



Family
Separation
Clinic

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Family Separation Clinic model

'Parental alienation is a spectrum problem of induced defensive splitting in a child that, typically, occurs within the context of a divorce or family separation and which causes the child to pathologically align with one of their parents, rendering them vulnerable to that parent's intra-psychic conflicts and defences.'

Woodall, K. & Woodall, N. (2019). Working with post-separation pathological splitting in children. London: Family Separation Clinic

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- Child protection model
- Differential assessment to understand reaction in child and causal dynamics
- Focus on defensive splitting in the child
- Utilisation of legal and mental health interlock to produce dynamic change
- Structured interventions based on immediate relief of splitting:
 - Immediate reconnection with rejected parent
 - *in situ* therapeutic intervention or
 - change of residence with therapeutic bridging
- Acts to protect the child first and resolve wider issues as part of ongoing intervention

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- These cases typically present themselves in private child 'custody' proceedings
- The risk is that it is treated as a 'contact issue' or the result of conflict between parents
- The problem appears to be the child's rejection of one parent
- In reality, the rejection is a symptom of the child's pathological alignment to the other parent
- Child protection approaches must be built into both assessment and treatment

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The child protection model

- Acts to protect the child as swiftly as possible
- Seeks the evidence that demonstrates harm is being done to the child
- Establishes the quickest route to protection of the child
- Utilises international evidence base
- Constrains alienating parent where possible
- Removes the child from the source of harm where constraint is not possible
- Protects child's right to relationship with both parents
- Supports permanent resolution of child's defensive splitting

The legal and mental health interlock

- Parental Alienation is a mental health issue which cannot be resolved by mental health alone because it is also a power and control issue
 - the legal intervention deals with the power and control element
 - the mental health intervention deals with the issue in the family
- It is not possible to do the therapeutic work without court intervention
- The court re-establishes the framework within which therapeutic work *may* remedy the problem
- The court provides extrinsic motivation for change
- Motivation is created through threat of sanction

Critical principles

- Protection of the child from harm is the first principle
- Legal and mental health interlock is a necessary prerequisite for change
- The voice of the child should be treated with utmost caution - listen to the words but respond to the actions of the child:
 - overt language - alienated child
 - covert behaviour - authentic child
- This work is not done in an office based situation, it is a relational approach in which the child is exposed to new dynamics in new situations
- Trauma based responses are necessary

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Critical principles

- Reunification work can be stressful for the practitioner
- Success rests upon:
 - the capacity of the practitioner to hold the child's split for long enough to reintegrate
 - the formerly rejected parent's capacity to reignite the suppressed attachment bond
- Reunifications take their own unique course
- Continuation of allegations may indicate:
 - the alienation reaction hasn't fully lifted
 - the allegations have become a habit
 - the child is testing the stability of the new landscape
- Allegations may extend to the practitioner

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Assessment and intervention are not separate

- Assessment is not complete until the child has been observed with the parent they are rejecting
- These families need intensive interventions which are in real time and which flow around their real lives
- Activity based therapy with child and rejected parent are key to reunification work
- Reunification work can and should take place at the earliest point in assessment
- Waiting until the child says yes is contraindicated - the child cannot say yes

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Tasks that must be undertaken

- Forensic examination of the case in order to make an assessment
- Inform and educate the court
- Prepare the treatment route
- Carry out the work
- Ensure follow up work is completed with the child

Co-therapy and co-coaching model

- The rejected parent is the healthy parent
- The rejected parent is necessary to bring the suppressed attachment relationship back to life
- The therapist acts as a co-therapist
- Normal boundaries are not in place
- Confidentiality agreements are different and enable information flow in a counter intuitive process
- Restores hierarchy of the family

Theoretical underpinning

Object relations theory

- A shift from Freud's *drive theory* (the satisfaction of innate biological needs) to the influence of relationships in developing and shaping personality
- An *object* is (usually) a person towards whom a desire or action is directed
- An *object representation* is an individual's mental representation of an object and how they relate to it
- Objects may be whole or part
- Splitting is a key concept
 - developmental
 - normal
 - defensive

Psychodynamic and psychoanalytic approaches

- Draws on concepts from psychodynamic therapy and psychoanalysis
- People adopt defence mechanisms to avoid uncomfortable feelings or impulses
- Some are conscious but most are unconscious
- Often result in maladaptive behaviours or symptoms
- Those defences, even where harmful to the individual, are powerful and often uncontrollable
- Working in this field requires practitioners who are able to:
 - interpret unconscious defensive behaviours
 - understand how these influence family dynamics

Psychogenealogy

- Transgenerational trauma re-enactment
- The splitting in the child is a displaced trauma from the influencing parent
- The inducement of the child to reject the other parent is caused by the implantation of narcissistic splitting
- The child is forced to split the self as a defence against the parent's narcissistic injury
- The rejection of a parent is, therefore, the result of past traumatic events not related to the child in the here and now

the child's route into defensive splitting

The child's route into defensive splitting

Alienation is an attachment disruption

- In the intact family, the child has a unified attachment experience
- Shifts in the child's attachment focus are fluid
- In the post separation family, the child has to find a way to maintain the unique attachment bonds in a fractured relational world
- We call this the *transition bridge*
- A child who experiences pressure in their inter-psychic world is a child who is at risk of pathological splitting

The child's route into defensive splitting

Splitting

- Splitting refers to the unconscious failure to integrate aspects of self or others into a unified whole. It is an infantile defence mechanism that helps a child to make sense of the world around them and protects them from unreconcilable feelings
- Faced with the overwhelmingly contradictory and unmanageable experience, the child splits off the powerless and vulnerable aspect of the self as a separate object representation
- The inability to hold an integrated sense of self is projected outwardly, whereby, one parent becomes the embodiment of every this that is good and the other parent the embodiment of everything that is bad

Primary internal splits



Projected expression of the internal splits



The child's route into defensive splitting

What causes a child to align

- A child's felt experience that it is not acceptable to have a relationship with the other parent
- Often present in the pre-separation family relationships
- The child's unconscious awareness of the power dynamics between their parents
- The fear of abandonment
- Sometimes overt but often rooted in the inter-psychic relationship between the child and the aligned parent

The child's route into defensive splitting

What causes a child to align

- Overt parental behaviours
 - Making a child believe they have been abused
 - Making the child feel they are unsafe in the other parent's care
 - Devaluing the role of the rejected parent
 - Involving the child in a hostile narrative
 - Telling the child things about the parent's relationship
 - Encouraging the child to make false or fabricated allegations

The child's route into defensive splitting

What causes a child to align

- Inter-psychic signals
 - Emotional shunning and abandonment threat
 - Anger and terrorisation of the child
 - Emotional dysregulation and psychological decompensation
 - Creating anxiety in a child by being overly anxious or emotional each time the child is due to see the rejected parent
 - Role corruption

The child's route into defensive splitting

Role corruption

- Enmeshed parent-child relationships including:
 - *parentification*,¹ where the child serves as a caregiver to parent, and
 - *spousification*,² where the child serves as a primary source of intimacy for parent

See, for example:

¹ Boszormenyi-Nagy, I., & Spark, G. (1973). *Invisible loyalties: Reciprocity in intergenerational family therapy*. Hagerstown, MD: Harper & Row.

² Minuchin, S. (1974). *Families and family therapy*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

The child's route into defensive splitting

Role corruption

'... when parent-child boundaries are violated, the implications for developmental psychopathology are significant. Poor boundaries interfere with the child's capacity to progress through development which (...) is the defining feature of childhood psychopathology.'

Kerig, P. K. (2005). Implications of parent-child boundary dissolution for developmental psychopathology: Who is the parent and who is the child? New York: Haworth Press.

The child's route into defensive splitting

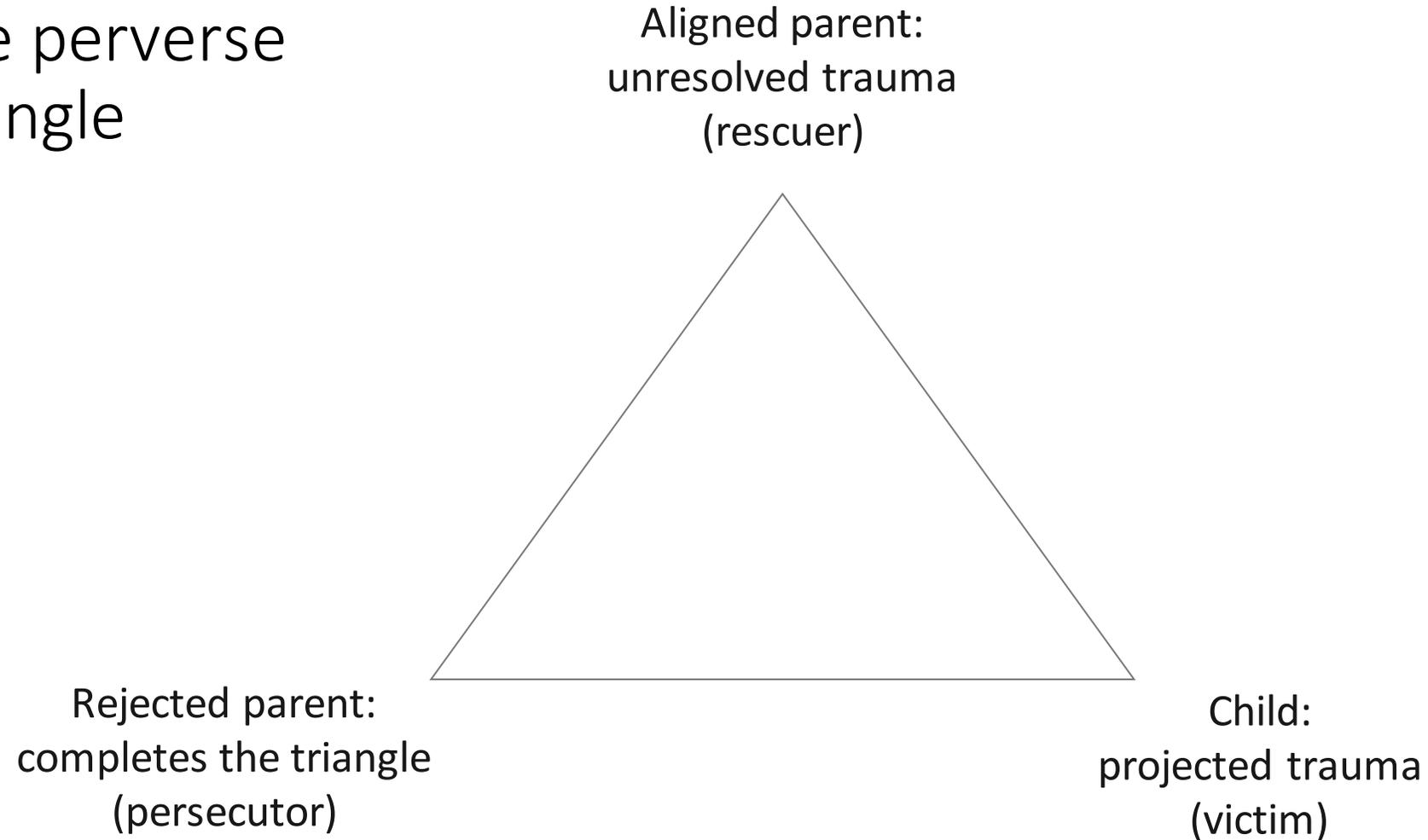
Transgenerational transmission of trauma

'During the course of normal child rearing, parents will re-experience their trauma leading to episodes of parental detachment and confusion (...) Incapable of understanding the source of the parent's distress, the child will either blame itself or be drawn into compulsively comforting the parent. Role reversal, the child comforting the parent, is a common attachment strategy undertaken by children of traumatised or disturbed parents.'

Hesse, E., & Main, M. (1999). Second-generation effects of unresolved trauma in non-maltreating parents: Dissociative, frightened, and threatening parental behavior. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 19(4), 481–540.

The child's route into defensive splitting

The perverse triangle



Haley, J. (1977). Toward a theory of pathological systems. In P. Watzlawick & J. Weakland (Eds.), *The interactional view* (pp. 31-48). New York: Norton.

The child's route into defensive splitting

Complex personality profiles and personality disorders

- Narcissistic Personality Disorder
- Borderline (Emotionally Unstable) Personality Disorder
- Histrionic Personality Disorder
- Paranoid Personality Disorder
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- Sociopathic Personality Disorder
 - also
- Intrusive parenting
- Bipolar disorder

The child's route into defensive splitting

Identification with the aggressor

- When the child feels that the attachment bond is threatened, they pathologically align with the threatening parent in order to avoid abandonment
- They split off the threatened part of themselves and the abusive parent as separate object representations
- Anything that threatens to force the child to confront the split off object must be repelled in order for the child not to have to face the trauma of recognising the attachment object as being abusive

The child's route into defensive splitting

Identification with the aggressor

'Invalidating environments contribute to emotional dysregulation by... actively teaching the child to invalidate his or her own experiences by making it necessary for the child to scan the environment for cues about how to act and feel.'

Linehan, M. M., & Koerner, K. (1993). Behavioral theory of borderline personality disorder. In J. Paris (Ed.), *Borderline personality disorder: Etiology and treatment* (pp. 103-121). Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Press.

Differential assessment

Differential assessment

Each case is unique

- Each child and each family is unique
- Whilst there may be familiar patterns between cases, each case must be forensically assessed to:
 - understand the severity of the reaction in the child
 - understand the causal dynamics
- Forensic analysis of the case
- It is not possible to identify the appropriate treatment route until this work has been done

Estrangement or 'justified rejection'

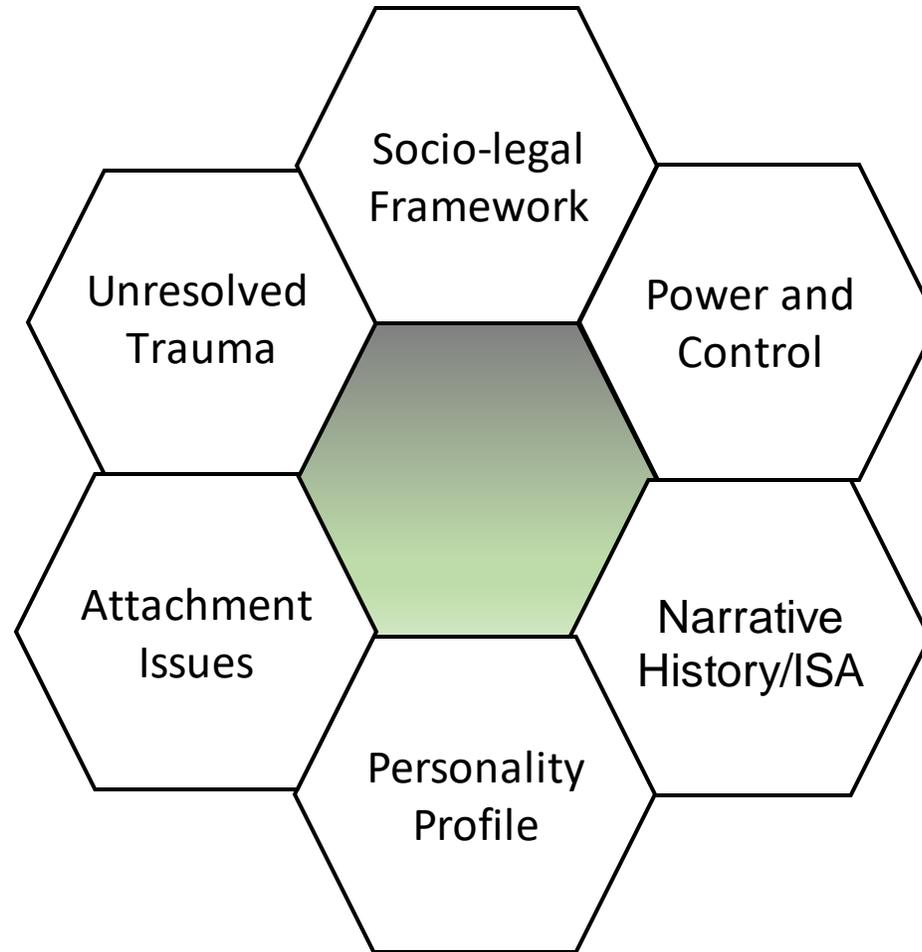
- There are no specific parental behaviours that lead to what may be termed a 'justified rejection'
- A justified estrangement is identified through the quality of the rejection and the child's narrative
- It is a (typically) temporary rejection of a relationship with a parent that isn't accompanied by the clinical markers of parental alienation
- The child is not psychologically split and retains ambivalence and perspective in the relationship with both parents

Assessing for severity

- Identification of defensive splitting :
 - projective testing
 - narrative description
 - ambivalence
 - spread of animosity
 - ability to access positive memories
- Strength of splitting
 - is splitting ameliorated through proximity with rejected parent?

Differential assessment

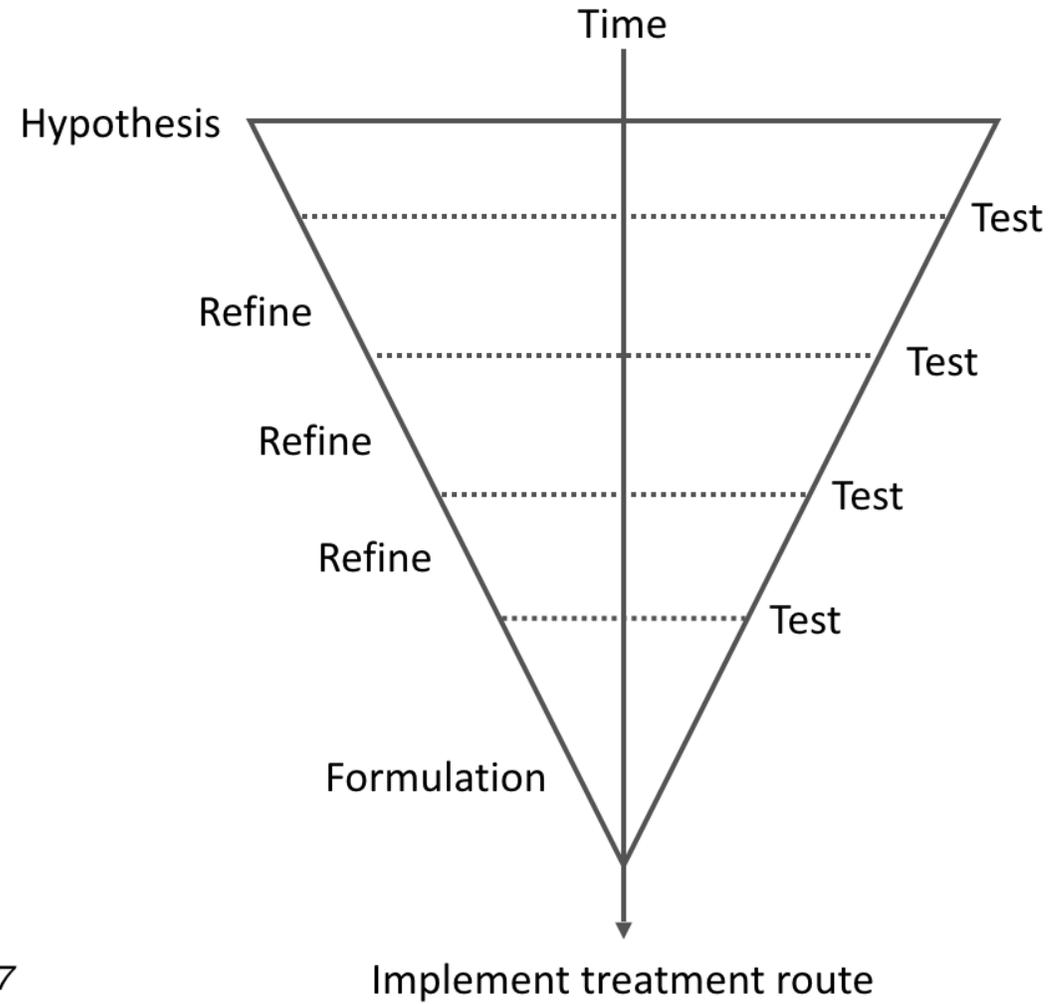
Assessment of
the causal
dynamics



Clinical observation

- Child(ren) alone
- Aligned parent alone
- Rejected parent alone
- Child(ren) with aligned parent
- Child(ren) with rejected parent
- Possibly extended family

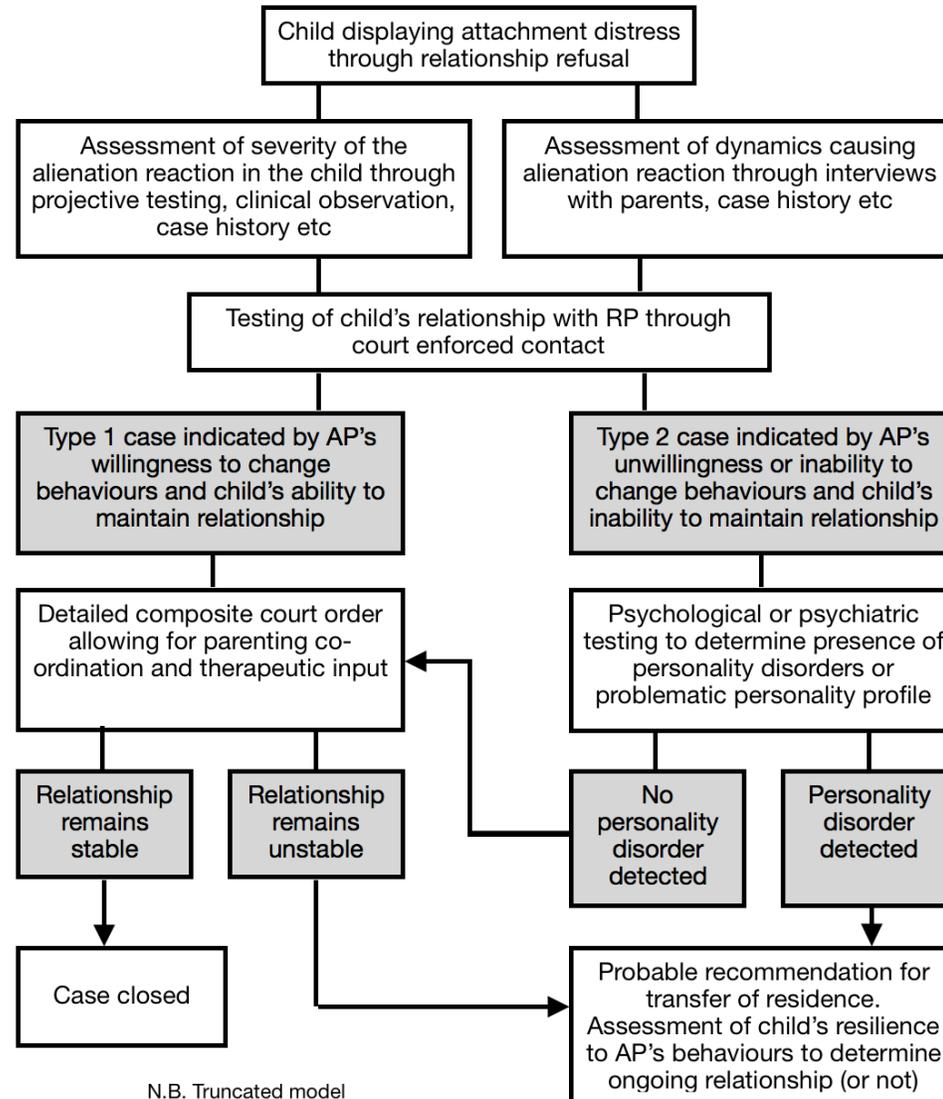
Differential assessment



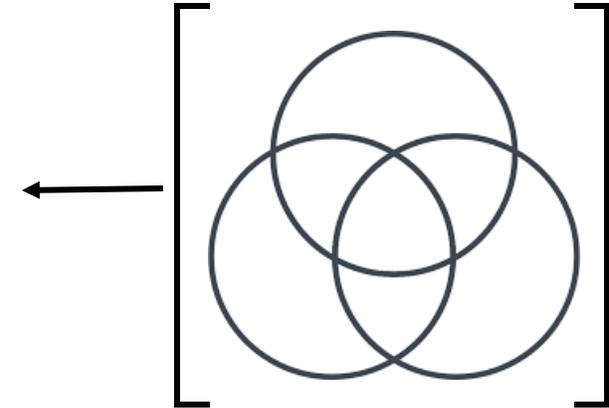
Woodall & Woodall, 2017

Differential assessment

Family Separation Clinic Diagnostic Model



N.B. Truncated model



Intervention and treatment

Intervention and treatment

Reconfigure the power dynamic

- Mediate the power over the child via the court process
- The judge assumes role of the *super parent*
- Hold the power as the practitioner on behalf of the court
- Expose child to the split off self and object (rejected parent)
- Allow attachment to do the work
- Hand responsibility to parent
- Allow proximity to do the work

Co-therapy and co-coaching model

- Rooted in Structural Family Therapy
- Assessment of the receiving parent's ability to receive
- Therapeutic input to address splitting and other issues in receiving parent
- Psychoeducation to help parent understand child's need
- Principles:
 - Authentic child responds to the attachment with rejected parent
 - Shift power and control over the child to the therapist
 - Place rejected parent in co-therapist role

Intervention and treatment

Generic therapy is not the answer

'even under court order, traditional therapies are of little, if any, benefit in regard to treating this form of child abuse.' [based on 1,000 cases]

Clawar, S. S. & Rivlin, B. V. (2013). Children held hostage: Identifying brainwashed children, presenting a case, and crafting solutions (2nd Edition). Chicago, IL: American Bar Association.

'[t]herapy in more severe cases, which may include some moderate cases, may be associated with the alienation becoming more entrenched.'

Fidler, B. J., Bala, N., & Saini, M. A. (2013). Children who resist postseparation parental contact: A differential approach for legal and mental health professionals. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Intervention and treatment

Practitioners have to be prepared to override the voice of the child

'Children align themselves with the parent they most fear, or the parent they regard as most unstable (...) [a]lthough these children may be outspoken in their custodial preferences, their wishes may not reflect their genuine best interests (...) Giving children's wishes and feelings paramount weight in determining the outcome of such cases burdens children with the terrible responsibility and impossible task of managing the adult world around them.'

Warshak, R.A. (2003). Payoffs and pitfalls of listening to children. *Family Relations*, 52, 373-384.



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www.familyseparationclinic.co.uk
