

## STATE DENIED PRIVATE INTERVIEWS WITH KIDS IN DRUG ABUSE PROGRAM

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Children enrolled in a controversial drug and alcohol treatment program may not be questioned by state investigators without a lawyer or advocate present, an appeals court has ruled.

Circuit Judge Howard Berman had ruled in May that state officials investigating reports of abuse at Growing Together Inc. in Lake Worth could interview children without their parents being present. Berman had said the children would be interviewed as "witnesses, not suspects."

But the parents appealed, asking that the children be allowed to have their parents or an attorney present during the questioning.

The 4th District Court of Appeal struck down Berman's ruling on July 18 and said the children could have an attorney or advocate ad litem present "to protect the child witnesses from the risk of self-incrimination."

An attorney or advocate ad litem is a person appointed to look after the interests of people who are too old, too young or too infirm to protect their own interests.

James Herb, attorney for the children's parents, said the ruling gave the parents what they had asked for. "Our intent was to protect the children," he said.

The ruling affects 11 youths who are enrolled in the treatment program, which uses strong peer pressure and harsh discipline to help the youths kick drugs and alcohol.

Officials from the state Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services are investigating complaints that employees at the center have emotionally abused or neglected youths. Officials from the center argued against allowing the youths to be interviewed, claiming they would lie to gain their releases. Growing Together treats drug and alcohol abusers aged 12 to 22. In March, HRS officials suspended the program's permanent license. They issued the program a temporary license until the investigation is completed.

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