

The Symbolic Meanings of Child Maintenance Money

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Abstract

Parents are being encouraged to come to their own ‘family based arrangements’ outside the statutory scheme following a paradigmatic shift in the child maintenance policy framework for separated families in the UK. The statutory scheme (the CSA) was not only failing administratively, but it was also believed to have increased conflict between parents. Now all CSA cases will be closed and parents will be pointed in the direction of relationship support services to help them make these ‘family based’ agreements. But many express concerns about the power imbalance that might take place between parents in private negotiations over child maintenance and some people fear that vulnerable parents will be subjected to coercion tactics to accept lesser or no payments. However, we do not know much about what goes on inside negotiated agreements, or the predicted behaviours of parents once they are released from the statutory scheme. This paper puts forward an account of the existing evidence on non-resident parents’ behaviours and provides an argument that conflict was increased as a result of child maintenance having been hitherto treated by policy makers and the CSA as a ‘public good’. It raises some tricky questions for discussion: are there useful insights to be gained from the evidence on non-resident parents’ behaviours? Does the institutional arrangement matter? Is there reason to be cautiously optimistic about private agreements going forward in the future?

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