

# Support center keeps focus on the kids

By Kay Fate

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Sandy Keith, former chief justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, practically cringes when he hears the word "custody."

It's a term best used about prisoners, not parenting, he said.

"I never use it," Keith said. "You don't own your kids. 'Visitation' and 'custody' are negative; they make (parenting) territorial. It's 'parenting time.' Let's leave custody out of it."

And so he has, in his role as a neutral party in an innovative service now available in southeastern Minnesota.

Keith is one of several evaluators for the Southeastern Minnesota Family Support Center, which provides assistance to divorcing — or never-married — parents.

The process is called Early Neutral Evaluation, and it's helping not only those parents, but the court system, as well.

Facilitated by a male/female team of qualified neutrals, ENE combines the skills and benefits of mediation, custody study and settlement conferences. It identifies and focuses specifically on the key issues raised by both parents, then provides a recommendation for parenting time.

When Keith was practicing law, "I wouldn't even do a divorce," he said. "It took so long, and it was so adversarial."

Today, divorces and custody battles rage on for months, if not years. Attorneys' fees easily reach \$20,000 and climb from there, said Scott Springer, an attorney with Springer and Gumbel.

He, too, is a "neutral" with ENE. He's also encouraged his own clients to use the process.

"There's a misperception about lawyers," Springer said, particularly those who practice family law. "The attorneys aren't necessarily dragging it out; they're waiting for the settlement process to occur naturally. This forces it to occur quicker."

It's designed to cut through the often-emotional behaviors that typify parenting issues.



Keith

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