



Best Interests of the Child - Separation and Divorce

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Because I have had the privilege of working in Child Welfare, three school systems, Mental Health and private practice I have learned a great deal about how people think. Frequently I hear the term "best interests of the child" and am surprised to learn that the parent believes that this situation is ONLY possible if the child lives with him or her. In fact, I am constantly amazed that couples like each other well enough to make a child but not well enough to work together in order to parent the child or ensure that a healthy environment exists for the child when the marriage or partnership ends. Hillary Clinton, Senator for New York State made popular the phrase "It takes a whole village to raise a child". Unfortunately, immature and vengeful parents frequently sabotage the resources by bad-mouthing those very family members or friends who have much to offer the child and are emotionally closest to him or her. I hear accusations about drug or alcohol abuse, inappropriate decision-making, poor relationship building and even police involvement by "other" parent. Sometimes I even hear about all the sins of the grandparents! One of my first questions is to ask why the accuser ever got involved with someone who, according to the accusations, has not been capable of being a suitable partner - let alone parent. Usually the response is that the informant just HOPED that the person with problems would change.

One of the worst things a child can experience is conflict! Imagine how traumatic it is for a little one to witness every person s/he loves being exposed as inappropriate to be around! Even if the child is pre-verbal and cannot express emotions s/he experiences an environment that is either tension-filled or lacking the consistency of having both parents available to the child at the same time because of separation. I tell teenagers that "growing up is doing all the things you don't want to do - anyway". This includes developing a healthy co-parenting relationship with all of the relatives of your child. "Best interests of the child" is about the child - not your needs or emotions or convenience. It means far more than structure, routines, nutrition, clothing and medical care. It includes emotional support, good problem-solving skills and most importantly role-modeling. History does repeat itself and I am saddened to have children present as clients when they are unable to negotiate the behaviours of their parents after a separation occurs. Ancient scripture claims that sins of the father do go down to the fourth and fifth generation. Children not only suffer but also don't have any idea how to break the cycle and make healthier choices than their ancestors. If you are worried about which man your child will call "dad" or how the child will talk to you when s/he is a teenager - look in the mirror. You are the example.

I travel by airplane frequently and enjoy watching the flight attendant give safety instructions to the passengers. We are told, "If there is an emergency a mask will fall from the ceiling. Put it on yourself FIRST and then help the person beside you". You cannot change other people but you can ensure that you are hooked up to healthy supports. It all starts with you making a move towards making good choices. My father and sister were in the banking industry. When they trained tellers they never let counterfeit touch their fingers. That way, when a counterfeit bill appeared the teller knew immediately that it wasn't acceptable. Children recognize counterfeit. Best interests of the child, I believe means ensuring that you offer only the genuine currency that will help your offspring to be able to navigate life - with or without you! It's up to you to ensure that best interests of the child are truly about the child.