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Parental Alienation: The Psychology of Fractured Parent–Child Relationships

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Parental alienation occurs when a child rejects a parent without good cause, usually under the influence of the other parent.

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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 others affected by this problem to identify, prevent, and heal psychologically damaging fractured relationships.

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

Summary: Parental alienation

This article covers the following issues.

A. What is parental alienation?
B. Parental alienation behaviors: Making children allies in a battle between parents
C. How to identify a child who suffers from parental alienation

- Child resists a relationship with the other parent
- Loss of a prior positive relationship with the rejected parent
- The absence of abuse, neglect, or seriously deficient parenting
- Behaviors by the alienating parent and allies
- Denigrating attitudes and behavior toward a parent

D. Prevention of parental alienation and early intervention
E. Ten common mistakes for targeted parents to avoid
F. How family courts can help with parental alienation
G.How to get more information about parental alienation

A. What is parental alienation?

A1. Definition of parental alienation

Parental alienation is a disturbance in which a child rejects a parent without good cause. The rejection can range from mild to severe. In mild alienation, a child may share a parent's litany of complaints about the other parent but warms to that parent when they are together. In severe parental alienation, the child may refuse contact, express raw hatred of a formerly loved parent, and believe the parent is worthless.

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

As with other mental health problems, our understanding of the disturbance, and the terms used to describe it, have evolved over time. For instance, today what we call "post-traumatic stress disorder" was once known as "shell shock." Because clinicians observed that unreasonably alienated children tend to share a cluster of attitudes and behaviors, such as expressing only negative thoughts and feelings about the alienated parent, in the past this mental health problem was known as *parental alienation syndrome*. The term *syndrome* was used because it refers to a cluster of mental health symptoms that consistently occur together.

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Despite the commonly observed cluster of behaviors of children who are alienated, the term, *parental alienation syndrome*, fell out of favor, especially in family law litigation. Mental health professionals were concerned that when an alienated child showed these typical behaviors toward one parent, therapists and judges in a child custody case would leap to the conclusion that the other parent was to blame. Naturally, other factors can harm a child's relationship with a parent, and thus it essential to keep an open mind when searching for the roots of a child rejecting one parent.

A3. Parental alienation and adult children

A child's alienation from a parent, left uncorrected, can last a lifetime. Many rejected parents report that their adult children remain aloof or completely out of touch. These parents lose out on important events, such as their child's college graduation, wedding, and the birth of grandchildren. Alienated adult children may deprive their own children of a set of grandparents.

As adults, some formerly alienated children come to realize they were manipulated to reject a good parent. They eventually reconnect with the parent they rejected for so many years but are angry with the alienating parent who interfered with their ability to give and receive love from a rejected parent and caused them to miss out on many experiences with that parent.

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

Most separated and divorced parents understand the importance of shielding their children from the couple's conflicts and do a fairly good job of honoring this responsibility.

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, enlists children as allies in a battle against the other parent, sometimes called the targeted parent or the alienated parent.

Through a variety of parental alienation strategies, alienating parents teach children that their other parent is a bad parent who does not really love them, may be dangerous, and does not deserve their trust, affection, or respect. Alienating parents encourage and support the children's defiance and disrespect toward the other parent and reward the children for avoiding contact with the other parent. Some children feel burdened by a parent's need for emotional support and become 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 hate from an alienating parent pull away from a formerly loved mother or father, and often an entire extended family, 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 conspire 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 of parental alienation, mental health and legal professionals, and professionals involved in child custody evaluations, consider five factors.

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 spend time in the parent's care but refuse to engage meaningfully with the parent—remaining withdrawn; rebuffing the parent's attempts to communicate, interact, or share enjoyable activities (even meals); scorning expressions of affection; and treating the parent with contempt.

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The child may spend time in the targeted parent's home only to steal items and documents, sabotage electronic equipment, or gather evidence by "spying" on the parent. While in the home, the child may destroy cherished possessions, physically assault the parent, or attempt in other ways to provoke a dramatic scene that results in complaints of being mistreated.

Or the child may resist contact with the parent, refuse to comply with the court-ordered parenting time schedule, or run away from the rejected parent.

For a 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 that parent, and be atypical for a child of that age. For instance, a child who feels closer to one parent or more comfortable in that parent's home but continues to show love and interest in spending time with the other parent, is not alienated.

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

In most cases, before the child began rejecting the targeted parent, they enjoyed a normal relationship. The child's current alienation contrasts starkly with the past. The child used to show affection and comfort with the parent. Now the child claims to hate or fear the alienated 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 deteriorated significantly after the breakup. For instance, children may feel anxious around or resent a parent who has begun to relentlessly bad-mouth the other parent. Instead of aligning with the alienating parent and rejecting the targeted parent, the children want to avoid the parent who makes them feel uncomfortable—what professionals call "blowback."

If an alienating parent relentlessly bad-mouths the other parent, children may feel anxious and resentful, and they may want to avoid hearing bad things said about a parent they love.

Also, in some families, a child can be alienated even when a prior good relationship was never established. In these families, the child was deprived of sufficient opportunities to see the parent in a positive light, either being kept out of contact or being taught from an early age that the other parent was unworthy of respect.

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

When a child's rejection is a justified reaction to being harshly mistreated by a parent or witnessing 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. When these children know they no longer must spend time with an abusive parent and don't fear retaliation, they may resist or refuse contact. This is not parental alienation.

In some families a child rejecting a parent involves a mix of rational and irrational components. The rejected parent has acted in some manner that could reasonably disappoint 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–unless someone, such as the other parent, fuels discord and encourages the child to view a single unfortunate episode as unforgivable and justification for a permanent rupture. In that case, the child's hostility and scorn are unrelenting, clearly out of proportion to the parent's misdeeds, and may risk ending the parent-child relationship.

All children find things to criticize about their parents. Normally this does not torpedo the relationship. Children who are alienated need help understanding that mistakes do not define a person and that people, including rejected parents, are more than their mistakes.

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 alienation. It is not uncommon for a parent who does not understand the child's confusing and hostile behavior to lose patience with the child.

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 when the alienation began, the nature and context of each parent's behaviors, the child's attitudes, and whether the rejected parent can have good relationships with other children (such as stepchildren).

C4. Behaviors by the alienating parent and allies

In most cases of parental alienation, the alienating parent engages 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, **Divorce Poison**, I refer to a spectrum of alienating behavior ranging from bad-mouthing to bashing and brainwashing.

In these cases, the alienating parent and allies persistently bad-mouth the targeted parent, focus children's attention on the targeted parent's mistakes, and exaggerate the parent's flaws. They hide from the children all evidence of the other parent's love and support. Alienating parents interfere with parent–child contacts by scheduling conflicting activities, giving children the choice to opt out of court-ordered time with the other parent, or encroaching on this time with frequent calls and texts to reinforce the children's negative attitudes while they are with their other parent.

By never speaking positively about the other parent and drum-beating negatives, an alienating parent manipulates the children to reject the other parent in the same way a politician paints an unfavorable picture to alienate voters from their opponent. In some cases, an alienating parent coaches a child to falsely accuse the other parent of physical, emotional, or sexual abuse.

C5. Denigrating attitudes and behavior toward a parent

According to psychologists who work with parental alienation, children who are unreasonably alienated share certain attitudes and behaviors. Alienated children are preoccupied with denigrating the parent, recite a list of complaints, and treat the parent as if he or she has no value and never did. Many severely alienated children say they wish the parent would die or just disappear.

At the same time, the children express no guilt or remorse for their hateful behavior. In contrast, most physically abused children fear their abuser and act obsequious and compliant to avoid angering the parent. They do not openly defy or disrespect the abusive parent.

Unless they accuse a parent of abuse, children who are irrationally alienated generally cannot adequately explain why they reject the parent. They give trivial, sometimes absurd, reasons for wanting to sever ties. For instance, one child said he no longer wanted to see his mother because he did not like the meals she prepared.

Ordinarily, most children have mixed feelings about their parents. They like certain things and dislike others. Even children who have suffered a parent's physical, sexual, or emotional abuse cling to memories of good times with that parent, want to see the abuser in a positive light, and often defend the parent to authorities.

In contrast, in the case of parental alienation, children who are irrationally alienated lack ambivalence toward their parents. They can think of nothing good to say about the alienated parent but withhold criticism of the preferred parent (also called the favored parent) with whom they are aligned. In parental disputes, the children automatically side with their preferred parent against the alienated parent and automatically accept as true the aligned parent's allegations about the targeted parent.

> As their alienation becomes more entrenched, children reject not only a parent, but also the people, pets, and activities associated with the alienated parent.

In fact, children who are alienated echo the aligned parent's catalogue of complaints, often using similar language even when this includes words and phrases the child does not fully understand. At the same time, the children insist they are rejecting the parent on their own initiative and have not been influenced by the parent they prefer. This occurs even when observers point out the alienating parent's obvious manipulations.

As their alienation becomes more entrenched, children reject not only a parent, but also the people, pets, and activities associated with the alienated parent. Professionals in mental health refer to this as hatred by association or the spread of animosity. Relatives who refuse to denounce the parent are condemned as unworthy of a relationship, as if the child believes "the friend of my enemy is my enemy." Tragically, deeply loving relationships with grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins evaporate in an instant.

The spread of hatred may be the most obvious sign that the child's attitudes are unreasonable, because often it occurs without any intervening interactions from the relatives. The last time the child was with Grandma, she loved spending time in her home. Now she wants nothing to do with her, and her attitude change could not possibly reflect her Grandma's treatment of her because there was no contact or communication since the last visit. Loving one minute, hating the next.

D. Prevention of parental alienation and early intervention

It is easier to alleviate parental alienation before it becomes severe and entrenched. Parents engaged in alienating behavior need to learn how they are harming their children and develop healthier ways to cope with their disappointment and anger toward their ex-partner. They need to know their children may resent their bad-mouthing of the targeted parent and want to avoid being around them—blowback. In some cases, severe alienating behavior can result in restricted, supervised, or temporary loss of contact with the children. Learning about such possible negative consequences can help motivate parents to inhibit toxic alienating behavior.

Parents whose children are becoming alienated should maintain contact with the children, except when this raises concerns about the safety of the parent or child. It may be necessary to seek legal remedies, such as asking the court to enforce parenting time orders and perhaps order the parents and children to attend divorce education programs or therapy.

E. Ten common mistakes for targeted parents to avoid

Parents with children who are experiencing parental alienation need to learn ways to communicate with their children that do not intensify the problem. **Divorce Poison** teaches parents to how to respond to negative behavior of children who are alienated and how to avoid these 10 common mistakes that make things worse.

1. Don't lose your temper, act too aggressive, or harshly criticize your children.
2. Don't counter-reject your children by telling them that if they don't want to see you, you don't want to see them.
3. Don't passively allow the children and your ex to dictate the terms of your contact with them. Don't wait patiently until the children "cool off" or feel "the time is right" for them to see you. Alienated parents learn too late that the time is never right.
4. Don't waste your time with the children trying to talk them out of their negative attitudes. Engage in conflict-free, pleasurable interactions instead.
5. Don't dismiss the children's feelings or tell them they're not really angry or afraid of you. Although this may be true, the children may feel you don't understand them.
6. Don't accuse the children of merely repeating what the other parent has told them. Again, although this may be true, the children will vehemently deny it and feel attacked by you.
7. Don't bad-mouth your ex.
8. Don't demand apologies from your children for their past disrespectful behavior. Focus on your relationship in the present and the future.
9. Don't insist on setting the record straight about past false allegations as a precondition for moving forward. It is not necessary for children to agree you were falsely maligned. This can make them unduly anxious around you and be counterproductive.
10. Don't be reluctant to get legal help to enforce expectations for contact with your children and to rescue them from a toxic parenting environment.

F. How a family court can help with parental alienation

Parents involved in proceedings at a family court, including cases of high-conflict divorce and child custody litigation, sometimes learn about parental alienation in a brief educational program ordered by the court. It helps when the court makes and enforces detailed orders about parenting time and court-ordered treatment.

> Losing a parent is a tragedy in a child's life. We should do everything we can to prevent the tragedy of parental alienation.

Structured, time-limited parental counselling and psychoeducational programs for the entire family may help prevent parental alienation or decrease mild levels of alienating behaviors. Structured counselling teaches coping and conflict-reducing skills to parents and children.

The family court may appoint a parenting coordinator to help parents engaged in high-conflict co-parenting better manage disputes, understand their children's needs, and protect healthy parent–child relationships.

The video, **Welcome Back, Pluto: Understanding, Preventing, and Overcoming Parental Alienation**, has helped many children resist becoming alienated while learning to stay out of their parents' disputes. Some professionals who provide family therapy show children and parents a few sections at a time during family therapy sessions. In some child custody cases, the judge asks or orders parents to watch the video. A parenting coordinator may have the parents watch the video to improve their ability to keep their children out of parental disagreements.

Overcoming more severe alienation usually requires legal intervention. The family court may place children who are alienated in the custody of the rejected parent and authorize that parent to get specialized help for the children, such as attending a Family Bridges workshop. In some cases, the court temporarily suspends the children's contact with an alienating parent, essentially quarantining the parent to protect the children from further exposure to negative influence that may thwart their progress in healing the relationship with their other parent. This is sometimes called a period of protective separation from the alienating parent and a period of restorative contact with the alienated parent.

An alienating parent and alienated children may oppose such efforts to overcome the problem and argue that removing children from the parent they prefer—even if the court finds that their preference resulted from psychologically abusive manipulation—will traumatize the children. No scientific basis exists for such a prediction, and most mental health professionals believe it is essential to rescue children from a toxic process that could cost them a loving relationship with a parent and the parent's relatives and lead to lifelong sorrow. No study has found that children regret being reunited with a good and loving parent.

Losing a parent is a tragedy in a child's life. We should do everything we can to prevent the tragedy of parental alienation and to help children recover from it and avoid lasting psychological harm. The family court can help.

G. Where to get more information about parental alienation

Material on this website

Child & Family Blog article: Parental alienation is child abuse, say researchers of child development.

More resources by the author

For more information, visit my official 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 overcome parental alienation and deal with child custody issues. The website's Divorce Poison Control Center describes remedies for alienated children; tips for working with attorneys, evaluators, and therapists; antidotes for divorce poison; and advice on how to initiate helpful conversations with reluctant children.

The website also includes a list of movies, TV shows, and books that teach children how to overcome unreasonable alienation from a parent. You will also find links to community and online support groups and other resources that offer help for alienated children and their parents.

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, Pluto: Understanding, Preventing, and Overcoming Parental Alienation is a powerful video for families facing potential or current parental alienation. The video teaches children and teens how and why to avoid taking sides with one parent against the other, and motivates children and adults to restore positive relationships with parents and other relatives.

Warshak e-LIBE provides downloadable resources on parental alienation, child custody, and divorce issues, as well as tips about how to manage legal cases with accusations of parental alienation, and how to defend against false accusations of parental alienation.

My Facebook Page features extensive essays about correctly identifying, preventing, and overcoming parental alienation.

Plutoverse is my blog with numerous essays about how to understand and overcome parental alienation, cultural references to parental alienation, and child custody arrangements.

Other resources on parental alienation

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

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