

EQUAL PARENTING: WHY IT MATTERS

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When I was a little girl, I wanted to be the first female Prime Minister of Canada. Why not? Raised in a single parent matriarchal home, I was told on a daily basis that women were equal to men. "We can do anything men can do, if not better. You don't need a man." Unfortunately for me, Kim Campbell beat me to it. I was still a high school student when she became the first female Prime Minister.

So, imagine my shock, when as a young mother, I divorced and realized that there was one area where women had MORE equal rights than men. Parenting. I was told by six lawyers that I had all the rights when it came to the children. I could have sole custody. I could sit back and focus on myself and my children because my husband would have to pay me for the privilege of seeing his children four days a month. I imagine that it is a very heady moment for some women when they are provided with this information: a moment of omnipotence; a moment of retribution.

My former husband and I decided on Joint Custody, however, I've come to learn that regardless of what the law says, in the eyes of the courts, joint custody is really only sole custody with visitation. "But this is the way it is," I was told.

That is, with joint custody, children do not necessarily spend equal amounts of their time with each parent. Rather, one parent retains physical custody, usually the mother, and the father is left behind, often with relatively infrequent access rights, despite the fact both parties are supposed to have equal say about the child's upbringing.

After several months on my own with the children, I was beginning to feel far more like I was living in the underworld, rather than a specially ordained place called single motherhood. My young children were suffering and needed their father far more than four days a month. They were no longer being raised by their mother and father, but by their mother and a string of babysitters and daycare providers that would be better off caring for inanimate objects. Something had to change.

I became involved with another man who was a great dad: one of the new generation of men we women have been seeking. Caring, involved in raising his children, a good provider, does dishes AND takes out the trash. He, unfortunately, went from being the primary caregiver to his own children to a non-custodial, four-day a month dad. And the pattern repeats. His children displayed all the same suffering and symptoms my own children did.

I began to do research and in December of 1998, the government issued a report on child custody and access called "For the Sake of the Children." The Joint Senate/House Committee made 48 recommendations, and one was for a presumption of shared parenting – a recommendation that has yet to be implemented.

My ex-spouse and I decided, however, that a shared parenting arrangement would be much better for our own children. We made a joint motion to the court to vary our custody order to 50:50 time with equal rights and responsibilities and no child support. The judge, in his infinite wisdom, said no. We applied again. Our order was granted and for the past ten years I have had what I now call equal parenting. Our children live alternate weeks with each of us. The children benefit from not only both of their parents being continuously involved, but from their extended family, as well. Our children are being raised by the people who love and protect them most.

As an adult, I realize how much I lost out on being raised in a single parent home and I have a different view on equality as a result. If I gain my rights by taking away someone else's, I have gained nothing at all. It is now my life's work to fight for equal parenting as a presumption in law. The welfare of women, men and children demands it and 80% of the population agrees.