

Child Psychological Abuse – A Parent’s View

I want you to imagine something for me. You’ve been a divorced parent for a decade, your child is 16, you have a court order which states that your child should live with you in term time but visits the other parent in the holidays. Your ex has a personality disorder and is abusive to anyone they claim to be close to. Your ex is still hostile and you keep distance between you. Life is good and settled, for the most part. Then you attend your child’s GCSE graduation and everything changes overnight. After years of trying, your ex has finally succeeded in convincing your child that you are an abuser, your child refuses to come home and makes allegations of abuse about you and your current spouse. This sounds like the stuff of nightmares, right?

This happened to me last year. I haven’t seen my son for months. I missed Christmas, his 17th birthday, Mother’s Day, all the holidays when we would have done fun activities together, the weekends when we would have had breakfast - just the two of us chatting. He told me he loved me on Christmas Day but I haven’t spoken to him on the phone since January.

My son’s behaviour went from no issues to oppositionally defiant overnight, then came the false allegations against us, my son left home, he and his dad shared the allegations with my family causing most of them to turn against my husband and me and they engaged professionals and turned them against us too. He’s reported me to the police and NMC twice, trying to destroy my career.

My son decided he wanted to continue studying at the same college but his dad lives 200 miles away so social care referred him to live in independent accommodation. I’ve been assured by 2 social workers, 3 school staff, a therapist and an MP that my son is old enough to make his own decisions, which is legally true. I retain parental responsibility but I have zero parental authority. My role in my son’s life - erased. I believe he has been coercively controlled by his father, in the same way he used to try to control me.

Above is my perspective. It’s post separation abuse. Spousal psychological abuse, using a child as a weapon. I have become what is known as a ‘targeted parent’ (a parent who’s previously loving child is turned against them by another member of the family, usually the other parent).

What about my son? He is now a ‘victimised child’. I can’t tell you how he feels as we’re not able to have those sorts of conversations currently. Other children, now adults, who have come out the other side of this have described how they still feel guilty years later; how the ‘alienating parent’ made them reject their other parent by convincing them they were dangerous; how they were ‘parentified’ so that they had to care about the alienating parent’s needs more than their own. They say they did not understand they were being manipulated. There’s no guarantee a child will ever understand what happened or make contact with the parent they rejected. The ramifications for children are huge. Statistics show these children are at increased risk of severe depression and suicide, increased risk of not meeting their potential as an adult, they are more likely to have relationship difficulties, more likely to develop a personality disorder, more likely to alienate or be alienated from their own children. They meet several criteria for Adverse Childhood Experiences. Psychologists agree that such children suffer severe child psychological abuse at the hands of their alienating parent.

As school nurses how do we identify these children? They claim that the parent who loves them is an abuser and that their abuser has never done anything to harm them. The system is rightfully set up to protect children from abusers. But the same system places children like my son with their abuser and keeps their loving parent at arm's length. My son's fortunate in that he is not being made to live with his dad, but most children will not be this lucky.

What is this phenomenon? Colloquially it is known as 'parental alienation'. But it's been mired in controversy since Richard Gardener, who invented the term Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) in the 1980s, was discredited. PAS doesn't exist but the problem definitely does. Dr Childress (2015) pulled together work from theorists Bowlby, Minuchin, van der Kolk, Tronick, Linehan, Millon, Beck, Freud, Kernberg and more. His model includes diagnosis from DSM-5: child psychological abuse; adjustment disorder; parent and child relational problem; child affected by parental relationship distress and ICD-11: shared psychotic disorder. He described how the alienating parent always has personality disorder, usually narcissistic or borderline. Personality disorders are secondary to attachment problems. The alienating parent mirrors their attachment problems onto the child. There's a 'role-reversal' where the child has to care for the parent emotionally. The child is 'triangulated' into the centre of the parental conflict. The child is 'over-empowered', which creates an 'inverted hierarchy' (usually both parents are at the top with the child at the bottom but now the child and alienating parent are at the top with the targeted parent at the bottom of the triangle). This is known as a 'cross-generational coalition' between alienating parent and child. The goal of the alienating parent is an 'emotional cutoff' that appears to be instigated by the child. The alienating parent has fixed and false beliefs about the targeted parent which result in a 'persecutory delusion' and then the child develops a 'shared persecutory delusion'. It's also 'trans-generational abuse' which means the same abuse is passed down the generations of an afflicted family. These are all terms that psychologists know and understand. They are all valid and all used on a daily basis across psychology. However, there is no collective scientific term that brings all these behaviours together. 'Parental alienation' is a hotly disputed term but I hope I have managed to convince you that psychologists agree that 'pathogenic parents' are psychologically abusive towards their children and former partners.

I've been a school nurse for 17 years and sat in thousands of safeguarding meetings. Prior to my research into 'parental alienation' I'd only met one family where it had been alleged - by a bully of a father and it was clearly untrue. In recent months I have identified 3 families on my caseload. What stopped me noticing it before? Lack of knowledge. What a difference when I suggest it to other professionals as a school nurse. People listen and want to act, unlike in my personal situation where I am shut down. My safeguarding training is up to date, yet this form of child psychological abuse has never been mentioned in any of my training sessions.

This is a mental health issue, not a custody issue. It's happening to millions of children in the UK right now. I've seen American quotes stating that more children suffering from this problem than are diagnosed with Autism. So where are all these children? Bearing in mind the impact on children this is a significant public health issue. The impact of abuse is so severe when a child has emotionally cutoff. We need early intervention, to support a family before it gets to this stage. We need to be aware that children of separated parents are at high risk if there is significant parental

conflict. We need to understand that this is not a gender issue. Both mums and dads are perpetrators. Sometimes a parent isn't absent at all, we'll hear the same lies the child does, that Mum or Dad just doesn't care. But a lot of alienated parents have stepped back, beaten down by a system that doesn't recognise their emotional pain, that doesn't believe a seemingly loving parent could actually be so destructive, that doesn't recognise narcissistic behaviour, that doesn't have diagnostic or screening tools available, that allows court orders to be broken and never enforced, where professionals misguidedly think they are doing the right thing for a child by validating rather than challenging delusions. There are no specific pathways. If you are concerned that a child is being psychologically abused you have a duty to raise concerns, as you would for any abused child. You can refer into CAMHS for a diagnosis. The rejected parent can go to court to request a period of protected separation between the child and the alienating parent while the child accesses therapeutic support to increase their resilience. And please remember that rejected parents go through a living bereavement. They may react in ways that do not help their cause. They need to be listened to and to feel believed. They need empathy rather than judgement.

CA Childress (2015) An Attachment-Based Model of Parental Alienation: Foundations.