

Fatherhood is for life, not just marriage

By Barry Lillie

Father's Day 2008, another year, another Sunday in June to celebrate the unique relationship between a father and child. As fathers ready themselves to enjoy the family events of the day, many dads and children are left dealing with sadness, loss and sense of abandonment as life has interrupted this key, lifelong relationship

This year is the 10th anniversary of an all-party parliamentary report For the Sake of the Children. This report was an exhaustive study on child access, separation and divorce and focused on modernizing Canada's family law and to ensure every child's right to have both parents in their life. The report was really about "fatherlessness" and its recommendations were a road map to ensure engaged fathering for every child, in every family form. Unfortunately, the politicians and special interests of that day abandoned the report's recommendations and principles for the comfort of a failed status quo.

Ten years later, research provides evidence that 50 per cent of children from separated families lose an involved relationship with their dad within three years of a family separation. The research also suggests 25 to 30 per cent of Canadian children are raised entirely without their father in their life. This means that in a decade 300,000-plus Canadian children, along with their dads and grandparents, have suffered the fate of distant, remote or lost relationships. The dads of these children are the same as every other dad; they were in the delivery room; they were part of their child's first breaths, first words, first steps, first crisis and first recovery.

In fact, Canadian dads fare well in most measurements of their involvement. They consider being dad to be their top priority and desire even more family time with their children.

Every dad remembers vividly the moment he became a father. For this writer it was a visit to Family and Children's Services to adopt my son. Our caseworker placed him in my arms and he was my son at that moment. A remarkable experience. A similar joyful, ecstatic moment is shared by all fathers and remains so whatever their family arrangement.

So what about those 300,000 children? What about the crisis of fatherless children? How is it explainable with all those magical beginnings?

A few years ago, a separated dad from our support group said he felt “marginalized” as a parent. He had been valued seemingly for his parenting skills, love and character in the intact family, but he seemed to be needed now only for his support payments. He was angry at a stereotype of separated dads being disinterested parents, deadbeats, perpetrators of domestic violence or child abuse. This ran counter to his personal story and the history of the fathers around him.

For every single mom there is a single dad yet Statistics Canada designates most separated dads as single male households. It is a paradox that these fathers wake up every morning with an ache in their heart and emptiness in their soul, thinking about their children. They live often in a world of poverty, debt and bankruptcy. They are penalized for all of these outcomes as they struggle to maintain or rebuild their life and to be a good parent to their children. A caring society may be measured by the resources it directs toward helping solve social problems. It is also a measurement of the pecking order of social concerns or consciousness. Separated dads are almost invisible.

A recent Canadian study on separation, divorce and depression revealed separated dads suffer alarming and disproportional rates of depression. The main reasons are the lack of a support system outside the intact family and that they are living separately from their children. These dads often become the missing dad of the 300,000 as they are left to survive what is the crisis of their lifetime.

On this Father’s Day consider as parents what connects us. It is our love for our children and our desire to support them to become healthy, responsible, joyful and resilient young adults. The evidence strongly asserts that a separation threatens the opportunity for a dad to be that continuing presence and force in their child’s life.

Father’s Day is a day of many personal emotions. Even at my current maturity I think of my grandfather and father and their gift of love and their belief in me. I give thanks for my children and that we made it through the darkness to the light, together. I give thanks for the gift of the fathers I meet and work with every day, the fathers of the 300,000. They remember every day that magic moment when their child was placed in their arms and the lifelong commitment to their child was sealed. They understand that their child needs them more than ever following a family breakdown.

The question is whether our society gets it before there are another 300,000 children suffering from our indifference. They are not a single male household; they are dad . . . for a lifetime!

Barry Lillie is executive director of Kids & Dad and a father of three children as well as grandfather to one.