

## **In This Contest, There Are Never Any Winners**

**By Bob Kerr, Providence Journal Columnist**

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Mickey Mouse got bounced from the birthday party. Actually, he never got in the door. He stood there, in full Disney, and was told he wasn't wanted.

It was one of those mad, cruel moments from the divorce wars, where people get competitive over a kid's happiness. In this case, a father who couldn't attend his daughter's birthday party because of a restraining order hired a person in a Mickey Mouse suit to go instead. It was his way of being part of the day without actually being there.

It didn't work. The fun Mickey Mouse might have brought to the party was no match for a mother's need to keep a father out of sight and out of mind.

There are lots of names for it — payback, revenge, getting even, sticking it to the ex. It might be the sickest part of divorce. It is the attempt to lay waste to the idea that divorced parents can both maintain strong relationships with their children. It is the attempt to poison kids' minds. It gets vicious sometimes.

And it's always expensive. Lawyers and therapists do well with it. A considerable chunk of a family's assets can go down the tubes because an angry parent would rather keep hauling the case into court than reach healthy resolution.

Officially, it's parental alienation syndrome. It's not easy to diagnose. Sometimes, it's impossible to determine whether one parent is more guilty of it than the other. It is filled with screams and accusations, court-ordered therapy and the degrading experience of visiting with one's own sons or daughters under court-ordered supervision — at \$35 an hour.

False charges of abuse are fairly standard.

And in Rhode Island, of course, it all plays out in Family Court, where cases move toward resolution at a mud-like pace. And the longer a case goes, the more twisted the legal options become. Any accusation, no matter how baseless, can be reason to go back to court one more time for a few more billable hours.

I have seen it and heard it. Once, a young girl caught in the middle of an especially nasty custody struggle that I had written about called me sobbing and screaming to tell

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me how much she feared having to spend time with her father. She did not, I am sure, make the call on her own.

It is stunning how two people who were once so crazy about each other that they got married can turn into bitter opponents in a contest that can't possibly have any real winners.

The divorced mother or father who gets satisfaction from hearing sons and daughters badmouth an ex-spouse is a strange person indeed. But it happens. There have been high fives exchanged over particularly hurtful anti-mom or anti-dad zingers.

When Pamela and I had coffee, she told a story of divorce and its scorched-earth aftermath that she thought was extreme. It wasn't.

"I paid \$4,500 to two lawyers and I got nothing," she says.

She was 24 when she got married in 1994.

"It was doomed from the start."

She tells of emotional abuse. Her husband threw things. He smashed a chandelier.

"I locked myself in my room once. He broke down the door."

She filed for divorce four years ago.

Her two sons are now 13 and 8 years old. They have been through the wringer of divorce Rhode Island style. They have moved back and forth.

At first, she had custody of the two boys. Their father saw them every weekend.

Then, the divorce became one of those draining, endless contests that consumes time and money and emotional resources.

It continues.

"I don't know how to fight back," says Pamela.

She no longer has custody of her sons after a too familiar exchange of charges and counter charges. Once, her boyfriend, who she says she will marry next year, was ordered by the court to see a therapist after Pamela's ex-husband accused him of abusing the two boys.

She had a visit with her sons last Tuesday, the first in three weeks. But the visit was allowed only after she and her ex-husband went to a court-ordered class on "co-parenting." It didn't go well. It is simply part of the divorce business.

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Some visits have been canceled. Her ex-husband tells her one of the boys got sick. Once, a visit was canceled because the \$35-an-hour supervisor couldn't make it.

More and more, she notices her sons disrespect her when she does see them. It's that alienation thing.

"I just want it to be over," she says.

Those words could be put on a plaque outside Family Court. And below those words could be the words "Forget About It." Because it is almost never over as long as an ex-wife or ex-husband wants to keep up the competition — keep filing charges and making motions and using Family Court as a marital boxing ring.

"I don't have a problem letting the boys go to him," says Pamela. "But he wants to erase me from their lives."

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