## SOUL CUSTODY

Divorce after divorce, year after year, professionals bow and pay homage to a principle with which everyone agrees. Divorce should be conducted in the best interests of children. Their feelings and needs should come ﬁrst.

We place this principle in our laws. It is supposed to be the cornerstone of all decisions afecting our progeny. It is the ruler by which all judgments are to be measured. We glorify it and repeat it to each other, family and friends, the courts, and ourselves. Everyone believes in making decisions based on the best interests of the children. That's what we say.

I performed custody evaluations for over 35 years. I saw the pain, fear, confusion, and trauma of families torn apart. As a child advocate, I was particularly aware of the impact of parental divorce on children who felt helpless to keep the family together even though they tried. They universally wished that their parents would stop ﬁghting and reunite, a wish that rarely came true.

The children who sufered most were those whose parents exposed them to intense conﬂict. They saw their parents yell at each other, treat each other with disrespect and hatred, and sometimes hit each other. They were too often caught in the middle of these disputes and treated like pawns in a destructive game of chess. They observed mom and dad struggling over money, property, privileges, the “truth”, and their custody.

Children typically withdrew into themselves. They sufered emotionally, developmentally, and relationally. Their school performance sufered; they became depressed; they developed anxiety and sometimes post traumatic symptoms; and some acted out in self-destructive ways.

### As a forensic psychiatrist who has witnessed the toll of high conﬂict divorces on children, I urge parents and mental health professionals alike to prioritize children's well-being.

To children their parents’ ﬁghts were very personal. Kids incorporate each of their parents. Each parent becomes part of them. When one parent attacks the other, the child feels attacked. If dad hates mom, he hates that part of them. When mom hates dad, the same feeling state is activated. As a result, children lose self-esteem and feel unloved.

Good parents protect their children from damage. Parents who are self-centered focus on winning the war and are too often unaware of the harm their behavior causes. This lack of awareness adds to the children feeling unsafe and uncared about. These children protect themselves by withdrawing even more.

Fortunately, most children are resilient and don’t end up with life-long problems when exposed to parental conﬂict, but about 25 per cent do. Children less fortunate continue to be caught in the middle even after the divorce has been ﬁnalized. They carry the trauma into adulthood, have dificulty establishing healthy relationships with members of the opposite sex, and often avoid romantic relationships altogether. They also distance themselves from their parents who may or may not realize what they’ve done.

Parents are responsible for keeping their children safe during all war, including divorce. Please keep this in mind if you are headed for a divorce, are involved in a divorce, or have ﬁnalized a divorce. Be empathic, support their needs, and keep them out of the middle. Your children will thank you.

***As a mental health therapist with decades of experience, I’m on a journey to understand and mitigate the impacts of high conﬂict divorces on children. With my blogs, get practical insights and compassionate guidance to navigate this challenging terrain with empathy and wisdom.***