



**Separated parents in dispute:
Don't drag in your service providers!**

Separated parents in high conflict have a way of dragging others into their dispute. Not just family friends, and neighbours, but every professional associated with the children. The parents seek to bolster their claims to support their custody and access position and believe letters of support from their professional service providers will do the trick.

They ask doctors and dentists for letters stating which parent more often brought the children to appointments. They ask daycare providers and teachers how the child behaves depending on which parent drops off the child. In the process, the parent also informs the professional of his or her version of events, thus going beyond asking for a letter of support, by actively recruiting the professional to his or her side of the dispute.

If a professional service provider offers a letter of support, the precedent is set for that professional service provider to then become a target from the other parent. The other parent is seeking to discredit the letter provider. In reality, the nature of the dispute *requires* the other parent to discredit the letter provider. The aim is to restore balance and hopefully tip the scale in favour of his or her own claim in the custody/access dispute.

As the dispute intensifies and the competence or bias of the professional service provider(s) becomes the battleground, the services provided to the children may become tainted. The physician and/or dentist may seek to remove him or herself from providing the child's care to escape parental harassment. The daycare or school setting, once perceived as a place of neutrality and safety for the child, is a source of anxiety as the child fears parental intrusion and has to cope with the service providers' consternation with the parents. Collateral damage then includes a loss of service to the child as well as an increase in distress for the child.

In the eyes of the assessor/custody evaluator, such letters of support may say less about the quality of that parent's relationship with the child and more about his or her own boundaries and ability to contain the dispute and keep it from reaching or affecting the child. Hence, a parent who resists dragging in the professional service providers may actually reflect more positively in the eyes of the assessor than a parent who brings a sheaf of letters.

In the event a parent determines that contact with a professional service provider is necessary to a determination of the case, then let the assessor make contact. Assessors, with written consent, can request information from service providers in neutral fashion so that the information is not tainted by the intrusion of the parents. Service and parental relationships can remain intact, the child is spared distress and the case can proceed accordingly.

If parents are using a collaborative family law approach to settling custody and access disputes, then they or their lawyers or child expert/consultant may send a joint request for information, thus bringing balance to the request. In such cases, they would be wise to clearly state that they are involved in a collaborative strategy to facilitate their resolution, and advise the service providers that their involvement will not extend beyond their letter of information.

Service intact, kids spared.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
www.yoursocialworker.com

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.