

THE PASG PREVENTION PROJECT: BUILDING PREVENTION

By Dr Nick Child and Judge Philip Marcus – August 2020
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This is the next step in our PASG Prevention Project: a discussion paper. It's about our further ideas on how to build prevention. Before you read it, you might like to review our preliminary report (see [PAI April 2020](#)). In that preliminary report we covered what we had begun to make of the many prevention ideas that lots of people sent in. The summary list has grown further ([available here](#)).

Introduction

Here we want to share our ideas on how the focus on prevention opens up wide and challenging areas for us all. PASG's networking and range of work establishes a solid foundation. We think serious prevention now calls for a more outward-facing skill set, focus, and attitudes: Careful, well-honed, persuasive rhetoric. Policy objectives. Organizational teaming-up and lobbying. Media skills and media content production that engages the widest audiences.

The thing is that those new outward-facing ways demand some radical reviewing of the basic assumptions we've take for granted in PASG. Here we set this out for everyone to consider so that PASG helps develop what prevention can mean for us.

It's rather obvious, but remember that prevention can only help future cases. It cannot help current cases. The frontline services that urgently preoccupy us in PASG at the moment rightly focus on the present cases in our current, less than perfect, systems. Pursuing prevention may give new heart to present approaches. Yet it may not be a primary interest to many PASG members and their immediate focus. Still PASG has taken prevention on as a remit. So, here's what we think serious prevention means for us.

Useful Terms

The terms we used before are still handy: prevention and intervention. Prevention before parental alienation (PA) appears; intervention after it appears—with a good target area in the boundary between them. We've proposed a simple first principle for PA prevention, a field where late intervention is common.

Just now, late intervention is essential—lifesaving even. If that's all we've got, that's what we must do. Late intervention comes after great psychological and emotional damage has been done to the child. It is far less likely to be effective in restoring proper relationships in the family. It is costly in time and other resources, far more expensive than prevention and early intervention. So, in order to create a future world in which we've found ways to prevent and intervene early, we must hold to the basic aspiration that future good practice and prevention means that late intervention should become unnecessary. Prevention builds from that first step in envisaging a better future.

We don't need extra metaphors about prevention: The whole world is right in the middle of a major learning experience about prevention and intervention: a tiny virus faces us with a

devastating pandemic. We're struggling hard to spot, stop, treat, or cure it effectively—and eventually to prevent a recurrence of pandemics altogether.

Familiar Foundations

Naturally, most PASG members who answered our call for ideas assumed two founding features: One is the term “parental alienation” that we all use for the terrible family pattern that brings us together. The other feature is an often-enduring, love-hate relationship with family law as a problematic but seemingly only way to deal with PA. Meanwhile the language of PA as psychological maltreatment and emotional abuse has grown.

Facing outward to the wider world we've found that “careful, well-honed, persuasive rhetoric” means finding other ways to talk than our usual. We all must know how easy it is to explain PA in more ordinary words to folks who are new to it. It takes only a little longer to say the eleven syllables of “one parent turns their child against the other” than the eight syllables of “parental alienation.” Those eight syllables mean so much to us. But it's the eleven syllables that more reliably lead to instant recognition and understanding in the wider world: “Oh yes! That happened to my uncle!” Use the eight syllables and—if you're not instantly dismissed—it can take quite a lot longer to explain.

We don't imagine any change in the way we use the term “parental alienation” within the field. We know what great relief and comfort comes to sufferers and helpers when we find there's a word for it, a support network to join, help, research, and campaigning. But we think it would help us hone the rhetoric of prevention for the outside world if we in PASG could clarify how far our own terminology has clear, agreed, and reasonable meanings. To help us talk about future prevention in the wider world, we ask that PASG finds a way to debate the points raised, for example, by David Curl (2019) in [“Words matter: Three reasons why we should use the term Parental Alienation—and eighteen reasons why we shouldn't.”](#)

To talk about prevention and build allies in the wider world it helps to use the framework of psychological maltreatment. In PA and PASG we naturally focus on the parent who is not a risk to the child. Yet we know that the psychological damage that PA causes—to the child as well as the rejected parent—is the same as happens in other relationship troubles, in other kinds of abuse, physical and sexual and coercive control.

Family Courts and Prevention

The majority of the prevention ideas sent in were about improving family court systems. Family courts often seem to be part of the problem. Rarely do we hear that they can be part of effective intervention. How far can they be part of prevention?

This leads us to compare the different court systems across the world. For example, problem-solving courts (e.g., family drug and alcohol courts) and public family law courts (where the state and social services have a key responsibility). Where it is effective, public family law seeks to sustain and reconcile if not reunite family relationships. That's where serious concerns are known to have happened. Even with adoption and fostering the trend is to keep children in some contact with their birth parents and history.

A good example of a problem-solving court is the Cochem or Consensus Model ([Child 2018](#)) developed in Europe. The context is a continental inquisitorial system of law unlike the English-derived adversarial system that the rest of us know. The next PASG conference in Brussels will feature much more on what European countries have been doing. Put simply, the continental system enables a good judge to collaborate with a good helping professional to make good things happen quickly for children and families. The downside is that the system similarly enables the judge—with or without a professional—to allow or make bad things happen.

One of us (PM) has developed and described one of the few effective family law systems in the common law world ([Marcus 2020](#)). Philip reports how Israel's prompt integrative and specialist courts can exert a preventive function in their community by influencing how parents do separation. There in Israel the aim is to complete the process, from filing of a claim until the start of reconciliation and treatment, within three months. Yet Philip says the claim is often filed after there has been no contact for three months or more. He says that is far too long. Note that it's too long, not just for PA, but for all genuine concern for children's welfare after separation.

Apart from that, though there seems no alternative to them, the list of prevention ideas PASG members sent in portrays family courts doing more harm than good. We suggest that, while having to do our best for now with the system we've got, serious prevention requires us to search for ways that work as much as is humanly possible to make involvement of family courts unnecessary.

Every other trouble that humans have—physical and mental health disorders, drug and alcohol problems, educational, community, social and even criminal troubles—to all of them we respond with constructive, compassionate services of healing, support, therapy, reparation, and rehabilitation. The family is the first thing we look at to provide a framework for rehabilitation. Prevention raises this question: How come, in contrast, that all around the world for post-separation family troubles, we've ended up with a “mud-slinging boxing-ring” with extremely unfair rules (see [Philip Kedge's YouTube](#))? That is a system that tends to deliver the precise opposite of healing: adversarial escalation that often sanctions a terminal evaporation of family relationships.

Prevention means this: If three months is the quickest that private family law can deal with serious child safeguarding concerns, and if three months is too long, we suggest that family law systems in a future era cannot be the primary, or even the secondary, elements in preventing serious or risky separated family troubles.

Most obviously for prevention: If we are only focused on PA that is happening already, by definition we have neither prevented PA nor considered how to prevent it.

Following the Prevention Road

In our view, prevention requires us to review other ways to talk about parental alienation, to focus on how PA is child maltreatment like other abuses are, to imagine a world where we

don't turn to family law as the primary place to go. We think these are not just possible but desirable to do. We have to do this if we're serious about prevention, if we want to engage the wider world, and to team up with natural allies.

We propose to head a dedicated team upstream to find long-term ways to stop people falling or being pushed in the risky river we know so well. Yes, that's no comfort for those suffering now. Otherwise we hope that you can see how the discipline of prevention calls for that more outward-facing skill set, focus and attitudes, rhetoric, policy, teaming up, lobbying, and using modern media.

Prevention aims to help future cases not current ones. Frontline services must focus urgently as best they can with present cases in our current, less than perfect, systems. Some future cases may continue to call on the best skills and legal authority we know already. PASG Is the only organisation we know that has the right people to do this: parents, professionals, academics, together working on alleviating the current situation. We are proud to be part of it.

Pursuing prevention can create new thinking, hope, and direction that improves present approaches. Even if prevention is not everyone's primary interest, we trust our views here merit attention and engage discussion across PASG and its various activities.

Lastly, a global prevention project can never determine what everyone in the world should do. From a collected smorgasbord of ideas and projects, each activist, each country and locality will want to and need to decide what will work best for them. A PASG Prevention Project can help shape our thinking about prevention, but it cannot determine specific local solutions.

Where Next?

For prevention, our own priority now is a radical development based outside of PASG. We will, of course, continue to be involved with PASG and contribute in any way possible. We invite those inspired to share this journey to contact us to hear more and to see how we can work together. Email us at: prevention@pasg2020.eu.

We need to do justice to the range of ideas now collated by the PASG Prevention Project—ideas that mostly focus on improving current intervention. We ask any PASG members who are interested and willing to develop that, to contact us and/or Bill Bernet to work out how to make the most of that more in-house side of it.

In conclusion, we find that prevention requires some radical discussion and review of our familiar foundations. We think it's best to show a way to prevention that works and to hope that some will want to follow. We're working on a new prevention force and will let you know more about that when it's ready for the road.

Who We Are

Nick Child is a retired doctor, child psychiatrist, and family therapist in Scotland.

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Acknowledgements

Both Nick and Philip are fully retired and comfortably pensioned. Our previous career and interests may bring a bias to our thinking. But we have no vested interest in promoting any particular sector or approach. We are motivated entirely to use reason, discussion and evidence to find the best way to prevent suffering, to help those who suffer and those who try to help them, through these worst post-separation family troubles.

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