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Mind The Gap. The Impact of Parental Alienation on Children by Dr Damian McCann

Dr Damian McCann's presentation at Westminster November 13, 2017. Damian is the Head of Learning & Development; Couple Psychoanalytic Psychotherapist and Clinical Lecturer at [Tavistock Relationships](http://TavistockRelationships).

In my presentation I will concentrate on the needs of the children and the impact on them of parental discord and parental alienation.

Firstly the really good news

The quality of our couple relationships profoundly affects how we feel about ourselves and, the quality of these relationships has material and measurable consequences for our lives and those around us, affecting the emotional, cognitive and physical development of our children. The Early Intervention Foundation places particular emphasis on how parents communicate and how they relate to each other as being key factors in good outcomes. Essentially, children desire a strong and healthy relationship with both parents.

Some other good news...

The majority of couples and parents do indeed have good quality relationships, managing moments or indeed periods of dissent and conflict without recourse to abuse, violence or the need to separate.

The bad news, however, is that...

As we know, a number of couples, struggle to manage or contain their conflict within what could be considered reasonable limits with profound consequences for both themselves and their children. Research shows that parents and couples who engage in frequent, intense and poorly resolved inter-parental conflict put their children's mental health and wellbeing at risk. It is of note that exposure to discordant but non-violent conflict (emotional standoffs, cold and prolonged silences, etc.) also has a powerfully negative effect on children's development.

A further bit of bad news is that...

Research also shows that children of all ages are affected by destructive inter-parental conflict within the home.

Children and young people are also negatively affected by unresolved conflict between parents post separation – as indeed my clinical work with such family's shows.

Children exposed to severe and/or ongoing inter-parental conflict exhibit a broad set of negative externalizing behavioral issues – such as aggression, hostility, non-compliant and disruptive behaviors, verbal and physical violence, antisocial behaviors, etc. and internalizing behaviors such as withdrawal, inhibition, fearfulness and sadness, shyness, loss of self-esteem, anxiety, depression and suicidality in the extreme.

Yet, if we compare these with the effects of parental alienation on children's emotional and behavioral outcomes, we discover the reappearance of low self-esteem, but we now add the concepts of hatred of self and others, as well as capacity to trust issues, together with feelings of guilt and confusion or, to put it another way, feelings of alienation. In some instances, the child may believe that the alienated parent does not love them and may also experience feelings of betrayal towards the resident parent through a longing to maintain contact with the alienated parent. Ultimately, parental alienation for the child represents a persistent un-mourned loss.

A key finding in Gordon Harold's work (1) is the attribution of meaning the child or young person attaches to the loss – in other words, how children read their parent's difficulties in relation to themselves. In the same way that a child who has argued with a parent or sibling before they disappear or die often finds themselves wondering whether it is their fault. In that regard, children might feel responsible for what has happened, especially if a part of the parental difficulty centered on the child or young person's behavior beforehand.

Now to the really bad news...

Some parents and couples are simply unable to work through their difficulties either within their relationship or even within the court system – giving rise to the concept of Parental Alienation. Kruk (2) who has investigated this concept – believes that apart from the profound consequences of two parents being prevented from working together, the children are then left to fill in the gaps.

As a consequence, these children are required to take sides – involving an imagined or actual hate of the targeted parent, or in more extreme cases a symbolic killing off of the alienated parent who is demonized and seen as dangerous, manipulative and worse. One man, who I saw for a two sessions, had been using the court for a number of years to get the mother of his children to agree contact, he stopped therapy because he quickly realized that I could not resolve the issue and he was not interested in exploring his struggle. However with others I have worked with and who managed to actually meet their children, the situation was so fraught and traumatic that it only served to reinforce the alienation.

In psychoanalytic parlance, parental alienation would be viewed as an extreme form of splitting, where love and hate, good and bad, hope and despair are kept apart rather than being brought together in the service of a resolution. However, in situations of parental alienation attempts to engage the resident parent, more often than not results in a tightening of the defenses. Indeed, parental alienation is viewed as a sign of a parent's inability to separate from the couple conflict – whilst at the same time preventing any possibility of addressing that conflict – an impasse that we are trying both to understand and manage today.

Strategies that are often employed to keep the targeted parent alienated – include badmouthing, denying contact and systematically attempting to remove the existence of the alienated parent from the child or young person's mind – held in place by beliefs that the targeted parent is dangerous or manipulative – a projection if ever there was one.

Indeed, Kruk (2011) found that most of the targeted parents had lost contact involuntarily. Even more worrying is a finding in a study by Barker (2010), which shows that half of the respondents (now adults) who had experienced alienation as children find themselves alienated from their own children.

Given the obvious damage that parental alienation causes to children, one might wonder what can be done to limit the fertile ground for such hatred to breed. Kruk (2011) reminds us that hatred is not an emotion that comes naturally to a child – it has to be taught. And, he goes on to say that a parent who teaches a child to hate or fear the other parent represents a grave and persistent danger to the mental health and emotional health of that child.

This, however, is not to deny that in particular circumstances, such as domestic violence or, where the behavior of an alienated parent is designed to harm their partner, should not be taken into consideration when considering the alienated parent's contact with their children, although failure to think about and explore the situation from both parent's point of view, frustrates efforts to resolve a serious and damaging situation for all concerned. And, of course, these situations are incredibly complex – as this case example testifies. In fact this is the little three years old girl I spoke of at the last Westminster Dialogue. Well, one year on, I still continue to see her and her mother following a serious domestically violent attack on her mother by her father. However, I have now met with the father and was completely left fielded by his rational and selfless explanation of what had happened on the night mother and daughter fled domestic violence. Thinking further with the child about what she remembers (in the presence of her mother) leads to a dance involving uncertainty, confusion, and an eventual declaration that she thinks that she can remember her father hitting her mother but she then adds that she isn't sure. This coupled with the mothers recent brain surgery involving memory difficulties renders us all wondering where the truth actually resides. Luckily, in this case, both parents are agreeing to the divorce and mother is willing to negotiate, with the court's assistance, to the father's contact with his

daughter, although the daughter is somewhat confused about her wish or not to see the father.

By way of ending this presentation I wanted to inform the audience of a [therapeutic intervention delivered by Tavistock Relationships](#) in 2014/15 (in partnership with CAFCASS and funded by the DWP) designed to help and support separated families.

The aims of the Parents in Dispute treatment intervention were to:

- Reduce conflict and improve the parenting alliance
- Increase parental sensitivity to their children's needs
- To improve the mental health and wellbeing of parents in entrenched conflict
- To divert parents from using the court system to resolve their disputes.

Parents were offered an initial consultation in which each parent, was seen separately by an individual therapist after which, the two therapists would join forces to work with the parental couple assuming they were deemed appropriate to undertake the joint MBT-PT intervention consisting of 6-12 sessions. For those who were unwilling or who were not considered appropriate for the joint intervention, these individuals would be offered up to 6 sessions of therapy on their own.

Although this was a difficult to reach population, not only were the therapists successful in engaging both co-parents in attending sessions together, but they found that for those who were able to attend together, there was a significant improvement in their capacity to co-parent effectively as measured by the Parenting Alliance Measure. On the other hand, those who were unable to attend together showed little change in regard to the strength of their co-parenting alliance, suggesting that if we are unable to reach the two parents in some way then the conditions leading to alienation continue.

Indeed, parents who are unable to agree the arrangements for their children and repeatedly return to court are a much more difficult to engage in joint therapeutic work and seem unable to enter into a help-seeking state of mind. Initiatives must target this resistance but bringing the two alienated parties to the table to think about the needs of their children may need a multilevel intervention, involving

the legal process, health and social care and specialist therapeutic intervention, such as the PID project that I spoke about earlier.

Footnotes

(1). Baker, A. (2010). “Adult recall of parental alienation in a community sample: Prevalence and associations with psychological maltreatment.” *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 51, 16-35.

(2). Kruk, E. (2011). *Divorced Fathers: Children’s Needs and Parental Responsibilities*, Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Bob Greig / 17th November 2017

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