



“Restoring hope. Changing lives.
Practical solutions for family wholeness.”

Tina Finical Mayer

LMHC

Florida Supreme Court Certified Family Mediator

Parenting Coordinator for 4th Judicial Circuit

Guardian Ad Litem

Notary Public

Manipulation and control are the hallmarks of alienating behaviors that make identifying and remedying the rejection of the target parent so difficult. To the world at large, the portrayal of the target parent as being unloving, unavailable, or unsafe is not a difficult task to accomplish. Most of this is done by the alienating parent through histories and harrowing accounts of abusive behavior, including sexual abuse, given to professionals, friends, and anyone who will listen. The abuse narrative catches like a spark in dry leaves involving agencies, investigations, multiple hearings and a great deal of lost time. With some effort and steady unraveling to find the origin of information, it is possible to prove that the accusations are untrue and the depiction of the target parent has been skewed. That avenue of alienation, with careful investigative work and a clear presentation of a case, can be undone. What then can become a road block when the court recognizes and takes strong action for reunification?

“I will kill myself if I have to spend time with him!” Those are the words that put all power and control into the hands of the alienated child and stop every movement in the room. Mandatory reporters have to take action that results in a flowing stream becoming an uncontrollable, raging river. Suicidality is serious and should not be taken lightly. Along with the threats of self-harm and harm to others, statements made in this arena need to be addressed immediately. However, in cases of parental alienation, the automatic response should not be a halt or reversal of any progress made in the reconciliation. Professionals who work with alienated children hear these intimidating statements in almost EVERY case. If you ask them how many children followed through with any of those actions, the response would be negligible with most stating that none of their clients had followed through, especially after the reunification process was underway. How can we respond to address the threat without allowing it to manipulate the process?

Any denial of the reality of the threat by the adults involved is not going to be helpful. It is important to walk through a few steps to let the child find central ground and truth for themselves. Determining the voracity of the claim means finding out if the child actually understands the significance of the words they have spoken and what the consequential procedures are that follow them. The declaration is either true or it is false. If it is true, then appropriate measures must be taken to stabilize at a facility. If it is not true, taking those measures would not only exacerbate the issues, but could cause even more harm to a child already distressed by the situation with the trauma of being hospitalized unnecessarily.

Step 1: Explain that those words MUST be taken seriously and mandatory reporters are required by law to report it. This is something that is explained in the beginning of all therapy regarding confidentiality, but in the heat of the moment explaining it again in detail is important.

Step 2: Be candid and straightforward. You will need to adjust the wording to be age appropriate, but the content of the inquiry is a question of intent. What is the intent of the statement? The child needs to determine if he/she is feeling a strong emotion (anger, fear, sadness, confusion) and pain OR does this child wish to die? It is a hard stop question, but those are the only two options. Children will often say: "I just don't want to go" and will say anything to accomplish this goal but do not have the objective of actual harm. In the case of intimidating or harming the target parent or someone else, the same logic applies. Walk through the consequences of that action and allow the child to determine the truth of their answer. Helping the child identify their feelings and process them to a point of recognition can start a healing process.

Step 3: If the determination is made that the child is indeed posing a serious threat, then take the appropriate steps according to the law or mandate to ensure the child's safety and the safety of others. If they insist that they will indeed harm someone else, then there are consequences to that intention and accountability for the statement should be implemented. Extended or inpatient facilities that have sufficient knowledge in the area of parental alienation should be a consideration for continued care, not a reversal into the abuse of the alienating parent.

The pattern of manipulation and controlling behaviors can only be reversed when the child is not empowered or rewarded by making threatening statements they know require a response. Again, this is not to infer that any threats should be ignored. Harm to self or others is a very serious matter and should be treated as such. BUT when there is no accountability on the part of the child or favored parent for making statements of such magnitude insincerely, false statements of harm become a nuclear weapon option to avoid the help that the child actually needs and further entrenches them in the destructive world of alienation.