

Divorce-Related Malicious Parent Syndrome

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Divorce-Related Malicious Mother Syndrome was described originally by Turkat (1995). When this initial report was published, the disorder had been observed only in females. Recent case material has emerged which suggests that the abnormality may be gender neutral. To facilitate proper scientific investigation, the taxonomic label and diagnostic criteria have been changed accordingly. Divorce-Related Malicious Parent Syndrome is a significant clinical and legal problem, which remains in dire need of pertinent research and analysis.

KEY WORDS: malicious mother syndrome; divorce.

Child custody and visitation disputes can bring out the worst in people (Gardner, 1987, 1989; Turkat, 1994). Parents with no psychiatric history and no prior entanglements with the law may find themselves engaging in highly problematic behavior during the course of a custody or access dispute. Some parents deliberately interfere with the other's visitation [see Turkat (1994) for a review of the literature on child visitation interference] and sometimes, parents manipulate their offspring to hate the other parent [see Gardner (1989) for a description and review of Parental Alienation Syndrome]. In certain circumstances, the fighting over children can escalate to violence.

Turkat (1995) described a pattern of vicious parental behavior observed in these types of family law disputes. In the 1995 article, Turkat discussed the nature of the Divorce-Related Malicious Mother Syndrome and provided specific diagnostic criteria to facilitate clinical, legal and scientific investigation and analysis. As noted by Ammerman and Hersen (1992), ". . . the first and most difficult step in assessment is identification" (Ammerman

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and Hersen, 1992, p. 5) and as Adams (Adams and Cassidy, 1993; Adams and Haber, 1984) points out, "The clinician begins by noticing the regularity by which certain characteristics occur together and conceptualizing them as a diagnostic entity (Adams and Cassidy, 1993, p. 5). Accordingly, significant care was taken to provide highly specific criteria for identifying cases of Divorce-Related Malicious Mother Syndrome (Turkat, 1995).

At the time of providing the initial clinical description of this abnormality, the author had only observed the phenomenon in females. As such, the disorder was appropriately labeled, "Divorce-Related Malicious *Mother* Syndrome." However, since the original publication of that manuscript, case material has emerged which suggests that this pattern of behavior may not be gender-specific.

The purpose of the present manuscript is to recommend that the syndrome described previously by Turkat (1995) be relabeled as Divorce Related Malicious Parent Syndrome. The modified criteria for the disorder are presented in Table I. To expedite appropriate research and clinical usage, the criteria for this psychopathologic category remain intact, although the wording has been modified to reflect the gender-neutral nature of the abnormality. The reader should be aware that the present diagnostic entity carries with it a variety of important taxonomic, scientific, clinical, conceptual, and legal issues which have been reviewed in the original manuscript (Turkat, 1995); given space limitations, the reader is referred to that publication.

There are several advantages to modifying the nosologic label and clinical description in the manner proposed herein. For example, the recommended modification enhances the scientific value of the abnormality's

Table I. Diagnostic Criteria For Divorce Related Malicious Parent Syndrome

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1. A parent who unjustifiably punishes his or her divorcing or divorced spouse by:
 - A. Attempting to alienate their mutual child(ren) from the other parent
 - B. Involving others in malicious actions against the other parent
 - C. Engaging in excessive litigation
 2. The parent specifically attempts to deny the child(ren):
 - A. Regular uninterrupted visitation with the other parent
 - B. Uninhibited telephone access to the other parent
 - C. Participation by the other parent in the child(ren)'s school life and extra-curricular activities
 3. The pattern is pervasive and includes malicious acts towards the other parent including:
 - A. Lying to the children
 - B. Lying to others
 - C. Violations of law
 4. The disorder is not specifically due to another mental disorder although a separate mental disorder may co-exist
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characterization, as diagnostic criteria should be as reflective of the actual phenomenon as is possible. It should also be noted that by changing the disorder's description to be gender neutral, it increases the probability that research will not be restricted to any one particular sex. The author is presently unaware of any significant disadvantage to the proposed taxonomic modification.

In considering the criteria herein, the reader should appreciate that it is most likely that the proposed diagnostic attributes will change, as the research data begin to accumulate. At the present time, there is a lack of scientific information about Divorce-Related Malicious Parent Syndrome. Given the severity of the clinical and legal problems it presents (Turkat, 1995, 1997a, b), this situation requires significant attention. Hopefully, the modification proposed in the present manuscript will contribute to the scientific pursuit of understanding and managing the significant clinical and legal problems that accompany cases of Divorce-Related Malicious Parent Syndrome.

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