

NONRESIDENTIAL PARENTS: THE FORGOTTEN PARTNERS IN CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

The revised Western Australian Education Act (1999), places great importance on partnerships between schools and parents. Changes to Commonwealth Family Law, enacted in 1996 in other states and enacted in 1998 in W.A., ushered in reforms aimed at increasing the involvement of both parents in children's lives following parental separation and divorce. This study investigated the school involvement of nonresidential parents, bearing in mind the changing context of Family Law, and the revisions to the Education Act in W.A. Two hundred and twenty one nonresidential parents completed a questionnaire on school involvement (78% from W.A. and 22% from other states). The study employed a purposive sampling strategy, thus the participants were a self-selecting or volunteer sample. The aim being to deliberately target nonresidential parents who believed school involvement to be important to them, in order to investigate how nonresidential parents rated themselves on a number of issues related to involvement in their children's schooling.

The majority of the nonresidential parents surveyed (79% of the total sample), rated themselves as either "not involved" or "very little" involved in their children's schooling. Ninety percent were not satisfied with their current level of involvement and 91% wanted increased involvement. Less than half receive school reports. The nonresidential parents in this study overwhelmingly wanted increased school involvement. Ninety five percent rated school involvement as "very" to "extremely important." Moreover, they clearly identified the areas they wished for increased involvement: Firstly, nonresidential parents emphatically stressed the importance they place upon the classroom teacher, in that 82% wanted increased contact with their children's class teacher. Secondly, 85% wanted to receive communication from school (reports, newsletters, notice of forthcoming events), and 75% wanted to be able to help their children with homework and projects. Clearly, this is an untapped resource for schools to draw upon to benefit children's academic progress. However, when nonresidential parents do not know of special activities, receive reports or news of projects, there is little they can do to assist their children, or support the school.

Intended or not, there appears to be a widespread "culture of exclusion" towards nonresidential parents' involvement in their children's schooling. Thus, while school communities and educational authorities embrace and encourage "partnerships with parents," there seems little doubt that nonresidential parents are the forgotten partners in children's education.

There is a clear need for the Minister to make a clarifying statement through the public media and educational channels that

nonresidential parents are a valued partner in the educational community, and to dispel widespread concerns that nonresidential parents are excluded from involvement in their children's schooling. There appears to be a lack of awareness of the Department's updated policies on Family Law in this area and the Minister needs to bring awareness of the new policies to the wider public and school communities. Additional recommendations to increase nonresidential parents' school involvement, such as schools maintaining databases of nonresidential parents' contact addresses, are listed in the preliminary report.

The 'forgotten' parents

By PAUL MURRAY

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http://www.sundaytimes.news.com.au/common/story_page/0,7034,5096657%255E15470,00.html

Father One: "The information I receive from my ex-wife regarding my children's education is limited to 'they're doing fine', when in fact the report cards continually indicate otherwise.

When I ask the school for some clarification of where my child is having difficulties and what they feel could be done to improve the situation, they persistently avoid returning my emails and phone calls."

Father Two: "It seems that the schools, the government, are geared towards the mother. Even after requests I have not received any notice of functions, school outings or requests to assist. I feel I am only good for paying. Even when kids get sick at school I never hear about it; only mothers seem to get notified."

IT'S been pretty clear for some time that we are living in an era of rapid social change.

This makes it even more remarkable that many of our social institutions seem so disinclined - or just bureaucratically unable - to keep up.

Divorce is one of the social epidemics of the past 30 years - better called relationship breakdown because de facto relationships probably are disintegrating at something like the rate of marriages.

Around half of all marriages fail. Children are involved in about half of those splits.

While governments bust a gut to keep up with changes in the economy or technology, this social revolution - and its victims

- seems to have got away from them in some important areas, one of them being the education of the children from split families.

The quotations from two fathers at the head of this column come from new research done in WA by school psychologist Ron Baker, of Curtin University.

His study is about the role of those who used to be called non-custodial parents in the education of their children.

Since changes were made to the Family Law Act in WA in 1998, these parents are now called "non-residential" parents. Until then, custodial parents had control over the day-to-day affairs of their children, including their education. Non-custodial parents had no role without express consent.

The changes did away with the idea of "ownership" of the welfare of the children through custody. It was an attempt to bring about equal and shared responsibilities between both parents.

"The default position is that it is now irrelevant to schools which parent has residence," Mr Baker said. "Schools should be treating both parents equally."

But, he added, the changes had been a failure.

"There appears be real confusion and lack of awareness of the Department of Education's new policies for non-residential parents among school personnel and little evidence to suggest increased involvement for non-residential parents," he said.

"There is a clear need for the Minister of Education to reinforce the new policies of partnerships with all parents and dispel the widespread concern that non-residential parents are excluded from involvement in their children's schooling."

The research survey of 221 non-residential parents revealed that 91 per cent want increased involvement in their children's schooling.

About 79 per cent feel they are excluded from their children's education, 82 per cent want increased contact with their classroom teacher and 85 per cent want to receive things such as reports, newsletters and notices of coming school-related events.

Professor Patrick Parkinson, from the University of Sydney's law faculty, says we are now moving into a time of profound change in handling the consequences of relationship breakdown.

In a recent paper to an Australian Institute of Family Studies seminar, he described what he called the three epochs of family law.

The first was a 500-year period based on the indissolubility of marriage flowing from the teachings of Jesus Christ. The second embraced the free dissolubility of marriage. That had lasted only 30 years, since a consensus about divorce began to emerge in Western countries in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Now, Professor Parkinson said, we were entering the third epoch - and going through real labour pains.

"We are slowly coming to recognise," he said, "that divorce can only mark a change in the relationship of most couples, not its end, and that a society which takes children's well-being seriously must do what it can to create the conditions in which children's well-being is least harmed by their parents' separation.

"Part of the struggle we are experiencing in modern family law (and which is sometimes framed in the language of gender conflict) is between two conflicting visions of what divorce means for parents. "On the one hand, people are holding on to the promise of post-divorce autonomy and the chance for a fresh start. On the other, we are having to deal with the consequences of the parents' connectedness through their children."

In the main, non-residential parents are men. But 14 per cent of the people in Mr Baker's study were women. And his survey found they faced the same problems as males in dealing with schools.

That, he says, suggests that this is not a gender issue, but a clear failure of the institutions.

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