

The non-custodial father: common challenges in parenting after divorce

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A non-custodial divorced father faces many challenges in establishing a new relationship with his children after his marriage ends. During marriage, a father may fulfil his parenting role indirectly by supporting the mother's caretaking and by being the breadwinner. A father who divorces will probably become one of the 90 percent of men who do not get custody (Richards and Dyson, 1982; Weitzman and Dixon, 1979). In the aftermath of marital separation he may find emotional and practical obstacles to continuing a relationship with his children from a distance which require him to make more of a direct commitment to parenting than he did before the separation. As many as 50 percent of divorced fathers in the US and the UK do not overcome the challenges and have less than yearly contact with their children (Fulton, 1979; Gingerbread and Families Need Fathers, 1982). However, many fathers do master the struggle and are rewarded by good relationships that benefit both the children and fathers.

During the twentieth century there have been marked shifts in the law in the US and the UK regarding fathers' involvement with children after divorce that have paralleled trends in theory about fathers' importance in child development (Lowe, 1982; Thompson, 1983). English legal tradition originally asserted a preference for father custody after divorce, since children were property of the marriage and men were deemed best fit to look after children's moral development. The twentieth century saw women gaining legal rights and the courts considering the welfare of the children above the property rights of fathers. Women, as the parent judged to be more nurturant, were routinely granted custody of children during their 'tender years'. Courts did not recognize fathers as primary caretakers.

The problem of conflict between parents leading to marital breakdown and presumably continuing after divorce, further diminished the legal role of the non-custodial father. In *Beyond the Best Interests of the Child* (1973), Goldstein et al. argued from the point of view of psychoanalytic theory that the child's bond with one 'psychological

parent' should not be disrupted, even if that means stopping contact with the other parent. In reaction to legal rulings that primarily favoured mothers after divorce, fathers' rights groups began forming in the US and UK to lobby for the importance to children of father involvement (Francke et al., 1980; Trombetta and Lebbos, 1979).

Recent research on divorced families gives qualified support to fathers remaining involved with children. Early research on divorce and children showed the disadvantages of growing up in a 'single parent family' compared to 'intact families' and implied fathers had no role at all after divorce (Ferri, 1976; Levitan, 1979). Later studies in the US examined the complex variables in children's adjustment after marital separation, including parental conflict and father involvement (Hess and Camara, 1979; Hetherington, 1979; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). The conclusion from the largest and most methodologically sophisticated study (Hetherington, 1979) was that continued father involvement was associated with better functioning for children unless the father was 'emotionally immature' or there was intense, child-focused conflict between parents. Taken together, these American studies suggest that in the majority of families a strong father-child relationship after divorce can help ameliorate some of the ill effects of divorce for children.

Although the impact of parental conflict on children has received much attention, probably because of heated legal disputes over custody and access, there has been much less notice taken of an equally problematic outcome of divorce for children: the virtual loss of one parent. Little is known about the large percentage of fathers who slip from their children's lives. Even now with the courts shifting to encouraging father contact, many fathers do not visit children. The answer as to why children lose fathers may lie in the challenges that non-custodial fathers face, at a time in their lives when they feel least emotionally equipped to face them.

This chapter focuses on the ways divorced fathers cope with common problems in developing a new role in children's lives when they become non-custodial parents. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) found that there was little association between the closeness in father-child relationships before and after the separation. About 25 percent of the fathers in their clinical study of sixty separating families grew more distant from their children in the space of 5 years, but another 25 percent actually grew closer. Whether or not a divorced man remains an involved father may depend on how he responds to new demands as the family changes, perhaps even more than how close he had been to his children during the marriage. Research material from a British study of divorce presented here highlights the struggle of divorced fathers to learn new ways of contributing to their children's upbringing

while also dealing with the complex emotions of divorce: grief, guilt, and anger.

Divorced fathers in the Cambridge study

This chapter reports on data from thirty families from the south-east of England who volunteered to participate in a research project primarily designed to study divorced family relationships and children's adjustment. In all families, parents had been separated for at least 2 years at the time they were interviewed. Fathers fell into the following social classes (Registrar General's classification of occupations, 1970: HMSO): I Professional — six; II Managerial — eight; III Non-Manual, Highly Skilled — two; IV Manual Highly Skilled — nine; V Partially Skilled — nine; VI Unskilled — two. One child in each family, averaging 8 years old, was assessed to determine social, emotional and academic adjustment. Since mothers had care and control in twenty-seven of these families, 90 percent of the men were non-custodial fathers.

The design of the research called for interviews with both natural parents, when access was occurring, to determine the characteristics of the family. These characteristics could then be related to the assessment of how children were behaving at school and at home and how they performed on intellectual tests. Three-hour interviews were conducted with each custodial parent and 23 non-custodial parents (all those who had access, plus two who did not have access). Parents were also asked to complete a questionnaire about their interaction with each other and about the behaviour of the child focused on in the study. Children's teachers were asked to complete measures of the child's behaviour in the classroom (Rutter Behaviour Checklist, Coopersmith Inferred Self Esteem Inventory). Children were also given tests of both intellectual achievement and ability (Columbia Mental Maturity Scale, NFER Basic Mathematics Test, Neale Analysis of Reading Ability).

Based on ratings by the researchers of parental co-operation and non-custodial parent involvement from interviews with parents, families were divided into three groups. In ten *Harmonious Co-Parent* families, parents had a neutral or affectionate relationship with each other and co-operated on the issues they had in common concerning the children. In eleven *Conflicted Co-Parent* families, both parents remained involved with children, but parents were hostile and unco-operative, quite often in legal dispute over visitation or maintenance. In nine *Single Parent* families, one parent had ceased contact with the children and custodial parents varied in how co-operative they were willing to be. (There was one father-custody family in each of the three groups.)

Results showed that the 8-year-old children assessed in the study were best adjusted in the *Harmonious Co-Parent* families and least adjusted in the *Single Parent* families, according to teacher reports. A finer grained analysis showed that a friendly and co-operative relationship between parents and a visiting schedule that gave non-custodial parents extended periods of time with children were associated with children's adjustment (see Lund and Riley, 1986, for details of method and results).

The material presented in this chapter includes statistics and quotations from the study of thirty families. Some quotations are also presented from eleven non-custodial fathers who participated in a pilot project for the study. Although the original intent of the study was to explore the connection between post-divorce parenting and children's adjustment, the material presented here highlights father's experience of developing a new role in their families.

Common challenges to the non-custodial father

Similar themes emerged in the interviews with divorced fathers as they talked about the problems they faced in becoming non-custodial parents. Non-custodial fathers must cope with the practical issues of setting up access visits, establishing a new type of parenting relationship with their ex-wives, and contributing to children's upbringing from a distance and on a part-time basis. What was especially poignant was fathers' disclosure of the feelings that accompany facing these challenges.

Separation — setting up access visits

The first task of a non-custodial father is to work through his grief and anger about the separation so that he is able to start access visits. Since all but three men in the study became non-custodial fathers, the time of separation was experienced as an intense loss of the daily routine of the family. An electrical technician, 'Peter', whose wife wanted the separation, described his feelings.

I was very happy when I was married . . . everything I wished for was handed to me on a plate. I never had any hardships or anything, and then all of a sudden, sort of the whole world falls out . . . all of a sudden everything stopped; it just went wrong. The house routine carries on much the same as when I was there . . . I'm the kindly uncle that takes them out, on a weekend.

For the thirty families in the study, the time immediately after the separation appeared to be crucial in setting up successful access visits. In the twenty-one families comprising the *Harmonious Co-Parent* and *Conflicted Co-Parent* groups, regular visitation began within 3 months after separation. In the nine *Single Parent Families* there

were sporadic attempts at visitation immediately after separation and gradually diminishing contact thereafter until it was less than yearly.

Five fathers who had stopped contact with children were interviewed. Their interview responses suggested that fathers' unresolved feelings about the separation can interfere with access. Two men, a salesman and an auto mechanic, found visiting too painful. They maintained that visits were harmful to children and that a clear break was preferable. An army sergeant was so angry at his ex-wife, he wanted no contact. A university lecturer's guilt for initiating the break-up emotionally paralysed him so he did not try visiting. A man who owned his own business was legally restrained from seeing his children because of his erratic behaviour. These men were emotionally ill-equipped to deal with the complex feelings of separation and did not get past the grief, guilt, or resentment that can interfere with visiting children.

Mothers and fathers reported that immediately after the separation everyone in the family was upset when fathers visited and then had to leave the children. Almost all parents in the study reported that early on, children were likely to cry when leaving either parent. If visiting continued that upset usually diminished as children adjusted to the pattern of the visits and became secure in the knowledge that they would see each parent again. However, some fathers said they stopped visiting or visited less frequently because children cried when they left them. These men were uncomfortable with the expression of feelings in general. The extreme position, voiced by two fathers, was the 'clean break' philosophy, that it was better for children not to see their father after divorce so they could get over him.

Peter, the father described earlier, articulated the link between his own grief and staying away from his children.

I find it . . . it's very easy to perhaps cut yourself off and not think about it. That way the pain goes. It's, uh, you know, if you saw them every weekend it might be a bit too upsetting, so to speak.

For fathers who initiated the break-up there was also the problem of guilt interfering with setting up a relationship with their children. Nigel, a graduate research student, said:

She also needs the children very much . . . that's really the reason I have not taken my own needs into account. This is some expression I suppose not of guilt, but of concern, for my actions or the consequences of my actions. I feel she needs the kids, so I said O.K., you have care and control, they can live with you if that's what you want.

Nigel had maintained contact with his children, but not as much as

he would have liked, because he was concerned about his ex-wife's feelings.

Many men expressed helplessness in overcoming a custodial mother's opposition to their visits. Guilt about the separation could compound the problem. A university lecturer described his dilemma:

I wanted the separation from my wife, but not from my family. That was the most painful thing. The family was almost sacred to me . . .

The pain was not only that I lost my children, but that the divorce caused them to gang up against me. Their allegiance always had been with their mother. Maybe I did things wrong . . . I buried my head in the sand and she gathered her little ones around her to tell them I was wicked.

There was no way I know of to maintain a proper relationship with the children, because of the propaganda. The only hope was that maybe I could, when they grew up.

Continued anger about the break-up also interfered with setting up contact with children. A retired army sergeant, who had not wanted the separation, described his interaction with a judge over his refusal to visit the children:

They tried to get access arrangements started out in the courts, and the judge didn't like it when I said I'm not having anything to do with it, access. I'll never claim it, never accept it. And of course he looked quite annoyed at that. It's nothing to do with you. The kids are entitled to see you, sort of things, you know. His personal viewpoint. At this time I said this matter finishes today when I walk out of this court. I'm not going to another hearing later on to discuss it. I said the matter is finished. That's exactly how I felt.

Non-custodial fathers, who eventually had regular, comfortable visits, persevered in the beginning despite the grief, guilt and anger. Marked reduction in contact with their children was part of their loss. Of the twenty-one families in the Cambridge study, in which access was occurring, ten non-custodial parents saw their children on a fortnightly basis, and seven saw them on a monthly basis. Only four non-custodial fathers saw their children weekly or more often. When asked what they thought about the frequency of contact with their children, fourteen of the twenty-one non-custodial parents said the frequency was about right for children. However, all non-custodial parents thought the contact was too little for themselves; they would like to be able to see their children more.

Establishing a parenting relationship with ex-wives

A challenge non-custodial fathers face from separation onward is reaching agreements with custodial mothers about the children. Rarely is a separation truly mutual or amicable. No parent in the Cambridge study, even those who ended up with a harmonious

relationship 2 years later, described their parting as easy. Especially when conflict remained high between parents, co-parenting required clear agreements about the way parents would interact around issues concerning the children. These agreements served as a wall between parents which allowed only an opening through which the children could pass.

The most important issue in co-parenting was access. Clear agreements about when fathers would see children and how plans could be changed facilitated an easy relationship with their ex-wives. Parents felt that these agreements were necessary, not only for their own well-being, but also for the children. A mother whose ex-husband, an unemployed cab driver, visited sporadically explained her upset:

It hurts, I suppose, because he will not commit himself to visiting on a regular basis, which I felt was absolutely essential. All he will say is he doesn't want to be prevented from seeing them if he wants to. It upsets all of us if he just turns up on the doorstep.

Most parents kept to a minimum their contact with each other. Over half talked on the phone once a month or less. Only in the *Harmonious Co-Parent Group* did the majority say that they spoke weekly with their ex-wives. In this group, fathers felt they could flexibly schedule visits around parents' and children's immediate needs. A teacher who had an amicable relationship with his ex-wife described the way they set up visits:

The principle is supposed to be that children ask. That's the way Joana and I like to think this is happening. If they want to come, they are welcome any time, and at the same time, if they want to do something or I want to do something in London; but it's based on every other weekend. Maybe it's being disorganized, but it's always felt important from Joana's and my point of view that it should be flexible; so I think the first time that the children said they didn't want to come because they had a party, I felt a bit stunned, and possibly the other way around, but now it doesn't really matter — it's pretty open. The children will ring me, or I will attempt to ring and talk to them. It's not an issue.

Fathers in the *Harmonious Co-Parent Group* felt more involved in their children's lives. The majority of the ten men in this group reported frequent discussions with their ex-wives about their children's health, schooling and behaviour. These fathers preferred to get information from their ex-wives, rather than directly from teachers or doctors. They seldom discussed money with their ex-wives. All but one paid regular child maintenance and most thought mothers should spend it as they saw fit. Four of them bought children some clothing or other necessities, in addition to paying maintenance. All of them discussed with their ex-wives what to get children

for birthdays or Christmas, and half had bought gifts jointly with ex-wives on some occasion.

Fathers in the *Conflicted Co-Parent* group were much less likely to discuss issues concerning children with their ex-wives. Instead, over half of these fathers got their information directly from children or others. One father, a farmer, explained:

Our daughter is a bit deaf, and often the mother might have something to say about that, but even if she tells me something I'm liable to ring up the doctor, rather than take what she's told me as true. You know I don't really believe anything she tells me. I just don't trust her now . . . It's probably me. I'm unwilling to talk to her. It's me really, who is breaking any discussion. I find it difficult to talk with her because otherwise it reawakens feelings I've sort of suppressed.

The one issue conflicted co-parents did discuss frequently was money. Half of the mothers were dissatisfied with the amount of child maintenance being paid. Seven couples had initiated legal action after the divorce in dispute over maintenance or visitation.

Curiously, some of the mothers in the *Single Parent* group reported that fathers who were not seeing their children kept up contact with their ex-wives. Two of the eight paid child maintenance, and six occasionally wrote to children or sent them gifts. Three of the mothers wrote to or occasionally phoned fathers to tell them about children. The co-operative mothers in this group believed that fathers' lack of involvement was circumstantial (one father was in a mental hospital) and wanted to keep lines of communication open so access might occur in the future. On the other hand, four of the mothers had court orders for no access because their ex-husbands had been so aggressive.

Fathers' approaches to conflict had an impact on the parenting relationship after divorce, which in turn related to children's adjustment. Mothers filled out a questionnaire about their ex-husbands' and their own behaviour. In the *Harmonious Co-Parent* group, fathers were judged to be the best problem solvers and children best adjusted at school. In the *Single Parent* group, fathers were judged to be the most aggressive in their interaction with mothers and the least likely to use problem solving and children least adjusted at school. These results suggest divorce mediation may benefit children by assisting the non-custodial divorced father to be able to face problems with his ex-wife without becoming hostile and to take responsibility for airing views and coming up with solutions.

Parenting on a part-time and long distance basis

Once a divorced father has made it clear he is going to stay involved with children through access visits and formed a working relationship

with his ex-wife about parenting issues, he then faces the ongoing challenge of being directly involved with his children. Most men want to establish a 'real' relationship with children, so they are not just seen as kindly, treat-bestowing uncles. The emotional task for the non-custodial father in part-time parenting is mustering the motivation and energy to take on a 'single parent' role for time spent with children and to find other ways of being involved from a distance.

The motivation required of visiting parents can be great. The first problem they may face is distance from children, since many divorced couples find it emotionally easier not to live in the same area. In the Cambridge study, the men who were visiting children regularly lived an average of 42 miles from them.

The problem of distance is compounded by problems of housing. Seven of the twenty-seven divorced fathers in the Cambridge study did not have space for children to stay overnight, even though they had been separated from their ex-wives for over 2 years. These men shared housing with other men or lived in bedsits. They had to rely on bringing them to friends' and family's homes for visits.

A polytechnic lecturer who drove from London to the north of England to see his son told of the frustration he experienced with the practical problems of visiting:

I travel on Friday, sleep in the car so I don't have to pay for bed and breakfast, and then fetch him in the morning.

Saturdays are fine inasmuch as it's nice to see him. We go off to do things together, swim, eat. But then, Sundays are awkward because everything is closed. We have no place we can go and just be together.

That's one of the reasons I don't do it so often now. When he was younger I went once a month, now it's only once every six weeks or so.

So it's unsatisfactory as far as I'm concerned. I don't enjoy it. I feel relieved when I leave. I do it because it's important to him. He's distressed if I don't go. Although when I can have him come stay with me for longer periods, it's great, fabulous.

It does make one feel a mixture of sad and angry, but where does that anger reside? Can't put it anywhere. I can't put it into my son, my ex-wife. It becomes an impotent rage you have to control in that situation.

The fathers interviewed in the Cambridge study voiced a strong preference for longer visits with children in fathers' homes. A father who works as a teacher explained how he would strive to make children feel at home with him:

I suppose it's partly on principle. What I'm trying to do when they come is just to be carrying on what I would normally be doing, more or less. I've always been against this idea that it should be one long series of treats . . . certainly the times I enjoy the most is to act as if they were really living here. So a typical thing would be that they will arrive in the evening and spend some time getting a meal together and hop and dance around, or

bring games that they can play, and hear the news. Sometimes I feel a bit guilty because I keep them up late, wanting to talk to them. They have to ask to go to bed.

Fathers felt that having children stay with them in their own homes helped them relax with each other and helped children know what fathers' lives were like.

Virtually all the fathers who had access (seventeen out of nineteen) in the Cambridge study had children with them overnight on a routine basis. They also averaged a week spent with children sometime during the year, usually summer. About half of the fathers with access also telephoned children between visits to stay in touch.

Fathers in the study reported that they could easily show affection to children. Almost all said they still cuddled their 8-year-olds. Despite the lack of everyday contact, fathers and children who remained in contact enjoyed warm relationships.

Despite the reports of affection between fathers and children, non-custodial divorced fathers almost always felt that their ties to children had become more fragile. The way the fragile nature of the father-child relationship showed was that children seldom misbehaved on visits and fathers seldom disciplined or got angry with them. Fathers expressed a fear that children would not 'want to come back' if they were harsh.

The families in the Cambridge study reported that children were far less likely to be naughty or show anger to fathers. Therefore, fathers seldom needed to discipline children. A mother tells of her upset about the difference in children's behaviour in their fathers' home and hers:

He thinks they are totally at home there. I don't think he is doing anything wrong, but . . . they never say no to him for anything and would never argue with him . . . I said later was it because she was frightened of him getting upset, or of hurting him, or getting him angry. I think she said she's not scared of him getting angry. He won't ever get angry with them because maybe he's scared of getting angry — of frightening them so they won't want to go, and they won't argue with him in case he doesn't have them. It's interesting — I realize it was not a perfectly relaxed situation when they are with him. They probably need to spend more time so that they loosen up — he's never said anything, he's always said that they have been absolutely fantastic, great. There's only ever been a couple of times they got a bit rowdy, and that was the worst thing he ever said about them, which probably meant that they started running up and down the stairs.

Fathers' tendencies to become less effective in disciplining children after marital separation has been shown in other research (Hetherington et al., 1976). In the Cambridge study, children were more likely to show anger to mothers than fathers, if the parents had a

conflicted relationship. If parents had a co-operative relationship children were more likely to behave similarly with both parents. A lorry driver explained how his co-operative ex-wife helped resolve an incident with his daughter:

It was Brigit that I had to smack. She rushed up into her bedroom and slammed the door and started throwing things about, and I smacked her. She said that she wouldn't come over here any more, she was quite adamant about the fact that she wasn't going to see me again. I said, well, fair enough, it's up to you to decide, and she went home. I discussed it on the phone with the wife and my mother was quite worried about her — and we all got on the phone, the wife, Brigit, my mother and me — and had a little chat, and the next time I saw her she was perfectly all right. (What did you say? I'm curious to know what turned it around?) I don't know, it was just the fact that we talked about it, blended it into the conversation with other things as well. She was determined she wasn't going to say sorry, and so was I. She was only a little girl of 10.

Remaining a 'real' parent who can discipline, after marital separation involves the risk of anger from children. Many fathers did not take that risk because they felt their time together was too precious or that the children would not want to see them. Strong backing from custodial parents about visits contributed to non-custodial parents taking on more of the disciplinarian roles.

The benefits of non-custodial father involvement for children

Although divorce certainly meant a change in father-child relationships for the families in this study, the findings suggested that they still had an influence in their children's lives. There were a variety of ways in which fathers maintained a nurturing relationship with children despite lack of day-to-day contact. The researchers rated non-custodial parents on the extent to which they shared any social, recreational or educational activities with children. These activities, plus the extent of fathers' primary responsibility for children during access visits formed the basis of the 'Non-Custodial Parent Involvement' rating used in the research (see Lund and Riley, 1986).

Non-custodial parent involvement ratings were correlated with higher scores on a test of abstract reasoning for children ($r(30) = 0.46, p < 0.01$). There were also correlations between the length of access visits and children's positive self-esteem measures in school ($r(30) = 0.30, p < 0.05$), and their mathematics ($r(30) = 0.37, p < 0.05$). These results are typical of the patterns also found for the association between father involvement and children in intact families (Blanchard and Biller, 1971). Higher involvement of fathers, married or divorced, is associated with children's achievement in visuo-spatial

and mathematical skills and, to some extent, with their self-esteem.

Father's involvement with children took place in the context of his relationship with his ex-wife. In this study, as in others (Hetherington, 1980; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980) continuing conflict between parents correlated with children's behaviour problems at school ($r(30) = 0.40, p < 0.01$). The courts in the US and the UK currently favour continued access even when there is conflict between parents. Only when there is clear danger to children because a father may be violent with the mother or them, will fathers be restrained from seeing them, as happened in four families in this study. Fathers (and also mothers) are being encouraged in conciliation courts in the US and the UK to refrain from exposing their children to continued conflict in order to keep children in touch with both parents.

Fathering from a distance has become an increasingly common experience for children. Between 30 and 50 percent of children will grow up in divorced families in the US and UK (Richards and Dyson, 1982). Still, non-custodial fathering is a role which is unclear and unexpected for most men. For most men interviewed in this study, the loss of everyday contact with children was a source of continuing heartache. 'Peter,' quoted earlier, said:

I've done more things these last years than I've done for a long time . . . but they're not things I wanted to do. What I wanted to be was a sort of fairly loving father who came home every night and played with the children. That was about it, my ambition in my life. Just to grow old like that.

The message coming from research findings cited in this chapter is that keeping fathers involved with children is probably important for children's well-being. Non-custodial fathers do matter to children. That message may help more of them meet the challenges of becoming this new kind of father.

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