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I have never accepted a fee for consulting in the family court system. I also do not receive remuneration for conducting research, nor have I been personally adversely affected by a family court decision. I felt compelled to come and testify today because of what I have seen while conducting research.

As a psychiatrist I am very concerned with the courts' inability to discern mental health and mental illness in parents and the impact of these and intra-familial abuse on children. For the last three years I have been gathering data with respect to family court cases where one parent was mentally ill and abusive toward both the co-parent and children and the other parent was relatively mentally healthy. I have followed about 50 cases; I have also collected data from young adults who were victimized by a parent and the family court system. Although not all of the subjects were residents of Connecticut, it seems that the patterns I have observed occur in every state.

I believe that the children of mentally ill parents need and deserve special care and protection. Due to their parent's mental illness they both carry the genes that create risk, and they are exposed to that parent's dysfunctional parenting. This is a double whammy of jeopardy the affected child did not ask for and deserves to be protected from as much as possible. Tragically, children also suffer when their relatively healthy parent is abused by the co-parent and the court system and therefore cannot be fully present for them. For these children the presumption that every child is better off with ample time with both parents is not appropriate. It is my observation that children who are abused psychologically by a mentally ill parent have no one to turn to. When they seek validation from their relatively healthy parent, they cannot receive it because often the courts restricts the healthy parent's speech. A healthy parent who validates a child's perception of abuse, and co-parental mental illness is at risk of being labeled "an alienator". A child who rejects an abusive parent and tries to protect him or herself runs the risk of being removed from a safe environment and placed with an abuser.

In the cases I follow both the abuse and mental illness of the affected parent are obvious, not subtle. I have observed officers of the court knowingly advocating children spend unsupervised time with abusers. I have also observed numerous mental health professionals misrepresenting information that showed mental illness and abuse on the part of a parent and the suffering of children. In these cases professionals had long standing relationships with the court, and family law attorneys and financially benefitted from these connections. It is clear to me that financial conflicts of interest place children in harms' way—the result is that children do not receive the loving parenting and peaceful life they need and deserve.

I am convinced that more objective research into the impact of mentally ill parents on co-parents and children needs to be conducted before there is a presumption made with respect to how parenting time should be allotted in these families. The presumption that a 50-50 split is best could endanger the mental health of children and create life threatening situations for co-

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parents and children. I wonder why every child should not be entitled to the best upbringing their relatively healthy parent can give them. I wonder why the healthy parent should not be afforded more latitude in deciding how to help a child cope with a co-parent's mental illness. The relatively healthy parent will live with the damage inflicted by the co-parent long after the child has aged out of the system.

Articles

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