

Treating the Effects of Parental Alienation

Date: [9th February 2013](#)

Ludwig F. Lowenstein on how psychologists and the courts should approach cases where one parent has turned their child against the other

Past a certain age, it is difficult to reverse the long-term effects of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS). There is, however, a chance to tackle the effects of PAS when it occurs in children, as will be noted in the article which follows.

Are There Long- and Short-term Effects of Parental Alienation?

As a practising clinical, forensic psychologist for over 40 years, working with families in turmoil, I am frequently asked this question by the judiciary, members of which are frequently required to make very difficult decisions in the case of contact and custody disputes between separated and divorced parents.

Such parents were at one time united, even in love, and were probably members of a close family. The child probably had a good relationship with both parents, until the unexpected happened: the parents became enemies, leading to separation.

One of the repercussions may be contact disputes between the now absent parent and the parent who has care and total control of the child. The absent parent, whether the mother or father, is at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to having any contact with the child. The custodial parent may manipulate and encourage the child not to have any further contact with the absent parent, and may insist that the child no longer wishes to have any further contact.

The destruction of that relationship by the process of alienation has immediate and long-term repercussions on children. This is especially the case where the absent parent has disappeared or died.

Children and adolescents frequently develop behavioural problems such as suffering from aggression, sleep disturbances, enuresis and sometimes educational difficulties. As they get older and begin to take a more independent view of life, they may suffer feelings of guilt. Many also have difficulties in forming relationships with a partner as adults.

Sometimes parental alienation will be perpetuated in their own future relationship when they have children of their own.

How Can Parental Alienation Be Identified?

This is another question which, as an expert witness in child-contact cases, I am frequently asked by the courts. It is vital that parental alienation be identified with some certainty as soon as possible. One can be certain that the alienator will deny any knowledge that they are responsible for the child no longer wishing to have contact with an absent parent. The absent parent has been discredited in the child's eyes, despite their once close relationship. Hence Judges need to be convinced that the custodial parent has misused their power to successfully turn a child against the once loved and now absent parent. There needs to be evidence that parental alienation has taken place. In some cases it has not occurred.

In many, if not most, cases, Judges will turn a blind eye to the diagnosis of parental alienation. They will consider the concept of parental alienation of little importance and concentrate on what the child superficially feels and says. Judges most frequently regard the child's views as sacrosanct. Whatever causes a child to react with enmity towards a now absent parent appears to matter very little to some Judges. Their typical response, when questioned about a child not wishing contact, is likely to be: "What can I or anyone do when the child refuses to interact with the now absent parent?" Hence follows the resigned conclusion by some Judges to do nothing further to encourage the child and the alienator to change their mindsets, instead accepting the status quo. Without the help of experts, Judges are unlikely to look deeper into the matter. Some even ignore expert opinion based on verifiable evidence after a thorough investigation.

One of the most telling ways of identifying that parental alienation has indeed occurred is the fact that the child in the past had a warm relationship with the now despised, rejected parent. Judges rarely ask why the child has changed their view towards that parent. Another clue is that the child has totally identified with the mental state or views of the alienator. Children will use identical phrases to those uttered by the alienator without realizing it, considering those ideas and words truly their own.

Children may, therefore, view the now rejected parent with the same hostility shown by the alienator. In extreme forms they experience what tends to be called the "folie a deux effect". Here the identification with the alienator is total. Anything that differs



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from the alienator's process of thinking is totally rejected. In addition, the victim of such insidious direct or subtle brainwashing (an extreme term, but that is what it is) develops a total loyalty towards the alienator for fear that, in having lost one parent, they will also lose the other if they do not show total obedience. There appear to be no arguments or therapeutic intervention which can easily overcome or reverse this obsessive-compulsive delusion or mindset. To the child, the alienator is perfect, while the once loved parent is evil and to be avoided.

How Can the Condition of Parental Alienation Be Treated and Reversed?

The simple answer to that question is: with the greatest of difficulties. Once the condition of parental alienation has been recognized, and the expert witness has convinced the Judge of that fact, there is a need for urgent treatment of both the child and alienator. This treatment needs to be directive, comprehensive, and in-depth, involving the child, the perpetrator and the alienated parent, who, like the child, is also a victim.

Both child and alienator are very difficult to treat. They are ever in collusion, the child being unaware of this, while the alienator is fully aware. The child is convinced that the absent parent is to be avoided and even to be insulted if present. The result is total rejection of that parent. Attempts to convince the child that they have much to gain by re-establishing a warm relationship are met with resistance.

Facing this challenge, therapists will often attempt to make the alienator aware of and believe the following:

1. The child would benefit considerably from having contact and a good relationship with the now rejected parent.
2. The alienator is practising a form of emotional child abuse by enlisting the child in their vendetta against the now absent parent.
3. The expert is aware of and understands the reason for the custodial parent's feelings, such as animosity, towards the sidelined parent.
4. The alienator alone can, if they so wish, change the mindset of the child as regards avoiding contact with the absent parent (this is rarely done convincingly, however).
5. The alienator needs to change the mind of the child and avoid further behaviour which will make the child feel insecure if they have a good relationship with the now absent parent.
6. The expert witness needs to insist that the alienator sincerely and firmly encourages the child to have good, long-term contact with the absent parent. The argument that the child does not want contact needs to be exposed as a ruse.
7. The alienator needs to be made aware that, if the therapist is unable to change the child and the alienator's behaviour, the child may need to be removed from the influence of the custodial parent.
8. If the alienator still stubbornly refuses to change and does nothing to help the child overcome their feelings towards the absent parent, the child can be moved from the abusing influence of the alienator by the court.

The Repercussions of Judicial Decisions in Cases Where Parental Alienation May Be Present

Not all Judges accept that parental alienation exists following acrimonious divorce and separation. The same can be said of many expert witnesses, who equally fail to accept this condition exists. Such Judges and experts are foolish, if not biased against the victimized child and the alienated parent, if they do not consider that parental alienation could have occurred. In many cases, those Judges who accept the possibility of parental alienation find it difficult to deal justly, fairly and effectively with a child who claims they do not wish to have any contact with the now absent parent. This is especially true in the case of children of eight years of age and upwards.

The Judge's attitude tends to be pragmatic. They will consequently make such statements as: "I must respect the rights of the child to make a decision. The child cannot be coerced to have contact with a parent with whom they do not wish to have a relationship anymore." If an expert recommends therapy to change the child's mindset, some Judges will see this as a way, temporarily at least, out of the dilemma. This is despite the fact that this approach may prove to be difficult and ineffective. Therapists must use the "softly, softly" approach, often welcomed by other mental-health workers and Judges. When this approach leads to the child accepting some contact with the absent parent, most practitioners and Judges are likely to be delighted. The child has been given a choice and made the right one.

Unfortunately, therapy, on the whole, fails in such cases. This is due to the alienator's continued behind-the-scenes influence on the child. Very few alienators can or want to understand the harm they are doing. They are too influenced by the continued hostility they feel towards their former partner.

When no amount of therapy is effective, the court will need to make a decision: either accepting that no contact with the absent parent is best, or removing the child from the alienator and the continued emotional abuse. Judges are, on the whole, loathe to do the latter, even despite the opinion of expert witnesses who can no longer see any alternative. Most Judges will still rely totally on what the child wishes, thereby creating an injustice for the absent parent and child, in the short and, possibly, long term.

The situation is like that of the patient who suffers from a gangrenous limb, which, if not amputated, would lead to death. We must remember that a child's emotional future is at stake. Failure to deal with alienation, as explained, can lead to both short- and long-term serious, harmful consequences. The judiciary must consider these consequences in the decisions they make.

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Issue: [Vol.177 No.6](#)

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