

Badly Managed Issues have National Economic Implications

Families' **disputed/messy divorces should be a matter that interests society**

Petri Kolmonen, Chairman of the Fathers' Association for Children, says that he himself has gone through a very difficult divorce. Kolmonen says he was accused of 'everything possible' but luckily, he was able to prove that the allegations were untrue. In his opinion, it was extremely hard to prove to society that he was a good father. In practice, I was the person to whom my child was most attached, and I had the prime responsibility for caretaking and nurturing, and this was not acknowledged.

Kolmonen also states that when the custody issues were dealt with by the local social welfare office his experience was that, as a father, he was treated in an unfairly biased way. Of course, this is district-specific and employee-specific, but according to research it has been proven that authorities do treat fathers differently from mothers. In addition, he also feels that in his case, negative issues concerning him were more easily documented by the social services than any of those of the mother. For example the interaction and bond between him and his child was also wrongly assessed, he says. This bond was then reassessed positively, but the Court of Appeal did not take this into account in their decision.

Fathers do not always consider custody agreements in the best interest of the child. Studies also show that the authorities favor mothers in custody decisions

Research results also indicate that many official documents are corrected retrospectively in favour of fathers after re-assessments. In Kolmonen's case he had the main responsibility for raising his child and this was not recorded and had to be corrected in the records of the social services in hindsight. According to research approximately 13 percent of fathers are granted primary custody in the District Courts but at the Court of Appeal this rises to 27 percent in favour of fathers. These statistics show that it appears that there is bias in favour of mothers says, Kolmonen.

Mari Palo-Revo's statistical analysis revealed, inter alia, that mothers or their new partners who had a proven mental health, substance abuse or violence problem were still given a 32 percent chance of being granted primary custody at Helsinki Court of Appeal between 2003 and

2006. Fathers with similar aforementioned problems were never granted primary custody.

Kolmonen considers the figures unnecessarily bad but feels that they do reflect the current situation. He would also seek to remind us that there has been a big change in the role of the father, especially during this millennium. In the past we thought of the father as the provider and that the mother was the one who brought up the children, nowadays both sexes share these roles. Still, it seems that the social services have not fully abandoned these old stereotypes in their practices. According to Kolmonen, the problem is that the law is seeking a winner and the loser will pick up the bill. Custody decisions are often made in the midst of a crisis, is that even a good moment to decide the fate of child's entire life?

Last year, almost 700 phone calls were received by the Father's Association for Children (Isat Lasten Asiassa) which is a figure that has almost doubled from the previous year. According to Kolmonen the association did not previously place so much focus on its visibility and that these figures may just be the tip of the iceberg concerning the true scale of the problem. He also stated that another possible reason for the increase in the number of calls may be that fathers are now better aware of the possibility of participating in the life of the children after divorce, as this topic has recently been more widely discussed in the media.

Fathers who are divorcing or are living with the threat of divorce, often do not believe that the authorities will comply with the law on constitutional equality (clause six). Fathers know they are in a weaker position with authorities such as the social services. During this period of crisis, they may be on the receiving end of threats from the spouse to take the children to the other side Finland or that they will never see the children again. Some fathers face untrue allegations and attempts by the spouse to alienate the children. Kolmonen regrets that in cases of parental alienation there are no systematic services or protocol to deal with this serious problem. Kolmonen, also reminds us that other divorce support services are used by parents who already concurrent that they want an agreement.

It must also be remembered that there are many parents who do think in terms of the best interests of their child. On the other hand, there are also cases where one parent alienates a child, even though this is serious mental abuse. In the current system, those parties who carry out alienation, for example, are not required to go to mediation unless they want to. Alienation is defined as when communication with a child is prevented or made difficult by the other parent. Studies show that about 30% of

children are alienated from the other parent. This number rises to 37% when a parent with primary custody finds a new partner.

In Kolmonen's opinion, the parent with primary custody has a lot of power if they do decide they want to misuse it. This shouldn't even be seen as a gender issue, as a lot of mothers also share the same experiences and have similar crises. However, the fact is that statistically more fathers than mothers suffer from being alienated from their children.

According to Kolmonen's experience, regarding crisis calls to the Association, it can be seen that different values, different perceptions of bringing up children and/or cultural differences often cause serious disputes in divorces. Kolmonen hopes that in the future divorces would not even be granted unless there is a binding agreement concerning the children. This really would be in children's and their parents' best interests. Kolmonen also believes that disputed divorces, where children are involved, should be a matter for society: as children of single parents suffer the most poverty.

There are also clearly more health and welfare problems for children of divorce. 12 percent of children in nuclear families have such problems which rises to 20-25 percent of children of divorce. It is clear that badly managed issues concerning children of divorce impact the national economy.

The Father's Association for Children provides a peer support phone line, where people can call for help, for example, in the midst of a crisis concerning their divorce. The association also organizes peer support meetings and divorce support services. The crisis support line volunteers hear a lot of very tragic stories. For the callers the consequences of these difficult situations have led to sick leave, early retirement and suicidal ideation. For children this period may also be very traumatic

- The same amount of oxytocin, the so-called love hormone, is secreted by fathers as by mothers when their child is near them, Petri Kolmonen says.

A new association for children's rights has been co-founded by Petri Kolmonen. Children's Rights Ry was founded on Independence Day last year and had its first meeting in January. The association will be publishing new web pages, and more information about their activities will be available this spring. The new gender neutral association will also encourage mothers to join to help promote the rights of children, says Kolmonen.

The framework for equal parenting-shared living is slowly moving forward in fits and starts. The law in Finland does not yet recognize the concept of equal parenting-shared living even though it is becoming common elsewhere. For example, in Denmark, a child may have two registered addresses where social benefits, for example, can be equally shared. In Denmark, the new law will enter into force on the 1st of April 2019. With it, a child can be legally registered in two homes which both share social benefits. By law, all actors connected to child welfare in Denmark, such as social workers and judges, will also be sent for further training.

In Sweden, equal parenting-shared living is considered the best option for the wellbeing of children after divorce. In the new child welfare and parental access bill shared living is only mentioned as alternative, although according to Petri Kolmonen, there is extensive research that overwhelmingly shows that is the best arrangement after the breakdown of the nuclear family.

In Finland last year, the working group of Health and Welfare Ministry led by MP Annika Saarikko (Centre), presented new ideas about reforms to the ministry's current practices. The working group advocated, among other things, that shared living should be recognised by registration in the population information system.

Saarikko's working group also proposed renewal of laws concerning general housing support, making it possible that a child could be recognised as permanently resident in two locations. Similarly, reforms are also being considered in the laws concerning child maintenance payments and of home care and personal support benefits. These new laws would make possible the equally shared payment of benefits to both homes where children reside. These proposals are being processed by Finland's State Council. This feasibility study is referred to as (VN-TEAS) which refers to the current status of equal parenting-shared living and the effects on services and the benefit system.

Proposals for the reform package are being processed and maintenance and legislative reforms (OM) are pending subject to parliamentary review. According to Kari Ilmonen, the Chairman of the youth sector of the Health and Welfare Department of the Ministry of Health, these new laws would enable the Registrar to be able to officially record a child's shared living status and the agreed addresses in the population registry.

Petri Kolmonen, chairman of the Children's Association, believes that equal parenting and shared living should always be the starting point concerning living arrangements for children after divorce. This would guarantee the right of the child, above all else, to spend time equal time with both parents. According to research, the most important single factor for the well-being of children after divorce is the relationship between parent and child. Petri Kolmonen emphasises.

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