

THE PASG PREVENTION PROJECT: A PRELIMINARY REPORT

By Dr. Nick Child and Judge Philip Marcus – 2020

During 2019 a number of strands of interest within Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) grew a focus on prevention. The topic of prevention was featured in the PASG 2019 conference in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. After discussion, PASG set up a Prevention Project coordinated by Dr. Nick Child, retired child psychiatrist and family therapist (Scotland), and retired Family Court Judge Philip Marcus (Israel).

Background

The main concern of sufferers and helpers at the frontline of parental alienation (PA) is intervention: to get urgent authoritative measures of help, safeguarding, and justice for the case in hand. The wider world has remained unaware if not actively ignorant and dismissive of PA. Separating families are shocked to the core when it ambushes them. PA threatens to destroy all that they hold dear. Their top concern is the welfare of the children and the quality of family love and care the children are getting with one parent, when they are cut off from the other.

Across the world, the context for intervention with severe post-separation trouble is private family law and family courts. Yet there is also widespread dismay at the slow ineffectual way family law systems often mishandle PA.

Naturally, intervention dominates our concerns in the PA field and in PASG. Everyone, it is said, must long for prevention of a scourge like this. So a prevention project should express this desire. Everyone has certainly longed for earlier intervention than most family courts deliver. And early intervention is a step forward on any scale of prevention.

Aims and Methods

Clarifying the aims and methods of this prevention project has been its first task. If prevention is so important, a second overall aim is to build a culture where we work on prevention as much as we work on intervention. The third aim is obviously to develop the best prevention ideas and practice to be shared, tried out, and evaluated. Fourthly, a prevention project might help formulate the methodology and structure for all of this.

The initial stage of the project was to invite PASG members through emails and an article in the PAI newsletter to submit the best prevention ideas they have. As well as engaging wide interest, the aim was to use this as a starting point for organising the ideas and to think through the rationale of what prevention of PA looks like.

Initial Results

By the end of January 2020, 64 people had emailed the coordinators 132 of their own or other people's prevention ideas. Despite three invitations, people we know who have serious ideas about prevention have not yet sent them in. As we get serious, we are sure no one will want their ideas left out.

Some respondents have clearly thought a lot about prevention. They submitted several well-worked out ideas. Some were already established in practice; others were just brief blue-sky thinking. A few expressed hopes rather than actual ideas for prevention.

A spread sheet was created to summarise the submissions. To get a handle on a mass of information, we [NC] took the liberty of condensing each idea into a short phrase that contained the gist of it. A raw list of these one-line summaries without the authors' names is available [HERE](#).

We then worked hard to discuss, digest, and organise the wide range of ideas submitted. We wanted a schema to make best sense of prevention that factored in key things like: time-scale, mode of operation, key target group, need for resourcing or major (e.g., legal) changes, as well as how feasible it is to roll out good local innovation to be standard for all.

We have used a simple timescale—a notional trajectory of PA's development before and after the emergence of the recognisable pattern we know. Of course, even that simple schema raises interesting and often complex issues. We set out a few of those issues below.

Some Examples

To illustrate the range and diversity, here's a few of the ideas sent in, some only half serious.

- Don't partner up; (if you do) don't have children; (if you do) never separate
- Teach young people about life, e.g., to spot and avoid wrong friends and partners
- Hold parents accountable after separation more than the system does
- Find ways to talk and resolve misunderstandings with PA-detractors
- Make shared-parenting the rebuttable default starting point after separation
- Social impact media campaigns to build the value and importance of family ties
- Campaign to train, educate, and raise awareness of "parental alienation" per se
- Early, e.g., school-based programs to spot and help post-separation trouble (including PA)
- More, e.g., early routine education and support for separating couples
- Transfer "PA" into a "psychological maltreatment / emotional abuse" framework
- Much more, e.g., compulsory use of mediation, alternative resolution, and support
- Major reform of present family law; consider adversarial vs. inquisitorial systems
- Mandatory education in PA, etc., for family judges, lawyers, and professionals
- Make the courts effective and efficient—weeks, not months and years
- "Three strikes," i.e., mess up contact three times and residence changes
- Real consequences for false allegation and contempt of court orders

The three last ideas count both as early intervention and as prevention—through their educational or salutary effects on others. Many of the ideas submitted were about how to improve family law and courts. Well over one-third of the suggestions were for multidisciplinary education of professionals, especially those in legal and judicial roles. The focus on family law and courts is not a surprise within a PASG membership who mostly work in that context. Yet

it is also clear how many see family law as part of the problem, the wrong system even. If so, prevention might mean a new system not just improving the old one.

How to Think About Prevention

Here is some of our preliminary thinking about prevention. The aim is to provide feedback and engage everyone in this process, to share our thinking, and build more of it so that, ultimately, we can all rapidly find the best ways to prevent these worst post-separation family troubles.

A prevention timescale

First, a basic timescale. Logically preventing X must happen before X appears. Once X appears, you've not prevented it. Thus: Vaccination prevents disease. Pedestrian crossings prevent people being run over.

Here's a schematic three-stage prevention timeline to work with:

- Early prevention
- Late prevention
- Early intervention

Early intervention happens as soon as possible after PA appears. See below for more on late intervention. This simple schema gives us six points to look at:

- When does PA appear? Who sees it?
- A good target group for prevention
- Reframing severe and entrenched
- Late intervention is not acceptable
- The dilemma of raising public awareness
- Resistance to prevention within the field

When does PA appear? Who sees it?

We can see that PA requires more definition than concrete events like infection or road accidents. Those who know what to look for would see PA starting (if they were there to see it) long before others would, that is, people who are unaware or actively blind to it.

Note that unlike other family abuse which is done in secret, signs of PA can be seen quite openly by anyone with eyes to see them. That means we can hold the highest hopes for the prevention of PA.

We suggest that PA starts when someone competent would positively recognise it—if they were there to see it. That basis implies that we promote education and awareness so that routine recognition of PA at its start can eventually be expected.

In any case, we can see there is a grey area when we would see things that might be heading towards PA but wouldn't count as PA itself at that stage. We can rate them as "early signs of PA." Education, medical, and social work professionals are among those in a good position to pick up the early signs. We can envisage picking up the "early signs" right away, to work with them so that fully developed PA does not appear. Thus, late prevention prevents PA.

A good target group for prevention

This is an important principle of effective prevention: Target a likely affected group of people and the boundary where PA may emerge. That is where we most want to focus our limited resources on preventing the expected from happening. In general, this target group will be parents known to be separating (e.g., because they tell someone or come for help or to family lawyers). And the children of separating parents (e.g., in school or other agencies who see them). This targets the boundary between late prevention and earliest intervention. Thinking about this target area leads to other prevention targets like earlier signs of concern before separation itself; and to how things may not go wrong until long after separation.

Reframing severe and entrenched

This led us to imagine how prevention will work first of all for all kinds and degrees of pre- and post-separation trouble, not just the stereotypical severe kinds. Mild or severe, these are all highly distressing and harmful patterns for children and families. Secondly, we see how prevention will work more, not less, effectively with the most severe cases. We tend to assume severe cases will keep going into entrenchment and years of family courts. But actually they will be most easily spotted. Then, if mild measures of help don't work, what works years later—e.g., actual or threatened transfer of main residence—can be done more easily at this much earlier stage.

Late intervention is not acceptable

We can right away confidently urge that PASG's—or anyone's—top prevention policy should be: Late intervention is not acceptable. Intervention months and years down the river of family courts may be common and needed just now. But delay is harmful to children and families. And late intervention is less likely to be effective. Anyone who is happy with long drawn out family law proceedings is pursuing other less ethical agendas than child welfare.

Heroic late intervention is better than none. But it does not prevent PA. Late intervention is only preventive in the medical sense that it prevents more fatal consequences: relationship cut-offs, injustice, harm, despair, insanity, disorder, murder, and suicide. For these reasons, late intervention is an essential but still a second best to early intervention and prevention.

The dilemma of raising public awareness

If raising awareness of the experience and pattern we know as PA is what's needed to prevent it, what do we do with the abiding dismissal of that particular term by powerful detractors? Do we build even more powerful scientific evidence for PA and battle harder to establish it? Or do we move away from the provocative term PA, as some campaigns do, to a positive

promotion of family ties, love and child welfare? Or both? There are already established campaigns of both kinds to compare, for example:

- PA-based campaigns, such as [Parental Alienation UK](#) and [Parental Alienation Europe](#)
- Non-PA campaigns, such as [For Kids Sake](#) and [Erasing Family](#)

Resistance to prevention within the field

We mentioned above how “everyone” surely welcomes prevention. In fact, there can be considerable resistance from within the field. Heroes are often fighting with all their might to fight, survive, and intervene at all with cases of PA. Many have made their name, fame, and fortune from leading these battles. And no one disputes that early intervention would be best.

But if you are dedicated to that front line of (usually late) intervention, it can be annoying to have someone—who may be ignorant of what that heroic intervention entails—make the suggestion that there might be other better ways to do things. Even more infuriating, the prevention-promoter admits they do not yet know for sure what the better ways are. One of us explored this dynamic further, setting out an assessment of how receptive a system would be if presented with better prevention options (Child, 2020).

Conclusion

This is a preliminary report of the PASG Prevention Project. From the full summary list of 132 diverse ideas about prevention of PA submitted by 64 PASG members, we present some examples. Many emphasised the need for multidisciplinary education of the professions involved. But prevention starts much earlier: the objective should be to prevent cases from getting to the stage of adversarial, or of misguided inquisitorial, litigation.

We share some preliminary thinking arising from this first phase that aims to get us working as much on prevention as on intervention. We have proposed a basic timescale to help us think about prevention, along with six other points arising: When does PA appear? Who sees it?; a good target group for prevention; reframing severe and entrenched; late intervention is not acceptable; the dilemma of raising public awareness; and resistance to prevention within the field.

What Next?

This is not the last word, but a starter on prevention to generate engagement and further ideas. Please read widely and talk to anyone and everyone about prevention. Let us know your favourite resources. We expect to engage those most able and interested in developing more of a structure for prevention strategy and plans within PASG and more widely.

Acknowledgements

Both coordinators/authors of this report are fully retired and comfortably pensioned. Our previous career and interests may bring a bias to our viewpoint. But we have no vested interest

in promoting any particular sector or approach. We are motivated entirely to use reason and evidence to find the best way to prevent and help those who suffer and those who try to help these worst post-separation family troubles.

We thank all those who have sent in their ideas. We are sorry we have not been able to set up proper discussion with each of you and your ideas. Now you've put them in writing, we would encourage you to develop your ideas into a submission in your own right, e.g., in the PASG, newsletter, *Parental Alienation International*. Perhaps we can create an online page on the PASG website for everyone's prevention proposals.

Contact Us:

Email the coordinators of the Prevention Project at: prevention@pasg2020.eu

References

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