

Men'sHealth

WHAT MATTERS TO MEN®

8  
Secrets of  
Super-Successful  
Fatherhood

# BEST LIFE

STAY  
YOUNG,  
RETIRE  
RICH

Best New Investments

The Fastest Way  
to Lose Weight

SMART NEW  
RAIN BOOSTERS

The Sexually  
Satisfied Wife

Must-Have Moves, p.28

Be a (Much)  
Better Man

5 Rules for Living the Best Life

BUILD  
WEALTH  
FOR YOUR  
FAMILY

19 Essential  
Guy Skills  
Every Man  
Must Know

The Gracie  
Ultimate-  
Fighter  
Diet

45 New  
Ideas  
That Will  
Change  
Your Life  
Forever!

X-MEN 3'S  
JAMES  
MARSDEN:  
"Before  
parenthood, I  
was just going  
through the  
motions"

JUNE 2006

DISPLAY UNTIL JUNE 27, 2006

\$4.99US \$6.50CAN



06>

BestLifeOnline.com



# LOST CHILDREN

An insidious brainwashing can destroy the once-close relationships of children and their divorced dads.

Some psychologists call it "Parental Alienation Syndrome." Fathers call it their worst nightmare

BY JOHN SEDGWICK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
JULIA FULLERTON-BATTEN



A young girl with long, dark hair in two braids, wearing a purple dress with white lace trim, is seen from behind. She is standing in front of a large chalkboard, writing the phrase "I hate daddy" repeatedly in white chalk. The phrase is written in a cursive, childlike script across several lines. She is holding a piece of white chalk in her right hand, which is raised towards the board. The background is dark, and the lighting is focused on the girl and the chalkboard.





## FATHERHOOD SPECIAL

**J**eff Opperman, a 49-year-old corporate-communications officer in Seymour, Connecticut, got the first gut-churning clue of how ruinous his divorce was going to be to his relationship with his younger son the night it became clear he and his wife, Anne, had to part.

They'd been married for 17 years, but it hadn't been going well. "We were fighting and drifting apart," says Opperman, "and the more we fought, the more we drifted apart, and the more we drifted apart, the more we fought." They decided to hold off telling Alec, just 11, until he'd finished camp that summer. But the marriage was so rocky that Jeff and Anne arrived in separate cars to take him home, leaving it to Alec to choose

which car to ride home in. He picked his mother's—a fateful choice, as things turned out. "God knows what she said to him in that car for an hour and a half," Opperman says.

The next night, when he and Anne "got into it" in their bedroom, she burst out the door and raced down to Alec's room, where she yelled, Opperman recalls, "the most horrid, disgraceful things, calling me a liar, a cheat, a son of a bitch, just everything." Tears streamed down Alec's reddened face, but he didn't try to defend his dad. Instead, to Opperman's astonishment, he started to chime in, feebly parroting some of his mother's charges, even though he'd always been close to his father. When Opperman tried to give the boy a reassuring hug, Anne abruptly stepped between them and, claiming that Jeff was going to hurt the boy, threatened to call the police if he came any closer. Opperman backed off, not wanting to risk a bigger scene in front of his son. "Alec cried his eyes out," Opperman recalls. "Just cried and cried."

That was 6 years ago, but it established the dynamic by which Jeff became the designated ogre parent and Alec became Anne's exclusive possession. Jeff acknowledges that he hadn't been a perfect husband. "When a marriage breaks down, both parties are at fault, and ours was no different," he says. But regardless of who was responsible for the divorce, Jeff feels his ex should have protected Alec from the negative aspects of the relationship. Instead, he claims, she burdened their son with her pain and sense of betrayal—and Alec responded by aligning himself fully with his mother and emotionally cutting off his dad.

Although Opperman was granted joint custody and lives just 10 minutes away, he has since seen his son only for the briefest intervals—despite repeatedly taking his ex to court over custody violations. "The court adopts this tough-talking John Wayne attitude," Opperman

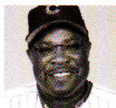


recounts. "'You will take the child to counseling. You will allow the child to maintain relations with the father. You will, you will, you will.' But my ex doesn't do any of it—and nothing happens." Despite all Opperman's efforts, the court has been both reluctant to force Alec to spend time with a father he wants nothing to do with and unwilling to compel Alec's mother by threat of jail time.

All this leaves Opperman out in the cold. His Christmas and birthday presents to Alec go unacknowledged. When Opperman calls, Alec will occasionally pick up, but when he hears that it's his father on the line, he won't speak. All Jeff hears is Alec's breath in the receiver before he sets the phone down. Last summer, Opperman came to the house to pick up his older son, Alec's brother. There were lights on in Alec's bedroom, and Opperman could see the back of Alec's head as he stared at a computer screen. Jeff honked the horn, hoping to get

### HOW MY DAD DID IT

#### DUSTY BAKER *Manager, Chicago Cubs*



One time, I asked my dad for a 10-speed bike. He told me, "You don't need all those speeds." So he went to the dump, got some 10-speed handlebars, and put 'em on my bike. That was my 10-speed. A lot of the rules I live by are because of my dad. He was my Little League coach, and he was the disciplinarian for the whole neighborhood. And if he disciplined someone, the parents would thank him. He was strict and firm but always fair. My dad cut me in Little League three times. When I was 10, I tried to quit, so he told me, "No son of mine is gonna quit nothing." And that's how I feel to this day. He didn't play no quittin', and he didn't play no whinin'. If I said my arm or knee hurt, he'd tell me, "Go get the Ex-Lax." So to this day, I don't like whinin', and I don't like chocolate.



Alec's attention. "I was sure he could hear me," Jeff recalls. "But Alec never even turned his head."

Opperman's desperation is hardly unique. About 40 percent of children living with their mothers don't see their fathers so much as once a year. Even allowing for fathers who are at war, in prison, or otherwise unavailable, statistics like that force the question: Are there really that many men out there who simply don't care about their kids and vice versa? Or is something more sinister at work?

## WHY FATHERS GET TURNED AWAY

Nightmarish as the tale of Alec's transformation may sound, it is not an entirely uncommon experience for divorced parents to witness this change in their children, and a new term is entering the psychiatric lexicon to describe it: Parental Alienation Syndrome, or PAS. "I see it all the time," says Lynn McNeese Swank, a Jonesboro, Georgia, lawyer specializing in custody issues. "A child is manipulated by one parent or the other on a subconscious basis—the survival level, really—fundamentally altering his understanding of reality. It can take years to undo, if it ever is at all."

And the damage can be extensive. Now 43, Peter G., of Houston, says he's still not over the fact that his mother alienated him from his father; it created overwhelming "trust issues" that have kept him from forming any serious romantic attachments. The alienation started abruptly one afternoon, when he was 13. His mother, who'd won sole custody of all eight children, herded the kids into her psychotherapist's office and, apparently with the therapist's blessing, had each one complete the sentence: "I hate my dad because . . ." Peter could tell that his mother had coached some of the children on what to say because they echoed her own words about how their father had "abandoned" the family and was, as she often implied, a "no-good philandering bastard" besides. But Peter clung to the memories of happy days he'd spent with his father working on the family car. He fled the room in tears along with another brother who felt the same way. And that created a permanent family divide between the kids who followed Mom and the two outcasts who still felt some sympathy for Dad. "My mom was the saint, and my dad was the devil," Peter says. "That was her line. And if I didn't agree with that, then obviously I had 'unresolved issues.'"

The pressure from his mother and siblings to turn against his father was unrelenting. "Every day was a battle," Peter recalls. "I felt like a soldier going back and back and back to a war that never ends." In his despair, he turned to drugs and fell in with the "wrong people." The father didn't respond well to this merciless ostracization campaign against him, either. He suffered a nervous breakdown—seemingly confirming his deficiency as a parent. Later, Peter discovered that, while his father had indeed been unfaithful, his mother was the far more shameless philanderer, having had a number of wildly inappropriate affairs. "That's when I realized my mom was total bullshit. She ran me out of the family to make sure her secrets got

# ALIENATION ALERT

Some warnings signs your ex may be turning the kids against you

Your child starts to talk about you and your ex in black-and-white terms. He might say, "You always try to embarrass me. Mom would never do that."

Your kid refers to the divorce as "when you left us," which means he may be parroting your ex-wife's emotions and even her words. Another: "You're trying to buy my love with toys."

You taught your son to play soccer, but he quits. If this is part of a pattern, it may indicate he's rejecting things associated with you.

He starts calling you by your first name, indicating that you no longer warrant the respect due a parent.

While looking at a happy father-child photograph, your kid says, "I was smiling because you told me to." His mother could be reinterpreting old memories for him.

kept." Concludes Peter: "Basically, I felt I had no parents at all. Which one could I trust?"

That, of course, is the cruelty of parental alienation. It's *Sophie's Choice* in reverse: A child has to choose between his parents, consigning one or the other to emotional oblivion. "A child shouldn't have to choose," says another grown-up PAS child, 27-year-old Christine L., showing a flash of anger in discussing what must have been a tortured childhood. In her case, it was her dad who had custody and who pushed her mother completely out of their children's lives. "It's so selfish on the part of the alienating parent. It helps him deal with the pain, but it just burdens the child with it," says Christine.

## EMOTIONAL EXILE AND LEGAL LIMBO

Explosive as PAS is, the phenomenon continues to fly largely below the radar, until a high-profile case kicks it into public awareness, as happened recently when newspapers reported that actor Alec Baldwin accused his ex, Kim Basinger, of turning their 10-year-old daughter Ireland against him.

Strictly speaking, PAS occurs when impressionable young children join forces with one parent against the other, often attended by the "in" parent's deliberate thwarting of any contact with the children by the "out" one, no matter what the courts might officially require in terms of custody or visitation. Classically, the alienation is perpetrated by the wife against the husband, although both parents are fully capable of it if they are sufficiently desperate—and venomous. "It's a terrible act of cruelty," says clinical psychologist Richard A. Warshak, Ph.D., a leading scholar of the disorder who has written a book, *Divorce Poison*, describing the condition of PAS. To him, the behavior is reminiscent of the brainwashing by religious cults but with this difference: Cults affect a relatively small number of Americans. With close to half of all marriages ending in divorce and a vast majority of them involving children, the number of children at risk for PAS, he says, runs well into the millions.

"Whatever their intentions, these parents are stealing their children's souls," Warshak contends. "They are rendering them incapable



# It's *Sophie's Choice* in reverse: A child has to choose . . . between parents, consigning one to emotional oblivion.

of receiving love from the people who have the most love to give them.” Some of the alienating behavior is simply petty, like deriding an ex-husband’s cooking skills or housekeeping so the children will think less of him; or it can be insidious, like encouraging the children to call the alienated father by his first name, diminishing his stature.

Some of the alienating techniques are simple propaganda, similar to what combatants use in wartime, Warshak says. “You repeat negative messages until they are so deeply imbedded in memory, the child doesn’t really know how he’s come to know them.” One father saw his youngest daughter, just 8, at a meeting attended by an array of attorneys and psychologists to appraise their relationship, write on a whiteboard, “Dad, you are an asshole.” Only she spelled the word “asshole,” since she was obviously unfamiliar with the term. For good measure, the girl added, “And you’re a suck-up,” another word that was not likely part of her vocabulary. She wrapped up with a strangely adult send-off: “I never want to see you again.”

Alienating parents have been known to clip the heads off their ex-spouses’ photos in family albums, deliberately lose their letters or telephone messages, treat them like nonpeople at events like a kid’s soccer game, or, in one case, mount a photograph of the ex on a dartboard for family target practice. And it is not just the father who is alienated. Everything about him can be relegated to the discard pile—his side of the family, his associations, his friends, even the family dog, if it is considered to have been primarily his. “It’s tribal warfare,” says Warshak. “Anything associated with the alienated parent is tainted and has to be rejected.” McNeese Swank said one mother insisted that her son change his clothes before he visited his dad’s house and then leave those garments there, lest they somehow contaminate her own house if he were to bring them back.

Some of the alienating verbiage is more like a political attack ad that, Warshak says, “draws attention to the problems of your opponent, while talking only positively about yourself.” A mother might be braiding her daughter’s hair, he says, and ask pointedly, “Does Daddy do that for you?” The implication, of course, is that Daddy doesn’t—because he doesn’t care.

Fathers used to playing the role of disciplinarian can lose points with their young children for encouraging a masculine-style toughness and adherence to rules, and mothers win them for being indulgent and cozy. A wholesaler named Richard Burke lost out to his ex when he insisted that their two children go to a stricter private school than the one attended by their friends. “My wife told them,” he reports,

“‘It’s really a shame that Dad makes you go to that hard school where you have to wear a uniform and do all that homework.’” She also bought them cellphones and in-bedroom satellite TV. Before long, the kids opted out of the school and moved in full-time with Mom. The son was the first to go. When he refused to come out of his mother’s house to go for his usual nights at his father’s, Burke called the police. He showed them the custody agreement and pointed to the calendar. “See? This is my day,” he insisted. But it was no use. “The police didn’t want to get into the middle of it. They said, ‘Yeah, but the kid doesn’t want to go.’ And that was the end of it.” The sister later repeated the same scenario. And the courts offered Burke no support. “They just don’t understand what parental alienation is when they’re looking right at it,” Burke sighs.

“Getting custody is like getting a judgment in small-claims court,” says Reena Sommer, Ph.D., a divorce-and-custody consultant in Galveston, Texas. “You still gotta go collect.” Adds psychotherapist J. Michael Bone, Ph.D., a leading authority on PAS, “Court orders are ignored all the time. When a father objects, a judge will say, ‘What am I supposed to do? Throw the mother in jail?’ You may have to go back multiple times to get visitation rights enforced, and it can take months. By then, the child can be more alienated than ever.”

## THE TOLL ON THE CHILDREN

The legacy of such warfare on the alienated children, Warshak says, is terrible and lasting—depression, low self-esteem, and strained relationships for decades to come.

“Alienated children are like ghosts,” says Timothy Hoffman, Ph.D., a Massachusetts family therapist who has treated many of these kids. “They don’t fully exist, because they are trapped between two adults who are battling to be right. Allegiance, betrayal, deciding whom to believe—it’s a dreadful position for a child to be in.” In later life, Hoffman goes on, these alienated children are likely to struggle to develop trusting relationships, to be emotionally shut down, and to be prone to an identity crisis after ultimately discovering the truth about an alienating parent. “They may find they’ve aligned themselves with a parent who styled himself or herself as the victim but then turns out to be the perpetrator,” says Hoffman. “What a betrayal that can be.”

For the alienated parent, the brutality of the experience is often intensified by the nuclear bomb of custody disputes—a charge of physical or sexual abuse coming straight from the child’s mouth on some witness stand or in a court-appointed therapist’s office. Many PAS



JAY MOHR Actor



My dad’s way of looking at the world always reminds me of that line from *Jerry Maguire*: “My dad worked for the United Way for 36 years! You know what he said when he retired? He said, ‘I wish I’d had a more comfortable chair.’” He was from the generation that just went out there and took their lumps. He was always on business trips or working to provide for the family. In that respect, he showed me how not to deal with the world. In fact, he was pretty aloof, which can come across as “I don’t like you.” But in an ironic way, that actually helped me to be more loving and outgoing with my own kids.



experts agree that the syndrome is sometimes used to cover up real abuse; and because 79 percent of confirmed abuse cases involve a parent as the abuser, the courts have a hard time distinguishing between situations involving actual abuse and allegations that are the result of PAS. But since nothing asserts, or provokes, a child's alienation quite like charges of abuse, they are a regular feature of PAS cases.

"The parent who files the charges is automatically given protection," says Burt W., a 48-year-old chemical engineer from Virginia, whose ex-wife orchestrated his two daughters' claims that he'd molested them in the shower. (The court later ruled there was no evidence to substantiate the claims.) The accuser rarely has to submit to the polygraph tests or psychiatric evaluations that are imposed on the defendant. "But the other person is damaged, isolated, and completely powerless. You want my advice? Learn to manage your anger, or it will eat you alive. Me, I was pumping weights like never before, and I was still driving up to hilltops to scream my lungs out," says Burt.

## THE SUDDEN EXPLOSION OF ALIENATION

It was the psychologist Richard Gardner, M.D., who first identified Parental Alienation Syndrome in 1985 after he began to notice an increase in children of divorce who seemed to have it in for their dads for no good reason. In all but 10 percent of cases, he wrote in 1987, the mother was the alienating parent and the father the "target parent" with the bull's-eye on his back. In his book *Parental Alienation Syndrome and the Differentiation Between Fabricated and Genuine Child Sex Abuse*, Gardner, who died in 2001, attributed the behavior to a combination of maternal entitlement and a custodial privilege that had traditionally won mothers special influence over their children—and thus the means and incentive to turn them against their fathers should that primacy be threatened.

And it was starting to be threatened, for this was the era when custody standards were shifting because of a reappraisal of parental sex roles. The "tender years presumption" by which children had long been routinely awarded to mothers had been evolving since the 1970s into a "best interests of the child presumption" that was more open to giving custody to fathers. The battle for the children was on, and, as Gardner told it, some mothers went ruthlessly on the attack to win over



**SHUT OUT** Enforcing visitation rights can take multiple visits to court. By then, the child can be more alienated than ever.

## HOW TO FIGHT BACK

Once you were close; now your child treats you like a criminal and takes his mother's side in every dispute. It's tempting to fire back at your ex—to tell your side of the story to your child, defend yourself, put the blame where you think it belongs. But that's not going to help—in fact, it will only hurt both your child and your relationship with him. Instead, follow these guidelines.

### MAKE YOUR HOUSE A SAFE HAVEN

Parents who have retained access to their kids have had success by offering their children a sanctuary from the vilification, making it a point never to bad-mouth the other spouse in their child's presence, no matter how much bile is coming from the other side. An alienated father named Kevin Askew maintained that policy, and he could see his son grow more comfortable with him by the hour. "At my house," he says, "my son could be a little boy and just play."

### TALK TO INTERMEDIARIES

Reach out to your children's teachers, religious leaders, or coaches, says attorney Lynn McNeese Swank. "A teacher or someone might be able to tell the kid, 'You know, Dad isn't so bad as you think.'" Fathers we've spoken with have battled the alienation by joining the PTO, coaching the kids' sports teams, or organizing Indian Princess meetings. This also allows you to be around your children's friends, who might decide that Dad is actually kind of cool.

### EXPECT RESPECT

If your child starts calling you by your first name or labeling you in some way, immediately state that such behavior will not be tolerated, and explain that you disapprove of pejorative labels of all sorts.

### BE EMPATHETIC

If your child repeats something negative his mother has said about you, reply that it must be difficult for the child to hear such things and that even parents, when they get angry, say things they shouldn't. Explain that no matter what his mom might say, no one is entirely good or entirely bad. If your ex tells the child a lie about you, simply say, "Mom's mistaken about that."

### DON'T GIVE UP

As painful as the situation may be for you now, children grow up, and one day they'll figure out the truth for themselves. If you withdraw, you lose. Stay involved. J.S.





**LASTING IMPRESSION** Later in life, children who become alienated from their fathers often struggle to develop trusting relationships.

the children they considered rightfully theirs. The mothers drove the anti-Dad messages in deep, turning the children into the chief accusers of the fathers they once loved. But Gardner noted a "rehearsed quality to the speech" and suspiciously adult "phraseology." He noticed that small children might claim Dad "harasses us." But the evidence they gave was often slim. "He always used to say to me, 'Don't interrupt,'" one child complained. Said another: "He always used to speak very loud when he told me to brush my teeth."

While the term was intended to be merely descriptive, the designation Parental Alienation Syndrome soon was seized upon by lawyers as a way for aggrieved dads to fight back. But the designation of PAS is still caught in the crosswinds between psychology and the law, with lawyers eager to make use of a tactic that has such a powerfully effective medical overlay and psychologists reluctant to confer a definitive diagnosis on a fairly blurry cluster of behaviors. "PAS is hard to accept without clear, objective markers," says Robert E. Emery, Ph.D., a psychologist at the University of Virginia who has written

critically of the syndrome. He notes that PAS has not been accepted in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—Fourth Edition* (or *DSM-IV*), the bible of accepted psychiatric disorders.

(Neither have such commonly accepted phenomena as Stockholm Syndrome, for example, in which people held hostage for extended periods come to sympathize with their captors.) Defenders point out that there can be a long lag before new diagnoses are recognized. To Emery, PAS is simply too much in the eye of the beholder. "Expert A will say it is," he says, "but Expert B will say it isn't."

A lot of the dispute is simply over the terminology. Few psychologists doubt that one parent could turn a child against the other if she put her mind to it. "In developmental psychology, we know that kids can be manipulated to hate and fear others," says Warshak. "It's absurd to think that can't happen in a divorce situation." After all, adds Bone, the litigation process encourages it. "The child is already being taught that he has been abandoned by one parent," Bone says. "He is not going to risk being abandoned by the other." So he will exhibit unquestioning loyalty to the



parent who is brainwashing him because the child is terrified of being abandoned again and becoming a virtual orphan. Hence the pathological extremes of love and hate that mark the alienated child, who sees nothing but good in the alienator and nothing but bad in the target parent. And, says McNeese Swank, that fear is likely to be all the stronger if the alienating parent is the mom: "Ninety percent of the time, she's the one thing they have to look to for shelter, sustenance, and support." Indeed, the fear etched on the alienated child's face is one of the hallmarks of the disorder. The Virginia chemical engineer, Burt W., saw the look on one of his daughters when he was finally allowed to see her after the mother had created that elaborate molestation charge against him. Not long before, the girl had performed circus acts with Burt, balancing upside down on his knees on the living-room floor. Now she was, he said, "standoffish, wary, like she was frightened of me."

#### UNDOING THE DAMAGE

Because alienated children aren't allowed to establish a rapport with their noncustodial parent, it can be a stunning surprise to a child to finally encounter the truth about a father who had long been vilified. Edward C., a 49-year-old computer programmer, was so alienated by his wife that she withheld custody of his daughter even from the grave. Dying of cancer, she entrusted their daughter to her aunt as legal guardian and to the in-laws of her son by a previous marriage. Because of everything the mother had told the daughter about her dad, the girl was reluctant to get in touch with him. But on a lark, she sent her dad a Father's Day card and called him 2 months later. Soon thereafter, Edward took her shopping for school clothes and out for an afternoon of horseback riding. "I loved it," the girl told the in-laws, amazed. "He was so nice!" To this day, they remain close. "With my ex-wife, all love was conditional," Edward says. "If my daughter did it the way my ex wanted, she'd love her. If not, she'd rage at her or give her the silent treatment. It was completely controlling."

Happily, as in Edward's case, the alienation can end eventually, although experts say a final reconciliation is far from guaranteed—for the simple reason that the alienating parent cannot keep total mind control over the children forever. They grow up, leave the house where all the secrets are kept, and eventually come to discover the truth. Difficult as it can be, alienated parents need to maintain a positive, welcoming attitude for the day the phone finally rings.

It can be a long, anxious wait. Despite his best efforts to stay in touch with his children, Burke—the wholesaler whose custody agreement the police refused to enforce—hasn't seen his son in 3 years. That left Burke stumped as to how to acknowledge the boy's 18th birthday. In desperation, Burke decided on an extreme measure. He hired a small plane to fly a banner over the school, wishing his son a happy 18th birthday and signed "I LOVE YOU, DAD," all in huge block letters. Through the grapevine, Burke learned that his son's friends thought the banner was "great." And his son?

"I haven't heard a word." ■