

# PARENTAL EQUALITY

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15<sup>th</sup> September 1999

## **New aspects of Bereavement Counselling**

### **Background.**

The Department of Social, Community Affairs have a grant scheme to provide for Bereavement Counselling and for counselling for children of separations. While the Department is prepared to fund counselling for children of separation their definition of bereavement counselling as outlined by Gerry Burke of the Department is strictly limited for counselling for those who have suffered bereavement as a result of death. There is no grant aid funding for the personal loss and sense of bereavement that is suffered by those adults in separation, parents who suffer bereavement from the loss of a partner, or from the loss of disconnection from their children.

On an RTE Radio 1 Sunday night program in early July this year (1999) the subject of bereavement was discussed on air. Various aspects of bereavement through death were discussed. The representative of BE (Beginning Experience) talked about the need for bereavement counselling and support for husbands, wives and partners who are suffering loss from

their spouse as a consequence of separation and divorce. She mentioned that this type of bereavement was socially treated as slightly embarrassing and not as valid as the bereavement as a result of death.

However, she pointed out that the other partner was still constantly present as they were alive and perhaps living nearby and this caused its own type of grief and issues in relation to trying to rebuild one's life. I rang in and made a contribution on air to the discussion.

I noted the earlier aspects of bereavement that had been discussed, and stated that, while bereavement of separated parents might be treated less validly than that of bereavement through death, there was another type of bereavement, which invariably, happens through separation, of which the vast majority of people are simply unaware, a type of bereavement that doesn't get named.

This is the bereavement that is caused, in the majority of cases, as a result of our "sole custody to the mother tradition", where fathers are disposed of and removed to the periphery of their children's lives in a real and practical sense. It was apparent that neither the presenter nor the other contributors had even considered or were aware of this issue. The fact that the issue was so isolated and not been brought into the mainstream of bereavement discussion, only served to further marginalise and isolates these fathers.

Through society's continuing denial of the reality of their grief and pain, survival for these fathers often takes the form of suppressing and denying their own grief, in the unconscious or even conscious awareness that no-one will honour and validate their experience. There is an increasing public awareness, that where issues and difficulties are suppressed in one area of a person's existence the resultant stress and strain often reveals itself in other aspects of this person's life. I believe, that many of these men do irrefutable damage to themselves, through implosion of their emotional beings as a consequence of this suppression, or in other cases through the explosion of their unresolved anger and grief, which harms themselves, society in general and those around who are close to them.

### **Post Separation Custodial Norms.**

Family separation is on the increase in Ireland for the last number of years and there is no indication that this trend is likely to reverse in the foreseeable future. The resolution of child-care issues after separation are generally dealt with either through the legal process, which is an adversarial court system, or through the mediation process, whether it be a formal mediation process, such as a government mediation services, or by mediation with some facilitators known to the couple themselves.

While mediation purports to be a fair and balanced approach, towards identifying the needs of everybody in the family system and addressing them as best as possible, it is still quite clear that in the majority of cases, the solution arrived at, is one, where the children are effectively in the sole care and control of the mother, while the father has an minority, secondary, diminished and partial role in the development and the relationship with the children.

The decision for a father to go to mediation and to accept such a solution, must be considered against the backdrop, that his alternative is to go to the court system, where almost invariably he will be told by every legal advisor, the outcome of the court will be sole custody being granted to the mother, except in exceptional cases, where the mother is clearly and provably inadequate, incapable or unacceptable as a parent.

Hence many fathers, who enter the mediation process and sign up for an agreement, do so with the pre-conditioned and limited expectation of a minority and thus secondary relationship with their children. The alternative route, which is the legal process, partly because of its adversarial nature and its win/lose ethos, inevitably produces a sole custody position, normally where the mother has sole custody and the father has limited or controlled access.

The outcomes for father child relationships and separation can be considered in four-child age categories;

#### 1. **Pre-Natal.**

The separation which occurs prior to the birth of a child. This situation is likely to occur mostly in relationships where the parents are young and unmarried. In many of these situations the father is neither present at the birth of the child and often in fact only becomes aware of birth itself and the gender and name of the child, by accident or in some roundabout way.

Our welfare system, which supports lone parents, of whom the claimants are almost exclusively, mothers, historically and traditionally encourages the mother, to exclude the father from a continuing relationship with the child, often creating fears, within the mother, that by allowing the father to have his name on the birth certificate and to become a guardian, this might impinge on her potential access to support welfare from the state. In many cases, the pregnancy may have been unplanned, the relationship itself may have been relatively non-committed, on either for both sides, and neither parent, mother or father may have done much soul searching, or planning and evaluating their future roles as parents. In such cases, the father of the child, will often have had very little opportunity to physically, emotionally, or intellectually bond with his child, and certainly will miss forever the vital and irreplaceable early experiences of tactility, love and

emotion, that exists just after a child is born. Because of this absence of investment of physical time with his child, and due perhaps, to the low level of commitment in the relationship combined with the unexpected nature of the pregnancy, many such young fathers, may not, during that period of their lives, be aware of experiencing a grief or bereavement about their child, whom they haven't physically spent much time with.

The experience, in Parental Equality, in dealing with some of these fathers, is that sometimes, after a number of years, or when entering a more stable and long lasting relationship later in their lives, sometimes leading to children in a second relationship, with whom they have a strong relationship, that memories and unacknowledged issues start to surface for them, accompanied by feelings of guilt, confusion and ignorance of the legal implications for this relationship.

Often the issue of involving the half brothers or sisters with each other confuses them, they have concerns as to how the two mothers might feel about the involvement of the children with each other. They are faced with the societal condemnation on them, that because they had not been involved or fought for their involvement with their children when they were younger, that they have somehow extinguished all rights to such a relationship. Very little consideration is actually given to the relationship itself between the child and its biological father, as to the child's needs and wishes over a long term, to know and have contact with and a relationship with his or her father. The confusions and guilt, the wishes for establishing a relationship with the child etc, can often have devastating effects on these fathers, in relation to their emotional and physical wellbeing. It can also have a very negative effect on their second relationships, causing sub surface stress on that relationship which may not be understood by the other partner.

Many other case fathers in relationships, which have broken down prior to the child being born, have a heightened sense of the father/child relationship, directly as a result of the relationship disintegrating prior to birth. These fathers often feel the pangs of loss by not being present at the birth, and by being excluded from the early lives of their children. In some cases these men might exhibit their response by removing themselves from the environment totally, developing denial and blockage of the reality of the existence, of their child, in the hope that it will all go away. The sense that they are being prevented from having a real and meaningful relationship with their children, both prior to the birth and afterwards can effect them so deeply, that they often need to close down their emotional interaction with anyone in order to survive. Sometimes to outsiders, their approach and attitudes can appear to be callous and uncaring, while in fact what they are experiencing is a deep sense of loss and a rejection by society of acknowledging either, their emotions, or the needs of the father/child relationship.

**Father/child separation during early years.**

This applies to relationships where the parents separate when the children are very young, say up to early school going years (5/6 years of age). In these cases many, fathers have been very heavily involved with their children during the pregnancy, the birth and during their early years. They have been involved in every aspect of their children's lives, in caressing them, feeding them, putting them to sleep, and watching the enormous and rapid changes, which take place in their children over the early years. During the baby period, children often experience a very tactile and gentle side of fathers, as the children are so delicate and frail. Father's attitudes towards their work and careers and their involvement outside the home, can often be radically re-evaluated during this phase. In many cases, it may not be easily possible for men to substantially modify their career path, or their time commitment to work. Traditionally, being the sole or majority breadwinner in the family presents the dilemma of the contradiction of the increasing financial demands on the family at a time when a father might want to spend more time with his child.

Suddenly, as a result of a breakdown in the interpersonal relationship between the father and mother, but not of the relationship between father and his children, the father typically finds himself now at the periphery of the family system, often seeing his children on a limited access basis and very definitely in a secondary, subservient and controlled position, where the extent and nature of the father/child relationship is effectively regulated by the sole custodian mother, who acts as a **gate-keeper** to the extent and nature of the father/child relationship, based primarily on her personal feelings, views and prejudices, which while they may be natural and understandable, they are often potentially in conflict with the child's best interest.

Fathers in these situations face a range of different fears and bereavements, grief's and losses. There is the huge fear in the father that he will be replaced in his children's lives with a new man whom the mother might take on, who will effectively replace him as a substitute dad. This fear, which to an outsider, may be classified as paranoia, can often be exacerbated during times of tension between the mother and father, by comments from the mother, such as that her new lovers are much better father-models for the children than the children's father is etc.

Fathers, in these cases will be very aware that because of the sole-custody-to-the-mother/ access-to-the-father norms of the Irish Court system, his relationship with his children is always on tender hooks. He has to continually balance his fears of further investing his emotional relationship with his children, with the very real possibility that this could be undermined or swept away, at the whim of the mother. There is a very real sense by the father of the loss of daily contact with his children. How does he deal with not being there at bedtime with his children, talking them to sleep, dealing with their nightmares, caressing them in their fears, sharing in their enjoyment, as they learn to walk, talk, read, write, and experience

the many joys of childhood. He faces the fear of something dreadful happening to the children, (as in a childhood accident) when he is not close by to help them, or be with them in their hour of need.

Typically, as he is now often living alone, in a bed-sitter or a limited sized house or apartment, he has to try to deal with how he will spend time with his children, if he is lucky enough to have time with them, including overnights, in such small and meagre surroundings. If there is interpersonal tension, between himself and the mother, or if he has to go to Court to try and resolve access of child care situations, it is very likely that such a father will put through the mill of being constantly abused, in relation to his time and relationship with his children. This type of grief and bereavement is different from that of death in so far as that the children and the sense of the relationship are real and evolving at all times.

Many fathers are reduced to standing silently and invisibly across the road from a school, watching their young children being collected from school in the evenings, by someone who is not even related to them, while they themselves cannot share in that experience. As a result of either unawareness by society, or denial, of the reality of this most hurtful and abusive treatment of the child/father relationship, the emotions of fathers are dragged along in turmoil. For years the father effectively goes into a limbo situation, where he can either get on with his life and forget his children, or be permitted and supported in having a full developmental relationship with his children in these early formative years. The stress on such fathers is such, that it is no wonder that the life expectancy of males is measurably shorter than that of their female counterparts. Why should it surprise anyone that the level of male depression and male suicide far exceeds that of women of similar ages? The whole spectrum of emotions, including despair, loss, anger, grief etc produce a particular concoction of bereavement which is either officially denied or treated in such an offhand and frivolous manner, that it just propagates the pain.

One of the most marked effects on fathers in these situations is the inordinately large number of fathers who report to Parental Equality that they never again be willing to have children with another woman, for fear of recreating this continuing crucifixion. They say this, despite the fact that they may be deeply needing and wanting a loving relationship with another woman, and willing to enter into one, but scared afraid and suspicious of another parental situation which could leave them destroyed once again.

### **Teenage Years Separation.**

This applies to father/child relationships where the parents separate when the children are in their early teens. In these situations, fathers and children are likely to have had a good ten years of bonded investment with each other. Fathers have seen their children develop from birth, through babyhood and right through the primary school period. In this time their

children have learned to talk, to express themselves, to communicate with their parents, to get to know their parents and their extended families and friends on both sides. They have started to develop attitudes and personalities of their own. In their early teens they will go through their typical rebellious phases often being out of sync with their "old-fashioned" parents views of life.

On the surface it often appears in these separations that the parent who ends up without the custody of the children, is actually escaping from a continuous wrangle with their children during the teenage years. The depiction of fathers who can spend this fun quality time with their teenage children, when not having to deal with the awkward aspects of relationships is the stereotypical one, which is presented when further demonising many fathers in our society. However, many of these fathers have been hardworking and committed fathers to these children during their first decade and the level of their emotional investment is immense. During these vital teenage years where their children choose career directions, develop relationships with their own friends and behavioural attitudes, which will last them for their lives, the father's relationship and influence on his children has been effectively capped and strangled.

One man, who described his sixteen-year-old son, talked about his belief that his son was beginning to dabble in drug dealing. The family had a comfortable business background and lived in a comfortable neighbourhood, the father was shocked by his son's involvement with drugs, but because of the dilution of his influence with his son, over the previous number of years, and of his being sidelined to the secondary and minority role, left him with a horrible feeling and pain, frustration, anger and helplessness, watching his son go down the tubes, while not being able to do anything about it. Furthermore, he referred quite cynically, to developments in our society, which were trying to make parents responsible for the misbehaviour and crimes of their children. In this he said that he was likely to find himself accountable for his sons misdeeds, while at the same time not having any opportunity to influence his sons behavior and inform his morality. Though he was a successful businessman, he now carried unresolved guilt and fears for his son's future and welfare.

For other fathers, they have to watch their children move from second level education away from home to third level education, often entering into relationships with others while the father has no knowledge or influence in these situations. The fatherly advice, the value systems, which have been handed down through the family tree and the heritage of the father, are often blocked from ever passing on to his children. For father/son relationship and for issues of masculinity, the initiatory transitions from baby to boy, from youth to young man, to adult are prevented from being experienced fully, as a result of father isolation.

Young teenage men do not have the opportunity of initiation and of resolving the father son relationship and these sons themselves then carry these marks in their future relationships. The images of the father are often delivered to the teenage children through personalised and prejudice experience of the mother. If those teenagers are fortunate enough in later life (it may be in their thirties and forties) they may be able to track down and challenge their fathers. If they are fortunate they may get the opportunity to ventilate, then to embrace the father they were prevented from experiencing in their youth. Fathers, being older, can see all this happening in real time. A father's grief and sense of loss about the denial of this teenage child/father relationship and the prevention of his opportunity to pass on his life experience, in an honourable and dignified way, to his children, is a very painful excursion, which renders much of his life's work useless. The sense of pointlessness of what it's all about can lead to a deep depression within men at this stage.

### **Separating when children are grown up.**

This applies to Fathers and children where separation takes place when the children have grown up and left home. In many of these cases fathers playing the traditional role of males in our society have been either sole, or the majority breadwinner in their families. Once again, a contradiction emerges in that, if they have been considered successful in their career/provider role, and the children have been achievers, it will often have been at the expense of them spending long hours at the office, investing huge energy in their careers. In reality these fathers have put the opportunity to share substantial time with their children on hold to help their family.

Often now when fathers are in their forties, fifties or sixties and their financial family needs are reduced, they are easing back and have more time to spend with their children and perhaps to help them and advise them in the early years of their children's marriages and relationships. Separation at this time often causes the isolation of a father from his children and can lead to a great sense of being cheated and having lost everything he had worked his life for. The isolation and separation of the father from his children in these cases, is a different model than that which happens with children of an earlier age. Here the victim/martyr position of the mother, who has the manipulative potential, whereby having often been the stay-at-home parent, she has spent enormous close contact time with the children and knows many of their habits and interests intimately, she is in a prime position to tug and pull on the emotional strings with the children, often forcing them to choose between herself and their father.

Many children, in these situations, feel a need to show support for one parent against the other and if they have been conditioned to rely on their mothers in a day to day sense, for permissions and other things children need, they may feel obligated to be seen to isolate their father. Fathers in such cases are effectively helpless.

Recently an 88 year old man explained how he was frozen out of his family, by his wife's manipulation of their children against him. For over forty years his children had not spoken to him. Then a few weeks ago he read an obituary in the national papers, stating that his estranged wife had died and eulogising her, while visibly failing to acknowledge her husband's existence. The twist in the tale is that the person who wrote the obituary was his son, who is a priest and who has not spoken to his father for all those years.

For the first time fathers often realise that they have been cheated and how they have cheated themselves by spending so much time at the office, by investing so much time in their careers, all for their family's sake. Now having provided for their family financially and materially, as reliable breadwinners, they don't really know their children and as their children are now financially self-sufficient, their children don't feel a need to spend time with them.

In fairness, those children have perhaps been raised and conditioned to see their fathers as stoic, logical, emotionally self-sufficient fathers, or fathers with low personal needs and those children can then fail to recognise the particular need of their fathers at this time. The father is now facing depression, hopeless and old age and often on his own. Their relationship with their children and his grandchildren, may be perceived as becoming more reclusive, stoic and distant, when in fact they are often in deep shock as the realities of their lives dawn on them for the first time.

## **Conclusion.**

Fathers in all of the categories mentioned above and in massive numbers are living lives of hopeless despair, watching their loved offspring, often from behind ***bars of many kinds***, whether self imposed or societally imposed. If we are serious about bereavement counselling, then it is time that we get real and support these fathers in their hours of need.

### **Suggested Actions:**

- ❑ It is imperative as a core value of Men's Health and Community Welfare, that proper funding and research are immediately injected into this abyss of male reality.
- ❑ Given the dismal failure by the present crop of administrators and professionals to even recognise, let alone acknowledge and respond to the needs of fathers, that a solution requires the central engagement of the small number of individuals and groups who are struggling to create an awareness of these issues within the Social Policy sphere.
- ❑ Grant aid and state funding should be provided in a proactive and imaginative way to allow innovative ways of addressing these needs to develop and be nurtured.
- ❑ Those people who are working with men at the coal face in these issues and who have the credibility with these men, must be supported instead of being ridiculed.
- ❑ The Dept. Social Family and Community should extend measurably their parameters of support for bereavement work to include specifically work with fathers.
- ❑ The Health Boards should provide immediate seed finance for funding full time workers drawn from the voluntary group of activists who actually know and understand what is going on with men.
- ❑ Funding should be provided as a health/Education/Welfare priority to encourage the publishing of books, and multimedia material to support men in this area of their lives. After all men have paid their taxes to the public purse for long enough.
- ❑ Funding should be provided to develop a forum around men's needs coordinated by the activists presently working in the area.

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***“The reasonable Man adapts to the world. The unreasonable Man expects the world to adapt to him. Therefore all progress depends on the unreasonable Man”.***

– G.B. SHAW