

Copyright 1996-2002 Suzanne Shell  
Reproduction without permission prohibited

The government is changing the face of the American family. We already know about single parenting, and homosexuals having children through artificial insemination/surrogate mothering or adoption. These have become the norm in our society today.

But there are even more intrusions into the family.

Take the situation of the following family: Mom and dad are divorced. Mom gets the son. Mom gets a live-in boyfriend. Mom dies. Dad gets the son. Mom's boyfriend sues for visitation rights and wins. A state court recently ruled that because the boyfriend had acted as a parent to the child, that he was entitled to some parenting rights.

This is a variation on the theme of strangers as parents. The government has set forth the proposition that parents are merely props, easily replaced when damaged, defective or lost, all in the 'best interests of the child.'

But this mentality create conflicts around the child. In the case of the youngster who lost his mother, the boy's father objected to the continued intrusion of his and his son's life by the boyfriend. By what logic can the government decree that a non-relative be elevated to the status of pseudo-parent? This is a shocking ruling, as it opens the door for teachers, neighbors, babysitters, etc. to demand parenting rights to children they have no responsibility toward.

Think about it, these strangers don't contribute to the support of the child, their influence can undermine the values the parent chooses to impart, they can expose the child to negative influences without having the burden of dealing any negative impact to the child as a result of that exposure, they have no legal responsibility for the behavior, maintenance or education of the child, they share no familial bond or history. They are outsiders. They are friends, and as such, the parent should have full say over their access to the child.

But that give too much power to the parent, too much control to the family. Government cannot abide that kind of autonomy.

There is a much publicized case before the Supreme Court now that deals with grandparents visitation rights. And when it's put that way, it sound so benign. Who could be against it. But on closer examination, it also deals with the issues of allowing strangers parental prerogatives over children. It is unfortunate that these ancillary issues are attached to a grandparents rights case, because no matter how the court rules, it will not be good.

Let's face it, there are some evil grandparents out there who shouldn't have access to the their grandchildren without some protections in place. There are some spiteful parents out there, especially in divorce situations, who use the kids to punish the ex-spouse and his or her parents. But these cases need to be judged individually. To set up wholesale rules would not be fair to either side.

The argument has been forwarded that ``de facto parents" - anyone who played a significant parent-like role in a child's life, whether a grandparent or a co-parent in a same-sex partnership" should be allowed visitation. But any ruling that allows former foster parents, or lovers, or whatever, to intrude into the sanctity of the family undermines the family. It forces the parents to abdicate a measure of their responsibility and rights in favor of people who have no standing before the family. It steals parent-child time from the parent and gives the child mixed messages about the nature of family. It also will establish the legal precedent for the subornation of the parent's rights to the state.

It's the camel's nose in the tent. This weakens the definition of family and further blurs the distinction between the rights of the family and the state over the children.

These are alarming times for those who hold the family as autonomous and sacred from government intervention.