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Family Law: Parent and Child

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I. UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT DECISIONS

DURING the 1981 Term the United States Supreme Court decided two cases that relate directly to Texas law in the parent and child area and three others that have an indirect effect. The Mills v. Habluetzel decision arose out of a direct attack on the constitutionality of the Texas statute of limitations for bringing a paternity suit. The suit attacked the original, one-year limitation period and not the current statute, which provides for a four-year period. A unanimous Court had no difficulty finding that one year is an "unrealistically short time limitation [and] is not substantially related to the State's interest in avoiding the prosecution of stale or fraudulent claims." The Court concluded that the Texas statute denied illegitimate children the equal protection of the law. At the time the Supreme Court decided Mills a similar case was pending before the Texas Supreme Court in which a court of civil appeals had found the same statute unconstitutional based on due process grounds. The Texas Supreme Court affirmed the appellate court's decision, but based its holding on equal protection in accordance with the Mills opinion.

Neither the United States Supreme Court nor the Texas Supreme Court expressed an opinion as to the constitutionality of the new four-year stat-
ute of limitations, although both courts stated that they were aware of the change in Texas law. Justice Rehnquist, in his opinion for the Court, stated that the holding that "Texas must provide illegitimate children with a bona fide opportunity to obtain paternal support does not mean . . . that it must adopt procedures for illegitimate children that are coterminous with those accorded legitimate children." Thus the Court left open the question of what is a constitutionally mandated length of time for illegitimate children to determine their paternity. Justice O'Connor, together with four other Justices, noted that the decision might be interpreted as approving the current Texas four-year statute of limitations. In her concurrence, after discussing various fact situations that might require a longer period than one year for establishing paternity, Justice O'Connor stated that she did not read the Court's decision as prejudging the constitutionality of periods longer than the one-year limitation. Justice Powell went even further; he agreed with Justice O'Connor's interpretation of the decision, but emphasized the fact "that a paternity suit is one of the few Texas causes of action not tolled during the minority of the plaintiff." Considering the complaints from the Justices concerning the overcrowding of their dockets, the Mills decision is most irresponsible. Since Texas is not the only state with a limitation period shorter than the age of minority in paternity suits, the Court will have the same question before it again very soon. In fact, the court has already noted probable jurisdiction in a case concerning a Tennessee statute. That case is just one of a number of contradictory state court decisions based on Mills. It would seem that the Texas Supreme Court should also have considered the new four-year statute since the amount of litigation on the subject in Texas indicates that it is an important issue. Furthermore, by not addressing the new statute the court may further delay certainty in this area. The common law now controls the limitation period for all children born prior to the enactment of the new statute. An even longer period of confusion

10. 102 S. Ct. at 1552 n.1, 71 L. Ed. 2d at 775 n.1; 631 S.W.2d at 732.
11. Id. at 1553, 71 L. Ed. 2d at 777.
12. Id. at 1556, 71 L. Ed. 2d at 780.
13. Id. at 1558, 71 L. Ed. 2d at 782.
14. Id., 71 L. Ed. 2d at 782 (quoting Justice O'Connor's opinion, 102 S. Ct. at 1557, 71 L. Ed. 2d at 781).
16. See, e.g., IND. CODE ANN. § 31-6-6.1-6 (Burns 1980) (two-year limitation); N.Y. FAM. CT. ACT § 517(a) (McKinney Supp. 1976-1981) (two-year limitation, or two years after the mother becomes 18); UNIF. PARENTAGE ACT § 7, 9A U.L.A. 596 (1979) (suggests either a three-year limitation, or three years after child reaches the age of majority).
19. See In re Renteria, 624 S.W.2d 353 (Tex. Ct. App.—Corpus Christi 1981, no writ), relying on Texas Dept of Human Resources v. Delley, 581 S.W.2d 519 (Tex. Civ. App.—Dallas 1979, writ ref'd n.r.e.), in applying not only the general four-year statute of limitations, TEX. REV. CIV. STAT. ANN. art. 5529 (Vernon 1958), but also the statutory tolling
will occur if the new statute is found unconstitutional. Let us hope that either the courts or the legislature will shortly resolve the question.

The second decision that directly concerned Texas law was *Plyler v. Doe.* A five Justice majority held that Texas could not treat undocumented aliens as nonpersons who are outside the jurisdiction or responsibility of Texas, and thus undeserving of equal protection. The Court found that the complete denial of a free public education to undocumented alien children would create a permanent subclass of illiterates, and such a denial must be justified by a substantial state interest. The Court found no such interest. While not deviating from its view that public education is not a fundamental right, the Court found that the cost to Texas of providing these children with a free education was not burdensome enough to form a reasonable basis for denying them an education. Because of this decision the legislature should amend the Texas Education Code to provide reimbursement from the Available School Fund to the school districts throughout the state for the cost of educating these children.

*Board of Education v. Rowley* delineates the standard for providing personalized instruction to handicapped children. The Court interpreted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 to mean that a state has provided a handicapped child with a “free appropriate public education” if its services allow the child to “benefit educationally.” The five-Justice majority found that it was not necessary to “maximize the potential of each handicapped child.” The Court also cautioned lower courts “to avoid imposing their view of preferable educational methods” when interpreting the Act.

In *Lehman v. Lycoming County Children’s Services Agency* the Court...
refused to extend federal habeas corpus jurisdiction to child custody cases. The Court held that it would not permit a collateral challenge to a state court's involuntary termination of parental rights by means of a writ of habeas corpus, even though the writ alleged that the underlying state statute is unconstitutional. The Court based its decision on two important factors. First, the state has a strong interest in finality of child-custody disputes because of the child's need for certainty. Secondly, although habeas corpus historically has been used to settle child custody suits, these cases have arisen within particular jurisdictional systems, not between them. This type of federal interference with state judicial systems is not justified since the federal government has no substantive interest in child custody matters, and would unnecessarily undermine the principle of federalism. The decision is significant in that it may prevent expansion of federal court involvement in domestic relations matters.

The last case concerning the parent-child relationship that the Supreme Court decided during its 1981 Term does not change Texas law. In Santosky v. Kramer the Court held that when a state seeks to sever the parent-child relationship permanently, it can do so only if the evidence is clear and convincing. In 1980 the Texas Supreme Court established the same rule in In re G.M. Although the holding of Santosky is not significant for Texans, its reasoning is important because it attempts to explain and evaluate the factors a court must consider to provide due process in cases where the state and the parents, or the child, are antagonists. The test in these cases is the one promulgated in Mathews v. Eldridge. The tribunal should balance the importance of the parent's or child's interest, the risk of error in depriving him of that interest, and the governmental interest in not raising the costs of its procedures in order to further minimize the possibility of error.

II. STATUS

Texas now must provide tuition-free education to undocumented illegal alien children, but individual Texas school districts may still exercise some control over who receives a free education within their particular district. The Texas Education Code establishes the requirements for ad-
mission to schools in Texas, and the various boards of trustees have the power to implement these requirements in accordance with an overall policy that favors a tuition-free education for all Texas children. The mere presence of a child in a particular district, however, does not necessarily entitle him to a tuition-free education in that district. For example, a district may require a child to reside with a parent or guardian in the district before that child may obtain a free education. In Jackson v. Waco Independent School District the court not only found sound policy reasons for this residence rule but also reasoned that because a court desegregation order had previously established attendance zones, this rule was necessary.

Once the right of attendance has been established, problems may remain concerning eligibility to participate in interscholastic athletics. The University Interscholastic League's (UIL) summer camp rule withstood a constitutional attack in Kite v. Marshall. The court held that a minimum rationality test applies to this type of classification and found no equal protection violation. In addition, the court found that the rule is not wholly arbitrary and, therefore, does not offend the due process clause. This victory for the UIL in federal court may be a hollow one, however, since a Texas trial court granted a permanent injunction against enforcement of the rule, and the appellate court dismissed the case on the basis of nonjurisdiction. The appellate court held in this and in another appeal from a UIL injunction that it could not have jurisdiction unless the UIL posted an appeal bond, which it failed to do. The UIL is not a public entity and, therefore, is not excused from filing appeal bonds.

45. See Tex. Educ. Code Ann. § 23.26(b) (Vernon 1972) (“The trustees shall have the exclusive power to manage and govern the public free schools . . . .”); id. § 21.031(c) (Vernon 1972 & Supp. 1982-1983) (“The board of trustees . . . shall admit into the public free schools of the district free of tuition all persons who are . . . over five and not over 21 years of age . . . if such person or his parent, guardian or person having lawful control resides within the school district.”).


47. 629 S.W. 2d 201 (Tex. Ct. App.—Waco 1982, writ ref’d n.r.e.).

48. Id. at 205.


50. The summer camp rule prohibits a student from participating in interscholastic athletic competitions for a year following the student's attendance at a specialized athletic training camp. See Marshall v. Brown, 635 S.W. 2d 578, 579 n.1 (Tex. Ct. App.—Amarillo 1982, writ ref’d n.r.e.).

51. 661 F. 2d 1027 (5th Cir. 1981), cert. denied, 102 S. Ct. 2934, 73 L. Ed. 2d 1333 (1982).

52. 661 F. 2d at 1030.

53. Id.


55. Id. at 580; see also University Interscholastic League v. Payne, 635 S.W.2d 754 (Tex. Ct. App.—Amarillo 1982, writ dism’d) (UIL must file bond).

56. 635 S.W.2d at 580.
In *Horton v. Goose Creek Independent School District* the court per curiam withdrew a previous opinion and held that the use of trained dogs in dragnet sniff-searches of children in school is unconstitutional, but the use of these dogs to detect contraband in students' cars and lockers is not. The court found that a dog's generalized exploratory sniffing of persons is an unreasonable search when no individualized suspicion exists and, thus, violates the fourth amendment. The court held, however, that using these dogs to detect contraband in students' cars and lockers is not an unreasonable, unconstitutional search if the dogs are reliable. This is a modification of the holding in *Jones v. Latexo Independent School District* that enjoined all such searches.

A child's name is important in determining his status and normally the last name is the name in controversy between the parents. The courts have supported fathers when mothers have attempted to change the surnames of their children without using legal steps. *In re M.L.P.* did not involve the surname, but rather the first and middle names of the child. The child was born prior to the parents' divorce hearing, and the mother named the child without consulting the father. The father challenged the child's name at the time of the divorce, but the trial court refused to change it. The appellate court also refused, holding that, while the court should make a name change at the father's request whenever there is evidence that a change is in the best interest of the child, there was no such evidence in this case.

The status of a child directly controls the right to intestate inheritance from parents. Intestate succession is governed by the Probate Code, but identity may be a factual issue. Such was the case in *Joplin v. Meadows* in which the cousins of the deceased attempted to establish themselves as the rightful heirs by showing that an alleged nephew was not, in fact, the nephew of the deceased. The nephew's father was the brother of the deceased and had predeceased her. The nephew was born during the second year of the brother's prior marriage. After eight years the marriage of the deceased's brother ended in divorce and the divorce petition alleged that the couple had separated on the day after the marriage. The cousins

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57. 690 F.2d 470 (5th Cir. 1982).
58. 677 F.2d 471 (5th Cir. 1982).
59. 690 F.2d at 481-84.
60. Id. at 488.
61. Id. at 481-82.
62. Id. at 486 n.40.
64. Id. at 236-37.
67. Id. (mother named child Marcus Lee while father favored Shawn Christian).
68. Id. at 431.
69. TEX. PROB. CODE ANN. § 38 (Vernon 1980).
argued that the petition, which raised questions of access, was evidence that the nephew was not the deceased brother's legitimate son. The court found, however, that the son was born during the term of the brother's first marriage and thus was presumed to be his legitimate child. This presumption is one of the strongest known in the law, and only clear and convincing evidence will rebut it. The only evidence the court would accept to rebut the presumption was proof of nonaccess or impotence of the alleged father. Affirming the trial court's finding that the nephew was the deceased's heir, the court held that the allegations of abandonment recited in the divorce petition and decree were merely hearsay and of no probative value.

In some situations the child's identity is established, but not his legitimacy. In Batchelor v. Batchelor two alleged illegitimate sons of the intestate intervened in an application to declare heirship. The two alleged sons claimed a right to inherit because the decedent had recognized them as his children. The claimants agreed that their father had not followed the Probate Code procedures that would have made them legitimate heirs, but they relied on Johnson v. Mariscal to argue that this was not necessary. The Fort Worth appeals court distinguished Johnson in that it involved a will contest rather than intestate succession. The court followed Bell v. Hinkle instead, which held that an illegitimate child may inherit from his father only if the Probate Code requirements are met. Texas recognizes the concept of adoption by estoppel. Thus, with proper proof a person not formally adopted by the deceased may, nevertheless, inherit as the legitimate child of the deceased. Pouncy v. Garner limited the right of equitably adopted children to a right to inherit only from their adoptive parents and their privies, excluding ancillary relatives. This distinction does not appear to comport with the Probate Code definition of child, which specifically includes those adopted by estoppel. The Probate Code provides that an adopted child inherits from and through his

73. 623 S.W.2d at 444.
74. Id.
75. Id.
76. 634 S.W.2d 71 (Tex. Ct. App.—Fort Worth 1982, writ ref'd n.r.e.).
78. 620 S.W.2d 905 (Tex. Civ. App.—Corpus Christi 1981), writ ref'd n.r.e. per curiam, 626 S.W.2d 737 (Tex.), cert. denied, 102 S. Ct. 3496, 73 L. Ed. 2d 1375 (1982). In denying the writ of error the Texas Supreme Court stated: "The question of whether an illegitimate child may be recognized in any manner other than that provided in section 42 of the Texas Probate Code is not properly presented for our review. We therefore express no opinion on the writing of the court of appeals on this question." 626 S.W.2d at 738.
79. 634 S.W.2d at 73.
81. 607 S.W.2d at 937.
82. See Cubley v. Barbee, 123 Tex. 411, 73 S.W.2d 72 (1934).
83. 626 S.W.2d 337 (Tex. Ct. App.—Tyler 1981, writ ref'd n.r.e.).
adoptive parents and their kin as if the child was the natural, legitimate child of the adoptive parents. For inheritance purposes, therefore, adoption by estoppel should place the child in the same position as all other legitimate children. Proof of an equitable adoption is at best difficult, and evidence of an agreement to adopt must exist. A mere intention is not sufficient.

Conlon v. Schweiker is an interesting case because it held that the Secretary of Health and Human Services, when deciding who is entitled to survivor's benefits under social security, is not bound by a state court's decree if the court did not have personal jurisdiction over all the parties. In Conlon a child claimed survivor's benefits under the Social Security Act through her alleged father. The child's mother had obtained an ex parte divorce based on an alleged common law marriage, and the Texas divorce court had found that the child was born of the marriage. In making his ruling the Secretary ignored this finding. The court sustained the Secretary and held he was not bound by the Texas decree and could determine, from all the facts, the child's right to benefits. The court agreed that the facts were not sufficient to establish a common law marriage. The child, therefore, was illegitimate and was not entitled to receive the social security benefits.

Paternity suits in Texas are dismissed with prejudice if blood tests exclude the putative father from the possibility of actual fatherhood. The possibility exists that a man not excluded by the blood tests is not the father, and if he is able to convince the trier of fact, then the court will find that he is not the parent of the child, perhaps causing some other male to undergo the same procedure. For example, in In re J.T.H., after the blood test but before the trial, the putative father agreed to admit fatherhood in exchange for a waiver of compensation or support of the child. The trial court did not admit this agreement into evidence since the court considered it an offer to compromise and not a completed compromise agreement. The jury found that the putative father was not the parent. The appellate court sustained the trial court and agreed with its interpretation of the law pertaining to admission of offers of settlement. The court pointed out that the offer could not have ripened into a settlement because the child was not represented by a guardian ad litem, and, thus, the settle-

85. Id. § 40.
86. Id.; see King v. Heirs and Beneficiaries of Watkins, 624 S.W.2d 252, 255, 257 (Tex. Ct. App.—Tyler 1981, writ ref'd n.r.e.).
88. Id. at 163.
89. Id. at 164.
90. Id.
91. Id. at 165.
93. Lopez v. Texas Dep't of Human Resources, 631 S.W.2d 251 (Tex. Ct. App.—Corpus Christi 1982, no writ), is a more typical paternity case in which the jury despite some evidentiary flaws found the putative father to be the parent.
95. Id. at 477.
ment would have been in violation of the Family Code.  

In In re M.G. another putative father, who was found to be a parent after trial, appealed the decision on the grounds that he had been denied due process because the paternity proceedings would not have been initiated if the mother of the child had not applied for aid from the Department of Human Resources. He alleged that he should have been notified of her application so that he could contest her need for financial assistance. The court, while agreeing that the Department of Human Resources instituted a paternity proceeding as a direct result of providing financial assistance to the mother, nonetheless held that the application for assistance in itself was not the cause of the paternity proceeding.  

Hearings by the Department of Human Resources are merely to determine the applicants' eligibility for benefits and relate to their own financial needs, not the activities of third parties. It is true, of course, that the Department of Human Resources initiates paternity proceedings in order to be reimbursed for its expenditures in behalf of a child it has found to be in need, and this is what happened in this case. In In re J.A.K. the mother appealed from a paternity suit, and the appellate court reversed and remanded because the trial court had used clear and convincing evidence as the standard of proof instead of a preponderance of the evidence. The court pointed out that in Texas a paternity proceeding is a civil action and involves no criminal sanctions. The standard pertaining to the pretrial conference, which can result in dismissal, is clear and convincing, but the court concluded that the pre-trial situation is different since its purpose is to dismiss frivolous claims. Thus, the policy is that claims about which there is the slightest doubt should go to trial, so that the merits can be determined by a preponderance of the evidence.

III. CONSERVATORSHIP

Under Texas law a parent has the right to physical possession of his child unless there has been some judicial ruling to the contrary. Accordingly, mere possession of a child for a period of time will not ripen into a right superior to that of the parents, and a court faced with such a fact situation should automatically issue a writ of habeas corpus in favor of

96. TEX. FAM. CODE ANN. § 13.07 (Vernon Supp. 1982-1983) provides that "[the child must be a party to a settlement agreement with the alleged father . . . [and] shall be represented in the settlement agreement by a guardian ad litem."
97. 625 S.W.2d 747 (Tex. Civ. App.—San Antonio 1981, writ ref'd n.r.e.).
98. Id. at 749.
99. Id.
100. TEX. FAM. CODE ANN. § 13.42(a) (Vernon Supp. 1982-1983) provides that "no alleged father denying paternity may be required to make any payment for the support of the child until paternity is established."
101. 624 S.W.2d 357 (Tex. Ct. App.—Corpus Christi 1981, writ ref'd n.r.e.).
102. Id. at 357.
103. Id.
105. 624 S.W.2d at 357.
the parent. A parent's right of possession prevails in spite of a guardianship order, since such orders cannot terminate the parent-child relationship. This same rule applies to disputes between parents, one of whom has been given custody by a proper court order. The court should not, however, relitigate custody orders in a habeas corpus hearing.

Once a trial court establishes custody, third parties may not intervene by moving for a new trial. While the best interests of the child are always paramount and should not be subverted by procedural rules, a court will consider an intervenor's plea only if he produces evidence that had not been available to the court in its original hearing. In Gillespie v. Gillespie an appellate court reversed and remanded the trial court’s decision to name the father managing conservator in a child custody case. The appeals court based its decision on the trial court's improper introduction of hospital records that showed the mother had received treatment for alcoholism. The Texas Supreme Court, however, reinstated the trial court's decision, holding that trial courts have wide latitude in custody cases and that sufficient evidence existed without the hospital records to support the trial court's finding. The court specifically did not reach the question of the introduction of hospital records. Trial courts must, however, follow proper procedure. The Tyler appeals court in Hawkins v. Hawkins granted a new trial in a divorce and custody suit because the divorce court failed to make a record of the trial. The Tyler court found that, although the father waived service and notice of the trial, he did not waive the record. He was entitled to a statement of facts, the court reasoned, to preserve his right to an appellate review. Moreover, an appeals court will reverse a trial court’s custody determination unless the trial court shows that it had jurisdiction over the parties. The mere recital of jurisdiction over a nonresident party will not provide jurisdiction to a

107. See Trevino v. Garcia, 627 S.W.2d 147, 149 (Tex. 1982). The court granted the parents a mandamus to overturn a writ of habeas corpus granted by the district court to the child's aunt and uncle. The aunt and uncle claimed a right of possession based on the doctrine of adoption by estoppel, having had physical possession of the child for over six years.
108. Armstrong v. Reiter, 628 S.W.2d 439, 440 (Tex. 1982): "[T]he county court lacks jurisdiction to enter any order which would affect the parent-child relationship."
110. Id. at 303.
115. 631 S.W.2d at 593.
116. Id. at 592-93.
117. 26 Tex. Sup. Ct. J. at 84. The supreme court specifically did not reach the question of admissibility of hospital records.
118. 626 S.W.2d 332 (Tex. Ct. App.—Tyler 1981, no writ).
119. Id. at 333.
120. Id.
121. Id.
court to decide custody. Some facts as to the nonresident’s minimum contacts with Texas must be shown.

Enforcement of court orders can be a problem and courts often use contempt to force compliance. Civil contempt is frequently used to enforce support orders when the individual has the money to pay but willfully refuses. The attorneys' fees and costs that are engendered by the attempt to collect support are considered a part of the underlying obligation and may be collected through the same contempt procedure as is used to enforce the support obligation. Attorneys' fees for enforcement of a conservatorship order, however, are debts for legal services, and thus are not enforceable by contempt. In addition to holding that conservatorship orders cannot be enforced by contempt, one justice in Ex parte Rogers held that a sheriff could reduce a criminal contempt sentence by good time credit. In that case a mother failed to return her minor children for four years after the end of the visitation period. In addition to a civil contempt order, the trial court sentenced her to thirty days in jail for criminal contempt. The sheriff allowed her to complete her time in less than thirty days by applying a good time credit to her sentence. The appellate court analogized criminal contempt to misdemeanor sentences and held that the credit could be used to reduce her sentence. The concurring justices modified this statement by holding that this credit could be used only if the court issuing the criminal contempt order had not prohibited it. The dissent would not allow the credit in any circumstances, reasoning that the power to modify a contempt sentence rests with the rendering court.

The doctrine of continuing jurisdiction obtains in child custody matters. A court will modify a conservatorship order when there has been a change in the circumstances of the managing conservator that is injurious to the child so that a change in conservator would be a positive improve-

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123. Id. at 502; see TEX. FAM. CODE ANN. § 11.051 (Vernon Supp. 1982-1983).
126. Ex parte Helms, 152 Tex. 480, 259 S.W.2d 184 (1953).
128. Id. at 668-69.
130. Texas law allows the sheriff to deduct time from convicts' prison terms for good conduct, industry, and obedience. Id. art. 5118a.
131. 633 S.W.2d at 669.
132. Id. at 672.
133. Id. at 674.
A jury must base its decision on evidence substantiating this change of circumstance. Regardless of any evidence, a court will order a new trial if the respondent was not properly notified of the modification hearing. The court, at both the trial and appellate level, keeps the child's interest paramount. For example, when a trial court has found that no change should be ordered, the appellate court can rectify procedural errors by reversing and remanding without changing the child's situation unnecessarily. Furthermore, if a trial court decides to change the managing conservator, it can suspend the judgment pending appeal. Thus, if the appellate court reverses, the trial court's decision will not have changed the child's situation unnecessarily. This is a discretionary power, and an appellate court will not intervene unless there has been a clear abuse.

The exercise of continuing jurisdiction over a mobile population can become quite complicated. When the child's residence changes from one county to another within Texas the Family Code provides for a transfer of jurisdiction. If all the provisions of the statute have been satisfied, this transfer is mandatory. The process works smoothly within Texas, but problems arise when the moves are between Texas and another state. In Medellin v. Dillon a mother whom a Texas Court had named managing conservator moved with the child to Louisiana. When the child, two and a half years later, visited Texas the father filed a motion to modify asking that he be named managing conservator. The mother was personally served in Louisiana and filed a special appearance to protest the Texas court's jurisdiction on the grounds that she and the child had been permanently out of the state for more than six months. Prior to the hearing on the special appearance motion, the father changed the basis of his lawsuit

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138. McPherson v. McPherson, 626 S.W.2d 349 (Tex. Ct. App.—Fort Worth 1981, no writ) (trial court failed to make available to the parties social studies that court had considered); In re Brazil, 621 S.W.2d 811 (Tex. Civ. App.—Eastland 1981, no writ) (father, movant, failed to appear at hearing; trial court should have dismissed for want of prosecution).
140. Id. at 782.
144. 627 S.W.2d 737 (Tex. Ct. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1981), writ rev'd n.r.e., per curiam, 633 S.W.2d 786 (Tex. 1982).
145. Tex. Fam. Code Ann. § 11.052(a)(1) (Vernon Supp. 1982-1983) provides that without written consent of both parties, a court cannot exercise continuing jurisdiction to modify the "appointment of a managing conservator if the managing conservator and the child have
from a motion to modify to a claim that it would be in the best interest of the child for the court to take jurisdiction because there was a serious question concerning the child's welfare. This plea changed the case from one asserting continuous jurisdiction to one asserting original jurisdiction. The trial court denied the mother's challenge to the jurisdiction and named the father temporary managing conservator.

The mother, meanwhile, petitioned the Louisiana court to enforce the original 1977 Texas custody judgment. The court dismissed the case on the father's exception to the Louisiana court's jurisdiction. An intermediate Louisiana appellate court sustained this decision. Shortly thereafter, the Texas appellate court reversed the Texas district court on the basis that, while it had proper subject matter jurisdiction, it did not have in personam jurisdiction. The appeals court held that the mother and child had been absent from the state for so long that it would be a violation of due process for the Texas court to exercise personal jurisdiction. The Texas Supreme Court denied the writ and affirmed the appellate court, but noted that it did so on the basis that Louisiana was the more appropriate forum. The court specifically did not express an opinion on the due process question.

The Texas Supreme Court also noted that, prior to its decision, the Louisiana Supreme Court had reversed and remanded the decisions of the lower Louisiana courts. The Louisiana Supreme Court held that Louisiana had jurisdiction based on the definition of home state found in the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction Act (UCCJA), which Louisiana had adopted. The Louisiana court also found it to be in the best interest of the child to assume jurisdiction because of the child's significant connections with Louisiana and the presence in the state of substantial evidence concerning the child's welfare. Additionally, the Louisiana court pointed out that Texas has not enacted the UCCJA and while the Family Code's provisions are similar, they are not the same and, therefore, need not be given the same deference. Medellin significantly illustrates the problems caused by Texas being the only state that has neither enacted nor judicially recognized the UCCJA.

established and continued to maintain their principal residence in another state for more than six months.

146. Id. § 11.045(a)(2).
148. 627 S.W.2d at 741.
149. 633 S.W.2d at 787.
150. Id.
151. Id.
152. 409 So. 2d at 574-75; see LA. REV. STAT. ANN. § 13:1705(A) (West Supp. 1983).
154. 409 So. 2d at 576.
155. The 68th Texas Legislature will probably rectify this by adopting the UCCJA and modifying the relevant Family Code Sections.
IV. Support

In *Ridgway v. Ridgway*\(^{156}\) the United States Supreme Court limited a divorce court's jurisdiction over insurance policies issued under the Serviceman's Group Life Insurance Act.\(^{157}\) Congress modified this decision by amending the survivor benefit plans through the Department of Defense Authorization Act of 1983.\(^{158}\) In planning to use such an annuity to ensure support for a child, a parent must carefully follow the provisions of the Act, which can require the service person to get the former spouse's approval before changing the beneficiary.\(^{159}\) Even if the obligor spouse is unwilling to agree to such a plan, the Act provides for notice to the former spouse should the obligor spouse attempt to make such a change.\(^{160}\)

Texas courts may order either lump sum or periodic child support payments.\(^{161}\) Both parents have a duty to support their children and the courts may order both to pay.\(^{162}\) Neither disparity of income\(^{163}\) nor total disability\(^{164}\) will necessarily relieve a spouse of this duty. The court, however, must base its decree on evidence, and the obligor's ability to pay is a necessary part of that evidence.\(^{165}\)

In order for a court to modify a support decree, it must, of course, have jurisdiction over the parties, and the presence of the children and one parent will not necessarily give the court jurisdiction over a nonresident party.\(^{166}\) Valid jurisdiction, however, does not mean that a court can base a modification on no facts. In *Staff v. Staff*\(^{167}\) a Texas court had entered the original decree and in a later suit modified the child support order. The father appealed the modification. The father entered a special appearance to contest the court's jurisdiction in the modification suit and provided no evidence as to his ability to pay child support. Although a statement of facts was not in the record, the appellate court presumed there

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\(^{156}\) 454 U.S. 46, 102 S. Ct. 49 (1981); see also Solender, supra note 65, at 159.


\(^{159}\) See 10 U.S.C. §§ 1447-1450 (1976) (pre-amendment code provision allowing service person to designate beneficiaries).

\(^{160}\) Id. § 1450.


\(^{162}\) Id. § 4. A duty of support exists only if there is a parent-child relationship. See also Linan v. Linan, 632 S.W.2d 155 (Tex. Ct. App.—Corpus Christi 1982, no writ) (motion to terminate own parent-child relationship denied).

\(^{163}\) Hourigan v. Hourigan, 635 S.W.2d 556, 558 (Tex. Ct. App.—El Paso 1981, no writ) (former wife ordered to pay lump sum from her share of community assets as child support).

\(^{164}\) Mendoza v. Mendoza, 621 S.W.2d 420, 421 (Tex. Civ. App.—San Antonio 1981, no writ). The original decree recited that the disabled spouse/father had no obligation to support. Before final judgment on the original decree, the mother filed a motion to modify, and after a hearing, the father was ordered to pay $200 a month support. *Id.*

\(^{165}\) In re E.L.P., 636 S.W.2d 579, 584 (Tex. Ct. App.—San Antonio 1982, no writ). In addition, the two concurring justices, who were the majority on this point, held that the grandparents' claim for reimbursement for necessaries for the child may, on proper pleadings, be considered in the suit. *Id.* at 583.

\(^{166}\) Ford v. Durham, 624 S.W.2d 737 (Tex. Ct. App.—Fort Worth 1981, writ dism'd) (original divorce decree was in New Mexico, and appellee's visits to Texas to see child held not sufficient for jurisdiction).

\(^{167}\) 623 S.W.2d 152 (Tex. Ct. App.—Fort Worth 1981, writ dism'd).
were enough facts to support the trial court's jurisdiction, but the Fort Worth court reversed on the child support issue. The modification judgment recited that there was no evidence on the father's financial situation except that he had a college education and had worked in the aerospace industry. The court found this to be insufficient evidence to support an upward modification of the child support payments.

Evidence of the obligor's change of circumstances is sufficient to increase or decrease support payments. The amount of the modification is within the trial court's discretion, and an appeals court will not overturn it without evidence of abuse. The trial court may also condition suspending the order of downward modification on whether or not it is appealed. In many cases both the needs of the children and the earnings of the obligor have increased. The obligor's increase in earnings need not be in the form of a cash salary. For example, although the former spouse did not receive a salary, the appeals court allowed a modification order based on the value of the work she performed because it contributed to her community estate.

A consent judgment does not bar an increase in support when the original judgment indicates that the parties intended the agreement to survive the decree as an enforceable contract as well as a judgment. The law pertaining to modifications of contractual child support agreements has not been clearly established. Although the lower courts have addressed the issue, the Texas Supreme Court has not.

Edwards v. Edwards involved a tangle of collateral and direct attacks upon various child support modification judgments. In 1977, on a motion to modify, the trial court entered a default judgment relieving a father from support obligations that had accrued prior to the motion to modify. The judgment also decreased future support obligations for a period, after which the obligations increased for their duration. The mother did not

168. Id. at 153.
169. Id.
170. Bible v. Bible, 631 S.W.2d 177 (Tex. Ct. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1981, no writ) (payments decreased from $640 to $540 per month); Williamson v. Williamson, 624 S.W.2d 633 (Tex. Ct. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1981, no writ) (support increased from $150 to $500 per month).
172. Id. at 179.
173. See Broday v. Burleson, 632 S.W.2d 803, 805 (Tex. Ct. App.—Fort Worth 1982, no writ) (support increased from $215 to $375 per month); Smallwood v. Smallwood, 625 S.W.2d 75, 77 (Tex. Ct. App.—Fort Worth 1981, no writ) (support increased from $300 to $500 per month); Carpenter v. White, 624 S.W.2d 618 (Tex. Ct. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1981, no writ) (support increased from $325 to $475 per month).
177. 624 S.W.2d 635 (Tex. Ct. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1981, no writ).
appeal from this judgment. The father/obligor failed to comply with the modified decree, and the mother filed a motion to reduce the unpaid child support to judgment. The trial court, in determining the amount of the judgment, omitted from its calculations the arrearage that the court on the previous motion had forgiven and, also, the later increases in support. The appeals court found that the original modification order that forgave the arrearages was void. The arrearages had accrued prior to the filing of the motion to modify and were, therefore, final. Thus, the court reasoned, the first modifying trial court did not have the power to forgive those payments. Furthermore, the court held that the second modifying trial court, in reducing the father's obligation to judgment, had miscalculated the later payments. The court distinguished modification proceedings from contempt proceedings, indicating that in the former courts may not modify retroactively, whereas in the latter they may. It would seem that the better view is that courts cannot modify arrearages in any proceeding, but can suspend the payment of portions of the arrearages for a period of time in order to have the obligor avoid contempt.

In Nagle v. Nagle a mother orally agreed to waive one of several past due child support payments. In exchange, the father agreed to pay the past due payments and convey his one-half interest in their home. The father paid the arrearages as well as the payment the mother had waived, but refused to convey his interest in their house. The mother sued for specific performance of the oral contract, or in the alternative, for damages based on fraud. The jury found fraud on the part of the father, and awarded the mother an amount equal to the father's interest in the house plus the court costs. The appeals court affirmed this decision. The Texas Supreme Court reversed the intermediate court on the basis that the agreement violated the statute of frauds. The supreme court also rejected the mother's argument that the court should uphold the agreement as an enforceable compromise and settlement, reasoning that, in order to apply this theory, a valid dispute must exist. In this case the parties agreed that back child support was owing; therefore no evidence of a dispute existed.

Huff v. Huff provides the Texas Supreme Court with an opportunity...
to settle the question of which statute of limitations applies in suits to enforce child support. The Beaumont court of appeals in *Huff* held that the ten-year judgments statute should govern. The court pointed out that a conflict exists among the intermediate courts, with some favoring the four-year limitation. In *Texas Department of Human Resources v. Allred* the trial court applied a four-year statute of limitations. The appeals court indicated that this was incorrect, but specifically did not address the issue because the parties did not properly plead it or raise it as an error.

Contempt is the most common method for enforcing support payments. The appellate courts have no jurisdiction to hear appeals from contempt orders, but they can grant writs of habeas corpus. A court may issue a writ of habeas corpus when it finds the contempt order to be insufficiently clear in that it combines several charges. A habeas corpus writ is also appropriate if the lower court issued the contempt order orally or without notice. The court will not grant the writ if the relator had the opportunity to defend himself at the contempt hearing and has not shown an inability to pay. In *Ex parte Colley* the relator complained that in the contempt hearing he had been called to be a witness against himself. The appeals court found that he had merely been informed that he could call witnesses or testify in order to explain his failure to pay child support.

Texas has enacted the Uniform Reciprocal Enforcement of Support Act (URESA), which provides a method for persons from out of state to enforce support obligations. To enter a judgment under this Act proper evidence to support it must exist. In *Sheres v. Engelman* a federal court held that while an order under URESA does not supplant the original order, it may modify the original order. Although no Texas court

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190. 621 S.W.2d 661 (Tex. Civ. App.—Waco 1981, writ dism’d).
191. *Id.* at 663.
192. See *Texas Dep’t of Human Resources v. Hebert*, 621 S.W.2d 466 (Tex. Civ. App.—Waco 1981, no writ).
194. See *Ex parte Jacobs*, 636 S.W.2d 20, 21 (Tex. Ct. App.—Austin 1982, no writ).
197. *Id.*
198. *Id.*; see *Ex parte Werblud*, 536 S.W.2d 542, 547-48 (Tex. 1976); U.S. CONST. amend. V.
199. 621 S.W.2d at 652. *But see* *Tex. Fam. Code Ann.* § 14.09(d) (Vernon 1975): “A parent may be compelled to testify fully in regard to his ability to support the child.”
203. *Id.* at 288-89.
has addressed the issue, the court relied on the language of the statute and decisions from other states, and concluded that a Texas court may modify a support order upward, but cannot decrease a support obligation under URESA because that would eliminate the original order. The court reasoned that URESA is a supplemental, not a supplanting, remedy. Thus, in this case the obligor remained liable for the full amount due under the original decision less the amount he had already paid, despite a Texas court’s subsequent reduction in the amount of the original New York decree. The court also found nothing that would prevent a federal court from enforcing the original order if it has jurisdiction over the parties.

V. TERMINATION AND ADOPTION

The Texas Supreme Court sustained the constitutionality of the voluntary presuit waiver of citation in cases terminating the parent-child relationship. Balancing the child’s interest in security and stability against a parent’s right to change his mind, the court held that a parent may waive citation if he has done so “voluntarily, intelligently and knowingly.” Furthermore, the court held that it is not error to fail to make a record of the trial, reasoning that the relinquishment to a licensed agency is irrevocable and therefore the agency’s petition and the affidavit of relinquishment attached to it are sufficient to support a judgment. If the petition and affidavit are not sufficient, then it is up to the party alleging error to show that a statement of facts is necessary. Finally, the court held that it is not necessary to provide an attorney for the parent at the time he voluntarily signs the affidavit of relinquishment. The court distinguished voluntary relinquishment of rights from an involuntary termination procedure, but did not discuss the question of counsel in an involuntary proceeding. This decision sustained the practice of adoption agencies and the Department of Human Resources that have been in effect since the enactment of title 2 of the Family Code. The importance of finality in adoption decisions was recognized in Texas prior to the enactment of the Family Code, and the code provisions are merely a codification of that

205. 534 F. Supp. at 293.
206. Id.
207. Id.
208. Id. at 294. Sheres v. Engleman and Wasserman v. Wasserman, 617 F.2d 832 (4th Cir. 1982), may signal a trend toward the federal courts' increased involvement in family law matters. But see Lehman v. Lycoming County Children's Serv. Agency, 102 S. Ct. 3231, 72 L. Ed. 2d 928 (1982) (discussed supra notes 32-37 and accompanying text).
210. Id. at 393.
211. Id. at 394.
212. Id.
213. Id.
If a person is not a parent, then his parent-child relationship cannot be terminated since he has no legally recognized relationship. A biological father is not a parent within the contemplation of the Family Code unless he has legitimated his child. To legitimate his child a father must either marry the mother or obtain a decree of legitimation. Legitimation requires the consent of either the mother or a court, which has found legitimation to be in the best interest of the child. The trial court in *In re Baby Girl S*, terminated the parental rights of the mother and specifically found that it was not in the best interest of the child for the father to legitimate her. The appellate court approved this decision following prior Texas law, which holds that distinguishing between biological mothers and biological fathers furthers the important state objective of protecting the interest of children born out of wedlock. In *Najar v. Oman* the court, while not stating the best interest test specifically, pointed out that it was not necessary to follow all the standards of the provisions for involuntary termination of the parent-child relationship when the biological father was not a parent. The biological father was serving a fifty-year prison sentence and the mother's husband wanted to adopt the child. In *Standard v. Bledsoe* the biological father claimed the child was legitimate based on an alleged common law marriage to the mother. Because the father failed to prove this allegation, the court found that the biological father was not a parent, terminated the mother's parental rights, and permitted third parties to adopt the child.

There is a presumption in favor of the validity of the most recent marriage and children born during this marriage are, of course, legitimate. A father in *In re R.L.* entered into a relationship with a woman whom he allegedly believed to be married to another man. He had two children by this woman, but he alleged they were legally another's. The trial court

217. *Id.* § 12.01.
218. *Id.* §§ 12.02; 13.21. Legitimation requires the mother or the court to approve. *Id.*
219. *Id.* § 13.21(c).
221. 628 S.W.2d at 262-63.
223. 624 S.W.2d 385 (Tex. Ct. App.—Austin, writ ref'd n.r.e.), *cert. denied*, 102 S. Ct. 2034, 72 L. Ed. 2d 483 (1982).
224. 624 S.W.2d at 387. The court also found that a biological father has no constitutional right to appear and testify personally at trial. *Id.*
226. *Id.* at 568.
227. TEX. FAM. CODE ANN. § 2.01 (Vernon 1975).
228. 622 S.W.2d 660 (Tex. Ct. App.—Fort Worth 1981, no writ).
notified the alleged legal father of the proceedings and terminated any interest he might have had in the children. The court then found that a binding marriage existed between the parties who had actually produced the children and held the father to be the legal parent. The court found, however, by clear and convincing evidence, that it was in the best interest of the children to terminate the parent-child relationship. Unless there is proof by clear and convincing evidence that a statutory basis exists for an involuntary termination of the parent-child relationship, an appellate court will not sustain the trial court's decision. A court may not apply this standard retroactively. The clear and convincing standard applies to both termination requirements: a finding of statutorily disapproved actions on the part of the parent, and also a finding that it is in the best interest of the child to sever the parent-child relationship.

A suit for termination of the parent-child relationship is a suit affecting the parent-child relationship, and therefore the rules of continuing jurisdiction apply. If the original court in such a case has not transferred jurisdiction, a new court is without jurisdiction; the appellate court also lacks jurisdiction and may dismiss the case on its own finding. The Family Code mandates the appointment of a guardian ad litem to represent the child in a termination suit, unless the court finds that the child can be adequately represented by one of the parties.

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230. 622 S.W.2d at 663-64. The agency brought the termination suit because the father had killed the children's mother and left the children unattended when he fled. See Tex. Fam. Code Ann. § 15.02(2) (Vernon Supp. 1982-1983).

231. 622 S.W.2d at 663; Tex. Fam. Code Ann. § 15.02(1)(B), (C), (D) (Vernon Supp. 1982-1983).


234. *Hellman v. Kincy*, 632 S.W.2d 216, 218 (Tex. Ct. App.—Fort Worth 1982, no writ); *see also* *Chambers v. Terrell*, 630 S.W.2d 800, 802-03 (Tex. Ct. App.—Tyler), *writ ref'd n.r.e. per curiam*, 639 S.W.2d 451 (Tex. 1982). The court held that no evidence of the best interest test was dispositive, and the clear and convincing holding was unnecessary. 639 S.W.2d at 452. The court stated:

The trial court, sitting without a jury, did not use a lesser standard.

We are not to be understood as approving the holding of the Court of Appeals that the affidavit of relinquishment was void because the attorney who acted as the notary . . . had a "strong financial and beneficial interest." Among other things, no financial interest appears in the record. The point is reserved.

*Id.*


236. *Id.* § 11.06. *But see* *Arias v. Spector*, 633 S.W.2d 312 (Tex. 1981) *supra* note 142 and accompanying text.


In *Arnold v. Callier*\(^{239}\) the court reversed and remanded the case because of the lower court's failure to appoint a guardian ad litem to represent the child at a hearing when there was no independent finding that the child was adequately represented. In *Linan v. Linan*,\(^{240}\) however, the record did reflect that the child was adequately represented, thus, the trial court's findings were sustained. The cases are also distinguishable in that the parent-child relationship in *Arnold* had been ordered terminated and in *Linan* it had not. Because "[t]ermination is a drastic remedy and is of such weight and gravity,"\(^{241}\) it is not surprising that appellate courts are less likely to find that the child had adequate representation without a guardian ad litem in cases in which the trial court ordered termination than in those cases in which termination was denied.\(^{242}\) Moreover, when a trial court orders termination, the court will approve an affidavit of inability to pay costs of appeal based on present poverty, although "past misconduct or improvidence" caused the inability to pay.\(^{243}\)

Despite an array of procedural devices, courts sometimes err in either finalizing adoptions or terminating parent-child relationships. In *In re Baby Boy S*\(^{244}\) was apparently not such a case, although the Harris County Child Welfare Unit filed a bill of review in an adoption proceeding. The trial court denied review, and the appellate court sustained that denial because the agency did not allege or prove that the adoptive parents were unfit or that the natural parents' rights were improperly terminated.\(^{245}\) Apparently, and perhaps rightly, the Welfare Unit's concern was whether the actions of the managing conservator were proper. The appellate court pointed out that an adoption proceeding was not the proper forum for settling grievances concerning placement procedures, especially when the child has lived with his adoptive parents for more than four years.\(^{246}\)

The appellate courts can reform improper judgments only if they are appealed. The number of cases cited above that appellate courts reversed and remanded merely on procedural grounds indicates the difficulties Texas lawyers and judges have in following the Family Code provisions. Few of the requirements of the Code are merely technical. An improper decision can destroy a child's life, especially when the decision is as final as in a termination procedure. *Joiner v. Vasquez*\(^{247}\) gives some indication of the magnitude of the problem. The court terminated the father's parental rights in a proceeding for which he was given notice by publication. Joiner, the father, was not present at the hearing. Although no evidence was presented, the court found that termination would be in the best inter-

\(^{239}\) 628 S.W.2d 468, 469 (Tex. Ct. App.—Beaumont 1981, no writ).
\(^{240}\) 632 S.W.2d 155, 157 (Tex. Ct. App.—Corpus Christi 1982, no writ).
\(^{241}\) *In re G.M.*, 596 S.W.2d 846, 847 (Tex. 1980).
\(^{242}\) 632 S.W.2d at 157.
\(^{244}\) 635 S.W.2d 147 (Tex. Ct. App.—Houston [1st Dist.] 1982, no writ).
\(^{245}\) *Id.* at 149-50.
\(^{246}\) *Id.* at 150.
\(^{247}\) 632 S.W.2d 755 (Tex. Ct. App.—Dallas 1982, no writ).
ests of the children. Unfortunately, when Joiner discovered what had happened he filed a motion for bill of review instead of a motion for a new trial. The court denied the bill of review because Joiner failed to establish a meritorious defense. Joiner did not appeal this denial, but filed a second bill of review that was denied on the basis of res judicata. Without appealing the second denial, Joiner filed a third bill of review and then appealed its denial. The appellate court sustained the trial court, holding that the failure to appeal the denial of the first bill of review was a bar to further litigation. The court mentioned the possibility that the minor children might have a right to attack the decree, but did not explain who might do so on their behalf.

A number of principles are in conflict in Joiner v. Vasquez. One is the importance of the finality of judgments and another is the importance of stability to the child. In Joiner, however, these principles are in opposition to the principle that the courts should follow the law. The law mandates a genuine finding as to the best interests of the children in any suit affecting the parent-child relationship. In all this litigation the merits of the original decision were never reached. Moreover, the original trial court did not reach the merits because only one party was present and the other parties were represented in a pro forma manner. Thus, in Joiner, stability may not be in the best interests of the children. Joiner v. Vasquez should lead us to question whether the finality of judgment principle is so important that an illegally arrived at decision, vital to the children involved, cannot be reconsidered.

248. 632 S.W.2d at 762 (Arian, J., dissenting).
249. Tex. R. Civ. P. 329 provides that when a defendant has not appeared and service of process was by publication the defendant may file a motion for new trial within two years after judgment. The motion must show good cause for a new trial and must be supported by affidavits. Joiner's petition was filed less than a year after the judgment based on citation by publication.
250. 632 S.W.2d at 759.
251. Id.; see Durham v. Barrow, 600 S.W.2d 756, 760-61 (Tex. 1980) (discussion of restrictions on powers of guardian ad litem).
252. 632 S.W.2d at 758.
253. Id. at 759.
255. See Edwards v. Edwards, 624 S.W.2d 635 (Tex. Ct. App.—Houston [14th Dist.] 1981, no writ) (appellate court modified a final judgment, which had not been appealed, because trial court had exceeded its powers in the original decision). For a discussion of Edwards see supra notes 177-81 and accompanying text.