

Britney and K-Fed Doing It All Wrong, Family Researcher Says

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Britney Spears and ex-husband Kevin Federline continue to duke it out in the headlines over the custody of their two children. This week, a judge turned down Spears' plea for joint custody. Her visitations rights were previously reinstated and she is allowed to see her two boys three times a week during monitored visits. A University of Missouri-Columbia researcher and expert in divorce and stepfamily issues said this story should open everyone's eyes to the damage that can be inflicted on children who are caught in a custody war.

"They are doing almost everything wrong," said Larry Ganong, professor and co-chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Studies (HDFS) in the MU College of Human Environmental Sciences and professor in the Sinclair School of Nursing. "Interparental conflict is so damaging for kids. The message is that parents need to cooperate as much as possible, put the children's needs first, stifle anger and take the high road. I don't get the sense that Brit and K-Fed are doing that."

More than half of America's courts require some type of parental education for adults going through divorce or separation. Ganong is one of the co-creators of "Focus on Kids" – a program developed 12 years ago by HDFS faculty at MU and continually updated. It is used in many courts to educate parents on ways to put their differences aside for the sake of their children.

"We don't necessarily expect the parents to like each other, but we do try to teach them to act cordial as though a person would with a co-worker

or a business associate. In this case, that business is raising a child,” Ganong said.

Ganong said it is a big challenge to do this because during this time period there is a lot of hurt and anger. It takes two people to make co-parenting a success. In this situation many parents are unable to work together to make their marriage a success and they just are not on the same page most of the time.

“When I teach Focus on Kids classes, I tell them when they interact with their former spouse it will be difficult because that person knows what buttons to push, in fact, the ex-spouse probably installed those buttons,” he said. “It sounds like common sense; but there is a lot of research to support the fact that conflict between parents is more damaging to children than not having their parents in the same household.”

While some parents are mean-spirited and driven for revenge, others do a good job of putting their children first. Ganong says even the parents who try hard to do their best slip sometimes; he likens it to a person on a diet grabbing a candy bar once in a while. Above all, it is important for both parents to be a part of their children’s lives.

“It is extremely important for the other parent to have visitations,” Ganong said. “Safety is the priority especially if domestic violence or substance abuse is a problem. However, there are ways to have supervised visits even with parents who might be alcoholics. If a child never sees one parent, there is a tendency for the child to either idealize the parents they don’t see or have a distorted view of that parent because all they hear is negative, and neither situation is good for kids.”

Source: University of Missouri

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