

Re-engaging separated fathers with their children after contact has broken down

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Abstract

This paper explores how separated fathers, who may have limited or no contact with their children, can be understood from a non-deficit perspective (Fleming 2002; Hawkins & Dollahite 1997; King 2000, 2001, 2005; King, Sweeney & Fletcher 2004). It describes how the generative fathering framework is used as a model to assist separated fathers to rebuild their connection with their children. The paper also examines parent/child contact time from a child focused perspective.

What motivates fathers to disengage from their children?

After separation, some fathers disengage from their children and have little involvement or contact time in their lives. Australian research indicates that 26% of children have contact with their fathers less than once per year (Smyth 2005) and 4% of children rarely or never see their non-resident parent (typically their father) (Smyth, 2004). Reasons for this may include issues or allegations involving child protection, domestic violence, and conflict with the mother of their children or issues about how the father copes with the legal and social issues surrounding the separation (Kruk 1993). In this paper, 'limited contact' refers to a significant reduction in the time a father spends with his children. The authors acknowledge that the terms used in the article for resident and non-resident parents have changed in 2007 to the 'parent that the child lives with' and the 'parent that the child spends time with' (Barry 2007).

This paper builds on Kruk's research in 1993 and explores current practice issues in working with separated fathers. It explores the male experience associated with post-separation disengagement and how re-engagement can be fostered. This exploration is based on the authors' experiences of working in a large Fathers' Centre in NSW that specialises in working with separated fathers. An outcome of this paper will be better responses and improved communication (Smyth 2004) to use when talking to and supporting fathers in reconnecting with their children when they have little or no contact time.

After family separation occurs, children benefit from some level of involvement with both parents as long as an unacceptable risk to the child does not exist. Over the past decade, there has been a steady increase in separated fathers being more involved with contact or care of their children. Parkinson and Smyth (2003) (cited in Smyth 2004) found that 75% of non-resident fathers would like to have more contact with their children. The hope that non-resident fathers might have more contact with their children was also supported by 40% of resident mothers (Smyth 2004). This social change is demonstrated by the number of men obtaining support from Mensline Australia, with 461,177 phone calls received between September 2001 and November 2006, 85% of them being made by men (Mensline Australia 2006), as well as through the high level of involvement in the Men and Family Relationship Programs throughout Australia (King 2005; van Ryke 2004).

After family separation occurs, non-resident parents' contact with children will vary as the children change and grow (Smyth 2005). It is not uncommon for these parents to feel disengaged from their children. Disengagement can involve an active or unconscious decision by a parent to have minimal involvement physically or emotionally with their children. They might disengage due to:

- increased geographic distance between them and their children
- increased economic demands
- new family responsibilities
- their inability to deal with their own anger or the mother's anger
- feeling it is in the best interests of the child/ren as they will be exposed to less conflict
- high to extreme level of father-child alienation.

What is clear from the literature (Hawkins & Dollahite 1997; Kruk 1993) is that the decision to limit contact with one's children is neither straightforward nor easy for men to make. Kruk (1993) interviewed 40 men about the reasons why they disengaged from their child/ren (p.72). Of the men who disengage from having contact with their children, Kruk (1993) found that 90% of these men disconnect due to the pain and frustration that arises when they have contact with their children (see Table 1).

Table 1

Reason men disengaged from contact with children	Percentage of men	Number of men
Contact difficulties	90%	(36)
Father's decision to cease contact	33%	(13)
Practical difficulties to making contact happen (distance, finances, shift work schedules)	28%	(11)
Child(ren) not wanting contact	18%	(7)
Legal orders prohibiting contact	16%	(6)
Early pattern of no contact (influencing future contact)	5%	(2)

Kruk (1993) argued that non-residential fathers' disengagement from their children should not be interpreted only as a lack of interest in their children, or the end result of previous difficult father-child relationships. Kruk stated that psychological factors related to fathers' unresolved grief and inability to adapt to child absence, role loss, and the constraints of the 'visiting' relationship, are significant factors in their disengagement. Kruk also posits that fathers' lack of help-seeking behaviour further intensifies the grief and increases the impact of the losses involved with the separation (i.e. loss of child relationship, partner relationship and increased job pressure).

Physical reasons

Relocation: Children in some cases may be immediately relocated by the mother to outside the city, state or even country where they resided prior to the separation. In Australia, at least one in four non-resident parents (mostly fathers) lives a significant distance (more than 500 kilometres) from their children (Smyth 2004). The amount of contact non-resident parents have with their children is strongly influenced by the

distance they live apart (Smyth, 2004). In recent times, many separated fathers have been much more proactive with seeking the assistance of the Court in returning the children to their usual place of residence until formal arrangements can be decided by the parents or the Court.

Reduced standard of living: Fathers may have to accept less than adequate accommodation that may not be suitable for their children. Some men are forced to live with friends, family of origin, in bed sits, backyard granny flats, etc.

Financial hardship: Some fathers report finding it difficult to cover the costs of contact with their children due to the demands of child support, legal fees and re-establishment costs after separation occurs. While women and children are more likely to experience financial hardship after separation/divorce, according to Smyth's 2004 study, a significant number of men are not in a strong economic position, particularly men living alone (Smyth 2004).

Adversarial nature of legal processes

Legal processes can exacerbate or create conflict: Direct communication between the parents may be minimal when communication is channelled through legal representatives. The non-compliance by either parent with agreements or Court Orders can lead to exasperation from a parent who may be unaware of the enforcement options available, or unable or unwilling to re-enter the legal process to gain compliance.

Fathers who are finding the separation process difficult benefit from accurate information which is understandable to them. Some fathers may feel a sense of betrayal by the system, and can have feelings expressed through statements such as 'where are my rights?' or 'the system is supporting her'. The key here is to work with the father's instinctive nature for protecting and supporting his children. When he is seen as confrontational or aggressive towards the mother, the safety he desires for his children is compromised. This is an important realisation for the father as he develops a child-focused solution approach where the safety of the child is essential. However, this may be limited in domestic violence situations where the father's desire is to control the mother's responses and actions.

The recent changes to the Family Law Amendment (Shared Parental Responsibility) Act and the establishment of 65 Family Relationship Centres (FRC) is part of a broader government strategy for improving outcomes and experiences arising from relationship breakdown in Australia (Altobelli 2006). They also provide vital opportunities for fathers who have interrupted contact with their children, to review those contact arrangements. At a recent NSW Men and Family Relationship Services Network Meeting, it was reported that, in their first 12 months of operation, local Family Relationship Centres found that there has been a high level of interest in their support services from fathers who had been separated for several years and have minimal contact with their children.

Psychological factors

Grieving process: There is a direct connection between the intensity of the pre-separation father-child relationship and the outcome of the grieving process for non-resident fathers. Fathers with strong emotional attachment to their children before separation and divorce are more likely to experience the post-separation period as traumatic and are more likely to withdraw from parenting for a period of time. Often child disengagement relates to the level of pain experienced by the non-resident parent (Kruk 1993). This was also found to be the case in Killeen and Lehmann's (2004) study, during which one father said:

'Just not having daily input, not having the daily physical contact ... is hard'.

Mark filled with emotion, commented: 'It's very important ... he ah ... he's the first thing I think of probably ... of a morning ...' (referring to his five-year-old son) (Killeen & Lehmann 2004, p. 15).

When separation occurs in families with young children, there is little time for the development of father-child involvement. This may cause an alarming sense of deprivation and exclusion from the child's life. Many fathers in this situation become anxious that the child will not know or remember them (Family Planning Association 1998).

Child absence: Child absence produces a significant difference in fathers' perception of their functioning as a parent post-separation. Feeling devalued as parents, previously highly involved and attached fathers described themselves as being lost, having no structure in their lives, and generally anxious, helpless, and depressed (Kruk 1993). The fathers may have spoken to few people about their feelings and the importance they attach to their fathering role. The crisis of separation can provide the first opportunity for this to be expressed.

The child's safety: The authors have observed (through their work in a large Fathers' Centre in Western Sydney) that many men have concerns about how they can protect their children and maintain their safety when they are no longer living with them. They become anxious when another man lives with the mother and the children. In some cases when another man is involved, this is seen as a direct threat to their role, bringing feelings of identity displacement and embarrassment.

To deal with this, fathers need to recognise it is in his children's best interests for him to accept the new relationship. The expression 'the nearby guy' may be useful as it emphasises the relationship with the child, rather than 'the boyfriend' which focuses on the new adult relationship. The healthy development of all children relies on their easy access to connections with positive male role models. While 'the nearby guy' may not replace the biological father, he provides fathering responsibilities (Smyth 2004). When the father views and accepts their partner's new relationship from the child's viewpoint, they reduce the chance that their child will feel disloyal to their father if they accept this new man/partner in their family's life.

Role loss: Child absence is accompanied by role loss unless fathers can value the new and ongoing role they play in the children's lives. After separation, fathers can lose the identity and status they traditionally associated with being a 'dad'.

Alternatively, fathers need to acknowledge that post separation fathering is not about reclaiming the role, which still exists. However, the circumstances have changed, so the role would benefit from being restructured to suit the current needs of the children. However, there is no denying the fact that he is still the children's father, and this must be affirmed by significant people in his life.

The 'visiting' relationship: Disengaged fathers often view themselves as 'visiting' fathers, rather than full-time carers of their child/ren for the time they spend with them. The constraint of the 'visiting' relationship is a significant component in the disengagement of those fathers who had an active role to play in their children's lives during the couple's relationship (Kruk 1993). This is demonstrated by one father in the Killeen and Lehmann study (2004, p. 15):

He lived in a caravan and felt this had an unfavourable effect on his contact, commenting: 'I feel inadequate because I'm not providing her with a room and that sort of stuff'.

Being child-focused is an important skill for all fathers to develop. The man who says, 'just give me my kids and I will be okay' is not on a child-focused path. Post-separation, a father benefits from being a much more competent parent, able to respond to the child's immediate needs. This is a challenge to which most men can rise, especially when they receive support from peers and workers. These fathers become valuable parents who are supportive and responsive to the child, providing a positive, non-pressured environment in which the children can relax and grow as themselves, rather than be exposed to high levels of conflict between parents.

Perceived effects of divorce on children: A primary factor associated with the disengagement of previously highly involved and attached fathers is their perception that their children are 'caught in the middle' of an ongoing conflict between the parents. They may, therefore, choose to wait until the child is older before they attempted to re-establish contact.

The issue of conflict is reduced when both parents actively use strategies to avoid or deal with conflict in a child-supportive way. It is important for the fathers to acknowledge that separation impacts on all members of the family, but that ongoing conflict can have longer lasting ramifications for the children.

Parental Alienation: There are many degrees of parental alienation imposed upon many children when separation occurs. It can be shown by a lack of acknowledgement or respect by one parent for the other, their family and/or other people having direct influence on the child. An example of this might be stating a negative view of the other parent with regard to their feelings for the child, such as when a mother says, 'Your father doesn't love you, he doesn't even like you, and he didn't even want you'.

Alienation may also occur when one parent seeks to convince the child that the other parent is a threat to the child or the family. While these statements may contain some truth, some positive regard for the other parent relates directly to the child's own view of themselves. It is recognised by the authors that it is important for fathers to acknowledge that mutual respect between the parents would enhance relationships with their children.

The generative fathering framework as a tool to rebuild engagement

The generative fathering framework (Fleming 2002) is a model for understanding the non-deficit approach to fathering. **Generative fathering** has been described as: ... fathering that meets the needs of children by working to create and maintain a developing valuable relationship with them (Hawkins & Dollahite 1997, p.18). Generative fathering is caring for someone external to you or supporting the development of the next generation.

Erikson (Erikson 1975) considered parenthood to be the primary developmental task of adulthood, which includes both the moral obligation to attend to the needs of the next generation and the recognition that caring for children is central to personal and societal well being.

The non-deficit perspective, an approach to understanding and working with fathers (King 2000, 2001, 2005; King, Sweeney & Fletcher 2004), suggests that most fathers are interested in family life and that their engagement with support services is influenced by a variety of relationship challenges. These challenges can impact in a phenomenon called '*generative chill*' that is discussed later in this article (King 2001).

The non-deficit assumptions recognise (Hawkins & Dollahite 1997; King 2000) that fathers have the desire and the ability to:

1. **Commit** – to provide physical and ongoing support and involvement with the child throughout his/her lifetime
2. **Choose** - to make day-to-day decisions for their children that meet each child's needs
3. **Care** - to attend to the important transitions in a child's life and to work to provide the optimal conditions that maximise their growth
4. **Change** - to adapt as children grow older and the father matures in his relationship with his children
5. **Create** – to provide resources for material well-being and the resolution of problems that allow opportunities for the development of emotional well being
6. **Connect** - to form lasting and healthy attachments with their children and other significant people. These attachments will change over time to meet their child's evolving needs
7. **Communicate** - to relate with children by sharing meaningfully with them, both verbally and non-verbally

Generative chill (Hawkins & Dollahite 1997) is a useful concept for understanding how fathers disengage from their children. The challenge is how men can rebuild this generative connection. Professionals and close family members may desire to help men deal with the pain of their family separation, but it is the father's timing alone that will ultimately dictate when he is open to rebuilding connection, engagement or reunion with his child.

Generative chill (Hawkins & Dollahite 1997) is described as the anxious awareness people experience arising from the threatened loss of the relationship with one's child. The reaction men have to family separation will be influenced by how they deal with this experience. When separation is managed well, generative chill is a motivation that creates a stronger father/child relationship. When separation is managed poorly, generative chill becomes depression, despair and disengagement.

The authors argue that the dominant social view of separated fathers contains images that reflect their absence, disinterest, abandonment, disengagement, non-involvement, and how they can be labelled 'Disneyland Dads'. As the contact parent, they are often viewed as playing a secondary and less important role.

Current research provides a different image which indicates that:

- fathers are generally important to their children's lives
- continued contact with their father after separation enhances children's adjustment
- fathers benefit from involvement with their children after separation
- fathers want to be involved with their children and to fulfil their responsibilities as a father (Hawkins & Dollahite 1997; Smyth 2004).

Men's behaviour often reflects the attitude that 'good fathering means good providing'. The responsibility of providing for the family's needs influences men's level of self esteem and the value they place on their family role. Hawkins and Dollahite's (1997) research shows that unemployment can prompt working-class men to question their value to the family. Current programs, such as *Being Connected* (CSA 2005), being trialled by the Child Support Agency throughout Australia, is assessing whether or not closer connections between fathers and their children positively impact on fathers' abilities to access employment. The research so far suggests that separated fathers are more involved and are more active contributors

of child support when they have a firm identity that is supported by other people around them.

In the USA, Bryan (1997) recognised that a father's unemployment and absence can result in problems of poverty, depression, violence and neglect for the mother and children left behind. Fathers, as represented in the wider community, generally undervalue how important their presence is to their children's schooling, gender identity, emotional stability, security and self confidence (Bryan 1997).

Valuing differences in roles

Women are less likely to evaluate good mothering according to how well they provide for their children financially, or what they do in maintaining their relationship with their partner (Hawkins & Dollahite 1997). Men, however, are more likely to evaluate their role in the family by using a limited range of criteria, for example, being the financial provider.

After separation occurs, fathers need to be able to define the new role they play in their children's lives. The use of educative groups for separated fathers aids the development of, and expression of new parenting roles. The new parenting role emphasises:

- that men can redefine their parenting relationship to highlight the unique opportunities that separated fathers experience
- the unique and valuable qualities men play in their children's lives with ongoing involvement
- that the father is also the vital link to the paternal family of the child.

This new role can be poorly developed when fathers enter into a new relationship too quickly. Redefinition and co-parenting issues may not be adequately addressed, so confusion and disengagement are more likely (Hawkins & Dollahite 1997). The new relationship may present a fresh start, even though it might conflict with a child-focused and child-supportive position. Acting as a block or defence for the father, it might interfere with the grieving process and reduce his ability to identify what impact the separation has had on himself and the child. This can result in a reduction of support for himself and towards his child, while relying on his new partner for relationship satisfaction.

Ways that men can deal with disengagement

The key for men to re-engage with their children is to recognise the significant pain involved in the disengagement process and redevelop the experience of *being-in-the-moment* (Smyth 2005) with their children. Bryan (1997) refers to this disengagement pain as a 'haunting' that occurs when men *themselves cut off from their children*. While a strong emphasis is placed on the responsibilities men have after family separation has occurred, the word 'responsibility' has a wider meaning. Responsibility means 'response-ability'. Until proven otherwise, men and women have the ability to respond from a deeper place in their heart that focuses on their relationship with the child (Bryan 1997). The recognition of the significance of the father-child relationship is the first step in nurturing positive responses.

The authors have found that most disengaged fathers hope that they will be able to regain the relationship connection with their children. Bryan (1996, p.19) states, 'until he is able to do that, no matter how a man may try to deny it, he is divided'. Often after a period of disengagement, the possibility of reconnecting with their child/ren arises. Sometimes this emerges as a result of the men being around other people's children; they develop a deeper urge to reconnect with their own children.

To counter the men's belief that their children are better off if they have less involvement in their life, it is important for disengaged fathers to realise that their children may share many of the same feelings. When the initial attempt to reconnect occurs, both the father and the children can share similar feelings. They both have a fantasy about the reunion after not seeing each other for a significant period of time as well as a sense of loss and bewilderment about the separation and a possible wish for a workable route back into each other's life (Bryan 1997).

The reconnection of fathers with their children should always focus on the safety and well being of the child. Neither the mother nor the father should be with their children if their behaviour is in any way detrimental to the child.

Through the operation of the Fathers' Support Service in Western Sydney, the authors have observed that fathers experience this 'haunting' (Bryan 1997) when reminded of their children. When men are asked if they have children, they may respond in a less than positive manner, such as, 'Well you might say that, I don't get to see them'. This will be the end of a dialogue started with positive intention, and will most likely not be revisited. Fathers would benefit if guided to a more positive response, such as 'Yes, I have two great kids and they live with their mum'. Similarly, 'haunting' (Bryan 1997) can occur when fathers report being around other children – hearing them call to their dads can be an upsetting reminder of their loss. The father can maintain the love he feels for his own children through contact he has with other children, thus developing an appreciation that fathers, and other significant men, are important in children's lives.

Useful steps for fathers rebuilding engagement with their children:

Fathers who have rebuilt engagement with their children have identified a number of useful steps.

1. Maintain a journal over several months that enables the men to prepare themselves emotionally for reunion with their children. It is useful to develop an emotional map that recounts key memories of the child/ren and then over time focuses on the development of a clear picture of where their child is today and what their life is like. It is also useful for the father to create a narrative time line of their life, a life history in their own words, as this will help when communication starts with his children.
2. It is important for the men to obtain current information about their child/ren, if they have not already done so. School reports and current photographs and contact with the school will be useful. This will focus the father on the present context and replace images of the past. The unique and valuable qualities the children possess must be acknowledged by the father as this will be important in dialogue with the children to build their self esteem.
3. Negative ways of responding to issues can be addressed by writing a list of positive strengths about themselves. It may also be useful to create a gratitude list of fifty things they are grateful about in their life (present and past). The fact that their children are healthy, cared for and safe should be high on the list as this will support the appreciation for the mother's role.
4. Identify a professional support person or mentor. Often professionals can coach and support men in this process as they share their new learning. It is important for the men to develop useful strategies for dealing with their emotions, such as talking to someone, exercising, cleaning, walking, etc. They need to manage their health and take care of themselves.

5. Access to a mediation service may be useful in contacting the mother if communication is difficult. A skilled mediator can be a vital resource in these situations. A mediator or legal representative will be important if there is any order restricting direct contact. In any case, the father should seek legal advice from a Family Law Specialist Solicitor/Lawyer about their intended actions.
6. Humility and responsibility are core values that will support the reconnection process. Writing a list of the key lessons they have learnt through their life is one of the exercises that can assist fathers to develop the necessary emotional flexibility to deal with the experience of reuniting with their child. It is useful for fathers to join a support group for separated fathers to reinforce the use of a new business-like relationship with the mother (Killeen & Lehmann 2004). This business-like relationship with the mother of their children has been reported to be vital by fathers who have shared care responsibilities because it assists in disentangling the adult relationship from the parenting relationship (Smyth 2004).
7. It is important for the fathers to prepare for the reunion with their children slowly, without having firm expectations of what will occur. It is useful for them to lighten up and value the good things currently happening in their life. Fathers need to be careful about making promises to their child/ren or the mother that they may not be able to keep.
8. It is important for men to be able to show positive regard for the child's mother, as re-establishing the relationship with the child does not take place in isolation, and requires them to avoid or manage any negative communication and conflict that may arise.

Discussion

This article has explored the reasons why contact between separated fathers and their children can break down and lead to disengagement.

In summary, there are many factors that result in fathers disengaging from their children, such as increased geographic distance between a father and child/ren; increased economic demands; father-child alienation; new family responsibilities; conflict with the mother of their children and their inability to deal with either their own anger or the mother's anger.

The generative fathering framework is a model for understanding the non-deficit approach to fathering and supports a process for rebuilding engagement. Generative chill is a useful notion for understanding how men disengage from their children. It is vital that separated fathers value the new roles that they play in the lives of their children. The primary roles that fathers have played in the family before the family separation occurred, such as providing financial security or being the protector (while this role may not exist in reality, it still provides a high level of motivation for men), may need to be readjusted. Secondary roles that traditionally may have had less prominence, such as cooking for the children, reading stories and talking about ordinary life experiences, will become more important and rewarding in the new post-separation relationship. While the reassessment of these roles will be difficult, the new roles used post-separation are often more rewarding and relationship enriching.

Solutions

A number of steps and strategies have been identified in this article that may assist in restoring positive contact between separated fathers and their children. These are:

- to maintain a journal over several months, enabling the men to prepare themselves emotionally for reunion with their child/ren
- to obtain current information about their child/ren, such as school reports or current photographs
- to identify positives about their current situation to enable them to respond in a child focused way rather than out of bitterness
- to access a professional support person or mentor
- to access a mediation service such as the newly developed Family Relationship Centres that are available throughout Australia, which may be a useful step in contacting the mother
- to remain humble, rather than self-righteous, and to take responsibility for their own feelings and actions
- to move slowly through the process, rather than rushing.

Conclusion

While many fathers may find it difficult to express their feelings in words, the primary motivator in their lives is relationships, especially the relationship with their child/ren. From the child's perspective, every child has a biological father whether he is present, absent or even deceased. They have a natural curiosity about their father because it leads to answers about who they are themselves and why they look, feel, think and behave as they do. Children need many different sources of familial input to understand and value their own existence. Positive support for the father-child relationship is as healthy and vital for children as it is for the father.

However, this is only true for the father who is willing to be open to the changes that separation creates and who is willing to seek new knowledge and the support required to meet the new challenges. The post-separation experience is not about 'getting even' with or seeking revenge on the mother, but involves the subtle nurturing of a stronger relationship with their child/ren. When this focus is achieved, many fathers report that after separation they achieve a new, deeper and more meaningful relationship with their children. Often the relationship is both richer and stronger than before the separation occurred in spite of the confusion in role experienced by many fathers today.

After contact has broken down, separated fathers are likely to re-involve themselves with their children when they receive respectful support that nurtures the significance of the father-child relationship. Professional support needs to be accessible, easy to understand, relevant to their immediate situation, of high quality, and yet still affordable. ■

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