

December 12, 2020 by [Jeffrey Leving](#)

‘What Office Do I Go to to Get My Reputation Back?’

How does a divorced father keep from becoming the victim of gossip, or getting the stink-eye when he encounters onetime friends or relatives?

A longtime friend sent me an email recently, telling me that his son is getting divorced after 14 years of marriage, and asking if I could help. As a matrimonial attorney – a divorce lawyer – focused on the rights of fathers, I’ve gotten many men a “good” divorce, in terms of the financial settlement and maintaining their relationship with their children. I said I’d fight for his son.

My friend also mentioned something else. He said his son is concerned about his reputation. That’s definitely a problem men going through a divorce face that can’t be solved in a courtroom: the false belief by others that these men are failures as husbands and fathers. This belief rests on a couple of incorrect assumptions:

- That the man is culpable for the breakup. If he is seeking the divorce, he must have another (younger, prettier) woman lined up. If the wife is seeking the divorce, it’s because the husband has been seeing another woman. The data on marital infidelity are suspect because they rely on surveys, but clearly both sexes do a certain amount of fooling around.
- That a married man who loves and cares for his children, goes to parent-teacher conferences, attends their sporting or performing arts events, and takes them to the doctor or dentist is a good father, but a divorced man who wishes to do the same things is somehow up to no good.

These assumptions are rampant in society, and yet when you see them before you in print, they don’t withstand the slightest scrutiny. Being divorced and being placed in one or both of these categories by your in-laws and anyone else who may have heard about the situation through the grapevine is like being falsely accused of a crime – only in this case, you don’t get a trial where you can defend yourself. The court of public opinion can be harsh.

Even then, I’m reminded of Raymond J. Donovan, a construction contractor who served as secretary of labor in the Reagan Administration. He was accused of fraud in what the government called a minority contracting scam. When he and the other defendants were acquitted, Donovan famously asked, “Which office do I go to to get my reputation back?”

I consider the clients I represent in divorces to be victims. In a legal sense, they almost invariably are, as the courts are often dubious of divorced fathers, regardless of the law and the evidence. Some judges will see a divorced dad as nothing but an ATM responsible for a child support payment each month, and not as someone indispensable in the upbringing of his children, when his relationship with the children’s mother has ended.

In a social sense, who broke up with whom is important to some men and not to others, but the cause of the breakup should have no bearing on the allocation of parenting time, authority and responsibility. The issue at hand here is how does a divorced father keep from becoming the victim of gossip, or getting the stink-eye when he encounters onetime friends or relatives?

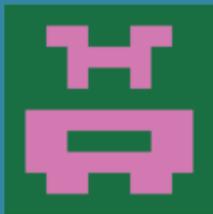
I'm particularly concerned about a condition called parental alienation. This is when one parent badmouths the other parent to the children: "Your father doesn't love you," "your father doesn't care about you," "your father cares only about his new family." Many experts in child psychology consider parental alienation to be child abuse, and I agree. It is quite serious, and a parent who engages in parental alienation can lose custody.

But the mundane barbershop chatter about a man's worth as a husband and father can be infuriating, even if it isn't illegal. I caution men about trying to generate favorable gossip: It doesn't work that way. The rumor mill cares only about damaging information. The news that the scuttlebutt making the rounds is false doesn't have a chance. It'll turn into a scandal about the man trying to plant his version of events as a way to seek revenge.

In 1640, the Welsh poet George Herbert opined that living well is the best revenge. My suggestion to divorcing or divorced men is to be the best father you can be. In my book *How to be a Good Divorced Dad*, I urge fathers to treat the visitation schedule as sacred time, and to engage their children. Engaging means talking to them, playing with them, taking them places (once we get the coronavirus under control), plan some activities. It doesn't mean asking a few general questions and making some perfunctory remarks. Demonstrate to them that you're happy to be with them, that you want to know about their lives, and that you remember the things that are important to them.

I realize this can be difficult for men who are devastated by the divorce. Some dads exit the divorce process enervated. They can barely pick up the phone to call their children, let alone plan an activity. Dads who feel this way must get help from a therapist, a life coach or a trusted friend – someone who can give them a push.

Because ultimately, If you're a loving, caring, attentive father in this way, you'll know it, your children will know it, and dare I say your ex-wife will know it. Over time, word will spread. That's how you get your reputation back.



About Jeffrey Leving

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