Preface

Deadbeat dads? (Boumil & Friedman, 1996; Braver, 1998). Percentage wise, very few. And contrary to popular opinion, many, if not most, divorced dads have not been alcoholics, nor drug addicts. Nor have they been physically or sexually abusive. Why then have they, as a group, been given such a “bum rap”? Why have their stories not been told, or if told, not heard? This book will provide answers to these questions and other serious issues concerning divorced dads and their children, from the dad’s point of view, in order to fill this enormous gap. Much has already been published, broadcast, televised, and communicated in other forums about what happens to moms and to children during and postdivorce, but the dad’s story has either been neglected or overly sensationalized, especially when it has been one of abandonment, neglect, or nonpayment of mandated child support.

The myriad “good guy” dad stories have been shoved asunder as if insignificant and unimportant. It is urgent that a representative sample of “good dad”’ stories be told – on their behalf – to illuminate a more comprehensive and realistic kaleidoscopic overview for the various professionals in the legal, judicial and mental health systems engaged in working with those embroiled in painful, disturbing divorces; other men (and their families) who have felt alone in their rejection and isolation from their children and grandchildren; children of divorce; couples contemplating divorce; and others who want and need to know more about this large and growing segment of men the world over.

A quote from one dad interviewed sets the stage for some of the real-life dramas that unfold in the 13 case stories that appear in this book.

It’s Father’s Day and although I’m a dad, I won’t see my children. My ex-wife has always come up with some way to keep me apart from them – like intercepting my birthday and holiday cards and gifts to them and returning them, and then berating me to the children – saying I was too unconcerned (or cheap) to send a gift and thereby driving a wedge of resentment between us. Sometimes when it was supposed to be my turn to have the children she would say they were sick or had plans with friends, etc. Father’s Day is always an especially sad day as I always wanted to be a dad and loved being one – before I was told to leave. Now I’m a childless dad and it hurts.
Thousands of dads have a similar lament because it seems to them that “no one hears and no one cares.” This book focuses attention on why and seeks to lead the way to rectifying this egregious oversight. It is critical to highlight the fact that although marriage may end legally, it is never fully over if there are children. They are the ties that bind the original biological parent couple together – “‘til death do them part.” And the judicial system and all of the professionals involved in the process of divorce should unite to make this experience less cumbersome, traumatic, debilitating, punitive, and stressful.

Most of the literature on postdivorce focuses on two parts of the prior family – the wife/mother with the emphasis centering on her legal rights and emotional needs and those of the children. These are critical aspects of the divorce scenario which merit and have received much attention, and they are not being minimized here. However, little has been written about the postdivorce emotional needs for contact with and involvement of those fathers who have been dedicated and deeply attached to their children in their lives before the breakup. This book seeks to fill this gap for all of the professionals who are charged with “helping” them and for the fathers and mothers who may choose to read it. Given that 50% of all marriages in the USA (and some other countries) end in divorce, this is a critical problem right now, and the sooner it is addressed on both the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels, the better for our entire society.

The marital settlement sessions and the legal arguments presented in court and the marital settlement agreements (MSA) handed down by the judges usually focus on issues confronted by the ex-wife/mother (Wallerstein, 1986) and on the custody and visitation plan. Yet few consider what it will be like for the children to live both in Mom’s house and Dad’s house (Ricci, 1980; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). The relationships with two sets of grandparents (Kaslow, 2007) usually receive scant attention in the deliberations and final agreement. Nonetheless, these are issues that surface quickly and ultimately need to be handled with a wide-angle lens that considers everyone’s needs and feelings. What is it like for children to shuttle back and forth, often finding they left something they need at the other household, and resenting that parents wanted the divorce but they are the ones forced to live with these unsettling consequences? Where will the children really spend the holidays and vacations; what a fair rotation is from both parents and the children’s point of view; decision making in specific realms of the children’s lives; and how continuing parental discord will be resolved may not be addressed (specifically enough) in mediation, settlement sessions, or in court. In fact, sometimes the party’s respective attorneys have whipped up the areas of disagreement and exacerbated the schism to make their arguments more convincing and the issues at stake less resolvable. Eventually the areas of conflict must be worked through, or they will continue to distress one or both adults and the children for many years to come and color the divorced dad’s future dating relationships and willingness to marry again. Children are not the “property” of either parent – they are people with their own hearts and thoughts – and their best interests should be paramount. But what best interests and as determined by whom? That is the question! This book will address these salient issues.
First, a history of factors influencing child custody decisions over the past century is presented to provide a backdrop against which to understand the current emotional climate and expectations, the legal and judicial machinations, and the postdivorce difficulties experienced by various members of the immediate and extended family. Next, 13 individual case stories of divorce, as told to the author in personal interviews with 13 divorced dads based on a questionnaire administered to each (See Appendix 1) in person, are chronicled. Many are heart wrenching as the pain, loss, hurt, and anguish of not living with their children on a daily basis as part of their nuclear family often linger for years and become intensified if the children have been alienated from them and their fathers do not see them. This is not what occurred in all of the cases, and the two types of outcomes emanate from different sets of partner dynamics and personality types of the individuals involved in the specific divorces.

In Chapter 15, an analysis of the themes in the cases as an aggregate is presented, and Games Divorcing and Divorced People Play are analyzed and made more easily recognizable. Chapter 16 offers responsive commentaries on the cases by experts in the field of divorce, and they each discuss how the outcomes might have been more positive for all members of the families if different services/interventions had been utilized and provided by well-trained professionals with a systemic perspective capable of considering the gestalt of the best interests of all members of the family. Subdivided into five parts, the vantage points of the divorce therapist, divorce mediator, and collaborative divorce specialist are the first three separate specialties covered in Part I. Part II delves into the domain of the matrimonial lawyer. Part III ventures into the relatively new arena of family evaluation – which includes and goes well beyond child custody evaluation. Parenting coordination, another fairly new specialty in the widening array of services available to divorcing couples, receives attention in Part IV. And the spotlight shines on the role of the child advocate in Part V. So many more services are available now than when many of the men interviewed were divorced that we can only ponder whether they and their wives had been willing to use them if, in reality, they would have made a positive difference.

Chapter 17 looks at why some people can share their children reasonably amicably, and others cannot. It ponders the variable of the personality of each parent as a key ingredient in determining the outcome of the divorce process and aftermath (Baum & Schnit, 2005).

The specific common factors or personality patterns that emerged in the former couples, based on the ex-husband’s reports, that seem to have contributed to their difficult divorces and to much of the postdivorce continuing poor communication and antipathy and often loss of or infrequent contact with one’s children are identified. The stages of the divorce process as they are relevant to the issues and dilemmas being discussed are highlighted and summarized in Appendix 2.

In Chapter 18, suggestions made by the divorced dads, others formulated from my years of clinical practice as a psychologist doing couple, family, divorce therapy and divorce mediation, and a summation of the best ideas culled from the contributing authors and the literature meant for professionals dealing with divorcing and
divorced families – be they lawyers, therapists, mediators, child custody evaluators, parenting coordinators, or family court judges – are contained.

“Tips” are provided on how to improve the situation, even many years later, to both former partners and the “children of all ages, if they are amenable to trying to heal, improve, and/or reconcile relationships” (Gold, 1992). The idea of utilizing a divorce ceremony, even many years after the legal divorce, is introduced as another technique for shifting relationships into a more positive direction. A ceremony I have utilized in the past (that has been published previously) is alluded to illustratively, in the tips portion of this chapter, and included as Appendix 3 (Kaslow, 2010). There is also a discussion of forgiveness and its many facets as they may be applicable (Bonach, 2007; Freedman, 1998).

It is hoped that this book may have wide reverberations by making an impact on legislators who can change the laws regarding divorce to make them more equitable in today’s world where many dads help raise the children and moms work full or part time; where more judges will give greater amounts of time and thought to the decisions they render and use mechanisms to insure adherence to them; where all family and child custody evaluators will be adequately trained and function objectively; where matrimonial lawyers will continue to represent their clients well and try to persuade them to negotiate with honesty, integrity, and a sense of fairness; and the entire system and all of the structures that revolve around “divorce” will be more humane, beneficent, logical, coherent, and truly in the best interest of the children – with their being protected from abuse, exploitation, and alienation from either or both parents (and extended family members). If some of these recommendations are utilized by the respective professionals, and the laws governing divorce are changed nationally and/or in some of the states to be more humanistic and equitable, and if those decrees that already have been enacted are enforced, then the drama and trauma of marital breakup should become less painful and destructive for many experiencing it. And the prodigious effort invested in this volume will have been well worth it.

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References

Divorced Fathers and Their Families
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