

BRAINWASHING CHILDREN

A child is being brainwashed when one parent does or says something in an attempt to undermine the child's relationship with the other parent.

Brainwashing children can be subtle (one parent minimizing the existence of the other by erasing any reference to him/her in conversation or photos) or overt ("Your father doesn't love you—he doesn't send me enough money to take care of you!").

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Brainwashing is sending the child a message that says, in effect: "You and I are allies against the world. We are best buddies. I wish you didn't have to be with that other parent, but there's nothing I can do about it—you and I are victims of a system that wrenches you away from me three days a week and that forces me to share you with the other parent. Someday you'll be old enough to choose where you want to live, and I just know you'll choose my house."

Brainwashing or programming children is usually done to convince the child that one parent is better and more loving than the other. Parents who excessively demonize the ex-spouse want their viewpoint to be validated by others—especially by the children. If they can sway the children to "vote" for them, it validates them as the good person and the ex-spouse as the bad person.

A 1991 study of 700 families titled *Children Held Hostage: Dealing with Programmed and Brainwashed Children* (Clawar and Rivlin, American Bar Association, 1991) reported that brainwashing and pro-

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programming occurred at least occasionally in eighty percent of families. The study found that some level of brainwashing and programming occurred more than once a week in fifty percent of families and, in the families who were experiencing high-conflict divorces, brainwashing and programming commonly occurred more than once a day.

In the book *Healing Hearts*, author Elizabeth Hickey writes:

According to the Clawar and Rivlin study, women are often the worst offenders. Bitter mothers represent the majority of likely programmers. The study contends that women have a sense of ownership of their children and a conditioned view of their role. Also, women are overwhelmingly “awarded” custody of their children and thus spend more time with their children.

Remember that once upon a time you, too, could see the good in the child’s other parent. Your child now stands at that point.

What is best for [children] is a healthy relationship with both parents, and they need permission from each parent to enjoy a relationship with the other.

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Brainwashing can result in severe, long-term emotional damage to children. It distorts their perception of reality. For instance, they may perceive Mom as a good parent, but that doesn’t coincide with what they hear Dad saying about her. This can result in children doubting their own sense of reality, having low self-esteem, withdrawing from relationships, becoming mistrustful or misinterpreting the world around them—in extreme form, all symptoms of paranoia.

Brainwashing children may backfire against the parent who does it. When children grow up and learn the truth about both parents, learn

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that they have been lied to and used as a tool for one parent's vindictiveness, they sometimes limit or sever contact with that parent.

In extreme form, the programming of children is known as "parental alienation" (PA) and "parental alienation syndrome" (PAS). In the book *Divorce Casualties*, Douglas Darnell defines the difference between the two:

Parental alienation focuses on how the alienating parent behaves toward the children and the targeted parent. Parental-alienation syndrome symptoms describe the child's behaviors and attitudes toward the targeted parent after the child has been effectively programmed and severely alienated from the targeted parent.

Excessive brainwashing or parental alienation may result in a court cutting back or terminating child custody for the offending parent.

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Some examples of brainwashing:

"WHEN YOU COME 'HOME' FROM YOUR 'VISIT'"

Many parents say something like the following to their children as they drop them off at the other residence: "When you come 'home' from your 'visit' at Mom's house, we'll do something fun." This implies that one residence and parent is primary while the other residence and parent are secondary. In certain circumstances, it can even imply that time spent at the primary residence is "fun" while time at the other residence is not.

On days when the child is in your care and goes off to school or to a friend's house, it's okay to use the term "home": "When you come

home from school, we'll go to the park for a while." But if it is a transition day to the other parent's house, use neutral phrases: "When you come back to my house on Saturday, we'll . . ." or "When I pick you up from your mom's house on Saturday, we'll . . ."

It's best for the child if parents treat the two residences as equally important, not portraying one as primary and the other as secondary. I hope the term "visit" will someday disappear from divorce vocabulary altogether.

SABOTAGING JOINT CUSTODY

Sabotaging joint custody is doing things that make the child's transition to the other parent more difficult. It can be tearfully saying goodbye when the child leaves your care, thereby making the child reluctant to leave. It can be keeping the child up late watching television or having sleepovers (where not much sleeping is accomplished) on the night before a transition to the other home. This usually results in the child being cranky, tired, and out of sorts at the other parent's home. If this happens often enough, the child may begin to associate the other parent's home with being cranky and tired—and may grow reluctant to go there. The best script to follow is, "You must go to bed on time tonight. You're going to Mom's/Dad's house tomorrow, and you need to be well-rested because you're going to be doing lots of fun stuff over there."

It's important that children know you will be fine without them, and it's vital that they spend quality time with both parents. Each parent must honor the child's custody time with the other parent by behaving in ways that make transitions as easy as possible for all concerned.

MAKING NEGATIVE REMARKS ABOUT THE OTHER PARENT

Making negative remarks in an attempt to turn a child against the other parent is an act of emotional violence against both the child and the other parent.

A parent is part of a child's soul. When destructive, negative, critical remarks are made about a parent, it damages a part of the child's soul—you are sending the message that you despise part of the child. The same is true when the source of those remarks is a relative or family friend.

Think back to when you were still in love with your ex; try to recall how much it hurt or angered you when others said unkind or insulting things about your spouse. Or think about how it feels when someone makes derogatory remarks about your family, your race, your religion, your ancestral culture, your political views, your city, your former school or college, your favorite sports team.

When a child hears ugly things said by one parent about the other, it hurts deeply. As adults, we have the choice of responding to an insult by making a retort or by walking away. But children aren't yet prepared to do this. They have no choice but to listen to the hurtful remarks, sometimes year after year.

WITHHOLDING POSITIVE REMARKS ABOUT THE OTHER PARENT

Withholding positive remarks about the other parent is also destructive, in a passive-aggressive way. It is a subtle way of encouraging the child to favor one parent over the other. Manipulating a child in this manner is an act of emotional violence.

The best thing we can do for our children is to find ways to say positive things about the other parent. Sometimes this may be extremely difficult, but doing it is an act of love for the child. It makes the child's feelings our primary concern.

These positive statements about the other parent may be small ones ("Your mom/dad was a good tennis player in high school"), but they must be truthful.

When children have regular access to both parents, they learn the truth about both parents. Insecure parents may want to limit a child's access to the other parent, fearing that they will not compare well in the child's eyes. When parents manipulate a child to validate their own feelings about themselves, they harm the child, who has no real choice and becomes an emotional hostage.

REFUSING TO COMMUNICATE OR COOPERATE WITH THE OTHER PARENT

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Refusing to communicate or cooperate with the other parent or minimizing the existence of the other parent places the adult's selfish wishes ahead of the child's need for cooperative joint-parenting.

It can also be a way of sabotaging joint custody. For instance, Mom may have made plans for hosting a play date or dinner party following a weekend transition from Dad's home. If the child has a bad cold and is unable to socialize, and Dad (who knew about the social engagement) purposely withholds this information from Mom until the moment of transition, he creates a scenario that will heighten the parents' conflict. He has sabotaged the occasion by withholding information that would have allowed the other parent to make alternate plans.

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Another tactic some parents use is to withhold information about school activities, music or dance recitals, sports activities, doctor and dental appointments, medication instructions, and so on.

Some of this may be contrived to make the other parent look and feel foolish or to convince the court that the other parent isn't involved in the child's life. ("He shouldn't be awarded joint custody—he doesn't even know about our child's medication needs!") But it may also be done to plant seeds of doubt in the child's mind, with the hope that he/she may think something like, "Gee, if Dad doesn't know about my school stuff, he must not care as much as Mom" or "If Dad says Mom doesn't give me my medicine correctly, I'm safer at Dad's house. He cares more."

KEEPING SECRETS

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Yet another level of abuse occurs when the child is asked, perhaps in unspoken ways, to keep secrets from the other parent. The child is manipulated into being a co-conspirator in the withholding of information.

Children must not be burdened with the responsibility for keeping secrets about one home from the other parent. Such communication is often subtle—for instance, a dad may introduce his new girlfriend to the children and say, "Don't tell your mom about this. It'll make her mad, and she'll make a scene." Not only does he tell them to keep a secret, but he is portraying the mom as angry and vengeful, planting doubt and fear in their minds about the mom.

Or consider a case where a dad finds that his ex-wife has been involved in a lesbian live-in relationship for a year. The dad doesn't mind that the mom has a new lover, doesn't even mind that the relationship

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is homosexual, but does mind that the children were told about it a year earlier and have been brainwashed to keep it a secret.

A good rule: Whatever you tell your children about important issues in your life, you must tell the other parent.

You may justify noncommunication with the other parent by thinking, “I’ve never told the children they can’t talk about events or people at my house. If they don’t feel comfortable enough or close enough to the other parent to discuss things freely, it’s another indication that I’m the parent they like the best.” This isn’t true. Children need permission from each parent to speak freely about their life at the other household. You give this permission by communicating openly with the other parent about important events and people in your household—and making sure the children know you’ve done this, so they feel safe to express themselves freely in both homes.

Whether overtly or by an unspoken understanding, whenever you give your children the message, “Don’t tell Mom/Dad about this,” you are damaging them by putting them in the middle of your conflict with your ex-spouse.

For an excellent, comprehensive discussion of brainwashing, see Chapter 3 of *Healing Hearts* by Elizabeth Hickey and Elizabeth Dalton.