

## Commentary

# Parenting is a basic need for noncustodial fathers

By ROCHELLE ANIXT GOLD, LMSW

Fatherhood after divorce is seen by many parents as a secondary role.

Fathers often feel constrained by a new and unrehearsed setting within which they carry on their parenting with their children now outside of the familiar home setting.

To most children, fathers' visits represent the depth of their love and commitment. Fathers busy changing their venue with their children experience less self-assurance, which can cause a holding back of genuine, spontaneous feeling as they worry about being judged for their actions.

In successful visiting relationships or joint custody, there is a positive correlation between a child's self-esteem and a good father-child relationship.

Fathers should maintain what was and is good in the parent-child relationship with the least amount of tampering. This will afford the opportunity to retain a reliable visit with the children that enhances the deeper and positive emotions that have always defined the relationship. All the usual excursions, homework, hobbies and interests should be pursued.

If a child exclaims, "I'm bored," father can say, "Is that altogether new?" The idea is, "Weren't you ever taking it easy with me before the divorce?"

Remind yourself as well as the children that what is reliable and the norm in the relationship will continue. This is particularly important to share with younger children, who experience parents' separate dwellings as unsettling. It is an enormous change, requiring subtle and obvious adjustments: Children are without their routine in the family as a unified system with both parents in the home.

This is also true at the time of separation, where the frequency of visits is valued by the child, who tends to keep a careful count. Visitation at the time of separation is especially reassuring of the father's love for his children and maintains a sense of family life as it was before the divorce. This keeps the memory of the family alive.

Mother and father both face the challenge of parenting outside the usual family framework as they shift to a single- or visiting-parent arrangement. Continued child-rearing includes a separation of spousal

## Fathers Are Important!

Studies from the Administration for Children and Families of the Department of Health and Human Services measured fathers' impact on their children and found:

- Children without a father are more than twice as likely to live in poverty.
- Children in single parent families are 63 percent more likely to run away from home, and twice as likely to drop out of high school.
- Boys without fathers are twice as likely to commit crimes.
- Girls without fathers are 53 percent more likely to attempt suicide.

from parental roles. Each parent then provides for their children in a primary way and satisfies the desire to protect the parent-child relationship outside of marriage.

This effort can be compromised when parents need to manage their own feelings of loss while responding to their children's increased need for attention.

The father is usually in the position of the visiting parent, requiring a particular adaptation and role change. The jarring experience of being confined to time limitations is disorienting and leads to symptoms of depression and helplessness.

Fathers should be prepared to expect their own sadness and trepidation. Fathers must give themselves permission to feel anxious or out of sorts before a visit.

The parent will inevitably look more real to the child who will want to commiserate with them. Fathers fear rejection by their children and often respond in extremes, by staying away or by giving too much materially, which can be financially and emotionally draining.

Every member of the fam-

ily experiences the uncertainty of divorce. Parents who are concerned with their children's mixed feelings and mood changes do best when they also understand their own emotional reactions during this transition. Noncustodial fathers, while facing many similar challenges as the custodial mother, experience a unique revision of their parental role.

Co-parenting under circumstances of separation and divorce is best accomplished when the emotional demands imposed upon the noncustodial father are taken equally into consideration. Watch your own sleeping and eating patterns. Contact your children regularly, treating communication with them as a "basic need."

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