

Island Parent Magazine September 2004 article

Preventing Parental Alienation – Awareness to Action

What is Parental Alienation?

Current research is just beginning to identify and catch up to the social changes around our families that have taken place in the last number of decades. Hundreds of thousands of children have been affected by family breakups, and have been placed at risk, not only by some of the actions of the parents, as we shall see in this article, but also by a legal system which both fails to understand the severity of this problem, and is not equipped to deal with the consequences of an adversarial divorce process and custody system. The major victims suffering the consequences of these disintegrating social bonds are our children.

Parental Alienation occurs when one parent turns their child against the other parent. Comments or actions may be unconscious, or extend to intentional, on-going, unjustified or exaggerated attacks. Unfortunately, this behavioral acting-out by divorcing parents, irrespective of the gender of the alienating parent, has become a common and destructive part of divorce in our society, and is considered by most professionals in the field to be a form of child abuse. In severe cases, the child's love of the parent under attack is destroyed. The sad truth, revealed by a study on the subject, is that Parental Alienation is practiced to varying degrees by a great majority of divorcing parents¹.

Alienation can range in intensity and severity. Author Dr. Douglas Darnall² describes the degrees as follows: "Naïve alienators are parents who are passive about the children's relationship with the other parent but will occasionally do or say something to alienate. All parents will occasionally be naive alienators. Active alienators also know better than to alienate, but their intense hurt or anger causes them to impulsively lose control over their behavior or what they say. Later, they may feel very guilty about how they behaved. Obsessed alienators have a fervent cause; to destroy the targeted parent. Frequently a parent can be a blend between two types of alienators, usually a combination between the naïve and active alienator. Rarely does the obsessed alienator have enough self-control or insight to blend with the other types."

The transition from one degree to another can be a slippery slope. What may start with comments such as: "Dad/Mom is too busy" can become "Your Dad/Mom doesn't seem to care" and eventually degrade to "I guess your Dad/Mom doesn't love you." In extreme cases, one parent may make false accusations against the other, charging physical, emotional, or sexual abuse of their child. Even though an investigation may uncover absolutely no evidence at all, the accuser in question remains obsessive in their conviction that the abuse actually occurred. In this kind of case the judge may realize the falsity of the accusation, but rarely will change custody, to avoid a ping-pong effect on the child.

How can it be prevented?

To prevent Parental Alienation, hard solutions are necessary. On the legal front, it is essential to change the Divorce Act, to eliminate conditions which force parents to assume adversarial positions. In 1998, a Commission composed of members of all the political parties, traveled the country seeking public feedback, and produced a report entitled "For the Sake of the Children." Forty-eight (48) recommendations were proposed to the Act, on related topics such as; suggested implementation of early intervention programs, the importance of shared parenting for the best interest of the child, legal requirements to implement and follow a mandatory parenting plan to be presented to the court, recognition and inclusion of the role of grandparents and other extended family members in the parenting plan, required participation in an education program about both the post-separation reaction of parents and children, and children's developmental

needs at different ages, elimination of preferences for either parent based on gender, enhanced professional development for judges on the concept of shared parenting, and a need for increased public awareness of the impact of divorce on children. To date, none of these recommendations have been implemented.

On the home front, the first step towards prevention is the willingness of the parents to develop skills and adopt attitudes that will strengthen their family bonds, and reduce misunderstandings. This strategy will aid them in whatever stage they find their relationship.

A mom comments: "After the initial emotional upheaval that most of us experience when faced with separation and divorce, my ex and I settled into a fairly amicable relationship. We agreed on joint custody, and access was never an issue between us. Having said that, I still found, after learning about the different levels or degrees associated with Parental Alienation, that I was not completely innocent, and on occasion I was guilty of being a naïve alienator. Just knowing more about Parental Alienation has helped me become more conscious of what I say to my kids. I think a broader awareness and understanding is a key step towards prevention."

Here are some helpful tips for parents:

- Draw on community resources, such as counselors, to deal with your anger and/or hurt - don't make your children victims in a war with your partner
- Connect with a parent support group (ex – www.nanaimomen.com, www.parentsupportbc.ca), to expand your parenting skills, share your experiences, and find emotional support from other parents
- Both learn and make it a habit, to practice a clear and non-threatening communication style
- Seek out a mutually trusted mediator
- Communicate directly with your partner, not through the children
- Express appreciation for your partner's efforts, be positive about upcoming visits
- Keep a flexible routine, and stay open to spontaneity
- Model appropriate language and behavior for your children
- Be respectful when speaking to your child about your partner
- Monitor your child's on-going emotional state by keeping in close communication with their teachers
- Have regular meetings with your partner to discuss your child's well-being and progress

Our intention when writing this article was to provide insights and tools for awareness and change. Remaining ever-conscious of the end effect of all our actions, both the small moments and the grand plans, is the best way to ensure the well-being and best interests of those so dear to our hearts, these tender souls assigned to our sacred trust and care for such amazing but fleeting moments.

Written by: Michael Beechey and Kate Large (staff), and Theo J. Boere (Executive Director) The Nanaimo Men's Resource Centre (www.nanaimomen.com)

1. Clawar SS, Rivlin BV: Children Held Hostage: Dealing with Programmed and Brainwashed Children. Chicago, American Bar Association, 1991

2. Douglas Darnall "Divorce Casualties: Protecting Your Children From Parental Alienation" (Taylor Publishing Company, 1998)