

Article in *Seen and Heard*, Volume 30 | Issue 1 | 2020  
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**ASSESSING THE NARRATIVES OF ABUSED AND ALIENATED CHILDREN:  
IMPORTANT DIFFERENCES IN UNDERSTANDING THE CHILD’S EXPERIENCES FOR  
THE PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT AND PLANNING IN COURT PROCEEDINGS**

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**Introduction**

Working in the field of expert witness work within the family courts, I have, over the last eight years, assessed families both within public and private proceedings covering an array of challenging family circumstances. This has included children experiencing different kinds of abuse, such as being physically or sexually harmed, being exposed to Fabricated Induced Illness (FII), experiencing emotional abuse and neglect, as well as children living in circumstances where there is acrimonious parental separation or concerns about parental alienation. My background prior to this was in NHS services, working within Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the arena of child protection, fostering and adoption.

Assessing children across this wide and diverse set of circumstances has highlighted some of the fundamental differences in the narratives of children who have experienced different forms of abuse, which can help professionals in understanding the nature of children’s experiences.

This article is an attempt to capture those observations into a structure that supports good quality assessment of the presenting issues. The focus of this article is to share these observations with other professionals tasked with assessing and understanding the needs of children within the court arena, and ultimately in supporting child-centred permanency planning.

This structure is considered to be work in progress and, it is anticipated, will continue to evolve over time.

**Defining abuse**

It is first important to define what one means by ‘abuse’. The NSPCC definition of abuse is any action by another person – adult or child – that causes significant harm to a child. Abuse can take many forms and may include physical, sexual or emotional abuse, but can just as often be about a lack of love, care and attention. Neglect, whatever form it takes, can be as damaging to a child as other forms of abuse.

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