



## **Kids & Dad Shared Support**

### **A New Vision for Our Community- Family Renewal Project**

#### **Background**

Kids & Dad Shared Support is now into our fifth year of serving the community of Waterloo Region. Our mission is to ensure that children have the love and daily support of both of their parents following a family breakdown.

As the founder of Kids & Dad (KND), I returned 5 years ago from a Walk to the Ontario Legislature and Parliament Hill designed to improve understanding of the obstacles and damage inflicted on too many separated families. At the Walk's conclusion, I decided that my skills could best serve our community by helping families, one at a time, and setting out a model that could possibly have a broader reach and impact.

My early connection with KW Counselling through the Men's Network provided education and insight into the non-profit world and the programs within the myriad of community agencies. I founded Kids 'n' Dad Shared Support and set out to fulfill our mission to help families and to create a new, more supportive paradigm.

Kids & Dad received start up funding from United Way and KW Community Foundation. I was pleased with our early success and viewed it as an acknowledgement for what we were doing at KND.

Over the years additional financial support came from Trillium, Wallenstein Feed Charitable Foundation, individual donors and various fundraising events. But it has been a difficult path to build financial sustainability. The Trillium Grant required a Business Plan to be completed mid-way. This was significant because it forced KND to reflect upon and to develop a long-term strategy.

#### **The Challenge and the Vision**

Out of the need to create a long-term strategy emerged a bold vision, namely,

**To build a community framework of services that all members of separating and changed families could/would access sooner than too late in the 'crisis of their family's lifetime.'**

KND initiated negotiations with a major, community social service agency. The vision was endorsed, an implementation plan was developed and limited, new, start up financing was found.

Negotiations took place over a year, but in the end they were unsuccessful.

Although the parties agreed that the vision for one-stop access to comprehensive services was needed and long overdue for families in transition, in the end, the parties were unable to finalize a strategic relationship.

Two disappointing concerns emerged from these negotiations and the eventual breakdown from our agency's perspective.

1. A perception that at least some in KW's social service community view KND as a 'fathers rights' organization.
2. That the culture within many community agencies lacks the necessary sensitivity to the needs of separated fathers and the impact on their children and extended families.

For the sake of implementing the vision of this project it is vital to respond to these issues.

KND's client base is wide ranging and includes:

- a) Separated fathers, statistically 50% will become fade away dads to their children without community support.
- b) Separated mothers who want to ensure that their children have an involved dad in their lives; mothers who have become a non-custodial parent.
- c) Grandparents who are forgotten victims of their child's separation.
- d) Extended families who are caught in the turmoil of their family struggling to support each other.
- e) "Subsequent" families- new intimate partnerships and the children of this new family who are considered second best children within the current framework.
- f) Employers who must deal with the aftermath of a parent in crisis in their employ.

In truth, children from both genders and all ages- toddlers to adults- are also our clients. It is through our work with all of the above that KND supports these children to develop into resilient, responsible and happy adults connected closely to their parents and families for a lifetime. When KND is successful children continue to have both sides of their family to love them and support them... for a lifetime.

This mini sketch is included only to correct the twin, mistaken perceptions that KND is a fathers' only organization and that dads live in isolation from all of the 'rest of us'.

Let's be clear, what happens to separated dads has a dramatic impact, positively or negatively, on their loved ones and our community.

The 'KND approach' is based on the best practices suggested from mental health professionals including well-respected researchers and authors such as Judith Wallerstein, Barbara Colorosso and Isolina Ricci.

During KND's existence we have attempted to educate the community through regular articles in the Record and other communication forums. Our approach has always been based on 'best practices', yet it appears some continue to view KND through the lens of gender, i.e., that it represents only the needs of fathers.

KND has always rejected radical advocacy found in many separated fathers' organizations. KND also rejects that same kind of advocacy too often found in the opponents of a two-parent approach for separating and changed families.

**The danger of either of these forms of advocacy is that they prefer gender supremacy to gender equality.**

I return to KND's mission:

**To ensure that every child has both parents positively involved in their daily life, whatever their family form.**

## **Challenges, Changes Needed, New Directions**

**So what is this vision thing?** There is no end to supportive materials for the vision being offered in this document. Most will be saved for a later presentation but I will offer just a few salient facts in order to recognize the scope of the project and the urgency to take action now.

Separating and Changed Families:

- 40%-50% of families end in separation and 60%+ of second relationship families (called subsequent families) end in separation.
- 50% of the children of separated families lose meaningful contact with their father within 3 years of separation. This has obvious consequences for grandparents and other extended family members.
- 28% of Canadian children live without their fathers in their lives.
- Separated women are 3.5 times more likely to suffer from depression than women in an intact relationship.
- Separated men are 6 times more likely to suffer from depression than men in an intact relationship, and experience significant suicide rates.
- Depression often leads to short/long-term disability, unemployment and increased medical costs or uncared for medical needs.
- Separated mothers suffer from lower incomes, education and work experience limitations. These factors contribute to the cycle of poverty.

- Mothers raising their child without the father's positive involvement in the child's life often become overburdened by life. This leads to negative outcomes for mother and child..
- Children from separated families are 3 times more likely to need mental health services than children from intact families.
- Children from separated families are more likely to experience a number of school related negative outcomes.
- High incidence of family violence and child abuse occurs for the *FIRST TIME* in the early stages of separating. Our approach will make dramatic inroads into this statistic.

Many mental health professionals have stated the desired outcomes for separating parents and their children. I offer the following list by Barbara Coloroso from Parenting Through Crisis -

**Kids need to hear over and over again that:**

- They still have a family.
- They will have two homes, one with mom and one with dad.
- Both parents will always love them and take care of them.
- The kids did not cause the divorce. This is an adult problem. They will not be left in the dark about any decision that will affect them. Their feelings will be acknowledged and considered. However, the adults will make the decisions, based on the children's best interests.
- They will never be asked to choose one parent over the other, to act as a messenger or as a spy.
- They will not be treated as another piece of property to be fought for, bargained over, or seized.
- They will have the financial support of both families.

**KND is committed to these outcomes for children and parents!**

In order to successfully generate these outcomes the following changes are required, based on our experiences with separating families. They are stated frankly because there is no other 'social crisis' that fits the phrase 'the fierce urgency of now'.

The basis for our vision/approach is straightforward and based on the following premise.

**Caring and knowledgeable social work professionals can best support the needs of separating and changed families as they deal with the on-going challenges of their family's renewal.**

In order to be part of the solution, our community agencies need to recognize the following flaws or gaps in services.

Research informs us that the fade away dad must be part of the solution. KND's suggests the following necessary changes:

- The current mindset that sees most family programs as essentially for mothers and children must change. **A determined two-parent strategy must be put in place and reach out to non-custodial parents (usually dads) from separating and changed families.**
- Social workers and major community funders must be educated about separated dads. Agencies must recognize the culture that may exist within many of their organizations that is comfortable with mothers and ill at ease with fathers.
- Changing the notion that a separated father who is afflicted with a disease (e.g. depression, addiction, ALS) is incapable of being a loving dad; or equally disturbing of being loved by his child and therefore must be excluded from his children's lives.
- The frequent exclusion of separated fathers from conversations about their children's welfare in education and medical contexts in different community reviews.
- The community denial that Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) prevention requires a two-gender approach; and research informs us that **partner violence and parental child abuse occurs most frequently in intimate relationships for the first time following a family breakdown. (Kruk 2009)**

**Our community must move from a social service system that marginalizes fathers to a solution based service system that values the unique contributions of both parents.**

**Our community cannot allow gender stereotypes and comfortable paradigms to get in the way of lifelong family solutions.**