



Child Alienation

and how we can help to minimise it



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Acknowledgement of Country

On behalf of Mediation Institute I would like to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the Traditional Custodians of Australia and pay respect to elders, past, present and emerging.

I recognise their continued connection to the lands, waters and communities of Australia.

www.mediationinstitute.edu.au/acknowledgement-of-country



What is Child Alienation?

What causes it?

Family Law Act

Parental Alienation Syndrome?

Attachment disorders

3 Myths

Family Court

How you can help



What we will discuss in this session



What is Child Alienation?

- **when a child loses the capacity to give and accept love from a parent or other family members.**
- an alienated child aligns to one parent and rejects the other.

What do we observe?

- they don't want to spend time
- they say the parent is dangerous or doesn't care about them
- they may be very angry or frightened.
- They may act out when with the parent they have rejected

Being alienated is harmful for children

There is well documented evidence that children who have been alienated from a parent are more likely to experience:

- Low self-esteem
- Self-hatred
- Lack of trust
- Depression
- Substance abuse
- Relationship difficulties
- A high likelihood to have attachment problems with their children in later life (50% in one study)

Child Alienation is able to be thought about as an attachment disorder.



Family Law Act 1975

- Back to basics – what does the law say?
 - Section 60CC and the best interest of the child;
 - Presumption of equal shared parental responsibility;
 - Legislative pathway - consideration of equal time and substantial and significant time.

What causes Child Alienation?

All over the internet but how true it is?

Separation poorly handled

- Attachment under strain
- Long periods of no contact
- Parent blamed by the child

Parent emotionally unavailable / dangerous

- Drugs
- Violence
- Mental illness
- Post-traumatic stress disorder

Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS)?

- Deliberate
- Malicious
- Objective is to remove the other parent from the child's life

Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS)

- The concept was developed by Psychiatrist Richard Gardner. 1931 – 2003
- It has influenced many courts in the US and perhaps Australia, but it is not universally accepted as having a sound scientific basis.
- There is considerable controversy about some of his views about the bad “alienating parent” and the good “victim parent” which ignored history of family violence.
- Anecdotally DFV victims discouraged by their lawyers from fully disclosing family violence for fear of being labeled as an alienating parent
- “Threat Therapy” was introduced as part of the PAS doctrine.



How does a parent align / encourage alienation?



Asking the child to choose sides

- Looking to the child for support against the other parent
- Denigrating the other parent / family



Undermining trust and love

- Over sharing their own emotional pain
- Enrolling the child on their support team
- Preventing contact or making contact frightening
- Highlighting faults and minimising good points (polarising)



Actively interfering with the relationship

- Telling frightening stories
- Consistent denigration and encouraging the child to denigrate the parent
- Forbidding any positive discussion of the other parent
- Interrupting the time with the other parent
- Letting the child decide and proving more interesting alternatives

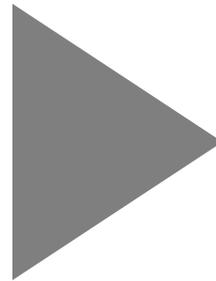


Encouraging the aligned behaviour

- Rewarding the child for rejecting the other parent
- Punishing the child for acceptance of their other parent
- Encouraging the child to show their distress “you can start crying now”
- Encouraging the child to refuse contact visits

A Few Myths #1

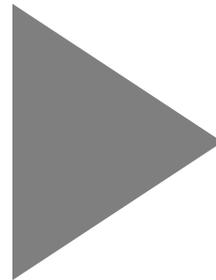
Myth - Children can only thrive with a primary caregiver.



Truth – Children need secure attachment figures who can provide them with the love, support and security they need to develop normally

A Few Myths #2

Myth – Child Alienation is caused by an alienating parent deliberately brainwashing their child

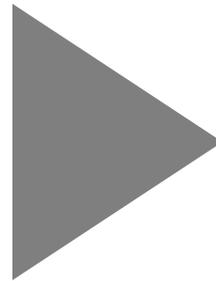


Truth – Parental contribution to alienation may be unintentional and can be reduced or reversed by educating the parent about their child's attachment needs.

Myth #3

Has an adequate assessment of the family violence history and risks been done? How do you know?

Myth – It is always in a child's best interest to spend time with both parents.



Truth – Some parents are not able to provide safe care for their child. The fear the child feels may be real and justified.

Family Court and best interest of the child

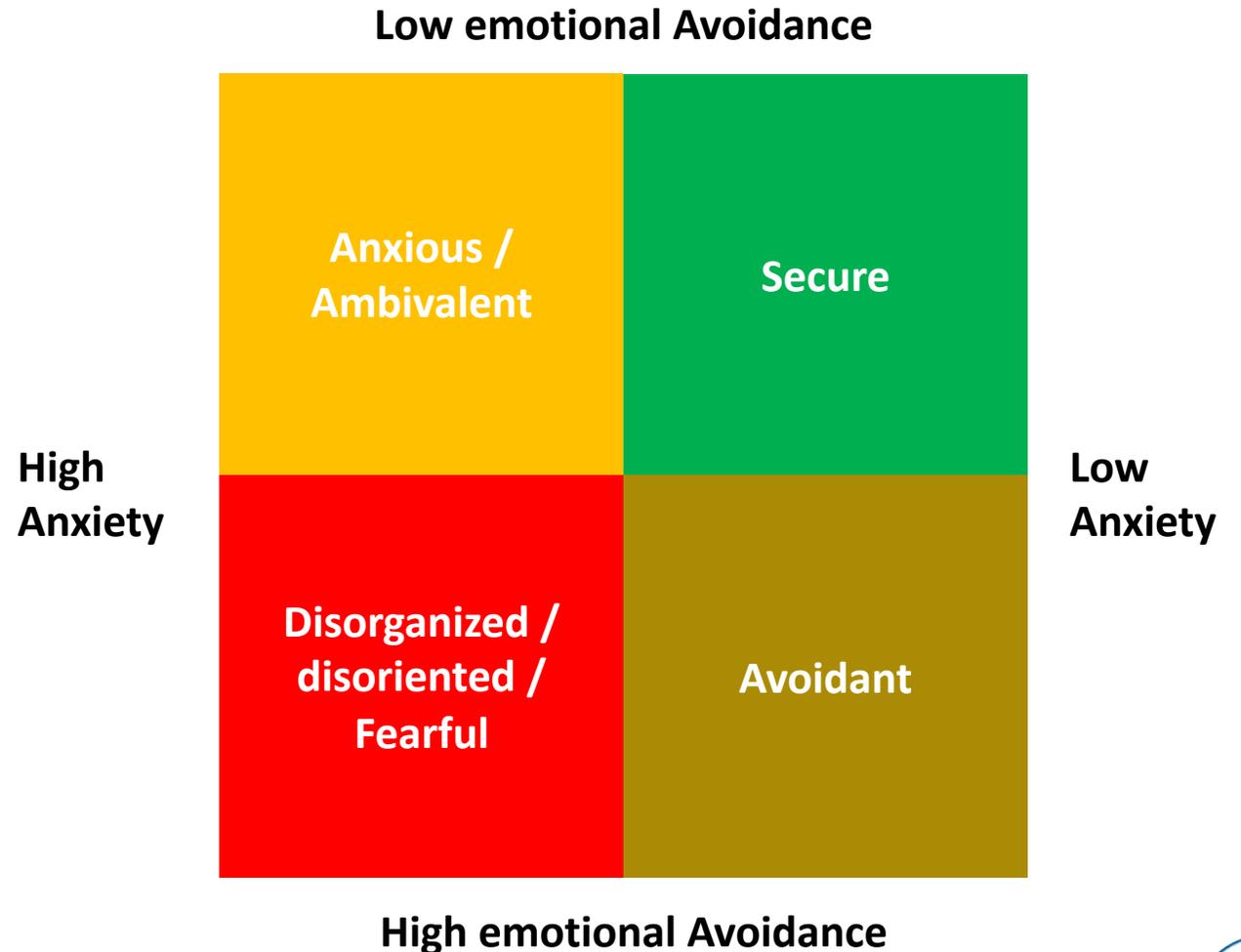
- Independent Children's Lawyers
- Family Reports and expert witnesses
- Orders for interventions

Attachment disorders

- The theory was developed originally by John Bowlby and has been confirmed and built upon by many other researchers and behavioural scientists.
- He developed the theory while working with children separated from their attachment figures following the 2nd world war.
- The work isn't focused on separation and divorce but rather on secure and insecure attachment but gives us insights into the effects of separation on children.

Secure attachment = emotionally and psychologically secure children

- Symptoms of insecure attachment include becoming clingy and anxious or apparently indifferent and avoidant
- This behaviour is often mistaken for “they are turning my child against me” or “they are doing something to them”
- That leads to a vicious cycle of claim and counter claim with the child further impacted in the middle.
- If they have been exposed to family violence and were not able to be soothed and supported they may develop a disorganised attachment style (no one is safe)



What can you do to help prevent Child Alienation?

Evaluate

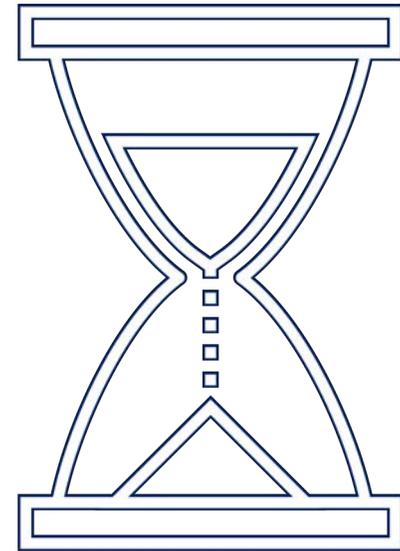
Educate

Support
the child

Some resources to help

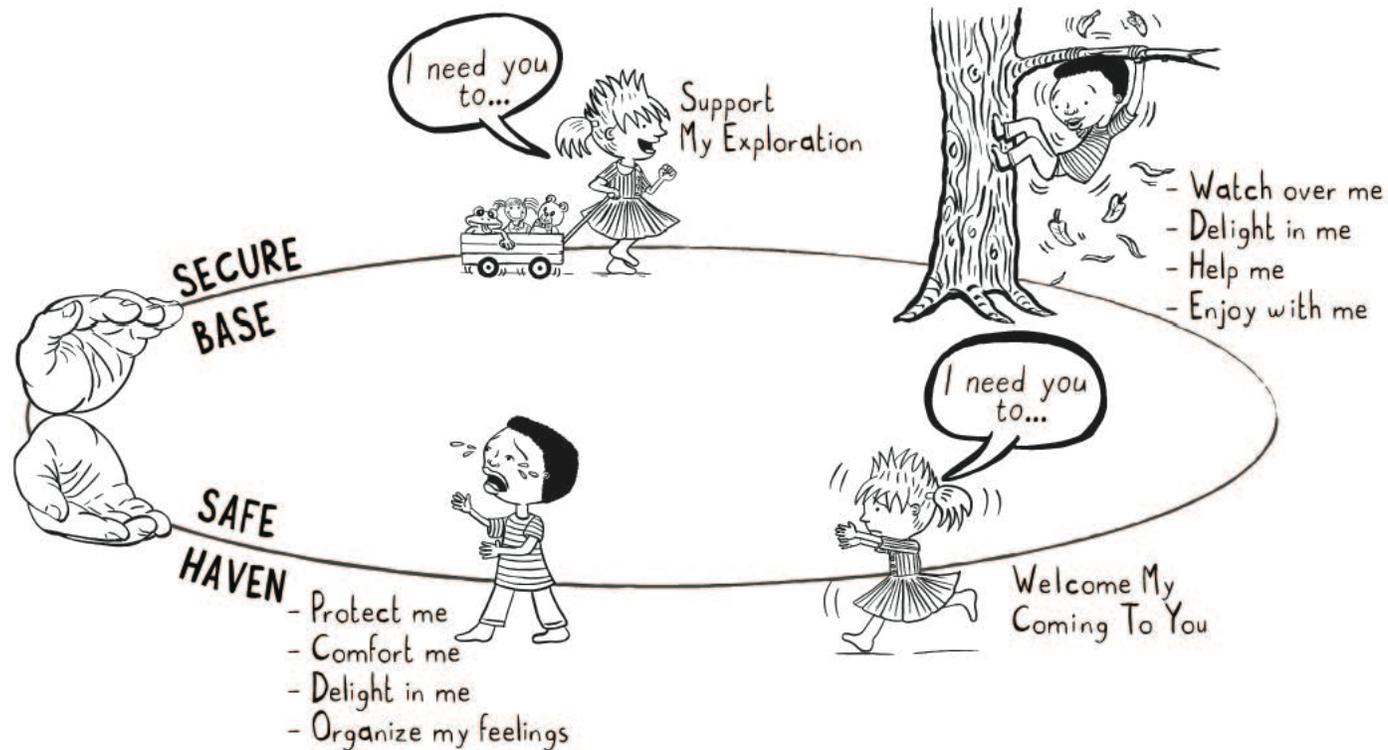
1. **Circle of Security** or attachment education resources
2. **New Ways for Families** – post separation parenting education
3. **Use Family Dispute Resolution** and child inclusive practice where possible
4. **Co-Parenting Software** to help shield children from conflict

Time is critical in alienation cases – the longer the child is left unhelped with an insecure attachment the harder it is to reverse.



Circle of Security®

Parent Attending To The Child's Needs

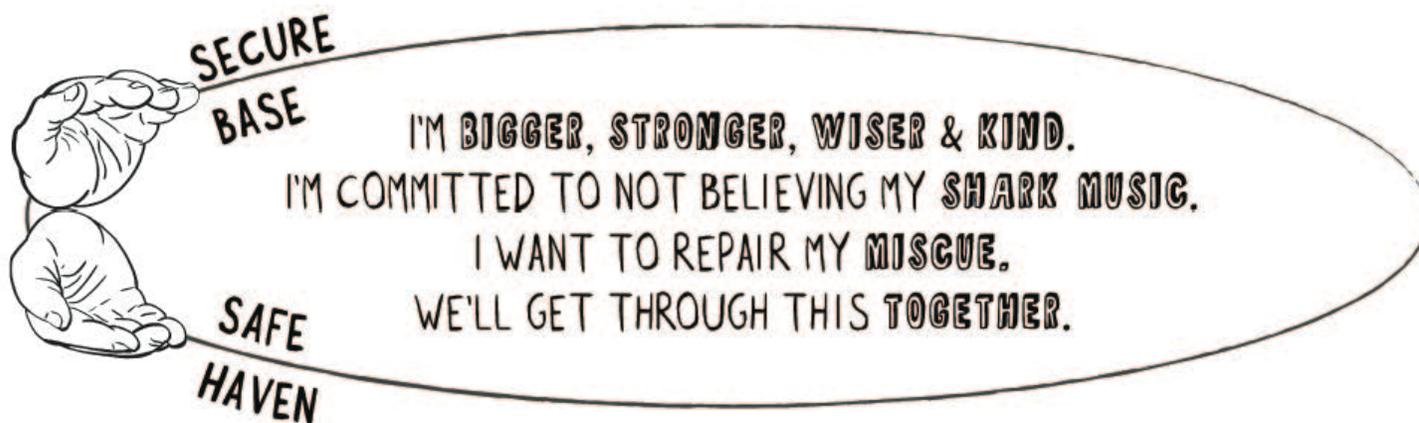


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<https://www.circleofsecurityinternational.com/circle-of-security-model/what-is-the-circle-of-security/>

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Repair



The child behaviour when their attachment is under strain can be seen as “naughty” and punished. That makes things worse.

Strategies such as time-in can help parents, who often have attachment issues themselves, to learn how to help their children to regulate their emotions and rebuild emotional attachment

New Ways for Families



**Online Post Separation
Parenting Course**



- 12 hour post separation parenting course
- Fully online with a parents journal
- Teaches the 4 big skills using simple strategies to develop the parents interpersonal skills
- Covers child developmental needs, personality disorder information and the Australian Family Law System

Family Dispute Resolution



- Don't discount it!
- The FDRP can talk openly with both parents to fully understand the dynamic
- The FDRP has post graduate level studies in family violence, family dynamics and family law mediation
- They can, with some encouraging support, engage with a child specialist in Child Inclusive Practice (CIP) so that the child's needs can be assessed properly and respectfully

Government funded services are not the only option. There are independent FDRP's throughout Australia as well as organisations such as Interact Support's Interact Online FDR services throughout Australia www.interact.support

What if it goes to court?

- Challenges for evidence of past behaviour in affidavits (will it be believed?)
- Court orders for no time
- Court orders removing parental responsibility
- Court orders to change the child's residence
- Examples ...

References

- National Domestic and Family Violence Bench Book - <https://dfvbenchbook.aija.org.au/family-law-proceedings/>
- Fidler, B and Bala, N. 2010 – “Children resisting postseparation contact with a parent: Concepts, controversies and conundrums”
- Bernet, W. et al, 2010 – “Parental alienation and the DSM V”
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