Much-publicised cases of children dying at the hands of their fathers have prompted experts to reflect on the possible catalysts for such terrible crimes, writes Helen Gregory.

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war zone

ULTIMATE REVENGE: Arthur Freeman clipped his hand on to the pedestrian crossing button of what was to be his daughter’s first day of school, January 25, 2009. He took four year-old Dundee out of the car and threw her over the edge of the bridge to her death. Freeman pleaded not guilty on the grounds of mental impairment and his lawyer declared “mad” not “bad”. The jury rejected this defence. Supreme Court Justice Paul Coghlan sentenced Freeman in March to life with a non-parole period of 35 years. It cannot be concluded that you ever treat your daughter in an attempt to hurt your former wife as “profoundly impossible,” he said. Freeman is appealing again against his sentence.

LIFELINE Newcastle and Hunter received 232 calls from January to mid-May, with 123 categorised as relating to family problems. A Lifeline spokesperson could not say how many were from men, but said counsellors were noticing calls were becoming longer, now lasting for an average of 40 minutes. They were also more “intense and emotional” in nature. The Dads In Distress Support Services helpline receives 300 calls every year and is operated by fathers who have gone through separation or divorce. The peer support model is also implemented in meetings across the country that attract 120 people a week. The Newcastle branch meets at Tugger Hill Public School on Wednesdays and is the strongest in Australia. Guidera said the job of its volunteers was first to listen and to offer support, advice and guidance.

While many of the organisations appear to be centred around helping men through separation or divorce, Guidera said the focus was the health, safety and well-being of every member of the family. It sees its task as the best way forward and encourage fathers to try to keep in touch with the children and to continue with emotional and financial support of their families for the sake of their children. “We have the kids’ best interests at heart, they need to be first and foremost,” Guidera said.

“I have a win-win for everybody involved, if it goes the other way, the only winner is the lawyer.” Being a custodial parent does not give you a reason to abuse the father or the children away from the father, because every child deserves to have a father in their lives.”

University of Newcastle senior lecturer Dr Richard Fletcher agreed, saying research showed that children not only deserved to have a father; they benefitted from having a father.

“Fletcher leads the Fathers and Families Research Program in the Family Action Centre within the University of Newcastle’s Faculty of Health. His research is not based on fathers’ rights or gender equity, but on child welfare.”

From our point of view, fathers are important because children turn out better when a father is involved,” he said. Fletcher said fathers brought something unique. They had more varied levels of excitement when playing with their children and a different role in introducing risk taking to their children. Fathers also offered children a man’s perspective on the world.

While it used to be thought that it was important for mothers to form a bond with their children and for the father to simply support this, new research shows it is just as important for fathers to do the same.

“HOPE at the coalface says there are many ways to support men’s health after separation and divorce and to encourage them to seek help alongside their partner and children could also be beneficial.”

“There is no one who can see the pain of being a parent.”

FOUNDER of anti-violence organisation Ken Marslew said it was never acceptable to use violence towards a child.

“His own son Michael was killed in an armed robbery in 1984 and he understands the pain of losing a child.”

“How do you answer that question of why has your child been killed?” Marslew said, “The senselessness of it all.”

Marslew said parents’ natural instinct should be to protect rather than harm.

“Children have the right to be protected and we have a responsibility to make sure that they are.”

Marslew said bullying, violence against children and domestic violence were all rampant.

“We have a society that tries to use violence to control people,” he said.

“Am we losing the fight against violence?”

In short, yes.

“Why do we still have a society where people are starting to say hell, look at what we’ve got and how are we going to fix it?”

Marslew does his part by holding educational programs in schools, facilitating a responsibility model program in jails and providing counselling for victims of crime.

“You can’t take away the pain but we try to help them navigate that pain,” he said.

“Those who are left are left with rage, those who are left with rage, the concept of revenge. They’re left with unanswered questions.”

“A lot of people are not dead but they’ve been damaged forever, physically and emotionally.”

Saturday, May 28, 2011 NEWCASTLE HERALD A 5

NO EXCUSES

CUSTODY dispute: The body of Kyra Rogers, 5, was found with the body of her father, Paul Rogers, in a car parked near Casino, NSW, on May 16. Her mother, Tracey, was found two days later in a car at an airport on the Gold Coast and were found dead on the Gold Coast the same day. Police believe Rogers killed Simpson and the friend before abducting Kyra. Paul and Kyla Rogers died from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Police said a custody dispute was at the centre of the rampage.

KEN MARSTEW