



BOTH PARENTS MATTER

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Janet Finch-Saunders AM
Chair
Petitions Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

14th May 2019

Petition P-05-751 Recognition of Parental Alienation

Dear Janet

May I take this opportunity of thanking your Committee for the commitment and persistence you have shown in holding Welsh Government / Cafcass Cymru to account in respect of Parental Alienation. I am in no doubt that without the Committee's involvement we would not have reached the current position.

It is important to reflect on the distance travelled since we first raised this matter with your Committee. We launched our petition against a backdrop of the concept having been dismissed as a serious child protection matter on two occasions by Welsh Government – firstly after consideration at the Family Justice Network in 2014 (following a presentation from our charity) and secondly in correspondence from Albert Heaney, Director of Social Services and Wellbeing following a further meeting of the Family Justice Network in March 2017. In that latter response Mr. Heaney acknowledged that:

'The Network recognises some parents can behave in a way that alienates the other parent from their child's life and acknowledges the significant impact this type of behaviour can have on the emotional well being of the child.'

Later in Mr. Heaney's response of 13th April he stated that:

'CAFCASS Cymru practitioners, as professionally qualified social workers, are trained to understand and recognise the potential for implacable hostility by a party in divorce or separation cases and its potential impact on the child.'

This last paragraph strikes at the heart of the issue that your Committee has highlighted. Nigel Brown's latest submission indicates that, at last, this training will soon be available to Cafcass Cymru FCAs (though not Children's Services social workers) in a way that will help them to assess and make recommendations to Courts in Wales on this important child protection issue.

Our charity has welcomed the opportunity to be involved in the development of training for Cafcass Cymru on domestic violence and abuse – specifically in relation to male victims. Regrettably we have not so far even seen any of the proposed training materials mentioned in the most recent response from Cafcass Cymru and our attendance at the 'sector wide event co-facilitated with Cardiff University' was cancelled by the University.

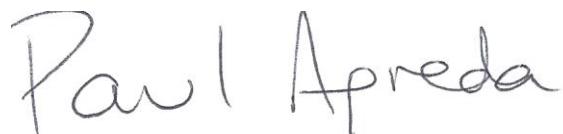
We are most fortunate in Wales to have one of the leading experts in the field of Parental Alienation researching and engaging in front line practice. Dr Sue Whitcombe has already given oral evidence to the Committee in January 2018 in which she emphasized the central importance of recognising and understanding the concept as a child protection issue and not as any form of 'syndrome'. Training materials produced by Cafcass in England (see here <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/grown-ups/parents-and-carers/divorce-and-separation/parental-alienation/>) include direct contribution and referencing to the work of Dr.Whitcombe. We can only assume that her expertise has significantly informed the development of the Cafcas Cymru guidance – for it would be a terrible omission if a Wales based expert were not to be at the centre of guidance produced for practitioners here.

We urge the Committee to look at the Cafcass (England) guidance, training materials and operating framework referenced above. Assembly Members will note that in the English materials there is clear use of the term Parental Alienation – a consistent contrast with the Welsh Government's use of terms such as 'Alienating Behaviours', 'implacable hostility' or 'Alienation' . A clear statement from Welsh Government using the term 'Parental Alienation' would go a long way towards reassuring parents and family members who remain sceptical about Cafcass Cymru's real commitment to tackle this child protection issue.

Finally on a very positive note we want to acknowledge the attendance of the CEO and Deputy CEO of Cafcass Cymru together with a number of frontline FCAs at our interactive drama about Parental Alienation that was staged in the main foyer of the Senedd on Thursday 25th April this year to mark International Parental Alienation Awareness Day. We were delighted to hear from Nigel Brown that he found the performance powerfully represented the complexity of emotions and circumstances that can drive adult behaviours and the impact these behaviours can have upon their children. We have subsequently, at his request, put him in contact with the drama production company who produced and performed the piece. We hope that this may result in the company assisting in developing and delivering training on this and other issues for Cafcass Cymru staff.

We urge the Committee to request a copy of all of the training materials and associated information around Parental Alienation from Cafcass Cymru and to consider the appropriateness of these against similar materials from England and the wider international experience.

Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Apreda". The signature is fluid and cursive, with "Paul" on the top line and "Apreda" on the bottom line.

PAUL APREDA

National Manager