

The Psychosocial Treatment of Parental Alienation

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KEYWORDS

• Divorce • Parental alienation • Psychotherapy

Psychiatrists, mental health workers, and lawyers serving families in court have all heard it before: a mother saying, “He is nothing but a sperm donor,” a father trying to contain his rage, saying, “My ex-wife is brainwashing my children with denigrating accusations, so the children are afraid of seeing me because of false allegations of abuse.” Observing the hostilities first hand, one can only stand by in frustration thinking how parents can do this to their children and the parent they may have once loved. Most mental health professionals dread the idea of being subpoenaed to court to testify in a custody case. The dread of knowing that the testimony will be challenged makes the professional look like a buffoon before the eyes of the parents and the court. There are also the ethical issues about what can be said in court.¹

High-conflict parents display a persistent pattern of animosity, hostility, and retribution to each other. Court personnel frequently know the parents by name because of the protracted litigation that appears to have no resolution. The children are dragged along and expected to publicly reject the targeted parent with accusations of abuse, psychological abandonment, or whatever irrational belief the alienating parent can muster. Such behavior promulgates the child’s delusional beliefs. The children become the tragic victims of the hostilities. The allocation of parenting time is frequently the parent’s battlefield. Parenting time is the spoils of the war.

Over time the true victims, the children, can display serious symptoms of depression, aggressiveness, social withdrawal, and other psychological problems. There is considerable research demonstrating the adverse effects a high-conflict divorce can have on children.²⁻⁴ Wallerstein and colleagues⁵ described the impact divorce had on children’s lives years later into their adulthood. Although there is some concern about her upper middle class Caucasian sample, she made a dramatic point that high conflict can cause lasting scars. Logic tells us that if children are exposed to a parent’s animosity with the intent of depriving them of a loving relationship with

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the other parent, the consequences for the child later in life can be significant. The children in time will likely suffer from significant emotional distress, the loss of affirmation of knowing they are loved and valued by both parents and the extended family, the void from not having a sense of family continuity, and the loss of potential financial resources.

DEFINITIONS

Parental alienation (PA) is not parental alienation syndrome (PAS). Basically, in this article PA refers to the alienating behaviors of a parent, while PAS refers to the symptoms that are manifested by the child. The first edition of *Divorce Casualties*⁶ emphasized the importance of making a distinction between PA and PAS because at the time the book was written, reunification or reversal of severe PA was thought to be near impossible. For that reason, the first edition argued that parents needed to understand the symptoms of PA with the hope of modifying their behavior and preventing the more serious threat to the child, PAS. The distinction is still important for the same reasons, although we can be more hopeful today for successful reunification.

It is also important to understand the difference between PAS and estrangement in this article. In PAS, the child rejects the targeted parent without a good reason or perhaps without any reason at all. In estrangement, the child rejects one of the parents for what the objective observer would call good reason, such as a history of abuse, a mental disorder, substance abuse, or domestic violence.

PARENTAL ALIENATION

Darnall defined PA as “any constellation of behaviors, whether conscious or unconscious, that could evoke a disturbance in the relationship between a child and the other parent.”^{6(p4)} Typically, one parent is the aggressor and is described as the alienator. The object of the alienation is the targeted or rejected parent. The identity of the alienator is not difficult to determine after ruling out the influences of estrangement. It is important to keep in mind that that alienation is not about “bad guy” versus the targeted parent or “good guy.” The roles can alternate between being the alienator and the victim. The targeted parent, feeling victimized, may retaliate with his or her own alienating behavior against the original alienating parent. This process can occur well before PAS appears in the child.

Baker and Darnall⁷ conducted an Internet survey of 96 individuals who were self-identified as targeted parents to identify the most frequently reported alienating behaviors. The percentage of the most frequently reported behaviors were:

General badmouthing	74.0%
Creating impression that the targeted parent is dangerous or sick	62.5
Confiding in the child about the court case and child support issues	45.8
Saying the targeted parent doesn't love the child	44.8
Badmouthing targeted parent to authorities	31.3
Limiting visitation	29.2
Confiding in the child about the marriage	29.2
Badmouthing targeted parent's new family or extended family	27.1
Intercepting calls and messages	22.9
Moving away or hiding the child	14.6

Baker and Darnall⁷ found that there were no differences between the gender of the targeted parent and gender of the child, meaning that both mothers and fathers were

alienating parents and both boys and girls were targets of alienation. However, the gender of the targeted child and the age of the targeted child were associated with the severity of alienation. That is, 55.6% of the targeted girls and 32.6% of the targeted boys were perceived to be severely alienated. Also, targeted children who were perceived as severely alienated were older than the targeted children who were perceived to be mildly alienated. Targeted parents who perceived their children as mild and moderately alienated did not report differences in the number of alienating strategies employed. However, alienating parents identified by the targeted parent as obsessed in their desire to alienate were reported as having more severely alienated children.

PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME

Richard Gardner,⁸ the physician who coined the term “parental alienation syndrome,” explained that the process was similar to brainwashing except that the motivation for the alienating parent has a conscious as well as “a subconscious or unconscious” component. The children themselves may have motivations that will make the alienation worse. Their hedonistic outlook for immediate gratification or their desire to avoid discomfort makes them vulnerable allies for siding with the alienating parent. Gardner^{9(p20)} defined PAS as “...a combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent’s indoctrination and the child’s own contribution to the vilification of the targeted parent.” The child’s denigration is unjustified and/or exaggerated. A child’s response to a physically or sexually abusive parent is not PAS.

Gardner’s^{9(p76)} “eight cardinal symptoms of parental alienation syndrome” that focused on the child’s behavior included:

- Campaign of denigration, which refers to the child’s relentless name-calling, criticizing, and deprecating the targeted parent
- Weak, frivolous, and absurd rationalizations for the child’s criticism of the targeted parent
- Lack of ambivalence, in that the child perceives the targeted parent as all-bad with no redeeming qualities and the alienating parent as all-good
- The independent thinker phenomena, which refers to the child’s spontaneous insistence that his or her feelings are his or her own, not those of the alienating parent
- Reflexive support of the alienating parent, such that during an argument between the parents, the child will support the alienating parent without any thought or any contemplation that the alienating parent could be wrong
- Absence of guilt over cruelty to or exploitation of the alienated parent, so the child feels no empathy or remorse and, to an outside observer, the child appears to gloat about his or her hate
- Presence of borrowed scenarios, when the hateful child justifies his or her feelings by reciting “memories” or opinions he or she heard from the alienating parent
- Spread of the child’s animosity to the extended family of the alienated parent.

Baker and Darnall¹⁰ conducted a second Internet study to examine the relationship between PAS and the 8 symptoms identified by Gardner.⁹ The frequencies of PAS symptoms or behaviors reported (“Mostly” or “Always”) by 68 alienated parents were:

- Campaign of denigration 87.8%
- Weak, frivolous reasons 98.4%
- Lack of ambivalence 96.9%
- Independent thinking 95.0%

- Express no guilt or remorse 88.9%
- Sides with alienating parent 100%
- Borrowed phrases 79.7%
- Rejects extended family 76.6%.

The study found that the amount of time the child spent with the targeted parent did not prevent PAS. Baker and Darnall¹⁰ said “joint custody is not a *de facto* protective mechanism against PAS.” A second finding on a more positive note was that all but one alienated child had something positive to say about the targeted parent, suggesting a window of opportunity for reunification with even the most severely alienated child. All but the one child exhibited some degree of attachment and affection toward the targeted parent.

JUDICIAL INTERVENTIONS

Of course, judges routinely deal with high-conflict divorces and children who are alienated or estranged from one or both parents. In cases of mild PA, judicial intervention alone may resolve the problem. That is, the judge may simply order both parents to support the child’s relationship with the other parent and to follow the visitation or parenting time schedule. In cases of moderate PA or PAS, the judge may order a comprehensive treatment approach, usually after hearing the recommendations of a mental health professional. When a court order cannot fix the problems between parents and the children and the judge doubts that the parents can work out their differences, reunification therapy is an option. The features of reunification therapy are discussed later in this article. In cases of severe PA or PAS, when the alienating parent and the child have adopted intractable false beliefs about the targeted parent, there are no simple answers or interventions for resolving the impasse. Proposed solutions range from doing nothing and hoping the problem will go away to making an involuntary change of custody to the alienated parent. That possibility is also discussed later in this article.

Judicial decisions are ordinarily based on the “best interests of the child,” which is a complex notion. It is more than simply identifying which parent will foster a loving relationship between the children and the other parent. Alienated parents do not understand this. For the alienated parent, being a target of alienation is a good enough reason for him or her to gain custody. Frequently attorneys fail to educate their client about other factors involved in making a custody order. The alienated parent must keep in mind that a parent’s refusal to foster a loving relationship with the rejected parent is only one of many criteria for deciding best interest. The alienated parent needs to know all the criteria concerned with a court’s decision, especially issues that involve estrangement.

Angry parents enter the court ready to attack, and expect to defend their arguments in typical adversarial manner. The parent may think his or her story is unique, believing that the judge cannot help but agree with the parent’s arguments. However, the judge has heard the stories many times over and may have little interest in which parent is right and who is wrong. Blaming does not help the children. The court focuses on making a decision that appears fair, lessens the conflict between the parties, and ultimately protects the children.

The judge will assess arguments in light of how the local jurisdiction defines the child’s “best interests.” The judge may agree that alienation has occurred, but place less weight on that argument than on other criteria. For example, if a parent has been convicted of domestic violence, the judge will put more weight on the history of abuse than alienation.

Judges have the right to use their discretion on how they weigh the various factors defining best interests. Some states have no written criteria defining “best interests,” so the judge uses his or her experience to decide what is best for the child.

REUNIFICATION THERAPY

Definitions

There is a distinction between what is referred to as reunification and reunification therapy. Reunification emphasizes case management, making use of court-appointed mediators, parenting coordinators, or special masters to monitor compliance with court orders and educate the parents about working together.^{11,12} Reunification therapy, on the other hand, is a recently developed therapeutic modality for treating high-conflict, litigious families.^{3,12–15} Reunification therapy occurs between the therapist and the family. The focus is threefold: tempering the hostilities of the alienating parent; assuring an emotional and safe environment for the children with both parents and significant others; and repairing the damaged relationships with the children. The term “reunification therapy” is becoming more common, although there are few detailed treatment protocols for this form of treatment.

Although these approaches are effective for most high-conflict families, they are less effective with the severely alienated child and the obsessed parent. Reunification alone does not address the unique problems with these parents and children who refuse any cooperation with the targeted parent. Reunification therapy remains a difficult task because the alienating parent and child usually have little or no desire to participate in the therapy, and may try to sabotage any gains made with the children, miss appointments, and discount any value from the therapy. This can be a good argument for removing the children from the alienating parent if he or she persists with this pattern of behavior during the reunification process.

The Reunification Team

Reunification is brought about by a team of professionals identified by the court: a guardian *ad litem*, a parenting coordinator, visitation center staff, a reunification therapist, and anyone else that the court believes should be involved. The court usually decides the composition of the team with the agreement of parents’ attorneys. Successful reunification involves a team of qualified specialists, each with a specific responsibility. Preparing for reunification is a challenging process. There is more to the preparation than obtaining a court order and telling the parents that they must participate in the process.

Role of the Therapist

The reunification therapist must have the flexibility to work with all parties and freely exchange information among them. The therapist cannot have an allegiance to one parent or child to the detriment of the others. Before initiating reunification therapy, the therapist will ask the parents to sign an informed consent form that explains the therapy guidelines, grant a waiver of confidentiality, and assign responsibility for fees. There can be no protection of confidentiality between the parents, children, judge, or other court-appointed persons. All of the parties must understand this before the start of the reunification therapy. Protecting a parent’s past medical or mental health records is the exception; those records remain confidential.

The reunification therapist should not be expected to testify or to make custody or visitation recommendations. That aspect of the therapist’s role should be understood by all before a therapist is assigned to the family. Testifying and making custody or

visitation recommendations is considered unethical because of the prohibition against dual relationships. Some treatment approaches may include both a reunification therapist and a parenting coordinator. Whereas the reunification therapist would not make recommendations to the court regarding custody or visitation, the parenting coordinator may make such recommendations. For example, the parenting coordinator may testify that one parent has completely cooperated with the treatment plan whereas the other parent has been very uncooperative with the plan, and the coordinator might conclude and recommend that the former parent be given custody or greater access to the children.

Focus on the Parents, Not the Child

A judge looking into the faces of the hostile parents and a child refusing parenting time or visits with the targeted parent will frequently order the child into therapy. Such an approach to reunification rarely works, for good reason. Children forced into counseling rarely like counseling. They will complain that counseling is boring and that it interferes with other more desirable activities such as playing with their friends. Children will typically blame the targeted parent for being forced into counseling, which adds to the divisiveness rather than facilitating reunification. There are additional ramifications for the children. The child becomes the identified patient, suggesting that the problems between the parents are his or her fault. Equally devastating to the children is the implication that they are responsible for repairing the damage between the parents.

The child should never be the primary focus of reunification therapy. The parents, not the child, should be ordered to participate in reunification therapy. The parents, not the child, have the power to change. If there is to be a change in the child's anger and distorted thinking, the parents together must learn how their irrational beliefs are harmful to the child.

Role of the Child

Although the child is not the primary identified patient, the reunification therapist must have court approval to access the child for occasional meetings. The therapist monitors the child's attitudes and behaviors as a way to measure the progress of the parents' treatment. Also, the therapist may use those meetings to help the child achieve a more realistic view of the targeted parent and to lessen the child's anxiety against the targeted parent. Children who have been victims of PA need the opportunity to build a new history with the targeted parent, while the targeted parent is coached on how to rebuild the relationship with the children without getting defensive or attacking. Frequently parents ask, "what should I do with the children in a particular situation?" The answer is to do or say whatever will reduce the child's anxiety.

Sometimes, therapy for the child is appropriate when there is significant deterioration in the child's global functioning. The reasons may have nothing to do with alienation. If the reunification therapist finds the child's general functioning is impaired for whatever reason, a different therapist may need to intervene. Impaired functioning may be manifested by a drop in school grades, signs of depression, impaired social relationships, or belligerent behavior outside the context of the divorce. If the child already sees a therapist, he or she should continue. The child's therapist should know that the family is participating in reunification therapy.

Considering the Child's Preferences

The child should not feel caught in the middle; children should never have to choose one parent over the other. That principle supports the argument for not having laws allowing a child to elect custody or choose a custodial parent. Child advocates may

argue that children should have the right to choose, but for the alienated child the consequences are too severe because the child's judgment is questionable. The child's public pronouncement of choosing a parent becomes the ultimate rejection, and is difficult for the child to take back. For these reasons, many states have eliminated the age of election, meaning the age a child is able to choose where to live. Instead, most states have a provision for the child to express his or her wishes, but the decision still rests with the court and what is considered to be in the child's best interest.

Reunification is not choosing the rejected parent over the alienating one. However, both parents must respect the child's dignity and right to have a reciprocal relationship with both parents, free of interference and exposure to further alienating or estranging behaviors from either parent.

The Alienating Parent

Alienating parents are more likely to comply with court orders if they know their behavior and compliance to court orders are monitored. Parents obsessed with their desire to alienate may ignore court orders, believing that no one is going to tell them what to do. These parents believe they must protect the children at all costs, arguing that the court does not understand the risks involved with the child having a relationship with the rejected parent. Courts expect those parents to explain the reasons for their refusal to cooperate, so the parent may have to defend the reasons why he or she should not be sanctioned.

Parents risk sanctions if the court believes the parent's arguments are irrational or unfounded. The court may give a parent a second chance, and targeted parents are angered when they see the alienating parent getting only a "slap on the hand" for noncompliance. Unfortunately, after a couple of slaps on the hand the alienating parent's arrogance and defiance are reinforced. The following case illustrates the way one court set limits on an alienating parent.

Case 1

Emma, though the custodial parent of her 3 girls, was frustrated and hurt because she had not seen her daughters for 5 months because they refused to return from their father's home after an extended summer visit. The father of the girls expressed contempt toward the court to the extent that he went to jail twice for 10 days each because he refused to comply with court orders about the financial settlement. He argued before the court that Emma was a risk to the children's safety because she was "emotionally unstable," though he could not give any rationale to support his beliefs. The girls wanted nothing to do with their mother, believing she could harm them. The girls refused to talk with her on the phone, avoided eye contact while waiting in the hallway for the court hearing, and expressed relentless anger.

The court found no evidence presented by the father or the children that Emma was a threat to their safety. The court concluded that this was the "worst case of parental alienation" that had come before the court and ordered the immediate return of the children to the mother. The court ordered reunification therapy and forbade the father from having any contact with the children until the court proceedings 4 months later were completed. The judge said that the only "damage he saw was the danger created" by the father himself. The judge also ordered that if the court found that the father willfully and wantonly violated the court orders, father would serve "30 days in jail for each count of the five (5) contempt charges to be served consecutively for a total of one-hundred and fifty (150) days."

Both parties agreed on a reunification therapist. The therapy began with identifying the realities that both parents and children must accept: the court orders; the fact that

continued litigation and alienation harms the children; state laws supporting both parents' involvement with the children; and that neither parent is going to disappear. Facing these realities, both parents must assume personal responsibility for how they behave and learn to readjust their beliefs and behavior. Failing to do so runs the risk that the court will impose serious sanctions, which could include a change of custody.

Forcing or coercing an alienating parent with threats if they do not change his or her behavior may work for a short time, but not for the long term. Lasting change will only occur when there is a change in the parent's belief system or behavior.¹⁴ In private moments the alienating parent will frequently express the opinion that the rejected parent should just disappear, making life easier for everyone (Darnall DC. The content validity of parental alienation. Unpublished raw data, 1993).

The Targeted Parent

Sometimes the targeted parent can be the greatest obstacle to successful reunification. In the following vignette, Robert's anger and belief that the court betrayed him is a good example.

Case 2

Robert had custody of his two sons, ages 7 and 11, since the divorce. His wife Christina filed for custody when she heard the boys complaining about their father's anger. The court ordered a custody evaluation, which described in detail the children's complaints about their father's anger. The children were willing to continue seeing their father but wanted to live with their mother. Robert was ordered by the court to enroll in an anger management class. The order was humiliating to Robert because he vehemently denied the allegations. After 3 years had passed, the allegations continued. The court ordered an updated custody evaluation because there were 9 criminal complaints filed and investigations conducted by the Department of Human Services for child abuse against the father. The psychologist who conducted the custody evaluation was clearly frustrated about what had occurred during the past 3 years with the children, and father's failure to get treatment for his anger. The psychologist recommended that all contact between Robert and the children be terminated. The recommendation enraged Robert. For months he had not seen his children and saw little hope of reunification. Later, all complaints against the father were dismissed.

Robert was surprised to receive an e-mail from his attorney saying that Christina was willing to ignore the psychologist's recommendations and consider reunification. Robert was cautiously optimistic and sought help to better understand how reunification works. During the discussions, Robert's anger and insistence that the children know the lies that had been perpetuated about him tended to derail the process. He wanted someone to acknowledge the lies told by the children and the psychologist. He wanted to be righted for all the wrongs that he felt inflicted on him. Contrary to what his attorney said to Robert, he could not shake the injustice that he felt. Robert's anger was understandable, but his failure to control his passion hurt him and his cause. A challenge for many targeted parents is learning to control the intensity of their emotions. Some of these parents are not very likeable by the time they go to court. Robert may not have appreciated how his anger was feeding into his ex-wife's argument that he was volatile and abusive.

The Extended Family

A new significant other or a grandparent can destroy any progress parents and children make in their therapy. The alienating parent's source of support (spouse and

extended family) may need to participate in the therapy and be educated about their contribution to the problem. The reunification therapist must have the ability to interview and educate anyone that may play a role in the alienation.

All Family Members Must Accept Change

The reunification therapist's task is to identify the realities that both parents must live, that is, the probability of that any further alienating behavior will harm the children.¹⁶⁻¹⁹ State laws and courts support the children's right to have a reciprocal loving relationship with both parents. Both parents must reconcile themselves to those realities by changing their behavior, and most importantly their beliefs about what is best for the children.

Reunification therapy can be time consuming because the alienation may have been going on for a long time and the alienating parent will frequently resist change. The alienating parent must learn to empathize with what the children are feeling, put self-serving interests aside, and reframe his or her beliefs. Targeted parents must learn how to rebuild their relationship with the children and avoid their own alienating behavior. The children will have to learn to differentiate reality from their delusional thinking. Children learn that they can have an opinion about either parent, but their opinion should be founded on personal experience rather than what they are told by an angry or hurting parent.

ACCESS TO THE CHILD

If a parent is prevented from spending time with his or her children, the parent has no chance of preventing further damage from alienation or repairing the damaged relationship. Having access to the children is imperative. The targeted parent's attorney must advocate for his or her client to have continued parenting time with minimal supervision. Allegations of abuse or threats to the children's safety are the only good reasons for severely restricting parenting time or requiring supervised visits. The parent must abide with supervised visits rather than lose all time with the children. The angry parent must be told by the attorney to swallow his or her pride and comply with the court-ordered supervised visits. The parent stands a better chance of continuing or rebuilding a relationship with the children if he or she complies with the court order.

SUPERVISED VISITATION

Courts will order supervised visits when there is a concern about the children's emotional or physical safety, or have reasons to believe that the children are afraid of the rejected parent. Sometimes the court's decision for supervised visits is attributable to false information provided by the alienating parent. The risk of ordering supervised visits is the subtle message to the child that the targeted parent is a threat to the child's safety. The threat can be reinforced by the alienating parent's comments, such as, "Honey, don't worry, the nice lady at the center will protect you."

Supervised visits should only occur in conjunction with reunification therapy or a court-ordered intervention to repair the damaged relationship. Supervised visits alone simply mean that the court has designated someone to observe the parent and children during limited visits. Supervised visits will limit how a parent can interact with his or her child. Visits are usually limited to one room or the center's backyard. Physical affection, leaving the center for a fun activity, or sharing a relaxed day at home is discouraged or not allowed. Restricted access helps ensure the child's safety but limits the parent's ability to heal the relationship. Because of the center's rules,

both the parent and the child feel inhibited. The rules may restrict hugging or exchanging gifts. A theory behind supervised visits is to give the parent additional time to regain the child's trust and feel more comfortable together.

Older children may feel bored during the supervised visit, later complaining that "I don't want to go back to the center." When the older child complains, the alienating parent may use the child's complaint to support the argument that the child wants nothing to do with the targeted parent, rather than blaming the child's attitude on the restricted environment. The person supervising and observing the visits should report any progress or problems during visits to the court.

Case 3

The alienating parent may look for reasons to argue that supervised visits are a failure and should be discontinued. An example is the mother who was told that her son warmed to his father, and together had a great time. In response, the mother grabbed her son's hand and ran out of the visitation center, never to be seen again. This mother was not interested in her son's having an affectionate or fun relationship with his father. The mother's agenda was clearly more important than what was best for her son.

COURT ORDERS

Ideally, court orders that mandate supervised visits should address important practical questions such as:

- What criteria should the visitation center or guardian *ad litem* use to extend or eliminate supervised visits? The criteria should be an improvement in the parent-child relationship rather than a calendar date.
- What reparative or corrective actions should be taken by the staff of the visitation center to promote an improved parent-child relationship?

Ideally, the court order should distinguish the role of the reunification therapist from the role of the parenting coordinator. In particular, the court should not assign arbitration responsibilities, such as the authority to modify parenting time, to the therapist. In many states, doing so is unethical and places the therapist in an awkward position of being the gatekeeper. The therapist who functions as an arbitrator becomes the object of the parents' manipulations, which detracts from the therapy or places the therapist in a position to defend the decision to reduce or increase parenting time.

On the other hand, a parenting coordinator may function as an arbitrator and have the authority to modify parenting time. A parenting coordinator is an impartial individual assigned by the court to monitor progress, make certain limited decisions, and offer recommendations to the court to modify access. The parenting coordinator should usually consult with the reunification therapist before making significant decisions. The family will save considerable time and money if the court grants the parenting coordinator limited arbitration power to make quicker decisions and changes in the parenting time schedule.

IMPASSES AND STALEMATES

It is not uncommon for the reunification therapist to encounter bumps, potholes, and road blocks. For example, the alienating parent may avoid meeting with the therapist or communicating with the targeted parent. The therapist cannot be expected to track down an uncooperative parent; that is not the therapist's responsibility. If one of the parents refuses to cooperate, the therapist should notify the court, parenting

coordinator, or the referral source, usually one of the attorneys or the guardian *ad litem*. Sometimes the cooperating parent will need reassurance from his or her attorney that the alienating parent's failure to comply will hurt the offending parent in court, providing the court has the reputation of not tolerating blatant failure to follow court orders. Emma's case, discussed earlier, can attest to this. Both parents must believe there are sanctions for failing to follow court orders.

During the course of reunification the parents or the child may encounter a crisis that could stifle reunification. The crisis does not have to be a bump in the road, but can be an important opportunity that may motivate a change in the parents' behavior. There are anecdotal reports that a crisis will prompt an oppositional parent to cooperate with court orders and allow the targeted parent to resume parenting time. Dealing with the crisis should occur in the context of the reunification therapy.

Crises may occur because of a variety of life events. However, there are also ways by which the court can create a crisis that may reduce an uncooperative parent's resistance to change. A crisis can arise from circumstances in the parent's life or from a court's intervention. The judge in Emma's case is an example of the court's creating a crisis. The court and the professionals involved in the case must be vigilant in looking for an opportunity to create a suitable crisis. A crisis can take many forms, such as the following.

The Stalemate that Hurts

A stalemate usually refers to a situation in a game in which neither player can win. Divorcing parents may find themselves in a no-win situation, when they realize that continuing to fight for their position harms not only themselves but most importantly the child.

A Recent Catastrophe

Sometimes a shared crisis will bring people who have been fighting for years together. Science fiction movies have made use of this theme in the films *War of the Worlds* and, more recently, *Independence Day*. Both plots involved aliens who threatened the existence of the earth, so the nations of the world united against a common enemy.

Impending Catastrophe or Deteriorating Position

Both parents are more likely to break their stalemate when they can see and agree that any inaction on their part will lead to a crisis that will hurt their child. For example, failure to obtain emergency medical treatment can have devastating effects on their child's health.

An Enticing Opportunity

An opportunity may arise with a child that demands the parents' cooperation or their working together. Taking advantage of this type of crisis requires the parents to think about what is best for the child rather than their own narcissistic needs. There are many possible enticing opportunities, such as: completing the college financial statements for scholarships; graduation from high school, college, or even graduate school; extensive medical treatment; and an important family event, including weddings and funerals.

A Judicial Crisis

Rather than waiting for a crisis to develop, the court may want to consider creating its own crisis for the warring parents. A judge can create a crisis to motivate the unmotivated parent. Frequently the court will limit its intervention to a lecture with

a well-meaning threat to sanction the uncooperative parent. When deciding how to intervene, the court has to decide between doing nothing and hoping the problem will go away, or creating a crisis.

For example, a judge might threaten to put the children in foster care, which gives the parents reasons for putting their differences aside. The judge creates the circumstances for motivating the parents and extended family to change because the crisis now has more to do with the children than the parents' need to control. In one such case, the parents and extended family were in a hurting stalemate because they and their children were in a no-win situation unless they cooperated. When they were threatened with foster care, the parents and the children shared the potential of an impending catastrophe, and without a shared solution each were placed in a deteriorating position. To avoid the crisis, the court provided an enticing opportunity for these parents by offering the pathway to resolution through mediation and reunification therapy.

If the court chooses this approach, the crisis and the consequences of the crisis should affect both parents and not harm the child. The court may consider the following methods to create a crisis.

- Considering a change of custody to the targeted parent. The alienating parent needs to understand the possibility of the change of custody before going to court.
- Transferring the children's temporary custody to a responsible family member.
- Ordering one or both parents to sit in the county jail long enough to understand the consequences for failing to comply with court orders. This has been done, with positive results.
- Requiring the alienating parent to put a significant sum of money in an escrow account to pay for missed appointments and court expenses that the compliant parent may incur for returning to court.
- Filing criminal charges for contempt and then allowing for a plea bargain to include cooperation with court orders.
- Granting extra parenting time for the targeted parent to make up for times that the alienating parent failed to provide the child for visitation.

For the crisis to work, the court cannot bluff. The court must follow through with the threat and realize that the court and the targeted parent will be the target of the alienating parent's rage. In many jurisdictions, the parents do not take the court's threats seriously. The court will lose credibility in the eyes of both parents if the noncompliant parent only receives a slap on the hand. Therefore, the alienating parent must be sincerely frightened by the order. He or she must believe and feel the crisis. However, there must be an escape clause in the court order that generally involves both parents. The escape clause specifically describes to both parents what is expected to avoid the consequences of their contempt. Finally, the court—not the targeted parent—must be responsible for the court's decision. This fact must be emphasized to the alienating parent and the children. The judge should invite the children into the courtroom and explain to the children the court order, and emphasize to the children that it is the court and not either parent that is making the order and that they are expected to comply with the court order.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There are many obstacles to reunification, a serious one being the cost. Reunification therapy can take months of intense work with the parents. Insurance companies will frequently refuse to pay for court-ordered therapy because insurance is intended for treating mental disorders and not relationship problems (V-codes). Even if the

DSM-5 (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition; in development) accepts PA disorder as a diagnosis, it will not guarantee insurance reimbursement because the disorder will likely be viewed as a relational problem and not a mental disorder. Parents will likely carry the financial burden for the treatment. Another concern that few attorneys consider when making a referral for therapy is that the insurance companies require a valid mental health diagnosis for payment. The diagnosis can later be used in court, suggesting that the parent either has a serious mental disorder or the therapist is fraudulently claiming a mental disorder so he or she can get paid. A wise therapist will never take this risk, knowing they could later have to defend the diagnosis in court.

SPONTANEOUS REUNIFICATION

When all hope for reunification is lost, there are circumstances when the alienated child or “adult child” will reach out to the targeted parent. Darnall and Steinberg^{20,21} sought to understand how and why these children/adults reached out to their alienated parent. Together they identified 27 severely alienated children and found that each child/adult had something in common with each other. Each child/adult reached out in response to a crisis in his or her life, believing that somehow the alienated parent might be helpful. The wise parent was comfortable with knowing he or she was being used or taken advantage of, but was willing, hoping that he or she might reestablish a meaningful relationship with the son or daughter. The reunification came about without mental health counseling or court intervention. The study by Darnall and Steinberg offers hope for alienated parents who believe they have forever lost their children.

CRITERIA FOR SUCCESSFUL REUNIFICATION

Successful reunification can be judged from different perspectives. The criteria for successful reunification are different for the alienated child, the alienating parent, and targeted parent, and the court. The court’s goals for successful reunification may include: the parents’ never returning to court; the parents’ facilitating a reciprocal loving relationship between the children, the parents, and extended family; and repair of any damage done to the child’s relationship with the alienated parent. For the alienated child, successful reunification is to feel safe and trust that both parents will attend to their basic emotional and physical needs. Children do not want to be exposed to their parents’ hostilities or petty arguments. The child wants to feel and express affection toward both parents without emotional repercussions. For the targeted parent, the goals are to reduce alienating behavior, strengthen his or her relationship with the child while reducing conflict with the other parent, and repair the damage that alienation has caused the child. The targeted parent’s goal is to enjoy unimpeded parenting time with the child and heal the suffering caused by previous alienation. The goal for the obsessed parent is typically the total removal of the targeted parent from the child’s life. That goal is contrary to successful reunification therapy. If the criteria for successful reunification are to include the child’s opportunity for a reciprocal positive relationship with both parents, the outcome studies must include verification from both parents.

POSSIBILITY OF FAILED REUNIFICATION

Successful reunification implies more than a successful reconnection between a rejected parent and the alienated child. Reunification must include the child’s having a reciprocal and safe relationship with both parents. Some mental health professionals may disagree because of the concern that the alienating parent is emotionally abusive and

manipulative, arguing that a more realistic goal involves helping the child reconnect with the targeted parent and undoing the negative programming by the alienating parent. Adopting this alternative goal implies that the alienating parent may not change, which can certainly be true. Success may include limited contact with the alienating parent.

There may be concern about who should define the criteria for denying an alienating parent access to his or her child and under what circumstances such should occur. Assuming that the child's safety is not an issue, the decision to deny access should be made after sincere attempts to reunify have failed and the likelihood of continued alienation persists. It is especially important to consider denying the alienating parent access to the child when there continues to be false allegations of abuse. Also, persistent noncompliance with court orders represents failure of reunification, and may result in denying the alienating parent access to the child.

CONSIDERING CHANGE OF CUSTODY

The difficulty the court has before changing custody is deciding, on balance, what is best for the child: maintaining the status quo, knowing that the child is making an adequate adjustment, or taking a risk in changing custody. Changing custody is thought to be very risky for most judges, especially with the severely alienated child who vehemently expresses a hatred or fear of the rejected parent. The court may freeze with its own fear when it hears that the child will run away or kill himself or herself if they have to spend time with the targeted parent, while the other side is yelling about fairness and his or her right to have a loving relationship with the child. Making a decision under such circumstances can be extremely stressful. Courts have looked to mental health professionals for guidance. Unfortunately, there are few outcome studies supporting either position's impact on the child's global adjustment. This area of research is one that needs to be addressed, but there are serious problems with this type of study because of an insufficient sample size and identifying a treatment and control group.

Gardner²² advocated an involuntary change of custody or forced visitation in cases of severe PAS. He conducted a follow-up study of 99 children from 52 families, that is, cases that he had personally consulted on. For 22 children, the court followed Gardner's recommendation to reduce the alienating parent's access to the children or transfer custody to the targeted parent. Subsequently, the PAS symptoms of all of these 22 children were reduced or eliminated. For 77 children, the court did not follow Gardner's recommendation to reduce the alienating parent's access to the children or transfer custody to the target parent. Subsequently, the PAS symptoms of 7 of the 77 children were reduced or eliminated although they remained with the alienating parent, while the PAS symptoms of 70 of the 77 children were not reduced or eliminated. There were limitations to Gardner's study, which involved follow-up interviews with the targeted parent but not the alienating parent. He reasoned, probably accurately, that the alienating parent would not want to talk with him or provide accurate information about the child's adjustment with the change. The conclusion of the study, while taking into consideration the limitations, is that an involuntary change of custody is a viable option for reducing or eliminating PAS. Not known is the quality of the relationship between the children and the alienating parent when a change of custody occurred.

CONSIDERING PREVENTION

The worst phrase for a parent to hear is "I don't want to see you ever again. I will run away or kill myself." After hearing the contempt in the child's voice and recovering from the shock of disbelief, the parents and the court can be frozen with fear. No

one can shake the child back to reality. Despite all the discussion of PAS in recent years, there are still no validated treatment protocols for reversing the damage caused by the overly zealous parent. There continues to be speculation about the effectiveness of changing the alienated child's custody to the targeted parent. Then, there is the misguided notion of simply referring the child for therapy, frequently reinforcing in the child's mind that he or she is at fault, or at least that he or she is responsible for maneuvering his or her life between two warring parents. It is easy to see that such a recommendation rarely works.

Preventing PAS is much easier than treating a family damaged by a severe degree of alienation. There is a need for courts and attorneys to identify local resources offering parents educational programs or parenting classes that teach parents how to prevent alienation and how to focus on building and keeping strong the relationship between the parents and children. If such a program does not exist in a community, the court may suggest to the local mental health center that it develops such a program.

SUMMARY

Reunification therapy is a complex process that requires a therapist to be experienced not only in that specialized form of treatment but also in family therapy and cognitive behavioral therapy. The goal of reunification therapy is to assist the parents to change not just their behavior but also their destructive beliefs. The parent may use false beliefs to rationalize his or her alienating behavior, such as "I am only trying to protect my children," when no evidence of abuse exists.

During the course of reunification therapy, parents must accept the following realities: that both parents agree that continued and protracted litigation harms children; that state laws support the value of children having a reciprocal, loving relationship with both parents; that it is important to obey court orders; and finally, the reality that neither parent is going to disappear from their children's lives.

Reunification therapy requires active collaboration between the therapist, the court, and other agents, such as the parenting coordinator. Through its authority, the court can greatly support the reunification therapist, providing the parents fear the sanctions that will be imposed by the court for noncompliance to the court orders. The children will be the beneficiaries of this teamwork between the court and the therapist.

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