

Ending Bitterness Doesn't Mean Walking Away From Kids

My last column, "A Father Fears His Wife Is Turning The Kids Against Him," stirred a hornet's nest of controversy, and I appreciate every one of your e-mails and personal stories. This column is to give voice to a few and to reassure the many that you are not alone.



DR. SANDRA SCANTLING
INTIMACY, SEX
& RELATIONSHIP

As near as I can figure, what really steamed some of you was when I said, "we need to give up the battle and win the bigger prize — the health and happiness of your children."

I also said "you should stay involved in your children's lives

and maintain communication," but those last comments were pretty much overlooked.

What I heard in your e-mails was "I will never give up the fight"; "to stop fighting is to stop loving!" I heard from those of you who are angry, frustrated, helpless, grieving and sad; those of you who are trying to stop the financial bleeding from the mounting legal costs; and those of you with deep regrets. Many of you have been the targets of parental alienation and have tried to "protect" your children from further harm but don't feel the legal battle has served either you or your children well.

Robin Denison, co-founder of the Parental Alienation Awareness Organization (www.PAawareness.org) e-mailed

[excerpted]: "I still do not feel comfortable with your response to Michael. The reason I say this is because, although you advise him to tell his children he will always remain in their lives, that generally is not enough. Children need ongoing proof that this is the case, meaning continuous communication (even if one way), on the part of the targeted parent, as well as going to every visitation allowed by the court, even if that visitation is blocked by the alienating parent, or refused by the child." She recommended a new book by Amy J. Baker, "Adult Children of Parental Alienation Syndrome: Breaking the Ties That Bind" (Norton, 2007), which offers a perspective of PA in the words of those who have been alienated.

But my most compelling dialogues were with you, the readers.

DR. SCANTLING,

I read your response to the father struggling to maintain his relationship with his children during an ugly divorce. Your advice: "Find the courage to give up the battle and win the bigger prize, the health and happiness of your children" is absolutely horrendous. Shame on you! A father has every right to a healthy relationship with his children. . . . If the father walks away, the next statement from the mother will be "See . . . I told you your father didn't love you. . . . That is why he is divorcing us!"

**MARK (NAME CHANGED),
FARMINGTON**

DEAR MARK,

I certainly didn't mean to imply that the father should walk away from a child's life when I say he should "stop the fight." I agree that both parents should have equal access to their children (barring abuse, of course) and that our children need both parents. I was suggesting ways to manage the bitterness to spare children the ongoing pain.

DR. SCANTLING,

I appreciate your response to me. As a divorced/devoted father who went through what this father is going through, I blew a cork when I read it. I owe you an apology. Our courts need to take the fight out of custody battles right from the start. The children become the biggest weapons and the greatest losers in the whole mess.

MARK, FARMINGTON

No apology is necessary, Mark. Thank you for your comments!

DR. SCANTLING,

I must take exception to some of your recommendations in the column "A Father Fears His Wife Is Turning the Kids Against Him." Giving up the legal fight because you love them is an invitation to disaster. I gave up the legal fight with my three boys and grieved as, one by one, they stopped coming with me on visitation days. For years, my birthday and holiday cards to them were returned unopened. Eventually the younger two re-established contact with me, but the oldest, who is now 47 years old, will not speak to

me and shows considerable anger in my presence. The younger two also turned against their mother; but what satisfaction is there in that? . . . My middle son eventually committed suicide.

My greatest regret is that I gave up the legal fight. I think my children understood that my battle with their mother was based on my love for them. As far as they could tell, when I stopped battling, it was because I stopped loving.

**"JAY," KENSINGTON SECTION
OF BERLIN**

DEAR JAY,

I am so sorry. I can't imagine your pain. Losing a child to suicide is a tragedy of unspeakable proportions. I hope that your oldest son will find a way to move beyond his anger — for his sake and for yours.

Most of us try to do the right thing, but we make mistakes because we're only human. Your middle son can no longer be helped, Jay, but I hope you will get some professional support to salvage and strengthen the family that remains. Find a way to forgive yourself and accept the way you chose to express your love. Although you gave up the legal fight, I have no doubt that you've never stopped loving your children.

DEAR DR. SCANTLING,

Thank you for your answer to Michael of Collinsville. My particular domestic problem is very much similar to his. I read carefully everything you answered, and I thank you very much for your efforts and suggestions. They were ex-

tremely helpful to me.

ETON, WEST HARTFORD

The complexities of PA are gut-wrenching. We must find ways to assure parents (moms and dads) equal, unfettered access to their children and bring a speedy halt to PA, but with overburdened court dockets, by the time a PA case comes before the special masters, the damage has already been done.

So, where does this leave us? There is no one-size-fits-all solution. But we can't close our eyes and hope the problem of parental alienation will just go away — it hasn't, and it won't.

As I read and reread your e-mails, I keep thinking about the phrase "battling for peace" and the futility of trying to build relationships as we detonate charges that implode a family's structure. I ask myself, "How do we protect without destruction?" "How do we love without hurting?" "How do we keep the innocent safe?"

I wonder, and keep wondering. Thank you for wondering along with me.

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