



HOW ACCESS ISSUES CAN AFFECT CHILDREN

Access can be a tricky situation for parents to manoeuvre, but it is often the children who suffer most in this fight. Rajan Chettiar explains how parents can help make access less of a trial for themselves and for their children.

Q: What is parental alienation and how it does occur?

A: Parental alienation arises when the mother deprives the father of access to the children by making negative statements about the father to the children, winning sympathy through allegations of loneliness when the children are with the father or by promising treats if the children stay with her and not have access to the father. The father may then respond by not returning the children to the mother on time or removing the children from the mother without notice to cause her emotional stress. Parents may think they're hurting each other, but the actual victims in this situation are the children.

Q: How do warring parents affect their children's wellbeing?

A: While the emotional hurt caused to either spouse in a divorce is understandable, it's important to not cause the same hurt and damage to the children. Children who are forced to take sides can become guilty and even feel responsible for the breakdown of their parents' relationship. The psychological and emotional damage inflicted can affect their studies and their growth. These children often grow up to become dysfunctional, unbalanced, and have problems in their future relationships or even become divorcees themselves.

Q: What can parents do to make access easier for all parties?

A: Mothers will need to put the children's interest first by slowly letting go of her hurt and forgiving the father for what has happened. While the mother takes the time needed to heal, the father may still face access problems. He will need to wait patiently and give the mother the time she needs to come to terms with the divorce before granting him full access.

If the children have genuine issues with the father, the mother should discuss it with the father or seek counselling for the children. In the meanwhile, the father can take baby steps to rebuild his relationship with the children by finding out the children's interests and wishes, and maintain communication with gifts, cards, emails or text messages. The father needs to be patient, understanding and work at the children's pace to make the relationship successful.

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Q: But what happens if child access difficulties cannot be resolved?

A: If both parents have tried to resolve their issues and failed to do so, then it's best to seek assistance from a counsellor and a mediator to help find a solution to the issues before going to Court. If this is not a viable option, then the father can file an application in Court for orders for access or enforce earlier access orders. Alternatively, he can apply for the Court to appoint a Child Representative to assist in the case. The Child Representative is not the children's lawyer, but will communicate with the children to find out their wishes regarding access. These findings will then be reported to the Court to help the Court make the relevant access orders. The Child Representative can also make recommendations to resolve the access problem or for a mental health professional to be appointed to assess the child.

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