Mothers are Non-resident Parents Too: A Consideration of Mother’s Perspectives on Non-residential Parenthood

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What does it mean to be a non-resident mother?

- **Sample**
  - 20 respondents (17 recruited from MATCH, 3 via personal contacts)
  - 8 - lost residence to fathers via the court
  - 12 - no formal residence order in place

- **Interview**
  - ‘Can you tell me the story of how you can be non-resident and what this experience has been like for you?’

- **Research Sub-questions:**
  - What are the pathways into non-resident motherhood and how do these relate to subsequent mothering practices?
  - How do women experience and adjust to a ‘non-normative’ situation, and what helps or hinders their adjustment?
  - How is a mothering identity constructed within a non-residential context?

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![Routes leading to non-resident motherhood](image)

**Voluntary non-resident mothers**

“I decided that they needed to stay where they were. Whoever had had left home, so if I’d have stayed and my ex husband had left, the children needed to stay at home. They’d got the school there, they’d got family there, they knew the house and it didn’t seem fair to disrupt them”

“It felt like the equation was, you can have one and a half parents, if I did the looking, or you can have one which is me in chaos, not knowing who the hell I am really, and an absent father. And I knew the kids would get a better deal if he stayed and I went because I did know as I left that I wouldn’t let go”

“I’ve never regretted the decision I made, in a fundamental sense. I have never thought that was wrong of me to do that. I’ve always felt, that it was absolutely the right thing to do but there have been consequences……..and I oscillate y’know……women who leave …that’s such powerful stuff and yet I look at the evidence in front of my eyes and they’re nice people, y’know”

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**Involuntary non-resident mothers**

“I just remember thinking ‘I’m not a drug addict, I’m not an alcoholic, what have I done wrong? And I thought ‘How can that be?’ There was nothing, I mean even in the end they said ‘well both of you are good parents, but he’s started school so, …y’know, you will leave him where he is’”

“In most houses the mum’s the one who puts them into the bath, puts them to bed, if they break their leg or cut their knee, they’re the one’s who give them a kiss, they’re the people that give them all the love and the cuddles and the kisses and all those kind of things’

“what really upsets me most, is that I haven’t got Josh and he needs me……and I feel, the worst thing is, I feel I’m letting him down. Because he’s looking to me the whole time saying ‘Mum’ you know have you talked to him, what have they said?”

“I mean do you go back into the court system, for them to tear your life apart and tear your children’s life apart again, only to have no guarantee of it not going in the same way and leaving him more scarred because he’s gone all through that and he still hasn’t had what he, what he needed to get or what he wanted to get out of it. And it’s just not knowing which way to turn and also being accountable to this little boy.”

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**Acting in the child’s best interests?**

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<tr>
<th>Voluntary</th>
<th>Involuntary</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Children Need Security and Stability</strong></td>
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<td>Familiar environment</td>
<td>ongoing maternal care</td>
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<td>Meets child’s practical needs</td>
<td>Meets child’s emotional needs</td>
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<td>Fathers are competent carers</td>
<td>Children need maternal care fathers are no substitute</td>
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<td>Children robust and adaptable</td>
<td>Children sensitive and vulnerable</td>
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Questions and issues for research and debate

- Are mothers and fathers potentially interchangeable as primary carers post-divorce?
- To what extent does the atypical nature of role-reversed parenting arrangements pose additional adjustment difficulties for children and parents?
- How do separating parents manage to negotiate and balance child-care responsibilities and employment?
- Are maternal perceptions particularly salient with regard to role-reversal arrangements?

In light of cultural changes surrounding family roles and relationships there is need for research and policy to provide a more contemporary gender-sensitive approach towards post-divorce parenthood.