

Deterioration in the Parent Child Relationship: The Third Ingredient of Parental Alienation

This is the third in a series of four parts devoted to the four behavioral criteria that are all present in cases of parental alienation. These criteria were first described in an article authored by myself and family attorney, Michael Walsh. The article was first published in the Florida Bar Journal and then was republished as the lead article in the Minnesota Bar Journal. I am told that it also found its way into a Supreme Court ruling in Israel regarding parental alienation. I think the interest in this is related to the difficulty in identifying if parental alienation is going on or if it is not. To this very day, when I am contacted by a parent or attorney about a case where parental alienation is believed to be present, I still rely on these four criteria to satisfy myself that such may likely be the case. While the template that these criteria is not foolproof, it is at least some sort of reasonably and reliable measure to assist in the ruling in or ruling out of its presence. But enough backstory. The subject of today's post is the third criteria, which deterioration in the relationship between the targeted parent and the child(ren). In many ways, this criterion is the result of the first two. That is, when a child is kept from a parent and is done so for illegitimate reasons, and these reasons are conveyed to the child (which they virtually always are) the relationship between that child and that now absent parent begins to deteriorate. Perhaps breaking this down a bit can make this more understandable. When a parent is less physically present in a child's day to day reality, that child's view of that parent is more vulnerable to distortion. When children maintain regular contact with each parent, it is this concrete face to face interaction that maintains and supports that child's true view of that parent, as it as developed via that child's interactions with that parent, as fed through the child's senses and recorded in memory. This is not true just for children, but for adults as well. For example, if I have a friend with whom I have had a good and ongoing relationship, and I am told negative and alarming things about this friend, it is primarily the ongoing contact with this friend that will allow me to maintain more objectivity concerning the various negative things I am being told. I will be better able to critique these accusations for myself to decide if they have merit. If however, that friend, say suddenly moves away and I loose contact and I am told

these same negative and alarming things, absent contact with that friend, I am more prone, over time, to give these allegations more weight. Of course, I am speaking in the most general terms. The closeness of the friendship and the quality and quantity of the time spent together will tend to mitigate and make less believable these negative things being told. For example, a combat soldier who served in a forward post with a fellow combat soldier with whom they trusted and relied for their very lives, this sort of situation would be less vulnerable to such distortion. But consider, even if the fellow combat soldiers who relied on each other for their lives was told by a trusted authority that the soldier with whom they had been close, was actually say a pedophile, even the close bonds formed in combat might be vulnerable. Now let us turn our attention to the child who has had a close and loving relationship with a parent whom they no longer see. And let us further assume that the child is told that the reason that the parent is gone is that they simply do not want to be with the child, such information would be quite hurtful and damaging in and of itself. Now let us assume that this same child is told that the absent parent who suddenly appeared to not want to see them any more was actually a dangerous and violent person and that the child had been fooled into thinking otherwise, and that this same parent was actually a sly and deceitful manipulator. Absent contact with that parent, even the most bonded child to this parent will begin to wonder and harbor suspicions. The phenomenon of “confirmatory bias” comes into play here. Due primarily to the way we are wired neurologically, when we hear disturbing things about someone that we may even know well, the phenomenon of confirmatory bias tends to cause us to give weight to these disturbing things if that person’s behavior in any way endorses what we have been told. Suppose that you are told that a close co-worker secretly had a serious psychiatric disorder that caused them to become violent. Further, let us suppose that while we have never seen any evidence of any such behavior from the co-worker over the span of many years, this co-worker learns that he has just been robbed blind by a trusted business partner, and that due to this, he might well find himself homeless. As the co-worker describes and expresses his understandable anger at the deceitful business partner, we find ourselves wondering if the psychiatric disorder might be really what is going on. Maybe there never was a business partner. Perhaps all of this is delusional. The fact of the matter is that before we were exposed to this information

about the alleged psychiatric history of the co- worker, we would never have considered these possibilities. The point is, once we are exposed to these alternate interpretations, we find it very hard to ignore them. We may end up not giving them much weight, but they will occupy some space in our thoughts. This is especially true if we do not understand our vulnerability to bias. We are simply built that way. While we humans do not like to think of ourselves in this way, we really do tend to be herd animals. We tend to be very influenced by our environment and this is especially true with children. Therefore, under the weight of the first two criteria (1) access and visitation blocking and (2) false abuse allegations justifying the lack of access, virtually any parent- child relationship will tend to deteriorate. The level of deterioration will be related to the temperament of the child, the child's developmental stage, the depth and closeness of the now absent (targeted) parent relationship and its history, as well as the the duration of the absence, and the degree of vilification to which the child has been exposed. The good news within all of this is that our ability to become "biased" towards the truth also remains and can be potentially resurrected. Consequently, even severely alienated children, when exposed over time to the targeted parent for whom they once expressed fear and hatred, can recover and reclaim their true selves. Granted there are case where this does not happen, however it is hoped that the more one understands how neurologically vulnerable we inherently are to the tricks of alienation, the more we can manage them. I hope this is of some help, and as always please send any thoughts you may have about this. Thank you.