

# Orienting Services to Separated/Divorced Fathers: A Conceptual Framework



Denise Whitehead, LL.B., Ph.D. Candidate, Lynda Ashbourne, Ph.D. & Linda Hawkins, M.A.

Department of Family Relations & Applied Nutrition, University of Guelph



**The Issues**

- Fathers must have the tools, competencies and resources to engage in a co-parenting relationship with the mother.
- De-coupling refers to the tasks and acts that bring about the separation 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.
  - 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.

**Types of Services**

- Parenting after separation educational groups
- Mediation or Alternative Dispute Resolution to allow for successful negotiation of conflict in the context of decoupling
- Divorce "Coaches" or Parenting Co-ordinators that can help maintain a distinction between couple issues and parenting issues

**Goal**  
Effectively undergo the decoupling process without having either parent "decouple" from their children

**Support for Reconfiguring Family Structure**

**decoupling to co-parenting**

**Support for Psychosocial Needs**  
depression, loss, self-care

**Support for Parenting**  
skills, knowledge of effects of separation/divorce on children

**The Issues**

- Fathering after separation/divorce includes nurturing, sharing, and connecting with their children as well as their financial support.
- Father involvement varies across families based on such factors as marriage duration and patterns of involvement prior to separation
- Custody arrangements vary 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.
- Fathers with full and shared custody face the highest rates of role overload due to work obligations and juggling child care responsibilities.
- Interventions and programs need to address the father's social context with a focus on interparental conflict and the father's experiences of stress and role overload.
- Social support serves a protective factor and influences the quality of parenting over time.
- The degree to which fathers see and interact with their children is a function of many factors, such as re-partnering, work, geographic proximity, family violence, and mobility issues.

**Goals**

- Coordination/cooperation between parents is a primary concern.
- Fathers (and mothers) must learn to focus on their children's needs (including the child's needs for a relationship with all of their parents), protection from conflict and promote a sense of stability and security.
- Offer fathers 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.
- Provide fathers with opportunities to develop parenting skills and interact with their child and understand the child's developmental needs.

**The Issues**

- 2007 report from Statistics Canada 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).
- Loss of social support and contact with children identified as potentially the most salient contributors to this finding.
- Reluctance by men to seek formal support for mental health issues can exacerbate either pre-existing problems or those arising post-separation.
- Women tend to experience their highest levels of stress before the decision is made to divorce, whereas men appear to experience their highest levels of stress after separation/divorce.
- Men tend to mourn the loss of their children & family life more than they mourn loss of their ex-spouse; women tend to mourn the loss of the marital relationship more than men

**Goal**

Provide support and acknowledgement regarding the impact of the changed relationship with their children. Facilitate the process of loss and mourning, particularly during times of potential depression and higher levels of stress.

**Types of Services**

- Individual counselling
- Psycho-educational groups
- Websites helping men to assess their own emotional well-being
- Support groups for men

**Systemic Processes: Social and Legal Contexts**

SERVICE NEEDS CHANGE OVER TIME

**Types of Services**

- Provide a variety of *parenting programs*, such as:
- Individual or group counselling
  - Parenting Education Programs such as "parenting after separation" groups
  - Father specific groups offered through early years programming
  - Father-only support groups that contain an education component

**The Issues**

- Fathering occurs within social and legal contexts.
- Fathers can face systemic biases (e.g., "deadbeats", absent, or incompetent parents) that create powerful and negative barriers that can make father involvement difficult.
- The onus is often on the father alone to face and manage these perceptions.
- Fathers often perceive a bias within the court system and social service agencies in favour of mothers and mother-oriented resources.
- Breadwinning is sometimes seen to take precedence over a father's desire and ability to care.
- Enforcement of child support is provided with resources, but there is a lack of responsive mechanisms for enforcing time with children.

**Goal**

Fathers require clear and accurate information on their legal rights and responsibilities

**Types of Services**

- Legal support for child support variation, custody and visitation
- General information on how to access the legal system (e.g., via court attached information and referral services)
- Service providers and a legal system that focuses on the well-being of fathers, and acknowledges the unique and complementary roles that fathers play
- Highlight the positive role that fathers play in healthy child development