

# A Father Fears His Wife Is Turning The Kids Against Him

**DEAR DR. SCANTLING:** *I'm desperate. I'm afraid that my soon-to-be-ex is turning my kids against me and making them*



DR. SANDRA SCANTLING  
INTIMACY, SEX  
& RELATIONSHIP

*think I don't love them. We're in the middle of a nasty custody battle, and I know that it would be better for the kids if they lived with me. My daughter is 9, and my son is 11. My wife has a new boyfriend who*

*has already moved into the house that I built! Her new lover is taking my kids to their sports events, and the kids ignore me when I'm there. Whenever I call, she makes some excuse for the kids not to come to the phone. . . . They're in the tub, or watching TV, or asleep. I'm worried that they're being brainwashed against me. I've read about the Parental Alienation Syndrome, and I think it may be going on. Do you know anything about it? I have a lawyer and a therapist, but I'm getting different advice from both of them. I want what is best for my kids, but I don't want*

*to lose them!*

— Michael, Collinsville

**DEAR MICHAEL:** I'm not a specialist in treating children, but I frequently work with partners involved in custody "battles," aptly labeled because they become a mess for everyone involved — especially the children who are caught in the line of fire.

Parental Alienation Syndrome, or PAS, was coined by Dr. Richard Gardner more than two decades ago, as a cluster of symptoms seen in children going through custody disputes who reject one parent because of strong negative claims made by the other parent.

There are questions whether parental alienation is an actual "syndrome" in the formal medical sense, but there is no question that alienation exists — from mild to severe. There are multiple causes for claims of PAS, including "brainwashing" by the aligned parent or because the rejected parent needs someone to blame for their poor relationship with their children.

Shifts in parent-child alignments are common during custody litigation. Whether this requires professional interven-

tion depends upon a variety of factors, including the degree of maturity of the children, the solidity of the pre-divorce attachment to the parents and the degree of animosity between the warring couple.

Children struggle to make sense of the senseless. Parents, who once loved each other, now hate each other. "How can this be?" they wonder. They long to trust what they are told by their mom or dad, but are confused and frightened when stories conflict. Step-siblings, extended families, and new love interests may all take sides in the vilification process.

Parental denigration or disenfranchisement can be subtle or overt — "Call me if there are any problems when you're with dad, honey" a parent may "harmlessly" instruct. Or there may be numerous calls during the other parent's visitation to "check" on them, suggesting they are in less than competent care. Parents may even accuse the other of abuse, when it is unfounded. Making disparaging remarks or encouraging your children to spy on the other parent is a set up for alienation. Asking a child to be the messenger or routinely

pumping them for information about "what's going on at mommy or daddy's house" is unacceptable. These behaviors only serve to weaken a child's sense of safety, security and trust in their caretakers.

So don't rush to judgment, Michael. Not all children who show parental preference are the product of parental alienation. Any parent who has been in your shoes empathizes with your pain and anxiety. When a child "chooses" the other parent, it's hard not to feel deficient, humiliated and unloved. This wound is often expressed through rage and an even more determined embattled posture. It feels like you're literally fighting for your life.

In your case, and in all cases, before there is a determination of PAS, the entire family picture must be evaluated by a competent licensed professional you trust. If you don't feel comfortable with the legal or mental health professionals you have at this time, find another team. Professionals may become wedded to a particular viewpoint and unintentionally fuel alienation. Agendas drive perspective. In the midst of polarization and heated allegations, parties may focus on

the "win" — but when a child loses, no one wins.

We need the wisdom of King Solomon to let go when we love. Find the courage to give up the battle and win the bigger prize — the health and happiness of your children. Tell your children that you are ending the legal fight because you love them. (It would be best if you could tell them this in the company of their mother). That you understand they love both of you. Tell them that you wish you could be with them more, but that it isn't possible right now. That you feel sad, but will stay involved in their lives. Invite them to call or write whenever they would like — and that you will always be their dad and mom.

Maintaining parental communication is essential, but difficult in acrimonious highly conflicted relationships. In your therapy sessions, set up protocols for sharing information in writing or in log books that "connect" households while respecting their separate boundaries. Specify parameters for what is to be communicated and what is not. Agree on methods to monitor compliance and achieve cooperative resolutions.

Children may remove themselves from the storm of controversy to stay afloat in a capsizing vessel by aligning with one parent. We need to believe that they are doing the best that they can, given their particular circumstances.

Parents are the responsible adults — first, last and always. Parenting in the best interest of your children is having the wisdom to empower their choices — as painful as that may be. But I can assure you of one thing — if you have nurtured a loving pre-divorce connection with your children, it is the best "vaccination" against loss and the best insurance for their future well-being.

*Dr. Sandra Scantling is a licensed clinical psychologist and certified sex therapist. She practices in Farmington. You may e-mail her at AskDrScantling@aol.com. This column is not intended as a substitute for professional, medical or psychological advice, diagnosis or treatment. Case material used here includes composites and is not intended to represent any actual couple or individual.*