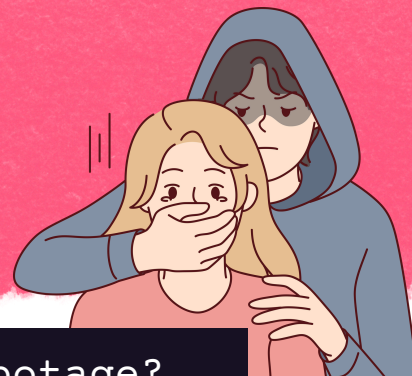


Have you heard of Child and Mother Sabotage? (aka CAMS)



What is Child and Mother Sabotage?

Child and Mother Sabotage (CAMS), is a term for how coercively controlling male abusers intentionally sabotage the child's relationship with their mother.

CAMS IS AN EXAMPLE OF COERCIVE CONTROL AND POST SEPARATION ABUSE.

THE TACTICS

- Slandering the mother to the child and in front of the child
- Telling the child that their mother doesn't love them
- Blocking the mother's ability to spend time with the child & blocking communication
- Twisting events & conversations to paint the mother in a bad light
- Making *false* allegations of abuse in family court



THE EFFECT ON KIDS

- The child believes that half of them must be bad
- The child feels unlovable
- The other child feels abandoned by their mother
- The child believes their mother isn't safe based on false allegations

The long-term impact



*Children face many **life-long** challenges as a result of this form of abuse!*

LOW SELF-ESTEEM DEPRESSION ANXIETY ADDICTION ABUSIVE ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS
DIFFICULTY TRUSTING OTHERS EATING DISORDERS LEARNING DIFFICULTIES SUICIDAL IDEATION

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Child and Mother Sabotage is Child Abuse

THE EFFECT ON TEENS

- Learn “destructive patterns about the use of violence and power in relationships,” which may be carried into adulthood and transferred inter-generationally
- Experience “narrower space for action” (a limitation on their freedom to say and do things), which may compromise development
- Internalize victim-blaming attitudes and/or harmful views about unequal power relations between men and women
- Be at higher risk of severe injury, death threats, and/or homicide
- Experience challenges in school such as learning difficulties and disengagement

Signs To Look Out For



A child appears to have only one parent and another parent is missing from the child's life



A grandparent or someone else, instead of a mother is listed as an emergency contact



Badmouthing a mother, especially in front of the child



Father limits a mother's contact with their child and tries to interfere with her parenting time



Attempt to block a mother from having access to the child or the child's information, including grades and extra curriculum schedule and activities



Father acts like a victim (in the situation he's created), in order to gain your sympathy

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Child and Mother Sabotage is Child Abuse

How is CAMS an example of Coercive Control?

Coercively controlling male abusers sabotage the children's relationship with their mother in order to:

- enforce their belief that the mother and children should be obedient to them and their authority in the family. (For such abusers, children are considered a possession, beneath the mother who is also seen by the abuser as a possession).
- abuse the mother by indirectly hurting her relationship with her children. One study reported an abuser said:

"Why [attack] her mothering? It was just to assert power over her ... attacking something ... that probably means the most to her," – perpetrator quoted in Heward-Belle 2017, p.8–9).

Examples of this are available globally, such as in this study from South Africa:

"He'd tell me I'm a crap mother, that someone else should be looking after my children, that I don't know what I'm doing. He would undermine me and say this in front of my children,"
(Dekel and Abrahams, 2023, p.6).

Recognition of CAMS can also help professionals see how male abusers exploit the family courts in order to succeed in their post-separation abuse of the mother, including sabotage of mother–child relationships.

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How does CAMS relate to children taking the side of the (male) abuser post-separation, and why is this suspicious?

Post-separation, some children may seem to take the side of the abuser. If there is a backdrop of family violence, this behaviour cannot be taken at face value. Rather, it should be explored for whether it is a continuation of a child's defence and survival strategy used during abuse, i.e.

- Children facing abuse from a parent are less likely than an adult to be able to “fight” or “flee”. They are more likely to “freeze”, “submit” and “trauma bond” or develop a coerced trauma attachment to the abuser to try to keep safe and avoid harm (Bancroft, [2022a](#); [2022b](#); [Lahav et al., 2019](#); [Santos et al. 2023](#)).
- For a child, attempting to please an abusive father by playing, smiling, laughing, or mimicking/responding to their demands for “care” and “affection” may be a way of deflecting the abusive father's aggression or managing it, based on the situation they are trapped in. As noted by Jenny Kitzinger ([2015, p.176](#)): ‘it is precisely the children who are most vulnerable, eager to please and easily-led who obstinately reject any idea that they have ‘rights’ and refuse to develop a ‘sense’ of their own power. Such unexpected conviction from the most vulnerable children is understandable if we accept that a ‘sense’ of powerlessness may in fact reflect their external ‘reality’. Children are sometimes hopeless because there is no hope, helpless because there is no help and compliant because there is no alternative. Powerlessness is in the food they eat, the air they breathe and the beds they sleep in. As one 9-year-old, explaining her own abuse, said simply: “He was big and I was little. I had to do what he said...”

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In such cases, it is unlikely that the child will step out of this behaviour until they are safe from the perpetrator father's harm and control. This is because:

- A child who has had an abusive father may be traumatized or at minimum frightened, having been exposed to an ever-present threat and intimidated by the abusive father. A child may therefore have seen that power and coercion 'works', and that it is safer not to identify with the victim-surviving mother who is under attack.
- They may also have been directly abused by that father. (Generally, false allegations of rape and abuse are rare, and children tend not to make false allegations of abuse, so any abuse report should be taken seriously and explored fully).
- Though they do not often exhibit this in court, many abusive fathers make it clear to the child victims that they hate the mother and want to destroy her relationship with her children. In this context, children know they need to fall in line with the abuser father's goals in order to avoid risking their own safety — even if they do not really want to. Displeasing the abusive parent is too dangerous; such children may instinctively suppress their affection for their other parent to stay on the dangerous parent's good side.
- It does not require ongoing, persistent physical violence for a child (or adult) to learn that it is too dangerous to anger the abusive father — more 'subtle' abuse, which is rarely obvious to an outside observer, can also create that fear. Most abusive relationships entail patterned behaviours of ongoing abuse.

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How is CAMS part of a pattern of abuse?

The idea of child-parent relationship sabotage is not new. It is long-established in academic research, particularly research in the domestic violence field, such as the power and control wheel noted above.

- McHale ([1997](#)) and Feinberg et al. ([2012](#) p.3) studied how an abusive parent can undermine the other parent with 'criticism, disparagement, and blame', taking a 'competitive approach' against the other parent in attempting to gain 'authority or warmth' with a child at the other parent's expense.
- Lamela et al ([2016](#)) studied how abusive parents make 'disparaging communications to the child about the absent coparent, sabotaging the other coparent's parental authority', and interfering in other ways in the other parent's relationship with the child.
- Researchers have identified abusive fathers stopping new mothers from looking after their babies ([Buchanan, 2018](#)), with news reports of courts denying children from receiving [breastfeeding](#), because it was deemed as interfering with the father's visitation. Others have reported abusive fathers stopping mothers and children from playing and having fun together ([Katz, 2022](#)).

Post Separation Abuse

Because abusers lose direct control over their adult targets after separation, their focus on the children as a vehicle for continuing their abuse of the mother increases post-separation. [Spearman et al \(2022, p.1225\)](#) define post-separation abuse as **"the ongoing, willful pattern of intimidation of a former intimate partner including legal abuse, economic abuse, threats and endangerment to children, isolation and discrediting, and harassment and stalking."**

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Spearman et al (2022) explain why post-separation abuse is likely to be male-on-female, involving male perpetrators using children, courts and litigation against female victims. They explain that 'mothers are more vulnerable to 'post-separation abuse' through custody litigation for several reasons, including:

- gender differences in economic power (wage disparities between partners),
- gendered discourses of parenting that undervalue mothers' unpaid domestic labour, and
- misogynistic norms that position mothers as obstructive or vindictive.

Additional research supports this analysis:

Harrison ([2008: p.393](#)) studied **how a perpetrator-father used the children and the court-ordered supervised contact to continue abusing the mother, despite not being in contact with her. The perpetrator-father's conduct taught the children not to respect their mother, to treat her abusively, and to feel compelled to do so for fear of the perpetrator-father:**

"He's nasty, verbally abusive. Through the children, he'll say things to the children about me and they'll come back and tell me what he has said about me... even though the contact centre is public."

Several other researchers have studied how litigation abuse is a form of post-separation abuse, where the law is used to exert control over and continue abuse of victim-survivor mothers.

"A father who abuses the mother has indicated that he cannot put the children's interests first, since their mother's abuse, by undermining her well-being is inherently harmful to children."

Joan S. Meier,
Professor of Clinical Law, Director of Domestic Violence Legal Empowerment and Appeals Project, GW Law School



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Child and Mother Sabotage is Child Abuse

So, what do health and legal professionals therefore need to consider about children taking the side of the (male) abuser in CAMS?

A child's apparent warmth towards the abusive father may be based on the defense strategy that they need in order to survive. This applies to situations when they are:

- Placed in a room with their abusive father - such as during supervised or unsupervised contact
- Asked about their abusive parent - such as during a family court evaluation
- Seen and interviewed when the child is aware their abusive father is nearby, and they may have to return to his care.
- Health and legal professionals should also be aware that often perpetrators are master manipulators, influencing not just children but also adults, including professionals involved in these cases.

What Teachers & Staff Can Do

- Encourage the child's critical thinking;
- Offer 2 different parent teacher conferences, so both parents can be included;
- Do not allow the father to talk negatively about the other parent in front of the child;
- Get informed about **Child and Mother Sabotage**.

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