

Parental Alienation: Alignment, Estrangement, & Refusal

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Parental Alienation

- Wallerstein and Kelly identified parent contact refusal in 1980
- Gardner's Parental Alienation "Syndrome" referred to brainwashing by a parent leading to the child presenting a campaign of denigration of the other parent
- Darnall 1997 attempted to focus more on the alienating parent's behavior



Parental Alienation

- ▶ Warshak 2001
 - ▶ Persistent denigration of the alienated parent
 - ▶ Unjustified, persistent rejection by the child of the parent
 - ▶ Partially the result of the alienating parent's influence
 - ▶ A previously positive relationship with the alienated parent
 - ▶ Rejection might apply to extended family or friends

Child alignment, estrangement, and refusal ?

- ▶ Kelly and Johnston 2001 reformulated:
 - ▶ more nuanced, systems based, multifactor model
 - ▶ focused on the child's estrangement from one parent and alignment with the other
 - ▶ need to differentiate child who resists/refuses contact as a result of a parent's malicious influence or a child who rejects the parent for other reasons with or without an alienating parent
 - ▶ Reasonableness of child's rejection is considered

Child alignment, estrangement, and refusal ?

- Other writers have continued to opine and refine
- *Family Court Review*, Wiley
- Resist/Refuse Dynamic



Parental alienation

- Polarized family situation and professional concept
- Process for assigning blame increases that polarization and doesn't improve outcome
- Irrespective of sole or primary cause models, these families are usually complex and dynamic
- Require family specific understanding
- Costly and time consuming regardless of label
- More extreme alienation cases may not be responsive to any intervention but fortunately are less common

Child alignment, estrangement, and alienation

- ▶ If we expand the conversation . . .
 - ▶ Some families might make progress
- ▶ Continuum of alignment to estrangement in relation to each parent is expected and may change over time
- ▶ Ebb & flow of preferences and gender identification in childhood
- ▶ Can become exaggerated in divorce process

Child alignment, estrangement, and alienation

- Parent's emotional needs may be met by estrangement/alignment
- Some parents
 - deliberately attempt to turn children against the other parent
 - Some make false abuse allegations
 - Some have delusional beliefs that may involve the child or other mental illness
- Child with a healthy attachment to each parent who is now rejecting one is considered alienated
- What other contributors are there to this problem?



Child Specific Contributions to Situation

- Age, cognitive factors, temperament, vulnerabilities, etc.
- Anger about the divorce
- Coping with persistent, contrary information from sparring parents
- Difficulty with transitions and changes
- Unresolved loss and/or trauma
- Developmental stage of thinking
- Developmental delays
- Personality factors



Parent Contributions

- Unresolved divorce emotions/trauma
- Involving children in their divorce disputes by:
 - Over exposing children to information
 - Criticizing child rearing choices
 - Relaying fears to the child that something bad might happen due to the other parent's care
- Unable to differentiate parent-to-parent from parent-to-child relationship
- Personality-control/selfish/lack respect



Parent Contributions (cont.)

- Interference of other people-new spouses, extended family
- Parent rights and parent focus; not child focused
- Abusive parent-to-parent and/or parent-to-child
- Serious mental health issues
- Poor Interpersonal problem solving skills and/or coping skills
- Valid differences in child rearing styl
- Rigid, morally superior parenting

Relational Issues Between Child and Each Parent

- Affinity for favored parent
- Refusal and alignment reinforced by favored parent
- Refusal dealt with passively by favored parent
- Enmeshment with favored parent
- Child's reaction to differences in parenting approaches
- Relationship problems before divorce with alienated parent

Relational Issues Between Child and Each Parent

- Relationship problems as a result of the divorce or divorce related knowledge
- Poor parent-child communication
- Lack of common interests
- Poor personality match
- Alienated parent reactivity to resistance/rejection

Parenting Plan Contributions

- Realities of new life
- Child does not like the schedule
- Interferes with child's interests, socialization
- Child struggles with the changes required of them because of differing environments
- Plan puts child in contact with individuals they don't want to be in contact with
- Differing interpretations of plan, conveyed to child
- Shared decision making has no tie breaker



When There Are Abuse Accusations

- This is a reason to not comply with the time sharing plan
- It happened or it didn't (physical and sexual)
- If it **did**, can a safe and healthy relationship ever be restored
- Must be an admission
- Must be therapeutic intervention

Abuse Accusations (cont.)

- May only minimize not ameliorate the damaging effects to the child and the parent-child relationship
- If it **did not** happen but someone said it did need to determine how that happened
- Can accuser let go of that accusation
- Management and treatment will depend on the answer
- Continued monitoring either way

Abuse Accusations (cont.)

- ▶ Is it abuse if . . .
- ▶ The favored parent is controlling and intrusive?
- ▶ The favored parent is actively undermining an important attachment figure/parental relationship?
- ▶ The favored parent is meeting his/her own needs in lieu of the child's thus seriously interfering with health development?
- ▶ If done consciously and with malicious intent? If not?
- ▶ There is no clear definition of when line is crossed to emotional abuse



What do we do?



??????????

What Have We Tried?-Parenting Plan

- Both parents involved, both have decision making powers
- One parent in charge, other not involved
- One parent in charge, other involved but no decision making power
- Threatening the parent or child with court sanctions
- Sudden change of contact/living arrangements



What Have We Tried?-Interventions

- Individual therapy
- Family therapy
- Co-parenting therapy
- Educational classes
- Group therapy/training
- Parenting Coordination
- Summer camp
- Intensive group therapy/education with similar families

What Do We Do?

- ▶ Prevention-general and family specific
- ▶ educate parents pre-marriage, in marital therapy, etc.
 - ▶ Effective communication, conflict resolution, co-parenting, importance of positive relationships
- ▶ educate parents from first contact with court system
 - ▶ effects of parental estrangement and hostility
- ▶ Educate professionals
 - ▶ Negative advocacy, client enmeshment, domestic violence

What Do We Do?

- ▶ Increase client directed dispute resolution services
 - ▶ Mediation
 - ▶ Collaborative Law
- ▶ Create better Parenting Plans

What Do We Do? (Cont.)

- Early intervention into contact resistance or refusal
 - Contract agreement, voluntary then order
- Analyze factors contributing to noncompliance and provide associated remedies
 - Social Investigation/Parenting Plan Evaluation
 - Guardian ad litem
 - Expedited assessment
 - Plan for dissemination of results

What Do We Do? (Cont.)

- Expedited intervention with competent professionals
- Review of prior information as needed to avoid repeats
- Include all family members in appropriate combinations
co-parenting component
- Confidentiality clarified

What Do We Do? (Cont.)

- Detailed and comprehensive:
 - Parenting plan
 - Treatment protocol-goals, structure, who participates
 - Realistic intervention and progress expectations
 - Path to intervention if problems occur
- Risk/benefit analysis to all components of plan
- Determine how much input the child will have
- Understanding of time and cost limitations

What Do We Do? (Cont.)

- ▶ Support and accountability by attorneys, MHP, the court,
 - ▶ Early, ongoing and vigilant case management by one judge
 - ▶ Removal of MHPs that are polarized
 - ▶ Attorney support of plan and understanding of need for client accountability
- ▶ Team approach
 - ▶ Open minded, mutual respect, space to disagree
- ▶ Limited contact, no contact, supervised contact



What do you do?-Summary

- Support parent-child relationships
- Identify alignment, estrangement, alienation early
- Intervene quickly with support
 - Fit the intervention to the problem
 - Clear plan
 - Everyone committed
 - Method for adjusting
- Do not replicate the alignment/estrangement dynamics