

Description of Seminars & Trainings in Parental Alienation Dynamics

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Parental Alienation **Dynamics** typically emerge during divorce and involve the active, although often covert, alienation of the child from one parent by the other parent.

Background:

Dr. Gardner (1985) first identified a set of child symptoms, which he called “Parental Alienation Syndrome,” involving a child’s active rejection of one parent. While Gardner’s work has helped to highlight the issue of parental alienation, his approach to the alienation process has been controversial and has not received acceptance within the legal establishment for two primary reasons:

1. An alienation “syndrome” is not a professionally recognized diagnosis.
2. The absence of a reliable clinical-forensic assessment of the alienation syndrome.

Parental Alienation Dynamic vs. Parental Alienation Syndrome

The alienation **dynamic** identified by Dr. Childress addresses similar issues to the alienation “syndrome” described by Gardner, however with **several key differences**.

Dr. Childress organizes the alienation process along its core psychological **dynamics**; the trans-generational transmission of psychological-relationship trauma. Unlike Gardner’s proposal of a new syndrome, Dr. Childress identifies the alienation **dynamic** within an interpersonal set of recognized and established DSM-IV TR diagnoses, centering on a Personality Disorder in the alienating parent (the Beta parent).

The DSM-IV TR Diagnosis for a Parental Alienation **Dynamic** is a two-person diagnosis, which is necessitated by the child’s primary diagnosis of a **Shared** Psychotic Disorder. A Shared Psychotic Disorder (DSM-IV TR Code 297.3) is when a person (the child in the case of an alienation dynamic) shares a delusional belief (i.e., a fixed belief system that is impervious to influence by facts, evidence, or reason) with another person (the alienating (Beta) parent in the case of an alienation dynamic).

The primary parental DSM-IV TR Diagnosis for the alienating (Beta) parent is a Personality Disorder with Borderline, Narcissistic, and Antisocial features. Emerging from the Personality Disorder of the alienating (Beta) parent is an “encapsulated” Delusional Disorder (a fixed belief system that is impervious to influence by facts, evidence, or reason) involving the fundamental inadequacy and/or danger of the target (Delta) parent. This fixed belief system (the encapsulated delusion) represents an intransigent psychological re-enactment dynamic of early childhood relationship trauma consistent with the development of the Personality Disorder.

The **Parental Alienation Dynamic** does NOT represent a new “syndrome,” but instead represents an organizing label given to an interpersonal relationship dynamic defined through existing DSM-IV TR diagnostic constructs.

Parental Alienation Dynamic vs. Normal Range Family Problems

Spousal conflict is embedded in the divorce process, and negative parental influence of a child is common. Child behavior problems and parent-child conflicts are also typical of the family dissolution process. The issue facing the legal system and treating mental health professionals involves differentiating an active alienation dynamic from “normal-range” parent-child conflict and/or “normal-range” negative parental influence and inter-spousal conflict. Two key features in this differentiation are 1) the presence of a Personality Disorder in the alienating (Beta) parent, and 2) the vacancy of the child’s attachment system.

The Personality Disorder of the alienating (Beta) parent exhibits a distinctive set of Borderline, Narcissistic, and Antisocial features. The Personality Disorder of the alienating (Beta) parent displays defensive processes of splitting, devaluation, denial, and projective identification, with a predominant defensive level of major-image distortion as described in the DSM-IV TR. The differentiation of a Parental Alienation Dynamic from “normal-range” family dysfunction therefore involves an assessment of the non-target parent’s (i.e., the Beta parent’s) psychological processes. The presence of a particular form of Personality Disorder dysfunction in the Beta parent is one half of the alienation **dynamic**.

The second half of the alienation **dynamic** is expressed through the child. This is because the Beta parent and Delta child represent a psychologically enmeshed system. Through the child’s psychological fusion with the disturbed psychological processes of the Personality Disordered parent, the child enacts the dysfunctional relationship dynamics of the parent’s Personality Disorder. The key feature in recognizing this process is the impact of the dysfunctional Beta parent - Delta child psychological fusion on the child’s attachment system.

The attachment system was first identified by Bowlby (1968) and has subsequently received considerable scientific validation. The attachment system is an inherent neurologically based brain system designed to protect children from predators. It is an extremely resilient brain system because of its role in conferring a basic survival advantage to children. The child’s attachment system can be disrupted in a variety of ways, leading to insecure attachment, Reactive Attachment Disorder, and displays of angry-oppositional behaviors. However, in all cases of disruption to the attachment system, the child’s attachment system nevertheless remains evident.

Within a parental alienation dynamic, however, the child’s attachment system becomes selectively vacant. The child evidences **NO** signs of an attachment system with regard to the target (Delta) parent. It is not that the child’s attachment system is disrupted relative to the Delta parent, the child’s attachment system is simply vacant. Furthermore, within a Parental Alienation Dynamic the child’s attachment system appears to remain fully functional and non-disrupted in other settings and with other people. The normal attachment system is highly resilient because of its survival advantage, and it is not capable of such selective vacancy. “Normal-range” parent-child conflicts evidence a different pattern of relationship dysfunction than is evident in an alienation dynamic.

Assessing the Parental Alienation Dynamic

Dr. Childress has addressed the second criticism of Dr. Gardner's "syndrome" approach by developing a specific clinical interview instrument (the Childress Alienation Scale) that aids in the clinical and forensic diagnosis by quantifying the set interpersonal diagnostic features involved with a Parental Alienation **Dynamic**.

Sexual Abuse Exception: The Childress Alienation Scale requires a sexual abuse exception. The scale is inherently insensitive to differentiating between a Parental Alienation **Dynamic** and authentic sexual abuse. If there are allegations of sexual abuse against the target (Delta) parent, the Childress Alienation Scale becomes invalid for identifying a Parental Alienation **Dynamic**.

Trans-generational Transmission of Relationship Trauma

The Parental Alienation Dynamic involves the trans-generational transmission of relationship trauma through the development of a Personality Disorder in the alienating (Beta) child/parent and the later re-enactment of this relationship trauma pattern with the target (Delta) parent and identified (Delta) child.

In order to organize the trans-generational explanation and discussion of the alienation **dynamics**, Dr. Childress defined three levels to the alienation process.

The Alpha Level

This level involves the initial relationship dysfunction between the alienating parent (i.e., the Beta parent) as a child (i.e., the Beta child) and the alienating parent's own parent (i.e., the Alpha parent). It was in the Alpha parent – Beta child relationship that the initial psychological/relationship injury occurred that led to the Beta child's/parent's subsequent development of a Personality Disorder.

The Beta Level

This is the level of the alienating parent as a child and subsequently as an adult. The psychological/relationship injury that occurred during the Alpha parent – Beta child relationship resulted in the development of a particular set of psychological processes and defenses that are organized around a Personality Disorder with Borderline, Narcissistic, and Antisocial features.

The Delta Level

The Delta level represents the current re-enactment level of the Alpha level psychological/relationship injury, and involves the spouse of the Beta parent who is the target of the expressed alienation process (i.e., the Delta parent) and the child (i.e., the Delta child) of the Beta parent and Delta parent who becomes the active agent enacting the hostile rejection of the alienation **dynamic**.

Seminars in Parental Alienation Dynamics Offered by Dr. Childress

Dr. Childress offers three types of seminars related to Parental Alienation Dynamics, depending on the target audience:

The Legal Profession

Dr. Childress offers 1-hour and 2-hour seminars for legal professionals regarding the forensic issues related to identifying, diagnosing, and intervening with Parental Alienation Dynamics, with a particular focus on the following areas:

- The conceptual framework for differentiating alienation **dynamics** (with established DSM-IV TR diagnoses) from Gardner's alienation **syndrome**, with a focus on the relevant legal issues facing attorneys and the court.
- Identifying alienation **dynamics** as distinct from "normal-range" negative parental influence, "normal-range" parent-child conflict, and "normal-range" parental hostility during a marital dissolution.
- Issues in the clinical-forensic assessment of the Parental Alienation **Dynamic**; including how to clinically-forensically establish the presence of the 4 relevant DSM-IV TR diagnoses (1. Personality Disorder, 2. Delusional Disorder, 3. Shared Psychotic Disorder, and 4. Oppositional Defiant Disorder) as distinct from "normal-range" family and parent-child relationship problems.
- Court related treatment recommendations, including a simple compromise intervention-solution of a Strategic Family Systems intervention that either resolves or exposes the alienation dynamic.

The Mental Health Profession

Dr. Childress offers 1-hour and 2-hour seminars for mental health professionals in which the core dynamics of the trans-generational process are elaborated. Clinical diagnostic and treatment issues are examined, with a particular focus on the following areas:

- The Personality Disorder dynamics, including the development and manifestation of the Borderline, Narcissistic, and Antisocial features.
- The alienation dynamic relative to attachment networks, anger vs. hatred issues, psychological fusion vs. authenticity, and associations with an incest-sexual abuse dynamic.
- Therapy of the Delta child-Delta parent relationship and the restoration of child authenticity. Discussion of Self-psychological psychodynamic interventions, Structural and Strategic family systems Interventions.

Delta Parents

Dr. Childress offers 1-hour and 2-hour seminars directed toward parents who are the target of alienation, with a particular focus on the following:

- The core **dynamics** of the alienation process are explained.
- Treatment issues are explained.
- Legal options are discussed.