

Maternal Alienation Fact Sheet

What is maternal alienation?

Sometimes a man who is violent within his family alienates children from their mother as an ongoing part of that abuse. He often isolates his partner from any sources of support, and is skilful at convincing her family, the neighbours, the children's school, and any professionals involved with the family, that she is mad or bad. This type of abuse has been called *maternal alienation*.

It generally occurs within a context of violence against women and/or children, and is a term for both

- the range of tactics used by men to deliberately undermine and destroy the relationship between mothers and their children
- the profound and often lasting alienation created in the relationships between mothers and their children by the use of those strategies

Maternal alienation

- is simultaneous abuse of women and children
- is a form of emotional abuse
- occurs within both domestic violence and child sexual abuse

Men who alienate children from their mothers usually manage to convince the children and all those involved with the family that they are blameless and misunderstood, and the mother is to blame for all the problems. In this way, maternal alienation successfully hides the man's responsibility for the violence and abuse, and directs people's attention towards the so-called 'bad' mother. The man who uses these tactics remains 'invisible'.

What is the evidence for it?

.... In the area of Child Sexual Abuse

A number of researchers and practitioners in the 1990's researched the tactics used by child sex offenders to isolate and entrap the child he was abusing. They found that the offender's greatest concern was to break a child's trust in her/his mother.

"The most common tactic acknowledged by (sex offenders) was that of dividing mother and child" (Laing, 1999, 147).

"the abusive man had appeared to 'take over' the child, drawing her into the secrecy surrounding the abuse and excluding the mother" (Hooper, 1992).

"The offender's actions create a context in which the mother and child are blind to his role in creating the difficulties in their relationship" (Laing & Kamsler, 1990, 169).

"Children's descriptions of the victimisation process illustrate the way in which such 'special' relationships are constructed, with abusive men manipulating children's estrangement from potential sources of support....Study of abusive men shows they are fully aware of this process" (Hooper, 1992, 38).

... In the area of Domestic Violence

Recently there has been concern about the damaging effects of domestic violence on children, and some understanding of the manipulation of the mother-child relationship by men who use violence and abuse.

"Many practitioners and women commented that the undermining of the relationship between women and their children is a common behaviour perpetrated by men who are violent" (Irwin, Waugh & Wilkinson, 2002, 129).

Maternal alienation is deliberate and intentional. This element of intention has long been recognised as an aspect of violence against women.

Gendered violence is intentional and patterned, and aimed at achieving certain outcomes (Dobash & Dobash, 1998, 141; Ptacek, 1988, 150).

Through "the instilling of fear, the humiliation, the degradation, the assault on her identity as a woman", (Ptacek, 1988, 147), perpetrators of violence set out to punish, to inflict injury, to silence, to isolate and to maintain dominance and control over their partners. *Maternal alienation uses all these ingredients of violence against women, in a form that is directed also against her relationship with her child.*

... From 1999 Research on Maternal Alienation

In 1999 a research project was carried out in the north of Adelaide to investigate what had been perceived as an aspect of violence against women and children. This phenomenon had not received adequate recognition, and during the research, the term *maternal alienation* was coined to name it (Morris, 1999).

The research identified a number of tactics commonly used by men to destroy the mother-child relationship. These were based on both

- denigrating the mother as a figure to be despised
- elevating the father as both a victim and a hero (Morris, 1999, 1999/2000).

Maternal alienation is a powerful strategy of abuse. Its power is drawn from the tendency in our society to trust and believe what men say over and above what women and children say. Its power is also drawn from the tendency to give more credibility to those who appear logical and calm, over those who seem distressed. People who have been traumatised usually convey their testimonies in emotional and apparently incoherent ways, and what they say is often painful to hear (Herman). On the other hand, those that use power and control over others often speak logically and articulately, and so may be more likely to be believed.

Thus professionals and non-professionals alike may take up a man's explanation that the mother is to blame for problems in the family, while he has been misunderstood and wronged. Indeed, the research found that, lacking an understanding of maternal alienation,

service providers across many services and sectors tended to believe the man and often acted to exacerbate the family situation (Irwin et al; Morris, 1999).

When and where does it occur?

It appears that maternal alienation is a common element of domestic violence, as well as a part of child sexual abuse. The men who perpetrate maternal alienation may not be the fathers of the children involved, but are the perpetrators of abuse against that woman and/or her children. The targets of maternal alienation are the mother and her children.

In some families, men use maternal alienation as one of the modes of abuse that is ongoing in that family, so that children grow up continually exposed to these denigrating messages about, and behaviours to, their mother.

In other cases, maternal alienation begins when a couple separates, and a man may use maternal alienation as a strategy to gain control of the children, and to isolate and punish his ex-partner. Involvement in Court processes such as those to determine contact and living arrangements is one major forum for the use of these tactics. It is also common when maternal alienation is used at these times, for a man to attempt to turn a woman's family and friends against her, as well as her children, and to try to involve other services such as Child Protection Services against her as well.

Don't women do it too?

Most domestic violence and child sexual abuse is perpetrated by men (Irwin and Thorpe). Similarly, most 'successful' perpetrators of parent-child alienation are men. When women try to alienate their children against their father, societal structures and beliefs make this difficult for women to achieve successfully. People are more ready to hear and act on negative and blaming stories about women than about men. These views can be reflected by service providers that become involved with family members (Irwin et al; Edleson; Morris, 1999; Humphreys).

Also making it less likely for women to act to as alienators is their concern to support their children's relationship with their father, even at a cost to themselves (Irwin et al; Mullender et al). The recent study by Mullender and colleagues reported that:

"what was remarkable...was the extent to which mothers were willing to maintain a variety of forms of contact between the children and their fathers, making judgements more on the basis of the children's wishes and interests than their own safety. This finding is consistent with that in earlier studies...thus demonstrating a pattern in women's decisions about contact that is at odds with what the courts frequently assume" (198).

Who is affected?

As maternal alienation is simultaneous abuse of children and women, both children and women are affected by it. The effects can last a lifetime.

Effects on children:

- Children are divided from their mother, and are blocked from accessing her as a loving and nurturing parent
- Children's trust in loving relationships is undermined
- Children are affected in many ways by being used as 'pawns' in the man's long campaigns against mother and/or child.
- Children are trapped in a world created and controlled by the abuser
- Children are often coached into perpetrating abuse and violence against their mother – and this may affect their later relationships with other women
- Children are punished for not participating in abuse against their mother
- Children often cannot heal from the effects of being subject to abuse while they are forced to adopt the 'realities' of the perpetrator
- Children are caught up in a primary relationship with a parent who is inconsistent, tyrannical and puts his needs above those of his child. He may continue his abuse against the child
- Children often take up the role of carer for their father, and subjugate their needs to his

Effects on women:

- Women often blame themselves, and see themselves as the person others see them as - that is, as the person portrayed by the man who abuses her
- Women are isolated and alienated from their family and community – sometimes for the rest of their life
- Women feel enormous grief and pain at 'losing' their children
- Women find that they have little room to 'move' – whatever they do, their words and actions are re-interpreted by the abuser (to children, family, community, professionals)
- Women are traumatised by continual emotional abuse and the undermining of their relationships and attempts to communicate
- This constellation of effects impact on women's ability to represent themselves well in forums such as the Family Court.

What is being done about it?

Maternal alienation and its devastating effects on children and women need to be understood by more people. If more people and more services to families recognised it, something could be done about it. These people and services include:

- Families
- Neighbours
- Schools
- Police
- Community Health workers
- Judges and Magistrates
- Lawyers
- Family Court officials
- Child protection workers
- Child-care workers
- Child Health workers
- Domestic violence services
- Religious leaders

People and services involved with the mother and/or children can make a positive difference if they

- support the mother to help her rebuild her relationships with her children. This enables her to support and protect her children in the future, as well as helping her overcome the effects of violence and abuse herself. The latest research points out that good practice for better child protection should be built on supporting the mother, (Irwin, Waugh & Wilkinson, 2002; Mullender, Hague et al 2002) not blaming or punishing her further (Edleson, 1998).
- understand and make visible the role of the man who uses abuse in this way. The invisibility of the perpetrator of abuse is an unhelpful, even dangerous tendency (Edleson, 1998) and is a strong factor in services not being able to address his continuing campaign against mother and child.

A project called the Maternal Alienation Project was set up in Adelaide in August 2002 to inform professional workers about maternal alienation and develop tools for addressing its effects on children and women. This project is set up as a partnership between Northern Metropolitan Community Health Service, Women's Health Statewide and University of Adelaide.

Where can I find out more?

There are some publications that are helpful (they have been referred to in this fact sheet):

Dobash, R. E. & Dobash, R. P. (Eds) (1998). *Rethinking violence against women*. California: Sage.

Edleson, Jeffrey L. (1998). "Responsible mothers and invisible men; child protection in the case of adult domestic violence", in *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, April v.13 n. 2.

Herman, J.L (1992). *Trauma and Recovery - From domestic abuse to political terror*. U.S.A.: Basic Books.

Humphreys, C. (1999). 'Walking on eggshells': child sexual abuse allegations in the context of divorce'. In J. Breckenridge & L. Laing (Eds). *Challenging Silence: innovative responses to sexual and domestic violence*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Irwin, J., Waugh, F. & Wilkinson, M. (2002). Domestic violence and child protection: A research report - a collaborative research project by Barnardos Australia and the University of Sydney. Sydney: University of Sydney.

Irwin, J. and Thorpe, R. (1996). "Women, Violence and Social Change", in R. Thorpe & J. Irwin (Eds), *Women and Violence: Working for Change*, Sydney: Hale & Ironmonger.

Laing, L. (1999). 'A different balance altogether? Incest offenders in treatment'. In J. Breckenridge & L. Laing (Eds). *Challenging Silence: innovative responses to sexual and domestic violence*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Laing, L. & Kamsler, A. (1990). 'Putting an End to Secrecy: Therapy with mothers and children following disclosure of child sexual assault'. In M. Durrant, & C. White (Eds), *Ideas for Therapy with Sexual Abuse*. Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications.

Morris, A. (1999/2000). 'Adding Insult to Injury', *Trouble & Strife* 40, Winter

Morris, A. (1999). *Uncovering 'Maternal Alienation': a further dimension of violence against women*, unpublished Dissertation for M.A., Department of Social Inquiry, University of Adelaide.

Mullender, A., Hague, G., Imam, U., Kelly, L., Malos, E., Regan, L. (2002). *Children's Perspectives on Domestic Violence*. Sage.

Ptacek, J. (1988). 'Why Do Men Batter Their Wives?' In K. Yllo & M. Bograd (Eds), *Feminist Perspectives on Wife Abuse*. Newbury Park, C.A.: Sage.

You can contact:

Anne Morris
Senior Project Officer
Maternal Alienation Project
NMCHS
Kylie Crescent
Ingle Farm SA 5098
(08) 8396 1345
anne.morris@dhs.sa.gov.au