

Pathogenic Parenting During Divorce: When Orders for Joint Custody Becomes De Facto Sole Custody to the Pathological Parent

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The interpersonal processes that result in divorce and the dissolution of the family places considerable psychological stresses on everyone involved. When one of the parents has a narcissistically organized personality disorder, the psychological stresses associated with the divorce can result in that parent's psychological decompensation, involving a process that will exhibit characteristic signs and symptoms.

One of the leading authorities on personality disorders, Theodore Millon, describes what occurs when the narcissist psychologically decompensates as a consequence of the unmanageable stresses that can occur in divorce and the dissolution of the family:

“Under conditions of unrelieved adversity and failure, narcissists may decompensate into **paranoid disorders**. Owing to their excessive use of fantasy mechanisms, they are disposed to misinterpret events and to construct **delusional beliefs**. Unwilling to accept constraints on their independence and unable to accept the viewpoints of others, narcissists may isolate themselves from the corrective effects of shared thinking. Alone, they may ruminate and weave their beliefs into a network of fanciful and **totally invalid suspicions**. Among narcissists, delusions often take form after a serious challenge or setback has upset their image of superiority and omnipotence. They tend to exhibit compensatory grandiosity and jealousy delusions in which they reconstruct reality to match the image they are unable or unwilling to give up. Delusional systems may also develop as a result of having felt betrayed and humiliated. Here **we may see the rapid unfolding of persecutory delusions** and an arrogant grandiosity characterized by verbal attacks and bombast. Rarely physically abusive, anger among narcissists usually takes the form of oral vituperation and argumentativeness. This may be seen in a flow of irrational and caustic comments in which others are upbraided and denounced as stupid and beneath contempt. These onslaughts usually have little objective justification, are often colored by delusions, and may be directed in a wild, hit-or-miss fashion in which the narcissist lashes out at those who have failed to acknowledge the exalted status in which he or she demands to be seen.” (Millon, 2011, pp. 407-408; emphasis added)

The divorce and dissolution of the family represents just the sort of “unrelieved adversity and failure” and perceived humiliation and betrayal from the spouse that Millon notes as responsible for the narcissist's decompensation into “paranoid disorders” and “persecutory delusions.” As a consequence of these psychological stresses, the narcissistic parent develops persecutory¹ delusions regarding the abuse potential and fundamental

¹ DSM-IV TR: “Persecutory Type: delusions that the person (or someone to whom the person is close) is being malevolently treated in some way” (emphasis added)

inadequacy of the other parent. The narcissistic, now paranoid, parent will “weave their beliefs into a network of fanciful and **totally invalid suspicions**” that can lead to numerous unfounded and unwarranted allegations of abuse directed toward the other parent, who becomes the target of the narcissistic parent’s paranoid and persecutory fantasies. Faced with the “unrelieved” psychological stresses of the divorce, the narcissistic parent “reconstructs reality” to match the paranoid/persecutory image regarding the targeted parent which “they are unable or unwilling to give up.”

Meanwhile, the child who is also caught in the family divorce process struggles to understand both the personalized meaning of the divorce and the broader meaning regarding the impact of the divorce and the family’s dissolution. For a variety of neuro-developmental reasons involving the brain’s developmental immaturity,² children will reference the meaning constructions of parents in order to orient themselves to the meaning of situations, particularly in ambiguous situations. This natural process of socially referencing parents for meaning construction combines with the strong assertions of meaning emerging from the paranoid psychopathology of the narcissistic parent, resulting in the child adopting and expressing the aberrant and unbalanced meaning constructions of the pathological parent.

Achieving True Joint Custody

A prominent feature of narcissistic personalities is that they do not recognize authority, only power. In addition, narcissists lack empathy, they do not recognize the rights of others, and they are highly exploitative. Therefore, narcissistic parents will not recognize the authority of court orders that place “constraints on their independence,” and they will engage in a series of exploitative efforts to undermine the child’s visitations with the other, healthier, parent.

Furthermore, without separation from the source-origin of the psychopathology, the child will continue to develop and express an unbalanced, aberrant, paranoid-persecutory belief system regarding the psychologically healthier parent that will undermine the possibility of a normal-range positive and supportive parent-child relationship. The child’s increasing rejection of a relationship with the healthier parent will be psychologically-interpersonally supported by the narcissistic-pathological parent through a variety of overt and covert communications that will actively undermine the child’s ability to develop a normal-range relationship with the other, psychologically healthier, parent.

² The brain development of children remains immature until around the ages of 16-20. Within an evolutionary context, younger children who attributed independent meaning to events while their brain development remained immature tended to make poorer decisions that reduced their survival chances, thus eliminating these genes from the gene pool. On the other hand, children who referenced the meaning constructions of the more maturely developed brains of their parents tended to make better decisions that increased their survival chances, thereby increasing the presence of these genes in the gene pool. The neurobiology of children is designed by the selective pressures of evolutionary adaptation to reference the meaning constructions of their parents, particularly in ambiguous situations. Divorce and the dissolution of the family represents just this sort of ambiguous situation that promotes the child’s socially referencing parental meaning construction.

In response to the disruptive influences of the narcissistic parent and their cavalier disregard of Court orders, the targeted parent may repeatedly return to the Court seeking enforcement of existing Court orders. However, throughout this process the custody-visitations between the child and the targeted-healthier parent will be severely disrupted for months, or even years, by the exploitative undermining by the narcissistic-pathological parent of the healthier parent's relationship with the child. Delays and the passage of time, therefore, serve the psychopathology of the narcissistic parent. During this period, the child will remain in close psychological association with the severe psychopathology of the narcissistically decompensating parent, so that the child's symptoms will grow more entrenched and severe with the passage of time.

Through this process, the Court's orders for "joint custody" will effectively become de facto orders for sole custody to the narcissistic-pathological parent, supported by the child's increasing (induced) psychopathology that results in a rejection of a relationship with targeted-healthier parent. Without treatment of the underlying interpersonal psychopathology being expressed through the child, true joint custody will be impossible. Treatment, as indicated by the DSM-IV TR, requires a period of psychological separation of the child from the source-origin of the psychopathology (i.e., the decompensation of the narcissistic-borderline parent into paranoid-persecutory delusions).

In order to achieve true joint custody, the child's induced delusional disorder must first be treated and resolved in order to provide for the development of a normal-range loving relationship with the psychologically healthier parent without the corrosive influence of the other parent's severe psychopathology. Through targeted and active therapy that teaches the child appropriate critical thinking skills and provides the child with balanced meaning constructions, a normal-range and balanced attribution of meaning regarding the divorce and the child's relationships with each parent can be provided to the child that will allow the child to form healthy loving relationships with both parents.

Once this normal-range and balanced meaning construction has been achieved, the child can be reintroduced to the psychopathology of the narcissistic-paranoid parent so that the child and family can achieve true joint custody and co-parenting. During the process of the child's reunification with the pathological parent, careful monitoring of the child's symptoms by the child's treatment team can ensure that the child continues to have positive relationships with both parents without a return to the aberrant and unbalanced meaning constructions of the narcissistic-pathological parent.

To achieve the Court's order for joint custody requires first that the underlying psychopathology in the family as expressed through the child symptoms be treated and resolved. Only then can true joint custody be achieved. Without treating the underlying interpersonal psychopathology within the family as expressed through the child symptoms, Court orders for joint custody will simply become de facto orders for sole custody to the pathological parent because of the nature of the interpersonal psychological dynamics involved.