FWA

FATHERS WITH ATTITUDE

A POSITION ON FATHERHOOD, FAMILY BREAKDOWN AND THE MODERN SOCIAL CONTRACT

The family has already changed. Now redesign the institutions around the family we actually have.

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Executive position

Fathers With Attitude (FWA) begins with a simple proposition: fatherhood is not a leisure activity, a financial transaction or a status that disappears when an adult relationship ends. It is a continuing social responsibility. The child is not property belonging to either parent and is not the prize at the end of an argument. The child is the reason for having the argument properly.

Modern Britain has transformed the roles of women and men, marriage, work, housing, childcare and family life. Yet when families break down we can still fall back into an older architecture: resident and non-resident; custody and access; payer and recipient; winner and loser. FWA argues for a different vocabulary and a different starting point: responsibility, continuity, openness and the welfare of the child.

This is not a campaign to restore male authority, nor a presumption that fathers are harmless, mothers unreasonable, or equal time always desirable. Safety and the child's welfare override every formula. It is also not a complaint that fathers should be made happy. It is a proposal that active, safe, responsible fatherhood is valuable to children and to society, and that systems should avoid turning a functioning parent into a visitor without good reason.

> **Rights are downstream of responsibility. And both are downstream of the child.**

THE CHILD	Welfare, safety, stability, truthful relationships and freedom from adult conflict.
THE FAMILY	Continuing parental responsibility after the romantic relationship ends.
SOCIETY	Institutions, work and economics that either support family life or place it under intolerable load.

1. The proposition: fatherhood is socially valuable work

For many men who are fathers, fatherhood becomes one of the core organising facts of adult life. This does not mean that every man must have children, or that a child exists to provide an adult with purpose. It means that once a man has assumed responsibility for a child, an enduring relationship has been created that is qualitatively different from employment, consumption or leisure.

The labour of fatherhood is often ordinary and therefore easy to overlook: earning money, making breakfast, changing nappies, school runs, reading, repairing things, attending appointments, sitting through homework, enforcing boundaries, teaching, comforting, transporting, worrying and eventually letting go. Much of this activity is economically invisible, but it is part of the work by which the next generation is built.

> **Fatherhood burns. Don't extinguish it. Give it something useful to do.**

The phrase is deliberately emotional. Paternal attachment can contain extraordinary energy: protection, fear, pride, sacrifice, continuity and responsibility. Culture has long understood this. The father-son dynamic in stories such as The Revenant is powerful precisely because the bond becomes an engine of action. FWA is interested in the constructive destination of that energy. A father in pain is not automatically right; pain is not the welfare test. The challenge is to convert attachment into disciplined responsibility rather than rage, possession or grievance.

The discipline

- A father's suffering may be real; it is not identical to the child's interests.
- A mother's fear or hostility may be real; it is not automatically proof that the child is unsafe.
- Adult claims must be tested against the child's welfare, evidence and proportionate safeguarding.
- Where a father asks for a place in a child's life, he is also asking to carry the ordinary burdens of parenting.

2. Turn the camera around: what are we asking families to survive?

FWA does not want to examine mothers and fathers as though they exist in a sealed laboratory. Family behaviour is produced inside a social and economic environment. We have built an extraordinarily productive society, but one that can require parents to operate like ants: commuting, working, answering messages, financing housing, arranging childcare, maintaining two incomes and then attempting to create a calm family life in the remaining hours.

> **Before we ask why families are failing, ask what sort of environment we are asking families to survive in.**

When a household fractures, one economic unit can suddenly become two. Bedrooms, heating, transport, childcare, furniture and time are duplicated while income may not be. The emotional crisis and the economic crisis arrive together. Conflict is then interpreted principally as an interpersonal failure, even though housing, work, money and time scarcity may be loading the relationship from outside.

This is not an argument that capitalism causes divorce, nor that difficult relationships should be preserved at any cost. It is an argument against analysing family breakdown without examining the conditions in which modern families live.

> **Why are parents fighting over 20% of their children's time while both are selling most of their waking hours somewhere else?**

3. The scale is not marginal

Official DWP statistics estimate that in the financial year ending 2025 there were 2.4 million separated families in Great Britain containing 3.9 million children. Sixty-five per cent had a child maintenance arrangement. Across the three years ending 2025, 88% of parents with care were female and 86% of non-resident parents were male. The same statistics estimate £2.9 billion a year in child maintenance received by parents with care.

The family courts show the institutional scale of unresolved conflict. Justice Data records 55,321 private-law Children Act cases starting in England and Wales in 2025, up from 51,494 in 2024. These are parental disputes concerning the upbringing of children. They sit alongside mediation, solicitor negotiation and countless private disputes that never reach a courtroom.

Indicator	Latest figure
Separated families, Great Britain, FYE 2025	2.4 million
Children in separated families	3.9 million
Separated families with maintenance arrangement	65%
Private-law Children Act cases started, 2025	55,321
Child maintenance received annually, 3-year period ending 2025	£2.9 billion

These figures do not prove discrimination against fathers and should not be used that way. They show something more basic: separation and post-separation parenting are mass social phenomena, and the institutional structure is strongly gendered.

4. From access to Responsibility Time

Language matters because it reveals the model underneath. 'Access' can make a parent sound like a visitor to somebody else's child. FWA proposes the term Responsibility Time: time in which a parent is not being entertained by the child but is carrying the work of parenting.

> **80% primary responsibility. 20% secondary responsibility. 100% parenthood.**

FWA proposes 80/20 as a discussion starting point or presumptive floor within a voluntary Parental Compact, not as a scientific optimum, a court rule or a universal schedule. Parents may choose 50/50, 60/40, 70/30 or another arrangement. The 80 is not allocated by sex. Geography, age, schooling, work, accommodation, the child's wishes and the parents' capacities all matter.

The purpose of 80/20 is conceptual: to make it harder for a safe, previously involved parent to slide from ordinary parenthood into symbolic contact. Twenty per cent is not a prize. It means meals, school mornings, washing, transport, boundaries, boredom, illness and responsibility. If the arrangement is unsafe or contrary to the child's welfare, the formula disappears.

What 80/20 is not

- Not a presumption that fathers should receive 20% regardless of risk.
- Not a claim that 20% is the optimum developmental schedule.
- Not a substitute for the child's wishes and changing needs.
- Not a mechanism for buying contact through maintenance payments.
- Not an instruction to courts; it is a proposition for voluntary pre-conflict planning and research.

5. What does the evidence say about continuing relationships?

Research on post-separation living arrangements does not justify a simplistic '50/50 is best' slogan. Families self-select into arrangements; conflict, income, geography, parental competence and prior involvement differ. Nevertheless, the evidence is strong enough to reject the opposite assumption that maintaining substantial relationships with both safe parents is inherently harmful.

A 2023 PLOS ONE systematic review examined 39 studies published from 2010 to 2022 across emotional, behavioural, relational, physical and educational outcomes. It reported that children in shared physical custody generally had better outcomes than those in lone physical custody, while also emphasising theoretical explanations such as selection and resource differences. In 75% of the included studies, children in shared physical custody had outcomes equal to those in nuclear families. This is association, not proof that a particular time split causes better outcomes.

Cafcass itself advises that post-separation arrangements depend on age, wishes, specific needs, work commitments, accommodation, distance and flexibility. Young children may suit 'little but often'; older children may benefit from longer periods. That is much closer to FWA's position than a rigid custody ideology: continuity matters, but the child is an individual.

6. Conflict is itself a child-welfare issue

The Department for Work and Pensions states that frequent, intense and poorly resolved inter-parental conflict can place children at risk of mental-health, behavioural, social and academic problems and can affect long-term outcomes. Its guidance also explicitly links parental conflict with pressure on education, health and social care, courts and other public services.

> **The child is not the prize at the end of the argument. The child is the reason for having the argument properly.**

This is central to FWA. A system can preserve a nominal relationship with both parents while exposing the child to relentless war. Equally, eliminating one parent may reduce one form of conflict while creating another loss. The objective is not maximum contact. It is minimum destructive conflict combined with the strongest safe parental relationships that the child's circumstances allow.

The DWP's 2018-22 Reducing Parental Conflict programme tested interventions and reported statistically significant improvements on several measures among participants. The evaluation was non-experimental and had no control group, so it cannot establish the counterfactual. But the policy direction is important: government already recognises reducing parental conflict as a legitimate form of early intervention.

7. Safety is not a footnote

A fatherhood movement loses credibility immediately if it treats safeguarding as an inconvenience. The House of Commons Library reports estimates that around 60% to 90% of child-arrangements cases in the family court feature allegations of domestic abuse. Allegations are not the same as findings, but the prevalence of allegations means any serious proposal must be designed for a world in which coercion, violence and risk are real.

FWA therefore rejects both lazy extremes: 'contact at all costs' and 'an allegation automatically settles the case'. Evidence, professional assessment, proportionality and the child's welfare must govern. Where genuine safeguarding requires supervised, indirect or no contact, that overrides the Compact.

Nor should the child be turned into an evidence-gathering device. Cameras, surveillance and adult intelligence-gathering can recruit the child into the dispute. Concern should instead lead to proportionate adult safeguards: structured handovers, agreed check-ins, professional supervision where necessary, and formal risk assessment.

8. Money: responsibility, not a ticket to access

Financial responsibility and relational responsibility must be kept conceptually distinct. Child maintenance supports the child's household and inevitably contributes to shared household costs such as housing, heating, food and transport. That is not a defect in the system; a child does not consume a neatly separable slice of the electricity bill.

Child maintenance is not a payment to buy access to your child. It is one way of accepting responsibility for your child.

Equally, where a parent is contributing reliably but contact is limited or impossible, the child should not be given a false history in which that parent simply vanished and did nothing. FWA proposes a principle of age-appropriate truth: children should be allowed an honest account of the emotional, practical and financial contributions made by each parent without being shown bank statements, recruited as judge, or burdened with adult accusations.

Money cannot substitute for care where care is possible. Care cannot cancel financial responsibility. Both belong under the larger heading of parenthood.

9. The Parental Compact: agreement before the fire

Financial prenups attempt to decide some consequences of relationship failure before the relationship is in crisis. FWA asks why parents cannot do something analogous for parental conduct: not a contract disposing of the child, but a declaration of intentions and responsibilities made while both adults still have the capacity to think beyond immediate hurt.

Current GOV.UK guidance already allows parents to create a child arrangements plan recording where children spend time and other forms of contact. Such a plan is not legally binding; a consent order can become binding if approved by the court as being in the children's best interests. The FWA Compact therefore builds on an existing idea rather than pretending private agreement can contract out of the court's welfare jurisdiction.

Proposed Compact principles

1. The child comes first. Neither parent's pain, fear, pride, convenience or entitlement is the test.
2. The couple relationship and the parental relationship are different. One may end without cancelling the other.
3. One home may be primary. Neither safe, responsible parent should become peripheral without a child-centred reason.
4. Use Responsibility Time rather than visiting rights: parenting means carrying ordinary obligations.
5. Treat 80/20 as a proposed voluntary floor for discussion, not a universal formula, scientific optimum or entitlement.
6. Do not allocate the 80 or the 20 by sex. Allocate responsibility around the child.
7. Safety overrides every model. Abuse, coercion and genuine risk require proportionate protection.
8. Do not use the child as messenger, spy, weapon, therapist or witness to adult hostility.
9. Financial responsibility and parenting time are distinct. Money does not purchase access; contact does not erase maintenance.
10. Give children an age-appropriate truthful account of each parent's contribution without recruiting them into the dispute.

11. Review arrangements as children age, circumstances change and their wishes develop.
12. Rights follow responsibility. Both are downstream of the child's welfare.

10. The legal moment: the system is already moving

The present debate is not occurring against a static legal background. The Children Act 1989 makes the child's welfare the court's paramount consideration. The statutory presumption of parental involvement, introduced later, expressly concerns involvement of some kind and not any particular division of a child's time.

The Ministry of Justice's 2025 review concluded that the presumption was one of a number of factors contributing to a 'pro-contact culture' and raised concerns about contact where a parent had caused or posed a risk of harm. The government announced repeal. The Courts and Tribunals Bill currently before Parliament includes removal of that presumption from section 1 of the Children Act 1989. At the time of this paper, it should therefore be described as proposed legislation rather than completed reform.

In March 2026 the government also announced national rollout of Child Focused Courts, formerly Pathfinder Courts, following pilots reported to resolve cases substantially faster. The direction of travel is clear: more child-centred investigation, more attention to safety and faster resolution. FWA should engage with that direction rather than fight it.

Modern families require modern institutions.

11. The economic case: prevention may be cheaper than conflict

FWA should make an economic argument, but it must make it carefully. We do not yet know that a Parental Compact will save the state a particular number of pounds. Claiming a billion-pound saving before testing the intervention would weaken the project. What we can state is that parental conflict already consumes private and public resources, and government itself identifies potential pressure on courts, education, health and social care and other services.

The research question is therefore testable: if a structured pre-conflict Compact reduced the number of high-conflict cases, shortened their duration, improved maintenance compliance or reduced repeated applications, what would the saving be? A pilot could measure this.

Early agreement — fewer contested applications. Does pre-agreement reduce court entry?

Lower conflict — fewer repeat disputes / shorter cases. Does it reduce institutional load?

Clear Responsibility Time — more stable practical arrangements. Does clarity improve compliance and child stability?

Clear financial duties — maintenance compliance / fewer disputes. Does responsibility framing reduce enforcement demand?

Child-centred conduct — wellbeing / school / service-use indicators. Are downstream child outcomes improved?

The proposition is deliberately modest: prevention is worth testing. If even a small proportion of avoidable conflict can be prevented or resolved earlier, the benefit may accrue simultaneously to children, parents, employers and public services.

12. What happens next if nothing changes?

FWA does not assume an apocalyptic future of endlessly rising divorce. Marriage, cohabitation and family formation are changing in more complicated ways. The more important forecast is institutional: more fluid families, more blended households, more children moving between homes, more economically independent adults and more fathers who have participated deeply in day-to-day care before separation.

That last change matters. A father who has changed nappies, attended scans, worked around childcare, cooked, read bedtime stories and managed school mornings is not occupying the same social role as the distant breadwinner of an earlier era. Converting such a father after separation into payer plus occasional visitor can represent a profound discontinuity for both parent and child.

The answer is not nostalgia. The old family was often held together by economic dependence, social pressure and legal inequality. FWA does not seek their return. The task is to develop institutions appropriate to freedom.

> **The old family was held together partly by obligation. The modern family is held together by choice. The next family may have to be held together by responsibility.**

13. FWA's wider social position

Fathers With Attitude is not a fathers-versus-mothers movement. It is a challenge to a culture that too easily turns family breakdown into opposing camps while ignoring the economic and institutional machinery around them. It is possible to recognise the historic subordination of women, welcome women's economic and social independence, and still ask whether modern fatherhood has been adequately integrated into the structures that follow separation.

The relevant inheritance is not that England and Wales are literally governed by Victorian family law; the central modern statute is the Children Act 1989 and family law has continued to evolve. The deeper point is cultural architecture. Terms such as custody, access, provider and dependent carry histories. Modern families have moved faster than some of the categories through which we imagine them.

> **Less ownership. More openness. Less access. More responsibility. Less secrecy. More truth. Less Mum versus Dad. More child.**

This is also why FWA rejects the politics of male grievance and dominance. The answer to one sex gaining freedom is not to demand the other sex regain control. The answer is to ask what responsibilities free adults owe the children they create together.

14. What FWA is — and is not

FWA IS	FWA IS NOT
Child-centred	A vehicle for punishing mothers
Pro-fatherhood	A claim that every father is safe or competent
Pro-responsibility	A campaign for automatic 50/50 time
Open to evidence	A custody ideology with a predetermined answer
Concerned with social conditions	An excuse for adult misconduct
Interested in prevention	A substitute for safeguarding or the courts
Prepared to challenge men	A male grievance club
Future-facing	An attempt to restore Victorian family roles

15. A research and policy programme

A position paper becomes useful when it generates questions that can be tested. FWA should therefore treat the present document as the beginning of a research programme rather than the announcement of a finished doctrine.

1. Map the population: separated families, children affected, patterns of care, maintenance and private-law applications.

2. Study fatherhood before and after separation: how much practical care was undertaken before breakdown, and what changes afterwards?

3. Test the language of Responsibility Time against 'contact' and 'access': does it change expectations of fathers and mothers?

4. Prototype the Parental Compact with family lawyers, mediators, Cafcass-experienced practitioners, domestic-abuse specialists and separated parents.

5. Build safeguarding exclusions and escalation routes into the Compact from the outset.

6. Pilot the Compact prospectively with consenting parents rather than relying only on retrospective testimony.

7. Measure conflict, repeat disputes, maintenance compliance, practical care, child wellbeing, parental wellbeing and service use.

8. Model public and private costs under 5%, 10% and 20% reductions in avoidable high-conflict cases; label these scenarios, not forecasts.

9. Include children and young adults with lived experience in the design. A child-centred system cannot be designed entirely by adults.

10. Publish failures as well as successes. If 80/20 is wrong, change it. The principle is responsibility, not loyalty to a number.

Conclusion: what is a man's time for?

Modern society offers adults enormous freedom but also enormous pressure. We work, consume, travel, entertain ourselves and remain reachable almost continuously. Yet one of the most constructive things a human being can do remains stubbornly ordinary: raise another human being well.

FWA's claim is not that fathers own children, deserve children or should be protected from the consequences of their behaviour. It is that responsible fatherhood is valuable work; that children should not casually lose safe parental relationships; that separation should not convert responsibility into visitation; and that society should examine the conditions under which families are being asked to function.

The movement therefore shines the light in three directions at once: on fathers, who must accept the burdens attached to the place they seek in their children's lives; on mothers, who share the responsibility to protect a child's safe relationships even after adult love has ended; and on society, which should ask whether its economics, institutions and language are helping families adapt or pushing them towards conflict.

> **Relationships can fail. Parenthood doesn't.**
>
> **We are not trying to put fathers back in charge. We are trying to keep responsible fathers in the picture.**
>
> **We live in hope.**

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Status note. This is a discussion and position paper, not legal advice. The 80/20 proposal is explicitly a research proposition and voluntary starting point, not a claim that a particular division of time is legally required or scientifically optimal. Child welfare and safety remain paramount.