

Parental Separation: Who do you see?

There is a dynamic that naturally evolves when parents only see lawyers to determine their ongoing relationship to children, post separation or divorce.

Regardless of the disposition of the lawyer, on the mind of the parent, is winning or coming away with a particular outcome. The parent races to stake a claim. The parent meets the lawyer, states his or her case, convinces the lawyer of the righteousness of the claim and thus retains the lawyer to fight the battle.

When one parent has staked a claim and begun battle the other parent will naturally defend him or herself. Given that most people view the best defense as a good offence, the other parent has to stake a bigger claim. In the process, each parent resorts to assailing the other while holding his or herself out as the better parent. The fight is on and hopes fade.

Lawyers are experts at law. Some are also experts at negotiation. Certainly others are expert at litigation. However, from a child's view, relationships with their parents are generally non-negotiable. From the child's view and already feeling their relationships are threatened, their goal is to see relationships remain intact; that neither parent hurts the other; and that they can enjoy their lives reasonably with both parents with as little disruption as possible.

The more involved parents are in battle and the more hurt they are, the greater the likelihood the children's lives are emotionally and psychologically disrupted. The more disrupted their lives, the more difficult it is for them to get on with the tasks of childhood, learning and socialization. Therefore, the greater the parental conflict, the greater the risk of school and social difficulties. Given childhood is the time of life for the development of cognitive and social skills necessary for adult life, those children whose learning and socialization is disrupted are then also at greater risk of problems in adulthood, not having acquired the necessary skills during childhood.

Separated parents are encouraged to see a social worker or attend educational programs aimed at helping them understand issues related to settling

such matters. Interestingly, some jurisdictions require parents involved in contested custody and access matters to attend such programs.

The objective in meeting with a social worker or attending a program is to minimize the risk of conflict by learning about of the consequences of various courses of action and by learning about the range of alternatives for restructure family life, children's time between parents and processes for decision making. The goal is to resolve matters more amicably, thus alleviating stressors on the child to provide for better psychosocial outcomes.

Consider the fact that early childhood educators and teachers don't want children to fight their battles in the sandbox. They want them to learn to get along and play nicely. This is what children learn and what they expect to see in their parents. When parents do otherwise, their influence will outweigh the early childhood educators and teachers. Children will learn to battle and fight, particularly with loved ones and peers, as that will be their role model.

Social problems require expertise with social solutions. Use your social worker or educational program to learn and develop a parenting plan that reduces risks while leaving relationships intact. Use your lawyer to write up the terms of your agreement if necessary or to understand rights *and* obligations. If matters continue to be contested, your lawyer can help you with the legal process.

Social workers, programs and lawyers each have a role. Use them all wisely and appropriately.

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