

Introduction

In the UK, the prevalence of divorce and separation has been a significant social issue for decades. Approximately 42 per cent of marriages are estimated to end in divorce, with half of these involving couples who have children under the age of 16 (Office for National Statistics, 2012). The divorce rate surged during the 1970s and has remained relatively stable since 1985. Additionally, cohabitation has become increasingly common, now preceding 80 per cent of UK marriages. Despite these changes in relationship dynamics, the overall outcomes often still lead to separation or divorce, reflecting ongoing challenges in marital stability.

Family breakdown, particularly involving children, is a complex and emotionally charged event. It has profound implications for fathers, who are increasingly expected to play active roles in their children's lives while also maintaining traditional roles as providers and protectors (Bateson *et al.*, 2017). For example, previous research highlights that men often struggle with feelings of loss and grief during family breakdown, which are exacerbated by societal expectations of hegemonic masculinity that discourage help-seeking and emotional expression (Connell, 2020).

Fathers also frequently report issues in successfully negotiating co-parenting arrangements, including when their cases have to go to Family Court. Indeed, fathers often express extreme dissatisfaction with the Family Court system, feeling that it is biased against them and overly complicated (Bates & Hine, 2023; Hine & Bates, 2023). They describe the legal process as financially and emotionally draining, with little confidence in achieving a fair outcome. It is during these processes that fathers also report post-separation abuse, including the use of children against them. Alienating behaviours, used where one parent deliberately undermines the child's relationship with the other parent, exacerbate these challenges. Fathers, often as non-resident parents, are particularly vulnerable to alienating behaviours, which can lead to significant psychological distress and feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness (Bates & Hine, 2023; Hine & Bates, 2023).

The impact of family breakdown and these subsequent processes on fathers' mental health is severe. Divorced and separated fathers are at heightened risk of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation. Specifically, men are nearly ten times more likely to die by suicide following a divorce compared to women, highlighting a critical public health concern (Evans *et al.*, 2016). This heightened risk is attributed to a combination of factors, including societal pressures to conform to masculine norms, inadequate social support networks, and the psychological toll of reduced contact with their children.

In summary, the levels of divorce and separation in the UK remain high,

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