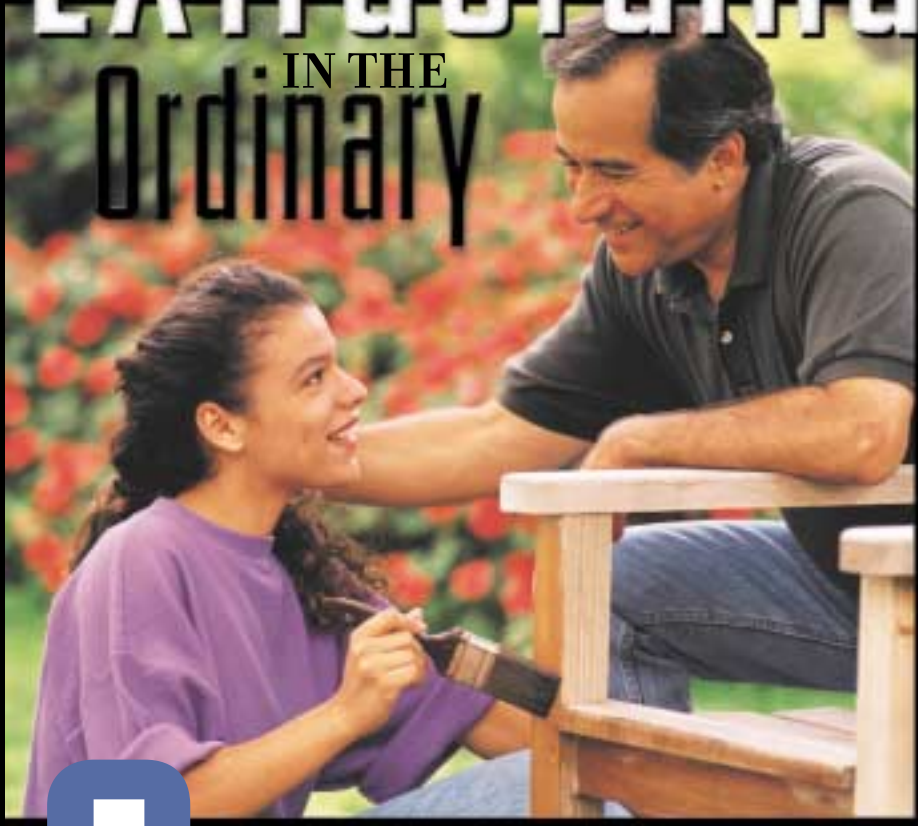


FINDING THE Extraordinary IN THE Ordinary



by Jenifer J. Call

Ordinary, small, regular—prosaic—father-child interactions may be crucial to good father-child relationships. Yet these interactions are threatened when fathers live apart from children. Evidence suggests that father-child relationships in areas such as visitation, communication, recreation, and education help noncustodial fathers maintain stronger connections to their children.

When Thom Hunter was growing up, he didn't have a father in his home. Someday, he knew, he wanted to be a dad, and he felt that a dad's number one responsibility is to "be there, not to miss the events, momentous and miniature, that bind a

father to his children."¹ In his research, K. J. Daly found that fathers felt spending time with their children was the "primary standard of good fatherhood."² In most cases of divorce, noncustodial fathers are limited in their ability to uphold this primary standard of "being there" and spending time.

Most parents assume they will spend time with their children in ordinary ways, such as bed and meal times; that families will interact with each other daily. By their frequency, these events become so ordinary that they rarely stand out as notable. The term *prosaic* refers to the common or ordinary, and in family life, there is much that is prosaic. However, when divorce disrupts family

structure, it also substantially diminishes family processes, many of which are prosaic. How can fathers who don't live with their children "be there"? How can they be "good fathers" during specified times or intermittent intervals? How do they create the prosaics of family life from a distance and on their own?

This article focuses on fathers who have chosen to build and maintain relationships with the children they don't live with. We wanted to explore how noncustodial fathers re-create prosaic connections rather than become special-occasion or "Disneyland" dads. We wanted to know why these noncustodial fathers maintain involvement in their children's lives when too many men in their situation do not. In addition, we wanted to know how they do it, including specific actions they take to "be there" for their children.

Do Kids Need Dads, or Do Dads Need Kids? Reciprocal Developmental Needs

For most men, parenting is a package deal, and marriage is part of the package. When divorce occurs, it often dissolves the family as well as the marriage.³ Marriage brings a certain amount of structure to life in relation to the family; activities are usually centered on the home. After the dissolution of his marriage, a noncustodial father lacks the structure commonly associated with family life. Many areas of his life undergo significant change.

P. A. Cowan refers to such transitional rebuilding times as "period[s] of deorganization in which almost everything is out-of-sync."⁴ Cowan defines a developmental transition as a long-term process that results in a qualitative reorganization of both inner life and external behavior. The loss of family life as it has been requires major structural changes in a father's behavior and his physical world. In addition, he must cope with the sense of loss he feels for his children. For three-fourths of noncustodial fathers, that sense of loss becomes real as they generally have diminishing contact over time.⁵

There has been growing recognition of the value and importance of fathers in the daily care of their children.⁶ Scholars generally agree that one of the important causes of emotional problems in children of divorce is their diminished contact with their

fathers.⁷ Studies cited by Warshak, Biller, Blankenhorn, Popenoe, Lamb, and Parke⁸ found that fathers play a significant role in the development of their children's social competence, goal motivation, academic achievement, moral development, and self-control, among other things. In addition, we know that children fare better when their fathers continue to take an active part in their lives after separation or divorce.⁹ But the problem remains that children of divorce are largely deprived of significant time with dad.¹⁰ Moreover, fathers are important figures in children's lives, for good or for ill, whether or not they continue to be active fathers.¹¹

Scholars have devoted less attention, however, to the importance a father places on his interaction with his child. A father's adult development is threatened by divorce.¹² Fathers "need to be needed"¹³; most want

to feel that they make a difference in the lives of their children. Being a father with restricted influence over his children doesn't feel like fatherhood.¹⁴ When it doesn't feel like fatherhood, it may be hard to act like a father. However, such a removal is not only detrimental to his children, it is developmentally threatening to the noncustodial father, as well.

Umberson and Williams, in their study of noncustodial fathers, stated that "through marriage and parenthood, men become husbands and fathers—roles that are central to male identity. In turn, divorce may represent an important social and

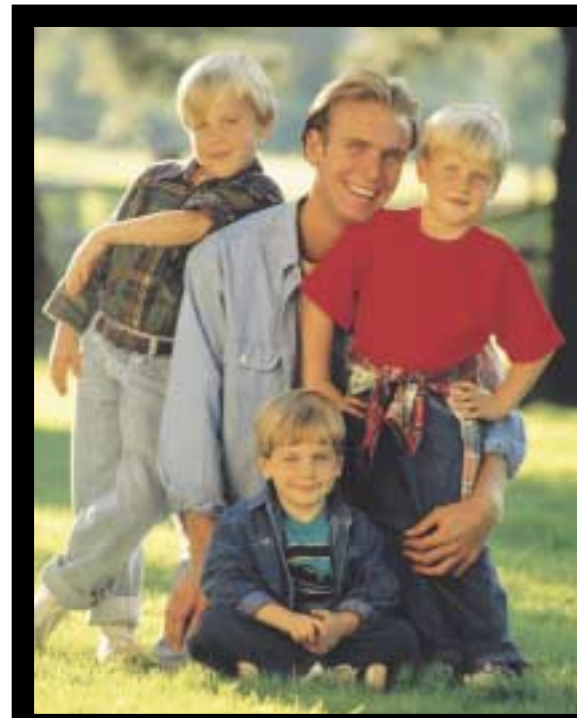


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personal failure to men.”¹⁵ Specifically, Popenoe says, childrearing encourages men to “develop those habits of character, including prudence, cooperativeness, honesty, trust and self-sacrifice that can lead to achievement as an economic provider. . . . and having children typically impresses on men the importance of setting a good example.”¹⁶ Thus, noncustodial fathers who have limited involvement with their children may be at risk developmentally. Snarey wrote that “Generative parents provide important support for their children’s development and, in turn, children provide opportunities for parents to satisfy their own developmental need[s].”¹⁷ Children need a dad; but just as important, dads need their children.

Fatherhood on the Fringe

Why is it that most fathers who do not live with their children have such a hard time staying involved in any significant way with those children over time? Previous research points to four important factors: (1) conflict with the ex-wife; (2) inexperience with maintaining relationships with the children; (3) role ambiguity and psychological juggling; and (4) a feeling of powerlessness. Our research seeks to explore the possible role of a fifth factor: the loss of prosaic connections.

Conflict with an ex-wife. Many studies report that the main reason fathers decrease, or even cease, involvement with their children is the continued problematic relationship with the mother, who is usually the custodial parent.¹⁸ Fox and Blanton

found that the “one factor identified consistently across studies as most salient in constraining the relationship [of noncustodial fathers] with their children . . . is the nature of the relationship with the former wife.”¹⁹ Many fathers feel that they are “father by permission of the mother.”²⁰ The presence of conflict and hostility often prevents the father from seeking frequent contact with the child. This may be due to continued conflict with his former wife or his feelings that the child is better off without constant exposure to animosity between the parents.²¹ Thus, it seems unlikely that a lack of love keeps most noncustodial fathers from their children; rather, it is the lack of a good relationship with their ex-wives that cripples them in their efforts to continue relationships with their children. It is important for men to find effective ways to manage the anger in their relationship with their ex-wives, rather than cutting themselves off from their children.²²

Inexperience in maintaining relationships with the children. In addition to conflict with the ex-wife, however, there are other barriers to noncustodial fathers’ continued involvement in their children’s lives. In their report on responsible fathering, Doherty and his colleagues stated, “One might say that in American culture, a woman is a mother all of her life, but a man is a father if he has a wife.”²³ During marriage, many men rely on their wives to facilitate relationships with their children.²⁴ And, although fathers’ involvement with their children has increased substantially in the past few decades,²⁵ many fathers have not taken the time to learn

how to initiate interaction themselves, or have spent little time assuming sole responsibility for their young children.²⁶ Following divorce, a father must create new routines in areas that may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable for him. Divorce may present the first opportunity some fathers take to learn about and establish independent relationships with their children.²⁷ Many succeed, but many struggle.

Role ambiguity and psychological juggling. Noncustodial



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fathers are uncertain about their responsibilities. They must be both mother and father to their children on an intermittent basis, then go back to life without their children in their homes. They have complete, short-term responsibility for their children, then return to fatherhood on the fringe. Men have difficulty balancing this physical and mental juggling act. Noncustodial fathers have to bridge autonomy and connectedness in strange, confusing ways. As C. R. Ahrons puts it, they must find ways of “letting go while holding on.”²⁸ Not surprisingly, many noncustodial fathers struggle to do this.

Feelings of powerlessness. Along with the loss of nearness to their children, noncustodial fathers must also contend with the loss of authority or influence over them. Fathers are often unprepared for this experience. Research suggests that those fathers who feel they have some control or influence over their child’s upbringing have a better record of supporting their children and staying involved in their lives, as well as greater satisfaction with parenting.²⁹

For men, strength is usually an important part of their masculinity. For the noncustodial father, his strength may appear to be in another’s control when it comes to interactions with his children. Therefore, he must find a way to channel the loss of this power into the strength to build a relationship with his children in spite of his feeling of powerlessness.

Prosaics: ordinary and overlooked. Helping professions often focus on the more dramatic aspects of divorce, such as legal issues, that noncustodial fathers face. However, there is another important barrier to maintaining ongoing connections with children that has received less attention, perhaps because it is too obvious and simple. That is, no matter how freely his child has access to him, the very ordinariness or prosaic nature of a father’s relationship with his child is diminished or lost, robbing him of day-to-day time and commonplace experiences that are difficult to replace. G. S. Morson provides a provocative perspective on the importance of the prosaic in our lives:

Prosaics questions whether the most important events may not be the most ordinary and everyday ones—events that we do not appreciate simply because they are so commonplace.

... Cloaked in their very ordinariness, the

prosaic events that truly shape our lives—escape our notice.

... What if the important events are not the great ones, but the infinitely numerous and apparently inconsequential ordinary ones, which, taken together, are far more effective and significant? After all, memorable events are memorable just because they are exceptional.³⁰

Noncustodial fathers must work hard to re-create the prosaic element for themselves and their children, since it no longer exists. As some scholars have said:

After divorce, fathers retain the status of father, but the roles associated with fatherhood are difficult to maintain if the father and child no longer live in the same household. . . . When a father loses the daily, routine, familiar opportunities to parent after divorce, his identity as a father is expected to be affected.³¹

Some noncustodial fathers want to continue a relationship with their children that reflects their former closeness. They find a way to overcome the hardships—large and small—that confront them when divorce splits their family. Our study sought to examine the role that prosaic experiences play in these fathers’ relationships with their children. We hypothesized that noncustodial fathers who succeed at maintaining strong relationships with their children find a way to create prosaic connections with them. In essence, they insert the ordinary into extraordinary circumstances. In addition, we wanted to know what motivates those divorced



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fathers who make the effort to maintain prosaic connections with their children.

Interviews

The most helpful information in our study came from interviews with noncustodial fathers. Interviews are a useful way to investigate sensitive or touchy matters such as divorce and men's feelings about children who do not live with them. We used a "purposeful selection" that was "information rich."³² That is, we included fathers who "exemplify [the] characteristics of interest, [and] the situation of the sample is determined according to the needs of the study, and not according to external criteria, such as random selection."³³

The fourteen fathers we interviewed had been

obvious they were more intimately involved with their children than what statistics indicate is true for most noncustodial fathers. These fathers often went to heroic lengths to create prosaic outcomes. At times their efforts were less strenuous, but they made a conscious decision to be involved in their children's lives.

Our analysis of the interviews found four areas where these fathers expended concern and effort for their children: visitation, communication, recreation, and education. Each area has a clear connection to the prosaic—the simple, daily, regular, ordinary nature of family life.

Visitation. The fathers didn't plan on having the relationship with their children reduced to directions on a piece of paper, as though relationships could be run by recipe and still grow and develop "naturally." Guttman says that "the maintenance of a close and meaningful bond by adhering to [a] rigid visiting schedule tends to obstruct the natural ebb and flow of a normal relationship."³⁴ Researchers know that this is tough for fathers. There is no question that, in most instances, it is beneficial to include the father as part of the family system. The fathers in our study expressed their sadness over the loss of a former relationship that included the more prosaic parts of family life. Brad tells how even regular visits can't replace an everyday relationship: "[It] was really hard right at first with the divorce because you go through a period of time where, as a father, you're so lonely in the first place, you want to overcompensate, you want to show the kids that

you love them so much and that you care about them . . . you miss that relationship so much. When you go from having them every day, you know, the day-to-day things, as a father you miss tucking them into bed, saying their prayers, reading a book. It might just be coming home from work and asking them how their day at school was. It can be anything like that."

Ken shares similar feelings as he talks about missing out on the simple, everyday parts of the relationship with his children: "It was a tremendous feeling of loss for me, tremendous regret to think about what it's like when children first get up in the

divorced from less than one year to more than twenty years. Several had remarried, but many were still single. Some had been through a second divorce. They had as few as one and as many as six biological children. We asked these noncustodial fathers to share stories and experiences that illustrated their efforts, successes, and failures while trying to maintain strong relationships with their children.

All of the fathers interviewed said they enjoyed the time they spent with their children. This enjoyment was often coupled with guilt, as they wished they could spend more time or do more with their children; an interesting observation, since it was



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morning . . . to give them a big hug and a kiss and to be with them at the end of the day and to have dinner with them on a regular basis. The ability to just have all the little things You want a full experience as a father, you want them to feel full love and you want them to feel it continually, you want them to feel it [all] month and not four days a month. That has weighed heavy on me.”

Although these fathers expressed their sense of loss, they continued in their efforts to build an ongoing relationship with their children. Several fathers mentioned their attempts to make their house a home for their children. They would have rooms especially for them so the children felt they had a physical place in their father’s lives. Andrew bought a townhouse with three bedrooms and put the children’s names on their bedroom doors and had them help furnish the rooms. Ron related how it was important to him to “make your home your kids’ home—their own bedrooms, their own clothes. Instead of making them feel like they’re just a visitor.”

Brian said that one of the successes he has experienced as a noncustodial father is “having the ability to provide a home that allows them to have their own rooms and clothes. A neighborhood that has friends that are true to my children, that call to have them spend the night and wait anxiously for them to arrive at 6 p.m. on Friday nights. . . . That is my largest success.”

These noncustodial fathers knew it was important to have a home for themselves and for their children, a place where they could build new experiences and memories.

It appears these fathers want to do the best they can for their children in the limited amount of visitation time they have. They thought about their children and were sensitive to the value of making visitation time as ordinary as possible.

Communication: One of the simplest but most consistent things these noncustodial fathers did was call their children regularly on the telephone. Some fathers have a set day when they always call; others make contact a couple of times a week or as needed. Andrew tells how important these phone calls are: “I would always call and chat with them on Sunday morning. I used Sunday morning as the phone rates were lower, and the children were likely to be home



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and rested after a good night of sleep. To call on a weeknight after a long and stressful day would not be a relaxing time for either them or me. This pattern has continued for 22 years, to the point that if I don’t call on Sunday to check on their week, they feel ignored.”

Brian has two young children and says: “In short, compensation [for day-to-day contact] takes place over the telephone. I call my kids a few times a week and they call me a couple of times over the two-week period. My daughter (who is 3) has especially taken to calling me, which I enjoy immensely and consider it to be nothing short of a gift.”

At times fathers feel the limitations of the phone, as Mark expresses: “Sometimes they don’t have time for me on the phone. . . . You can’t pick a kid up over the phone and play games or whatever. Sometimes I get really hurt because they’re watching a show and how do I compete with Darth Vader?”

Another communication method commonly used by noncustodial fathers is sending their children mail. When Ron’s children were young, they lived in another state. He bought a giant pad of newsprint and drew them picture letters that they could hang on their wall. When they got older, he bought blank puzzles and drew picture stories involving the kids to send to them.

Several fathers also mentioned the use of computers for keeping in touch. Rob put together a computer for his children using spare parts. He teaches them how to maintain and work on computers. Brian and Steve created web sites for their children. Steve also was in the process of building a computer with video conferencing capabilities, which he felt could give them the opportunity to be more personal. Ron uses computers to help his boys

with school research projects, then transmits the information via e-mail. For Andrew, e-mail has become an important way of staying connected to his adult children.

Whatever means they used, all the fathers stressed the importance of communication. They communicated with their children frequently when they were physically apart.

Recreation. Most of the fathers in this study talked about the importance of sports in staying

tant to them and when I was there, how important that event was to me.”

Several fathers who live close to their children have been able to coach both their sons and daughters on their sports teams. This gives them more time outside of their regular visitation with their children. Fathers also mentioned attending sporting events and watching them on TV with their children. They biked together and went boating, rollerblading, fishing, hiking, and climbing. Fathers and children influence and make connections with one another as they engage in common activities that parents and children usually share.

Education. Another important area in which these noncustodial fathers were involved was their children’s education. Ryan gets involved with parent-teacher task forces at his children’s school. He says: “By keeping involved, I am aware of what my girls are doing in school regarding particular subjects. Also, their teachers now see me as an interested parent and are comfortable and more likely to discuss the children and what they are doing.”

Ryan joined his daughters for lunch at their school and even started a “Breakfast with Dad” fundraiser, now in its fifth year, at the school. Brad brings the treats to school on his sons’ birthdays. There he interacts with the class and gets to tell stories about his boys. Assemblies, performances, field days, and parent-teacher conferences are all school activities that these fathers have participated in or attended.

Educational opportunities are not limited to formal activities, however. Mark uses the time he has with his children while transporting them between his home and their mother’s home to tell them stories: “I always tell them superkid stories. They’re the superkids and I kind of trick them because I try and teach them while I’m telling the stories.”

Andrew says to read to small children, “read to them again and again and again.” Ron did just that even though he lived in another state than his children.

“I did some books on tape so they could have story time with me at night. I just read books and rang a little bell when it was time to turn the page and then I’d send them the book and the tapes. They

connected with their children. Sports are a common, ordinary part of children’s daily lives; this seemed especially true for boys. Ken, who lives in another state than his four sons, always plays basketball and football with them on visits. They also enjoy recreational sports such as bowling, swimming, and miniature golf. He talked about the importance to their relationship of attending sports events: “I think probably as important to them, and as important to me as anything we ever did, were all the athletic activities, attending all the different events. Sometimes this was difficult to orchestrate, because with four boys going all over the state, it was difficult to be at everything and stretch yourself so thin. Athletics was, and has always been, an extremely important part of our relationship as a father with his sons. I think that really imbedded in their brains how much I loved them and how much I wanted to be at any event that was impor-



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had a little tape player and they'd sit in bed at night and that way I got to read them bedtime stories when I wasn't there."

Most fathers are interested in their children's schooling and want to encourage and assist in their intellectual development. For

noncustodial fathers, however, everyday involvement in educational matters is challenging. These fathers extended their thoughts and efforts to become involved in common experiences of learning and education with their children, benefiting both.

Why They Stay Connected

In our interviews, we also sought to understand what motivated these fathers to remain connected to their children and what factors influenced them. We asked them to tell us why it was important to continue their connection to their children, even when it was difficult, or at times when it might seem the children weren't benefiting from it.

Sense of responsibility. Some fathers made comments suggesting a keen sense of responsibility for the quality of their children's lives because they created these lives and because the children didn't ask to be placed in the situation they were in. Brian gave his reasons for his efforts to maintain a relationship with his children: "Unconditional love. My children didn't ask to be put into this situation, and I consider it my responsibility/obligation to give them everything I possibly can in an effort to maintain a sort of distorted normalcy in their lives."

Andrew felt it was important to have a relationship with his children "because I thought they wanted and deserved one. I also felt it was my duty to them and to society. . . . I owed them some guidance and protection."

Modeling or compensating. For some, the motive

to stay connected with their children came from feelings about their own fathers. These men were either compensating for what they missed with their fathers or they were modeling what they felt had been a wonderful experience. It seemed that there was no in between, no neutral experience with their fathers. Ken talked about what he wanted for his children: "I had a terrific model in my mother and father of parents that were totally committed to their children and loved us and I wanted my kids to have what I had. I felt like they deserved a dad that was interested in their sports, interested in their school, and wanted to hug them and express love to them and just let them know that no matter what the years are that we're separated, that the love of a father doesn't go away."

Most poignant were the fathers who felt they had missed something. Mark said: "I didn't have a good role model in my father. My father never told me when I was a kid that he loved me. . . . I felt sort of like a second-class citizen and . . . I just don't want my kids to suffer the same fate I suffered."

Steve shares his feelings of loss: "Even though I had a great stepfather, I still feel cheated [that] my real father didn't stick around. To this day I can't understand how a father can leave his own child."

Ron stated simply, "One of the things that happens to you is you try and become the father that you wanted and never had." These fathers passed on their positive experiences with their fathers, or they turned negative experiences into a positive outcome. To the benefit of their children, they were able to make a choice to do their best.

Overcoming Obstacles to Connection

These men stayed connected to their children despite significant challenges experienced by most noncustodial fathers. One of these challenges involved coping with ongoing conflict with the ex-wife. It surprised us to find that the fathers we interviewed faced the same difficulties other noncustodial fathers deal with. We expected these fathers would be relatively exempt from some of the problems that other noncustodial fathers face, and this was what enabled them to have sustained high-quality contact with their children. We assumed it was because it was easier for them. In many cases,



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Suggestions for Maintaining Prosaic Connections Between Noncustodial Fathers and Their Children

1. Visitation
 - a. Tell them you will see them at a certain time so they have a time to look forward to seeing you again.
 - b. Make your home their home; if possible, have their own clothes and toys at your home.
 - c. Develop routines you can all participate in (e.g., reading, church, sports, scouts).
 - d. Involve them in household projects (e.g., making dinner, mowing lawns, cleaning up).
 - e. If older children work, and it doesn't interfere with their jobs, make short visits at their jobs.
2. Communication
 - a. Stay in touch regularly. Let your children know how to contact you.
 - b. Set up a certain day and time to call.
 - c. Get them a phone card.
 - d. Send them mail. If you travel, send postcards.
 - e. Send certificates about their accomplishments or just about them.
 - f. Send large picture letters to young children to "read." (These do not have to be elaborate, just colorful.)
 - g. Read stories on tape, complete with a bell to turn the page. Send them the book and the tape.
 - h. If possible, set them up with an e-mail account.
 - i. Set up a personal family web site.
 - j. Provide a photo album of things they do with you to keep at their house.
3. Recreation
 - a. Teach them things you are interested in.
 - b. Learn what they are interested in.
 - c. Coach their sports teams.
 - d. Take them to sporting events.
 - e. Attend events such as games, plays, concerts, and recitals that they are involved in.
 - f. Teach them things their mom might not have time for (e.g., how to ride a bike, dive or swim, rollerskate).
4. Education
 - a. Know your children's teachers. Call their school; ask for separate parent-teacher conferences, if necessary. Ask how you can be involved.
 - b. Let your child know you will help them on school projects. Visit the library, follow through. Ask about homework in e-mail messages.
 - c. Volunteer to help chaperone on field trips.
 - d. Have lunch with them at school.
 - e. Volunteer to bring treats for their class on their birthdays.
 - f. Give educational advice in letters where you can reread your words, and so can they.
 - g. Tell stories starring them as the heroes to teach and guide them.

See "Divorced dad's survival guide," *Men's Health* 10, 57 (Oct. 1997) and Divorced Dad's Site, <http://www.geocities.com/divorceddads/index.html>

our assumption was wrong. Many of these fathers experienced significant conflict with their ex-wives, and several related painful experiences involving the police.

Ron talks about why it may be so difficult for men to overcome the ex-wife factor and how he and his ex-wife cope: "Dealing with an ex-spouse is so aggravating. . . . You walk into a situation where you're feeling a loving feeling, a caring for those children. . . . And how do you blend loving . . . [with] hostility? I don't know how you put those two together and maintain the demeanor. So I think what happens for a lot of men, is that they try for a while and the conflict of dealing with the ex-spouse is so great that they can't put those two together and it hurts. And so rather than hurt, they just shut it down and close it off."

If conflict was an issue in their interactions with their ex-wives, the fathers in this study felt that time with their children was more important than avoiding those conflicts. Distance and the relationship with their ex-wives were the two factors that most affected how much visitation these men had with their children. They seemed to be able to adjust to distance. However, feeling like they didn't know how their ex-wife would react from visit to visit was more difficult, as Brian relates: "There is only one main factor that decides how often I see my children, and that is their mother. . . . My ex holds all the cards, and short of a dispute in court, I am at her mercy."

Most of these fathers came to the point of managing the conflict rather than resolving it. Andrew sums this up: "As a father you do not have to like and respect your ex, but you can be civil and polite to her in front of your children. The civility will be greatly appreciated by your children."

Thus, it seems these fathers put the priority of spending time with their children and their children's well-being ahead of the personal discomfort and stress that often comes with maintaining a relationship with an ex-spouse.

Conclusion

From our study we have distilled many recommendations to help noncustodial fathers stay connected with their children. In the accompanying

box we have included suggestions in the four areas discussed previously—visitation, communication, recreation, and education. These suggestions are drawn primarily from the interviews, with a few suggestions from a web site and magazine article (as referenced) and our own experience. These are minimal sugges-

tions to help fathers think about what works for them. The important thing is to instill in the children the feeling and the confidence that their father is interested and here—even if he isn't there.

Hochschild argues: "The premise behind quality time is that the time we devote to relationships can somehow be separated from ordinary time."³⁵ The fathers in our study feel the loss of what was. Nevertheless, their efforts are focused on making the most of what is. These are fathers who are heroic in prosaic behavior; they are exceptional in maintaining the common, ordinary, simple parts of their relationships with their children. They have been able to instill in their children the idea that they will always be there. They do this by showing their children that they care about being involved in their lives in ordinary, regular ways, despite the daily separation.


According to our interviews, these fathers help their children to understand the limitations that distance and time put on dads who live apart from their children. These noncustodial fathers want their children to know that dad would be there if he could, that he cares and is on their side, so the children know that the person they called dad is still their dad. He may be gone from the household, but he is not gone from their lives. As one father said, "I am not a super-dad; I am just a dad who loves his kids." Perhaps these messages are best communicated in prosaic moments of life, the very moments that noncustodial fathers are most likely to lose. 



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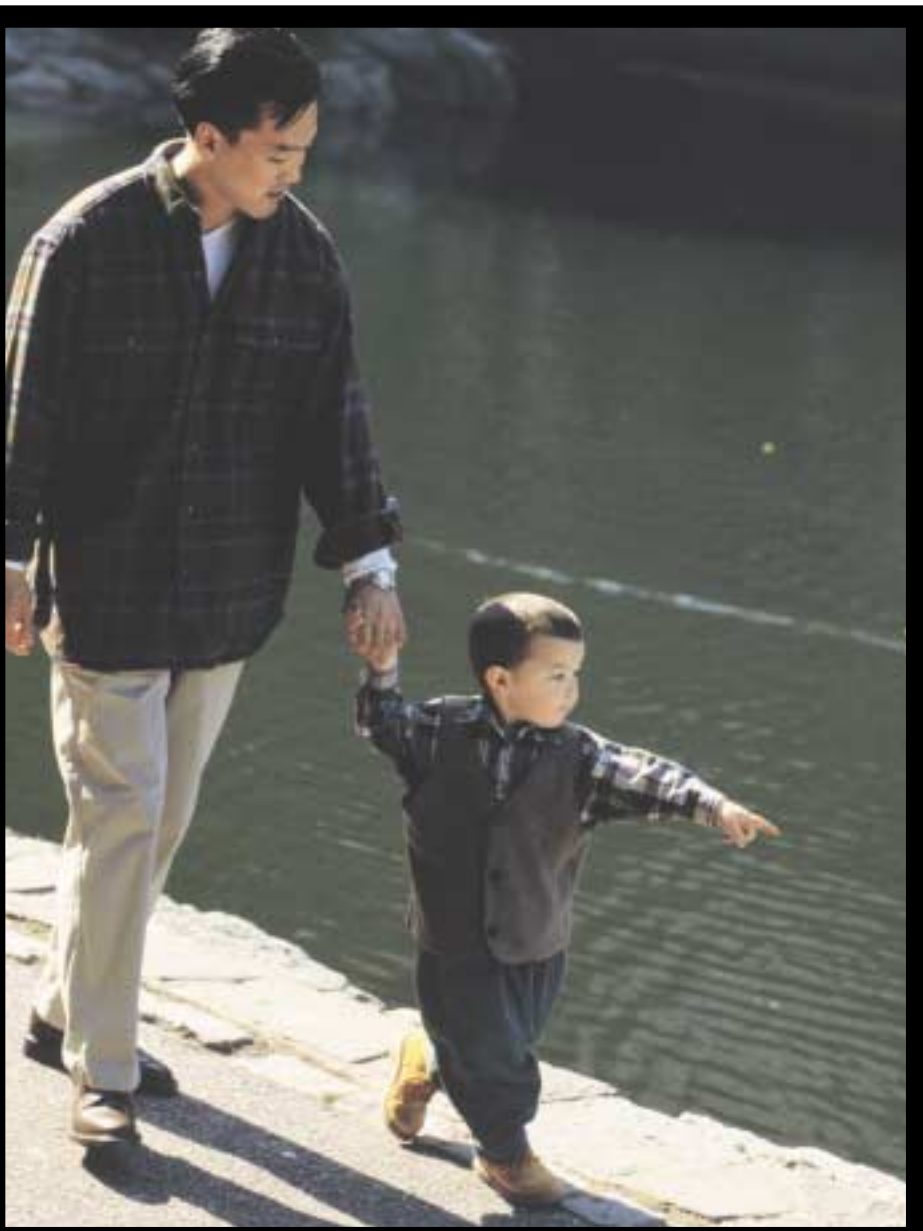


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