

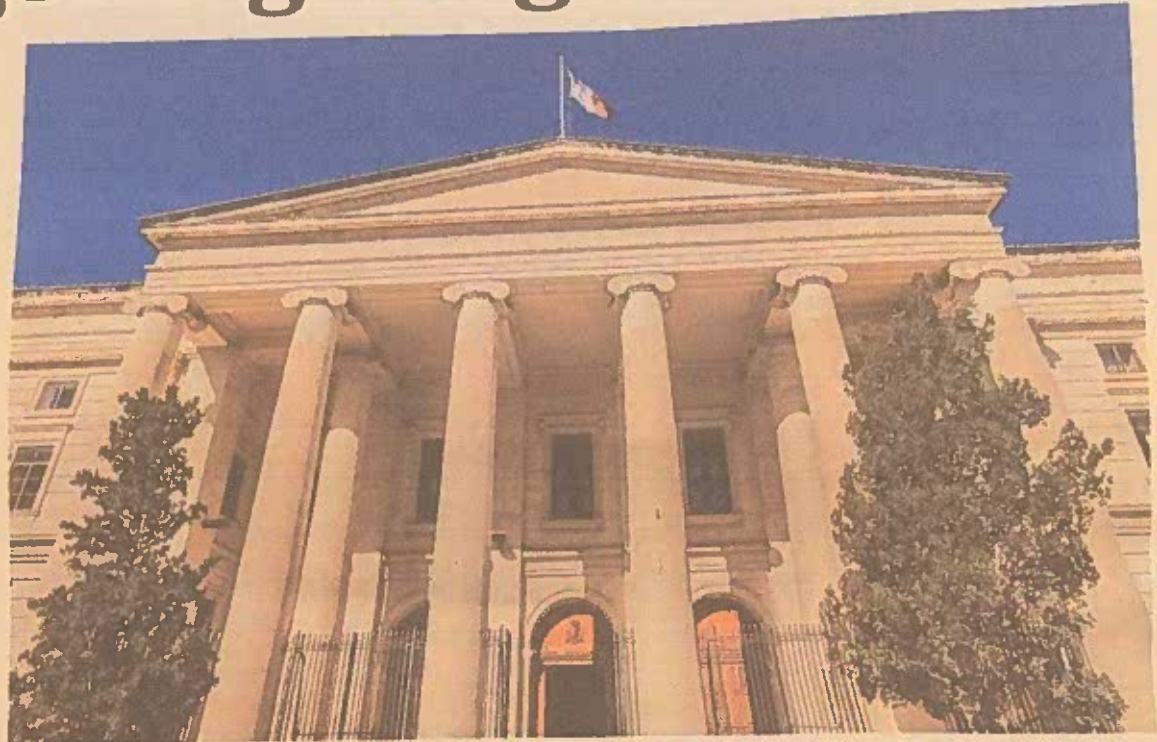
Opinion

Parental alienation: we're not getting it right



MARK SAID

These last months I've been spending hours on end listening to distraught parents who have been and still are victims of parental alienation and have confided in me what they have been through. What I learnt and got to know is truly incredible, shocking and extremely worrying. This was no exaggeration, and I was provided with tangible and irrefutable proof of what is going on in our family court system.



Cases are increasing of pure or severe alienation in which the reason for the rejection by the child was solely caused by one parent acting in a determined and conscious manner to eradicate the other parent from a child's life.

I am concerned about the dynamics present within the Family Court system itself and around it regarding parental alienating behaviours and the tragic outcome, parental alienation.

In discussions about parental alienation, some academics, family court lawyers and other court professionals, such as the child advocate, use dismissive or undermining language. They often call it "pseudoscience" or describe it as an overly simplistic, reductionistic, controversial or heated topic. This choice of words creates an impression of doubt and divisiveness around the issue, manipulating public perception and discouraging meaningful dialogue.

Some practitioners within the family court system are pushing the narrative that claims of parental alienation are primarily tactics used by abusive fathers to gain custody from protective mothers. Although abusive parents can make false claims of abuse, this perspective dismisses parental alienating behaviours as a valid form of emotional abuse and downplays irrefutable proof demonstrating its severe impact

on children and targeted parents. That same proof is today even capturing alienating behaviour extending to grandparents and is now considered a form of elder abuse.

An agenda seems to be driven that benefits from ignoring parental alienating behaviours. By framing parental alienation as a weapon used in abuse claims, these practitioners deflect attention from the actual psychological harm caused by these behaviours. This results in a biased approach where genuine cases of alienation are not taken seriously, and the courts fail to protect children from emotional manipulation.

Another concerning trend is the increasing emphasis on prioritising the child's voice in family court decisions. While considering a child's perspective is important, these practitioners often overlook the fact that alienated children may have been emotionally manipulated or coached to reject one parent.

In one particular case, an alienated mother experienced a grave injustice and offered me a lot of insight. The children involved were all minors, lacking full maturity to decide their own real fate. No one could blame the children for anything. They were simply 10 or 11 years old, so what kind of life skills did they have to decide that their father was the most exemplary father of

the century and their mother should be eliminated from their lives?

Common sense should tell us that if these children used to always be taken good care of by their mother all their lives, what had suddenly happened to make these children all of a sudden refuse her to be in their lives?

A child psychologist misled the mother that her report would contain the sole award of custody to her. Her report contained a simple statement stating if these kids wanted to forever live with their father, then their wish should be granted.

To add insult to injury, the judge in question accepted such a puerile report, while the child advocate did not even bother to investigate.

The suggestibility of children, particularly in alienation cases, means their expressed wishes may not always reflect their true needs or desires, but rather the influence of a coercive parent.

The stark truth is that a significant financial incentive is starting to perpetuate the high-conflict model. The longer a case remains in court, the more money legal professionals earn. Ignoring parental alienating behaviours ensures the conflict continues, as the targeted parent is likely to persist in their legal battle to maintain a relationship with their child. This cycle benefits family court practitioners financially

while causing ongoing harm to the family, especially the children.

It is important that the use of the term parental alienation, in describing a child's rejection is accurate and based on reality. Only then can a definitive prognosis be given and a treatment route set out. Sadly, for some, although this matching of analysis to treatment is done carefully and with the knowledge that this can release the child, the desire to carry on the projection of blame onto the other parent remains so strong that only the term parental alienation in its pure meaning will do.

Often, it seems, patterns of behaviour are being discerned, which creates a double bind for a child who becomes captured in the unresolved conflict between two adults and sometimes two family systems. These are complex and difficult cases to deal with.

Education, research and increased awareness are even more crucial than ever, as we have not yet come to grips with this elusive and evil phenomenon.

For now, regrettably, the Family Court and practitioners therein are persisting in perpetuating the parental alienation industry.

Some time back, I had already called for parental alienation to be made a criminal offence. Today, I make a stronger plea.

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