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Family Therapy: An Early Intervention in Mitigating PAS

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Abstract:

Children with Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) potentially suffer from negative indoctrination from at least one parent. This results in damaging the bond between the targeted parent and child and in the creation of an emotionally taxing environment for the child. This clinical challenge calls for a review on the dynamics of PAS and the child caught in the crossfire between parents. PAS is difficult to treat because alienated parents don't realize the harm they are causing to their child. Hence, it is difficult for the alienating parent to change their approach and negative feeding of the rival parent. Thus, court-ordered family therapy sessions should be considered by some psychologists and legal authorities, so that therapists can have the power of identifying examples of PAS occurring within a family. This review will investigate family therapy as a possible intervention to mitigate the effects of PAS.

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Evaluators, attorneys, and judges play fundamental roles in child custody decisions during marital discord and divorce (Lamminen, 2013). Yet despite their efforts, there are three underlying realities that are often dismissed in many toxic divorce cases. First is the child's hatred towards the rival parent—a product of negative indoctrination of one parent about the other. This ultimately leads a child to form “his or her own vilification of the alienated parent” (Baker & Darnall, 2007, p. 254). Second, the child's fabrication of stories of the rival parent has potential to damage the bond with that parent. And third is the emotionally taxing environment a child becomes exposed to (Lamminen, 2013). This alienation phenomenon has potential to psychologically harm the child. A better understanding of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) during custody battles should be taken into account by clinicians and other legal professionals (Lamminen, 2013). Psychologists and legal authorities have yet to accept an examination of parental conflict—unconsciously or consciously alienating the child from the other parent—in child custody cases (Bruch, 2001). Ultimately, accepting such a condition could help build healthy relationships between the child and the alienated parent.

Considering the alienation that occurs in the aforementioned

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tioned three steps, it is of little wonder that PAS is attributed to the increase of child custody disputes — especially since the child can become a parent's most important ally during a relationship conflict or divorce (Lee & Hunsley, 2001; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976). Gardner's (1998) research has shown that mothers are usually the allegedly "loved" parent denigrating the "hated" parent, which is generally the father. Furthermore, PAS can result in serious sex-abuse accusations. In such incidents, serious consideration must be taken to evaluate if accusations are true or just a derivative of PAS. PAS has damaging consequence for the child's futures as well, especially when the child has learned to loathe one parent without remorse and love the other.

In view of these underlying realities of PAS, this paper will offer awareness in recognizing this syndrome as more than a phenomenon. PAS must be considered a diagnosable disorder rather than a situation that is observed to exist or questioned by legal authorities. This paper suggests family therapy as an early intervention (Baker, 2007). Once more people recognize PAS as a potential diagnosable disorder, the parents and other legal authorities can realize the serious implications that must be considered during child custody disputes. If this phenomenon were dealt with in family and marital therapy, the degree of neg-

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ative implications may be mitigated (Baker, 2007). This would provide the best results for the parents, and most importantly, the child.

Understanding the Manifestation of Negative Indoctrination

Often, divorce troubles comes from trying to reconcile two different perspectives: one party wants x; whereas, the other wants y. This psychological and physiological difference in mindset can lead one parent to be vindictive. This malice creates a higher risk for PAS since one parent pathologically contaminates the relationship of the child with the rival parent (Viljoen & van Resenburg, 2014). The alienating parent (often the one opposed to the divorce), may alienate their child subconsciously (Viljoen & van Rensburg, 2014). It is imperative that parents be aware of how they may be affecting their child — consciously or subconsciously.

There's a power alienating parents hold over their child that makes the child want to love the alienating parent and loathe the other. Child attachment to the alienating parent shows the pathological bind that causes a child to be hostile to the targeted parent. Steinberger's (2006) research discusses a story of 5-year-old Sally, a victim of PAS. Sally would want to

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call her father to tell him about her fun-filled day, yet her mother would respond in only one way: “sullen anger” (Meier, 2009); this anger and dissatisfaction led to the mother being “too tired” to read her a bedtime story later that night. The alienating mother showed her child that displaying the same affection to both parents is inappropriate behavior. Thus, Sally learned that she should not share the same experiences with both parents — she must learn to choose one. The child will then learn to cave to meeting the alienating parent’s needs (Baker, 2006). These actions have the potential to become vengeful as they occur over a period of time. The reoccurrence of the alienating parent’s reaction to the rival parent may vary in degrees of intensity, but will always be a powerful motivator to the child (Steinberger, 2006). The alienating parent sees the rival parent as a threat and will cause their child to remove themselves from that parent (Meier, 2009). Therefore, the strategies developed among PAS children are the cultivation of dependency or threat of rejection and a creation of obligation/guilt for the alienated parent (Baker, 2006). This may then cause in the child a manifestation of an unhealthy reliance on acceptance and approval (Baker, 2005). Unfortunately, the cycle seems to perpetuate.

Furthermore, as the alienated parent feels vexed, the

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child becomes emotionally cut off from the alienating parent (Baker, 2006). The child's attachment to the parent, makes the child want to fix their emotional needs by being hostile to the rival parent as a form of reassurance and comfort, as well as revenge for the alienated parent (Baker, 2006). The longing for parental love makes PAS hard to disentangle (Golumb, 1992, as cited by Baker, 2006). The child-attachment present between the child and alienated parent is a strong bond that the child needs secured.

The child's emotionally taxing environment

Another problematic effect of PAS is the child's response to the taxing environment. The child's environment is shaped by the alienator's perception of the rival parent (Baker & Sauber, 2013). In order to manipulate the situation and environment, the alienator ensures that the child has no actual positive experiences with the targeted parent. Children may also partake in "parrot-like echolalia" behavior, meaning that they mimic the language of the alienating parent — which often isn't very generous or kind (Waldron & Joanis, 1996). The affected child may start to use blended pronouns referring to him- or herself and the alienator as "we" or "us", displaying that their mind is pro-

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grammed to protect the alienating parent (Waldron & Joanis, 1996). These behaviors demonstrate that the child is claiming to have their own thoughts, but in reality they are just mirroring the alienating parent's thoughts (Waldron & Joanis, 1996). The child's lack of control for their own emotions affects their developmental environment.

Consequences to the Child's Development

Furthermore, this emotionally taxing environment may create "poor interpersonal relationships, depression/anxiety, difficulty trusting others, and low self-esteem" in the child's adulthood (Baker & Sauber, 2013, p.6). The child will then grow to perceive that parental love and acceptance is conditional. They have based their individual expectations, behaviors, and beliefs off of meeting the alienating parent's needs (Baker, 2007). The consequences of PAS indicate "they lack parental support, encouragement, and responsiveness" which in turn "negatively influence the autonomy, competence, and relatedness" of the child (Borstlap, 2014). Parenting structure becomes neglected, disrupting the child's development, since they are not experiencing healthy family relationships (Baker & Verrocchio, 2013; Campana, Henderson, Stolberg, & Schum, 2008). Unfortunately-

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ly, these effects can continue into adulthood.

Another child development consequence is perceiving children as being cognitively immature when in reality their problems are due to PAS (Gardner, 1998). Children with PAS learn to behave negatively toward the alienated parent without any remorse, often seeing their relationship with the alienated parent as insignificant and feeling no shame in “exploiting the goodness of the targeted parent for their personal gain” (Wakeford, 2001, as cited by Raso, 2004, p. 37). Because of this manipulation, the child views the alienating parent as either a weak victim or a perfect superior being in comparison to the rival parent (Cartwright, 1993). For example, an alienating mother may tell the child that the father never pays child support. The child will believe that the checks are “fraudulent and not that his mother is lying” (Warshack, 2000, p. 37) even if the father shows the child proof of payment. Thus, the child’s environment consists of negative indoctrination by the alienating parent, altering the child’s reality-testing ability.

The extreme allegations of PAS

Although parental alienation syndrome is a form of emotional abuse (Gardner, 1999), it must be noted that PAS is different

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from physical abuse and sexual abuse. Occasionally, a case of PAS gets so bad that the child falsely accuses a parent of one of society's worst crimes: physical and/or sexual abuse. These allegations are formed when the alienating parent manipulates the child into believing the targeted parent is unloving, unsafe, or unavailable (Garber, 2004). Now for psychologists and other legal authorities, these extreme allegations can become dangerous. Some psychologists or legal authority may become convinced by the compelling stories told by children of PAS (Baker & Sauber, 2013). For the targeted parent, abusive allegations become an instance of frustration and a demoralizing process (Baker & Sauber, 2013, p. 4) as authorities try to evaluate the extreme allegations. Ultimately, it is best for the authorities to get to the truth in order to protect both the child and the parent. In such incidents, serious consideration must be taken to evaluate accusation as a derivative of PAS or an actual assault.

Distinguishing between bona fide abuse and PAS

In majority of cases, the accusation of sexual abuse is not just PAS, but a reality. Abuse is a common occurrence and it is vital to understand that PAS is not a term for abusers to hide behind. Legal authorities need to be able to distinguish between sexual

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abuse and PAS in order to prevent abusers from falsely proclaiming innocence through PAS. A child with PAS will exhibit the eight primary symptoms of PAS “campaign of denigration; weak, frivolous, or absurd rationalizations for the deprecation; lack of ambivalence; the ‘independent thinker’ phenomenon; reflexive support of the alienating parent in the parental conflict; absence of guilt over cruelty to and/or exploitation of the alienated parent; presence of borrowed scenarios; spread of animosity to the friends and/or extended family of the alienated parent” (Gardner, 1999, p. 98). Whereas, abused children will exhibit primary symptoms found in post-traumatic stress disorder (DSM-5;1). A child of PAS will rarely ever exhibit these symptoms. Some children with PAS “represent rational responses to abusive parenting . . . that are outside the scope of manipulation of the favored parent” (Baker & Sauber, 2013, p. 2). Therefore, references to the aforementioned symptoms can help distinguish between PAS and bona fide abuse.

It is also important to examine the parents being accused of abuse, too. A parent who is guilty of the accusation is more likely to be uncooperative with legal authorities. Whereas, a PAS victim will be cooperative and will reach out to professionals and legal authorities to prove their innocence.

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Investigating family therapy

Just by analyzing the research on PAS, it is clear that the syndrome is complex. PAS becomes difficult to treat because the alienating parent fails to realize the harm they are inducing in their child. This makes it difficult for them to change their approaches and stop the negative indoctrination of the rival parent to their child. With the solution of court-ordered family therapy sessions, a therapist may have the power to point out examples of PAS occurring within the family. With family therapy, mood disorders could also possibly be detected. Narcissistic characteristics may be identified in some alienating parents (Viljoen & van Resenburg, 2014). Garber's (2004) research concluded that children of highly conflicted parents are "among those most in need of psychotherapeutic support" (Viljoen & van Resenburg, 2014, p. 270). If these children are in most need, one must wonder why courts aren't mandating more family therapy.

Family therapy may be a challenging approach as it's usually one parent that seeks therapeutic interventions (Lamminen, 2013). As well, PAS may cause a child to be guarded during the family therapy sessions in order to protect their alienated parent (Lamminen, 2013). Or the alienating parent

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might feel as though the therapy intervenes with their goals to undermine the other parent, resulting in blaming the therapist. Parents with narcissistic tendencies can be arrogant, disregarding the therapist's suggestions. As well, psychologists working with the syndrome, can be tainted with frustration and stress due to the complex cases of PAS (Viljoen & van Resenburg, 2014). Thus, more research on PAS is necessary in order to find solutions for a better family therapy approach.

Mandating Family Therapy

Because family therapy can be successful, many families with PAS effects should seek the help. However, family therapy is a system that needs all individuals involved in order for the family to be restored (Waldron & Joanis, 1996). A mandated family counseling session for those in toxic divorce cases should be enforced in order to help children maintain healthy relationships with both parents.

Furthermore, attending family therapy can lead to a diagnosis of PAS effects in toxic divorce cases (Meier, 2009). Conscientious child-centered mental health professional should screen every child referral from the first contact in order to minimize the risk of therapist alienation (Baker, 2007). Family therapy allows for PAS to represent the dysfunction family dy-

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dynamic and then address the family subsystems (family members involved) (Baker, 2007). The child can learn to identify behavior that may lead to mistreating the targeted parent. This allows the therapist to detect and fix problems within the family.

Overall, family therapy will allow the family (alienator, target, and victim) to reestablish positive relationships by allowing them to develop healthy relationships with one another during marital discord (Baker, 2007, p. 258). The therapist can create a treatment plan for families. Due to PAS having yet to be universally accepted, few legal authorities have the foresight to order this kind of intervention. Yet, by understanding the dynamics of parental alienation syndrome, legal professionals may realize that family therapy may mitigate the effects of PAS with the goal of rebuilding a healthy family dynamic.

Discussion

Parental alienation syndrome is a rising problem for high conflict divorce cases due to the syndromes existence not being recognized. The current problem with PAS is the stance that it is not a diagnosable syndrome; however, it is a very real problem for people who have felt deprived of a child's love. Arguments state that proper authorities are "likely to misunderstand the

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experience . . . minimize the problem (i.e., say that the children will figure it out and come running back in no time) or encourage the targeted parent to take actions that could be quite unhelpful (i.e., taking a ‘wait and see’ attitude)” (Baker & Sauber, 2013, p. 4). An understanding of PAS should embolden the courts and clinicians to go beyond diagnosis routine to apply a parental alienation-informed perspective during litigation (Baker, 2007, p. 259), because such efforts would help mitigate destructive consequences for children caught in the crossfire between parents.

Additionally, it is an unfortunate truth that most people do not know about PAS. When describing PAS to a stranger, clinician, or adult, people will start remembering individuals they know who may have potentially suffered from PAS—it’s that common of an issue. Occasionally people misuse the term PAS, threatening the validity of PAS (Borstlap, 2014). Diagnosing the syndrome is the first step. Once more research is done on a universal PAS diagnosis, faulty logic and poor clinical practice for high conflicted families experiencing PAS will not be as much of a problem. Courts, psychologists, and affected families will be able to minimize the problem and take action in order to improve parent-child relationships during marital discord.

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