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Turning child against parent 'very common' in nasty separations

By CARLY WEEKS

From Monday's Globe and Mail

The last time Jane Smith spoke to her eldest son, he told her he wished she was dead.

She hasn't had a conversation with her youngest son in seven years.

When her boys graduated from high school in southern Ontario, Ms. Smith watched them get their diplomas from a hiding spot at the back of the room because she wasn't invited to attend.

It's a stark contrast to a relationship that was once loving and caring.

But Ms. Smith, who did not want her real name used, said her connection with her sons has been torn apart since she and her husband divorced in the late 1990s.

Once Ms. Smith moved out of the family home, her husband used an arsenal of emotionally abusive and manipulative tactics to turn their teenaged sons away from her.

It's called "parental alienation syndrome" and the situation is hardly unique. Last week, an Ontario judge ruled a 13-year-old boy could be flown against his will to participate in a United States-based program to repair his relationship with his mother. The judge said the boy's father tried to brainwash him against his mother and that unless he received intervention, the situation could have serious consequences on the boy's life and his future relationships with women.

Experts say thousands of Canadian parents going through a separation, divorce or other difficult conflict convince their children - sometimes even unconsciously - to reject the other parent.

"It's very common in high-conflict parent relations," said Robert Samery, vice-president of the Parental Alienation Awareness Organization, which is based in Oakville, Ont. and has international membership.

"It can be extremely devastating."

The Ontario case brings to light the serious problems that can erupt when one parent manipulates a child's view of the other parent.

Tactics range, but can include constantly insulting the other parent in front of the child, denying custodial visits, fabricating stories of abuse to the police to cut the parent off from the child and make him or her appear dangerous, and encouraging the child to stop talking to the other parent.

That kind of behaviour has a major impact on how a child views the other parent and may cause him to reject that

parent, according to Richard Warshak, a clinical psychologist and expert on parental alienation.

"Often times these are very, very nice children who are well behaved in other respects," he said. "But somehow they don't show the normal amount of regret for rejecting a parent so maliciously. These children can be quite obnoxious in the way they treat a parent but they feel entitled to do that because they feel they have the permission of the other parent to do it."

Dr. Warshak, who developed the one-of-a-kind U.S. program where the Ontario teen is being sent, said many cases of parental alienation remain unresolved and can persist for years, partly because the problem is still not well recognized or understood and also because of the lack of resources available to help parents in this situation.

"Our offices are just swamped and we really can't handle the volume of inquiries," he said. "I get e-mails every day from desperate parents who are trying to reconnect with their children."

Children in these situations may renounce their relationship with their parent, call them names, refuse to talk to them or become angry at them for trivial reasons, such as making them go to bed on time.

Dr. Warshak's program, the Family Workshop for Alienated Children, lasts about four days and focuses on reconnecting parents and children through a series of educational workshops. It offers the child a "face-saving" way to get out of the middle of the parental conflict without having to choose one parent over another, Dr. Warshak said. Counsellors are also on hand to help both the parent and the child deal with the issues that arise.

In some cases, parents may not even realize they are slowly poisoning their children's perceptions.

"They're so caught up in their own disappointments in the marriage and their own frustration and their own anger that they fail to recognize that the children need more protection from those feelings," said Dr. Warshak, whose book *Divorce Poison: Protecting the Parent-Child Bond From a Vindictive Ex*, has helped shed public light on this problem.

Ten years after Ms. Smith's divorce, her sons - who are now adults - still won't speak to her or answer any of her letters.

Over the years, Ms. Smith had to learn about illnesses or milestones in their lives through other sources. When she called the house to talk to her sons, someone would hang up the phone. Letters were torn up before they were read. At her son's elementary school, she couldn't get past the principal's office. Whenever her son made a sporting achievement, she had to read about it in the newspaper.

"It's like I don't exist," she said.

While Ms. Smith holds out hope her boys will want to reconcile one day, she does her best to get on with her life.

"I pray for my children every single day, that they find some peace and some happiness. That's all that I want for them," she said. "I easily could have fallen down on the ground. I refuse to be defeated by this."

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