

## CHAPTER XXIV

### **Parental Alienation: A FORM OF CHILD ABUSE AND MORE**

Who are the true victims of the Parental Alienation (PA)? What price is being paid for the damages it inflicts on family functioning? I have heard it expressed by more than one judge, by more than one attorney for the child, and by more than one therapist that only the alienated parent suffers abuse resulting from the PA; and because they are "big boys and big girls," they are expected to, "Just get over it and move on." The difficulty in acknowledging the PA as a form of child abuse is a consequence of society's failure to have reached a consensus on what constitutes emotional abuse. Emotional abuse is not so easily recognizable because it does not leave physical bruises or scars, and the PA child does not confirm the brainwashing but instead refutes it.

I take an unequivocal position that the PA is a form of emotional child abuse, as do those who were interviewed for this book. What is the support for this position? Gardner (1998) stated, "A parent who inculcates a PA in a child is indeed perpetrating a form of emotional abuse in that such programming may not only produce lifelong alienation from a loving parent, but lifelong psychiatric disturbance in a child" (p. xxi). Garbarino and Scott (1992) labeled the PA child as being "psychologically battered." Clawar and Rivlin (1991) asserted:

The effects of losing not only the intact family, but also a parent, hang heavily over children, touching them in ways that can wreak havoc in many realms of life both in the present and future. As adults, many victims of bitter custody battles who had been permanently removed from a target parent....still long to be reunited with the lost parent. The loss cannot be undone. Childhood cannot be recaptured. Gone forever is

that sense of history, intimacy, lost input of values and morals, self-awareness through knowing one's beginnings, love, contact with extended family, and much more.

Virtually no child possesses the ability to protect him or herself against such an undignified and total loss. (p. 105)

Major (2006) declared the following:

Because PA is among the most severe kinds of abuse of a child's emotions, there will be scars and lost opportunities for normal development. The child is at risk of growing up and being an alienator also, because the alienating parent has been the primary role model. (p. 285)

The resistance to recognizing this syndrome as a form of emotional child abuse must be understood in the context of the alienating parent's ultimate goal, which is to permanently sever the relationship between the other parent and their child. Cartwright (2006) elaborated about this point:

The awful outcome of PA is the complete separation of a child or children from a parent. Even more dreadful is that it is deliberately caused, maliciously done, and entirely preventable. This terrible form of child abuse has long-lasting effects for all concerned. (p. 286)

The detrimental and abusive affects on children resulting from the loss of a parental relationship is aptly characterized by Everett (2006) when he defined PA as “a destructive family pathology because it attributes a quality of ‘evil,’ without cause or foundation, to a parent who once nurtured and protected the same child that has now turned against her or him” (p. 228). And Frank Williams (1990) coined the phrase

“parentectomy” to describe the ultimate goal of the PA, which is to sever the relationship with the child and the targeted parent.

In her book, *Adult Children of Parental Alienation Syndrome*, Baker (2007) concluded from her research on this population that the PA is a form of emotional child abuse.

Some of her core findings I paraphrase here as follows, but I refer the reader to her book for a complete accounting: 1) Damage to the child's self-esteem resulting from the pain of being "enlightened" that the targeted parent does not love and has rejected her/him; 2) Feeling bad about herself/himself resulting from the introjected negative view of a parent, with whom children instinctively identify; 3) Being ignored by the alienating parent for association with the targeted parent; 4) Terrorizing the child, who is criticized and/or punished for expressing normal feelings and opinions; 5) Corruption of the child whereby the alienating parent tolerates extreme acting out behaviors in exchange for the child's allegiance and also because the child's maltreatment of the targeted parent is normalized; 6) Exploiting the child's dependency as a captive audience of the alienating parent, who chooses to expose the child to adult information that exceed the child's cognitive and emotional capabilities to handle; 7) Formation of shame and guilt resulting from the child's inability to fulfill the alienating parent's expectation as her/his problem solver; 8) Subjecting the child to the fear of abandonment as a punishment for the child's desire for contact with the targeted parent (pp. 84-99).

Baker (2007) summarized the research of her book as follows: 65% of the study's participants were afflicted with low self-esteem; 70% suffered episodes of depression due to the belief of being unloved by the targeted parent and from extended separation from that parent; 35% engaged in substance abuse as a means to mask their feelings of pain

and loss; 40% lacked trust in themselves as well as in meaningful relationships because the trust was broken with their parents; 50% suffered the heartbreaking repetition of the alienation by becoming alienated from their own children; and 57.5% were beset by divorce, higher than the national average of 52%. (pp. 180-191)

Robert Hiltzik labeled the PA a form of child abuse when he described what he has witnessed in his 22 years of family law practice:

The alienating parent is not enforcing discipline. The crucial dynamic is that the alienating parent strives to be the child's best friend while the other parent is left with the responsibility of being the disciplinarian. The children then run amok, and the alienating parent is sanctioning this because they are saying to their child, 'I won't enforce the rules as long as you do what I say and give your other parent a hard time. Make him miserable.' I think the damage is pervasive. If you allow a child to conduct himself/herself in such a conflicted way, the child carries that throughout life. If the child can be so disrespectful to a parent without any justification whatsoever, then there is no doubt the child will exhibit similar conduct before other authority figures. Even the most amicable divorces have a negative impact on children. And with the PA, the conflict is so heightened that the child becomes a victim of war. How healthy is it to turn feelings on and off? If you hate one of your parents and you don't know why, you can't love yourself and you can't love others.

Mr. Hiltzik asserted that, although there are therapists and attorneys who understand the negative ramifications to children of parental alienation, many judges do not recognize that it is a form of child abuse. He stated this problem as follows, "When the

courts look at alienation, whom do they see is the victim? They see the victim to be the alienated parent. The courts don't see that it damages children."

Mr. Previto graphically described what he has encountered in his 17 years of practice as a marital attorney as to the damage done to children by the PA when he stated, "If a child is walking the across the train tracks, gets an electrical shock from the third rail but is not killed, the scars will be there for the rest of his life. The emotional scars resulting from an alienation are not going away either." Mr. Previto described some of these injuries to children as having to live with tremendous guilt for having allowed themselves to be manipulated by the custodial parent to be so abusive to their other parent.

Ms. Saltz stated in her interview that alienation is a form of child abuse. She expressed it this way, "Alienated children do not form healthy relationships as adults. And very often as adults, they don't have healthy relationships with their own children." Ms. Saltz added, "It's not healthy for these children not to see the non-custodial parent. I think children need to know where they come from, and if they are missing a parent, they are missing a part of themselves. If they miss out on one of their parents, there is a hole inside of them. And they don't fill that hole with good stuff." Ms. Saltz agreed that these children tend to hate themselves as a result of hating a parent. She commented, "And when you hate yourself, you are likely to act out."

Mr. Hecht believes that the negative effects of parental alienation are "impactful and severe" and agrees that children are susceptible to brainwashing by the residential parent because they are generally so impressionable. He expressed, however, that the courts face an acute dilemma in recognizing instances of parental alienation because there is only circumstantial evidence. He expressed the dilemma as follows: "There are no

bruises and there are no scars with alienation. It's all under the surface. That's perhaps the biggest problem."

In my interview with Dr. Burkhardt, I inquired as to her opinion as to whether she considers the PA to be a form of child abuse and how it can be readily identified when observed. She replied the following, "This is maltreatment of children in the most profound way." She continued to explain that they are seeing children years subsequent to their initial evaluation so that her agency is in a position to observe the outcomes. She is concerned that PA children are empowered when asked to join with the alienating parent as an ally. As a result, Dr. Burkhardt affirmed the following:

These children do not follow rules; they are out of control; they are basically naughty and lack limits. These children behave as if they have license to do whatever they want. It may have begun as a breakdown in not having to respond the authority of and respect for the other parent. In the cases of treatment or court failure to reunite, we have seen the lack of respect for authority figures including the favored parent, school, and the law. Among the cases where reunification efforts have failed are children who have dropped out of school, become addicted to drugs, born children out of wedlock addicted to drugs, and engaged in other antisocial behaviors. This is not a good outcome.

Dr. Burkhardt became maudlin upon reporting these developments, and she expressed her chagrin by explaining, "They initially came in as high functioning kids from seemingly high functioning, involved parents."

To provide a clearer picture for the reader about how disturbed these children become, Dr. Burkhardt compared them to another group of kids whom she treats on a regular basis.

This other group of children have been raped, burned, beaten, sexually abused, and victims of crime. "If they are in the newspapers, the children are likely to wind up in this office because we specialize in traumatized children. And yet, they don't hold a candle in terms of symptoms and prognosis to the PA children. PA kids are a mess." Dr. Burkhard continued to express how PA children suffer emotional abuse:

Childhood is a time to develop a sense of responsibility. It is a time to develop a conscience. Children who become alienated have this fundamental aspect of their development derailed. They are not only not held accountable for their mistakes and misdeeds, they may be encouraged to tell lies or exaggerate the truth, and otherwise act in ways that are disrespectful of others. That these behaviors are reinforced by a trusted parent further undermines normal moral development as well as the development of their ability to develop normal relationships.

Dr. Kelly asserted that children who become victims of the PA suffer lifetime damage. She expressed, "They do not learn interpersonal problem solving because they are often prevented from working out realistic everyday conflicts with a parent. This is simply not healthy in the long run. This affects them in a very negative way." In addressing the damage of the PA on adolescents, who are generally not receptive to confrontation, Dr. Kelly stated the following, "Adolescents are very difficult to disabuse of the PA. Having permission or a sanction from a parent to treat the other parent so badly is going to, at some point, have a very deleterious effect on their ability to interact with others. Dr. Kelly is also concerned about the serious damage to children from false sex abuse allegations. She stated, "It confirms damage to the child as if the abuse really happened." She further commented:

The PA undermines healthy family functioning, such as family hierarchy in that the boundaries between the parental and child subsystems breakdown when the child is elevated by the alienating parent to an adult level as a result of their coalition. This explains why PA children often do not respond appropriately to authority figures, such a school principals, teachers, etc.

Dr. Kelly cited an example from her practice to concretize this message. She began working with a girl when she was nine years old, and Dr. Kelly was convinced that "the mom was determined to surgically remove the father from the girl's life." Dr. Kelly cautioned the mother that she was setting the girl up for "all sorts of authority problems because, when you teach a child to disrespect one authority, it will be transferred to other authorities." Dr. Kelly was reintroduced to the girl again when she was 15 years old, and, as she had predicted, the girl was exhibiting serious behavioral issues. The mother was unable to control her; the girl was not listening to any of her teachers or to any other adults, for that matter, and she had a problem with truancy. According to Dr. Kelly:

Another lifelong penalty is that PA children often pay results from the guilt that they bear for having abused their targeted parent, because, on some level they know that this treatment was unacceptable. And should the targeted parent no longer be available to them when they come to the realization of what has occurred in their family, there is no possibility for atonement.

In response to my question as to whether all children who are victims of the PA are damaged, Dr. Kelly responded, "There are always resilient children, just as you see with physically abused children. But they are the exception!"

Ms. Zarkadas confirmed for me that she has witnessed during her 20 years of practice severe detrimental affects to the child as a result of parental alienation. She stated that these difficulties run the gamut from problems in education, difficulties in peer relationships, illegal substance use, engaging in criminal activities, development of mental health disturbances. Ms. Zarkadas expressed, "These children are being asked to deal with adult situations that even adults don't know how to handle." She believes that when a parent engages in alienating practices, the child will walk away with the idea, "What did I do wrong?" Ms. Zarkadas elaborated by stating, "These kids walk away from these messes feeling that they are to blame."

I inquired of Ms. Zarkadas why the courts do not deem alienation to be form of child abuse given the severity of the conditions which she had just described. She responded that it has not met the criteria of Article 10 of the Family Court Act, which defines abuse. But she insisted, "It should be criminalized. The pain these children suffer because of the decision by one parent to erase the other parent out of their life----is criminal!"

Ms. Courten stands with the others interviewed for this book in considering parental alienation to be a form of child abuse. She described what she sees happening to these children:

In terms of showing disrespect for authority, it is absolutely there. These children get so convoluted in their thinking because mom tells them she loves them and says do this. And dad tells them he loves them and says do that. You get really mixed up little kids out of it. Because these kids lack control over what is happening to them by finding themselves in an upside down world---a world in which they are manipulated into believing that love is hate; that disrespect, defiance and maltreatment are

acceptable; that their feelings must be denied---I do not see a good outcome for them. They become self-destructive. They attempt to take back control by adopting behaviors over which they do have control, such as bedwetting, drug use, eating disorders, drinking, and stealing. They become violent people.

Dr. Havlicek declared to me, "There is no question that PA is a form of child abuse. It is a horror show. The damage to children is enormous. When a child loses a parent, they are killing off a part of themselves because there is an identity between the child and both parents. The result is that they become self injurious." Dr. Havlicek confirmed:

I see all the warning signs and all the red flags of this self-hatred: nightmares, anxiety, oppositional behaviors in school, presence of gastrointestinal syndromes, falling school grades, more susceptibility to peers with oppositional behaviors, juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, depression.

He asserted that he has much anecdotal evidence for the abuse from his practice in that he sees symptomatic adults who were child victims of the PA.

Dr. Havlicek concluded that, in his professional opinion, most psychological problems and problematical behaviors do not have a primarily biological basis. Instead, he asserted, "the basis is rooted in a combination of disordered family circumstances and biological factors." Dr. Havlicek's extraordinary observation confirms what I had argued in the last chapter: that the mental health profession is rushing to medicate for a chemical imbalance before undertaking a comprehensive assessment of IP's family situation in order to determine its impact on the patient's symptoms. By locating the site of pathology within the dysfunctional family transactions rather than within the individual has very different implications for treatment.

In his article, "Father? What father? Parental Alienation and its Effect on Children," appearing in the *Law Guardian Reporter*, Chaim Steinberger, Esq., (2006) painstakingly summarizes the literature which addresses the detrimental effects on children of the PA. These effects include but are not limited to anxiety, self-loathing, rigidity, hopelessness, powerlessness, confusion, withdrawal, isolation, and hypocrisy. This exhaustive summary can be read in completion on Dr. Havlicek's website, [www.drhavlick.com](http://www.drhavlick.com).

The preceding chapter discussed the pathological implications for children who are caught in the perverse triangle. In the worst-case scenario, a psychosis is the result. In the least-case scenario, it was shown that the PA inflicts on its young victims various degrees of chronic emotional disabilities, ongoing circumscription of potentials, and vulnerability to antisocial behaviors and to interpersonal difficulties. These damages accrue because of: a programming which distorts reality testing, perception, and judgment; a cognitive distortion resulting from the belief that the targeted parent's love and nurturing is instead maltreatment and rejection; the normalizing of deceit and cruelty; the fostering of a dependency upon a manipulative parent; the suppression of the superego, or conscience; the self-alienation from the repression one's true feelings; a chronic state of anxiety that a slip of behavior will expose the true positive feelings and longing for the alienated parent; the loss of self as a result of the rejection of the alienated parent.

There is, additionally, the issue of damages to society from the PA: it exacerbates the deleterious effects from divorce on the institution of the family----the building block of our culture. Given that 52% of marriages end in divorce, massive numbers of families and children are affected by the inevitable emotional turmoil that results from even the

most amicable family break-up. Divorcing parents who are mature and who therefore subjugate their needs to those of their children are able to minimize the damage to their children. But much of the research and anecdotal evidence indicate that children usually become triangulated into at least some of their parents' sparring even in the least adversarial divorce proceedings. Triangulation resulting from divorce is a cancer on our society, and it is metastasizing. It can no longer be swept under the rug. As concerned citizens, we must address the effects on culture when the family fails in its responsibility to keep children protected. Society ignores this circumstance to its own peril because there are inevitable costs attached to the psychological treatment of the conditions that result from the PA. Society at large must ultimately bear these expenditures through higher health care costs, through incarceration expenses, and through social services and income maintenance when these children's handicaps prevent them from functioning as contributing members to society. These costs are particularly devastating at this time when public budgets are under economic stress. But the greater tragedy is that the PA preventable.