

Evidence for the Senedd Petitions Committee
in respect of Petition P-05-751 *Recognition of
Parental Alienation*

Prepared by: Dr Sue Whitcombe
Chartered Psychologist, AFBPsS
HCPC Registered Counselling Psychologist

Email: sue@suewhitcombe.co.uk

Date: 10th January 2018 (revised 17/01/2018)

1. I am a HCPC registered counselling psychologist, chartered with the British Psychological Society (BPS). I founded a social enterprise, Family Psychology Solutions CIC, with support from Teesside University to develop provision around parental alienation resulting from my research and doctoral training. I provide therapeutic interventions, offer consultancy and training, and have conducted research into parental alienation. I facilitate BPS approved training (CPD) on parental alienation for practitioners and professionals. I have been instructed to provide expert assessment and opinion in family law cases in England, Scotland and Wales. I sit on the Expert Witness Advisory Group of the BPS, am Chair Elect of the BPS Division of Counselling Psychology Welsh Branch and Chair of the BPS Training Committee in Counselling Psychology.
2. I support and volunteer on a pro bono basis for a number of charities who work with and for children and families. Families Need Fathers Both Parents Matter Cymru is one of these charities.
3. This petition calls for:
 - a. the recognition of parental alienation as a form of emotional abuse by the Welsh Government
 - b. mandatory training for professionals, including social workers and Cafcass Cymru staff, in the recognition of parental alienation and pathways to protect children from harm
 - c. a national campaign to raise awareness of the harm caused by parental alienation
 - d. a duty on Welsh Ministers to protect children from abuse and harm where parental alienation has been identified.
4. Parental alienation is characterised by a child's strong alignment, or enmeshment, with one parent whilst rejecting a relationship with the other, or presenting with an almost phobic fear of that parent. This rejection, or fear, seems unwarranted based on the entirety of the child's actual experience of that parent. As a condition which may be a focus of clinical attention, parental alienation is most readily categorised as a Parent-child Relational Problem (V61.20) or Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress (V61.29). In some cases the behaviours of a caregiver in perpetuating an alienated condition in a child may be defined as Child Psychological Abuse (995.51) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).
5. Many children impacted by alienation appear, on the surface, to function well. They may be seen as model pupils at school, polite and well-behaved. In my experience, school staff are shocked when they witness the out of character vehement rejection and callous response of a child when referring to a parent. However, studies have identified increased emotional and behavioural problems in alienated children as well as risks to a child's psychological and emotional development. Going into adulthood, those who have been alienated are more likely to have an impaired ability to sustain effective, healthy relationships throughout their life-course, including work and social relationships. In addition there is increased risk of mental health and psychiatric disorders, including disturbances in identity and personality functioning, and substance misuse.

6. The symptomatic behaviours and the underlying psychological processes in an alienated child have been independently identified since the 1980s by researchers and practitioners in social work, law and psychology. These behaviours include:
 - a. Psychological splitting, a lack of ambivalence, where a child idealises one parent and devalues the other. The child sees one parent as all good, the other as all bad. This is most readily apparent in the enmeshed relationship with, or reflexive support of, one parent. This polarised thinking often extends to the rejection of one side of the child's family in its entirety.
 - b. Apparent fear, irrational anxiety, refusal or resistance to being with a parent, or parenting time which is characterised by extreme withdrawal, gross hatred and animosity
 - c. An evident absence of guilt over poor behaviour towards the parent
7. These behaviours are the presenting features of a maladaptive coping strategy. Within the dynamics of a family system under stress, the child feels a loyalty conflict, is unwittingly co-opted into an unhealthy cross-generational coalition with one parent, or empowered or elevated to the role of decision maker in perverse triangulation, parentification or adultification processes.
8. Within this dysfunctional system, a child's critical thinking is impaired, they experience a cognitive dissonance – they are unable to reconcile their actual experience of a loved parent with the contrasting overt and implicit information received from the other loving parent.
9. In order to achieve some equilibrium, the child is driven (usually unconsciously) to reduce this psychological distress by rejecting the least vulnerable or least fearsome parent. This rejection enables a child to present, on the surface, as coping and functioning well.
10. A child is biologically and psychologically wired to connect with their primary caregivers in order to have their needs for sustenance, safety and security are met, enhancing the chance of survival. A child's attachment to their parent is innate, even when care is less than good. In general, children crave a relationship with their parent, even if their experience of that parent is poor and they have been subject to physical or sexual abuse or neglect.
11. Rejection of a parent is rare in a child, particularly in pre-adolescence, and is a key indicator that alienation may be present. Rejection or expressed fear in an alienated child is usually accompanied by a lack of evident emotion, or extreme displays of emotion which are disproportionate to their actual experience of the parent.
12. Psychological splitting – the idealisation of one parent and/or one side of the family and devaluing or rejection of the other parents and/or side of the family - is another key indicator of alienation.
13. In response to the petition, the former Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Children stated that the Family Justice Network:
 - a. Recognised that some parents can behave in a way that alienates the other parent from their child's life

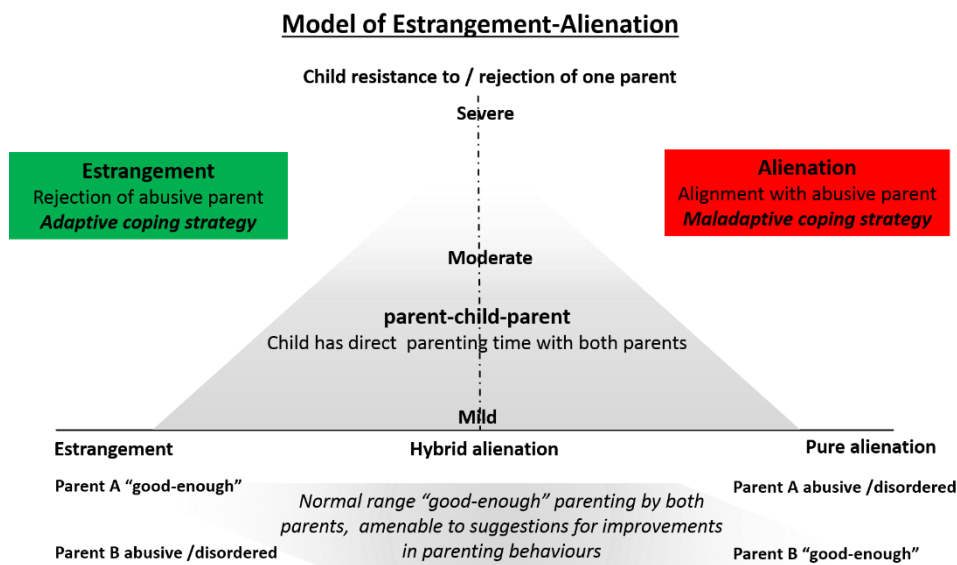
- b. Acknowledged the significant impact this type of behaviour can have on the emotional well-being of the child
 - c. Stated their belief that the Family Court already has sufficient range of powers to deal with cases where alienating behaviours feature
 - d. Acknowledged that some cases can and have been considered by Welsh local authorities under child protection procedures
 - e. Affirmed that parental alienation should continue to be dealt with using current legal provisions.
14. In his response, Mr Sargeant also stated that “CAFCASS Cymru practitioners, as professionally qualified social workers, are trained to understand and recognise the potential for implacable hostility by a party in divorce or separation cases and its potential impact on the child.” My professional experience suggests otherwise.
15. Having worked in academia and having close working relationships with academic social work professionals, my understanding is that parental alienation is not a core aspect of all Social Work curricula. In fact, my understanding is that it is not included in the majority of Social Work curricula at either undergraduate or postgraduate level. As such, the assertion that Cafcass Cymru practitioners, by virtue of the fact that they are qualified social workers, have sufficient understanding regarding parental alienation is likely to be incorrect.
16. Given that Sir Anthony Douglas, CEO of Cafcass, confirmed in October 2017 that it will likely take a considerable period of time before all Cafcass Family Court Advisers have a good understanding of parental alienation, it is clear that on recruitment to Cafcass, social workers are not required to have an understanding of parental alienation. To clarify, it is unlikely that their initial training included knowledge and skills around parental alienation, and certainly this would not have been universal.
17. As Cafcass Cymru draw from the same pool of social workers, albeit regulation of Social Work in Wales is by Social Care Wales and not the Health and Care Professions Council, it is unlikely that Cafcass Cymru practitioners, as professionally qualified social workers, **are** universally trained to understand and recognise parental alienation as was suggested by the former Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Children.
18. Social Care Wales’ (2013) *Evidence Matters in Family Justice Tools* resource pack for child and family social workers in Wales does not include parental alienation in the list of 57 areas of expertise in which social workers might be expected to have even a minimal knowledge.
19. Since 2014, I have delivered fourteen workshops on parental alienation to a total of 397 practitioners and professionals – practitioner psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, family workers, mental health practitioners, counsellors, family therapists and trainees in these core professions. Data suggests that professionals across these disciplines have minimal knowledge of parental alienation prior to this professional development training.

Parental Alienation Workshops – April 2014 – December 2017			
Number of Workshops = 14 Number of Attendees = 397			
	Scale 1-10 (1= very poor; 10=excellent)		
	Mean	Mode	Range
Pre Workshop: <i>Please rate your knowledge or understanding of parental alienation</i>	3.49	3	1-8
Post Workshop: <i>Please rate your knowledge or understanding of parental alienation</i>	7.72	8	5-10
	Scale 0-5 (1=not at all; 5=very useful)		
<i>How useful will this training be in your client work?</i>	3.94	4	2-5
All feedback is provided anonymously			

20. All workshop delegates in clinical practice acknowledged more than one client on their caseload from the previous six months, in which parental alienation had likely been a factor.
21. Delegates expressed ongoing concerns following training that the lack of understanding of practitioners in Local Authorities would render it difficult for their concerns regarding a child to be dealt with appropriately should they wish to make a referral.
22. In November 2017, two employees of Cafcass Cymru, including one of the Heads of Operation, attended BPS Approved training in parental alienation facilitated by myself. These delegates reported that they believed they were able to identify cases where alienation is a factor though they would like to be able to identify these at an earlier stage. They reported that they were not always aware of the most appropriate intervention or where to access necessary interventions.
23. One delegate stated her belief that there were a very small number of these cases, though they made exceptional demands on resources. Establishing the prevalence of parental alienation is hampered by issues of data samples and definitions. In Wales, Cafcass Cymru have to date not seemed to be prepared to identify a case as one including alienation. Case management information does not appear to include this data. The most recent study of 610 randomly selected adults in the USA suggests that 13.4 percent of parents have been alienated from one or more of their children which is much higher than previous estimates (Harman, Leder-Elder, & Biringen, 2016).
24. In my experience, throughout the country and in Wales, recognition of cases where alienation may be a factor is inconsistent, and there are likely many more cases than are currently identified. In informal conversations with Family Court Advisors, Guardians and Local Authority Social Workers in Wales they have suggested an increasing number of cases

where alienation is likely present, a lack of knowledge and training in how to work with these cases and limited resources.

25. Parental alienation exists on a continuum from mild to severe. In reality, cases of family breakdown can be complex, often with co-existent intimate partner or domestic violence, substance misuse, long standing mental health issues, prior safeguarding and child protection issues. When faced with a child presenting as resistant to seeing a parent, vehemently rejecting a parent or displaying extreme anxiety or fear of a parent, it is important to determine whether this presentation is 'reasonable' or not, based on the entirety of that child's experience of that parent. Often, in my experience, there is a failure to unravel the complexity in cases.
26. Front-line practitioners in the UK are well-versed at evaluating families where there is recognisable abuse or poor parenting – the far left of the Estrangement-Alienation model. It is likely that both Parental Estrangement and Parental Alienation will be classified in the 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) due for issue in 2018. Established assessment, evaluation and intervention models used in typical cases of abuse and less than good parenting are core components of social work training.



27. A limited understanding of alienation often leads to a presumption that a child's resistance or fear is justified – 'there's no smoke without fire.' Incorrect assessment, formulation and intervention can be damaging, exacerbating alienation and on occasions leaving a child in the care of a psychologically abusive or psychologically unwell parent. My direct clinical and legal experience suggests that few practitioners are aware of appropriate interventions and their actions, or failure to act appropriately, in some cases likely exacerbates the emotional harm and psychological distress experienced by children.

28. In October 2016 I was commissioned to write an article by the editor of *Seen and Heard* for their readership of independent social workers, children's guardians and child protection social workers. The scope was to include the information needed to distinguish the

(potentially) alienated child from a child with other issues; approaches likely to be successful when trying to re-establish a relationship with a parent; approaches which have the potential to further damage the child; the pros and cons of a change of residence. For reference and clarification, the article which was published in 2017 and includes a comprehensive bibliography can be accessed here:

https://www.academia.edu/35180977/Parental_alienation_or_justifiable_estrangement_Assessing_a_child_s_resistance_to_a_parent_in_the_UK

29. I have been instructed on cases in Wales where early indicators of alienation were not identified or acted upon leading to entrenched alienation, significant harm and psychological distress in the child.
30. There is a tendency, in my opinion, for many Cafcass and Cafcass Cymru practitioners to conceptualise cases as high conflict and a propensity to conflate 'high conflict' with alienation. Acrimony and conflict is often present in cases where there is parental alienation. However, the conflict is often a symptom of the alienation dynamic and the adversarial legal process; it is not a cause of the relationship breakdown or disagreement regarding child arrangements.
31. My clinical and legal experience in Wales suggests:
 - a. there are some excellent, knowledgeable Guardians who recognise parental alienation in its complexity and take appropriate action in seeking psychological assessments and involving the Local Authority
 - b. there are front line professionals in Cafcass Cymru who do not recognise the common signs of alienation, misinterpret and wrongly attribute a child's response, do not identify emotional harm, fail to suggest appropriate interventions and consequently prolong, and exacerbate, psychological distress and emotional harm.
 - c. Local Authority social workers rarely have an understanding of parental alienation and find those cases referred with concern around significant harm or child protection difficult to assess and manage appropriately.
 - f. despite the range of powers available to the Family Court, the limited knowledge and understanding on the part of practitioners results in a failure to ensure that it has the necessary information to make informed judgements in cases where alienation may be a factor.
32. In 2014 I completed my doctoral research into the experience of alienated parents. Whilst not the main focus of the research, the findings identified concerns for child welfare, mental health and safety and variable, often negative, experiences in relation to family proceedings and social care services. A report which detailed these findings was distributed to Local Family Justice Boards in England and Wales in 2015. A copy of this report is available here: https://www.academia.edu/35475673/Whitcombe_2015_Summary_Report
33. To summarise, in my professional opinion, based on my clinical, training, research and family proceedings experience:

- a. The Welsh Government does not recognise parental alienation as a form of emotional abuse.
- b. There is minimal training of professionals, including social workers and Cafcass Cymru staff, in the recognition of the complexity of parental alienation and pathways to protect children from harm. There is no mandatory training.
- c. There is limited awareness of the harm caused by parental alienation.
- d. Current procedures and practices fail to protect children from psychological distress, abuse and harm where parental alienation is a factor.