Divorced Parents Debate Return to School Guidelines

By Rebecca L. Palmer

As K-12 schools begin to reopen this fall and kids return to school, the debate over who has the final say in deciding what is best for minor children's health and safety as they return to in-person learning continues. The Center of Disease Control (CDC) has released its operational strategy for schools to open, including recommendations for mask usage, physical distancing, and hygiene. Recently, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis blocked mask mandates in the state's schools, stating that parents have the right to decide if their children would wear mask coverings.

Another layer of complexity is added when co-parenting a minor child comes into play due to a divorce, and the parents disagree on health and safety protocols, including wearing a mask. In most divorce cases, during the custody process, a parenting plan is put together that outlines how co-parenting will be handled, what each parent is responsible for, and who has decision-making authority. If coming to an agreement with your former spouse is proving to be difficult even with a parenting plan, here are few tips to keep in mind:

• Remain focused on the well-being of the child. Your views may be different but keeping your child healthy should override any negative feelings between former spouses. A small goal would be to have the same ground rules in both homes around safety and hygiene.

• Lean on the recommendations published by the CDC or the school districts. In most cases, this will be the mandate implemented by the schools. Even if you have opposing opinions, it will be helpful for the child to follow the

official guidelines to reduce further isolation based on the parents' opposing opinions and perhaps exclusion from the parents' school year.

• Document all communication. In cases when working out a solution becomes impossible, make sure you document all communication. Documenting conversations, frequency, and outcomes will give a court representative some context into the issues you are having, and these notes can be used if a 3rd party is needed to resolve the conflict.

• Review your family court order. If you believe that the decisions made by your co-parent are putting your child in harm's way, it may be time to revisit the court order and move forward with judicial intervention.

There are still many uncertainties around COVID-19 and returning to school is a stressful time for kids and parents. Throughout this year and probably a few years to come, there will be new health and safety protocols for each of us, so being flexible with some grace and understanding toward your co-parent as we settle into this "new normal" will benefit everyone in the long run.

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