



2020 POSITION STATEMENT

Abusive Influence on Children

We, the undersigned, recognise that:

- 1) Children experiencing family breakdown or separation are particularly vulnerable, and frequently exposed, to undue influence, coercive control or extreme levels of psychological manipulation – especially when their parents are involved in legal action or family court proceedings;
- 2) Children can be psychologically manipulated into showing extreme and unwarranted fear, disrespect or animosity towards a parent or other family members, and into unjustifiably refusing contact with parents or other family members, carers and friends;
- 3) Commonly referred-to as “turning a child against a parent”, this is a distinctive form of psychological child abuse and family violence as defined by legislation in some countries¹ and by internationally recognised mental health publications² and represents a breach of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child³;
- 4) This variety of child abuse is extremely harmful to children; its impact is often life-long and as serious as other, more familiar forms of child abuse. It may cause a serious, mental and long-term disorder in the child and increases lifetime risks of mental and physical illness, self-harming behaviours and suicide⁴;
- 5) The behaviour of children experiencing this form of Psychological Child Abuse is distinct and consistent; properly trained specialists can distinguish it reliably and diagnostically from the behaviour of children who justifiably reject, or have been physically abused or mistreated by, a parent;

¹ e.g. Australia’s Family Law Act 1975: definitions of “Child Abuse” (Section 4(1) (c): “causing the child to suffer serious psychological harm”); and “Family Violence” (Section 4AB: “violent, threatening or other behaviour by a person that coerces or controls a member of the person’s family (the family member), or causes the family member to be fearful”, including “preventing the family member from making or keeping connections with his or her family, friends or culture”;

² e.g. DSM-5 of the American Psychiatric Association, 995.51 Child Psychological Abuse. See also: V61.20 Parent-Child Relational Problem & V61.29 Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress;

³ UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. General Comment No. 12 (2009) *The right of the child to be heard*. Fifty-first session Geneva, 25 May-12 June 2009

⁴ Adverse Childhood Experiences Study:

<http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html>

- 6) Many professionals, including psychologists, lawyers & judges, are unfamiliar with this phenomenon and with its signs, symptoms and treatment; specialised knowledge and experience is required to assess its occurrence, especially since both the child and the perpetrator may present as genuine and convincing, and perpetrators may even be unaware that they are abusing their own children;
- 7) Where this abuse is suspected or identified, this becomes a child welfare & protection issue of the utmost urgency. Early intervention is best to minimize the risk of long-term psychological damage to the child; as with other forms of child abuse, the most appropriate and effective response can be to remove a child from the abusive parent;
- 8) Considerable scientific research shows that, in a large majority of separated families, it is best for children to maintain and develop pre-existing relationships with those who are fit and able to care for them and to have both parents playing central roles in their lives. Thus, this now-widespread form of psychological abuse frequently undermines what is best for a child.

We urge Governments/associations/professional bodies/agencies to issue a statement raising awareness of this serious form of harm to children and to put in place measures to prevent its occurrence.