

Dear Governor Musgrove:

First, let me congratulate you on becoming Mississippi's Governor for the beginning of the New Millennium. I voted for you and look forward to following you and your administration.

Governor Musgrove, I would like to know how you feel about the role of fatherhood and the importance of fathers in their children's lives.

I, for one, feel that far too many fathers have been relegated to merely "visitors" in their children's lives in our society today, when a divorce occurs. Unfortunately, divorce is all too common these days, and many children are scarred for life because of it. I feel that we as a society need to re-evaluate the family/chancery laws in our country. No matter what anybody says, there has been a great deal of gender bias with respect to custody arrangements. I am not advocating taking children away from their mothers. I am, however, strongly advocating the need for immediate changes with respect to how children and fathers are being treated. I believe that children need BOTH PARENTS. CHILDREN SHOULD NOT HAVE TO FEEL THAT DADDY MUST NOT LOVE THEM, BECAUSE HE ONLY SEES THEM TWICE A MONTH. Sadly, in most divorce cases, the fathers are lucky if they get 2 weekends a month with their children. Fathers are second class citizens, and are turned into merely "visitors", rather than parents.

Yes, there are some deadbeat parents (I detest the term Deadbeat Dads) It is used too loosely and inaccurately, by an uninformed general public. The sad thing is, our court system helps to perpetuate the myth of Deadbeat Dads. Many fathers start out paying child support faithfully, only to be denied access to their child(ren) by a vindictive ex-spouse time and time again. The custodial parent can keep children away from the other parent and in most cases, gets away with it, and might get a little warning not to do it again, after the non-custodial parent has to spend more money to go back to court and ask for his rightful "visitation", as already outlined in his divorce decree.

There needs to be a department set aside to give free advice and legal assistance to these non-custodial parents, just like there is currently with respect to child support enforcement. In fact, the laws concerning divorce should be amended to include certain changes. For example, many people believe there should be mandatory mediation, mandatory parenting classes, and stipulations in each and every divorce decree protecting the parent/child relationship for both parents, not just the mother. There should be a paragraph in each divorce decree stating that if either parent is in contempt (not paying child support, not allowing the other parent their rightful custody, etc.) that the party that is in contempt, will be responsible for any and all legal expenses incurred by the other party by having to hire an attorney and go back to court, etc., to receive what they should already be getting - the support payment, or the custody/visitation times, etc. If some of the custodial parents knew they would have to pay back the non-custodial parents' legal fees, I truly believe a lot of these problems would stop. Right now though, not many of the custodial parents are concerned if they should decide on their own that the non-custodial parent just doesn't need to see their child, for whatever reason. Why should they be concerned, when all they will most likely receive is a little slap on the wrist and a warning not to do it again. Also, I feel that it should automatically be in each and every divorce decree where minor children are involved - that the parents can obtain assistance from the local law enforcement agencies, if they go to exercise their legal custody/visitation and they are denied by the other parent. Children and parents should not have to be kept from each other for months, until the parent being denied custody/visitation, can get on a court docket.

Please keep in mind, that I am referring to the majority of cases involving minor children of divorce, when 2 equally capable, loving and decent parents are concerned. I am not saying give equal custody to the neighborhood "hardened criminal".

I hope that all the citizens of the State of Mississippi can count on you, Governor Musgrove, to assist in bringing much needed changes in the custody laws and the enforcement of the current orders already in place. I agree with you, in that it is time Mississippi moves out of 50th. place, and I can't think of a more important issue than the future of our children. DIVORCE HURTS, BUT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO HURT QUITE AS MANY CHILDREN - WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

Good Luck in your administration, I know you will face many challenges. I look forward to speaking to you over the telephone soon or perhaps in person 1 day.

Sincerely,

Teri Setnikar

Concerned Citizen, Mother and Grandmother in Long Beach, MS