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Parental Alienation is Child Abuse

By Jeffery M. Leving



One of the things that makes divorce so difficult is the emotion involved: The couple was once in love; now they're not. They have children who will now spend time with their parents separately. The couple may have worked hard together to buy a home, plan for retirement, start a business or build careers, and those efforts are now out the window. Add to that the personal details of betrayal, often with some exaggeration, being blabbed in open court, and every

button for passion is pushed. This is nothing like business litigants haggling over contracts.

Because of the brutal nature of divorce, a horrific problem can arise known as parental alienation. This is when one parent badmouths the other parent to the children, in order to get or keep the children on “their side.” This can occur during divorce litigation, or afterward if there is unpleasantness surrounding the custody arrangement. Even mild to moderate alienation can cause children to have low self-esteem and feelings of abandonment, which can harm them throughout their entire lives.

“Your father doesn’t love you,” “your father isn’t interested in spending time with you” and “your father wishes you were never born” are examples of parental alienation. Either parent can do it, but I’ve illustrated this with statements a mother might make, simply because mothers often end up with primary custody, so they are more likely to be the offenders for that reason. The bad-rap statements don’t even have to be objectively false: It’s simply wrong to disparage the other parent.

Many experts in child psychology and development consider parental alienation to be child abuse, and I agree. In Illinois, a parent who is found to be committing alienation can lose custody, so it’s a serious matter indeed.

When we observed Parental Alienation Awareness Day on April 25, we thought about what we can do to stop it.

First, it seems that many parents who are badmouthing the other parent do not realize they’re doing it. They’re merely grinding their own axes against their ex-spouse out loud. Therefore, we must educate divorced or separated parents not only on what parental alienation is, but we must give them examples of parents doing it, and the great pain it causes the children. In a contentious divorce, it’s easy for parents to slip into this if they haven’t been warned exactly what not to do.

Of course, some parents do commit parental alienation on purpose, thinking it's a strategy to assure they don't lose the love of their children, or to use their children as tools for revenge. It's not a good strategy, of course. It's better to deal with the reality of shared parenting in a constructive manner than to compel the children to choose sides. It's best for children to be raised by both parents, even after divorce or separation, if possible. Many parents who diminish the other parent on purpose probably need psychological counseling.

Second, friends and relatives who become aware that alienation is occurring — either having witnessed or heard about the offending parent or the parent who's on the receiving end of the denigration — should mention it if they think they have standing to do so. If they don't feel comfortable talking directly to the parent, they can talk to the professionals involved with the family, including lawyers, psychologists and guardians *ad litem*. It should not be ignored.

Ultimately, the penalty can be harsh if word of parental alienation reaches a courtroom. But the harm that alienation causes to children is so severe that those of us who care about families and children shouldn't wait until then. We must do everything we can to prevent parental alienation, or to stop it immediately.

In my advocacy work on behalf of fathers over the last 40 years, my true motivation has been saving the children. Being a child of divorce, as I was, poses many challenges. It's not ideal. But instead of making the situation worse, we adults must do everything we can to help divorced and separated parents raise their children in a helpful and healthy way. Preventing parental alienation is essential.

Matrimonial attorney Jeffery M. Leving is the author of Fathers' Rights, Divorce Wars and How to be a Good Divorced Dad, the latter of which was praised by President Obama and by Cardinal Francis E. George, then the archbishop of Chicago.

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