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Educational support for fathers caring for the quality of their relationship with their child after divorce

Wsparcie edukacyjne ojców dbających o jakość relacji z dzieckiem po rozwodzie

Abstract

Background: Educational support for fathers who strive to improve their parenting competences, to improve their caring skills, to increase their knowledge of the child's needs at different stages of development, but also for those fathers who have been deprived of regular contact with their child as a result of divorce, is an important factor in determining the quality of the relationship with the child after divorce.

Goals: The aim of the research was to explore the educational experiences of fathers concerned with the quality of their relationship with their child after divorce. The research problems focused on the forms of educational support they undertook and men's expectations of the types of support dedicated to fathers seeking to maintain a good relationship with their child after divorce.

Methodology: The research was situated in a qualitative orientation using a narrative interview which was conducted among ten fathers who are divorced and seek to maintain or improve their relationship with their child.

Results: The main forms of educational support used by the surveyed fathers are online portals, legal and psychological counselling, workshops and training. The surveyed fathers expect the popularisation of involved fatherhood and the expansion of the educational offer for post-divorce fathers especially in the field of family law.

Conclusions: Awareness of the importance of educational support for fathers wishing to maintain a good relationship with their child after divorce points to the need to extend

this kind of support to men who are seeking solutions to improve their quality of functioning in a situation of loss of contact with their child.

Keywords: educational support, fathers, relationship with the child, divorce.

Introduction

Social support for families holds significant importance today, mainly due to the changes occurring in society and the need for family members to respond to new challenges arising from these transformations. A lack of support can lead to various states of tension and stress, result in conflicts between adult family members, and, consequently, lead to the breakdown of the family. Existing scientific explorations primarily focus on the importance of social support in the context of individuals coping with depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts (Scardera *et al.*, 2020, pp. 1–12), as well as improving mental health (Cheng *et al.*, 2014, pp. 31–38) and quality of life (Kumsağız and Şahin, 2017, pp. 1–7). Social support plays a crucial role in dealing with difficult life situations associated with various types of conflicts affecting family members (Dudak, 2021a, pp. 120–121). Divorce is undoubtedly an event considered as a critical life event, characterised by: “causing destabilisation in the subject-environment system, requiring changes in one’s functioning, creating risks of pathology, inducing significant emotional tension, and disrupting habitual activities of the individual” (Beisert, 2000, p. 44).

In a broad sense, social support pertains not only to stressful situations but is understood as a consistently available characteristic of relationships that fosters adaptation and health (Lin, 1986, pp. 17–30), as well as the activities of altruistic communities or the activation of behaviours helpful to individuals (Wojciszke, 2002, pp. 313–344). Social support is also defined, in the light of social exchange theory, as “a type of social interaction in which emotions, information, instruments of action, and material goods are conveyed or mutually exchanged by one or both participants in a difficult situation” (Sęk, 2003, p. 22). In this approach, support facilitates overcoming difficulties, and the awareness that there is someone in a similar situation makes it easier to take actions to solve the problem. Such support holds particular significance for fathers who wish to fulfill their roles as engaged caregivers, participate in raising their child on an equal footing with mothers, and for fathers fighting for their right to custody and contact with their child after divorce.

Given the focus of the issue, it is important to emphasize that educational support for families, as a type of cognitive support, alongside emotional, instrumental, material, or spiritual support (S k, 2003, p. 24), is particularly significant for parents who wish to fully and competently fulfill their parental roles, as well as for spouses experiencing the crisis of divorce and seeking professional help. In this context, educational support serves as a crucial element in supporting the lives of fathers who strive to maintain the quality of their relationship with their child after divorce. This primarily concerns fathers fighting for their rights to custody and equal treatment in the realm of family life, as well as fathers seeking to enhance their parenting skills to provide the best possible conditions for their child's proper development. It also involves improving their ability to cope with relationships with their child – often complicated by the breakdown of the family – and fulfilling the role of a secondary caregiver.

1. Selected forms of educational support for fathers caring about the quality of their relationship with their child after divorce

The rising divorce rate in many countries has led to increased interest in creating support mechanisms for men who struggle with the conflicts of divorce and post-divorce challenges. The demand for this type of assistance stems primarily from the growing awareness among men regarding their essential and irreplaceable role in their child's life and the necessity of fulfilling their fatherly responsibilities despite the breakdown of the family. Fathers fighting for their rights to maintain contact with their child after divorce can benefit from various forms of educational support offered by non-governmental organizations, foundations, and associations. These institutions primarily provide educational support in areas such as legal rights, psychological assistance, mediation skills, conflict reduction – particularly in situations involving children – and improving co-parenting relationships for the child's benefit. Examples include organizations like Narodowe Centrum Ojcostwa (National Fatherhood Initiative) in Poland and programs in the United States¹, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, Responsible Fatherhood Programs, and the Dads for Life (DFL) program (Cookston *et al.*, 2007, pp. 123–137). These programs aim to create opportunities for fathers to participate in their children's lives by improving the

¹ The article refers to American examples of father-focused institutions and educational programs due to the fact that the United States of America is a country where pioneering forms of social support for divorced fathers were introduced. This was primarily the result of the increase in the number of divorces, the demand for this type of assistance, and the country's social policy.

quality and stability of relationships between spouses, if they remain in a relationship, or by helping fathers maintain relationships with their children in the context of divorce.

Another important form of educational support for men seeking to fulfill their roles as fathers is the promotion of engaged fatherhood and programs supporting families and relationships with children (e.g., National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, National Fatherhood Initiative). These initiatives aim to raise public awareness about the critical importance of fathers' presence in their children's lives (Fatherhood.org, 2023). An essential aspect of this support also involves developing parenting competencies, assisting fathers in managing daily caregiving and upbringing tasks, and organizing training and workshops for prospective fathers in the broader context of pedagogical culture (e.g., Fundacja "Dajemy Dzieciom Siłę" (the "Empowering Children Foundation"), 2023; the Tato.net initiative, 2023; and The Department of Children and Families' Fatherhood Programs, 2023).

The educational support, particularly in the United States, offers fathers the access to programs designed to teach skills for establishing and maintaining positive relationships with the child's mother to facilitate cooperation and agreement on matters concerning the child after divorce. This is especially important given the popularity in the U.S. of shared custody arrangements following divorce (Dudak, 2021b, pp. 15–16). In Poland, this form of custody remains relatively uncommon. However, it is worth noting that fathers, in particular, seek educational support in this area, aiming to obtain information about the conditions required to implement shared custody arrangements.

2. Methodological assumptions of the research

The study was conducted within a qualitative framework, situated in a biographical perspective. Its core aim was to explore and analyse the forms of educational support undertaken by fathers and the expectations of men regarding the types of support available to fathers striving to maintain good relationships with their children after divorce. In this research, fathers' use of support in the discussed area was regarded as a central biographical experience in the context of a challenging life situation resulting from the breakdown of the family and the loss or deterioration of contact with their children (Bauman, 1995, as cited in Ostrouch, 2004, p. 90). The narrative interview method was applied, following F. Schütze's concept, which assumes that individuals shape their behaviour through interactions with their environment and that men's educational activ-

ity aimed at obtaining support is undertaken consciously. Furthermore, it was assumed that there is a fundamental consistency between what men experience in their lives and their narratives about these experiences (Urbaniak-Zajac and Kos, 2013, pp. 91–92). The outcomes of applying narrative interviews in this research could serve as a form of support for social change programs (Denzin and Lincoln, 2009, p. 4). The narratives presented by fathers who utilize educational support to expand their parental knowledge and competencies and to seek solutions for coping with the difficult situation of losing contact with their children after divorce can achieve several objectives. These include drawing greater societal attention to the challenges fathers face, such as stereotypical assessments of paternal competencies and the needs of men in family relationships. Additionally, the narratives could provide insights into ways to improve the circumstances of other fathers struggling with the loss of contact with their children and aspiring to fulfill their roles as engaged and committed fathers.

The conducted interviews provided answers to the following research questions:

1. What forms of educational support do fathers caring about the quality of their relationship with their child after divorce utilize?
2. What are the expectations of the surveyed men regarding forms of educational support dedicated to fathers striving to maintain good relationships with their child after divorce?

All interviews were conducted in person and recorded. Subsequently, the recordings were transcribed and the collected material was organized according to the guidelines established during the development of the research concept. The interpretation of the material began with a formal analysis, dividing the text based on thematic indicators (Urbaniak-Zajac and Kłos, 2013, p. 104), which were then subjected to a thorough analysis. This process enabled the exploration of the educational experiences of fathers who strive to maintain the quality of their relationship with their child after divorce.

3. Characteristics of the study group

The study used a purposive sampling method. It involved ten fathers who are divorced and are striving to maintain or improve their contact with their child. The research was conducted between October and December 2022 in Poland. Among the participants, the vast majority are fathers who, by court decision, have defined visitation rights, with the child residing with the mother. In only

three cases, the court ruled for shared custody. The average age of the men is 35 years, all of them have higher education, and they reside in urban areas. The majority of the participants have one child, with only two men being fathers of siblings.

4. Analysis of research results

The study aimed to identify the forms of educational support utilized by fathers striving to maintain the quality of their relationship with their child after divorce. Based on the analysis of the conducted interviews, three primary forms of educational support preferred by the participants can be distinguished. In their narratives, the fathers highlighted participation in workshops and training sessions that allowed them to expand their pedagogical knowledge and find satisfaction in their role as fathers. Examples of such statements are as follow:

M5: 'I participated in workshops for fathers with their children. Great activities, more playful in nature, but it was an amazing time.'

M2: 'Conversations and group exercises on how to deal with children, how to organize their time. These workshops also gave me more confidence, and I appreciated the role my father once had.'

M8: 'Meetings in fatherhood clubs. Although I was initially apprehensive, these meetings taught me to notice simple things, gestures, and behaviours that allow you to enjoy being a dad. A friend convinced me to join, and he's someone who hasn't experienced divorce himself.'

It is worth emphasizing that this type of support primarily targeted fathers who needed help in improving the quality of their contact with their child. My interviewees saw participation in the workshops not only as an opportunity to enhance their parenting skills but, importantly, as a way to discover that being a father brings joy and satisfaction. The experiences revealed in the participants' statements align with the modern image of an engaged father who finds fulfillment in his role, viewing contact with his child as an opportunity for self-realization and personal satisfaction (Muszyński, 2011, p. 138; Arcimowicz, 2010, pp. 13–15; Dudak and Klimkowska, 2023, p. 336; Majka-Rostek, 2011).

Another form of educational support identified by my interviewees was legal and psychological counseling. The interviews highlighted, in particular, the fact that men seek educational support in legal matters due to difficulties in preparing court documents and because of feelings of helplessness and fear of losing in family court cases regarding contact with their child after divorce.

M10: 'I reached out to an association [...] because I had no idea what to do to win custody of my child in court. They helped me, taught me how to fill out the documents. I still stay in touch with them, just in case my situation changes.'

M4: 'After the divorce, I didn't seek legal support as often as I did during the court proceedings, but I try to keep up with the proposed changes regarding custody arrangements granted to fathers.'

M1: 'I knew that a father in court always has an 'uphill battle,' that no one would believe he truly cares about his child. That's the stereotype. I needed to learn how to act in court and what documents to prepare to have at least a chance.'

The above narratives of the men clearly revealed the challenging situations faced by fathers fighting for their right to custody through the court system. It is worth emphasizing that, despite receiving educational support in legal matters – which enabled them to prepare for court proceedings – as well as psychological support, my interviewees did not abandon this form of assistance. Their statements reflected uncertainty regarding the permanence and consistency of court decisions, which is why the men continue to actively seek this type of support. The difficult situation of divorced fathers stems primarily from the fact that family court decisions are rarely favourable to men (GUS, 2020, p. 246).

One of the most popular forms of educational support used by the fathers in the study is online platforms aimed at fathers. An analysis of the interviews with my participants indicates that such resources provide them with the most accessible way to obtain information and also offer psychological support, fostering a sense that they are not alone and that there are other men in similar life situations. Examples of this include the following statements:

M1: 'The Internet is a source of knowledge for fathers seeking support and help. I've learned that I'm not alone in my problems, that there are other men who, like me, want to be good fathers but are also looking for knowledge.'

M2: 'Through the Internet, I found out where I could call. There are various organizations. I also read and searched for the opinions of other fathers.'

It is worth emphasizing that the fathers' statements clearly revealed skeptical or cautious evaluations of the content posted on father-focused websites. The following remarks reflect not only the men's awareness and experience in using advice found on such platforms but, above all, their motivation to fight for the regulation of contact with their child after divorce. It is important to note that there are currently fewer father-oriented websites on the Internet that primarily promote advice aimed at seeking revenge on ex-wives or stripping mothers of custody rights. The decline in popularity of such websites is mainly due to a shift in

the approach of fathers themselves. Fathers seeking to regulate contact with their child are no longer hostile toward the mothers but rather aim to maintain amicable relationships for the sake of the child's well-being. This undoubtedly also reflects a higher level of awareness among fathers regarding the importance of both parents in a child's life for their proper development.

M4: 'I thought I would get help by searching father-focused websites. There's a lot of different information, but you have to be careful not to get carried away. Not all advice appealed to me. But it depends on what someone is looking for.'

M3: 'Over the years, I've noticed how much the information for fathers on the Internet has changed. Six or seven years ago, when I was searching for information for fathers fighting for their children, I read everything I could find and believed it all. Later, I realized you have to be cautious because that knowledge isn't always useful or helpful. Information for fathers is available, and it's worth using, but you need to know-how. Some websites post content that stirs up more conflict among fathers rather than promoting good solutions.'

The conducted interviews indicate that my interlocutors perceive all forms of educational support as a source of knowledge, specific assistance, and solutions that would help them better cope with the role of an engaged father and the challenging situation of losing contact with their child after a divorce.

The study also attempted to diagnose the expectations of the men surveyed regarding the offer of educational support. The respondents' statements allowed for the identification of three areas of these expectations. In my interlocutors' narratives, the theme of promoting engaged fatherhood was particularly prominent. Recognizing changes in attitudes toward the evaluation of contemporary fathers, the men expressed a desire for the dissemination of information not only about the difficult situation of fathers after divorce but also, and perhaps most importantly, about emphasizing in society that the modern father wants to be actively involved in his child's life and to participate equally with the mother. They are not afraid to show emotions in this regard. This approach aligns with the modern model of masculinity and fatherhood, rooted in the concept of androgyny (Mandal, 2004, pp. 196–212; Bem, 2000, pp. 118–119). The principles of androgyny allow contemporary individuals to approach functioning in a changing world more easily and flexibly. According to E. Gładzewska (2005, p. 140), "androgynous individuals are better psychologically adjusted and cope more effectively in various life situations than those with distinctly masculine or feminine personalities. They have a holistic nature, which enables them to experience the full spectrum of human emotions. Their adaptive abilities lie in applying either masculine or feminine behavior patterns as needed." The an-

androgynous approach is thus treated as an opportunity for individuals to transcend the limitations of gender stereotypes and choose their own path in fulfilling social roles. This holds particular significance for men because, as Brannon's research indicates (2002, pp. 211–228), they are subject to stronger stereotyping than women. Androgyny allows men to take on roles previously reserved for women. of particular importance here are parental roles associated with caregiving and educational tasks (cf. Arcimowicz 2010, pp. 13–15).

M3: 'I notice some positive changes, but I think there should be more information, like TV programs or newspaper articles, not only about the difficult situation of fathers after divorce but also about the fact that fathers want to and love their children. It seems obvious, but unfortunately, not to everyone.'

M8: 'I'm glad that engaged fathers are finally being noticed, but I would like our society as a whole to change its attitude toward fathers. A father also has feelings and wants to be with his child.'

Significant from the perspective of the transformations occurring within the family is the revealed narrative of fathers who openly admit to their emotions and express a desire to be actively involved in their child's life. My interlocutors also expressed the need for an expanded educational offer in the area of legal support, particularly concerning solutions that provide equal opportunities for both parents in matters of contact with the child after divorce. They also sought specific advice on how to act in court, what documents to prepare, and how to increase their chances of success. Examples of such statements include:

M10: 'There is a lack of information and advice regarding shared custody. I was successful, and I'm happy about that, but I know that many of us are looking for knowledge on this type of custody.'

M4: 'There should be more written and spoken about what happens in courts and the situation fathers face after divorce.'

M1: 'I think there should be a synthesis of the legal status of a father who is trying to gain the right to contact with his child. Polish legislation is unclear and not very accessible for laymen.'

M10: 'I don't need it anymore because my contact with my child is now legally regulated, but I know that when I was fighting for it, any legal help was invaluable. And it needed to be practical.'

The presented narratives also reveal the challenging situations my interlocutors experienced due to the lack of educational support in the form of legal advice. Importantly, in their statements, they proposed solutions that

could help other fathers go through the divorce process and secure the right to regular contact with their children. An example is the statement of one of the men:

M5: 'Even now, after the divorce and all the court proceedings, I feel that I need to be legally prepared. I don't believe my ex won't try to make it harder for me to maintain the contact I've been granted. That's why it would be good for us fathers to have a reliable collection of legal advice – guidelines to follow, what not to argue about, and things like that.'

This narrative also reflects a negative opinion about the relationship with the child's mother and women's approach to respecting court rulings. This issue aligns with previous research describing women's unfavourable attitudes toward complying with court decisions regarding the organization of father-child meetings after divorce (Dudak, 2013, pp. 116–117).

My interlocutors' expectations regarding educational support were also related to the organization of support groups for fathers, led by reliable and qualified specialists. In this case, the men expressed a need to gain knowledge about coping after obtaining the right to shared custody. Below are examples of such statements:

M3: 'Support is important, such as groups where you can go and seek advice. In my case, I was looking for knowledge about shared custody from friends, but it wasn't easy because few had achieved it, and others didn't have much knowledge either. Besides, everyone has different experiences and goes through it differently, but I think the support of a good specialist and the opportunity to share your problems is very important.'

M1: 'Many of us need support and faith that we have a chance to be good parents. Now that I have designated times when my son is with me, I want to use that time in the best way possible for him. That's why classes for fathers would be helpful – especially for those who lack confidence in their abilities but are also afraid that if something goes wrong, their wife or the court will take away their contact with their child. We need someone who understands us and knows how to help.'

This form of custody, relatively uncommon in Poland compared to other countries, is a subject of discussion and undoubtedly requires greater promotion, focusing on its advantages, challenges, and the necessary conditions for its proper implementation for the benefit of the child (Dudak, 2021b, p. 19).

Summary

The results of the conducted research revealed that fathers who care about the quality of their relationship with their child after divorce seek educational support in developing skills for managing interactions with their former partners to maintain positive relations. They also wish to enhance their parenting competencies and gain knowledge in the field of family law. The primary forms of support utilized by the surveyed fathers include online platforms, legal and psychological counseling, as well as workshops and training sessions.

It is worth noting that the men's narratives included a balanced assessment of the available support forms, particularly regarding father-focused online platforms. This approach indicates that fathers are keen on receiving reliable assistance and support to improve their situation related to the loss or limitation of contact with their child after divorce.

Educational support should not only serve as a solution for divorcing parents but also as a form of preventive action implemented in family courts. It should aim to develop skills for managing conflict situations arising from divorce while fostering knowledge and parenting competencies.

The addressed issue holds significant social importance as it aligns with the current discourse on the modern paradigm of masculinity, in which the father is perceived as more present, aware of his role, and, importantly, open to engaging in responsibilities and tasks that have traditionally, due to gender stereotypes, been primarily reserved for women. It is worth emphasizing that the attitudes and needs of fathers revealed in the research, particularly their interest in acquiring reliable knowledge and seeking support to improve their relationships with their children without escalating conflicts with their former spouses, highlight the necessity for support institutions, non-governmental organizations, and father-focused associations to undertake initiatives aimed at improving the quality of life for all family members, regardless of the family structure. Such efforts should prioritize the well-being of the child and the individual needs of each family member.

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