

## What we can learn from the *Non-Alienated* child

By Linda J. Gottlieb, LMFT, LCSW-R

Whenever I am about to deliver a presentation to an audience of alienated parents, I fantasize, instead, for a call from the presentation's organizer, who joyfully proclaims to me, "Linda, your presentation has been canceled. In fact, all of your colleagues' presentations have been canceled. We no longer have a need for specialists in parental alienation. You and your colleagues have worked your way out of a job. The world has suddenly awakened; that is, the professionals who intervene in child custody have come to see the light. These professionals have had an epiphany. These professionals finally recognize what **all non-alienated** children have known their entire lives and what these children have **decisively** and **irrefutably** manifested in their behaviors: **that children do not reject parents—not even abusive parents!** The organizer continues to jubilantly exclaim to me that the sudden awakening to this message from non-alienated children that children do not reject their parents—not even abusive parents—is long overdue. I respond to the organizer, "Well, it's still better late than never."

But sadly, I have not received such a call. Sadly, all too many professionals who intervene in child custody are still asleep at the wheel. And frankly, I cannot understand this. It boggles my mind because, in my experience from having worked with 3000 abused and neglected foster children, I cannot recall a single case in which a child rejected a parent. To the contrary, foster children bond with their parents—as Amy Baker wrote about in her book entitled, *Bonded to the Abuser*. The resolute behavior for abused children to bond with their abusive parents is rooted in numerous psychological factors. I will focus on a few of these factors: since we believe we are half our mother and half our father, if we believe one of our parents is evil, we are going to believe that we are evil; and if a parent has maltreated and/or abused us, we believe that we must be bad. To think of oneself as bad or evil is counter-instinctual. So, instead of rejecting their parents, abused children bond with their abusive parents in order to gain the parent's approval and love in hopes of initiating a process known as "undoing" the negative self-perception of being evil and bad. Furthermore, because of our long dependency period, survival depends upon having a parent meaningfully in one's life. The desire for a parent is therefore part of the instinct for survival. That's right, it is part of the instinct for survival to have a parent so it is therefore **profoundly anti-instinctual** for child to reject a parent. And who would dispute how instinctual children are? I cannot emphasize strongly enough how powerful is instinct for parent because it is part of the instinct for survival.

How hard is it to act in contradiction to the instinct for survival? Just try to convince an emotionally stable person to commit suicide! Well actually, please, **do not** try this at home: your spouse may **misinterpret** your actual motivation! But in all seriousness, and it does go without saying, that a normal, emotionally stable person would never attempt to convince someone to commit suicide. And it logically follows that a normal, emotionally stable parent would never attempt to manipulate his or her child to reject the other parent!

Returning to the behaviors of abused foster children, they are actually protective of their abusive parents by minimizing or denying the abuse. I would frequently hear their defensive comments such as, “Mommy didn’t break my arm; I fell off the swing. Daddy didn’t burn me; I was reaching over the stove for cookie.” The foster child’s two most frequently asked questions were, “When is my next visit and when cannot go home?”

So again, it boggles my mind when professionals who intervene in child custody are unable to reason from the behaviors of foster children to the behaviors of children who reject a **fit** parent in the situation of parental separation or divorce. 3000 abused foster children have informed me that **an uninfluenced child** will simply not reject a parent—even an abusive parent. And 3000 children can’t be wrong.

Unfortunately, we have a bifurcated approach to the child welfare system versus the custody system, and our approach to the custody system is irrational, inexplicable, unjust, and contradictory to the standard of the best interests of the child. I will explain: the parental rights of an adjudicated abusive parent are scrupulously protected by the foster care system; but the parental rights of a divorcing fit parent are frequently not protected and all too often undermined by the custody system. How is this bifurcated approach possible? Adjudicated abusive parents have their parental rights respected and **enforced** by federal mandates—whereas a fit parent’s parental rights are at the mercy of and almost always repudiated by a determined alienating parent. Federal mandates oversee the provision of foster care services. And in recognition that children do best when parents are meaningfully in their lives, federal mandates on foster care agencies require that there be a **minimum** of weekly visits between the child and their adjudicated abusive parent, even though the visits may be supervised for protective reasons. Federal mandates require that foster care agencies not merely consult with, but usually have to abide by, the abusive parent’s wishes regarding the child’s educational plan, medical attention, and social activities. Indeed, as an assistant director of foster care and adoption for Nassau County New York, I was not permitted to sign for **even** a child’s **school trip** unless the caseworker had first made **diligent efforts** to obtain the parent’s approval and signature on the school form. The same applied to vacations out of state in which the child would accompany the foster family. And if a biological parent refused to sign consent for an educational, medical, or social procedure or event, the agency had to abide by the parent’s wishes; or, if, overriding the parent’s wishes, the agency was required to satisfactory document in the child’s record how it was in the best interest of the child for the agency to do so.

The federal mandate to respect and enforce the parental rights of adjudicated abusive parents is based upon overwhelming consensus that doing so serves the child’s best interests. I discovered through my work in foster care that the children who had the most favorable outcomes were those children whose parents remained meaningfully involved in their placement and collaborated with the agency for their child’s permanency plan.

I have no explanation for why the custody system fails to enforce the rights of a fit parent **at least** as equally as the rights of an abusive parent are enforced.

There are other ways that our child custody system is inexplicably irrational and contradictory to the best interest of the child. We send children all the time to the therapist's office because of unresolved anger issues with peers and because they are unable to resolve interpersonal conflicts with their peers. We deem it unacceptable for children to engage in emotional cut offs as a way to resolve interpersonal conflicts with peers. And yet the custody system accepts and permits the child to remain with hatred for a parent and walk away from that relationship—a relationship so important to the child that the scientific community deems a meaningful parental relationship to be essential to the child's short and long-term adjustment across the entire spectrum of the psychological, cognitive, and interpersonal realms?

Our custody system irrationally empowers children to decide when and if to have a relationship with a parent—yet a child's cognitive and emotional functioning is immature and compromised—meaning that the child cannot theorize about the consequences from having a parent absent from their lives. Nor are children capable of knowing what is in their own best interests. Counterintuitively, the custody system allows children to make the crucial decision about the relationship with a parent—even though children are not permitted to decide if they will attend school or keep medical appointments. There is no justification for the custody system to put children in charge of such a life-altering decision about a relationship with a parent. And in cases of alienation, in particular, we should heed the reasoning presented by Jaime Rosen in his article in *Family Court Review* entitled, "The child's attorney and the alienated child: Approaches to resolving the ethical dilemma of diminished capacity." Rosen correctly asserts that the alienated child lacks free will and ability to express his or her own true feelings—having been influenced and manipulated by the alienating parent. In such cases, Rosen asserts that the child's attorney has grounds to substitute judgment for the child's wishes.

Something is very rotten in the state of Denmark and in our child custody system!

### References

- Baker, A. J. L. & Schneiderman, M. (2014). *Bonded to the abuser: How victims make sense of childhood abuse*. New York, NY: Roman and Littlefield.
- Rosen, J. (2013). The child's attorney and the alienated child: Approaches to resolving the ethical dilemma of diminished capacity. *Family Court Review*, 51(2): 330-343.