

The Post and Courier

Child-centered custody cases

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It's hard enough for a child to witness his parent's divorce. But to watch them bicker and battle over custody can be excruciating.

And the longer it takes to resolve the situation, the worse it feels.

So a new voluntary program called the Fast-Track Custody Initiative, which aims to settle the question within three or four months of the first court filing, is a welcome effort.

After all, a divorcing couple can have myriad issues to work out, but none is more important than the children's well-being.

Judge Paul Garfinkel, who hears custody cases in Family Court and sees the fallout, was the one to kick off the program. In January, almost a dozen family court lawyers began meeting with him weekly to hone it. If a guardian ad litem is appointed, he or she has 60 days to complete the required study. The parents then have 90 days to meet with a mediator and come up with a fair resolution. They hope the process will shave off nine months in an average custody case.

That should be reason enough for lawyers and judges to push Fast-Track Custody and for parents to cooperate in hopes of easing their children's pain.

But divorcing people don't always see beyond their own anger. So perhaps the prospect of saving thousands of dollars in legal fees and avoiding hours of valuable court time will speak to them.

About 40 percent of couples with children in the United States divorce. Psychiatrists have known for years that the process can cause emotional and financial trouble for those children.

The more efficiently and expeditiously the court handles custody cases, the better for the children involved.