



Going Down The Wrong Road Again Or How FRO Just Doesn't Get It

Kitchener, ON - October 2008 - The secret is out, the grand initiative launched by Premier McGuinty's Liberal government to make dramatic inroads in collecting family support payments is a dismal failure. The posting of the pictures on the Internet has apparently resulted in finding 10 individuals since the very public launch of Good Parents Pay.com over the past 18 months.

Community and Social Services Minister Madeleine Meilleur acknowledged that compliance in fact has decreased by 1% and that the dollar value of arrears has also increased. The Minister's response was to downplay the statistics as simply a 'variation' and that other efficiencies have been introduced to the operation of the Family Responsibility Office (FRO) leading to greater 'customer satisfaction'.

What is more disturbing than the outcome was the attitude in the Minister's response to the Toronto Star that 'there were always arrears, and I guess there will always be arrears'.

When the Good Parents Pay site (posting pictures, personal info including aliases) was introduced, what was frightening was not the Government's worthy target to get support payments to the appropriate parents; it was their belief that more deterrents, more penalties and more humiliation would make a difference.

The government listened to and was politically inclined to perceive that the problem is about 'bad dads'. Dads make 95-97% of payments to mothers thus it is logical that it is predominantly fathers in arrears. Unfortunately the Government failed to recognize that research in the United States found that non-custodial mothers were more likely to be in arrears than non-custodial fathers. Does this mean that non-custodial mothers are the problem and care less about their children than dads? Of course not!

This is critically important; the problem of arrears is not about gender, it is about many other factors including the quality of the continuing relationship that a non-custodial parent has with their children following a family breakdown.

Kids & Dad has a close up, on the ground experience with 250-300 dads over the past two years. Our clients often have few financial resources and earn at best incomes between \$ 20-30,000. At the time of separation the family often has debts greater than their assets. Their children's mother often earns less than dad.

All our dads wish to support their children financially according to the guidelines and then some. But the ability to pay is important. In Waterloo Region this is especially appropriate with the continuing loss of many better paying industrial jobs. In the Record, the United Way kick off identified the hit taken by manufacturing and those workers now looking at seriously reduced incomes.

If these families have separated or go through a separation, many of these dads will be in arrears and suffer the indignity of being called a 'deadbeat dad'.

A typical dad's income following a job loss could be half or less. In order to get relief a payer will have to go to Family Court to change an order. His children's mother will often oppose the change (she needs the money) and the legal fees (\$2000-5000) for a family with debts mount. It will likely take several months to get to court and the arrears grow and he becomes a 'deadbeat' parent.

Research in Canada has found that separated dads are particularly prone to depression related to separation and divorce. To this is added the loss of a job, severely reduced income and increasing debt. While this happens, this dad is trying to grow his relationship as a dad with only part time parenting time and a former partner who is disinterested in his problems.

Many of these dads are experiencing what is known at Kids & Dad as the triple whammy; namely feeling that they are a failure as an intimate partner, as a father and as a provider. To this is added the public perception, aided and abetted by politicians of all political stripes that child support is about enforcement and bad parents.

The true challenges facing politicians and our community are two fold; namely, how do we ensure that children from separated families have the necessary supports in their life; how do we help parents help themselves to a quality life, whatever their family form?

Our work with separated dads has led to a conclusion that they love their children as deeply as mothers love their children. If that premise is correct the key to supporting children and improving quality of life rests not in penalties, humiliations and false assertions but in supporting families to achieve positive outcomes.

Long-term father involvement begins with regular parenting immediately upon separation. It requires that both parents be involved in sharing parenting decisions about their children for two involved parents leads to more resources for the child.

Most importantly research provides evidence that the greater the involvement of a father in their child's life the greater likelihood the child will grow into a happy, resilient and responsible young adult.

The Family Responsibility Office is a necessary instrument to do the easy stuff (that money in, money out thing); unfortunately it has proven itself incapable of handling complicated cases. FRO don't believe in a caseworker model, open communication or Regional offices for customer service. The FRO mantra is essentially to tell clients with little or no money and a fear of the courts: Hire a lawyer and GO TO COURT TO CHANGE THE ORDER!

If the money squandered on Good Parents Pay.com had gone to research the complexities of arrears, the direction of future solutions would be evident.

Researchers would have found:

- * That unemployment was a significant factor in arrears;
- * That a severe drop in income was a factor in arrears;
- * That situational depression or chronic depression were factors;
- * That the debts related to the couple's separation left a financial burden that were factors in arrears;
- * That legal fees and a Family Court system that is often out of touch and overworked are a factor in arrears;
- * That some dads who are not seeing their child are in arrears;
- * That many dads are living in poverty and have made care choices for their children when they have them and this is a factor in arrears;
- * That there are a few dads who are unfortunately indifferent and they are in arrears.

So Minister and Premier, Good Parents Do More Than Pay Money!

They are involved in the daily life of their children. So that dad who is recently laid off and is now in arrears is hardly a deadbeat as he goes to the food bank for his children, plays games with/and takes his daughter and son to feed the animals at Waterloo Park.

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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