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The Emotional and Psychological Terrorist: False Allegations in Parental Alienation

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Many of the cases I work with feature allegations of harm. The allegations can range from mild to severe, from a child being chastised, to a child being involved in an organised child sexual abuse gang. A case which features allegations of harm can create anxiety in the unaware practitioner because of the way in which these are made in the cross fire of what appears to be high conflict. Being the practitioner who ventures into such cases, requires the highest levels of confidence and clarity about the role one plays and the manner in which the allegations are fed by the anxieties around the child.

One of the worst cases of such allegations came to me as a report of something a child had said had been done in a visit with a parent. This something was profoundly shocking as well as bizarre and was reminiscent of the 'satanic panic' cases which arise from time to time in the UK. When I heard this report, I was aware that what was happening in the case needed further investigation, as well as clarity in terms of sorting through the tangled weeds which had been spun around the family by the professionals in the case. It turned out that I was able to do that work over a period of months and through that, bring the children to a safe place. Whilst it remains that this case is one in which the most bizarre of allegations were made, it is not the only case I have worked on or continue to work with, in which allegations are made. In doing this work I learn much about how family dynamics configure to make such allegations appear possibly real. I also learn much about how the underlying and often unconscious beliefs in the professionals who work with families where such allegations are made, feed the fear which escalates the problem.

Allegations made in post divorce and separation cases are described by Blush and Ross in their work on the SET analysis and S.A.I.D syndrome. Put simply, it is possible to consider cases where allegations made from the perspective of power dynamics, that is, to think about who gains power over the children or advantage in the case when an allegation is made. Using this approach, it is possible to begin to understand the reasons why such allegations arise at given points in cases and why, for example, allegations that harm was done in the past, were not raised in the past but instead raised retrospectively to cause concern about the capacity of a parent to care for a child post separation.

The whole issue of allegations in divorce and separation is so thorny that many professionals will not go near such cases and it is true that working in such a case can become a nightmare if one does not follow the rules. In general, where such allegations are made, a fact finding is the most important tool for the practitioner, because the practitioner cannot be judge and jury on things which are being alleged and if one tries to do that, one becomes inveigled into the story as someone who is either a) seeing more clearly than anyone else in the case or b) brainwashed by the alleged abuser. Therefore, entry into such cases is made more possible

and practical by a legal team who seek fact finding on such matters at the earliest opportunity. For when a fact finding has been held, the practitioner simply holds that as the bar beyond which no further rumination nor speculation is allowed. Anyone unable to conform to that requirement is regarded as needing further investigation because one of the problems that personality disordered people may have, is the capacity to understand a boundary.

Allegations which stop contact are frequently made and there is a pattern of behaviours which are seen when this occurs. The stepped approach to this is usually –

- **A parent is unhappy with the children seeing a parent**
- **This creates anxiety and efforts to prevent contact**
- **Reports come back from children which appear to confirm the anxiety in the parent**
- **The parent consults with children's services who advise that contact is stopped or**
- **The parent consults with domestic violence workers who confirm that the things fit a pattern of ongoing domestic violence and advise that contact is stopped**
- **Contact is stopped and the parent who stops it has the backing of outside services**
- **The child's behaviours settle down (because the child is no longer responding to the anxiety signals in the parent they live with)**

Too many cases which have followed the steps above end up being dragged out in court for years and years and years. Whilst the alleging parent is expressing a sense of relief and safety, the parent who has been targeted by allegations goes through a terrifying round of psychological responses. Some parents whose children have made allegations against them, in cases I have worked in, have been on bail for years without even knowing what the allegations were that were made against them. As the legal process grinds slowly on, the mental and psychological and emotional health of the targeted parent is slowly stripped down to the bare bones of functioning. This is emotional and psychological terrorism at its very worst. It is coercive control which is state sanctioned and actioned and it kills target parents routinely around the world.

It must stop.

Holding a gun to the head of a loving parent through the making of allegations which have no basis in truth and which eventually are demonstrated in such cases to be both without foundation and maliciously made, should be punished with imprisonment in my view. And yet they are not. Every day around the UK and, it seems, the world, children's relationships with the parent they love are erased by the use of allegations which have no basis in reality. This is aided and abetted by the state and the manner in which the post-divorce and separation landscape is populated by women's rights workers who are either convinced that every father is a murdering child abuser or that all women everywhere should always be believed (apart from those women whose children reject them, in which case it is the children who should be believed without question).

This splitting in thinking about what is frankly, **the most psychologically terrifying environment to live in, serves no purpose other than to enable the use of emotional and psychological terrorism.** It is akin to pumping parents full of cortisol, arming them with an AK47 and sending them off across a land mine filled landscape to find shelter. The question in my mind, when I am confronted by yet another round of proclamations by Women's Aid or Refuge about the dangers of fathering post separation, (an attitude which in reality, affects mothers whose children reject them in exactly the same way), is not, how do such allegations happen, but why do they not happen more often?

In the analysis of cases where allegations are made it becomes possible to see how the fragilities in the mind of the parent who makes such allegations, are met and fed by the unconscious beliefs of the people they turn to for help. Time and again I have worked with parents (usually mothers) whose own childhoods were peppered with abuse which is unresolved. There is a high number of mothers in the group of parents who make allegations which turn out to be unfounded, whose own family turns out to be an unsafe place. Thus it seems that allegations made in this way are likely the projection of unresolved issues in the family of origin. More research is being undertaken right now in this issue at the Family Separation Clinic, because it is a repetitive feature of our work.

Emotional and psychological terrorism of parents is a horrendous way to strip a child of the right to a relationship with a loved one but it is happening all of the time in the most myriad of ways. From the intimation of an allegation which leaves a parent discomforted (she came home and needed to use the toilet a lot) to the outright false allegation which is seen in the satanic ritual abuse case – he kills and eats babies and anally rapes us.....all such allegations require rapid investigation and then a practitioner intervention which works to hold the boundary which prevents such things from escalating. Because when the allegations escalate they do so swiftly and they engulf anyone and everyone who stands in the way of them, family members, friends, teachers, the local cafe owner and in the case referred to above, the staff of the local McDonalds.

Why do they escalate as they do? All to do with the inter and intra-psychic world of children, whose lives are lived symbolically and metaphorically and the manner in which our divorce and separation family services are populated by people with unresolved personal issues and very little training in psychological care of families.

The psychological world of children in the post divorce landscape and other themes in severe parental alienation cases, will be unpacked and explored at the EAPAP Conference on august 30/31st in Central London.