

Separated Parents and Unfounded Reports to Child Protection Agencies

Some separated parents fighting it out over the custody and residence of their children seek to induct the child protection agency into their dispute. The belief is claims against the other parent may bolster their position at court. At times the claims are of a dubious nature and not really of the magnitude to require involvement of the child protection agency.

These parents whose custody/access issues languish in family court due to unremitting disputes are referred to as high conflict separated parents. They can be the bane of child protection agencies and waste valuable worker time and resources.

More to the point, the only thing truly accomplished by dubious claims to child protection agencies is placing the children into the middle of parental conflict and exposing the children to unnecessary investigations and interviews. If anything, this reflects negatively on the parent making the claims and can work against that parent given a view of always crying wolf. Indeed, if bad enough, these claims can be viewed as a kind of institutional abuse where the caller evokes the power of the agency to harass and intimidate the other parent.

The challenge of the child protection agency however is trying to close those cases where the allegations continue and by mandate, investigations are still required. Further, if an ongoing worker is successful at closing the file, the risk is that it will be re-opened when a new issue presents at intake.

Strategies to wean high conflict separated parents away from spurious claims include helping the parents to understand and appreciate the impact of their dispute upon the children and the impact of multiple investigations including the sense of embarrassment a child can feel when workers must show up unannounced at home or school. Another strategy is to make clear that multiple unfounded claims make the caller look like a disruptive or even abusive person which in turn can undermine their position at court.

Beyond those strategies, workers need to key in on personal and interpersonal variables of both parents to help them strengthen capacity for resilience in the face of their dispute.

To round out the strategies for closing and keeping files closed, there needs to be a collaboration between intake and the ongoing worker, facilitated through the supervisors so that each group may be apprised of higher order strategies to resolve new matters quickly at intake.

I have the pleasure of providing consultation to our local child protection agency on matters concerning high conflict separated parents whose claims fall below the threshold of legitimate child protection issues save for perhaps emotional harm, the result of parental conflict. It would be my pleasure to be of service to provide consultation on these matters to other child protection agencies, either in person or electronically as through SKYPE.

If you are the parent forever engaging the child protection agency thinking it will bolster your claim in a custody/access dispute, think again. You just may be working against yourself. Don't cry wolf and save the intervention of the child protection agency for legitimate concerns.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847

gary@yoursocialworker.com
<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert in social work, marital and family therapy, child development, parent-child relations and custody and access matters. Gary is the host of the TV reality show, Newlywed, Nearly Dead, parenting columnist for the Hamilton Spectator and author of Marriage Rescue: Overcoming the ten deadly sins in failing relationships. Gary maintains a private practice in Dundas Ontario, providing a range of services for people in distress. He speaks at conferences and workshops throughout North America and was the first social worker to sit on the Ontario Board for Collaborative Family Law.