


**” IF I SAID NO TO SEEING MY
FATHER, IT WAS SEEN
AS IF I HAD BEEN
ALIENATED BY MY MOTHER ”**



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By
Ysoie Lepri, Eve Pepin and Layla Vallières^[1]
In collaboration with Simon Lapierre^[2],
Michèle Frenette, Patrick Ladouceur
and Alexandra Vincent^[3]

[1] Ysoie Lepri, Eve Pepin and Layla Vallières are members of the group Safe & Sound

[2] Simon Lapierre, PhD. is a Full Professor in the School of Social Work, at the University of Ottawa

[3] Michèle Frenette, Patrick Ladouceur and Alexandra Vincent are doctoral candidates in social work at the University of Ottawa

SAFE & SOUND



sainsetsaufs@uottawa.ca

Introduction

Safe & Sound is a group of young people founded in 2021 as part of a research project, which aims to better understand the experiences and point of view of children and young people's experiences and perspectives on father-child relationship in the context of post-separation violence. The group is composed of young people (between the ages of 12 and 17) as co-researchers who guide the different research stages. The project, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, is carried out under the direction of Simon Lapierre, PhD, full professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Ottawa.

This document emerges from a discussion with the group of young people and its content represent their perspectives. It was produced in response to the Call for submissions published by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences.



EMERGING CONTEXT OF PARENTAL ALIENATION ALLEGATIONS

This document focuses on situations where parental alienation allegations specifically target women who have experienced domestic violence. These allegations can arise from different sources, including fathers, relatives, youth protection workers and psychosocial experts. It is also possible that this question be raised by workers in domestic violence shelters, who recommend that women exercise caution to avoid allegations of parental alienation.

Different scenarios can lead to parental alienation allegations:

- The mother speaks to the child about the father's violent behaviours;
- The mother asks for sole custody of the child;
- The child expresses not wanting to see the father or wanting to see him less often;
- The child speaks of the father using terms that are similar to those used by the mother.

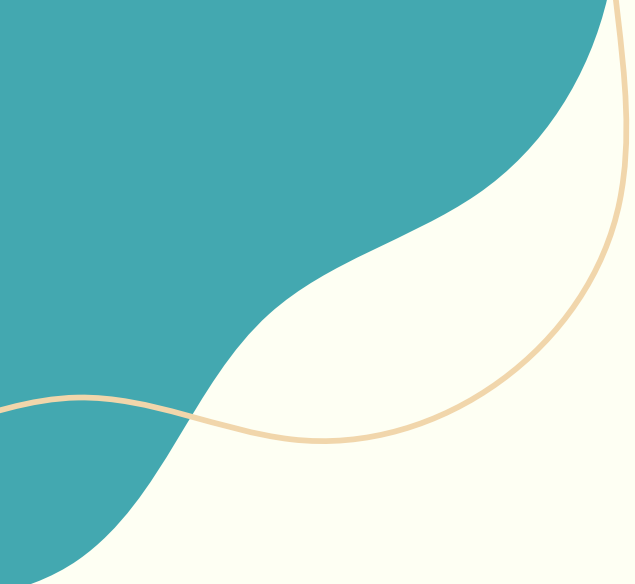
These parental alienation allegations can constitute strategies used by violent fathers to manipulate and maintain their control over their ex-partners and their children.

“The parental alienation allegations came from my father, so I was on guard. His manipulation pushed me to see him less because he questioned me and I felt manipulated.”

In certain cases, workers quickly came to the conclusion of parental alienation, without having carried out a complete and in-depth assessment of the situation.

“My mother, in less than three days, she was accused of parental alienation, but everything my mother told me was true.”

It should be noted that these allegations emerge in a context where, with regards to domestic violence, significant shortcomings are observed in the work of youth protection workers and psychosocial experts. These professionals seem to have an understanding of domestic violence that is often limited to incidents of physical assaults, therefore ignoring all other strategies of control adopted by violent fathers. The consequences of domestic violence on children are not always well documented. In addition, following separation, situations of domestic violence are often viewed through the high conflict lens, which opens the door for parental alienation allegations.



“If I listen to youth professionals, I wasn't experiencing domestic violence. It was parental problems, and it was normal. We all go through it.”

It should also be noted that these professionals really value the relationships between the children and their father. Even when fathers have had violent and controlling behaviours, these professionals insist on maintaining contact and find it hard to imagine that a child could request that contact with their father be limited or suspended.

“For professionals, it's your father, it's important that you see him, no matter what he has done to you.”



VICTIMS (WOMEN AND CHILDREN) REDUCED TO SILENCE

Allegations of parental alienation impose a silence on domestic violence. Once women are accused or fear being accused of parental alienation, they cannot speak with their children about domestic violence or the fathers' behaviours. They also cannot respond to the questions asked by their children. These women therefore find themselves in a situation where they have to deny or minimize the father's violence. In these situations, the domestic violence becomes a taboo subject.

“When my mother was quiet about these subjects, it really caused me a lot of trouble, it really confused me. I do not agree with making taboo subjects that are important to better understand the situation. It's important that we be able to speak, because there is tension and you're not able to put it into words. [...] even if you're young, you understand that there is something.”

Children therefore cannot obtain answers to their questions or information regarding their family situation, even when they have concerns regarding their own safety and well-being. They also cannot benefit from support from their mother, which is very important for many children living with domestic violence. Further, these children are excluded from discussions that could provide them with benchmarks to distinguish between behaviours that are acceptable and those that are unacceptable in intimate relationships.

“My mother, it was like she didn't care, but it's because she couldn't say anything.”

“We didn't talk about my father anymore, it was like *Voldemort* . We were not to say his name, we didn't really know why. Our mother had been told to be careful to avoid parental alienation.”

This silence, however, isn't limited solely to the relationship between the children and their mother. Children may also choose not to express their concerns regarding their father's behaviour to professionals, for fear that they will interpret their comments as a consequence of parental alienation.

“A child who expresses herself too well, that's an alienated child. A child who doesn't express themselves well enough, she doesn't know what she wants. It's a *lose-lose* situation.”




DOUBT, CONFUSION AND FALSE SENSE OF SECURITY

The parental alienation allegations sow doubt and generate confusion in children living with domestic violence, even more so since professionals do not clearly explain why they come to the conclusion of parental alienation. In these circumstances, some children question their mothers' accounts, as well as their motives. They no longer know who to believe, nor who they can trust.

“You no longer trust anyone because you think everyone is lying to you.”

Even more so, the silence imposed by the parental alienation allegations and the minimization of the father's violence invalidates children's experiences, especially when they themselves have observed certain violent behaviours which leads them to be concerned for their safety and well-being. These children can also come to question their own perceptions and judgement.




In certain cases, children may believe that, if there is no longer a question of violence, it is surely because their father has changed, creating a false sense of safety. This false sense of safety is also fuelled by the professionals, who insist on maintaining contact between the children and their father. Without access to all the relevant information, children are not in a position to make informed decisions.

“You are misunderstood. Why doesn't mom talk about it anymore? [...] But when I go to dad's, he hasn't changed.”

Some of these children suffer years of manipulation and violent and controlling behaviours from their father, which could have been avoided if they had had access to all the relevant information and if professionals had performed a better assessment of the domestic violence situation.

“If I had known earlier, I would've stopped going to my father much sooner. But I couldn't have known, because it was seen as parental alienation.”



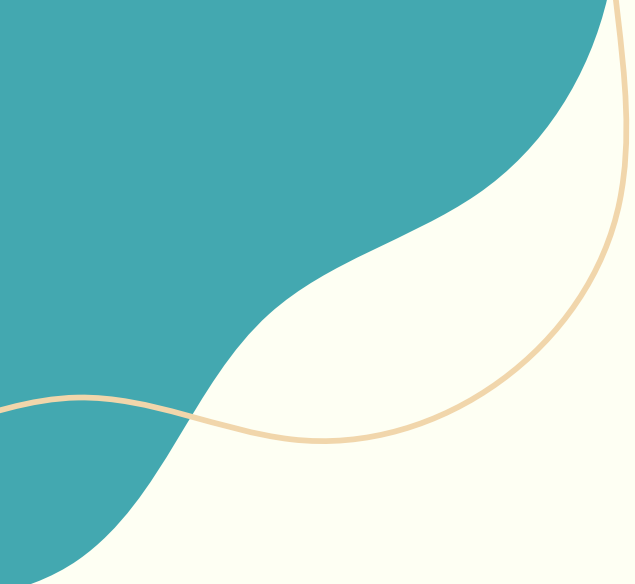
FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE REALITIES OF CHILDREN LIVING WITH DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Parental alienation allegations may therefore arise from a misunderstanding of domestic violence and the realities of children who live with domestic violence. In general, these children know that they live in a context of violence because they have observed the violent and controlling behaviours of their father. This situation can elicit strong emotions among children. In these circumstances, children have their own views, and they themselves can decide to take certain steps to ensure their safety and well-being, including steps to limit or suspend contact with their father.

“A child understands what's happening. A child has emotions. A child is a human being, and a child can be exhausted and is ready to do anything to leave a situation where they do not feel good. Children should not be underestimated.”

When children report the abuse perpetrated by their father, their words should be taken more seriously.


“If a child disclose, she is telling the truth. A child who is fed up and disgusted by all of this will do anything to get out.”



It should be noted that it is likely that these children describe the father's violence in terms that are similar to those used by their mother, considering that they have witnessed the same behaviours. It is also normal, more generally, for children to use the same words and expressions as their parents.

“When I expressed myself, they said to me ‘are you sure that these are not your moms’ words’? Of course, it’s your parent, so we’re going to say similar words, but that doesn’t mean that you don’t have your own values and opinions [...] They’re your parents and you grew up with them, but that doesn’t change the fact that it’s you who is saying it. People will observe what you are going through according to their own lens and judge everything you have said according to their lens.”

“Often, we will be told ‘ah, those words are your mothers’ words. [...] it’s not because we are alienated, it’s because we live daily life with someone. We express our emotions, even if it’s through the same words of our mother.”



“When they told me ‘you sound like your mother when you talk’ I found that difficult. Even if I was young, I needed someone to listen to me in order to defend myself.”

In addition, the children who were living with domestic violence often turned to their mother to obtain information, validation and support. It is therefore essential that women and children have the opportunity to discuss the situation of domestic violence and their respective concerns openly and frankly, without fear of accusations of parental alienation.

“I needed my mom in those difficult moments.”

“It’s important to speak about the violent behaviours. It’s important that the child be informed, especially if it is to give him tools.”

Recommandations

The implementation of the following recommendations would limit the allegations and avoid findings of parental alienation in the context of domestic violence. This would thus make it possible to better respond to the needs of children living with domestic violence and to respect their rights.

- 1 Through training programs, ensure that all professionals in the sectors of youth protection and family law (workers, experts, lawyers, judges, etc) have a good understanding of domestic violence and the realities of children living with domestic violence.
- 2 Raise awareness among these professionals regarding the fact that violent fathers often use manipulation and various control strategies, which may include the use of parental alienation allegations, as well as instrumentalization of the child and the mother-child relationship.
- 3 Raise awareness among these professionals regarding the negative impacts of their practices on the children's and women's rights to safety and integrity, when they conclude parental alienation in a context of domestic violence.
- 4 Educate these professionals on the importance, for children and women, of being able to discuss the situation of domestic violence and their respective concerns openly and frankly, without fear of accusations of parental alienation.
- 5 Put in place mechanisms to ensure that children are consulted and that their views are taken into account in the assessment and in the decision-making process, as provided for in the International Convention on the Rights of the child.