

What's a Guy to Do? (Part One)

by John Spiesman, Ed.D., LSW

Here it is the first of the New Year -- 2007 already -- you can't believe where the time has gone! You have been married seven years, and have the two best children anyone could possibly have.

But as this New Year starts, you find your marriage in ruins. Where has the time gone, you ask yourself, and how have things gotten to this point? So many times, we find ourselves in what we feel is a 'losing battle.' It appears that the courts are many times on the side of the child's mother. We have no rights, other than the right to provide food, clothing, shelter, educational expenses, medical expenses, not to mention spousal support to boot! How does a dad survive under these conditions, especially when he is being alienated from his children because the marriage arrangement did not work out?

First, we must remind ourselves, Dads, that our parental role in our children's lives is as vital as the mother's role. While the world may not quite see it yet, we can be nurturing, supportive, understanding, and kind as parents -- just like Mom would do. This is supported by the research of Dr. David Popenoe (as cited in Wilcox, 2006, paragraph 1) who states, "Fathers are far more than just 'second adults' in the home. Involved fathers bring positive benefits to their children that no other person is as likely to bring."

Wilcox (2006) goes on to state that there is a connection between fathers and child outcomes including cognitive ability, achievement in the educational arena, social behavior and psychological well-being (paragraph 2). This definitely supports not only a father's right to be involved with a child's life, but the need for the father to be and stay involved with his children throughout their lives.

One of the important influences that a father can have on a child is through his relationship with the child's mother. Remember Dads, your children are watching you! This means that they are learning from you how to interact with other people -- and especially boys with the women in their lives. Therefore, a non-violent, personable relationship with your ex-spouse is always best -- although this may take some work. You are definitely up to it!

Never, never, never abandon your child under any circumstances! It is never better for you to 'just disappear' from a child's life. Your children need you!

In terms of your ability to 'navigate the system,' you must be proactive. This means that you must surround yourself with people who can and will give you good advice (and that YOU will listen to!). On your team should be an attorney who believes that fatherhood is important, and believes that the research on fatherhood is true. You are the boss here. Interview the attorney to find out if he/she believes in your rights and importance as a father, and is willing to STOP AT NOTHING to make sure your rights and importance is not minimized in ANY way.

As soon as you feel that the attorney is not believing in your rights or importance, you are probably correct. You should NEVER settle for 'taking what you can get' or for 'every other weekend and one day per week' if you feel that you deserve more. You DO deserve more. And YOU have to be the one to demand more. I know that this can be emotionally draining -- that is why I recommend that you surround yourself with a top notch support team! So make sure the attorney is REALLY on your side from the

beginning. Check his/her track record in terms of custody issues and support issues. Make your expectations clear from the onset: You ARE a good father, and your children NEED you in their lives.

Another key person on your team will be your personal counselor. I know that this is difficult for us to swallow as men, but in such high-stakes cases we definitely need an objective person (not connected to the case) who will tell us when we are off base, AND keep us focused on what we need to attend to. Again, get some referrals by talking to people. Look on the internet for people experienced with parental alienation and men's issues. These are the people we need to give us the emotional support to face any possible situation that can occur and to help us plan how to deal with the situation.

I have spent many hours with Dads experiencing the possibility of accepting a minimal role in their children's lives. Their minds have become cloudy at times throughout the process. Many have been accused of things that none of us can or want to even imagine. This is very difficult to face alone (and don't forget, our families are VERY biased!) Find an objective, supportive, caring counselor, and MAKE and KEEP regular appointments.

In addition to a good attorney and counselor, I strongly suggest a competent child care provider become a member of the team. Family is great, but I also recommend that an objective 'outsider' be added to the team to provide you with the insight and knowledge into the things that you might miss about your child's journey through this maze of family restructuring. Again, seek referrals from your other team members, from the school personnel, as well as from others you know and trust. A competent child care provider will definitely help you learn much about your child's feelings and needs that you may miss in the midst of all the other things that have occurred in your journey.

Above all, keep in mind that YOU are an integral part of the process here. Without your health (mental and physical) you will be unable to both navigate the system, and be the father that you want and need to be. I strongly recommend that you also focus on YOU. Keep the work routine as normal as possible. Work on homework after school with the kids. And if you do not currently have custody of the kids, CHECK daily on the school day with the kids. Call and ask how things went, what homework there is, and how you can help with it. Keep a dinner routine. Eat regularly and healthily. Go to the gym for some good cardio exercise, a key element in stress management. Keeping this routine will help you to not fixate on how bad the situation is, which can lead to you becoming depressed. YOU need to take control of this -- with the support of a GOOD team! YOU have the power to do it -- because YOU are a GREAT Father!

Keep the Faith! And, as always, do not hesitate to contact me for support!

Email me at: spiesmanmcmanus@aol.com