

**From:** "liam" <chairman@parentalequality.ie>  
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**Date:** 03 Mar 2004, 12:09:17 PM  
**Subject:** YES Forum in Dundalk last night

I contributed at the forum organised by the Minister for Education last night (02<sup>nd</sup> March 2004 in the Fairways Hotel in Dundalk) in response to the comment, that for many teachers, they find that often the first time schoolchildren meet a male role model is when they reach 15 years of age.

My reflection on this issue was to ask if people consider whether or not fathers are relevant to the overall development and education of children.

If the answer is that society accepts the value of a fathers input and the evidence from teachers that schoolchildren are often bereft of male role models for much of their youth, then surely, one of the objectives and consequential strategies of the education process should be the facilitation and encouragement of fathers to increase their engagement with and involvement in the education of their children.

Having reflected on the very well organised event and the innovative approach of inclusion? to including of the broader views within society, I wish to make some suggestions which can support this process.

There are actions which can be taken to promote increasing interaction between fathers, the education process and their children. These can take the forms of:

- 1) Positive promotion of male involvement in education by proactively inviting fathers to engage, through using imagery, language, people, situations and locations which have "street-cred" with men. For example, advertising during Champions league or Premiership coverage on the television would seem more appropriate in terms of reaching out to fathers than the continuing practice by RTE of having topical affairs programs broadcast on RTE1 at times when champions league games are being broadcast on other channels and then failing to reflect on the level of engagement by men as critical participants and consumers of these programs.
- 2) Striving to remove the barriers, both real and perceived, that exist for fathers, in terms of their involvement with childcare and the educational development of their children. This process includes the cultivation of reflection by the media of its all-to-easy repetition of the sensationalist negative imaging of fathers as feckless, uncaring, uncommunicative parents. As an example we might consider media coverage of the tragedy yesterday of the death of young Cormac McAnnallen, Captain of Tyrone, Male teacher, positive male role model, exemplifying the most attractive human and masculine traits which I believe most of the participants of last night's forum would wish for in all of our children. Such positive coverage heightens the reader's sense of nobility, of community, friendship, commitment, leadership. It is at the opposite end of the spectrum to the contemporaneous reporting in the media of Stan Collymore's sexual proclivities, or of recent gratuitous descriptions of "Roasting" of apparently compliant women by some premiership footballers, or of the repeated falls from grace of icons such as George Best and Paul McGrath. There are many examples of noble, attractive, heroic and stimulating behaviours by men in our society. Making an editorial decision to move the media culture from the unchallenging banal pap of men-bashing to working around interesting men and their positive

work and contributions to society will, I believe raise men's expectation of themselves by affirming their positive nature's in balance with the negative aspects which seem to be the constant diet of media.

I was asked by Joe Duffy, the forum facilitator, for suggestions for increasing engagement by fathers in education. I take that to mean both as parents and in terms of increasing the numbers of men in teaching. By way of explanation of how our society has isolated fathers to the periphery of the family system over the last few decades, I cited two examples:

The first was the clip from the video shown at the opening of last night's forum, which included a contribution by Mary Davis, of the Special Olympics. As I don't yet have a copy of the video, I am paraphrasing from memory what I understand her to have said. She seemed initially to be encouraging the engagement of MOTHERs only from an early age in the education process. As almost a politically correct afterthought, she backtracked slightly and used the more inclusive terms Parents (which can obviously include fathers). What is the Freudian message contained in her comment? I have no other knowledge of Mary Davis nor have I any information or view of her gender politics. I just presume that she in tandem (hopefully unconsciously) with the cultural denigration of responsible, caring, loving image of fathers which has been societal practice for some decades, excluding fathers in one's consideration becomes natural and unquestioned.

The other example comes from my own personal experience. I believe this example is a measurable indicator of the deeply rooted statutory and cultural acceptance that fathers are a unreliable, unnecessary and increasingly a disposable addendum to the basic core of the mother-and-child family unit. As a separated father of two boys, presently in their mid-teens, I have co-parented our children on an equally shared basis for some twelve years. As joint custodians, our children reside with their mother and then with their father (myself) every alternate week, in a scenario where there is no Cross-alleviation of parenting care between either parent. Yet, in spite of my equal parenting, the state, reflecting presumably societally held values, persistently refuse to pay me any element of the children's allowance because of my gender. In direct denial of my parenting reality (and a reality for an increasing number of fathers), the statutory position (determined by Statutory Instrument, rather than a full vote of the Dail) the state has decided that a child can only have one residence (even though they share homes equally with both parents) and worse still, that the hierarchy of parenting residence is as follows:

- a) Mother
- b) Stepmother
- c) Father
- d) Stepfather

**Note** that not only is a father therefore categorised as a Secondary, thus less important and less valued parent, but that in fact, if a father is unfortunate to lose his wife in death and subsequently remarries, then as a gross insult to him personally and to his children and extended family, his new wife, a non-biological step-parent now takes precedent over the biological father as the sole recipient of the children's allowance.

This very day (02<sup>nd</sup> March 2004) in Dundalk I found it hard to find a parking spot in the centre of Dundalk. I was informed by the parking attendant that, as it was the first Tuesday of the month, the mothers were in town collecting their children's allowance. The fact that I didn't even know the significance of the day brought home to me how I have been excluded, as a father, from

acknowledgement, respect and inclusion with Parity of Esteem and basic equality and is just one of the unambiguous messages, some blatant and others more subtle, that have been presented to me during my lonely struggle as an unrecognised single parent of my two boys for the last twelve years in Ireland.

The relevance of the above example is, that when the statutory and administrative practices and culture in our society acts to both propagate the invisibility of fathers and to erase them from family life, particularly after the breakdown of the parental relationship, then it is perfectly rational and understandable, that as an outcome the presence of fathers as equal partners in rearing and educating their children should decline, and that we are now being forced to address the “Elephant in the kitchen” scenario, the father-and-male-role-model absence in the education of our children.

I wish to submit for consideration (see attachment) a work-in-progress document entitled “Communication between separated parents and the schools”. It was developed as a result of the experience within Parental Equality of a decade of fielding thousands of calls on our helpline from separated parents with difficulties concerning custody issues, which often included acrimonies that arise when they contact schools about their children’s welfare. The intention of the document is to contribute to developing and mainstreaming a communications model which allows everyone involved to retain respect and dignity with minimum stress for everyone, which allows the freed-up emotional energy and time to be redirected towards the children. I would be delighted to participate in developing the concept further with anyone who shares the same vision. I am mindful of the contribution of another woman last night when she stated that “a vision without action is just a dream”

I did suggest to Joe Duffy and to one of the organising officials from the Department after the forum last night that the organisers should consider streaming the audio record of last night’s event over the [www.youreducation.ie](http://www.youreducation.ie) website.

I presume that this contribution will be included in the contribution sections of the web site. I do not see a specific thread in that section which highlights the gender imbalance in education nor the specific involvements of fathers in the education process. Can I suggest that such a thread might open up further discussion on these issues. I would also invite a visit and linking to our websites at [www.parentalequality.ie](http://www.parentalequality.ie) and to [www.operationseahorse.ie](http://www.operationseahorse.ie)

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Please confirm receipt of this email and indicate what will happen to my contribution.

Once again I wish to thank the Minister for the innovative step of the engagement process which I hope will lead to substantive change in our education process.

Yours Sincerely

Liam O Gogain (Chairman ParentalEquality.ie)