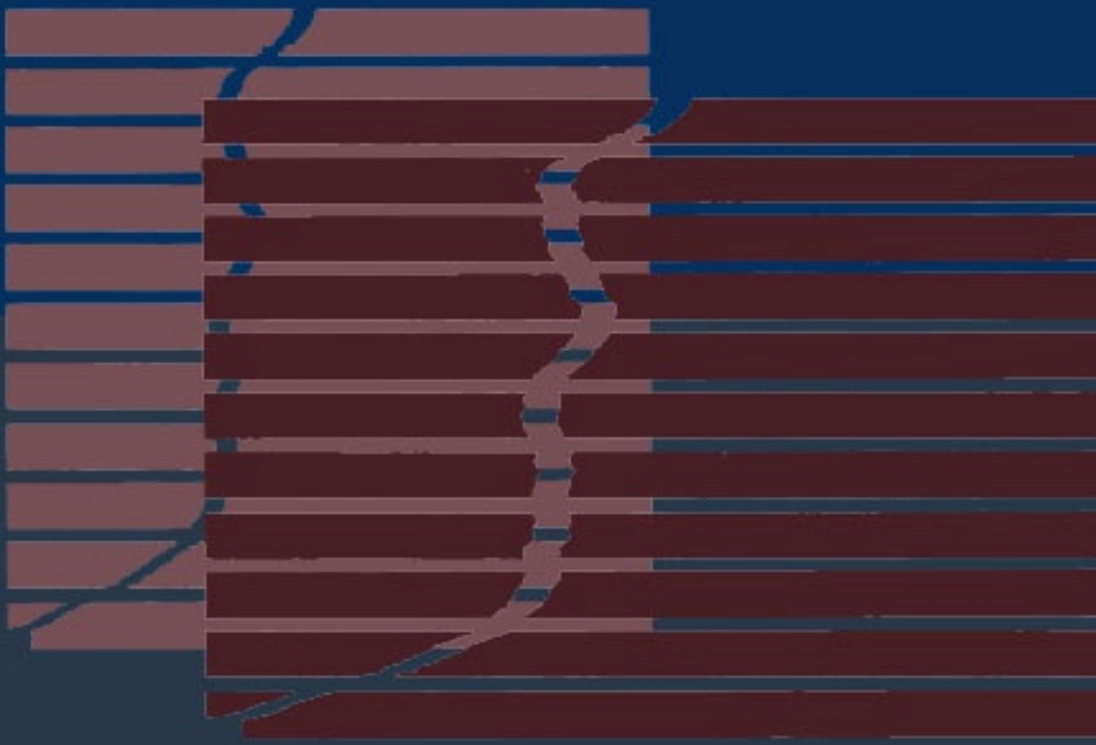
Counseling Single Fathers



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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

From *Handbook of Counseling and Psychotherapy with Men* by Murray Scher, Mark Stevens, Glenn Good, Gregg A. Eichenfield

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Divorce has become a common phenomenon in our society. According to the report of the Bureau of the Census (1983a; 1983b) about 13.7 million children were living with one parent. This is two-thirds more than the number of children living with a single parent in 1970. About 10%—over 1 million—of these children live with their father.

The increase in single fathers' custody is a result of changing trends in the law. During the era of Roman supremacy and the Middle Ages, men owned the children and therefore had the rights to them (Foster & Freed, 1978; Roman & Haddad, 1978; Vail, 1979). The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw women becoming more prominent in the caretaking role and the invention of "maternal instinct" took place (Roman & Haddad, 1978; Vail, 1979). By the early 1900s custody was generally awarded to the. mother, particularly for those children of "tender years" (Foster & Freed, 1978; Roman & Haddad, 1978; Vail, 1979; Woody, 1978). Today a custody battle is on in many cases. With the "best interests of the child" as the basic criteria (Child Custody Act, 1970), more men are trying for and receiving custody of minor children through the courts (Orthner, Brown & Ferguson, 1976).

Main areas of concern of single fathers center on having adequate support systems, having enough information in various areas, loneliness, and developing coping skills for unfamiliar situations. The role associated with being a single father is sometimes confusing. "When I go to a party," as one aptly put, "I don't know whether to go to the kitchen and trade recipes and kid stories with the women or go to the living room and talk football with the men!" Services and support are available in most communities through support groups, churches, community agencies, private sources, and friends.

Theoretical and Philosophical Bases for Intervention

Adjustment to divorce is a process. It is developmental in nature, going through several stages before there is disentanglement from the former partner. One analogy used by Bruce Fisher (1981) in

his book *Rebuilding* is that of a pyramid made up of building blocks. The first layer of blocks includes very basic issues such as acknowledging the divorce, adjusting to being alone, coping with the guilt and rejection associated with divorce, grieving the loss of the ex-partner, and dealing with the anger that accompanies a separation. These are some powerful feelings that need to be confronted before going on to the next stage. In the next stage each person works toward getting on with life: letting go of the old relationship, enhancing one's own self-concept, making new friendships as well as developing old ones, and leaving many of the difficulties and pitfalls of past relationships behind. Once this point has been reached, new healthier love relationships can develop leaving one with mutual feelings of trust, responsibility, and freedom. Fisher's idea is to work toward self-fulfillment so that a relationship is developed because one feels good enough about oneself to want the relationship to enhance growth, not because it is needed to exist.

Personal growth through this process of adjustment comes from various sources. Building skills in unfamiliar areas such as cooking, household chores, child-rearing matters, child care, and dating are crucial. Without these skills or the money to pay for them, life can be difficult indeed. Sharing information with others is also a source of growth. In support groups for custodial fathers that we conducted, a great deal of the learning and growth came through the experiences of other members of the group. Each individual sharing his own methods and experiences gave others ideas on how to proceed in different or complementary ways (Tedder, Libbee, & Scherman, 1981; Tedder, Scherman, & Sheridan, 1984).

Most communities have resources available to aid in this process of adjustment and learning. Therapy groups dealing with personal issues are available as well as support groups centering around specific issues. Groups for single parents are growing in number. These groups involve speakers on various topics such as spiritual development, practical skills development, and social activities. Not only are the adult needs addressed by community resources, but those of the children are acknowledged as well. Resources range from child development specialists and child-care facilities to recreational activities through local recreational departments and family Ys. The available resources are often plentiful, but the effort to locate them and the time to utilize them are sometimes problems.

A readily available source of potential growth is in the self-help area. Books abound to give insights and suggestions. These are available at odd hours of the day and night, which may fit a schedule when

nothing else will. Some available self-help books include *Rebuilding* (Fisher, 1981), *Fathers Without* Partners (Rosenthal & Keshet, 1981), *Creative Divorce (*Krantzler, 1973), and *The Single Father's Handbook* (Gatley & Koulack, 1979). In addition to reading material, discussions about the material are frequently important to check out perceptions and clarify information and feelings. Directions in which to move can also be identified and implemented.

SPECIFIC NEEDS OF SINGLE FATHERS

Both custodial and noncustodial fathers are extremely concerned with whether their children were affected by the divorce and in what way. In order to know what their children should be doing according to their age, many fathers turn to reading child psychology books describing child development. They want to know the physical, social, and intellectual development of children. In addition, they are concerned with the short-and long-term effects of divorce, and what they as parents can do to help their children cope with this crisis period. What and how to explain to the children is another source of apprehension. Often fathers will ask about books they can read or things they can do in order to educate themselves in this area (Bertin, 1981; Gasser & Taylor, 1976).

Children respond emotionally to the divorce, and some fathers have difficulties finding ways to deal with these responses. Many fathers complain that their children do not want to talk with them about their feelings; therefore, they are unsure how their children feel (Tedder et al., 1984).

Some fathers experience guilt feelings about their children being deprived of one parent and try to compensate by being extra nice, permissive, and attentive to them. Others feel that the children are the source of all their problems and they are very hostile toward them. Maintaining an objective perspective of the situation is a difficult task.

Relationships between custodial fathers and noncustodial mothers are often difficult. For the benefit of the children, it is important to keep a relationship with the mother even though some would prefer to terminate the contact completely. Concerns that might appear here are: "What do I do when my child refuses to see his/ her mother who insists on exercising her visitation rights?"" My child wants to live with his/her mother." Some mothers break promises, do not arrive on time to pick up their children

or come to visit when it was not agreed upon. Other noncustodial parents play the Santa Claus role and do not exert any discipline when children are visiting. All these instances have ramifications on the children's behavior and expectations.

Immediately following divorce the single custodial father faces severe stress. Work that had been accomplished by two people and took a lot of planning and energy is to be done by only one parent. In addition, this parent is also experiencing a high degree of stress that is not only emotional but sometimes financial; he is raising questions about whether the lifestyle enjoyed during the marriage can continue. Coping with these difficulties might raise questions in the single custodial father's mind about his capabilities for facing and solving all of the problems and continuing, at the same time, to function effectively (Bartz & Witcher, 1978; Mendes, 1979).

In the social domain the new single custodial father faces some problems, too. Most of the social contacts were family contacts that involved an intact family. Suddenly, the single custodial father is either no longer invited to these functions or, when invited, he might feel left out. Even more stressful is the occasion when both the custodial and noncustodial parents are invited to the same function by common friends without being told that their ex-spouse had also been invited (Gasser & Taylor, 1976).

The single custodial father suddenly faces the question of what is acceptable behavior: "Could I go out and visit a friend when my son wants me to go bowling tonight?" "Could I bring home a date when my children are still awake?" "Can a date spend the night in my apartment?" "Should I allow a date to criticize the behavior of my children when it has nothing to do with her?"

The divorce leaves a single custodial father cognitively confused: "Where do I get all the knowledge necessary to manage the house, raise my children and take care of my personal needs?" "Do I take care of my personal needs or my children's needs first?" "How do I deal with all the well-intentioned advice and interference from friends and relatives?"" How do I explain to the children all of the changes that have occurred lately in the family status?" In order to cope with this cognitive confusion, the single custodial father needs support and knowledge so that the task does not become overwhelming.

Questions about oneself appear as a problem only some time after the divorce. This occurs on the average about a year following divorce. The reason for this delay is simple: Immediately after separation

the single custodial parent has to cope with pressing problems that need immediate attention and has little time seriously to explore identity and personal characteristics. Concerns of dealing with loneliness and stress are the first emotional concerns the individual has to face. Then appear questions such as, "What am I now that I am no longer a husband?" Later questions to appear in this area are questions of personality, such as "What did I do wrong?" "Do I need to change some of my behaviors or perceptions in order to be more effective in a meaningful relationship?" "What could I do to avoid similar problems in the future?"

Single custodial fathers are very concerned with questions related to dating, remarriage, and their legal ramifications. Some of the questions these men raise are how to deal with children's resistance or encouragement to date. To what extent should children be allowed to interfere and what might happen legally if their personal status changes? It is common knowledge that most of the "motions to modify" custody arrangements are filed in court when a change in the personal status of the custodial parent occurs.

Noncustodial fathers are expected to provide financial and child support. They find themselves burdened with financial obligations when their involvement and input in the everyday life of their children is minimal. Usually they have to leave their household taking very little with them. They, too, go through the process of emotional and social disentanglement but with a higher degree of loneliness since the children are not in the home. In addition, they have to fight the popular image of a carefree, newly freed man setting up a "bachelor pad" from which to launch an exciting new social life. These facts coupled with an absence of services for noncustodial fathers is a great source of stress without the appropriate support systems.

Description of Components Included in Individual and Group Intervention

Fathers adopt different lifestyles in order to cope with the new family structure created by the divorce. They experience a variety of concerns relating to themselves and relating to their children. They also develop a personal style in interacting with their children. Therefore, it is important to take all these factors into consideration when developing an intervention plan or raising the awareness of coping strategies with fathers. Five areas of work with parents have been identified: how to help the parent

himself, how to help the child emotionally, how to explain to the child what has happened (the cognitive aspects), how to help the parent benefit from simple therapeutic and intervention strategies, and how to deal with dating and remarriage.

HOW TO HELP THE PARENT

Immediately following divorce, some parents may be so involved with their own problems that they neglect to see the needs of the child. The quicker and more effectively these parents are helped to deal with their own problems the better it will be for the children.

In support groups that we have offered (Tedder et al., 1981, 1984) emphasis has been on the dissemination of knowledge. Parents were not aware of all the community agencies available to them. Lists were compiled of local agencies dealing with day-care centers, mental health facilities, medical institutions, legal aid sources, and agencies who work with school problems and recreation. Pertinent information was included for each agency. Many parents were not aware of the variety and number of services available in the community and found them very useful. Among professional people, it seemed that pediatricians and social workers working with the courts were the most helpful in making themselves available for consultation.

In groups additional cognitive information may be given to parents in the form of bibliographic references for themselves and for their children. In the selection of books, the emphasis is placed on applied material and not on highly theoretical books. In addition, handouts on the expected behavior of children in the physical, social, and intellectual areas, as well as reactions of children to divorce at different age levels, may be helpful. Parents may feel the need for this information to decide whether their children are developing as might be expected.

Visitation with the noncustodial parent and the arrangements associated with it sometimes caused pain and problems. Most parents prefer a formal visitation arrangement that prevents surprises and minimizes contact with the ex-spouse. Several guidelines that could help make visitation easier and smoother are the following:

- The children should be ready on time, having all their needs packed. Don't pick that time to

clarify things with the ex-spouse.

- Noncustodial parents should be given rights and responsibilities in raising the children.
- What happened during the visit is the business of the child and the noncustodial parent.
- Be tolerant when the child is showered with presents and entertainment.
- Inform the ex-spouse about developments that need attention.
- Do not make departure or return from a visit unpleasant.

HOW TO HELP THE CHILD EMOTIONALLY

It is very important for the parents to understand the emotional impact that the divorce has had on the children (Olds, 1980). The children have gone through some important changes that they might want to explore. They might select very odd times to talk about these changes, such as two minutes before the father planned to leave for a meeting, or when they are being put to bed and he is looking forward to having some time for himself. A child willing to talk should be listened to immediately if at all possible. If this is not possible, select a mutually acceptable time, making sure that as the parent, one follows through and spends this time talking with the child. This creates a feeling of openness and frank communication between the custodial parent and the child.

On the other hand, we find that some children completely avoid the subject. Feelings about the divorce are never mentioned. Parents might feel relieved when this is the case. But it does not mean that the child is not preoccupied with thoughts related to the divorce. Parents should encourage children to talk about it. One father felt that his daughter (age 14) could not communicate with him and therefore left in her room a note mentioning that he noticed his daughter was in low spirits and invited her to discuss this in any mode she preferred. To his surprise, the father found a note in the morning after his daughter had left for school asking him to listen to the enclosed tape, which described in detail some of her fears and feelings. This girl preferred not to interact directly, and for a period of time, the communication between the two continued in this way. With younger children stuffed animals, dolls, play activities, and drawings helped to open discussion on the subject.

If the parent feels unable to discuss matters with the child because of his emotional state or any other reason, it is advisable to identify a person who can serve in this role, for example, a relative, a friend, a teacher, a counselor, or a neighbor. It is important to create the environment and opportunities for the child to discuss his or her feelings.

An additional feeling with which the child is concerned is guilt. Children might remember when they were mad at the parent who left and wished she would go, or the time when they went to the zoo and Dad bought something that Mom had said not to buy and afterward they quarreled. The child might be sure that these were reasons that caused the divorce and therefore feel guilty. By explaining to the child that sometimes people stop being friends, accompanied with appropriate explanations, the child may be helped to stop seeing himself or herself as the cause for the divorce.

Finally, parents might have to deal with the anger or sadness of their children—anger because "I am different," "I cannot spend as much money as before," and sadness because "I don't get to see my other parent as much as I would like." In all these cases, these feelings should be discussed and dealt with. The parent should either assume the active role and initiate discussion or provide opportunities for the child to discuss feelings by spending time and doing things with the child.

HOW AND WHAT TO EXPLAIN TO THE CHILD (THE COGNITIVE ASPECT)

It is no secret that a large number of parents avoid telling their children about the impending divorce. Single

parents find it hard to explain why they live in a single-parent home. The younger the child, the higher the frequency of avoiding the subject with the rationale "I will wait until he/she asks," or "Why upset the child now?" Some say, "We will wait until the child grows up and then tell him/her." Among clinicians, such as Gardner (1970) and Grollman (1975), the message is clear: Tell the children about the divorce. This should be done by both parents at the same time and to all the children involved. Children should understand what is happening so that no unrealistic expectations are developed. Of course, the language used during the explanation should match the intellectual development of the children. When the parents find it hard to discuss the divorce themselves, a third party, close to the

children, should discuss it with them.

Once children are told about the divorce they might have several concerns. One question young children ask is "Are you going to stop being my Mommy? " It is important to make sure that children understand that the parents continue to remain their parents. Children need to know in detail the arrangements that have been worked out for the future. In the case that there are difficulties in working out these arrangements, parents could say, "We both love you very much. We are not sure what is the best for you and, therefore, we asked the judge to help us in making the decision."

Sometimes separation occurs when the child is very young. At some point in the future the child might be curious about the other parent. "How did my Mom look?" "What type of things did she like to do?" Forster and Stenhouse (1980) suggest several ideas: Talk about the ex-partner, tell about things done together and keep souvenirs such as photos, letters, and cards that make memories vivid. Children can keep in touch with friends and relatives of the noncustodial parent or encourage and arrange for direct contact.

Visitation arrangements should also be clearly described: how children are going to be picked up, how long they will visit, and how the children are going to be returned. Children should be made aware of these details. Some flexibility, however, should be allowed to account for moods and unexpected events.

An area frequently neglected in explanations to the child is the legal one. "How come one day you go to the court and, suddenly, you are not married anymore?" Parents of children interested in this area are encouraged to explain the law to children and, if they feel they are not knowledgeable enough, their attorney should be able to answer some of the children's questions. Parents can take their children to the court where they can explain the functions of the court. This is an area where parents should carefully attempt to assess whether there is a need for knowledge and try to answer this need as best they can.

Children are also interested in the effects of divorce on their daily lives. "Will I still be able to take violin lessons?" "Will we go on vacation this summer?" Older children may ask, "Will I still be able to go to college?" These questions require detailed answers so that children are clear in what ways their everyday functioning and future plans are going to be affected by the divorce.

HOW TO HELP THE FATHER BENEFIT FROM SIMPLE THERAPEUTIC AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

The approach taken when working with custodial fathers depends on the therapeutic issues. If the main issues are those associated with single fathering, the most common approach is a cognitive-behavioral one.

One might have the feeling that the children are suffering enough and therefore a permissive attitude toward the child should prevail. Fathers may think that this attitude shows understanding for the needs of the child. The contrary is true. Now, when the child is in a state of confusion, there is a need for a structured environment that will stabilize the child's daily life. Understanding does not mean allowing the child to do everything. Children need to know that there is somebody who loves them so much that he will stop them from doing things that are harmful to themselves (Forster & Stenhouse, 1980).

In this search for stabilizing routine activities, it is important to keep, as much as possible, the same social, physical, and recreational lifestyle as existed in the past. Living in the same school district will enable the child to maintain the same friends and continue with past recreational activities.

A child of the same gender as the noncustodial parent ought not to assume so many responsibilities that most of the child's time is taken up by them. There is a need to find some balance between things the child does around the house and things that are done for himself or herself. Placing a chart in the kitchen or living room that is filled in by the child but that the father is instructed to read every day might facilitate solving this problem.

At the end of the week both the father and the child look over the daily activities and discuss whether it allows enough time for the child to do personal things. Another activity recommended to fathers is to have a box entitled, "I wish I had time to do." Every evening before going to bed, the child is encouraged to think about one thing he or she would have liked to have had time to do. At the end of the week the father and child discuss ways to find the time to do preferred activities.

Children might work very hard to bring the parents back together. This might take the form of inviting the noncustodial parent to school activities without telling the custodial parent, actively to

initiate contact for an activity with the other parent and asking the parent at home to make the arrangements. Children should be told repeatedly that parents are not planning to get back together. When the children realize that there is no chance of succeeding in this task, they might proceed to find the parent an ideal mate, such as a teacher, and make sure their parent spends time with this potential mate. Sometimes they invite this person to have coffee or plan a class committee meeting at home. Again, it is important to talk with children and make one's position clear. The explanation should be stern but not degrading.

In most cases with which we have dealt, there was a very close relationship between the children and the custodial fathers. Most of the problems that existed between them were either caused because of lack of communication or because the father was not aware that a problem existed. As soon as that awareness was reached, a solution to the problem followed very soon.

HOW TO DEAL WITH DATING AND REMARRIAGE

It is important to realize that dating is threatening to children because it is destroying the hope that their parents are going to get together again. Therefore, children might use any available way to interfere. Young children might sit between the date and the parent and continuously ask questions so that the adults cannot talk. Others might ask embarrassing questions the first time they meet the date such as, "Are you going to be my new mommy?" Older children might be embarrassed that their parents are doing things that only young people are supposed to do, such as going on dates and thinking about marriage. They might feel confused and rejected by their parent and angry or afraid of the new partner. Noncustodial parents, who are not married and are keeping constant contact with the children, might also encourage these attitudes in the children. Therefore, it is important to prepare the children and to create a trusting environment.

A father could begin by explaining to the children that he cared for the absent parent, but now that she is not around, he feels the need to meet and spend time with people his own age. Dating or spending time with other adults should not rock the regular routine of activities in which the children are engaged, and the relationship with the noncustodial parent should not be threatened by this new development. These precautions will reduce the resistance of the children to dating and, at the same

time, will increase the children's awareness of the finality of the divorce. Children should be assured that they are the most important thing in the parent's life. But at the same time, the children should not be allowed to completely control the parent's behavior.

Fathers raise the question of how soon after the divorce one should begin to date. Therapists should emphasize that on the one hand it would be inappropriate to do it too soon because the children need some time to grieve about the broken relationship and adjust behaviorally and cognitively to the new environment. On the other hand, if too much time passes, the children might settle into a new routine of the single-parent family and a change such as dating would be threatening.

Another question fathers might raise is how to deal with some of the problems you encounter when you begin dating again? Some children are very rude with visitors of the opposite sex: "I don't like you," "When will you go home?" The parent's first impulse is to send the child out of the room or to be authoritative and punitive. It might be more helpful to explain that not liking someone is no reason to be impolite. It is especially important to talk with the child and understand his or her reservations. Again, offer assurances that relationships with new adults will not affect the special tie with the child. At all times, parents should keep in mind that they themselves have needs, and in order to build a satisfying relationship with their children, these needs should be satisfied.

Children might not like the looks of the father's new friend. Their concern is that their father is going to change his style in order to adapt to the new partner. Keeping values and behavior constant will cause these concerns to disappear with the passing of time. Some dates can annoy children by taking the role of an "educator" as soon as they enter the home. Children will resent this attitude and ask, "What gives you the right to tell me what to do when I don't even know you?" Some fathers feel caught in the middle. Fathers should be assured that the date, if sensitive, should understand the children's reactions. If this understanding does not happen, the fathers can gently request that criticism or advice the date has about the children should be funneled through them. If the date is offended, this might indicate future problems and the relationship might be reconsidered.

Fathers might report that some children miss the absent parent so much that they immediately become close friends with everyone that they date. The child might suffer from continuous "losses" of

adults when these adults disappear. It raises questions about the way adults behave and about the wisdom of getting involved in a relationship. In these instances we would recommend the children be kept out of this process unless things are serious.

Another area where questions arise is entering into sexual relationships as a single father. Should children be fully aware of the parent's sexual activities or should it be a complete secret? Between these two extremes there are many possibilities. Sex in an intact family is generally private. Therefore, sexual behavior of a single parent should also be private. Young children might ask questions such as, "Did she sleep with you in the same bed last night?" Older children might use the parent's behavior as a model. One father realized the effect of his behavior only when his adolescent son brought his girlfriend home one weekend and announced that she was remaining to sleep in his room.

Finally, fathers ask how to deal with the question: "Dad, are you getting married?" Children should be reassured that they will be the first to know if and when it will be considered.

Future Trends

As illustrated in the introduction, child custody has gone through various periods when either fathers or mothers almost exclusively received custody. Today the trend is still for the mother to receive custody. However, with the new laws emphasizing the best interests of the child, more men are vying for and receiving custody—if not full custody at least joint custody with shared responsibility. Part of this change is a recognition of the fact that parenting and nurturing are key issues in raising children, not stereotypic ideas of mothering or fathering. Both males and females have these parenting and nurturing instincts and abilities. In 1977 the American Psychological Association approved a resolution supporting this idea, stating that men should not be discriminated against in child custody as well as other child-related issues based on their sex. This statement supports the idea that mothers and fathers can make equally good parents (Salk, 1977).

Another dimension that is beginning to be explored and utilized in divorce is mediation (Haynes, 1981). This entails the partners meeting with a mediator to make property settlements and custody decisions in a less adversarial and more rational and peaceful way. Mediation involves attention to the

emotional aspect of the divorce as well as the practical aspects with the interests of both parties being protected by a neutral person. In resolving conflict in this way, relations are often better between former partners, which can evolve into cooperative parenting for the children.

The public awareness and acceptance of fathers as custodial parents has had an impact on more fathers seeking and receiving custody. This has resulted in a need for new and/or modified information and services to facilitate coping with this population. This also involves the awareness of special issues with which single fathers have to deal. In this chapter, we have attempted to give some theoretical perspectives as well as some practical interventions that work with this special population.

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