

Alienation Made Easy: A Guide to Making a Relationship Disappear — No Magic Required

Jorge Guerra González
August 2026

[Entfremdung leicht gemacht: Ein Leitfaden, wie man eine Beziehung verschwinden lässt — ganz ohne Magie]

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Summary:

[This paper approaches parent-child alienation from an unconventional and provocative perspective. It explores how relationships may gradually come under pressure in highly conflicted separations and how different actors and dynamics can contribute to this process. Serious questions concerning family relationships, child welfare and professional intervention are combined with a narrative and at times satirical approach. The text invites readers to look at seemingly familiar situations from a different angle – and perhaps to notice what is easily overlooked.]

Keywords: [Parental Alienation, child's wishes, child's best interests, loyalty conflict, influence, attachment, family law, ECHR, scientific integrity, narrative control, child protection]

Zusammenfassung:

[Der Beitrag nähert sich der Eltern-Kind-Entfremdung aus einer ungewöhnlichen und zugespitzten Perspektive. Er untersucht, wie Beziehungen in hochkonflikthaften Trennungssituationen schrittweise unter Druck geraten können und wie unterschiedliche Akteure und Dynamiken zu diesem Prozess beitragen. Ernsthafte Fragen zu familiären Beziehungen, Kindeswohl und professioneller Intervention werden mit einem erzählerischen und stellenweise satirischen, zynischen Zugang verbunden. Der Text lädt dazu ein, scheinbar vertraute Situationen aus einem anderen Blickwinkel zu betrachten — und vielleicht wahrzunehmen, was leicht übersehen wird.]

Schlüsselwörter: [Eltern-Kind-Entfremdung, Kindeswille, Kindeswohl, Loyalitätskonflikt, Beeinflussung, Bindung, Familienrecht, EMRK, wissenschaftliche Integrität, Narrativkontrolle, Kinderschutz]

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¹ **A note on language:** For readability, this text uses "he" as a generic pronoun throughout (for parents, experts, judges, and so on). All genders are naturally meant. As it happens, the mechanisms described here work in a pleasingly non-discriminatory fashion – gender is irrelevant to how they operate.

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2. A Preliminary Confession

I have given up. It took me a long time to admit this to myself, probably far too long. For years I believed that parent-child relationships must be protected when they come under threat after separation and divorce. I researched this, wrote about it, gave talks and took part in discussions, engaged with scientific arguments, with family courts, parents, children and professionals, and all the while held on to what was probably a somewhat naïve idea: that insight must, sooner or later, inevitably lead to change.

Today I know better. Insight can certainly lead to change, but it has one decisive drawback: it makes work. One has to question cherished convictions, read studies, listen to opinions that contradict one's own position, distinguish between the different causes of a child's rejection of a parent, and sometimes even concede that a professionally well-intentioned intervention can achieve the opposite of what it was meant to achieve. It becomes even more uncomfortable when the necessary changes concern institutions that have spent decades growing accustomed to viewing certain things in a certain way.

But above all, one makes oneself unpopular. That is now over: I have changed sides.

My new role model is now Mr Hyde. As you know, a purely scientific product who had to find his own way in life after understanding the rules by which people, families and — not least — science itself operate. Not exactly orthodox, but decidedly instructive and remarkably practical. And when it comes to people, families and science, he knows his business exceedingly well.

I admit that I had certain moral misgivings at first. They vanished astonishingly quickly. I have felt better ever since. Mr Hyde helped me a great deal in overcoming them.

So I no longer have to explain, for instance, why it might be problematic for a child to lose a parent from its life. I no longer have to wait for changes that are supposed to come at some point and then, after all, take a few more years. I no longer have to be irritated that we have known about certain mechanisms for decades and yet regularly act as though we were encountering them for the first time.

Above all, I have time again for the truly interesting questions. And the most interesting one is no longer how to prevent parental alienation. The most interesting question is: *how do you cause it?*

After everything I have learnt in recent years, it would be positively wasteful to use this knowledge exclusively for prevention. After all, every good analysis can also be turned on its head. If we know under what conditions an endangered parent-child relationship can be protected, we thereby know, at least roughly, which conditions are not particularly helpful. If we know what stabilises a relationship, we can ask ourselves what destabilises it. If we know why early recognition can be important, we can deduce what value late recognition holds.

I have therefore decided to reorganise my previous experience and knowledge in the light of my new Hydean insights, and to turn it into a short guide: *Alienation Made Easy*.

3. And Off We Go

Let me begin, though, with a warning against a common beginner's mistake. Anyone wishing to damage a parent-child relationship for good should not rush to try manipulating the child. That is far too laborious, morally dubious besides, and in the worst case even detectable.

Beginners always think first, when it comes to parental alienation, of a wicked parent sitting at the breakfast table each morning, systematically devising a plan to annihilate the other parent. That is a decidedly primitive notion.

The *professional* needs no master plan: he needs *conditions*. That is far more effective, because conditions have the advantage that nobody appears to be responsible for them. When enough unfavourable conditions come together, a relationship can undergo astonishing changes, while everyone involved can simultaneously declare, with a clear conscience, that they merely reacted to what happened to be happening.

My first recommendation is therefore this: never make anything happen. *Make sure that as little as possible happens.*

That sounds paradoxical at first, but it is of fundamental importance. Action generates attention. Omission, by contrast, possesses a wonderful quality: it looks like nothing at all. One can wait, observe, review, review again, hold conversations, recommend further conversations, clarify responsibilities, and above all take care not to rush anything. For almost every form of doing nothing, professional language offers a term that sounds considerably more sensible than "doing nothing".

Particularly helpful here is the phrase that *one must first bring calm into the situation*.

Calm is excellent: if a child no longer wants to see a parent, any attempt at reconciliation may initially generate unrest. The child might protest, the parents might quarrel, professionals might come under pressure, and the (family) court might have to make decisions that do not please everyone. If, on the other hand, one simply leaves everything as it is, things often do genuinely become calmer.

One should simply *not* ask too closely why: a conflict can, after all, also disappear because one of the relationships it was fought over has disappeared. That is an extraordinarily effective form of de-escalation. Where no contact takes place any more, there will eventually be fewer handover conflicts. Where a parent barely features in the child's daily life any more, there are fewer occasions to argue about their role. And once enough time has passed, one can even interpret the newly arisen calm as a sign that the current situation evidently suits the child.

With that we have already discovered the first important principle of our guide: *never confuse stability with health... at least for as long as the confusion is useful.*

A stably bad state has a considerable advantage over an unstable process of change. From the outside, it often looks more *peaceful*. Now we need one more thing to render this state

morally unassailable. Fortunately, one of the finest concepts of modern family law and modern pedagogy is available to us for that purpose: *the child's wishes*.

I have since become a great champion of the child's wishes. I used to make things unnecessarily difficult for myself. I wanted to know how a wish had come about. I asked about relationships, attachments, loyalties, fears, expectations, dependencies, and whether what a child says in a highly conflicted family situation might need to be understood precisely within that situation. I distinguished between a child's right to be heard and taken seriously, and the notion that every preference a child expresses must immediately become an instruction for the adults to act on. That was exhausting. Today I make it simpler.

The child doesn't want to. This sentence possesses an almost magical quality. It shuts down questions that might otherwise become decidedly uncomfortable. Why doesn't it want to? Since when has it not wanted to? What happened beforehand? Is the rejection consistent? Does its intensity match the child's experiences?

Is a child allowed to reject a parent? Of course. But does it follow from this that adults no longer need to investigate why it is doing so? And who, in fact, bears responsibility for the long-term consequences of a decision whose full scope a child, given its stage of development, may not yet be able to grasp?

Such questions are dangerous, because they turn a simple sentence back into a diagnostic problem. My advice is therefore this: if you want to make life easy for yourself, treat *autonomy* as far as possible as though it meant *independence*.

That sounds progressive, and has the added advantage that anyone who objects quickly comes under suspicion of not taking children seriously. And one need not even claim that children are entirely uninfluenced. It suffices simply to stop being particularly curious about what influences them. Adults, after all, are influenced too, and yet we respect their decisions. So why make such a fuss about it?

The answer to that can wait. *Waiting*, as it happens, has become one of my favourite methods altogether.

For *time*, as it turns out, is not, as I used to think, the cause of the problem. Time is *far more valuable* than that. It works with everything already in place. It reinforces habits, alters expectations, and slowly turns the extraordinary into the normal. A week without contact is an interruption. At some point an interruption can become a condition, the condition can become a lived reality, and that lived reality can finally become an argument. Then things become truly interesting.

For now we can say that we naturally have nothing against the child's relationship with the other parent. Quite the opposite. We would even welcome it. Only now, one must take the child's reality into account. I love reality.

Above all, when we had enough time beforehand to let it arise. And at this point, at the latest, the search for someone to blame becomes difficult. One person wanted to protect the child. Another wanted to respect his wishes. A third wanted to de-escalate. A fourth thought further

assessment was necessary. A fifth did not want to apply pressure. The court wanted a robust basis for its decision, the professional wanted first to build trust, and all of them together, naturally, wanted only the best.

4. What You Will Need for This

Nobody destroyed a relationship. It simply, at some point, was no longer there. In my mother tongue there is an old proverb which I used to find amusing and which I now consider an astonishingly precise description of professional mastery:

"*Entre todos la mataron y ella sola se murió.*" (Between them all, they killed her, and she died all by herself.)

I ought to have taken that sentence seriously much sooner. For years, when it came to parental alienation, I searched for the perpetrator. That was my mistake. One does not need a perpetrator. One needs *helpers*.

The word sounds harsher than I mean it. Most helpers, after all, have no idea that they are any such thing. That is actually an advantage. People who are convinced they are doing the right thing work more reliably than people who first have to be told why they should do something wrong. Besides, they sleep better.

So if you want to make a parent-child relationship disappear for good, do not waste your time seeking out allies. Seek out people with good intentions.

There are gratifyingly many of these in family law: you will find people there who want to protect children, who wish to reduce conflict, who do not want to put children under pressure, and who are convinced that parents must learn to accept their children's decisions. You will find professionals who want to be careful, judges who do not wish to cause any further escalation, guardians ad litem who want to give the child's wishes a voice, youth welfare office caseworkers who bank on voluntary solutions, therapists who first want to establish a safe space, and expert assessors who rightly point out that complex family systems cannot be captured by simple explanations.

I would not want to be without a single one of these people: for my purposes they are priceless. One must, however, understand how to make proper use of their good intentions. The most important principle is to *consider every single decision in isolation*. Never ask what happens when ten decisions, each reasonable in itself, line up one after another and all pull in the same direction. That could get uncomfortable.

Let us suppose a child does not wish to see a parent for a while. It seems sensible not to apply immediate pressure. After that, the child may need some peace and quiet. That, too, seems sensible. Next, it may make sense first to clarify therapeutically what lies behind the rejection. Sensible again. Some time passes before a suitable placement is found. That is regrettable, but hardly anyone's fault. After that, trust has to develop. Trust, as everyone knows, takes time. If the child still does not want contact, one should not jeopardise the therapeutic process with outside pressure. Sensible once more. And when, at last, many months have passed, it must of

course be taken into account that there has now been no contact for a long time, and that an abrupt change might place a burden on the child.

Every single step can be explained. So can the outcome. It is only the connection between the two that should, ideally, *not* become the object of scrutiny.

I therefore recommend a *consistent orientation towards the present*. The past is complicated and the future speculative. The present, by contrast, lies directly before us. The child does not want it today. The child is under strain today. The relationship is difficult today. Today, a meeting might provoke resistance. Stick to this today, and do not let yourself be troubled by the tiresome question of what tomorrow will look like if today's approach is continued for a year.

Long-term developmental trajectories have the unpleasant character of demanding decisions before their consequences are fully visible. That makes them unattractive for my purposes. It is far more agreeable to react to visible distress. A child who cries before a contact visit is visibly distressed. A relationship that slowly erodes over two years, on the other hand, makes remarkably little noise.

So remember another rule: *immediately visible suffering nearly always beats possible long-term suffering*. That is humanly understandable. If a child shows fear, anger or resistance today, nobody wants to be responsible for intensifying those feelings. If that same child no longer has a relationship with a parent years later, by contrast, it can hardly be established any more which single decision was responsible for it. Perhaps it would have happened anyway. Perhaps the relationship was never especially good. Perhaps the child had its reasons. Perhaps, at some point, one simply has to be able to accept that relationships end.

Perhaps: this word is truly useful.

It reminds me of another insight I gained on my way to the other side. *Certainty is thoroughly overrated*. Anyone who waits to know for certain whether a child's rejection is based on genuine negative experiences, an escalated parental conflict, loyalty processes, influence, fear, attachment dynamics, or several of these factors at once, possesses an invaluable advantage: he can wait a very long time. *Complexity* is therefore by no means Mr Hyde's enemy. It is his shield.

The more complex a case appears, the easier it is to justify why one should not act yet. One needs further information, further conversations, perhaps a further opinion. One must differentiate. One must not label anything prematurely. All of this is professionally entirely correct. I myself have warned often enough against interpreting a breakdown in contact prematurely as parental alienation, and nothing has changed about that since I changed sides.

I would today merely add one small qualification: *differentiate for as long as it takes for the differentiating itself to become part of the problem*.

That is more demanding than it sounds. After all, there are very good reasons to diagnose carefully. A child can reject a parent for understandable reasons. It may have experienced

violence, neglect, fear, or other things from which it needs to be protected. Precisely for that reason, it would be irresponsible to interpret every refusal of contact as alienation.

For my purposes, this presents a wonderful opportunity. Because acting wrongly can be dangerous, not acting can easily be understood as *caution*. And caution enjoys an excellent reputation.

It has only one small methodological flaw: *not acting is also an intervention*. I used to overlook that often. If an existing state continues while a diagnostic or judicial clarification takes place, something is, after all, still happening during that time. The child goes on living. Relationships continue to develop. Narratives get repeated. Expectations shift. Closeness can grow, and so can distance. Proceedings may stand still; a family system does not.

From Mr Hyde's perspective, that is close to ideal. While the adults are debating whether they are permitted to intervene, reality intervenes on their behalf. One should not stand in its way.

This becomes especially effective if we add one further principle: *demand of every intervention a degree of certainty you would never demand of the existing state*.

If someone proposes actively stabilising an endangered relationship, ask about the risks. Could the child be burdened by it? Could resistance arise? Could the measure fail? Could it sharpen the conflict? Might the child feel under pressure? All of these are legitimate questions and must be carefully examined.

When it comes to the continuation of the current situation, on the other hand, you should be more restrained. Try not to ask, with the same persistence, what risks arise if nothing changes. Do not ask how likely further alienation is, what a prolonged breakdown in the relationship might mean developmentally, or whether the supposedly gentle solution merely shifts the burden from the present into the future.

This produces a remarkable *asymmetry*: change must prove its own harmlessness. The status quo is simply allowed to exist.

The system will play into your hands here almost of its own accord. Thorough and consistent hypothesis-testing is not really among its strengths. Often, given the prevailing conditions, it can barely manage it at all. And when it does, it needs, above all, one thing: *time*. And there we are again.

I now consider this one of the most elegant methods of all. *The status quo, in any case, carries an astonishing authority of its own*. The longer it persists, the more sensible it seems to respect it. After a while, one no longer speaks of how it came about, but of the fact that the child simply lives in this reality now. Later still, this reality becomes stability, and stability, as everyone knows, is something children urgently need.

One has to appreciate this development. You and Mr Hyde have thereby achieved something remarkable: a possibly problematic situation does not merely become harder to change through its duration — at some point its very duration supplies the justification for not changing it any more. That is close to an art form, you must admit.

For all one's enthusiasm, however, one mistake must not be made. *One should not entirely forget the other parent.* He, too, has an important function. As the breakdown in contact continues, he tends to grow more agitated. That is understandable, but decidedly useful.

A person watching the relationship with their child fade away does not necessarily behave the way a wholly neutral observer might expect. They may write too many messages, file too many applications, phone too often, demand explanations, turn up unannounced at the child's school, become emotional, suspicious or angry. Some, at some point, lose that very composure whose absence can later be held against them.

This is where you should pay attention. For now the process begins supplying itself with *evidence*: the more desperately a parent tries to save an endangered relationship, the more easily his behaviour can appear to be part of the conflict. The harder he pushes for intervention, the more readily one can ask whether he is adequately perceiving the child's needs — or merely focusing on his own. The more often he points out that time is working against him, the more uncomfortable his urgency can seem. And once he eventually becomes angry, we finally have something visible: anger can be documented.

The slow loss of a relationship, considerably less so. Now you understand me better. That is by no means to suggest that problematic behaviour on the part of a rejected parent should be ignored. Quite the opposite. Some parents contribute substantially to their own relationship problems, some apply pressure, some overstep boundaries, and some do genuinely endanger their children. Precisely for that reason, differentiation is necessary.

For our guide, however, a simpler insight suffices: *judge reactions, wherever possible, without their history.* That saves time and avoids unnecessary questions of causation. If someone is angry after a year of unsuccessful efforts, look at the anger. If someone desperately pushes for contact, look at the pressure. If someone no longer trusts institutions, look at the mistrust. The question of whether these behaviours are cause, consequence, or both at once merely leads back into that tiresome complexity from which we have just so skilfully extricated ourselves.

And at some point something decidedly useful happens. *The conflict itself becomes the diagnosis: the parents are high-conflict.*

It could not be more perfect. Grist to your mill. The expression describes something real while explaining astonishingly little at the same time. Above all, it *distributes responsibility* in the most wonderful way. Two people are in conflict, so we have a parental conflict. Whether one of them does something and the other merely reacts to it may or may not be true; for the term itself, it is, for now, immaterial. The conflict belongs to both of them. That is exceedingly democratic.

And now, at last, we can protect the child by keeping it out of this conflict. Exactly how one keeps a child out of a conflict that concerns its most important relationships is a philosophically interesting question, which we need not pursue any further here. For our purposes it is enough to declare *the reduction of conflict* the supreme goal. Fewer handovers may mean less quarrelling. Less communication means less quarrelling. Less contact can likewise mean less quarrelling.

In the end, *calm* reigns. Perhaps a parent is missing. But calm is calm.

I slowly began to understand why my earlier efforts had been so exhausting. I had always tried to protect two things at once: the child from the conflict, and its relationships within the family. That forces one into weighing things up, into assessment, and sometimes into uncomfortable interventions.

Mr Hyde has no such problem: he protects the child from the conflict by sacrificing the relationship that is being fought over. Naturally, he would never put it that way. He would say that he respects the child's current lived reality. That sounds much better.

5. Mr Hyde and Science

That I, of all people, underestimated science for so long is, in hindsight, somewhat embarrassing. After all, I come from that world myself. Just like Mr Hyde, actually, strictly speaking. I have conducted studies, analysed data, formulated hypotheses, argued about causation and correlation, and explained to other people why personal convictions are no substitute for empirical findings. I could therefore have worked out much sooner what an invaluable contribution scientific rigour can make to our undertaking.

Do not misunderstand me. I am by no means recommending that scientific findings be ignored. That would be amateurish. Still less do I recommend inventing data or misrepresenting research results. Such things can be checked, and might create the uncomfortable impression that one had set out to reach a particular conclusion.

No, we should become *scientific*. Very scientific indeed. Just, perhaps, in a different way.

The first step consists in *correctly distributing the evidentiary burden*. If someone claims that a child is being influenced by the other parent, demand evidence. That goes without saying. Ask about alternative explanations, about the quality of the relationship before the separation, about possible behaviour on the part of the rejected parent, about developmental factors, and about whether the observed rejection might not, perhaps, be entirely understandable. Insist on keeping correlation and causation apart. Remind everyone that complex human behaviour should never be explained monocausally.

Up to this point, you are doing everything right. It only gets interesting with the question of whether you apply the same evidentiary standard to the opposite assumption. Because you do not strictly have to. If a child declares that it does not want to see a parent, that statement can initially be treated as a fact. The child did, after all, actually make it. There, we already have something observable. If it makes the same statement repeatedly, we even have consistency. If it reacts emotionally at the thought of contact, we obtain a further finding. And if, after a longer breakdown in contact, the prospect of a meeting triggers even stronger reactions, we can note, with some satisfaction, that several observations point in the same direction.

What we do not have to investigate at all costs is the possibility that our observations are not independent of one another. Or that they need to be independently established. That would be methodologically tiresome.

Take a child who does not want to see a parent. We initially forgo contact because the child does not want it. Some time later we ask again. The child still does not want it. Now we can establish that the rejection persists. After a few more months, that parent is barely present in the child's daily life any more, the relationship has grown more distant, and the prospect of a meeting is possibly more distressing than before. If the child now rejects even more emphatically, we have apparently observed a development.

That we have, indeed. We should just not think too long about whether we were, at the same time, part of the experimental set-up. That question would, of course, spoil a great deal.

In my former scientific existence, I placed great importance on keeping the observer separate from the observed system. In family law proceedings, that is, delightfully, more difficult. There, decisions can alter the very reality that later becomes the subject of further decisions. A provisional contact arrangement changes relationships. A suspension changes relationships. A therapeutic recommendation changes the context. Proceedings change expectations. Even the mere duration of an assessment can become part of the family reality that is, in the end, being assessed. That is methodologically *fascinating*:

One can, in fact, treat a situation as *provisional at first, contribute to its stabilisation through the very proceedings, and later discover it as empirical reality*.

The finding is then entirely correct. The child genuinely has had no contact for a year. It genuinely has grown accustomed to this state. A reconciliation genuinely would be more difficult than it would have been twelve months earlier. And precisely for that reason we must now be especially careful. I admire moments like this. They show just how ingeniously facts can come into being without anyone having to invent them.

Even smarter, certainly, is when several professionals become unwittingly involved. A single person can be mistaken. Five professionals observing something similar, by contrast, look reassuring. That is understandable, and the agreement of independent observers is often, indeed, an important marker of quality. The decisive word, however, is *independent*. And here the case file opens up unsuspected possibilities.

Case files are the memory of proceedings, and like any memory, they structure what is perceived later. An assessment is recorded. The next professional reads it. They hold a conversation and possibly find indications that fit this assessment. Their observation, in turn, enters the file. A further professional now reads two already-similar assessments. If they arrive at a comparable conclusion, we have three.

That is starting to look like *evidence*. Perhaps it is evidence. Or perhaps it is simply three observations that are genealogically related to one another. I have a name for this by now: *the astonishing multiplication of certainty*.

A supposition enters a file and leaves it, some months later, as case history. Nobody has to act dishonestly in the process. Quite the opposite: professional practice naturally requires taking existing information into account. It would be absurd to expect every new professional to ignore everything the proceedings have established so far. And that is exactly where the beauty of the problem lies. What is professionally necessary can, at the same time, create a

methodological danger. For Mr Hyde, such circumstances are worth their weight in gold, as we can see.

Especially valuable are formulations whose origin, at some point, can no longer be traced. "*The child has rejected the father for a long time.*" "*The relationship with the mother is significantly strained.*" "*Contact has repeatedly led to distress reactions.*" "*The child has stabilised.*" Such sentences can be perfectly accurate. But after a few months, hardly anyone is interested any more in which observation they were originally based on, in what context that observation arose, or whether later events might have been influenced by decisions that were themselves based on precisely that first observation.

At some point the file no longer merely describes *reality*. It becomes *part of its making*. For a scientist, that ought really to be an exciting thought. For an expert assessor, it should, occasionally, be an unsettling one.

For me, it has since become decidedly practical. For now we can turn to *assessment*. Assessment has one great advantage over mere opinion: it sounds like knowledge. That is, fundamentally, also true. Good assessment tries to test hypotheses, to weigh alternative explanations against one another, and to bring together observations from different sources. It asks not only what we see, but also why we see it.

The problem begins where *observation and explanation are confused with one another*: a child refuses contact because the relationship is strained. How do we know the relationship is strained? Because the child refuses contact.

You will object that this is *circular*.

Of course it is. But mostly it does not get noticed so quickly. Because with enough jargon, a circle can astonishingly quickly lose its roundness. One can speak of significant emotional distancing, of an entrenched stance of rejection, of an absent inner readiness for contact, or of a currently unviable relational representation. All these descriptions can capture something real. They simply do not yet answer the decisive question of how this state came about.

That is a small distinction with large consequences. For as soon as we have precisely described a state, the feeling easily arises that we have also explained it. I used to criticise people for confusing a label with a cause. Since I changed sides, I have become more tolerant. Labels save an enormous amount of time.

It becomes especially pleasant once we can agree on the term *high-conflict*. As already mentioned, I have since developed a certain fondness for this word: it describes, first of all, that an intense and persistent conflict exists between the parents. That can be quite decisively relevant to assessing the situation. *But it can do more than that: it can, in fact, make causation disappear.*

If two parents are high-conflict, the problem lies between them. That sounds symmetrical, and *symmetry* has a reassuring effect. One no longer has to ask so precisely who did what, when, whether certain behaviours represent reactions to other behaviours, or whether responsibility in particular areas might be very unevenly distributed. Both must work on their

communication. Both must end the conflict. Both must learn to put the child's needs at the centre.

These are almost always sensible recommendations. Especially when both parents genuinely make comparable contributions to the conflict. If they do not, they merely become... even more interesting:

Imagine one parent continually preventing a viable relationship between the child and the other parent, while the other fights increasingly desperately against it. If we regard both purely as a high-conflict pair of parents, we can jointly recommend that they reduce the conflict. One of them would then perhaps have to stop obstructing a relationship. The other could, in turn, stop protesting against it so vehemently.

And already the two are moving towards one another. Only the relationship with the child, perhaps, is not.

One could easily develop a certain admiration for the *aesthetics of symmetry*. It looks fair, balanced, democratic as already noted — and professional to boot. Above all, it spares us the unpleasant business of asking, in every single area of conflict, about possibly differing shares of responsibility.

It would, of course, be equally wrong to assume asymmetrical responsibility as a matter of principle. Some conflicts really are sustained by both parents in comparable ways. Some shift their dynamic over time. In some situations it is scarcely meaningful any more to reconstruct who started it, because both have long been contributing to a self-reinforcing system.

Precisely for that reason, one rule is especially helpful: *use complexity not to look more closely, but to dispense with precision*.

That sounds almost identical at first — if not outright contradictory. But it is neither. Anyone who takes complexity seriously has to make finer distinctions; anyone who merely invokes complexity, by contrast, can use it wonderfully to avoid having to make any distinctions at all in the end. What is meant is this: *complexity as scientific necessity versus complexity as an excuse for diagnostic vagueness*.

At this point I would like to introduce one further tool that I long failed to appreciate sufficiently: *missing evidence*.

Missing evidence is scientifically important. If a claim is not backed by sufficient evidence, we may not simply treat it as fact. That belongs to the basic arithmetic of serious research.

For our purposes, one need only pay attention to which claim currently *carries the burden of proof*. If someone says that a child's rejection has been influenced, we can rightly ask whether there is sufficient evidence for it. If we cannot find any, we may not claim that influence has been proven.

The next sentence, however, is decisive. "*Not proven*" should not — at least, scientifically speaking — properly become "*not present*". *Properly*.

In practice, the temptation is great. What could not be established slips, linguistically, all too easily out of the realm of the unresolved and resurfaces on the other side as the all-clear. "There is insufficient evidence for X" becomes, in the memory of the proceedings, at some point, "X is not present".

A tiny step. Almost invisible. And suddenly science has not merely prevented us from asserting something unproven. *It has apparently proved that it does not exist.*

Mr Hyde loves null findings that turn into acquittals along the way. I understand that. He loves, in general, any confusion between uncertainty and certainty — as long as it works in the right direction.

The same naturally holds in reverse. An accusation against a parent must never be treated as true merely because it was made. A suspicion must be examined. Children's need for protection must not be relativised merely because a parental conflict exists. Precisely in cases of possible violence, maltreatment or neglect, it would be disastrous to interpret a justified rejection prematurely as influence.

That makes matters complicated. And complication, as we now know, is one of our most reliable collaborators. For between "*we must distinguish carefully*" and "*we cannot do anything until we know everything*" lies only a small linguistic distance.

But... in terms of *time*, years can lie between the two. During these years the file keeps collecting findings about the state whose cause we are still investigating. The child grows older. The relationship changes. The rejected parent reacts. The other parent reacts to that reaction. Professionals observe the reactions of both parents and write them down. New professionals read the records of the old ones. At some point there is so much material that hardly anyone can find the beginning any more.

That is the moment at which a case becomes an *archive*. All the traces are there. They simply lie one on top of the other. Perhaps this is, altogether, the most important piece of advice I can give you: *if you want to stop anyone recognising how a parent-child relationship was lost, you do not need to remove the traces. You only need to produce enough of them.*

At some point every explanation becomes possible: one person will say the rejected parent was too demanding. Another will point to the child's fears. Someone will emphasise the high-conflict dynamic. Someone else, the long breakdown in contact. Yet another will declare that after so much time one can no longer establish with any certainty what was originally decisive. And in that, he would probably even be right.

That is the most beautiful part of it. In the end, Mr Hyde does not even have to tell an untruth. He is not, after all, quite that wicked. One should not, after all, credit him with everything. He merely has to wait long enough for the truth to become sufficiently difficult to reconstruct.

6. The Child Is, Naturally, in the Spotlight

It took me a particularly long time to understand what role the child itself can play in our undertaking. Perhaps here, too, I was too shaped by my earlier way of thinking. I assumed

that adults bore responsibility for making decisions whose consequences children, given their age and stage of development, could not yet fully grasp. At the same time, I considered it self-evident that children must be heard, taken seriously, and involved in decisions that affect their lives.

At the time, no contradiction seemed to exist between these two thoughts. Today I know that one can be manufactured: *one merely has to turn involvement into decision.*

That is simpler than it sounds, because the transition is scarcely perceptible in language. First we say the child must be heard. Naturally. Then we say its wishes must be taken seriously. Also naturally. Next we declare that decisions running counter to a child's expressly and repeatedly stated wishes require particularly strong justification. That, too, is correct. And at some point we find ourselves facing a child who says it no longer wants to see a parent, and we ask a question that miraculously simplifies the entire matter: *how can we force the child, when it simply does not want to?*

At this point we have already achieved a great deal: *we have, in fact, turned a diagnostic question into a moral one.*

The original question may have been why the child is rejecting a parent, how this wish came about, what function it serves within the family system, how stable and autonomous it is, and what short- and long-term consequences different adult responses might have.

Now the question is whether we respect a child's wishes. There is a much simpler answer to that. Of course we respect them. Besides: *who, after all, wants to be the person who publicly declares that a child's wishes do not interest him?* Not us, in any case.

I therefore advise you to speak of respect particularly often at this point. Respect is an excellent word, because its opposite sounds so ugly. Anyone arguing against our conclusion must now first explain why he does not simply want to accept an expressly stated wish. Before he has even finished doing so, he already looks a little authoritarian. That is exceedingly useful.

We should, wherever possible, *not* mention that seriously taking a wish into account and immediately acting on it can be two different things. Adults experience this every day. A doctor can take a wish seriously without automatically deriving a medical indication from it. Parents can understand a child's wish not to go to school tomorrow without concluding that school attendance should henceforth be optional. A teenager can hate their family, love it, want to leave it, and two hours later desperately seek its closeness, without our needing to assume that their feelings are fake — or that their personality is unstable.

In parent-child relationships, however, we can occasionally spare ourselves such developmental-psychological truisms: here, *autonomy* is the prettier word. In any case, I recommend using autonomy as generously as possible. It sounds like freedom, dignity and self-determination. One should merely avoid defining too precisely what is meant by it.

Children are, of course, autonomous subjects. They possess their own rights, their own perspectives, and their own dignity. They are not the property of their parents, nor objects of

judicial or pedagogical measures. All of this belongs to the great and necessary progress made in how we treat children.

Now it becomes more interesting: from "*children are subjects*" we quietly make "*children decide autonomously*". And from "children decide autonomously" comes, at some point, "*the adults can do nothing*". With that we have accomplished something remarkable. *We have abolished our own responsibility and call the result children's rights.*

Mr Hyde is particularly proud of this unexpected achievement, I can see it in him. Because responsibility is tiresome. Whoever decides must weigh things up. Whoever weighs things up can get it wrong. Whoever wants to preserve a relationship for a child despite its resistance must explain why. He must assess risks, examine alternatives, and possibly stand behind a decision that causes short-term discomfort.

If, by contrast, we say the child decided, the matter is considerably cleaner. We, after all, merely listened. The child did not want it. *What were we supposed to do?*

This question should, wherever possible, be asked rhetorically: because it could actually be answered.

And that is not, in fact, what we want. One could, for instance, have investigated why the child did not want it. One could have examined whether its rejection matched its actual experiences, whether it had changed over time, whether it was context-dependent, whether ambivalence was present, and whether the child was perhaps showing something different from what it stated in words. One could have looked at how the adults respond to its statements, what expectations it perceives, and what consequences different positions within its family system carry. One could have taken protective measures where protection was needed, and supported relationships where the protection of relationships was needed.

That, however, sounds like work again.

Above all, it leads *to an uncomfortable realisation*: taking a child seriously can mean not merely listening to its answer, but taking responsibility for understanding the question. *What were we supposed to do?*

Answers, by contrast, have an invaluable advantage: they fit neatly into the record. "*I don't want to see Mummy.*" "*I don't want to go to Daddy's.*" Those are wonderful sentences. Short, unambiguous, and quotable. They fit beautifully into reports. One can put them in quotation marks, which makes them look even more authentic. It is, after all, hard to argue against a direct quotation. *The child said it.*

What the child did *not* say is *why*. That is what we have adults for. Or perhaps not.

It becomes especially interesting when a child explains its rejection *with reasons*. Then we should, of course, listen. Children can describe what they have experienced with great precision, and their accounts can contain decisive indications of distress or danger. Anyone who reflexively dismisses such statements as influence, merely because a conflict exists between the parents, is not acting in a child-centred way, but blindly.

For our purposes, here too we need *no blindness*. *Selective visual acuity* is quite enough.

We can take a child's reasons very seriously, so long as we avoid examining them with the same care as we would examine the statements of adults. That sounds contradictory at first. But it is not, *if one equates examination with distrust*.

One must not, after all, make a child feel it is not being believed.

Now please remember this sentence. It contains something very important. Children who report distressing experiences need adults who listen and do not burden them further with aggressive or suggestive questioning. The problem arises only once we conclude from this that respectful examination already signals disbelief — or that the mere possible discomfort a child might feel during such examination is reason enough to dispense with it.

For *then we have once again shelved a diagnostic question on moral grounds*. Not bad, is it?

I have since developed a simple rule of thumb for this: *the more strongly a necessary professional examination can be framed as a moral imposition, the lower the likelihood that anyone will demand it*.

That works astonishingly well. And now we can hand the child an even more important role: *it may not only decide whether a relationship takes place. At some point it may also decide when it can take place again*. Namely: "*when the child is ready*."

Please note this sentence down too: it sounds patient, respectful and therapeutically sensitive. But now for the most important part: *it contains no date*. That is decisive.

When we say that *a reconciliation should take place once the child is ready*, we have formulated a goal *without* creating any *obligation to act*. Nobody has to do anything tomorrow. Nobody has to do anything next week. We can wait until readiness arises.

How this readiness is supposed to arise when precisely the relationship within which positive experiences could be made is missing, is an interesting question. But not a strictly necessary one: *perhaps the child simply needs time*.

And now we have her again, my old friend. *Time*. While we wait, the child can go on growing accustomed to the absence. The distance can grow larger, the prospect of contact more unfamiliar, and the threshold for a renewed meeting higher. If the child is still not ready after six months, this apparently confirms how deep-seated the rejection is. After a year, a reconciliation would possibly be even more distressing. In that case we should, naturally, proceed even more gently.

At some point "*when the child is ready*" turns into *a state with no foreseeable end*. Nobody ended the contact. *We are merely waiting for the child*.

The truly elegant part of this: this form of transferring responsibility *feels very much like consideration*. And it is, besides, unbelievably practical for our purposes: we transfer the responsibility onto the child and can simultaneously congratulate ourselves for having taken it especially seriously.

Picture the situation from the child's perspective. Adults find themselves in a conflict it did not create. Perhaps it loves both parents, perhaps it is angry with one of them, perhaps it is afraid, perhaps it feels responsible for a parent's wellbeing, perhaps it genuinely has had serious experiences, perhaps it is caught in loyalty conflicts, perhaps several of these things at once.

Now the adults ask this child what should happen. *And then we take its answer so seriously that we leave it to bear the consequences.* That is consistent participation. There really is no other name for it.

Malicious tongues might see in this a remarkably child-welfare-oriented form of adult capitulation. Simply do not listen to them.

For the possibility of delegating *responsibility downward* is simply exhilarating. *Normally, responsibility in families and institutions works in the other direction.* Whoever possesses more power, knowledge and overview carries more responsibility.

In our model, *we can reverse this relationship.* And how we can. It is conjuring without any magic whatsoever. The child holds the least power over the proceedings, the least life experience, and possibly the least capacity to assess long-term consequences — yet it is granted, of all things, a de facto veto over the existential question of whether a parental relationship continues.

And now comes *the real punchline*: we call this self-determination. Not least because it sounds considerably better than the shifting of responsibility.

If someone later asks why the relationship broke down, we can answer entirely truthfully that this was in keeping with the child's express wish.

I have grown accustomed to quite a lot by now. But even Mr Hyde remains impressed by this one. One has to picture clearly what we have achieved with it: *not only has the responsibility vanished. We have handed it, of all people, to the very one we were actually meant to be protecting.*

Naturally, you should never put it that way. Say instead that *the child must be kept out of the parental conflict.* This sentence, too, you should commit firmly to memory.

A child should not have to decide between its parents. We have known this for a long time. It should not have to carry messages, should not have to enter into alliances, and should not be responsible for its parents' emotional needs. It should be allowed to be a child.

And then, of all things, when it comes to the most important decision, we do something astonishing. We ask it which parent it wants to live with, and whether, when, and under what conditions it still wants to see the other one.

Now all that remains is to neatly round off the argument: *we tell the child it bears no responsibility whatsoever for the conflict, and then organise essential parts of the solution around what it says.* If it wants contact, contact can take place. If it does not want any, then

that is simply how it is. If it later changes its mind, we can reconsider. Until then, we respect its wishes.

And, of course, we tell it again and again *that it is not its fault*. Why, indeed, should it be its fault? It has, after all, merely stated its opinion.

We were the ones who turned it into a decision. But we no longer bear any responsibility.

At this point someone might object that this is unrealistic. That such a thing could never work. That it is simply nonsense. A rather poor Mr Hyde, then. For family courts do not simply decide according to a child's wish, professionals are aware of developmental-psychological connections, and nobody with professional competence would seriously claim that a child alone must decide the continuation of a parent-child relationship. That is, of course, true.

And that is precisely why it works. Nobody needs to advocate this principle openly. That would even be decidedly clumsy. It is entirely sufficient if many small decisions, each reasonable in itself, together produce the same effect. A contact visit does not take place because the child does not want it today. A measure is postponed because additional pressure is to be avoided. A reconciliation is made contingent on the necessary readiness first arising. After a while, the by-now entrenched rejection is taken into account as a particularly weighty expression of the child's wishes.

None of these steps says: the child decides alone. *In the end, it has decided all the same.*

Or, more precisely: *we have decided not to decide against its decision*. That is a fine distinction. Above all for the adults: for the relationship, it is possibly meaningless.

I therefore began to rethink my earlier understanding of being child-centred from the ground up. I had believed that being child-centred meant taking the child's perspective seriously while not losing sight of adult responsibility. I thought children's rights consisted not only of autonomy and participation, but equally of protection, development, and the entitlement that adults should not conveniently offload decisions back onto them.

That was complicated. Today I prefer a simpler definition: child-centred is when the child stands at the centre of the decision. Especially when, properly speaking, an adult ought to be standing there instead.

There is, however, one small difficulty I must prepare you for. Children are not always as reliably unambiguous as our files would like them to be. They can be contradictory. A child can declare that it never wants to see a parent again, and still be delighted at a chance encounter. It can say something different in a parent's presence than when alone. It can simultaneously love and hate, miss and reject, seek closeness and guard against it.

In other words: children can behave like human beings. That makes our work considerably harder.

Ambivalence is dangerous for Mr Hyde, because it opens up questions. An unambiguous no can be administered. A "no, but" demands an explanation — and thus understanding. A child who verbally rejects a parent while nonverbally seeking closeness may force us to look more

closely. A child who changes its mind depending on context reminds us that a wish does not arise in a vacuum. That is why contradictions should be resolved as quickly as possible.

The simplest way to achieve this is *by declaring the clearest statement the most authentic one*. Which one that is depends on the case. But do not worry. *The file will help us*. It has, after all, an excellent memory for clear sentences. Ambivalences fit less well into summaries.

After a few months, all that may remain written there is: "*The child clearly rejects contact*." And again, this sentence is not necessarily wrong. It is merely tidier than reality. Reality is complicated. Its sanitised version is considerably more decision-friendly.

Above all, though, such sentences are easier to pass on. The next professional reads the unambiguous rejection, speaks with a child who by now has had no contact for months, and finds that it still rejects it. Our story thereby gains in consistency. What was originally, perhaps, a contradictory, situational, or otherwise not-yet-understood wish becomes, through repetition, time and documentation, a stable trait of the child.

At some point we stop asking why the child rejects. We say: it is a child who rejects. That is remarkable progress. *A process has become a trait*. And traits have an invaluable advantage: they lend themselves excellently to deriving *prognoses*. A process would have to be understood. A trait can be forecast. Traits, after all, are stable — processes, by contrast, are too unpredictable.

If the child has wanted no contact for a long time, resuming it will presumably be difficult. If it becomes difficult, it might place a burden on the child. If it might burden the child, we should be cautious. If we are cautious, we wait for its readiness. If we wait, contact does not resume. If contact does not resume, resuming it becomes harder.

A Hydean circle, if you will permit the expression. I hope you now recognise the beauty of this system.

It is very nearly a perpetual motion machine: it needs almost no energy from outside any more. Once it has been set going, it can, with a little maintenance, largely sustain itself. Perhaps this is, altogether, the highest form of professional efficiency. We do not need to destroy the parent-child relationship. We only need to ensure that nobody remains responsible for saving it.

The system takes care of the rest almost by itself.

7. The Parents: From Leading Role to Supporting Role

At this point we have to talk about the parents. I have deliberately avoided this so far. Parents are, in fact, a methodological risk in our undertaking. As soon as we talk too much about their concrete behaviour, someone might get the idea of asking about responsibility. It would be even worse if we started examining individual actions for their effect on the child. Then we might have to distinguish between a parent who genuinely supports relationships, one who merely does not openly prevent them, and one who claims to support them while the outcome reliably, suspiciously, moves in the opposite direction.

That would be needlessly complicated. Mr Hyde prefers simplicity, as we know by now. And here, too, there is a wonderfully simple derivation: *neutrality*.

Neutrality is a wonderful concept, especially in relationships where neutrality is not actually possible. A child, after all, does not live in a psychological vacuum. It observes faces, pauses, tensions, relief, worry and expectations. It notices which topics become easy and which become difficult in a family, at which names a conversation falls silent, and which feelings meet with approval. Children need no lecture in communication psychology for this. They grow up inside relationships and learn their language long before they can explain what they have learnt.

That could make our work harder. Fortunately, we can concentrate on visible behaviour. Our ideal parent never says: "You're not allowed to see Mummy." Nor does he say: "Daddy is a bad person." Such sentences would be crude. They would provoke questions, might even be recorded, and someone might eventually claim that active work was being done here against a parent-child relationship.

No, our ideal parent is far more discreet. And more modern, that is, child-centred. He says: "*You decide*."

Please read that sentence again: "*You decide*." It sounds generous and respectful, and at the same time transfers an astonishing amount of responsibility onto astonishingly small shoulders. If the child wants to go, it may go. If it does not want to go, then naturally it does not have to. *We cannot, after all, force a child*. We want to respect its boundaries. We want to give it a sense of safety. And above all we want to avoid it having to decide between its parents. So we let it decide.

I know I have already mentioned this contradiction. But it is so beautiful that it deserves repeating.

For the parent in question, this model has a further *advantage*: he does not have to prevent anything at all. He merely has to explain that the decision does not lie with him.

"I would support the contact, but the child doesn't want to."

This sentence belongs in any good collection of family-law classics. So do add it to your repertoire without fail. Even so: pay attention to its construction. The first part contains the moral position: I support the relationship. The second part contains the reason why it does not take place all the same: the child. Between the two parts sits one small word with a great effect. *But*.

Before this "*but*" lies the responsibility of the adult. After it lies the responsibility of the child.

This small, subtle little word will save you a great deal of effort.

Naturally, there are situations in which parents genuinely do everything that can reasonably be expected of them and a child refuses contact all the same. Equally, there are situations in which a child needs to be protected for good reasons, and a parent acts responsibly precisely by taking its rejection seriously. Reality is, as ever, tiresomely nuanced.

Mr Hyde is therefore less interested in what a parent claims than in what we stop asking about, once the claim sounds reasonable enough. Take an example: what does "I support the contact" actually mean? That would be a dangerous question.

For support is not an inner state. One cannot foster a relationship simply by privately having nothing against it. Children are poor readers of minds. They experience behaviour. They experience whether the other parent naturally belongs to their life story or is treated like a problematic optional extra. They experience whether anticipation is possible, whether their return is welcomed, whether they are allowed to talk about good experiences, and whether affection for the other parent remains free of emotional consequences.

But we did not, after all, want to look too closely. So for now the statement suffices: "*I never said anything against the contact.*" Excellent. Nobody said anything.

Acting can certainly be useful. Here, however, I would advise you to do as I do, and learn to value the *absence of action* as well. It possesses a remarkable *innocence*. An explicit ban can be established. Contact that is simply not fostered leaves fewer traces. A disparaging remark can be quoted. A facial expression, not always. A concrete obstacle can be documented. An atmosphere, considerably less so.

And what, indeed, is one supposed to do about it? Nobody, after all, can be forced to be enthusiastic.

That is even true: one cannot, in the end, prescribe to parents what they ought to feel. One cannot command a person, after a painful separation, to find their former partner likeable. One cannot demand that hurt simply vanish just because there are children in common.

For our purposes, it does not need to vanish at all. It is entirely enough if nobody asks how it is being processed within the parental role.

Here another *important distinction helps us: the couple level and the parental level*. Every professional knows it. The partnership has ended, the parenthood continues. Parents are supposed to separate their conflicts as a couple from their shared responsibility for the child.

Now, in practical sentence form, so that you can use it immediately if needed: "*The parents must separate the couple level from the parental level.*" With that, we have — forgive me: you have — named the problem precisely.

Now all that remains is for the parents to actually do it. If they do not, you can repeat the sentence at the next appointment. After a few months, perhaps somewhat more emphatically.

I admit that the therapeutic power of well-phrased exhortations used to convince me more than it does now. Be that as it may. For our purposes, in any case, they possess a decidedly useful advantage: *they document that we recommended the right thing*. That is not the same as change, but in a file it can look astonishingly similar.

This becomes especially useful when a parent declares that he has not influenced the child. More than that: *he could not possibly influence the child at all. How would that even work? And, after all, one must respect the child's wishes.*

At this point you should, wherever possible, avoid pointing out that parents naturally influence their children all the time. They do so when they convey that school matters, that one apologises, that grandmother is visited even though one would rather be at the computer today, that fear is taken seriously but need not dictate behaviour every time, and that relationships sometimes have to be tended even when one happens to be angry.

We otherwise call that *upbringing*.

When it comes to the relationship with the other parent, *we can temporarily forget this knowledge. Then influence suddenly becomes manipulation*. That is decidedly helpful, because nobody wants to recommend that a parent manipulate their child. So we recommend instead that they remain neutral.

"I don't want to influence the child." "Of course I don't do that either."

You need sentences like these. So into your list they go. *They sound like respect and restraint, like seeking help, and even like a willingness to accept it*. There is not much one can initially hold against that.

A parent with whom a child spends its everyday life, of course, has *no* way whatsoever of having *no* influence. Silence, too, is information. Restraint, too, is experienced. Even the decision not to display a particular stance visibly changes the social space within which the child develops its own position.

You know this, of course. But you need not go pointing it out straight away.

The relevant question, therefore, is not *whether a parent has influence*. *The question is what he uses it for*. But this question, too, brings us dangerously close to *responsibility*. So let us stick with neutrality instead.

The influence remains. Only its author has, delightfully, gone missing on us.

Now for the next tip. A true masterstroke, if you will permit the expression. The principle is exceedingly simple: *we can expect the child to organise its relationship with the other parent itself*. The child, after all, knows its own feelings best. Feel free to point that out.

If it wants contact, it can say so. If it wants to phone, it can phone. If it wants to write a message, it can do that. If it misses the other parent, it will surely make itself heard.

That is decidedly convenient, because relationships between adults basically work in a similar way: whoever needs more distance essentially determines the distance in the relationship, at least to begin with. Why should this tried-and-tested principle not also be applied to children?

The principle could, of course, be applied flexibly. A parent could just as well say: "I didn't want to influence my child's friendships. If it wants contact with its grandmother, it can call her itself. And if it needs help at school, it will speak up." Well, now. Strangely, the complete transfer of responsibility onto the child suddenly seems less convincing to us in these areas.

But do not let that unsettle you. If need be, we simply dispense with the flexibility. A good principle, after all, need not be stretched unnecessarily. Better to play it safe.

In a conflict-laden parental relationship, by contrast, we can apply it all the more generously. As already noted: *there, after all, the child does have its own wishes.*

Incidentally, even when it does not express any such wishes at all. That, too, is somehow a wish.

I must confess that I am growing increasingly fond of this logic. Silence can mean rejection. Rejection can mean decision. Decision can mean autonomy. And autonomy means that adults must respect the decision. Pure magic. *An absent action on the child's part thus generates an obligation on the adults to act: by doing nothing.*

One word comes to mind: efficient.

Now, our parent could, however, run into difficulty if the child suddenly shows positive feelings towards the other parent. Children are, unfortunately, unpredictable. They can miss someone they rejected only yesterday. They can come home happily after a successful visit. They can tell stories, show affection, or even express the wish to be there more often.

But do not worry: we do not need to make anything of it. *Positive experiences are snapshots.* So, incidentally, are negative ones, but in highly conflicted proceedings they occasionally possess a considerably longer *half-life*.

There are comprehensible reasons for this. Negative reactions can indicate distress and must therefore be taken seriously. Nobody wants to overlook warning signs. A child who is upset after contact deserves attention. A child who comes back happy, by contrast, seems to have no problem. So we need not concern ourselves with it any further.

This gives rise to an interesting *documentation asymmetry*. Distress produces reports. Successful normality rarely does. Nobody writes a detailed file note stating that a child came home in good spirits after a weekend with its mother, did its homework, and went to school on Monday.

Why would it? Nothing happened. Let us call it the *newspaper principle*: bad news is news. Good normality is normality. Who, after all, is interested in that?

And that is precisely why some information disappears more reliably than other information. Please keep that in mind. For when someone later reads the file, they may find a remarkable collection of problematic incidents, and only a few pointers to the many situations in which simply nothing problematic happened at all.

The file does not lie. It simply prefers to remember what was worth filing.

Perhaps we should stop speaking of the file as a memory altogether. It is a *memory with admission criteria*. Not everything that happened is allowed in. And what never got in can, later, only with difficulty be recalled. Please do not forget: nothing was deleted, nothing falsified, nobody had to lie. Certain realities simply never found their way into the institutional memory.

But back to our good parent. His most important skill consists in carefully keeping responsibility and power apart. He can declare that he fundamentally supports the child's

relationship with the other parent, while at the same time seeing no possibility whatsoever of influencing the child. "*What am I supposed to do?*"

This question, too, should, wherever possible, be treated rhetorically. For as soon as we answer it seriously, we would have to investigate what this parent actually does, day to day, to give the child inner permission to love the other parent, to miss him, and to have a relationship with him, without thereby endangering the relationship with the resident parent.

Luckily, there is such a thing as inner permission. It is, in fact, hard to measure. That makes it scientifically inconvenient. So, incidentally, is its absence.

It is therefore easier for us to concentrate on what is said explicitly. And explicitly, our parent should always say the right thing. "*Of course the child should have a good relationship with its father.*" "*Of course the mother is important.*" "*I've never tried to prevent contact.*" "*If the child wants it, I support it.*" "*But I can't force it, can I?*"

Perfect. For now, we need nothing more than that. If contact nonetheless becomes ever rarer, our parent can even come to seem increasingly concerned. He can regret that the relationship has developed this way. He can declare that he genuinely wishes it were different. He might even recommend professional help.

With that, he is no longer part of the problem. He is an *observer* of the problem. That is a decisive career move.

Once someone has successfully turned *from participant into observer*, he can speak of developments as though they had occurred *outside* his sphere of influence: "*Unfortunately, the relationship has deteriorated.*"

Notice the grammar. Not: someone made it worse. Not: certain interactions changed it. Not even: we do not yet understand why it deteriorated.

The relationship deteriorated. All by itself. Somehow, of its own accord.

Perhaps you now understand why I am so fond of that Spanish sentence: *Entre todos la mataron y ella sola se murió.*

One need not accuse anyone. That would, in any case, be too easy. Perhaps our good parent genuinely did nothing that could be specifically held against him. Perhaps he believes every word he says. Perhaps he genuinely loves his child and is convinced he is protecting it. Perhaps he would react with outrage if someone claimed he had damaged a parent-child relationship. And perhaps he would even be right.

This is the point at which Mr Hyde truly becomes appealing. Perhaps he is not even wicked. In any case, he needs no bad people. Bad people are easy to spot.

He needs good people who define their responsibility in such a way that it remains compatible with their good self-image.

He needs a parent who never says: "You mustn't love the other one." It is enough if the child, at some point, is no longer sure whether it is allowed to.

He needs nobody who expressly forbids contact. It is enough if nobody feels responsible for making it possible.

He needs nobody to actively end a relationship. It is enough if everyone waits for it to recover of its own accord. And should it not do so, we still have our best explanation ready:

The child wanted it this way.

8. The Professionals — Unwitting Helpers. A Selection

Method. Science. Children. Parents. All necessary conditions. But only once the professionals join in can our sums truly add up. They are the crowning touch. The still-missing condition.

But do not worry. They will join in.

Why, indeed, would they not? They are, after all, in favour of science, of children, of parents, of good methods. Of the right thing, the sensible thing, the good and the true.

Just like us.

So we do not need to talk them into anything. We do not even need to explain to them that they are helping us. Quite the opposite: *we merely help the helpers a little towards their own happiness*. They will join in willingly, if unwittingly. You will see.

1.1 The Family Court

The court deserves pride of place in our little course, naturally, and I say that with genuine admiration. For hardly any institution is so consistently geared towards carefully preparing decisions, weighing differing interests, and avoiding mistakes.

For Mr Hyde, that is a gift.

Courts should not act impulsively. They should hear, examine, weigh and give reasons. They should not be guided by emotion, and should not intervene prematurely in highly complex family systems. They must observe procedural rights, take differing perspectives into account, and frequently make decisions under considerable uncertainty that reach deep into the lives of children and parents.

That is a decidedly difficult task. And *difficulty* generates *caution*. Caution, in turn, generates *time*. And there she is again. Our dear friend.

I do not, however, wish to accuse time again here. It is, after all, merely the medium in which judicial proceedings take place. What is actually interesting is that the court, during this time, does not stand outside the family system. Every provisional decision, every adjournment, every ordered assessment, and even every decision not to change an existing situation for the time being, *becomes part of the very reality about which a further decision will later have to be made*.

The court, then, does not merely observe a state of affairs. It can, without meaning to, help bring it about. That thought has some bite to it. Please commit it to memory too. We shall need it again.

Let us suppose a child has had no contact with a parent for a few weeks. The court does not yet know why. There are differing accounts, perhaps contradictory allegations, perhaps a clear rejection on the child's part, and possibly indications that first need to be clarified more closely. What could be more sensible than not rushing anything at first?

One can hold a hearing. One can obtain submissions. One can involve the youth welfare office. One can appoint a guardian ad litem. Perhaps an assessment becomes necessary. Perhaps therapeutic or advisory measures make sense.

All of that takes time. And while we wait for clarity, the "family" system keeps working. After three months, the breakdown in contact is no longer three weeks old. After six months, no longer three months. After a year, we are no longer talking about a short-term interruption, but about a long-standing situation.

The court has, of course, not decided that this situation should last a year. *It has merely not yet finally decided that it should be ended.*

The distinction is legally significant. For a relationship — one that is meant to be drawing to its close — possibly less so. For I have learnt that provisional states possess a remarkable life expectancy. They begin with the label "pending further clarification" and, with every month, grow closer to the term "*status quo*".

Status quo is a lovely phrase. It sounds neutral. It does not say whether a state of affairs is good or bad, how it came about, or whether it was ever intended to be permanent in the first place. It merely describes that something is now the way it is. And courts must take that into account. Of course they must.

Children need continuity. Abrupt changes can be distressing. An established centre of life carries weight. Relationships, routines and attachments can change. The longer a particular living situation persists, the more serious an intervention into that situation can become.

All of that is correct. The decisive question is simply how the status quo came about. The good part: this question, over time, occasionally loses its appeal. For it leads backwards. *But the court has to decide looking forward.*

I can well understand this logic. Coming to terms with the past alone protects no child. Family courts are not historical commissions of inquiry. They have to ask themselves which arrangement, now and in future, best serves the child's welfare.

For our purposes — and thus for Mr Hyde — precisely herein lies a wonderful opportunity. *If we merely wait long enough, the past can change its influence over the future.* What, originally, should perhaps not have been accepted — perhaps — can later be hard to correct precisely because it has, by now, been accepted for a long time. That is no legal error. That is *chronology*.

And chronology is decidedly reliable. Cause comes before effect. Yesterday before today. Whatever persists long enough eventually gains the invaluable advantage of having already persisted long. Almost a law of nature.

We should not, however, unnecessarily complicate matters here with the theory of relativity. For our purposes, *time* may remain perfectly absolute. Above all, we should not rob it of the illusion that it has merely passed. It has, after all, been *working*.

I therefore recommend never judging judicial proceedings by what happens on any single day. That would be unfair. A hearing can be postponed. A file can be extensive. An expert assessor needs time. A parent can fall ill. A party to the proceedings can be unavailable. Further findings can become necessary.

Every single postponement has a reason. The interesting question is what happens when nothing but well-founded postponements line up one after another. Then something arises that nobody decided upon. A year. Perhaps two. And at some point the judicial question itself changes.

At the outset it may read: how can we preserve the relationship? Later it reads: is resuming contact still reasonable to expect now?

Do you see the progress? The problem has rephrased itself. We no longer need to discuss why the relationship was lost. We only need to examine what distress its restoration might cause. That is extraordinarily convenient.

Naturally, there are proceedings in which immediate intervention would be wrong and dangerous. Where there are indications of violence, maltreatment, neglect, or other risks, protection must take priority. A mere invocation of preserving the relationship must never lead to risks for a child being ignored. That goes without saying. Mr Hyde is no fool.

He merely wants the same attention that we give to the risks of acting to be given a little less often to the risks of not acting. Courts are particularly suited to this, because judicial decisions are visible.

An ordered measure bears a signature. A relationship recovery that never happened does not.

A contact visit that is carried out against resistance and goes badly can later be traced back to a specific ruling. A contact visit that never happens at all, and whose absence solidifies over months, has no comparable moment of decision.

That makes the status quo agreeably *low on liability*. Nobody created it. It was simply, at some point, there. And because it is simply there, one has to handle it carefully. I find that enchanting.

We can refine this principle even further: *demand as many preconditions as possible for every change*. That is not even meant cynically. Well, all right. Perhaps a little.

If a court intervenes in a difficult family situation, it should know whether the planned measure has any prospect of success. Are the parents capable of cooperating? Is the child ready? Is there a suitable professional available? Can a handover be organised with little

conflict? Is the measure professionally accompanied? Are there risks? Is therapeutic support available? These are sensible questions.

The more of these conditions we want to see fulfilled simultaneously, however, the more likely it becomes that one of them is still missing. Then we have to wait.

Perhaps the other parent is not yet sufficiently cooperative. Perhaps the child is not yet ready. Perhaps there is still no therapy place available. Perhaps counselling is needed first. Perhaps the assessment should be completed first. And when, finally, all the preconditions are met, it may turn out *that the situation has by now persisted for so long that an even gentler approach has become necessary.*

Gentleness is, altogether, an excellent judicial concept. I have nothing against gentleness. Quite the opposite. It is often necessary.

For our purposes, it only becomes truly interesting where gentleness no longer describes *how* to act, but increasingly justifies *why one cannot act yet*. Caution or gentleness themselves are not the problem. Mr Hyde is interested in the moment at which a principle for the *quality of action* turns into a principle for the *postponement of action*. That is much more precise.

But it has a curious *side effect*: the longer a relationship is endangered, the gentler the intervention is often supposed to become, even though it may be precisely the gentleness practised so far that has helped bring about the appearance that still more gentleness is now required.

That is almost poetic. Pure romance. *A self-reinforcing system of care.*

I particularly treasure, in this context, the formulation that *the child must not be drawn further into the conflict*. The court wants to protect the child. Entirely rightly so.

It wants to avoid a child being constantly questioned, shuttled back and forth between its parents, or turned into the object of escalating disputes. It should not feel that it has to take sides afresh at every judicial decision.

The consequence, however, can be that a child has less contact with a parent, so that it experiences less conflict.

That works astonishingly well. If conflict becomes visible above all where contact takes place or is meant to be established, at some point the contact itself can start to look like the problem. *Contact and conflict would draw ever closer together, until it is hardly noticeable any more that one may be the cause of the other.*

Do feel free to keep an eye on this small shift. Just do not draw unnecessary attention to it. If one removes one pole of a relationship, part of the visible conflict genuinely does diminish. That is hard to dispute. *One should merely take care not to accidentally confuse success with an absence of symptoms.* But we have already covered that.

Courts have another tool at their disposal, which I have since come to value greatly: the *delegation of insight*.

A judge does not have to know everything themselves. That would be absurd. That is why there are expert assessors, youth welfare offices, guardians ad litem, counselling services, and other professionals. The court gathers information, hears positions, and calls on support for questions requiring particular expertise. A very sensible division of labour.

For our undertaking, it is interesting precisely because responsibility, though it does not disappear this way, does get distributed. The court waits for the expert assessor. The expert assessor waits for appointments. The counselling service waits for a willingness to cooperate. A parent waits for a decision. The child, perhaps, waits for nothing at all any more.

Everyone waits for a different reason. The result is the same.

I used to believe that systems failed above all where nobody was responsible. Today I know that it can be done even more elegantly. They can also fail where *everybody* is responsible. *Each for their own part.*

The court decides on legal grounds. The expert assessor gives a professional judgement. The youth welfare office lends support. The parents are supposed to cooperate. The child is to be involved. Nobody owns the whole process. And processes that belong entirely to no one occasionally develop a remarkable independence of their own. One might call that institutional complexity. Or, in Mr Hyde's terminology: *division of labour with side effects.*

It becomes especially lovely once the court looks at the file again at some point. There it no longer finds the family *from the beginning* of the proceedings. It finds the family *after* the proceedings.

The child is older. The relationship with a parent is weaker. The resistance, possibly stronger. One parent, more frustrated. The other, possibly more secure in their position. Earlier provisional assessments have become reference points. New professionals have responded to old reports. The case, by now, has a history.

And this history is now itself a fact that has to be worked with.

At some point the file no longer looks like a *record of a process*, but like the *proof of its outcome*. The astonishing multiplication of certainty, as we have called it.

So now the court has to take this history into account. What else should it do? Turn back time? Of course not.

And with that we have arrived at one of my favourite points. *A judicial decision can, at some point, be justified on the grounds that a particular reality now exists — even though the judicial proceedings themselves were part of the conditions under which that reality was able to come about.*

Nobody did anything wrong. Everybody fulfilled their tasks. The proceedings were careful. The hearings took place. The professionals were involved. The rights of the parties were respected. And yet: in the end, a relationship barely still exists.

Entre todos la mataron y ella sola se murió. I'm sorry, this sentence will not let go of me.

I am slowly beginning to understand why. It would nonetheless be unfair to declare the court the cause. Courts, after all, make decisions on the basis of what is presented to them, what is observed, and what is professionally assessed. They work with the material they receive. And this material does not arise on its own.

It is gathered, selected, classified and finally put into a form the court can work with, by professionals. With that we come to another important helper. The expert assessor.

1.2 The Expert Assessor

I should be careful. Now it gets personal. Writing about parents is pleasant enough. So is writing about courts. Institutions are grateful objects of study, because one can analyse their mechanisms without seeing an institution in the mirror each morning.

With the expert assessor, that is harder. At least for me. Because I am one.

Perhaps, then, I should switch sides again at this point. I could explain that good expert assessors naturally work scientifically, test alternative hypotheses, take different sources of information into account, and are aware of the limits of their own findings. I could write about quality standards, about neutrality, transparency, and the necessity of keeping observation and interpretation apart. All of that would be correct. And decidedly reassuring.

Unfortunately, Mr Hyde has by now grown curious. He wonders whether one can miss the essential point even with good methodology. I do not like the answer. Of course one can.

Bad work is comparatively easy to recognise. An assessment that interprets facts oddly, ignores essential information, or argues transparently one-sidedly, can be criticised. Methodological errors can be named. Impermissible conclusions can be scrutinised.

What is meant here is something different: the cases in which every single methodological step seems reasonable, and yet something essential is lost all the same.

Notice one small thing here: *the expert assessor usually arrives relatively late.*

And by the time he arrives — Mr Hyde sends his regards — reality already has a prior history. There was a separation, conflicts, possibly judicial proceedings, counselling, failed agreements, and perhaps already lengthy breakdowns in contact. People have developed positions. Children have had experiences. Files have come into being.

The expert assessor, then, does not enter a crime scene immediately after the deed. He enters a crime scene where people have been living for months. That makes gathering evidence harder.

Fortunately, there are files. Thank goodness. We already know how much I treasure files.

The expert assessor reads what happened before him, and naturally, he must do so. He learns what the parents have claimed, how the child has expressed itself, what the youth welfare office has observed, which decisions were made, and which difficulties arose. Only then does he begin his own investigation.

Except that, in truth, no investigation ever starts from zero. Even the court's terms of reference direct attention. The file creates expectations. Earlier assessments supply hypotheses. Certain events appear significant because other people have already deemed them significant.

That is not a mistake. It is unavoidable. The problem begins only when we forget that it is *unavoidable*.

Mr Hyde therefore recommends regarding one's own neutrality, wherever possible, as an inherent trait rather than a task. *Neutral*. A word that sounds almost like a vaccination. It seems to protect against bias.

Yet neutrality is not a state one attains through appointment as an expert assessor. It is an ongoing methodological effort. One has to attack one's own hypotheses, search for information that contradicts them, take alternative explanations seriously, and occasionally allow for the uncomfortable possibility that one's first assessment was wrong. Well, now. That costs energy.

Mr Hyde would therefore recommend a *simpler form of neutrality*: balance. Both parents get their share of criticism. That looks neutral, and feels that way too.

If problematic behaviours are described in the father, we naturally also look for conflict-escalating contributions in the mother. Should the mother contribute substantially to the escalation, it would, after all, be decidedly unbalanced not to look more closely at the father too. Almost something can almost always be found. People are gratifyingly imperfect.

In the end we can write that both parents have considerable difficulty separating the couple level from the parental level. Perhaps that is even true.

The only question is whether *balance* is the same thing as *accuracy*.

An assessment in which both parents come out looking roughly equally bad appears astonishingly neutral. An assessment that concludes that responsibility, in a particular area, is distributed markedly asymmetrically, by contrast, quickly starts to look suspect.

Has the expert assessor taken sides? Perhaps. Or perhaps reality simply was not symmetrical.

That is exhausting. Reality is under no obligation whatsoever to be balanced. The problem is not searching for both parents' faults; it is *confusing neutrality with a symmetrical distribution of responsibility*.

It becomes especially difficult when one parent presents calmly and in control, and the other, emotionally, angrily, or in despair. The expert assessor observes real differences. He must describe them. Mr Hyde has already taught us what to do now.

It works best if you view behaviour without its history.

Careful now, an old acquaintance from psychology helps us here: *the fundamental attribution error*. Outside professional circles, it is delightfully not universally known. Put simply, people tend to explain behaviour more by a person's traits and to underestimate the influence of the situation. Rather convenient for our purposes.

The calm parent then appears cooperative, the angry one, conflict-ridden. One speaks matter-of-factly. The other interrupts, insists, corrects, and keeps raising the same accusations. All of that can be diagnostically relevant.

One should merely not ask too soon *whether calm and despair might reflect different positions within the same system*. Whoever is content with the status quo finds it easier to stay calm. Whoever is watching something important slip away has poorer conditions for that. That excuses no problematic behaviour. But it might help explain it.

And explanations are dangerous. They turn our lovely traits back into processes. Suddenly someone is not simply conflict-ridden, but behaves in a conflict-ridden way under certain conditions. And if conditions play a role, one might have to ask about them. Exhausting again.

Mr Hyde therefore prefers states. So, incidentally, do I. They are considerably lower-maintenance.

"The father is highly conflict-oriented." "The mother shows low attachment tolerance." "The child rejects contact." "The parents' communication is significantly disturbed." Sentences like these are convenient. Verbs would be more dangerous: who does what? When? In response to what? With what effect? What happens next?

Suddenly we would have no more traits. We would have a story. And stories carry causation. That is why we should be careful with stories. In the end they might make someone *responsible*. Or worse still: they might show that responsibility *shifts* over the course of events.

One parent may have started a conflict, and the other may later have gone on sustaining it too. An initially understandable protective behaviour can take on a life of its own. A child's justified caution can, through a long breakdown in contact, become a quite different form of distance. An inappropriate reaction from a rejected parent can be, at once, the consequence of earlier events and a fresh cause of further problems.

That is dreadfully complicated. Luckily, there are *diagnoses*. I do not mean that disparagingly. Quite the opposite: diagnostic concepts are necessary, because otherwise we would drown in an unmanageable mass of individual observations. Categories help us recognise patterns.

Mr Hyde merely recommends, at some point, taking the *pattern for the cause*. That saves space. And time. Take, for instance, the formulation that a child has developed a "*stable and autonomous stance of will*". Stable sounds good. Autonomous, even better.

The question of under what conditions this stability arose can then seem almost rude. After all, we have just established that the wish is autonomous. How did we establish that? Among other things, by the fact that the child expresses it stably. Does that sound *circular*? Of course it is. But it is nothing to worry about; it is gladly overlooked.

Do not be so strict, in any case. Others have been trying to square the circle for centuries. We have simply declared it a *method of proof*. Squaring the circle is, after all, far easier if one takes the circle itself as the proof.

And how do we know that the stable statement is not the expression of an equally stable relational system, within which a different position would be difficult for the child? Well, now. One need not be petty about it. Above all, at some point, we have to give clear answers. That, after all, is what the courts expect of us.

And clarity has an invaluable advantage over complexity: one can *decide* on its basis.

That is understandable. A court does not commission an expert assessor so that he can announce, after six months, that everything is complicated. It needs a professional basis for a decision. The court needs *decidability*. So the assessor has to condense complexity. And then: from *condensation*, *certainty* can arise. And there, of course, Hyde's old friend is already lying in wait: the *astonishing multiplication of certainty*.

The expert assessor is therefore under a curious pressure. He is meant to respect uncertainty scientifically while simultaneously delivering conclusions that are practically usable. Between these two demands lies a wonderful space. That is where Mr Hyde lives.

He can emphasise uncertainty where it makes acting harder, and probability where it supports an existing situation. Not consciously, of course. That would be unprofessional.

It is enough that people experience uncertainty differently depending on what consequence follows from it. Expert assessors are people too.

It gets more interesting with recommendations. An assessor can analyse a state of affairs and derive measures from it. He can recommend counselling, therapy, supervised contact, changes to care arrangements, or other interventions.

Here our old rule applies again: *change requires justification*. The more drastic it is, the better it has to be justified. The continuation of the current situation, by contrast, often needs no comparable recommendation. It simply happens.

With that, the assessor gains a remarkable power, without being able to order anything. *If he does not see an active change as sufficiently justified, the existing reality automatically gains extra lifespan*.

The assessor has decided nothing. He is not permitted to, in any case. He has merely found no sufficient basis for a change. The relationship knows nothing of this distinction.

I notice that this passage is becoming more uncomfortable for me than the one on the court. That is presumably a good sign. Perhaps everyone who writes about the failures of a system should, at some point, arrive at their own profession. Perhaps they should even arrive at themselves.

Was I always certain when I was mistaken? That, precisely, is the problem. Mistakes one recognises are comparatively harmless. One can correct them. But the interesting mistakes are the ones that feel like professionalism.

Perhaps I was sometimes too cautious. Perhaps sometimes too quick. Perhaps I described behaviour without adequately understanding its history. Perhaps I thought of conflicts as more symmetrical than they were. Perhaps, in other cases, I saw asymmetries where interactions

would have mattered more. Perhaps I gave too much, or too little, weight to an expressly stated wish of a child.

Anyone who seriously believes that their own professional activity could be exempt from the mechanisms they examine in others should not be writing expert assessments.

Not so terrible. A solution can, if need be, be found for the conscience. Back to our guide. As we now know, an expert assessor alone can no more make a parent-child relationship disappear than a court, a youth welfare office, a therapist, a parent, or a child can. For that, *teamwork* is needed. And with that we finally arrive *at the actual crime scene*.

By now we have assembled almost all the people involved. There is a child, whose wishes are to be respected. There are two parents, whose conflict is to be reduced. There are professionals, who want to protect and support. There is a court, which has to decide carefully. Perhaps there is an expert assessor, who wants to differentiate. Everyone, essentially, wants something sensible. That matters. We need good intentions. We need the child's welfare. We need participation. We need protection. We need de-escalation. We need scientific rigour. So we need time.

Now let us set it all side by side: the child says it does not want to see a parent at the moment. The resident parent declares that he respects this wish and cannot force the child. The professional does not want to create additional pressure. The court wants first to clarify the causes. The assessor points out that a premature intervention without sufficient assessment carries risks. Nobody is obviously wrong. So we wait for the decision to come.

Meanwhile, no contact takes place. The child grows accustomed to the situation. The other parent becomes more agitated. His agitation is observed. The child may experience this agitation as pressure. That gives us a further reason to be careful. The resident parent declares that the child now wants even less contact. The professional confirms that a meeting could currently trigger significant distress. The court waits for the professional assessment. The assessor establishes that contact has by now been interrupted for a long time and that a reconciliation would therefore have to proceed gently.

Nobody is obviously wrong. So we proceed more gently. That takes time, as we know. And so on.

Meanwhile, the relationship grows more distant. The child grows older. Its rejection appears more stable. Stability increases the weight given to the child's wishes. The greater weight of the child's wishes makes intervention harder. The difficulty of intervention increases the risk of distress. The risk of distress justifies additional caution. Additional caution needs even more time.

And there it is again: our perpetual motion machine. Nobody built it. Everyone merely supplied one cog. And yet the machine runs.

What is truly impressive about it: every single person can, with good reason, claim to have merely fulfilled their own task. Nobody feels responsible for the machine. It needs no engineer anyway.

So the search for the perpetrator must often fail. Which of them was it? The child? Absurd. The parent? Perhaps he genuinely acted problematically. But perhaps not. Perhaps only in part. The court? It examined the matter carefully. The professionals? They wanted to avoid distress. The assessor? He differentiated.

Time?

It has no address to which a summons can be served.

We could search for a long time. This, after all, is like a real detective case. Only the body is strange. It is not lying on the floor. *It is simply missing.*

A phone call is missing. Then a weekend. Then a birthday. Then a holiday. Then, perhaps, a Christmas. At some point shared memories are missing. Later, the taken-for-granted things are missing.

And later still, perhaps, even the feeling that something is missing goes missing.

A relationship rarely dies with a sound. That makes its post-mortem difficult.

9. Closing Word

In the end, a substantial file lies on the table. Within it are rulings, submissions, notes of conversations, reports, diagnoses, wishes, worries, recommendations, and perhaps thousands of pages of carefully documented professional work.

And somewhere between these pages, a parent has disappeared from a child's life.

Entre todos la mataron y ella sola se murió.

Between them all, they killed her, and she died all by herself.

Now we have reached our goal. I did, after all, set out to write a set of instructions. Here it is.

As you will have noticed, you need no spectacular manipulation techniques. You need no demonic parent. You need no conspiracy and no incompetent professionals.

It works far more simply than that.

You merely need enough people, each seeing a small part of reality and handling their part sensibly. You need a child's stated wish without sufficient investigation of the conditions that produced it. You need autonomy without development. You need protection without relationship. You need de-escalation without any analysis of what is actually being de-escalated. You need neutrality without causation. You need assessment without process. You need caution towards interventions and equanimity towards the status quo.

And, above all, you need nobody who feels responsible for the outcome.

Then the rest often takes care of itself.

10. Epilogue

That would be a good place to end this text. Mr Hyde would be satisfied. I, however, am not.

For there is a problem. Mr Hyde does not exist.

I have not, of course, changed sides. And if you know me, you probably suspected as much some time ago. All the same, perhaps at certain points you wondered whether I really meant all of it. Perhaps one sentence irritated you. Perhaps another struck you as frighteningly plausible. Perhaps, at some point, you recognised a situation, a case, a line of argument, a phrase from a report, or even a thought of your own.

That is precisely why I wrote this text.

Not to explain how to alienate a child from a parent. Heaven forbid.

And certainly not to interpret every rejection of a parent as alienation. That would be professionally wrong and dangerous for children. Children can reject a parent for very good reasons. They may have experienced violence, maltreatment, neglect, or other serious harm. They have a right to be heard, protected, and taken seriously in what they say. A child's wishes and participation are not problems, but indispensable components of child-appropriate proceedings.

I wrote this text to describe how another, equally sad phenomenon, equally dangerous to a child's welfare, can come about: the creeping loss of a parent-child relationship from within the very heart of a legal system staffed by competent and dedicated people. A system that has set out to do precisely the opposite: to protect children and families and, where it serves the child's welfare, to preserve their relationships and attachments.

Herein, perhaps, lies the real tragedy of this text. One does not necessarily need malicious intent, incompetence, or indifference to arrive at a result at odds with one's own purpose. Sometimes good intentions, sound principles, and professionally sound individual decisions are enough, once their combined effects slip out of view.

At bottom, the problem — but also its explanation — begins where correct principles turn into automatisms.

Where "the child must be heard" imperceptibly becomes "the child must decide". Where "we must not cause harm through intervention" imperceptibly implies that the possible harms of not intervening are not examined with the same rigour. Where diagnostic caution turns into diagnostic paralysis. Where de-escalation can turn into the absence of any relationship at all. Where a status quo first arises and is later protected for no reason other than that it now exists. And where every party handles their own part correctly, professionally, but nobody asks any more what the sum of these parts does to a child.

Now the point has come at which I want to be rid of Mr Hyde again.

He was useful. He allowed us to say things that become harder to see in the usual language of the child's welfare. He did not refute well-meant principles; he simply carried them

consistently through in the wrong direction. Precisely for that reason, he was so uncomfortable.

Perhaps, while reading, you sometimes thought: nobody would ever act like that. Good!

Perhaps, at another point, you thought: that is exactly what we do. Better still!

Then the interesting discussion begins. For the decisive question is not whether a child's wishes matter. Of course they do. It is not whether children should act autonomously. Of course they possess their own rights and their own perspective. It is not whether courts must decide cautiously. Of course they must. Nor is it whether expert assessors should differentiate. That is their job.

For me, the interesting questions would be these: how do we distinguish an autonomous wish of a child from a wish whose formative conditions need closer examination? How do we protect children from harmful relationships without prematurely giving up on relationships that are endangered but worth preserving? How do we prevent necessary diagnostic care from itself becoming a factor that creates irreversible facts? How do we take the status quo into account without forgetting how it came about? How do we distinguish cause from reaction? How do we avoid false symmetry without lapsing into premature apportioning of blame? How do we ensure that participation does not become a transfer of adult responsibility onto children? And who, in fact, watches over the whole process while everyone else correctly handles their own particular part?

There is no simple set of instructions for that. Unfortunately. I would gladly have given you one.

But simple answers to complex family situations were, from the outset, part of the problem.

Perhaps, then, only one last rule remains: when a parent-child relationship begins to disappear, do not first ask who is to blame. Ask what is happening right now. Ask through what it is happening. Ask what our own actions are doing to it. And ask, too, what our inaction is doing to it.

Above all, we should stop letting ourselves be reassured by good intentions. Good intentions matter. They are simply not an outcome.

If, in the end, a relationship has been lost, it is not enough for every party to be able to explain why their individual decision was sensible. We must also be willing to ask the far more uncomfortable question of whether many sensible decisions, taken together, produced a senseless outcome.

Perhaps that is the real meaning of the sentence that has accompanied me through this text: *Entre todos la mataron y ella sola se murió.*

If we want to prevent a parent-child relationship from dying "all by itself", we must stop merely searching for who killed it. We must learn to recognise who is watching it die. Who believes they have nothing to do with it. Who is waiting. Who is waiting for good reasons. And who, at some point, discovers that it is now, unfortunately, too late.

Mr Hyde would probably smile at this point.

I would not.

Or Perhaps Not, After All?

I had actually meant to say goodbye to Mr Hyde.

But perhaps — just perhaps — good old Mr Hyde is alive after all.

Consider this: there are people who seriously doubt — or pretend to doubt — that a child can be influenced in such a way that its relationship with a parent becomes increasingly damaged or, eventually, disappears altogether. Others do not dispute the possibility of influence as such, but rather certain explanatory models, terms, or the frequency of such processes. That is something one may, and must, argue about scientifically.

Mr Hyde would have no problem with that whatsoever. Quite the opposite.

For him, it only becomes interesting at the point where scientific controversy gives rise to the reassuring certainty that a particular possibility need not be examined at all any more. Where the very question of whether influence might have taken place already looks suspect, simply because there is disagreement over terms, causes, or diagnostic concepts.

That is truly grist to his mill.

For as long as we are arguing over whether something can happen at all, whatever may currently be happening is free to go on happening in perfect peace.

Naturally, we should not assert anything before we have examined it. We need evidence. We must investigate alternative hypotheses. We must be careful.

Until certainty is established.

Until the matter has been thoroughly explained.

Until we have agreed on the right terms.

Until then, a little time passes.

Does that sound familiar?

I'm afraid Mr Hyde sends his regards.

To be continued.

Unfortunately.

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