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### Kidnapped girls found but not returned home

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Parental alienation is a growing form of child abuse occurring in the world that is rarely addressed.

It affects a child's mental and emotional well-being and creates a world of hatred toward a parent, typically in a high-conflict divorce situation. It deprives children of being loved by both parents, according to Sarvy Emo, spokesperson for Parental Alienation Awareness Organization.

Courts around the world aren't recognizing the issue. Children are influencing court decisions after being manipulated by one parent, then leaving the other parent feeling abandoned.

Michael Peterson, Plano father of Katie and Emma, said he has been a victim of this growing dilemma.

After a custody battle in March 2005 didn't go the way his ex-wife, Tedra Erickson, intended, the story began.

Collin County Judge Curt Henderson ruled Peterson and Erickson were required to meet at the Plano police station to exchange the children.

In April, Peterson went to meet his girls, and they never showed.

After a year of no word where his children were, Peterson hired Private Investigator Phillip Cline.

In September 2006, Cline located his girls in Tralee, Ireland, a remote town of 2,500. They were living with Erickson and her mother Kay.

It finally became Peterson's time to see his girls.

Peterson said a trial took place in Ireland under the rules of the Hague Child Abduction Convention. Those rules help prevent international child abduction and provide a secure legal framework for cross-border contact among children and their parents when families separate.

He said a psychologist interviewed Katie and Emma together for 45 minutes.

“Through testimony, both girls said there was nothing in the United States they ever liked,” Peterson said.

He had one afternoon alone with his children in the foreign town of Tralee.

“They were both acting defiant,” Peterson said. “My oldest, Katie, was very angry at me, saying that I was terrible and had done everything bad in the world.”

Peterson said he attempted to buy Emma an iPod, and she wouldn’t accept anything from him.

“It was terribly hard to hear,” Peterson said. “They told me they hate me and never wanted to see me again. Tedra told them lies and bad-mouthed me.”

Peterson was left with a difficult decision. He said he didn’t want to force the girls to be miserable so he sent them home.

Erickson was unavailable for comment.

His one afternoon alone with his girls was ruined.

“It breaks my heart,” Peterson said. “All I wanted to do was take them away with me.”

Peterson came back to Plano, where he awaited the judge’s decision to send his children back under the Hague Convention.

Peterson said the judge’s ruling was shocking. The judge said his children seemed settled in Ireland, so he wasn’t going to force them to leave.

“They don’t believe in parental alienation,” Peterson said. “They wouldn’t even let us bring it up in court. What Tedra has done is illegal.”

A Collin County grand jury indicted Erickson and her mother on Interference with Child Custody, a state-jail felony.

Now, Peterson’s only hope to see his girls is through extradition.

Cline said out of 16 years as a child rescue investigator, this is one of the most aggressive cases of parental alienation he has seen.

“I bring kids back from all over the world,” Cline said. “In this case, these children are going to need extreme psycho-therapy. I believe the children will come back to their father, but it won’t be kisses and roses. It will be a long, hard road for the entire family.”

**Dr. Richard Warshack, author of “Divorce Poison Protecting the Parent-Child Relationship,” a best-selling book on parental alienation, said in most abduction cases children are easily convinced the other parent is a bad person to be around.**

“It can happen very quickly, and it’s very distressing,” said Warshack, who is also a clinical professor at University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center. “Families need a psychologist to heal the damaged relationship.”

He said parents go to many lengths to undermine a child’s love and respect toward another parent. He said the “favorite” parent lies and exaggerates and speaks badly about the “rejected” parent.

“I’ve seen children grow up and be depressed as a result of parental alienation,” Warshack said. “They feel used by the parent they favored, but also angry with the parent they rejected because they think they didn’t try hard enough.”

In most cases the parent that was favored tells the children the other parent doesn’t want to see them anymore.

“I want my girls back,” Peterson said. “I’ve looked into intense therapy. It’s going to be hard on the kids and tough on me.”

Peterson said he is frustrated with the amount of time it is taking to have Erickson and her mother extradited and his children’s safe return home. He said he is unsure if Ireland will fight extradition.

“I know if I would have done the same thing, being a male, I would have been brought back a long time ago,” Peterson said.

Curtis Howard, Collin County assistant district attorney, said his side of the paperwork to complete the extradition process is complete and he is waiting on the Department of Justice and the State Department to do final approval. He said he is unsure what the status is in Ireland.

“It’s hard to tell when they will be extradited,” Howard said. “I’m hoping it will happen in the next couple of weeks.”

Cline said there have been some communication errors between Collin County and the federal government.

“This has been unusually long,” Cline said. “They are working very hard, but there has been a lot of confusion on statute.”

Jeff Rich, Plano Police detective who helped locate the children, said this case isn’t over.

“My goal is to make sure the children are safe,” Rich said. “We want the offenders brought to justice. We are working toward extradition, but at this point it is out of our hands.”

Peterson said he is surprised more charges have not been filed on Erickson. He said she forged documents in order to take the girls out of the country.

“Kidnapping is exactly what it is,” Peterson said. “The D.A. should indict her on everything

under the sun.”

Rich said indictments are a matter of the elements of the offense.

“We fit the offense for the crime committed,” Rich said. “Interference with Child Custody is the crime that occurred.”

Howard said Erickson will be extradited on the single criminal charge. He said any federal crimes she committed are out of the state’s hands.

Cline said he has seen courts up charges when parents run away despite a court order.

“I would not be surprised if Howard ups the charges,” Cline said. “This is really egregious what this mother has done. She has poisoned the brains of her kids.”

Cline described parental alienation as an epidemic.

“It’s time to start sending a message,” Cline said. “You do it  you’ll go to jail.”

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