

Foreword

By William Bernet, M.D.

The readers of this narrative know that it has something to do with parental alienation because it says so right on the cover of the book. Parental alienation is an unusual human experience because it may continue for a long time, sometimes years, before the people who are directly involved realise what is happening to them. This is especially true for the alienated parent, that is, the parent whose relationship with his or her child has been stolen by the machinations of the alienating parent. Once in place, parental alienation may last a lifetime.

In this story, the alienating parent is Nellie; the alienated parent is Trevor; and the child is Jasmine. This book should be read by anyone that seeks insight as to how a good parent may be removed from their child's life. It should also be read by professionals such as police, social workers, psychologists, psychiatrists, lawyers, and the judiciary to gain an understanding of this form of child psychological abuse, systems abuse, and how their actions may aid the perpetrator.

The Pinball Machine is a detailed account, in which Trevor and Nellie move between Australia and the Netherlands;

their relationship transitions from blissful to controlling and vengeful; their children are caught up in intense loyalty conflicts; and they have numerous, frustrating legal interactions. During the early part of the story, there are red flags that parental alienation may be in the works. For example, Nellie tends to isolate herself from Trevor, her children, and their extended family. She has no interest in sharing her own past experiences with Trevor and her children. She has no empathy for Jasmine when she is seriously ill. She lies to Trevor about big and little topics.

Try to put yourself in Trevor's shoes and see if you can identify when he could have realized that he and Jasmine were victims of a campaign of alienating behaviours by Nellie. There is a very dramatic and heartbreaking scene in a McDonald's restaurant, and at that point, Trevor must have grasped that his child was severely alienated from him—even if he could not accept what had happened. Statements made by Nellie in court before that scene and information subsequently gathered by subpoenas, eventually reveal the tangled web of deceit and Trevor's acceptance of the reality of parental alienation and the relationship's destruction. In retrospect, it seems like the processes of brainwashing, indoctrination, and alienation had already been occurring for several years.

It is my contention—that parental alienation occurs right in front of us without being noticed—also happens with mental health and legal professionals. In my work as a child psychiatrist, I knew a family court judge in the 1980s, who told me about a psychologist named Barry Bricklin (who developed a psychological test that helps to identify alienated children). In the 1990s, a psychologist colleague

recommended that I read a book by Stanley Clawar and Brynne Rivlin (whose book, *Children Held Hostage*, dramatically described how one parent can brainwash the child to fear the other parent). After that, Richard Gardner and I worked together on a project for the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. Gardner wrote extensively about “parental alienation syndrome”, and I eventually learned from him to recognise that malignant psychological condition, which afflicts hundreds of thousands of children and families throughout the world. It was only then that I realized that in previous years, I had seen several cases of parental alienation, but I did not understand or recognise what I was looking at. The naïve evaluator simply takes the children’s statements at face value, that is, that they hate their father (or their mother) because of the horrible things that parent did; the evaluator does not realise that the children’s adamant refusal to see the rejected parent is driven a firmly held false belief, like a delusion.

This failure to recognise and identify the pathological phenomenon of parental alienation goes beyond the experience of individual families and lack of awareness of trained psychologists and psychiatrists—this blindness has persisted on a societal level for many decades. We know that parental alienation was described in British legal records from the early nineteenth century. We know that mental health professionals described parental alienation—using an assortment of names—in the twentieth century. For example, psychoanalyst David Levy in the 1940s, child psychiatrist Louise Despert in the 1950s, and psychiatrist Salvador Minuchin in the 1970s. Eventually, Richard Gardner identified more than

one hundred such cases and gave it a name, “parental alienation syndrome”, in 1985. Since that time, scholars have published hundreds of articles in professional journals, chapters, and books. Attorneys have successfully litigated cases involving parental alienation in hundreds of courtrooms in many countries.

Despite this widespread acceptance of the importance of parental alienation in mental health and legal domains, there remains considerable ignorance regarding this topic. Although I refer to it as “ignorance”, I am not sure whether this lack of awareness of parental alienation results from deficient knowledge or from a pernicious, purposeful refusal to accept the reality of this challenging mental condition. It remains for those of us who are concerned about parental alienation to continue to work energetically in at least four arenas: research regarding the underlying causes of parental alienation; systematic studies of the interventions for parental alienation; education of mental health and legal trainees and practitioners, such as attorneys and judges; and advocacy with legislatures and the judiciary to improve the practices in family courts. This book, *The Pinball Machine*, is a powerful light for raising awareness, and a beacon for guiding our paths toward addressing the misery of parental alienation.

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