



Accidental Dad

Joshua McDowell

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This story from a single dad about combating the court system for custody is moving and inspirational.

Single fathers are getting the short end of the stick in the United States family court system, Ohio writer Joshua McDowell argues in his new book, *Accidental Dad*. Combining substantial research with numerous anecdotes, McDowell makes a compelling case that the legal system works against single fathers seeking custodial rights of their children.

Accidental Dad is a semipolemical self-help memoir. It recounts McDowell's childhood, the psychological effects of losing his own father at a young age, the birth of his son when he was a senior in high school, and the years-long battle for sole custody of his son that followed. Research is cited throughout to support the book's underlying thesis: family court systems have an ingrained bias in favor of mothers and against fathers, particularly unmarried single fathers.

Much of the research is authoritative, including statistics from the US Department of Health and Human Services and the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. The book highlights the breakdown of traditional family structures, the negative effects of fatherless homes on children, and how biased courts reinforce these trends.

A few references are less than stellar, however. *Fatherhoodfactor.com*, for instance, is a blog that's treated as a primary source. One chapter uses *urbandictionary.com* to define "baby mama drama," degrading the book's tone into talk-show territory.

That same chapter, "An Angry Mother's Dirty Tricks," is the book's greatest weakness. Allegations of dirty tricks during McDowell's custody battle, including accusations of physical violence, throw readers into the middle of a personal and ugly conflict without information or testimony from the other side. The book could stand without this chapter and with fewer references to specific mothers.

The best chapters offer practical advice for other "accidental dads" on how to improve their circumstances and win custody of their children. Dads are told to work hard, to be punctual, not to succumb to negativity or divisiveness, and to act humbly and respectfully in court.

These same chapters explain the legal process of custody disputes, the different forms and motions to file, and selection of and cooperation with attorneys: "The attorney has expertise you don't have, but the attorney can't make an angry, bitter, aggressive father look like Mr. Nice Guy." These informative and helpful chapters steer the book toward the realm of self-help nonfiction.

Photos of McDowell and his son help make *Accidental Dad* a heartfelt endeavor. Even more than his arguments about the family court system, McDowell's story of trying to be a devoted father—with the odds stacked against him—is moving and inspirational.

SCOTT NEUFFER (March 14, 2016)

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