

Winners and Losers

"Unfair," claims a father whose child-support payments are in arrears, speaking of the new law.

"My former wife doesn't keep her end of the bargain. My visitation rights are a joke. It's never convenient for me to see my children. She sees to it that all their time is booked so there's none left for them to spend with me. That's why my support payments are late."

The children's mother responds, "That's just an excuse for not supporting the children. He can see the kids any weekend he really wants to. True, some Saturdays they have dentist appointments. That's when they aren't in school; but he could pick them up at the dentist's. I do that. It's never convenient for him to chauffeur or run errands or do anything to give me free time. Not sending the money, though, is the worst. We need those payments."

"Whenever I want the kids for the weekend there's a reason I can't. I want to pick them up Friday night, but there's a music lesson, rehearsals for a school play, or her folks are visiting. So I sit around doing nothing Friday night and can't pick the kids up until after their dentist appointments. Two-thirds of the weekend is shot. Their mother insists I bring them home before supper on Sunday so they can do their homework. If I'm late delivering them, she punishes me (and them) by saying 'no' the next time."

"My ex-husband is irresponsible, always was; that's why our marriage fell apart. When he's 'having fun,' he has no sense of time. I'm trying to help our kids learn to be aware of time, to keep appointments whether for lessons or with me. All the load of teaching them... whether their table manners or to look both ways before crossing the street... falls on me. When the kids are with their Dad they have a wonderful time; but they don't learn anything. They think I'm a cruel parent because I insist on certain standards of behavior. This new

law won't change that, but at least I should be able to count on a steady income from him. Together with what I earn, we can manage."

"With this new law, if I fall behind in the child-support, money can be withheld from my pay or taken out of my tax refunds. That's not fair. About the only handle I had on seeing my children was the money. If she would let me see the kids when I want to, I'd make a bigger effort to keep up with the support payments. Now I won't have any leverage at all. The court just ignores it when their mother won't let me have my kids over the weekend."

Who is right, father or mother?

As in most instances of this kind, both father and mother, to some degree, are right, but neither is, entirely. The real issues are 1) child support and 2) visitation rights. One should never be contingent upon the other. They are separate issues and have nothing to do with one another. When these issues blend in the mind of either parent, the children are the losers.

A parent ordered by the court to pay child-support is obliged to do so. And a parent given visitation rights is entitled to enjoy those privileges. Children need both their parents as surely as they need both fruits and vegetables in their diets. Not only is it a mother's responsibility to teach her children table manners; it is also her duty to teach them to respect their father. Residual angers and emotions often interfere with clear thinking and fairness; dealing with those can be difficult; but no child should be penalized to even the score between quarreling ex-spouses.

The new law addresses only one issue: child support. Fathers who are being deprived of their rights to see their children have a legitimate complaint. Legislation to protect fathers' interests may now be in order; certainly the problem does exist and should be addressed.