

BEYOND WHAT WE SEE

The Child's Experience of Coercive Control Before and After Separation

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Sybil Cummin, LPC, ACS | Arvada Therapy Solutions | Rising Beyond Power & Control

CHILDREN LEARN. CHILDREN ADAPT.

Behavior is often the visible part of an adaptation that developed in response to power, fear, unpredictability, loyalty binds, or relational pressure.

What Are Children Learning?

Instead of beginning with “What is wrong with this child?” consider what the child may be learning about:

Safety - When am I safe? What makes danger increase or decrease?

Relationships - Is love conditional? Do I have to manage other people to stay connected?

Needs & Emotions - Are my feelings welcome, dangerous, inconvenient, or used against me?

Power - Who gets to decide? What happens when someone says no?

Trust & Truth - Can I trust what I see, feel, and remember? Is it safe to tell?

Self - Who am I allowed to be? Does my voice matter?

A Pattern-Based Lens

Instead of only asking: What behavior is the child showing?

Also ask: What might this behavior accomplish for this child?

And: How does power and control show up in the parent-child relationship over time?

Children Adapt in Different Ways

The same coercive environment can produce very different adaptations. A quiet, high-achieving child may be struggling just as much as a child whose distress is loud and visible.

The Child Who Becomes “Easy”	People pleasing • Perfectionism • Hyper-attunement to adults • Parentification • Suppressing needs • Compliance
The Child Whose Distress Gets Big	Aggression • Defiance • Control-seeking • Explosive behavior • Testing adults • Difficulty tolerating limits
The Child Who Disappears	Withdrawal • Emotional shutdown • Dissociation • Avoidance • Somatic complaints • A convincing “I’m fine”
The Child Who Aligns With Power	Repeats the more powerful parent’s narratives • Rejects vulnerability • Distances from the protective parent • Learns that proximity to power may feel safer

Any child can use any combination of these adaptations. Adaptation is not destiny.

Case Vignette: Maya, Age 8

Maya is referred to therapy for anxiety, aggression, sleep difficulties, and increasing distress around transitions between homes. Her parents share another child, and both remain involved in her care.

Her father describes Maya as calm, cooperative, and doing well. Her mother reports that Maya becomes highly dysregulated after parenting-time transitions: crying, angry outbursts, difficulty sleeping, and needing significant reassurance. In therapy, Maya is quiet, agreeable, and careful when her father brings her. When her mother brings her, she is more expressive and sometimes has bigger behaviors.

School staff have noticed that Maya is less engaged than she used to be, more anxious, seeks reassurance from adults, and sometimes complains of stomachaches. Academically, she continues to earn good grades. A prior CPS report was closed without an immediate safety finding.

No single observation explains Maya. The question is not which adult has the “right” version of her. The question is what we learn when we examine Maya’s behavior across relationships, settings, transitions, and time.

Look Beneath the Behavior

What We May See	What We Might Ask
Aggression / defiance	What is the child trying to protect, control, communicate, or prevent?
People pleasing / compliance	What happens when this child disagrees, says no, makes a mistake, or disappoints an adult?
“Perfect” behavior / good grades	Does the child feel safe having needs, showing distress, or letting adults see that something is wrong?
Rejection of a parent	What has shaped the child’s relationship with each parent over time? What pressures, fears, rewards, or loyalty binds may be operating?
Different behavior across homes/settings	What changes in the child’s felt safety, expectations, role, and freedom to express emotion?
Control-seeking	Where has this child learned that control creates predictability or safety?

Felt Safety: Inside, Outside, In-Between

Inside	Outside	In-Between
Can the child notice and tolerate what is happening in their body? Can their nervous system settle, even briefly?	Does the environment offer predictability, responsive boundaries, and enough safety for the child to have needs and make mistakes?	Can the child disagree, tell the truth, have different feelings, and remain connected without having to manage an adult’s emotions?

Felt safety is not convincing a child that they are safe. It is helping create enough evidence of safety that their body and relationships can experience it.

The Adults Around the Child

A coercively controlling parent may extend control through the child's relationships with other adults. Each professional may see only one piece of the pattern.

Therapist / Counselor	Pressure for information • Attempts to shape the narrative • Records used strategically • Child questioned about sessions • Treatment consent or access used as leverage
School	Strategic reports • Conflicting parental narratives • Staff recruited into disputes • Attendance, behavior, or communication concerns viewed without family context
Child Protective Services	Reports may be strategic or repeated • Psychological harm can be difficult to substantiate • A closed report may later be used to discredit concerns
Healthcare	Consent or access to care used as leverage • Symptoms treated without relational context • Somatic complaints may be a child's most visible signal
Law Enforcement / Court Professionals	Snapshots can be mistaken for the whole story • Compliance may be read as comfort • Dysregulation may be attributed to the protective parent without examining the pattern

Questions for Professionals

- What might I be missing if I look only at this child's behavior in front of me?
- How does this child present across people, places, transitions, and time?
- What does the child appear to believe will happen if they resist, disagree, disclose, or have needs?
- Could my role, records, recommendations, or communication be used to extend control?
- What can I do within my role to increase voice, predictability, autonomy, and felt safety?

Continue the Learning

Resources for continued professional learning - and accessible episodes or tools you may want to share with survivors and protective parents.

Recommended Podcast Episodes & Resources

The Rising Beyond Podcast



Episode 216: The Problem with Using Children as Evidence in Family Court

Episode 205: Children as Collateral Damage in Family Court

Episode 190: Parentification After Abuse: When Children are Asked to Carry Adult Emotions

Anything by Robyn Gobel: <https://robyngobbel.com/>

Key References

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Are You a Mental Health Clinician?

I created ATS Professional Education to offer practical training for clinicians navigating coercive control, post-separation abuse, family court involvement, and other complex issues we weren't adequately prepared for in grad school.

Scan the QR code to get upcoming trainings and resources in your inbox.

Or go to:

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