

The DAD connection

In family breakup, it's the kids who count, group says

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Dads are disappearing. They fade from children's lives all too often after marriage ends -- a disturbing trend Barry

Lillie is trying to change.

That's why Lillie started a special group for dads to help them cope with the aftermath of marital separation and keep them in the lives of their children.

"It's really hard for dads to get their feet back on the ground and think of themselves as a family with children," Lillie said.

"When you get into a separation, it's almost like you're excluded."

Lillie knows personally the struggles single dads face. After separating from his wife, he fought to stay involved with his three teenage children.

He made it through and now battles to help other dads.

Lillie created the program two years ago and ran it through K-W Counselling. When the funding ran out in the summer, Lillie decided to keep it going on his own, paying costs out of his own pocket, including office space in downtown Kitchener.

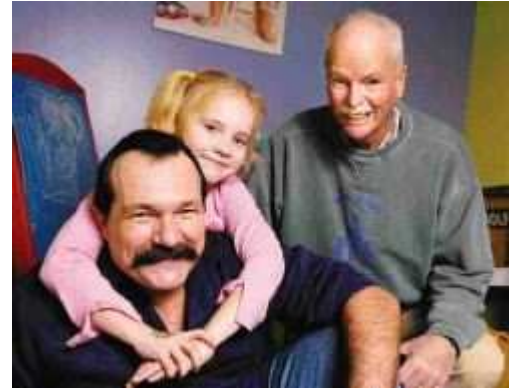
The goal of Kids 'n' Dad is to ensure kids from a separated family have two parents who are co-operating and caring for them, Lillie explained. That's done through mediation services, counselling, referrals and, perhaps most importantly, a support group.

The weekly meetings made a huge difference for Tedd Vernon.

"It was just like a big weight off my shoulders because everybody there is in the same boat," Vernon said.

"It did a world of good for me. . . . We're all there to help each other."

The Kitchener man felt very alone after separating from his wife three years ago. The separation was tough for Vernon, who had been a stay-at-home dad, spending every day with his young daughter Samantha.



PETER LEE, GRAND RIVER LIVE
Tedd Vernon (left), shown with his daughter, Samantha, is a volunteer with Kids 'n' Dad, a support organization for fathers started by Barry Lillie (right).

Suddenly, he didn't see his daughter for a month, then only every other weekend for a couple hours during supervised visits as ordered by the court.

"When you first get into this thing, it's very intimidating," Vernon said. "You don't know what to do."

Now Vernon, who has joint custody of his daughter, volunteers with Kids 'n' Dad, helping the new dads in the group by explaining how courts work, how to fill out forms and generally navigate the murky waters.

Instead of bashing former wives, Vernon said, "we would rather give a hug to a dad coming in."

Often that's needed. Men will come to the group who haven't seen kids for months, Lillie said.

"Our job is to calm them down and work with them," he said.

After a separation, the atmosphere can be very adversarial, sometimes with parents using children as a bargaining chip. Those bad feelings that cause conflict usually take anywhere between two and four years to dissipate, Lillie said.

"What we're trying to do is fill in that gap and help parents get through the anger," he said.

Support is crucial.

Along with sharing personal experiences during the meetings, dads also talk about practical things like discipline, how to avoid saying negative things about the children's mother, answering tough questions from kids and how to deal with tough times like holidays.

The pain and loss that follows a separation can make dads feel isolated, allowing them to slip away from their children easily, Lillie said.

"Fathers sometimes are too easily hurt," he said.

Some simply can't deal with all the obstacles in a society and court system where, Lillie said, "there is a sense that fathers have to keep proving that they can be good parents."

He said studies show that one out of two kids lose contact with their dad within two or three years of separation.

"This is unacceptable," he said.

"We've got a serious problem here and no one, quite frankly, is talking about it."

Lillie said his already strong conviction in tackling this problem is only growing as the age of children when parents separate is going down, and quite commonly children are now toddlers when the family splits apart.

Kids who lose their father are not just losing a parent, but the paternal side of their family, too.

"Children need all the love that they can have," Lillie said.

Many decisions after a separation are based on anger or a moment in time, he said, but the consequences for both kids and parents reverberate for a long time. Lillie encourages dads to "understand that this is short-term pain," to look past the moment and to their goals in the future.

That can be tough for dads, especially when their life seems to be falling apart and money is often tight. But it is possible to get through. Lillie points to himself as a good example. He has a close relationship with his children, and grandchild.

"That's what I want for the guys that come to the group," he said.

"My guys," as Lillie often calls them.

It's rewarding and frustrating work, said Lillie, who is a retired teacher. The future of the group is up in the air now that government funding is gone and Lillie has taken on the entire endeavour.

He's looking into hooking up with a charitable group so he can issue tax receipts for donations, as well as fundraising events and other community support -- whatever it takes to continue helping dads and kids stay together.

"Our belief is that both parents should be involved in the life of their children," he said.

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