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HOW CHILDREN COPE WITH PARENTAL HOSTILITY¹

Impact of Parental Hostility on Children: Parents who are hostile to one another hurt their children. Predictable effects, depending on the level of exposure, the kind of conflict and the resilience of the children amongst other factors, include: lower self esteem, less academic success, difficulty forming healthy relationships, lower incomes, lower reports of happiness, and increased rates of depression. Brain research tells us that our brains adopt a “use it or lose it” development path. Children of hostile parents have different pathways in their brains than those raised with a strong parental alliance. Young babies may have an amplified startle response; school aged children and teens may have trouble with social norms, have trouble making healthy friendships or be unduly aggressive or passive with peers. Self-harm in various forms may occur. Physical health may also be affected.

Symptoms of Acute Reactions to Hostility: Developmental stages, which occur in all children, get amplified and distorted when children must adapt to parental hostility. Sometimes these distortions appear as rejecting behaviour.

Birth-5/6 Transferring: Very young children often have trouble changing caregivers. When my children were small we called it “making strange” even when it involved caregivers known to them. The child is seen, by the uninformed but well-intentioned adult, to be unhappy in the new environment or troubled or clingy in the more familiar one. Parents and caregivers who have a level of trust can talk, reassure one another, and experiment with ideas for solutions. Parents who fail to collaborate, and who do not understand this behaviour as a development effect, often draw inaccurate conclusions such as blaming the other, and, in acting on these conclusions, actually make the baby or toddler’s reaction more extreme.

Example: Dad experiences a happy contented baby who may have an initial cry when leaving Mum but who settles in quickly. Mum experiences the baby as fussy, restless, wakeful, and cranky for the initial return period. Mum concludes that the baby should spend less time with Dad. Dad assumes that Mum is not caring appropriately for baby.

¹ In addition to my own experience and that of the brilliant mental health practitioners with whom I work, this paper draws heavily on Drs. Gary Kneier, Bonnie Haave, Steve Carver, Benjamin Garber and Bill Eddy.

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The reality is that the baby would likely be just fine if the level of tension between the parents would drop long enough for them to make a few small changes such as smiling with each other during transitions, or having a cup of tea together at transition, or playing together with baby, or simply talking it over together with an expert.

4-12 Switching: The brains of children this age are programmed to ensure they receive the care they need and thus to foster attachment in whatever environment they find themselves. They also experiment with “truth” and work hard to gain attention and approval. A pre-schooler, for example, may tell a parent, “At day care today we all got really wet when we went outside. I got freezing cold and Santa came and some fairies and then we napped all afternoon.” A parent with a good relationship with the daycare provider can trust that this is a mixture of reality and fantasy and imagination and clear up any anxieties or mere curiosities with a quick check in. But, with ineffective communication, things can really go wrong.

Example: Sam aged 7 in the back of the car says: “Dad do you still love Mummy?”

Dad: (gulping and careful): “Well no Sam, but we both really love you.”

Sam: “Would you like me to come and live with you all the time?”

Dad: “Well I certainly love your company, but your Mum and I have agreed to share you and that’s the best thing.”

Later that evening at Mum’s (Mum has had a hard day and there are some unresolved support issues with Dad):

Sam: “Mummy? Did you know that Daddy hates you and he wants me to live with him all the time?”

Mum freaks out and calls her lawyer and things go downhill from there!

These children often tell child specialists that they feel sadness about their families. Tragically, they get used to feeling this way and experience it as normal. As young adults they may associate “sadness” with family life.

Tasked with the necessity of fitting into two dissonant environments, children are unable to devote “brain space” to the age appropriate work of developing a sense of self. This makes adolescence much tougher and riskier.

All children at this age value “fairness” highly. They also assume that they are responsible for their parent’s pain. The resulting balancing act is acutely painful and stressful. Sometimes they get tired and work to simplify their lives. They may appear to be reluctant to go with one parent or have any identification with them. For example, they may tell a mother aligned adult that their new step- father is their “real Dad” or a father aligned adult “Mum is so mean to me I wish I could be with Dad all the time.”

Often there is incongruent behaviour. For example, a child may shout out, "I love you Dad!" on Tuesday, and on Thursday tell her Mum that her last name is not the same as Dad's anymore because he is too mean for her to want to be in his family. Mum will see only the latter. Dad will see only the former. Both will accuse the other of lying or manipulating when, in fact, it is the predictable, unconscious, switching reaction of the child to the conflict which is the true problem. But the parent's anxiety is felt by the child who may amplify the coping strategy and move from reluctance to refusal. Unwilling to destabilize the child's likely already fragile emotional health (a predictable outcome of living with parental conflict) by forcing her to do something which seems to make her so unhappy, the favoured parent supports the rejection. The rejected parent is confused and hurt by the child's rejection and may feel guilt for sub-optimal parenting. He is trapped into supporting the rejection by either amplifying the hostile climate between the parents with escalated demands for contact or by abdicating contact with the child.

When children succeed in rejecting a parent, often their lives do seem to improve. Their marks may improve, friendships stabilize, and moodiness lessen. The favoured parent feels vindicated. Her stress decreases. The child's external world is more peaceful. The reactive solution works! But the long-term consequences are real, severe, predictable, and preventable. The involuntary, genetically programmed reaction has been turned into a betrayal, one with which the child will live for the rest of their lives.

Because the behaviour originates as a coping mechanism to hostility, it can usually be addressed relatively easily by allowing the child to see collaborative behaviour between the parents. Examples which have had great impact include:

The child moves between the (coach or child specialist supervised) parents every 15 minutes for an hour at the park.

A child plays board games with each (coach or child specialist supervised) parent in two different rooms moving between them at the conclusion of each short game.

The parents smile at each other at transitions.

The dropping off parent places the child's hand into the hand of the receiving parent while using well wishing words. (Practice of this in the child specialist's office is important.)

Both parents tell the child simultaneously that they value each other as parents and want the child to have a relationship with both which includes some play, and school, and grandparents, and sleep time, and wake time, and special time, and ordinary time. (Exercise for child specialist's office as too many conflicted parents will find the urge to negate the other parent or inflate themselves irresistible.)

Each parent visits the child's room at the other house and places some object there that the other parent then admires.

Jointly hosted birthday parties, shared presents and joint outings are a next level.

11-21/22 *Splitting*: All young adolescents engage in splitting. In this developmental phase nature is equipping the adolescent to stop making fitting in with parents the primary task and to develop a sense of the importance of peers and self. We see parents in intact families complaining all the time that their 14 year olds do not talk to them about their social or school lives. This hurts! But if parents can avoid reacting only to their own hurt, and tact, demonstrating acceptance (which is not the same as approval!) of the young teen's weird new ideas (which are highly stressful experiments for teens and their parents alike) around dress, food or friends, teens will most often re-engage with their parents in a few months or years.

While normal teen experimentation with dissonance between parents, peer and self identification are stressful enough, imagine the results when a teen is required to move between a fourth dimension of dissonance – the two parents. The internal stress becomes intolerable. Some teens will send up warning signals like refusing to do homework, or substance abuse, or self harm which may amplify the parent conflict as each blames the other. The teen is likely to conclude that they will be happier if they simply choose one less arena of dissonance. Even in intact high functioning families, a teen's sense of self is still the major construction project appearances to the contrary notwithstanding! If a teen has been using switching to cope with parental conflict in their early childhood this will mean their sense of self is not developed even to age appropriate levels. Peer relationships are a teen's age appropriate priority. A childhood in a hostile family may mean that this is even more difficult for them than for other teens. Prioritizing peer relationship and self development, they are likely to decide that the easiest thing is to reject one of their parents. While it may seem to bring immediate relief, the long term impact has been compared to that experienced by parents when Nazis required them to choose which of their children would live or die. Again it is crucial to understand that, while it looks to caring, but uninformed parents, like a mature, considered response (especially if it echoes the feelings of that adult,) it is, in fact, an involuntary, genetically programmed, symptomatic reaction to the impossible demands of a conflicted world.

What if a teen simply refuses to see the other parent? Splitting is much more difficult to treat. The best research on the teenage brain points out that humans this age are even less ready to make a conscious choice about which parent they live with than they are to choose a career, choose whether to see a doctor or dentist, or choose whether to go to school -none of which we allow them to do at age 14 or 15. It may well require a third

party decision maker (a judge or parent coordinator) to require the teen to comply with spending time with the other parent so that neither parent gets blamed for the acute discomfort that this will mean for the teen who, after all, has “decided for himself!” Often the teen will need counseling support or therapy to accommodate the tension between the apparent assault on his emerging sense of entitlement to autonomy and the reality that by rejecting a parent a part of him will feel he is committing a betrayal. Reactions to forced time with the other parent may be immoderate. After all, teens are still learning moderation! Running away, self-harm, substance abuse, harm to either parent, and other reactions occur. Obviously these kinds of reactions need to be factored into the strategy, and splitting must be handled with great care. But the strategy still must be to provide for the maximum chance that contact will occur.

Why Bother?

The research is now clear that children, who are not able to spend time with both parents, so that they know that both parents are involved in their care and lives, suffer. Children who are fully separated from one parent suffer acutely. Those children almost uniformly report that they wished someone had seen through their rejecting behaviour and made them spend time with the other parent. The negative impacts on these children are the same as for those who managed to retain a meaningful relationship even if their parents were hostile, only more acute and more predictable.

How can we help?

Caregivers, parents and extended families, as well as mental health professionals need to develop a profound confidence that rejecting behaviour is not a conscious expression of a mature will no matter how “advanced” a child may be on some maturity indices but a genetically programmed reaction. Rejecting behaviour is a symptom of acute pain and stress caused by parental conflict². As the child did not choose to reject, the answer likewise does not lie in providing a choice to accept:

Time with both parents is absolutely crucial.³

Parents need to be taught how to parent through the various stages.

The rejected parent may need to be taught how to engage the child. Rejected parents are often not used to being child centered, playing games, implementing routines, paying attention to nutrition and schedules and imposing discipline. Rejected parents need to be supported, often very firmly, to avoid escalating the conflict or attempting to engage the child in taking sides.

² For a comment on realistic estrangement see later in this paper.

³ This is not to be confused with equal time which is an entirely different issue. Children do not need equal time to have meaningful relationships. If equal time heightens or sustains the conflict it might be the wrong response depending on whether parental alienation is occurring in its pure form or if it is a case of realistic estrangement or a hybrid case. The research out of Australia (Macintosh) and the US (Emery) described the profile of parents and families that fare well in equal time parenting.

The favoured parent may need to be taught how to sustain confidence in the parent-child bond they enjoy while dealing with the child's upset about being required to spend time with the rejected parent. It is a new idea for many favoured parents that it may be in the child's best interests for them to be angry with them. This means that the child now can see that they can be upset with both parents and see the parents as more interchangeable as a result. Favoured parents need coaching to understand how best to interact with a child who is reporting negatively about the other parent. Favoured parents need help preparing the child for time with the rejected parent. For example, they should avoid telling the child they will have fun with the other parent. Not all parenting is fun! A child may come back and choose to report all the "not fun" moments as a way of strengthening their alignment with the favoured parent or bolstering their future opposition.

Parents should be coached to learn collaborative behaviour. It is less important that they change their beliefs than that they change their behaviour. Coaches should have parents role play transitions and work out carefully scripted conversations. Simply instructing parents to change is ineffective. They need to be shown how to change and taken through the new behaviour step by step. It will feel unnatural and counter-intuitive and may trigger issues outstanding from the marriage or separation.

Children should be told by the decision maker that neither they nor their parents have any choice. It is important to note that, while the child is an important contributor to the dynamic, it is parental change that is needed. Children should, however, be given a voice. Their opinions about what kinds of activities they prefer with each parent, ideas for supporting them to spend time with the rejected parent, and even which parent they would prefer to support them doing homework or preparing for recitals, etc are important to elicit. If they volunteer that they would like less time with one parent, efforts should be made to coach the lesser time parent to make reasonable changes advocated by the children. If this is not possible, then lesser time may very occasionally be in order but contact must be maintained. But this voice should not be translated into a choice not to see a parent. This is developmentally inappropriate. ⁴

When there is Abuse:

Often parents seek to explain their own hostility and their child's rejecting behaviour by blaming the other parent for sub-optimal parenting. Often there are safety concerns.

⁴ There is an alarming tendency on the part of our courts to allow children 12 and over decision making power. This is sometimes called "The Myth of 12" and refers to the extra-ordinary belief that somehow a decision to reject a parent requires less maturity than whether to attend school, visit the dentist or doctor, complete homework, drive a car, drink alcohol or vote in an election. This paper does not seek to document the law but rather to share insights from leading research and practitioners.

It is important to avoid getting tied up in stories about truth when the main “witness” is the child. However, if there are substantiated concerns about safety the following should be taken into account:

If the definition of child abuse is substantial harm, parental hostility is child abuse. The alleging parent must be supported to keep this in mind when responding to their concerns for their child’s well being and safety. If one parent abuses the other, they need to be firmly supported to see that this continues the cycle of conflict and thus amounts to abusing their child. Engaging the child in the parental hostility by criticizing the other parent to the child, or encouraging them to take sides, or to state a preference for one parent over another, or supporting even apparently rational rejecting behaviour, is emotional child abuse.

Depriving a child of a connection with both parents is child abuse.

None of the above is intended to de-emphasize that physical harm to a child is, of course, child abuse. Protecting a child from physical harm must be the top priority. But, it is usually possible, and in the absence of “axe murderer” levels of physical or emotional violence, essential for the child to achieve this goal while maintaining the parental connection and containing hostility. Efforts must be made to bend over backwards to ensure contact using supervision, etc.

It may be advisable for the accused parent to volunteer for “supervision”. If he or she is able to ensure that another person is present, not only can that person vouch for their appropriate parenting, but it is highly likely that the child may interact differently. If the third person is someone who enjoys the confidence of both parents this may help to break the cycle rapidly as they can provide “independent” reports on the child’s experience. This will allow the child to understand that the parents are working together and decrease the child’s tendency to switch.

Reasonable Estrangement:

What if a child rejects a parent for good reason?

Children align differently with each parent and some kids fit better with one parent than the other at different ages and stages. A father in an intact family may feel less involved in the first few months after birth or in shopping for the prom dress. A mother of a boy may feel rejected when at 6 or 7 he begins imprinting off his Dad. This often hurts. If parents can see the development as the cause and not doubt the strength of the bond, they find it easier to rise above their hurt and not react by blaming the other parent and the child will usually work to maintain the attachment.

Some parents are not very engaged, creative, compassionate, or simply able. Some are self absorbed, or substance addicted, or distant. Some are emotionally abusive. Some are careless or too protective. A few parents are physically dangerous. Yet we know that children do better when they maintain a relationship with both their parents no matter how inadequate or unaligned they may be.

While a favoured parent may see a child's "reasonable estrangement" rejection as rational, especially if it mirrors their own experience, the favoured parent must not support a child's rejection. Indeed, it is the special job of the favoured parent to ensure that if they are not prepared to force contact (just as they require school attendance or foregoing that sexually explicit tattoo) that a third party does so. It is in the child's best interests that a relationship be fostered with the rejected parent, but it is important to note that therapy and coaching for the entire family may be required to effect this.

Time Shares:

Time shares must be carefully tailored to the needs of each family and child. If an equal time share is imposed, supporting professionals have a crucial role to play in teaching co-operative parenting which is sometimes very difficult to learn in the midst of intense conflict. Parallel parenting is sometimes more doable but can be very hard for children.

Conclusion:

It is important that the adults in a child's life be vigilant in protecting the child's right to a relationship with each parent. The nature of that relationship will be as diverse as each family. Parental views must be respected, but this does not imply agreement if one of them has ideas contradictory to the concept of maintaining a relationship with the child. Nor does it imply agreement if one parent seeks to force a time share which is not supported from the perspective (which can be different than the stated voice) of the child. Decision makers must listen to both parents and their children but hear what is being said through an informed filter.