

EXPERIENCES OF PARENTAL ALIENATION INTERVENTIONS

by

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides direct accounts of experiences of parental alienation interventions in North America and England and Wales. Parental alienation intervention is a significantly under-researched area. No objective data is available in either jurisdiction on the type, frequency, form and providers of such interventions in the family court arena and there are very few independent evaluations of the effectiveness or effects of parental alienation interventions (see Chapter 7 for a review of existing evaluations).

Absent from current knowledge and research are the highly problematic impacts of parental alienation interventions and 'treatments' on children and their preferred parents. These negative impacts are not apparent from the historical literature and legal analyses on parental alienation interventions. What is particularly unexplored are the lived experiences of the parents and children who are subjected to such interventions. This chapter provides a rare opportunity to hear directly from survivors of parental alienation interventions.

Recently, accounts have been emerging from child participants in residential workshops run by *Family Bridges* in North America which raise a concerning picture.

"I read a first-person account by a girl who said she'd grown suicidal and cut herself when she was taken to a Family Bridges workshop at age 15; she claimed

that the psychologists had threatened to ship her off to a psychiatric hospital. A young woman told me that her little sister had suffered panic attacks during the workshop; when the older girl challenged the Family Bridges therapists, they kept saying the girls would need “extra help,” which she understood to mean being sent to a wilderness camp for juvenile offenders. A teenage boy wrote that he is “still emotionally damaged from the program,” and that he “has difficulty connecting to others because I feel I can’t trust anyone.” None of these children has a relationship with the parent who brought them to the program.” (Hagerty, 2020)

The young woman whose sister had suffered the panic attacks is co-author of this chapter, Arianna Riley. This chapter offers her account of her experiences of *Family Bridges*.

In England and Wales, the more recent case law indicates increasing recommendations for parental alienation ‘therapeutic’ interventions alongside transfers of care of the child to the ‘alienated’ parent. However, parents and children cannot be ordered to undertake ‘treatment’ or ‘therapy’. One way in which it appears that ‘therapeutic’ intervention may be achieved is a hybrid arrangement whereby a court-appointed expert undertakes a discrete, time-limited segment of therapy for the purposes of their assessment. This can, however, lead to boundaries between assessment and therapy becoming blurred, particularly where the assessing expert is a psychotherapist (see, eg, *Re H (Children)* [2019] EWHC 237; *Re S (Parental Alienation: Cult)* [2020] EWCA Civ 568; *Re T (Parental Alienation)* [2019] EWHC 3854 (Fam)). Additionally, ‘therapeutic’ intervention for a parent may be achieved by the parent agreeing to the intervention, particularly when it takes place during the course of

proceedings. For the ‘alienating’ parent, however, such agreement may be driven by a fear of the consequences (such as losing care of, or not regaining contact with, their child) if they do not cooperate with the therapy (see, eg, *Re T (Parental Alienation)* [2019] EWHC 3854 (Fam)).

Little is known about what the therapeutic interventions recommended or undertaken in family court cases in England and Wales actually entail. Indeed, until recently, such interventions have rarely been specifically identified as ‘parental alienation’ or ‘reunification’ therapy. Parents may find themselves, as Katherine did, involved in parental alienation therapy without realising that this was the underlying purpose of the intervention.

Katherine’s account is written by Katherine herself. She has written it in the third person because she found the experience of writing in the first person harrowing and retraumatising. Katherine’s account raises all of the issues outlined above about parental alienation interventions in England and Wales.

Arianna Riley’s Experience of Family Bridges

I will begin my story by saying, I had a fairly normal (early) childhood. I went to a neighbourhood school, spent a lot of time with my family, and went to festivals and concerts every year. We took yearly family vacations and ate dinner together most nights of the week. Things seemed perfectly fine, up until they started to go wrong.

My parents separated in 2009, and almost immediately things started going wrong. My sister and I were fairly young at the time, and any disagreement that we had would often end up with my mom getting physical and hurting one of us. During this time, I was starting middle

school across the city and there were a lot of scary changes happening; this meant, for me, intensifying emotional abuse. Things like being called a 'slut' at age 11-12 repeatedly for dressing up in my own home and wearing things my mother had bought me, and at the time I didn't even know what the word slut meant. I just knew that it was meant to be hurtful and it was hurtful to me, not the word but knowing that someone I loved was intentionally trying to inflict harm.

I dealt with this abusive behaviour by going to live with my dad. My parents at the time had 50/50 custody, but it came to a point where my mother and I had been going to therapy and she continued to be abusive, so I went to live with my dad for a year or so. While I was living with my dad, I still talked to and actively saw my mother, including going to counselling with her. Things continued much like this for a few years. I would return to her house to live with her, she would break a promise or be violent repeatedly, I would leave and live with my dad so I could be safe, and on like that. Until she decided to completely disregard my feelings as well as those of my sister.

My mother had begun dating someone new around 2013, and in August of 2015 she decided that it was time to move him into the house, even though my sister and I were uncomfortable being around him due to his creepy behaviour and I had told her repeatedly that I didn't want him in the house. She chose to move him in anyways, so I left for my dad's house. I had a car that I paid for fully with my money but that had been registered and titled to her because I was underage, and when I left, she tried to stop me by taking the car. She told me that if I wanted to live with my dad, I would have to give her the car. She only agreed to reimburse me for it after I begged repeatedly and accused her of stealing. However, she shorted me

when I showed up for the reimbursement she had promised and expected me not to notice. However, as I had a job I was able to save up and buy another car.

One day in October, I was cooking with my friends and got a call from my sister. My sister chose to stay with my mom when the boyfriend was moved in, so she was calling from my mom's house saying that my mom and her boyfriend were escalating things, and last time this had happened they had trapped her in her room and screamed at her for hours. She told me that she thought this time they would become violent and she would be unable to leave. I immediately went round to get my sister and my friend agreed to wait at the house until we came back.

When I got to the house, I opened the door and started up the stairs towards my sister's room. My mom's boyfriend saw me and began physically attacking me as I was walking up the stairs, grabbing me and trying to drag me down the stairs to prevent me from getting up to my sister's room. I just ignored him and kept going, filled with adrenaline. I could hear my mother was screaming at my sister in her room. I went to try to open the door to my sister's room, with my mom's boyfriend still pulling at me from the back, and my mom trying to shove the door closed from the front. My sister was very upset, crying and saying that she just wants to leave and they can talk about this later after everyone has calmed down, meanwhile my mom is trying to attack my sister.

At this point, we managed to get down the stairs, and I assumed my sister was following right behind me, so I walked out and closed the door. I was wrong. I waited around 15 to 20 seconds before realizing that something must have gone wrong, and I opened the door to see my mother and her boyfriend physically restraining my sister from leaving. They tried to

close the door, and I stuck my arm in the door so they couldn't close it, at which point my mother started beating on the part of my arm that was inside, trying to make me leave. This, fortunately, caused her to lose her balance when my sister moved, and my sister was able to escape when my mother let go of her backpack. After all this, we were safe, and we drove back to my dad's. My sister and I were shaken up, and my friends (who love my sister also) were very concerned and tried to offer their support in any way they could.

We stayed in contact with my mom but my sister was unwilling to go back because of the violence, and my mom refused to accept responsibility for anything. We called her once a week, I would have lunch with her, I even brought in a woman whose kids I took care of to have lunch with her and I together to try to smooth things over. Unfortunately, this did not work- the woman left shell-shocked and basically told me that she didn't have any further suggestions on how to improve things.

Then came January 2016. I had been living with my dad full time since August, and my sister had been living with him full time since November. During this time, he was still paying my mother child support with no complaints. Eventually my dad filed in court a motion to stop paying child support, since we were living with him full time. About two weeks after this, during our weekly call with my mother, she told me she didn't want to have lunch with me and didn't want to talk to me or have any interaction with me and she hung up on me. So I said, ok fine. What could I do when she told me not to talk to her?

I knew my parents had a custody hearing in court on my birthday. I knew that my mom had asked for that date because she thought I would be busy. Little did she know, I had enlisted my boyfriend at the time to go to the court proceedings to see what happened, as the court proceedings were public. Even after this, we still had no idea what was coming,

unfortunately. We heard a slight inkling of a “program” and Richard Warshak, but we didn’t know anything for sure. But just to be safe, the day before the decision on who I was to live with was announced (April 25, 2016) I went around to my employers and told them I may just disappear for two weeks and they should make alternative plans. Fortunately my employers were fairly understanding, all things considered.

On April 25, 2016 my sister and I were called to show up for the announcement of the decision. We arrived that morning with a contingent of friends and family, an assortment of people gathered over many years to support us no matter what happened. We all filed into the courtroom, and the judge asked my sister and I to stand and say a few words. “Your honor, we don’t feel safe living with my mother and her boyfriend since they are abusive, and she has even told me that she doesn’t want to talk to me and doesn’t want a relationship with me. In addition, there are many things that she is supposed to provide as a parent that she does not seem interested in providing, and it becomes neglectful. In conclusion, we should not be forced to live with them because we absolutely will not be safe.”

The judge: “Well it sounds to me like you just have a very black and white view of the world, and not everything is black and white. Often, things are in shades of gray. I am ordering you guys to be sent to Family Bridges reunification therapy...” *audible gasps can be heard in the courtroom* and at that point I just tuned out. I handed my phone to my dad and gave him a hug, my sister did the same. I started hysterically crying and screaming. I said, “I’m not going, I refuse to go.” The judge, at this point still in the courtroom said, “if you don’t go, then they will send you to jail for 30 days.” I said, “I don’t care!” and continued hysterically screaming and crying while these strange people who had filed into the courtroom said, “come with me, you need to go with me.”

At this point, I actually refused to go. I dropped on the ground and said, "I refuse. You can carry me and handcuff me but I will not go willingly." And they told me that if I didn't go with them they would put my dad in prison for 30 days. I got up real quick, because punishing me I could take, but jailing my father? And jeopardising any safe housing I may have when I get out? That was completely unacceptable to me. After I got up, they took us out the back and put us in a van and we began driving to the airport. At first, we refused to talk to these 'transport agents'. I had a plan. I had flown fairly frequently, so I was familiar with the rules at airports, and familiar with all of their 'anti-trafficking' signage, which claims: "if you are being trafficked, just tell TSA and they will save you!" Well, I did. I told at least ten different TSA agents that I was being kidnapped. While they were checking my boarding pass, the nearest ones I could pull aside, TEN DIFFERENT AGENTS were told I was being kidnapped. NONE of them did anything besides laugh.

Then I felt extremely panicked. I asked the last agent for the police, but they weren't coming. I was trying to think fast, what's a surefire way to get police to come in an airport? Make a terrorist threat. So, in the middle of security, I loudly announced "I have a bomb in my shoe, I need you to come arrest me!" My trafficker meanwhile was busy trying to hustle me through the security machine, but the TSA agent had overheard me and, lo and behold, turns out if you make a terrorist threat they have to get the police and they are unable to allow you to fly anymore. My trafficker, sensing I am gaining the upper hand, begins trying to continue to hustle me through the machine, at which point I start to let out blood curdling screams. I do this for two minutes straight until the police come. Anything I can do to make a scene and get the police to interview me privately.

The police response: “they have a court order. So what’s the issue?” Well, the issue is that I am being trafficked and forced to live with abusers. So I told the port police that I would like to make a report of the October incident of violence, so that I am not forced to go be abused more. He refused to take the report seriously, and then a bunch of other cops came, one of whom said that my sister and I needed to “stop complaining” because “parents have the right to discipline the way they want to”. All the police ended up doing was helping the traffickers handcuff me, and then telling the traffickers they couldn’t fly that day. And the no-fly decision wasn’t even made by the cops, that was a decision made by the head of Alaska Airlines - if it had been up to the cops, they probably would have let them fly me in handcuffs.

After all this, we were to drive the 23 hours down to Ontario, California to start the Family Bridges workshop. After a few hours of driving, people were hungry and needed to use the facilities. The first time my sister had tried to use the bathroom on this trip, they went in the toilet stall with her to watch her which weirded her out. Again, when we stopped for food, they went into the bathroom with her. My sister let me know that this made her extremely uncomfortable and I thought it was gross behaviour. During this long car ride, one of the transporters let slip that if children don’t obey, she knows one that was sent to a wilderness camp and it’s unknown when he gets to come back.

This is why the transporters are essential. They make the threats before you even get there. We told them that we didn’t feel safe around my mother and her boyfriend, and they spent hours reassuring us that we wouldn’t have to see them if we didn’t want to.

When we ‘arrived’ at the Sheraton, which was where Family Bridges was supposed to happen, we walked into a room with my mother and her boyfriend. We were SO upset. The transport agents had lied to us. The psychologists asked my sister and I if we wanted to say anything, and we said yes, we don’t feel safe around them. They responded by informing us that we could no longer talk about the past (the implication also being don’t mention our dad) and that we would have to cooperate to ‘pass the program’.

What were the methods used?

We were stuck in the suite at the Sheraton for four days straight, trapped with my mother and her boyfriend with no ability to communicate with the outside world. Initially, there was a 90-day no contact order between us and my dad. The psychologists and Randy Rand came from 9am-3pm every day. They started off by saying that we were not allowed to mention ‘the past’ aka my dad, and there was to be no reflection on any of my mother’s past behaviour as we were supposed to just move forward and love her like nothing had ever happened. We were told that we couldn’t trust our memories because “there are two sides to every story” and that we should accept being abused because “the world isn’t black and white.” There is a lot that is implied, they showed us videos and then gave us sheets full of terms to define- not sure what the goal of that was, exactly. They do not explicitly threaten that “if you don’t cooperate we will send you to a wilderness program” but they do make threats that if you don’t pass the program then you know what happens, you won’t go home to see your dad. The biggest thing, one that they had us do multiple times daily and even after leaving, was the ‘family meeting’. We had to start with positive things about our day/each other, then move on to the scheduled agenda, then make a decision.

My sister was very stressed out, and on one occasion where they had decided my sister wasn't being positive enough and repeatedly criticized and threatened her, my sister started hyperventilating. She was criticized again for needing a break and when we came back from the break, was again threatened with 'not passing the program' aka years in a facility.

Another rule was that we were not allowed to leave our mother's sight - this manifested in ways such as when we went out to dinner one night, I brought up my dad and my mom got angry. I asked to take a break, like was agreed that we should do when things got heated, and explained that I would be going to sit on the bench in front of the restaurant. My mother came outdoors screaming and threatening to call the police because I was out of her sight line, and then said that she had called Randy and he had advised her to come out there and threaten me with jail in order to get me to cooperate.

Progression and last day

Much of the torture sessions consisted of the psychologists showing us movies and short clips, and then asking us to define terms on a sheet of paper while threatening us. A short list of these clips includes:

butterfly movie;

electric shock experiment;

Elizabeth Loftus- false memories talk;

Swedish teddy bear sad movie;

Desperate Housewives;

Welcome Home Pluto;

"Can you spot the gorilla".

While we were defining terms, there were rules on how our eye contact was supposed to be, and we were sometimes supposed to start off sentences a certain way - if we forgot, then we would be deemed 'uncooperative' and threatened with 'not passing the program'. We also had to have mandatory family dinners and at the end a 'reward' of a family vacation.

Running away/the aftermath

When I was 17, we came back from Family Bridges on Cinco De Mayo 2016. Even though we were back home with my mother, there were still mandatory family meetings and we had to follow extra rules (such as being home for family dinner every day) that weren't in place ever before. Luckily, my employers at the time both took me back, but this was not so good for my home life. In high school, I had to do volunteer hours to graduate, and I had been working for a few years by that point. I had a boyfriend who I had been dating for a while, and my mom did not let me see him until she had "briefed" him on what was and wasn't allowed. I was also barred from contact with my friends and family. They use this isolation method to try and keep kids from accessing help, and my mom was angry that I was out of the house so much because she wanted to keep me isolated. (I pretty much was only leaving for school and work and this was still an issue.)

This very fragile isolation arrangement continued for 2 weeks or so, until I was informed of an incident that happened in the household that needed police involvement. I took my sister to the police station to try and report it, and the cop who took the report was very unhelpful. I was very upset and crying, telling him that I felt unsafe at home and that we really needed help, and he told me that I sounded hysterical and just needed some therapy. At this point, my mother and her boyfriend came and showed the cop the court order, and the cop forced us to go home with them and told them that he recommended therapy for me. I was supposed to

work and volunteer that day, but when we got home, my mother said that I wasn't going to go, and there would be consequences. The biggest 'consequence' for disobeying the Family Bridges program is being sent away to a wilderness camp or to a facility indefinitely, so later this day, I shut the door to my room and jumped out of my bedroom window.

I was considered 'missing' for a bit before someone I was close to agreed to let me stay with her and tell my mom about it. This was working fine for a month or so, although the 'fine' part is debatable since at this point my mom told me not to talk to my sister ever again. The final straw for me was my High School graduation, I specifically asked my mother not to invite certain people, told her I wasn't going to go if she invited those people, and she told me two days before that she had invited these people. The day of my graduation, I just didn't show up. I have zero regrets about this, I just told the friend I was staying with that I would be 'missing' for the time being, and that was the last time I saw them until I was emancipated.

Researching options: first looking at CHINS petition

While I was living with other people and during the time that I was 'missing', I was researching options that would allow me to legally live apart from my mother. If I couldn't get custody changed through family court, what could I do instead to help myself? This took a lot of time and effort, but the two options I found available were a CHINS petition and then emancipation. The CHINS petition stands for 'Child in Need of Services', and basically transfers custody of the child to the state for the time being (even though you can live with family, for example). The problem with the CHINS petition was that it is very temporary and you need to prove continued risk of harm, but initially, I didn't think that I would be able to get emancipated.

Throughout all of this, I was helped by an eclectic team of dedicated Pro Bono attorneys who spend many hours trying to help me. The first organization I consulted is called Team Child, and a lawyer there helped me go over the requirements for the CHINS petition and prepare that. Ultimately, we didn't end up going forward with that because of the temporary status and because since I was so close to being 18, emancipation made more sense. The Team Child organization recommended finding someone else to help me with my emancipation petition.

After some research, I was able to find another Pro Bono law firm helping children, and I arranged a meeting with a lawyer there. We met at a coffee shop downtown, and it was refreshing for me to hear from an actual lawyer that I had a real shot at emancipation. If I remember correctly, we prepared the full petition within two days of that first meeting.

How to get emancipated

Getting emancipated requires proving that you can live and survive on your own as a functioning adult. There is no set monetary standard for “you need to be making 3.5x rent in order for us to grant this”, there is no set checklist of things that are guaranteed to work, it is really all done on a case-by-case basis. The court will accept living with a family as “survive on your own”, which is what we ended up doing in my case. I got a second job, got letters from my employers stating that I was employed, and then I had letters from family stating that they would give me a place to stay upon emancipation. These were the things that the judge considered in her decision.

I also wrote to the emancipation judge on my reasons for needing emancipation- the kidnapping, the fact that my mother was preventing me from going to work, the isolation tactics. In the end, the judge read through what I wrote but said that the more important factors in her decision were my outpouring of family support and the fact that I had gainful employment. The only reason that I was able to gain emancipation and get free was because the court that does emancipations is different from family court, and as a result I was assigned a different judge, one who didn't have a personal vendetta against me. This judge weighed her decision fairly based on the facts, and that day was one of celebration. Afterwards, my family took me out for ice cream and poke to celebrate, and then I immediately moved back in with my dad, that night.

The journey was far from over, because my sister was still not free, by this point my mom had told me repeatedly not to contact her, and the people who kidnapped me (Family Bridges and transport agents) were still in operation and seeing no ill effects.

Action on Family Bridges

When I first came back home, I called everyone I could think of. I called the FBI and the Ontario police department to inform about the interstate child trafficking, but once they heard the words 'family court' they told me they wouldn't do anything. I called and emailed my city council members, my federal representatives, you name it. Some of the city council people actually did respond and asked how they could help, but it turns out there wasn't much they could do in the end. From the beginning, I knew that I could file board complaints on the licenses of the psychologists involved, so I called the Board of Psychology in California and started to make official complaints about the unethical behaviour of the psychologists involved in my case. A couple months later, I got an email that they were not

going to investigate my complaint any further or take any more action. What I didn't know in all of this was that my dad had also been working behind the scenes to contact an even wider variety of people than I had.

My dad had been in contact with a lot of people in California, and one of them was Kathleen Russell, who is the Founding Executive Director of the Center for Judicial Excellence in Marin County, California (Center for Judicial Excellence, undated). Kathleen also founded and runs her own public affairs firm, Kathleen Russell Consulting. She tracks killings of kids in family court, lobbies the California state legislature and helps to reach out to kids who have suffered from these programs. Kathleen has led many successful legislative campaigns including legislation in 2012 granting children of 14 and older the right to testify about their wishes in California family courts (Section 3042 Family Code – Fam). She also led the first audit of the California Commission on Judicial Performance in August 2016 to make transparent the operations of this “powerful state agency that is supposed to be disciplining our state’s nearly 2,000 judges when they violate the canons of judicial ethics.” (Center for Judicial Excellence, 2016)

One of the biggest things that Kathleen was focusing on at the time was trying to get the Board of Psychology to take action on numerous complaints relating to reunification therapy and the associated psychologists. When I got the email from the Board of Psychology telling me that they weren't going to move forward on my complaint, we had to figure out next steps. The next step that we eventually figured out was bringing a large group of those negatively affected by family court psychologists to the Board of Psychology meeting and having us all sign up for public comment. Very few people normally show up at the Board of

Psychology meetings, so when we showed up en masse to the California state capital I think they were a bit shocked.

This mobilisation was a fairly large undertaking, organizing this many people from all over the country to come to Sacramento at the same time, but we managed to successfully pull it off. Kathleen had also arranged a day of meetings with legislators at the Capitol, who were all very intrigued by our stories and all seemed genuinely concerned and willing to help.

In the end, thanks to putting continued pressure on the Board of Psychology, the psychologists in my case had other complaints against them and ended up losing their licenses. This means they can no longer practice psychology in the state of California. As for judges - they don't have much accountability, and often even when misconduct is reported, nothing is done. The only people who do truly hold power over judges are legislators- but they have to know that the problem exists and is widespread before they can do something about it. Lobbying legislatures is definitely useful. However, legislatures move slowly, and they are only one piece of the puzzle. If you are only focused on lobbying lawmakers, you will get nothing done.

This is where the importance of involving media and getting media attention comes in. Ultimately, reporters can force legislatures into action. However, journalists want to know how widespread a problem is so they can cover the most pressing issues affecting the most people but showing how widespread the problem is (and it is fairly widespread) proved difficult for us. The people involved in this program use fake data and the information had to be sourced out from people who don't want to talk. I'm sure there are many more people harmed who still haven't spoken publicly. The first article we got published was in the

Washington post, and that article only mentions my family and one other but started to ask the question, “just how widespread is this?” And that article was a start to a flood of more media.

In the beginning, we had to do the work reaching out to journalists ourselves. Now, there are multiple stories out where I have been interviewed, so the media can build on itself. My goal is for me personally to reach out to journalists for the first two years or so, get a good buildup of articles and then wait until the stories start feeding off one another and self-referencing so I can step back and let the media do their job. Laws trying to improve family court have been successfully passed in other states recently because the huge media attention has put the problem in the spotlight. So I found out from all this that the media is the biggest and best tool for effecting change at government level.

Our work is not yet done. Family Bridges is still in operation. Although Randy Rand’s licence to practice as a psychologist is inactive, he still participates in interventions because Family Bridges is promoted as an ‘educational’ rather than a ‘therapeutic’ program (Hagerty, 2020).

KATHERINE’S ACCOUNT

Katherine lives in England and has a daughter, Sophie (a pseudonym to preserve the child’s anonymity), who was 10 years at the time that Katherine left a marriage that she describes as being physically and financially abusive and coercively controlling. Katherine’s ex-husband warned her that if she attempted to apply to the family court for a financial remedy order, he would apply for a transfer of residence of their daughter. Over the next few years Katherine

experienced post-separation abuse and Sophie encountered incidents of physical abuse.

Katherine's ex-husband was able to use the family court to support his threats to have the residency of their daughter changed. As Katherine kept raising domestic abuse in the family courts, she was met with the counter claim that she was alienating their daughter from her father. Katherine had not previously heard of the terms 'alienation' or 'parental alienation' but was told that she was at risk of losing her daughter if she continued to speak about the post separation abuse that was continuing.

Several years after the first family court hearing, it was ordered that Sophie undergo a 'flooding' treatment. Sophie was removed from Katherine for 10 days and placed with her father, with the hope that she would 'love her father a bit more and her mother a bit less'. Sophie returned to Katherine, looking pale and thinner, and clearly stated that she never wanted to see her father again. The treatment had failed but this was blamed on Katherine not supporting the treatment.

A few months later, Sophie was removed from Katherine's care. The family court judge refused an adjournment to enable Katherine to find legal representation for the hearing and instead directed that Katherine must hand over her house keys to the social worker who was also present. The social worker had previously never raised any concerns about Katherine's parenting but was now ordered to travel to Katherine's home and, unannounced, remove Sophie on the basis of parental alienation. The social worker called Katherine from inside her home and ordered her to tell Sophie that she needed to leave with the stranger and added that if he heard any signs of abuse, he would cut the call. Later the same evening the social worker called Katherine to tell her that he had seen evidence of child abuse because Sophie had asked to leave her bunny on mother's bed to look after her. The social worker explained

that this amounted to child abuse as no child should have to worry about their parents.

Katherine was permitted to see her daughter in a supervised capacity only and the contact would be stopped if she showed any signs of emotion.

Following a lengthy period of family court hearings, it was finally ordered that an established children's mental health centre should be commissioned by a local authority, up to the total cost of £20,000, to re-establish a shared care arrangement. Katherine chose this centre because the therapy centre proposed by Sophie's father and social services would not allow Katherine any contact with Sophie for three months. However, Katherine was unaware of the treatment regime of the centre she chose until the treatment had already started. Katherine was advised by her barrister that she should not appeal the court's decision but embrace the work that would be carried out at the centre, as they would be able to independently recognise the domestic abuse and coercively and controlling behaviour perpetrated on Katherine. However, Katherine explains that what transpired was the complete opposite and that Katherine and her daughter's experiences were discounted. Katherine attended the centre sporadically for just under a year. During this time, she was told that if she did not change her behaviour then she would never be able to have Sophie returned to her and would only see her under supervised conditions until her 16th birthday. Sophie was also told that contact between herself and her mother would be suspended unless she stopped saying that she wanted to live with her mother.

Katherine was so afraid with what occurred at her first session that she began to secretly record the sessions, not only for her own mental well-being – as she could not believe what was happening – but also as evidence that something 'wasn't quite right'. Katherine disclosed that she had been doing this to the centre's clinical director as part of a formal complaint to

the centre. During the 'treatment' time at the centre it became clear to Katherine that her ex-husband was able to control what was being decided. On one occasion, during one of three joint sessions, where both parents were present, Katherine's ex-husband told the psychiatrist that he was unhappy that Katherine could not have eye contact with him. He said that he felt this was alienating behaviour and if this wasn't rectified then he felt Sophie could not return to her mother's care. The centre immediately agreed with the father and did not try to understand why Katherine felt intimidated by her ex-husband.

After eleven months, the centre admitted that it had failed in being able to achieve a shared care arrangement which they interpreted to be a 50/50 split of time. The centre suggested that if the parents cannot come to an agreement about where Sophie should live then the matter should be returned to court. However, the centre did not seem to appreciate that this would involve starting a new set of proceedings because social services did not intend to extend the supervision order. They attributed this to Katherine being unable to change her view about the coercive control that she was still experiencing from her ex-husband, and Sophie's wish to still be with her mother. The centre stated that they had £5000 left from the total amount given to them by the local authority. In the summary of the last meeting the psychiatrist reported that the remaining money could be used for ongoing therapy at the centre but suggested that Katherine would prefer not to continue the work because the trust had broken down. Katherine has no idea what eventually happened to the remaining £5000.

Nearly three years later, Sophie continues to live with her father and to see Katherine for a minimal amount of time. Sophie is close to 16 years old and continues to say that she wants to live with her mother. Even though Sophie has been found to have attained a sufficient age and degree of maturity for her wishes and feelings to be taken seriously or even to be

determinative (called 'Gillick-competence' in England and Wales), her wishes and feelings have not been acted on because of the parental alienation accusations.

Below are excerpts taken from various sessions that Katherine attended at the centre and the accompanying notes made by the therapists that were obtained by submitting a Subject Access Request to the centre. Katherine describes how frightened she felt during the sessions and how coerced she felt into making sure she said what the therapists wanted her to say so that she would be able to see her daughter.

Session 1

The first session at the centre consisted of the psychiatrist, psychologist and Katherine. After the session, Katherine was distressed and on returning home made some quick notes about her experience. Katherine remembers that questions were fired at her by the psychiatrist and before she was able to answer fully another question was asked. The psychiatrist's main focus was on Katherine not being able to say anything positive about her ex-husband. He focused on Katherine being unable to normalise the abusive behaviour that Sophie had witnessed and personally encountered. Katherine remembers trying to describe some of the coercive and controlling behaviour, but the therapists told her that it did not matter what had happened in the past as the judge had ordered the centre to try to find a shared care solution. Katherine was told that she was at risk of only ever seeing Sophie in supervised contact if she did not change her opinion of her ex-husband. Katherine was told that she needed to take responsibility for the alienation of Sophie and was told that even crying, as a response to the abuse, was emotionally abusive to Sophie. Katherine describes feeling like the session was a

game of cat and mouse and she was being hunted by the psychiatrist, it felt psychologically unsafe and she felt extremely vulnerable and frightened.

Summary of session by the therapist according to the therapist's notes

Katherine was very tearful throughout the session and said that she feels that she was never heard and listened to. She feels victim in the situation and said that her ex-husband has manipulated the whole situation to get Sophie away from her. Even though the psychiatrist and I asked her to think about maybe one positive thing she may be able to say about her ex-husband, she could not think of anything positive to say about him. She kept on talking about how controlling he is and the fact that Sophie doesn't like him not because of her but because of the things he has done to her. She was not able to take any responsibility what so ever for her own actions and ways in which she may have influenced Sophie.

Session 2

Therapist: With our work, it's basically what we're doing and what we did last week and what we are doing now to see whether you can see the part you played in Sophie becoming quite alienated from her father, actually and how you can reverse this.

Therapist: Sometimes a dad might be more aggressive with the child than the mother might want to be, that kind of thing.

[Later on]

Therapist: So what did you want to talk about last time? You said that you found it difficult.

Katherine: I just found it, yes, incredibly difficult. I just found it very, very hard and I came away feeling shocked and ... Yes.

Therapist: What was it that shocked you?

Katherine: That I wasn't given time to answer a question and I felt like I was a, a rabbit and you two were foxes hunting me down and there's a lack of belief in what I'm saying and a lack of understanding. It felt to me, yes, I came away feeling very ...

Therapist: Which is why it's not a good idea for us to be two clinicians which is why I'm seeing you on my own from now on because that can have that effect. I can see that. The thing is that because there's been a judgment and there's been findings, we can't really go against what's already been said, you know, what's been found. So we have to work with what the judge has said. Now we know that things have happened in the past, I'm not denying that, and Sophie did say yesterday that "My dad twisted my ankle and has also slapped me".

Katherine: Yes, he'd held her down on the bed and held her round her neck. I mean the findings against him, the physical and...

Therapist: Yes, absolutely but there is a sense of you either hold onto that and have her be very angry about that and be punitive about that which is not going to be helpful for Sophie

or you can help Sophie to kind of move on and say, “Look...” What I was saying to Sophie is “I hear what you’re saying, what I’m hearing is also that your father is regretting having done that and he understands that that’s not right and he won’t do that again”. I think that’s the message that needs to be given to Sophie now.

[Later on]

Katherine: So on Friday she said to me I don’t want to see my daddy, I know I have to but daddy hurts me

Therapist: The answer to that is, if you want to help move on is to say, “Daddy has hurt you in the past, but he won’t do it anymore and he hasn’t done it for a while”.

Katherine: How can you as a mum?

Therapist: As a mum believe me, I mean I ...

Katherine: Yes, I know as a mother’s it’s so hard, isn’t it?

Therapist: It’s not that hard because my husband does things that I don’t really agree with, he can be very hard with my girls, very harsh...

Katherine: But what about physical hurting, I mean it’s wrong.

Therapist: Even physical hurting I would say, “Look, he lost control, I’m really sorry, he’s really sorry, give him a chance to apologise and repair”, and that was months ago, you know, and the fact that you’re holding on to that isn’t allowing Sophie to move on either.

Summary of session by the therapist according to the therapist’s notes

“I can see now how abusive he was; his control was always wrapped up in kindness
....”

She went onto say: “On [deleted] he raped me because I was ill and he felt that it was his right to sleep with me. He later admitted it and said that he didn’t realise the impact”. According to Katherine, she was [deleted] put a great strain on [her ex-husband] and on their marriage. “He couldn’t control my illness and it made him nervous so he controlled me”.

Session 3

Therapist: [Sophie] feels that she is not being loyal to you and I’m not saying that directly to her but you are giving off messages. What are you thinking? I’d like to hear what you are thinking. Sophie is literally repeating, word for word, things that you say and that’s not right for a child. She needs to be able to have ...

Katherine: What is she saying, word for word, that I say?

Therapist: ‘He’s controlling’. That’s a word that you use and now she uses that.

Katherine: I don't. I've never said that to her.

Therapist: It is a word that you've used and she's using it, so there are words that you do use.

Katherine: Do you think he – well, I don't use these. Sophie hasn't been with me for nearly a year now.

Therapist: I know but a year is nothing and she very much ...

Katherine: A year is a very long time.

Therapist: She was very much, I'd like to say brainwashed by you before that and there's a certain....

Katherine: I'm sorry – I'm very ...

Therapist: I'm sorry, but this is, in all the reports, it's there. You have ...

Katherine: You haven't read all of the reports.

Therapist: I have. I've read most of the reports.

Katherine: You said that you hadn't read the reports last time.

Therapist: I have. I've read most of the reports and they all say the same thing, which is why Sophie has now been taken away from you and put with her father, which is very unusual.

Katherine: I haven't brainwashed my daughter

Therapist: Well the report talks about parental alienation and so do the experts, and that's what we see because we see ...

Katherine: There has been one expert and I wasn't allowed to challenge him.

Therapist: I know but all the evidence shows us, this is our expertise, that Sophie has been alienated because as a child she can't remember a single good memory with her father has been alienated because that's just impossible.

[Later in the session]

Therapist: So supervised contact under what – why? Because he held her down once?

Katherine: He didn't just hold her down once

Therapist: I really do think that these are things that you've made mountains out of little things.

Katherine: I'm sorry?

Therapist: I've read the reports and I've read what the police have said and I've read everything, and it's not – you know, that thing with her leg, she was kicking him and held her ankles. So what, is my – because you have so much – because he's been abusive to you and controlling to you, you are putting that onto Sophie. He's not the same with Sophie as he is with you. He's a different father....

This isn't just [the father's] doing. This is your doing as well, you calling the police, you constantly saying to people that she didn't mean that. You're doing this, you're doing this – this is your animosity with him. It's not just [the father]. [The father] has made mistakes, yes. He's made more mistakes to you, obviously, than he has with Sophie. With Sophie, it's been two incidents and they're not really big. You know, every parent can lose it and hold someone down or shout in their face or do something. It's not the end of the world, but you made it the end of the world.

Summary of session by the therapist according to the therapist's notes

Katherine was low today and said that she was really struggling with not having her daughter with her and spoke about contact sessions which were cancelled because social services couldn't supervise..... I did reiterate how important it is that she gives Sophie encouragement to be happy with her father and really to catch every comment Sophie makes and say something positive about [her father]. Katherine insisted that this is what she has always done but I continued to challenge her on this ...

2nd Joint Session with Katherine and Sophie

The centre decided that they would allow unsupervised contact between Katherine and Sophie. However, before this could occur, Katherine would have to explain the family court judgment to Sophie in front of the psychotherapist.

Katherine had to explain to Sophie that she wanted to have a shared care arrangement with her father and apologise for everything that had happened. Katherine felt coerced into doing this but realised that this way the only way that she would be able to see her daughter unsupervised.

Therapist [talking to Sophie]: It's been hard it was really hard for your dad and when you were saying, when you were saying I don't want to see you, I don't like you, that was really painful for him. I'm an... and I think he realised that he had made some mistakes to make you a bit scared of him, yep? [inaudible]...getting any better and it wasn't getting any better and I think the judge really thought, well, the only way to get Sophie to get to know her father and to know that he's actually a lovely dad is to have her live with him. And I think, I think your mum was a bit worried at first and she thought, oh my God she's living with her dad, how's that going to go? But I think she realised that he's a good dad you know, he maybe wasn't a good husband to her but he's a really good dad to you and he's going to get better and better the more he gets to know you. So, I think your mum's kind of saying, I'm really glad that Sophie is liking her dad I think it's really nice I think she's really reassured by that.

Summary of session by the therapist according to the therapist's notes

Katherine started off by talking to Sophie about why the judge had decided that Sophie needed to live with her father in order to allow them to bond more and to get

to know one another without the interference of the conflicts between her parents. She then said how important it is for Sophie to feel that she can love both of her parents and she apologised to Sophie for putting her through so much pain. I did not insist on Katherine telling Sophie that the judge found that she had alienated her from her father; I felt that Katherine saying that Sophie needed to bond with her father without the interference of the parents' conflict was enough.

Session 9

(After being able to spend time alone with Katherine, Sophie continues to express her wish to live with her mother. The therapists have not seen Sophie for months. It is now suggested that Sophie hears the judgement again.)

Therapist: But that's the problem you see. When you say she's not living with her dad, forever, it gives her this hope that I'm coming back.

Katherine: I'm not telling her that though. I'm telling you that.

Therapist: Well, I don't think you are directly, but I think you are in your attitude, and I think that's what she's thinking, that if I push hard enough and if I have tantrums enough, and if I write letters enough then, and she doesn't seem to understand, of course she doesn't know why she is, why she was taken away because she's asking in the letter, while I was there taken away from my Mama? So we think in the team with [the psychiatrist] that we should share the judgement, that we make a child friendly version of the judgement for her so she

understands why she was taken away from you. She needs to know the truth, otherwise she's going to be very confused for the rest of her life.

Katherine: Well, I'm sorry, the truth about what though?

Therapist: The judgment. You remember the judgment?

Katherine: Yes, and I disagreed with it completely.

Therapist: Well, you can disagree with it if you want to, but it is a fact finding and it is a ...

Katherine: But it wasn't right, I mean as we've said before.

Therapist: Well, you see, that's concerning to me because if you are still saying it wasn't right and it's not true and all of that ...

Katherine: Of course. Of course, I am.

Therapist: Well, then I don't foresee the future where she can be living with you I'm afraid because this judgement, I'm going to write a child friendly judgement with the help of [the psychiatrist] to her and she needs to know everything that the judge is saying. She needs to understand why she was taken away from you. Of course, we wouldn't give her the judgement like this because that's too violent for her, but she needs to know that the judge found that you had manipulated her.

[Later on]

The therapist shows Katherine a letter that Sophie has written to her father. The therapist accuses Katherine of manipulating Sophie.

Therapist: What do you think when you read the letter?

Katherine: I think it's sad.

Therapist: What do you think is sad about it?

Katherine: That she feels that she needs to write it. She is [age deleted]. I think it is sad. It's just awful.

Therapist: Well, I think what's sad is the fact that you can't see your responsibility in her sadness. I find that very concerning. You can't see any responsibility for her situation, because this is down to you. Her situation is down to you, Katherine, and I'm sorry. It's not down to me. It's not down to the judge. It's not down to the social worker. It's not down to [your ex-husband]. It's down to how you presented the father to her. [Your ex-husband] has made certain mistakes and he's apologised for them, but the rest is you.

Katherine: He hasn't apologised for them. I'm sorry but he hasn't. I'm being honest with you now, he hasn't apologised to me, not me.

Therapist: He said he had indeed because I asked him. He said that he had apologised to you.

Katherine: He never apologised.

Therapist: Well, maybe that's something he should do, but I do think that this is a situation where she is adamant that she doesn't want to stay with her father, and that whole situation when she was taken away from you, was caused by you. It wasn't caused by anyone else.

[Later on]

Therapist: But I'm saying what the Dr and I saw in that first session. Since then, you've changed, but in that first session you couldn't think of one positive thing about [the father] and one reason why Sophie should see her father. You could not think of one reason, Katherine, you couldn't.

Katherine: But he's very abusive, has been very abusive.

Therapist: Well, because you think that there is still no way that you're going to encourage – how are you going to encourage Sophie to be with her father who you see as someone who is abusive and dangerous?

Katherine: He was. I didn't say he was dangerous, but he was abusive, so when I came to that first meeting I was telling you what happened in the past.

Therapist: Which makes me think, and the judge think, and the Dr and other professionals, that since you hold that image of him in your mind you're going to transmit that to Sophie, whether you want to or not, or you are ...

Katherine: I'm not.

Therapist: That's how she sees him. That's how she sees him. This thing about, "He's buying me things and it's called bribery", that's not a child's words.

Katherine: That's not my words!

Therapist: Well, I've heard you say it before...

Katherine: No, I haven't.

Therapist: I have heard you say it before.

Katherine: I would never say that to my daughter.

Therapist: Well, you may not say it to her directly, but your actions. She's a smart girl. She knows what you think about her father. How do you expect Sophie to love her father, want to be with her father, spend time with him when she knows that her mother thinks her dad is abusive?

[Later on]

Therapist: I have been doing this job for 25 years, Katherine, I wasn't born yesterday. I've seen this kind of message through mothers and children before. This is exactly as [the psychiatrist] said, "it's as if mum is writing the letter".

Katherine: I haven't written the letter. I've been nowhere near that letter. I haven't.

Therapist: I know, but this is your influence, Katherine

Katherine: I'm sorry, but what is wrong with a little girl wanting to be with her mum and saying that she wants to live with her mum? What is wrong with that?

Therapist: The thing that is wrong with it is that a few months ago this little girl who said "I hate my father. I don't ever want to see him again. I don't want to be in a room with him. I don't want him in my life", this is wrong, Katherine, this is wrong, and if we are going back to that stage then that is abusive to that child because a child who hates her father has been emotionally abused and alienated. I'm sorry. That's the way it is. Any child who says, "I hate my father", and cannot think of one good thing to say about them.

Katherine: I've never, ever, ever, ever said to her-

Therapist: So it comes out of you?

Katherine: I have never ever said to my daughter: "I hate your father".

Therapist: He's abusive. He's controlling, he abused me

Katherine: Excuse me?

Therapist: I'm sure she heard that. She told me, "My father was very controlling"

Katherine: Yes, because he's controlling her.

Therapist: No. I'm sorry. She's using the same words as you are.

Katherine: No, I'm sorry

Therapist: Exactly the same words as you are.

Katherine: I'm sorry. I would never, ever say to my daughter, "Your father is controlling", I haven't done it. I wouldn't do it. I don't do that. I wouldn't do that.

Therapist: We are not getting anywhere. What I want to say is we're going to have contact today with [your ex-husband] and we're going to go through some of the cases and just think about how we move on in the future. There are a few points that he wants to bring up. You can bring up a few points, but as far as shared care is concerned we're not going there at all.

Katherine: Please I can't have a meeting with [ex-husband] now. I want an advocate because it's wrong [Katherine is crying heavily at this point]

Therapist: Yes, you can have an advocate. I'm also going to write to the social worker and just tell him that I'm going to write a child-friendly judgment and that we're going to go through the child-friendly judgment with Sophie so she understands the situation, and it would be really important that we both support it. I think that [your ex-husband] has worked hard to collaborate with you.

[The meeting continues but the therapist agrees to Katherine's request not to have a joint meeting with her ex-husband.]

Summary of session by the therapist according to the therapist's notes

I then shared my concerns with Katherine about Sophie writing the letter and the way that [her ex-husband] says things are going back to the way they were slightly.

Katherine was shocked to hear this and said that she had no knowledge of the letter but that Sophie is [age deleted] and her voice needs to be heard. I again explained, as I have in the past, that the reason that Sophie's voice cannot be heard completely is because we believe that it is not completely her voice, but that she is being influenced by her mother. Katherine started to cry hysterically and throughout the session, saying that she had never influenced Sophie, and that Sophie is just making her mind up about her father because of his past actions etc I expressed my concern that this sounded very much like the discourse Katherine used to have before and that I felt that she had moved on since before the summer. I then explained that I was thinking of talking to Sophie about the judgment so that she understands the situation.

Following on from session nine, two further joint sessions took place two months later, with both clinicians, Katherine's ex-husband and Katherine.

The psychiatrist also met with Sophie alone and read through a child-friendly version of the judgement. Sophie was told that it was unlikely that anything she said or did would have the judgment overruled and changed and that there would be costs involved that she would not be able to afford. Sophie was told that her mother had negatively influenced her. "We also told her that the care arrangements are not going to change and that if we remain concerned about her negatively influenced by her mother against her father, we will ask for the contact to be supervised again".

This account by Katherine reveals how North American parental alienation intervention theories and practices are being used in England and Wales, although this may not be apparent because of the different terminology and language used. While the ostensible goal of the 'therapy' was to try to establish shared care of Sophie by Katherine and her ex-husband, the underlying aim was to 'treat' parental alienation. The extracts from the recordings highlight how the power of parental alienation discourse reinterpreted and placed the focus on Katherine's protective behaviour, rather than on the abuse perpetrated by Sophie's father. It is apparent how Katherine was silenced by the therapists' lack of understanding of coercive control, with the abuse constructed as historical by the focus on forward thinking.

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