

DURING THE time McDonald's chairman Peter Ritchie's children were in their teens, Ritchie realised – too late – that he had missed out significantly on being a parent. His kids were growing up fostered than you could say “corporate dad” and he had hardly noticed their development until his son, Nicholas, was 15 and his daughter, Charlotte, 13.

“When my wife had Nicholas I was present at the birth,” says Ritchie. “Then I moved out for three weeks to live in a motel close to where we were opening our first McDonald’s.” He shakes his head in disbelief. “I was a typical Aussie dad! I saw myself as the breadwinner and my wife as the child-rearer. I worked hard and set up the family financially and I thought I was doing the right thing. The truth is, if I had the choice to do it again, I’d do it differently.

“I woke up to myself in the early eighties,” says Ritchie. “I had made some classic mistakes: firstly, I thought I knew everything you had to know about parenting, and I also thought that innately I was going to be a great father.

“I also made the most serious mistake of all – I underestimated how important those first couple of years are for a child. I thought they were ‘blobs’, really, until they could read and write. The truth is... they’re sponges!”

BY JOSEPHINE BROUARD

ILLUSTRATION BY GREGORY BALDWIN

Corporate dads

Subject to pressure from all sides, the business of fatherhood in the nineties is undergoing rapid evolution. But the payoffs of greater involvement in family life are evident in the workplace as well as the home

Ritchie says he hopes other Australian men won't make the same mistake. “We are suffering a leadership crisis in Australia at the moment. We're being led by the mediocre and it's largely because of the lack of ‘role model’ mentoring by fathers.

“A lot of children know their fathers consider their work important because they see how much time their fathers devote to work. What they need to see is that fathers also consider them important... it's that kind of contribution from fathers that builds a kid's self-esteem.”

Moved by his experience, Ritchie introduced family-friendly policies at McDonald's, encouraging senior executives to strive for a balance in their lives. One of his managers at the time was Bob Mansfield, who must have learnt something from him: when Mansfield, a father of five, quit his top post at Optus, he said he hoped to devote more time to his family. Similarly, Microsoft's ex-director of advanced technology in Australia, Daniel Petrie, shocked the business community when he resigned his preteen position, citing “family first”.

“If an executive has nothing in his life but work, believing that the more hours he works the more he will get noticed,” Ritchie says, “then I believe he will not make a good senior executive. You need more in your life than work.”

The director of the Affirmative Action Agency, Catherine Harris, says that more than ever Australian

