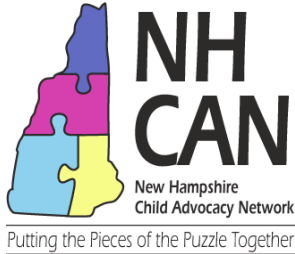


Our children. Our state. Our future.
2006 Priorities for New Hampshire's Children



**Best Interests of the Child:
Preserve the focus on children**

Highlights

- ✓ Supporting the "best interests of the child" means making decisions based on the needs of children rather than on the desires of adults.
- ✓ The "best interests" standard assures that, even in the heat of a contested divorce, adult disputes and disagreements take a back seat to long-term planning for children.
- ✓ Recent legislative proposals would change the focus of these decisions away from the children.

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Issue overview

Each year, approximately 6,400 children in NH experience the divorce of their parents. Research indicates that how well they adjust to divorce depends on several factors, including the amount and quality of time with their parents, the parents' psychological adjustment and parenting skills, the level of conflict before and after the divorce, and whether the children experience economic hardship because of the divorce. In trying to take all of these factors into account, courts have historically used "the best interests of the child" to guide their decisions affecting custody and child support.

A focus on children's best interests suggests that, even in the heat of a contested divorce, adult disputes and disagreements should take a back seat to children's needs. Parents who focus on their children's interests are more likely to make decisions that support children's healthy growth and development. But not all adults like the best interests standard and seek various changes to current law. Some seek a legal preference for "equal parenting time." Some seek to erode divorced parents' financial responsibility for their children. The common thread in all of these proposals is a misguided shift of focus away from the family members who are the most vulnerable and least likely to have their needs represented in court — the children.

Action plan

We CAN protect the best interests of children by:

- ◆ Preserving the best interests standard in all custody cases.
- ◆ Assessing the impact of recent changes in divorce law intended to minimize conflict and protect children.
- ◆ Support reform efforts that focus on children's rights and parent's responsibilities.

What can I do?

- ✓ **Encourage parents to tell their stories, or tell your own story.** Write commentaries and letters to the editor of local news media.
- ✓ **Read the Child Advocacy Updates and Alerts and track relevant legislation.** (To sign up to receive these e-mails, send an e-mail to childrensallianceness@childrennh.org and ask to be added to the e-mail list.)
- ✓ **Contact your legislators and urge them to cast their votes for the best interests of the children.** (Hint: Use the Children's Alliance legislative action center to contact your representatives: <http://www.childrennh.org/capwiz.php>.)

To learn more

For more information, please contact Jack Lightfoot at Child and Family Services, (800) 640-6486, ext. 145 or lightfootj@cfsnh.org.

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