



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

***An Open Letter to separating parents on preserving all the essential relationships that help children thrive.***

‘There is something ultimate in a father’s love, something that cannot fail, something to be beloved against the whole world.’ Frederick Faber, priest.

Lost in the hype of Father’s Day is the continuous, diminishing of the importance of a dad, unless it is within the intact family. The post, intact family role for a dad becomes *essentially conditional to the mother’s commitment to shared parenting*. A mother’s opposition leads to others becoming arbiters to *whether a dad is parent-worthy to their OWN children* and to what extent.

It is an insidious system and even mediation and collaborative processes suggest outside decision-makers make judgments, usually about a dad’s parenting value. *There is no guiding principle* that states that both parents and grandparents shall share parenting in the post-separation family.

*This Father’s Day, I decided to write about my journey as a separated dad and the cost to my parents-grandparents to five.*

The face of our web site (**captures the potential loss**) portrays my then 3-year-old granddaughter and I on the Gulf of Mexico, sharing with several hundred other families from every family form an awe inspiring moment. I know that my father and gramps were holding hands with Mollie and I; and that getting this separating process right is **a MUST** for the Mollies and Timothies everywhere- for they become parents and grandparents too.

A second, attached resource has some overlap with the original essay; it is my personal journey with my parents, grandparents to five, from the moment of my separation.

*My hope is that there are experiences and lessons that helps your family in some way. You are not alone in your journey.*

Barry

**Grandparents: The Forgotten Story of Family Separation and Divorce**

“I’ve come to realize, though, that it’s best for kids to spend **plenty of time** with both mom and dad. It’s best if both parents are very involved in day-to-day parenting, and its best to put the needs of kids ahead of the parents needs or desires...” Jennifer L.W. Fink, Wisconsin from Building Boys, 3/25/2015)

Ms. Fink, mother of two boys **once** rejected any notion of shared parenting following her separation. Five years later following the Court imposition (‘plenty of time’) of Wisconsin’s presumption of shared

parenting legislation, she is grateful not just for her children, but also for having dad as a parenting partner.

She succinctly captures her personal transformation:

**“My boys’ dad is not an unpleasant obstacle; he’s an integral part of their lives.”**

Stella Kavoukian, a mediator-therapist outlined a path for separating parents:

“Kids do as well as their parents do. We are their role models. The better that parents are able to communicate and resolve issues, the better the kids will be able to manage their own relations throughout life.”

An essential test of a good parenting plan following a separation is *how the agreement preserves all the essential relationships that help children thrive through the years and become happy and resilient young adults, fully capable of entering loving relationships.*

Namely: *Do you send your child to the other parent and their extended family with your blessing and encouragement to have a joyful time?*

***“Giving your permission to your child to love and be loved by the other parent and grandparents is a lifelong gift that is far greater than the ‘things’ we purchase!”***

I have reached the age of my father, when my family separation took place. I can remember as if yesterday *the chaos and piercing grief* that became part of my parents’ daily life. Their relationship with my three children became intermittent at best and special, ‘happy occasions’ were almost always filled with loss and sadness. They were caring parents and grandparents (good people, not perfect) who created special, lifelong memories for their grandchildren. A separation process without end left them *wounded for* the remainder of their lives.

**Humanizing the separating process became my life mission.**

Recently, my youngest daughter commented on a grandfather that she knows, who is not seeing his grandchild. She wondered aloud that she couldn’t imagine how I would have survived if I had faced the same outcome. I don’t know the answer to be truthful.

Barbara Coloroso calls the struggle the *piercing grief of loss*. Fortunately for this writer, estrangement over the years was only temporary and intermittent; ***but the fear of loss and the fragility of relationships have remained a lifelong companion. I don’t believe that it ever completely disappears from our being, once experienced.***

I witness today the exclusion of grandparents (most often paternal) from grandchildren in often the most egregious ways. The word *‘indifferent’* inadequately describes the time given by legal and social service professionals to grandparents and their significance to children and grandchildren of all ages. I often view parenting agreements from clients and rarely, if ever, have I read a parenting document outlining, let alone insisting on ‘the good intention’ to include the grandparents from both extended families.

The Ontario legislature passed a Bill that gave grandparents the opportunity to seek a *legal remedy*, when they are blocked from their grandchildren. This option may be a possibility for grandparents, when

the dad has faded away or simply surrendered to the grief and loss of a failing process. We shall see how this works out.

**However**, the most productive way of preventing the loss of grandparenting is to ensure that the 'best interests of the child' include **all the essential loving, committed relationships in each child's** life.

An after the fact legal remedy by a grandparent is doubtful at best, for most grandparents have experienced the devastating and costly consequences of the legal system through their child's separation. *They too have become worn out by their child's experience* within the system, and the thought of repeating this *same nightmarish journey* emotionally and financially with no certainty, is simply too great a risk.

**As one of our grandparents so clearly stated some years ago: 'the family justice system has lost the right to use the word 'justice'.**

Paternal grandparents disproportionately suffer from the aftershock of their son's family separation. Fathers are more likely to face *reduced parenting time* with their children and the challenges that such parenting arrangements present for strengthening and sustaining, enduring father-child bonds. Grandparent-grandchild bonds must be sustained often through the parenting opportunities of their child.

Paternal grandparents are often caught in what I have identified as the quadruple whammy, namely:

- a) Losing often a special relationship with their daughter-in-law (in long-term marriages they have become a 'daughter');
- b) Remaining a loyal support to their son and caught in his despair and loss of parenting time;
- c) Grandparents **may also be divided** on what needs to be done- loyalty to their son or going around their son to retain a relationship with their grandchildren;
- d) In many instances, the paternal grandparents may have been the key support to the parents and children in the intact family.

Our failure to demand inclusive outcomes for families, leaves children often on the outside of one side of their family, for no reason. In allowing this to occur, children lose what Ms. Fink described as 'integral' relationships- necessary to the completing of the whole of each child- the role of each parent and grandparent.

Grandparents contribute to integral relationships by providing:

- 1) The continuity of the family- for a child to understand their roots.
- 2) Modelling the personality/values/character of their families and as a consequence the child's own identity.
- 3) Children knowing they are loved, unconditionally.
- 4) Provide a place of calm that is less involved in the day to day upbringing and more focused on just *being there*.

- 5) Real poverty is unlikely and a source for enhanced opportunities are a trademark of grandparents.
- 6) Their involvement provide parenting experience and advice for parents.
- 7) By being a source of emotional support for parents and grandchildren in troubled times.
- 8) Etc.,

Father's Day, for this writer, is a reminder of the lifelong gift of knowing that I was loved forever, through whatever by my father and grandfather. That ultimate gift is what I 'hope' I have offered to my children and grandchildren in my imperfect way. It is what every healthy parent in an intact family or a family born out of loss and new beginnings desires/hopes to give to their children.

I have lived through my own family miracle as a separated dad. That miracle/good fortune has allowed me to be a day- to- day grandfather. Most days I take my two grand boys to school and after the farewell hug, smile and wave, *my eyes often go misty*. I think my reaction is ridiculous after so many years; yet, it serves as a daily reminder of the uncertain gift of being a dad and grandfather.

*"We find delight in the beauty and happiness of children that makes the heart too big for the body."*  
(Poet: Ralph Waldo Emerson)

This past week, I reconnected with four childhood chums from grade one through high school some 65 years ago. Stories were told that were embellished to the point of being unrecognizable. Good times from 60 years ago were joyfully recalled as yesterday. But what I took away in the end was our common commitment, love and support as a dad and grandparent.

As Kyle Lowry simply stated in the Toronto Sun: "But...fatherhood. that changed everything."

When I attend Christmas concerts or JK graduations, I am always touched by the love and joy of parents and grandparents from every background, connected as one, by our common mission of completing in the best way possible the whole of our child and grandchild. (See School Essays)

Events such as these constantly reaffirm my faith that parent and grandparent love has the capacity to overcome temporary anger between separating, intimate partners, when the right, supportive resources are in place.

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**Final Comment:**

**My parents failed to survive the chaos to enjoy our family's eventual recovery and renewal.**

**Time does sometimes bring about change. Change can occur because of the courage and caring of a key person i.e. a teacher, counsellor, a friend's parent, etc.**

**Time brought my son back to me; an amazing, courageous counsellor supported my youngest daughter; a parent of my daughter's friend helped bring her back into my daily life at Christmas many years ago. We must be prepared for those opportunities to build a renewed relationship as a parent and grandparent.**

**You are a grandparent. It is part of who you are!**

*A Few Recommendations for anyone who desires to support changing families.*

1. *Prolonged chaos can be prevented by timely intervention by friends, legal and social services. It is chaos that is destructive to ensuring all the essential caring relationships remain connected to the family.*
2. *Grandparents' ongoing contribution must be included in every, final parenting plan.*
3. *Paternal grandparents specifically must engage in open conversations with their son re: what is taking place. It must be done with sensitivity and reality. Many parents and their separating adult child suffer serious splits. This can be very tough stuff.*
4. *It can be necessary to find suitable counselling in order to deal with the heartbreak for many grandparents. Be sure to research if possible, any counsellors or assessors.*
5. *The parent- child loyalty issue is significant. It is my belief that a grandparent(s) should not secretly go around their son to see the grandchildren.*
6. *The decision to engage directly with the mother in order to see the grandchildren should be only done following a thoughtful conversation with the child's dad.*
7. *The dad may disagree but at least he has not been eliminated from your thought process. For some dads, the grandparent connection to the grandchild may provide needed updates on his children. For some fathers, the pain of absence could be too great for these updates.*
8. *The enemy is also that prolonged chaos and loss may lead to dangerous behaviors – addictions, stalking, violence, and suicide to name a few. Suicide risk from fear of losing your child is not uncommon. Everyone must be vigilant and not dismiss the possibility of such a tragedy for any parent suffering a prolonged loss of parenting. Grandparents may play a role in reassuring their son that he is a good person at a time of emotional difficulty and even isolation.*
9. *Grandparents may have different relationships and different views on their own child. This can lead to challenges to their own intimate relationship. They need to recognize their possible differences in order to not endanger their relationship. A child's separation can lead to their separating emotionally and affect other relationships with other children and grandchildren!*
10. *Grandparents may not believe their adult child about the challenges that he/she is facing. A lack of any such legal experience (re: a separation) in their lives may make grandparents 'insensitive' to their child's inability to get the situation under control. Coming across as judgmental is only destructive. Grandparents may need to do research and meet with other grandparents. This step may require setting aside any self-imposed embarrassment and exposing their own vulnerabilities and scars. A grandparent group exists because there is a common, emotional journey.*

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