

## THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

# Navigating Life as a Single Father

Dr. Steve S. Sommer can't recall feeling more alone than in 1997, when he became a single father after separating from his wife of many years. The couple's older daughter was 9 years old at the time, and their boy-girl twins were 4 years old.

"It was hard," said Dr. Sommer, who chairs the departments of molecular diagnosis and molecular genetics at the City of Hope National Medical Center in Duarte, Calif. "My dad was a fantastic dad. It had never occurred to me that I wouldn't have the same role with my kids. Instead, I found my close relationship to my children threatened. I had to fight hard for equal parenting time, losing most of my life savings in the process. I walked a tightrope between professional responsibilities and spending time with my children on the custody schedule."

The marriage fell apart a few months after Dr. Sommer and his family had moved to Southern California from Minnesota. Because he was new to the area, Dr. Sommer lacked a strong social support network. "My aging parents and two good friends provided emotional support long distance, and I found a fantastic nanny/housekeeper, who helped me to support the needs of the children," he recalled.

For many years, the children commuted the 15 minutes between their two homes. During most of that period, Dr. Sommer had the children after school on weekdays through dinner time and on Friday night through Saturday. "There was a level of continuity that seldom occurs with court custody orders," he said.

Nowadays, he sees his children much less frequently because his former spouse moved away from the area about 4 years ago. "Millions of children of divorce experience the family tragedy of move aways," he said. "Some move aways are motivated by diminishment or exclusion of the role of the other parent or by various personal choices, without necessarily prioritizing the children's need for frequent contact with both parents."

Dr. Sommer noted that better navigational tools for single fathers have emerged over the last decade, including Fathers and Families ([www.fathersandfamilies.org](http://www.fathersandfamilies.org)), which is led by Dr. Ned Holstein; the groups Breakthrough Parenting ([www.breakthroughparentingservices.com](http://www.breakthroughparentingservices.com)) and Stop Parental Alienation of Children ([www.stopparentalalienation.org](http://www.stopparentalalienation.org)), both led by Jayne A. Major, Ph.D.; His Side with Glenn Sacks ([www.hisside.com](http://www.hisside.com)); and the book "Father and Child Reunion" by Warren Farrell, Ph.D. (Los Angeles: Tarcher, 2001).

He also recommends the independent film "Jake's Closet," written and directed by Shelli Ryan ([www.jakesclosetmovie.com](http://www.jakesclosetmovie.com)), which premiered in July 2007 at the Dances



With Films festival in Los Angeles. The film "is an artistic enactment from the child's perspective of the incrementally evolving alienating dynamics that occur all too frequently during divorce," Dr. Sommer said. "Education and networking are key. Don't passively rely on a family law attorney. Better insight early on might have saved me much heartache."

Looking back over this period, Dr. Sommer reflects: "My children somehow managed to overcome the emotional stress of the family break; they're great kids and I am proud of them. I'm grateful for this outcome, and I consider myself luckier than many."

### Prioritized for His Daughter

When Dr. Lloyd Axelrod separated from his wife in 1991, time management took on a new meaning as he orchestrated his new role as single father of a then-3½-year-old daughter in a joint custody arrangement.

"I used to say that I went 17½ hours a day nonstop," said Dr. Axelrod, an endocrinologist at Massachusetts General Hospital, Boston. "But what I did in those 17½ hours switched a lot when I had a little child."

To compensate, he stopped doing research and closed down his diabetes research lab at the hospital. He also stopped working evenings at home on articles and grants. "I made a decision that my daughter was more important than becoming a professor of medicine," he said. "It was the right decision then, and it was the right decision now."

His effort to secure shared custody was "a brutal battle that shouldn't have been necessary. It should have been automatic, the way it is in the United Kingdom. The presumption should have been shared custody. But in our regressive society, that wasn't the presumption, so it was extremely difficult, expensive, and time consuming."

During the early stages of the divorce, Dr. Axelrod heard about a support group for single fathers that had formed in the Boston area, but it never got off the ground. "I had certain friends who were supportive at the time," he recalled. "I got to know a lot of the parents of kids my daughter's age at school events or soccer. So, in some ways, the parents were part of my support system when this was starting."

The experience "heightened my awareness that there were a lot of issues about single fathers that weren't addressed in the public forum—the legal issues and financial issues and support issues. What was most striking was the lack of appreciation in the public and in the workplace about the role of single fathers. I encountered some of that."

Dr. Axelrod, whose daughter is now attending college, was quick to note that re-

sources for single fathers are at an all-time high in the form of support groups, advocacy groups, blogs, and books on the topic.

He advises physicians who find themselves in the role of a single father to "be prepared for some rapid changes, get the appropriate legal and professional counseling, and read books on the subject. Get up to speed as quickly as possible, recognizing that the decisions you make will last your child's entire childhood. Expect that you are going to have to make some accommodations in your career. You have to make some adjustments."

### A Big Dose of Humility

In 2001, Dr. John Whelan was stunned to discover that his former spouse would have provisional custody of their 2-year-old son, Olivier, while their divorce was pending.

"I subsequently discovered that's routine," said Dr. Whelan, a pediatric rheumatologist at the MassGeneral Hospital for Children in Boston. "Unless a mother has a drug use history or is imprisoned, my understanding is that the mother always gets provisional physical custody and the father becomes the noncustodial parent while the divorce is pending. For a period of about 2 years, I was basically the second-class parent until the whole divorce was resolved. This is one of the cruelest things about the family law system in our state: One day a child has two parents who are important in his life, and the next day, he has one important parent and one unimportant parent."

The court ultimately ruled that the parents would have joint physical custody, "but that is a rare thing in Massachusetts," he said. "Only 6% of divorces involving children in Massachusetts are said to result in joint physical custody."

Today, Olivier resides with Dr. Whelan 3 nights a week, mostly on weekends, and for vacations. His former spouse watches their son generally after school during the week.

"My son and I have a close relationship," Dr. Whelan said. "Part of it is a result of the fact that when he's with me, I do nothing else: I spend whole weekends at a time with him. I do take him on rounds with me occasionally when I'm covering call on the weekend. He enjoys going to the hospital and it helps that I'm in pediatrics. I can come into a room with a child patient and it's very reassuring to these young kids to see that I have a 'child assistant.'"

Olivier, who turns 8 in October, plays soccer and Little League baseball, and is starting his third year of piano lessons. "Before that, he took weekly music classes at a local music conservatory," Dr. Whelan said. "Music has been a big part



Dr. John Whelan and his son, Olivier, celebrate the 200th birthday of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in Sudbury, Mass.

of our life. He's been to Boston Symphony Hall a couple of dozen times. He can sit through a 2-hour Wagner concert, which is amazing."

Last year, they took a weekly Mandarin Chinese class together, and Olivier is fully fluent in French.

Dr. Whelan described his relationship with his former spouse as "conciliatory," which "is so critical to the well-being of children who are living in a two-household situation. Do whatever you can to remain on good terms with your former spouse."

He advised physicians new to the single father role to assemble "several tiers of babysitters and contingency plans for those times when you get called into the emergency room in the middle of the night. Who can you call to come into your house and watch your child while you're in the ER evaluating somebody?"

For him, the road to becoming a single father brought a big dose of humility. "As a doctor, you are used to being treated with deference," he said. "People trust your judgment; they look up to you. To be in a situation where your judgment often is questioned and you're not respected can be somewhat humiliating. If you are able to go at it [in] a humble frame of mind and keep your sense of humor, then you'll probably come out a lot better off than if you follow the human instinct to fight back and constantly defend your honor. A life in medicine is stressful enough, family issues aside. It seems to me that doing what's best for your child and nurturing that strong relationship is the deepest balm for all the other challenges we face as doctors." ■

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau

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