



Not All Parent-Alienation Is Parental Alienation

By

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There appears to be a significant increase in Parental Alienation or Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) allegations in child custody cases. While this may be accurate, there are a number of reasons that children may reject a parent. Caution, therefore, is given for over alleging PAS.

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR PARENT REJECTION

While it seems difficult to fathom that a child would reject or even hate a biological parent in the absence of an apparently valid reason, when confronted with such a situation in a child custody case, we sometimes jump to a conclusion that one parent is fostering that alienation. Courts are then left with the difficult job of making sense out of the situation. Frequently, therefore, judges in custody cases need “experts” to tell them why children reject their parent.

The answer is there are many problems that contribute to parent alienation. The solution will probably still be a court order for continued contact between parent and child so the

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problem can be resolved, either through natural interaction or with the help of therapy. If contact between a parent and child stops, all of the problems listed below can develop into a phobic-like reaction to an alienated parent.

1. **Normal separation problems.** Preschool children usually go through some separation anxiety when leaving a parent. The extent that the separation is an issue is a function of the child's temperament and the parents' response to the behavior. Visitation problems with a preschool child are similar to reactions to going to school for the first time and the situation requires similar techniques. The child needs to be reassured, lowering their anxiety while being steadfast that the transition will take place. Court orders enforcing the visitation time along with counseling and therapy focused on reassuring the "primary parent" and reducing their anxiety may go a long way to help. One can see that interrupting or terminating the visitation may only reinforce the anxiety and strengthen the "phobic-effect" to the targeted or alienated parent. Even in cases where Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS)(See R. Gardner, 1989, 1992, 1998) is demonstrated this recommendation is a preferred course of action.
2. **Skill Deficits in the non-custodial parent.** Quite often the non-residential parent is beginning to take responsibility and care for the children on their own for perhaps the first time in the child's life. Frequently, they do not have a complete understanding of the children's needs or has limited experience in parenting.

Advice from one parent to the other is usually not received well, especially during litigation or just after the divorce. Generally, parent training will solve some of these problems. Sometimes, it is important to have the “novice” parent and children in counseling in order to help the parent understand the children's feelings and needs. A great book on communication skills for parents is *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen and How to Listen So Kids Will Talk*, (1980, Faber & Mazlish). Sometimes judges need to order a “novice” parent to buy things for the children so they'll have something to do or play with when they're visiting. It is surprising how literal one has to be with such parents.

3. **Oppositional behavior.** It is common for children to go through a stage of rejecting one or both parents, especially during adolescence and preadolescence. In intact families this rejection is not threatening and is developmentally normal. In a divorced or reconfigured family such rejecting behavior may require counseling in order to help set limits and negotiate a child's independence without ultimately sacrificing the relationship. The therapeutic assistance may become even more urgent as the reconfigured family matures and introduces step-parents and significant others into the equation. Here “limit-setting” is essential while easing the child through the rejection stage.
4. **High-conflict divorced families.** In high-conflict divorces the children may need to escape the conflict by allying with one parent. Johnson and Campbell, in their book, *Impasses of Divorce*, (1988) note that children around the age of nine usually ally with one parent in high conflict cases. This is a normal form of adjustment. Unfortunately, on the surface there is an appearance of PAS but it

may not be genuine PAS. Both legal and mental health interventions should focus on maintaining contact so the child can mature enough to stand outside of the conflict and form relationships with both parents. Counseling can help parents with what to do and what not to do in their interactions with the children. Probably the best therapeutic issue to focus on is to reduce the conflict between parents, sometimes easier said than done.

5. **Serious non-abuse problems.** There are situations in which there are serious problems in the relationship between the non-residential parent and the children, which are abusive, although do not always technically constitute reportable abuse. For example, parents who are alcoholic, extremely rigid and controlling, or have severe psychiatric disturbances may be rejected by the children. In such cases, the only way the children can tolerate being with that parent is in psychotherapy. In therapy a therapist is present who can “mediate” the impact of the parent's emotional problems on the children. However, it is still important that the child have some contact with the parent in order to form a realistic understanding of the parent and develop a workable relationship.
6. **Child abuse.** Physical and sexual child abuse occurs in divorced families just as it does in intact families. The therapeutic steps for such families involve protecting the child from the abusive parent until that parent takes responsibility and has demonstrated change. These cases present the difficulty of knowing when visits can commence, when to begin monitoring visits, the length of visits, the duration of monitoring, etc. However, some form of contact between parent

and child is still beneficial for the child after the parent shows readiness for appropriate interactions.

Other Treatment Considerations

Dr. Richard Gardner, referenced in L. Margolin and M. Lund's (1993) article, has referred to a "case management" (we might refer to this as Parent Coordination (PC)) approach to alienations cases. Case management follows after the court has made clear orders about custody and visitation based on a prior evaluation of the family. The case manager or PC is in charge of overseeing and coordinating the therapy. Treatment may involve one or more of the following components:

1. **Parent/Child Sessions**. Sessions can be held with the alienated parent that are designed to bring the parent and child together in a less emotionally intense and more pleasant way as well as to help the parent learn better parenting skills. Sessions with the preferred parent are designed to ensure that there is at least overt verbal permission given for the child to have a relationship with the alienated parent.
2. **Individual Sessions For Parents**. Therapy for the parents is designed to help them recover from the divorce so they can disengage from the conflict and find new or expanded roles for themselves. For the alienated parent, it is important that that parent is aware of his or her contributions to the child's rejection. For the preferred parent, it is important to reinforce the message from the court that it is important to allow and encourage a relationship between the other parent and the

child along with clear indications that sabotaging behavior will not be tolerated. It is also usually very important to help find ways of bolstering ego strength in a role outside of parenting in order that this parent may allow the child to separate more easily.

3. **Mediation With The Parents.** Finding a way to lower the overt conflict in these cases and keep the child from being "triangulated" into those conflicts, is a crucial aspect of therapy. Parents in these cases are usually unable to respond flexibly to changes in schedule or the other inevitable crises that occur with children. In a sense, the mediator becomes the person triangulated instead of the child.
4. **Communication Between Therapists.** Communication between therapists helps the therapists overcome their "advocacy" bias. It is especially important that a therapist for the child has open communication with the father or the father's therapist, if there is one, so there is some reality testing about the child's complaints.

A Final Caution

Having presented the various reasons for children to be alienated from a parent and the possible treatment interventions, nothing should be construed to negate the possibility of Parent Alienation Syndrome (PAS) or parental alienation fostered by the other parent. There are eight symptoms of PAS (R. Gardner, 1998), these are well documented elsewhere, but they are preceded by a number of very clear indicators or precursors of PAS. These indicators (J. M. Bone & M. R. Walsh, 1999) include: Visitation Blocking, False Allegations of Abuse and Deterioration of a Parent Child Relationship.

Visitation Blocking

Here a parent interferes with the visitation between the children and the other parent. Frequently excuses such as the child is sick and can not visit, or the child has too much homework, or is involved in activities, etc. The excuses are virtually endless, but the end result is visitation with a non-residential parent is truncated or eliminated for extended periods. Unfortunately, the targeted parent trying not to make waves or upset the child feels helpless in trying to remedy the situation and goes along with the situation until months and even years have gone by before they seek help. This approach to isolating a child from a parent is a necessary ingredient to a brainwashing process which leads to PAS. The longer the isolation period the more opportunity an alienating parent has to “convince” a child to reject the other parent. Unless courts are presented with reliable evaluation data that this is occurring at the hand of the “preferred” parent, they may not even consider PAS.

False Allegations of Abuse

Extremely common and virtually in every PAS case one parent falsely accuses the other parent of either physical or sexual abuse. These parents go so far as to obtain injunctions against the other parent. Even when these are dismissed as unfounded, they continue to pursue additional injunctions several times. This situation, if allowed to continue, strengthens the alienation between the child and parent. Unfortunately frequently therapists get lulled into the conflict and take sides, frequently siding with the alienating parent. As a parent experiences the isolation and is accused of abuse, they begin to experience an emotional reaction. When pushed to a limit, sometimes they express their

emotional frustration. This expression is then used as evidence that appears consistent with abusive behavior or temperament.

Deterioration of a Parent Child

As can be imagined, if visitation is blocked and the false allegations of abuse are repeated, then is it not unusual to witness a deterioration of the relationship between the targeted parent and the child. This disruption of the relationship is observable by third parties. The danger here is that the older the child the more convincing they are that they have a legitimate reason to dislike the other parent. To others, such as judges who interview them in their chambers, they appear sincere and forthright when asked about their relationship with their parent, with little hint of programming.

Summary

There are a number of reasons for a child to be alienated from a parent. Some of the reasons are “normal” consequences of the divorce process. These need to be treated with such interventions as outlined above. Other cases of alienation, however, are direct manipulations by an alienating parent. The specific pre-alienations indicators were presented. If a court is presented with evidence that specific, deliberate manipulations to alienation a child from a parent are present in a case, then swift, unambiguous action is warranted. Unfortunately, the legal system parents seek remedies from is not as expedient as need be. But, if courts are informed with relevant information about children, their behavior and the consequences of people’s actions, then perhaps we will witness fewer “system failures”.

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