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House Divided: Hate Thy Father

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In 1978, after Cathy Mannis and her future husband moved into the same cooperative at U.C. Berkeley, they ran into each other often. She was not immediately smitten. "I detested him at first, and I should have stayed with that feeling," recalls Cathy Mannis of her now ex-husband. "He was overweight and always very critical. Then he lost weight, became cuter, and started paying attention to me. He was going to be a doctor and he seemed so trustworthy; he said he would never desert his family as his own father had done to him." They started dating, and she ultimately cared for him enough to marry him. "I thought he'd be a good father, and I was dying to be a mother. I thought we'd have a good life."

She worked full-time as a legal secretary to put him through medical school. She also bought the two of them a town house with money she'd saved before marriage. When she gave birth to a boy, Matt (not his real name), she was as happy as she'd ever been. Over time, she saw signs that her husband was cheating on her, but she always forgave him.

Their second son, Robby, was born autistic, and things went downhill fast. The boy had speech and learning problems and was frequently out of control. Her husband was appalled. "He's dumber than a fish," he said.

Still, they had one more child, Harry (the name has been changed), hoping to give Matt a sibling without Robby's problems. Harry turned out normal, but he bonded most closely with Robby; they became inseparable.

When Cathy once again became convinced her husband was cheating—he inexplicably never came home one night—she finally threw him out. He filed for divorce before she could forgive him again.

Cathy was granted primary custody of the kids, and her ex soon married the woman he'd been seeing on the side. Because of all she had to do to help Robby as well as her other two kids, Cathy could no longer hold a full-time job. Meanwhile, her ex declared two bankruptcies and, at one point, even mental disability, all of which kept alimony payments to a trickle.

Eventually Cathy was so broke that her electricity was turned off; she and the boys ate dinner by candlelight. Then she became so ill she had to be hospitalized for life-threatening surgery. She had no choice but to leave the kids with her ex. "He promised to return them when my health and finances improved," she says.

That was almost seven years ago. Her health has long since returned and she has a good job

she can do from home, but the only child ever restored to her, despite nonstop court battles, was Robby. In fact, her ex got the courts to rule that the children should be permanently separated, leaving the other two children with him, since Robby was a "threat" to his younger brother's well-being.

Through all those years, Cathy says she faced a campaign of systematic alienation from Matt and Harry. "When I called to speak to them, I was usually greeted with coldness or anger, and often the boys weren't brought to the phone. Then my ex sent letters warning me not to call them at home at all. Whenever the kids came to stay with me, they'd report, 'Dad says you're evil. He says you wrecked the marriage.' " Then he moved thousands of miles away, making it vastly more difficult for her to see her children.

As time has passed, the boys have increasingly pulled away. Matt, now grown and serving in the military, never speaks to Cathy. Thirteen-year-old Harry used to say, "Mommy, why can't I stay with you? All the other kids I know live with their moms," before leaving visits with her. Now he often appears detached from her and uninterested in Robby, whom he once adored. His friends at his new home think his stepmother is his mom, because that's how she introduces herself. "She told me she would take my kids, and she did. The alienation is complete," rues Cathy. "All I ever wanted was to be a mom."

Divorcing parents have long bashed each other in hopes of winning points with kids. But today, the strategy of blame encompasses a psychological concept of parental alienation that is increasingly used—and misused—in the courts.

On the one hand, with so many contentious divorces, parents like Cathy Mannis have been tragically alienated from the children they love. On the other hand, parental alienation has been seized as a strategic tool in custody fights, its effects exploited in the courtroom, often to the detriment of loving parents protecting children from true neglect or abuse. With the impact of alienation so devastating—and false accusations so prevalent—it may take a judge with the wisdom of Solomon to differentiate between the two faces of alienation: a truly toxic parent and his or her victimized children versus manipulation of the legal system to claim damage where none exists.

A Symptom Of Our Time?

Disturbed by the potential for alienation, many divorce courts have today instituted aggressive steps to intervene where they once just stood by. And with good reason: Alienation is ruinous to all involved. "In pathological or irrational alienation, the parent has done nothing to deserve that level of hatred or rejection from the child," explains University of Texas psychologist Richard Warshak, author of *Divorce Poison: Protecting the Parent-Child Bond from a Vindictive Ex*. "It often seems to happen almost overnight, and neither the rejected parent nor even the rejecting child understands why."

Often, in fact, it's the emotionally healthier parent who gets rejected, Warshak adds. That parent tends to understand that it's not in the child's best interests to lose the other parent. In contrast, the alienating parent craves revenge against the ex—then uses the child to exact that punishment. "It's a form of abuse," Warshak says. "Both parent and child are victims."

The alienating parent could vilify the ex to rationalize the dissolution of the relationship, explains Atlanta family therapist Frank Pittman, M.D. "Even though they managed to stay married to that person for 10 or 15 years, they now see him or her as the devil's spawn. It's the only way they can justify the breakup of their marriage, because otherwise, it would be their own fault." Once they've convinced themselves of that, it's easy enough to see why their children should be kept away from the other parent.

The maligning of an ex need not be conscious—or even particularly extreme—to inflict lasting damage on a parent-child relationship. "The child can hear negative comments inadvertently," notes Diane McSweeney, a marriage, family, and child counselor for the San Diego Unified School District. "Mom is on the phone with a friend, or Dad is talking to his girlfriend and the child happens to hear negative things. I don't think most people mean to insult the other parent to the child, but they're caught up in their grief for their failed marriage and don't appreciate that the kid can hear everything."

Alienation is especially damaging when one parent can't contain the anger—Mom cheated, or Dad hasn't visited or paid child support—and the wounded parent starts venting to the child. "They're just so desperate to talk to someone, and there's no one else they trust left to talk to. They would never do that to their child in any other situation, but now they are in no shape or form ready to parent," says McSweeney. "The child is then thrown into confusion, feeling the need to take sides. 'I love Mom, but Mom hates Dad, so how can I love them both?' Or, 'I'll make Dad mad if I keep loving Mom, so I have to choose him over her.' "

"I was an adolescent when my parents were divorced," recalls Michelle Martin. "You were either on my mother's side or against her, and if you were on her side, you had to be against my father. She was so angry at him for walking out on her, felt so much shame and betrayal, that you couldn't possibly have a relationship with him if you wanted one with her."

Decades later, Michelle recalls her father (who has since died) as a gentle, caring man. But from the moment he left, her mother systematically worked to convince her that he had been abusive. "She really could not have portrayed him more negatively. 'How can you love him?' she'd say. 'You can't count on him.' He'd call, and she'd tell him my siblings and I didn't want to talk to him, then she'd tell me he didn't want to talk with us."

Afraid to lose her mother's love on top of having had her father walk out, Michelle ended up buying the brainwashing. Eventually, her father married another woman and moved away. At first he came into town regularly to visit, but the ever-renewing hostility gradually became too much for him, and the visits became few and far between.

Her father's reluctance to criticize her mother allowed Michelle's misconceptions to continue unabated, keeping up the walls her mother had created between them. It wasn't until she was 17 that her father finally said to her, " 'You know, a lot of the things you've been told about me were untrue.' It was instantly eye-opening." By her early twenties she'd reconnected with her father, but they only had about 15 years together; he died when she was 38. "I'd lost all those years with a wonderful man, as well as with the members of his family that I loved."

Strategies Of War

There's another side to the alienation phenomenon: the hard-edged legal one. Although it is a psychological issue, parental alienation can be truly addressed only in the legal system. Remedy for alienation, say experts, requires an order from a court to allow a manipulated child time to bond with the alienated parent. It is critical, therefore, that there be proof that alienation has in fact occurred. If a parent seeking custody can document the phenomenon, the system—if it is working—will adjust a custody arrangement to promote relationship repair.

The courts worked fairly for Larry Felton, an orthodontist in Detroit (identifying details changed). His wife, an architect who had put her career on hold to raise their daughter, Emily, left Larry and later divorced him. Immersed in his practice, he settled for the once a week plus every other weekend visits the court imposed. "I was devoted and determined to make it work. I wasn't going to let anything keep me from having a relationship with my daughter," he says.

But when Emily grew older and he asked for a little more time with her, things turned ugly. By unilateral decree of his ex, he stopped getting even the limited time that was his due. By the time the court got involved, Emily had grown distant and withdrawn, blaming him for all that had happened. She resisted seeing him at all.

He might have lost his bid for more time with his daughter if not for a key piece of evidence. His ex called to tell him she was canceling yet another weekend with Emily. Then, thinking she'd disconnected the phone when she had not, she said to the daughter and Felton's answering machine, "Your father is evil, a bad man, but we need him for his money. At least he's good for that."

After hearing the tape, the judge awarded primary custody to Larry in hopes of reversing the alienation that had been ongoing for years. Seven years later, 17-year-old Emily has reaped the benefits. Though it took time to earn her trust back, her father now has a solid relationship with her, and her time with her mother is more positive. "I think it saved her," Felton says.

Things are hardly ever so clear-cut in court. Often, judges don't have access to proof like Felton's incriminating voice mail. In the end, after listening to expert witnesses from both sides, decisions are often based on impressions and even the testimony of the children, the very ones who are brainwashed and may be least reliable of all.

"Even when a judge acknowledges that alienation occurred, the court can end up siding with the alienating parent because of the child's wishes," Warshak says. "Otherwise, they fear, the child in his anger might hurt himself or someone else."

In fact, it takes a sophisticated judge to realize what psychologists might see as obvious: Deep down, the child has never really stopped loving the other parent. He or she has just been brainwashed like a prisoner of war or a cult victim, programmed to accept destructive beliefs until critical thinking can be restored.

"Even if they say they don't want to see the parent, underneath they might be longing to reconnect," says Warshak. "These kids need more time with that parent rather than less. Only then will they have a chance to see that the poisoned thoughts are wrong." In the most extreme cases, children are permitted to see the alienating parent only during therapy sessions until the

alienation has been resolved.

Other times judges listen mostly to the parent who says he or she has been wronged—and that too can be misleading. According to John E. B. Myers, a professor of law at the University of the Pacific McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento, California, false accusations of parental alienation do "tremendous harm to many children and their parents, particularly mothers seeking custody in family court."

According to Myers, fathers accused of sexual or other abuse by mothers often hide under the protective mantle of "parental alienation" in court, pitting accusation against accusation. The alleged alienator may be dismissed as manipulative, an assumption not always representing truth. The charge could paint a protective parent as a liar trying to poison a child instead of keeping him from harm.

University of California at Davis law professor Carol Bruch adds that the theory of parental alienation fails to account for the anger often felt by children of divorce, especially the kind of contentious divorce that results in custody fights in the first place. "Sometimes the child's feelings are prompted by the behavior of the noncustodial parent. That parent may not be abusive, but just deficient in some way. A parent can become estranged from a child without any provocation whatsoever from the other parent." The estranged parent could accuse the custodial parent of alienating behavior through blindness to his or her own role.

Loss And Repair

With knowledgeable experts and astute judges, real alienation can be discerned from false accusations. When alienation is accurately recognized, appropriate intervention on the part of the court can certainly help families heal the damage.

Without the right intervention, however, the result is a scenario of loss and unresolved grief like that of Cathy Mannis. Ironically it is Robby, Cathy's autistic son, who is most acutely in touch with his pain.

"What his father did, first trying to institutionalize him as dangerous, then separating him from his brothers, gave him a devastating signal that he was not worthy, that he deserved punishment rather than help and love," explains Stephen Stahl, M.D., Ph.D., Robby's psychiatrist and a professor of psychiatry at the University of California at San Diego.

Now 18, Robby feels rejected by both his father and his younger brother, both of whom have very little to do with him anymore. "My father never cared about me, so I don't care about him anymore," he says. "But I loved being with Harry every day and every night. I try to call him a lot, but my stepmom is often mean to me or hangs up on me. I almost never get to see him, and he doesn't call. It all makes me so sad."

Parents' grief is also profound. "The child is alive but still lost to you, so close but yet so far, there but not seeing you, and you're uncertain if you'll ever have the relationship back again," Warshak says. "You can't grieve the final loss, because you can never accept that it's final."

As for Cathy Mannis, she recently had Harry with her in San Diego for a one-week court-ordered visit. She and Robby were both thrilled to have the chance to reconnect with him. But as wonderful as that week was, it only set Mannis up for further heartbreak. "He left on Sunday," she says, "and I won't see him again for four months."

Divorce Without Devastating The Kids

Clearly, some parents—those who are physically or emotionally abusive—should be separated from their children. But these are the rarity, and in virtually all other cases, children would do better if their divorced parents stayed amicable partners in raising them. To keep a divorce as healthy as possible for children, follow these rules:

- Never put the other parent down. Divorce uproots children's feelings of stability badly enough—trashing or eliminating one of the parents magnifies the instability exponentially.
- Rather than using kids as a sounding board, divorced parents who are struggling with each other should seek outside emotional help.
- Hold any charged or volatile discussions far out of earshot of the children.
- Do everything in your power to accept your ex's next mate, since this person will also play an important role in your child's future stability and happiness.

Parents who alienate may use the following tactics:

- Limiting the time a child can spend with the other parent, and even violating court-ordered visitation schedules.
- Making false or unfounded accusations of neglect or abuse, especially in a legal forum. The most damaging expression of this is the false accusation of sexual abuse.
- Creating fear of rejection and threatening to withhold affection should the child express positive feelings about the absent parent.
- Saying negative things about the other parent in front of or within earshot of the child.
- Blaming the other parent for the collapse of the marriage.
- Moving far away, making it difficult for the other parent to have a regular relationship with a child.

Highlights:
In an era of epic divorce battles, parents increasingly use kids to bash each other. Can a broken parent-child bond be restored?
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In an era of bitter divorce battles, parents often use children as hammers to bash each other, manipulating not only the legal system but also their children's affections. Can a broken parent-child bond be restored?
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7001: abuse
Secondary WebMD XPG:
7007: grief

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