EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

FATHERS AND PARENTING

SUBMISSION FROM TONY BROWN

In response to your call for fathers experience of shared parenting, I would very much like to share my experiences with you with in the main have been horrendous.

I was forced to take legal action in order to first establish contact and to get my parental rights. The whole affair has taken some 7 years and cost me my home in legal fees and all the while all I have tried to do is establish contact, which thankfully I did manage to do along with gaining my parental rights.

The problems I faced are to numerous to mention here, but I was up against an uncaring and unfair legal system that is of benefit only to solicitors and those in the legal profession.

Following your guide points, here are my comments.

1) Provision of services - in my case there seem to be none and I was let down very badly. The whole process is geared to only allow people with funds to benefit and solicitors are the stumbling block for many fathers and children.

2) Societal attitudes towards lone fathers - On this I found that society and the courts see fathers as some form of social leper if they do not have contact with their child. It is seen that if a child is not with its father, then it has to be the fathers fault. When you enter the court system and appear in front of elderly male sheriffs, they question your very capability of being a father by the very fact that you are in court in front of them in first place. Mothers on the other hand are always seen as the caring parent with no share of any blame in a breakdown. Society nearly always sees fathers who are separated from their children as having either a violent problem, a drug problem or the father was the one to walk away and abandon the child and therefore it's the father at fault. The attitude is backed up in the media and goes all the way to the top, I was once forced to write to the Prime minster David Cameron after I read an article of his in the Sunday papers when he wrote on mothers day, an appalling one sided view about absent fathers which did huge damage to good caring fathers who are simply absent because they are often let down by an appalling and uncaring legal and social system and by mothers who use the system to suit themselves.

To his credit and my surprise, the Prime Minster wrote back to me quite quickly and amongst other things said that he would pass on my comments and position to the Scottish Justice Minster so he could follow up and get back to me direct. Well that was 2 years ago and the Scottish Justice Minster and his office have ignored me, so its no wonder that fathers and children are not cared for by
society when those at the top don’t care.

3) the issues around parental responsibilities - are that they are not defined enough and in the main pointless if a mother wishes to ignore them. What’s more regardless if a father has his rights or not, the mother is always seen as the responsible career while the father has to prove him self.

Points you asked us to consider.

1) Daily challenges - this is such an open question and there could, and should be many answers, but in the main there is a strong feeling of helpless and having no where to go for help. If you question the care of your child over the mother, all you are seen as doing is trying to get at the mother rather than trying to help the child, and if you ask a solicitor to help, they charge so much money, that it becomes impossible to do anything, so the child suffers. I did care but I had to sell my house to pay the legal fees, because a father will never be awarded costs against a mother. It’s often said that the only people who benefit are the solicitors. At the outset I was advised by solicitors to make a crave for costs, but I was never advised that it was pointless.

2) Challenges for work and family - Again this an open question because it depends on your situation, for me my challenges were hard because I am mixed race and felt that I had to battle race issues with both family and society, why on earth would a legal system care about the views of a mixed race person from a poor background.

3) Challenges for finance and access - Again this an open question because it depends on your situation, for me my challenges are the travel distances and while I didn’t make the distance an issue, others did which certainly caused huge problems financial implications.

4) Public access - I have no opinion on this as I never had any problems regarding access to public facilities.

5) Thoughts on public perception and general awareness of the issue - The public basically see all absent fathers as irresponsible, and by the very fact that they are absent the public lay all the blame on fathers. Absent fathers are regarded as violent, aggressive uncaring and not interested in the child, and this view is largely backed up in the media and by the courts. Society can’t accept mothers being the ones to blame for family issues, its beyond the thought process for most people to consider that many mothers see their child as a possession and after a split will do anything they can to keep the child to them selves no matter what damage is caused to the child, and sadly solicitors go along with what their clients demands, rather than the child needs. Society views are not helped by groups such as Fathers for Justice because some of these groups are seen as radical crack pots and the media portray them in that way, when you do get worthy caring groups that support fathers, such as Families Needs
Fathers, they are simply ignored and don't get the help and government support they deserve.

I was brought up in a London children's home where I lived from birth until I left to joined the army at the age of 16. During my time in the home the best people that looked after me where the so called normal people i.e. the non professional daily house mothers and the house cleaners. The worst people charged to look after us, were the so called specialists, the social workers and those who had studied child care at university. The best people too care and make judgments for a child's care is not just so specialist, but those with life's experiences and a reasoned judgment, after all there are no university courses on fathering or mothering. Sheriffs / Judges, solicitors, social workers, MSP etc do not have a monopoly on wisdom when it comes to parenting, after all they will be parents them self's, are they governed by a second group of specialist when they find them selves in the position as us mere mortal fathers when we are separated from our children?

In the main it’s a sad indictment that you have to have a committee asking fathers questions as put. Caring for a child by father or mother is for most a natural emotion that can not readily be governed by committee meetings that will no doubt be of no great benefit to the child, cost many millions of pounds to consider and take many years to conclude or implement. It’s also fair to say that if in this day and age governments still don't understand a fathers role or position in child care, then what real hope is there for all our children.

Tony Brown
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