

Co-Parenting After Divorce

Rising to the challenge.

by Edward Kruk, Ph.D.

The Impact of Parental Alienation on Children

Every child has a fundamental need for love and protection.

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What children of divorce most want and need is to maintain healthy and strong relationships with both of their parents, and to be shielded from their parents' conflicts. Some parents, however, in an effort to bolster their parental identity, create an expectation that children choose sides. In more extreme situations, they foster the child's rejection of the other parent. In the most extreme cases, children are manipulated by one parent to hate the other, despite children's innate desire to love and be loved by both their parents.

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Parental alienation involves the "programming" of a child by one parent to denigrate the other "targeted" parent, in an effort to undermine and interfere with the child's relationship with that parent, and is often a sign of a parent's inability to separate from the couple conflict and focus on the needs of the child. Such denigration results in the child's emotional rejection of the targeted parent, and the loss of a capable and loving parent from the life of the child.

Psychiatrist Richard Gardner developed the concept of "parental alienation syndrome" 20 years ago, defining it as, "a disorder that arises primarily in the context of child custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child's campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from the combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the target parent." Children's views of the targeted parent are almost exclusively negative, to the point that the parent is demonized and seen as evil.

As Amy Baker writes, parental alienation involves a set of strategies, including bad-mouthing the other parent, limiting contact with that parent, erasing the other parent from the life and mind of the child (forbidding discussion and pictures of the other parent), forcing the child to reject the other parent, creating the impression that the other parent is dangerous, forcing the child to choose between the parents by means of threats of withdrawal of affection, and belittling and limiting contact with the extended family of the targeted parent. In my own research on non-custodial parents who have become disengaged from their children's lives (Kruk, 2011), I found that most lost contact involuntarily, many as a result of parental alienation. Constructive alternatives to adversarial methods of reconnecting with their children were rarely available to these alienated parents.

Parental alienation is more common than is often assumed: Fidler and Bala (2010) report both an increasing incidence and increased judicial findings of parental alienation; they report estimates of parental alienation in 11-15% of divorces involving children; Bernet et al (2010)

estimate that about 1% of children and adolescents in North America experience parental alienation.

There is now scholarly consensus that severe alienation is abusive to children (Fidler and Bala, 2010), and it is a largely overlooked form of child abuse (Bernet et al, 2010), as child welfare and divorce practitioners are often unaware of or minimize its extent. As reported by adult children of divorce, the tactics of alienating parents are tantamount to extreme psychological maltreatment of children, including spurning, terrorizing, isolating, corrupting or exploiting, and denying emotional responsiveness (Baker, 2010). For the child, parental alienation is a serious mental condition, based on a false belief that the alienated parent is a dangerous and unworthy parent. The severe effects of parental alienation on children are well-documented; low self esteem and self-hatred, lack of trust, depression, and substance abuse and other forms of addiction are widespread, as children lose the capacity to give and accept love from a parent. Self-hatred is particularly disturbing among affected children, as children internalize the hatred targeted toward the alienated parent, are led to believe that the alienated parent did not love or want them, and experience severe guilt related to betraying the alienated parent. Their depression is rooted in feelings of being unloved by one of their parents, and from separation from that parent, while being denied the opportunity to mourn the loss of the parent, or to even talk about the parent. Alienated children typically have conflicted or distant relationships with the alienating parent also, and are at high risk of becoming alienated from their own children; Baker reports that fully half of the respondents in her study of adult children who had experienced alienation as children were alienated from their own children.

Every child has a fundamental right and need for an unthreatened and loving relationship with both parents, and to be denied that right by one parent, without sufficient justification such as abuse or neglect, is in itself a form of child abuse. Since it is the child who is being violated by a parent's alienating behaviors, it is the child who is being alienated from the other parent. Children who have undergone forced separation from one of their parents in the absence of abuse, including cases of parental alienation, are highly subject to post-traumatic stress, and reunification efforts in these cases should proceed carefully and with sensitivity (research has shown that many alienated children can transform quickly from refusing or staunchly resisting the rejected parent to being able to show and receive love from that parent, followed by an equally swift shift back to the alienated position when back in the orbit of the alienating parent; alienated children seem to have a secret wish for someone to call their bluff, compelling them to reconnect with the parent they claim to hate). While children's stated wishes regarding parental contact in contested custody should be considered, they should not be determinative, especially in suspected cases of alienation.

Hatred is not an emotion that comes naturally to a child; it has to be taught. A parent who would teach a child to hate or fear the other parent represents a grave and persistent danger to the mental and emotional health of that child. Alienated children are no less damaged than other child victims of extreme conflict, such as child soldiers and other abducted children, who identify with their tormentors to avoid pain and maintain a relationship with them, however abusive that relationship may be.