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Local Columnist

Fathering Court helps fathers and mothers be better parents

By [Courtland Milloy](#), Published: June 17 The Washington Post

When it comes to difficulties between mothers and fathers, it doesn't get much tougher than the cases in Fathering Court. The program, which operates within the [D.C. Superior Court](#) system, helps men returning from prison reconnect with their children and learn to get along with the mothers.

In worst-case scenarios, a man will have sex with several women and discover after his release from prison that he now has several children.

“The fundamental problem is that too many people are having babies before they are prepared to take care of them,” said D.C. Superior Court Judge Milton C. Lee Jr., who presides over the program. “Once the child is born, however, we are in a race against time to get the parents working together. Or else the cycle of fatherlessness and delinquency will never be broken.”

During a recent Fathering Court hearing, an unmarried mom and dad who live apart were giving Lee a progress report on attempts to “co-parent” their child.

“I trust him only to a certain extent,” the mother said of the father, who was recently paroled after doing time for dealing drugs.

The man was upset at her because she had refused to let him spend time with the child away from her. He said his mother was visiting from China and wanted to see his child before returning. But the baby's mother wasn't cutting him any slack.

“His child support is almost nothing,” the mother complained. “A 20 here, 30 there.”

So the conflict was not just about trust. It was a dispute over money, too. A thicket for Lee to maneuver without leaving one of the parents feeling aggrieved. But he had pulled it off before.

In the four years since Fathering Court was created, more than 55 ex-offenders who might otherwise be unemployed, unable to pay child support and uninvolved with their children are establishing an impressive track record as responsible fathers.

Only two have been arrested again.

Remarkably, an ex-offender in Fathering Court is likely to be treated with more sympathy than a law-abiding dad in a traditional family court. Disputes in divorce cases are typically settled in favor of the mother, while the father is reduced to being little more than an ATM for child support payments.

In Lee's courtroom, fathers are empowered, not demeaned.

"Here, we don't make money unimportant, but we do think the priority should be given to helping the man get a job, keep a job and learn how to manage his money," Lee said. "What we want is for the father to be consistent in fulfilling his obligations."

In one case that Lee heard, a 33-year-old man had all but given up. He hadn't finished high school, and the only job he'd ever had had been selling drugs. He told the judge that he was trying to get his act together but had been overwhelmed by demands from the mothers of his children.

"I'm staying with my grandmother, but I'm used to living alone and having my own stuff," the man said. He was tightly wound and sounded hopeless. But when Lee said, "You've got potential. I believe you can make it," the tense muscles slackened and the man bowed his head.

"I just need a little push," he said.

You'd have thought it was the first time he'd ever heard an encouraging word from another man.

Lee keeps up with a father's progress both through regular hearings and a network of agencies that support the program — the Court Services and Offender Supervision Agency, the Child Support Services Division, the Office of the Attorney General and the Department of Employment Services, among others.

That's how he knew the background of the man whose mother was visiting from China — although he couldn't be sure why the baby's mother was refusing to allow a visit.

Working out the dispute over child support seemed like a good place to start.

"He had been laid off from his construction job for two weeks," Lee told the irate mother. "But he has now been rehired full time. So your comfort level should be increasing very soon."

Then he reminded them of the good times they'd had together.

"The two of you must have been getting along famously at some point, correct?" Lee asked, noting that they had at least been close enough to make a baby.

"It was cool," said the father.

"It was just puppy love," the mother countered, dismissively.

And having gotten in the last word in that subject, she agreed to let his mother visit.