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THE ISSUE OF CHILDREN'S CHOICE IN ALIENATION REACTIONS

Dr. Gary Kneier, 2013

I have been asked to talk about the issue of the child's choice in parental alienation cases. There are really two questions or issues involved here. Should we in the first place see the child's refusal of access and rejection of the alienated parent as a choice made by the child? And second, in treating or managing this problem, should we rely and focus on the child's wishes and decisions?

My answer to these questions comes from my psychodynamic approach to children's reactions to high-conflict divorce. Children are developing human persons. Their emotional and psychological development is determined both by the evolved nature of our species, and by the particular environment in which the child develops. The child's primary environment, especially for emotional development in the area of attachment, is the family. We know that all human beings from conception onward, have strong attachment instincts, because the survival and success of our species depends on strong bonds of attachment, love, and loyalty. (*One of the best summaries of attachment issues in children can be found in Dr. Gordon Neufeld's book Hang Onto Your Kids*)

Thus, strong mutual bonds develop between parents and children. Children are designed by nature to develop in an atmosphere where the people on whom they depend, and with whom they therefore have strong attachments, are attached to each other.

When the people, especially parents, that the child is attached to are not attached to each other, or worse yet are tense and hostile with each other, the child's attachment experience becomes anxious, stressed and painful. Even adults find it stressful trying to love and be loyal to people who hate each other.

Thus, the key insight that comes from my four decades of work with children is this: children's reactions to conflicted divorce are an outcome of the way children are designed (evolved) by nature. The breakdown of attachment, and the emergence of conflict and tension, between loved parents will necessarily cause stress and anxiety in children. Similarly, the stressed reactions of children will tend to increase conflict between their parents, who blame each other for the child's reactions. Thus, it is just as true to say that children's reactions cause parental conflict, as it is to say that parental conflict causes children's reactions. Obviously, as long as a child's reactions are a focus of conflict between parents, attachment stress will increase and the child's reactions will worsen, and so will the parental conflict.

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The key to helping children who are reacting to divorce conflict is to help parents see the reactions as a sign of stress due to the nature of the child's heart, and not as the result of bad parenting by the other parent. Only by focusing on the nature of the child through respectful communication can parents exit blaming, arguments over truth, and escalating animosity or even hatred.

While it is true that **alienation reactions** are also an intense family drama, involving the parents and their personalities as well as the child, the child's inner psychology is usually the most important, but least obvious, dynamic.

By instinct and by nature, children react to attachment stress in the same way the human mind reacts to all stress and anxiety – by developing defensive reactions to enhance survival or decrease pain in a toxic or stressful atmosphere. These defensive reactions tend to be automatic and unconscious, not deliberate choices.

Approaching the parental alienation phenomenon as an unconscious defensive reaction is absolutely key if we are to avoid escalating the parental conflict and help lead parents out of blaming and arguments over truth. This view also answers the questions about choice.

Let me explain how child psychological development accounts for the parental alienation phenomenon in adolescents. Very young children react to a stressed and polarized attachment atmosphere by having **transfer reactions**. These reactions can occur with both parents, but most often they occur with mothers. Parental conflict increases as each parent blames the other for the reactions. By age 3 or 4, children's instinct to simply fit-in with their caregivers, especially parents, along with their increasing ability to figure out their environment, causes them to become "**switchers**" – their feelings, preferences, reports, memories, etc. simply change depending on which of their polarized parents they are with. This is an automatic, instinctive reaction, not a conscious strategy. Parents engage in vehement disputes about which is the "true" child, conflict that only amplifies the switching. In fact, the child has two truths: one with Mom and one with Dad.

This nature-given adjustment to a toxic attachment atmosphere works well for the child until the approach of adolescence. Prior to adolescence, children that resist access are usually reacting to the stress of transfers and are fine once the transfer is accomplished. However, **transfer reactions and switching** are very poor preparations for adolescence on the one hand, and tend to fuel and escalate parental conflict on the other.

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The onset of adolescence between ages 11 and 13 is a real game changer. Nature – child development – takes away the instinct to just fit with parents, and replaces it with an imperative to establish a personal identity, complete with one's own thoughts and opinions. This takes away the ability to “switch” easily and automatically, and the stress of navigating the polarized parental atmosphere increases dramatically. Added to this are all the normal challenges to authority and disillusionment that accompany adolescence, along with the need to develop a clear cognitive map of the world. In a high-conflict divorced family, the adolescent heart and mind are in real trouble, with internal stress becoming intolerable.

It is then that a new automatic and unconscious survival reaction can occur, saving the adolescent child from intolerable stress, anxiety, and confusion. The reaction can be described in two ways: cognitively as a **splitting** of the child's parental world into good and bad; or emotionally as a **denial** of the child's attachment to one parent. Denial is an unconscious defense mechanism whereby the mind protects itself from a painful reality by pretending the opposite. The denial of attachment to one parent is accomplished by demonizing that parent and producing amnesia for good memories. This solves the very painful and unlivable problem of being caught between two loved parents. It is clearly an unconscious psychological reaction, a true “symptom”, and **not a choice**. The tip-off that it is a denial reaction is the total absence of guilt or anguish, along with the ineffectiveness of any logical reasoning to deal with it. It is as if some part of the child's mind knows that this is all unreal.

We all know the outcome of this reaction. Each parent vehemently blames the other. One calls it **parental alienation**, the other calls it **realistic estrangement**. Blaming and arguments over truth escalate dramatically. The child's mind, now in a truly dreadful spot, cements itself in it's splitting and it's denial of attachment to one parent. The parental conflict has destroyed all structure and authority in the family, and the now symptomatic adolescent child has become the most empowered family member.

Thus both the development and the nature of the reaction make it clear it is not a choice. It is a defensive, compelled, unconsciously driven survival reaction. It is a reaction the purpose of which is to allow the adolescent child to survive in a toxic attachment atmosphere, without going crazy, without needing to leave the family totally, and without intolerable stress. In truth, the child cannot decide or choose his/her way out of the reaction. Only a change in the family atmosphere along with lots of adult help for the child, can allow the child's mind to find better, less costly, solutions.

Unfortunately, the reaction seems like a choice and looks like a choice. The adolescent insists it is a decision. This is how denial works. Also, the family drama – high-conflict divorce – becomes focused on the child's apparent decision or choice. Child advocates, in general, tend to succumb to the appearances, approaching the problem as a choice.

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The favored parent sees the reaction as a choice. The rejected parent tends to see it not as a choice by the child but a choice by the other parent to brainwash and alienate the child.

I see two very great dangers for the child's development if we approach or frame the alienation reaction as a choice by the child.

For the child, the first danger is that we make a psychological defense reaction into something far far worse. We make it into a decision to utterly reject and demonize a once-loved parent. The magnitude of this danger cannot be overstated. To appreciate this we only have to remember one thing: parent/child relationships are reciprocal. The attachment is a reciprocal bond. Therefore, the repercussions of a child choosing to reject one parent while loving and keeping the other, are the same as a parent would experience if forced by circumstances to choose to reject and demonize one child while keeping and loving the other. It is absolutely crucial, I believe, to protect adolescent children from such a dreadful experience. We risk, and we aid and abet, this very outcome, abhorrent to human nature and to family attachment and loyalty, when we approach the problem as a choice, and communicate to the child that it is a choice. **The very nature of the alienation/splitting reaction, if we look at it closely, shows that it is a defensive denial reaction, a true psychological symptom, and not a choice.**

The second danger in approaching the denial-of-attachment reaction as a choice also has to do with the message it conveys to the child. We know that young children are designed by nature to assume that any pain or dysfunction in their family attachment life must somehow be their fault, or at least something wrong with them. We know that one outcome of this is that young children often feel that divorce (i.e., huge attachment breakdown between two very important family members) must somehow be their fault. This natural but erroneous feeling is greatly amplified if marital conflicts involved child issues, and/or if post-divorce conflicts focused on the child's reactions. When a marital breakdown has proceeded to a high conflict divorce affecting the whole family, and filtered all the way down to the adolescent child denying through rejection and demonization one of the most important and fundamental family attachments, we give a potentially very damaging message to the child if we frame the drama as caused by the child – as the child's choice.

For these very important reasons, I believe we should be very reluctant to approach splitting/alienation/denial-of-attachment reactions in adolescent children as a matter of the child's choice. We should not be fooled by appearances. If we are going to advocate **"the voice of the child"**, we should first learn to interpret the language of denial, of psychological symptoms, and of unconscious family and personal dramas. Then, and only then, can we relate to the child's reactions and apparent wishes and decisions in creative, helpful, and non-destructive ways.

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I hope these reflections will be helpful in how we approach the extremely serious problem of splitting/alienation/denial-of-attachment.

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