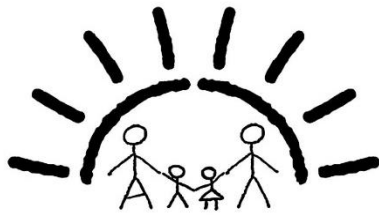


## Family Renewal Resources Project (FRRP)

*For separating and changed families*



**FAMILY RENEWAL RESOURCES PROJECT**  
parenting forever, through whatever

### ***An Open Letter to Separated Dads***

**'I like to see him (his son Karter) before the game said the Raptors star point guard'. (Kyle Lowry)**

**'It makes me whole. He doesn't watch the game out there. He watches in the back. For me, I tell him I love him. He tells me good luck. We have a talk. You've got a good thing like that going. I give him a kiss. You have that in your life, what have you got to be mad about. You go out and do your job with ease.'** (Excerpt from the Toronto Sun Dec. 25, 2014)

#### **Fathers**

Kyle Lowry captures the transformation that becoming a dad brought to his life. It changed and balanced his priorities – it brought true meaning to the rest of his life.

Every dad understands his words and relate to the transformation that takes place.

Talking about fathers is a complicated task, for many of us became a dad in many different ways and through many diverse relationships. As such the impact of separating may differ substantially and the challenges faced to be an effective dad are different.

Our common starting point however must be remembered always and the continuation of that father-child relationship is crucial. *Our common fear/risk must also be remembered; namely, that a separation from the other parent could lead to losing the relationship with our child.*

While what I call the 'fear' may find a home in both parents, the on the ground *reality for a dad is likely more real and more concerning.*

In this section there will be an opportunity to hear the words (voices) of fathers engaged in the everyday struggle to be an effective and loving parent.

Please listen to the voices to understand the challenges; listen to be an inspired parent that provides your children with the gifts of character that are the best of you and may become the best in your child; listen to learn the tools necessary to be an effective parent and how you can acquire those needed skills.

#### **Tools for fathering in a single parent household**

- The approach of the FRRP is that the term single parent is inappropriately employed and may have an unfortunate consequence of becoming a self-fulfilling outcome.

- Every intact family ***creates two single parent homes*** and how it plays itself out for each family is to be determined. Marginalizing **the other parent** works against the best interests of the children.
- While the FRRP strongly endorses the presumption of a minimum of 40% parenting time for each parent, the reality at this point in time is this is not taking place. The imbalance (besides the effects on the child) has significant consequences on fathers in terms of the psychological/emotional impact, financial assets to provide desired opportunities for their child; and a sense of their long-term impact on raising their child.
- The starting point is to realistically assess the challenges that you face in your new single, parent household-i.e. the terms/conditions for setting up a home! As an aside, I did a terrible job of building a home for my children in the early weeks, months and even for two+ years. It could have cost me dearly.
- Many dads, even with a middle-class income, probably are ill-prepared for the financial impact of a separation. Most families with children spend to their limits with any long-term savings coming maybe from an appreciating home and contribution to a defined pension plan. Most families have credit card debt and car loans. *I know that you get the picture.*
- The FRRP is also about providing a more cost efficient way to preserve your family assets to build two households.

**The legal system is not built around or for the separating dad and ensuring a strong, every day father-child relationship.**

- A working dad with income below \$50,000 before taxes is likely to be squeezed and face on-going debt.
- Do a realistic financial check-up! Assess what you need to build a new household. Make the necessary adjustments to goal setting. Try not to get into financial disputes with your child's mother. They are likely no longer interested in your woes. They would rather find someone to listen to their woes.
- Don't involve the children in your financial disputes. Find alternative activities and opportunities if necessary. Grandparents may be an alternative to provide opportunities for your children and basics for you. Grandparents can be complicated relationships in a separation. The FRRP section on grandparents should be read.
- This financial warning must be heard and heeded. You must be realistic and in this section there are ways to be an effective parent in cost efficient ways. These are the voices of other dads.
- Being a dad in an intact home is very different than in a separating family. It is likely that no one was an overseer in the intact home. Your role as a dad had evolved and become a norm in which the parent- child relationship carried on. For most homes there was an agreed to comfort level.
- *Separating changes the agreed to comfort level/norm. Working toward a new normal is what the separating process is all about.* Some fathers find their previously accepted parenting style under attack in the separating family.
- In an earlier section on telling the children about the separation, it was suggested that you need to assess your relationship with each child- strengths, weaknesses, concerns- in order to be an effective dad.

- Reflect on the months preceding the actual separation and whether the intimate, partner separating that began much earlier has consequences on your parenting relationship with each child. *That would not be uncommon for a dad.*
- As you work your way through this section make a list of the changes about to occur in your life. What do you need to support you through the next day or week or months to immediately become a supportive parent? Where can I find such support? Talk to your employer about possible flexibility in work schedule re: meeting children's schedules, while a more structured plan is put in place. Research suggests that the initial weeks and months are critical for separating fathers and their children.
- In the old days (me), dads tended to move out of the family home. It is often not thought out and is done out of a sense of failure and even caretaking. It is still occurring; but it is not recommended unless an interim parenting plan is already agreed to by both parents.
- Leaving the family home without the children and any firm parenting agreement begins your complicated, new parenting regime. Often our new/temporary place has no room for our children. Grandparents may or may not be an option depending on their age, location and relationship.

My personal experience after close to 25 years of marriage was that I was ill-prepared to live in a single household for the first time in my life. Even when my daughter came to live with me almost immediately, I failed to build a home. Everything was second hand i.e. legs falling off furniture, etc. I didn't want my youngest daughter to stay with me for my place was so inadequate. Take a moment and think about my mistakes (a few listed below).

- a) Self-sacrifice at my personal expense. I thought I deserved to be punished; b) Penalized my youngest daughter and endangered my relationship with her by not doing sleepovers immediately; c) I had not thought out any parenting plan; d) I went into caretaking mode by thinking I could cope with anything. That was not true; e) Fill in any additional observations for me or yourself!

## Steps

### Rule 1:

- Find yourself a suitable place to be a continuing parent from the very beginning! This is a must. Think through your options. Talk to the children about the choices or proudly show them your new place and their bedroom, etc.
- Don't leave the intact home without a recognized parenting plan and a suitable place to go!

### Rule 2:

- The suggestions in Rule 1 are intended to reduce the unpredictability when one become a separated dad. Work through the additional parenting disruptions that must be covered off from day one. Your mindset must change!

*The reality is that unpredictability is likely going to be your constant companion for every personal relationship.*

- Consider that parenting routines may be gone immediately. Attending dance classes, hockey or ringette three days after separating may be a formidable challenge. Seeing your children go off with the other parent is an emotional challenge.
- Informing parents, best friends, colleagues and bosses of your separation and new address, contact number may feel intrusive and may result in self-doubt or feelings of anger or betrayal, if their response fails to meet your expectation.

**Rule 3:**

- Fathers may reflect on their role in the separating family. As stated earlier, in every family the parents have found their own way of shared parenting. Obviously any number of factors including work, ages and needs of children have been a determining factor.
- **The role of being a dad is more essential and difficult in the separating and changed family!**
- Your role as dad was not challenged in the intact family. Your effectiveness maybe, but not who you are to the children! Your effectiveness may now be challenged and your love for the children may not be enough to sustain the relationship that your children and you need.
- The default position is not a viable option. An intact home where the mother dominated decision-making *and everything children* is not a positive option going forward. It may have the consequence of children without their father in their life in a meaningful way.
- If you were the kind of father that accepted taking your cues from the mother in the intact home then you *have a lot of parenting preparation work to do*. You may also face verbal or even legal assaults that you were not the primary parent thus you should now be even less of a parent. What was a more than acceptable role in the intact family is now working against you.

“Divorce calls for a total redefinition of who you are as a father and challenges you to come up with a plan for how to maintain or surpass the relationship that you have with your children during the marriage.” (Judith Wallerstein: What About the Kids)

**Rule 4:**

**‘Speak when you are angry and you will make the best speech you will ever regret.’ (Dr. Benjamin Spock)**

- Sound advice for both parents is perhaps more importantly for separating fathers. Normal conflict in an intact family can become escalated conflict in a separated family. The bad old ways that parents dealt with conflict over the years are no longer acceptable.
- For a separating dad some of these ways may be abusive or just as important **considered abusive**. Effective co-parenting does not thrive in an abusive relationship. The fault does not really matter; the consequences do.

- Building more effective ways to talk to each other on parenting issues is a key tool. In our parenting section there are some rules re: behavior necessary for effective co-parenting. In addition, there are several resources on co-parenting.
- Effective co-parenting requires compromise. Fathers who had lost their voice in the intact family on parenting concerns may find that their voice is an unwanted intrusion to the mother. This can lead to more open conflict, reduced cooperation or simply fleeing day to day parenting. In all instances the children lose and as such the parents lose if their goal is to love their children more than they are angry with the other parent.
- Courses and counselling programs are available for parents who find themselves repeatedly at odds.

## Rule 5

- Effective parenting following a separation is a moving target. Every relationship with your child is subject to the different stages of each child. Some we are prepared for, others may present unique challenges.
- Many parents separate with children of toddler age or younger. A father from these families faced in years past a judicial approach that often refused overnight stays with dad before the age of four. While this has changed somewhat, it may be a factor found in assessments for the Courts. You also cannot legislate against judicial bias or a mother's determination that she is the primary care parent.
- *As a separated father you must prepare to be an effective parent and fill in any gaps in your parenting comfort level, especially, with younger children.*
- Every parent has gaps in their parenting resume. Own it and then do something about making it your strength!
- Many dads express the importance of their daughters in their lives. They feel very close and protective. Yet research (often outdated or biased) in this area would suggest that fathers are less effective and needed as their daughters transition through the tween, adolescence and young adult stages of development. There is a moving away from healthy closeness. If this is *followed then the father-daughter relationship is at risk during a critical moment in their daughter's life.*
- *A dad is more than capable of understanding and learning to become comfortable with their daughter's transition into womanhood. If your daughter is uncomfortable with certain conversations then supporting her to have her own family doctor, female school counsellor, etc.*
- My oldest daughter lived with me for the first years of my separation (age 16-18). I messed up on occasion, but she knew that I would always be there for her. That helped us build a *relationship for a lifetime, through whatever.*

## Rule 6

**'Fathers that have their own special needs face obstacles to parenting their children. It is as if the community has decided that they are incapable of loving their children or of being loved by their children.'** (Barry Lillie Kids n Dad Shared Support)

- Many dads who deal with mental health issues, disabilities and extreme poverty are often left out of the parenting loop. In an intact family, a parent's illness would be an opportunity for caring and understanding for a child.
- Parenting would not be considered impossible because a parent doesn't have the resources to have an appropriate residence.
- Most shelters for men/fathers are unsuitable for children. Protective shelters for kids and dad are virtually non-existent and receive virtually zero funding. Consider the messages delivered to children about their dad through the way our community supports a separated dad, especially one who has pre-existing health issues.
- There is an uplifting film based on a true story called the ***Pursuit of Happyness***. The father takes his child to a House of Friendship men's shelter.

## **Rule 7**

*For all of the above rules, there is no certainty that the outcomes are going to be what you want for your children in their journey from childhood to adulthood. Of course they are uncertain in an intact family as well, but a separated parent may feel more responsibility for less than ideal outcomes.*

- ***So hanging in is Rule 7.*** I made enough parenting mistakes to fill this web site. I often think it was just *by chance* that I have the relationship that I have with my children and grandchildren. I know that I could have lost that relationship with each child along the way. There was such a defining crisis. I always thought- hang in. ***Be 'relentless' in a patient way.***
- I apologize for the hanging in counselling. But when you receive advice or feel the need to flee consider a time-out and the steps necessary for your personal recovery.
- While the FRRP advocates shared parenting (40% minimum), I have many clients who have built wonderful, enduring relationships with their children with considerably less parenting time. My standard for *the minimum parenting time is whether you are confident that you are able to build an enduring relationship that will continue into adulthood. I would not accept any parenting agreement that didn't provide that opportunity.*
- For some dads, *the parenting insult is all consuming.* Feeling insulted is understandable; but you cannot allow your sense of injustice to interfere with being an effective parent. The risk is that there are common outcomes for most children of a separation (reread After My Parents Divorced) and eventually teens may make decisions re: their access to you or the other parent. *It is too easy to become obsessed with the injustice.*
- Some dads surrender in order to survive. Living without their children and a legal fight without end is unbearable. If you are in this situation you must get help. Survival is primary, then you build a life from that step. Your children will survive and some part of you is always part of them. I know that adult children are often better equipped to understand what happened to their family based on their own life experiences.

- You are a role model for your children. They do observe and what they observe can be your gift to them on how to handle adversity and treatment of others.
- I often say that I would never wish what my family went through to happen to anyone. However, in my calmer moments, I believe that *I am a better parent and person for having gone through the chaos. The opening quote from Kyle Lowry makes clear what is important in life.*
- Parenting perfection doesn't exist in the intact or changed family. *Learn to forgive yourself* and your child's other parent. There is a big picture, the long game for separating parents. Try to keep it in mind when facing challenges. Don't get so thrown off that you **run away from parenting opportunities.**
- Don't disappear or even worse become an in and out parent. It is difficult for even the best of 'other' parents to encourage parenting relationships in such circumstances.
- It is easy to give up too soon. Situational depression is real for dads facing reduced parenting, loss of supports and living outside the family home.
- Some dads are angry with their children who are in their teens. They expect more from them when they choose not to follow the access schedule. Teens are different. Read the section on teens and on alienation. Don't give up on them! Everyone is wounded, even in the friendliest of separations with children. Children did not participate in the decision to separate.

### **Protecting Your Child as a Non-custodial Dad**

Finally, many dads may face an issue in high chaos conflict with the mother over access and care of the children.

#### **What do you do if you feel that your child is at risk?**

You have an obligation legally to inform F&CS with your concerns. Unfortunately for fathers, as noted earlier, *F&CS has not been father friendly*. They may see complaints about the mother as a ploy around trying to win custody of the child. They are however obligated to do an assessment. You need to keep a record of concerns and the steps you have taken. You will likely not become aware of F&CS findings.

In addition, a report may lead to a backlash by the mother and that could lead to a set of not so happy outcomes: a) interrupted access initiated by the mother, even against the current parenting plan; b) your child's being caught in the middle- interview by F&CS and targeted by the mother; c) confrontations on any child exchanges- high risk for abusive confrontations that can change parenting arrangements.

In our work and on a personal journey, assessing your child's risk in the other home is extremely difficult. You can be found by authorities, such as F&CS or therapists, that you are 'interrogating' your child and putting words in their mouths

My advice is that you must do your own evaluation. Remember that *your idea of risk* is quite possibly not the view of high risk by F&CS.

I failed my younger daughter because I was unable to find a way to protect her. I was on the outside and the chaos overwhelmed me. It is my personal shame. In the end, a counsellor for my daughter made a change of residence happen at the age of 17. My daughter was then in her mid-adolescence and the

chaos for her diminished. As important, more calm allowed each parent- child relationship to be renewed in the long-term.

If what you see is high risk, then you must do what I failed to do. Seek the resources to intervene. There are lawyers who specialize in F&CS cases; there are child therapists (*do your research*) who place the child ahead of gender;

Do it with caution and for the best reason. Then you will have satisfied the most important quality of being a dad; namely, protecting your child! I made a commitment on the day my daughter came to live with me that I would never fail her again. It was the same commitment that I made to her when she was placed in my arms in the birthing room. The same commitment made by every dad who has graced my life.

So far I have kept that promise.

**“The greatest gift that you can give your child is a sense that you’re a “forever father” who’s deeply committed to parenting.” (Judith Wallerstein: What About the Kids)**

I have yet to meet a dad who with the right support cannot be an amazing dad...for a lifetime!

**Please read over the parenting resources and selected voices of dads and others.**

**Barry Lillie**

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