

How Can One Overturn the Programming of a Child Against a Parent?

Ludwig.F. Lowenstein Ph.D

Southern England Psychological Services

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Abstract

What will follow will in some cases make a considerable amount of sense. It will consist of viewing the specific approach to dealing with the problem with some concern since emotional factors come into play which are not typically used in any therapeutic approaches otherwise. There are several ingredients necessary in order to reverse parental alienation, or what is often called Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS). We will use one or the other of these terms interchangeably as there is still some uncertainty as to whether the syndrome, which has not yet been accepted by the American Psychological Association, is relevant. Certainly, parental alienation does occur and has been accepted.

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The ingredients necessary for the therapist to have are: determination, resilience, frustration, resourcefulness and single mindedness. This is the only way that parental alienation can be reversed.

Few expert witnesses, be they psychiatrists or psychologists, take on cases such as parental alienation. This is because the methods which often need to be employed for overturning a child's animosity towards an alienated parent are strewn with dangers! It provides a minefield of visible and hidden dangers to the therapist to deal with such problems.

The chief dangers are the child and the alienator, who are opposed to the efforts of the therapist and will do almost anything and everything to sabotage the efforts of the therapist. They attend mediation sessions and assessment sessions merely because it has been ordered by the Court. They will go so far as to discredit the Expert and the manner in which he works in order to seek to change the thinking and behaviour of the alienated child. Whatever happens, one side or the other will be critical of the therapist. Behind the main antagonists, and opposed to the efforts of the parental alienation therapist, are legions of family members on the alienators side, Solicitors, even Guardians ad Litem who are frequently very child-centred. The Court itself may also believe totally what the child has to say about the alienated parent.

The Court and the thinking of others is likely to be as follows: "Why would a child say such things about her father or mother if it were not true?" In this of course they are totally wrong in their thinking, unless such views can be confirmed by other, truly independent sources. The therapist is in the middle, attempting to discover three important aspects:

1. Are the allegations of abuse about a parent true, false or exaggerated?

2. If untrue, and only if untrue, can the thinking and behaviour of the alienated child be reversed? The alienator is unlikely to change in their views towards the programmed parent. Hence work with the alienator is not likely to bear much success as many have found.
3. If the allegations against the alienated parent are true such as when true sexual, emotional or physical abuse has occurred then the Expert witness therapist should not be involved further, except under very specific circumstances.

Before commencing on how the present psychologist works and seeks to overturn the true effect of parental alienation we must consider the following:

1. Why does the 'programmer' carry out the process of alienation?
2. What are the psychological aspects involved in knowing that parental alienation has been carried out by the 'programmer' and what are its effects on the child?
3. What therapy can be used to overcome the effects of parental alienation?
4. To follow an illustration of rational emotive therapeutic approaches via a clinical case.

1. Why does the alienator programme a child against the other parent?

A parent who instigates accusations against another parent, for example, accusing the alienated parent as having abused a child sexually, physically or emotionally, are sometimes correct in this declaration. More often than not such accusations or allegations are wrong. Their allegations are frequently based on hostility towards a former partner. This can lead to one of two pathological reactions:

1. The accuser believes what he/she is assuming to be correct. That is he/she are deluded in their thinking or dangerously paranoid.
2. The accuser does not believe in the accusations that he/she are making but makes them nevertheless out of conscious hostility and the seeking for vengeance against a former partner.

In both cases, acrimony and hostility are the basis for such false accusations. There is even a middle position between these two extremes. Let me illustrate this by an actual conversation I have had with an alienating mother who could be said to be 'stretching the truth' of 'insinuating the worst scenario':

Dr. L: "So you think your daughter does not want to be with her father because he once made her go to bed with him?"

Mother: "Yes, I don't think a father should ask a daughter to come into bed with him not at the age of 10."

Dr. L: "What do you think happened when the daughter got into bed with her father?"

Mother: "I really don't know, but I don't think....Do you think it is appropriate?"

Dr. L: "I'm asking you what you think about it. Never mind what I think about it. If you really do want to know, I don't think or see anything personally wrong with a child getting into bed with her father as indeed with her mother, providing they are having a cuddle and nothing more."

Mother: "Well I think it is totally wrong especially if the child does not want this."

Dr. L: "I do agree that if the child does not want to be in bed with her father

he should not insist on it. You obviously believe the child did not want this and father did want her to get into bed with him.”

Mother: “Yes, and I don’t think it’s right, and goodness knows what could have happened or perhaps did happen.”

Dr. L: “You think perhaps she was sexually abused in some way by being touched?”

Mother: “I don’t know but I wouldn’t put it past him. Even if it didn’t happen it could have happened.”

Dr. L: “So you think your former partner might be a sexual abuser of his daughter?”

Mother: “I wouldn’t go so far as that. I don’t really think he would do that, but you never can tell.”

As one may note no precise accusations have been made but “insinuations” are often sufficient for a claim of this kind to stick and the need for further investigations to be carried out in relation to it. It is often the accused who will need to prove innocence, instead of one needing to prove his guilt.

Paranoid ideations are infections. A deluded parent, or one filled consciously with hate for the former partner, can lead to an effort by that parent (the alienator) to control a child totally and to inculcate certain ideas that the former partner and parent is somehow dangerous to the child. This could lead to the next development which is that the alienated parent may eventually be considered repulsive and worthy of denigration and rejection. Children will often act this hatred out for a parent, especially when the ‘programmer’ (the alienator) is present. The child will seek to please that parent by taking on, or accepting the views of the alienating parent.

Paranoid ideation is illustrated when the child states that the father or mother have somehow, in general terms, done the wrong things, or been evil or lied etc. Here the child is “parroting” what the mother or father has said about the alienated parent. This is because the child has identified with the alienator and custodial parent, and the alienated parent eventually becomes the ‘scapegoat’ for all and any wrongs ever perpetrated against the alienator and ‘ipso facto’ those wrongs which the child has felt done to him/her. This is in contrast with the programming parent who is idealised by the child as being both ‘all good’ as well as ‘all powerful’.

This occurs because a child feels, having lost one parent due to the acrimony of separation and brain-washing, there is a danger of losing the other parent as well. This fear is of a traumatic nature, leading to deep insecurity. The alienator senses this insecurity and works on the child making it clear that “I am all you have now.....Forget about your father/mother. They are no longer to be relied on.”

2. How does the ‘programmer’ work and what effect does this have on the child?

There are a number of ways in which psychological aspects come into play in the alienation process. Among the methods which will be discussed are: reaction formation, identifying with the aggressor and the strong person i.e. the custodial parent, identifying with an assumed ideal or perfect parent, a way of releasing hostility, and the child identifying with the power of the alienator.

a. The reaction formation

When deep love formally felt for a parent is turned to hatred for purposes of disguising that love, this is not true rejection. True rejection is being indifferent to the parent, not hating that parent. Where there is hate there has been love and love can be rekindled. Alienated children do not so much love the alienator but fear losing the alienator by showing affection towards the alienated parent.

b. Identifying with the aggressor

Here the child backs the more powerful parent, the one who has custody of the child, and the one who is likely to be present more often than the alienated parent. The weak or alienated parent has been sidelined totally or partly. This is based on fear of a strong alienator.

c. Identifying with an idealised or perfect parent

Children who have been alienated cling desperately to the alienator. A common experience of a young child is "My mother/father is perfect. I don't need a father/mother. My mother/father is perfect in every way." This is especially when the alienating parent vilifies the alienated parent regularly, directly or more subtly, making that parent appear to be despicable to the child. Alienators cannot tolerate "ambivalence". One parent has to be always good and the other perfectly evil.

d. Releasing hostility

Most individuals have reasons for feeling hostile at different times. This is due to accumulated rage from other sources for which the alienated parent often becomes a ready target. The child therefore develops the same power as the alienator who can attack the alienated parent with impunity. The child will do this as well both verbally, physically and by rejecting.

e. The child identifies with the power of the alienator

Hence the child feels free to attack and humiliate a father/mother (depending on who the alienated person is). They will call them horrible names, spit at them, and even strike them, knowing they have the protection of the alienator or anyone who is present at this particular interview. The alienated parent is helpless to counteract this except by talking kindly and often with tears in their eyes.

3. What to do to do reverse alienation?

There are a number of ways of attempting to reverse the process of alienation.

Firstly it is to appeal to the child's intelligence or rational thinking.

This could be difficult for the reasons already quoted. Such children are often so brain-washed that their rational thinking is totally at odds with reality.

Encouraging a child to confront the alienator

This is difficult to achieve due to the likelihood of the child identifying with the 'programmer' (alienator) and therefore fearing what the 'programmer' will do if the child is friendly towards the alienated parent.

Investigating specifics of pejorative remarks made by the alienated parent

One must be cautious about the remarks made by the child about the alienated parent. Such remarks made as 'father is nasty, evil, stupid, abuses me etc. etc.'. This will be illustrated in the last section

Making the child realise father loves him/her

This can only be done eventually when father/mother and child are together. This is sometimes difficult to achieve especially when through the courts or some other source access to the child is barred to the Expert Witness and to seeing the child and the alienated parent together.

To break down absurd or frivolous criticisms towards the alienated parent.

It is vital to spend as much time as possible initially listening to the child's

complaints about the alienated parent before “hammering home” the absurdities, unfairness and cruelty the child is expressing. This includes phrases like, “Father is always bribing me to be with him”. This is an example of a ‘borrowed scenario’ since mother could well have used this term to describe the alienated parent who gives the child presents or money. If that parent did not give the child presents or money the borrowed scenario from the mother could well be “He is such a mean man.....never gives me anything”.

It is important to explain to the child how frivolous, absurd statements, and borrowed scenarios come about and how it must be “hammered home” as originating not with the child, but with the alienator. This will not always be accepted by the child as the child thinks he is thinking “independently” of the alienator.

The alienated child lacks ambivalence towards the alienating parent or the alienated parent. The alienating parent is ‘all good’ while the other is ‘all evil’. There is not one good thing about the non-custodial parent and not one bad thing about the ‘programming parent’ in the child’s mind.

The term “independent thinking phenomenon” coined by Gardner is also of vital importance. Children must be shown how they have been alienated in thought and behaviour against the targeted parent by the programmer. Such children then consider such thoughts and behaviours as originating in their own thinking rather than originating from the alienator. They fail to understand that because of the alienator such ideas are in their minds. Children who are directly or individually being programmed, cannot admit this. Firstly they do not want to blame the programmer to whom they appear to be “devoted”. They will claim the alienating thinking and behaviour is based on their own independent thinking rather than emanating from the alienated parent. This is a delusion and hence difficult to nullify strictly by rational methods. This is why in the following section emotional approaches will be used in combination with rational methods.

4. How can rational emotive responses and methods be used to combat parental alienation (A case illustration)

The present author has found it useful in a number of cases to combine vigorous and dramatic emotional responses with rational procedures. This has at least produced a breakthrough when the child who has had little or no contact with an alienated parent will, at least during the discourse within the therapeutic setting, re-enact a warmer relationship with the alienated parent. Unfortunately, very often the child will return to the custodial parent who will re-use any and all programming methods to reverse this tendency. It does however, indicate how even brief therapeutic approaches of 6-10 sessions can, for a time at least, change the child’s thinking, until the child returns to the programming and custodial parent. The child should be seen in combination with the alienated parent whenever possible. It may be the very first time for a considerable period that both have been in the same room. The therapist at first sits between the two and later when some contact occurs, such as eye contact, the therapist will sit opposite the two. Still later, when some progress has been made via interaction verbally and otherwise between the child and the alienated parent, the psychologist briefly leaves the room and gradually extends the periods of absence. It will be noted that the psychologist becomes from time to time emotional to bring the child into reality thinking. The language tends to be ‘down to earth’, firm, rigorous and meaningful. The main objective is to make an impact on the brain-washed child, however difficult this may be.

5. Case illustration

This will be a summary of a number of sessions carried out with a child and his/her father. When collected the child very frequently clutched the alienator tightly. The child eventually went with the psychologist. Initially, the child entered the room hesitantly, fearing to leave the alienator. The father was waiting in the room while the child was being brought in by the psychologist to be with the father for the first time. The child on the whole tended to avert her

eyes so that no contact could be established. The father in the meantime looked at the child somewhat despondently but greeted the child in a friendly and caring manner. Frequently the father would remind the child of happy times together. This was reinforced by pictures or videos which had been brought along by the alienated parent to demonstrate how actually the alienated child behaved in the past when she was with her father. The dialogue went as follows:

Psychologist: "This is the first time that you and your father have been together for some time hasn't it?"

Child: Does not answer

Psychologist: "I would like you to speak to me even if you don't at the moment speak to your father. This is the first time you have been in the same room with your father for some considerable time isn't it?"

Child: "It's not because I want to. I'm being made to do it."

Psychologist: (speaking to the father) "Can you remind (child's name) of some of the happier times you were together by showing her some pictures of the past, or maybe some of the letters that she wrote to you before all this occurred."

Father then showed the child some pictures, and videos. The child averted her eyes in order not to look at these reminders of the past and happy times.

Psychologist: "I would like you to look at those pictures even if you don't look at your father so that you can see how things were in the past and why things have gone wrong in the meantime and this we will discuss later."

The child then turned her eyes to look at the pictures without looking at the father.

Child: "I can't remember these pictures being taken. I was probably only pretending to be happy when I was with my father. I have never really been happy with him at all."

Psychologist: "Well these pictures don't indicate this at all. You seem to be smiling and cuddling your dad and generally showing signs of happiness. Can all this be pretence?"

Child: "Yes. I was only pretending. The only person I want to be with and love is my mother. She only needs me and I only need her. I don't need a father."

Psychologist: "Don't you think your father loves you and deserves for you to be nice to him when he always tries to be nice to you. I believe he tries to telephone you regularly but you don't want to speak to him and hang up on him. Is that right?"

Child: "Yes. I don't want to speak to him. I don't want anything to do with him any more."

Psychologist: "Why is that? What are the reasons you have? I want specific answers why you don't want any contact with your father. I don't want general remarks like 'I don't like him' or 'He is horrible to me'. I want to know exactly what he does wrong in your eyes to make you wish to reject a loving father who cares for you."

Child: "I can't think of anything now but he always tries to make me go to places I don't want to go to and he sometimes asks me to come into the bed with him. I don't like that."

Psychologist: "And what else?"

Child: “He shows me off to other people and tells them how clever I am and I hate that. Also he always tells me what to do and makes me eat things I don’t want to eat. He makes me go on holiday with him and do things I don’t like doing. He makes me sleep on a dirty bed which he has in his house.”

Psychologist: “Is there anything else?”

Child: “There are many other things I don’t like. I don’t even like being in the same room and talking to him.”

Psychologist: “Again I want you to be civil and nice to your father. OK? He is one of the few people in this world who will give anything to help you in any way he can, and I don’t think it’s fair that you should treat him in this way. Do you?”

Child: Silent, says nothing at first. Then says: “You don’t have to be with him like I have to be with him. You don’t know what he is really like.”

Psychologist: “No I don’t really know. I am not always with him as you were in the past. There must be something good about your father that you enjoyed doing with him.”

Child: Thinking, then says, “Nothing”.

Psychologist: “There must be something that you remember that was good about him.”

Child: Thinking, then says, “He used to make some nice meals for me when I was with him. Nothing else. Anyway he could probably hit me from time to time if I was with him.”

Psychologist: “Has he ever hit you?”

Child: Answers, “No”.

Psychologist: “Has he ever hit you?”

Child: Answers, “No”.

Psychologist: “What makes you think he is going to hit you then ?”

Child: “He could hit me. He’s the sort of person who would do that sort of thing.”

Psychologist: “What makes you say that?”

Child: “Look at him, he is big and strong and he could hurt me.”

Psychologist: “But has he ever done so?”

Child: Reluctantly says “No”.

Psychologist: “If all these things you dislike about him and how he is with you were changed would you want to be with your dad after that?”

Child: “They could never be changed, and anyway even if they were changed I wouldn’t want to be with him.”

Psychologist: “So there is no sense in changing anything is there?”

Child: “That’s right. I just don’t want to be with him.”

It is clear from this interchange that there has been no breakthrough of any kind while the father has been in the room demonstrating pictures and videos from time to time to show how the

past had been and how happy the child had been in the father's company. It is now felt that a more emotional and direct approach is required. This approach could well be criticised by those who believe in pure therapeutic approaches of an orthodox nature. The current psychologist however, has found that these methods are totally ineffective with an alienated child who is obdurate about wishing any contact with a former affectionate, caring and loving parent. The psychologist from time to time therefore uses fairly emotional and direct expressions, and also the tone of his voice is louder to be emphatic to the child. Essentially it is, a way of "shocking" the child to reality.

Psychologist: "Now I am going to say something that has been on my mind for some time having read everything you've said about your father, and having talked to your father for a long period of time to find out how he feels about you. I think you have treated him abominably. I think you have been a horrible little girl. You have been too powerful for your own good. What right have you got to reject a father who loves you and cares for you and wants to do everything for you? You should be ashamed of yourself. Don't you feel guilty at all about the way you have treated him all this time by not even looking at him, by not talking to him, by hanging up on him on the telephone? What has he really done that is so terrible for you to behave in this way. I think you have virtually thrown your father into the rubbish pile. If that is what you want to do then so be it. I think your father is very, very caring or he would not persist in wanting to be with you and wanting to have contact with you, and wanting to show his love for you. I'll tell you one thing, many fathers would have given up and not bothered any more, and not bothered even contacting you or wishing you a happy birthday or a good Christmas, or providing for you financially. Many fathers would have given up and just said to themselves that this was the end and I am not having any more to do with this child."

At this point very frequently the child will develop thinking. The emotional tone of the therapist or psychologist will in many cases have 'hit home.' Sometimes one has to go on in this vein using very emotional expressions and very 'down to earth' expressions defending the father and drawing attention to the good times that the child has had with the father which have been substantiated by the pictures and other information provided by the father. The important thing is not to accept what the child says and how the child behaves since it is based on considerable programming or brainwashing. It is vital to continue to try to break through that barrier and very frequently one does break through.

Eventually in the case quoted above the child did look at the father having seen the pictures and seen what an impact this had on the father. It was then the chance of the father to talk to the child in a caring, loving manner and remind the child of the good times they had together in the past.

It is at this point that the psychologist would best leave the room for a short period to provide an opportunity for interaction between the two parties. It is surprising, very often, when the psychologist returns after the first or second time being away from the two how much closer the chairs are between the two parties and how their eye contact has improved and how they are now speaking to one another. Sometimes the child will even hold the parent's hand and even at a later stage give that alienated parent a cuddle (often for the first time in years) or a sign of physical warmth. Sometimes it takes a number of sessions of this kind before this can be achieved. Powerful emotional language is vital in order to break through the barrier that has occurred due to the alienation process. The child then begins to think again for him/herself rather than repeating the phrases and thoughts of the alienator.

It must also be said that the child feels safe interacting with the alienated parent as mother is not present. Were mother in the same room the child could be very reluctant to allow a breakthrough of this kind. The child would be worrying about the views of the alienator. The child would be concerned with the disapproval of the alienating party if the child is too friendly to the alienated party. It will take a considerable effort to redeem the damage that has been done to the child over a period of months or years in which the programmer (alienator) has

'hammered home' their own prejudices and the child has identified with these prejudices. Once the psychologist has completed the process of mediation there is a need for a report to go to the Court. The Court will either accept or fail to accept the views of the Expert Witness. In the extreme it will ignore all the views by psychologist and retain the situation as it was before with the child living with the custodial, programming parent. It is hoped more and more courts in future will in extreme and prolonged cases of programming consider the possibility of a change of custody, at least for a period of time, so that the alienated parent can have the opportunity of healing the wounds of the past. Only time will tell what occurs in the future.

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