Misguided Do-Gooder/Rescuer & Bottom-Line Professional Meet Family Therapist

The following tale portrays this family therapist’s interaction with a “do-gooder, child-rescuing” child protective caseworker who inadvertently harms children as a consequence of inexperience, lack of education in child development, absolutely no understanding of family dynamics, complete ignorance about the PAS, and probably subjective reaction to his own imperfect childhood. And yet, he would probably be incredulous and take umbrage by my depiction of him as someone who harms children.

Because the events in one PAS family are virtually identical to the incidents that occur in every other PAS family, I would not be surprised if a member of any PAS family perceives herself/himself in the following case summary.

The family consists of three teenagers, one girl and two boys. Several months ago they were transferred to the permanent custody of their alienated parent after a very knowledgeable and competent forensic evaluator (of which we have far too few) had testified as to the alienation in the case and that it is a form of child abuse. All contact by the alienating parent with the children was denied----not even phone calls or supervised visits. (Such limits I have found to be a necessary condition in order to assure the success of the transfer of custody.) The children quickly adjusted to and responded positively to their loving, formally alienated parent. And all their serious emotional and behavioral symptoms that they had exhibited while in the care of their alienating parent completely disappeared! (So much for biochemical causes of mental disorders.) The transition and adjustment progressed so smoothly that no professional services were necessary. (Please take note all custody judges. This ease of the change in custody is the norm and not the exception. Because the expressed enmity for and rejection of the targeted/alienated parent is spurious, the PAS child’s feelings flip like a light switch when the alienating parent is disempowered as a result of the loss of custody and denial of contact, which is generally used to reinstate the brainwashing process of the child against the alienated parent.)

But of course the obsessed alienating parent refused to accept the loss of custody without resistance and therefore subsequently appealed the court ruling and requested the return of the children. The Appellate Court did not reverse the custody order of the lower court but did implausibly grant the alienating parent unsupervised visitation with the children. After every visit, the children returned to the home of the once-again alienated parent and became aggressive, hostile, disrespectful, and defiant. The ease of transition was undone after just one visit with the alienating parent. The alienated parent filed a counter motion to terminate all contact between the children and the alienating parent, documenting the children's misbehaviors and the reappearance of symptoms after each visit with the alienating parent. The Court denied the alienated parent's request and instead ordered family therapy. I was chosen as the family therapist.

Guess what the alienating parent did next to sabotage the transfer of custody? An utterly frivolous report was filed with child protective services against the alienated parent. I subsequently received a call from the CPS caseworker, who questioned the therapy I was providing to the family. Hmm, someone with a bachelor's degree in a concentration of “who knows what” was instructing a therapist who has a Masters Degree specializing in Family Therapy; has 18 doctoral credits in Family Therapy; received 1,000 hours of training in Family Therapy at the Institute of child psychiatrist, Salvador Minuchin, the most respected, world-renowned child psychiatrist; whose 100 hours of those 1000 hours of supervision was provided by Salvador Minuchin himself; and whose Family Therapy practice spans 18 years! Who did this caseworker think he was? He actually believed that he had the credentials to question: 1) my videotaping of the sessions over the children’s objections (something that every therapist who treats the PAS family must do to protect against false allegations of what had occurred in the therapy); 2) my refusal to provide individual therapy for the brainwashed children for the purpose of taking into consideration their prejudiced, non-objective judgments about their parents; 3) my refusal to give credence to the children’s feelings of negativity towards their alienated parent and desires to return to their alienating parent’ care and custody. The CPS caseworker even had the hubris to suggest to the alienated parent to obtain the services of a therapist who would provide individual therapy to the children. Well, CPS caseworker, you had better first attempt to have the judge rescind the court order assigning me as the family therapist. Give me a break!

Now consider this: the caseworker challenged me with the following comment, “Well shouldn't the children’s feelings be accepted and validated?” I am so nauseated by therapists who “validate feelings” of brainwashed children and label it therapy. “NO!” was my resounding response. The feelings of brainwashed children----along with their attitudes----need to be challenged and nullified, not validated. How is it therapeutic to validate these children’s misconceptions, distortions, disrespect, and frequently the aggression that is also occurring in these cases? Is the purpose of therapy to facilitate psychosis or to promote healthy family functioning in order that children can be acculturated appropriately?

So in response to this naïve caseworker, I retorted, “So how would CPS respond if a child expressed the desire and intention not to attend school, and the parent gratified that wish? What would CPS react if a child determined to reject medical care, and the parent complied? How would CPS handle a situation in which a child felt like doing drugs and alcohol, and the parent approved?” I continued my critical thinking exercise with the caseworker and queried of him, “Do you believe that the relationship with a parent is fundamental to a child’s optimal emotional, cognitive and behavioral well being? Would you maintain that a child’s immature cognitive and emotional ability warrants anointing her/him with veto power over such a significant decision as custody?” And finally, I inquired of the caseworker, “How do you distinguish the true feelings of a brainwashed child from those of the alienating parent?” The caseworker’s silence mimicked Jackie Gleason (Ralph Kramden) when he had been caught flat-footed by his wife, Alice: “Humana, Humana, Humana, Humana.” (Not to be mistaken for the health insurance provider.)

Okay, I recognize freely that I sound a bit pedantic in enumerating my credentials. But I really do wish to make an important point: a principal emphasis of my book is that all treatment modalities are not created equal, and caseworkers are not professionals nor have they been trained adequately for the job to which they are assigned. I have therefore argued in my book that only someone who is sufficiently trained in family dynamics has to skills to recognize alienation and that only a professional thusly trained should be anointed with the power to treat families of high conflict divorce and/or make recommendations to the court regarding custody. I am willing to bet my license that the naïve and destructive recommendations made by therapists are not typically made by Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists or mental health professionals who have had rigorous training in dysfunctional family dynamics. (Of course, there will always be some exceptions.)

I certainly understand the anger of those who have suffered the pain of alienation, having been a child victim of the PAS and as a targeted professional. (to be discussed in subsequent articles. This is new meaning to the initials “TP”.) And I acknowledge that there are far too many professionals in the mental health, child protective, law enforcement, and matrimonial and judicial systems who encourage an adversarial approach to child custody and who unjustifiably demean, denounce and sanction the eradication of the targeted parent from the child's life. But it would be a mistake to ascribe culpability to these professions in their entirety. Doing so only discourages and disheartens those professionals who are genuinely endeavoring to eradicate the PAS, as do many of my colleagues in the mental health and matrimonial communities and as well as many in the child protection system.

So I will end this article with the beginning words from the closing chapter of my book: “Professional rescuers are not malevolent, but they harm children. They are misguided do-gooders. Other professionals who intervene in the lives of children are not so magnanimous: they are motivated by their bottom line to make a living, a big living. They will eventually discover that living with oneself has a higher value. As long as child custody cases continue to be adjudicated in an adversarial as opposed to a collaborative system, the best interests of the child will be compromised by this system in which attorneys for the litigating parents seek to maximize their advantage and often their bottom line and fail to admonish their clients from engaging in alienating behaviors; by PAS-unaware therapists who fail to involve both parents in diagnosis and treatment, as if the child had been conceived of the Immaculate Conception; and by PAS-unaware forensic evaluators who are appointed by the court to make recommendations regarding custody and visitation. Divorce inevitably involves some degree of distress for the child, and some degree of disruption to the parent/child relationship is unavoidable. But the distress and disruption can be minimized when the professionals work together to help the parents help each other allay each other's respective fears and anxieties in order to help them develop a shared parenting relationship.

Because of procrastination, incompetence, rescue-fantasy, ignorance, and/or sometimes self-interest, the professionals within the aforementioned larger systems that are supposed to support and protect children instead maintain a dysfunctional family system, known as the pathological triangle/PAS. The therapists who diagnose and treat it, the forensic evaluators who assess for it, the lawyers who quarrel about it, the child protection workers who investigate it, the law enforcement personnel who become ensnared in it, and the judges who adjudicate it, must be more proactive in guaranteeing to the child the right to have a meaningful and enduring relationship with each parent. Each profession that has influence over custody and visitation decisions must guard against becoming co-opted by the alienating parent and by their puppet child, who mimics the ventriloquist parent's words. These professions must further recognize that the concept of “time is of the essence” has the greatest relevancy to the PAS.” *The Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Family Therapy and Collaborative Systems Approach to Amelioration.* (2012).By Linda J. Gottlieb, LMFT, LCSW-r