

## Post-Separation Control- the impact on the child

Jo Wood, August 2013

*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.*

### Risk factors for post-separation control:

- Parental mental health problems, including mental illness and personality disorders. Parents can display rigid thought patterns, virtuous self-image and vulnerability to loss.
- Humiliating circumstances around the relationship breakdown e.g. one party having an affair or wanting to end the relationship significantly more than the other.
- High levels of conflict between parents prior and during relationship breakdown.

### Signs of post-separation control

Increasing geographical distance between former partner and child. The resident parent applies to move away from the non-resident parent in order to impede or force an end to contact with the child.

Exposing the child to direct, indirect, overt or covert denigration of the other parent e.g. making derogatory comments about the other parent, removing all signs of them from the house and reacting negatively to them being talked about or referred to.

Withdrawing love from or becoming angry with the child if they talk about the other parent with affection or refer to them positively.

Controlling the level of contact allowed (sometimes in contravention of court orders), interfering with planned contact time, or seeking supervision or restraining orders without foundation.

Limiting the amount of contact allowed with family members, particularly those of the other parent. This is done by interfering with planned contact time or blocking the process completely.

Forcing the child to choose between parents, with the aim of becoming the chosen parent. The controlling parent will employ emotionally harmful tactics to pressure the child into, for example, being frightened of the other parent. They will also try to isolate the child from social interaction with the other parent and their family and will corrupt the child via lying,

manipulation and aggression.

Abusive behaviours by the controlling parent. Making unfounded allegations of physical, sexual or emotional abuse against the other parent and/or displaying delusional behaviour and making exaggerated claims.

Role reversal. Displaying signs of parentification (the child is forced to act as a parent to their own parent), adultification (exposing a child to adult behaviours before they are emotionally ready) or not recognising appropriate boundaries in the parent-child relationship.

Enmeshed relationship with the child. The child becomes the sole focus of the controlling parents' life, to the detriment of their own wellbeing and that of the child. A one-sided alliance develops, thus alienating the other parent further.

### Effects of control on the child

- The child becomes emotionally entangled in their parents' relationship.
- Their capacity to deal with change decreases.
- They display behaviour problems such as depression, anxiety and phobias which can lead to underachievement.
- They display extreme oppositional behaviours, such as anger, hostility, rudeness, physical and verbal aggression, lying and spying.
- Their thinking becomes extreme, their sense of reality is distorted and their thoughts and feelings do not match actual behaviour.
- Their speech patterns and thought processes mirror those of the controlling parent. This is known as the 'borrowed scenarios' phenomenon.

### Practice implications

- Younger children seem to be able to get over initial resistance to contact better than older children.
- Shorter periods of no contact are also a factor as they promote a better chance of renewed contact.
- Find 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.
- Need to set and manage expectations e.g. first meeting just with parents to gauge their views. This can be useful when interpreting the child's wishes and feelings later, especially if they are being controlled by a parent.

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