

Children and Divorce: The Role of the Early Childhood Educator

Early childhood educators are often the front line for experiencing the impact of separation and divorce on children. In addition to providing support to upset children, they are oftentimes drawn into the actual custody and access dispute of the parents. Parents can and do subject early childhood educators to their one-sided version of events hoping to enlist them as allies to win their battle. Furthermore, one parent may seek to restrict access to the other parent; there may be concerns for child abduction; and parents may ask for reports of children's attendance and behaviour and the educator's theory linking these issues to the behaviour of the other parent. Both parents can be very convincing and their emotional tug on the educator can be intense. This however can be a no-win situation for the early childhood educator who can soon find themselves in conflict with one or both parents and distracted from their primary objective, the immediate care and supervision of the children.

It is vital for early childhood educators to remind themselves of their role and limit of professional boundaries (span of practice). While parents often look on early childhood educators as glorified babysitters, the early childhood educators' objective is to facilitate the child's social, emotional, behavioural, physical, intellectual and academic development. Early childhood educators do not sit still with children. They are forever nurturing appropriate developmental growth in all aspects listed and they are trained to carry out and develop curriculum to support these objectives. The context in which they provide service is varied but generally occurs in either community or in-home settings. Their role and practice setting therefore determines the span of practice, or professional boundaries. The early childhood educator is not likely trained in the dynamics and issues related to separation and divorce and matters related to parental behaviour in the midst of custody and access disputes, nor the legal matters therein.

Early childhood educators are cautioned against wading into custody issues with either parent. They are advised to take a concerned but neutral position towards the dispute, and to concentrate on supports to facilitate the child's development within the childcare setting.

If asked for information, early childhood educators are advised to return with only factual data representing

current curriculum, developmental progress, and behavioural descriptors of the child. They should refrain from suggesting any link or causation theories with regard to custody and access disputes and especially related to one or other parent. This is a time for all professionals involved with the family to have very clear boundaries and act within their span of practice. Parents who continue to ask for one-sided support for a custody position or written reports should continually and firmly be redirected to their lawyers, or it may be suggested they obtain an independent assessment by a qualified assessor trained in all matters related to separation and divorce, and custody and access.

To support the role of the early childhood educator and their professional boundaries, facility operators are advised to develop policy statements for managing parents where custody and access matters impinge on the facility or worker. Such policies may include: setting limits on reports for both quantity and content; requiring legal letters or court orders stipulating who and on which days a parent (or their designate) may pick-up the child or attend for meetings, observations, etc.; and that all requests must go through the supervisor or manager.

Just as early childhood educators have learned to set firm limits to manage the behaviour of children, in the context of parents' custody and access disputes, they must now learn to set firm limits with parents. This is a challenge for early childhood educators as they value parental involvement and helping parents develop their own parenting skills. However, managing custody and access matters are not within their role or span of practice and to wade in to such issues could involve themselves in the court process – clearly far beyond their intensions. Following the suggestions from this article can help the early childhood educator set appropriate limits with parents, which as they know from working with children, can ease behaviour and thus allow their attention to be directed to the child in the childcare setting.

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