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Do Men Become Better or Worse Fathers After Divorce?

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If divorce is in the future of duplicitous two-timers Gov. Mark Sanford to reality TV's Jon Gosselin, these men will have to navigate co-parenting. However, a growing trend shows that many men become better parents post-divorce, to the surprise of ex-wives who find it difficult to grasp that a man who wasn't a good husband can indeed be a good father.

Take the example of Peter Giles.

When Peter Giles' three daughters were toddlers, work consumed him at the expense of family life. The New York businessman would justify the absences as doing the right thing for his family since he was providing the financial womb while his wife was taking care of their other needs.

What finally made him a better father? Getting a divorce.

"The divorce was such a shock and forced me to take stock of who I was and what success should look like," said Giles, whose ex-wife Nancy Claus sought a divorce in 2001. "I came to realize that I had been providing for my children but needed to be more to them. "

Like the majority of divorcing men today, Giles sought joint legal custody, which courts are more willing to grant since a federal study shows that men paid child support 90 percent of the time in comparison to less than 45 percent when the mother had sole custody.

When his daughters visited, Giles morphed into a multi-tasker taking on chores previously done by his wife including cooking, buying cosmetics and remembering to buy eggs and bacon at the market.

"I wish he would have been as involved and helpful when we were married," said Claus. "But he has definitely become a much better Dad after our divorce."

He is not alone.

"When a father is away from the stress of a failed marriage, he can be more relaxed and more reflective and as a result enjoy being more fully involved with his children," said Don Gordon, professor emeritus of psychology at Ohio University and the director of the Center for Divorce Education.

David Gestl, the divorced father of four in Stewartstown, Pennsylvania, agrees, adding how it's a relief not to argue about parenting styles which allows the father to develop his own.

"In my marriage, I was always walking on eggshells and getting criticized," he said. "Recently after I made dinner, my son shook his chocolate milk and it went flying everywhere. I could say, just relax it's nothing a paper towel won't pick up. It's okay to make a mistake and fix it. "

One benefit to divorce is that with scheduled rationed time, each parent doesn't take it for granted and can have more single minded focus with their kids.

CNBC anchor Dennis Kneale says divorce has made him "vastly closer " to his 9-year-old daughter Jing-Jing. "In many families, mom is the center of everything and the husband is the supporting player," he observed. "But with divorce, I have had more one on one time with her in ways I never did before."

In a study on non-residential fathers, researcher Paul Amato from Pennsylvania State University found that the percentage of non-residential fathers being involved with their children more than tripled from 8 percent in the 1970's to 26 percent in 2000's.

A recent study by Kathleen Gerson, professor of sociology at New York University and author of " The Unfinished Revolution:How a New Generation is

Reshaping Family, Work, and Gender in America" found the number to be 27 percent.

"Large numbers of contemporary fathers are doing their best to fulfill their responsibilities as parents despite the limitations of not residing with their children," said Amato. "It's time to recognize, value and support the commitment of these men to their children."

Experts say that the rise of more involved fathers post-divorce is based on several factors that collectively aligned like shooting stars and is preventing what one organization calls, "a parentectomy."

A kid-focus culture for starters has helped cement ties.

Dr. Warren Farrell points out that pop culture's parenting focus expanded the definition of a man's identity. In one study tracking data from 1965-1998, married men had doubled their direct child care involvement. "More men put in the effort early which created deeper attachments that fathers didn't want to lose," said Farrell, who is also the author of "Father and Child Reunion." Hence, more requests for joint custody.

Technology has also helped prevent or reduce what is called parental alienation where in the past the residential parent may - consciously or unconsciously - block contact either out of her resentment towards the father or because she has remarried and is protecting the stepfather relationship. A study by J. Annette Vanini and Edward Nichols found that 77 percent of noncustodial fathers faced some form of visitation interference.

But now fathers can give their kids pre-paid cell phones to insure contact. Divorce contracts are also often written to permit contact through email accounts.

Ted Rubin, a Huntington Long Island divorced dad to two girls, admits to using Facebook to keep in contact with his kids. "Sometimes when we speak on the phone I can tell if Mom is standing there and then later my daughter will contact me on Facebook," he said. "A lot of Dads complain that moms could stand in the way of communication but now it's almost impossible because kids are so tech savvy."

In fact, Rubin, who has a contentious divorce with his ex-wife, says that email helps divorced parents diminish "the nastiness is our dialogues" which the kids would overhear on the phone. Now he can email what time he's picking up the kids and delivering them without any verbal warfare.

Another big boost for continued contact has been videoconferencing. In 2002, Utah resident Michael Gough worried that his ex-wife's relocation to Wisconsin would wipe out his parental involvement. Considering that less than 10 percent of divorces go to trial, he fought to have the right to videoconference with his daughter. Utah was the first state to pass legislation for virtual visitation in 2004.

"It costs me thousands of extra dollars to go to court but as a result there is now a statute for videoconferencing that other judges and attorneys can refer to and follow," said Gough, who now runs a website called internetvisitation.org. Because of his efforts, Wisconsin, Florida and Texas all passed similar legislation and North Carolina did this month.

"With videoconferencing, I was able to read bedtime stories, help her with her homework and even watch her open up a present," said Gough, with genuine sentimentality.

Schools are also helping divorced parents co-parent on neutral ground. While some wives would raise their eyebrows like thunderbolts when an ex-husband would arrive at the sports field, schools are not playing favorites.

"My ex-wife interpreted the divorce agreement that if I arrived at my son's soccer game that it should only be when I had him for an overnight," said Eric Ryerson, a nurse in Eugene, Oregon and father to an 11-year-old son. "But I want to see him more than my custody arrangement and by coming to sports events and volunteering at school, I can see him more."

Ryerson went to the school and volunteered to be a chaperone for class trips, signed his name to contact forms and also spoke to coaches to provide information on his son's soccer and baseball games.

"I asserted myself to be present and got rewarded for it," said Ryerson. "I also got to meet his classmates and interacted with them." Ryerson recalls fondly how in second grade he was nicknamed Mr. Pushy because he eagerly pushed his son's friends on the swings. "My son told me he liked it when I came to school."

In fact, research shows that the kids do like it when both parents are present.

"They have fewer behavior and emotional problems, higher self-esteem and better school performance than children in sole custody arrangements," said Glenn Sacks, the National Executive Director of Fathers & Families. "When researchers have examined children of divorce, and studied and queried adult children of divorce, they've found that most prefer joint custody and shared parenting."

For example, in one Arizona State University study of college students who experienced their parents' divorces while they were children, over two-thirds believe that living equal times with each parent is the best arrangement. A Harvard University study also confirmed that children in joint custody settings fared much better than kids living in sole custody households.

While many men acknowledge progress, some still complain that the system treats fathers as second-class citizens when asking for more time with their children.

As Gary Nicholson, the president of the American Association of Marital Attorneys, explains, part of the problem is that various state laws tie child support payments to the amount of time a father is with their child. Payments can be adjusted if the father spends as much as 100 nights with his child so many mothers resist giving 50-50 splits and are angered by the request.

Said Nicholson, "Are there folks who look at this economically and think if I have equal time I won't have to pay as much child support? Yes. But the majority of dads want to be involved in their kid's lives. They feel they should be equal partners."

As the nation sees more divorced families, more parents have learned that even though the marriage is over, they are forever linked as co-parents. Cultural cues also encourage that they should love their children more than they hate their spouse. Over time, many hard feelings thaw and enhanced appreciation can ensue.

Deb Rabino, a New York based make-up artist, learned to admire her ex-husband's parenting of their two sons so much that when he lost his job in the financial industry, she voluntarily reduced his alimony and child support payments.

"He definitely became a better father after our divorce," she said. "He honored his support of us and now it was our turn to help him out."

The increased connection between children and fathers also results in other sacrifices as well. Michael Gough says videoconferencing helped get him more involved with his daughter. "My participation reminded me I have a daughter who needed me otherwise it could have been out of sight, out of mind." Because his wife later relocated to Austin, Texas, Gough now found a new job to be near his daughter.

"Videoconferencing really helped us stay closer," said Gough. "But it still can't replace seeing my daughter and getting a hug."

Like many men, he is getting remarried and may start a new family.

As Stephanie Coontz, the Director of Research and Public Education at the Council on Contemporary Families, observes, men have for more than 150 years tended to think of the responsibility of kids as a package deal. When the relationship split up, they'd walk away and start new families. "But we're seeing a growing number of men separating from their wives but not their children," she said.

Do you have any doubt that recent divorced dads including Dylan McDermott, Robin Williams, Russell Simmons or Guy Ritchie won't enjoy time with their kids? All have said how much it means to them.

Still, it can be very painful for ex-wives to see that their families are living lives without them - especially when spouses repartner. However, in time, this divorce therapist has seen many women realize that a break from 24/7 parenting can benefit everyone. And love is far more elastic and flexible than we think.

(This story will also be discussed on CBS' "Early Show")

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