

Children need their dads, too

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Gender profiling is the unacceptable outcome of Canada's family law and too often leaves children with only one involved parent.

Individuals and groups who endorse gender based legal outcomes forget that fathers are parents not only to their sons but also to their daughters and as such are committed to protecting all of their children from harm and to eliminating barriers that would restrict their future opportunities.

The current approach operates with outdated principles that are focused on the father providing economic resources only. His active participation in the life of his children too often is permitted only if he quietly submits to the conditions laid out and fails to do what he knows is right for his children.

At a time of a family crisis, Canada's legal practices abandon the belief that children need and deserve two loving parents in their life and retreats to an earlier time when parenting roles were defined and forever.

Consider that the current regime of laws results in almost 50 per cent of children of family separation losing meaningful contact with their father within two or three years. A new guiding principle that values fathering at all stages and in all circumstances of a child's life is required.

Too many fathers are guided by legal advice and their own desire for reduced conflict and accept a limited role in their children's lives, not recognizing the "drifting away" consequences of such a step.

The following non-scientific "gut check" questionnaire is an opportunity to examine our gender differences, and even lead to constructive re-examination of our family parenting practices.

Agree or disagree:

- Maternal is more important than paternal in the successful upbringing of a child.
- Shared parenting (post-separation) should only occur if both parents agree.
- Fathers are more likely to be responsible for a marriage breakdown.
- The "tender years doctrine" is correct in asserting that young children should remain with the primary caregiver, post-separation.

- A parent who is the primary caregiver should have the legal right to move away with the children for personal reasons (i.e. new partner, job, etc.).
- Fathers are disproportionately more likely to miss their support payments or their access time than mothers in a similar situation.
- The parent who no longer dwells in the family home with the children is likely most responsible for the separation.
- The life of the children's primary caregiver is most negatively affected by the separation and divorce.

When this quiz is given, it usually results in eight positive responses.

Well-known author and professional Isolina Ricci, Mom's House, Dad's House, has provided a starting point, a set of guidelines or principles to which all caring parents who are going through a separation should subscribe. She calls it a family bill of rights.

The guidelines include the following:

- Each child has the right to have two homes where he or she is cherished and given the opportunity to develop normally.
- Each child has the right to a meaningful, nurturing relationship with each parent.
- Each parent and child has the right to call themselves a family regardless of how the children's time is divided.
- Each parent has the responsibility and right to contribute to the raising of his or her child.
- Each child has the right to have competent parents and to be free from hearing, observing or being part of their parents' arguments or problems with one another.
- Each parent has the right to his or her own private life and territory and to raise the children without unreasonable interference from the other parent.

By providing social services that promote the family bill of rights, parents can learn to accept their new separateness and their altered togetherness.

Every father and anyone who cares about children should consider the following scenario. You could be the most loving husband, the best provider and the most involved, loving parent, and if your partner no longer wanted to be with you, then you will likely become, at best, a 30-per-cent dad and your parenting influence will be diminished forever.

If you're unfortunate and your children's mother decides to move with the children to another city or province, then your limited participation will dissipate or even disappear...

Common sense tells us that fathers will meet their obligations when they are more involved with their children, not less. Our current system has somehow prioritized the transfer of income over ensuring the continuing presence of fathers.

Our children are damaged by a political and judicial mindset that fails to recognize that in every separation two single-parent homes are created. It rewards anger and rage by imposing parenting arrangements that create obstacles for a father and his children.

It is up to each parent to make the question of custody irrelevant. This can be accomplished by accepting that each parent's love is of equal importance, that each parent brings similar and complementary parenting skills to the raising of their children, that each parent will make the personal changes necessary to meet their children's needs in altered family circumstances.

Gender profiling is the dark, unspoken secret of Canadian family law and it must be publicly exposed if Canadian society wishes to diminish the havoc of our current system. Children are the real victims, too often growing up without their father's and paternal grandparents' support, love and wisdom.

This is not for a moment, but for a lifetime. The shame is ours.

Barry Lillie of Kitchener is co-facilitator of You're Still Dad, a support group for fathers committed to a continuing presence in their children's life.