



RAISING STRONG CHILDREN

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One of the biggest surprises to me when I took the bench in 2015 was how many children are born to unmarried parents. In many of our dockets the number is as high as 50 percent. Raising children is hard work. It taxes our patience and causes an untold amount of stress. In the best of situations, where the parents are married to each other, planned their family, have secure jobs and family support, the stress is still very real. In reality, most people don't have the best of situations. Too many of the parents who appear in my court have little or no relationship with each other – and yet they are forever bound by the child they created.

Here is what we know. We know that children do better when both parents are involved in their lives. A child's success is tied to the positive involvement of both parents. Children feel safe and secure and are emotionally more stable in families where the parents work together, even if mom and dad reside in separate homes. It is imperative that a bond exists between the child and the parent and that bond can only be created with frequent and consistent contact. Having a child is a serious obligation. Parents have a legal duty to protect and keep their children safe and a moral duty to encourage and promote a positive relationship with the other parent. I believe most parents take this obligation seriously and do their very best to co-parent. Sadly, many do not. Many barely know each other or have hostile and negative feelings about the other, despite having decided (or perhaps not decided) to have a child. All too often I deal with parents who, for whatever reason, engage in behavior that forever will impact their child and the relationship they have with the other parent. Referred to as "parental alienation," it often signifies a tragic social dynamic in which a child feels and expresses a powerful dislike or even hatred for one parent. Frequently following a bitter divorce, parental alienation also can occur when one parent refuses to let the former spouse have any

contact with the child. I contend this behavior is a none-too-subtle form of child abuse that can have appalling, long-term effects on the child's emotional well-being.

On the other hand, parents themselves could be struggling with emotional or mental health issues that remain untreated or unresolved. As practitioners and judges, we must do our best to identify and address these issues so parents can get the support and help they need. Without intervention, the bond between the child and the other parent can be destroyed over time. Children who are victims (and I believe they are victims) of this behavior often will verbally express their negative feelings for the other parent. This furthers the parent alienators' belief that their behavior is warranted and needed to protect their child from the other parent. And on and on it goes. In some cases, the child will literally refuse to see, talk to, or be in the company of the other parent. I have presided over cases where it took two hours for an 8-year-old child to get out of the car at a police station to see his parent – despite a guardian ad litem (GAL) and police officer's presence. I had a case where a parent told a child to hide a cell phone so the parent could communicate with the child, despite court orders to the contrary. I have seen a parent make a child wait at the end of a long driveway to be picked up by the other parent. These examples, which provide powerful evidence of the destruction these behaviors can have on a child, are sadly much too plentiful. Children in these debilitating circumstances may suffer anger, hatred, fear and rejection for the rest of their lives.

Unfortunately, there are not a lot of options left for us when we see cases like the ones described above. But there is a lot we can do for parents and families when we see emergent behaviors that cause concern. For example, much of the behavior of parents is done *subconsciously* and may be the result of situational hurt or fear. Even their body lan-

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guage while talking to the child about the other parent may send a subliminal message to the child that the other parent is somehow bad. Not talking to or ignoring the other parent in front of the child, not allowing the other parent into the home for pick-ups or drop-offs, refusing to acknowledge the other parent at school or social functions, and not allowing the child to talk about the other parent or express their feelings about the other parent are all none-too-subtle messages to their children. As counselors it is your job to talk with your clients and families about the long-term effects this type of behavior can have on children.

With the start the new year, perhaps one of your resolutions can be to spend a few more minutes with your clients and talk about the kids. Some newly separated or divorcing parents need a minute to gather themselves and work through their issues. But, when that minute has passed, you must try your best to see to it that they put their obli-

gations to their children above their negative feelings toward the other parent. This means they need to encourage a positive relationship with the other parent; notify them of upcoming events at school; acknowledge each other when they see the other parent; ask the child about his/her time with the other parent; make it okay to talk about mom or dad; share holidays and other milestone days; allow the child to keep toys, pictures and mementoes from the other parent; and just in general treat the other parent the way they would like to be treated. I am often reminded of a quote from Frederick Douglass, a man born into slavery who triumphed over an unspeakable, turbulent childhood to become a social reformer, orator, statesman and the "self-made man of history." His words: "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." That truth is evident each day in my juvenile delinquency docket. Let's make it a New Year's resolution to do our very best to raise strong children.