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Why Shared-Parenting Legislation Makes Sense

By **Ned Holstein** - March 21, 2015

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Being a single parent is a tough gig. Hustle the barely conscious kids off to preschool, fret whether your afterschool program is meeting the needs of your children, fidget in rush hour lines at the grocery store - or feel guilty about getting them a Big Mac and fries. That's why we have National Single Parent Appreciation Day on March 21, courtesy of President Reagan in 1984.

That's also the reason National Parents Organization wants to make single parenting a thing of the past. To help, we have a killer app: shared parenting by divorced or never-married parents. Instead of one frenetic single parent and one non-parent called a "visitor" (and relegated to every other weekend), both parents divvy up the work. The other reason for shared parenting is the emerging consensus among child development researchers that children want shared parenting and do much, much better in life if they have it.

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In this age of gender role convergence, people are often surprised to learn just how often courts currently favor one parent over the other. In fact, sole custody is awarded to one parent in about 83 percent of cases, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, thus creating a single parent and a "visitor." Thrusting parents into a winner-take-all gladiatorial arena helps create bitter custody battles with attendant and corrosive effects that last for years. National Parents Organization recently published a Shared Parenting Report Card that graded each state's child custody statutes A through F. The results show no state is heading for acceptance into the Ivy League.

Fortunately, millions of parents are rallying to reform our failed family courts. State legislatures in 17 states are considering shared parenting legislation right now. If passed, not only will single parents have help, but children will benefit.

Federal statistics from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Census Bureau for the 35 percent of children who are raised by single parents show that these children account for:

- 63 percent of teen suicides;
- 70 percent of juveniles in state-operated institutions;
- 71 percent of high school dropouts;
- 75 percent of children in chemical abuse centers;
- 85 percent of those in prison;
- 85 percent of children who exhibit behavioral disorders; and
- 90 percent of homeless and runaway children.

Whether the problem is emotional disturbances of children, drug use, alcohol use, teen pregnancy, poor performance in school, trouble with the law or running with gangs, the conclusion is the same: Being raised by a single parent is a powerful risk factor. It's something our nation's family courts should try and prevent instead of foster—for the health and well-being of our children.

Conversely, recent comprehensive reviews of child development research show that children thrive with shared parenting following separation or divorce. For instance, the American Psychological Association

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recently published a report by prominent University of Texas psychologist Richard Warshak. This review was signed by 110 child development experts and concludes, "Shared parenting should be the norm for parenting plans for children of all ages, including very young children."

The benefits of shared parenting don't end with children. The research shows shared parenting significantly increases child support compliance, diminishes parental conflict and domestic violence and allows both parents to pursue their careers, social lives and other interests without the burden of singlehandedly raising a child.

Like many creative solutions favored by the public, shared parenting often suffers from legislative gridlock. The reason in this case is that state bar associations, which hold immense political sway, usually oppose shared parenting legislation. Some shared parenting advocates have claimed that family law attorneys have a financial interest in fomenting custody litigation.

So by all means, let us show our appreciation for the heroic efforts of single parents by doing away with litigation and replacing "single" with "shared." On this national Single Parent Appreciation Day, I invite others to join National Parents Organization in supporting legislative efforts throughout the nation to reform family courts. If passed, parents and children will have a true reason to celebrate.

Ned Holstein is founder and board chairman of the National Parents Organization. A graduate of Harvard College, he earned a master's degree in psychology from M.I.T. and a medical degree from Mount Sinai School of Medicine, where he served on the faculty as a teacher and researcher.

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