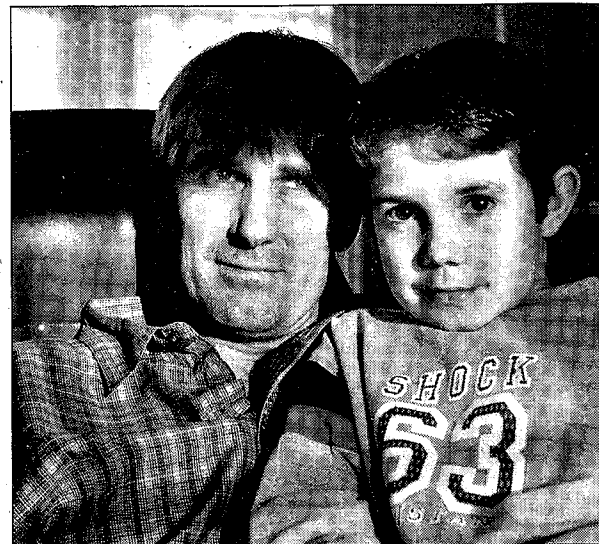


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Home alone with Mr Mum

Traditional family structures are undergoing massive changes in Australia. One of the biggest, writes Berwyn Lewis, is the rise of the single-father family.



Michael Borwell with his children, Madison, Marianne and Mitchell. Far left, Ian McDonald with his son Jordan. Photos: Edwina Pickles; far left, Steven Siewert

MICHAEL Borwell, 46, has been on a steep learning curve since he became a single parent to three of his six children – two girls and one boy aged from four years to 11.

A painter and decorator, suddenly he was confronted with a strange new world of preparing meals, cleaning, taking the kids to school and picking them up, a huge amount of unfamiliar and threatening isolation and poverty.

"Apart from the distress of my 20-year marriage breaking up the biggest problem has been the change in my income. It halved and it took me more than one month to get a single parent's pension," he says.

As a house painter, Borwell was used to working up to 45 hours a week. That's finished. "All my friends call me Mr Mum ... It's done heaps for me. I was so confused. I couldn't understand my daughters' issues. My wife used to handle all that.

"Then I realised there were people worse off than me. I've started thinking like a woman now. I think, 'It's a good time to wash'. It took years to get used to taking on the woman's role. I appreciate how much they do.

"Isolation is a problem. I go to my son's kindergarten committee meetings. I'm the only man but they treated me like an equal. The worst part was the loneliness. I've now got a friend who comes to my place occasionally.

The kids accepted her but now there's some issues coming up as they're trying to get used to her ... She calls the house a circus."

Borwell is no Man Friday in his experiences. About 22 per cent of Australian families are headed by a single parent. A nationwide report, *Trends Australia 2000*, estimated there are 200,000 single fathers around the country. As 21st-century Australia contemplates the collapse of its traditional family structures, a single, full-time father faces a rather different set of problems.

Like most single mothers, he can suffer from isolation, poverty and discrimination. Unlike most single mothers, he battles through a steep

learning curve taking on unfamiliar domestic and childcare duties, he lacks recognition or acknowledgement by courts, support services and the community and often does not choose his role. In many cases he can be a widower, he is deserted or he is forced to step in when the mother succumbs to illness or addiction to drugs or alcohol.

Thirty years ago Barry Williams's wife left him and their four children, aged three months to 10 years. Twenty-eight at the time, he has been doing it tough ever since. Williams, a truck driver who ran a steel carting business, often had to start work at 5am and did not get home until after 8pm. He had no experience raising children.

"My friends didn't want to know me,

I think they thought I was a threat. I was very isolated. I had to race home to get the kids out of bed ready for school, go back to work and I cooked, did their ironing and washing. Often I didn't get to bed until well after midnight. That went on for years," Williams recalls.

Back then, finding child care in Canberra was a nearly insurmountable problem. Williams believes single dads are damned if they stay at home as full-time carers and damned if they don't. Williams also thinks going on a supporting parent's pension degrades men: "It's not as accepted for men as it is for women to be home all day. It reduces him to a level of poverty and there are big problems with self-esteem. The hardest thing was seeing my kids stressing out about not having a mother in their early years. I looked after them till they started leaving home."

Williams went on to found the Lone Fathers Association in 1972. He is its president and the national welfare director of Parents Without Partners. Today the association provides support for fathers around Australia, with more than 20 branches and 32,000 members on its books, including women.

"There was so much discrimination against men. We weren't entitled to the same benefits – Medicare, dental treatment and other benefits – as single mothers. But the law has changed and allows a far greater measure of equality between single parents."

However, much remains to be done. Williams claims more than 20 men a week are killing themselves. He bases the suicide estimate on figures from various government departments and

university studies. His own organisation fields some 33,000 calls a year from around Australia, with about 5 per cent from single full-time fathers in distress.

Over the years, Williams has taken part in various research projects targeted at the phenomenon of single parenthood.

One groundbreaking study for the Keating government found single fathers were unable to meet child support payments when they had children with different mothers. They were often unable to form another relationship or get a mortgage, says Williams.

Many single fathers find isolation is a big problem.

On Australian Bureau of Statistic figures, 8 per cent of people paying child support are women. A breakdown of child support shows single parents pay 18 per cent of their total gross wage for one child, 27 per cent for two, 32 per cent for three, 34 per cent for four and five and 36 per cent for six.

Andrew King, the co-ordinator at UnitingCare's Burnside Fathers Support Service in Parramatta, believes society has a strong notion about supporting single mothers but the situation blurs because there are fewer services and support for single fathers.

"They're more vulnerable to becoming homeless, especially when they can't afford to pay rent and are forced to leave their jobs," he says. "For instance, one man, with a two-year-old daughter in his care, was earning \$50,000 a year

as a boilermaker. He couldn't get any support. He chose to leave his job to care for his daughter and was living on the supporting parent benefit. When he tried to access government housing he was told you should be working. There's an expectation that resident fathers should be outside the home working."

King says men are not good at asking for help and are afraid of the legal system. "They don't know the processes for funding. They often have to return to their own parents' home with their child. If they go before the Family Law Court to get better conditions they believe there's a high probability that the court will decide the children should be with the mother, not with them. There's a huge lack of recognition of the part resident fathers play."

Many single fathers find isolation is a special and big problem. Pubs, clubs and other traditional male enclaves cannot be compared with mothers' chat groups and informal support systems.

Ian McDonald, 42, lives with his parents, who are in their 70s, and his seven-year-old son. He has also had the care of his 16- and 18-year-olds at various times and has spent six years as a primary carer.

"I thought I'd be able to get on with my life, get a job, but circumstances are such that I have to be here full-time for my son. It's in his best interests. It's the decision I've made," McDonald says.

"I wanted to find employment but the daily demands of being a parent meant I had enough on my plate. I've lost my sense of direction. I'm not sure what to do with my life anymore."

He sees himself as a parent first and is grateful for the support he has received from groups such as Burnside and the Lone Fathers Association, which have helped him become more positive and focused.

McDonald says the main pressures were juggling it all and living with his parents. "Typical family things, noise, tipping things over, testing the boundaries, but I can take it all in my stride. I'm being positive, having a go at it. The rewards come later. My other son was 18 when he finally said he respected me as a dad and a person as well."

Bruce Campbell, 62, an accountant, has been a full-time dad since his wife died when their daughter was two. Eight years later he says he is enjoying every minute. "I'm lucky. I can work from home and the work comes second," he says.

Campbell is vice-president of the P&C Association at his daughter's school, works in the school canteen and is kept on his toes with her violin lessons, ballet, swimming, visit to friends' houses and parties.

"She's my wardrobe critic," Campbell says. "It's a joy to bring her up. It's a privilege to guide her into life and watch her cope with it all."

Mostly, there are quiet nights at home together. On the rare occasions when a woman friend visits, "my daughter likes to call her Mum ... She misses the parent she doesn't have."