

Ghost Dads: Why Fathers Disappear After Divorce

By Michael Mastracci, Attorney at Law

The “Ghost Dad” is the newest divorce buzzword. Ghost Dads are fathers who disappear after divorce. They continue to send child support checks, but they’re physically absent from their children’s lives. They become “ghosts” to their children.

For most dads the break is not instantaneous. They start out picking up their kids for assigned weekends and holidays, attend soccer games and band concerts, send birthday cards and Christmas presents. Gradually, though, contact decreases. Weekend visits become sporadic; holiday visits start to go by the wayside; attendance at their children’s activities dwindles; eventually, contact simply stops. No dad on the soccer sidelines; no dad in the audience; no birthday card in the mail; no present under the Christmas tree. As the years go by these ghost dads become a hazily remembered presence imbued with equal parts of love, anger and confusion; but for their children the ache of their loss never goes away.

The big question is why? Sure there are abusive fathers and irresponsible fathers whose children are better off without them. But why do fathers who love their children and who were engaged in their lives before divorce disappear afterwards? If they love their children, how can they hurt them by abandoning them?

In an article for *The Globe and Mail* in Toronto, Canada, author Sarah Hampson named this perplexing conundrum [*The Ghost Dad Phenomenon*](#) (click the link to read the article). Her article has generated a storm of controversy in divorce blogs and web chat rooms. As a divorced dad quoted in her article explains, “It’s about shame.” “In the world of masculinity,” writes Ms. Hampson, “you’re either a winner or a loser ... It’s black and white. Divorce is seen as failure, ergo you’re a loser. Who wants to be reminded of that?”

However, in many chat rooms fathers are laying much of the blame on post-divorce conflicts over child support, parenting and visitation. Coupled with dating, remarriage or job relocation, these factors can strain a father’s relationship with his family to the breaking point. Some men, financially drained and emotionally weary from divorce litigation, simply give up the fight after months of squabbling over visitation with their ex-spouse. New girlfriends or wives who don’t want to share time or who find dealing with someone else’s children an unwelcome challenge may exert significant pressure on fathers to spend less time with children from a previous marriage. The desire to feel loved is a powerful motivator, particularly for men. Many fathers choose the loving arms of a new love over the stormy emotions of children hurt by divorce and the angry criticism of an ex-spouse. Parental alienation can also play a part with hurt ex-wives discouraging children from having a relationship with their father or his new wife or girlfriend.

“A man feels sadness,” explains Calvin Sandborn, author of *Becoming the Kind Father: A Son’s Journey*. “But on some level he thinks, ‘I’m not supposed to feel sadness,’ so the way men react is to blame the person who is making them feel sad. They get angry. There’s an adrenalin rush. And that makes them feel powerful again.”

Many fathers who feel increasing anger at their marginalization in their children's lives respond by leaving. Ill-equipped to deal with their emotions and unable to express them, they choose to avoid them. The pain of being repeatedly reminded of both their failure and what they have lost drives them away. They push away from the pain and anger caused by a situation they cannot control and in the process abandon the children they love. They become "ghost dads."

As MB from Canada wrote in an online discussion: "I love my children and I am plagued by nightmares as the loss continues to haunt me. However, I am calling less and less often and I feel that I am becoming the 'ghost dad.' It is perhaps a means of managing the pain and sorrow. As my wife has made it impossible for me to have a meaningful relationship with my children, the only option I feel that I have left is to distance myself emotionally from my children...Under the circumstances it is best to try and move on, even if that means that I become a stranger to my children."