Dads in despair

SUN columnist Jane Moore has been inundated with letters and emails from heartbroken fathers fighting to see their children.

The floodgates opened when she wrote about a male friend denied access to his kids after a bitter split from their mother.

In her column last month, Jane also highlighted the case of Idi Atiba, 31, who killed himself following a custody battle.

She suggested the system was biased against dads when it came to agreeing contact with their children.

Here, two fathers tell their stories and we also print extracts from some of the desperate letters Jane received.

MyView

WHEN I wrote about the plight of fathers forcibly estranged from their children by the “family” court system, I had no idea quite what a raw nerve it would touch.

Hundreds of heartfelt emails and letters flooded in – and continue to do so – from divorced or separated men all over the country, desperate to maintain contact with their children but being treated like criminals on the basis of little or no evidence.

Of course some fathers deserve to be ostracised because of violent or mentally abusive behaviour but at the moment, the system’s default setting for all cases is to be entirely mother-centric.
What she says is believed without question. What dad says is ignored or treated with suspicion.

Consequently, men who have done nothing wrong spend years (and a small fortune in legal fees) fighting to see the children they love.

That can’t be right, particularly when we castigate wilfully-absent dads, laying much of the blame for societal breakdown at their door.

We can’t have it both ways so the system must be changed, moving away from its currently divisive mindset and more towards the role of mediator.

Today, The Sun hopes to start that ball rolling by highlighting the cases of just a handful of the thousands of men out there who want to be good dads but feel thwarted, desperate and voiceless.

MyView
By CRAIG PICKERING

Families Need Fathers

FAMILIES Need Fathers is backing Jane’s call to help dads banned from seeing their children on unfounded grounds. Here, FNF’s Craig Pickering gives his view:

WE believe any campaign should focus on children’s rights to have a relationship with BOTH parents following separation and divorce.

It is estimated one in three children don’t have any relationship with their father in these families. This is a tragic statistic.

The system is not fulfilling its purpose – and justice for children is not being achieved. Families, and in particular children, are the losers, as well as society as a whole. We would like to see the following introduced:

• Shared parenting presumption in law – the main purpose of the family justice system should be to keep both parents fully involved in a child’s life following separation or divorce where appropriate. In short, to encourage shared parenting whenever possible.

• An end to the delays that make a painful experience much worse. For example, long delays in Cafcass reporting and court hearings.

• Support services – the court is the worst place for these disputes. When couples don’t know where to turn they often go straight to a solicitor. Out-of-court options must be promoted for
Sean

SEAN got a heartbreaking phone call from his five-year-old daughter on Christmas Day. He said: “I hadn’t seen her since February and she said, ‘Daddy, I haven’t seen you for ages. When am I going to see you again?’”

“Later I got a text from my ex saying my daughter had been nagging her all day and she agreed to let her see me on a certain day.

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“I was so excited. But just before the date, my ex cancelled it.”

Sean’s partner left him for another man four years ago. His ex makes it virtually impossible for him to stay in his daughter’s life.

Sean, 37, said: “She told me, ‘You can’t see her any more’ when we split. We are in and out of court. My ex gets legal aid but it’s cost me around £12,000 to £15,000.

“I won a contact order but my ex ignores it. We have been back and forth to Cafcass (the Children And Family Court Advisory And Support Service) who are supposed to mediate between parties but they’ve been virtually useless.

“My ex has refused to turn up to Cafcass appointments and stops contact when she feels like it. Every time I have been forced back to court to get contact reinstated.

“She has also made up allegations of physical and mental abuse. They were proved untrue — but it all delays me seeing my daughter.

“Early last year my ex stopped contact again, telling me, ‘You were only a sperm donor’.

“Last February, after another day in court, she claimed I had verbally threatened her. She told social workers the incident was on CCTV and she had complained to police. It was proved she was lying but I haven’t seen my daughter since.

“After she cancelled our day out in January I sent her a text saying, ‘Brilliant, well done, see you in court then’.

“Social workers have apparently deemed that as intimidating. But I won’t give up. I want to be part of my daughter’s life — I adore her.”

Neil

NEIL discovered he was to be a dad after a one-night stand.

He said: “After the shock I was very excited. I was at the birth and fell in love with my son instantly.

“I saw him every day. But my ex made me cut down to twice a week for a few hours.”
“It was really hard not seeing your newborn son every day.

Then she announced, ‘You can’t see him again without a court order’. I was heartbroken.”

Neil was forced to see a solicitor, who recommended the couple go to Cafcass.

He said: “My ex had told them she didn’t trust my abilities as a parent.

“When we went to family court I was ordered to take parenting classes, at £65 an hour.

“I had to take him to these classes and change his nappies while some stranger took notes.

“After that I was allowed to see my son at a contact centre. I hated it there, it was noisy and dirty. I didn’t think it was the right environment for a baby. She complained to the police, saying I was harassing her and I was charged.

“I got a caution. After that I was allowed to see my son for one full day a week at my home until my ex claimed to social workers that he ‘wasn’t himself’.

“Even though I had loads of witness reports about how happy my son was with me, I was ordered to have a psychological assessment by Cafcass.

“They also ordered I undergo a ‘Domestic Violence Perpetrator’ course even though I had never been violent to my ex.

“I refused so contact with my son stopped. I haven’t seen him for more than a year. But I still pay for him at £82 a week.

“I think my ex thought if she made it really difficult for me I would give up... but I won’t.”

Extracts from desperate dads’ letters to Sun Columnist Jane Moore

'I TRIED to take my own life when I wasn’t granted access to my two daughters. After separation, all a father seems good for is paying the mother CSA, there is no need for love, only money.'

'MY four-year-old daughter said her mum beat her. Social services dismissed it when I told them. My ex then made our daughter say it was all lies. Now she has stopped me seeing her. This is killing me.'

'I HAVE not seen my son for a year because his mother married again and moved away. I haven’t been told where. I’m a 16st doorman and too upset to talk to anyone. I just break down.'

'I HAVE watched my son go through such pain for 18 months. His daughter now lives 125 miles away. He is allowed contact for seven hours a fortnight. Her eyes light up when she sees him.'

'thanks, Jane, for the story about dads. I have been in front of judges 48 times trying to see my son. I am an ex-soldier who has survived cancer and I am treated worse than a rapist.'

'I TRIED to return my kids after a weekend visit but their mother was out so I took them back to my home, bathed them and put them to bed. I was accused of kidnapping them.'

'EXPERTS say it’s like losing a child when a court rules “no contact”. I agree – but when you know Cafcass’s workings, it feels more like murder. It’s nice to know someone cares, Jane.'
I can't say I'm surprised, it's very sad though. Mothers seem to get most of the respect as the parent. When you hear of a single mum, you think nothing of it but with a single dad there will always be that one person to say 'oh, poor child, he must be struggling'. People are so focused on the fact the woman has carried the child, they tend to forget the child has just as much of the father's genes. With a new born baby it's all about the mother and baby bonding, not so much with men. My mother has even said to be on several occasions that you can always get a new father, but you'll always have the one mother. A couple of people have even made disgusting comments as I was always close to my father. Looks wise as well as personality, they couldn't get their head around the fact that a father would enjoy talking and spending time with his daughter. My two sisters spend hours every day talking to my mother but no one has commented on that.
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