

Department of Legislative Services
Maryland General Assembly
2015 Session

FISCAL AND POLICY NOTE

House Bill 888
Judiciary

(Delegate Carter, *et al.*)

Family Law - Rebuttable Presumption of Joint Custody

This bill creates a rebuttable presumption in an initial child custody proceeding, whether *pendente lite* or permanent, involving the parents of a child, that an award of joint physical custody for approximately equal periods of time for each parent and joint legal custody is in the best interests of the child. If the court determines by a preponderance of the evidence that a co-parenting custody arrangement is not in the best interests of the child, the court may award sole custody to one parent.

Fiscal Summary

State Effect: None. The bill does not directly affect governmental operations or finances.

Local Effect: None. The bill does not directly affect circuit court operations or finances.

Small Business Effect: None.

Analysis

Current Law: Maryland courts resolve child custody disputes based on a determination of “what is in the child’s best interests.” In a custody dispute between the child’s parents, the court examines numerous factors and weighs the advantages and disadvantages of the alternative environments. The criteria for judicial determination includes, but is not limited to (1) the fitness of the parents; (2) the character and reputation of the parents; (3) the desire of the natural parents and any agreements between them; (4) the potential for maintaining natural family relations; (5) the preference of the child, when the child is of sufficient age and capacity to form a rational judgment; (6) material opportunities affecting the future life of the child; (7) the age, health, and sex of the child; (8) the residences of the parents and

the opportunity for visitation; (9) the length of the separation of the parents; and (10) whether there was a prior voluntary abandonment or surrender of custody of the child. *Montgomery County v. Sanders*, 38 Md. App. 406 (1977).

Traditionally, when one parent was granted “custody” of a minor child, the other parent would generally be awarded visitation rights. In 1984, the Court of Appeals first recognized and applied the concept of “joint custody.” See *Taylor v. Taylor*, 306 Md. 290 (1986). The *Taylor* Court explained that, within the meaning of “custody” are the concepts of “legal” and “physical” custody. Legal custody means the right and obligation to make long-range decisions involving the education, religious training, discipline, medical care, and other matters of major significance concerning the child’s life and welfare. With joint legal custody, both parents have an equal voice in making those decisions and neither parent’s rights are superior to the other. Physical custody means the right and obligation to provide a home for the child and to make the day-to-day decisions required during the time the child is actually with the parent having such custody. Joint physical custody is in reality, “shared” or “divided” custody, with the child in the physical custody of each parent for periods of time that may or may not be on a 50/50 basis. *Taylor* at 296-297.

In addition to the factors set forth in the *Sanders* decision, a court considering an award of joint custody must also examine a range of factors particularly relevant to a determination of joint custody, including (1) the capacity of the parents to communicate and reach shared decisions affecting the child’s welfare; (2) the willingness of the parents to share custody; (3) the fitness of the parents; (4) the relationship established between the child and each parent; (5) the preference of the child; (6) the potential disruption of the child’s social and school life; (7) the geographic proximity of parental homes; (8) the demands of parental employment; (9) the age and number of children; (10) the sincerity of the parents’ request; (11) the financial status of the parents; (12) any impact on state or federal assistance; (13) the benefit to the parents; and (14) any other factors the court considers appropriate. *Taylor* at 304-311. The *Taylor* Court emphasized that the single most important factor in the determination of whether an award of joint legal custody is appropriate is the capacity of the parents to communicate and to reach shared decisions affecting the child’s welfare. *Taylor* at 305.

Background: The Commission on Child Custody Decision Making, which was established by Chapter 633 of 2013, was required to study numerous aspects of custody, including a review of statutes from other states used for child custody determinations. According to the commission’s final report, only seven states have a presumption of joint physical custody in the absence of agreement of the parents. A preference for joint legal custody appeared in the statutes of six jurisdictions.

State/Local Fiscal Effect: The bill requires judges to alter the manner in which they make custody decisions, but is not expected to substantially impact operations of the Judiciary. Parents who do not want a joint or approximately equal physical custody arrangement are required to rebut the presumption established in the bill. The bill does not alter case management standards and family services provided by the circuit courts and the Family Services Administration in the Administrative Office of the Courts.

Additional Information

Prior Introductions: SB 1004 of 2014, a similar bill, received a hearing in the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, but no further action was taken. Its cross file, HB 1440, received a hearing in the House Judiciary Committee, but received no further action. SB 909 of 2011 received a hearing in the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, but no further action was taken. Its cross file, HB 1132, received a hearing in the House Judiciary Committee, but no further action was taken. SB 1047 of 2010 was referred to the Senate Rules Committee but received no further action. Its cross file, HB 925, was heard in the House Judiciary Committee but received no further action. Similar bills were also introduced in the 2007, 2004, and 2003 sessions.

Cross File: SB 650 (Senators Muse and Waugh) - Judicial Proceedings.

Information Source(s): Judiciary (Administrative Office of the Courts), Department of Legislative Services

Fiscal Note History: First Reader - February 27, 2015
min/kdm

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