



Family Separation Clinic

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Using international standards in differentiating and treating cases
of parental alienation

Why children don't get the interventions they need

- Parental alienation is too often treated as a 'contact issue'
- Parental alienation is treated as being the result of conflict between parents
- We need to approach parental alienation as a child protection issue
- Child protection approaches must be built into both assessment and treatment

Parental alienation is a relational issue

'Attachment theory emphasizes (...) the primary status and biological function of intimate emotional bonds between individuals, the making and maintaining of which are postulated to be controlled by a cybernetic system situated within the central nervous system, utilizing working models of self and attachment figure in relationship with each other.'

Bowlby, J. (1988). A secure base: Clinical applications of attachment theory. New York: Brunner-Routledge.

The post separation landscape

- In the intact family, the child has a unified attachment experience
- In the post separation family, the child has to find a way to maintain the unique attachment bonds in a fractured relational world
- A child who experiences pressure in their inter-psycho world is a child who is at risk of pathological splitting

Identification with the aggressor

‘Ferenczi (1933) found evidence that children who are terrified by adults who are out of control will “subordinate themselves like automata to the will of the aggressor to divine each one of his desires and to gratify these; completely oblivious of themselves they identify themselves with the aggressor.... The weak and undeveloped personality reacts to sudden unpleasure not by defence, but by anxiety-ridden identification and by introjection of the menacing person or aggressor”’

Frankel, J. (2002). Exploring Ferenczi's Concept of Identification with the Aggressor: Its Role in Trauma, Everyday Life, and the Therapeutic Relationship. Psychoanalytic Dialogues, 12:101-139

Identification with the aggressor

'Bowlby (1982) observed a pattern of insecure attachment he termed compulsive self-reliance, in which a "parentified" child assumes care-giving responsibilities toward the parent. Bowlby hypothesized that, because of their insecurity about the emotional availability of others, some parents turn to their children to meet their own emotional needs, placing developmentally inappropriate demands on young children to provide their parents with nurturance and comforting. Although the parent may be ostensibly protective and solicitous, parentification has negative implications for child development in that the parents' emotional needs are being met at the expense of the child's.'

Kerig, P. K. (2005). Implications of parent-child boundary dissolution for developmental psychopathology: Who is the parent and who is the child? New York: Haworth Press.

Identification with the aggressor

'By identifying with the aggressor, the child preserves the self as powerful and disowns the weak self representation. At the same time, identification with the aggressor can preserve the object by allowing the victim to maintain an internalized image of the abuser, and thereby avoid abandonment by the abusive attachment object.'

Blizard, R. A. (1997, November). The origins of dissociative identity disorder from an object relations and attachment theory perspective. Paper presented during the workshop, Effective Psychoanalytic Technique and Its Theory in Treatment of Dissociative Identity Disorder, International Society for the Study of Dissociation, Montreal.

Identification with the aggressor

- When the child feels that the attachment bond is threatened, they pathologically align with the threatening parent in order to avoid abandonment
- They split off the threatened part of themselves and the abusive parent as separate object representations
- Anything that threatens to force the child to confront the split off object must be repelled in order for the child not to have to face the trauma of recognising the attachment object as being abusive.

Resolving alienation cases

- Use the power of the court to neutralise the power dynamic in the case
- Carry out a thorough assessment to understand the cause of the child's rejection
- Propose a treatment route that matches the assessment

The 'justified rejection' controversy

- A justified estrangement is a temporary rejection of a relationship with a parent that isn't accompanied by the clinical markers of parental alienation.
- The child is not psychologically split and retains ambivalence and perspective in the relationship with both parents.

Severity (child)

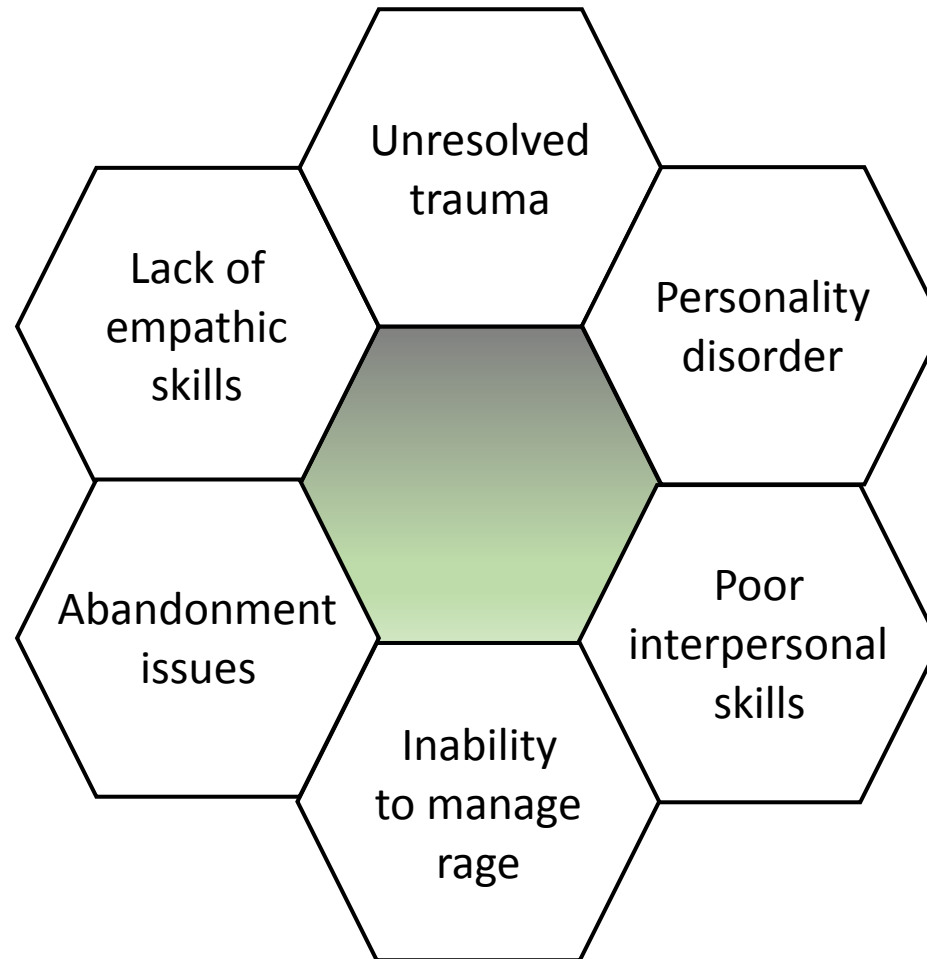


MILD	MODERATE	SEVERE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reluctance to spend time with a parent which eases off when transition is complete • Occasional outbursts of behaviours which are odd • Wanting to be in touch with the other parent • Becoming rude and surly 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More determinedly rude and objectionable • Find it increasingly difficult to spend time with parent • Miss times when they are due to be see parent • Withdrawn, monosyllabic and disinterested • Take some time to settle down • When they are settled they find it difficult to leave 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absolute refusal • Psychological splitting • Hatred • Signs of alienation showing • Quasi phobic • Hysterical

Assessment of the component dynamics (parents)

- Power and control
- Behaviours of the aligned parent
- Responses of the rejected parent
- Cross projection
- Environmental factors
- Potential personality disorder

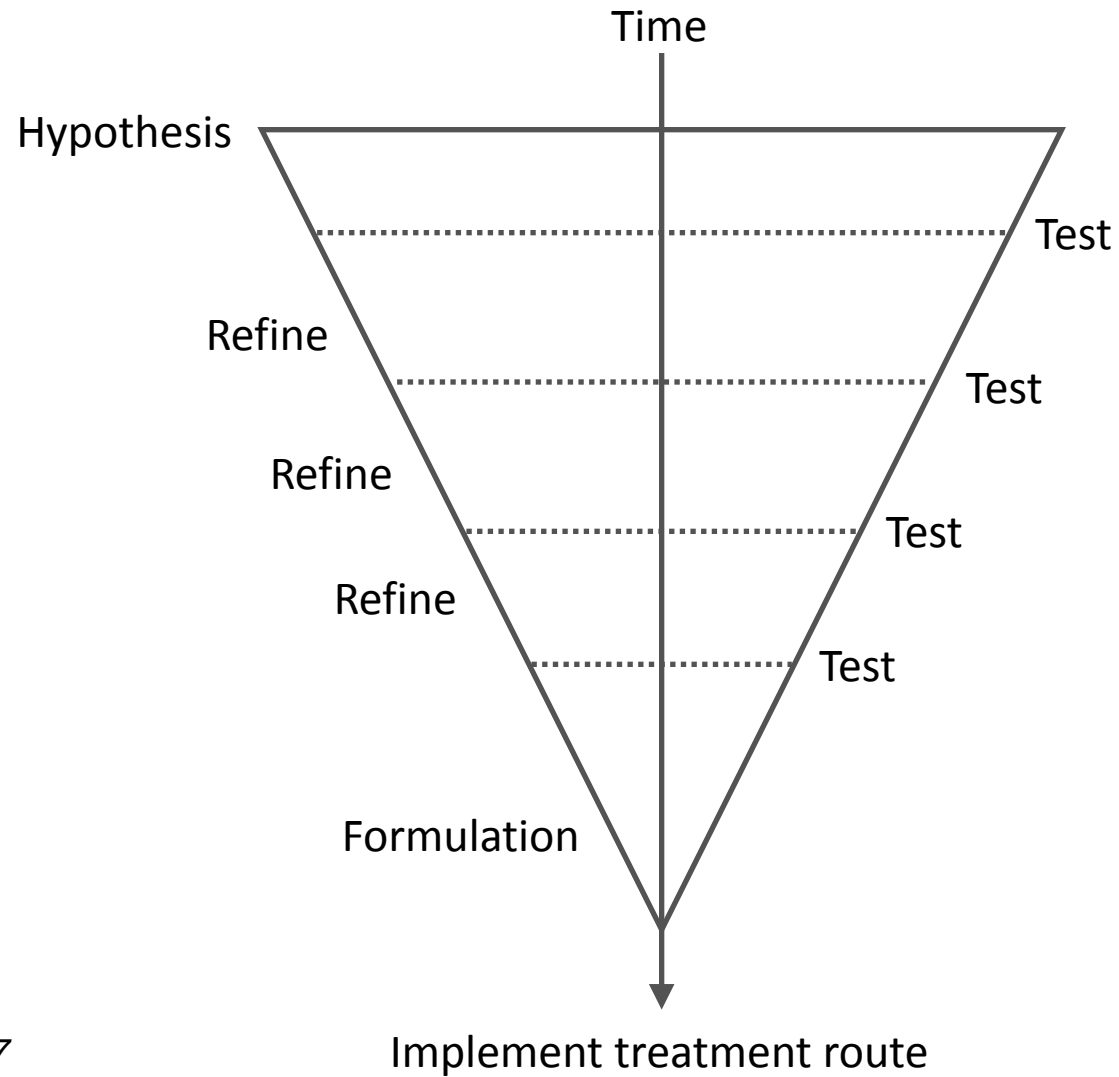
Analysis of power and control



Analysis of power and control patterns:
Psychosocial Model

The assessment

- Use the court to shift the power dynamic and get us to the alienated child
- Use the power to make the alienating parent do what they don't want to do – e.g. bring the child to see the rejected parent
- Use all of the legal consequences available to compel behavioural change (or not)
- Utilise a concurrent assessment and treatment approach



Woodall & Woodall, 2017

Reunification

- What:

We reunite children - not in the distant future but as swiftly as we can

- Why:

To heal the psychological splitting - because pathological splitting is the root parental alienation

- How:

We use the power of the court to neutralise the power of the alienating parent and reunite the child with the rejected parent immediately

Assessment and Therapeutic Trial

- We support the rejected parent and work in a 'co-therapy' relationship with them
- We keep confronting the child with the split off object – rejected parent
- We contain, control, educate and scrutinise the alienating parent
- We monitor the child's resilience

Practitioners have to be prepared to override the voice of the child

'Children align themselves with the parent they most fear, or the parent they regard as most unstable (...) [a]lthough these children may be outspoken in their custodial preferences, their wishes may not reflect their genuine best interests (...) Giving children's wishes and feelings paramount weight in determining the outcome of such cases burdens children with the terrible responsibility and impossible task of managing the adult world around them.'

Warshak, R.A. (2003). Payoffs and pitfalls of listening to children. Family Relations, 52, 373-384.

Change of residence – personality disorder present

- Psychological evaluation
- Presence of shared delusional disorder
- Removal of child from source of harm
- Immediate reunification in the rejected parent's home



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