

# Fathering after Separation: A Reflection on Problems and Possibilities.

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The role of the father has gone through enormous change in our recent history, change that has been embedded in the changing nature of relationships and family life. As we have moved from “a more authoritarian to a democratised family”, and as more women have entered the workforce, the “old breadwinner/homemaker model no longer fits”<sup>i</sup>. But with the high rate of separation and divorce, it would seem that ‘new models’ are difficult to create and perhaps even more difficult to sustain. And within this changing landscape, it would seem that conceptions of fathering are even more confusing to the point where it has become “difficult to separate myth from reality, research from rhetoric”<sup>ii</sup>.

Against this background, discussion of fathering *after* separation has an added intensity. Part of this intensity lies in the fact that separation *is* a time of enormous change and the transition from a one household to a two household family involves many practical, financial, emotional and relational decisions. Part is also that separation and divorce can be traumatic not only for fathers, but for mothers *and* children (and extended family) as well, and often taps into deep-seated emotions and fears including intense feelings of loss and anger and abandonment.

And clearly there are a whole range of experiences to consider. It is often overlooked that around half of all separated couples manage to sort out parenting and financial issues in a relatively cooperative manner. The remaining half have difficulties ranging from intermittent problems to enmeshed and intractable high conflict disputes<sup>iii</sup>. And while some issues are certainly gender related, they are not necessarily gender specific, as the range of experience of separated mothers *and* fathers varies widely depending upon such factors as the quality and intensity of the relationship, the age of the children, how the separation occurs, how it is managed as well as the personality characteristics of each partner. And it must be said that while there are some wonderful fathers out there, there are also some that are violent and coercive. And there is also a whole range in between.

Within this context then, this article is a brief focus on what may be termed ‘problematic’ fathering post separation. This stems from my work with separated fathers, many of whom present as caring and committed parents but struggle with their sense of marginalisation (or the “sometimes forgotten parent”<sup>iv</sup>) in their children’s lives. And while each situation is different in its own right, there are a number of themes that clearly emerge. These are briefly described below.

For the majority of separated men, the decision to separate was not their own. And while there can be a rich discussion about the decision, the history of the relationship, the responsibility of both partners and the role the non initiator may play, the reality is for many fathers separation comes unprepared and unwanted.

Added to this is the fact that around 90% of children remain primarily in the care of their mothers post separation<sup>v</sup>, and therefore 90% of fathers become “contact” parents. For many fathers then, separation means not only separation from a spouse, but separation from a family. And whether this is by agreement or enforcement, the implications for familial relationships, particularly the father-child relationship is great. Blankenhorn states that structurally, the preconditions for fatherhood are twofold: “co-residency with children and a parental alliance with the mother....(and)... when one or both of these enabling conditions of fatherhood are absent, good enough fatherhood is not possible for most men.”<sup>vi</sup>

For separated fathers, loss of co-residency with children already puts their relationship on fragile ground. If the parental alliance is not strong, or is actively unsupported, then the father-child relationship is likely to be at risk. Put another way, because the child is not residing with the father, and if the mother (for whatever reason) does not actively support the father’s role, then the father-child relationship is greatly under threat. This is all the more critical where there is high conflict and young children. And while it is clear that the parental alliance is a *joint* responsibility, the residence parent (generally mothers) has a fundamentally instrumental role.

And if the parental alliance is not supported, many fathers in problematic separations speak of the inherent *powerlessness* they feel - a powerlessness to impact constructively on the alliance and therefore a powerlessness in their children’s lives. This is further exacerbated as it is not well articulated, and where fathers may turn to the court system for help, they find that courts cannot order cooperation and often have little or even negative impact on already problematic parental alliances.

In the face of compounding problems many fathers literally give up. Many give up their children. It is a sad reflection that around 30% of separated children in Australia have minimal or no contact with their non-resident (mostly fathers) parent.<sup>vii</sup> And while this includes a number of fathers who have had little bond with their children and who willingly disappear after separation into new relationships and reconstructed lives, it also includes those fathers who are unable to sustain meaningful relationships with their children in the face of negative alliances.

It is sadder still that a number of fathers also give up their lives. As a group, separated fathers are high risk. Relationship breakdown is a major cause of suicide worldwide<sup>viii</sup>. An Australian study looking at the “protective aspect of childrearing” in separation and suicide found that rates of suicide for separated men were 6 times higher (compared to married men), and greater in the younger aged groups. Separated female suicide rates were not significantly elevated. They raised the possibility that females were “protected against suicide by child rearing responsibilities”<sup>ix</sup>. And behind these stark figures, levels of depression, illness and other dis-ease that are not reported can only be guessed.

Having said this, what of the possibilities? Many fathers maintain rich and meaningful relationships with their children post separation. Not only do they continue as provider but also nurturer, educator and guide. And even where parenting is ‘problematic’ many fathers maintain as much a relationship as they are able and await the maturation process and the new connections and possibilities that may eventuate. And for others? Perhaps the first step is in wider recognition and acknowledgment of the problematic nature of post separation parenting for many

fathers. The next is in examining our own perspectives and the models of family and parenting they may be based upon, particularly as they relate to separation.

As we become more aware of the importance of fathers in children's lives<sup>x</sup> and as more families shift to a "partnership model" of relationship<sup>xi</sup> including greater involvement of fathers in child rearing and parenting, more and more fathers want and expect, greater involvement in their children's lives, whether in a one-household or two-household family. And rather than attempt to reduce either parent's importance, or take an adversarial approach, the emphasis should be on each parents willingness to explore constructive approaches to two-household parenting and their responsibility in developing and sustaining an ongoing parental alliance. In this manner the focus should be on both parents and how each of them will foster the positive involvement of the other in their children's lives.

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<sup>i</sup> Seddon, E (2000): Conference Handbook: 9<sup>th</sup> National Family Law Conference Sydney.

<sup>ii</sup> Sullivan, R. Fathering and Children. Family Matters, no.58, Autumn 200

<sup>iii</sup> Whiteside, M.F.(1998): The Parental Alliance Following Divorce: An Overview. Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 1998, Vol.24, No. 1.

<sup>iv</sup> Ochiltree, Gay (1987): The Sometimes Forgotten Parent. Family Matters, AIFS Newsletter, No. 19 October 1987

<sup>v</sup> Commonwealth Bureau of Statistics, 2001

<sup>vi</sup> Blankenhorn, D. (1996) Fatherless America. Harper Perennial, New York

<sup>vii</sup> *ibid*, Commonwealth Bureau of Statistics.

<sup>viii</sup> Andrews report

<sup>ix</sup> Cantor queensland study...

<sup>x</sup> Commonwealth Department of Human Services Report (1999): Fitting Fathers into Families. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

<sup>xi</sup> *ibid*, Seddon.