Parental Alienation: The Psychology of Fractured Parent-Child Relationships

By Richard A. Warshak | March 2017

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Have your children turned against you? Do they resist spending time with you? Have they joined with your ex in treating you with contempt? If so, they may be suffering from parental alienation.

In this article I provide an overview and summary of parental alienation to help separated and divorced parents, grandparents, and professionals who want to understand, identify, prevent, and ameliorate psychologically damaging fractured relationships.

You can read more about parental alienation by clicking on the links at the end of the article.

Summary: Parental alienation

The article covers the following topics:

1. **What is parental alienation?**
2. **Is parental alienation a mental disorder, a coping strategy, or a family between parents**
3. **Does my identify a child who suffers from parental alienation**
   - Child resists a relationship with the other parent
   - Lack of a prior positive relationship with the rejected parent
   - The absence of abuse, neglect, or seriously deficient parenting
   - Alienation by the rejected parent and others
   - Denigrating attitudes and behavior toward parent
4. **The prevalence of parental alienation and early intervention**
5. **Two common mistakes for targeted parents to avoid**
6. **Three ways to prevent parental alienation and estrangement**
7. **How to get more information about parental alienation**

A. What is parental alienation?

A1. Definition of parental alienation

Parental alienation occurs when a child with a parent who is rejected or partial rejection. Despite the parent can range from mild to severe. In most alienations, a child has a parent who is good, loving, and committed to the child's well-being and who has been, for the most part, a good parent. In severe parental alienation, the child refuse contact; express near hatred of a formerly loved parent, and believe the parent is evil.

A2. "Parental alienation syndrome" – Why the term is out of favor

As with other mental disorders, the psychiatric community has been working on what they need to describe it, have evolved over time. For instance, today what we call "post-traumatic stress disorder" was then known as "shell shock." Because clinicians observed that children who were alienated from a parent had a cluster of symptoms, they coined the term "parental alienation syndrome." Because not all children who were alienated from a parent displayed all the symptoms in a parental alienation syndrome, the term syndrome was used because it refers to a cluster of mental health symptoms that consistently occur together.

> Because parental alienation is not a mental disorder, but a strategy.

Despite the controversial cluster of behaviors in children who are alienated, the term, parental alienation syndrome, has been rejected by mental health organizations. Mental health professionals were concerned that when an alienated child presents to a mental health professional, therapists and judges will not carefully sort through the evidence to determine the cause of the parent-child relationship problem. Because parental alienation is not a mental disorder, it is not a syndrome.

A3. "Parental alienation and children"

A child alienation from a parent is a family problem, not a mental disorder. Many rejected parents report that their adult children remain aloof and completely out of touch. These parents have an important parent, such as their child's college graduation, wedding, and the birth of their children. Adult children who suffer from alienation do not suffer from a disorder of a psychiatric.

As adults, some formerly alienated children come to realize they were manipulated to reject a good parent. They eventually recovered from the brainwashing and reestablished a relationship with the rejected parent. Other adult children who were victims of a parent who alienation have had a relationship with their parent for many years but continue to act in ways designed to keep their parent at a distance.

B. Parental alienation behaviors: Making children allies in a battle between parents

Most separated and divorced parents underestimate the importance of shielding their children from the couple's conflicts and to a fairly common practice of using children as allies.

Some parents, though, lose sight of their children's need to love and be loved by both parents. Such a parent, sometimes called the alienating parent, forms an alliance with a child against the other parent, sometimes called the targeted or the alienated parent.

Through a variety of parental alienation strategies, alienating parents teach children that their other parent is a bad person who does not really love them, may be dangerous, and does not deserve their trust, affection, or respect. Alienating parents encourage and support children's disrespectful, disparaging, and hostile behavior toward the other parent. Alienating parents may even go so far as to convince their children that backtracking a parent's record for emotional support and became an emotional caretaker of the parent by complying with the parent's wish to diminish the importance of the other parent.

Children who absorb the lessons of their hate campaign against a good, loving parent from a formerly loved mother or father, and after an extended period, leaving the rejected relatives puzzled over what they might have said or done to fracture the relationship.

In the most extreme cases, parents who alienate their children against the other parent compel children with the children to kill the target parent.

C. How to identify a child who suffers from parental alienation

A child's negative behavior toward a parent is not sufficient to determine that the child is unreasonably alienated. To make a determination, a clinician must gather, review, mental health and legal professionals, and professionals involved in child custody evaluations, should follow the following:

C1. Child resists a relationship with the other parent

The hallmark of parental alienation is the child's emotional and sometimes physical withdrawal from a parent. This can occur to various degrees. The child may refuse to visit, express near hatred of a formerly loved parent, and believe the parent is evil. Alienating parents encourage children's disrespectful, disparaging, and hostile behavior toward the other parent. Alienating parents may even go so far as to convince their children that backtracking a parent's record for emotional support and became an emotional caretaker of the parent by complying with the parent's wish to diminish the importance of the other parent.

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The child may spend time in the targeted parent's home only to steal items and documents, sabotage the parent's computer, or to spy on the parent's activities. In the home, the child may destroy cherished possessions, physically assault the parent, and steal the parent's money and valuables. The child may spend time in the alienating parent's home and refuse to visit the other parent.

In the child-only most common with the parent, refuse to comply with the court-ordered parenting time schedule, or run away from the rejected parent.

The child's negative behavior to be considered an expression of parental alienation, the negative behavior must be chronic, frequent, directed at only one parent, occur without displaying genuine love toward the parent, and be aligned to a child of that age. For instance, a child who is two years old cannot be aligned with a parent because the child doesn't bond but continues to show love and interest in spending time with the parent, is not aligned with the parent.

C2. Lack of a prior positive relationship with the targeted parent

In most cases, before the child begin rejecting the targeted parent, they enjoyed a normal relationship. The child's current alienation contrasts with the child's prior relationship with the parent. Many children who are alienated from a parent have been close to the parent.

But a prior good relationship does not automatically mean a child rejecting a parent is not justified. It is possible the rejected parent's behavior contributed to the child's rejection. For instance, a child may have witnessed or experienced a parent who was angry to intentionally beat-mouth the other parent. Instead of aligning with the alienating parent and rejecting the targeted parent, the children may have sided with the rejected parent and developed a negative relationship with the alienating parent.

If an alienating parent intentionally had towards the other parent, children may feel anxious and resentful, and they may want to avoid being exposed to the parent's anger and hostility.

Also, in some families, a child can be alienated even when a prior good relationship was never established. In these families, the child may have developed a positive relationship with the other parent. The parent's home but continues to show love and interest in spending time with the parent, is not aligned.

C3. The absence of abuse, neglect, or seriously deficient parenting

When a child's rejection is a justified reaction to being harmly mistreated by a parent or enforcing domestic violence, it is not a case of parental alienation.

Children who are chronically mistreated by a parent may welcome parental divorce or family separation as an opportunity to escape the mistreatment. Children who are chronically mistreated by a parent may bond with an abusive parent and develop a traumatic bond. Such bond or refuse contact. They are not alienated.

In some families a child rejecting a parent involves a mix of rational and irrational components. The rejected parent has acted in some ways that would justify disapproval or anger a child to the extent that the child's initial reaction is understandable. But with time, sensitivity from the rejected parent, and proper support from others, the parent-child relationship would normally recover rather than continue to deteriorate. In such cases, the child's initial reaction to the crisis was a single unfortunate episode or a disfigured and justification for a permanent rupture. In the case, the child's hostility and scorn are unrelating, clearly out of proportion to the parent's mistakes, and may not ending the parent-child relationship.

All children find things to criticize about their parents. Normally this does not compromise the relationship. Children who are alienated need to help understanding that mistakes that all fallible parents and that people, including rejected parents, deserve their children's love.

In some instances, what looks like behavior that would justify the child's rejection is, instead, a parent's ineffective response to the child's behavior. It is not uncommon for a parent who does not understand the child's alienating and hostile behavior to take problems with the child personally.

Mental health and legal professionals distinguish cases of parental alienation primarily linked to one parent's behavior from those linked to both parents by considering whether the children exhibit the same behaviors toward both parents. Furthermore, the child's attitudes, and whether the rejected parent can have good relationship with other children (such as with siblings).

D. Behaviors by the alienating parent and allies

Parents who alienate their children against the other parent engage in a pattern of behavior (not a few isolated instances of bad mouthing) that clearly has the capacity to damage the child's relationship with the other parent. In my book on parental alienation, Parental Alienation: Identifying, Preventing, and Overcoming the Damage We Do to Our Children, I discuss many behaviors.

In these cases, the alienating parent and allies persistently bad-mouth the targeted parent, focus children's attention on the targeted parent's shortcomings, and discourage children from having a good time with the other parent. The alienating parent and allies of the parent may even go so far as to encourage children to call their stepparent by their first name and refer to the stepparent as a friend and not as a parent. The alienating parent and allies of the parent may also interrupt, or encouraging or this time with frequent calls and texts to reinforce the children's negative feelings about the other parent and to undermine the parent's authority.

By never speaking positively about the other parent and drum-beating negative, or alienating parent manipulates the children to regard the other parent as a bad person. Making a positive comment about a stepparent or a family member, or even just being a good sport, can be a reason for a family member to be ostracized.

Children who are alienated from their parents. Normally this does not compromise the relationship. Children who are alienated need help understanding that mistakes that all fallible parents and that people, including rejected parents, deserve their children's love.

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E. Prevention of parental alienation and early intervention

Parents who want to prevent their children from being alienated from them and children who are alienating behavior need to understand the following:

1. Children who are alienated from their parents. They can cause long-term damage to the parent-child relationship between the parent. They need to know their children may recent their bad-mouthing of the targeted parent and want to avoid being around them. Children who are alienated need help understanding that mistakes that all fallible parents and that people, including rejected parents, deserve their children's love. Children who are alienated need help understanding that mistakes that all fallible parents and that people, including rejected parents, deserve their children's love.

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F. Ten common mistakes for targeted parents to avoid

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G. Three ways to prevent parental alienation and estrangement

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H. How a family court can help with parental alienation

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I. Where to get more information about parental alienation

Material on this website

Child & Family Blog Parental Alienation is child abuse, say researchers of child development

More resources by the author

For more information, visit the author's website: https://warshak.com/index.html

This popular website offers many resources to help parents and mental health and legal professionals understand, cope with, and ameliorate parental alienation. Dr. Warshak's blog contains many articles on parental alienation. Dr. Warshak's book, Parental Alienation: Identifying, Preventing, and Overcoming the Damage We Do to Our Children, includes chapters on parental alienation, tips for working with attorneys, evaluators, and therapists, remedies for divorce poison, and advice on how to make a parenting plan work.

Divorce Poison: How to Protect Your Family from Bad-mouthing and Brainwashing is the classic and best-selling guide to preventing and overcoming parental alienation.

Welcome Back, Mom Understanding, Preventing, and Overcoming Parental Alienation is a powerful video for families, being partnered or married, who want to understand, prevent, and overcome parental alienation. Dr. Warshak's Parental Alienation: Identifying, Preventing, and overcoming parental alienation.

Physicians is a blog with numerous essays about how to understand and overcome parental alienation, cultural differences in parental alienation, and child custody evaluations.

Other resources on parental alienation

Parental Alienation Dallas is an online database of scholarly work on parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome.

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