

'I see a wall, and then I cannot reach my son'.

Coercive control and post-divorce resistance to parent-child contact.

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SITUATION

The post-divorce resistance of children to parent-child contact is estimated to affect over ten percent of all divorces, interfering with constructive open contact between children and both parents, and significantly impairing post-divorce safety and long-term positive parenting.

KEY QUESTION

When parents are denied the ability to positively interact with their own children after a divorce, what is the impact on family relationship dynamics and contact issues, and how do parents and professionals deal with the rejection? What role does past and ongoing (coercive controlling) violence have in these cases?

GOAL

To gain professional and societal awareness on the impact of coercive control by the ex-partner on the relationships between the other parent and their children.

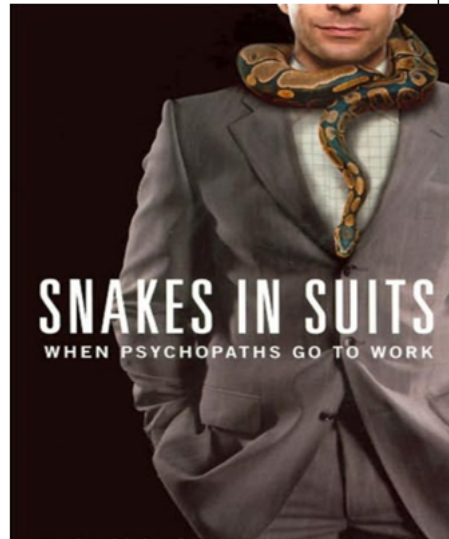
OBSERVATIONS

More research is needed on ex-partner violence and the impact it has on all family members, especially on relationships between partners and children, siblings and extended family.

Women are often accused of being mad, bad, or dangerous, in that order; while men complain that they are accused in the opposite order: first dangerous (not safe, feels threatened), then bad (addiction, narcissistic behavior, badmouthing, corrupting), and then mad.

METHODS

- Ten semi-structured interviews with mothers under pressure
- One focus group and follow-up meeting with rejected fathers (n=6)
- Two focus groups with abused highly educated divorced women with a young child (n=6) and rejected mothers (n=4)
- Three-day accredited basic and in-depth courses for professionals on complex divorce and relationships featuring violence and coercion
- Two-day course on recognizing parental alienation



EAPAP (Prague, 2017, London, 2018) and Second European Conference on Domestic Violence, Porto (2017)

BACKGROUND

- Analysis focuses on relational dynamics, coercive controlling tactics, and the impact of the rejection of one parent by the children under the malignant influence of the other parent, taking into account which parent has power over the children and why, and how children react over time to these controlling tactics.
- Once one parent succeeds in alienating the affections of their children toward the other, the children may refuse contact out of psychological splitting in which prior parent-child attachment is suppressed.

When I left home after the divorce, after ten days I got my children back acting as if they were devils; I was afraid of them.

My teenage children manipulate me now and show no compassion. Last Christmas at my house they were lighting the wall paper on fire where they had cut out a heart for father and a skull death symbol for mother, stating, 'We hate you.'

They are using their phones and texting on WhatsApp all the time they're with me, and my ex is fueling their rude behavior. Now I cannot make eye contact with my sensitive daughter anymore. Her eyes are mostly empty.

For questions, literature, suggestions and remarks, please contact Sietske Dijkstra, PhD, at fran.dijkstra@gmail.com and visit www.sietske-dijkstra.com



RESULTS

- Excluded parents live under enormous pressure of continuing sometimes intergenerational family disruption and exclusion from family life: they feel unprotected and misunderstood and experience several forms of psychological, identity, social, career and financial loss.
- Social professionals make things worse by stressing joint communication while ignoring heavy negative feelings like fear (for life), anger, resentment, hatred, and fail to name and analyze violent patterns of coercion and imbalance of psychological and financial power.
- Professionals often lack awareness of how to interpret the child's resistance to parent-child contact, rejection (eight characteristics of Gardner) like the dark side of the moon.
- Professionals may not see through the pattern to the manipulative mechanisms behind it: lying, controlling, intimidation, humiliation, corruption, betrayal, defaming, complaints, and even court involvement.

CONCLUSIONS

'Present absence', safety concerns, and 'sneaky hatred' undermine the emotional bonds of children with the excluded parent. More attention is needed on how to recognize coercive control and its impact on family relationships and heavy feelings and accusations. Professionals need more skill in how to interpret the testimony of children and parents under pressure, and in analyzing the abusive patterns to improve their abilities in decision making and counter-intuitive action on family matters.