

The Dangers of Badmouthing Your Ex To The Kids

By Jeff Murphy

June celebrates Father's Day – a special day to spend time with Dad. But if parents are divorced, this day can bring difficult emotions for both parent and child. Consider a couple caught up in an ugly divorce and custody battle who develop extremely hostile attitudes towards each other. The divorce may be final, but the battle continues, with innocent people destroyed in the process.

Some men and women, who have been left behind, in effect deserted by their spouses, experience the four steps of grief, i.e., shock, denial, anger, and acceptance, but never get past anger. The anger obsesses them to the point their children are used to get revenge against their ex. Instead of focusing on the best interests of their children, the kids are made allies and weapons in the ongoing cycle of hatred.

Mediators, lawyers, and judges see this in children who express hatred of a “bad” parent and who voice complaints that sound like a litany that's been fed to them by the “good parent”. They have no mixed feelings; one parent is all good and the other is all bad. When interviewed, they'll proudly state their feelings are all their own; they were not influenced by anyone else and refuse to see the “bad” parent or have any contact at all.

The “bad” parent loses all contact with the children; child and spousal support payments are delayed or stopped. Court battles begin in an endless series of arguments over custody, parenting time, back payments and accusations of abuse and neglect.

There is a controversial theory called Parental Alienation Syndrome that is used in family courts to counter this behavior. If it can be proven that the angry parent has been using this strategy, there is a possibility that legal and physical custody might be transferred to the other parent.

If the case is in mediation during the divorce process, the lawyers and the mediator will hear that the “bad” parent, “Never feeds her, and she comes home dirty. She always cries when it's time to send her to my ex. She doesn't want to see him/her and she's always crying when she comes back.” The lawyer representing the angry parent fights hard to keep the child away from the other parent. If the lawyer represents the “bad” parent, he/she has to find evidence disproving the allegations, and it's hard to prove a negative.

What about the mediator? A mediator has to remain neutral, but if the mediator is experienced, he/she can see the potential for the case becoming a long term battle that will destroy the parental relationship and possibly the lives of the children. As a mediator, I will often tell a parent this, “Picture yourself at your children's high school graduation. What would you like them to be thinking about how you and your ex worked together, or not, to help them grow up. Did you have their interests at heart or was it always about anger and the need for revenge? What message did your actions give your child?”

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Getting a divorce is tough on any couple, but it's even tougher on the kids. Think about them when you're tempted to bad mouth your ex. The outcome may be very different from the one you planned.