

PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME AND PREVENTION TECHNOLOGIES

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Abstract

The authors present some results of the research devoted to the sociological study of the Parental alienation syndrome (PAS). The aim of the Article is to show typical features of the PAS manifestation based on expert survey of professionals (N=364). It was established that preventive technologies should be applied depending on the acuteness of the manifestation of family conflict in crisis divorce. According to the research results the necessity of introduction into practice of family conflict resolution compulsory Information and Explanatory Meeting (hereinafter - IEM) on family mediation, the effectiveness of which is proved and consists over 98% and also the Parenting Plan technology (written agreement between parents to raise children after divorce). This can be used as justification for legislative initiatives, as well as the development of services in the regions of the Russian Federation to support families in crisis and reduce the number of divorces.

Keywords

Parental alienation syndrome (PAS), family conflict, crisis divorce, ecological divorce, family mediation, outreach meeting, parenting plan.

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1. Introduction

Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) is a psychological state and behavioural pattern in which one parent manipulates the child to create a negative perception of the other parent and obstacles to communication with the former partner. It can take the form of emotional child abuse, unfounded accusations, negativisation of the spouse's image and a desire to emotionally and behaviourally completely 'detach' the child from the alienated parent and his/her relatives. PAS has serious consequences for all parties involved (Gracheva & Mkrtumova, 2021; Ivanova, 2014; Hayrapetyan, 2023; Kuznetsov, 2022).

PAS occurs a result of a variety of reasons: mainly contentious divorce and acute conflict between parents continuing after separation. Personal problems of the parents,

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psychological or status characteristics of one of the parents can contribute to the strategy of alienation. In addition, perceptions of family relations, values, the admissibility/inadmissibility of harsh emotional and sometimes physical manifestations of conflict and ethno-confessional and socio-cultural prejudices in the immediate and distant social environment of the family may play a role in the formation of negative attitudes towards one of the parents (Konovalov & Belonogova, 2017; Ivanova, 2022; Zdrok, 2018).

Verbal manipulation, such as overt or covert negative comments about the other parent, can be a manifestation of PAS. Emotional pressure to make the child feel guilty about communicating with the targeted parent. The most significant is physical isolation, as restricting the child's contact with the alienated parent.

Conflicts in the family can occur at different levels and for various reasons (Konovalov & Belonogova, 2017). Understanding of these levels by professionals - mediators and family psychologists, helps in diagnosing the problem and choosing appropriate methods for its resolution and effective prevention technologies. Psychologists usually subdivide conflicts into three levels: 1) actual conflicts are expressed in bright outbursts caused by some momentary reason; 2) progressive conflicts arise when people cannot adapt quickly enough to each other, as a result of which tension grows; 3) habitual conflicts are associated with established contradictions in the relationship between spouses, which, due to the established stereotypes of behaviour, can no longer be practically eliminated by themselves (Gracheva *et al.*, 2023; Karabanova, 2016).

Family conflicts can also occur and manifest at the individual, interpersonal, systemic and sociocultural levels (Ivanova, 2014; Panteleeva, 2014). On the individual level, family conflicts usually arise due to internal psychological or emotional problems of one of the family members. There can be various reasons, including among the main ones: personal psycho-emotional traumas or unresolved internal conflicts; emotional disorders (depression, anxiety), inability to cope with stress. So, for example, one of the spouses is going through a midlife crisis and becomes significantly more irritable. On the other hand, a teenage child may experience problems and difficulties with self-identification, which may cause frequent quarrels with parents. The preventive psychotherapy techniques or psychological counselling can be applied to intervention. The parent's personal willingness to work on their emotional regulation is essential (Konovalov & Belonogova, 2017).

At the interpersonal level, ongoing family conflicts arise between two or more family members, usually spouses, although quite often older generation (who 'know better how to bring up children') act as the other party to the conflict and usually concern specific interpersonal interactions or situations. The reasons may be differences in needs and expectations, communication barriers, balance of power, needs for supremacy and control. Strategies for resolving the conflict are in the field of family mediation of divorcing spouses or psychological counselling. Joint decision-making and willingness to compromise are also important (Ivanova, 2022; Karabanova, 2016).

Systemic (permanent) conflicts affect the entire family ecosystem and arise due to dysfunctions in family structure and dynamics. The causes of conflicts can be unbalanced family roles; patterns of negative behaviour passed down through the generation, violation of boundaries between family members. For example, one of the older relatives constantly interferes in the decision process that should be made by the both spouses (e.g. grandparents interfere in the parental rearing). The family, which is

constantly experiencing difficulties of a material nature, is always in atmosphere of stress. Addicted member of the family (alcohol, etc.) creates a constant atmosphere of stress and threatens the safety of children (Karabanova, 2016; Usmanova, 2019).

At the socio-cultural and ethno-confessional level, conflicts may arise due to the influence of external factors, such as difference in ethnic cultures, confessions, cultural codes, socio-economic status of the spouses, social expectations of family life (etc.). The reasons in this case may be ethno-confessional and socio-cultural differences and expectations; external stresses (work, social pressure); changes in the value and normative order. Strategies of conflict prevention and resolution are related to information and awareness raising and cultural education, seeking external support (e.g. mediation centre, social services, support of relatives); adaptation and flexibility in accepting the family values of the second spouse (Gracheva *et al.*, 2023).

Understanding the levels of family conflict allows for effective differentiation of problems and the application of appropriate techniques for their resolution and prevention. Each level requires its own approaches and strategies and often conflict resolution requires comprehensive approach in interdisciplinary practice of mediators, psychologists and conflictologists to provide assistance at several levels simultaneously (Gracheva *et al.*, 2023; Zdrok, 2018).

2. Research results

The acute social significance and relevance of the PAS was the reason why the Centre for Mediation and Socio-Legal Assistance held (Gracheva *et al.*, 2023) a Round Table ‘Parental Alienation Syndrome: Myths and Practice’, in December 2023. The event was organized under the auspices of the Department of Labour and Social Protection of the Population of Moscow. 364 professionals from 32 Regions of 7 Federal Districts of The Russian Federation took part in the Round Table discussions (Gracheva & Mkrtumova, 2021; Gracheva & Mkrtumova, 2023).

Online survey study was conducted in advance in order to find out among the event participants the attitude of professional community to the parental alienation issues and prevalence of PAS.

The first research question pertained to the proportion of respondents recognizing the prevalence of the problem of alienation of the parent and other members of the child's family after the parents divorce (Diagram 1).

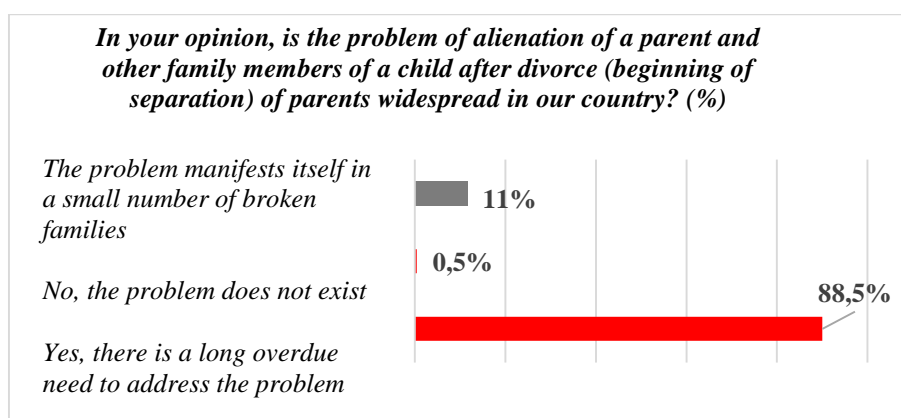


Diagram 1. Opinion on the prevalence of the problem of alienation of the parent and other members of the child's family after the parents' divorce

As can be seen from the analysis of answers to this question, 99.5% of specialists are convinced of the existence of this problem and only 0.5% of respondents believe that such a problem does not exist.

The results of the study showed that the majority of the Round Table participants (99.5%), namely 88.5% of respondents believe that the need to solve this problem is long overdue.

And every tenth out of 99.5% of those convinced of the existence of this problem, however, does not believe that the problem has a mass character and is convinced that the problem is manifested in a small number of families (11%). 0.5 per cent of respondents are convinced that the problem does not exist (Gracheva & Mkrtumova, 2021).

A separate research question was focused on experts' opinion on the extent to which courts, considering family disputes, realise the seriousness of the impact of the consequences of the PAS on future of the child (Diagram 2).

In your opinion, to what extent do you think the courts, when considering family disputes, realize the seriousness of the impact of the consequences of the psychological impact of parental alienation on the future fate of the child? (%)

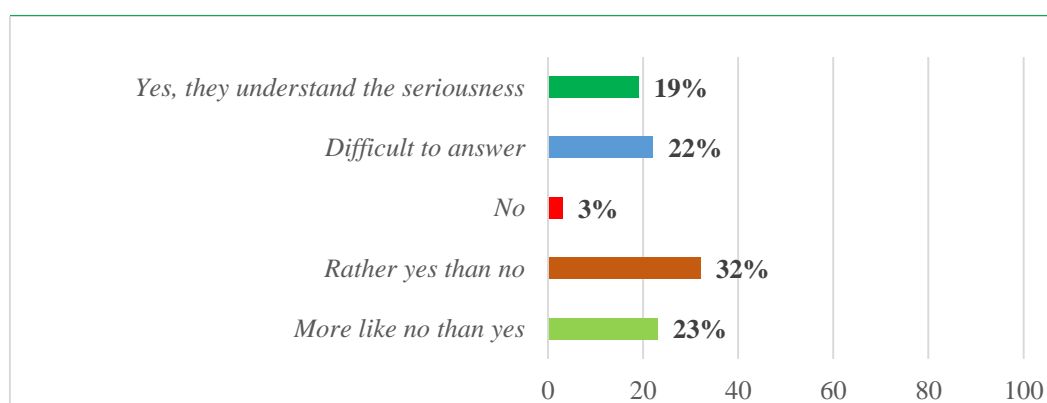


Diagram 2. Opinion on the extent to which courts, considering family disputes, realise the seriousness of the impact of the consequences of the PAS on future of the child

Based on the provided data respondents' opinions were divided as follows:

1. 'Yes, the courts realise the seriousness of the impact of the consequences'.

19% of the respondents believe that the courts are fully aware of the seriousness of the impact of PAS on future of a child. This means that only one-fifth of total respondents are fully confident on this issue (Gracheva & Mkrtumova, 2021).

2. 'More likely yes than no.'

32% respondents believe that the courts are more likely to understand this seriousness than not. They believe that the courts have an understanding of the problem, but they are not as categorically certain of this as the previous group.

3. 'Difficult to answer.'

A meaningful number of those who answered the question, 22% of respondents, found it difficult to give a specific answer. Perhaps these people do not have enough information to form an opinion or feel that the information is contradictory.

4. 'More likely no than yes.'

23% of survey participants tend to believe that courts are not fully aware of the impact of PAS on children future.

5. 'No.'

3% of respondents explicitly expressed the opinion that the courts do not realise the seriousness of the problem. This is the smallest group, indicating that only a small proportion of respondents believe that the courts completely ignore the importance of the issue.

6. And 1% of respondents chose the answer "Other."

This is not reflected in the Diagram, as it is the minimum value.

Analysis of the vector of opinions shows that the majority of respondents (51%) are either sure or inclined to believe that the courts are aware of the seriousness of PAS. At the same time, a significant proportion (49%) is either unsure or lean towards the view that there is a lack of awareness of the problem.

Since the geography of the Round Table participants covered 7 Federal Districts of the Russian Federation, this may be an indicator that society is rather unsure about the position and actions of the judicial system on this issue.

The other question was focused on the prevalence in family disputes the phenomenon of a child rejects the alienated parent and his/her family members (blocks in social networks, telephone, devalues the parent and (or) relatives of the parent) (Diagram 3).

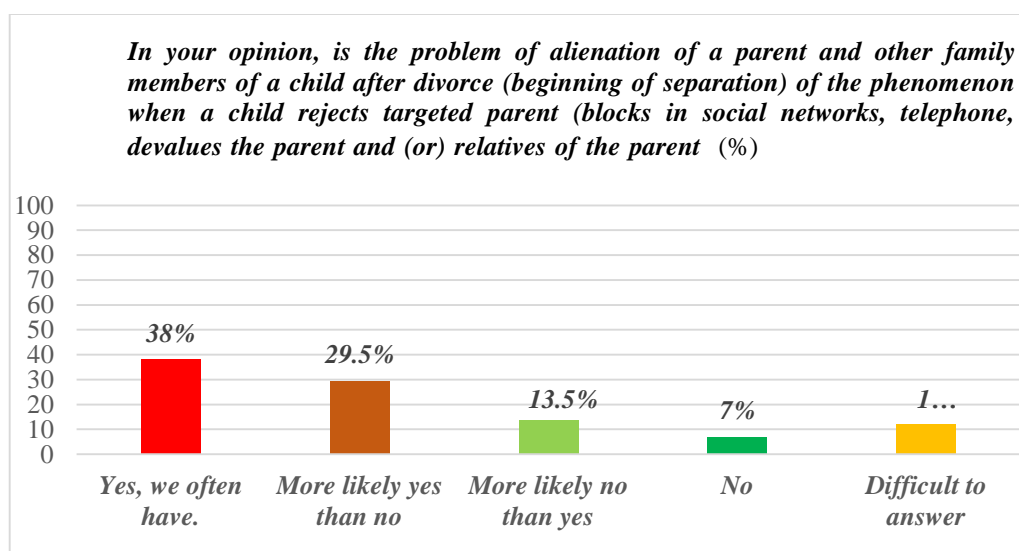


Diagram 3. Opinion on the prevalence in family disputes the phenomenon of a child rejects the alienated parent and his/her family members (blocks in social networks, telephone)

Analysing the obtained data, it is possible to draw certain conclusions regarding the recurrence of situations in parental disputes, where child rejects targeted parent:

1. 'Yes, often'. We see that 38% of respondents face this phenomenon frequently, which indicates a significant prevalence of the problem of parental alienation in conflict family situations.

2. 'More likely yes than no'. Almost the same number of respondents - 29.5% of respondents confirm the existence of such a problem. It means that almost one third of the respondents have noticed such a tendency, but not as regularly as the previous group.

3. 'Difficult to answer'. One in nine respondents (12 %) of those surveyed could not say for sure whether they had encountered such a phenomenon. It may indicate

uncertainty in their personal experience or a lack of information to form a definite opinion.

4. 'Rather no than yes'. 13.5% of the Round Table participants have encountered this phenomenon not very often, but they do not rule it out completely.

5. 'No' - 7% of respondents do not encounter children's refusal to communicate with one of their parents at all. This is a relatively small share of opinions, which emphasises the lack of familiarity with the problem in the experience of this group of respondents.

In total, majority of experts (67.5%) indicated that they often or sometimes notice parental alienation in family disputes - the child's refusal to communicate with targeted parent without a reasonable objective basis. This emphasises the importance of being aware of the impact of inter-parental conflicts on children and the necessity to develop measures to minimize negative impact on children and their relationship with the both parents (Gracheva & Mkrtumova, 2023).

One of the research questions pertained to the proportion of respondents recognizing on possibility of a child experienced parental alienation to repeat the parents' scenario in his/her family life (divorce, parental alienation) (Diagram 4).

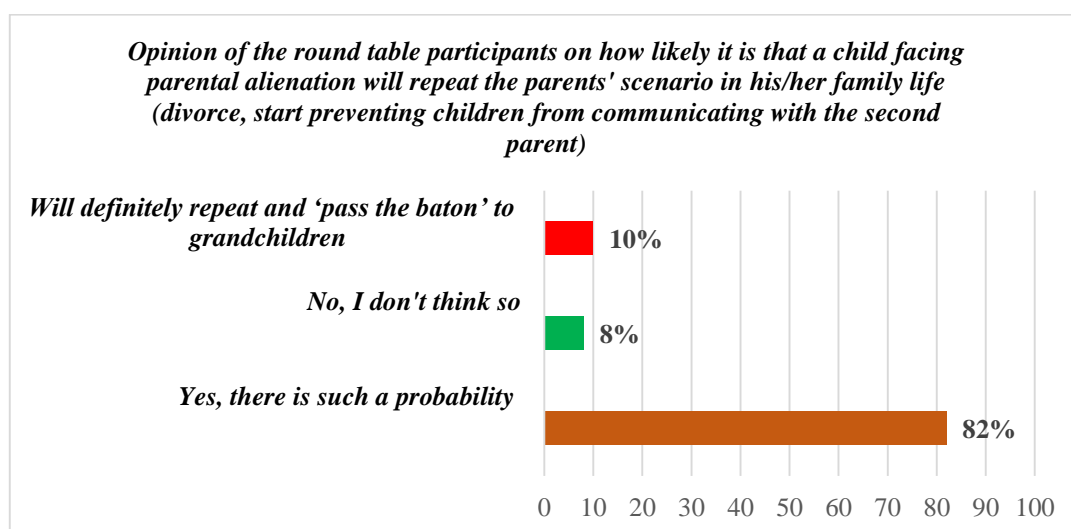


Diagram 4. Opinion of the Round table participants on possibility of a child experienced parental alienation to repeat the parents' scenario in his/her family life (divorce, parental alienation)

The following answers were received to this question: Yes, there is such a probability - 82%, No, I don't think so - 8%, certainly will repeat and 'pass the baton' to grandchildren - 10% (Gracheva & Mkrtumova, 2023). Based on the results of the survey of the Round Table participants, it is obvious that the majority of respondents (82%) recognize that there is a possibility that a children who experienced parental alienation will repeat in future the scenario of their parents in own family life. This view is based on the psychological phenomenon that a child's early family experience can strongly influence subsequent adult patterns of relationships and behaviours, including partner choice and parenting styles.

A relatively small percentage of respondents (8%) see no connection between childhood experiences and adult behaviour at the level of family relationships. This may

reflect an optimistic view of the human capacity for change and personal development despite negative experiences in childhood.

Every tenth respondent is convinced that the child will 'definitely repeat' the negative scenario of the parents and 'pass the baton' to the next generation. This opinion may be based on the observation of relationship and parenting cycles that are passed from generation to generation.

These results of survey study emphasise the importance of the problem of parenting and family relations, as well as the need for mediation in family conflicts. It is important to work with families and develop informed parenting in order to prevent the repetition of negative family scenarios in the future (Gracheva & Mkrtumova, 2023; Konovalov & Belonogova, 2017).

Many psychological professionals focus on preventing and minimising the effects of parental alienation, as this can have long term consequences for the emotional wellbeing of the children and the construction of their own interpersonal relationship.

3. Conclusion

Parental alienation syndrome is a serious problem that requires a comprehensive approach for prevention. Mediation, educational programmes, support of the legal system, involvement of schools and social services can significantly reduce the risk of its occurrence. It is important to develop and implement effective prevention methods in time to preserve the psycho-emotional health of the child and to establish harmonious parental relationships.

Almost all experts (99.5%) among the participants of the Round Table 'Parental Alienation Syndrome: Myths and Practice' recognise the existence of the problem of parental and close relatives' alienation in children after their parents started to live apart due to divorce. The results of the study emphasise the significance of the problem of family upbringing and the need for mediation at all stages of family conflicts. It is important to work with families and develop informed parenting to prevent children from repeating negative family scenarios in the future. Thus, the majority of experts are sure (82%) that there is a probability that a child who has faced alienation of one of the parents will be able to repeat the scenario of their parents in their own family life in the future. The results of the study can help specialists of family mediation services, family psychologists, as well as specialists of family centres, guardianship and custody agencies to understand which conflict manifestations of family problems are most often encountered in situations of alienated parent syndrome. This knowledge can be used to develop strategies for eco-friendly divorce and the use of family mediation, to overcome the problems of parental alienation and to support families in difficult situations.

Importantly, the experts supported the *need for mandatory mediation information and explanatory meetings with divorcing parents on the benefits of mediation*, which can be used as a justification for legislative initiatives, as well as the development of services in the regions to support families in crisis and reduce the number of divorces. The experts also expressed the need to use diagnostic tools to identify signs of parental alienation and to include the results obtained as additions to the opinion of the guardianship and custody agency sent to the court when resolving a dispute on determining the order of residence of a child/children in the event of divorce of the parents or any other dispute on the upbringing of children (e.g., determining the order of communication, collection of alimony, etc.). It is especially important to teach parents after a conflict divorce to draw up a '*Parenting Plan*' as a plan for joint upbringing of

the child(ren). This is a new management approach to interdisciplinary work of professionals with parents at divorce stage aimed to prevent and minimize the impact of the consequences of parental alienation on the fate of their minor children.

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