would not forget them and so that they could teach them even more effectively to their children.

Here is a picture of a father with a right view of God, who trusts, obeys and serves his God and who seeks to teach his children to understand the

wisdom of God and to follow him. This is also a picture of an involved father. If we were to translate this biblical picture into contemporary terms, we would see a father who seeks to obey and honour God, who sets a good example for his family, who models what it is to be a child of God. Such a father spends time with his children, listens to them and shares godly wisdom at meal times, while resting, while together at home, while travelling. This is an engaged father who makes time for his family!

If we were to consider the three categories of involvement that Pleck and Masciadrelli discuss, this is a father who is responsible for his children, who is accessible to them, and even more significantly, who engages with them. He talks with them, listens to them and does things with them. And as a Christian, what he does is framed by his faith in God and an understanding of what God expects of him.

The demographic data and the research evidence presented at the beginning of this article present a worrying picture of a world that does not understand the way God planned families; the way they were meant to be, and the key purpose that they have in his plans for mankind. It also presents a worrying picture of how modern life makes it increasingly more difficult to be the kind of father that God’s word encourages us to be. My hope in writing this article is that it might encourage fathers and mothers to examine their lives and the priorities that shape how time is spent, and how relationships within families are nurtured.²² If there were just two things that could be taken away from this article I would want the first one to be that fathers (and mothers) develop an understanding of what God expects of fathers as men of God; and, second, to encourage further discussion relating to how we can work at reshaping our lives so that those of us who are fathers spend time with our families, loving them, teaching them, instructing them in God’s ways and modelling what it means to “love the

LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” ©

ENDNOTES

- 1 I do not have the space here to enter into the interesting debate about what families are. While, I accept that the nature of families has changed, much of what I have to say relates to the role of parents towards their children adopted or biological. Kirsten Birkett has an interesting discussion of this issue in her book *The Essence of Family*, Kingsford (NSW): Matthias Media, 2004.
- 2 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2005). *Australian Social Trends, 2005*, 20th July.
- 3 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007). *Australian Social Trends, 2007*, 7th August.
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- 5 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007). *ABS Media Release*, 11th May.
- 6 Relationships Forum (2007). *An unexpected tragedy*, Sydney: Relationships Forum Australia.
- 7 La Valle, I., Arthur, S., Millward, C., Scott, J. & Clayden, M. (2002). *The influence of atypical working hours on family life*, Bristol (UK): Policy press.
- 8 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006), op. cit.
- 9 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002). *Australian social trends, 2002*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- 10 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007). *Australian Social Trends 2007*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia.
- 11 Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006), op. cit.
- 12 Pleck, & Masciadrelli (2004). ‘Parental Involvement by US Residential Fathers: Levels, sources and consequences’. In M. Lamb (Ed), *The role of the father in child development (4th Edition)*, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- 13 Goldman, R. (2005). *Fathers’ involvement in their children’s education*, London: National Family and Parenting Institute.
- 14 Hamston, J. & Love, K. (2003) ‘Reading relationships’: parents, boys, and reading as cultural practice’, *The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*. 26 (3) pp. 44-57.
- 15 Cairney, T.H. & Ruge, J. (1998). *Community literacy practices and schooling*, Canberra: Department of Employment, Education and Training.
- 16 Goldman (2005), op cit., p. 14.
- 17 Qu, L. & Soriano, G. (2004). ‘Forming couple relationships’, *Family Matters*, 68, pp. 43-49.
- 18 Goldman (2005), op. cit.
- 19 Lamb, M. & Tamis-Lemonda, C. (2004). ‘The role of the father: An introduction’. In M. Lamb (Ed), *The role of the father in child development, 4th Edition*, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons.
- 20 Birkett (2004), op. cit.
- 21 This should not be taken to mean that all activities within the home should be in line with traditional gender stereotypes. This is not about the activities performed within the home, but rather the roles. There is room within the Bible’s teaching for men to have greater involvement in caring for children and for a husband and wife in a loving relationship to negotiate who does what.
- 22 Fathers seeking a practical book that will help them to reflect on their own role as a father will find Ton Paynes’s helpful book on fatherhood – Payne, T. (2004).