

Bill may halt financial divorce of children

Every once in a while, we actually come up with a solution to a problem. This is an event so unusual in our complicated, embattled society that it should be immediately elevated to the status of news. "Man bites dog" stories pale beside such reader-grabbers as "Congress solves problem!"

Ellen Goodman

The solution that appears to be on hand is called "The Child Support Enforcement Amendments of 1983." With luck, a bill to reform and strengthen the payment of child support may get as far as a congressional vote before Thanksgiving.

The problem, of course, has been around for a long time. One study after another has shown that an extraordinary proportion of divorced parents — mostly fathers — also divorce their children, at least financially.

It has been popular to assume that the only men who don't pay for their kids can't pay. Perhaps the court demanded too much, perhaps their incomes produced too little. This is true in some cases. But the statistical picture that has emerged lately is less kind to these fathers. The Census Bureau reports that child-support payments represent only about 13 percent of the average male income. A Stanford study shows that men who earn \$50,000 a year are no more likely to pay their child support than men who earn less than \$10,000.

It is clear now that the quickest way for a mother and children to get poor is to get divorced. Most of the poor children in the country live in single-parent homes. In California, a year after divorce, the average wife's income drops 73 percent, while her husband's rises 42 percent.

By last January, child-support enforcement was not only in the women's Economic Equity Act but in the president's State of the Union address. By July, a

gaggle of bills were proposed, heard and studied. August was dubbed Child Support Enforcement Month by the president.

The bills were bogged down in details during the early fall and ran into opposition from divorced fathers' groups. Some men complained about wildly varying child-support judgments. Others testified that money was their only weapon in the fight with mothers who denied them access to their children.

But one piece of legislation was finally wrought out of compromise, brought out of subcommittee, and reported out of the House Ways and Means Committee, close to a legislative track record. The bill beefs up enforcement of child-support payments for both welfare and non-welfare families. The central point is that states will not be required to withhold money from the paychecks of fathers who are 30 days late with their payments.

States also will be able to withhold tax refunds from men whose families are on AFDC, make liens against the property of any delinquent parent, and add the bad news of unpaid child-support to his credit rating. A full 70 percent of the costs of administration will come from the feds, money that also will support clearinghouses to monitor and track payments.

This is not a perfect bill, but it's about as decent a compromise as could be wrought out of this odd alliance. The unhappy reality here is that the government has had to step in where parents dropped out. The Census Bureau tells us that when divorcing parents make their own agreement, there

is a much less trouble with payments. But a large proportion of the people who couldn't make their marriage work can't make their divorce work either.

This bill is the end result of failed marriages, and failed divorces. But for the moment, at least the Congress is acting the way parents should: in the best interests of the child.

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