Post-Separation Abuse Harms Children

There are myriad ways abusers can harm children even after the protective parent escapes

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A person sitting on a chair

Description automatically generated with low confidence

Even abusers recognize how much domestic abuse harms children—but, oddly, they don’t think it applies to their own actions.

In an innovative 2015 study out of [The University of Sydney](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281445639_The_Diverse_Fathering_Practices_of_Men_Who_Perpetrate_Domestic_Violence), researchers interviewed domestic abusers in treatment. All of the men agreed that domestic abuse was harmful to women and children, with most describing it as “devastating and long-lasting.” However, they denied that their own actions had harmed their children and minimized the impact of their actions on their partners and ex-partners. Instead, they blamed the women.

**Abusing Through the Children**

Domestic abusers typically use many of the same coercive and controlling tactics with children as they do with partners and former partners:

Steve gaslit Sally during their relationship by hiding her purse and then secretly making purchases with her credit card. When she asked him about the purchases, he would call her “stingy” and “controlling.” He would hide her keys and unplug appliances, making her think she was losing her mind. The children grew up believing that their mother was unstable. After the divorce, Steve repeatedly asked the children if their mother was still trying to control them as she controlled him.

After years of covert coercive control, Marty locked Cassie out of the home when she filed for divorce. The teenaged children were confused because they did not perceive their dad as abusive. When Cassie was forced to get her own apartment and her children tried to visit her, Marty became overtly coercively controlling of the children, too. He would hide the car keys or turn off the electricity in the garage so they couldn’t pull the car out to visit their mom. He would berate and scream at them, “Why do you want to visit that b--tch?”

Sexually, Marc would not accept Sarah’s “no” for an answer. After separation, Marc similarly violated his children’s boundaries by insisting that his daughter do cheerleading and that his son play football—activities that the children tried to refuse. He tracked his children’s online activity, read his daughter’s diary, and grilled them both with intrusive questions about their mother. He seemed unable to see them as separate people with a will of their own.

Christine consistently put her own desires ahead of her partner’s. She insisted on shared custody. When her children were with her, she would ignore them, party and stay up late with friends. When they told her that they hated staying at her apartment, she shaved their heads as punishment.

Children who spend time with a coercively controlling abuser fearfully monitor the abuser’s mood. They become hypervigilant, learning how to manage what they say and do around their abusive parent both prior to and after a parental separation.

**Domestic Abuse and Custody**

People who abuse their partners may continue to control them through their children for years after they separate or divorce, sometimes referred to as [domestic violence by proxy](https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/in-the-news/documentaries-focus-on-domestic-violence-by-proxy). Abusers who have demonstrated little interest in the children during the relationship sometimes enact a vengeful strategy of seeking shared or even full custody, using the children as pawns to harm the protective parent. This strategy seems to be a fulfillment of the common abusive threat, “If you try to leave me, I will take away the kids.” This hurts the victimized partner and also any child caught in the abuser’s manipulative web.

Evidence of coercive control domestic abuse is highly relevant to considerations of child custody. Coercive control portends poorly for the abuser’s ability to be an empathic, loving, and supportive parent. Interfering with the economic and emotional stability of children’s other parent post-separation is a red flag indicating harm to the best interests of the child. Abusive fathers will sometimes make accusations of [parental alienation](https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/child-custody/children-used-as-pawns-in-court) against the protective parent.

Courts often ignore a history of domestic abuse in making custody decisions. Some state laws have a “presumption” of 50/50 shared custody. “Fathers’ rights” groups have morphed into groups with neutral sounding names such as the National Parenting Foundation, which work to legislate 50/50 custody across the United States. Shared custody may be ideal where parents have historically shown equal dedication and caring with their children. Shared custody is unsafe where there is a history of domestic abuse.

When the domestic abuse history is insufficiently acknowledged, children may be forced into unsupervised parenting time with a domestic abuser. Sometimes the domestic abuser bullies or lies his way to full custody. The result—[children are not protected](https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/children-and-domestic-violence/kids-caught-in-the-crossfire). If someone abuses their adult partner, why would we think a child who is smaller and more vulnerable would be safe with that person?

Recently adopted [Connecticut legislation](https://www.connecticutprotectivemoms.org/a-guide-to-jennifers-law) underscores the importance of child safety and well-being as the primary factor in determining child custody. To learn more, read, “[Jennifer’s Law Addresses Coercive Control in Family Court.](https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/legal/jennifers-law-addresses-coercive-control-in-family-court)” \* Among other points, the law reinforces that it is ultimately safer for a child to have one protective parent as a primary caretaker rather than two parents sharing custody when one of those parents is a coercively controlling abuser.

* ***Only Connecticut, California and Hawaii have enacted similar coercive control laws to Connecticut’s, and Massachusetts, Maryland and South Carolina are working on bills, though Maryland’s stalled in 2018. The proposed Massachusetts Act, which is part of Bill 1123, was first filed in February 2021; only recently was given an order authorizing the joint committee on the Judiciary to make an investigation and study of* An Act to empower and protect survivors of domestic violence *.***