

## Chapter 1

### Self-containment

#### How to contain yourself during a divorce and, more importantly, after the divorce

Self-containment is important as many people lose themselves when going through a divorce.

You should try to contain your own:

- Anger
- Bitterness
- Resentment
- Unresolved feelings
- Issues
- Hate
- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Emotions

#### Parents should take responsibility within a divorce -- not the children

To have a 'good' divorce is the exception rather than the rule as most people end their marriages while harbouring some level of anger, to a lesser or greater extent. Usually, the couple can not see eye to eye on how to make the relationship work again and one or the other partner feels resentment towards their ex-spouse. In most cases, unfortunately, although people remove themselves from the partnership, the problem remains and whatever the particular issue may be, it will potentially be projected onto someone else and be transferred to the new, blended family. Therefore although divorce takes place between two people, it affects the whole family and other systems.

There is no easy solution because even after a divorce, numerous problems that existed in the marriage will remain in the family. Often, it is precisely this that affects the children because

these unresolved issues between the parents are projected onto the children in bitterness, anger and resentment, and the children are placed right in the middle.

### **Important points when considering divorce**

Parenthood does not end with separation and divorce. You are divorcing your spouse not your children, and you will more than likely have to talk to your ex about the needs of the children.

The involvement of both parents is desirable and the importance of both parents should be prioritised. No matter how angry you are with your ex, it is important to remember that children need both their parents. You may not disregard the input of the child's mother or father. Unless the other parent is physically, emotionally, sexually or psychologically abusing the children, he or she always will, and needs to be, in the children's life. Please note that the abuse must be real and not perceived, just because of your anger regarding the divorce.

Structured residential and visitation plans are essential. This is often the time when things become ugly and people start to put the children in the middle of parental conflict. It is understandable that both parents want their children to live with them, but the children can't be cut into halves. It is of great importance to realise that children need to be raised in a stable, settled household and to see the alternate parent as often as possible, but within routine and structure, to avoid confusion or anxiety. Therefore parents must stop arguing about who wants what regarding the children and consider the best routine possible for the children in a difficult situation. Remember, your children don't necessarily feel the same anger and resentment towards your ex as you do. In their eyes they love their mother and father equally and will not choose between the two of you, nor should they be expected to do so.

The socio-emotional and psychological needs of the child must be considered. Everyone in the family is wounded through a divorce and no matter how much you dislike your ex, you will also experience hurt and sadness. The after-effect of a divorce is much like a mourning process because you lose someone who played an important part in your life for a long time. It is, therefore, important to look after your self and to not lose yourself in the process. The more emotionally settled you are, the more emotionally stable your children will be, as children reflect the way their parents cope with a divorce. During a divorce, focus on your own social, emotional and psychological needs, but prioritise the needs of your children.

Children should not be used as mediators between angry parents. You don't have to be a brain surgeon to understand this concept, but many parents are guilty of it, displaying a singular lack of emotional intelligence or maturity. The following represent a few examples of things you should avoid:

- Saying negative things about your ex in front of your children.
- Saying 'YOUR mother/father ... so TYPICAL ...'!
- Swearing at each other in front of the children.
- Discussing money/financial issues with the children e.g. 'Your father never wants to pay for anything you want to do ... We have very little food yet your father bought a new car.'
- Discussing the mistakes your ex made in the marriage. They have nothing to do with your children.

### **How to control your feelings when facing a divorce: try to fight fairly -- the impossible request**

Many couples have differences, resentments, or deeper conflicts that drive them further apart after a divorce. Unfortunately, the only way many couples relate after a separation is by fighting with each other. Truth be told, both partners are willing participants because the conflict may be the only excitement in an otherwise dull existence. This consequently becomes a vicious cycle and for many, the fight itself is the prize, not winning the argument. The fighting serves a definite purpose as it affirms that 'I still have some sort of power in this relationship'.

It takes two to make war but only one to make peace. If your arguments clarify issues and solve problems, they are constructive, but if they are destructive, you may need instruction in the art of fighting fairly. Here are some ground rules:

- Don't fight in front of the children.
- Never resort to physical violence.
- Set a limit on the duration of the fight.
- Keep to the subject at hand. Don't dredge up past issues or resentments that have nothing to do with the current issue.
- Use neutral 'I' language, rather than blaming 'you' language.

- Keep to one topic at a time, and take it to a conclusion.
- Be respectful.
- Don't use bad language.
- Only discuss things that are necessary.

### **The use of 'I' language**

One of the most effective ways of communicating and to get your point across without blaming your ex-partner is to use 'I' language. Simply put, it uses the first person when telling your ex how you feel instead of blaming him or her, e.g. 'I feel angry when you bring the children back late ...' rather than 'You make me so mad when you come late'. 'I' language is inherently neutral because it does not accuse anyone of anything; it simply states how you feel, and nobody can argue with that. Using 'I' means taking full and honest responsibility for honest feelings. When you tell your ex-partner something using 'I' language, he or she won't have any reason to feel blamed and become defensive.

When a relationship ends people are prone to say many dreadful things to each other in anger. 'I' language can help you express yourself freely and honestly while being sensitive to your ex-partner's feelings.

### **The Gestalt exercise**

The Gestalt exercise can help you to see your own self in a larger context. It can also assist you in changing yourself or a situation you are in, by rehearsing it in private.

Sit facing an empty chair. Imagine that someone or something important to you is sitting in that chair. It could be a person, such as a close relative, or a thing, even something intangible such as divorce, your partner's temper, your partner's drinking, or your own passivity. Now, engage in conversation with whatever it is you have put in the chair. For example, try putting your job in the empty chair. Be the job and answer yourself: 'You're lucky to have me. The airlines cut 500 jobs last week. You could make me better by coming up with some fresh ideas.' You'll be surprised at what you hear your job tell you.

Maybe your job is to take care of your children and you feel trapped because you're stuck at home and the children's needs are so great. Put your children in the chair. Tell them how you feel. Ask them to be good and to let you have some time to yourself. Then, sit in the other chair and be your children, answering you. 'We are young and we need you. We constantly ask you for things because we trust you and love you. Who else should we ask?'

Who do you want to put in that chair? A future partner? Tell yourself about the partner. How do you feel about him or her? Tell yourself what the relationship would be like. How would you be as a friend or a lover? This exercise is an experimental rehearsal that may help you to respond more effectively when someone or something in the chair confronts you in reality.

Now I'd like you to put your ex-partner in the chair. Talk to him or her with respect. Write down some questions to obtain clarity on certain matters. Thereafter you could schedule a meeting with your ex-partner if you need further clarity on a specific issue.

The Gestalt can become a highly emotional exercise, and you might find yourself in tears. Tears are normal, protective and healing. You may feel drained emotionally after doing this exercise because of the memories that are recalled, but it can enhance your sensitivity to your feelings. Be assured that it will make you more whole.

### **What not to do as a good parent**

Divorce is a difficult situation and experience for everyone. It causes everyone to experience feelings that they are not used to and it can be a rollercoaster of emotions – a trauma for both the adults and children involved. The support of adults and loving parents can cushion a child in a divorce case against many of the worst aspects. All children are affected by a divorce but some more than others. How the parents deal with their divorce and with each other, has a direct impact on the children. It is important that parents inform the children of the situation as soon as possible. Don't keep the intention to divorce a secret, only for the child to overhear something or find out from someone else, as this will create trust issues for the child.

Parents often think their children won't pick up on their arguments or fighting, but the reality is that children are highly intuitive and know that the parents have problems before their parents tell them. Most children simply don't know how to express or verbalise their feelings and don't

talk to their parents. The majority of children have vivid imaginations and it is important to give your child the correct age-appropriate information before they start imagining things that can cause even more problems.

Divorce brings about great changes and children need and function best with routine and structure to create their security. Change therefore causes insecurity, which in turn leads to anxiety that children experience but don't necessarily express or understand. That is why it is so important to create as much stability and routine as possible within a divorce situation. Don't make children choose between parents or where they would like to live as this creates confusion for the child, and usually leads to insecurity and anxiety. As parents, you must take control of the situation and assure your child that it is normal to be upset, to feel angry, sad or confused, but that they can talk to you at any time. Assure your child that everything will be fine and that you will take care of them even if things are changing. Don't create more insecurity by putting the other parent down, watch what you say and how you say it, and focus on making the child feel as safe and secure as possible.

It is normal for parents to be angry with each other but deal with that on your own; do not include your children. They are not your sounding board or your therapist. They are still just kids! Take responsibility for your own mistakes and choices and do not project them onto your children because this is a big reason for dysfunction in children from a divorced family. If parents allow their own projections and perceptions of the divorce to filter through or influence the children, it creates an unhealthy situation. A projection of negativity or hate about the child's father or mother will not help the child to get closure regarding the divorce; rather it will only going create sadness, anger and confusion for the child. To facilitate a more positive outlook for the children, do not discuss the following with them:

- Money, financial issues and problems.
- The weaknesses of the other parent.
- Details of why you are divorcing.
- What you hate about your ex.
- All the negative things that have gone wrong within the marriage.
- Custody matters and access issues.
- Details regarding the divorce proceedings.
- Unresolved issues you have with your ex-partner. **Your child is not your therapist.**
- Your sex life.

- Your ex-partner's new girlfriend or boyfriend and your hatred of him or her.

The importance of the extended family, including grandparents, aunts and uncles, must be recognised. Don't have the attitude after or during a divorce that you never liked your in-laws anyhow, so why should your children ever see their extended family. Family is important for children and it gives them a sense of security that they are still part of a bigger system even when their immediate family has broken up. Encourage interaction with the extended family and make an effort for the children to be able to see their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins on a regular basis during the divorce. This is normally a great support network that can be used during a divorce.

The separated parents should work together on parenting issues. Whether you feel like it or not, it is important to discuss such matters with each other. Parenting differences usually cause problems and contradictions will affect the children directly. If you feel that you are unlikely to agree, consider mediation with a professional. Even if you are now a single parent or, in your perception feel that you have always been a single parent, it is still important to include the other parent. If the parents stand together on parental issues, the children will not have the opportunity to manipulate the situation and get what they think they want. Once children think they are able to manipulate either or both parents, it will create problematic attitudes within the children and they will play the parents against each other, creating even further problems.

Do not make your children feel as though they have any responsibility for the separation or any subsequent complications after the divorce. Above all, do not tell a child when he or she is naughty that such behaviour is the reason why you and daddy/mommy got divorced. Parents can become quite irrational during or after a divorce and must be careful not to project their problems on their children. Even if you have a bad day, you may not involve your children in your unresolved issues and misplace your sadness into blame on them.

Numerous couples claim that their problem started after having children or after their second child was born. Even though the presence of children might have triggered the problems in your marriage, you cannot blame your children for those problems. As the adult, it remains your responsibility to take care of your own marriage and children should be removed from the centre of conflict between parents.

To facilitate these guidelines, refer to your ex-spouse in positive terms. Do not use children to convey your messages to the other parent, and it is vital that children have access to important support structures in their life such as friends, family and extended family, particularly as it is not always possible for the parents themselves to be supportive as they go through their own emotional process.

Parents must establish and adhere to set arrangements regarding the children's residential, visitation and access systems. The residential, visitation and access rights must not be changed by any party out of anger or animosity towards the ex-spouse. It is advisable that both parents contain themselves and their feelings towards their ex-spouse because this may cause dysfunction for the children.

Ultimately, therefore, no matter how angry you are with your ex-partner you may not allow yourself to fall into the trap of using the children as pawns. Even if you think 'I would never do that', it is surprising how many people project their anger onto their children and the latter find it very difficult to cope with the resulting emotional turmoil.

### **Parental alienation syndrome (PAS)**

*(Adapted from materials from the University of Granada)*

Parental alienation syndrome is a putative disorder proposed by Richard A Gardner as a disturbance in which children are obsessively preoccupied with depreciation and/or criticism of a parent. In other words, denigration that is unjustified and or exaggerated. Although parental alienation syndrome has not gained official recognition as a psychological disorder, it has been recognised in child custody disputes in South Africa and internationally.

Parental alienation syndrome may occur if one parent criticises the other parent or step-parent -- directly to a child or in front of the children. It is most likely to occur during divorce or custody hearings, when a parent remarries or, most commonly, during primary contact with the children. This results in a disturbance in the child's relationship with the other parent. Garner proposed that children are taught by an alienating parent to hate the targeted parent, to the point of wanting to eliminate the targeted parent from their lives. He considered this a form of psychological abuse that has clear-cut, unmistakable signs and symptoms, and is therefore easy to diagnose.

The alienating parent refuses to comply with court orders, tells the children they do not have to abide by them either, thus encouraging them to ignore the authority of the targeted parent. The goal of the alienating parent is to destroy the targeted parent by using the children as weapons or pawns. This is achieved by motivating the children to verbally terrorise, isolate and accuse the other parent, and by reducing the financial or earning capabilities of that parent through continual harassment e.g. false accusations of abuse and disregard of court orders that will ensure further custody changes. Victory is achieved by the alienating parent when the targeted parent is destroyed through emotional, financial or physical collapse, resulting in the loss of child custody to the alienating parent because the latter appears to be the better parent. According to the book *Divorce Casualties: Protecting Your Children from Parental Alienation* by Dr Doug Darnall, there are three main categories of parental alienation syndrome perpetrators in terms of severity: naïve alienators, active alienators and obsessed alienators. In general, naïve alienators don't realise what they are doing to their children, nor do they consciously intend any harm; active alienators act when an event triggers them; and obsessed alienators fully and consciously commit themselves to alienating the child from the other parent.

The three stages of PAS

Children who are victims of PAS often go through different stages as they experience the depth of the alienation.

- Stage 1: Mild

The mild PAS parent may superficially appear to encourage involvement with the other parent, but their behaviour actually tries to give them a perceived advantage with the child, as in 'I'm better than him or her'.

- Stage 2: Moderate

In the moderate PAS situation, the alienating parent will clearly interfere with the visitation rights of the other parent, but on the surface seem to support the other parent's involvement.

- Stage 3: Severe

Finally, in the case of severe PAS, the children are brainwashed, programmed and redirected away from a parent with whom they used to have a normal relationship.

In an insightful article on parental alienation syndrome, entitled "How to detect it and what to do about it?" by J Michael Bone and Michael R Walsh, and published in *The Florida Bar Journal*,

Vol 73, No 3, March 1999, it indicates different criteria for identifying PAS. (The following is the quoted published article up to the last Criteria IV )PAS is a familiar term within custody battles and within evaluations, however there is still a great deal of confusion and lack of clarity about its nature, dimensions, and, therefore, its detection. Its presence, however, is unmistakable. In a longitudinal study of 700 'high conflict' divorce cases followed over 12 years, it was concluded that elements of PAS are present in the vast majority of the samples. Diagnosis of PAS is reserved for mental health professionals who come to the court in the form of expert witnesses. Diagnostic hallmarks usually are couched in clinical terms that remain vague and open to interpretation and, therefore susceptible to argument pro and con by opposing experts. The phenomenon of one parent turning the child against the other parent is not a complicated concept, but historically it has been difficult to identify clearly. Consequently, cases involving PAS are heavily litigated, filled with accusations and counter accusations, and thus leave the court with an endless search for details that eventually evaporate into nothing other than rank hearsay.

Bone & Walsh (1999) indicated that the following four specific criteria may be used to identify potential PAS. In most instances, these criteria can be identified through the facts of the case, assessment reports and individuals involved in the case.

### Criterion I: Access or contact blocking

Criterion I involves the active blocking of access or contact between the child and the absent parent. The rationale used to justify it may well take many different forms. One of the most common is that of 'protection'. It may be argued that the absent parent's parental judgment is questionable and, therefore, the child may be damaged by the visit. In extreme cases, this will take the form of allegations of child abuse, quite often sexual abuse. This will be addressed in more detail in Criterion II, but suffice it to say that this is often given as a reason for the suspension or even termination of visitation. On a more subtle and common level, an argument proffered for the blocking of visitation is that contact with the absent parent is 'unsettling' for the child, and that he or she needs time 'to adjust'. The message here is that the absent parent is regarded less as a key family member and more as an annoying acquaintance that the child must see occasionally. Over time, this pattern can have a seriously erosive effect on the child's relationship with the absent parent. An even more subtle expression of this is that the visitation is 'inconvenient', thereby relegating it to the status of an errand or chore. Again, the result is the

erosion of the relationship between the child and the absent or 'target' parent. One phenomenon often seen in this context is that any deviation from the agreed schedule is used as a reason to cancel visitation entirely.

The common thread in all of these tactics is that one parent is positioning him- or herself as apparently superior to the other, therefore the latter should be viewed as peripheral to the child's life. The alienating parent in these circumstances is acting inappropriately by taking on the role of 'gatekeeper' for the child to see the absent parent. When this occurs over substantial periods of time the child is given the unspoken but clear message that one parent is senior to the other. Younger children are more vulnerable to this type of message and tend to accept it uncritically, however, elements of it may often be echoed into the teenage years. It is, in fact, the responsibility of each of the parents to promote a positive relationship with the other parent. When this principle is violated in the context of blocking access on a consistent basis, it may be assumed that Criterion I has been unmistakably identified.

### Criterion II: Unfounded allegations of abuse

The second criterion is related to false or unfounded accusations of abuse against the absent parent. The most strident expression of this is a false accusation of sexual abuse. It has been well documented that the incidence of false allegations of sexual abuse accounts for over half of those reported, when the parents are divorcing or are in conflict over some post dissolution issue. This is especially true of in the case of young children who are more vulnerable to the manipulations implied by such false allegations. When the record shows that even one report of such abuse is ruled as unfounded, the interviewer is well advised to look for other expressions of false accusation.

Other examples of this may be found in allegations of physical abuse that investigators later find to be unfounded. Interestingly, experience has shown that there are fewer false allegations of physical abuse than of other types of abuse, presumably because physical abuse leaves visible evidence. It is, of course, much easier to falsely accuse someone of something that leaves no physical sign and that has no third party witnesses.

A much more common expression of this pattern would be that termed as emotional abuse. When false allegations of emotional abuse are levelled, it is often more a case of differing

parental judgment, which is perceived as 'abuse' by the accusing parent. For example, one parent may allow a child to stay up later at night than the other parent would, and this might be termed as 'abusive' or 'detrimental' to the child. In another case one parent might introduce a new 'significant other' to the child before the other parent believes they should and this might also be considered 'abusive' to the child. Alternatively, one parent might enrol a child in an activity with which the other parent disagrees, and this activity, which is really a difference of parental opinion, is then regarded as being abusive in nature. These examples, as trivial as they may seem individually, could be suggestive of a trend whereby parental differences are judged and described in ways that convey a message of abuse, either directly or indirectly. When this phenomenon occurs in, literally, thousands of different ways and times, each of which seems insignificant on its own, the emotional atmosphere that it creates has a clearly alienating effect on the child.

Obviously, this type of acrimony is very common in dissolution actions, but such conflict should not necessarily be mistaken for, or be taken as illustrative of, the PAS syndrome; however, the criterion is clearly present and identifiable when the parent is eager to hurl allegations of abuse, rather than being cautious, or even reluctant to do so. This latter stance is more in keeping with the parent's responsibility to encourage and affirmatively support a relationship with the other parent. The responsible parent will only allege abuse after he or she has tried and failed to rationalise why the issue at hand is not abusive. Simply put, the responsible parent will give the other parent the benefit of the doubt when such allegations arise. When this theme is present in a clear and consistent way, the criterion for PAS is met.

### Criterion III: Deterioration in relationship since separation

The third criterion necessary for the detection of PAS is probably the least described or identified, but is one of the most important. It relates to the existence of a positive relationship between the minor children and the now absent or non-residential parent prior to the marital separation, and a substantial deterioration of it since. Such a recognised decline does not occur on its own. It is, therefore, a critical indicator of the presence of alienation, as well as a measure of its relative 'success'. For instance, if a father had a good and involved relationship with the children prior to the separation, and a very distant one since, then one can only assume without explicit proof to the contrary that something caused it to change. If this father is clearly trying to maintain a positive relationship with the children through observance of visitation and other

activities and the children do not want to see him, or his involvement in their lives, then one may speculate that an alienation process may have been in operation. Children do not naturally lose interest in their non-residential parent simply by virtue of the absence of that parent. Also, healthy and established parental relationships do not erode automatically of their own accord. They must be attacked. Therefore, any dramatic change in this area is usually an indicator of an alienation process that has had some success in the past.

Most notably, if a careful evaluation of the pre-separation parental relationship is not made, its omission creates the impression that the troubled or even alienated status that exists since is a reasonably accurate summary of what existed previously. Nothing could be further from the truth! An alienated or even partially or intermittently alienated relationship with the non-residential parent and the children after the separation is probably a distortion of the real parental relationship in question. Its follow-through is often overlooked in the hysterical atmosphere often present in these cases. A careful practitioner knows that a close examination is warranted and that it should be conducted with the utmost detail and scrutiny.

If this piece of the puzzle is neglected, the consequences may be devastating for the survival of the relationship. Also, without this component, a court can be easily swayed into premature closure or fooled into thinking that the turmoil of the separation environment is representative of the true parent-child relationship. Once this ruling is made by a court, it is extremely difficult to correct.

In a separate but related issue, I would like to emphasise that not all mental health professionals are aware of, or know how to treat, the PAS phenomenon. In fact, when a mental health professional unfamiliar with PAS is called upon to make a recommendation about custody, access, or related issues, he or she may potentially do more harm than good. For example, if the psychologist or social worker fails to investigate the pre-separation relationship of the non-residential parent and the children, he or she may easily assume that the current acrimony in that relationship was an existing condition and recommend that the children have less visitation with that parent, thereby supporting the undiagnosed PAS that is still in progress. If that expert also fails to evaluate critically the abuse claims or the agenda of the claimant, they may be taken at face value and, again, potentially support the undiagnosed PAS. Furthermore, if that professional is insensitive to the subtleties of access and contact blocking as its motivator, he or she may potentially support it, and contribute to the PAS process. If these things occur, the mental health

professional expert actually becomes part of the PAS, albeit unwittingly. Alarming, this happens often. So, if PAS is suspected, the attorney should closely and carefully evaluate the mental health professional's investigation and conclusion. Failure to do so may cause irreparable harm to the case and, ultimately, to the children.

### Criterion IV: Intense fear reaction by children

The fourth criterion necessary for the detection of PAS is admittedly more psychological than the first three. It refers to an obvious fear reaction on the part of the children, of displeasing or disagreeing with the potentially alienating parent in regard to the absent or potential target parent. Simply put, an alienating parent operates by the adage, 'my way or the highway'. If the children disobey this directive, especially in expressing positive approval of the absent parent, the consequences may be very serious. It is not uncommon for an alienating parent to reject the child, often suggesting that he or she should live with the target parent. When this occurs, the threat is often not carried out, yet it operates more as a message of constant warning. The child, in effect, is put into a position of being the alienating parent's 'agent' and is continually being put through various loyalty tests because the alienating parent forces the child to choose parents.

Naturally this is detrimental to a child's emotional well-being. To fully appreciate this scenario, it must be realised that the PAS process operates in a 'fear-based' environment. This fear taps into what psychoanalysis tell us is the most basic emotion inherent in human nature -- the fear of abandonment. Children in these conditions live in a state of chronic upset and threat of reprisal. If a child should defy the alienating parent, he or she quickly learns that there is a serious price to pay. Consequently, children who live such lives develop an acute sense of vigilance over displeasing the alienating parent, often characterised by visitation plans that change suddenly, for no apparent reason. For instance, when the appointed time approaches, the child protests against a visit that was never a problem before. If PAS is suspected, in these instances a court should strictly enforce the visitation schedule.

The alienating parent often postures bewilderment regarding the sudden change in the child's feelings about the visit. In fact, the alienating parent often appears to be the one supporting visitation. This is a common scenario in PAS families, and encapsulates and exposes, if only for an instant, the fear-based core of the alienation process. Thus whenever the child is given any apparent choice in the visitation, he or she is placed in a position that requires an expression of

loyalty to the alienating parent i.e. refusing a visitation with the absent parent. Should the child fail to 'please' the alienating parent (the one with whom the child lives most of the time), he or she will then fear abandonment. Under these circumstances, children will simply comply with the alienating parent and not make a free choice. The court must therefore act expeditiously to protect them and employ a host of specific and available remedies.

The consequence of such alienation is that children learn to manipulate and will often play one parent against the other in an effort to gain some advantage. In the case of PAS, the same dynamic operates at a more desperate level. No longer manipulating to gain advantage, these children learn to manipulate just to survive. They become expert beyond their years at reading the emotional environment, telling partial truths, and then telling out-and-out lies. One must, however, remember that these are survival strategies that they were forced to learn in order to keep the peace at home and avoid an emotional backlash from the residential parent. Moreover, it is easier to understand why children, in an effort to cope with this situation, often find it simpler to internalise the alienating parent's perceptions of the absent parent and to echo those feelings. This is one of the most compelling and dramatic effects of PAS, viz. hearing a child vilifying the absent parent and joining the alienating parent in such attacks. If one is not sensitive to the 'fear-based' core at the heart of this, it is difficult not to take the child's protests at face value.

One of the most common questions parents ask me within a forensic process is why parents turn into alienating parents. The following are some of the reasons:

- Bitterness and unhappiness resulting from the divorce and the impact it has on that parent's life.
- Inability to cope emotionally or accept the finality of divorce.
- An anti-social personality disorder or a mood disorder such as bipolar.
- Individual psychological problems such as insecurity, anxiety, paranoia or obsessive traits, that are transferred onto the child and the alternate parent.
- Placing their own needs and desires above those of their children, family, ex-family or other people around them.
- An obsession to raise the child on his or her own.
- An unhealthy 'partner' relationship with the child and not a child-parent relationship, which can lead to an obsession with the child and the child's other relationships.
- Jealousy regarding the child's relationship with the alternate parent.

Mothers are often the alienators while fathers the targeted parents. The following are some of the reasons why women are guilty of alienation:

- Women often experience irrational thought patterns during a divorce or post divorce.
- In general, women struggle more in the long term to cope effectively post divorce.
- Women often view children as their possessions and during divorce proceedings or post divorce they refer to the child as 'my child' excluding the father and dismissing him as the alternate parent or his role in the child's life.
- With financial strain or the perception that the lifestyle lived is not good enough, children are used as pawns to receive more money from the father. If this is unsuccessful it often happens that children are alienated from the father due to bitterness resulting from financial matters.

### **A new partner**

One of the most challenging experiences in facing a divorce is when one of the partners meets someone else. I often tell my patients that this is when the real divorce starts. Most people don't accept a new person in the ex's life. It doesn't matter who is divorcing who, people find it hard to accept that the other partner is going on with his or her life. I can't place enough emphasis on this fact, that it is the right of your ex to move on with his or her life and not to ask your permission. Try to focus on your own life not your ex's life; grant them the freedom to move on and be happy. Remember, if your ex is happier and more fulfilled in a loving relationship, it is also good for the children as they see that their parents are individually happy.

It is very important for children to see that their parents are happy post divorce because many children often take their parents' happiness on their own shoulders. The key message is then to accept the divorce so that both you and your ex-partner can move on with your own lives. It is recommended by most therapists that both parents remain single for 8-12 months after the divorce and to find your own identity. This gives everyone enough time to adjust to the new circumstances, to focus on the changes that come with divorce, to settle down emotionally and to heal.

What to do when your ex-partner meets someone else:

- Be respectful. You don't have to be friends with this person, however it is important to remember that this person will be involved in your children's lives, which makes an amicable, tolerable relationship necessary.
- Appreciate the fact that your ex-husband or wife has every right to move on with his or her life.
- Look for the positives within the situation and for the good qualities in the new person that will help you to feel comfortable with this person in your children's life.
- Be thankful that you don't have to listen to your ex-partner's personal problems any longer. If you're honest with yourself you'll admit that your 'shoulder' is quite worn out already.

Obviously there are many more things on which to focus on with regard to what not to do when your ex-partner meets someone else:

- Don't act out of character just because your ex is in another relationship. Remain the good, nice person that you hopefully are.
- Don't go 'nuts', 'psycho', 'off your head' or start stalking your ex or the new partner. (Once you've calmed down, you'll regret it and feel extremely foolish.)
- Don't condition your children against the new party and tell all sorts of weird and wonderful stories.
- Don't use your children as mediators, go-betweens or therapists and tell them how sad or angry you feel because your ex-partner has moved on.
- Don't create other issues simply to keep the focus on yourself and the divorce, thereby preventing the new couple from enjoying their own happiness.
- Don't become negative, resentful or hateful, or transfer any such emotions onto the children.
- Most importantly, don't become vindictive and mean, destroying everyone (especially the children) with your unresolved hatred.
- Remember that your negative behaviour can never be taken back and that it will create a foundation for a continuing negative relationship with this couple. Dysfunctional communication patterns will negatively affect you and the children in the long term.

Self-containment and self-respect are important factors. It is of cardinal importance to remember that all involved in a divorce, you, your ex and your children, have the right to move on into new

relationships, and that you do not have to justify anything to your ex-partner. In practice, though, many people struggle with this concept and may become resentful and traumatised when the ex-partner moves on because they can't face the fact that this is the final stage of the break up of the marriage and there is no turning back.

As a therapist I have witnessed, during mediation, people expressing the wish for the settlement agreement (court order) to state that their ex-partner may not remarry or that neither may remarry until the children are 18 years. This is legally impossible and it is important that both parties accept that they may move on with their lives and that their ex-partner has the right to a happy life with someone new.

### **The developed step-witch-mom horror-tale**

It is interesting how the story of the horrible, new step-mother is traditionally featured in children's stories while less focus is placed on the step-father or the children's biological parents. There are numerous theories on why the step-mothers are portrayed in such a negative manner. One explanation is often revealed within therapy. The story starts when the biological mother sketches the step-mother as a monster and makes it almost impossible to have a relationship with this other person as she victimises herself into a position where the children feel so sorry for their own mother that they are forced to reject the new person in their life.

I have also witnessed so many cases in which the step-mother is a near- perfect step-mother: helping the children with their homework, playing with them, financially contributing, emotionally supporting them and accepting them into her life as her own. However, because the biological mother (and far more women than men are guilty of this) conditions the children negatively towards the new person by making negative comments, putting the children on a guilt trip and playing emotional games, she creates a dynamic in which the children don't know if they are allowed to have a good relationship with the other person.

Unfortunately, after prolonged subjection to disappointment, negative attitudes and unfair treatment, the step-parent may well change her or his attitude towards the children. So once again, the children bear the brunt of their biological parents' unresolved issues.

I do believe that biological parents inherently want a new partner to be nice to their children, but due to their own emotional problems and turmoil, they create a dynamic in which the new

partner is portrayed as 'bad' and the self-fulfilling prophecy becomes true. My advice to biological parents is that you should be careful what you wish for, as it might come true.

It is also sad to witness children turning against their biological parents because of persistent negative conditioning, once the children start to realise that they are being lied to and how their parents have projected their own negativity towards the new partner who is trying to build a relationship with them. Let the focus be on forming good relationships because that is in the best interests of the children.

In my professional opinion I don't believe that step-parents are inherently unkind (as portrayed by numerous biological parents), but they make useful scapegoats for those parties who need an outlet for their unresolved anger and emotions.

Advice for a step-parent if treated badly by a biological parent:

- Limit all communication with the biological parent. If communication is necessary, perhaps approach an attorney to conduct this on your behalf.
- Don't lose character and play the same game as the biological parent.
- Build a good support system to help you through difficult times.
- Be the best step parent you can be, no matter how you are treated.
- If constant harassment continues, approach a magistrate court for a Protection Order.
- Don't allow the biological parent within your space or your new family's space.
- Don't discuss the biological parent with the children.
- You have a right to tell the children within a family meeting that you do not appreciate the way you are being treated and that the biological parent's behaviour is unacceptable.
- Emotionally disconnect from the situation and focus on your own life and not on the biological parent's pathological behaviour.

### **The importance of good parenting in a divorce situation**

**Heal yourself**, in order to move on with your own life without leaning on your children. Reassure them that even though these are difficult times, you're strong enough and are there for them.

**Behave maturely**, even if you don't feel it. This means acting in your child's best interests. Often, perspective can only be gained by the passing of time.

**Take time to listen** to your children and understand their needs. Their view of a divorce is often quite different to that of their parents. Ask them how they are feeling; don't tell them how they should feel. Reassure them, but don't feel obligated to share every morbid detail.

**Respect each other's competence as parents.** Separate the marital from the parenting relationship. Let your ex-partner do what he or she needs to do in their access time. It has nothing to do with you as a parent unless you suspect that the parent will do damage to your child.

**Divide parenting time** in such a way that the children still feel they have two parents. Decide upon a parenting plan, including living arrangements, financial contributions, decision-making and contingencies.

**Accept each other's differences.** Respect the other person's private life. As an ex-partner you do not have the right to constantly interfere in the other person's life. Accept your divorce and try to maintain a respectful relationship.

**Communicate about, and with, the children – but not through them.** Don't make them messengers, especially of bad news. Children cringe whenever they hear, 'Ask your mother ...,' or 'Tell your father ...' Cooperate on enforcing rules and punishments, which prevents a child from playing one parent against the other.

**Step out of traditional gender roles.** Dad should be able to take care of a sick child as well as mom; mom should learn to fix a flat on a bike.

**Recognise and accept that change is inevitable.** Anticipate it. No matter how civil your arrangement, new people, new jobs and new situations will affect the status quo. Try to be flexible and understanding.

### **How to parent your child effectively with the help of your ex-partner**

Learn how to disengage from the other parent. Disengagement assists a parent after a divorce to create a healthy distance between you and your ex-partner and this space allows you to be more at peace with the divorce and will help you to be a better parent. If you disengage, it has the effect of creating a calm space around your children. Moreover, by minimising your contact with the other parent, there is less likelihood of conflict developing and you will be able to create your own space as a single parent with your children.

In this space of 'contentment', both parents will learn to parent the children effectively and do the best job possible during the time they spend with the child. Continue to disengage from the

other parent so that conflicts are avoided. If you cannot parent cooperatively because of your level of conflict resulting from unresolved issues, you should disengage and parallel-parent, (only communicating in an emergency situation) for an extended period of time until a respectful relationship can be established. ) Parallel-parenting is a process of parenting in tandem because you are unable to parent together.

Before you can learn to co-parent, you each need to learn to parent on your own. The first step of parallel parenting is disengagement. This means that you will not communicate about minor things regarding your child. You will give the other parent important information about your child perhaps every second week, but you will not enter into discussions about any other related things regarding the children. Remember, after you are divorced it is inappropriate to discuss your feelings about a situation. The focus of any discussion should be on facts regarding the children's functioning, therefore daily, on-going communication is unnecessary.

Important information includes health, financial welfare and the interests of your child. If there is a medical emergency or the child becomes ill, it is necessary to inform the other parent, with details on what medication is needed, what has already been administered and when the next dose is due. Each of you should develop independent relationships with your child's teachers, doctors, coaches and friends so that you don't have to rely on the other parent for all information. Don't complain to the other parent if he or she is ten minutes late for an exchange of your child and don't argue about whose turn it is to take your child for the next haircut. Have parameters in your parenting plan for some of these things and ignore the rest. Don't be petty.

When parents are trying to disengage, but communication is necessary, it is often best if non-emergency communication is done by fax or e-mail. Only use faxes if both of you have sufficient privacy where you will receive the fax. By putting your communication in writing, you have time to gather your thoughts and make sure that the tone is not argumentative. It also gives the receiving parent some time to gather his or her thoughts so that the response isn't impulsive or angry. Sarcasm is never helpful when trying to disengage. Don't share your e-mails and faxes with your children; they are simply meant to convey important information between parents. Try to limit non-emergency communication to twice a month, unless of course the information is time-sensitive (e.g. faxing a notice from school to the other parent on the day it is received). Obviously, emergency information about illness and injuries, unforeseen delays in visitation (as a result of traffic conditions, for example), or immediate school concerns should be shared

telephonically as soon as possible. However, by reducing general communication and by putting necessary communications in writing, you will go a long way toward disengaging from conflict.

If you have very young children, it is important to share all aspects of your child's functions with the care provider when you drop him or her off. In the same way, it is critical for parents to share detailed information with each other upon the exchange of the child. A useful tool is a 'parent communication notebook'. In it you can record the highlights of your child's emotions and behaviour during the time he or she is with you, then pass it on to the other parent at the time of transition. Include details and your observations on things such as your child's health, feeding and sleeping patterns, language issues, mood, what soothes or upsets your child, your daily routine, and other information about your child's functions and needs. This notebook should stay with your child so both parents can use it as a forum for preserving thoughts about your child and his or her needs.

Do not tell the other parent how to parent, and **ignore** (rather than argue back) when the other parent tries to tell you how to parent. Support different styles of parenting in order to avoid conflict. Obviously, some things are very important, such as consistent discipline philosophies and techniques, adequate supervision, administering necessary medication and ensuring that your child arrives at school on time with homework completed. If you have concerns about these very important issues, you will need a forum such as mediation for working out your differences.