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# 7 THINGS SINGLE DADS MUST DO

TO PROTECT  
THEIR PARENTAL  
RIGHTS



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## **Dedication**

This book is dedicated to all the single fathers who stick it out, for the love of their kids, in a sometimes biased court system. Your love will change the world, one child at a time.

# About

## Mindy L. Hitchcock



Mindy L. Hitchcock is a Michigan family law attorney and mediator with 27 years experience who is committed to two-parent families. She recognizes that, although more than half of children in the United States are born to single parents, today's family court system is still based on the outmoded model of the nuclear family. Single dads are treated as little more than payers of child support, while single moms are presumptively the "better parent." This book was written to help single fathers avoid the traps and landmines that await them in the family court system, enabling them to take their rightful place in their children's lives.

# 7 MUST-KNOW TIPS FOR SINGLE DADS

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# TIP 1

## Take a Deep Breath!



While it may surprise many who expect a more cynical response, most single men have a similar reaction to the news that they are becoming a father – fear, and joy. Here are just some examples found on the internet:

- “So I found out today that my fiancée is pregnant! Considering my age (20), I’m surprised at the utter happiness I felt upon her telling me.”

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- “I never wanted a child. I was that person that said the world was overpopulated and bringing a child into this world was an act of cruelty. Boy did I get a dose of reality this past xmas. Found out I'm going to be a father in a few months. Now that things have changed in more ways than I can imagine, I'm searching for ways to prepare for this new experience in my life. What books do I read? What can I do to make the mother of my child as comfortable as possible during the next 8 months? What the hell am I going to do??”
- “I just found out yesterday I'm going to be a father, I'm so scared because I'm afraid I won't love my child and be able to give him or her the upbringing I want so badly for my child...I just need some advice on what I can do to be the best father I can be to my child and to be as supportive to my partner as I can.”

Without exception, every comment I found, and every single father I've talked to over the years, wants to do the very best they can for their child...just like a new mom does. In fact, fathers not only worry about taking care of their child, they also worry about taking care of the mother of their newborn.

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The news that they are becoming a father brings out many tender feelings in men. It is part of the bonding process. It is also a time when their protective mode begins to kick in, for their child, and the mother of their child. And, it can be a scary and unnerving time, too, for fatherhood is a time of great responsibility! So the first step is to take a long, deep breath, know that you can handle the challenge of fatherhood, and take it one step at a time.

Go with your girlfriend to the doctor. Show her consideration as her body starts changing and she begins to feel certain discomforts. Tell her she's beautiful. (Some women have issues with the weight gain of pregnancy, and encouragement is always appreciated.) Realize her hormones are in full gear at this time, and she may become more emotional. Start buying all the things your child will soon be needing, such as car seats, bassinets, cribs, high chairs, and of course plenty of onesies (you'll need them). Enjoy this unique time in your life. Take pictures, share them on Facebook, and start child-proofing your home to make sure your baby will be safe. That means installing outlet covers, gates for when they start walking, and clearing out any toxic liquids your little one might get into when they start exploring. It happens fast. You may have other children, but you will never go through the process with this child again. So enjoy it!

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Becoming a father is one of the most undeniably wonderful times in any man's life. This is a time when you are feeling open and trusting, expressing your love in profound ways. There is something about the miracle of life that engenders such feelings. Yet, if you are a single dad, you must also remember that in the eyes of the law, you are not on equal footing with the mother. You do not have any custody rights, so far as the law is concerned. So, while you are enjoying the pleasure of new fatherhood, let your protective mode also be engaged. The following chapters were written to help guide you through the legal maze that awaits you.



# TIP 2

## Put Your Name on the Birth Certificate



Congratulations - you've just become a father! There is nothing like the moment when your child is born. You're overwhelmed by the miracle of birth, and filled with loving feelings for the infant who has just come into the world, and his mother, who endured the pain of childbirth to bring him or her here. This isn't the time to be defensive, thinking about protecting your parental rights. But in reality, this is exactly the time when you *must* do so, for the sake of your new baby. Before you even leave the hospital, make sure that your name is on BOTH the child's birth certificate AND the affidavit of parentage.

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Why do such mundane details matter at a time like this? Simply because, if things go sour between you and your partner, this is step one to giving you “standing” (i.e., the right to file for custody) in family court. The birth certificate and affidavit of parentage are usually filled out right at the hospital when your child is born, and are easy to complete. It’s much harder to accomplish later...especially if the mother doesn’t consent. Consider this your first official fatherly act.

**Why Do I Need Both?** Because some courts require your name to be on the birth certificate before allowing you to file a case, while other courts require that your name is also on the affidavit of parentage. Otherwise, if you have broken up with your girlfriend by the time you file, she may deny that you are the father, and set up the first of many roadblocks to keep you from seeing your child. If this happens, you will then need to pay for a DNA test, and while you are awaiting the results, the mother can move away and then you will have to start all over again in a different county or state. Make no mistake: In family court, if the parents of a child are not married, the mother is presumed to have sole custody, and the father has the right to pay child support. **The courts will not protect your custody rights at all.**

If your child’s mother resists putting your name on the birth certificate or affidavit of parentage, then run-do not walk-to a family law [attorney](#) for help immediately. This may sound

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cynical, but it is based on my nearly three decades of experience as a family law attorney. When relationship challenges come up, as they always do, individuals respond in different ways. Most women are aware that they hold the trump card as a single mother. And some may even feel that it's only right for them to call the shots, since they gave birth to the child. (If she refers to the baby as "my child," this could be a warning sign of future troubles.) A lot depends on the maturity level - both yours and hers. And if the two of you break up, it's the easiest thing in the world for her to leave with the baby and there is nothing you can do to stop her. Or worse yet, she can call the police, claim you assaulted her, and get *you* legally removed or arrested. (More on this later.)



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Suffice to say, many a man has done nothing to protect his rights, assuming that his girlfriend will be fair, only to discover later that she has no intention of doing so. Once you have a child, you must protect your relationship with him or her every step of the way. The more you do now, the easier it will be for you later. The mother of a child must agree to put the father's name on the birth certificate or affidavit of parentage, or they likely won't do it down the road. Do it now, when things are fine and your relationship is on solid ground. Don't wait until things break down. AND, make sure you get copies. Otherwise you could be in the same boat as a young single father whose girlfriend put his name on the birth certificate...then tore it up when he left the hospital, before it was filed with the state. Some women see babies as a source of income – *theirs*.

# Tip 3

## *Never* Agree to Give Her Sole Custody



You're at the Friend of the Court, because your girlfriend filed for child support. You're okay with that; after all, it's your child and you want to provide proper support. In fact, you *have* been supplying financial support. When the Friend of the Court specialist asks you about the custody arrangement, your girlfriend says that she has sole legal and physical custody. Or she might agree to joint legal but wants primary physical custody, offering you "reasonable parenting time." This seems a little strange, but you trust her. After all, she is the mother of your child. Here is where a huge red flag should go up for you!

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**What is legal and physical custody?** In order to understand the importance of this point, you need to know the difference between “legal” and “physical” custody. **Legal custody** involves a parent’s right to have a say in their child’s medical, religious, or school choices. **Physical custody** refers to where the child resides.

If your girlfriend wants sole custody and offers you “reasonable parenting time” instead, then **DO NOT AGREE** to it! Never, never, *ever* agree to let the mother have sole legal *or* physical custody. The fact that she suggests this means: 1) she has likely talked to an attorney about this and received legal advice, 2) she wants to have all the control

If your girlfriend asks for sole custody, be forewarned! There is trouble ahead.

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over your baby, and 3) she intends to use the baby to control *you*. When she tells you, "Don't worry, you can see him whenever you want," do not believe it! If it were true, she'd agree to a fair parenting time schedule in the first place.

Many a single father has been lulled into a false sense of security by such reassurances, only to find out later that such statements weren't sincere. If they break up with their girlfriend all access to the child is blocked, and then the father finds out that his only option will be going to an unsympathetic court, hoping it will intervene on his behalf. **Avoiding this one mistake alone will save you thousands of dollars - and untold grief.**

At this point, the Friend of the Court specialist may tell you that he or she is going to approve what the mother wants. Refuse to sign the document and tell the mother that you will agree to nothing but joint legal and physical custody. Yes, they will try to persuade, coerce, or bully you into it, by acting like you are making a big deal out of nothing. Don't believe it! Seek legal help immediately.

### **What's wrong with "reasonable parenting time"?**

The short answer – a lot! Example: You live in Wayne County. The mother insists on sole legal and physical custody,

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but agrees to give you "reasonable parenting time." You may think that means what *you* think is reasonable, but it doesn't. In fact, the mandatory Wayne County Co-Parenting Plan specifically says: "If a court order says 'reasonable' parenting time or pursuant to the FOC guidelines, the following is the schedule that **will be enforced** by the Friend of the Court." And what does that schedule consist of in reality? For dads, it means **NO** overnights, for the first year of the child's life! Instead, you will be allowed two contacts of "up to" 2 hours each and one 6- hour contact, per week. Between the child's age of one to three, you the father will be allowed **four overnights per month**. Just imagine the kind of meaningful



**Never underestimate the importance of YOU in your child's life!**



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relationship you can foster under that scenario. (To see the full mandatory schedule, go online and type in <https://www.3rdcc.org/Documents/FamilyDomestic/FOC/Links/Wayne%20County%20Co-Parenting%20Plan.pdf>)

Not only does this prevent you from having a strong relationship during those crucial, formative first 3 years of life, it also ensures that the mother has what is called the "established custodial environment." This is a legal term which refers to where the child thinks of as "home" for food, shelter, love, nurturing, and so forth. If the mother has the established custodial environment, any attempts you make later to change custody will be subject to the highest standard of proof in the civil law: clear and convincing evidence. So with that one decision to allow your girlfriend to have sole legal and physical custody, you basically guarantee that you will be little more than a visitor in your child's life. That is, unless his mother decides to permit you more time, or she is such an awful and neglectful parent that the courts are forced to act. You do not want to be in this position.

Even in counties that don't have such harsh definitions of "reasonable parenting time," it is far too vague. If you get to the point where your girlfriend is claiming all custody rights, you must make sure your parenting time is spelled out and not left to the whim of the Friend of the Court referee

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who is hearing your parenting time motion, and knows nothing about you.

**RECAP: When it comes to that initial custody and support order, here are the key items to keep in mind:**

✓Be alert when your girlfriend refers to the baby as “my child,” or says that she will decide what is best for the baby. These are signs that she does not consider you an equal parent and spells trouble ahead.

✓Insist on having **JOINT** legal and physical custody.

✓Spell out all parenting time arrangements in detail in court orders; don’t settle for “reasonable parenting time.”

✓Remember that in some counties (Wayne), “reasonable parenting time” means you get **NO** overnights for the first year of your child’s life.

✓Tell your girlfriend about the [No Parent Left Behind Plan](#) and eliminate the problem before it starts.

✓Do not sign any legal document giving you less than joint custody of your child without first talking to a [lawyer](#).

You will never regret taking the time and money to handle this properly the first time, and will save yourself thousands of dollars and untold grief in the meantime.

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Remember, when a father has no custody rights, he not only misses out on overnights and meaningful time with his child, he also has no legal authority when it comes to decisions related to medical treatment, religion, or the education of his child. A father with no custody rights is, in effect, legally powerless, at the mercy of the mother's whims.

The dream of parenthood quickly turns into a nightmare when one parent has all the control and decides when to dole it out to the other. Prevent this problem before it starts, by taking action immediately!



# Tip 4

## No Parent Left Behind



There are many wonderful single dads who support their children faithfully and want just one thing: a real place in the lives of their kids. Some have even won sole legal and physical custody, because the mothers were deemed unfit due to drug, alcohol, or emotional problems. Unfortunately,

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**Studies show that children raised by two parents have a better chance of success in life, staying in school, and avoiding trouble.**

due to some of the very traps mentioned in this book, the men were already at a disadvantage when they sought legal advice. It often takes more than a year, and many thousands of dollars, to undo the harm and obtain meaningful parenting time. Sadly, if a mother came in asking to remove custody from a father with similar problems, it would usually take just one hearing. Of course, that would almost never happen, because such a father would not have received custody in the first place. Fathers don't enjoy the presumption of "superior parent" that mothers enjoy.

If you take nothing else away from this book, always remember that family court is *not* a sympathetic place for single dads. The courts still operate on the outdated view of the nuclear family; a married couple where dad works and mom is the full time caregiver of the children. Although more than 50 percent of children are now born to single parents, your child will likely be grown before the courts catch up to that reality.

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That said, this is the perfect place to make a plug for the No Parent Left Behind Plan™. It was designed to eliminate the worst things that happen to male clients: the stress of court battles, the invariable need to take time off work, the polarization that always occurs when parties become adversaries, the denial of time with their child, and of course the high cost of legal representation to get any parenting time at all. Not to mention the very worst – having a total stranger - no matter how well intended, have the last word in your child's life.

The No Parent Left Behind Plan™ gives single parents equal power to raise their children. For a flat fee, single parents meet with me to prepare a consent judgment giving them equal custody. There is nothing about child support or parenting time in the judgment, except to say that they are unnecessary conditions, because the parents live together. Then we file a case, get the judgment entered, and make it legal and binding. The benefits to this are many:

- Both parents will have authority to consent to necessary medical procedures. So if mom happens to be unavailable and the child needs medical care, dad has authority to consent to it.
- There is no need for a bitter custody battle; the parents are viewed by the court as equals.
- The parents save on legal expenses, because they paid a flat fee and had the foresight to plan for the welfare of their child.

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- The parents are aligned on their child's side, right from the start. No trying to prove who is the better parent, by making the *other* the bad parent.
- The parents, not the judge, get to make decisions about their child.
- The parents are united as co-parents.

The No Parent Left Behind Plan™ is simple, yet effective, and offers a low cost way to preserve your parenting rights. Call (248) 355-5688 for more information.

# Tip 5

## PPO's Used As Weapons



Martial arts legend Bruce Lee once said that good footwork can beat any kick or punch. He called it “winning the war without firing a shot.” This is sound advice for most situations, but especially so when it comes to personal protection orders (PPO’s). Bad moms are willing to lie to get PPO’s, which they then use to keep dads out of their children’s lives. The repercussions of this can last years and can prove emotionally, and financially, devastating.



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The story of a single father named Jesse illustrates this point very well. Jesse met a girl in a bar and she got pregnant within a week of their meeting. Jesse tried to do the right thing and make a go of it with the girl, letting her move into his home. Unfortunately, the girl was immature, insecure, and perhaps even mentally unstable. One night, they went to a mixed martial arts event together. The girl was supposed to be the designated driver that night. Instead, she drank more than 15 Jello shots, then insisted on driving home, weaving all over the highway while at the same time accusing Jesse of cheating on her, and hitting him over the head with her cell phone. Refusing to stop driving she continued hitting him, and finally in frustration and anger Jesse kicked in her radio. Then she pulled over, and let him out. But not before he leaned over and poured a cup of pop on her head.

Their difficulties continued, and a few days later the girl demanded that Jesse come pick up his belongings at her house, when he dropped off the baby. Jesse did so, and she followed him out to the car, calling him "white trash" and other insulting names with the baby in his car seat, still at the front door. He responded with a few choice words of his own, including "whore." She began screaming at him as he put a fan in his trunk, and then yanked on his arm, so hard she ripped the skin off, to get him close enough for her to hit him over the head with her sandal. Jesse kept telling her to get off him and go back in the house. When she started hitting him he yelled, "Get the f--k away from me!" The girl responded,

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“You spit on me! I’m going to tell the cops that you spit on me!” and began running up her porch steps to call the police. In her haste, she tripped and stubbed her toe, which began bleeding. He then went directly to the police station, where they photographed his visible injuries and laughed out loud when he said that he wanted to press charges. Meanwhile, the girl got a PPO when she related these incidents, (leaving out everything she had done), and despite the fact that she had no visible injuries. She used it to deprive Jesse of any real parenting time with his child for the next two years. After that, she clearly had the “established custodial environment” and she used *that* to further deny him parenting time.

If an angry girlfriend obtains a PPO against you on trumped-up charges, it’s possible that you can file a motion to terminate, and win. But the better, faster, and easier way is to avoid getting it entered at all, because being on the wrong end of a PPO can have serious ramifications. It appears in the police LIEN system and the public record. It can prohibit you from appearing in certain places, possessing/purchasing a firearm, or even entering your own home. The PPO can also negatively affect your current or prospective employment. And it puts you at constant risk of violation, and jail, for the flimsiest of reasons. Here are some tips to help you avoid getting a PPO against you on false charges:

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# SELF- DEFENSE: DODGING A BOGUS PPO

✓ **Never Hit Back:** It's hard not to fight back when someone is screaming at you and hitting you on the the head with a cell phone, a shoe, or a purse. But if you strike a woman who provokes you, her assault will be forgotten and you will be the bad guy attacking an "innocent" woman. If your girlfriend begins striking you, scratching you, shoving you, etc., leave the situation immediately. Do not hit back, even if it's to push her away from you. You would be amazed how that story will play out later when she files for a PPO.

✓ **Watch Your Mouth:** If your girlfriend is acting outrageously (whether she is drunk, angry, or whatever), do not respond in kind. If she screams at you, don't scream back. If she curses at you, don't respond.

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Or you may shortly see a petition filed, listing all of the things you said to her, but none of the things she uttered to you. You do *not* want to be in court, trying to explain that "she started it." Again, if what she says or does is very upsetting, just leave.

✓ **Listen to Your Mama:** Figuratively speaking, that is. In almost every case where the mother of a client's child obtained a bogus PPO against him, his friends and family had been warning him long before that she was bad news. Men tend to get warm and fuzzy about a woman who has just given birth to their child. But believe me, your inner circle is warning you for a reason! Take heed and keep her at a safe distance.

✓ **Don't Put It In Writing:** In one case, a client's girlfriend emailed him repeatedly, saying one insulting thing after another to him. Finally he reacted to her comments and responded with a few of his own. Guess what was taken out of context, copied, and pasted into every document her lawyer filed? That's right; all of his insults, and none of hers. If you must respond, write down everything you want to say; then delete it or burn it. Don't send it! The momentary satisfaction you feel could cost you thousands of dollars in court, and precious parenting time with your kids.

**If a PPO has already been issued:** Take it seriously. Some women get a PPO and then continue living with the man who is the target of the PPO. If they have an argument,

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the woman holds the man's ticket to jail in her hand. Not surprisingly, women who make up charges to get PPO's against men use them improperly. Another client had his ex-girlfriend obtain a PPO against him on false charges to enable her to leave with their child. Later, she sued him for cable boxes she had left at his house. When he mailed them back to her to avoid having contact with her at court, she pressed charges for a PPO violation ("contacting her by mail") and tried to have him jailed for 93 days!

Although he was successfully defended against the charge, in the process it was learned that courts routinely cite men merely for engaging in just *one* of the acts prohibited under the "Stalking" section of a PPO; such as appearing within the alleged victim's sight, or approaching them on private property, or communicating with them by mail. The stalking statute actually requires a "course of conduct" consisting of **2 or more** separate, non-continuous acts. For example, sending unwanted emails on one day, and showing up at the alleged victim's workplace on another.

But the way courts, and prosecutors, interpret it, is to cite a man for a PPO violation if he commits even **one** of these acts...even if it is in response to the alleged victim initiating the contact, as in the above case! Once the woman filed a small claims case, there was no way short of simply defaulting and letting her garnish his wages that the client would *not* be violating the PPO, under the view commonly held by courts. And if you are deemed to have violated the

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The PPO, you will have a criminal record for a misdemeanor, and you may go to jail for up to 93 days.

A PPO should always be granted to protect women who are truly in danger. But women who misuse PPO's to manipulate men, or prevent them from being with their child, should be prosecuted. They aren't. It is the tyranny of the victim, and for now, that is the legal reality. It is a very serious predicament **you must avoid at all costs.**

### IN CONCLUSION

A PPO can put you on a slippery slope to a criminal record. You've worked hard to get where you are in your life and in your career. Don't let a momentary outburst of anger make you a sitting duck.

**REMEMBER:**  
**With PPO's, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.**

# Tip 6

## Paying Child Support



Child support seems pretty self-explanatory, doesn't it? She wants money, you pay her money. Pretty simple. And actually, it is quite elementary. There is just one thing to remember about child support: **GET IT IN WRITING!**

In a nutshell, the law says that only child support paid through the system (i.e., Friend of the Court) or which the mother acknowledges as a support payment, will count toward

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your child support obligation. I cannot stress this strongly enough. A couple examples of fathers who didn't follow the rule to "get it in writing" will demonstrate this point all too well:

- Allen gave his daughter's mother money all the time; for food, clothing, and other necessities his little girl needed. He never asked for a receipt or anything, or kept track of what he gave. That just seemed silly to him. One day the Friend of the Court took him to court for child support arrearages. Allen protested that he had been giving the mother money all along. The referee responded that, if the mother acknowledged what he gave was support, he would credit it accordingly. Otherwise, it was simply a gift. The mother refused to acknowledge it as a support, and Allen wound up with a sizeable past due child support bill.
- Jesse gave the mother of his son money for her confinement expenses (the cost of going into the hospital and giving birth), while they were still together and getting along. When she later filed for child support, she didn't even ask for confinement expenses in the complaint. But when they broke up, she sued Jesse for her confinement expenses, some \$3,000. Jesse protested that he had already paid her for these expenses. The mother denied it. Jesse had no proof of his payments. He was forced to pay for her confinement expenses - again.



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It may seem odd to ask your baby's mother to sign a receipt for all the money you give her for the child. She may say, "Don't you trust me?" You can always respond, "Sure, I trust you. I just want to make sure we have an accurate record, so we are both on the same page." After all, if she is trustworthy she should willingly put it in writing. The child benefits.

**And So.** The bottom line is that anything paid outside the system doesn't count towards your child support expense. If you are giving money to your child's mother, either outside the system completely, or over and above what is taken out of your check for child support, either get it in writing or chalk it up as a gift, and forget about it. If she has integrity, she will acknowledge it because it's the right thing to do, but that happens rarely, in my experience. When mothers engage in bad behavior, their most common tactic is to lie...about child support, about being assaulted, or to make the child believe his or her father is a bad person who doesn't love them (more on that in the final chapter).

If, after all the dire warnings in this chapter, you still want to take a chance and give your child's mother money outside the Friend of the Court without getting a receipt, there is one other thing you can do to protect yourself: Write a check.

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A check can at least document that the money was paid. In the memo section, write "child support." When she cashes it, you can claim that this was her acknowledgment.

### MODIFICATION OF CHILD SUPPORT



Modification of child support is an often misunderstood area of law for fathers. Time and again I have talked to fathers facing a court hearing for child support arrearages they failed to pay after they lost their job, or incurred some setback, like expenses after a serious illness. They think that all they have to do is go in and tell the Friend of the Court their situation, and then things will be fine. **They are wrong.**

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Here is the rule of thumb to always remember when it comes to child support: **There is no retroactive modification of child support.** Period. Child support will be modified as of the day you file a motion to change it. So, whether you experienced a “downsizing” a year ago, diagnosed with cancer, or struck by lightning, your child support bill marches on **unless and until** you take action to modify the amount. If you lose your job and wait six months to file a motion, asking for the amount to be recalculated based upon your new, lower income, you are still on the hook for the six months and the new amount will only be effective as of the date of the motion. (Divorced men: the same holds true for spousal support. You get no relief prior to the date you file your motion.)

One exception to this would be if your child’s mother (or your ex wife) agrees to date the change retroactively to the date of your job loss, or injury. But never rely on this. In 27 years of practicing law, the number of times this has happened can be counted on one hand. If your girlfriend is one of these rare few women, I recommend you marry her immediately!

# Tip 7

## Best Interests of the Child



Never underestimate your power to positively shape your child's life. Parents are like gods to their children. No matter how many others will touch your child's life, the fact remains that they have only one father and one mother. Irreplaceable. What they learn from you, by your words and more importantly by your example, will help shape who they become. They take what you say as gospel, until the day they become old enough to think for themselves.

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Then, if you have lied to them or mislead them, they will realize it, and often they will turn away from you. Many mothers who try to turn their children against their fathers find this out, to their great sorrow. That is why, despite anything the mother of your child has said or done to you, leave your child out of any parental dispute. Your son or daughter has the absolute right to love you both without having to decide who is "right" or "wrong." It is imperative that you *truly* respect this right of your child, because your child will know how you feel whether you articulate it or not. Children are incredibly sensitive to the feelings of those around them, particularly their parents.



If you take this advice to heart, you will be richly rewarded.

## **7 Things Single Fathers Must Do to Protect Their Parental Rights**

If you don't, you will live to regret it. Sometimes parents feel they must explain to the child when the other parent is playing games, or they won't understand. And it's hard, when your child is saying, "Why do you have to leave, daddy? Why can't I stay with you longer?" and the only reason is that their mom is restricting your time out of malice. There is certainly nothing wrong with telling your son or daughter, "Sweetheart, I really want to stay longer. But your mom and I are working some things out right now. And even though we don't always see eye to eye on everything, one thing we do agree on is that we both love you. And I am doing everything I can to make sure I get as much time with you as I can possibly can, because you are very important to me. And it's not your fault that your mom and I disagree, remember that."

Many years of experience demonstrate that it is usually the mother who tries to alienate the children from the father, not the other way around. Maybe it's because mothers are presumptively given custody of the child, and it's easy to use the children to punish the father for his "sins." In any event, don't respond in kind. Don't worry. One thing one learns from being a parent is that our kids know our flaws better than anyone. Yours, and their mother's. They really don't need any help, thank you very much, in figuring out that particular mystery. Just ask them and see.

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If you must go to court to regain your place in your child's life, do it! Fight hard and don't give up. But whatever minimal time you have with your son or daughter in the meantime, make sure it is free from vindictive or negative comments about their mom. Just love them. They'll figure it out for themselves, when they get a little older. And they will be forever grateful to you for keeping them out of that terrible place, caught in a vise between their mom and dad.

I was a child of divorce, raised by a bitter mother bent on turning us against our father. She had her reasons to be hurt, of course. And I really don't believe she had any idea of the damage she was doing, telling us that our father never loved us, sharing intimate details of their life that we did not want to know, and in particular telling my brother that he did not have a father. At first I was just devastated by the loss of my father. Then, surrounded by nothing but my mother's negative comments, I decided that what she said must be true. That hurt so deeply that I began spiraling down a very negative path, as did two of my other siblings.

My father, when I was with him, said very little about my mother. And in time, as I grew up I began to realize what she had done. And I turned away from her. Sadly, my sister and brother continued to believe what she said, and isolated themselves from the family. They turned to alcohol, and died, too young.

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Please keep this in mind if you are facing the rage of a vindictive mother bent on keeping you from your child. It's so easy to take a cheap shot at the other parent, especially when you feel that you are being wrongfully blocked from having a relationship with your child. Yet being a parent requires you to look past your own immediate anger and hurt feelings, to consider the impact of the conflict on your child. Your commitment to what courts call the "best interest of the child" will pay enormous dividends in the long run. You will be a hero to your child in the long run. Focus on the court fight, if you are forced to have it, and win!





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