

PAIN GAMES

The following are a list of Pain Games identified by the Menninger Group¹.

- 1) **The Nasty Game**
-Threatening to get what one wants. "If you don't pay child support, then you won't see the kids!"
- 2) **The Messenger**
-Telling the children to relay messages to the other parent about issues that should be discussed between parents. "Tell your father to get the support payments to me on time!" Children caught between their parents.
- 3) **Set Up**
-Parent may try and interfere with the visitation schedule. Father phones son and tells him he has tickets to a game but it is not on the weekend of their visit. He tells son to ask mother, who, in turn, says no. Child is then angry with the parent for not allowing the visit.
- 4) **I Spy**
-Attempting to obtain information about the other parent. "Who is your father seeing?" "Who does your mother have over to the house?" Child may also try to make the parent jealous by telling them who the other parent is dating.
- 5) **Don't Worry / I Wish**
-Fantasizing about what things would be like if the family was back together. Child may tell a parent that they would like to be living together in a nice house and the parent agrees this would be really good. This may result in false hopes of reconciliation.
- 6) **Disneyland Parent**
-One parent buys expensive gifts or takes the kids on extravagant outings. This can make the other parent feel inadequate because they can't afford such purchases. Often the parent who buys the gifts cannot afford it either, but feels it is the only way to connect with the kids.
- 7) **Party Poopers**
-Criticism of child's visitation with parent. For example, child has just returned from an outing to the zoo. Parent criticises everything they did. Child ends up feeling badly about the day.
- 8) **Cut Downs**
-Criticism / put downs of other parent in front of the children.

¹ Menninger Video Productions, The Menninger Clinic, PO Box 829, Topeka, KS, 66601-0829, 1-800-345-6036.

PAIN GAMES: HOW TO HELP PARENTS AND CHILDREN COPE

Suggestions for helping parents cope with Pain Games:

- 1) Help parents to identify these games and recognize when they, as well as their ex-partner and / or children, are engaging in them.
- 2) Teach parents effective ways to disengage from Pain Games.
- 3) Assist couples to separate their marital and parental roles. Pain Games are often a result of unresolved emotions over the ending of their relationship.
- 4) Help parents to understand that they cannot control or be responsible for their ex-partner's behaviour, however they can be responsible for their own conduct.
- 5) Suggest that parents find ways to get support through this transition.
- 6) Remind parents that although anger and frustration are a normal part of the divorce process, it is important not to express or involve children in these games or emotions.
- 7) Help parents to establish a new language - nonjudgemental, factual, neutral, as well as effective communication and conflict resolution skills.
- 8) Suggest community resources, counselling services and support groups that will help parents through this difficult time.

HOW WILL THE CHILDREN TAKE IT?

Tips for Children -How to Survive Your Parent's Fights (Share these with your kids)

First, understand IT IS NOT YOUR FAULT. Parent's arguments, like decisions about divorce or separation, are their business and not kids' fault or responsibility. Don't feel guilty when your parents argue. It is not up to you to get them to stop.

Second, DON'T TRY TO SOLVE YOUR PARENTS' PROBLEMS. Only they can do that. If you try, you will probably get caught in the middle, and that will only make matters worse. Don't take sides. If one parent asks your opinion or advice, or in other ways tries to pull you into the middle of a disagreement, just say, "I think I'd better stay out of this."

Third, LEAVE THE ROOM WHEN YOUR PARENTS ARGUE. Find some activity that helps take your mind off of it. Call a friend, put on a favourite record or video, take up your hobby in the basement.

Fourth, KNOW THAT THESE EXPERIENCES ARE REALLY HARD ON EVERYONE. It's not easy to live through such confusing times. You're not crazy to feel the way you do. Remember, arguing may be scary, but it isn't the end of the world. An argument can be an effective way of working out a disagreement.

Fifth, DON'T KEEP YOUR FEELINGS INSIDE. Find someone you can trust, talk to them. This may be a parent. It could be a grandparent, friend, teacher, clergy, counsellor, or older brother or sister.

Ask your parents for what you need, such as:

- ❖ Please spend some time *alone* with me, even five minutes of my very own time, not related to school, room cleaning, or things like that.
- ❖ Even if you are sure my "other" parent will hurt me, please let me learn myself. I'd like you there with a hug if I do get hurt...and please don't say "I told you so!"
- ❖ Please don't call me the man or mother of the house. I NEED TO BE A CHILD.
- ❖ Please trust me if, once in a while, I don't want to talk. Sometimes, even though you are ready, I'm not.
- ❖ Don't react with anger when I say I want to live with the other parent. Usually when I say it, I am angry, hurt, and scared too.
- ❖ Please let me tell you what I want to tell you about my visits with the other parent. Often I'm afraid I'll hurt your feelings if I tell you that I had a good time.

BEST HELP FOR CHILDREN OF ANY AGE

- ❖ Reassure your child that this separation is not his or her fault.
- ❖ Don't talk negatively, or with anger, about your spouse to your children on a regular basis. If you can't talk positively, limit what you say. It's okay to acknowledge your anger as long as your children understand they can, and do, have feelings that are different than yours.
- ❖ Try to avoid arguing bitterly in front of the kids so they won't feel that differences are resolved by yelling and fighting. Remember, too, that retreat and silence are just quieter forms of anger and are just as destructive.
- ❖ See if you can agree with your spouse about disciplinary matters, at least in the presence of your children.
- ❖ Make special efforts to maintain individual relationships with each child.
- ❖ Assure your child that it's okay to love the absent parent. A child who wants to be like Mom or Dad isn't being disloyal to you.
- ❖ Don't compare your child to your ex-spouse, even when similarities are poignantly striking and painful to observe.
- ❖ Don't blame your child's anxieties, fears, or problems at this difficult time on the absent parent - either to the child or the absent parent.
- ❖ Help your children not to feel shame about your divorce. If you feel shame and shut your children out, they too will be ashamed and worry about facing their friends and schoolmates. A divorce doesn't make you a failure.
- ❖ Don't make your child a messenger between you and your ex. Children will not enjoy being in the middle, but they will probably not tell you that.
- ❖ Do let your children's teachers know about the change in your family's structure so they can help your child.
- ❖ Don't make too many changes in your child's life at once.
- ❖ Allocate family chores in such a way as not to overburden each child. Find ways to get house chores completed despite the absence of the one who always mowed the lawn, washed the car, and so on. Kids should not have to do all of Daddy's or Mommy's jobs around the house.
- ❖ Don't ask a child who she or he wants to live with or loves more...directly or indirectly!
- ❖ Encourage your child to resume normal activities.
- ❖ Acknowledge children's deep-seated wish for a reunited family without offering false hopes or angry denials.
- ❖ Include a child in any appropriate discussions with a parent who will be making a long-distance move.
- ❖ Try to maintain as much emotional control as you can. If you repeatedly fall apart, your children may, too, or they may feel obligated to take over adult roles that are beyond them.
- ❖ Don't turn your child into your adult confidante!

Source: Vicki Lansky, (1989). Divorce Book For Parents. New York: New American Library.



CUSTODY

Mother loves her children so,
Just can't bear to let them go.
Father wants to share the joy,
Of his little girl and boy.

Mother drank for years with Dad;
Now she finds his drinking sad.
Daddy lived with Mom for years;
Now her morals cause him fears.

Mom then drops her subtle bomb,
"Dad wants to take you from Mom."
"Mommy hates to cause alarm,
But, kids, his booze could cause you harm."

Kids are crying, in a funk,
Report to Dad that he's a drunk.
Knowing he must match the score,
Dad replies that Mom's a whore.

Or if Mother holds her cool,
Dad consents to play the fool,
Tells the kids some awful "fact",
To which Mom feels she must react.

Each now builds with all their skills,
Legal mountains from molehills.
Each by hatred rendered blind,
Answer insults, each in kind.

Mother fails to note the tears,
Choked back by those too young in years
To stop the fight or turn the tide,
Who only want to love each side.

Father is too filled with rage,
To note that at their tender age,
Each child is scarred in subtle ways,
By each parent's hateful plays.

In love's name they scratch and tear,
Watched closely by a frightened pair
Of tiny people who can't cope,
Whose parents ate their only hope.

Heidi Uptegrove
Family Conciliation Court,
Red Bluff, California.

EFFECTS ON CHILDREN OF HIGH INTERPARENTAL CONFLICT

- * Children often bear the symptoms of the parents' distress which may take any of the following forms: acting out, regression, depression, being "too good" being rebellious or overly compliant, over/under achieving.
- * Children experience distress caused by divided loyalty.
- * Children assume responsibility and blame themselves for their parents difficulties.
- * Development of healthy self-esteem is hindered.
- * Children may become alienated from one parent due to repeated exposure to negative information about that parent.
- * Children may direct their anger towards a parent who sends negative information about the other parent.
- * Children experience distress, confusion and anxiety if they are made to feel it's "not OK" to love both parents ie. They don't feel they have "permission" to love both parents.
- * Children are not able to grieve normally.
- * Children may experience confusion about feeling "important" by being the focus of parental conflict.
- * Children may experience an increased sense of vulnerability to fears of being rejected or abandoned by one or both parents.
- * Children may be burdened by requests of support or nurturance from a distressed parent.
- * Children may find themselves in the role of "messenger" between high-conflict parents and are drawn into parental disputes.
- * Children feel responsible for their parents' pain.

Research indicates that the duration intensity and frequency of interparental conflict is directly related to psychological, social and emotional problems in children. If parents are not able to find ways to resolve disputes in ways that minimize their children's exposure to such conflict, the chances of these children having significant problems which have lasting effects is 100%.

BADMOUTH YOUR "EX", HURT KIDS

I am an attorney and I've had cases where parents have been very bitter and the divorces have been lengthy because of child custody or visitation arguments.

In a recent difficult hearing, Judge Haas of Walker, Minnesota, provided some of the most profound words of wisdom I've heard from the bench in all my years. His philosophy could provide insight to all parents. A portion of the transcript:

"Your children have come into this world because of the two of you. Perhaps you two made lousy choices as to who you decided to be the other parent. If so, that is YOUR problem and YOUR fault.

"No matter what you think of the other party — or what your family thinks of the other party — those children are one half of each of you. Remember that, because every time you tell your child what an idiot his father is, or what a fool his mother is, or how bad the absent parent is, or what terrible things that person has done, you are telling the child that half of HIM is bad.

"That is an unforgivable thing to do to a child. That is not love, it is possession. If you do that to your children, you will destroy them as surely as if you had cut them into pieces, because that is what you are doing to their emotions.

"I sincerely hope you don't do that to your children. Think more about your children and less of yourselves and make yours a selfless kind of love, not foolish or selfish, or THEY will suffer."

Paul J. Kiltinen, Attorney At Law
Baxter, Minnesota

Bill of Rights for Children in Dissolution Actions

1. The right to be treated as important human beings with unique feelings, ideas and desires and not as a source of argument between parents.
2. The right to a continuing relationship with both parents and the freedom to receive love from, and express love for, both.
3. The right to express love, affection or a designated name such as mom/dad for each parent without having to stifle that love or name because of fear of disapproval by the other parent.
4. The right to know that their parents' decision to divorce is not their responsibility and that there will be a parenting plan worked out which is best for the children.
5. The right to continuing care of guidance from both parents.
6. The right to honest and age-appropriate answers to questions about the changing family relationships.
7. The right to know and appreciate what is good in each parent without one parent degrading the other.
8. The right to have a relaxed, secure relationship with both parents without being placed in a position to manipulate one parent against the other.
9. The right to have the parents not undermine the other parent's position, such as suggesting tempting alternatives or by threatening to withhold time spent with the other parent as a punishment for the children's wrongdoing.
10. The right to be able to experience regular and consistent time with each parent as stated in the Parenting Plan and the right to know the reason for a change in time scheduled with a parent.

One parent can be all a child needs, but something will always be missing

How it feels to grow up with divorced or separated parents is different for every kid. Sometimes the parents don't even realize that it makes a difference to who the child becomes. It is easy to think that you can be everything your child needs as a single parent, and sometimes that is true. But there will always be something missing from that child's life, and no matter how hard you try, you can only be one person at once.

It's a funny thing, but every single close friend I have, myself included, has one thing in common. We have all grown up without stable father figures in our lives. It's interesting how we all came together, one by one we met over the years, and something unidentifiable kept us together, forced us to grow together.

It is very hard to grow up without a father, and I'm sure just as hard without a mother. Sometimes I think it might have been easier if my father had been dead, instead of alive and as close as Vancouver. At least if he had been dead I could have begun the healing process from the loss of him, but with him there and gone over and over again it was impossible to heal a wound when there was barely time before I suffered the next one.

My father's childhood was straight out of a horror movie, the abuse included emotional and verbal, not to mention physical and sexual.

I believe my father vowed never to be like his father, and sure enough, he never was. On the surface, he was a wonderful father. But down inside me I felt abandoned.

A joint custody arrangement, where the child spends equal time with each parent, can sometimes seem like the best answer for the child. And in some cases, it may be. But for a friend of mine it was one of the worst things the parents could have done.

I guess she was about seven when her parents split up. Her father had a new girlfriend and her mother would call her father's new girlfriend a whore, and her daddy a bastard. My friend began to think that this was what her father and his girlfriend really were. Through this she built up a resentment toward him, and she always felt as if her daddy was a bad person, by hating him her mother made her feel like she shouldn't love him at all.

If there is resentment between the child's parents, or misunderstandings still unresolved, or child or spousal support disagreements, this can reflect on the child's view of one of the parents. Especially in cases where the child lives with one parent and only visits the other, it is crucial that the parent be conscious of how the child feels toward both parents. This was the case with my parents.

My dad would tell me that his relationship with my mother was emotionally abusive, he made me feel as if she was the cause. When I was with my dad I felt like my mom was a bad person, stubborn, cold-hearted walking PMS symptom. My mom would tell me that my dad never gave her the things she needed from him, that she was very unhappy and had been for a long time. Both my parents would tell me that they stayed together for my brother and my sake. Do you know what kind of a responsibility that is for a child to hold? I always knew that my parents were unhappy when they were together. That makes me feel responsible for my parents' unhappiness. That is too much for a child to have on their conscience.

My mom told me she loved me enough for two parents. Was she trying to compensate for something my father didn't give me? Did that mean my father didn't love me?

All one of my friends ever wanted was a father, a stable man in her life. She has watched her mother take men into her bed, and my friend would grow to love and trust them like a father. Soon enough her mother would grow tired, or something would go wrong, and she would move on to the next man. My friend's mother was not a whore. Just a single lady looking for the right one. Not only did my friend lose one father like most kids, she lost father after father. Her entire childhood consisted of never knowing who it was safe to trust, safe to love.

I'm not saying don't get divorced. Sometimes it is best. And I am certainly not saying stay together for "the sake of the children." Try to think how it makes your child feel when you say negative things about their other parent to them, try to think about how it makes them feel to be torn between the two people they love and need most in the world.

And if you don't have kids yet, know not just that you can afford it, or that you could convert the den into a nursery with just a touch of wallpaper, but that the child is going to need you as its provider, as its role model for the rest of your life. This child is going to be whatever you make it.

I read somewhere that having a child is like ripping your heart out of your chest and letting it walk around unsupervised, unprotected. I agree wholeheartedly.

by Robyn Hovorka

Reprinted with permission of the author and the publisher
Originally appeared in *The Reporter: Voice of the Sunshine Coast*
(Monday July 21, 1997)

from BCIFV
newsletter
Fall '97



Reasons Both Parents Need to Maintain a Close Relationship With Their Child

- ❖ Aids in a child's healthy emotional development.
- ❖ Prepares the child for a change in custody (due to death or serious illness of a custodial parent or a change in the child's needs or requests).
- ❖ Prevents a child's distorted or unrealistic fantasies about a parent.
- ❖ Alleviates a child's poor self-esteem and guilt (wondering why my other parent does not want to see me).
- ❖ Provides gender role modeling by birth parents.
- ❖ May prevent power struggles and possible backlash effect between parent and child.
- ❖ May prevent a non-custodial parent from initiating court action.
- ❖ May relieve parenting pressures.
- ❖ Helps prevent a child from feeling divided loyalties.
- ❖ Improves emotional well-being and recovery from divorce for a child and parents.
- ❖ Validates importance of birth parents and long-term relationships.
- ❖ Provides opportunity for a child's development of an extended family identity.
- ❖ Aids in a child's identity development, which is partly maternal and partly paternal.
- ❖ Models different parental qualities for a child to learn from.
- ❖ Helps maintain parental authority for the child.
- ❖ Promotes parental willingness to financially support the child.
- ❖ Demonstrates that parents can put aside their personal differences enough to unite regarding their parenting.

from "Healing Hearts" by E. Hickey and E. Dalton

GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS CONCERNING THE BEST INTERESTS OF THEIR CHILDREN

Although the court does have the power to dissolve the bonds of matrimony, the court does not have the power to dissolve the bonds that exist between you as parents and your children. Both of you, therefore, are to continue your responsibility to emotionally support your children. You are to cooperate in the duty and right of each other to love those children. By love, the court means the training, the education, the disciplining and motivation of these children. Cooperation means to present the other party to the children with an attitude of respect either for the mother or the father. Neither of you should in any way downplay, belittle, or criticize the other in the presence of those children; because you may emotionally damage your children. It is of the utmost importance to love both parents without fear of being disloyal to either one of you.

In support of this admonition, the court has drafted written guidelines on your future conduct relating to the best interest of your children. I sincerely urge that you preserve them, periodically read them and always be guided by them.

Guidelines for Separated Parents

As you know, children are usually the losers when their parents separate. They are deprived of the full-time, proper guidance that two parents can give - guidance and direction essential to their moral and spiritual growth.

It is highly desirable that you abstain from making unkind remarks about each other. Recognize that such remarks are not about a former spouse but are about the present parent of your child. Such comments, in the children's eyes, reflect adversely upon the children.

It is urged that both parties cooperate to the end that mutual decisions concerning the best interest of the children be made objectively. Parents should remember that the parent who has custody should urge the children to find time to be with their other parent and encourage them to realize that the other parent has affection for them and contributes to their support. The non-custodial parent should recognize that his/her plans for visitation must be adjusted from time to time in order to accommodate the planned activities of the child. Visitation should be a pleasant experience rather than a duty. Cooperation in giving notice and promptness in maintaining hours of visitation is important to avoid ruffled feelings.

Although there is probably some bitterness between you, it should not be inflicted upon your children. In every child's mind there must be an image of two good parents. Your future conduct with your children will be helpful to them if you follow these suggestions.