Domestic Relations—Right of Child to Sue Parents for an Intentional Tort

Follow this and additional works at: http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_lawreview

Part of the Family Law Commons, Juvenile Law Commons, and the Torts Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/law_lawreview/vol1952/iss1/12

This Case Comment is brought to you for free and open access by the Law School at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Washington University Law Review by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
separate that case from the principal one. The use of paper money has long ceased to be a legal issue, and does not affect the principal case as it did the former one. In addition, cyclic inflation and deflation make the change in monetary value quite foreseeable, thereby further distinguishing the two cases.

**Conclusion**

While the decision in the principal case may be supported as being equitable in view of the facts involved, it does not suggest the general availability of hardship caused by the decline of the purchasing power of the dollar as a discretionary defense in equity. First, it is not the sole ground on which the decision in the case rests. Second, although the court was liberal in its extension of equitable discretion in this case,\(^{22}\) such liberality as here displayed is open to charges of being arbitrary and capricious, and of going beyond accepted practice, as described above. Finally, if the defense were developed into a consistently applied legal theory it would go a long way toward tying the courts to the administrative agencies which determine price indices.

JOHN M. DRESCHER, JR.

---

**DOMESTIC RELATIONS—RIGHT OF CHILD TO SUITE PARENTS FOR AN INTENTIONAL TORT.**

Plaintiff, an unemancipated minor child, sued her deceased father’s estate for damages (for mental pain and suffering) resulting from the father's killing plaintiff's mother in plaintiff's presence and then a week later committing suicide, also in plaintiff's presence. The child was the illegitimate offspring of the deceased persons.\(^1\) A Maryland appellate court reversing the lower court's sustaining of defendant's demurrer declared:

... where the parent is guilty of acts which show complete abandonment of the parental relation, the rule giving him immunity from suit by the child, on the ground that disci-

---

\(^{22}\) Another interesting example of Missouri liberality in the field of hardships is Rockhill Tennis Club v. Volker, 331 Mo. 947, 156 S.W.2d 9 (1932), noted in 47 HARV. L. REV. 441 (1933) as the “first case where a court of equity has declared civic beauty of sufficient importance to warrant a denial of specific performance,” and one wherein the court had to determine what constituted beauty under the facts of the case.

\(^1\) The court gives no consideration to the fact that the child was illegitimate; rather it treats the father as the legitimate parent.
pline should be maintained, cannot logically be applied, for when he is guilty of such acts he forfeits his parental authority and privileges including his immunity from suit.\(^2\)

The question whether an unemancipated child can maintain an action for personal injuries against his parent is one which, until recently, was easily answered by most courts. These courts proceeded to cite the precedents, which almost unanimously answered the question in the negative,\(^3\) and irrespective of the factual situation involved in the case being considered, reached a mechanical result by affirmation of the precedents. The answer to the problem given by the various courts has been subjected to severe criticism by both legal writers and dissenting judges.\(^4\)

Thus the general rule was, and still is for the most part, that an unemancipated minor cannot maintain such an action.\(^5\) This rule, however, has been subjected to modification by the courts until, in recent cases, there exist at least three exceptions to the general rule, and the trend appears to be to modify it still further.

The exceptions where recovery has been allowed are: (1) situations in which a parent guilty of actionable negligence has been covered by indemnity liability insurance;\(^6\) (2) situations in which courts have construed "wrongful death statutes" as a declaration of public policy on the point and have permitted such an action; and (3) situations in which some courts have taken a more realistic view of the varying fact situations and have differentiated between negligent and intentional conduct,\(^7\) allowing recovery in the latter instance. Thus, it will be shown


\(^{4}\) Crownhart, J., Wick v. Wick, 192 Wis. 260, 263, 212 N.W. 787, 788 (1927); McCurdy, Torts Between Persons in Domestic Relations, 43 HARV. L. REV. 1056 (1930); Recent Cases, 23 Geo. L. J. 430 (1939).

\(^{5}\) Dunlap v. Dunlap, 84 N.H. 352, 150 Atl. 905 (1930); Worrel v. Worrel, 174 Va. 11, 4 S.W.2d 45 (1939); Lusk v. Lusk, 112 W. Va. 17, 166 S.E. 538 (1932).

\(^{6}\) Minkin v. Minkin, 336 Pa. 49, 7 A.2d 461 (1939).

\(^{7}\) Mahnke v. Moore, 77 A.2d 923 (Md. App. 1950); Meyer v. Ritterbush,
that the principal case is not an abrupt departure from the
general rule, but rather the result of evolution and change
therein. The three exceptions noted above are by no means uni-
versally followed by the courts, but the trend is toward more
widespread adoption of them.

The General Rule and Its Development

The general rule seems to have originated in an early Missis-
sippi case, Hewellette v. George. There a minor daughter was
placed in an insane asylum for eleven days by her mother. She
brought suit against her mother to recover for the injury to
her character and for the time lost. The court held that a minor
child could not recover from his parent. It should be noted that
the court in the Hewellette case cited absolutely no authority
to substantiate its holding. This fact is especially noteworthy
in that there appear to have been no rulings at common law
which forbade such an action by a child against his parent before
the Mississippi case. Reeve and Cooley contend that such an
action could be maintained. The former asserts that a parent
"... may so chastise his child, as to be liable in an action by the
child against him for a battery." The latter states that on prin-
ciple there is no reason why such an action should not be per-
mitted.

In 1903, in McKelvey v. McKelvey, the Tennessee court fol-
lowed the rule expounded in Hewellette v. George and cited that
case as its only authority. As an additional reason for denying
recovery, the court analogized the child-parent relationship to
that between husband and wife, where an action is ordinarily
denied one against the other because of the common law view
of their identity. From this point on the die was cast. Case after
case laid down the general rule of no recovery, giving diverse
reasons for so holding, but failing entirely to distinguish and
differentiate between varying fact situations and between negli-
gent or intentional torts.

Among the more prominent reasons advanced by the courts for

---

9. 68 Miss. 703, 9 So. 885 (1891).
10. REEVE, DOMESTIC RELATIONS 287 (1st ed. 1816).
11. COOLEY, TORTS 171 (2d ed. 1887). But he goes on to intimate that it
might not be allowed.
denying recovery were: (1) the "possibility of succession" idea;\(^{13}\) (2) the "family exchequer" doctrine;\(^{14}\) (3) the analogy to the denial of a cause of action between husband and wife because of the common law view of their identity;\(^{16}\) (4) the doctrine of "domestic tranquillity" (prevention of discord and disruption of family harmony);\(^{16}\) (5) "public policy";\(^{17}\) (6) the undermining of parental control and discipline.\(^{18}\)

A few courts did allow recovery to a child, but in all of these early cases the person stood in loco parentis\(^ {20}\) to the child and was not the natural parent. To what extent this was a factor in influencing the decisions is, of course, debatable. On the basis of their reasoning, however, it would appear that the writers of these opinions would have held a natural parent liable also.

**The Effect of Insurance in Modifying the General Rule**

The first deviation from the rule occurred as a result of the vast increase in the number of automobiles and indemnity insurance thereon. At first, the fact that the defendant had insurance was held immaterial,\(^ {20}\) and many later cases have continued to maintain that position.\(^ {21}\) However, in the leading case of *Dunlap v. Dunlap*,\(^ {22}\) where the father was a contractor carrying workman's compensation insurance and his son was injured while working for him, the New Hampshire court allowed recovery on the theory that the child could not be denied the right

\(^{13}\) Roller v. Roller, 37 Wash. 242, 79 Pac. 788 (1905). The theory involved here is that should the child die before the father, then the latter would get money which the child had recovered from him.

\(^{14}\) Ibid. The court claims that the funds of the family would be depleted to the detriment of the other children if the child were allowed to recover.

\(^{16}\) McKelvey v. McKelvey, 111 Tenn. 388, 77 S.W. 684 (1903).

\(^{16}\) Small v. Morrison, 185 N.C. 577, 118 S.E. 12 (1923); Wick v. Wick, 192 Wis. 212, 212 N.W. 787 (1927).

\(^{16}\) McKelvey v. McKelvey, 111 Tenn. 388, 77 S.W. 684 (1903).

\(^{16}\) Small v. Morrison, 185 N.C. 577, 118 S.E. 12 (1923).


\(^{16}\) Matarese v. Matarese, 47 R.I. 131, 131 Atl. 198 (1925); Wick v. Wick, 192 Wis. 212, 212 N.W. 787 (1927).


\(^{16}\) Schneider v. Schneider, 160 Md. 18, 152 Atl. 498 (1930); Lund v. Olsen, 183 Minn. 515, 237 N.W. 188 (1931); Lasecki v. Kabara, 235 Wis. 645, 294 N.W. 33 (1940).

\(^{22}\) 84 N.H. 362, 150 Atl. 905 (1930).
to sue his parent because of the effect on discipline and family life, when the father's liability insurance prevented such effect and in fact transferred liability to a third party. In other words, fears that a suit by a child against his parents might disrupt family relations or might deplete family funds to the detriment of the other children under the “family exchequer” theory, have no applicability when, in fact, the real party defendant is not the father, but the insurance company. Instead of depleting the family funds, the action would augment them, and certainly the action would not be conducive to any strained relations between the child and parent.

The same rule was applied in *Lusk v. Lusk*, the West Virginia Supreme Court holding that, since the reason for the general rule failed, parental immunity from suit by the child did not apply.

These cases represent the first modification of the general rule.

*Construction of Wrongful Death Statutes as a Declaration of Public Policy in Modifying the General Rule*

The second modification of the general rule was effected by the construction of a wrongful death statute. In *Minkin v. Minkin*, the plaintiff brought suit against his mother under a wrongful death act for the death of his father as a result of her negligent operation of an automobile in which the deceased was a passenger. A Pennsylvania court allowed recovery. The court held that the legislature had created no exceptions in the operation of the statute so that there were no grounds for depriving the child of the benefit of recovery under the statute because the surviving parent is the tortfeasor.

*A More Realistic Approach by the Courts as a Factor in Modifying the Rule (Distinguishing Between the Negligent and Intentional Torts)*

As was stated previously, the courts generally refused recovery whether the tort was negligent or intentional. A change in the

23. *Lusk v. Lusk*, 113 W. Va. 17, 19, 166 S.E. 538, 539 (1932). The court aptly stated “when no need exists for parental immunity the courts should not extend it as a mere gratuity.”
25. *Id.* at 51, 7 A.2d at 463. “The legislature made no exception, such as defendant would imply, to the effect that the child shall be deprived of the benefit of the statute when the surviving parent is the tortfeasor.”
attitude of many tribunals is reflected in the statements found in later cases where, though the courts continued to deny relief for negligently caused injuries, they indicated that the result might be otherwise in the case of malicious and intentional torts by the parent against the child. It is from this background that the holding in the principal case evolved.

For example, in a Georgia negligence action, although the court denied recovery, it went on to say:

...we do not hold that a father could not be liable for wilful or malicious wrongs or for some act of cruelty which operated at the same time to forfeit his parental authority.

It should be noted that the idea of parental forfeiture of immunity represents one of the main bases upon which the Mahnke case is predicated.

The above case and others of a similar nature indicate by dicta that when the presence of malicious and intentional torts on the part of the parent is shown there might possibly be recovery in an action by the injured child. Certainly the commission of an intentional tort renders the disruption of family relations argument inapplicable; they will have already been interrupted.

This developing practice of differentiating between negligent and intentional torts is best exemplified and carried to its logical extreme by three of the latest cases, one of which is the principal case. For example, in a recent New York case, the court stated that although a child may not maintain an action against a parent for negligence, "an action may lie where wilful misconduct is present."

27. Id. at 8, 163 S.E. at 711.
29. For statements as to why other reasons given by the courts for denying recovery are invalid at one time or another see McCurdy, supra note 4, at 1056.
32. Id. at 554, 92 N.Y.S.2d at 598.
However, it is in the case of *Cowgill v. Booch*\(^{33}\) that the most realistic and lucid thought is expressed in dealing with the entire question. There the son of defendant's decedent was ordered into a car by his intoxicated father, the latter then attempting to drive home. Due to the father's gross negligence in attempting to drive while intoxicated, the car ran off a bluff, killing both father and son. An action was brought against the father's estate by the son's administrator. The court, in allowing recovery, stated that:

Whatever may be the early common law rule, we should not be bound thereby unless it is supported by reason and logic. The law is not static. It is a progressive science. What may have been a wholesome common law a hundred years ago may not be adapted to the changing economic and social conditions of this modern age.\(^ {34}\)

In a later paragraph, the court cited the following words from the Lusk case, "...we must not exalt this rule [the general rule of no liability] above ordinary common sense.'\(^ {35}\) It then decided that the general rule so well established should be modified to allow an emancipated minor to sue his parent for a willful and malicious tort. The court held that the defendant's gross negligence amounted to willful misconduct and allowed recovery.

It is in the light of these decisions that the principal case was decided. Although the instant case cites none of these decisions, it shows the modern tendency to allow recovery when the logic of the case compels it.

We may fairly conclude that in any case where the recovery will in fact be against an insurance company, the usually stated objections to recovery are not present whether the tort be intentional or negligent. In the absence of insurance, however, the problem is more complex and depends upon the particular facts of each case. This is true because of the fact that although some of the reasons advanced for denying recovery may be valid in one factual situation, they may not be in another. It may well be generally true, for example, that willful and wanton misconduct on the part of a parent may have disrupted family relations to such an extent that a law-suit will have little effect on them...

\(^{34}\) *Id.* at 295, 218 P.2d at 450.
\(^{35}\) *Id.* at 297, 218 P.2d at 451.
either way. Yet, that may be no answer to the "family ex-
chequer" argument if there are other children in the family,
whereas the argument would lose most of its force if there were
no other children. Again, if the conduct complained of is only
negligence, there would normally be no family disruption in the
absence of a lawsuit, but if the tortfeasor were dead and recovery
was to be had from his estate to the exclusion of strangers who
would take under his will, even the bringing of the law-suit
would not disrupt family relations. The examples given are, of
course, merely illustrative, for many combinations of factors
could be devised. One feasible solution would be recognition by
the courts of the existence of such factors and analysis of each
case in terms of them in order to determine whether those in
favor of recovery outweigh those opposed to it.

Thus, the modern trend as exemplified by the Mahnke and
Cowgill cases would appear to represent the better view. Al-
though in some cases recovery might well be denied, there should
be no static rule of no recovery. 36

J. Milton Stein

36. The principal case is further complicated by the fact that it might
be argued that there was no impact involved in causing the child's injury.
This would pose additional problems to those courts which refuse recovery
for mental disturbance unless there is an impact. However, in the principal
case when the father shot himself some of his blood lodged on plaintiff's
hands and face. It is quite possible that some courts which consider impact
necessary might construe this to constitute sufficient impact.

Vicarious Liability of Third Parties: Whether a child may maintain an
action against his parent's employer for injuries inflicted on the child by
the parent while the parent was acting in the scope of his employment, is
a question on which the few courts that have decided this issue have split.
In those jurisdictions where the father is liable to his child for a tort, no
question arises as to the employee's liability. But in those states where the
father is not liable because of the child-parent relationship, is the principal
then liable? Some courts take the view that the employer is liable even
though the parent is not. Mi-Lady Cleaners v. McDaniel, 235 Ala. 469, 170
So. 908 (1933); Clover Creamery Co. v. Diehl 185 Ala. 429, 63 So. 196
(1913); Chase v. New Haven 111 Conn. 377, 150 Atl. 107 (1930); LeSage
v. LeSage, 224 Wis. 57, 271 N.W. 369 (1937). One of the reasons given is
that the liability of each (principal and agent) exists without relation to
that of the other, the servant for his own wrongful conduct, the master
for the wrongful conduct of his servant while acting for him. The few
other courts that have decided the issue have taken a contrary view. Meece
v. Holland Furnace Co. 269 Ill. App. 164 (1933); Graham v. Miller, 182
Tenn. 434, 187 S.W.2d (1945). One of the reasons advanced for denying
recovery is that when there is an absence of legal liability on the part of
the agent the principal is not liable. The master's liability is considered
derivative. The reader is to be warned, however, that most of the courts
have not as yet considered the problem, although there are numerous analo-
gous cases in which a wife or husband has successfully sued the other
spouse's employer.