

perspective

Recognizing parental alienation syndrome

By **Mary Winter**

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The 46-year-old Denver father has seen his two daughters only a handful of times in the past five years, never without a mental health therapist in the room and rarely without a fight from the girls.

The father, a disabled military veteran who divorced the girls' mother in 2002, says he desperately wants a relationship with his daughters, now 14 and 15, but that his ex-wife has brainwashed the girls to hate and fear him. He says she has thrown up every roadblock at her disposal to isolate them from him — including accusing him of sexual abuse.

His attorney believes the girls are the victims of parental alienation syndrome, often described as a "campaign of denigration" by one parent against the other, a term currently under heavy discussion in mental health circles.

In 2005, when the girls were 9 and 10, they testified in a Jefferson County courtroom that their father hit them, made them sit between his legs and watch pornographic movies, washed his genitals in front of the younger girl and once touched her inappropriately. The girls told the judge they hated their father. The 10-year-old said she had come to court "because I want a divorce from him." The younger one, shown a photo in which she appeared to be having a good time with her dad, told the judge she was "smiling on the outside but frowning on the inside."

The judge later called the girls' testimony "prepared and rehearsed," but added he believed they were sincerely afraid of their father.

The father, a former Denver sheriff's deputy, denied all allegations of sexual misconduct, and two social services investigations and Adams County police failed to find evidence to support the charges.

Where his children are concerned, the Lakewood dad says the courts have utterly failed him. He was awarded joint custody in Texas in 2002, but he called the order a "joke" because no one enforced it.

The mother has walled the girls off from him and his side of the family, he contends. She has routinely flouted visitation orders, cut off his phone calls and birthday cards to them, and told them repeated lies about him, poisoning their relationship, he said.

As long as the girls continue to say they fear their dad and that he physically abuses them, no judge will increase his parenting time, let alone give him custody.

In Jefferson County in 2006, a judge jailed the mother for three days for failing to bring the girls to supervised visits with their dad. But when visits resumed two years ago, the girls hid in the bathroom. The oldest girl threatened suicide if she had to continue seeing him. The dad has not seen them since.

He takes anti-depressants and pain medication for a back injury. He sees a psychologist and started going to church with his mother, hoping it will erase his anger and the "feeling that I have been abandoned by God." He says he can only hope the girls will look him up someday when they are adults.

Arguments against "trivial"

Attorney Brett Martin, whose Westminster practice specializes in helping fathers win child custody cases, calls the Lakewood father's situation an extreme but "classic" case of parental alienation.

Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is being considered for inclusion in the fifth edition of the 2012 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. The DSM, updated every decade or so, is therapists' official catalog of mental disorders.

But that possible inclusion is controversial. Proponents are led by Vanderbilt University

psychiatrist William Bernet, who has said that PAS "causes horrible outcomes for children All the arguments I've heard against it are trivial."

Bernet has written that the addition to the DSM "would spur insurance coverage, stimulate more systematic research, lend credence to charge of parental alienation in court, and raise the odds that children would get timely treatment."

But many psychiatrists are reluctant to make it an official disorder. They argue the PAS label needlessly pathologizes children. "I really get concerned about spreading the definition of mental illness too wide," Elissa Benedek, past president of the American Psychiatric Association (APA), told US News & World Report last year. Some women's groups have also pronounced PAS bogus, calling it a false accusation made by abusive fathers against mothers in an unscrupulous effort to deflect attention away from them and onto the mothers.

Yet studies documenting PAS's long-term damage make it clear it belongs in this all-important catalog of officially recognized mental disorders.

Courts also need to take parental alienation more seriously, and adding it to the weighty DSM can only increase its importance in judges' eyes.

"If you had any idea of the number of parents who come into my office and just sob," said Phillip Hendrix, who runs Covenant Counselors, a family therapy practice in Castle Rock. "When

you look at the emotional damage done to children [by alienation], it's really striking to me that the APA doesn't consider PAS valid."

A child living in such an atmosphere "suffers tremendously," writes Reena Sommer, an authority on PAS. Such children "are made to feel their love and attachment for one parent is contingent on their abandoning the other."

Women used to be thought of as the main perpetrators of parental alienation, but no longer. Fifty percent are men, said Judith Ray, a licensed family therapist in Colorado Springs. Those men tend to be narcissistic, characterized by a sense of entitlement, arrogance and low empathy. Female alienators often have borderline personalities, marked by insecurity, neediness, a strong fear of abandonment and chronic emptiness.

Psychologists says alienation occurs on a continuum: mild is when the parent is ignorant of what he's doing and will quit bad-mouthing the other parent when informed of how it hurts the child. A moderately alienating parent will ask the child to spy on the other parent and treat him or her like an adversary. Severe alienators are obsessive. Their hatred for their ex-spouse is stronger than their instinct to protect their children, said Ray.

Experts agree alienation robs children of more than a parent. "They lose half their heritage," said Ray. "They lose their grandparents, they lose their aunts and uncles, they lose their cousins."

In cases of severe alienation, the broken bond is usually permanent, she said.

Keep both parents involved

Local family therapists and mediators say courts are slow to recognize parental alienation.

"The majority of judges may acknowledge alienating behavior, but they don't seem to appreciate that it can be serious," said Martin. Courts, he said, still hew to the "tender years" doctrine that says a mother's care is best for young children, and that often gives mothers an unfair edge and marginalizes fathers in custody cases, Martin believes.

Martin presses his clients to stay involved in their children's lives, especially in school, day care and medical matters. "Changes are happening, but a dad who wants to stay involved has a difficult battle. Fathers have to prove themselves."

Local experts also suggest that in a perfect world, custody cases would not be decided in the current court system because it is adversarial: the focus is on determining a winner and a loser rather than the best interests of the child.

Martin's preferred system: one in which "kids are presumed to have *both* parents raising them."

The key to eradicating PAS is education, said Ray. "To save the children, we need to first educate the courts."

Parental alienation syndrome deserves a place in the DSM. But unlike post-traumatic stress disorder — which took years to recognize as a potentially debilitating illness — let's do it sooner rather than later.

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