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D.C. Family Court Launches Pilot Family Education Program For Parents and Children in Contested Custody Cases

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Family Court of the D.C. Superior Court today announced a new pilot family education program for parents and children ages 7 to 14 in contested custody cases. The program was developed to limit the emotional strain on children when their parents are involved in contested custody litigation.

“All too often the children – though not the target of their parents’ anger – are affected by their parents’ hostility and there is a profound emotional toll,” said Family Court Presiding Judge Anita Josey-Herring. “This program was created to assist parents with developing skills to improve their interactions with each other, and also help children to develop skills to better manage the negative effects of parents in conflict,” Judge Josey-Herring explained. Judge Odessa F. Vincent will preside over the family education program cases; Darrell F. Hale, Branch Chief, Multi-Door Division’s Family Mediation Branch, will serve as program director.

The family education seminars will run three to four hours on weekends, with adults and children participating in separate sessions at the same time. The goal of the program is to give parents the skills to mediate their disagreements in the future, thereby reducing the impact of their conflicts on their children. Children will be encouraged to give voice to their feelings, and helped to understand that they are not at fault. Children will learn coping skills for dealing with conflict, as well as skills for dealing with the negative emotions they may be experiencing. Two weeks after they attend the session, parents or caretakers will go to mediation to attempt to resolve custody issues and settle the case. Parents and primary caretakers in all cases involving a contested custody issue will be required to participate in this pilot program.

“Our goal is to teach parents to interact constructively with one another in order to minimize the adverse impact of their dispute on their children” Judge Josey-Herring concluded.

This new and innovative program is funded by the Family Court, and by grants from the State Justice Institute and the Women’s Bar Association of the District of Columbia. The American Psychological Association will facilitate the family education program seminars for both parents and children. The Court is most grateful to members of its Domestic Relations/ Paternity & Support Subcommittee, as well as the D.C. Bar’s Family Law Section for their contributions to the development and implementation of the program.

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