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Father's Attachment

During the 1960's when the divorce rate began to rise, parents, professionals, and the Family Courts were increasingly confronted with making important decisions about the nature of living arrangements for children following separation and/or divorce. These decisions were based on mid 20th Century cultural beliefs and traditions of single income families where the mothers stayed home to raise the children and fathers were the primary bread winners. It was assumed mothers would be primary caretakers following divorce and that fathers would "visit" their children reflecting their minor role in rearing the children. This mid 20th Century belief system was based on untested and un-researched psychological theories which focused on the exclusive importance of the mother in early childhood development. These theories were bolstered by some of the early separation research done with British wartime and hospitalized children which reported the dangers of prolonged separation of children from their mothers. These untested and un-researched psychological theories help shape the development of "visitation" guidelines and were adopted by the Courts to assist judicial decision-making.

According to Kelly (2006), "most of these guidelines were designed as a one-size-fits-all prescription that children would live in the primary custody of the residential parent for all but two weekends during a 4-week cycle, and "visit" 4 days out of 28 with the nonresidential parent, most often fathers." This type of parenting plan was simple and did not require judicial or psychological analysis; this reflected the still untested and un-researched belief that children would be harmed if they had more than one home. Even after the adoption of the "best interest" statutes of the 1980's, these cultural beliefs/guidelines became the definitions of what was in the "best interest". Although during the 1980's and 1990's the tenor was to encourage frequent visitation along with shared physical custody, the living arrangements of children following divorce has relatively remained stable over the past 35 years. This is despite the growing number of mothers who are working outside of the home and the increasing number of fathers who have assumed more and more responsibility in the care of the children. Research by Pleck & Masciadrelli (2004), indicates both fathers and mothers are important for the normal adjustment of children.

Several barriers have been identified to inhibit extended contact between fathers and their children; for the sake of brevity I will discuss only the two major barriers. The first barrier has been the institution of the family court system, with mid 20th Century guidelines in place. Based on the power of precedence set in the courts, some attorneys discourage fathers from seeking more generous timesharing (Kruk, 1992). This is due to the large number of mothers who seek

full physical custody which leaves fathers with the notion of either attempting to negotiate, mediate, or litigate to attain more custodial time with their children. According to Kelly (2006), when fathers attempt to attain more physical custodial time with their children they risk being labeled a high-conflict or uncooperative parent.

The second major barrier relates to the psychological and relationship that exists between the parents. Maternal perceptions related to paternal involvement plays an enormous role in the amount of involvement by fathers after divorce. Kelly (2006), states “Mothers can be influential gatekeepers of the paternal involvement through attitudes and behaviors that either facilitates or limit fathers’ opportunities to parent and develop close relationships with their children.” According to the research by Allen & Hawkins (1989), and Fagan & Barnett (2003), following divorce, the more the mother considers the father to be incompetent, the greater the gatekeeper effort. The research by Wolchik, Fenaught, & Braver (1996), along with the research by Macoby & Mnookin (1992), showed the higher the maternal hurt and anger about the divorce the greater the probability of less contact father will have with the children.

In attempting to understand what is really in the best interest of the children it has been important to ascertain the perspective of the children involved in divorce. The early research has found that the majority of children stated the loss of the non-resident parent as the most negative factor of the divorce. They were distressed and dissatisfied with the conventional every other weekend visitation, and as a result described their fathers as less involved in providing discipline and emotional support (Amato, 1987; Hetherington, 1999; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Research by Fabricius (2003) was paramount in showing the closeness to fathers increased incrementally with the incremental increases in time spent with fathers. The second paramount finding of Fabricius was that 70% (percent) of the young adults of divorces indicated equal timesharing would have been the best solution to the custody arrangement.

The research related to outcomes of custody arrangements shows that without paternal involvement in the childrens lives from the beginning it doubles the risk of problems for the children in the areas of adjustment, social and academic (Kelly, 2006). Early studies of joint custody arrangements showed better adjustment of the children compared to those of sole custody arrangements, along with more satisfaction, as stated by the children, with the joint custody arrangement. A meta-analysis of 33 studies comparing joint custody and sole maternal custody showed the joint custody children were better adjusted across multiple measures of general, behavioral, and emotional adjustment, self-esteem, family relations, and divorce-specific adjustment.

According to the research by Kelly (2006), “Overall, the empirical literature demonstrates numerous benefits to children, including better psychological and behavior adjustment and academic achievement when their living arrangements enable supportive and loving fathers to be actively involved in their children’s lives on a weekly and regular basis, including a combination of overnights and school related and leisure time.” Dr. Kelly goes on to state: “Those children and adolescents who have lived in shared physical custody arrangement are generally satisfied,

feel loved, report less feelings of loss, and do not frame their lives through the lens of parental divorce, compared with those who lived in sole custody of their mothers.”

It is clear from the preponderance of research indicating the importance of co-parenting from the conception through adulthood, especially during infancy. According to Yarrow (1963; Yarrow & Goodwin, 1973), attachment begins from the time of birth and becomes more and more intense during infancy. During the infant’s development, even at 6 months an infant will seek out the non-custodial parent for other social and emotional needs. The research shows it is extremely important for both parents to have the opportunity to engage in normal parenting activities (feeding, playing, soothing, putting to bed, changing diapers, etc.) during this time when attachments are being established to promote healthy development. During the past 20 years research has shifted from focusing exclusively on the infant-mother attachment to the importance of the infant-father attachment and the importance of positive infant-father attachment to normal behavior and development. During infancy the development of trust is the outcome for infants, when there is a missing parent the development becomes impaired.

In summary, the literature shows the importance of both parents engaging in normal parenting activities. When there is an absence of normal parenting activities with both parents the child develops in unpredictable ways and most studies show problematic behavior and achievement. To reduce this problematic behavior and achievement later in life it is important to create a custody arrangement which enables both parents the opportunity to share in the tasks of raising and influencing their children.

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