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So many parents today with children who decide to divide get caught up in long high-conflict court battles, often fueled by external influencers that have zero care, compassion or insight into the long-term clinical effects on families with children.

As family clinicians, we see vulnerable parents literally taken in by others agendas: this could be angry extended family members with a long-standing resentment that literally use the angry parent, the children and the legal system to exact their revenge. This is the perfect recipe for the dangerous cycle of systematic abuse to begin.

Worse is pairing up with family attorneys who serve as antagonists to fuel the fires of unregulated emotion keeping the billing hours high only to result in high conflict family court matters. Families spend enormous amounts of money often hanging on empty hope and promise that they will prevail. Angry parents get angrier, and the best interest of children gets lost in the process.

The family courts are overloaded and often lack the education insight and awareness into the emotional toll that their very legal process is taking on the family system before them, especially the children. The legal system allows anyone with a legal right to be heard. If malice exists, that right gets used as a weapon to actually bring harm judges in the end, tend to make the appropriate findings. The saving grace is often a mental health professional(s) who have appeared. To be fair, the system in the end usually does work, but the harm in the entire process cannot be ignored. A myriad of mental health-related challenges for children are often triggered in a high conflict matter that may otherwise never present. Bottom line, children are put at risk unnecessarily.

An example of a legal loophole that can bring tremendous harm when used with a clear intent of malice is the grandparent rights argument. Ask yourself: why would a grandparent have to sue their own child to get rights to their grandchildren? Unless there is a death of their own child and they are forced to use the legal system to gain privileges to a grandchildren, often revealed is estrangement with their own child. A court room is the last place to heal a relationship, only an expensive temporary place to carry out a vendetta, increase conflict in an existing legal matter.

Getting into solution: consider sitting with an adolescent and family clinician first. I have had young parents actually come to my office and say, we want to make sure we keep our kids best interest first. My reply: What a gift to your family. Interview a few family attorneys that come from a place of guiding you through the process with the skill of minimizing chaos. Do not involve outside opinions, especially from estranged relatives who have an axe to grind. They are only using your family matter to further their resentment rooted agenda.

Finally, do your very best to remember that children need their parents to eventually co-parent in peace. Keep your children's best interest first, always. --Mitzi MacKenzie, MSW, LCSW, Mackenzie Family Advocacy, Adolescent & Family Clinician