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Mother Bear v. Ghost Dad: Nobody wins

By Sarah Hampson
From Thursday's Globe and Mail

In my previous column, I wrote about the epidemic-sized problem of ghost dads - fathers who disappear from the lives of their children following divorce. Rather than vilify them, I was trying to understand some of the emotions that possibly underlie their absence. Often, the loss of daily contact with their children is so painful, they react by staying away.

The response was enormous. Some men welcomed the understanding and vowed to deal with their loss in a more productive way. Far more blamed the mothers.

Which serves as a reminder of the enduring rancour between fathers and mothers in divorce. Even though blame exists on both sides, it is easier to attack the other than to address one's own culpability. In war, each side thinks of itself as righteous.

But let's be honest: Mothers are not paragons of virtue.

We have all done it.

The ex has promised to pick up the children on a Friday night. He is late. The children sit by the window, waiting and worrying that maybe dad won't come.

And what do we say? Something less than charitable about him, muttered under the breath.

"The custodial mother who continues to fight the divorce issues through the children as a means of revenge is contemptible and real," wrote one father, who concedes that his involvement as a parent decreased with time because his children expressed enormous resentment against him.

Of course, the problem of bad-mouthing the ex is not exclusive to mothers. Divorce and child specialists are quick to point out that in high-conflict cases, both parents are often guilty of disparaging the other.

"Some parents are so angry with the ex, they want to punish them," says Richard Warshak, an American psychologist and author of the best-selling book, *Divorce Poison: Protecting the Parent-Child Bond from a Vindictive Ex*.

But since mothers are granted primary custody of the children more often than fathers, they spend more time with them, which, in turn, can lead to more influence. That, at least, is what many ghost dads argue.

At the extreme and uncommon end of the continuum, the problem is called parental alienation, and Dr. Warshak is not the only expert to consider it "a pathology, the most under-recognized form of child abuse. In essence, it is

manipulating children to be agents in their own deprivation."

Far more pervasive is the habit of making a little comment here and there, uttered in frustration or anger, that can cause the children to question the merits of one parent. Even a seemingly innocuous comment by the mother - referring to the other parent as "your father" instead of dad, for example - suggests to the child that something is amiss. Before the teenage years, when they begin to make up their own minds, children look to mothers for clues, obvious and subtle, on what or who may be dangerous. It is a blow to their self-esteem to have one parent criticized as children intuitively know that they are a product of both.

Why do mothers badmouth their exes in front of the children?

Well, some of the resentment against the father is simple. Mothers feel they are the ones who must do all the work, both as good cop and bad cop. No amount of support payments can compensate for the emotional strain of raising children by yourself. They must supervise the homework, mete out punishments, make the meals, do the laundry, and be the loving parent who cajoles and encourages and tucks the children in at night. What was once parcelled out between two parents falls on her shoulders. Dads get all the fun times.

Soon after separation from my husband, I called him with some worry about our three boys, then all young teenagers. "If you can't handle it on your own, then just let me know. You don't have to have custody," he replied tartly.

That, in a nutshell, is the problem of divorced parents. They rarely work as a team any more, and there's a strange and unwarranted competition for love of the children.

Women can also get stuck in the role of victim. Several fathers I spoke to describe their ex-wives as being unable to get over their anger and pain, even 20 years after divorce. "Emotionally, she can't be in the same room as me," one father laments of his former wife. The children, now grown and thriving, feel they will never be able to have both parents at their weddings or other family events.

"For people who are struggling with a traumatic separation, in order for them to manage the intolerable feelings of loss, they often do a reconstruction of reality and begin to see their ex-husband as a bad man," says Linda Chodos, a social worker and family therapist in Toronto.

Men and women develop divorce amnesia - forgetting that they once loved the ex enough to get married and have children together.

Mostly, though, the anger directed at fathers is due to what I think of as the mother bear instinct.

Fathers are equally capable of being good parents. When Bob Geldof, singer, divorced dad and fathers' rights advocate, speaks about "the perverse notion [in the family court system] that men themselves, by virtue of their masculinity, are unfeeling brutes, incapable of love or clear displays of affection," I don't think there's a woman alive who wouldn't feel compassion for their anguish.

But the truth is, mothers know their children better. We had them in and through our bodies. The attachment is primal.

We can diagnose infants' problem by the sound of their cries. Within days of their birth, we know their bodies like maps, the crinkle in an ear lobe, the tuft of hair on top of the head. We talk about their bowel movements like we used to analyze novels. Motherhood is a strange and wonderful thing: both expansive, in its experience of unconditional love for another, and boringly reductive.

It leaves us a trembling force of protection and knowledge, and unfortunately, in divorce, that deeply connected relationship mothers have with their children can become a liability when dealing with the fathers.

"Dads don't want to hear suggestions on how to care for the children," says Constance Ahrons, author of several books, including *The Good Divorce*. "They see it as criticism." What should be helpful is seen as an attack. A mother's advice or complaint is a reminder of the marital relationship they no longer want.

I would also argue that a mother's anger spikes when she perceives injury being inflicted - such as when she

watches her child's disappointment when dad doesn't show up on time.

If there were an easy solution, there wouldn't be an army of parenting and child specialists eager to help divorced parents. But one thing mothers can do is remember that protection of their children includes trying to avoid scrapes to their hearts, which they can be equally guilty of causing.

Dr. Warshak even provides a script. "When the father is late, the mother has a choice. She can criticize him and say, 'Oh, he's such an irresponsible guy and he cares more about his girlfriend than he does about you.' Or she can think about what she would say if they were still happily married and she didn't want to undermine the child's respect for his father. She might say, 'Oh, dad is always late for things. Lots of people are. I wish dad were better at being on time. But he'll be here soon. Let's find something to do until he arrives.' "

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