

## **Cloona Child Contact Centre**

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**Draft Presentation**

### **PARENT ALIENATION**

The importance of contact is recognised in both national and international legislation and everyone agrees that children must be given a real opportunity to develop a relationship with both parents. This is sometimes easier said than done. Lord Justice Wall draws our attention to the difficulties facing a parent after what is likely to have been a traumatic separation on being asked to try rationally to make contact arrangements with the person whom they think has just betrayed them or who has been violent towards them.

Wall believes that most people who are adamantly opposed to their former partner or spouse having contact do so in the express belief that it's in the best interests of the children. He says that most parents live in the here and now and find it very difficult to see 10 years ahead when a teenager or adolescent will round on them for ruining their relationship with the other parent. People don't see that in the immediate fog of the separation.

Parental alienation, also known as PAS, is a real problem for many separating and divorcing families. Clearly the courts have a role to play in ensuring that contact takes place. But contact will always be a highly contentious and very difficult issue for the courts to deal with, especially where there are complications of domestic violence. The dilemma the court has to resolve is that while children's safety must be a top priority, we cannot and must not forget that we have a responsibility to protect children's relationships with both Mum and Dad.

We all know how easy it is for parents, professionals and the family court itself to get mired down in the "he said, she said" debate while the needs of the child take a back seat. The adversarial arena of the court tends to bring out the worst in the warring parties. Lady Butler-Sloss pointed out in launching this pilot project in September 2006 that it is generally recognised that the courts are not the best place to resolve contact disputes.

While awareness of PAS has increased over the past several years, alienation has been and still is a hot bed of controversy in many professional circles and family court jurisdictions.

The issue of PAS, usually invokes lots of strong opinions and feelings on both sides. Mothers who are accused of PAS often regard it as a courtroom tactic designed to give abusive fathers access to children and to further exploit mothers who are trying to protect children. Unfortunately there have been cases where the family court system has not protected the needs of children by either minimizing the need for safety or by creating unwarranted obstacles for parents desperately trying to maintain

a relationship with their children. In a recent court case in Belfast a father threw his hands up and walked away because he felt that his former partner was asking him to jump through too many hoops and, in his view, the court was not doing anything to stop her.

When considering whether or not PAS exists we should not expect a simple yes/no answer. Alienation exists rather on a continuum. At one end of the continuum a parent may engage in activities which include consistent derogatory remarks, subtly placing children in situations where they are asked to take sides or scheduling activities during the other parent's scheduled time with a child. The alienation can be so subtle and so insidious that the child doesn't realize what is happening.

I remember one case where the father could only see the child on Sundays. The mother claimed that the child was attending church service in the morning, Sunday School in the afternoon and choir practice in the evening. She reminded the court of the importance of keeping holy the Sabbath day.

At the other end of the continuum we find implacable hostility. We might see a parent blatantly interfering with contact, rewarding a child's rejection of the other parent, making abuse allegations or insisting that the other parent is bad, evil or someone to be feared.

If PAS is suspected intervention needs to be guided by the assessment of a qualified experienced professional. Belfast and Lisburn courts, both of which make referrals to Cloona, have expert Court Welfare Officers. I feel confident in saying that they are the best around. But they do not have the time to carry out a thorough analysis of the situation. This is best done using a multi-disciplinary team approach such as is available in Cloona where the team is comprised of a range of experts.

The service offered by Cloona is holistic and comprehensive, allowing families to access a wide range of inputs and supports according to their individual needs. And individual needs can vary greatly from parent to parent and from parents to child(ren). A parent's needs may range for example from learning how to bottle feed a baby and change its nappy, to learning how to interact with his/her children, to controlling substance abuse and anger management.

Children caught up in separation/divorce proceedings may find themselves living in a constant state of either/or – forced to choose this family or that one, Mum's side or Dad's side. They learn early on that if they do not side with the alienator, they risk rejection. Seeing how the alienator deals with the target parent is a clear and ever present reminder of this. A child can feel anxious most of the time, have unexplained aches and pains, a feeling of isolation and many tearful moments. Therapeutic intervention may be necessary.

The alienation can also create a rift between siblings with one feeling a strong need to take their mother's side, while the other feels the need for a relationship with their father.

When a child chooses not to see the absent parent, that parent is usually reluctant to accept that this is the child's decision. They invariably blame the resident parent for turning their child against them.

There are actually many reasons why children may be reluctant to spend time with one of their parents. In some cases, a parent may alienate themselves from a child by withdrawing from their lives, trying to discredit the other parent or by engaging in harmful, abusive or destructive behaviour. When a parent does not take responsibility for their part, children may choose to distance themselves. Expert intervention is needed to work through these issues with the parent, helping them to see how they contributed to the alienation instead of piling all the blame on their partner. They need to learn how to take a positive approach, to accept that short consistent periods of time that enhance the relationship are better than no time at all and that, if children enjoy the contact, they will wish to increase it. In this way parents are encouraged to understand how their children are feeling and to support them. They learn to focus on the best interests of the child and to leave aside their animosity for their former partner/spouse. In doing so the parent will achieve greater insight and personal development in his/her own right.

It is important for the parent to realise that their child(ren) still needs them, even if it is not acknowledged. Knowing that the absent parent cares and is available can be incredibly valuable to children dealing with the pressure inflicted by an alienating parent. Indeed children may feel closer to the absent parent because they are not forced to choose.

The best way to prevent PAS is to nip it in the bud. Often timing and intervention make a significant difference. The sooner parents and children have access to support and information the less likely they are to fall victim to the negative and destructive aspects of separation and divorce. It is encouraging to note that families can avail of Cloona's mediation services at the point of breakdown without going through the court process.

Cloona's approach also involves court liaison with legal representatives with a view to insuring intervention at the earliest opportunity. This is important because, while there are many family lawyers who are educated and knowledgeable about PAS, many still are not.

Dealing with parent alienation is not something which can be done in a hurry. The journey to repair relationships may be long and often requires an enormous amount of patience, persistence and expertise. Cloona has demonstrated the effectiveness of their approach in this regard.

In reading through the evaluation report I am pleased to see the move towards supported contact. Supervised contact is almost always contentious with implications of lack of trust. Supported contact on the other hand carries the connotation of everyone wishing the contact to go well. Cloona's approach of focussing on supported contact coupled with mediation and counselling is, I believe, the way forward.

Where supervised contact is deemed to be necessary, as a result of a Re L hearing, for example, a multi-disciplinary risk assessment can be carried out and a report prepared

for the court to help inform future decision making. To the best of my knowledge, Cloona is the only contact centre which can carry out such an assessment.

The pilot project has been running for some 18 months. The demand for its services is demonstrated by the fact that demand far exceeded expectations. In a twelve month period from 1<sup>st</sup> July 2007 to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2008 Cloona worked with 162 families instead of the projected 100. Its success may be gauged by the fact that 63% reached a consensual agreement with only 6% going to a final court hearing and only 2% going to appeal.

The project has developed a unique model of delivery in terms of integrated working and the provision of a holistic service. The service that has developed offers a seamless and continuous input that can be tailored to meet the individual needs of families and provide support for a range of options.

Judge Loughran, speaking at Cloona's AGM a few weeks ago, described Cloona as the "Gold Standard" amongst Contact Centres. Lady Butler-Sloss, speaking at the launch of this project in September 06 asked the organisers to consider exporting their idea to the rest of the UK. Everyone is agreed about the quality of work emanating from Cloona and of Cloona's uniqueness.

It is therefore disquieting to note that there is a question mark over future funding. I see in the audience Mr Jeffrey Donaldson who was so influential in getting this experiment off the ground. I trust that he, in his new position of power at Stormont will be able to persuade his colleagues to find the small amount of money which is required to guarantee that this project can carry on.

Contact is such an important topic. So much more needs to be done to make sure that children are in touch, not just with parents but with all relatives after a family break-up. The various parties need help to deal with their own issues so that they will not contribute even more pain and trauma to the child by alienating someone they care about. Cloona has demonstrated that this can be done and is in the process of developing a model of how to do it. We must all ensure that their work is allowed to continue.