

Alternatives to Parental Alienation: Acknowledging the Broader Scope of Children's Emotional Difficulties During Parental Separation and Divorce

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The concepts of parental alienation in general and of the Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), in particular, have become very popular but often misused among family law and mental health professionals concerned with children's responses to separation and divorce. Both the generic and the specific refer to circumstances under which one or both parents act in such a way as to estrange a child from the other parent. Jane Doe, for example, potentially alienates her preschooler son from his father by confessing her new-found hatred for her ex-husband to the child. John Smith may equally well be alienating his teenage daughter from her mother by condemning his ex-wife in conversation with his new girlfriend while the daughter is nearby. These actions, regardless of intent, are acknowledged in the psychological literature as having destructive and even abusive effects on children regardless of age, and are often associated with psychological and interpersonal distress in the children.

Psychologist Richard Gardner² first presented alienation as a specific syndrome to describe his experience of children of divorce who are "preoccupied with deprecation and criticism of a parent - denigration that is unjustified and/or exaggerated" (p. 226). He discussed the sociological pressures that lead parents to alienate, the tendency of estranged mothers to alienate more than fathers, and the intentional and unconscious maneuvers through which one parent can alienate a child from his or her other parent.

New Hampshire psychologist Peggie Ward and attorney Campbell Harvey³ together have elaborated upon the alienation construct by distinguishing among the types of alienation (mild, moderate, overt and severe) and the alienating behaviors

characteristic of each type via illustration of both characteristic parenting behaviors and samples of children's resulting distress. They furthermore make broad recommendations for the types of education, mediation, psychotherapy, and legal remedies best suited to alienating families.

Gardner's and Ward and Harvey's presentations have succeeded in defining PAS and bringing the term to the popular attention of mental health professionals, attorneys, and litigants alike. Indeed, charges of alienation both in and out of court have reached epidemic proportions. It is now not unusual, for example, for an estranged parent (regardless of former marital status) to seek legal counsel or mental health services citing the effects of parental alienation from the time of the first phone contact. Unfortunately, it is very easy for such a presumption of alienation to take on a life of its own without proper consideration of the many alternative (and often more likely) causes of a child's distress during parental separation and divorce.

The View Through a Funnel

The presumption that a child's distress during her parents' separation or divorce is the result of alienation is often a confusion of cause and effect. Examples from both the physical and social sciences demonstrate that a cause can not necessarily be inferred from an effect. Geneticists, for example, would be grossly mistaken to assume that all blue eyed children (*effect*) were born of two blue-eyed parents(*cause*).⁴ Psychologists, as a second example, can correctly claim that a very large percentage of child molesters (*effect*) were themselves molested as children (*cause*), but not that a large percentage of molested

children (*cause*) will become abusers (*effect*).⁵ This logical dilemma can best be conceptualized using the metaphor of a funnel: A given outcome at the narrow end can not logically be associated with one among many causes at the broad end.

This principle must be applied to understanding children's distress during parental separation and divorce. The nature and severity of childhood distress associated with divorce has been studied in depth⁶ and is often correlated with such factors as (a) children's age at the time of parental separation, (b) the degree of emotional security present within the home prior to the parental separation, and (c) the degree of explicit conflict witnessed by the child. In many (if not all) such studies, the single best predictor of a child's distress and dysfunction during and after parental divorce is the duration and severity of the parents' conflict. Thus, one can reasonably infer that a child of divorcing and highly conflicted parents will be highly distressed.⁷ The reverse reasoning, however, is not sound.

Just as one could never infer from an unknown child's apparent distress (*effect*) that his or her parents must be conflicted and divorcing (*cause*), one can not reasonably infer that the distress of all children of divorcing parents (*effect*) must be the result of alienation (*cause*). Observing, for example, that Johnny refuses to go on visits with dad, curses his name, or becomes obviously anxious in his presence is not sufficient grounds for concluding that his mother is actively alienating the child. To jump to this conclusion without first ruling out alternative causes of the child's distress is to potentially harm the child and one or more of his caregivers in ways which, particularly when codified in a guardian *ad litem*'s report, or in a formal custody or visitation order, may be profound and long lasting.

Evaluating the dynamics of a separating or divorcing family, in general, and evaluating the distress of a child of divorce, in particular, requires comprehensive, unbiased assessment of all parties.⁸ To conclude that alienation is active requires documentation of specific parental behaviors effecting the child including, "brainwashing," "harassment," "programming,"⁹ or other efforts which more or less explicitly turn a child against his or her other parent. Second hand "hearsay" reports, while often a staple of office-bound mental health professionals, must be considered carefully, keeping in mind (a) historical, political, and cultural trends which have blamed the mother while giving her the bulk of parenting responsibility, (b) many estranged partners' willingness to blame the estranged co-parent (a malicious but not an alienating behavior unless and until the child is pulled into the innuendo), and (c) the potential limitations and biases of reports from well-intentioned guardians *ad litem*, attorneys, officers of the court, and mental health professionals.

Ruling Out the Alternatives to Alienation

When a child of separating or divorcing parents evidences negative feelings toward one parent in the range from strong ambivalence about contact (e.g., resistance to visits) to explicit hatred, and in the absence of documentable evidence of alienation, all possible causes of such feelings and behavior must be considered. The following eight categories can serve as guidelines for inquiry into these alternatives.

1. Normal Separation Anxiety

A child's ambivalence toward or outright refusal to visit with a parent must be viewed within the context of normal development. Most children in the period from infancy through the preschool years evidence epochs of increased anxiety separating from objects of attachment.¹⁰ Under the stress of a major family transition such as parental separation or divorce, with the common accompaniments of relocation to a new home, neighborhood and school, normal fears of separation and loss can be intensified among young children and can recur after periods of quiescence in older children.

Assuming the presence of a healthy bond between a child and each of his or her parents, normal separation anxiety can often be distinguished from the other dynamics discussed here by its re-emergence at all points of separation, no more so when separating from one parent than the other.¹¹ The symptoms of normal separation anxiety would also be expected to calm soon after the point of transition, whereas anxiety associated with many of these other dynamics persists long after the actual transition.

2. Child Abuse and Neglect

A child who has been psychologically, verbally, physically or sexually abused, or otherwise neglected by a parent, may understandably voice strong negative feelings about that parent. Such a child may experience strong anxiety or resistance around the time of visits with the abusive or neglectful parent as manifest by regressive symptoms (e.g., bedwetting [enuresis], soiling [encopresis], thumb sucking), fear, or outright refusal to accompany that parent.⁴ This can be the case even in the absence of physical signs of abuse (e.g., bruises), in the absence of abuse prior to the parental couple's schism, and despite a child's explicit denials. In considering abuse as a possible cause of distress in a child whose parents are separating or divorcing, several factors must be kept in mind:

- (a) Reports of suspected abuse are subject to mandated reporting laws.
- (b) A child's avoidance of one parent may be the result of abuse associated with that parent but not caused by (and sometimes not even known by) that parent. Such has been the case, for example, when non-custodial parents have taken in roommates or boarders who abuse during a child visits.
- (c) The evaluation of a suspected child victim must remain sensitive to the potential for retraumatization during inquiry as well as the potential for inadvertently leading the child's responses. Such investigations are best conducted by skilled mental health professionals and in accordance with established guidelines.¹²
- (d) The use of abuse allegations as a manipulative tool in custody litigation is, unfortunately, ever more prevalent.¹³ This destructive tactic must be construed as alienation when the child

is involved or, worse, when the child has been asked to play a role in the manipulation.

3. *A Parent's Inappropriate Behavior or Expectations*

A child may demonstrate fear, avoidance or resistance to spending time with a parent whose behavior is ill-suited to the child's needs without becoming abusive or neglectful. This situation can be manifest in a number of ways.

- (a) "Adultifying" the child: Creating expectations (chores or implicit emotional responsibilities) for a child more appropriately expected of another adult; e.g., the father who asks his preschool daughter to do the laundry, wash the floors and vacuum during weekend visits, or the mother who gossips about her dates with her child.
- (b) "Infantilizing" the child: Treating an older child as if he or she were younger; e.g., the mother who gives her teenage son an inappropriately early bedtime.
- (c) Other examples of inappropriate parent-child "fit" can include parental behavior that doesn't suit a child's physical or intellectual limitations. For example, children with Attention Deficit Disorder often benefit from parental directives offered one at a time. These instances, once identified, are often easily remediated through parent education and can result in a dramatic decrease of the child's distress.

4. *Inappropriate, Unpredictable or Violent Behavior Known to the Child*

Children may be avoidant of spending time with a parent known to have a violent temper, mood swings or other overt substance abuse or psychiatric problems even in the absence of abuse and neglect. Identification of such conditions is often relevant to custody and visitation decisions and may prompt recommendations for the parent to seek medical or psychological evaluation.

A parent who suspects that a former partner may be acting in such a manner (e.g., having mood swings, using substances) faces a difficult dilemma. On the one hand, parents must always act to assure a child's safety. On the other hand, telling a child to beware of an absent parent's unacceptable behavior may constitute alienation; that is, the parent may be negatively influencing the child's relationship with the absent parent. This parent is often well counseled to teach the child about safety and honesty in general terms without specific implications about the other parent, while seeking all available support through legal and mental health channels to assure safety at all times.

5. *Parental Avoidance Due to "Incidental" Causes*

Comprehensive evaluation of a child of separating or di-

vorcing parents must include consideration of everything the child comes to associate with each parent, respectively. Children who seem fearful of contact with one parent may, in fact, be fearful of experiences only incidentally associated with that parent. This can include anything from an abusive neighbor, roommate or boarder (see below) to other less obvious and less malicious culprits. In one instance, a child was found to have a previously undiagnosed allergy to a pet in his non-custodial father's new home. In another case, a child's avoidance of visits with his mother was found to be related to embarrassment about the lack of privacy in her new one-room apartment. Unfamiliar night noises and specific physical discomforts (e.g., beds, toilets, baths) have caused other children to appear to be avoiding contact with a non-custodial parent.

Children's avoidance in this situation is easily distinguished from avoidance caused by many of the other dynamics discussed here by its specificity. When a child eagerly joins a parent to play outdoors or to visit a favorite restaurant but becomes tearful and angry or withdrawn when visiting that parent's home, there is reason to investigate the home as much as or more than the parent. Often, identification of the actual irritant is sufficient to invite change resulting in the child's dramatic relief.

6. *Alienation Via Third Parties*

Professionals involved with children of separation and divorce must recognize that alienation can occur outside of the newly broken nuclear family. New partners, step-parents, roommates and boarders, grandparents, and even well-meaning but biased teachers can effectively alienate a child from a parent even without parental involvement or consent. Although the impact of damning statements from others outside of the immediate family may not be as damaging as such statements heard directly from a parent, the short term effect can be the same. This fact once again prompts the call for unbiased, comprehensive evaluation.¹⁴

7. *The Child's Unassisted Manipulation*

Parents and professionals alike must acknowledge that some children see an opportunity in parental separation or divorce as much as (and sometimes more than) they may feel the distress. Teenagers, in particular, are prone to play one parent against the other for their own personal gain. This behavior is generally unprompted (except perhaps by the peer group), but can certainly grow from the seeds of alienation planted by one parent.

A child's manipulative efforts to split between parents, no less than a child's tears or fears or anger, calls for close communication between separating or divorcing parents regardless of the parents' other differences. Parents must be counseled in all cases to put their own differences second to the child's needs in order to address these concerns as they arise.

8. *Fears for the Absent Parent*

It is not uncommon for children to evidence distress during visits with one parent unrelated to that parent's behavior, anything incidental to the place of the visit, and in the absence of alienation. In this instance, a child may fear for the absent

parent's welfare as a result of that parent's known or suspected self-destructive behavior or incompetence. Such is the case of the child who fears that her mother, if left alone, might act on her suicidal statements, might get hurt by her malicious new boyfriend, might drink or use illicit drugs. These children have been cast in an inappropriately "parentified" role, a role that some children fill with great pride but which is developmentally inappropriate. These family roles and relationships can often be distinguished from the other dynamics discussed here by the presence of other, more generalized or pervasive fears of leaving the parentifying parent alone, including such symptoms as school refusal or social withdrawal.

Summary

It is critical that both legal and mental health professionals be familiar not only with the concept of parental alienation, but also with the many alternative circumstances which are often and easily mistaken for alienation. These include elements of developmentally normal separation anxiety, reactions to abuse, "parentification" or "infantilization" of the child, a parent's inappropriate behavior around the child, avoidance of noxious experiences incidentally associated with the parent, alienation via third parties, the child's intentional manipulation, and fears for the absent parent. When concerned professionals are able to weigh each of these alternatives in the context of a comprehensive family evaluation, the concept of alienation will take on a more appropriate and narrower meaning. More importantly, this broader understanding may decrease the frequency with which incorrect and damaging charges of alienation are heard, charges which often do more harm than good.

Endnotes

1. The author wishes to thank to Attorney Honey Hastings for editorial review and format recommendations.
2. Richard Gardner, "The Parental Alienation Syndrome" in his book, *Family Evaluation and Child Custody Mediation, Arbitration, and Litigation*. Cresskill, NJ: Creative Therapeutics, 1989.
3. Peggie Ward and Campbell Harvey, "Family Wars: The Alienation of Children". *New Hampshire Bar Journal* 1993.
4. In fact, the inheritance of eye color is not a simple case of single cell dominance. All other things being equal, the conditional probability that both parents are homozygotes for a single (theoretical) recessive attribute given that a known child is homozygous for that attribute is .11, or one chance out of nine. That is, there are eight other parenting pairs which can produce the same outcome!
5. David Finkelhor (1984, p.47), for example, in reviewing the relevant literature, finds that a minimum of 23% of perpetrators had been sexually molested as children. Finkelhor summarizes other studies as finding, "ten times as many ... childhood sexual abuse experiences in the background of incest offenders as compared to non-offender controls."

6. See references including: Mavis Hetherington and M. Cox, Long Term Effects of Divorce and Remarriage on The Adjustment of Children. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 1985, 24, 518-530. Mavis Heatherington and N. Kalter, Implication of Parental Divorce for Female Development. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 1985, 24, 538-544. Allan Z. Schwartzberg, The Impact of Divorce on Adolescents. *Hospital and Community Psychiatry*, 1992, 43(6). Judith S. Wallerstein, "The Long Term Effects of Divorce on Children: A Review." *The Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 1991, 30, 349-360. Judith S. Wallerstein, and J.B. Kelly, "The Effects of Parental Divorce: The Adolescent Experience." In, *The Child and His Family: Children at Psychiatric Risk* (E.J. Anthony and C. Koupernik, Eds.). New York: Wiley, 1974. Judith S. Wallerstein and J.B. Kelly, "The Effects of Parental Divorce: Experiences of the Preschool Child." *Journal of Child Psychiatry*, 1975, 14, pp. 600-616. Judith S. Wallerstein and J.B. Kelly, "The Effects of Parental Divorce: Experiences of the Child in Early Latency," and "The Effects of Parental Divorce: Experiences of the Child in Later Latency." *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 1976, 46, 20-32 and 256-269, respectively.

7. Although the manner in which such divorce-related distress might be expressed will differ for each individual including, but not limited to anxieties, depression, behavioral disruptions and/or developmental regression.

8. B.D. Garber, "Practical Limitations in Considering Psychotherapy with Children of Separation and Divorce." *Psychotherapy*, 1994, 31(2), pp. 254-261.

9. See Gardner, 1989, endnote 1.*

10. John Bowlby, Separation Anxiety. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 1960 (41) 89-113, or T.B. Brazelton, *Toddlers and Parents*, 1974.

11. For example, William Hodges, in *Interventions for Children of Divorce* (1991), notes that normal separation anxiety is most commonly seen as, "symptoms at transition from leaving both parents" (p. 171).

12. The American Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) has published applicable guidelines including, "Guidelines for Psychosocial evaluation of Suspected Sexual Abuse in Young Children" and "Guidelines for Psychosocial Evaluation of Suspected Psychological Maltreatment in Children and Adolescents." Contact APSAC at 332 South Michigan Avenue, Suite 1600, Chicago, Illinois 60604.

13. K.C. Faller, D. L. Corwin and E. Olafson, "Literature Review: Research on False Allegations of Sexual Abuse in Divorce." In, *The APSAC Advisor*, Volume 6 (3), Fall, 1993. Also: Richard Gardner, "Differentiation Between True and False Sex Abuse Accusations in Child Custody Disputes." *The Champion*, April, 1994.

14. See Garber, 1994, above.

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