

# **Orienting Services to Separated/Divorced Fathers A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

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## **Introduction**

The existence of programs and services to support and assist fathers after separation or divorce has often been lacking, invisible or under recognized in Canada and elsewhere. While parenting research and programs and supports have focused almost exclusively on mothers (Silverstein, 2002), there has been a growing awareness, and shift in understanding, of fathers' place and impact in the parenting process (Marsiglio, Day & Lamb, 2000; Mincy & Pouncy, 2002), and on children's well-being (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio, Amato, Day & Lamb, 2002). Strengthening the bond early on can have a positive benefit in the long-term of fathers maintaining involvement in their children's lives. Yet, as DeGarmo, Patras and Eap (2008) have commented, little is known about how divorced fathers use and benefit from social support to manage their parenting responsibilities after divorce.

There is growing awareness that helping fathers maintain a relationship with their children following separation or divorce, while also grappling with issues with an ex-partner and the legal process brings to the fore many challenges. Recognizing that this can be a difficult and emotional time for all family members, there has been an increase in availability and attention to programs and services to help families navigate these changes. The primary goal of these has been to help all family member fairly and expeditiously to further a co-parenting relationship that honours each parent's relationship with their child.

## **The Conceptual Framework**

The authors have developed a framework for thinking about what kinds of services and programs would be appropriate for separating fathers (which can apply to mothers as well). These fall into three key domains: facilitating fathers' parenting and their adaptation to structural changes affecting the entire family, the process of emotional and legal separation from a partner/significant other or spouse, and their individual emotional and psycho-social needs. Services might be multifaceted and cover several of these dimensions or they may be designed more broadly, not being specifically focused on separation issues (e.g., a parenting program designed to teach developmental stages and approaches to discipline).

When thinking about what services are or could be offered to fathers undergoing separation and divorce, it is also important to recognize that the needs of fathers and their families change over time. Children grow and mature, relationships may improve or decline in quality, family structure continues to change, including the incorporation of

new (step) family members. What are critical moments for some men (e.g., conflict during a mediation process) might be less difficult than for others (e.g., when a former partner remarries).

The conceptual framework<sup>1</sup> (See Figure 1 attached) provides a lens by which to consider the complex and multi-faceted realities that divorcing fathers face and services that may be needed to help fathers. We incorporate the importance of time by thinking of the various dimensions below as *processes* rather than static descriptions, and as cyclical or emergent as opposed to stages that are deterministic and representative of all fathers' experiences. We also highlight the systemic issues with respect to social and legal contexts that frame many of the experiences for separated/divorced fathers.

### **Psycho-social Needs**

A 2007 report from Statistics Canada analyzed depression rates for men and women following marital dissolution (including legally married and common-law relationships). This research found that the rates of depression following marital/relationship dissolution were higher for men than for women, even when other factors, such as loss of contact with children, loss of social support, work status and income were controlled (Rotermann, 2007; see also Amato & Keith, 1991). The loss of social support and loss of contact with children have been identified as potentially the most salient contributors to this finding. In addition, men tend to mourn the loss of their children and family life more than they mourn the loss of their ex-spouse (Baum, 2003), in contrast to women who tend to mourn the loss of the marital relationship more than men. A reluctance to seek formal support, particularly for mental health issues can exacerbate either pre-existing problems or mental health problems that have developed post-separation (Smyth, 2004).

Recognising the important influence of their relationship with their children, fathers, then, may require explicit support and acknowledgement regarding the impact of the changed relationship with their children alongside other supports that attend to loss and mourning, potential depression, and higher levels of stress. This type of intervention (treatment?) or programming may be offered in the form of individual counselling, psycho-educational groups or websites helping men to assess their own emotional well-being, or support groups for men experiencing similar challenges.

### **Reconfiguring Family Structure: De-coupling to Co-parenting**

The capacity to nurture a father-child relationship and be a good parent requires that a father has the tools, competencies and resources to engage in a co-parenting relationship with his ex-partner, while also managing the act of "decoupling" from a former intimate relationship. De-coupling refers to the myriad of tasks and acts that bring about the separation of the individuals who were once a couple, including:

- Emotional de-coupling as the individual works to detach their mental and social life from the other;
- Physical acts of de-coupling as members of the couple move separate and apart, moving to new homes;

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<sup>1</sup> The conceptual framework is the intellectual property of Hawkins, Whitehead & Ashbourne, 2008.

- Legal de-coupling as the couple engages with lawyers and the legal system to bring about property division, arrangements for the children and, if married, the formal divorce.

How individuals move through this process may be seen on a continuum, perhaps related to the nature of the pre-separation relationship dynamics. On one end are those couples that are able to cooperate with little to no apparent conflict, or other couples who are less harmonious but are able to work through the decoupling with assistance. Further along the continuum are highly conflicted couples who may engage in protracted litigation but are not violent, with those at the farthest end at risk of or experiencing violence as part of restructuring the parenting and family relationship. The relative need for specific resources and the appropriateness of resources will be closely tied to where the family is on the continuum. The challenge facing many families is to effectively undergo the decoupling process without having either parent “decouple” from their children.

The types of services that can facilitate these distinct and overlapping processes may include “parenting after separation” educational groups, mediation or alternative dispute resolution to allow for successful negotiation of conflict in the context of decoupling, and divorce “coaches” or parenting co-ordinators that can help maintain a distinction between couple issues and parenting issues.

### **Parenting**

The acts of nurturing, sharing, and connecting with their children after separation and divorce is a facet of men’s lives which speaks to father involvement (Allen & Daly, 2007; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999). Father involvement, however, looks very different from family to family. Some fathers may have lived in a relationship/marriage of many years and been an active part of their children’s lives. Other fathers may have had only a brief relationship with their child’s mother, and may never have lived with her and his child prior to the dissolution of the relationship. The outcomes after the separation/divorce are just as varied, including fathers with sole custody, joint custody, shared custody, and many others who will fall somewhere in between as well as fathers with no contact. The degree to which fathers see and interact with their children will also be a function of many other factors including re-partnering by one or both parents, work, geographic proximity, family violence, mobility issues, etc.

Fathers may need assistance in finding ways to parent in the context of their own stress, fear, grief, and anger, the challenges associated with managing work and new relationships, and frequently, having only “part-time” parenting opportunities. Other fathers may need opportunities to develop parenting skills to improve their ability to relate and interact with their child and understand the child’s developmental needs. Parenting programs may be offered in the context of individual or group counselling, and within an educational context such as “parenting after separation” groups, father-specific groups, or skill development and opportunities for father-child interaction.

### **Systemic Processes: Social and Legal Contexts**

Parenting following separation and divorce occurs within a social and legal context. Fathers can face systemic biases (see Gillis, 2000) which are difficult to overcome. Perceptions that separated/divorced fathers are “deadbeats,” absent, or incompetent parents create powerful and negative barriers that can make father involvement difficult (Hallman, Dienhart, & Beaton, 2007); the onus is often on the father alone to face and manage these perceptions. Perceptions of mothers as more important in the lives of small children continue to be dominant, such that fathers often perceive a bias within the court system and social service agencies offer more “mother-oriented” resources.

Within and outside of separating families, a father’s breadwinning is often seen to take precedence over his desire and ability to care. This, in turn, can limit the expectations of fathers and the types of support they can rely on (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001). Fathers engaged in custody disputes may be told by lawyers that their chances of achieving something more than “visitation and access” are slim, and that there is still a bias in favour of mother caregiving. The enforcement of child support is provided with resources, but there is a lack of responsive mechanisms for enforcing time with children (Bala & Bailey, 2004/2005), again limiting perceptions of the role of fathers to expectations of support.

Like mothers, fathers require clear and accurate information on their legal rights and responsibilities. For instance, a father who is paying child support may require a variation to a support order when faced with job loss, decrease in income or illness. The instigation of this process requires time and knowledge. When fathers are unable to support children and are faced with managing guilt over the loss of their provider role, or the other parent wishes to “punish” the father who does not pay by withholding access, a father’s relationship with his children is compromised. Services that allow fathers to get needed information and assistance about child support, custody and visitation, and how to access the legal system generally are important. Court attached information and referral services can facilitate access for fathers to needed information and support.

### **Conclusion**

Focusing on the well-being of fathers, and acknowledging the unique and often complementary roles that fathers and mothers play, offers a positive orientation to services for fathers. We are advocating attention and efforts by service providers and the legal system that highlight the positive role that fathers play in healthy child development and result in comprehensive approaches to supporting the multiple facets of separated/divorced fathers’ needs.. These approaches should include an understanding of needs as changing over time, and considers separation and divorce as a process highly affected by multiple factors.

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