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# Custody tactic can shred families

## When parents turn kids into pawns, everyone hurts

By Nancy Amdur  
Special to the Tribune

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Three years ago Elgin resident Norma Perez lost custody of her 9-year-old daughter to her ex-husband. He had accused Perez of turning their daughter against him.

Since then Perez slowly regained visitation rights after a court-appointed supervisor determined she showed no signs of acting to alienate her daughter against her ex-husband. Her daughter spends weekends and one day after school with her.

Accusations of parental alienation are a tactic sometimes employed in divorce and custody cases when to turn a child against the other parent.

Parental alienation typically occurs in "nasty, assaulting, toxic custody cases," said Donald Smith, an Orange, Calif.-based psychologist who does evaluations for family and juvenile courts.

Example of comments a parent might say to a child:

"Your dad is spending all his child-support money on his new girlfriend."

"He's an alcoholic."

"Your mom is rotten."

Signs that parental alienation might be occurring:

The child refuses to visit the parent from whom she has become alienated.

The child tells negative stories about the parent that parrot adult language.

The child attempts to publicly humiliate the parent.

The child refuses contact with the parent's extended family, friends and even pets.

Children exhibiting this behavior often deny being influenced by anyone, therapists said.

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Parental alienation is "one of the most unrecognized forms of child abuse," said Dallas-based psychologist Richard Warshak, who wrote a book about the topic, "Divorce Poison: Protecting the Parent-Child Bond from a Vindictive Ex" (Regan Books).

"Since writing my book I've been flooded with so much e-mail, I realized the problem is bigger than even I knew," Warshak said. Parents often haven't heard about alienation, and have told him they found it helpful to learn the term.

"There's a denial of the problem reminiscent of how child abuse used to be denied," he said. "Often children end up losing an entire side of the family, as if aunts, uncles and cousins all died at the same time, because they lose that contact and that support. And as they get older they feel a sense of loss and become angry with the favored parent for having poisoned their relationships."

The late psychiatrist Richard Gardner coined the term parental alienation syndrome in the 1980s. But the mental health community does not officially recognize parental alienation as a syndrome, and it is not in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, which lists accepted mental disorders.

Nevertheless, after Gardner coined the term, lawyers began using it in court to try to obtain custody for clients, and some judges followed Gardner's recommendation that in severe cases the rejected parent be given full custody of an alienated child. But this solution is controversial in the mental health community because a child may reject a parent for a legitimate reason, such as abuse.

For this reason, many therapists recommend examining alienation claims on a case-by-case basis. "It's complicated," said Geri Fox, a child and adolescent psychiatrist with the Institute for Juvenile Research, a child guidance clinic that is part of the University of Illinois at Chicago. "You have to sort out where the trouble is from and sort out how much is based on reality and how much of it is based on distortion."

When there is alienation, "a parent may feel angry and vindictive and want to turn a child against the other parent because of their own rage or hurt," Fox said.

Researchers Janet Johnston and Joan Kelly, based in California, have published articles in the last five years stating that parental alienation involves the entire family, not just the alienator, as Gardner suggested.

"It's not solely caused by the parent brainwashing a child," said Johnston, a professor in Justice Studies at San Jose State University. "Both parents have a part in causing or continuing a child's rejection. Parental alienation is becoming a catchword, and people are using it without thinking what it means."

"There are a lot of reasons people get upset and angry, and it should not be confused with alienation," Johnston specializes in family conflict, divorce and domestic violence.

Among the reasons a child might resist visiting one parent are that the child is going through a developmentally normal stage of feeling more comfortable with one parent, is estranged for legitimate reasons such as abuse, or rejects the non-residential parent's new spouse or partner, said Kelly, a clinical psychologist who conducted one of the nation's first divorce research projects, in 1969.

"Parental alienation is a buzzword for bad behavior," said Chicago matrimonial lawyer Paul Feinstein, who represented Perez. "In Illinois, if a parent does alienating-type things, the court looks at it, but the danger is [alienating] becomes legitimized in a way that's not merited."

Even under hostile conditions generated by a high-conflict divorce, most children do not become alienated,

Kelly said. Some children are more vulnerable and feel they have to choose sides, Johnston said. Typically, one child among siblings is alienated, but an older sibling may try to recruit younger siblings to steer from one parent. Children ages 9 to 16 are the most susceptible to alienation, Kelly said.

If alienation does occur, it can affect a child's self-esteem and relationships, doctors said. Therapy can help but is not always successful.

"As much as possible, I try to get families to work together in the best interest of the child and not demonize one parent," Fox said.

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#### How families can repair rupture of parent-child bonds

To combat parental alienation, therapists often recommend the entire family get counseling individually and in combinations. Following are some topics discussed in therapy:

- The parent from whom the child has become alienated may be taught appropriate parenting skills.
- The parent may be encouraged to apologize to the child for any inappropriate behaviors and tell the child he or she is working on improving any problems.
- The therapist may advise the parent to persist despite repeated rejection on the child's part.
- The parent should try to show the child that he or she is respected by others.
- The parent doing the alienating will be educated about how alienation affects the child's self-esteem and relationships.
- The alienating parent should discourage a child's inappropriate behavior, such as hanging up when the non-custodial parent phones.
- The child should learn about alienation and be reminded that he or she got along with both parents before.
- For more information about how children can be affected by family strife, visit [www.aacap.org](http://www.aacap.org), the Web site of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, a non-profit, professional medical organization.

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