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## Moms owe dads the opportunity to visit the kids

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In his State of the Union address, President Bill Clinton once again declared war on "deadbeat dads." Before a cheering Congress, the president promised to hunt down derelict fathers, and either make them pay their back child support or throw them in jail.

This is a good thing. But it's curious that neither he nor any other major politician is as troubled about the flip side of the same problem: the millions of custodial mothers who deny ex-husbands their court-ordered visits with their children.

Such action can be just as damaging as failing to pay child support. Recent studies show the importance of fathers in teaching responsibility,

### MEN-TION

In a survey of 220 divorced couples in Arizona, 23 percent of mothers said they had denied visitation rights to their ex-husbands at least once; 30 percent of their ex-husbands said they had been denied visitation rights.

Source: American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, July 1991

ity, empathy, moral development and other values. In addition, psychological evidence reveals that children, especially young ones, often become depressed when their fathers aren't available, and blame themselves for their disappearance.

"To turn a child against his father is to turn a child against himself," says Dallas psychologist Richard Warshak, who specializes in divorce.

Warshak, 44, a stepfather, grandfather and author of "The Custody Revolution" (Poseidon, \$21), says it's surprisingly common to find mothers refusing visitation to their children's fathers. A recent survey of divorcing

couples in Arizona found that nearly one in four mothers admitted that they had denied an ex-husband his visitation rights at least once.

Just like delinquent dads, these mothers could be jailed, fined or stripped of custody rights. But that almost never happens. Why not?

One reason is money. Warshak says the government chases delinquent fathers in part because it makes financial sense. The more child-support money the government collects, the less it has to pay in welfare. Prosecuting mothers who deny visitation rights, on the other hand, is both messy and expensive.

It's also very difficult to quantify the damage that results from denying visitation. When a father fails to pay child support, we can determine how many meals his children might miss, how many pieces of clothing they might be unable to buy. But if children can't see their father, can we tally up the trauma?

A third reason we ignore the issue of denied visitation is our culture's belief — even in the face of the mounting evidence — that fathers are

expedient. We still tend to think that having a father around is not crucial to a child; at best, it's a bonus.

Some mothers justify denying visitation rights by claiming that their ex-partners have failed to pay child support. Some fathers, meanwhile, say they stop paying child support because their ex-partners cut them out of their children's lives.

Both actions, while understandable, are inexcusable. They amount to punishing the child for the actions of parents.

And that's the point here. If our objective is to minimize the damage to the children of divorce, we must stop blaming only the fathers, and start recognizing that both parents can do great good or great harm.

### Male call

Men: Have you ever been denied your visitation rights? Women: If you have refused to allow your ex-partner to see his children, what was the reason? Send responses, comments and questions to PO Box 8071, Lexington, Ky. 40533-8071.

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CHETHIK

The men's  
column

