

Parental Alienation and
Reunification Procedures When
Autism is a Consideration
American College of Forensic Psychology
San Diego, 2018

**PARENTAL BEHAVIORS ASSOCIATED
WITH PARENTAL AIENATION**

- **Fundamental Issue**
(Targeted Parent [TP] is all bad; Accepted Parent [AP] is all good)
- **Clawar & Rivkin (2013), *Children Held Hostage* – Specific behaviors the alienating parent uses against the target parent.**

BEHAVIORS USED AGAINST THE TP

- Exaggerating target parent's (TP) flaws
- Escalating complaints over the divorce action
- Distorting social reality to support their negative view of the TP (e.g., reasonable lateness = abandonment)
- Intensely, rigidly, attached to their negative view of the TP

BEHAVIORS USED AGAINST THE TP

- Blaming the TP and those associated with him/her; exonerating self
- Hypervigilant search for flaws in the TP
- Manipulating and ingratiating self with others to promote negative view of the TP
- Using rewards to influence the child to have negative view of the TP
- Mask their negative behavior with legal, educational, medical, or other "system" excuses

BEHAVIORS USED AGAINST THE TP

- Expecting sympathy and support from others
- Isolating the TP from the child
- Reinterpret information supporting the child's need for the TP
- Control the child's social relationships excessively
- Foment conflict

BEHAVIORS USED AGAINST THE TP

- Rigidity to others' ideas about how to change the situation
- Harassing the TP with unnecessary child care advice
- Tell stories (real or imagined) that defame the TP
- Claim that they alone care for the child (claim exaggerated suffering on the child's behalf)
- Uses language that connects child to them and only to them (e.g., "us," "ours," first name not father or mother)

BEHAVIORS USED AGAINST THE TP

- Both parents can engage in PA
- Stamina
- Appears consistent but within a narrow realm; probing reveals inconsistency
- Gender stereotyping
- Hides egocentricity but equating own needs with child's needs

BEHAVIORS USED AGAINST THE TP

- False abuse allegations
- Coaching others, building supportive networks
- Family stereotypes (e.g., child needs one home)
- Exit strategies if disbelieved (e.g., kidnapping)

RECENT CASE

- PARENTS DIVORCED
- FATHER AWARDED PRIMARY LEGAL AND RESIDENTIAL CUSTODY
- 2 CHILDREN... ONE AN EMANCIPATED ADULT 18+ AND ONE 12YRS AND HAS HAD DIAGNOSIS OF ASD; AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER
- NEITHER SIBLINGS WANT VISITATION WITH MOTHER

RECENT CASE; cont'd

- FATHER HAS BEEN TAKEN TO COURT TO ANSWER PARENTAL ALIENATION CHARGES BY MOTHER- CASE HAS BEEN PROCEEDING FOR ~4-5 YEARS.
- MOTHER CONTENDS THAT FATHER HAS NEGATIVELY INFLUENCED THE CHILDREN BEFORE THE SEPARATION; DURING THE SEPARATION; AND, POST THE DIVORCE.
- FATHER VEHEMENTLY DENIES THE ALLEGATIONS AND OFFERS THAT THE MOTHER CAUSED THE ALIENATION DUE TO HER OWN BEHAVIOR.

RECENT CASE; cont'd

- MOTHER HAS A DOCUMENTED HISTORY OF DEROGATORY REMARKS AND ACTIONS MADE AGAINST HER CHILDREN AND WHICH SHE DEMURES;
 1. PHYSICAL ALTERCATIONS
 2. VERBALLY DERIDING
 3. INCITING VIOLENCE ON HER PERSON
 4. SUPPORTING A VIOLENT PARENT REUNIFICATION INTERVENTION ON HER SON WITH ASD

RECENT CASE; cont'd

- ALL COURT ORDERED VISITATIONS WITH MOTHER AND THE PARENT REUNIFICATION EFFORTS HAVE FAILED; WITH BOTH SIBLINGS REJECTING ANY EFFORTS ON PART OF MOTHER, WHO CONTINUES TO DENY HER CHILDREN'S ALLEGATIONS AND PLACES FULL RESPONSIBILITY ON THE FATHER AS ALIENATING HER CHILDREN AGAINST HER.

WHAT CONDITIONS ACCOUNT FOR CONDITIONS THAT APPEAR TO BE PARENTAL ALIENATION BUT ARE NOT?

- AUTISM IS AT THE CORE
- 1. EASILY TRAUMATIZED BY VERBAL, PHYSICAL AND VISUAL ASSAULT ON SENSES; see amygdala
- 2. PTSD FROM SUCH TRAUMA; see failed Reunification approach.
- 3. DIFFICULTIES WITH TRANSITIONS
- 4. RIGID AND IRONCLAD RULES OF ENGAGEMENT
- 5. NEED FOR PREDICTABILITY AND CONSISTENCY
- 6. TRUST IS HARD TO ESTABLISH
- 7. ANXIETY/WORRY/FEAR IS EVER PRESENT
- 8. DEPRESSION/WITHDRAWAL ENSUES

AUTISM AT THE CORE

- FATHER ON THE SPECTRUM? VERY INTELLIGENT BUT UNABLE TO KEEP A JOB DUE TO SOCIAL AWKWARDNESS.
- HE IS VERY PREDICTABLE IN HIS LOVE AND CONCERN FOR HIS CHILDREN
- HE IS CONSISTENT IN HIS EXPECTATIONS OF EXCELLENCE IN HIS CHILDREN'S ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS
- HE ALLOWS HIS CHILDREN TO PURSUE THEIR INTERESTS AND SHARES SOME WITH THEM
- HIS FAMILY RULES OF ENGAGEMENT ARE RIGID BUT FAIR
- THERE IS ALWAYS A QUESTION ABOUT WHETHER HE INFLUENCED HIS CHILDREN'S VIEW OF MOTHER; BUT THEY DENY SUCH INFLUENCE AND THEY SPECIFICALLY RECALL THE ALTERCATIONS WITH MOTHER AND BOTH SAY THAT THEY 'DO NOT WANT TO SEE HER AGAIN'.

CHILD WITH AUTISM RESPONSE[S]
<http://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/102708p26.shtml>
 "Parental Alienation Syndrome — The Parent/Child Disconnect"

- **Weak, Frivolous, and Absurd Rationalizations**
When alienated [AUTISTIC] children are questioned about the reasons for their intense hostility toward the targeted parent, the explanations offered are not of the magnitude that typically would lead a child to reject a parent. These children may complain about the parent's eating habits, food preparation, or appearance.

CHILD WITH AUTISM RESPONSE[S]

- **Absence of Guilt About the Treatment of the Targeted Parent**
Alienated [Autistic]children typically appear rude, ungrateful, spiteful, and cold toward the targeted parent, and they appear to be impervious to feelings of guilt about their harsh treatment. Gratitude for gifts, favors, or child support provided by the targeted parent is nonexistent. Children with parental alienation syndrome will try to get whatever they can from that parent, declaring that it is owed to them.

CHILD WITH AUTISM RESPONSE[S]

- **Rejection of Extended Family**
Finally, the hatred of the targeted parent spreads to his or her extended family. Not only is the targeted parent denigrated, despised, and avoided but so are his or her extended family. Formerly beloved grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are suddenly and completely avoided and rejected.

What to do?

Come in the back door- gently desensitize
 Utilize a CBT desensitization approach:

1. text/email [s] with no expectations by the AP
2. Phone call[s] with pre-taught scripts for both the AP and the Child with ASD
3. Exposure of the Child with ASD to the AP from a distance with a trusted therapist
4. Gradual increase in proximity
5. Full contact under conditions comfortable for the Child with ASD
6. Note; all of the above with significant pre-teaching by the TP with visual and verbal desensitizing, e.g., family photos of good times, verbalizing the good attributes of the AP on a random, non intense fashion, etc.

Current Events

- concerns have been raised about the kinds of values and attitudes that may be inculcated by exposure to certain kinds of media content, especially violence in movies (Kubey & Larson, 2005). During the last decade, accusations toward the media have also been made against violent computer and video games, the popularity of which among adolescents is rising (Scott, 2000).

How Individuals with Autism learn

- 1. Scripting has been shown to be a powerful means through which a child with Autism can learn.
- 2. Presenting learning cues, under controlled conditions, through the visual modality along with repetition/rehearsal is an evidence based means of successful learning with ASD individuals; repetition for overlearning/automatic responding.

How Individuals with ASD Learn, Cont'd.

- 3. Rehearsal across varied environs; for generalization training.

History Repeating

- ...Dr. Holmes has drawn on his vast expertise in providing services and advocating for people on the autism spectrum across the life span. He continues to find and provide valuable and timely resources and information that assists us in providing quality care. As one example of Dr. Holmes' advocacy, what follows are his comments in response to the recent school shootings. "Just as people did with the Newtown, Connecticut (Sandy Hook) shooter, advocates want to downplay any connection with ASD but if we do not learn from history we are doomed to repeat it. We, as advocates, can help others understand that **without proper supports and proper redirection** away from violent DVDs, violent gaming and pornography, young men with ASD can be scripted inadvertently to engage in the illegal and deadly actions; as they act out what they have seen/watched over and over. If we do not have a national conversation about this, we have a significant **probability** it will be repeated." [Dr. Karl Altman in nominating Dr. Holmes for APA's Citizen Psychologist Award, 2018.]

Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Parkland, Fla.

February 14, 2018

- Shooter Kills 17 at Parkland, Fla. High School
- Nikolas Cruz avoided eye contact during Monday afternoon's hearing, silently staring down. It was his second time in court since last Wednesday's shooting, and more **missed warning signs are emerging.**
- Newly released documents reveal that in September, 2016 an investigator with Florida's Department of Children and Families (DCF) visited the family to investigate allegations of medical neglect. The investigator noted Cruz had **depression, ADHD and autism.**
[Washington Post, D.C., 03/07/2018]

THIS YOUNG MAN NEEDED HELP AND IF HE GOT APPROPRIATE SERVICES AND SUPPORTS THIS DISASTER COULD HAVE BEEN AVERTED!


