As attorneys, most work is client-driven. While our work varies from practice area to practice area, every focus has and will continue to have its difficult clients. Learning how to manage difficult clients is as much a life skill as it is a rite of passage as a young attorney.

Sometimes the most difficult client isn’t actually the client. Rather, they make take the form of a parent or guardian of a minor child. I have seen this attorney-client relationship pan out in many ways: actions brought on behalf of a minor, minor compromises and settlements, and even lesser crimes committed by minors wherein the costs of defense are paid by his/her parents or guardians. While these types of cases raise their own challenges, I want to focus on the unique professional and ethical issues one faces when representing a parent in a custody or support dispute.

In the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, one very important rule of law to remember when preparing your custody case is: what result is in the best interest of the child? This simple query fuels some of the hardest attorney-client relationships. It requires one to balance the client’s own expectations as well as consider the harsh reality that such an expectation may not be in line with the child’s best interest. Family law attorneys must be acutely aware of which lines never to cross. Problems arise when that line gets swept one way or another as if it were drawn in sand. If you have a client who wants to set up a custody arrangement wherein the child is sent to stay at the mother/father’s residence every other week, you work out this agreement and all goes according to plan – or does it? Fast forward a few months down the line, now your client returns to you seeking to petition the court to move out of state. Assuming, arguendo, the pros, cons and likelihood of success are fully explained to the client, your client still wants to proceed with the petition. At this time, you recall the doctrine of the best interest of the child. You ask yourself is this type of petition in his/her best interest? It would require changing school systems, traveling long distances and separating peers and friends. Such a move very well may be contrary to the child’s best interests, but what about your own client’s wishes? As any attorney might easily say, “it depends.” While that is an undoubtedly valid answer absent additional facts set to this hypothetical, it showcases the unique ethical and professional quandaries that are unique to family law. Keeping the best interest of the child in mind, sometimes your only option may be to terminate the attorney-client relationship should your client’s wishes become so adverse to your own morals and ethics.

As attorneys, our work is client-driven. On one hand, it is our job to make sure the clients are happy; on the other, it is our duty to practice with integrity.