



Perspectives of a Reform Commission: Ensuring the Role of Fathers in Their Children's Lives

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Author(s):	<i>Kathleen A. Clark and Randall W. Leite</i>
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Perspectives of a Reform Commission: Ensuring the Role of Fathers in Their Children's Lives

Kathleen A. Clark, PhD, MSW; Randall W. Leite, PhD

Introduction

Each year in the United States, more than one million marriages end in divorce, and approximately two-thirds of all divorces include couples with children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). In Ohio, more than 45,000 couples with children sought to end their marriages in 1999 alone (Ohio Courts Summary, 1999). Three-quarters of divorced men and two-thirds of divorced women remarry, and approximately 60% of second marriages end in divorce (Norton & Miller, 1992). Children in these families have a 50% chance of experiencing a second divorce before they reach age sixteen (Wallerstein & Johnson, 1990). More than 71 million children live in homes with a divorced parent or with parents who have never married each other (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990). According to *Kids Count Data Book 2000* (1997), 27% of all children in America live in single parent homes, a 24% increase over the 1990 figure. As a result of these trends, 19,770,000 children are being raised by a single parent, or by parents who do not reside together, also termed "two-home families." In 1997, the reported number of single parent families in Ohio was 383,000.

Research indicates that in the absence of interaction with both parents, children are more likely to develop at-risk behaviors. Children who do not reside with their biological fathers are at risk for increased rates of poverty, various emotional and psychological adjustment problems, academic difficulties, and heightened participation in criminal behavior (Blankenhorn, 1995; Popenoe, 1996). Through the work of The Ohio Task Force on Family Law and Children, Ohio's legislature was attempting to implement viable interventions to reduce the occurrence of these negative consequences.

History of Ohio Reform Efforts

Fathers who experience divorce are often unhappy and dissatisfied with the court system (Arditti & Allen, 1993). The fathers' primary complaint stems from the belief that courts favor mothers (Arendell, 1995). Less than 10% of divorced fathers have both legal and residential custody of their children, and less than 5% of the awards are joint residential decrees (Braver & O'Connell, 1998). Fathers are also dismayed with the apparent lack of court enforcement concerning visitation or parenting time schedules (Emery, 1994).

On April 11, 1991, Senate Bill 3 became the "Shared Parenting Bill," which allowed parents in Ohio to share in all or some aspects of the physical and legal care of their children. The purpose of the bill was to eliminate gender specific language and to substitute wording in earlier legislation denoting "ownership" and "winning" with less emotionally charged terms. The Chairman of the lobbying group Children and Parents' Rights Association, which had lobbied for four years to reform Ohio's custody laws, hailed its passage as the guarantee of equality between mothers and fathers. The following observations underscore the need to introduce policy change to address the gender-biased assumptions of previous legislation:

It's important to note that when I took the bench in 1977, the sitting judge's traditional philosophy was that a man was not entitled to overnight visitation with a child until the child was two and that fathers were only allowed two weeks visitation. We now have the first generation of children of divorce grown to adulthood without significant male nurturing (Personal Communication with Ohio Judge, 1994).

Kathleen Clark is Visiting Assistant Professor at the Ohio State University at Marion.

Randall W. Leite is Assistant Professor in the School of Family and Consumer Sciences at Bowling Green State University.

Correspondence should be addressed to:

Dr. Kathleen Clark, The Ohio State University at Marion, 1465 Mt. Vernon Ave., Marion, OH 43302

Dr. Randall W. Leite, School of Family and Consumer Sciences, 206 Johnston Hall, Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, OH 43403

Telephone: (419) 372-6824 E-mail: rleite@bgsu.edu

In 1994, proposed Senate Bill 178 was introduced to assist nonresidential parents in gaining more physical time with their children by advancing a 50/50 physical custody arrangement. The ensuing discussion and debate over this controversial bill resulted in the 1996 Ohio Parenting Act, submitted by the Ohio State Bar Association Family Law Committee. The Ohio Parenting Act required parents to submit a formal "parenting plan" upon filing for divorce, restricted the physical relocation of a child without the court's approval, and called for the creation of a Parenting Time Enforcement Unit. Concerned groups on either side of the debate contended that there was not enough empirical data to support these recommendations. In response to the myriad complexities underlying these issues, Ohio's 122nd General Assembly ratified Senate Bill 112, creating The Ohio Task Force on Family Law and Children (Task Force).

The Task Force was charged with creating "a more civilized and constructive process for the parenting of children whose parents do not reside together" (Amended Substitute Senate Bill 112). The group was to "research the current state of family law in Ohio and make recommendations that would result in a system that put children first, ensure that families have choices during the divorce and dissolution process, minimize conflict, and emphasize problem solving" (Family Law Reform: Minimizing Conflict, Maximizing Families, Task Force Final Report).

The Ohio Task Force on Family Law and Children

The original twenty-four-member Task Force began to meet in January of 1999. The members represented the legal and mental health professions, and included attorneys and judges (both juvenile and domestic), child and domestic violence advocates, parent educators, researchers and academicians, mediators, Senators, Representatives, and consumers. One of the authors (a social worker), served as Executive Director of the Task Force. This group of volunteers was instructed to submit a

Table 1: Key Points and Themes Drawn from Expert Testimony to the Task Force

- It is in the best interest of children to have an ongoing relationship with both parents.
- Mothers and fathers contribute in valuable and unique ways to their children.
- Nonresidential parents should remain involved.
- Parenting time arrangements (schedules) must allow enough time for children to bond with both parents.
- Children form attachments to both of their parents at about the same time.
- Parents should file parenting plans which detail the future parenting of their children.
- There should be enough time with each parent to assure that each remains emotionally and psychologically significant. Each parent has one third of the child's non-school hours.
- There is strong support for a presumption of joint legal/shared parenting.
- In cases of relocation, the burden should be on the parent who is moving away to prove the move is in the best interest of the child.
- Courts should mandate parents to attempt mediation.
- Programs which help reduce the conflict, such as parent education class, class for high conflict couples, and mediation should be available.
- There is a need for stronger efforts to educate those working with divorcing families (judges, attorney, custody evaluators, mediators, clinicians) of the contributions both parents provide to the development of their children.

final report to the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives. For the next six months, the Task Force gathered data on the current state of the law in Ohio and all relevant research findings regarding families and children in transition. This information was obtained through surveys and original research conducted by the Task Force, expert testimony, public input, and a review of the research literature.

Data Collection

Reform Initiatives in Other States and Countries

The Task Force was interested in other reform efforts, the scope of these efforts, and the results of policy changes. Family law reform legislation from

Washington, Oregon, California, Connecticut, Florida, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Australia, and the United Kingdom was examined, and proposed changes in Canada's legislation were also reviewed. The Task Force found that all of the above reform efforts shared a common goal: to decrease the animosity between parents often generated by an adversarial system, and to ensure that both parents are allowed to continue parenting their children. The majority of the reform legislation had proposed deleting emotional terms denoting ownership and promoted shared parenting responsibilities, parent education classes, and mediation. In Washington and Australia, longitudinal data focusing on the efficacy of reform efforts, suggested that, despite the progressive spirit of the law, in practice, the process remained the same, as parents continued to use litigation to resolve disputes. Most disturbing was the fact that nonresidential parents (predominately fathers) were not being granted more time with their children (Family Court of Australia, 1999; Lye, 1999).

What The Task Force Learned About Fathers

The Task Force employed the following research findings with regard to promoting healthy child transitions during the divorce process: (1) The importance of the involvement and contributions of both parents in the development of their children can not be overemphasized; (2) Fathers desire more involvement with their children, and overnight visits should be allowed for infants and young children; (3) Depending on the temperament of the child and the relationship between the parents, a child can adjust to multiple transitions and form multiple attachments; (4) Parenting plans should assume a shared parenting orientation and promote time scheduling equality between each parent; and (5) Parents should be required to attend mandatory parenting classes, where mediation strategies and conflict resolution are emphasized (Braver & O'Connell, 1998; Emery, 1999; Lamb, 1986, 1987; Lamb & Kelly, 2001; Lamb, Sternberg, & Thompson, 1997; Stahl, 1994, 1999).

The panel of experts discussed the myths associated with fathers and divorce, such as the deadbeat dad stereotype, the notion that men enjoy a higher standard of living after divorce, and the belief that fathers are able to make a rapid emotional recovery. Experts also described the prevalence of "parentally disenfranchised dads," who felt the legal system had stripped them of their role as father.

Recommended policy changes included the presumption of joint legal custody, with a specific formula to determine parenting time as a minimum of one-third of the child's non-school hours. Further, in a recent longitudinal study of mediation, Emery et al. (in press) concluded that parents who mediated their disputes remained more involved in their children's lives twelve years later, versus those parents who did not seek mediation. A summary of key points and themes drawn from the testimony of the various experts is included in Table 1 (page 46).

Public Input and Selected Survey Results

Using random sampling techniques, the Task Force surveyed over 1,375 parents in Ohio who had attended court mandated parenting programs for divorcing parents. The authors distributed the survey because parent representatives had not been appointed to the Task Force as consumers of the legal system. The survey was administered to determine the parent's level of satisfaction with the court process, the judges, attorneys, mediation, and social services, and to solicit their suggestions for policy change

Table 2: Levels of Satisfaction with Aspects of the Legal System (6 point scale)

Aspect of Legal System	Mean Score (std. dev.) n=510
Attorneys	3.20 (1.89)
Judges	4.26 (2.24)
Social Services	5.15 (2.18)
Mediation	5.53 (2.05)
Divorce Education	3.52 (2.19)
Overall Satisfaction	3.78 (1.78)

(Task Force Report, Appendix B). Five-hundred and ten of the surveyed parents were fathers. Table 2 provides a summary of fathers' levels of reported satisfaction with various aspects of the legal system.

The fathers' overall satisfaction level was 3.78 on a scale of 6.00. Fathers' were least satisfied with attorneys and divorce education programs, and their written comments indicated dissatisfaction with the length of the process and a perceived bias toward mothers. The fathers' evidenced relatively high satisfaction rates in relation to mediation and social services.

The Executive Director of the Task Force received 65 phone calls from the surveyed parents concerned about the current system. 90% of the phone calls were from fathers who were dissatisfied with the minimal amount of time court orders had provided for them to see their children. The Director had also received letters from fifteen fathers whose child(ren) had been relocated with their mother to another location, despite the fathers' objections. These men suggested Ohio adopt a position prohibiting residential parents from "moving away" with their child(ren) if the move would result in the deterioration of the non-residential parent-child relationship.

Recommendations to Eliminate Barriers to Fathering

The Task Force developed a set of recommenda-

tions designed to eliminate barriers to fathering. These are summarized in Table 3 and described below.

Education Regarding the Importance of Fathers in Children's Lives

The Task Force emphasized the need for all parties involved in the allocation of parenting responsibilities and functions to be knowledgeable about the importance of children having an ongoing relationship with both their mother and their father: "Establishing and maintaining a parent child relationship is of fundamental importance to the welfare of a child. Therefore, the relationship between a child and both parents should be fostered unless inconsistent with the child's best interest" (Task Force Report, pg. 7). Task Force members sought to underscore, to the courts and all parties involved with the development of parenting time schedules, that both mothers and fathers are vital and unique contributors to the ongoing development of the children. The Task Force's final report calls for post-divorce arrangements that promote a sustained relationship between the nonresidential parent and child(ren). Time distribution arrangements that ensure the involvement of both parents in important aspects of their children's everyday lives and routines — including bedtime and waking rituals, transitions to and from school, and extracurricular and recreational activities — are likely to maintain non-residential parents as psychologically important and preserve their central role in the lives of their chil-

Table 3: Task Force Recommendations Concerning Father Involvement

- Mandatory attendance at parenting education seminars and the development of pilot parenting programs addressing the unique needs of never-married parents.
- Statutory language should be adopted, which designates each parent as the "residential parent" of a child during the period of the child's residential stay with each parent.
- Legislation should include statutory language, which directs the courts not to draw any presumption from an interim order, and to not consider the order to be a factor in making a final decision regarding a permanent parenting decree.
- Expedited enforcement procedures should be developed, which may result in a continuum of sanctions through mandatory mediation. Sanctions should include, ordering additional "make-up" time, ordering the offending party to post bond and pay court costs, and ordering both parties to participate in counseling sessions.
- A parent wishing to relocate should be required to notify the court and the other parent of his/her intentions. In the event of an objection from the nonresidential parent, a hearing should be held to determine if the move is in the interest of the child.

dren (Lamb et al., 1997).

Though over half of the counties in Ohio currently offer parenting seminars, the Task Force believed that all parents should be apprised of this information through mandatory participation in such seminars. One study found that parents who attended these seminars were more aware of the importance of father involvement, and mothers were more likely to encourage and welcome participation of fathers in their children's lives (McKenry, Clark, & Stone, 1999). Therefore, the Task Force recommended that all parties attend parenting education seminars, and that pilot parenting programs be developed to address the unique needs of parents that never married (Task Force Report, pg. 16).

Survey data collected by the Task Force suggest that many fathers are dissatisfied with the professionals who conduct custody evaluations. Custody evaluators, court social workers, and community mental health professionals, who work with families in determining parent disputes and parenting plans, must understand child development, the impact of divorce on children and adolescents, and the role of mothers and fathers in the successful post-divorce adjustment of children. A Task Force review of programs and policies in Ohio's 88 County Domestic Relations Courts indicated: (1) Over half (55) of the counties did not have trained staff to conduct custody evaluations; (2) Of the 82 counties that use guardian ad litem (GAL) in parenting disputes, 78 counties have attorneys in this role whose only training was graduation from law school; and, (3) Only nineteen counties indicated that specialized training was required to become a GAL in their respective county (Task Force Report, Appendix B).

Language

The underlying connotations of language proved to be powerful motivators for parents' behavior in the divorce process. Terms denoting "power" and "ownership" trigger disputes between parents, implying that one role is more advantaged or valued over the other. Therefore, the Task Force rec-

ommended statutory language designating each parent as the "residential parent" of a child during the timeframe that that child spends living with that parent. In this model, residential parent status shifts as the child visits or resides with each parent. Currently, the term "residential parent" refers to the parent residing at the child's primary residence; whereas the term "nonresidential parent" refers to the parent the child does not primarily reside with. Ohio recently replaced the term "visitation" with "parenting time," and the Task Force recommended replacing the term "Temporary Orders" with "Interim Parenting Orders," in an attempt to remind all parties to focus on their role as "parents" (Task Force Report, pg. 8; Appendix A, Section 1 & 2).

Protecting the Father-Child Relationship

As stated earlier, the majority of the father's anecdotal comments to the author regarded their dissatisfaction with the amount of time they had with their children. Twelve of the experts who testified before the Task Force recommended a presumption of shared legal parenting, and two experts supported a presumption of shared physical parenting. Though members deemed it to be a potential source of conflict, the Task Force desired to preserve the intent of shared parenting, which was to empower parents by allowing them to make joint decisions about the health and welfare of their children. This goal was a marked departure from the standard "custodial parent" award, which allots a larger portion of the child's time and control over most major life decisions to the residential parent (predominately the mother). The Task Force recommended a parenting plan be submitted by the time of the final hearing to delineate the parenting time and responsibilities of each parent. The plans were to be developed through mediation, and the courts were to avoid standard time allocations (i.e., every other weekend for the nonresidential parent) (Task Force Report, pp. 8-10).

Concerns were raised that initial orders awarding mothers temporary care and custody of the children

often evolved into permanent orders, because the court was reluctant to introduce additional change into the children's lives. Upon further investigation by the Task Force, it was discovered that Oklahoma's Parentage Act allowed parents to have an equal time-share with the child from the time of the first court hearing, if either parent asked for it as a means of addressing this problem (Speak Out For Children, 1999/2000). The Task Force recommended statutory language be used to eliminate presumptions drawn from an interim order, or to consider it as a factor in making a decision on the terms of a final parenting decree (Task Force Report, pg.10).

The Task Force also explored research indicating that fathers were dismayed with the apparent lack of enforcement by the courts concerning visitation interference by residential mothers (Emery, 1994). It may be argued that fathers view the residential parent's "gate-keeping" as condoned by the courts, since sanctions are often not imposed against the mothers, or if sanctions are imposed, they often result in a minor "slap on the wrist." Therefore, the Task Force recommended that expedited enforcement procedures be instituted, resulting in a continuum of sanctions from mandatory mediation. These expedited enforcement procedures require: the provision of additional "make up" time, the offending party to pay court costs and post bond, and both parents to participate in counseling sessions (Task Force Report, pg. 15).

Through anecdotal conversations, the fathers conveyed that they felt powerless in decisions made about the relocation of a child, especially in terms of the relocation of children away from the nonresidential parent (i.e., "move aways"). The fathers' perception of the move was that the resultant geographic separation of father and child(ren) would often be great enough to fundamentally alter the father and child relationship. Many fathers' experience is that the court would approve the move, despite the fathers' objections.

The Task Force recommended that a parent wishing to relocate be required to notify the court

and the other parent of his/her intentions and, in the event of an objection on the part of the nonresidential parent, a hearing be held to determine if the move is in the best interest of the child, upon review of five key factors. It was the Task Force's hope that these factors would guide court decisions in this area. The order in which the Task Force organized these five factors reflects its emphasis on the parenting needs of children over the legal rights of adults. The ordering of factors is as follows: (1) The reason(s) either parent has in seeking or objecting to relocation; (2) If approved, whether there is a realistic opportunity to preserve the relationship between the child and the non-relocating parent; (3) The age and developmental level of the child and the impact the relocation will have on the child, taking into consider any special needs the child may have; (4) Whether the relocation of the child will enhance the general quality of life for both the child and the relocating parent, including but not limited to, financial and emotional benefits and increased educational and health opportunities; and (5) Any additional factors the court deems relevant (Task Force Report, A-11).

The priority ordering of these factors reflects the strong influence social workers and mental health professionals had in devising Task Force objectives. For example, item 4 was originally assigned the second-highest priority, because representatives from the legal community felt that the financial security of the residential parent was the paramount issue. Social workers and mental health professionals reminded Task Force members of social behavior research, which underscores the importance of sustaining the relationships between children and their parents. The maintenance of these somewhat fragile relations is far more important to a child's development than a \$5.00 an hour raise, for which a parent might move hundreds or thousands of miles away. Hence, the order of the factors was changed. Indeed, the influence of the Task Force's social workers was prominent, both in shaping policy and advocating for fathers.

Role of the Social Worker in Policy Making

Maryann Mahaffey, MSW, President of Detroit City Council, described the special role social workers have in influencing and contributing to the political process:

A social worker brings to the political process something that's unique, that no one else has. Anyone else can learn how to play games; you know, power games. Anybody can learn how to negotiate. Anybody can learn how to do the power manipulations. Those are techniques and skills that can be learned fairly easy. What the social worker brings is a value system that, if implemented, along with the skills, makes the difference (Haynes & Mickelson, 1997).

The main focus of social work is to enhance human well-being and to help meet basic needs by "assisting individuals to interact more effectively with the people and social institutions that are important to their lives" (Morales & Sheafor, 2001). Understanding and acknowledging the environmental forces that create and exacerbate problems in one's living arrangement is fundamental to social work practice. The environment is a critical factor, both in causing as well as in solving individual and social problems (Haynes & Mickelson, 1997). The dual focus of social work—the individual and the environment—lends itself to involvement in the policy making process, inasmuch as the focus of policy is on individuals' struggles and the directed efforts of institutions, social structures, and community organizations in supporting and enhancing human well-being (Siporin, 1992).

It is the profession's dualistic orientation of working both with micro and macro societal levels that allows social workers to contribute to policy making. The social worker is aware of the clients' needs, and can be a viable conduit between those who are powerless and those who hold the decision making power. In 1922, Mary Richmond wrote, "...family caseworkers should be making social discoveries as a by-product of successful casework.

They should be bearing faithful witness to the need for social reforms whenever their daily work reveals that need" (Webb, 1981). Indeed, social workers are specifically instructed to become socially and politically active as an ethical responsibility to the broader society (NASW Code of Ethics, 2001).

The roles and inherent values underlying the social work profession contribute to the policy making process. The professional roles of a social worker may include human services broker, social and adaptive skills teacher, counselor/clinician, case manager, workload manager, staff developer, administrator, social change agent, and professional (Sheafor, Horejsi, & Horejsi, 1991). As the Executive Director, one of the authors utilized the roles of clinician, professional, and social change agent in guiding the Task Force toward the completion of its assignment. Each of these roles is described more completely below.

Clinician Role

For the past 22 years, one of the authors worked with children and families experiencing divorce. Through day-to-day involvement in the lives of children and parents experiencing divorce, the Executive Director was cognizant of their needs and their perception of the court system. It is the clinician's "citizen social worker role" that allows information and knowledge gained through interaction with individuals and groups to inform the larger society of needed programs and policies (Haynes & Mickelson, 1997). After hours of discourse between Task Force members, it was the author's perception that judges and attorneys were only cognizant of specific aspects of their client's lives. It was the social worker who was able to provide a sense of context and possible explanations for the behavior of parents and children. Specifically, non-residential fathers were portrayed as detached and uninvolved parents, who pursued shared parenting responsibilities because they did not want to pay child support. However, the social worker informed fellow Task Force members that, for many fathers,

this lack of involvement may be largely a function of barriers they experience (e.g., custodial mothers and access schedules), rather than their own preferences (Dudley & Stone, 2001). In fact, many fathers find it less painful to withdraw from their children's lives completely, than to remain partially involved (Kruk, 1992; Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

Professional Role

As a professional, the social worker is required to assume an ethical practice orientation, while contributing to the profession's knowledge base through practice and research (Sheafor et al., 1997). In this regard, the author developed and utilized a) knowledge of current research on parenting after divorce, b) the evaluative data on services and programs for divorcing families, and c) recommendations and implications for future research. Further, the author had conducted qualitative research on children and fathers' adjustment to divorce, which served to expedite the data collection phase.

Advocate / Social Change Agent

The role of social change agent requires one to identify problems and direct efforts toward institutional change, resulting in the enhancement of individual functioning, viable solutions to a problem, or correcting an injustice via social advocacy (Sheafor et al., 1997). Social workers not only advocate for change, but need to ensure that marginalized voices are recognized, heard, and respected. Adhering to the profession's ethical value system, the author insisted that all shareholders impacted by divorce (e.g., mothers, fathers, children, grandparents, and social service agencies) be heard, either through written or oral testimony. With minor resistance, the author comprised a panel of four young adults, who had experienced parental divorce, to appear before the Task Force to share their experiences and to offer recommendations. The judges and attorneys later contended that the panel's testimony had "opened their eyes" to the impact of divorce on children. The judges stated they had often wondered

what the long-term impact had been on the decisions they rendered regarding custody.

Building Consensus

Task Force members were diverse in the professional fields they represented, their personal and professional experiences, and in their recommendations for policy change. There were members who felt that there was nothing wrong with the current system, while others felt that the entire process should be overhauled. Other points of conflict focused on whom should testify before the Task Force, what groups' needs were "legitimate," the type and quantity of information to be disseminated, and the format of the Final Report. The author believed that if members were made aware of current research findings, it would be easier to make recommendations based on empirical data.

The author was guilty of what Haynes and Mickelson (1997) cautioned as being naïve, in that "social workers entering the political process want political candidates, elected officials, and administrative executives to have all available information, rather than a biased and limited perspective, and the freedom to make informed and self-determined decisions." Thus, the author was naïve in assuming that empirical evidence related to divorce would be utilized by the members when formulating policy recommendations. Two factors that had the greatest influence over the decision making process were (a) a lack of understanding regarding how the political process works, and (b) the legal community's reception of the research being presented (i.e. from the behavioral science, not law).

Families encountering the divorce process can benefit from the collaborative efforts of the mental health community and the legal profession, because divorce is not just a legal event, but also an emotional experience. However, there is a history of unsuccessful professional collaboration between these two groups (Fisher & Fisher, 1982; Herrman, McKenry, & Weber, 1979; Mosten, 1995; Weil, 1982). Barriers to collaboration include differences

in values, professional training, language, traditions, methods, and goals (Hancock, 1982; Johnson & Cahn, 1995). Many legislators and representatives of the legal system do not have an accurate picture of social workers or their professional activities (Haynes & Mickelson, 1997). However, mental health professionals must understand the guiding tenets of the legal community as well. The fundamental issue at hand is the methods employed to bring these factions together in a way that results in a better system and outcomes for parents and their children, which incorporates the social skills of emotional neutrality, impartiality, and mediation. Social workers can effectively apply their micro and macro level mediation skills to buffer between groups with opposing interests (Siporin, 1992).

An example of a successful collaboration between attorneys and social workers was accomplished in Portland, Maine. The Resources for Divorced Families (RFDF) was established as an interdisciplinary organization of divorce professionals. Similar to the Ohio Task Force, RFDF had divisions among the members. "At the outset, issues of territoriality and tradition, particularly for attorneys accustomed to retaining primary power in the legal arena, made the formation of a shared vision of the divorce process difficult" (Cohen-Konrad, 2002). The Ohio Task Force, like RFDF, did reach consensus on the goals and recommendations for improving the system, through a process of respectful dialog that occurred only after many months of forced inter-group activity. The preconceived stereotypes of "bleeding heart liberals" and "cold, black-and-white, by-the-book legals" were replaced with more accurate assessments. As one attorney shared, "[T]his committee work has given me an education of social workers which I respect."

Conclusion

Social work education should continue to encourage students to train as generalists. The generalist-oriented social worker is a natural fit in the policy making process, because such a person carries a

macro-level focus that enhances policy deliberations and decisions. Generalists also embrace interventions on different levels (Billups, 1992). Students should be encouraged to follow a social action track in order to develop activism and related skills and knowledge about political practice. (Hull, 1987; NASW Code of Ethics, 2002; Sheafor et al., 1997). Internships with political candidates and elected officials would afford students the opportunity to learn how the political process works, while allowing them to continue to build bridges between the legal field and the social work profession.

The Task Force developed recommendations for improving services to families and reducing conflict between parents by offering mediation, parenting classes, submission of a parenting plan, support groups for children and adults, and the use of guardian ad litem. Social workers proved to be invaluable in assisting parents and the courts by applying the multi-faceted roles of clinician, case manager, and social change agent (Sheafor et al., 1997).

In envisioning the role of social workers in the 21st century, Mason (1997) expresses the need for social workers to integrate themselves within the court system to work with children and families. Social workers bring specialized training of child development and family systems. The dual focus of social work will allow social workers to better assess the totality of individual family situations when determining parenting issues. Mason also suggests that social workers would be excellent mediators, because their training emphasizes impartiality and respect of groups and their interests.

Social workers should remain vigilant in their pursuit of knowledge about individuals and families through practice and research. It was the combination of practice experience and empirical research knowledge, with regard to fathers, that resulted in the successful profiling of the fathers' experiences and concerns in the divorce process. The Ohio Task Force on Family Law and Children critically examined the barriers fathers face in sustaining an active

parenting presence in the lives of their children after divorce, and recommended policy changes that would address these barriers. It was the unique skills

and value system of social work practice that facilitated a process resulting in unity, and a new respect between the disciplines of law and social work.

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