

Divorced Dads: Shattering the Myths

by Sanford L. Braver, with Diane O'Connel

Sanford Braver joins an emerging trend of divorce researchers: those who study fathers and how they have fared in the divorce process. Braver's book is based on his 12 years of researching the subject. During this time period, his group interviewed numerous divorced families. The poor image of divorced fathers caught Braver's attention. He decided to focus his research on divorcing fathers and expected to discover that the stereotypical images he had been reading about (deadbeat dads, runaway dads, absentee dads) would be confirmed by his research.

Because he had noticed that prior research was based on information gleaned from only one divorcing party, and because he suspected that this produced a biased result, he was careful to interview both parties. Therefore, he was able to collect data that led to his thesis that the stereotypical images of divorced dads are not true. Braver did not actually set out to disprove the myths in his research. Initially, he chose not to challenge the results that determined the myths; rather, he wanted to find out why such myths exist.

Braver identifies the problems in prior research and makes cogent arguments as to why prior studies have produced inaccurate results. But he also points out that myths arise because of the need for someone to be the scapegoat in the tragic divorce process. That is why he believes the image of the "bad dad" has been so readily accepted by society.

The identified myths are as follows:

- Deadbeat fathers are fathers who simply do not pay their child support.
- Divorced fathers are runaway dads.
- Divorced fathers impoverish their former wives and children.
- Divorce settlements tilt unfairly in favor of divorced fathers.
- Divorced fathers have it easy emotionally after divorce, whereas their ex-wives and children are distressed.
- Fathers initiate most of the family breakups, abandoning their families and responsibilities.

Braver then proceeds to "debunk" these myths, devoting a chapter to each. In each chapter, the reader is educated about the myth and why Braver believes there are flaws

in the research. Braver provides research results from his own study, which tends to refute the myths. For example, Braver demonstrates that past collected data about how many fathers are not paying child support may be inaccurate for various reasons. Another problem he exposes is that in many former studies, divorced fathers and never-married fathers are lumped together. He points out that research that does not combine these categories produces significant differences in payment dates for the two groups.

To further his argument, Braver has reexamined each issue using what appears to be superior methodology and analysis than the original studies that brought about these myths. In examining what happens to families' standards of living after divorce, Braver concludes that no one figure is the correct figure. He argues that there are a number of ways to come up with these calculations, and he concludes that both fathers and mothers fare about the same economically 1 year after divorce. Upon close analysis of the myth that divorce settlements unfairly tilt in favor of men, Braver goes to what he believes is the best source of information on the issue: both divorcing parties. His results, based on extensive interviews, indicate that women, rather than being less satisfied with the divorce results, are more satisfied than men.

Braver also discusses the significant role Lenore Weitzman's research and book had on policy makers and the general public. Most notable is Weitzman's figure that shows a 73% decrease in standard of living experienced by women and children after divorce. Braver recounts how he, and others, attempted to get Weitzman's research data to try to examine how she arrived at her conclusions. He recounts how she finally admitted to him that she could not rule out that a mistake had been made in her figures and that ultimately she did acknowledge that her figures were wrong. Braver concludes that the reason Weitzman's results were so easily accepted, even though they were anomalous, was because they comported with what most people believe: that belief being that divorced dads have it easy and divorced moms are victims.

Braver then moves into identified problems and potential solutions. One question that he asks is: "If men are disconnected from their children after divorce, why is that so?" He concludes that if a dad is made to feel as if he does not matter and is being driven away, he will disconnect himself from the children. The solution Braver proposes is that there be a rebuttable presumption of joint legal custody that may be overcome by showing that it would be inappropriate because of such factors as psychopathy, drug and alcohol abuse, and domestic violence. After examining various standards for determining custody, Braver concludes that indeed "the best interest of the child" is the correct and only necessary standard.

The final suggestions of the book are needed reforms in the divorce landscape. The suggestions are sound but not novel. They include divorce as a social service matter, which would make it nonadversarial. Therefore, parents would be better educated about divorce, particularly early in the divorce-breakup process before the parents become fixed in their positions. Braver has developed a program out of his research called Dads for Life. The description of the program is not given in detail because it is currently being evaluated. He makes it clear that the program does not take away from mothers but rather helps fathers parent in whatever situation they may find themselves.

Is this book helpful and, if so, for whom? Any divorce professional, be it lawyer, mental health professional, or judge, can benefit from reading a book that critically examines custody issues. There is no question that we do not know the best way to achieve custody agreements and whether they belong in or out of the court system. We need to continually question how to make the custody decision process work better for children and parents. Braver does an excellent job of challenging the dad stereotypes. The book reasonably questions stereotypes that have been accepted about fathers, mothers, and children of divorce. Reading it could cause a professional to think differently when dealing with the next case, or a policy maker to take a fresh look at issues. I found this book to be well worth reading.

Reviewed by M. Dee Samuels