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The Problem of Parental Alienation

“My ex-spouse is alienating my children against me. What can I do about it?”

This is a question that divorce professionals are confronted with more and more these days, as - more and more - divorcing spouses decide that “parental alienation” is the explanation for their troubles with their kids.

Just what are these parents responding to, as they invoke this expression, with all its inflammatory implications? In most cases, what they have experienced is that their children have become less loving and less compliant with them since the divorce, or that they actively complain and resist spending time with them. Divorcing parents are already suffering with the loss of access to their kids that comes when a marriage breaks up. Imagine, then, the knife-in-the-heart feeling when a child complains that even spending this limited amount of time together is unwelcome. How could it be, a father wonders, that my once-loving son who wanted nothing more than to be shooting hoops with me in the yard, will suddenly have nothing to do with me? Or the mom who wonders what happened to that little girl who clung so desperately to her leg, but now seems just

irritated by her presence. What's behind these dramatic changes in attitude? As a parent, when you feel this kind of rejection during a divorce, it's tempting to say that your spouse has been brainwashing your child against you. Then, with "parental alienation" as a cause, it's a short hop to believing that the solution is to fight fire with fire in court. Unfortunately, down that road is usually more pain for the parent and more damage for the child – sometimes irreparable damage to the child's present day happiness and future mental health.

A Little Back Story on Parental Alienation

In the early 1970's, after Ronald Reagan signed into law California's No-Fault Divorce decree, a couple of family therapists in the Bay Area began noticing a significant increase in the number of children having emotional difficulties following a divorce. With the number of divorces skyrocketing, they decided to investigate, and began a research project tracking the mental health of these children over the next half century, continuing even to today.

Something these researchers – Joan Kelly and Janet Wallerstein – noticed early on was presence among these children of a small group of kids who seemed inordinately hostile toward one parent. Not only did they not want to spend time with their parent, but they seemed unflinching and unstinting in their criticism of that parent, even though the evidence suggested that the relationship had been adequate or even good before the divorce. Wallerstein and Kelly noted also a kind of black-and-white thinking among these kids - mom (or dad) is all good, while dad (or mom) is just hateful. They noticed that the ages of these alienated kids seemed to cluster between 9 and 14, an age when children are already developing autonomy from parents, but where their cognitive development may not yet have reached the stage where they can hold competing or conflicting notions of reality simultaneously in their minds. They might not be able to understand, for instance, that although Dad and

Mom are blaming each other, they don't have to choose between the two versions of the story.

Wallerstein and Kelly did not follow up on these findings – they had other fish to fry trying to flesh out their understanding of the effects of divorce on kids. But a child psychiatrist by the name of Richard Gardner took their findings and ran with them. Based primarily on his clinical experience, Gardner proposed that these children's hostility was a result of a kind of mind control practiced by angry parents (mostly moms) with the purpose of cutting their ex-spouses out of their children's lives. Gardner termed this practice "parental alienation," going so far as to propose that an official diagnosis, Parental Alienation Syndrome or PAS, be drafted into the list of approved psychiatric disorders of the American Psychiatric Association.

Gardner's advocacy of this position sparked a firestorm of resistance from women's rights groups who saw it as a scheme to provide an advantage for fathers in custody battles (which was in fact part of Gardner's thinking – that dads were being unfairly treated in court), and, even worse, as way for abusive fathers to regain control over children who had escaped their grasp through divorce. Fathers' rights groups picked up the gauntlet, and the result has been a decade or so of serious battling in the press, in academic journals, and in court between advocates for women and moms versus rights groups for fathers/dads.

While these groups battled for public awareness and for court approval of their opposing positions, serious researchers, academics, and legal scholars were developing a consensus about the validity of parental alienation as a diagnosis and as a legal strategy. Among these experts there is broad agreement today that:

- Parental alienation happens. One parent sometimes poisons the mind of a vulnerable child against the other parent for the purpose of capturing that child's total love and loyalty, and perhaps for financial gain as well.

When that poisoning works to produce a strident, impermeable and irrational hostility toward the targeted parent, that condition in the child is called parental alienation.

- It's pretty rare, at least in this pure form.
- There is not valid research nor sufficient clinical experience with this condition to grant it official status as a clinical "syndrome" or diagnosis.
- Mostly, when divorcing parents bring accusations of alienation against their ex-spouses, what they are referring to is criticisms or complaints (valid or invalid) made in the presence of the child, which then get repeated to the parent bringing the charge. Kids CAN be influenced by this kind of complaining, and they can certainly be damaged by the loyalty conflicts that result. But most children won't be "brainwashed" into an absolute and uncompromising hatred of the targeted parent, which is the generally accepted definition of parental alienation.
- Children often favor one parent over the other following a divorce. Similarly, it's not uncommon for kids to resist contact or closeness with one parent. There are many reasons for this, including poor parenting on the part of the unfavored parent, normal attachment needs (e.g. a toddler who doesn't want to be away from his mom), normal gender identification (a 12 year old boy who'd rather hang out with his dad), availability of resources (a 16 year old girl who wants to live at the house with the big bedroom and a pool). None of these fit the description of parental alienation.
- It is clearly possible that an abusive parent might use the charge of parental alienation to regain access to or control over their children who have escaped them through divorce. It's not clear how often this happens, however.

Parental Alienation, and What to Do about It

As mediators, and as legal and mental health professionals, we have strong opinions about what to do when issues of Parental Alienation arise. These opinions are driven by three considerations:

One, parental alienation, the real thing, not just the complaining variety, is very hard to verify, and even harder to prove in court. And the process of proving it, using custody evaluators and other experts, may seriously damage the child's wellbeing.

Two, "recovery" from parental alienation – that is, the restoration of bonds between the targeted parent and the child – is more likely to occur naturally over time than through court-mandated therapy or other programs. Children of good parents most often "see through" the manipulation of the alienating parent, though it may take years. As children mature cognitively past the adolescent stage of black-and-white thinking, and emotionally past the attachment fears of losing the love of the alienating parent, they are able to risk re-connecting with the lost parent, and forgiving him or her for the transgressions, real or imagined, that caused the alienation in the first place.

Three, the issue of parental alienation is still poorly understood by the judges, lawyers and mental health professionals who will be called upon to determine the case and the course of treatment of your alienated child. You have no assurance that justice will prevail, or that healing remedies will be put in place. The outcome of your legal efforts may be to push reconciliation with your lost child years into the future.

For these reasons, while recognizing the agony of the parent who has been excised from his child's life by a alienating ex-spouse, our general recommendation for targeted parents is to practice patience; to make themselves visibly and vulnerably

available to the child they have lost through alienation; and to wait patiently for the lost child's return.