
Parental Alienation Europe

Newsletter of the European Association of Parental Alienation Practitioners

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Parental separation, alienation and splitting: Healing beyond reunification

The European Association of Parental Alienation Practitioners' 2020 conference was due to be held in the beautiful city of Zagreb, capital of Croatia in June of this year. However, after careful evaluation of the Coronavirus epidemic and maximum gathering guidelines that are currently in place, together with the wish to enable all those registered to be able to participate at the conference, the organisers have decided to hold the conference online as a LIVE WEBINAR.

This year's conference will focus on trauma and the harm that induced psychological splitting causes to children. It will bring together practitioners and specialists in the field of child abuse, trauma and attachment to explore the ways in which existing therapies and models of understanding of abuse and trauma can be translated into work with abused children of divorce and separation.

We are, therefore, particularly delighted to welcome, as our special guest speaker, Jill Salberg, PhD, ABPP, Associate Professor of Psychology, faculty member and clinical supervisor at the New York University Postdoctoral Program in Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis, who will present a paper titled *The shadow of our ghosts: Generations of ruptures*.

The dynamic referred to as *parental alienation* is typically described as a child's rejection of a parent. However, whilst the problem appears to be the child's rejection of one of their parents, in reality, the rejection is not the cause of the problem but is, rather, a symptom of the child's pathological alignment to the other parent. Similarly, many papers on the subject refer to the alienating 'strategies' of aligned parents.

Whilst it is true that some cases are driven by the deliberate and conscious actions of a one parent seeking to remove the other, many more feature dysfunction in the inter-psychic relationship between the aligned parent and the child. Such cases feature

high levels of psychopathology and maladaptive defences which are often rooted in the transgenerational transmission of unresolved trauma of the aligned parent.

Dr Salberg argues that children of parents who have unresolved trauma inherit altered biochemistry that can leave them more vulnerable to registering fearful and anxious situations and to being more fearful and anxious themselves. She writes that the legacy of transgenerational transmission of traumatic forms of attachment is an alteration in both the biology and the attachment systems and suggests that, whilst some of these parents will be able to transmit safety and provide for consistent attachment, others will transmit a confusing mix of messages of fearfulness and safety.

For clinicians working with post divorce splitting in children, the patterns and disruptions of attachment

are of vital importance as what often appears, on the surface, to be warm and attentive parenting can be charged with the projection of unresolved trauma, enmeshment and the child's unconscious, existential terror of abandonment. This area of research is one that is opening up new ways of understanding children's experiences and new approaches to treatment. The work of Dr Salberg is, therefore, something that will be of great interest to anyone working in this field.

We are honoured to be able to welcome Dr Salberg, who is a world leading expert in transgenerational trauma and the effect that it has on children's relational self, to speak at our third international conference which, this year, is to be hosted online by the Child and Youth Protection Centre of Zagreb.

The conference will build on work undertaken by the Centre to raise the issue of alienation, both in Croatia and the wider region. Prior to the conference being moved online, almost 400 psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, social workers and other family practitioners had booked to attend. This follows the publishing of the Centre's protocol 'Experts Protecting Children From Emotional Abuse In Divorce: Establishing Good Practice In Croatia' which was signed by over 800 practitioners.



Jill Salberg, PhD

Conference booking at:
www.eapap.eu

Parent-child reunification interventions in Israel: Challenges and dilemmas from daily practice

Benjamin Bailey & Inbal Kivenson Bar-On

Controlling twelve horses running and pulling a wagon about to break, with us as the driver, is a metaphor that can be related to the practice of parent-child reunification and its various means. Over the past two years we have been heavily involved in dozens of cases as experts appointed by a family court, working with both rejected fathers and mothers. About half of these have entailed the severe alienation of parents who were disconnected from their children for over six months to five years.

In our practice we have met few parents whose conscious intention was to prevent the other parent from a role in forming their child's life. While claiming that they want their child to have two parents they, still nevertheless, fuel the child's split identification. The minimising of this total dissonance is what we experience as one of our main challenges. It is not easy to intervene in these complex cases and much assertiveness is needed to gain some control over these troubled families.

When preferred parents say they want the child to have two parents, we attempt to believe them until they prove otherwise. In these families, bi-directional accusations by the parents tend to be overwhelming and we try to avoid 'stories from the past' as much as possible; we prefer to rely on our own impressions, based on what we see and hear on 'our shift.' In a battlefield full of mines, our own impressions are often the single solid piece of ground to rest our foot on.

Framed as narcissistic personality disorder, or borderline, or both or any other, these categories merely help us understand the heavy transference and countertransference we feel with these parents. These cases come up in our dreams, when we brush our teeth or meditate. They bring us to extreme levels of frustration, to moments of losing our cool with a parent, carrying the real potential for mental and physical burnout.

In a descriptive account of the clinical challenge with preferred parents, as an alternative to psychiatric

disorder diagnosis, we would describe the difficulty as such: these are parents who are made conscious of their contribution to their child's unbearable tension amidst their ongoing contention, and yet are unable to realise and/or regulate their part in it. So whatever personality disorder they may have, we find ourselves working with a parent that willingly or not needs to stop his psychological pressure to delegitimise their child's human affinity to his other good-enough parent. And due to these extremely complex interpersonal situations between parents, empathic therapeutic strategies often seem insufficient. In addition to a practitioner with solid therapeutic stamina, a strong judge is also essential. As one of Israel's more decisive family court judges lately wrote in his final ruling on an alienation case, 'a judge in these cases needs to hold the boundaries and "to grab the bull by its horns" and, referring to the preferred parent, "especially if it's a wild bull".'

Whilst a rejected parent's parenting deficiencies can never be considered to be the cause of an alienation reaction in a child, as clinicians working to restore the relationship between the child and the rejected parent, we sometimes need to address potential shortcomings, such as a lack of presence or intimacy, or a tendency to be too harsh, in order to help the child reconnect to their natural attachment bond. This can be difficult for rejected parents who may experience this as being blamed for what has happened.

During the last two years, parental alienation has become a burning issue in Israel, both clinically and politically. It has been regularly debated in the public arenas of welfare services and workers' skills, legislation and court interference, clinical practice and expertise, and in the formal and social medias. A strong opposition to the

concept of parental alienation and reunification processes is heard by a group of women's organisations and some prominent family lawyers. Their main claims are that parental alienation is an invented phenomenon, unproven in empirical research, and is often claimed by abusive fathers in order to cover up their faults. Not least, that it also traumatises children under unregulated interventions, which is an immoral practice that overlooks children's rights.

Under such clinical and morally charged discourse we, as practitioners, are also keen for more research-based practice; and we also struggle with dilemmas about the *forcing* of children to re-establish their relationship with a parent. While children (at least overtly) object, refuse, or fear to do so, it is our responsibility to weigh the clinical risks. As clinicians, in an emerging field of work which is currently unregulated, we are faced with criticism that the

"In addition to a practitioner with solid therapeutic stamina, a strong judge is also essential."

interventions we use increase pressure upon children whose lives are already replete with emotional difficulties. Whilst pressure in reunification processes may appear to cause regression in mental stabilities, the short term problems are recognised as being outweighed with the long term mental, emotional and psychological impacts for children who are left to spontaneously reconnect with a parent.

All these phenomena are known to be true and are to be expected both by us and by parents who should be responsible for supervising their child and seeking professional assistance and guidance. Are we "adding trauma to trauma" like one of us was accused of by a lawyer in one of our court interrogations? Relying on over twenty years of interventions with complex families, including family violence and child maltreatment, we feel we must also weigh the alternative risks of leaving these children to their stated will of spontaneous recovery. More

than once we found ourselves in court interrogations, or in policy discussions with public servants, arguing that, to think that by refraining from intervening with alienated children, we free them from potential psychological harm – is somewhere between naivety and clinical maltreatment. In other words, there are risks in intervening and risks in not.

The accusations of ‘adding trauma to trauma’ are unfounded, because people, including children, prove resilient to most challenging situations. In a children’s refuge centre, where one of the authors has worked in the past, on visiting days, severely abused children eagerly waited for their abusive parents at the window, simultaneously holding on to their attachment to, and their trauma from, their parent. Complete rejection of a parent by a child is an extreme psychological and worrying mindset, and a gradual, supervised exposure to a rejected parent – the ascribed source of fear and anxiety – is better than letting the real or invented trauma live its own life. Our clinical standpoint, therefore, is that allowing a child to decide or maintain his denial of a good-enough parent who is alive and currently wants to build a healthy relationship with him, carries traumatic qualities as well; they could be analogical to being half blind or without one hand, facts that one can outlive, but carry dramatic limitations.

Until the qualification and skills of clinical practice in this field are more formally regulated, the acknowledgement of such risks can enhance risk-reduction practices: constructing multi-system interventions that check and balance one another (courts, welfare agencies, private practitioners, long-term follow up), requiring that practitioners work under supervision and remain ever careful and skeptical, realising that we are in an developing field. Cases of problematic parenting call for parental guidance, therapy, or supportive mentoring for any parent who is interested in changing. Due to child safety issues and the high prevalence of false or exaggerated allegations against rejected parents, screening for abusive or neglectful parenting is key to this practice, and may usually be assisted by past and current available reports of welfare/mental health/law enforcement agencies. In our practice, less than 10% of cases in which a child has rejected a parent have resulted from emotionally abusive parents to a

degree that made their children’s rejection seem plausible behaviour. For these parents, reunification remained a worthy goal, but with some different routes and emphasis.

Accusations of immoral aspects in the authoritative elements of reunification processes stem from children’s rights discourse, arguing that such interventions threaten the child’s sense of autonomy. Indeed, children may experience oppressive feelings during these procedures. However, the developing of traits of self-centred grandiosity and a lack of empathy run counter to moral behaviour in interpersonal relationships, in family ties even more so. We often tell the resisting child, who inevitably holds a limited perspective on life, that when he’ll turn twenty-five, or on his wedding day – he will better understand the court intervening to restore the relationship with his rejected parent. Supporting children to work through family relationship problems and assisting them to overcome anxieties for the cause of recovering family ties may be argued to be the most moral thing to do for alienated children.

We believe that for judges to execute productive and brave rulings in cases of alienation, they need skilled and experienced practitioners to present an accumulated abundance of solid, logical and persuasive interventions. In this regard, earlier this month, a bench of three district court judges (Heb: mechozi) denied an appeal by several Women’s Organisations, asking the court to order the Ministry of Welfare to reject a literature review on parental alienation that was written and handed in by us in February 2020. Their claims were in line with the oppositional arguments mentioned above.

This ruling is a move in the right direction for children in Israel who are disconnected from a parent as a result of alienation. Over the past two years in Israel, there has been a rise of 300% in new court cases involving alienation. Until this field develops to become a recognised, differentiated child maltreatment phenomenon and a formally trained clinical skill of practice, we designate for ourselves and our judges one challenge each. The American Psychosocial Association’s ethical principles section 2.01e on boundaries of competence states that ‘in those emerging areas in which generally recognised standards for preparatory training do not yet exist,

psychologists nevertheless take reasonable steps to ensure the competence of their work and to protect clients.’ This is our responsibility as practitioners: careful practice and cumulative, sound research. But, for us to do our work, we need the courts who appoint us to protect us more decisively. The courts and judges must see themselves as being responsible for protecting us – in court procedures and on social media – from unprofessional, extrinsic, and often vicious personal attacks. Otherwise there will be few clinicians in any country who are fit and willing, for the sake of disconnected children, to drive a broken wagon that’s being pulled by 12 wild horses.

At the forthcoming Zagreb conference, we will share some of the major challenges and dilemmas connected with this work in Israel. We were looking forward to meeting practitioners from other countries, face-to-face, so as to share and hear how they find their encounter with this professional experience- personally, clinically, and politically. Although the Corona virus means that the conference has moved online, our wish remains the same: to share, support and be supported by other practitioners working to reconnect children and parents who for no justifiable reason live their lives apart. Though the occasion has shifted, we still wish to share some common themes and experiences from our child-parent reunification work in Israel. Hopefully this will be a first step in an ongoing dialogue to improve our highly needed practice with a demanding, controversial, and emotionally charged family phenomenon.

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European Association of
**Parental
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'I did not see my daughters for years:' The impact of coercive control on post-divorce relationships between mothers and children

Sietske Dijkstra

Intimate partner violence and ex-partner violence can have many different faces and be played out by turning the children against the former spouse, thus a form of emotional child abuse. In this article¹ with the title above, I was reflecting on these issues based on in-depth interviews and a focus group I held with fathers, focusing my attention especially on the rejected mothers² I met in and through my work. The paper was originally presented at the second European Conference on Domestic Violence held in September 2017 in Porto, written up for the E-book in March 2018 and published in August 2019 as an E-Book. As a domestic violence specialist³ I am involved in discussions on issues on relational and social safety and disruption in family relationships. Last decade I developed accredited courses for social professionals on child abuse and vulnerable family relationships, intergenerational trauma, complex divorce parental alienation.⁴

Investigating the roots and the penetrating effects of disrupted post-divorce family relationships is essential to raise awareness and guide practitioners and researchers in their attempts to understand and treat complex family matters. Only with greater awareness can society promote greater safety, diminish emotional harm, and promote healthy parenting. More specifically, post-divorce relationships are becoming a worldwide issue. Yet research is limited concerning how post-divorce relationships are poisoned by prior and continuing domestic violence. An issue of special interest is how post-divorce relationships are shaped by the continuing tactic known as coercive control, through which one parent reorients their children's view of the other parent to sabotage their parent-child relationship, often with severe short-term and long-term consequences. The following two examples from the e-article show how coercive controlling tactics in different (abusive) relationship dynamics during and after the relationship between the (ex)partners go along with alienation.

Sophie (45) lives with her ten-year-old son, while her thirteen-year-old

daughter lives with her ex-husband. She describes how in her view her ex-husband's two-faced behaviour and his manipulation of the children's perspectives became evident at the conclusion of their marriage. She also reveals that he hides his anger, remaining outwardly calm, and how he uses the alienation allegation against her:

'I did not know how manipulative he is until the end of our relationship. I had breast cancer then and one breast had to be amputated. He was like a chameleon until then, but after the divorce nine years ago his anger was really provoked. What kind of person is he? When I raise my voice, he stays calm and in control: his legs are spread wide, his body relaxed. He spreads his hands with open palms and looks up with puppy eyes. He is a very charming man who is pleasing, but who turns on you, manipulates while remaining outwardly calm. For years he did not look after our kids (now ten and thirteen). I was the nurturing parent. Now to the outside world he claims to be the alienated parent.'

Carey (48), nine years divorced with three adolescent children, spoke about severe emotional abuse in her previous marriage. She has sole custody. Nowadays her ex-partner tries to turn the children against her. The two elder children, fifteen and nineteen, refuse to see their dad, but the youngest, of fourteen, is getting angrier all the time under his father's influence, and as a result tensions between the siblings in her home are growing. His father has promised him a bigger room a puppy, but according to Carey her ex-partner cannot take care of them:

'He indulged the children and compensated them. When my youngest of fourteen complained that he had to mow the lawn, he said, 'Oh my! Don't do it. You are far too young for this. Just come live with me.' He made my son write a letter to the judge saying that he wanted to live with his dad. All three of my children are affected: my eldest has a gambling addiction, my youngest is full of anger, and my daughter falls for dominant, nasty males. After nine years I am just a shadow of the woman I used to be, and very, very tired. My ex turns everything around, twists all the facts. My family fell apart regardless of whatever I did.'

Alienation is recognised as a mental health issue (Woodall & Woodall, 2017) and alienation that disrupts the parent-child bond is a form of child abuse and of ex-partner violence which should be addressed. A deeper understanding of this kind or pattern of alienation, often unrecognised by social professionals even in its most flagrant form, is likely to improve the quality of professional care. A lack of understanding makes it more likely that professionals will simply reproduce the power imbalance and overlook the mental violence happening right under our collective nose.

1. Dijkstra, S. (2019) 'I did not see my daughters for years:' The impact of coercive control on post-divorce relationships between mothers and children. Theme Intimate Partner violence, E-book, Second European Conference on Domestic Violence, Porto, 50-56.
2. The women interviewed were between 40 and 65 years of age and had been divorced for between three and 22 years. Each was a mother to two, three, or four children who at the time of the interviews were between nine and 38 years of age. An article based on the accounts of ten alienated women as mothers, is submitted for review to an international journal.
3. www.sietske-dijkstra.nl
4. <https://www.rinogroep.nl/opleiding/5395/omgaan-met-vermoedens-van-ouderverstoting.html> and <https://www.rinogroep.nl/interview/331/meer-zicht-op-geweldspatronen-verbetert-de-hulp-bij-complexe-scheidingen.html> and <https://www.kingnascholing.nl/cursussen/kindermishandeling-en-kwetsbare-gezinsrelaties>

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Bucharest conference widens the debate

A significant two-day conference, entitled *Interdisciplinary Approach to Disputes Involving Juveniles in Cases of Parental Alienation*, was held at the Bucharest Tribunal in Romania on 27-28 June 2019.

The Bucharest Tribunal – the central court in the capital – together with the APISET Association, organised for the first time in Romania an international congress devoted exclusively to the issues of children affected by parental alienation. It was also the first international congress organised by a public authority in the field and the biggest court in Romania that handles juvenile cases. The Tribunal, who understand the gravity of the phenomenon of parental alienation, are committed to providing knowledge and training around the issue of children's post separation rejection of a parent.

The audience was made up of judges, prosecutors, lawyers, psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, social workers and others working with families. In Romania prosecutors are treating as criminal offences cases of non-observance of measures concerning the custody of minors, harassment and ill-treatment of minors. Professional specialists from Romania and abroad met for two days to listen to a varied programme including presentations on understanding parental alienation from legal, cross boarder, forensic, psychological and therapeutic perspectives.

The main purpose of the conference, which was the initiative of EAPAP Board member, Simona Vlădică Ph.D., was forming the skills and abilities of magistrates judges and prosecutors through theoretical and practical training, in order to be able to identify cases of emotional abuse exercised by parents on minors and develop measures in order to analyse and to take the effective action to stop this serious form of abuse.

The conference heard from a number of specialists in the field both from within Romania and from abroad and aimed to produce a number of proposals to improve legislation in Romania.

Some key presentations included *The need for interdisciplinary approach to litigation with juveniles in cases of parental alienation* from Judge Laura Radu - President of the Bucharest Tribunal; *Psychological expertise: a useful means of solving juvenile cases. The need for a separate regulation of psychological expertise as a means of proof in criminal proceedings* from Prosecutor Dr. Laurențiu Sorescu - Prosecutor's Office attached to Bucharest Court of Appeal; and *Psychological assessment of the minor in a family context in civil and criminal proceedings: procedure and objectives. The importance of identifying the types of co - parenthood, parenting styles and attachment types in the resolution of disputes with minors* from Dr. Gabriela Marc, D.G.A.S.P.C. Sector 5 Bucharest

Zagreb lecture brings together judges and psychotherapists

A public lecture for experts on *Understanding and Working with Children and Families Affected by Parental Alienation* was held by Karen Woodall and Nick Woodall on 10 July 2019 in Zagreb. It was organised by by the Zagreb Child and Youth Protection Centre and the Association of Judges for Youth, Family Judges and Experts for Children and Youth at the Andrija Štampar Teaching Institute of Public Health.

More than 200 participants from various childcare sectors – health, social welfare, police, judiciary, education and non-governmental organisations – gathered in the hall of Andrija Štampar Teaching Institute of Public Health. Given the great interest of the public, the lecture was broadcasted live to the Institute's library. We are grateful to Institute's staff and Director, Dr. Zvonimir Sostar, for constant cooperation and support. There was a great interest for additional seats, so many followed the lecture, commented and asked questions on Facebook.

The Centre's Director, Gordana Buljan Flander, Ph.D. and the President of the Juvenile Department of the County Court in Zagreb, Lana Petö Kujundžić, Ph.D., opened the lecture with a minute of silence in honor of tragically murdered social worker

Blaženka Poplašen. A video clip of a clinical interview with an alienated mother (hidden identity of the mother and child) was presented as an introduction to the subject. Tatjana Katkić Stanić, representing Ministry of demography, family, youth and social politic, has also welcomed the participants and supported the initiative for having this lecture. Karen and Nick Woodall then held the lecture.

The main conclusions addressed by the lecturers relates to the observation of alienation as emotional abuse, the public health problem and the issue of child protection, with emphasis on the necessity of the joint action of various sectors, in particular the judiciary, social welfare and health care systems. The lecturers paid special attention to the possible abuse of Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and explicitly emphasised that the direct question to the child with whom he wants to live and accepting the child's response as a final decision, is a violation of the child's rights and participation in the emotional abuse of the child.

At the end of the lecture, discussion developed and the audience posed a lot of interesting questions to the lecturers, both in person and over social networks. Through the discussion of Croatian and international participants with the lecturers, the judge Lana Petö Kujundžić, Ph.D and Center's psychologist Mia Roje Đapić have come up with concrete proposals for improving work in alienation cases. Karen and Nick Woodall thanked the Centre's Director, Gordana Buljan Flander, Ph.D., for inviting them and co-operating and announced the conference on the subject of alienation in Central Europe. This way, the Centre once again thanks them for every moment of devoted work in the field of child protection.

The lecture, which focussed on alienation as a child abuse issue, led to the development of a protocol based on clinical practice, models of good practice in Europe and around the world, and on the findings of more than a thousand scientific papers. The document, titled *Experts Protecting Children From Emotional Abuse In Divorce: Establishing Good Practice In Croatia* was signed by over 800 practitioners. It declares that 'alienation is a public health problem and should be approached from the position of protecting child's health and rights.'

Important legal rulings

CASE OF PISICĂ v. THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA (Application no. 23641/17)

This case concerned a claim by a mother that, by failing to take effective measures to protect her relationship with her children, who had been alienated against her by their father, the Moldovan authorities had breached her right to protection of her family life, pursuant to Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights. The ECHR agreed that there had been a violation of Article 8 stating *'The Court considers that the alienation of the applicant's children, of which the applicant complained much earlier than any judgment concerning their custody was adopted, was a major factor impeding the enforcement of the judgment of 24 June 2015. Therefore, the authorities' failure to react to the applicant's complaints about alienation and to examine the custody case in an urgent matter must be seen as having substantially*

contributed to the eventual difficulties in enforcing the judgment.'

Neutral Citation Number: [2020] EWHC 1940 (Fam) Case No: ZC19P00137 IN THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE FAMILY DIVISION ENGLAND & WALES Re S (Parental Alienation: Cult: Transfer of Primary Care)

This case followed an appeal to the by a father against the refusal of his application for a change of residence for his 9-year-old daughter to live with him. The original judge had found that a process of alienation of the girl from her father had begun in the context of the mother's adherence to an organisation called Universal Medicine. The Court of Appeal ruled that, *'in a situation of parental alienation the obligation on the court is to respond with exceptional diligence and take whatever effective measures are available'* and noted that, *'the obligation on the court is to keep the*

child's medium to long term welfare at the forefront of its mind and wherever possible to uphold the child and parent's right to respect for family life before it is breached. In making its overall welfare decision the court must therefore be alert to early signs of alienation.'

Hearing the application for a change of residence, the High Court argued that, all the child's *'views have to be assessed having regard to the fact that they are distorted by the prism of alienation. Her wishes and feelings are the subjective result of exposure to harmful beliefs and practices which have led to her alienation from her father and her enmeshment with her mother,'* adding *'I accept that whilst there will be short-term harm and distress for the child as a result of moving to the father's care, underlying the current estrangement lie the foundations of a positive and beneficial relationship between the child and her father.'*

A change of residence was ordered.



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Live online practitioner conference
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