

Jumping to conclusions

Children may want to see both parents equally after a marriage ends. But courts rarely grant shared custody. Now, a Jewish group is campaigning for change. Helen Jacobus reports

If a mother doesn't get custody of the child, people wonder what she must have done."

Alison, 38, is a Jewish mother of two young sons who lost the tug-of-love battle for her children when she and her ex-husband divorced.

"I'm a professional, working mother, and I feel I've been penalised for being in that position," she maintains.

She is among the founders of a new national initiative called Jewish Unity for Multiple Parenting (Jump), a support group aimed at raising awareness in the Jewish community about problems caused by unsatisfactory contact arrangements between children and their non-resident parents.

The group is open to non-custodial mothers and fathers, as well as to other family members who feel they are suffering from restricted contact, such as grandparents, or separated siblings.

Although in most divorces the mother is awarded custody of the children, cases such as Alison's may be increasingly common.

An imbalanced custody arrangement can exacerbate the bitterness that may already exist when a marriage breaks down.

"My ex-husband was very involved with the children during the times the marriage was working successfully, but he almost took over to the point where the children were such a focus in his life, he almost had nothing else," she claims.

"Ultimately, he needed the children more than he needed me and he used contrived and unproven allegations against me to actually have the children, in preference to me."

Although her ex-husband also worked, "she says his hours were more flexible than hers. Unfortunately, when marriages break down, these are the issues that come to the fore."

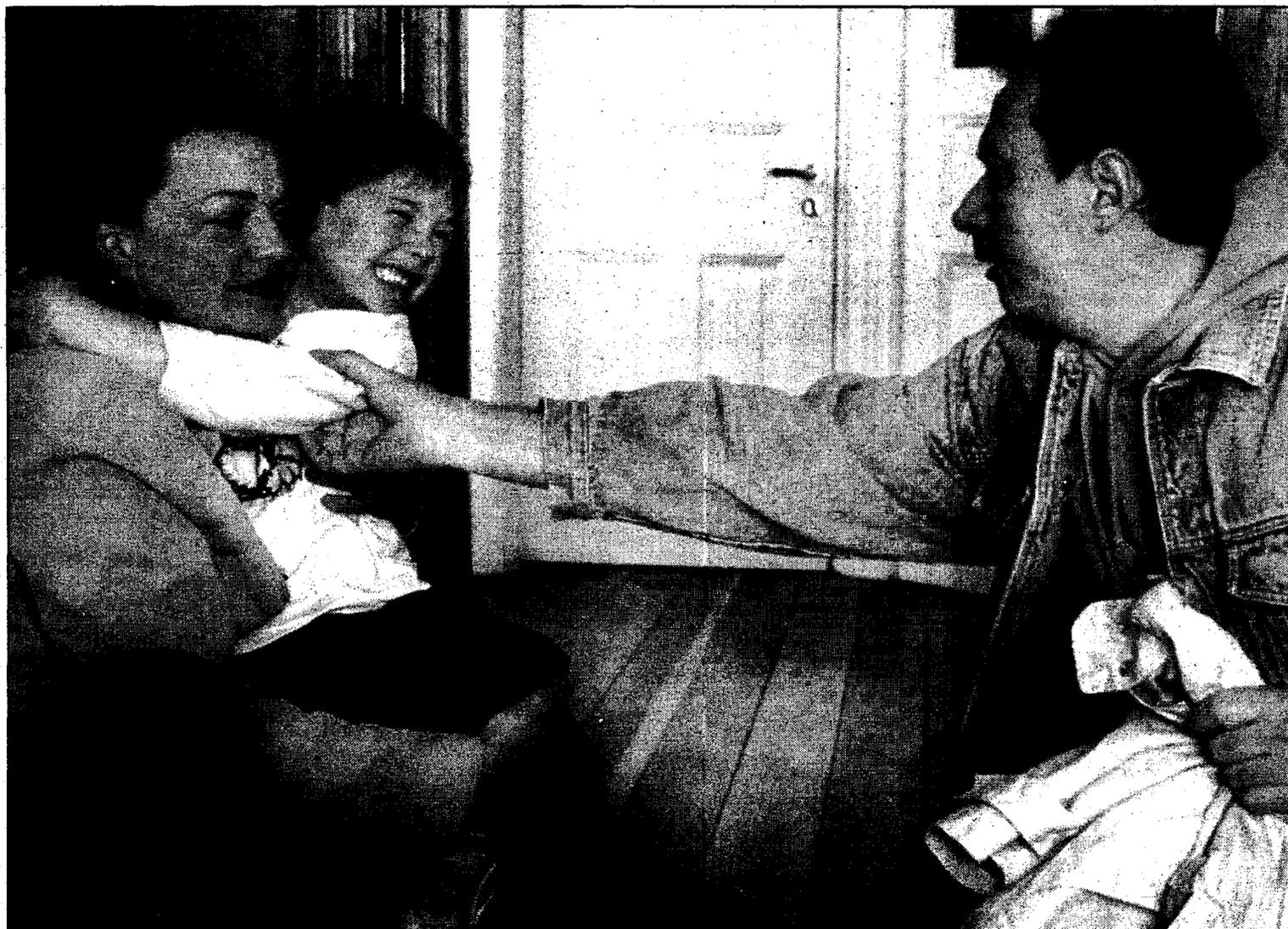
She sees her children on alternate weekends, with no contact during the week — a situation she finds very hard.

"The parents who have the custody in these acrimonious divorces refuse to be co-operative because they want to be controlling," she maintains. "It's child-like behaviour. It's as if he's saying: 'Right, I can't have everything I want, so I'm not going to let you have what you want.'" She and her ex-spouse fought over "all issues" during the divorce, she adds.

The children were treated as part of that process, "like little pawns in a chess game." Then aged six and four, "they were manipulated to choose which parent they wanted to be with, which I think is a dreadful thing to put any child through."

One of Jump's stated aims is "to allow the children the freedom to love both parents openly once again and without conflict."

At present, her children's lives are "compart-



Agonising break: "There is always conflict at hand-over times. The kids are torn..."

PHOTO (POSED BY MODELS): REX FEATURES

mentalised," she says. "They have their life with their father. They have their life with me." The rigidity of the contact arrangements means that neither parent invites the other to the children's birthday parties.

"If I'm fortunate enough to have the children's birthdays fall on the day that they're with me, that's fine — if not I'm fighting again for contact for an extra hour or so."

Another of Jump's goals is to encourage parents to share child contact equally over the festivals and Shabbat. One common difficulty is maintaining observance where the divorced parents live far apart.

"I'm hopeful that in the long term, things will improve, but it's a long haul and it's very painful," Alison adds. "I want to avoid this continual conflict, particularly at hand-over times. The kids are torn."

"They are almost forced into a situation again and again, where they have to choose

between us. Emotionally, it's very tough for them, and as a mother, I can't bear to see that."

Another Jump founder, Michael, 43, partly blames the legal system for the almost inevitable acrimony involved in custody cases.

When his ex-wife told him she wanted a divorce, he explains, their two children were aged three, and 10 months old. "I don't think custody should be decided by the courts, but by mediation," says Michael, who is not English.

"Children are not property. The courts should be involved only in extreme cases. Children don't divorce from parents."

Acting on legal advice, according to Michael, his former wife will not release the children's passports. "It was only after my ex-wife started seeing solicitors that I've been prevented from taking my children to another country, in case I abducted them," he says.

"It's very unfair. In the first year of our separation, my ex-wife took the children to visit her

family, who live abroad. But I couldn't take them to see my father before he died."

As Michael travels frequently on foreign business trips, he has a flexible arrangement whereby he sees his children for the equivalent of two long weekends per month, plus one overnight stay in the week. "I understand that children are not like luggage. They must have a routine, too."

Michael does not feel his contact arrangements are unreasonable. "It's the feeling of being completely unable to do anything against the controlling element of the other parent" which, he says, he finds difficult.

He reveals that he also has problems with his wife's mother. "In my case, it's my ex-mother-in-law who doesn't want my name mentioned and who says I'm no good."

But the hand-over of the children between the two parents is often extremely fraught. "My youngest child, when he was almost 18 months old, almost turned violent against his mother when she came to collect him. He screamed at her to go away and began kicking her."

"So I told him to hold mummy's hand, because she hadn't seen him the whole day, and to spend time with mummy."

The names of the interviewees have been changed.

'My youngest child almost turned violent when his mother came to collect him. He screamed and began kicking her'

JUMP: Jewish Unity for Multiple Parenting Goals and principles:

- To act as a support group and to lobby for improving contact arrangements so that Jewish parents going through the difficulties of divorce act responsibly to protect the emotional, psychological and spiritual welfare of their children.
- To allow the children the freedom to love both parents openly once again and without conflict.
- To avoid one parent's assuming control over the relationship with the children and over the contact that the other parent has.
- Except in cases of risk, children should see both parents equally during Shabbat and festivals.

■ Under appropriate Jewish auspices, an arbitration board should be constituted with input from Jewish experts in child psychology and Jewish and English law to resolve contact in a non-contentious way. Certification should be required to show that arrangements regarding Jewish issues have been properly addressed. Jump can be contacted at Suite 193, 176 Finchley Road, London NW3 6BT. Tel: 0207 691 4514. E-mail: jump@yourwebstrategy.com; or at www.jump-parenting.co.uk

Links on the Jump website include:
Families Need Fathers: www.fnf.org.uk. An established support

group for non-resident fathers. 134 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3AR. Tel: 0207 613 5060.
Equal Parenting Council: www.equalparenting.org. A lobbying group, open to both mothers and fathers, with similar aims to Jump. Helpline: 0906 550 11865.
Match: (Mothers Apart From Their Children): www.match1979.co.uk. A support group for mothers who do not have custody of their children.
Spig: Shared Parenting Information Group (UK): www.spig.info. An organisation aimed at helping divorced and separated parents who want to improve co-operation in the upbringing of their children.