

Tug of war- The Alienated Child during Marital Separation

What is Parental Alienation?

Parental alienation is when a child expresses unjustified and unreasonable strong dislike or hatred towards one parent, rendering access to the rejected parent difficult or impossible. In such circumstances, these feelings of the child towards one parent are due to brainwashing on the child by the other parent, usually referred to as the alienating parent.

The aim of this article is to share the insight gained from working closely with high-conflict families who come in contact with Agenzija Appogg, and to provide an understanding of this very serious and newly emerging issue, parental alienation.

Parental alienation is on the increase as the rates of separations in our country are escalating. Its importance is being lost as high controversies surrounding separations and divorce take precedence over the best interest of the child. Parental alienation is the construction of an exclusive relationship between one parent and the child or children, with the exclusion of the other parent. The alienated child is one who has only extreme hostile feelings towards one parent, while only positive feelings for the other parent. Such a child loses the genuine range of feelings for both parents. Research shows that the mother is significantly more likely to be the alienating parent and the father, the target parent. However, this is not to be taken as a general rule as in not all cases the alienating parent is the mother.

Where does alienation feature?

There can also be alienation without separation. In fact, it is noted that when the social worker from the Court Services of Agenzija Appogg meets the parents, they hint at alienation patterns that have been there even before the actual marital breakdown. In an ideal setting, there should be no alienation going on. Each parent should appreciate the part that the other parent can play in the lives of the children, and that the children need both parents after the separation takes place, just like when they were still married. When the parents recognize this, there is no motivation for alienation because of the worth credited to the other parent. However this ideal is very rarely realized, mainly because of highly intense issues preceding separation such as domestic violence and infidelity, and so it might not be in the best interest of the child to maintain an equal relationship with both parents. Furthermore, separation brings with it a change in the parent's role and this in itself is an end of a life stage and brings about a change in lifestyle.

It has also been noted that many times, the parents have been amicably separated for years and the alienation starts only when a new partner comes along. Many parents go

through all this, carrying many intense emotions without ever having the chance to deal with these emotions through therapy. Such an entanglement of charged emotions may put the parent at risk of confusing his/her own needs with that of the child. This, in turn will put the child at risk of alienation where in its severe form, the child's sense of self becomes completely dependent on the relationship with the alienating parent, and a failure in this relationship would imply destruction of the self.

Conflict, love and loyalty

Aby* (11yrs), Paul* (9yrs) and Jake* (5yrs) have always enjoyed a good relationship with both their mother and father. As their parents' relationship deteriorates, the children witness domestic violence. As a result, when the father leaves home, they lose contact with him. In the meantime, the father goes to Court and asks for visitation rights. However when these rights are decreed by the Court, the children resist any contact with him. Their mother denies that she has ever said anything against the father while the children were present. However the children tell the social worker that they hear their mother calling their father names and constantly blaming him for her financial situation.

Children frequently interpret conflict as caused by the rejected parent. As children feel loyal to the aligned parent, they refuse any contact with the alienated parent. Many times, the father finds himself at the mercy of the children's' mother, regularly obstructing contact visits while the father is deprived of the legal right to participate in decision-making about significant aspects of the children's' life. When asked, these children are not aware of the conflicting loyalties they are constantly battling with, so they do not give stories that are convincing and sometimes they make use of words which are not usually part of children's' vocabulary, such as *'Id-daddy ma jhobbniex għax ma jthiex flus lill-mummy'* (Daddy doesn't love us because he does not give money to mummy) or *'Jien niftakar ta li kien isawwatni allavolja kont baby'* (I remember that daddy used to hit me even though I was still a baby).

More awareness and better guidance to parents

Educating the parents at the very initial phases of marital breakdown is crucial and serves as a preventive measure against child alienation. Parents should attend an educational programme when they are still at mediation phase. The programme should be designed to help parents understand the effect of the separation both on them and on their children and to recognize that children need both parents. Such a programme helps to prevent against common problems that may arise, including child alienation, when out of lack of knowledge, parents do not understand the psychological consequences the separation has upon themselves and upon the emotional development of the children. During such programmes, it is important that parents who are showing signs of alienating behaviour are identified and referred to Court-ordered therapy.

Social workers and therapists are in direct contact with separating parents. The role of these professionals is to educate their clients about the aspects that separation brings along with it, such as anger, loyalties and manipulation, and provide parents with the necessary skills so they are in a better position to control and outgrow such aspects. This role also encompasses the recognition of signs such as when a parent is keen to directly involve a child in the court proceedings, can well mean that the parent is using the child to further one's own agenda. Here it is crucial to note that this is valid only when referring to alienation cases and when there is suspicion of any kind of abuse, full professional assessment, involving the child, is essential. Similarly, courts and lawyers should identify the initial signs of alienation and know when and how to intervene.

Though parental alienation is on the increase, there are many separated families where alienation does not come into play at all and these come as a breath of fresh air to Appogg professionals who have a hard time dealing with alienating parents. The most important thing with parental alienation is to help everyone see that the separation of the parents does not mean that the child is separating from one's parents. Separation is hard as it is a turning point in one's life however helping the child to have a healthy connection with the non-custodial parent is a lifelong gift that will surely be cherished by any child, both when still a child and as an adult when the child grows up.

- *Names of minors have been changed to protect their identity.*

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For more information on Agenzija Appogg one may visit www.appogg.gov.mt. Agenzija Appogg forms part of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services which also incorporates Agenzija Sedqa (www.sedqa.gov.mt) and Agenzija Sapport (www.sapport.gov.mt).