



**FAMILIES NEED
FATHERS®**

because both parents matter

Families Need Fathers Charter 2015



Foreword

Public attitudes about the role of mothers and fathers, both before and after separation, are very clear. A YouGov survey in 2012 found that 86% of us believe that the role of fathers has changed dramatically in the past 50 years; 85% that fathers play an instrumental role in bringing up children; 95% that both parents should share responsibility for bringing up children; and 84% that both parents should have an equal standing when it comes to caring for their children after separation.

Unfortunately, the law (and perhaps more importantly, its application) can take some time to catch up with what the public expects. We still find on a daily basis through FNF's support services that too many children end up losing a relationship with a loving parent after separation, not because there would be any risk to the child, but principally because of conflict between the parents.

The family justice system has made some important strides in recent years to ensure that children are able to maintain a meaningful relationship with their children, but there are still a number of areas which require urgent and long overdue improvement.

There is far too much reliance on the adversarial courts system and that we need far more emphasis on collaborative dispute resolution and therapeutic methods of facilitating separated and separating parents in overcoming mutual hostility in favour of doing a better job in supporting their children's futures.

This Charter sets out the key areas which we believe require attention. We will do all we can to ensure that shared parenting, cooperation between parents, and a supportive family justice system that is easily accessible where needed remain high up the political agenda. This will benefit families, communities, and most importantly, our children.

The Charter has been compiled by Families Need Fathers charities in England, Wales and Scotland. This version of the Charter is intended for use in England.

Families Need Fathers
134-146 Curtain Road, London, EC2A 3AR
0300 0300 110 fnf@fnf.org.uk
www.fnf.org.uk

Registered Charity number 276899

No child should be denied a full and loving relationship with both their parents unless it has been proven that such a relationship presents a risk to the child.

- Legislation and other ways to encourage joint birth registration should be considered. This will encourage the involvement of unmarried fathers in their children's lives, and send an important signal from Government about the important role both parents have to play in their child's life.
- 'Parental alienation', where children are pressurised by one parent to reject the other, should be recognised and dealt with. Professionals working with separated families should receive training to assist them in recognising these patterns of behaviour. Deliberate attempts at alienation should be considered as abuse, and as a form of domestic violence.
- Child contact centres provide a crucial service for some separated parents for a wide variety of circumstances, but lack of funding is leading to many local centres closing. This valuable lifeline for children and parents to maintain contact should be supported with statutory provision of funding, and the adoption of minimum standards for training, support and supervision.
- Social policy which acts as a barrier to the involvement of both parents, such as the spare room subsidy which prevents many separated parents on low incomes from having their children stay with them overnight, should be reviewed and amended.
- Allegations of violence and abuse should be investigated thoroughly, and treated with the urgency and seriousness they deserve. Allegations that are found to have been made falsely or maliciously should be treated as legally and socially unacceptable. Costs should be routinely recovered from those who raise malicious allegations for tactical reasons as part of proceedings, and the court should impose sanctions as a deterrent to confirm such actions, which go against a child's best interests, are considered unacceptable in today's society.
- Separated parents should be helped to avoid the courts and to overcome mutual animosities and learn to put aside their differences in favour of a much more important goal – their children's happiness.

The family justice system should promote collaboration and shared parenting between parents following separation.

- Efforts to promote the resolution of conflict outside of court, such as through mediation, counselling or educating parents on the impact of conflict on their children, should continue to form a central part of family law reform.
- Attempts to improve collaboration and signposting between organisations involved in family law, such as the Help and Support for Separated Families initiative, should continue to be supported by the Government.

Family courts need to respond swiftly to breaches of Child Arrangement Orders, to ensure that relationships between children and the parent they do not live with day-to-day are not compromised.

- Orders are only made where the court has found that the arrangements will best serve the interests of the child. Wilful and continued breaches of orders are unacceptable, and actively work against the best interests of the child. It is up to the courts to decide if an order needs to be varied, and not a decision for a parent to take unilaterally. Courts need to treat deliberate breaches of orders with the urgency and importance they deserve, in recognition of the principle that time is critical in a child's life.

Information and support services should be easily accessible for separating parents throughout the different pathways of the family justice system.

- Resources for separating parents should encourage shared parenting wherever possible, as children do better when both parents are fully involved in their lives.
- Resources for separating parents should highlight the importance of parents focussing on the best interests of their children, rather than on the conflict between them.

The important contribution of fathers, mothers, grandparents and the wider family should be promoted wherever possible, in both family policy and wider society.

- Negative portrayals of fathers as ‘absent’, irresponsible or inadequate care givers still dominate in coverage of fatherhood in the media. The important role of fathers in caring for their children, both when parents are still together and when separated, should be celebrated.
- The importance of grandparents and kinship carers should be recognised. Grandparents should have the right to apply directly to courts for children to spend time with them.
- Employers should better support parents to share care where possible, such as flexible working to allow them to drop off or pick up their children from school.