

OUR VIEW

Fathers finally getting respect

THE *LEAVE IT TO BEAVER* image of the perfect, two-parent, stable, middle-class family with the stay-at-home Mom and 9-to-5 Dad seems almost laughably naive these days.

The reality for too many families in the 1990s is a divorce rate approaching 50 per cent, a single parent struggling to make ends meet, fading hopes for the well-paying, lifetime job an older generation took for granted, and both parents working to make ends meet.

In fact, though, the *Leave It To Beaver* stereotype of the family is still thriving in one key area of Canadian society: our divorce courts.

In the majority of divorce and custody cases, June Cleaver (mom) gets sole custody of the Beaver and Wally, while Ward (dad) is expected to keep working and hand over a good chunk of his pay cheque, while hardly seeing the kids except on weekends, if at all.

However, after several decades of being

brushed aside by the divorce courts, fathers demanding a more equal place in raising their children are winning some victories. And, paradoxically, the type of family Ward and June tried to create is beginning to regain some respect.

Item: An Alberta judge finds that having a relationship with his father is a four-year-old boy's right, even if the mother only used the father as a "sperm donor."

Item: A U.S. study finds that even after 25 years, the children of divorce remain scarred by the experience. The study found that children of divorce were more likely than non-divorce kids to be involved with drugs and alcohol, quit their education in high school, end up in low-paying jobs. Apparently, contrary to popular opinion, there's no such thing as a "painless divorce."

Item: A B.C. report suggests tax relief so more parents can stay home while their children are young, to give their kids a "positive start" in life.

This early bonding with parents, the report says, is critical not just to their physical health, but also their capabilities, attitudes and behavior later in life.

Item: A study of the genetic differences between boys and girls finds that fathers are often better at teaching their sons social skills than mothers.

Item: Radio psychologist Laura Schlesinger's emphatic repetition of the mantra: "Children need their fathers!"

There's no way we're going back to the lifestyle of the Cleavers.

But in the midst of the maelstrom of social change, we can try to establish some stability and common sense, by ensuring that the importance of *both* parents are recognized by the courts and public opinion. Slowly, this seems to be happening, and that's something to celebrate on this Father's Day, 1997.

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