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Parental Alienation: What Is the Solution?

A call to action to combat and eliminate parental alienation.

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Every day I receive emails from alienated parents and extended family members distraught over the suffering of their children as well as their own grief and frustrated by their powerlessness to protect their children from the egregious form of emotional child abuse that is parental alienation. In addition, I get numerous replies to my postings on the topic of parental alienation bemoaning the lack of concrete suggestions and solutions to the problem. I struggle in being unable to offer constructive advice or suggest practical steps that parents and extended family members can take, especially in light of the widespread professional misunderstanding and seeming indifference to the plight of these parents and their children.

Like many commentators, I have only been able to offer bland platitudes in regard to concrete action steps that parents can take to fight against the alienation of their children. I reassure myself that it helps parents to have a label for what they and their children are going through and to know that they are not alone. I urge them to take the high road, and always respond with patience and loving kindness to their children. I tell them to hang in there and never give up. Yet I must admit to parents that their best efforts may well prove fruitless; the sad fact is that many, if not most, severely alienated children never reconnect with their alienated parents, and respond in a vituperative fashion to any attempts their parents take to restore the relationship.

There is no shortage of advice in the clinical literature to alienated parents, much like the largely lame responses I manage to muster in regard to never giving up. These well-meaning efforts fall short in regard to what alienated parents are seeking, which is a full restoration of the parent-child relationship. Instead they are told, "Practice smiling," "Meditate," "Spend time with friends and family," "Make sure you get enough sleep," "Help others and be of service," "Practice gratitude," "Plan a trip," "Go outside and spend time in nature," and "Get plenty of exercise." Such self-care and stress-reduction efforts, while important, fall far short of what alienated parents most want and need.

The only effective means to combat and eliminate parental alienation is to address it by means of a multi-faceted approach that involves fundamental changes to the present system of divorce, and alienated parents and their allies would be well-advised to channel their energies in this direction. This article is a call to action, involving four essential steps to address the problem of parental alienation. All other efforts will produce only superficial or short-term results.

Step 1: Professional recognition of parental alienation as a serious form of child abuse, and corresponding intervention of child protection authorities

Parental alienation is a form of individual child abuse, the result of actions by an individual caregiver that represent a significant form of harm to children. Parental alienation as a serious form of emotional child abuse, which is linked to child neglect and to physical and sexual abuse, clearly makes it, above all else, a child protection concern. First and foremost, we need to recognize parental alienation as a form of individual child abuse that requires a child protection response, no different than physical and sexual abuse. This may involve child removal from the abusive parent or, in most cases, family support services aimed at educating the parent about the effects and unacceptability of alienation and effecting a reunification process between the child and the targeted parent.

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Parental alienation is also a form of collective child abuse; that is, alienation flourishes within legal structures that remove a parent from a child's life by means of primary residence orders in disputed cases. Adversarial "winner-take-all" systems force parents to denigrate each other to prove that they are the superior parent and more worthy of being granted primary caregiver status, in effect engaging in alienating behaviors and the system thereby encourages and produces alienating behavior.

Shared parenting as the foundation of family law is a bulwark against parental alienation. Specifically, a legal presumption of shared parenting, rebuttable in cases of substantiated child abuse and domestic violence, is needed to prevent parental alienation from occurring in the first place.

Step 3: Provision of effective treatment programs and services by trained service providers, including reunification services and prevention programs

Clearly, changes to the child protection and family law systems are in themselves insufficient. The provision of effective treatment services by trained service providers, including reunification services and preventions programs, is vital to restoring the relationship between children and targeted parents. Reunification efforts should be undertaken with service providers with specialized expertise in parental alienation reunification. Further, the trauma of alienation is severe, and therapeutic services to individual victims of alienation are urgently needed.

The Australian "Family Relationship Center" model may offer a useful approach toward the provision of treatment and prevention programs in the arena of parental alienation. These government-supported centers are accessible to parents across the country, provide core services free of charge and others on a sliding fee scale. Families can access information and advice on building and strengthening relationships, early intervention and prevention services, child-friendly services for families in conflict, family mediation and conflict resolution services, development of co-parenting plans, re-partnering and stepfamily arrangements, and information and referral to more specialized services. The centers encourage separating parents to maintain a strong focus on the needs of their children for both parents in their lives. They offer individual, family and group sessions to assist separating families to create workable parenting arrangements for their children, as well as information sessions and workshops on a range of practical topics to assist families.

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Step 4: Effective legal enforcement of shared parenting orders, and legal consequences for parents who withhold children from the other parent

Again, changes to the child protection and family law systems, as well as the availability of effective treatment programs, are in themselves insufficient. Legal sanction of shared parenting must include meaningful consequences for failure to comply with shared parenting orders. Law enforcement is needed to ensure compliance, as well as consequences for engaging in parental alienating behaviors.

Enforcement is perhaps the most contentious step, as markedly different approaches have been suggested by professionals, ranging from incarceration to custody reversal to family therapy to leaving the situation alone. Some argue that continued exposure to the alienating parent will be counterproductive to reunification methods; others suggest that using alienation from a parent to punish or deter alienation seems counter-intuitive. However, the most recent research indicates that therapeutic interventions are most effective when there are strong legal sanctions for non-compliance with shared parenting orders, and there is an emerging consensus among alienation specialists that awarding primary parental responsibility to the targeted parent when parental alienation is severe is an important step in ameliorating parental alienation.

In addition to being a form of emotional child abuse, parental alienation is a form of domestic violence directed at the targeted parent. The criminal justice system does not have a great track record on behalf of abused parents generally but to date, it has had virtually no role to play in dealing with parental alienation as a form of domestic violence and it should.

In sum, the challenges of finding constructive and effective solutions to the problem of parental alienation are rooted in the present-day disavowal of parental alienation as a form of emotional child abuse and domestic violence among both mental health practitioners and legal bodies.

Thus, the key to combatting and eliminating parental alienation is the implementation of a multi-faceted approach that involves fundamental changes to the present system of divorce, and alienated parents and their allies would be well-advised to channel their energies in this direction. The four-step approach suggested here—professional recognition of parental alienation as a serious form of child abuse, and corresponding intervention of child protection authorities; fundamental reform of the family law system, and establishing shared parenting as the foundation of family law; provision of effective treatment programs and services by trained service providers, including reunification services and prevention programs; and effective legal enforcement of shared parenting orders, and legal consequences for parents who withhold children from the other parent—provides a framework in that regard and represents a call to action for alienated parents and their allies.

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