

How Divorce Wars Take A Toll On Kids

Children Are Often Caught In The Middle Between Feuding Parents

By Daniel Schorn



Kevin Peters holds his daughter, Victoria. (CBS/EARLY SHOW)

(CBS) Children often get caught up in their parents' divorce battles, forced to take sides. As **Tracy Smith** reports, "parental alienation" can take a serious toll on kids.

Experts tell **Smith** that a child easily picks up the hostile cues of one parent toward another. And whether those cues are subtle or intentional, either way the child suffers and can carry that burden into adulthood.

One girl who loved both parents very much but got caught in divorce crossfire is Victoria Peters.

Her parents also loved her — so much that they spent hundreds of thousands of dollars and five years battling in court to win custody.

"It was gut wrenching," remembers Victoria's father, Kevin Peters. "The whole thing was strange."

Franny Carney, Victoria's mom, says, "It's hell. It's like living in hell."

It was not an ordinary custody case.

Victoria's father claims that for years, while his ex-wife had full custody, she led a campaign to turn his daughter against him, what some experts refer to as "parental alienation."

"It's easy to teach a child to hate. Courts are now recognizing this is a serious problem," explains author **Richard Warshak**. "The children's affections are being poisoned against the other parent."

Kevin says the alienation campaign began with last-minute changes to his scheduled visits with Victoria.

"It was always an excuse that, on my weekend, there was some reason she couldn't come," Kevin says.

But Franny says she did not deny him visits.

"My daughter was locked in a closet when I called," Kevin tells **Smith**. Her mother would say, 'Lets go get in the closet. It's your dad.' "

Months went by. Kevin lost his temper. The police were called. His visits then had to be supervised. But even then, he says, his ex-wife continued to prevent him from seeing Victoria.

Franny contends that Kevin, who suffers from chronic depression, was emotionally unstable.

"I was frightened of him, ya know? When he was out of line, me and my daughter hid in the back of the bathroom," Franny says.

As charges mounted against Kevin, a court-appointed evaluator had to decide: Were these charges real or was there a concerted effort by Franny to turn Victoria against her father?

"Parental alienation is one of the common dynamics that occurs in high-conflict cases," says Daniel Stockley, a parental evaluator.

"The mother had difficulty, in this case, of letting go of, almost like an obsessive thought, that the child was at risk," says Stockley.

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