

SPOTLIGHT ON FACULTY RESEARCH

A Q & A with Associate Professor Jocelyn Crowley on her forthcoming book, *Defiant Dads: Fathers' Rights Activists In America* (Cornell University Press, 2008.)

Q. What are fathers' rights groups? How did you study them?

Fathers' rights groups are made up mostly of white, middle class men who have children, but are currently unmarried, separated, or divorced. These groups meet throughout the country on a regular basis (usually monthly.) One estimate puts their membership at 10,000 nationally. I studied these groups by interviewing 158 members and leaders, as well as observing eight groups in action; I also reviewed their websites and printed materials.

Q. How do fathers' rights groups want to change public policy?

In the area of child support, these groups want to reduce their obligations in ways that they argue would be fairer to them. In the area of child custody, they want all of the states to pass joint physical custody laws. I argue in my book that these policy positions are **not** positive for American families because they would hurt women and children.



Q. What do fathers' rights groups want in terms of their relationships with their ex-partners?

Research has shown that parents who are (1) *satisfied with their parenting arrangements*, and who (2) *communicate effectively with one another* will get along better in the post-dissolution context. I argue that fathers' rights groups **can be** positive for American families in this context because they can help fathers achieve these relationship goals in four ways:

- Providing legal information about their rights as fathers
- Promoting constructive discussion techniques with their ex-partners through a reduction in anger (for example, using short, unemotional language when making a request of their ex-partners)
- Encouraging non-confrontational "phraseology" with their ex-partners (for example, calling their ex-partners "my children's mother" instead of "my ex," which can seem hostile)

- Propagating special “group rules” in shaping individual behavior both at meetings and outside of meetings (for example, redirecting their need for revenge against their ex-partners toward healing instead)

Q. What do fathers’ rights groups want in terms of their relationships with their children?



Research has demonstrated that children from dissolving families need both (1) *a high quantity of time with their parents*, as well as (2) *a high quality of time*.

I argue that fathers’ rights groups **can be** positive for American families in this context because they can help fathers achieve these relationship goals in three ways:

- Providing fathers with support and empowerment regarding their irreplaceable roles in their children’s lives (for example, continuing to see their children on a regular basis even if they are overwhelmed with work or other personal problems)
- Giving them child-centered skills and activity suggestions (for example, creating a space in their new homes for their children’s belongings)
- Offering them an important new philosophy or creed by which to re-envision their lives as parents (for example, by stressing that fathers should always go through life with their child’s best interests at heart)

Q. What is the future of fathers’ rights groups?

Their success has been limited so far in terms of changing public policy, but they do seem to help men work on their relationships with their ex-partners and children. They need to control extremism within their ranks that sometimes manifests itself as anger toward women in general. In addition, they should encourage men to be more active in their children’s lives when their families are still together. Finally, they should focus first on working towards women’s equality in terms of economics and child care responsibilities.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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For more information on this book and Dr. Crowley’s other publications, visit:

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