

## Off-putting relationships: the essentials of Child Alienation

By Nick Child



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### No joke

Berger and Wyse's custardy-battle cartoon is an exception that proves the rule. There is no room for humour in the distress and tribal warfare of high conflict family separations. No one would choose it if they could avoid it. Nor is it fun for workers who ride the wild waters of family separation to help the families. Life jackets are essential. This overview is an invitation to learn about a neglected but important field. The first half is an introduction with case examples. The second half summarises essential general points and issues, a life jacket to keep afloat. I start with the benefits of describing a spectrum over defining a syndrome, and end with how changing court practice might make the biggest difference.

### Engaging with alienation

The word alienation by itself tends to alienate people. If we add capital letters, plus the pointed word parental in front of it, and the static word syndrome after it, it becomes Parental Alienation Syndrome (Gardner 1985). For sensitive British professionals this foreign label may cause severe allergic reactions. I was only cured recently. We avoid such off-putting language and labels precisely to cut down any more alienation. But that is to forget that labels have various purposes that we use in a discriminating way. And anyway off-putting things often have off-putting names. See footnote for more on diagnosis and labels.

In fact 'social alienation' is a very ancient subject (for a good summary, see Wikipedia). Here our focus is on patterns that are more interpersonal and more recently named. Some resistance to the word is natural. But we can explore and think that through rather than dismiss the whole topic. We urgently do need to get over the allergy against what is now an important established international field of study of one troublesome family pattern. Child and Parental Alienation has been accepted in English case law now (Bellamy 2010) thanks to a few expert witnesses, past and present (Weir 2011; Cameron 2014; Woodall in press). Pitcher (2010) gives a wise British account of quiet but effective family court social work. In Holland, van Lawick & Visser (2015) describe a substantial group approach to working with children and families in enduring high conflict. All about Alienation, these important approaches succeed by avoiding the term. But without the label, this wisdom is hard to find when you need it. We need to raise awareness more generally. And to update much of the present general literature, policy and guidance in UK family law, risk and child protection that does not mention it at all so that these become a more authoritative basis for evidence, practice, research and training. We need to wonder whether some of our intervention may be what's making it worse.

Deceptively the core concern of Child and Parental Alienation is not for the parents even though they are most vexed. It is that the children involved can suffer from serious emotional abuse and long-term harm. Our collective professional involvement or ignorance is evidently failing families and their children. I want to raise awareness for those as resistant as I was once. I have tried to modify off-putting aspects. For example, the Child and Parental Alienation pattern is not fixed to gender, so that cannot be the main premise for understanding or rejecting it. Attachment-based understanding and proactive family court practices may help more. Many counter-intuities challenge even the experts (Miller 2013) and put off newcomers – over fifty have been listed (see <http://tinyurl.com/PACounterIntuities>). So it is no surprise that engaging with Alienation is hard work – unless you yourself have been thrown into the deep end of it.