

## The Role of the Social Worker

*in Preventing Child-Parent Contact Failure*

By Philip Marcus, Judge (retired) Jerusalem Family

Two recent articles, describe a three-part multi-disciplinary programme for prevention of contact failure, and especially parental alienation. The programme includes prevention, by alerting public awareness to the phenomenon of parental alienation; early identification and intervention, by informing persons in professions in which they come into contact with children about PA and the severe damage it causes, and providing immediate intervention when there are signs that a child is stressed as a result of friction between the parents; and swift and authoritative judicial action, including orders for restoration of contact and therapeutic intervention, with sanctions for non-compliance, where child-parent contact has been, or is about to be, severed.

The present article will show how social workers, guardians ad litem, and persons in allied professions can use their skills, in all three parts of the programme, to help the children and their families when such issues become apparent.

### Contact failure:

When the parents of children are at odds, even when divorce or separation proceedings have not yet started, their children are inevitably affected by the changes in their lifestyle; the foundations on which their lives have been built are shaking, and they will have to live, at best, in two homes rather than one. Where the parents are preoccupied with the dispute, they may have less time to attend to the children's needs. When the dispute develops into open conflict, the children very often find themselves exposed to arguments and verbal and physical fights; this undermines their sense of safety and stability. They hear things that one parent says to, or about, the other parent. Where one parent opposes the separation, the child, who also fears the breakup of the family, may identify with that parent. The child may feel angry, abandoned, and injured, and he may find himself taking sides in the dispute or being enlisted by one parent against the other. This is exacerbated when the parents separate and disagree as to where the children are going to live and who is going to make decisions about them, and the best interests of the child have to be determined by the court.

Some children whose parents are at odds stop seeing one of the parents. This is referred to in this article as "contact failure".

There may be many reasons for contact failure:

- ☞ Where the child has been physically or sexually abused by a parent, or a parent has abused or killed the other parent, the child (or resident parent on the child's behalf) may be justified in breaking off contact with the perpetrator.
- ☞ Sometimes a child will choose to break off relations with one of his parents, so as to resolve (he thinks) the impossible conflict of loyalties that he feels.
- ☞ An adolescent may prefer one parent over the other.
- ☞ In other cases both parents may bear part of the responsibility.
- ☞ However, in many cases one of the parents has acted or said things to the child which have caused the breakdown of contact.

This last type of contact failure is parental alienation, which may be defined as actions or omissions by a parent which cause the child unjustifiably to cut off contact and connections with the other, previously loved, parent. This is a particularly injurious form of child psychological maltreatment

Whatever the seasons for contact failure, the child will need therapeutic intervention, to help him to cope with the feeling of loss, sometimes accompanied by hatred or ambivalence and other emotions, arising from the disruption of family life. A child whose parents have separated does not have an opportunity to observe a normative, loving couple relationship; when there is no contact with one of the parents, he cannot have a normal child-parent relationship.

But in cases of PA, these problems are exacerbated, and often become pathological.

### PA causes emotional and psychological damage to the child

Children who stop having contact with a parent often express fear of that parent, even though the fear may have no rational basis. Clinical observations, case reviews and both qualitative and empirical studies uniformly indicate that alienated children may exhibit:

- ☞ poor reality testing;
- ☞ illogical cognitive operations;
- ☞ simplistic and rigid information processing;
- ☞ inaccurate or distorted interpersonal perceptions;
- ☞ disturbed and compromised interpersonal functioning;

- ☞ self-hatred;
- ☞ low self-esteem, or inflated self-esteem or feelings of omnipotence;
- ☞ pseudo-maturity;
- ☞ identity and self-image problems;
- ☞ poor differentiation of self (enmeshment, parentification);
- ☞ aggression and conduct disorders;
- ☞ disregard for social norms and authority;
- ☞ poor impulse control;
- ☞ emotional constriction, passivity, or dependency; and
- ☞ lack of remorse or guilt.

### Adults who were alienated as children suffer

In a qualitative retrospective study of adults alienated as children, it was discovered that these adults suffered from:

- ☞ low self-esteem, having internalized the negative characterization by the alienating parent of their rejected parent;
- ☞ self-hatred, self-blame and guilt for abandoning younger siblings;
- ☞ significant episodes of depression (seventy percent of those interviewed);
- ☞ use of drugs or alcohol during adolescence, to cope with painful feelings arising from loss and parental conflict (one third of the sample);
- ☞ self-doubt about their own perceptions and feelings about themselves and others;
- ☞ difficulty trusting other people, and fear that they will never be loved;
- ☞ high rates of divorce (two-thirds had been divorced once and one quarter more than once);
- ☞ anger and resentment about being emotionally manipulated and controlled;
- ☞ negative effect on their relationship with the alienating parent;
- ☞ alienation from their own children.

For this reason, a parent who causes such destruction of contact is described as pathogenic. Such a parent abuses the child. This is maltreatment, and is unlawful.

Some children, for example those in the 8-13 age range, or those with special needs, are especially susceptible to alienation.

Once there are signs that a child might resist contact with a parent, immediate intervention is essential: the longer the situation is allowed to continue, the more likely it is that contact will be completely severed, and repairing the situation – reconciliation and establishing normal relationships – become progressively more difficult.

In what follows, the ways in which social workers and those who work in similar professions should assist in preventing PA, or at least in alleviating the effects. It is clear that there will be differences between social workers in public authorities, social work departments, schools, hospitals, and those in private practice, in terms of their statutory powers and responsibilities and their professional orientation. The descriptions of roles and tasks in this article will of necessity be general, although certain specific duties will appear. However, each professional sector and branch may need to develop its specific procedures.

### The social worker: Primary prevention.

Primary prevention efforts are usually conducted by government and voluntary agencies, by way of mass media and sectoral publicity campaigns, and a social worker may be in a key position to increase public awareness of PA and its catastrophic effects on children.

- ☞ A social worker who has dealt with children and adults affected by PA is in an excellent position to describe the damage caused to his client by PA.

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☞ Experience shows that a first-hand account by an adult, who as a child was alienated by a parent, is exceptionally effective in bringing home the message. A social worker may be able to identify clients who are strong enough and motivated to take part in prevention campaigns.

☞ A multidisciplinary approach is needed in preparing awareness campaigns, and a social worker with knowledge and experience in the field can play an important role in developing such campaigns and activities.

### The social worker: Early identification and immediate intervention

For early identification of the signs that a child is being adversely affected by disagreements and strife between the parents, and of parental conduct which might lead to a child breaking contact with the other parent, all those who deal professionally with families should be given appropriate materials and training. This applies at all levels: university and college studies, preparation for professional qualification, and in-service continuing education systems. Without such preparation, a social worker may miss important signals, or dismiss them as being normal reactions to lifestyle stresses, ordinary adolescent rebellion, and the like. But parents who alienate their children from the other parent frequently manipulate situations so as to justify their actions. Such a parent is likely to draft in professionals on their side, subtly turning the social worker into an ally in the campaign to exclude that other parent from the child's life.

For these reasons, and bearing in mind that PA is a form of child abuse, it is incumbent on social workers to ensure that they, and all those working with them, are properly educated on the topic. Those in senior positions should take the lead in ensuring that appropriate materials and programmes, with periodical updates, are provided. In organizations where many different professions operate, such as hospitals, schools, the armed forces, local authorities and many others, it may be necessary for the social worker to take the lead in ensuring that all staff members have the necessary guidance in early identification.

Some examples of how a social worker may become aware of a child who is liable to distance himself from a parent follow. This is not a comprehensive list, but may shed light on the various situations in which intervention will be needed.

The social worker in a local or regional social services office, who receives clients seeking help with couple relationship or parenting issues, should include in the intake interview questions about child-parent relationships, and be able to identify responses which may indicate that a child is not in normal communication with one of the parents, or signs that one of the parents is sabotaging such relationships.

The social worker in a child protection agency should be aware that a child who is the subject of alienating behavior by a parent is at risk of serious psychological harm, and may be in need of protection. Where the referral is for physical or sexual abuse or neglect, in addition to investigation of the strengths and weaknesses of each parent, the social worker needs to find out whether there are signs of incipient or established contact failure.

If a child who is hospitalized or brought to an accident and emergency department, and a social worker is called in, there should be alertness to signs of conflict between the child's parents which might affect the child, or unexplained unwillingness of the child to have one parent present.

Once identified, the child who appears to be struggling needs help. The parents, who have primary responsibility for the child, must be apprised of the sit-

# ANNOUNCEMENT

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### and Universal Approaches

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This new series will be a much-needed dialogue among family professionals from across disciplines. Chaired by Judge Philip Marcus (retired, Family Law Court, Jerusalem), this series will seek out and welcome manuscripts and interviews with those seeking to serve one goal: preserving child outcomes when parents separate.

In my book, *Preserving Family Ties*, I have addressed extensively the role of all working with families (family professionals) who then can share their responsible role in mitigating the onslaught, dare I say, prevent the deleterious manifestations of children so brainwashed by one parent against another.

As Publisher of *Contemporary Family*, I view my role as a facilitator to bring the important conversations that family professionals need to share and many parents need, indeed, want, to hear.

A targeted parent who contemplated suicide twenty years ago, I was saved emotionally, and redirected to making a difference. Though having remained a targeted parent this long, I remain unwavering in the work that is so vital to many yet today.

Mark Roseman



### A Welcome by Philip Marcus

When parents separate, their children often have great difficulties in adjusting; in some cases, their problems manifest themselves in their behaviour in school or among their peers, and sometimes come to the attention of social workers, teachers, mental health workers, medical staff and other professionals. In some situations, there are problems with child-parent contact, and this can lead to complete cessation of contact with one of the parents and the wider family. This may be instigated or encouraged by the other parent, but even when the child wants to stop seeing a parent, the other parent has a responsibility to see that contact continues, unless the rejected parent has acted so badly that no contact is possible without causing serious damage to the child. Parental alienation causes serious damage to the child, which may continue into adulthood.

Members of professions who deal with children and their parents have an essential role in identifying children at risk of suffering when their parents are at odds, and the behaviors of parents which might cause such suffering. They can thereby refer the family to get help before the situation deteriorates, and thereby prevent or at least minimize the psychological and emotional damage to the child.

This series of articles, based on the writer's experience and research, will show how members of the various professions can recognize the signs of distress and thereby keep the children safe.

uation. Social workers should make themselves aware of professionals or organizations, who may give such help in the location in which they work, and should emphasize to the parents and the service provider that there is a need for urgency.

If one of the parents denies that anything is wrong with the child's relationship with the other parent, or blames the other parent for the situation, the social worker should consider referring each of the parents to take legal advice, since there may be a need for immediate court action to prevent deterioration of the situation into full-blown contact failure.

### The social worker/guardian ad litem: Judicial action

If a case in which parental alienation is alleged comes to court, the judge may need professional assistance in establishing whether the refusal of the child to have contact with one of the parents is due to alienation by the other parent. If PA is the reason, immediate court orders are needed for reestablishing contact and therapeutic work for the child and assistance for the parents. Thus assessment of the reasons for contact failure must be carried out immediately, since, as stated, time is of the essence if contact is to be renewed.

A social worker may be involved in carrying out the initial assessment, or in giving an expert opinion to the court, or in planning and carrying out programmes for intervention. A guardian ad litem may be appointed for the child.

It is essential for a social worker or other professional involved in such cases, to be aware of the current literature and accepted practices.

Of particular importance is the understanding that the child's stated wishes, for example to have no contact with one of the parents, may be strongly held, but are

the result of the overpowering influence of the alienating parent. Bringing the child's views before the court without investigation plays into the hands of the alienating parent. There are specific issues which can be raised with the child, and if for example, the child says he cannot remember any positive experience with the targeted parent, or the antipathy is also towards members of the targeted parent's family, then the report of the GAL or social worker should reflect this.

In preparing recommendations for the court, the social worker needs to be aware that the alienating parent has an interest in deferring court decisions. The alienating parent may also try to draft in the social worker as an ally, using all means of persuasion and manipulation.

The social worker is an essential part of the court's work in handling such cases, and every effort should be made so that a working coalition of professionals, all of whom have received suitable training, can be harnessed in order that the outcome shall be what is best for the child in the circumstances.

### Conclusions

From the above, which is of necessity a brief sketch, certain conclusions follow:

Working with children when contact between the child and a parent has failed or threatens to fail requires specific training.

Such cases must be dealt with swiftly, so as to avoid deterioration and possible long-term psychological and emotional damage to the child, which may persist into adulthood.

Multidisciplinary collaboration is essential so that the child and parents can receive therapeutic interventions and guidance as necessary.



**Philip Marcus** was born and educated in England. After obtaining his LL.B. (Bachelor of Laws) degree at University College London, and qualifying as a Solicitor, he moved to Jerusalem in 1978. He was admitted as an Advocate at the Israel Bar in 1979. He served as a Judge of the Jerusalem Family Court from its opening in 1997 until his retirement in 2012. Most recently he has been working on programmes to prevent Parental Alienation. His article, *Parental Alienation, Contact Refusal and Maladaptive Gatekeeping: a Multidisciplinary Approach to Prevention of Contact Failure* was published in 2019, and his article, *Innovative Programs in Israel for Prevention and Responding to Parental Alienation: Education, Early Identification and Timely and Effective Intervention*, appeared in *Family Court Review* in April 2020