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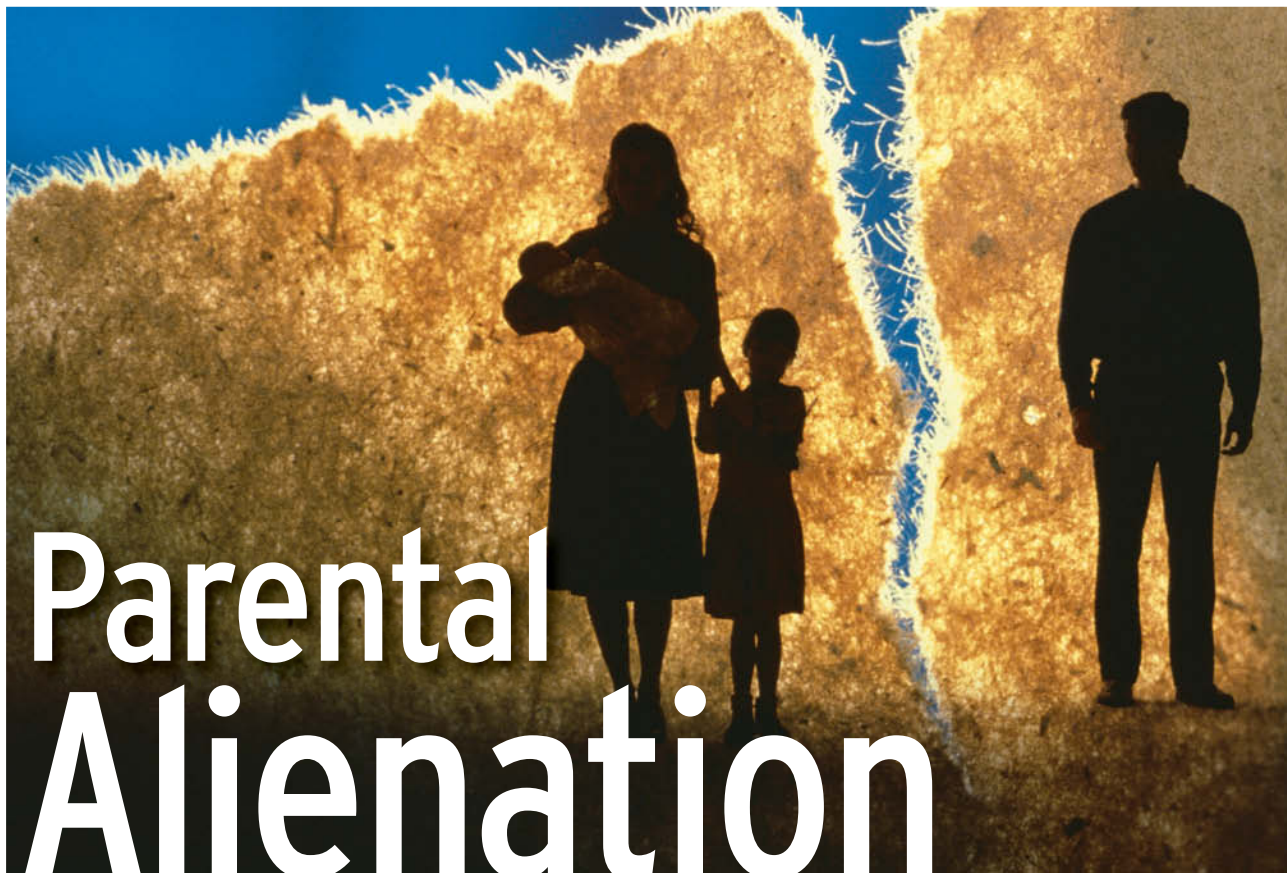
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Anna Dylan Brooks

Aaron Rosenfeld

**metro** » cover story



**Parental Alienation**

Children suffer most from their parents' inability to resolve conflict in a healthy way.

Ronelle Grier | Contributing Writer

**M**y son lives around the corner from me, and we have not spoken since 1985," said Brian (not his real name). "I learned he was getting married when I read it in the *Jewish News*. I have two grandkids I've never met."

Don (not his real name), another divorced father, became estranged from his three children after his ex-wife began to thwart his parenting time and turn the kids against him. One of his two sons committed suicide; Don's name is not listed on the headstone, and he has not spoken to his other children since the funeral in 2010.

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Marine Cpl. David George

**Honoring Veterans**

JWV Commander David George was a Marine on the spot in the "Forgotten War."

Bill Carroll | Contributing Writer

**W**earing his lucky mezuzah around his neck, Marine Pfc. David George spent a few months during the Korean War dashing around that country's mountainous terrain "spotting" targets for bombardment by U.S. Navy ships — while bullets constantly whizzed over his head.

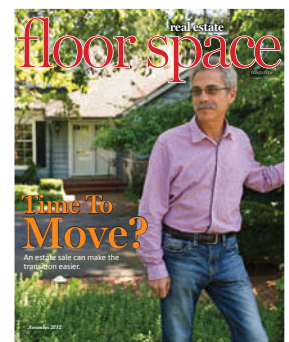
Fortunately, he escaped without wounds. "George displayed outstanding ability and professional skill," reads his commendation. "Under enemy attacks, he expressed complete disregard for his personal safety by exposing himself to intense hostile mortar and small arms fire ... as he voluntarily directed accurate and devastating artillery fire on the enemy."

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# Parental Alienation

Children suffer most from their parents' inability to resolve conflict in a healthy way.

Ronelle Grier | Contributing Writer

## CONTINUED FROM THE COVER

Both of these men have been subjected to a social dynamic known as parental alienation, characterized by the seemingly unreasonable hatred and rejection of one parent during or after a divorce. The contempt is most often aimed at the father, although mothers also can become targets of their children's negativity.

According to Robert Hack, Bloomfield Hills psychotherapist and divorce counselor, parental alienation happens among

couples whose divorces are considered high-conflict, which is about 20 percent of all divorces, according to statistics from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Attorneys and therapists who work with these families agree

that the children are the ones who suffer the most from their parents' inability to resolve conflict in a healthy way.

"Parental alienation is a form of child abuse," said Hack, who is working on developing new legislation for high-conflict divorces through an ad hoc committee of the State Bar of Michigan. He said there is an urgent need for education among attorneys who practice family law and mental health professionals.

Despite most couples' good intentions and promises to stay together "for better or worse," almost half of today's marriages end in divorce. While childless couples may be able to go their separate ways when a marriage ends, the situation is far more complicated for those who have children.

"Two people may no longer be marriage partners, but they will always be parenting partners," said family law attorney Richard Victor of Victor & Victor PLLC in Bloomfield Hills. "It's important to maintain an open line of communication and also to give the children permission to love both of their parents."

Don remembers a holiday when he arrived at the home of his ex-wife and

children to take the kids to his mother's house for a holiday dinner. Because it was not one of his specified parenting days, an argument ensued when his ex-wife pulled up and found him at the front door. After some angry words were exchanged, Don drove away. The next day, he was served with a Personal Protection Order (PPO).

Don said the courts "give out PPOs like candy on Halloween;" however, Victor said judges take a harsh view of parents who frivolously try to obtain court orders as a form of manipulation.

"PPOs should be used, not abused," said Victor.

Don went to court to fight the order, and the judge ruled that Don had to pick his children up at the police station on his parenting days. When his ex-wife would bring the kids to the station to meet him, they refused to get into his car. The next courtroom visit, which included negative testimony about Don from a local psychiatrist whom he had never met, resulted in an order for supervised visits at the HAVEN shelter in Pontiac, although Don said there was no record of abuse. After an argument with his daughter during one of these supervised sessions, the HAVEN staff refused to allow any more visits at their facility.

"My daughter is going to be 18 in March; my son is 16. What am I supposed to do?" he asked.

He saw his daughter at her high school homecoming football game that he attended at the invitation of a friend.

"I learned she was a pompop girl," said Don, who did not approach his daughter at the event. It was the first time he had seen her since his son's funeral in 2010.

## Education Needed

Hack's motivation to help other families stems from his own experience with parental alienation when he was divorced in 1970. At the time of his divorce, the legal and mental health communities were not knowledgeable about parental alienation; the issues were not understood and there were few mechanisms for preventing such situations. He believes ongoing



education and training for lawyers and therapists are the key to counteracting the destructive behaviors that are so damaging to children of divorce.

"Since I couldn't help my kids, I want to help other parents," said Hack. "I consider myself a child advocate. Leave the kids out of it."

Victor said there are steps parents can take to reduce the potential for parental alienation and protect children from its damaging effects.

"A child is the product of two parents," Victor said. "If one parent is bad-mouthing the other, it hurts the child's self-esteem."

He said that when problems arise, parents should try to communicate with each other before involving lawyers or the court system. If this is difficult, he recommends divorce coaching or counseling with a therapist trained to deal with issues pertaining to divorces where children are involved.

If these preliminary problem-solving attempts are unsuccessful, and one parent continues to withhold parenting time or otherwise violate the divorce judgment, he recommends filing a show/cause order with the court.

"It's a felony to withhold parenting time," he said, adding that preventing a child from seeing a parent during specified parenting time for more than 48 hours can be considered parental kidnapping. While Victor believes legal action should be a last resort, he acknowledges that some parents will not comply with the terms of their judgments unless they are made to do so. He said a parent is less likely to repeat the behavior if he/she knows the other parent will not sit back and accept it.

"Many parents are good people who behave badly because they don't recognize the harm they are doing to their children," said Victor. For those parents, counseling or other programs can be helpful.

## Getting Help

One such program is SMILE (Start Making It Livable for Everyone), a mandatory program for divorcing parents with minor children developed in 1989 by Victor, along with Oakland County Circuit Court Judge Ed Sosnick. SMILE now is used throughout the United States and also is licensed in Australia. The program consists of educational material about how divorce impacts families. It provides positive suggestions on how parents can help the children through this difficult time in their lives.

"The goal [of the SMILE program] is to create a conflict-free zone for children," Victor said.

For parents with more serious issues, Hack offers an eight-week communication skills program called ADEPT (After Divorce Effective Parenting Together), which is offered through the Family Division of Oakland County Circuit Court. The program is designed to help parents put an end to constant fighting and ongoing litigation by teaching them how to communicate and solve problems without putting the children in the middle.

Hack, who also produces and moderates a cable television show called *Michigan Divorce Matters*, believes communication is the No. 1 reason for divorce.

According to Victor, communication is also the key to a healthy post-divorce relationship.

"It's important for parents to have open lines of communication after a divorce; they should talk to each other instead of talking 'at' each other."

Because many cases of parental alienation center on custody issues and parenting time, detailed divorce agreements that specify schedules and other factors can go a long way toward minimizing potential conflict.

"Putting 'reasonable and liberal' parenting time in a divorce judgment is a waste of paper," said Victor, who advises clients to be as specific as possible about weekends, holidays, vacations and anything else that could be cause for misinterpretation or argument.



Robert Hack



Richard Victor

“Some of the schedules have been as long as five pages, so parents know exactly where the children will be during winter break five years from now,” said Victor. “It provides stability for parents and children, and it’s an enforceable court order.”

Money is also a major source of contention between divorced couples; it is often used as a means of control or a tool to “buy” a child’s allegiance. As parents argue over who pays for a new winter jacket or the latest video game release, it is the children who are caught in the crossfire.

As with other issues, Victor advises couples to spell out as much as possible in the divorce judgment to avoid future conflict. He recommends including such things as summer camp, birthday parties, bar and bat mitzvahs, religious or private school tuition, health insurance, medical care not covered by insurance, orthodontia, school trips and anything else that is likely to come up over the next several years.

Parents going through a divorce are looking at a small knothole; we’re looking at the whole forest,” Victor said. “The goal is to have lawyers out of your life once the divorce is over, so it’s better to deal with everything now.”

Don agrees. “I had a feeling more needed to be done; I was worried about the kids,” he said, referring to the initial stages of the divorce.

If an original divorce agreement is not specific enough, it can be amended via a post-judgment modification, which, according to Victor, can often be accomplished through Friend of the Court.

Victor said his judgments usually include a provision stating every child has the right to a continued relationship with both parents, and the parents will work together to facilitate that.

“I also recommend including certain communication requirements that obligate parents to share information about the kids’ education, health issues, visits to the doctor and dentist — and no bad-mouthing,” he said.

### Training Needed

Experts agree that training is needed so courts, lawyers and mental health professionals become more adept at recognizing parental alienation in its early stages. Because some parents use litigation as a means of controlling their ex-spouse, the target parent becomes frustrated and depleted, emotionally and financially.

Such is Don’s situation. He did not have the financial resources to continue fighting his ex-wife in court; he also believed further legal action would be futile or make matters even worse because of the children’s negative attitudes toward him.

“There is no such thing as a winner in

a divorce case,” said Victor. “If there’s a winner, that means there is also a loser, and usually it’s the children who lose.”

In her book *Parenting Apart*, parent educator and author Christina McGhee gives five key signs of parental alienation:

- The child has a black-and-white view of his parents, perceiving the alienating parent as good and honest and the target parent as all bad. Negativity toward the other parent eventually turns to hatred and contempt, which is reinforced by the alienating parent.

- The child mimics accusations and opinions about one parent but denies being coached or influenced by the other parent, insisting the ideas are his own.

- The child’s negativity extends to the other parent’s extended family, including grandparents, even if a close relationship existed before.

- The child’s contempt and rejection are not based on actual circumstances, such as abuse or harmful behavior, but rather on seemingly unwarranted or unsubstantiated reasons.

- The child consistently rejects one parent and refuses to see or spend time with him or her, regardless of how close their bond was in the past.

Parental alienation can extend to grandparents and other extended family members. Victor, founder of the national Grandparents Rights Organization, has done extensive work to enhance and protect the legal rights of grandparents who have been ostracized following a death or divorce. He was instrumental in the passing of a state grandparent visitation law in 2004 that gives grandparents the opportunity to petition the court and show that the lack of contact is harmful to the children.

“I feel disappointed that I never get to see my grandchildren,” said Don’s mother, who is 84. “I’ve never been invited to a bar or bat mitzvah. People get divorced; I understand that, but you don’t have to be nasty.” □

### Divorce Resources

SMILE (Start Making It Livable for Everyone)

Oakland County Circuit Court  
[www.oakgov.com/courts/foc](http://www.oakgov.com/courts/foc)  
(248)-858-0453

(MIPA) Michigan Inter-Professional Association on Marriage, Divorce and the Family

For lawyers, judges and mental health professionals in the field of family law  
[www.mipaonline.org](http://www.mipaonline.org)

AFCC (Association of Family and Conciliation Courts)  
[www.afccnet.org](http://www.afccnet.org)

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