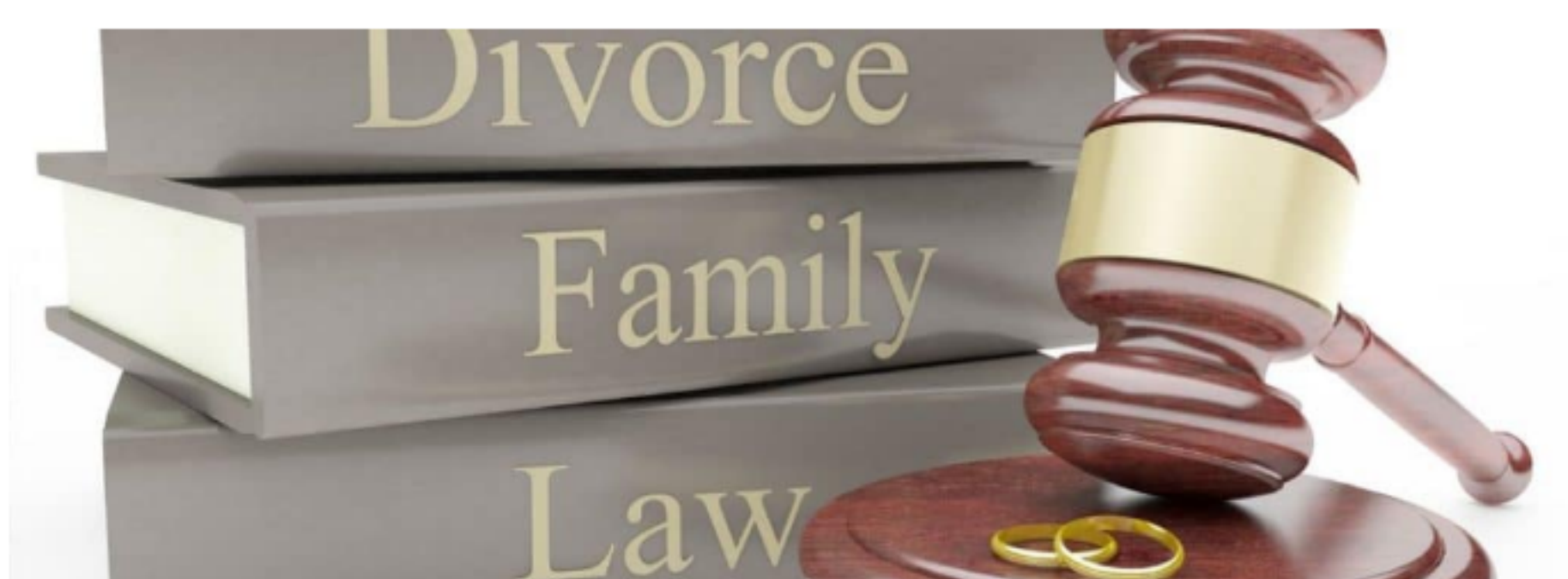


## Mothers Likewise Suffer from Poor “Debate” Performance: But the Consequences are Far Worse

Her performance as a maternal caretaker in her day-to-day activities as a mother is largely eclipsed by her performance on the witness stand.

BY AMY NEUSTEIN, PH.D. • [COMMENTARY](#) • JULY 14, 2024



Two weeks ago, Biden’s poor performance at the presidential debate plunged his ratings in the polls to record lows. Immediately, a shrill chorus of media, public officials (and later joined by celebrities) began urging him to abandon his quest to serve another four-year term. What appeared to have happened was that up against a redoubtable rival – with a history of bullying and intimidation – Biden folded under stress. His debate responses were marked by stuttering, mumbling, and incomplete sentences. The viewers were flummoxed. Speculation as to his mental competency abounded; and exhortations from media, public officials, and celebrities for Biden to leave the race became louder by the day.

Ironically, for many women watching the stressful debate and listening to the torrent of new stories in its aftermath, this hit home for them on a very deep personal level. That is, many mothers across the country have shown poor courtroom “debate” performance, which have led to catastrophic consequences. Facing their opponent – an ex-spouse/partner that has exerted coercive control, committed physical assault and rape, and endangered their children’s safety and well-being – mothers routinely show poor “courtroom debate” performance when questioned under cross-examination. As such, they become flustered when placed on the witness stand: they have trouble answering rapid-fire questions from opposing counsel and from the attorney for the child (AFC). One Delaware mother aptly described this experience as feeling as if she were “shot at” by “piercing darts aimed at her like a dartboard.” Some break down and cry; others have fainted in the courtroom. Most tragically, some will subsequently take their lives after an accretion of courtroom terror that commonly lasts for years.

Ironically, the mother’s record of performance outside of the courtroom “debate” setting does not seem to matter at all. Family Court judges justify the draconian removal of a child from the mother, including nursing mothers, solely based on the mother’s courtroom performance.

Whether the mother read bedtime stories to her child, prepared nutritious meals, showed affection, was punctual with vaccinations, encouraged playdates to foster the child’s social skills, devised innovative projects to help a child overcome learning difficulties, and so forth does not seem to matter to the family court judge. In fact, it is rarely, if ever, discussed in a family court decision. In essence, her performance as a maternal caretaker in her day-to-day activities as a mother is largely eclipsed by her performance on the witness stand. Remarkably, the core issue at hand by which the mother is judged is her elocution skills in her courtroom face-off against a terrifyingly abusive ex-spouse or partner.

As a result of poor performance in the courtroom debate, mothers lose custody of their children, often forever. Some never see them again, for the costs of paying supervisors by the hour just to visit one’s child are often too prohibitive to bear. Not surprisingly, many mothers go bankrupt when shelling out hundreds of dollars a week for supervised visitation with their children. This is compounded by the onerous costs of legal representation and the exacting of hefty child support payments from the mother, even though many no longer hold jobs after years of protracted courtroom trials.

Is this where we want to be as a culture, and as a society? Do we want to obscure a mother’s record as a devoted parent just because of her poor courtroom debate performance? Similarly, do we want to eclipse Biden’s stellar record on domestic issues and foreign affairs because of a poor debate performance? Does his long-serving tenure as a US Senator where he introduced the Violence Against Women’s Act – the backbone for funding battered women’s shelters and violence prevention programs throughout the country – and his reauthorization of VAWA as president (with the critically added section of “Kayden’s Law” to require a court to seriously weigh evidence of domestic violence and child abuse before making a custody decision) matter? Apparently not, given the current climate of disapprobation for his disappointing debate performance.

In essence, when Biden showed up for the controversial presidential debate, suffering a cold, a poor night’s sleep, and an unusually stressful year on the stage of world events, the American public and the press judged him by his telegenic skills – an ability to speak forcefully in sound bites to the 51.3 million viewers glued to their television sets, iPads, and smart phones as they closely watched the performance between two contenders for the highest office in the land. Is this a way to measure a presidential candidate? Should we judge our leaders by their telegenic skills? If we do, we are electing the wrong leaders. Or, even worse, persons who are not leaders at all, but rather manipulators of viewers’ emotions. Those are the ones who traditionally score high on debate performance.

Given that mothers now share with POTUS something in common – both have risked losing their jobs (mother as caretaker, and president as chief executive of this country for another four-year term) because of poor debate performance – it’s time for mothers to bang on Biden’s door to ask for direct help with getting their children back. And he could help.

You see, the President has the power to activate Health and Human Services to instruct the local child protective services to bring petitions against the abusive parent so that the children undeservedly seized from their mothers can be returned to their mother’s arms forthwith. We need not wait for legislative hearings, we need not wait for judicial training programs to educate a whole new generation of judges to the perils of removing children from loving mothers, and we need not wait for the election fever to be over either.

We need to call Delaware Senator Chris Coons right away – as he is the staunchest supporter of President Biden. He has the ear of the president. By joining hands with the President, showing that mothers are victims of poor debate performance too, we can finally resolve this long-standing affliction of women in the courts. Imagine a press conference with an announcement that mothers will be getting their children back as the President understands firsthand the perilous effects of poor debate performance. We must not tarry, for now is the moment to call Senator Coons to request a press conference on the return of the children to their mothers. The debate debacle may ironically prove to be the heavenly answer to our prayers for the children to be returned to the love and nurturance of their mothers – and for the dark clouds hovering over the White House to finally give way to rays of sunshine.

**About the Author:** Amy Neustein, Ph.D. (sociology), co-author of *From Madness to Mutiny: Why Mothers are Running from the Family Courts – and What Can be Done about It*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition to be published by Oxford University Press. She is the author of Women’s eNews guest column: [MOTHERS FACE CIVIL RIGHTS CRISIS IN THE FAMILY COURTS – UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE MUST INVESTIGATE](#) – [Women’s eNews \(womensenews.org\)](#)

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