

# KIDNAPPED

By Jane Scott, Society Manager

Imagine that you are a parent and your children have been kidnapped. You are frantic and you call the police. They launch a nation wide search with the hopes of reuniting you with your children.

Friends and relatives call to offer support. Strangers organize search parties and launch fundraisers. It is the news of the day on the radio and television. It is national news!

Imagine, now, that you are a parent and your children have been alienated from you by their other parent, the custodial parent. You have been denied access and contact via telephone has been severely curtailed if not eliminated. You are a good and loving parent, responsible, not neglectful, and non-abusive. You have a court order granting you joint custody and reasonable and fair access. You make many attempts at contacting your estranged or ex-spouse but you are continuously denied contact with your children. You cannot go to the police. This is a family matter. The loss is no less than if a stranger had kidnapped your children.

Friends question what it was that you must have done to create this situation. Your credibility and reputation come under scrutiny. The loss is no less than if a stranger had kidnapped your children but it is not nationwide news. Strangers who have heard the other parent's story look at you like you are guilty of some horrendous crime. You come under attack, all without any evidence to substantiate your ex-spouses allegations.

Imagine the frustration, anger, anguish and fear.

Your only recourse is to go to court. Although you may get into court in as little as a few days, it may take months and the usual result is insistence that the custodial parent allow access. If that parent leaves court and continues to deny access you will have to go back to court again and again and again.

Only after repeated violations of court orders are there consequences for the parents who breach custody/access orders. On the rare occasion, consequences may include fines, reduced support payments, imprisonment or a change in custody orders. More often there are no consequences or the alienated parent runs out of money for lawyers and psychologists and frequently severe psychological damage has already been done by that time.

According to Dr. Richard Gardner, Clinical Professor of Child Psychiatry, in New York, PAS is a disorder which arises almost exclusively in separation or divorce situation where child custody is an issue. One parent embarks upon a campaign of denigration of the other parent. While this is not particular to any gender it is mostly mothers that institute such a campaign and fathers are usually the victims, simply because most often mothers are the custodial parents. This is not simple brainwashing. Parents systematically undermine the relationship the child has with the other parent by word, deed and attitude.

The degree of alienation can be mild, moderate or severe. In the most severe of cases the children are either openly hostile to the "hated" parent or are paralyzed with fear when in the presence of that parent.

Children in the severe category are quite disturbed and often frantic. They share in their mother's paranoid fantasies about the father. Statistics show us that this behaviour is exhibited in some degree, in 90% of separation/divorce situations where custody of children is an issue.

Children, who grow up in this environment will likely bear the scars of this experience for the rest of their lives and whether the relationship, with their estranged parent, can be restored is questionable. The impact on these children

A parent who is a victim of parental alienation suffers tremendously however it is the the children that suffer the most with long lasting psychological trauma. Every child is entitled to two loving parents whenever possible as long as there is no abuse or neglect. Children learn to be adults by modeling their parents and each parent has something substantial to offer his/her children. To deny a child access to a relationship with a parent is seriously harmful to a child.

What motivation would a parent have for denying access? I think there are as many answers as there are people who do it. Most often it is centred around control and custody of the children.

What can be done about this? There is no simple solution. The first step is raising awareness about this tragic situation that is more common than you may think.

We need to raise the consciousness of society and I hope I have done that for you here tonight. I have prepared a handout with websites, which Kim will pass out to you. I encourage you to read more about this very real danger to society and I also encourage you to discuss this within your personal network of people. Please continue raising awareness so that this can be stopped.

In December 1998, A Report of the Special Joint Committee on Child custody and access was released. It is called "For the Sake of the Children" and is was based on a number of forums held across the country designed to review the divorce act. It was done for the Parliament of Canada and contains 48 recommendations. One of those recommendations was that all parents entering into a divorce/separation should attend compulsory classes and counseling sessions so that they are fully aware of the consequences to their children. Another was that joint custody should be mandatory in all divorces unless there were severe circumstances involved, such as sexual abuse, physical abuse, prostitution, or drugs. The adversarial nature of the court system has spawned a divorce industry which is the sole means of support for a variety of professionals (i.e. lawyers and psychologists).

A mandatory "joint custody" clause would all but eliminate this industry and give divorced and separated parents their children back, rather than have them become weapons to be waged in a battle of power and control.

This report, released two years ago, has been buried on the back burner. No action or change in the Divorce Act has ensued because of it. "Further study required has been the official line." It is time to change the Divorce Act in Canada.

Imagine a society where all children living through divorce or separation of their parents can feel safe and loved and free to love and be with both parents.