AFCC Monthly Webinar Series

Parent Child Contact Problems
Family Violence and Parental Alienation Either/or, Neither/nor, Both/and, One in the Same?

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Learning objectives

- Define and Differentiate Parent child contact problems (PCCPs), Family Violence (FV), Parental Alienation (PA), and Parental Alienating Behaviors (PAB’s)
- Discuss Practice and Policy Implications for Family Justice professionals based on more precise terminology and concept utilization
Parent-child contact problems (PCCPs) refer to a spectrum of family dynamics that result in a child developing resistance and sometimes refusal to have contact with one or both of their parents. PCCPs may derive from a complex interplay of multiple dynamics occurring within a family over time.
Dominant Single Factor cases:
Alienation and Estrangement

- Parental Alienation (PA) is a type of PCCP where the dominant single factor contributing to the child’s resistance and refusal is a pattern of PABs by the preferred parent. When the PCCP has multiple contributions (which might include PAB’s) these cases are not PA cases; they are another type of PCCP case. Similarly, child estrangement is a type of PCCP, where the dominant single factor contributing to the child’s resistance and refusal to have contact with a parent is a response to the rejected parent’s behaviors (past or current). These can be child maltreatment, intimate partner violence or deficient parenting practices, including PABs by the rejected parent.

- Both PA and Estrangement are valid phenomenon. The conceptual development for both are still a work in progress. The social science pertaining to FV is more robust, but that differential does not mean PA is not a valid family dynamic.

- Broad professional validation for the PA phenomenon (Pruett, Johnston, Saini, Salem, & Sullivan, 2022). The social science is developing rapidly. (Harmon, et. al. 2022)

Parental Alienating Behaviors (PABs)

- PABs are “an ongoing pattern of observable negative attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of one parent (or agent) that denigrate, demean, vilify, malign, ridicule, or dismiss the child’s other parent... together with the relative absence of observable positive attitudes and behaviors, (affirming the other parent’s love/concern for the child, and the potential to develop and maintain the child’s safe, supportive and affectionate relationship with the other parent)” (Johnston & Sullivan, 2020, p.283)
Family violence (FV)

- FV is defined as child maltreatment (physical, sexual, emotional) and/or intimate partner violence (IPV) which has traumatic impact on the domestic partner and on the child both through direct and indirect exposure (AFCC Guidelines for Examining IPV, 2016; also see the Battered Women’s Justice Project, https://bwjp.org).
- Severe PABs are a form of child maltreatment akin to psychological abuse.
- Severe PAB’s are a form of IPV. (Coercive Control)

Psychological Child Maltreatment

- “A repeated pattern or extreme incident(s) of caretaker behavior that thwart the child’s basic psychological needs (e.g., safety, socialization, emotional and social support, cognitive stimulation, and respect) and convey a child is worthless, defective, damaged goods, unloved, unwanted, endangered, primarily useful in meeting another’s needs, and/or expendable” (The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) 2019).
  - Corruption
  - Isolation
Coercive control (Stark, 1995, Hardesty, 2022)

Ongoing, repetitive use of tactics
to regulate, dominate, isolate, and manipulate
an intimate partner’s daily life
across multiple domains (e.g., work, sexuality, supports)
to restrict or deprive of personal liberties

Practice implications

Prioritize safety (of child, of victim parent)

Differentiate protective versus non-protective parental behaviors
- The Multidimensional Assessment of Causes of Parental Rejection (MAP) - Milchman. (2021)

Multi-factor analysis
- Need to include all sources of abuse, contributions to the PCCP
  - Kelly and Johnston (2001); Fidler and Ward (2016); Johnston and Sullivan (2020);
    Drozd, et.al. (2020)
- Anchoring biases (Simon and Stahl, 2014)
Best Practices

Exercise care about your sources of information when you rely on concepts for assessment and treatment.

Stay conscious of your own biases, they may be helpful in general, but not for case-specific work.

Assuming court involvement, be up to date and precise about concepts and their use.

When your clients’ mis-use concepts in your work use it as an opportunity to educate them about the concept.

Public Policy Approaches

Kayden’s Law (2023)

NCJFCJ/AFCC Joint policy statement on PCCPs (2022)
Implications

• How do we best protect the most children and families from FV?
  • Not by eliminating PA as a type of family violence because of the threat of weaponization in family court, the status of it’s theoretical development or because of the degree of evidence-base supporting the effectiveness of interventions is incomplete. Families and children will be best served by public policy approaches that support the legitimacy of this destructive family dynamic, which in it’s severe form is a type of FV and support continued work to refine the concept and effective and safe interventions to address all forms of FV.