

IMPASSES *Of* DIVORCE

THE DYNAMICS
AND RESOLUTION OF
FAMILY CONFLICT

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vate disputes and resistances to making divorce settlements, no one element is usually sufficient to maintain chronic conflict. Typically, a family is locked at more than one level. The greater the number of layers or components of the impasse, the more complex and entrenched the dispute. While there are numerous ways in which impasses can be generated and maintained, it is useful to identify some prototypical examples illustrating the three levels of impasse in mutual interaction.

For individuals with vulnerable self-images, traumatic separations are particularly humiliating (intrapsychic level). Their defensive need to recoup self-esteem and see the other parent as defective (for example, morally reprehensible or mentally disturbed) coincides with desperate and outrageous separation behaviors, providing behavioral confirmation of their emerging negative views (interactional level). These parents also tend to gather an army of supportive others who will espouse their cause and testify to their victimization. These affirmations consensually validate the negative reconstruction of the ex-spouse and reconstitute a more positive sense of self. Entering the public arena of the court, the presence of a formal audience, while offering possible vindication, is also potentially threatening to these narcissistically vulnerable parents, because any questioning of their views further attacks self-esteem and redoubles their need to fight (external level).

Separating spouses with paranoid tendencies who jealously guard, harass one another, and threaten violence, often induce their partners to leave the home suddenly and unexpectedly and to conceal their own and the children's whereabouts. These ex-mates are likely secretly to engage the assistance of friends and professionals for protection and to petition authorities for restraining orders. This series of escalating secret maneuvers and withholding of information then becomes reality-based evidence of their ideas of conspiracy and is likely to dramatically increase the paranoid panic and precipitate a catastrophe. Moreover, since most paranoid personalities are also vulnerable to feelings of humiliation and helplessness, an enormous need to take action, to set the record straight, and receive total public vindication is engendered.

A child's stress reaction (to the divorce and parental discord) and symptomatic behavior maintains many long-term disputes between parents with vulnerable self-esteem. While one parent tries to protect the child, proving the other is to blame for the child's problems, in defense the other attempts to prove him- or herself capable of good or better parenting, frequently making flagrant unilateral decisions. In a vicious cycle, the fight that ensues increases the child's disturbed

