

# Chicago Sun-Times

CHICAGO SUN-TIMES, Friday, March 11, 1988

COMMENTARY

## Divorced dads don't deserve humiliation

By Jeffery M. Leving

**A**ccording to a recent Chicago Sun-Times article, State public Aid Director Edward T. Duffy tried public humiliation to shame the state's "10 most-wanted men" for the nonpayment of child support. The article seemed to portray certain fathers as deadbeats and fatherhood as possibly being just another word for irresponsibility.

However, the article did not describe the helpless feelings many fathers experience in attempting simply to visit their children. It did not relate the gut-

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wrenching feelings certain fathers experience in not even knowing where their children live or what schools they are attending.

The article did not touch on the fact that the state's attorney's office represents custodial parents "at not cost to them" to collect back child support, yet it cannot by law offer the same free services to indigent non-custodial parents who are not receiving their court-ordered visitation.

Legal representation by the state's attorney's office is limited to child support and does not extend to visitation, pursuant to the Illinois Marriage and Dissolution of Marriage Act.

But is the collection of child support more important than the enforcement of court-ordered visitation rights? I hoe not. Both rights should generally be of equal importance in protecting the "best interest of the child."

It appears that our public policy may be to place the collection of child support above the enforcement of visitation rights. If this is true, then who is protecting the children who can end up the ultimate victims in this deadly game of alienation of affections and denial of visitation rights? Father loss and deep feelings of rejection may be the end result for innocent children.

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Many immigrants come to this country with little or no money, but their children grew up to be leaders of our current society. The answer was family stability, not material wealth. Money is not an adequate substitute for health parent-child relationships.

The Illinois Marriage and Dissolution of Marriage Act states (concerning custody determinations) that "the court shall presume that the maximum involvement and cooperation of both parents regarding the physical, mental, moral and emotional well-being of their child is in the best interest of the child."

But can this legal presumption concerning the "best interest of the child" really be effectuated if the custodial parent is entitled to preferential treatment?

The preservation of our family unit also extends to preserving the father-child relationship and preserving the emotional well-being of our society's children, not just collecting money in a vacuum.

If children are not protected, then the mental health profession may be the growth industry of the future.

One of the damnable aspects of child support, visitation and custody litigation is that children can be treated as commodities. But children should never be sold, bought and traded in broken-up and scattered families.

This conduct, if allowed, can only give cruelty a deeper meaning.

Society should be deeply concerned about gender bias and children's right to the protection of the family unit. Our society's foundation, the family unit, depends on it.

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