

The need for a National Parental Alienation Day on 25th April – Sad, but true

'Parental Alienation' is a relatively new term. It has certainly caused controversy in the legal and medical world, and Women's rights campaigners say the term discriminates against women as they are still generally the primary carers of children.

Parental Alienation is when one parent, often the 'absent' father, following separation or divorce, feels, or is in fact, alienated (distanced/estranged) from the good relationship they once shared with their child(ren).

The child will usually express unjustified dislike, possible hatred, but at least unreasonable bad feeling towards the absent parent. This causes the child to distance themselves from the absent parent. They will refuse to see the absent parent and become anxious about spending time with them. This sad situation is unfortunately more often than not a result of the parent with whom the child lives influencing, or brainwashing, the child against the absent parent. It must be noted that the absent parent can also exert such influence but this is not as common.

How and why does this happen? The parent with primary care of the child may be so hurt by the separation from their spouse or partner and/ or fear the impact the separation may have on the family unit that they push the absent parent further away. They may feel that the separation was not their fault, feel upset and bitter by the absent parent's departure, and allow (intentionally or unintentionally) their emotions to transfer to the child. They may repeatedly undermine the absent parent in front of the child prior to or post separation. One or both parents may make negative comments in ear shot of the child about the other parent. For most, this behaviour is their main coping mechanism to get them through the separation. They do not necessarily recognise that they are using the child to hurt the absent parent, nor do they see how this can ultimately damage the child. Sadly, but not unsurprisingly, the subjected child is likely to later blame the primary parent for destroying their relationship with the absent parent.

Parental Alienation can happen where the child previously loved spending time with both parents. It can occur at any time, all of a sudden or gradually over time. It is however very difficult to prove and whilst the law now appreciates its existence, one may have a long journey proving its existence and then eradicating it.

How can this be prevented? Well first, it is important to raise awareness of its existence. It is unfortunate when any relationship comes to an end but there is now more help and support available to those experiencing a relationship breakdown, to ease the separation process and allow both parties to focus on what is most important: the children. For instance those finding any separation difficult can undertake counselling, either individually or as a separated couple. Couples may find joint counselling useful to help them discover a way to work together on matters generally following separation – explore how they are now going to move forwards, as separated parents.

If couples struggle to communicate following separation, or simply feel they need extra support, they can also attend Mediation. A neutral third party's perspective may be needed and discussing matters in the presence of another may just defuse any ill feeling and assist to move matters forwards, in the best interests of the children.

It is advisable for separated parents to agree a Parenting Plan from the outset of a separation detailing the day to day arrangements for the children. A clear agreement as to the arrangements for the children helps parents to not only stay positive about the change they are experiencing but also allows them to concentrate on finalising their separation amicably and in the best way possible for all concerned. They can focus on spending quality time with their children and building a new life as two separate units rather than harbouring ill feeling for their former lover which will only cause prolonged hurt for everyone, especially the children.

Only the parties themselves can choose to deal with their separation or divorce amicably, logically, and as adults, to ease the heartache caused to everyone involved. Very often it is the children who suffer the most. They often have no one to express their feelings to and unhealthily store their emotions. They experience feelings of guilt, as well as sadness, and if they see the primary parent showing ill feeling towards the absent parent then this can easily transfer to them drawing the child closer to the primary parent and further away from the absent parent.

Children need both parents in their lives. The Courts recognise this and parents should also. The term Parental Alienation should not exist, let alone there be a Parental Alienation Day on 25th April, but sadly it does.

If you feel you are experiencing Parental Alienation and/ or struggling with agreeing arrangements for the children, or dealing with other matters arising from separation or divorce, then please do not hesitate to contact **Specialist Family Law Solicitor Lauren Greenhalgh at Focus Family Law on 07990 806086 or 01949 485358. Alternatively please email Lauren: lauren@focusfamilylaw.co.uk.**