

NOTE: This column won a Silver Award at the Parenting Publications of America Awards.

Sorry Situation

In most divorce cases, it's the fathers who lose

By Lynn Armitage



Last week, my oldest daughter dropped a bombshell. She did not want to spend the night at her dad's anymore because she doesn't sleep well there. "It's dark and cold" and her sister snores. To my great surprise, I was overcome with compassion for my ex. I knew he would be devastated to lose this precious time with her. With a 70/30 percent custody split, he misses out on so much of their lives as it is.

And that realization made me cry.

I suddenly empathized with him and every father who has lost his children through divorce. "The average divorced father in Orange County

sees his children only 15-20 percent of the time,” claims Marvin Chapman, president of United Fathers of America, a non-profit organization that helps fathers (and some mothers) fight for custody and visitation. Sadly, these fathers are missing out on about 80 percent of their children’s lives.

How utterly heartbreaking.

Take the boat and the frequent flyer miles. But lose my children? As a mother, it’s unthinkable. But isn’t it just as unthinkable for fathers? Yet their hearts are ripped out over and over again every day in family court, an anti-Disneyland that I’ve dubbed, “The Unhappiest Place on Earth.”

True, biologically women are the nurturers. Apparently, the courts see it that way, too. In the majority of cases, primary custody is awarded to mothers. Not fair, says Chapman, who blames an outdated bias in the court system. “There’s still a lingering mentality from the Tender Years Doctrine, which was done away with in 1972, that said children of tender years needed to be raised by a primary parent, which was mom because dad was off working.”

And what about child support? How fair is that? While I understand the concept and benefit greatly from it, let’s see it from a father’s perspective: “Not only do you not get to see your kids every day, but you’re going to pay for that knife in your heart, also. In fact, the less you see of them, the more it will cost you.” Isn’t that like double jeopardy? Being charged twice for the crime of a failed marriage?

Watching your children grow is a feast for all the senses. I would die a slow death from sensory deprivation if I couldn’t see them, hear them or touch them every day. As one single father says, “I miss their voices, their smiles, their laughter. I miss their little hands in mine.” Another says, “Purpose and routine are missing when they’re gone.”

I don’t have the answers. (Heck, I contribute to the problem.) But I do know that fathers are the real losers in divorce. And for that, I’m truly sorry.

I’m sorry you spend more time without your kids than with them.

I’m sorry you can’t hug them as they run off to school.

I’m sorry you can’t hear them singing in their rooms and laughing at SpongeBob.

I'm sorry you can't kiss their sugar lips a hundred times a day.

I'm sorry you can't fall asleep at night to the comforting sound of children snoring in the next room.

I'm sorry that life – and family court -- have cheated you out of the miraculous experience of watching these beautiful roses unfold every day.

I am so, so sorry.

Lynn Armitage is an award-winning columnist and freelance writer in Orange County, California.