

MEETING THE NEEDS OF NONCUSTODIAL PARENTS IN THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

JOAN B. KRISTALL, LCSW

Coordinator, Families of Separation and Divorce Project, Jewish Family Services of Central Maryland, Baltimore, Maryland

AND

GEOFFREY L. GREIF, DSW

Associate Professor, School of Social Work, University of Maryland at Baltimore, Maryland

The needs of noncustodial mothers and fathers have long gone unrecognized. One attempt to serve this population through a Jewish Family Services-sponsored support group revealed a number of common themes that the members were experiencing that have implications for social work practice: parents wishing to reject their children and feeling rejected by them; struggling with family events and Jewish holidays; dealing with their own parents; becoming emotionally triangulated; having mixed emotions about their children's progress; and coping with loss.

Since 1986, Jewish Family Services of Central Maryland has offered, through its Families of Separation and Divorce Project, a comprehensive network of services aimed at providing support and guidance to the vulnerable population of adults and children who have experienced the trauma of a family breakup. The primary mode of treatment is group therapy and short-term workshops aimed at such common issues as single parenting, stepparenting, grandparents of children, legal concerns, obtaining a Jewish divorce, and parents without custody. This article focuses on a short-term support group offered for noncustodial parents and details some of the common themes that emerged during the course of treatment.

Separation and divorce are difficult transitions for adults to make even when no children are involved. Divorcing adults have to cope with the loss of a key relationship, residential and economic instability, the death of the myth of "living happily ever after," and, often, the resulting depression, anxiety, and anger that accompany the event (Keshet & Rosenthal, 1978; Pett &

Vaughn-Cole, 1986).

When there are children in the marriage, the number of tasks related to coping are greatly increased. A parent has to be concerned not only with his or her own adaptation but also with how the children are coping. Frequently, children are in need of explanations, attention, nurturance, and structure at a time when the parents are feeling least able to provide them. It is well established that children of divorce are "at risk" for a number of problems ranging from emotional instability (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) to lower social competence (Devall, Stoneman, & Brody, 1986) to lower educational achievement (Krein, 1986).

Single parents do not always have control or input into how their children will cope. They may be a visiting parent or have no relationship at all with the child. This places them in a precarious position both as a parent and as an adult trying to establish an identity. They often feel socially isolated and cut off from their children and other systems that support the family. Although the plight of the single custodial parent has been amply documented, until the last 20 years, the role of fathers and particularly of mothers living apart from children has been given short shrift in much of the research (Depner & Bray, 1990; Greif & Pabst,

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1988). In addition, little is available about group work with these parents. For example, one article specifically focusing on a voluntary agency's attempt to reduce alienation in the family through group work ignores this population (Levine, 1991).

Helping noncustodial parents through group intervention would seem to hold the promise of reducing some of the isolation they experience. In addition, when divorced parents are content with their situation, there seems to be a greater likelihood of a smooth adjustment for the children (Johnston, 1990). This article describes a short-term community-based support group for noncustodial parents and details some of the common themes that emerged during the course of treatment. These themes would also be relevant for individual and family treatment.

LITERATURE ON NONCUSTODIAL PARENTS

Noncustodial fathers began drawing great interest as a target of intervention and research in the 1970s, perhaps a result of the growing number of divorced parents and the advent of general systems thinking (see, for example, Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976; Jacobs, 1982). Noncustodial mothers did not attract attention until the 1980s. Currently, the Census Bureau estimates there are over 1,000,000 single fathers and 7,000,000 single mothers raising children (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1993), resulting in noncustodial fathers (both married and never-married) potentially outnumbering noncustodial mothers by six to one. The actual number of noncustodial parents, though, is much higher than this count as a noncustodial parent's ex-spouse may have remarried and be counted among those parents who are married and raising children.

The literature on noncustodial fathers describes them as struggling with and sometimes failing to maintain a relationship with their children, as well as with their ex-wife, after a breakup (Ahrons & Miller,

1993). The parental relationship for these fathers is not defined clearly in this society and is thus rife with stress (Wallerstein & Corbin, 1986), anxiety, and feelings of rootlessness and being shut out (Jacobs, 1983). Noncustodial fathers may suffer from depression, low self-esteem and status, and disturbances with work performance and sleep (Coney & Mackey, 1989; Stewart, Schwebel, & Fine, 1986). There is a different side to this picture, though. Anecdotally, we have observed noncustodial fathers who find that, with the breakup of the family, the parent-child relationship takes on a new importance to them. They forge stronger relationships with their children and spend more time with them than ever before.

Whereas noncustodial mothers suffer from many of the same feelings as the noncustodial fathers (Fischer, 1983; Greif, 1987) and probably an increased sense of economic instability, they also are subject to great external and internal pressures. Society has historically placed responsibility for the children on the mother. This perceived and actual external pressure (mothers do hear negative comments about their not having custody) makes it uncomfortable for them to discuss their noncustodial status with others. Thus, some choose to hide it (Greif & Pabst, 1988). The internal pressure arises from their own sense of self derived from their upbringing. When they are not fulfilling what they have been raised to believe is their role, some feel guilt, shame, anxiety, and depression (Greif & Pabst, 1988; Rosenblum, 1986). On the other hand, those who choose to be noncustodial parents tend to have an easier time adapting.

Given the difficulties facing some of these parents and the recognition by clinicians at Jewish Family Services that many of the clients who are seeking help could benefit from a support group, it was decided to offer a short-term, professionally led support group to the community.

THE GROUP

During the years of service to families of divorce within the Jewish community, it became apparent that the needs of noncustodial parents were distinctly different from those who maintained primary custody. Therefore, the Families of Separation and Divorce Project decided to sponsor a short-term professionally led group that would offer support to those parents who were experiencing difficulty with their parenting role. Through client contacts and advertisements, parents without custody referred themselves to a 4-week support group led by the two authors. After a screening interview on the telephone, a core group was formed for the first 4-week contract. These members found the experience sufficiently successful to request two additional 4-week sessions, during which time new members joined for one or both of the 4-week sessions. Eight members in total attended some of the group meetings.

All the members were Jewish, although their affiliation varied to include Reform, Conservative and Orthodox practice, and they ranged in age from the mid-thirties to the mid-forties. Four were male and four were female. Their backgrounds varied. Most worked on a full-time basis, though one of the men became unemployed during the time the group was meeting, and one of the women, who was previously unemployed, began volunteer work at the group's suggestion to occupy her time. The children they were living away from ranged in age from 5 to 22, with the number of children ranging from two to four. Half of the group was remarried, with two of those members having children from their new marriages.

The greatest differences between group members were in the amount and nature of contact they had with their children. It is within these differences that we observed the large continuum of post-divorce relationships between parents and children. Two of the mothers had regular contact

with their children, but wanted to have more as they were unhappy with the way the children were being raised. The other two mothers had little or no contact. In one situation, after the mother ended the marriage and left the home, visitation was initiated while the children were living in the home with the father. Over time, the children became verbally and physically abusive to the mother. She told them they could not see her again until they could treat her with respect. When the mother entered the group 1 year later, she had not held a conversation with either child (both in their teens) since the schism. The second mother had gone through a series of ups and downs with her four children (12 to 22 years old), some who refused to see her and some whom she refused to see. Substance abuse, psychiatric hospitalization, a suicide of a 16-year-old son, and a suicide attempt by another child made this mother's parenting situation the most complicated.

The fathers also presented a varied picture. Two had children who lived great distances from them, one in a distant state and another on a distant continent. Both were allowed to visit their children. A third father had regular visitation, and the fourth father was rejected by his 22-year-old daughter and 12-year-old son.

As might be expected, relations with ex-spouses varied also, but tended toward the extremely acrimonious. Clear signs existed among this sample that significant levels of attachment (Masheter, 1990) remained, which made it hard for some of the parents to separate their angry feelings for their ex-spouses from their need to parent competently. It is likely that parents who have good co-parenting relationships with their ex-spouses would not have as great a need for a support group.

COMMON THEMES IN THE GROUP

Several common themes emerged during group work with these parents that we believe would need to be addressed in future groups serving this parent population.

Children Rejecting Parents

The most painful issue for these parents was living with the rejection they felt from their children. It was experienced in many ways. In some cases, as noted, the children refused to see the parents for reasons with which some of the parents could intellectually agree when questioned, but which caused hurt nonetheless. In other cases, custody decisions were made based on the children's desire to live with the other parent. For mothers in particular, this decision to live with the father can be devastating. In still other cases, the noncustodial parents felt rejected when their children did not want to spend part of the prearranged visitation time with them if it interfered with peer-related activities. With this latter situation, the group members proved particularly helpful to one of the fathers when they were able to interpret his daughter's need to be with adolescent peers as age-appropriate behavior.

A hope that was frequently stated by the parents who were struggling with feelings of rejections was that, by their behaving in a caring and consistent manner, the children would some day "return" to them or appreciate them more. Thus, the mother who had not spoken with her children in a year continued to send them postcards with warm sayings on them and to attend sports events at their school, so that her children would one day look back on this period in their lives and think more kindly of her. Despite this optimistic attitude, members struggled with deciding at what point their reaching out with no response or with outright rejection became self-defeating or too painful to continue.

Parents Rejecting Children

The flip side of parents feeling rejected was their rejecting their children. As a response to their children, some parents refused to see them, setting up a cycle that was hard to break. Most of the parents of preadolescent and adolescent children felt enormous anger

at them for reasons that ranged from the understandable to the incomprehensible. Often rubbed raw by the divorce process and the legal wrangling that accompanied it, some of the parents were unable to assume an adult, parenting role in relation to their children. They treated their children more like peers or siblings than like children who, at a difficult time of transition for the family, were in need of nurturance and reassurance.

One mother found dealing with her children to be so difficult that she discussed with the group whether she should sign a document that she had read about that would have allowed her to divorce herself from her children. Some of the group members, joining her in her anger at her children and her need to protect herself from them, initially were supportive. At future sessions, members took a more neutral stance and the idea was dropped.

Differences between Men and Women in the Group

The fathers and mothers tended to differ both in the issues they raised within the group and the ways they interacted, thereby supporting observations about gender-related behavior made by earlier research (Gemmill & Schaible, 1991). Perhaps chief among the differences is the method they used for explaining their noncustodial status to new acquaintances outside the group. Women were much more apt to deny their custody status. Two of the mothers, perhaps reflecting the greater shame women feel than men, particularly in this traditionally conservative Jewish community, changed the subject or lied whenever they were asked if they had children. The fathers expressed no such tendency. Due to the greater likelihood of fathers having to pay child support than mothers, money matters and anger at lawyers were more frequently raised by the fathers.

In terms of group process, the mothers were more likely than the fathers to seek and accept advice from the group and not to

use intellectualization as a defense. Given the socialization of women as help-seekers and their tendency to seek affiliation after divorce to a greater extent than men (Diedrick, 1991), this behavior was anticipated. As men in general are less apt to seek therapeutic services and are considered a more difficult population to serve, in part because of this reluctance (Meht & Pasick, 1990; Sternback, 1990), it is not surprising that they would be harder to reach initially.

Member-to-leader communication seemed to differ by gender of the leader. Both female and male members tended to look to the male leader for advice and approval and, in the case of male members, for camaraderie. The female leader was looked to for the types of emotional support that females are stereotypically expected to offer. Thus, when the members were emotionally upset, her counsel was sought most often.

Issues Around Holidays/Simchas

A great deal of group time was consumed by discussions of holidays and major life transitions for the children. Mother's Day and Jewish holidays were typically difficult times for these parents, as they are for most divorced parents who ascribe meaning to such events. One mother first spoke about planning to spend Mother's Day by going to work where she could be alone and not have to deal with other celebrants. The holiday made her acutely aware of the loss of her role and status. Upon suggestions from the group, though, she spent time with friends instead. Fathers were not as affected by the passing of Father's Day.

Most upsetting were such ceremonies as graduation, confirmation, and Bar and Bat Mitzvahs. It is at these events, especially the latter ones, which typically include many family members, great financial expenditure, coordination of celebrations, and a public display of the now-divorced parents, that the most problems surface. For example, the mother who had not spoken with her children for a year was determined

to attend her daughter's graduation ceremony and to be seen by her so that the daughter would know that she was there. The question arose in the group as to whether the mother should then attend the public party afterward or leave. The mother, fearing a replay of a scene that had occurred at an earlier graduation when her older child hid in the bathroom, decided to attend the ceremony only. A father in the group recounted how he and his ex-wife had been warring up to the time of their daughter's Bat Mitzvah, but then agreed to make amends for the ceremony, which they did successfully, with both standing on the pulpit with the daughter. One month later the warring began anew. Another father considered "crashing" his son's Bar Mitzvah party to which he had not been invited.

Stories also abounded of parents snubbing and being snubbed by in-laws at ceremonies, of major events never taking place because neither parent was willing or able to assist in the planning, and of stepparents being inserted into key positions where the parent "should" have been standing. As these events revolved around the children, they were frequently caught in between the warring parents.

The question remained for the group members of "Where do I belong?" The parents had a desire to be present at these events, but it was left unclear what role they should play.

Grandparent Issues

The support of parents, relatives, and friends can be vitally important when a parent has reduced or no contact with a child. Among these group members, their own parents played key roles with those who were having the most difficulty visiting their children. To some extent, as the members' role as parent diminished, they may have regressed to a child-like role where reassurance from their parents took on a new meaning. The grandparents took a variety of positions vis-a-vis their children and

grandchildren when communication broke down between member and child. Some were supportive of the group members, whereas others refused to become involved.

In the case of one mother, her parents would not see their grandchildren until they were respectful of their daughter. Although this decision gave great support to the mother, the mother worried that, as her parents aged, they might never see her children again. Another set of parents took the opposing view, saying that the relationship between their son and grandchildren had no bearing on their own relationship with the grandchildren. They continued to stay in touch and financially help out the grandchildren, much to the chagrin of the father who was hoping to get back at his children or force a reconciliation through monetary withholding.

Another byproduct of the relationship between parent and child was that members, with little time to spend with their children, felt caught between trying to spend time with them during visitation and also having their children visit their parents. In addition, some members complained of grandparents pressuring them into changing their relationships with their children, a situation that arguably exists regardless of marital status or custody. Yet, these help-seeking parents, because of their own unhappiness with their parenting status, seemed more vulnerable to such influences than many parents and often reacted to such "advice" with anger.

Emotional Triangulation Involving the Custodial Parent and Child

Typical among divorced parents is the struggle to establish clear boundaries with the other parent and the children so that co-parenting can continue for the benefit of the children. This frequently does not happen. The group members described a myriad of situations with their ex-spouses and children where attempts to parent unfettered were blocked, where lawyers were assigned to children by the custodial parent and

billed to the noncustodial parent, where children were screaming on the telephone at both parents, and where agendas aimed at the other parent were played out through the children.

Some of the parents in the group believed the custodial parent's well-being was tied too closely to the affections the children showed that parent. In what were described as symbiotic relationships, the custodial parents were seen as having almost a stranglehold on the children's emotions and using that hold to paint the noncustodial parent as incompetent. The children were depicted as being unable to make a decision on their own, yet having the power to affect to too great an extent the custodial parent's emotional well-being. Within these complex relationships, it seemed as if the children were in a "lose-lose" situation where they felt they had to align emotionally with the custodial parent and be supportive. If they aligned with the noncustodial parent, which was difficult if they believed that parent was incompetent, they ran the risk of being rejected by the caretaking parent.

Depending upon the emotional maturity of the group member and the behavior of the custodial parent, these thorny relationships can prove difficult to sort out. The advantage of this mixed-sex group was that members were able to begin to examine their own reactions and to gain potential insight as to the behavior of the male and female custodial parents. The clear message the group members gave each other when contentious relationship issues arose was that members should behave in a way that made them feel good about themselves and would do the least harm to the children. This message was heard, but not always acted upon. Gaining revenge at the custodial parent, at the expense of the children, remained for some members the operating principle.

Children's Progress

One of the more paradoxical themes in the group revolved around the satisfaction that

the parents with the least amount of involvement with their children seemed to take in how the children were progressing. On the one hand, they hoped their children's lives would go smoothly. On the other hand, they took a certain amount of reassurance in learning that the children living with the custodial parent were having difficulties. From the member's perspective, if the children were progressing well with little contact with them, then they obviously held little importance to the children, thus diminishing their parental role even further.

CONCLUSION

The group experience provided members with their first opportunity to discuss issues that some had believed were best kept hidden. An atmosphere of support was established due to the commonality of the problems and concerns (Gitterman, 1989). The members found kindred spirits, which helped reduce the isolation many had felt coming into the group. Relationships that were formed during the sessions continued after its formal termination.

In planning services for the growing number of single parents, social workers need to focus on noncustodial parents as well. Attempts to meet their needs can ease the difficult divorce-related transitions that adults and children often have to make and can broaden the services that Jewish communal professionals bring to the community.

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