

Coached children – Understanding the impact of parental alienation

Note: The term 'Parental alienation' is more commonly used in the United States than in the United Kingdom. The term 'Implacable hostility' is used in the UK, but the research base refers to parental alienation so the latter term has been used throughout this text.

Kelly and Johnston (2001) define parental alienation as "The angry alienation of a child from a parent following separation and divorce". The term was originally coined by Wallerstein and Kelly (1976, 1980). Gardner (1982) added the word syndrome to the end of the phrase, arguing that it was a definable disorder, but this is still controversial.

Key issues:

- The needs, wishes and feelings of children are based on the adult's interpretation of what's best for the child, rather than what the child actually wants
 - Children feel under pressure to support one parent or the other. This can lead to them 'modifying' their views to match those of the alienated parent. This may lead to the child trying to placate the parent e.g. if they see the alienated parents at contact and enjoy it, they may tell the alienating parent that they had a terrible time and were forced to interact with them.
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- The child's version of events can be seen as a preference, or 'taking sides'.
 - There is a tension between the child's views and promoting the child's welfare.
 - There is a difference between a strong attachment or affinity to a parent and the parent telling the child what to say. Sometimes this is obvious but there is a fine line between undue influence and neutral information-giving preparation.
 - Distinction between brainwashing and coaching. The former is about turning the child against the other parent. The latter is about feeding a particular view to the child and reinforcing that view so that the child also believes it.

Effects on children:

- The impact on children: undue influence from both sides can be very distressing, especially as family court enquiries tend to be adversarial, which can make children anxious.
- Children caught up in disputes between their parents feel torn as their loyalties are divided.

Types and examples of coaching:

- Children who are coached can be afraid of enjoying themselves with the other parent.
- Overt coaching: “Mummy said when you see him, cry and scream”.
- Covert coaching: refusing cards and presents from the alienated parent; irrational fear of the alienated parent

Signs of coaching:

Children who have been coached are likely to display the following signs:

1. They exhibit hatred towards target parent.
2. They copy/imitate the alienator.
3. They don't want to spend time with the alienated parent.
4. They are delusional or express irrational beliefs.
5. They are not intimidated by the court process.
6. Their reasoning is clearly based on what they are being told by the alienator and is not based on personal experiences.
7. Their feelings appear to be unambivalent.
8. They align themselves with the alienator.
9. They show no outward signs of guilt, just obsessional, irrational hatred.
10. They can present as normal until asked about alienated parent.

Other indicators:

- Clearly expressed antipathy by the alienator makes a difference. This can be heightened, for example, when the alienator gets a new partner who takes on the role of “Mum” or “Dad” while the alienated parent is referred to by their first name.
- Grandparental involvement heightens tensions as they will naturally be supportive of their own child.
- Children can also be influenced by older siblings if they take on their version of events.

Considerations when working with coached children:

Practitioners should meet with parents first when they are concerned about the possibility of parental alienation. Boundaries need to be set and expectations managed. This can be useful when interpreting the child's wishes and feelings later, especially if they have been coached.

Younger children seem to be able to get over initial resistance to contact better than older children.

Children should be seen individually where possible – sibling influence can be significant.

Shorter periods of no contact are also a factor as they promote a better chance of renewed contact.

Weir: no correlation between length of proceedings and success or not of contact.

Practitioners have to consider whether the alienating parent is helping to undermine the child(ren)'s relationship with the alienated parent.

Practitioners should look for ways of finding out who is important to the child and the strength of the relationship: e.g. “Me and mum think that...” indicates some degree of influence.

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