

advice

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'My daughter believes the divorce is all my fault, and she believes that her daddy lies," says a Nassau County father who divorced two years ago. "She believes," he adds, his voice cracking with anguish, "that I left her and her mother because I don't want to provide for them."

None of these things is true, says the man, who didn't want his name used, but he says his ex-wife often makes disparaging remarks about him to their child in order to deliberately turn the preschooler against him.

Although it places children's emotional welfare at risk, bad-mouthing ex-spouses in front of them is not uncommon in acrimonious divorce cases. But all too often, even long after custodial, financial and other issues have been legally resolved, unresolved bitterness between the spouses continues, with the children used as pawns.

"A parent may expose a child to certain papers that are put forth in a lawsuit to have the child see things," says Sari Friedman, a matrimony and family law attorney with a practice in Garden City. A custodial mother may repeatedly cry poverty to her children, pointing to their father as the culprit, or a father might make statements such as, "If your mother hadn't wanted to divorce me, we would all be happy."

Don't bad-mouth your ex

"He says your mom is a jerk, she says your dad never pays . . . whatever negative things you can think of that can be said are said, but it's extremely important not to bad-mouth each other," says Jeannette Lofas, founder of the Stepfamily Foundation based in Sag Harbor and

Manhattan. "The child is half the mother and half the father," so if negative things are said about one parent, the child will think a part of herself incorporates those horrible qualities as well.

As Locust Valley clinical psychologist Fran Praver sums it up, parent bashing "unsettles the child." It frequently causes confusion, inner conflict and loyalty issues that the child may internalize as he develops.

And sometimes, because children are vulnerable and susceptible to believing all sorts of things parents say to them, a contentious ex can elevate hostilities to another level by deliberately and systematically programming the child against the other parent, to the point where the child may no longer even want to see the denigrated parent. The buzzword for this is PAS, or Parental Alienation Syndrome.

The term was coined in the mid-1980s by psychiatrist Rich-

ard Gardner, who wrote extensively about divorce, created a highly regarded board game for children in therapy and testified in hundreds of child custody

FOR MORE INFO

- Sources for more about Parental Alienation Syndrome or father's rights in custody and divorce cases:
- "Divorce Poison: Protecting the Parent-Child Bond from a Vindictive Ex" by Richard Warshak (Regan Books)
- "A Kidnapped Mind: A Mother's Heartbreaking Story of Parental Alienation Syndrome" by Pamela Richardson (Dundurn Press)
- "Children Held Hostage" by Stanley S. Clawar and Brynne Valerie Rivlin (American Bar Association)
- National Congress for Fathers & Children (nfc.net)
- American Coalition for Fathers and Children (acfc.org)

cases before his death in 2003.

At its most basic level, the syndrome can be explained as brainwashing. At its most extreme, it can include one parent falsely accusing the other of sexually abusing the child and trying to convince the child that it happened. But PAS is not recognized as a disorder by the American Psychiatric Association; it is not listed in the current edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, says a psychiatric association spokeswoman. And critics point out that Gardner's syndrome was not based on standard scientific research.

Besides its not being a standard diagnosis, it's difficult to prove, according to Daniel P. Kremin, a clinical and forensic psychologist with a private practice in Westbury. Kremin also serves as a Nassau County Supreme and Family Court parent coordinator, where he works on conflict resolution and media-

tion of highly litigious cases involving divorce and custody issues.

"In New York, not all judges and courts recognize PAS *per se*," says Friedman, "but whether you put the formal label on it —

BASHING CAN BACKFIRE

Parental Alienation Syndrome is not recognized by all courts as a bona fide diagnosis. But a word of caution to potential ex-spouse bashers:

In certain legal cases, a degree of alienation has been proven so detrimental to the child's emotional and developmental well-being that judges have removed the child from the custodial parent's care. A child then can end up either in foster care or in full custody of the very parent the child was manipulated into disliking.



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KATTI GRAY

Looking heavenward for answers

The war between humankind and the heavenlies was weighed, as I grew up awash in Southern lore, on the oddest of scales and often in relation to the weather. If it rained while the sun was shining, which is common in the Mississippi delta, my playmates and I took to echoing what adults half-jokingly muttered about this seeming incongruity.

"The devil's beating his wife," we chanted, mocking the grown-ups. We ducked into a dry spot until the shower passed. Some of us kids hadn't the sense or daring to challenge this adult idea of a woman-battering Satan who would interrupt a sunny day, teasing us with his power.

If, in our small minds, we wondered whether this fabrication was intentional, we did not express those doubts aloud. As much as the weather is a cosmic mystery, it also can be charted scientifically, which the most precocious among us knew already, even if we deferred to a grown-up's fiction about cause and effect.

Likewise, when there was an explosion of lightning and thunder alone, with nary a droplet of precipitation — also common to the delta — the adults dispatched their pseudo-science. Everything electrical had to be switched off, for fear a house was a lightning rod to be struck and set afire by a God who loved and punished.

"Sit down and be quiet," the adults demanded. "God's doing God's business." And we complied, fearing the Almighty and, more than that, perhaps, God-fearing grown-ups.

The other day, the Rev. Ray Andrew Giddings, my friend and self-appointed human weather vane, cell-phoned me on his bus trip from Washington, D.C., where the temperature was an unseemly 75 degrees, back to his home in Brooklyn, where cherry blossom trees were freakishly in full bloom. This was not supposed to be happening in what is supposed to be the dead of January, he said, pointing out the obvious.

"Girl, I'm going to pack my stuff and get out of New York. If I move to a better place, I can get my act together. I want to be ready when Jesus comes."

The good preacher was all but yelling at me, what with the weather carrying on uncharacteristically. He was

Parental Alienation Syndrome — or say this parent is trying to turn my child against me, in my viewpoint, we are talking about the same thing."

Smear the ex, smear the kids

Kremin agrees. Whether it is "officially" recognized as a syndrome or not, a tactical smear campaign set up by one parent against the other "is detrimental to children and a form of emotional abuse," he says. But it's not only abusive to the child; the parent on the receiving end of the alienation suffers as well. Mothers are more likely to have primary custody, and Gardner's statistics showed that the majority of PAS occurrences were initiated by mothers, says Jayne Major, founder of Breakthrough Parenting Services Inc., a Los Angeles-based nonprofit family service agency. So, it is often, although not exclusively, fathers who suffer this abuse.

"I took my ex-wife to family court," says a Long Island father of three who also requested anonymity for fear of retribution from her. "I had standard visitation, every other week. On paper, everything looked great, but I wasn't seeing my kids." He

says his wife had launched into a premeditated effort to deny him a relationship with his children by not only saying negative things about his character in front of them, but by not giving him access to the children, even when he had legal visitation. "The kids just weren't available. If I went to school functions, she'd say, 'Stay away from the kids.' She repeatedly called the police on me. I couldn't believe this was the same person I walked down the aisle with!"

A 10-year court battle ensued, but now the children are adults, and the damage has been done, he says sadly. Mailed birthday cards are returned unopened, phone messages are ignored, and he has no relationship with them.

But this does not have to be the outcome when parental alienation comes into play.

"If you are not getting to see your kids, do something about it — fast," attorney Friedman says. "That's a cancer that only gets worse. The longer you allow a period of estrangement with your kids, the harder it is to create reconciliation. . . . So if your visitation is being interfered with, get into court right away. Even if you can't afford a lawyer, go to

Family Court and file a petition yourself."

But she also offers this: "Keep your relationship with your child so that they are not vulnerable to that; make sure your kids can't wait to see you." In other words, your children will be less prone to believing bad things about you if you've fostered a happy, trusting, communicative relationship with them.

And for those who recognize that they may be alienating their

kids from their other parent, even unintentionally, psychologist Praver pleads to put the children first. "Really love your children. Their needs come ahead of yours, and you have to go somewhere else to get your needs taken care of. If you feel hurt, betrayed, rejected, stressed, get help," but don't use your children to vent your frustrations.

"If parents only loved their children as much as they hated their ex spouses, this wouldn't go on," Friedman says.

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. . . children are the ones
who suffer the most