

Using Genograms and Parent Coordinators to Craft Interventions for Families Characterized by Parental Alienation

Elizabeth Ellis, Ph.D. and Susan Boyan, LMFT

Introduction

Since the term “parental alienation syndrome” was first coined by psychiatrist Richard Gardner in 1987, this term has become part of the lexicon of family courts, family therapists, and co-parenting coordinators. While it has grown in acceptance, it has also been the subject of much controversy. As editor Andrew Schepard stated, “PAS became a kind of nuclear weapon in the custody wars” (2001, p. 243).

Noncustodial parents whose children were refusing contact with them could launch a barrage of allegations that the custodial parent was alienating the children, in hopes of being awarded primary custody of the children. Gardner (1987, 1992) used the term to describe a pattern of behavior in which children demonstrated hostility and fear of a parent, post-divorce, and a pattern of cognitive distortions as well, while refusing contact with that parent. Gardner included descriptions of the children’s actions but also examples of behaviors on the part of the alienating parent which supported this behavior. Johnston and Kelly (1988) Johnston (1993) and Kelly and Johnston (2001) have avoided the term PAS, inasmuch as no “syndrome” could be scientifically established, and preferred to describe this problem as “children who refuse visitation.”

Over the years the term PAS has sparked a gender war as well. Fathers who had lost contact with their children as the children due to the child’s alienation from them, launched an all-out offensive to accuse mothers of “brainwashing” the children turning the child against them, and of having “malicious mother syndrome” (Turkat,

1995. They saw alienation as one more strategy, along with false accusations of domestic violence and sexual abuse, by mothers, to deny them their rights. They sought a change of custody as a remedy. Women and their attorneys, on the other hand, often view the term PAS as junk science, as a way to take away the gains women have made in protecting children from violent, abusive, or unstable fathers.

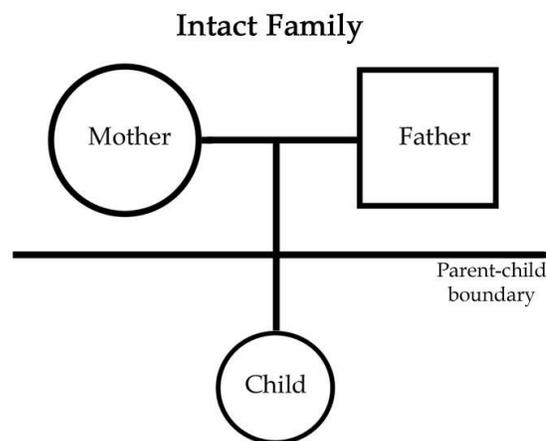
The July, 2001 issue of *Family Court Review* brought together a group of seminal papers from some of the leaders in this field and remains today the single best source of our conceptualization of parental alienation. Kelly and Johnston continue to avoid the term “syndrome” and prefer the term “alienated child,” with a specific focus on the experience of the child, not the caregivers. They define an alienated child as “one who expresses, freely and persistently, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs (such as anger, hatred, rejection, and/or fear) toward a parent that are significantly disproportionate to the child’s actual experience with that parent” (p. 231). Other professionals in the field refer to the same dynamic as “parental alienation” or simply “alienation” rather than as PAS.

Lee and Olesen (2001) offer a decision tree to use in assessing children who are alienated. For guidelines as to management of these cases by the courts, with instructions for building a therapeutic team, and sample court orders, the reader is referred to Sullivan and Kelly (2001). Ellis (2000) offers a literature review with a special emphasis on the overlap between parental alienation and *folie a deux*. Ellis (2005) covers strategies for consultation with the targeted parent, and Ellis (2007) offers a DSM IV-R style description of PAS with a group of 15 symptoms, along with the methods to use to assess for those symptoms.

These cases are typically the most intractable child custody cases that come before family courts. One way to conceptualize the problem is through genograms.

We start with the simplest family structure, an intake family with a mother, father and a female child. There is a clear intergenerational boundary between the parents and the child. The parents have a strong bond together, as illustrated with a solid line. And lastly, the parents have a good bond with the child, again with a solid line.

Fig. 1

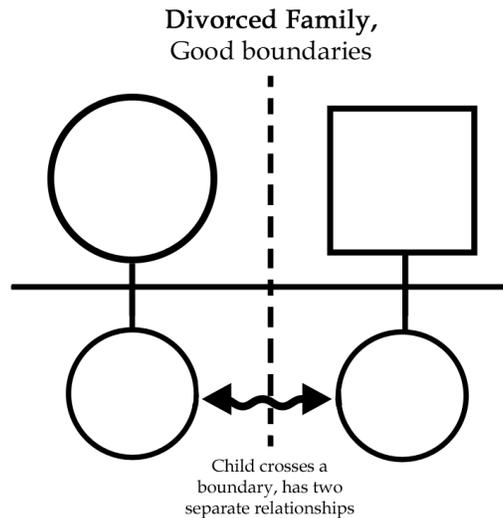


Divorced Family: “Minimal Conflict”

Following divorce, the parental bond is severed, though there may still be communication and a good working relationship (Fig. 2). Thus, the co-parent relationship is illustrated with a dotted line. Though it may be contradictory to refer to a divorced family as “ideal,” the diagram below may reflect the best possible outcome for a child of a divorced family. Both parents still maintain a good intergenerational boundary with the child as noted by the horizontal line. The child has a close relationship with both parents. The child can easily pass from mother’s home to father’s home (wavy line indicates movement). The boundary between them is

there but it is permeable. It is not difficult for the child to transition back and forth between homes.

Fig. 2



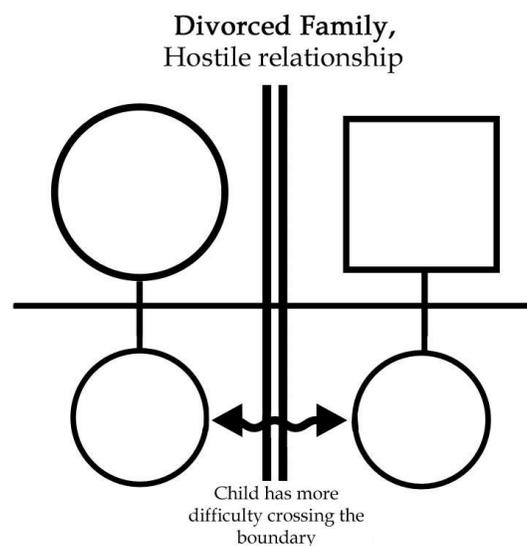
Post Divorce: Parental Conflict

Where there is post divorce conflict, the barrier between the parents is more complete as noted by the thickened vertical line(Fig. 3). There may be little communication between the parents. Thus, there is some corresponding pressure on the child to relay information back and forth. The information relayed by the child to each parent may be sparse, distorted or inaccurate. Even telephone calls can be problematic as they involve the free flow of communication back and forth between the two homes. Thus, many phone calls don't go through or may be experienced as tense situations when they do go through.

There may be tension between the parents at the time of transitions, making them more stressful for the child. This may be tension expressed verbally in the form of arguing, or simply nonverbal cues in terms of posture, gesture, or facial expressions. Either parent may approach the transition with apprehension and/or

sadness which is communicated to the child, making the separation from that parent very emotional and more difficult. Crossing the co-parenting boundary becomes more difficult. However, the child still has a good bond with both parents, and both parents maintain an intergenerational boundary with the child.

Fig. 3



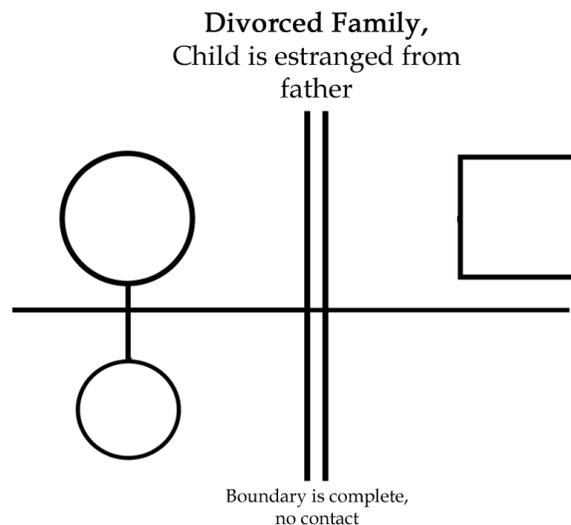
Post Divorce Conflict, Estrangement of Child from Parent

Following the guidelines by Kelly and Johnston (2001), some children become *estranged* from one parent as the parents' marriage deteriorates. This is due to some actions on the part of the estranged parent that a majority of people would agree are offensive, dangerous, or immoral. The parent may have been violent toward the mother (or father) or children, or may have committed a crime. The estranged parent may have a substance abuse problem or a serious mental illness. And, finally, the

estranged parent may have simply abandoned their role as parent for many years and has suddenly reappeared to assert their parental rights.

In these scenarios, the children completely shut out the estranged parent. The co-parental barrier between the homes is impermeable. However, the children do have a healthy relationship with the primary parent and have clear parent-child boundaries with that parent. The estrangement may not be problematic unless the estranged parent asserts his (or her) rights through the court, and the court is demanding reunification. Sometimes the court upholds some ban on contact between the estranged parent and children, or may allow the children, if older, to determine if they will have contact and under what conditions. In other cases the estranged parent is required to undergo treatment, meet strict criteria for restoration of contact, and the contact must be supervised.

Fig. 4

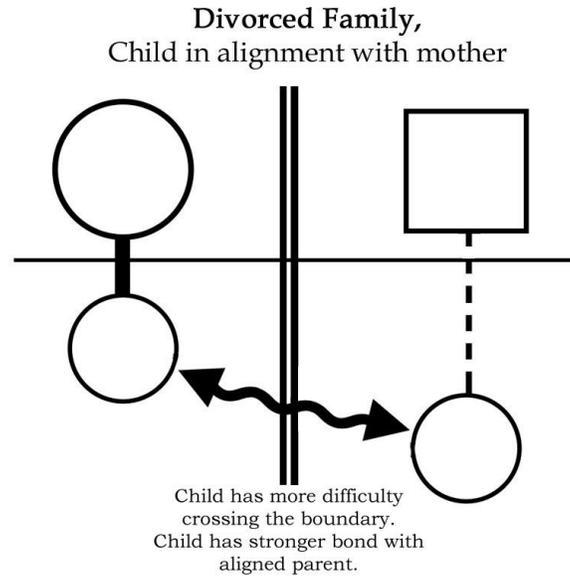


Post Divorce Conflict: Alignment with Primary Parent

In these cases, there has been a pattern of conflict between the parents post divorce, and the vertical barrier between them has become increasingly difficult to cross. The children may have a healthy relationship with the allied parent, with good boundaries. However, they have historically had a more distant or more strained relationship with the parent whom they have begun to reject. The rejected parent may have spent less time with them, been less involved in their lives, or may simply be less adept at being sensitive to their needs. Or the rejected parent may have engaged in an extramarital affair in such a flagrant manner that the other parent feels profoundly betrayed. The children may be old enough to sympathize with the betrayed parent and to also feel a need to be protective of that parent. In some cases the father (or mother) has engaged in some activity which the children found to be a violation of their religious or moral values. Or, it may be that the children feel a need to ally with their primary parent out of a sense of loyalty. Sometimes these cases may not include significant pathology on the part of the primary parent.

This rejection is typically mild and is described as “discomfort.” It can be overcome with court orders for the primary parent to enforce the contact with the rejected parent. Family counseling can help the rejected parent and children form a more cohesive unit.

Fig. 5

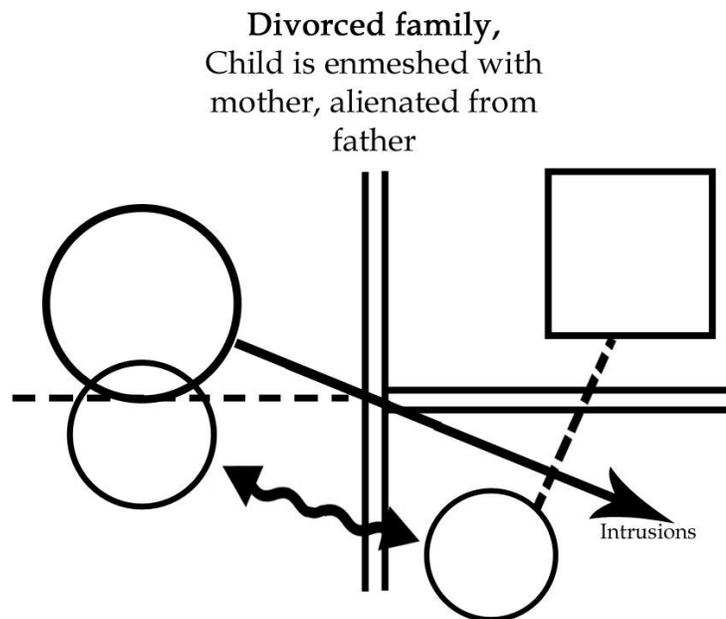


Post-Divorce Conflict: Parental Alienation

These cases are similar to the cases of alliance and estrangement in that the border between the parents, due to a past history of conflict, is more extreme and more difficult for the child to cross. One feature that is different, however, is that the alienating parent will typically have a personality disorder. As a result the child has an enmeshed relationship with the alienating parent. The parent-child boundary is poor, and the child has had trouble individuating. This enmeshment is typically with a mother, given that mothers are more often the custodial parent but this is not always the case. The enmeshment is so extreme that the alienating parent often maintains the enmeshment by making numerous intrusions into the custodial time of the targeted parent (the bidirectional arrow). The child has a distant relationship with the targeted parent, and the child completely rejects that parent. The child and targeted parent may have had a close relationship in the past. However, any evidence of that is contradicted and discounted. Any warm feelings for the targeted parent are denied publicly, though the targeted parent may report that the child does show comfort and affection toward him out of public view. What is most confounding to the

people in the community and to officers of the court, is that—unlike cases of estrangement--there appears to be no significant basis for the outright rejection of the targeted parent.

Fig. 6



Using the Genogram to Conceptualize Interventions

Intervening in cases of PA has posed significant problems for family therapists and the courts for many years. Many allegations are made against the targeted parent by the alienating parent-child dyad. These must be carefully investigated in order to insure the child's safety. In cases of PA, however, (not estrangement), they turn out to be baseless. While the allegations are carefully being evaluated, the enmeshment becomes more intense, the targeted parent is at risk of becoming more distant. Whatever bond the alienated parent and child once had becomes a distant memory (Sullivan & Kelly, 2001). Coalitions form around the alienating parent-child dyad to

support the enmeshment and rejection. These may be friends and relatives of the dyad, well meaning teachers, coaches, and school counselors, and even psychotherapists. Coalitions even form around them through internet blogs, websites, and support groups. Court delays further strengthen the alienation. Those professionals appointed by the court to forge a bond between the child and the targeted parent are rejected by the coalition as part of the enemy.

The courts often approach these cases with the view that only mental health professionals can put things right again, and so assign the alienated parent and child to meet with a family therapist. Such “treatment” has a high failure rate. While the targeted parent is highly motivated to see treatment succeed, the alienating parent-child dyad is highly motivated to see treatment fail. This is because for them, the rejection of the targeted parent is not the problem, it is the solution to the problem as they see it. For the alienating parent who may have felt humiliated and betrayed by the divorce, the child’s rejection of the hated parent restores their sense of control, their sense of esteem and self worth as the “chosen” parent. For them, it vindicates them, it rights their sense of being wronged.

For the child, rejection of the other parent eliminates cognitive dissonance and confusion. The child no longer has to cross impermeable borders, to determine what information to share with each parent, to manage tense or hostile transitions, or to figure out how to be loyal to two parents who despise each other. The child does not have to separate and individuate from the alienating parent. Nor does the child have to worry about causing harm to the alienating parent by being disloyal to that parent, or worry about being rejected by that parent. In PA cases, the child is often satisfied with the status quo. “...This is a key insight into working with these children in that

PAS, while an irresolvable conundrum for the courts and family therapists, is not the *problem* for the child, but rather the *solution* to the problem” (Ellis, 2005, p. 417).

The alienating parent-child dyad resist any attempt to modify the situation through various means. They will be extremely demanding about appointment times and find no openings acceptable. They will cancel appointments on short notice for trivial reasons, or fail to show for appointments, claiming sudden illness. They will reject the therapist (e.g., “My child doesn’t like you,”), assert that the sessions with the alienated parent are too stressful and unpleasant. They will claim the therapist is biased, a claim which is true since the therapist is charged by the court with somehow undoing the alienation and weakening the enmeshment. They will make complaints about the therapist to officers of the court (“He is incompetent. We want him off the case.”). It is impossible to achieve a good outcome in this manner because the two parents have completely opposite agendas. The alienating parent is invested in seeing treatment fail, and the child is allied with that parent and also invested in seeing no progress. When “treatment” fails, the therapist is blamed. The court is left with a diminished view of the effectiveness of mental health professionals in such cases and is in a quandary as to what to do next. Dunne and Hedrick (1994) reviewed 13 cases of parental alienation syndrome which were referred by the courts to some combination of individual psychotherapy, couples therapy, child play therapy, and/or family therapy. In two of the cases, the child was seen as “somewhat improved. However, in 11 of the cases there was no improvement, and in two of the cases the children were rated as worse in their alienation than prior to the initiation of treatment.

In extreme cases, the court has been faced with permitting the child to have no contact at all with the alienated parent. Some writers such as Johnston and Roseby

(1997) and Garber (2007) argue for this course of action in order to maintain the child's primary bond with the alienating parent and reduce the child's perceived stress. The other option is to make a complete change of custody to the targeted parent. The courts are very reluctant to do this for many reasons. The alienating parent typically has been the primary parent in the child's life. The child's strongest bond is with that parent. Coalitions may have formed around that parent-child dyad which support the maintenance of that bond. These may be teachers, coaches, church youth ministers, and therapists who all testify to what a wonderful parent that mom (or sometimes dad) is. The child's therapist may even testify that to rupture that bond would be profoundly traumatic for the child and may result in a psychosis. Some therapists have referred to this change of custody as a "parentectomy" (Johnston, 1994) The child herself (or himself) may be completely distraught over the possible separation from that parent and threaten dire consequences (i.e., "I'll die," "I'll kill myself," "I'll run away").

Given these scenarios, the courts often proceed slowly with these cases over a span of many years. Several evaluations are made, numerous hearings are held, rounds of family therapy may be ordered with different therapists, all of which fail. Garrity and Baris (1994) were among the first experts in this field to recommend intervention with a "special master" or co-parenting coordinator. The term co-parenting counselor has changed and the term most often used is that of parenting coordinator. A parenting coordinator is a neutral appointed to work with the high conflict family. The process is a form of dispute resolution and may include some form of authority. For more information on parenting coordination visit www.parentingcoordinationcentral.com.

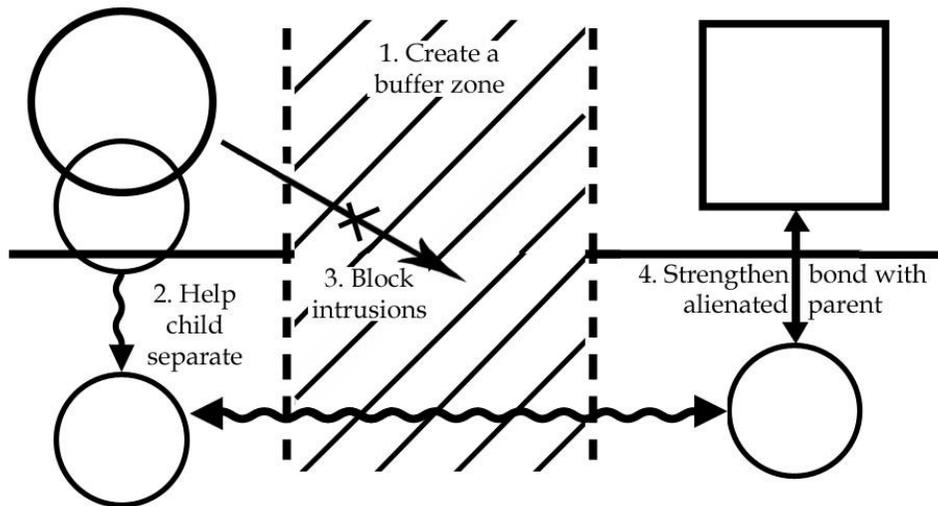
The option of appointing a parenting coordinator offers more possibilities of a positive outcome, but only if it is backed by strong court orders. Thus, the trend in the courts has been to move toward this middle ground in which a parenting coordinator is appointed by the court to make strategic interventions. The PC should have the backing and the support of the Guardian and the court. Penalties for violating court orders or noncompliance with the PC may result in sanctions such as fines, loss of parenting time, directives to pay more than half the fees, even a weekend in jail. Sullivan and Kelly (2001) have written a thorough approach for legal management of parental alienation cases.

The challenge in these cases is to develop a common agenda for the two parents who have historically had opposite agendas. For example, if the alienating parent wants to retain primary custody of the child, and the targeted parent wants regular visitation, then the court may order that the alienating parent must support regular visitation between the child and the targeted parent, or face a loss of custody. Thus, regular visitation with the targeted parent becomes a common goal for both, and if it is successful it creates a win-win scenario for the two parents.

The parenting coordinator can look at the genogram for insights as to where to craft interventions.

Fig. 7

Interventions



(1) How do we make border crossings easier for the child?

One standard method for making border crossings easier is to reduce the face-to-face transition from mother to father and father to mother. A parenting coordinator can facilitate this by creating a buffer zone between them. For example, having the targeted parent pick the child up from a neutral zone (i.e., school, daycare, karate lesson) allows for an easier transition. Having a neutral person drive the child from one home is a second option, though it is less desirable since usually coalitions have formed around each parent, and no one is fully neutral. If neither of these can be achieved, the PC can insist that child come out to the car alone to avoid parent to parent contact or the parents can be directed not speak to each other at handoffs beyond a polite hello.

Alienating parents usually will strongly oppose the establishment of buffer zones. The parenting coordinator can direct them to sign forms with the school, daycare center, Boy Scout meeting, summer camp, etc. that permit the targeted parent to pick the child up from that facility. Since one aspect of the parenting coordination

role is to monitor parental behaviors, the PC may report lack of cooperation to the attorneys thereby increasing compliance. The PC may have to frame the assignment in the form of a double bind. Ex. "It is a very tense situation for everyone when your child has say goodbye to you and go to the other parent, and we want to reduce that stress as much as possible. I know you are a good parent and you wouldn't want to put your child through any more stress than is necessary. Thank you for your cooperation in this."

Another strategy for facilitating the crossing of the border from one home to the other is to re-build a working relationship between the two parents. Conjoint parent sessions are the primary focus of parenting coordination interventions. By solving problems, arbitrating disputes, assigning tasks, and giving out directives, the PC can put a set of guidelines in place for the parents to reduce conflict and open up communication. With the backing of the court, and swift judicial sanctions for failure to abide by the directives, the PC can put a system in place that may eventually transition into email communication or even phone calls between the two parents. However, the degree of improvements may be limited by the degree of pathology present in the alienating parent.

(2) How do we reduce the enmeshment between the alienating parent and the child?

Enmeshment is often seen as a problem in alienation cases, though it is not viewed as a problem by the alienating parent. The alienating parent will proudly say, "We have an especially close relationship." The child will say, "We like all the same things. We are best friends. We never want to be apart. Everyone is trying to tear us apart." The enmeshment is not viewed as ego dystonic by the dyad. However, it may

be seen very clearly by the targeted parent. The child may insist he (or she) cannot sleep alone at the targeted parent's house because they sleep with the alienating parent at the other home. In some cases the child insists she cannot bathe at the targeted parent's home because only her mother can wash her hair, or, in one case, the child could not have a bowel movement at the father's home because only the mother could wipe his bottom.

Set up a double bind. Strategic interventions by the PC can help make the problem ego dystonic and put the alienating parent in a double bind. The PC may want to forecast dire consequences such as the son "being a momma's boy and never marrying," or the daughter being "too attached to mom to date boys," and "too homesick to attend college." The PC may stress to the alienating parent that she is a good parent and wouldn't want these things to happen to her child. The PC can say "I know you wouldn't want to erode your child's self esteem as she [he] sees she [he] is not as mature as other children and has considerably more fears about growing up. Therefore, being a good parent, you would naturally want to promote some healthy independence and self esteem." Few healthy parents could disagree with this. Unfortunately, the parent with borderline personality disorder may not be able to reframe the enmeshment without the risk of loss of their self esteem.

Reduce guilt. While alienated children often feel vulnerable, confused, and unsafe when separating from the alienating parent, they also separate with concern and worry for the well-being of the alienating parent who is also having separation anxiety. These parents must be directed to "put on a good face" at the time of separation, to keep the transition brief and upbeat. Even more importantly, they may need to be directed by the parenting coordinator to make plans of their own while the child is absent and let the child know of these plans. Some parents will counter with,

“Well, I’m too worried to make any social plans,” or “Well, what if I just want to stay home?” The important issue is for the parent to communicate to the child that the parent will be busy, will be enjoying herself (or himself), and will not be sad or lonely. With some parents this may require considerable effort and even scripting because they themselves have not individuated from the child and have no separate identity outside of childrearing.

Promote other separations. From there, the PC should look at opportunities for the child to separate and individuate. The PC may want to direct the alienating parent to set up simple changes such as taking the bus to school or carpooling with other parents rather than be driven to school every day by the alienating parent. School attendance problems should be reviewed as high rates of school absences characterize many of these cases. Often alienated children miss school due to alleged or exaggerated illnesses in order to stay home with the alienating parent. Some of the enmeshment occurs around these exaggerated illnesses and the bond that is created through frequent doctor visits and the giving of medicines. The PC may want to give the directive that if the child becomes ill, the targeted parent must be the one to take the child to the doctor. Some alienating parents will begin homeschooling as a way to control, alienate, block access and increase their child’s dependence.

Bathing alone and sleeping alone should be stressed and strong directives given to the alienating parent to focus on age appropriate milestones in these areas. The PC may require the child go to summer camp as a wonderful opportunity for a week or two week separation. Promoting overnight stays at a friend’s house is another strategy. If the child is in Girl Scout or Boy Scouts, or in Band or other clubs that have outings, the alienating parent should be directed specifically *not* to be a chaperone on these trips. Again, the alienating parent can be given a scripted

statement to deliver to the child. Ex. “I see that you’re growing up, and I’m proud of you. I don’t want you to feel that you need me with you all the time. That’s not good for you. I’m confident that you can meet new people and do just fine without me.”

(3) How do we reduce intrusions on the targeted parent’s time with the child?

No phone calls. Intrusions occur when the child is with the targeted parent but has contact with the alienating parent. Each contact has the effect of strengthening the enmeshment with the alienating parent and creating distance between the child and targeted parent. The parenting coordinator must address this early on and, in some situations, eliminate contact altogether. One method of intrusion in this technological era is the cellphone. Some alienating parents give the child a cellphone to take with them on a visitation and may call or text the child 10 to 20 times a day. Alienating parents justify this on the grounds that the child needs a cellphone “for emergencies,” and that their checking on the child is normal parental concern. However, the underlying message to the child is that he (or she) is not safe with the targeted parent. The child may also use the cellphone to contact others in the coalition (i.e., grandma, their best friend) to complain about the targeted parent. In these cases, the PC may direct both parents to eliminate the cell phone for visits with the targeted parent. The phone must stay home and it is the alienating parent who must direct it. They might be literally given a script that says, “The cellphone takes away from time with your dad (or mom) and it has to stay home. You can use the house phone for emergencies.” The PC might suggest that the alienated parent be permitted one 10 minute call to the child at a designated time every other day, so that

there is contact between the two, but it is very minimal. For those parents who are more resistant or more impaired, the PC may require that the parent child calls be recorded for PC review.

No joint appearances. Another intrusion is the appearance of the alienating parent at the child's activities. Children who are alienated have been observed to have a warm relationship with the targeted parent at soccer practice or baseball games, until the alienating parent arrives. Then they stiffen, show obvious tension, and suddenly distance themselves from that parent. Parents must be instructed to alternate attendance at mid week activities and never attend programs together during the other parent's weekend time. Their script may say, "Your dad and I talked and we want you to focus on the game and not worry about us both being there and whether we'll get along, so we agreed not to attend your games at the same time." The PC may help the parents reach compromises regarding such parenting matters. For example, one parent might help the child select an outfit for graduation and attend the first half, while the other parent attends the second half and takes the child out to lunch afterward. Again, the alienating parent will be assigned the task of explaining this to the child

No parental edicts. A third set of intrusions are the edicts that often come from the alienating parent toward the targeted parent about the care of the child. These may be as mundane as specifics about what food the child is to eat, what tv shows she is to watch or not watch, what type of shampoo he is to use or a directive to wear PJs rather than nightgowns at the noncustodial parent's home. This sets the stage for the alienating parent to exert influence even when she is not present, by having the child reject the targeted parent's food, television shows, and shampoo. They may be orders from the alienating parent that the child is not to attend the

targeted parent's church because it would be "too confusing," but that the alienating parent must come to the targeted parent's home and take the child to "their church." They may even give orders to the child in the form of "You are not to play with the children over there," or "Your stepmother is not to give you a bath," or "You are not to associate with the grandparents," etc. The PC must explain to them continually that once the door closes, they cannot dictate what goes on at the other home, just as the targeted parent has no say about how the alienating parent raises the child while in their home.

The alienating parent must be charged with not only discontinuing this, but actively promoting its opposite. She (or he) can be given a script to say to the child such as the following. "I know we have our set way of doing things here, but other people do things differently. I think it's good for you to try different foods or tv shows or shampoos. So I'd like you to have a good attitude at your dad's (mom's) house and give these new things and new people a try."

(4) How do we strengthen the bond between the targeted parent and child?

Put the alienating parent in charge. In cases of alienated children, much of the work of strengthening the bond between the targeted parent must be done by the alienating parent. The PC may want to reinforce the alienating parent's influence over the child. Ex. "She has a strong bond with you and you have a lot of influence over her. If you promote contact with dad (or mom) she will follow your lead." or "She adores you and she listens to what you say. She takes her cues from you. If you insist that it is important for her to enjoy her time with her dad (or mom), she will believe you." The parent may counter with "I think _____ (the targeted parent)

should do something to make my child love him (her) more,” or “Why don’t you make _____ (the targeted parent) promote a relationship with me?” The PC can counter with, “No one has power over your daughter like you do. _____ (the targeted parent) doesn’t need to promote a relationship with you because your daughter worships you.” Thus, the alienating parent must encourage and promote the child’s bond with the targeted parent, or be forced to concede that they are not adored and worshiped, and are not all powerful, etc.

Say positive things. A second strategy is to issue an order that the alienating parent say something positive about the targeted parent to the child on some regular basis. The alienating parent will insist they can’t think of anything to say and be honest, so the PC may want to assist them with statements that are factual. They may be simple as “Your mom is good with math. Ask her to help you with those problems,” or “Your dad works hard at his job,” or “Your mom is a good cook.” This can be monitored by the PC by asking the alienating parent what they said to the child about the targeted parent that week, and occasionally asking the child if the alienating parent had said anything good about the targeted parent recently.

Show respect. A third strategy is to order the alienating parent to demand that the child treat the targeted parent with respect. So often in PA cases, the targeted parent will complain that the child calls them by their first name, not “dad” or “mom,” or is sarcastic to them, ignores them, rolls their eyes at them, refuses to speak to them, etc. The alienating parent will justify this with statements such as, “Well, that’s how they feel. I can’t change how they feel” or “Well, respect has to be earned.” The PC can again counter this by placing the alienating parent in a double bind. The PC may say, “I know you are a very good parent and that you have done much to teach your child manners and politeness. I know you would never tolerate your child being

disrespectful to grandma, or Uncle Bob, or their teacher, even if they didn't respect them." Thus, the parent is in a double bind. Either he (she) must agree with you or state that they have never taught their child to respect adults. The PC can then give them this script to say to the child, "I have taught you good manners and I have raised you to be polite to adults. I expect you to go over to your dad's (or mom's) home and be respectful to the adults there. What you do reflects on me." It should be noted that the more severely impaired the alienated parent the more the scripted material may be manipulated. For example, they may make it known to their child directly or through body language that they are simply following the directives of the PC and do not mean what they are telling their child.

Make the alienating parent enforce consequences on the child for acting out. In many of these cases, the alienated child sabotages the targeted parent's custodial time by being rude, sarcastic, and uncooperative. They use passive aggressive tactics such as avoiding the targeted parent, tuning him out. They may even be verbally abusive, call the parent names, curse the parent, etc. The child's goal is to sabotage the targeted parent's efforts and to show loyalty to the alienating parent. The alienating parent and child dyad hope the targeted parent simply gives up and withdraws from the battlefield. Often the alienating parent will take the position of surface neutrality. Ex. "It's not my problem if he's unhappy over there with you. I didn't want him to go over there but the court ordered him to go. No one listens to him. Now it's your problem if he's acting out. *You* punish him." If the targeted parent attempts to manage negative behaviors this will only reinforce the belief that mom is the good guy and dad is the bad guy.

Naturally the child will not accept consequences from the targeted parent and may even use the punishment to make a false claim of child abuse. So the targeted

parent must not be in charge of enforcing consequences during the early phase of this process. It must come from the alienating parent. In PC sessions together, the alienating parent must spell out clearly the acting out that is occurring. The two parents and the PC will decide how this behavior is to be reported--by phone or email, during or after the contact with the targeted parent. They will agree on appropriate consequences for specific behaviors ahead of time. For example, if the child is refusing to do tasks around the home, the targeted parent might call the alienating parent on the phone, who would then remind the child of the behavior contract and warn them of the consequences. For those alienating parents that can not manage direct contact without creating conflict, the information may be related through the parenting coordinator. The alienating parent must be reminded frequently that only *she* (or *he*), and not the targeted parent, has a strong influence over the child and can get the child to do comply with the targeted parent. If the child is told, "I expect you to behave over there and not give him any trouble," the child is put in a situation of cognitive dissonance. The child cannot disobey the targeted parent and be loyal to the alienated parent.

Bond through longer visitations and common interests. The most obvious way to strengthen the bond between the targeted parent and child is to help them find an activity in which the two participate exclusively during their time together. In PA cases, this activity may be disparaged by the alienating parent. Thus the PC must make a directive to the alienating parent to support such an activity. Again, they may be given a script to say such as, "I think it's good that you and your dad go camping since it's not something I'm interested in doing," or "That's nice that you and your mom go to the theater. It's good to learn about new things. Your mom has given you some opportunities you wouldn't have with us." The PC can monitor this by checking

in with the child from time to time. And finally, condensing parenting time into longer blocks of time can help consolidate a stronger bond as well, provided, again, there are few to no intrusions from the alienating parent.

In summarizing, the genograms above can assist the parenting coordinator in crafting interventions for PA cases. Where the parents are simply hostile, family therapy might provide an opportunity for the parents to begin to communicate with each other. In cases of strong alignment, there is still the possibility that lessening the inter-parental barrier and strengthening the bond between the child and the non-aligned parent may be achieved through voluntary, confidential family therapy. Reunification “therapy” for estranged parents and their children is a form of intervention that sits in a boundary between family therapy and court ordered conflict resolution. Most likely it will be court-ordered, and the parenting coordinator will want to investigate the stability and risk potential of the estranged parent, and the parties will need to waive confidentiality so that the parenting coordinator can report back to the guardian and/or the court. For these reasons, a parenting coordinator is the best person to take on this difficult role. For alienated children, traditional family therapy is not practical nor productive. These cases must be handled by a PC who can assess what interventions must be made in the four areas described above and monitor progress. The PC must be empowered by the court to make directives and suggest consequences for non-compliance. All rights to confidentiality must be waived and the PC in alienation cases should be prepared to make regular updates to the attorneys and guardian if one has been appointed. Reports to the court should only be made when the Judge has made a specific request to be copied on the progress reports. Due to the complexity of alienation cases, the PC must be prepared to testify on the majority of these cases. And, ideally the court must be willing to shield the PC from

lawsuits and licensing board complaints that arise out of this high-risk and very litigious area of practice (Kirkland & Kirkland, 2001).

References

Dunne, J. & Hedrick, M. (1994). The parental alienation syndrome: An analysis of 16 selected cases. *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*, 21 (3/4), 21-38.

Boyan, S. (2005). *The Psychotherapist as Parenting Coordinator in High Conflict Divorce; Strategies and Techniques*. (Taylor Francis Publishers)

Ells, E. (2007) A Stepwise Procedure for Evaluating Children for Parental Alienation Syndrome. *Journal of Child Custody*, 4 (1/2), 55-78.

Ellis, E. (2000). *Divorce Wars: Interventions with Families in Conflict*. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association)

Ellis, E. (2005). Help for the Alienated Parent. *American Journal of Family therapy*, 33, (5) Oct.-Dec., 415-426.

Garber, B. (2007). Conceptualizing visitation resistance and refusal in the context of parental conflict, separation, and divorce. *Family Court Review*, 45 (4), 588-599.

Gardner, R. (1987). *Parental alienation syndrome and the differentiation between fabricated and genuine sexual abuse*. (Cresskill, N.J.: Creative Therapeutics).

Gardner, R. (1992). *Parental Alienation Syndrome*. (Cresskill, N.J.: Creative Therapeutics).

Garrity, C. & Baris, M. (1994). *Caught in the Middle*. New York: Lexington.

Johnston, J. (1993). Children of divorce who refuse visitation. In C.E. Depner & J. H. Bray (Eds.), *Non residential parenting. New vistas in family living* (pp. 109-132). San Francisco: Sage.

Johnston, J. (1994, November). Invited Address, Regional Convention of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, Tucson, Arizona.

Johnston, J. & Campbell, L. (1988). *Impasses of Divorce: The dynamics and resolution of family conflict*. New York: Free Press.

Johnston, J. & Roseby, V. (1997). *In the Name of the Child: A developmental approach to understanding and helping children of conflicted and violent divorce*. New York: Free Press.

Kelly, J. & Johnston (2001). A reformulation of parental alienation syndrome. *Family Court Review*, 39 (3), 249-281.

Kirkland, K. & Kirkland, K.L. (2001). Frequency of child custody evaluation complaints and related disciplinary action. A survey of ASPPB member boards. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 32, 171-174.

Lee, M. & Olesen, N. (2001). Assessing for alienation in child custody and access evaluations. *Family Court Review*, 39 (3), 282-298.

Schepard, A. (2001). "Editorial Notes." *Family Court Review*. Special issue: Alienated Children in Divorce, 39 (3), 243-245.

Sullivan, M. & Kelly, J. (2001). Legal and psychological management of cases with an alienated child. *Family Court Review*, 39 (3), 299-315.

Turkat, T. (1995). Divorce related malicious mother syndrome. *Journal of Family Violence*, 10(3), 253-264.

Special thanks to Sarah Lawrence, who photoshopped the diagrams.