

## Angry Mums, Angry Dads

Separating from a partner when there are children involved is an emotional, environmental and legal nightmare waiting to happen. Like all hardships, they seem to come in threes and are arguably not dissimilar to temptations in the wilderness luring our souls with the promise of power and retribution.

When you have been storing up anger for months or maybe even years, it might seem like an outward release will set the anger free and will free you of the anger whilst giving an enormous sense of satisfaction but the opposite is in fact true. By exercising our anger, we never truly get the chance to exorcise it; anger breeds anger because one aggressive action is met with an aggressive reaction or the anger turns inwards on the person expressing it, which then festers and comes up again and again, like an erupting volcano, ultimately damaging the angry person.

As a legal researcher I come into contact with angry mothers and fathers often. I often receive letters from parents who feel that they have been wronged and there is no doubting that many of them have, but the way parents cope with these challenges often indicates whether they are truly thinking of their children or whether they are nursing deeper hurts that are wholly personal to them.

Anger does not always manifest itself in screaming and shouting or verbal ranting; sometimes anger is masked by what appears on the surface to be a rational point of view, carefully considered and edited just in case the person listening might cotton on to the fact that the parent is actually harbouring prejudicial opinions based on their own emotional history rather than a preliminary concern for the emotional history of their children. That is not to say that these parents do not care about their children; most do care deeply but confuse their own complex emotional drives with their children's.

It can be hard to spot which parents are truly in tune with their kids and which are so focused on their pain and hurt that they cannot even attempt to see another point of view, but listening to parents often, patterns do emerge. The scenario below is typical of e mails I receive in relation to divorcing parents:

Mike\* is a divorced father who spends every other week end with his daughter, has an overnight stay in the middle of the week and contact on Mondays as well as Thursdays, with the holidays equally split. Mike has been divorced for two years but still continues to seek more contact with his daughter. He is polite and humorous and rationally sets out his contact schedule, his deep affection for his daughter and his hope that one day he can share his daughter's contact time equally with the mother of his child. He then expresses irritation that his daughter's main home is with her mother. He says he feels abused, as if he is being used as a nanny service and worst of all, he fears that this arrangement will destroy his bond with his daughter.

My reply to these sorts of e mails is always based upon the following observations: children do not do well splitting their contact time in half to the point where they live two lives, having to oscillate frantically during term time from one parent to another or go for long periods of time without seeing one parent. It has been proven time and again that this notion of shared parenting is nothing more than a logistical rationalisation of a more complex emotional paradigm that requires not only a pragmatic mind but an open one, emotionally aware and sensitive to the realities of being human.

Furthermore, where the resident parent is not obstructing contact and the child is not being exposed to negative and painful emotional situations, my reply is always the same: you cannot lose your bond with your child if you continue to spend quality time with them on a regular basis whilst allowing them the comfort of stability provided for by an anchor in one place. Children also go through phases; I know I certainly did, where I focused more on my father during moments in my childhood and more on my mother in others. These sorts of phases are totally natural but for a divorcing parent feeling threatened and hurt, these movements are unsettling and prone to misinterpretation, which can make matters worse for the child, who ultimately, is being misunderstood. Here, the parent becomes the child, in need of support and guidance and a good old fashioned dose of realism!

Much of my reply will also depend on the age of the child and one question I always ask is: have you talked to your child about this? Often, the concerns raised are not borne out of conversations these parents have had with their children; they are assumptions being made through an emotional lens that suffers with the stigma of rejection. It never fails to surprise me how many parents with grown children fail to ask them how they feel on these issues.

Divorce does not of itself destroy a family or the bonds within it; it is just a metamorphosis of the family unit and more often than not, even where the non-resident parent lived at home during the marriage, they often spend more quality time one on one with their children post divorce. In many ways, divorce offers advantages to parents – it allows them to focus on their children, in a more tangible way, especially when parents know they have to dedicate a certain amount of time to interacting with their child. Many children growing up in homes where the parents are living together grow up feeling that either one or both of their parents just did not make time for them. Divorced parents are forced to address contact and as a result, spend meaningful time with their children, if they can set aside their anger and just enjoy the moment, safe in the knowledge that their children will always be their children.

There are of course situations where that stability can be jeopardised by an angst ridden parent, still desperately trying to come to terms with the hurt the split has caused and may even take the view that the ex in question should be judged for their actions and to include debriefing their children with a view to making a similar judgment to the parent which in turn at best causes tension between the child and the other parent and at worst, a total disconnection with that parent. My personal view is that violence would certainly be an area where I would consider contact to be reviewed but this is a specialised area needing professional opinion by careful and experienced practitioners. Otherwise, whatever wrongs that parent may have committed against the other should ideally be kept out of the family unit. There may come a time when a child will learn of the reasons for the split and I have often seen situations where both the parents have been very good at not divulging the historical difficulties but somehow the facts come out as children do tend to be cunning foragers for information! At that point, if the child is mature and grown, they will make up their own minds about how they feel toward each parent. Growing up in a family that was not subject to divorce, as I matured and became a young woman, I also saw my own parents for what they were: human. From there, a new and complex set of emotions set in, but always with the underlying knowledge that they both loved me very much. Here, of course, is an illustration of how children process what they observe and whilst we cannot control how our children will view us, our calm and unconditional love

will ensure that they grow into balanced individuals who will learn one day, that our mistakes as parents were in no way a reflection of our love for them.

This emotional stability and balance within our children will be much harder to achieve if we allow our anger to get in the way or allow ourselves to believe that we have an excuse to be angry and to expose our children to our anger. Children are not given enough credit and are very badly represented, certainly in our judicial system with well meaning legislation that aims to quantify well being but has no idea what that means in real terms. It is staggering to note this, when the adults involved were once children themselves but poignant also that many of these adults did not have fulfilling or emotionally stable and loving childhoods, making it ever harder to crack the conundrum that is children's welfare. Perhaps then, our system should be a little more deferential to parents who are hurt and less judgmental but in any event, the key to any child's happiness lies in the hands of their carers and here specifically, their parents.

I have observed mothers, who like fathers adore their children but the anger can sometimes alienate the children to the point where although no bad words are said about the other parent, the children do not feel that support they need and in turn become introverted and ultimately damaged. The example below is also a common scenario a legal researcher like myself might encounter:

Jane\* is the mother of two daughters who live with her. She has separated from her husband but she feels alone and vulnerable. She loses her temper frequently with her children and tends to distance herself from them. Jane cannot understand why her children won't give her her space and wants to take them to a therapist because they are unruly and constantly causing trouble. Jane would like the recommendation of a good therapist she can send her children to.

To my mind, the difficulties here start with mum. The children are simply reacting to their mother's anger and in order to get her attention, they 'act-out'. In a scenario like this, the most important priority is trying to alert the mother to the consequences of her actions and to reassure her, as I do with fathers, that their children love them and that they just need to reassess their perspectives so that their children know how much **they are loved**.

Being a very practical type of researcher, which is arguably what researchers are by trade (!), I would also observe that whilst it is wonderful knowing you love your children it is equally important to show it. As we live not only in a cerebral world but also a physical one, the power of hugs and kisses cannot be underestimated and this kind of body contact can make even the worst day bearable, for both parent and child.

The kind of advice that I would give always varies on the differing circumstances of each case but in the end, unconditional love and earnest parenting (not to be confused with its uglier less effective counterpart forced parenting), is always going to be the key to success and family preservation. And even a basic understanding of children is enough to set the tone for a fruitful and loving bond that can survive the logistical disadvantages of divorce.