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Re: Legislative Amendment to Address the Family Pathology of “Parental Alienation”

Children have the right to love both parents, and to receive the love of both parents in return. The severe and psychologically brutal family pathology of “parental alienation” robs children this fundamental right of childhood.

The family pathology of “parental alienation” represents a brutal, and unrecognized, form of psychological child abuse in which the child is induced by the distorted parenting practices of a narcissistic/borderline personality parent into rejecting a relationship with the other parent following divorce. The pathology of “parental alienation” involves creating significant psychopathology in the child in order to destroy the child’s attachment bond to a previously beloved targeted parent as a means for the allied parent to enact a retaliatory revenge on the other spouse for the rejection and perceived abandonment surrounding divorce.

The clinical psychology term for creating significant psychopathology in the child in order to meet the emotional and psychological needs of the parent is “pathogenic parenting” (patho=pathology; genic=genesis, creation).

The current mental health response to this form of psychological child abuse has been inadequate and would be greatly enhanced by an amendment to the existing child abuse reporting laws that specifically acknowledges *pathogenic parenting* (i.e., creating significant psychopathology in the child through aberrant and distorted parenting practices) as representing a form of psychological child abuse which is reportable under the child abuse reporting laws. The addition of this simple acknowledgement that *pathogenic parenting* represents a form of psychological child abuse would be immensely helpful in highlighting the responsibilities of mental health professionals to assess for the severe family pathology of “parental alienation” surrounding high-conflict divorce.

The Pathology of “Parental Alienation”

The common-culture term of “parental alienation” is used to describe a severe form of family pathology in which one parent (the allied parent in a *cross-generational coalition* with the child) engages in an agenda to systematically undermine and destroy the child’s bonded relationship with the other parent following divorce. In its more severe form, “parental alienation” involves a narcissistic or borderline personality parent who uses the child as a weapon of revenge against the other spouse in retaliation for the rejection and perceived abandonment surrounding the divorce. This very serious form of family pathology involves insidious forms of parental psychological influence and control by the narcissistic/(borderline) parent that are used to manipulate the child into rejecting the love of other parent.

The clinical psychology description for this form of pathology is the child’s “*triangulation*” into the spousal conflict through the formation of a “*cross-generational coalition*” with one parent against the other parent. At its deeper level, the pathology of

“parental alienation” involves the trans-generational transmission of attachment trauma from the childhood of the allied narcissistic/(borderline) personality parent into the current family relationships, mediated by the personality disorder pathology of the allied parent which is itself a product of this parent’s childhood attachment trauma.

The Psychological Killing of the Spouse’s Child

The severe family pathology of “parental alienation” represents the psychological “killing” of the targeted parent's child in order to enact a retaliatory revenge on the other spouse for the divorce. Prior to the enactment of this severe form of delusional-psychiatric pathology by the allied parent, the other parent, the targeted parent, has a beloved child. After the enactment of this emotionally and psychologically brutal family pathology, the targeted parent no longer has a child. This parent's relationship with the child has been destroyed. For all intents and purposes, the targeted parent's child has been psychologically murdered by the manipulative and vengeful cruelty of the narcissistic/(borderline) parent.

The psychological murder of one's child - to lose completely one's relationship with a beloved child - represents a severe emotional and psychological trauma of profound proportions for the targeted parent; and for the child, the loss of a parent (the “psychological death” of this child's parent for the child) can have lasting and profoundly negative developmental repercussions throughout the child's life, including carrying this emotional and psychological trauma into the child's own marriage and family.

Psychological Child Abuse

Pathogenic parenting that creates significant developmental pathology in the child (through the suppression of the child’s normal-range attachment bonding motivations toward a previously beloved parent), personality disorder pathology in the child (as evidenced in a predictable set of narcissistic personality symptoms in the child’s symptom display which are created by the psychological influence on the child by the narcissistic allied parent in a cross-generational coalition with the child), and psychiatric-delusional pathology in the child (in which the child is incorporated into the narcissistic/borderline parent’s false trauma reenactment narrative of supposed “victimization” and “abuse”) in order to meet the emotional and psychological needs of the narcissistic/borderline parent, represents a DSM-5 diagnosis of V995.51 Child Psychological Abuse, Confirmed.

A confirmed DSM-5 diagnosis of V995.51 Child Psychological Abuse made by a licensed mental health professional through an appropriate assessment of family pathology should trigger a report of suspected child abuse to the appropriate child protection service agency. Incorporating a specific statement into child abuse reporting laws that ***pathogenic parenting*** which creates significant psychopathology in the child represents psychological child abuse and is reportable under child abuse reporting laws would clearly indicate to mental health professionals their obligation to properly assess for and accurately diagnose this form of brutal family pathology. Pathogenic parenting is not a child custody issue; it is a child protection issue.

Legislative Solution

The recommended legislative solution to the brutal family pathology of “parental alienation” is to highlight professional **child protection** responsibilities by amending the child abuse reporting laws to specifically indicate that pathogenic parenting that creates significant developmental pathology in the child, personality disorder pathology in the child, and psychiatric-delusional pathology in the child represents psychological child abuse by the parent, which is reportable under child abuse reporting statutes. This clarifying addition to current child abuse reporting law would provide directive guidance to mental health professionals regarding their child protection obligations.

Proposed Amendment:

<existing definition of child abuse; for example from the Florida law, “Any person who knows, or has reasonable cause to suspect, that a child is abused, abandoned, or neglected by a parent, legal custodian, caregiver, or other person responsible for the child’s welfare, as defined in this chapter, or that a child is in need of supervision and care and has no parent, legal custodian, or responsible adult relative immediately known and available to provide supervision and care shall report such knowledge or suspicion to the department in the manner prescribed in subsection (2).> <amendment addition:> **Pathogenic parenting, as determined by appropriate mental health assessment, which is creating significant developmental pathology, personality disorder pathology, and psychiatric pathology in the child in order to meet the emotional and psychological needs of the parent is reportable as psychological child abuse under this statute.**

This clarifying addition to the child abuse reporting law would notify all mental health professionals who are diagnosing and treating family conflict surrounding divorce in which a child rejects a relationship with a normal-range and affectionally available parent that they should be alert for the pathology of the child’s *triangulation* into the spousal conflict through the formation of a *cross-generational coalition* with one parent (the allied parent) against the other parent (the targeted parent). And if pathogenic parenting is evidenced in the child’s symptom display, then all mental health professionals would have clear statutory guidance regarding their child protection obligations.

Pathogenic parenting is not a child custody issue; it is a child protection issue.



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