

CUSTODY DISPUTES FUELING “PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME”

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New York — With increasing child custody disputes has come a growth in “parental alienation syndrome,” Dr. Richard A. Gardner said at a meeting of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis.

Abetted by one parent, the child develops an obsessive, irrational hatred of the other, who is “viewed as the incarnation of evil,” said Dr. Gardner, a child psychiatrist at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, New York.

Ninety percent of the time, the father is the victim; but in 10% the roles are reversed. There is no history of abuse. “To call it brainwashing would be an oversimplification...the child jumps on the mother’s bandwagon...but adds his own scenario,” he said.

In the typical presentation, which may arise within days of the announcement of custody conflict, the child obsessively denigrates the father, with no empathy and little guilt. The denigration has a litany quality; every altercation of the past is used to justify his hatred.

Lack of Normal Ambivalence

When asked why he never wanted to see his father again, one little boy said that “he chewed too loud” and added, “He used to say, ‘Don’t interrupt.’ ”

Bizzare charges, condoned by the mother, may be made. One child said that his father had murdered his grandfather, who had actually died, at age 85, in the hospital. The father “was the kind of person who would do it,” the boy declared, supplying details of the crime.

When asked what she thought, the mother said she didn’t actually believe the murder had happened, adding “but I wouldn’t put it past him,” Dr. Gardner said.

A hallmark of the syndrome is the child’s lack of normal ambivalence toward both parents: He can find nothing he dislikes about his mother and nothing he likes about his father.

The hatred may extend to the father’s family; grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins with whom relations had previously been good are now viewed as despicable, Dr. Gardner said.

Evidence that might counteract the distortions is met with rationalization and delusion. Asked about a photograph from happier times in which the family was together at Disney World, one boy explained that “if I didn’t smile for the picture, he’d beat me.”

He believes the syndrome has arisen as a result of social and legal changes of the last 15 or 20 years. In the mid-1970's, the presumption that the mother is the de facto preferred custodial parent gave way to an "egalitarian" commitment to determine the child's best interests in a gender-blind fashion.

Custody disputes burgeoned and the erosion of the mother's position deepened in the late 1970's and early 1980's with the increasing popularity of the joint custody concept...

In severe cases of parental alienation syndrome — the alienating parent is unamenable to therapy and so filled with rage, paranoia, and delusions that a virtual *folie a deux* has developed with the child — the only hope is court ordered removal of the child to the other parent's home. In this case, the primary psychological bond is strong but "sick," he said.

In more moderate cases, the bond must be respected but the child induced to see the other parent. "Being respectful of the child's wishes won't work," Dr. Gardner said.

To give the child no choice but to see the father provides an excuse that allows him to protect his relationship with the mother ("I still hate him, but the judge says I have to").

In moderate and milder cases, truncating custody litigation is probably more therapeutic than any intervention in resolving the syndrome. "Once the threat is gone, there's no need for the scenario," he said.

The syndrome may be seen at any age past 3 or 4 years. When a couple in their fifties divorces acrimoniously, a variant may occur in children in their twenties.

In severe cases, lifelong alienation from one parent may ensue, Dr. Gardner said.