



An Essay: Decency Should Matter

Decency is a descriptive word that I have recently found myself using to capture the essence of several of my dads who are not seeing their children on a regular, predictable schedule.

This is not by their choice!

As the founder and executive director of Kids & Dad Shared Support (a non-profit dedicated to ensuring that every child has both of their parents involved in their daily life), I struggle for the words that will move individuals (policy makers) who need to be moved to make a difference for these dads, children and families.

When I offer up the word decency, I do so because I know that children gain when they are loved, supported and surrounded by parents and significant others who can be described in such a way. When a child is missing such a parent from their life there is a serious failure.

Research tells us that 50% of children from separated families will lose a close relationship with their dad within 2-3 years of the family breakdown. These dads are all unique with attributes very often different from each other... and yet decent men and dads who have their own form of decency to offer as lifelong gifts to their child.

In the past I have often written about my personal story and the good fortune that I had at different times to arrive at a position that sees me with a remarkably close relationship with each of my three children. I would like to think that being a decent man/father made the difference. I could then package all the different 'decent man' formulas and provide a road map for every dad and child to arrive at that place together.

Unfortunately, I and every other dad who has somehow stumbled across the abyss to my current place know that this was not the case. They understand that their positive outcome was only a small part about decency; the reality is that other 'forces' of support, family circumstances, economics, their own strength or background, luck and most importantly the mom's commitment to shared parenting were of greater significance.

So these are the observations from someone who has made it to the other side successfully, luckily. They are also the observations of a son who lost his mom and dad prematurely (grandparents to his three children) to the ravages of the process because no one could get control of what was taking place. Their deaths were part of the continuing invisible (except to their loved ones) carnage of the current system.

By the way, they were decent, loving and supportive parents and grandparents.

A couple of weeks ago a lawyer lectured 'kindly' to one of my dads that not everything in life is always fair. He meant it as sound advice. You know that 'get on with your life' philosophy that we gratuitously offer up to others. My friend had asked his aid to help him to see his child by intervening with mom on his behalf (the lawyer represented mom).

The lawyer's response failed any test to make a difference for this family.

My friend is a decent man and father who has raised his son alone, without support of any kind. He worked overtime for years to rebuild his financial stability and to meet all his financial obligations. He obeys the rules, he is energetic, hard working, generous and up beat. He is remarkably resilient and steadfast in his efforts to reach out to his daughter.

He is a decent man and father. Any child would be proud to call him dad. He needs no lecture about life being unfair. He lives every day with an emptiness caused by his missing child and yet he presses on.

Another dad is someone who I see less and less now. He has moved a couple of hours away to pursue his chosen profession. I am so proud of his accomplishments. He was a young dad and his relationship did not survive the turmoil of the couple's youthfulness and their families

He placed his trust in a legal system that would work for his child to ensure that both parent's were involved in the child's early years. If he made a mistake it was a straightforward one-namely - he didn't push hard enough at every stage of the legal process. He had lawyers who were incompetent and faced a mother and family who were intransigent.

This young man is exceptionally smart, talented, serious, thoughtful, generous and caring. He is a decent son, man and would be as a dad. He has rarely seen his daughter in 5 years. He awaits the next step in the process. His child would be blessed to have their dad in their life.

Another of my dads is from a more difficult and yet not unusual situation. He was overwhelmed by a separation that uprooted his life and challenged his values about marriage and family. He met the irresistible force of family law and his belief that fairness would prevail. It was almost too much for him. He fled to survive, leaving behind his share of the family's financial resources. He lives constantly with a permanent ache and emptiness for his missing kids and wonders often about what he is working for or going to? These are not unusual questions for middle age dads going through a separation often not of their choosing.

He has not seen his kids in 5 years.

This dad is a unique individual, intelligent, well read, quick witted with a wicked sense of humor; he is thoughtful and like many separated dads has become so aware of what is meaningful to him. I am so proud of him for simply finding the will and courage to get up every morning and to survive. The truth is that he was always a decent man; but today he is even more so. His children would have their lives enriched forever by having their dad's decency in their daily lives.

These are simply three of the many stories of decent men and dads experiencing the ultimate cost of a failed intimate relationship - a severed relationship with their children.

The strange aspect of all this is that nowhere can we find this to be the desired outcome of Canadian Family Law. To be truthful there isn't even a condition that decent parents must raise children. I have set the bar that high just to demonstrate how the system has failed separated families, all members of separated families. If Kids & Dad, a small non-profit in Waterloo Region has numerous such cases, what does it tell us about the numbers across this province and country (30,000 children every year lose a close relationship with their dad)?

The research is clear and our common sense tells us that the findings are correct. Children are more likely to have positive outcomes and become happy, resilient and responsible young adults when they are raised with

involved, supportive and loving parents in their daily lives, whatever their family form; children are more likely to struggle when they are missing such a parent and they are left trying to cope with a sense of abandonment, often for a lifetime.

I can't expect every one to live with my passion for separated families. My family suffered through it and the consequences that will always leave us scarred. I do think though that I should be able to expect that each of us with children should have the imagination to know what the pain and loss would be for a parent and their children if they were missing from each other's life.

A caring society doesn't accept a shrug and gratuitous words to 'move on' as a response to injustice.

I have been blessed for the past several years to be friends to so many decent parents and grandparents. I offer the following words of a son, father and a Canadian soldier. He went through a separation a decade ago and he has seen his children only a handful of times. I know him only through his parents and his words to his child on their birthday.

He wrote:

"I remember on this day when you were born. Daddy cried. I was so happy to be given a baby. Put your hand to your chest and you will feel me there. Every beat of your heart is my loving you."

Dad

Too many separated dads and their children have been denied the opportunity to share the joys, tears and ecstatic moments of their child mastering their first two wheeler, scoring a first goal, earning a platinum ribbon at dance, going on a first date, reaching the honour roll, overcoming a disability or knowing that they are loved forever.

These separated dads understand that many of those magical moments are lost; but what they want and their children need and deserve is the opportunity to create and share the moments still to come, for a lifetime.

Our decency as a community and society is now being tested!

Kids 'n' Dad services families in the Waterloo Region. Its goal is to ensure that children from a separated family have two parents co-operating and actively supporting them as they develop and mature into adulthood.

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