

The Narcissistic Parent:

A Guidebook for Legal Professionals Working
with Families in High-Conflict Divorce

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Working with Families in High-Conflict Divorce

Oaksong Press. Claremont, California

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-0-9961145-4-7

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Child Testimony

When the child is being triangulated into the spousal conflict by the psychological control of a narcissistic parent (who forms a cross-generational coalition with the child against the other spouse/parent) the child's authenticity has been compromised:

"Psychological control refers to parental behaviors that are intrusive and manipulative of children's thoughts, feelings, and attachment to parents. These behaviors appear to be associated with disturbances in the psychoemotional boundaries between the child and parent, and hence with the development of an independent sense of self and identity." (Barber & Harmon, 2002, p. 15)

"Psychological control is defined as patterns of family interaction that intrude upon or impede the child's individuation process, or the relative degree of psychological distance a child experiences from his or her parents and family." (Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994, p. 1121)

"The essential impact of psychological control of the child is to violate the self-system of the child." (Barber & Harmon: 2002, p. 24)

According to Schaefer, who introduced the construct of psychological control through his empirical research on parental behavior:

"Psychological control is suggested for this dimension, for the defining scales describe covert, psychological methods of controlling the child's activities and behaviors that would not permit the child to develop as an individual apart from the parent." (Schaefer, 1965, p. 555)

Under the influence of the psychologically controlling behavior of a narcissistic parent, the child's authenticity and independent

autonomy have been compromised and lost. Under these conditions, the attitudes and opinions expressed by the child are those of the allied narcissistic parent in the cross-generational coalition:

“In a narcissistic encounter, there is, psychologically, only one person present. The co-narcissist disappears for both people, and only the narcissistic person’s experience is important.” (Rappoport, 2005, p. 3)

“In regard to narcissistic parents, the child must exhibit the same qualities, values, feelings, and behavior which the parent employs to defend his or her self-esteem.” (Rappoport, 2005, p. 3)

“In extremely invalidating environments, parents or caregivers do not teach children to discriminate effectively between what they feel and what the caregivers feel, what the child wants and what the caregiver wants (or wants the child to want), what the child thinks and what the caregiver thinks.” (Fruzzetti, Shenk, & Hoffman, 2005, p. 1021)

When a narcissistic parent is triangulating the child into the spousal conflict, the child is being placed in a loyalty conflict of having to choose sides in the spousal conflict. For legal professionals to further empower the child’s ability to choose sides in the spousal conflict only acts to further triangulate the child into the loyalty conflict by asking the child to choose a “preferred” parent. Asking the child to identify a preferred parent is exactly the wrong thing to do, even if the desire to designate a preferred parent appears to be coming from the child (through the hidden psychological control of the narcissistic parent). Empowering the child’s ability to choose a parent will only triangulate the child further into the loyalty conflict of siding with one parent against the other parent in their inter-spousal conflict. When legal professionals empower children to choose between parents, they only expose the child more fully to the psychologically manipulative control of the narcissistic parent.

“The need to *control* the idealized objects, to use them in attempts to manipulate and exploit the environment and to “destroy potential enemies,” is linked with inordinate pride in the “possession” of these perfect objects totally dedicated to the patient.” (Kernberg, 1975, p. 33)

“Psychological control refers to parental behaviors that are intrusive and manipulative of children’s thoughts, feelings, and attachment to parents.” (Barber & Harmon, 2002, p. 15)

“The central elements of psychological control are intrusion into the child’s psychological world and self-definition and parental attempts to manipulate the child’s thoughts and feelings through invoking guilt, shame, and anxiety.” (Stone, Buehler, and Barber, 2002, p. 57)

“Higher levels of covert conflict in the marital relationship heighten the likelihood that parents would use psychological control with their children. This might be because both parental psychological control and covert conflict are anxiety-driven. They share defining characteristics, particularly the qualities of intrusiveness, indirectness, and manipulation.” (Stone, Buehler, and Barber, 2002, p. 86)

“In short, an intrusive parent strives to manipulate the child’s thoughts and feelings in such a way that the child’s psyche will conform to the parent’s wishes.” (Kerig, 2005, p. 12)

When a child is being psychologically controlled by a narcissistic parent, the child is essentially in a hostage situation. The child is being manipulated and exploited by the psychological control of the narcissistic parent. Under these circumstances, the child’s expressed attitudes and opinions are sufficiently compromised as to be of minimal to no value in determining the best interests of the child.

In cases of high inter-spousal conflict, there is a correspondingly higher risk of the child being triangulated into the spousal conflict by a narcissistic parent who coerces the child (through psychologically controlling parental manipulation) into choosing sides in the spousal conflict. Under these circumstances, the most important consideration for the child’s best interests is to NOT further triangulate the child into the loyalty conflict by asking the child which parent the child prefers. Instead, the goal is to de-triangulate the child from the spousal conflict by dis-empowering the child’s imposed need to select a “preferred” parent by having the adults make separate and independent decisions on behalf of the child, based on independent adult determinations regarding what

represents the emotional, psychological, and developmental best interests of the child.

Whenever there is a high degree of inter-spousal conflict, children should not be allowed to testify in Court to state a preference for parents because of the considerable risk this entails of furthering the child's unhealthy triangulation into the spousal conflict by asking the child to choose between parents in the spousal conflict. Seeking the child's preference when there is high inter-spousal conflict essentially makes the child's expressed preference for a parent a "prize to be won" in the inter-spousal conflict. The child is essentially being placed in the position to judge which parent is the winner of the "best parent" award (i.e., the "preferred" parent)

The potential psychological control of the child by a narcissistic parent should always be a preeminent consideration in high-conflict divorce. Under these circumstances, balanced and objective decisions need to be made by the involved adults that free the child from having to choose sides in the inter-spousal conflict and which will consider the child's best interests from a balanced and objective viewpoint. If the Court desires that children's views should be considered, these views should be obtained by a family systems therapist who is in a balanced and objective position of interpreting the child's expressed views within a broader family context. This balanced and objective interpretation of the child's views can then be offered to the Court by the family therapist rather than by the child directly.

In order to perform their roles effectively within the potential family pathology created by a narcissistic parent, minor's counsel, guardians ad litem, and family law judiciary need to be cognizant of the potentially complex family systems dynamics involved with high-conflict divorce and the potential psychopathology of a narcissistic parent who is creating the high levels of conflict within the family. Within this context, the role of minor's counsel and guardians ad litem should be to facilitate for the Court's consideration a balanced and carefully considered analysis from professional mental health regarding the family dynamics and the child's best interests.