

Reform child support to encourage parents to pay

By Jason Perkins-Cohen

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Let's re-create our child support system to put kids first. We say the state's program is in the best interests of the child now, but our policies tell a different story. Let's restructure our policies to make sure they encourage parents to support their children rather than turn them away. Some specifics:

- Don't set child support above a level at which a parent can pay. This sets the parent up for failure and pushes the parent away from supporting his or her child.
- When a parent's income changes (an increase or decrease), modify the order promptly. For example, when a parent loses his or her job, the order must change to reflect reduced income. This doesn't happen now. Debt and bad feelings can build up, and inevitably the child pays the price.
- Don't garnish wages at preposterous levels. In Maryland, a non-custodial parent's wages can be garnished at 65 cents on the dollar. A tax rate of 65 percent is too high. We should establish reasonable standards and, while we're at it, we should rethink whether garnishing wages - dragging the employer into the issue - is the right way to go.
- If we need to punish parents who do not pay their support, don't do so in ways that damage their ability to pay in the future. Right now, parents who fall behind in their child support can lose their driver's license and, as noted above, have their wages garnished. This makes it more difficult for them to get a job, earn money and pay their support. It doesn't make sense.

The details need to be worked out with each of these ideas, but the parameters are common sense. Let's make the commitment and get it done.

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