



The Case for Shared Parenting in Social Policy

By Families Need Fathers

Shared parenting is the right of children to the full and free involvement of both their parents in their lives, whether they live together or not, unless there are contrary reasons. The parenting arrangements should reflect the needs, wishes and practicalities in each family. What should be sought is the best blend of both parents rather than polarising them into 'caring' and 'absent' parents. Both parents should be involved in both child care and in earning. Both parents should be given equal status in law, treatment by public and private agencies and be equally respected by 'society'. The children should see their roles as comparable and be able to be close or very close to both. The parenting arrangements should enable both parents to be fully involved in all aspects of the children's lives – for example schooling – and the children should be aware of the lives of both their parents 'in the round'.

This will have the following benefits:

To the children

- A majority of children want to see more of their 'other parent' than they are allowed.
- They will not be distressed by the breaking of loving bonds formed before family division.
- They will have a wider range of stimuli and activities.
- They will know that they are still loved and cared for by both parents; their need for an identity and for self-esteem will be better met.
- They will be safer and better looked after. Child care is a delight in moderation, a cause of tension and possible loss of control if the demands are excessive, especially in adverse circumstance.
- They are less likely to be in poverty, as both parents will be able to earn better.
- They will have better and more balanced role models in their lives.

- They will be less likely to have stereotypes of the 'proper' roles of men and women.

To the mothers

- The largest proportion of mothers now seek a balance between family responsibilities, paid work, and other activities.
- They will have some relief from childcare.
- They will be more prosperous as able to earn better; the long term damage to their career and earning prospects will be less.
- Because better able to make pension contributions, they will suffer less poverty in old age.
- There will be less tension between the need to earn and to ensure the proper care of the children.

To the fathers

- The number of career dominated men is falling; the majority of fathers now want a work/family balance
- A clear majority of fathers want more time with their children than they are currently allowed
- They will be able to share in the emotionally richest part of life
- The distress caused by exclusion from the lives of their children will be less

To 'society'

- An appalling amount of distress and damage is currently imposed on children and parents
- A huge potential supply of high quality, loving childcare is allowed to run to waste
- Children both of whose parents stay involved do better on every indicator, physical and mental health, educational and economic performance, chance of 'getting into trouble', becoming pregnant or getting others pregnant too young, having happier and more stable relationships, being better parents themselves.
- Social problems associated with children and young people not having had enough parental involvement will fall.
- Child poverty, and all the damage resulting from it, will fall as a result of 'lone parents' being able to earn more.
- There will be more gender equality.

To the Government

- Social security costs will fall as fewer 'lone parents' will be in need as a result of improved earnings.
- The social costs resulting from insufficient and unbalanced parental involvement with the lives of children and young people will fall.

- There will be less need for a CSA/C-MEC as parental incomes and costs will be more equal.
- There will be less tension between two policy objectives – promoting paid employment and more and better parenting.
- There will be less litigation.
- There will be less need for subsidised childcare.

To political parties

- The parents unable to see their children as much as they would like are all voters; they may be 1.5 million. To some this dominates their lives.
- Those children who are prevented from seeing one of their parents as much as they would like will all become voters. They may become one fifth of the electorate.
- Policy based on the current wish to see a better work/family balance accords with the values of a majority of the electorate.

Is there a downside?

- Some men may feel their role is to provide for and control their family, and that childcare is for women. These attitudes are in free fall.
- Some groups see shared parenting as an imposition on the rights of mothers to control the lives of their children. There are powerful lobbies to whom mothers in dispute with fathers can turn, but they represent a small minority 'in the community'
- There is belief in some quarters, now refuted by psychologists, that children do best with one full time carer
- There is a belief, in some quarters, that allowing men to take care of children exposes mothers and children to the risk of violence and abuse. There must be precautions and protection where there is a need. The view that this affects the mass of divided families, or that fathers are especially dangerous, is based on prejudice not evidence.

A key fact: The Equal Opportunities Commission Gender Index, published in July 2007, reported that in families studied fathers spent 2 hours 16 minutes per day looking after their children and mothers 2 hours 32 minutes. With few exceptions, court orders still give residence of the children to one parent and allow them a visit (readily stopped) once a fortnight to the other.

The discrepancy is clear, and needs radical redress.

John Baker, FNF Chair