

# THE ASBURY PARK PRESS

April 26, 1987

SUNDAY  
GLORY DAYS  
SPRINGSTEEN'S BOOK — USA WEEKEND

SINCE 1879

## Experts say children hurt by custody battles

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**WELL-PUBLICIZED**, bitter custody battles over very young children often shatter the tyke's self-esteem and can result in an inability to form close relationships, say experts in child psychology and development.

For children likely to encounter a lifetime of media attention, such as Baby M, the intense scrutiny early on can lead to a pattern of attention-grabbing behavior, regardless of whether it's positive or negative, they say.

"A child would rather be beat up than ignored," says Dr. Karen Shanor, a clinical psychologist in private practice in Washington. "It's a survival mechanism. If we're ignored as a child, we die."

Having cameras poked in a child's face at every turn exacerbates an already stressful situation, she said.

"It teaches the child to get atten-

tion for things that are not necessarily healthy attention-getters," she said.

Since the custody award of Melissa Stern, the 1-year-old also known as Baby M, whose surrogate mother battled unsuccessfully for custody, two other cases have drawn extensive media attention in New Jersey in recent weeks.

Four-year-old Rachel Rauser, who had been living in Florida with an aunt and uncle, was returned last week to her stepmother's home in Salem. She had been in Florida since March 10 when her father was arrested and charged with trying to sell her for \$100,000 in the parking lot of Giants Stadium.

The youngster has bounced between her father, grandparents, stepmother and aunt and uncle since 1984 when her mother died in a car accident.

The other case involves 2½-year-old Philip Taylor, who was ordered

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returned to his aunt and uncle on Staten Island April 16 after a nine-month stay with grandparents in Indiana.

The grandparents are fighting for custody of the boy, whose parents lived in Manalapan before his father murdered his mother when Philip was 5 months old. At his trial, Kenneth Taylor said he killed his wife upon seeing her sexually abuse Philip.

Children can interpret multiple caretakers as abandonment, which can wreak havoc with an already fragile self-esteem, says Dr. Peter A. Wish, director of the New England Institute of Family Relations in Framingham, Mass.

"We're in the process of producing some very poor self-images, (feelings of) 'I'm not worthwhile,' and the bottom line is 'I'm not lovable,'" said Wish.

"We know that children who experience an abandonment early in their life have a lot of difficulty establishing trusting relationships in their lives," says Dr. Richard Ades Warshak, a Dallas clinical and research psychologist who specializes in custody cases.

"Most children are so afraid of abandonment and most parents sense that. These children, in effect, have had their worst fears come true," continued Warshak, who currently is writing a book about the effects of various custody arrangements on children.

At about age 1, an infant is starting to realize she is different from those around her. By the time she is 2, she already has begun trusting individuals and, ideally, exercises some independence, said Shanor.

If this trust is ruptured, or never allowed to form, in the first three years of life, it could result in deep withdrawal and an inability to form intimate relationships, the experts say.

The withdrawal is often intensified if the distrusting children place unrealistic demands on those who do manage to get close to them. When these people fail to meet the child's impossible expectations, the feelings of inadequacy are reinforced.

"It's what we call the self-fulfilling prophecy," explained Warshak.

At the age of 4, children try to attract their parents' attention, noted Warshak.

"It's not so much a sexual thing, but 'am I the kind of girl who can be loved by a man?'" he explained.

In 4-year-old Rachel's case, Warshak said, "It's certainly going to make it harder for her to know her dad sold her."

When she learns that she has a \$3 million trust, she may even begin to wonder about the motives of those who fought for her custody, he went on.

Hostility between custody-seekers often compounds problems, the experts agree.

"If they see adults always fighting, that doesn't give them a lot of hope about the possibilities," said Shanor.

"We know very well that if a child continues to see conflict handled by violence, the child learns that's how you handle conflict," she said.

"The real danger is the child is left unattended," believes Barbara Nordhaus, coordinator of custody conflict cases for the Child Study Center at the Yale University School of Medicine.

Struggles sometimes make a child feel important, Shanor said. On the other hand, it also can make her feel fragmented, believe she is the source of all the discord in the family, and undermine her sense of security, Shanor added.

Guilt proliferates and can lead to anger, she said. An unresolved anger can lead to aggression, she went on.

Adults who allow their anger at another family member to intrude on a custody arrangement invariably are threatening the child's psychological

health, the professionals agree.

"The thing we have to remember is a 2½-year-old child is much more aware than we give them credit for," said Shanor.

Additionally, at age 2½, the Taylor boy is forming "pre-verbal memories," which, if painful, can be very difficult to work out in therapy later, Warshak said.

Even in Melissa Stern, who is 13 months old, "we're not dealing with an unemotional blob," warns Shanor.

"She knows there are a lot of people who love her and want her," the psychologist said.

But Melissa may soon, if she hasn't already, sense the tension that exists between her biological parents, Warshak said.

William Stern, the baby's father, and his wife Betsy have been granted custody over the objections of Mary Beth Whitehead, the surrogate mother, and her husband, Richard. An appeal is pending.

Once Melissa detects that tension, and learns the circumstances of her unusual birth and the subsequent court battle, she is likely to be disloyal to both sides, Wise feels.

In the meantime, Mrs. Whitehead's insistence on calling the baby "Sara" instead of her legal name is already helping to confuse the infant, said Warshak, who once counseled a family which called a child different names.

"It was extremely confusing to the child's sense of identity. Your name is your basic label, your tag in life," said Warshak.

Warshak believes the danger of the media attention may be felt more indirectly: for example, when the youngster starts school and meets other children who may ostracize her.

Teachers, as well, can present a challenge depending on their reaction to the child's difficult early life, he continued. A very sympathetic teacher may be too lenient or overcompensate and unfairly discipline the child.

Terry Lucarelli, an elementary schoolteacher in Brielle who is involved in discussion groups for children in kindergarten through grade 8, believes children often feel ignored in a custody fight.

"Young children talk very freely about" their feelings during bitter divorces, says Mrs. Lucarelli.

Lucarelli, whose own children were 2½ and 5 when she divorced five years ago, said most parents make the mistake of ignoring their youngsters during a family upheaval and the error has long-term effects.

"We don't listen to kids. We say, 'oh, that's stupid' and what they're saying is not stupid. It's what they feel," said Lucarelli.

Pat Stout, guidance counselor in the Fair Haven elementary schools, says she will always remember the 6th grader who went to live with her mother following her parent's bitter divorce.

Three years after the girl's parents split, "She told me, 'I'll keep coming to you until I don't hurt so much anymore,'" Mrs. Stout recalled.

Warshak and Shanor agree that problems formed in the first three years of life are extremely difficult to correct. Immediate therapy is extremely important for all of these children, Shanor said.

"In a way, their age helps them," said Shanor. "Children are very adaptable. They just need to be given a positive direction."

"There's no reason why the chances (for a normal life) can't be good if the parents don't drop the ball," believes Wish. "But, it's going to take more attention with these children. We want to give them a good chance at adjusting and we want to pay a lot of attention to their emotional needs."

"The problem is we can't choose our parents. And these kids can't choose their circumstances," he went on. "And the courts make a decision based on certain evidence presented to it and that's all it can do."