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Hello Mary,

I'm so sorry to learn of your struggles.

Restrictions governing the practice of professional psychology prevent me from commenting specifically on your situation, but I can offer some general comments regarding the processes associated with parental alienation.

As you are aware, the issue is NOT one of oppositional or defiant behavior, or of normal-range parent-child relationship problems. The issue is that the child has adopted false and unbalanced meaning constructions regarding one parent, as a result of the pathogenic parenting (i.e., parenting behavior that produces psychopathology in a child) of the other parent combined with the child's natural developmental tendency to socially reference the meaning constructions of parents, particularly in ambiguous situations.

The treatment issue involves resolving an induced delusional disorder. This means that therapies that target the child's relationship behavior, as if the child's behavior is simply normal-range oppositional-defiant behavior or parent child conflict, will be entirely ineffective.

In my professional view, the treatment involves 4 phases:

1. Rescue the child

Pathogenic parenting that is inducing significant psychopathology in a child (i.e., a delusional belief system regarding a parent, personality disorder traits, and a severely dysfunctional attachment system) move the issue from one of child custody and parental rights to one of child protection. The first step is to protect the child's capacity for healthy psychological development by rescuing the child from the psychopathology and psychological control of the narcissistic-pathological parent. This step is essential, and it is consistent with the DSM-IV TR Shared Psychotic Disorder treatment recommendation of "separation" of the secondary case (i.e., the child) from the primary case (i.e., the narcissistically decompensating parent).

2 Recovering the authentic child.

This step involves re-balancing the child's constructions of meaning, challenging the personality disorder symptoms of grandiose entitlement, and restoring empathy, love, and affection for the previously rejected-abandoned parent

3. Restoring the parent-child relationship.

This step involves restoring an appropriate parent-child hierarchy within the family structure and developing appropriate parent-child communication, including

appropriate self-expression of differences and resolution of authentic parent-child conflict (called "breach-and-repair" sequences).

4. Reunification of the child with the pathological parent.

Once the child's meaning constructions have been re-balanced, the final step is to reintroduce the parent-child relationship with the pathological parent, to restore this relationship following the imposed separation necessary for treatment of the delusional processes and recovery of the authentic child.

Treating Induced Delusions

In treating an induced delusional disorder, I think using the example of how another common induced delusional process resolves itself can be helpful for understanding an approach to treating the induced delusional processes of parental alienation. There is another common example of an induced delusional belief in children; the Santa Claus delusion.

So how does the Santa delusion resolve? First, through the development of the child's critical thinking skills. The belief in Santa Claus starts to change when the child begins to question the evidence in support of Santa and realizes that it just doesn't stand up to reason (i.e., critical thinking). How does Santa get to all those houses in one night? And deer don't fly, birds fly. Wait a minute, why are there different Santas at different shopping centers? And that's not a real beard on Santa.. i.e., the delusion resolves as a result of critical thinking (since critical thinking begins to emerge between the ages 5-7, the Santa delusion typically tends to resolve by age 8-9).

Second, the Santa delusion resolves through social referencing in which it is challenged by trusted others and socially discounted as an accurate belief. This occurs when friends and older siblings begin to say to the child things like "you still believe in Santa?!" so that the child realizes that others don't believe in Santa. Social referencing the meaning constructions of trusted others can help restore the child's own balanced constructions of meaning.

Critical thinking and social referencing that challenges the false belief, that's the treatment for the Santa delusion, and that's the treatment for the parental alienation delusion.

Personal approach

If I were faced with the pathogenic parenting that led to parental alienation processes following a divorce, I might adopt the following approach:

De facto sole custody versus authentic joint custody

I would seek to establish the conceptual framework within my legal filings that the children's increasingly hostile rejection-abandonment of me represents an induced

disorder in the children reflecting “pathogenic parenting” by the other parent in which “aberrant and unbalanced meaning constructions” are being induced in the children regarding the divorce and me as a parent and person (I would steadfastly avoid using the term “parental alienation”).

I would also establish in my legal filings that without effective treatment of this interpersonal family issue, Court orders for joint custody will essentially become de facto orders for sole custody to the other parent (see attached handout: “Pathogenic Parenting During Divorce”).

By making this argument early, I would then repeatedly make this argument in subsequent Court filings as the situation evolves and deteriorates into sole custody to the other parent. I would argue that as long as the family psychopathology remains untreated, Court orders for joint custody will become de facto orders for sole custody to the other, pathological, parent. True joint custody can only be achieved once the psychopathology within the family process is effectively treated.

Court-ordered psychotherapy

If I’m granted a Court order for parent-child therapy, I would want the expressed mandate from the Court that I have sole discretion for choosing the therapist, since it is my relationship with the children that is being disrupted, and that the other parent cannot withdraw consent for the children to participate in the parent-child therapy with me, and with the therapist of my choosing, since this will allow the other parent to undermine my ability to obtain appropriate therapy for my relationship with my child.

Interacting with the children

I would strive to maintain a calm and confident assertion of meaning with the children, and I would always strive to take the high road; to be an exceptional parent. This allows for three outcomes, 1) it does not place the children into the parental/spousal conflict; i.e., it is good for the children, 2) it makes it hard for the children to continue with their delusional false belief about my being a bad parent and person, which can be further supported through the development of critical thinking skills, and 3) it highlights that the children’s rejection-abandonment of me is not rationally justified, which helps the therapist and my attorney in making the case for the children’s behavior being an induced disorder resulting from the pathogenic parenting by the other parent.

I would strive to enlist and build on the children’s critical thinking. When the children make some judgmental rejecting comment, I’d respond in a calm and dismissing way that their meaning construction is simply silly (i.e., “that’s silly, there’s no [Santa Claus]”) and I’d engage their critical thinking (“you know me, does that really make sense to you? [“how can deer fly, they don’t have any wings.”]) WITHOUT getting into details that place the children into the spousal conflict (“I don’t want to discuss details, because that’s a marital issue, not a child issue. But I’ll just say that that’s just silly. You know me, you know your dad (or mom), and you’ll just have to use your judgment on that).

I'd recognize that the children have to survive psychologically with the psychopathology of the other parent, so that the children need to do what is necessary in order to survive. Unless I can accomplish their rescue, then I have to understand that they are still in the abusive psychological relationship of control-power-domination that I am escaping. But they can't escape. So I wouldn't take the kids' rejection personally, it's what they have to do to survive. Once we are able to rescue them, or if we cannot effect their rescue then when they ultimately escape through maturation, then we can work to recover their authenticity.

Enlisting professional help

Many therapists will be professionally incompetent and will therefore not comprehend the psychological-interpersonal issues involved. I would actively challenge the professional incompetence of bad psychotherapists. I would do so by providing them with the following handouts available on my website:

- Boundaries of Competence:

This handout puts the therapist or forensic evaluator on notice that I, as a parent, mean business and that, as a parent, I EXPECT professional competence. If the therapist doesn't know what he or she is doing, then the therapist needs to decline the case and refer to someone who does know what they're doing. This handout establishes one set of grounds for filing a licensing board complaint if the therapist acts incompetently.

- Professional-to-Professional Letter of Diagnostic Concern

This handout succinctly describes in professional language the psychological-interpersonal issues involved. At its conclusion the letter requests that if these psychological-diagnostic issues are not warranted, the therapist document the reasons. If it looks like a duck, and walks like a duck, and quacks like a duck... it's a duck. So why isn't the therapist's or forensic evaluator's diagnosis "a duck"? The failure to make an accurate and warranted DSM-IV TR diagnosis may also be grounds for filing a licensing board complaint.

- Narcissistic Decompensation during Divorce

This handout describes the theoretical underpinnings for understanding the process and identifies the specific personality disorder features for the professional to look for in the assessment-diagnosis process.

- Construction of Meaning

This essay presents the theoretical underpinnings for the transfer of psychopathology from the parent to the child through pathogenic parenting and the child's natural developmental tendency to socially reference the meaning constructions of parents, particularly in ambiguous situations.

- Diagnostic Criteria for Shared Psychotic Disorder

This handout orients the mental health professional to the actual DSM-IV TR diagnostic criteria. Of particular note is that the delusion is repeatedly identified as nonbizarre, that the child is identified as “otherwise healthy” in the discussion of the Shared Psychotic Disorder diagnosis, and that the strongly implied treatment involves “separation” of the child from the psychopathology of the primary case.

I would AVOID humanistic-existential therapists. I would seek to locate a family systems therapist (Structural Family Systems: Salvador Minuchin). And I’d read Salvador Minuchin’s work on family systems to understand what the family issues and treatment issues are. I’d become a very informed consumer of psychotherapy services.

(As an aside, I am available for e-mail or telephone consultation with any therapist or evaluator wishing to more fully understand the diagnosis or treatment of this family-interpersonal process).

Understanding the child

Your children love you. They want a loving and positive relationship with you. That’s just how children’s brains are constructed. Children absolutely and completely love their parents. Be certain in this understanding; your children love you very, very much.

But they aren’t allowed to love you or to be loved by you. Whenever they visit with you they will be interrogated by the other parent, and they have to say something negative. They can either have a wonderful relationship with you and then just make up flat-out lies for the other parent, or they can create conflicts with you so that they can report on actual problems during the interrogation by the other parent. Children will do the latter.

But they love you, and it hurts that they cannot express their love for you or receive your love for them. It hurts, and they try to understand why they hurt whenever they’re around you, and they misattribute the meaning of their pain to dad’s (or mom’s) attribution of meaning, “dad must be right, mom’s bad and hurts people.”

If I were faced with this situation, I might respond with something along the following lines as a calm and confident assertion of an alternate construction of meaning regarding the child’s inner experience:

Child: <says crazy rejecting stuff>

Parent: Really. You think I’m a horrible person just for that? That’s just silly <dismiss crazy constructions of meaning>. You know what I think? <offer alternative construction of meaning to child’s authentic inner experience of pain associated with you> I think you actually love me very much, <the child will not be able to acknowledge this, don’t expect it. What we’re doing is planting the seeds for an alternative construction of meaning> just like I love you with all my heart, but I

think that it's hard for you to express or share our love because of all this divorce stuff between me and your dad, so that you're hurting because you're finding it hard, or unacceptable to share our love. I understand that. This divorce is hard. Your dad and I had to separate, so now I've been able to get away. But you're still kind of caught in the middle. And that can be hard. And I don't want you to be caught in the middle, so you do what you need to do. I don't like it if you feel you have to take sides, and I won't ask you to take sides because I don't want to put you in the middle of your dad and me. But if you feel that you have to take sides, so that loving your dad means you can't express your love with me, or accept my love for you... I don't like it, but I understand. You're in a very difficult position... and I love you.

I just want you to think about it. You're a smart girl. You know me and you know your dad. I love you very much, and I know you love me too. But I also understand the difficult position that the divorce of your dad and I places you in.

There's no need to buy into their delusions. There is no [Santa Claus], that's just silly. Trying to answer all their irrational justifications as if they had a reality base will be irrelevant. You can't argue with a delusion.

I would calmly and confidently assert that the child's beliefs are not accurate (i.e., provide the child with clear social communications that clearly dismiss the proposed meaning constructions as clearly false – don't argue, just assert meaning), and I would calmly and confidently assert that I love them very much and that I want a positive loving relationship with them (i.e., I'd lovingly assert an alternative balanced meaning construction).

Hopefully, my thoughts will be helpful to you. Feel free to share them as seems appropriate.

Best wishes to you and your family.

Sincerely,

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