

A Tale of Two Cities and Parent Alienation Syndrome

Perhaps the most contentious of all custody/access disputes are those involving allegations of one parent undermining the relationship of the children with the other parent. When escalated one sees children caught between a vilified parent and an idolized parent. Therein any negative attributes of the vilified parent are magnified and any attempts to redress issues raised are placed in a context where the efforts are viewed as insincere or inadequate. Hence the vilified parent cannot win for losing. Meanwhile any concerns that might be raised about the idolized parent are either excused or positioned as an artefact of the vilified parent's behaviour. In other words, nothing negative sticks to the idolized parent; it's the other parent's fault. These dynamics are the hallmark of Parent Alienation Syndrome.

While the use of that phrase remains a politically debated hot potato, the behaviours and dynamics remain and children do take on the descriptors of the syndrome. The social science literature suggests that traditional counselling attempts to undo or redress the disharmony as when the children side with the idolized parent against the vilified parent, are unhelpful. In many instances, not only is traditional counselling unhelpful, but to the child who remains entrenched in a position against the vilified parent, traditional counselling can serve to support a skewed image by giving a platform to vent versus challenge misperceptions and cognitive distortions.

Moreover, the social science literature suggests that in order to undue the influence of the idolized parent on the children and the children's alignment with that parent against the vilified parent, the child must actually have more time with the vilified parent to gain first hand experience of that parent's behaviour through which their first hand experience challenges previously held beliefs. The children, thus living a cognitive dissonance, experiencing reasonable versus unreasonable behaviour, resolve the dissonance by rejecting previous beliefs in favour of accepting their actual experience of the parent as decent. Depending on the degree to which the idolized parent supports such interventions, children's exposure to the idolized parent may have to be altered or restricted to control for any undo negative influence. In the most extreme of circumstances, where the children refuse visitation with the vilified parent and support is not forthcoming from the idolized parent or the support is superficial, the children may have to be placed in an alternate living situation. There, the influence of the idolized parent is unavailable and the children can work towards reintegration with the vilified parent without undo influence from the idolized parent.

It should be noted that in cases such as these, treatment goes against conventional wisdom where normally the input of the children is respected and encouraged. Further, while

conventional wisdom would not condone use of force or coercion to facilitate visitation, such is often necessary in the most extreme of these situations. Throughout such intrusive treatment endeavours, resistance from the idolized parent and children is to be expected. Their resistance can include simple passivity or inaction to outright defiance including vilification of treatment providers, Courts or any other agency or entity acting in the service of the treatment plan. It is easy for the idolized parent and children to obtain support from the uninitiated and hence their efforts to undo an intrusive treatment plan can even polarize service providers, particularly those who may not have sufficient knowledge or experience with such cases against those responsible for intervention.

Not only can service providers subject to these situations be polarized, by so too can Courts. Hence depending on the jurisdiction, service providers may or may not align with intrusive treatment plans as Courts may or may not support such intrusive interventions too.

A tale of two cities: In one city, child protective services supported intrusive intervention and therein just the clear and unequivocal threat of taking the child into care was enough to evoke the cooperation of the idolized parent. Treatment progressed and the relationship between child and vilified parent continues. In a neighbouring city, child protective services not only does not support the plan but set the idolized parent as the residence and place of safety for the child. Thereafter and emboldened by child protective service support, the child treaded further from the vilified parent and denounced any form of relationship. In less extreme cases, simply holding the idolized parent accountable for ceasing their undermining behaviour and calling upon them to support the children's relationship to the vilified parent can be sufficient to restore and maintain relationships.

The social science literature suggests that unchallenged, these dynamics tend not to reverse themselves. Contrary to what many idolized parents would suggest to the vilified parent, "Give the kids space and time, and they will come back to you," does not work. Change requires intervention.

Working with these cases takes fortitude amongst the service providers, treating clinicians and Courts. Thus far, in many jurisdictions, it remains difficult to align the stars.

Gary Direnfeld, MSW, RSW
(905) 628-4847
gary@yoursocialworker.com
<http://www.yoursocialworker.com>

Gary Direnfeld is a social worker. Courts in Ontario, Canada, consider him an expert on child development, parent-child relations, marital and family therapy, custody and access recommendations, social work and an expert for the purpose of giving a critique on a Section 112 (social work) report. Call him for your next conference and for expert opinion on family matters. Services include counselling, mediation, assessment, assessment critiques and workshops.