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STEPFAMILY ADVICE



Stepfamily advice

Parental Alienation Syndrome: Two Views

Dear Lisa:

I'm writing in response to your column about the girl, Molly, whose mother was alienating her from her dad and stepmom.

If I were the 'alienated' parent, I would get my lawyer to petition the court to have the bad-mouthing parent psychiatrically evaluated and this horrible behavior cease and desist. If the parent is causing the hatefulness and disrespect, it is not in the best interest of the child and the parent doing this should lose custody and have supervised visitation. The child can be worked with, rehabilitated and communicated with -explaining this behavior is unacceptable and there are consequences for such bad behavior.

I am not divorced but I am sick of outrageous, immature behavior of divorced parents. A good majority of the ones I know are selfish and do not project long term how disastrous and damaging their behavior is to their children.

Robin

Dear Lisa:

While your advice column is designed to help stepfamilies, advising second wives to use "parental alienation" with the help of guardians ad litem serves mainly to wrench custody from first wives. Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) has so much anti-woman bias built in, that it could sink a cruise liner filled with the 'mad dad' father's rightsters and the second wives who love them.

PAS has been debunked as junk science by reputable mental health organizations: it's not peer reviewed; it's not science; and it's a legal tool used by family law attorneys to wrench custody from mothers. While both mothers and fathers are known to engage in alienating behaviors, control-freak fathers are well-known in family law circles to use PAS for tactical purposes in contested custody situations.

PHILLIPS, LERNER, LAUZON, & JAMRA, LLP

Since Sally's stepdaughter is 11 years old, she probably has other things to do in her life than visit with a vindictive second wife, who most likely doesn't want her around in the first place. Notice that Sally's husband didn't write the letter; she did.

Furthermore, pre-teen and teenage children, who morph their focus from their parents as their primary relationship to their peers, bear the burden of joint custody visitation orders of having to miss out on social functions and other interests in order to comply with the courts. Think about it: If you were a teen, would it be in your best interest to miss out on a sleepover with your friends or, say, a sporting event, in order to comply with a court ordered visitation with a cranky stepmother and a dad who in most circumstances is likely to relegate parenting to her?

Vicki Pierce

Dear Vicki and Robin:

Thanks for your responses to my column about Molly and her difficult situation. Because I received yours and other responses to my column, I'd like to provide some additional information and resources about this topic.

Says Stacy D. Phillips, a family law attorney in Los Angeles and co-author of "Divorce: It's all About Control: How to Win the Emotional, Psychological and Legal Wars," says mothers are most likely to alienate their ex-spouses (not the other way around, although it does happen).

And like the attorney I quoted in my column, she says it's important to get the courts involved.

"When you have an alienating parent, time is not on your side. You need to nip it in the bud very quickly, because it may be too late," she says.

If "alienated" parents can't find ways to work with their ex-spouses, they need to seek a court order. Depending on the situation, they can try to increase their custody time, get monitored visitation or permission to tape conversations with ex-spouses. In an extreme situation, they may try to gain custody of the child, Phillips says.

A number of books address this topic. They include: "Divorce Poison" by Richard A. Worshak; "Through The Eyes of Children" by Janet Johnston, and "Ex-Etiquette For Parents" by Jann Blackstone-Ford.

In my own experience, I have seen many divorced dads suffer as a result of the fact that their ex-wife doesn't want a child to have contact with the dad. I do believe this is a very real problem that carries terrible consequences for children.

Lisa