

Alienation And Alignment Of Children

by Philip M. Stahl, Ph.D.

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Prior to 1970, it was rare that parents disputed custody of their children. Beginning in the early 1970's, parents began litigating over child custody as a result of changes in societal factors and custody laws. With this increase in litigation, Gardner (1987) observed and outlined a concept that he referred to as "Parental Alienation syndrome." Currently, there is a significant dispute among experts whether parental alienation is a syndrome, as well as the causes and remedies of parental alienation. This brief article will describe some of the dynamics related to the alignment and alienation of children and provide some solutions for these children. For purposes of this article, I am accepting the premise that alienation exists and that the child is caught in a battle between the alienating parent and the alienated parent. There is little research on the effects of alienation on children, either the long-term impact on a child being alienated from a parent, the long-term impact of a change of custody to remedy alienation, or which qualities within the child might help to mitigate against the alienating behaviors of both parents.

What Is Parental Alienation?

While Gardner was the first to coin the phrase "Parental Alienation Syndrome." Wallerstein and Kelly (1980) first wrote about a process which they termed "alignment with one parent." In their break-through book, *Surviving the Breakup*, they wrote:

"A very important aspect of the response of the youngsters in this age group (ages nine to twelve) was the dramatic change in the relationship between parents and children. These young people were vulnerable to being swept up into the anger of one parent against the other. They were faithful and valuable battle allies in efforts to hurt the other parent. Not infrequently, they turned on the parent they had (previously) loved and been very close to prior to the marital separation."

According to Gardner (1992), "The concept of Parental Alienation Syndrome includes much more than brainwashing. It includes not only conscious but subconscious and unconscious factors within the preferred parent that contribute to the parent's influencing the child's alienation. Furthermore, [and this is extremely important], it includes factors that arise within the child — independent of the parental contributions — that foster the development of this syndrome."

He notes that the child becomes obsessed with hatred of the alienated parent. He also suggests that the hatred takes on a life of its own in which the child may justify the alienation as a result of minor altercations experienced in the relationship with the hated parent. Gardner differentiates between three categories of alienation: mild, moderate and severe. He acknowledges that there is a continuum along which these cases actually fall and he believes that fitting them into a single category is not easy. In general, it is the intensity of the reported alienation and the quality of the relationships between the child and each parent that differentiates families between mild, moderate and severe alienation.

Mild Cases Of Parental Alienation

In mild cases, there are subtle attempts at turning the child against the other parent and drawing the child in to the alienated parent's view of the other parent. This may be both conscious and unconscious and usually the alienating parent is not aware of how this makes the child feel. However, the alienating parent is usually supportive of the child having a relationship with the other parent. For most children, the consequences of mild alienation is minimal and manifests itself with a slight increase in loyalty conflicts or anxiety, but no fundamental change in the child's own view of the alienated parent.

Moderate Cases Of Parental Alienation

Moderately alienating parents are angry and often vengeful in their behavior toward the alienated parent. Feeling hurt, the alienating parent often expects the child to take sides and be loyal to him/her. Such parents may actively interfere with visitation arrangements, be derogatory of the other parent to the child and actively participate a process designed to limit or interfere with the child's relationship with the alienated parent. These parents support the concept of a relationship between the child and the alienated parent but will at the same time consciously and unconsciously attempt to sabotage it. In moderate cases, the alienating parent will ignore court orders if he/she can get away with it.

Most of the children in these moderate cases are filled with conflict. They show many of the symptoms, including anxiety, splitting, insecurity, distortion, etc. They often express their own frustrated views about the alienated parent, some of which mirror the allegations made by the alienating parent and some of which are borne from their own relationship with the alienating parent. They tend to view the alienating parent as "the good parent and the alienated parent as "the bad parent." Yet, they are able to integrate and discuss some good traits about the hated parent and some negative traits about the preferred parent. These children can enjoy a limited relationship with the alienated parent.

Severe Cases Of Parental Alienation

In severely alienated families, there is a clear, consistent derogation of the alienated parent by the alienating parent and by the child which includes programming, brainwashing and hostility. These behaviors and feelings begin with the alienating parent and are taken on by the child. In most instances, the child and alienated parent had previously had a positive and relatively healthy relationship, although the alienating parent can neither admit nor perceive this. Often, the alienating parent feels a tremendous bitterness and anger at the other parent, usually related to feelings of abandonment and betrayal. These families are quite intractable and may be difficult to evaluate when there are simultaneous abuse allegations. The alienated parent is outraged at the change in the child and generally blames the other parent.

Behavioral Manifestations In Parents And Children

The Alienating Parent

Most alienating behavior will fall into categories that include one or more of the following.

1. Unbalanced accounts of behaviors - Talking in extremes and absolutes
2. Merging of feelings between alienating parent and children, e.g. "We do not like the Tuesday night dinner visit"
3. Denial of the relationship between the child and the alienated parent, as if he/she has no right to it any more
4. Behaviors which directly and/or indirectly thwart the relationship between the child and the other parent
5. Intrusive behaviors such as frequent phone calls (e.g. 2 - 3 times per day or more) into the other parent's home during visits
6. Encouraging the children to act as spies during visits
7. Informing children about adult issues, such as child support, reasons for the divorce, etc.
8. Forcing the children to be messengers of communications
9. Derogatory and blaming statements about the other parent
10. Tribal warfare in which other family members or family friends get brought into the battle between the parents

It is critical to understand the rationale for those behaviors and what causes them. It could be that the alienating behaviors are the direct result of either actual or perceived shortcomings in the alienated parent. This will affect the recommendations. For example, if real problems in the alienated parent are found, recommendations to correct these problems will be made to the alienated parent. However, if the alienating parent is acting on the basis of perceived problems, it will be important to recommend interventions that encourage the alienating parent to alter his/her perceptions and recognize the many ways that the alienation is negatively affecting the children.

The Alienated Parent

For the alienated parent, there is a potentially different set of dynamics to explore. Alienated parents tend to fall into two groups. There is a group of parents who previously had a healthy relationship with the child prior to the separation, but who is now being shutout of the child's life. These parents are truly being alienated from the child by the behavior of the alienating parent. The second group of alienated parents are those who claim that alienation is the significant

source of the problems with their children, but who tend to be fairly defensive, avoidant of relationships, externalize blame and have a very difficult time seeing his/her own role in problems with the children. Such parents are often very controlling and powerful and are used to having things their own way in their relationships. After separation, they expect their relationship with the children to be as they want it to be. These parents are often less child centered and have less empathy than others. When the relationship does not work out the way they want, they are quick to blame the other parent for alienating the children and for creating problems with their children.

Alienated Parents Who Previously Had A Healthy Relationship With Their Child

Parents in this category seem to be truly alienated against. They may be insightful, able to reflect on a wide variety of possibilities for their children's behavior and are willing to look to themselves as a source of some problems. Typically, these parents have had a history in which they were close to their children and actively participated in their children's lives and activities. These parents can have a nurturing quality, though there may be a tendency toward some passivity and difficulty dealing with overwhelming emotions. These dynamics provide a fertile atmosphere for the alienation to flourish.

In these families, the alienating parent is typically extreme and emotionally over-reactive and the alienated parent is usually more passive, nurturing and sensitive. The alienated parent is often overwhelmed and does not know what to do when faced with the alienating parent's behaviors. Rather than confront the alienating parent or reality to the child, these alienated parents have a tendency to detach. This detachment reinforces the alienating parent's vengeful behaviors. These parents may exhibit sensitivity to the children, nurturing behavior, passivity, insight and a tendency to be overwhelmed with intense emotions.

Alienated Parents Who Previously Had A Poor Relationship With Their Child

Many of these parents have had very little to do with their children prior to the separation and divorce. They may have been workaholics who came home late at night. They may have been fairly self-centered individuals who were more involved in their own activities than the activities of their children. Many of these parents may be quickly involved in a new relationship and are insensitive to the feelings of their children about this new relationship. Rather than recognize that their children may have their own feelings about their new partner, they are quick to blame the other parent for the children's feelings. Blame is common for these parents.

In exploring the history of the relationship between these parents and their children, we often find that there is a general absence of a quality relationship in the formative years of development. There is a superficiality to the relationship caused by years of neglect or a history in which the other parent was truly the "primary parent" in the marital relationship. These parents may show up for the "Kodak moments," but do so in more self-centered way, often for their own enjoyment and interest rather than to participate with their children. These parents may report active involvement in activities such as coaching the children's sports, yet, upon further exploration, the child often felt pushed into these activities and distant from their parent-coach. Often these parents are not even that interested in the child after the divorce. They claim

alienation primarily as a way of continuing the control and blame that they exhibited during the marriage. For these parents who are claiming alienation, but are more likely to be the cause of the rift with their children, we look for indicators like defensiveness, control, externalization of blame, self-centeredness and superficiality.

The Children

The relationships between parent and child are fragile in these families, even if they were positive prior to the separation. When children are brought into the tug of war between the parents, they have a diminished ability to maintain healthy boundaries and relationships. Ultimately, this dynamic causes the alienating parent to reject anyone who perceives things in a way that the alienating parent does not like. In most instances, the family is so heavily invested in the alienating efforts that the root causes may be difficult to understand.

The effect of this alienation is dramatic on children. They suggest that children are most susceptible to alienation when they are passive and dependent and feel a strong need to psychologically care for the alienating parent. In both the child and alienating parent, there is a sense of moral outrage at the alienated parent and there is typically a fusion of feelings between the alienating parent and child such that they talk about the alienated parents as having hurt "us." The general view is that children in such families are likely to develop a variety of pathological symptoms. These include, but are not limited to:

1. splittings in their relationships
2. difficulties in forming intimate relationships
3. a lack of ability to tolerate anger or hostility with other relationships
4. psychosomatic symptoms, sleep or eating disorders
5. psychological vulnerability and dependency
6. conflicts with authority figures
7. an unhealthy sense of entitlement for one's rage that leads to social alienation in general

Some children tell very moving stories of how they have not liked or have been fearful of the alienated parent for a long time. They can give specific details of abuse, angry behavior, etc. prior to separation. These children often feel relieved when their parents divorce because they are now free of those problems. The differential understanding will come from the child's clear account of inappropriate behavior, detachment in the relationship and a convincing sense of real problems (as opposed to the moral indignation of the alienated child).

When we listen to these children in those cases where the child is detached from the alienated parent, there is little evidence that these children are put in the middle by the alienating parent. Rather, there is a sadness to these children who wish (or may have wished in the past) for a

different quality to the relationship with the alienated parent. For many of these children, they have observed significant spousal abuse during the marriage or have observed one parent being controlling and hostile to the other parent. It is the sadness and ambivalence about the lack of a relationship that is one of the key differential indicators that these children, while certainly aligned with one parent, are not being alienated.

Other Reasons For Alignment With One Parent

There are two other dynamics that are important to look for in these children. First, many children seem to be aligned with one parent primarily because of shared interests or a goodness of fit in the personality dynamics with one parent. There is a natural affinity between an active, sports-oriented child and his/her active, sports-oriented parent. Other children may have a stronger affinity with the parent who has effectively been the primary and a concomitant need to be with that parent. These dynamics have nothing to do with alienation but are related to the quality of the child's relationships with each parent. Unlike the alienated children, however, these children want to spend time with the other parent, though on a more limited basis. The evaluator will note that the child's reasoning is related to these interests or the quality of the relationship rather than imagined problems in the relationship with the alienated parent.

Second, conflict takes an emotional toll on children. As the level of conflict between parents increases and as children are caught in the middle of these conflicts, the child's level of anxiety and vulnerability increases. For many of these children, an alignment with a parent helps take them out of the middle and reduces their anxiety and vulnerability. When pressed, these children will prefer a relationship with both parents and show no real history of any significant problems with either parent. By making a choice to be primarily with one parent, these children are making a statement that they need to be free of the conflict. For some, it may not even matter of which parent they live with, as long as they are removed from the conflict.

In fact, when the child's anxiety is driving the split, the intensity and severity of the child's feelings may be greater than the intensity of the alienating parent's behaviors. Unlike children who are alienated primarily because of the alienating parent, or children who are aligned because of a rift in the relationship with the alienated parent, these anxious and vulnerable children are experiencing alignment as a direct result of the conflict and behaviors of both parents.

Recommendations For These Families

Within those families labeled moderate to severe, there is wide disagreement about possible solutions. Gardner touched off this debate by suggesting that the best solution is a change of custody from the alienating parent to the alienated parent, with an initial cut-off of all contact between the alienating parent and child. In a variety of court cases in which there were allegations of sexual abuse, he has testified that the sexual abuse allegation was a form of parental alienation and that a change of custody was clearly in order. Turkat supported Gardner's position and recommended this change of custody in cases of severe parental alienation.

Gardner's remedy has led to a number of articles written by attorneys (Isman [1996], Mauzerall, Young, and Alsaker-Burke [1997] and Wood [1994]) who dispute Gardner's view. They

perceive his recommendation as extreme and dangerous. They question the existence of Parental Alienation Syndrome, suggesting that it does not meet any objective standard in the mental health community. They believe that changing custody on the basis of a syndrome that does not exist is potentially damaging to children.

Others (Ward and Campbell [1993], Johnston [1993]. Johnston and Roseby [1997], Waldron and Joanis [1996], Kelly [1997] and Garrity and Baris [1994]) prefer a more cautious approach to these severely alienated families. They feel that caution is indicated in order to balance the risk of harm to the child from being cut off from one parent (i.e. the alienated parent) or harm as a result of cutting the child off from the other parent (i.e. the alienating parent). One solution does not fit all families because children and their parents are quite different.

Cautious recommendations are likely to include many of the following:

1. A court order that recognizes the value of on-going contact between the child and the alienated parent and establishes structure around that contact
2. A mental health professional working with the child and/or family to therapeutically support the contact
3. The use of a case manager, Special Master, guardian ad litem, or parenting coordinator who would monitor the cooperation with the order and have the authority to enforce compliance or report to the court quickly when one parent is out of compliance
4. Avoid changing custody as a corrective tool; there may be times when a change of custody is indicated, but it will be because there is a different problem than alienation
5. Attempt to engage the alienating parent in therapy that is understanding and supportive while simultaneously providing a clear and consistent message that the alienation process is harmful to the child. If the alienating parent is currently in therapy with someone who supports the position of the alienating parent (i.e. contact between the child and the alienated parent should be nonexistent), it may be necessary for the court to order a change of therapists for the alienating parent unless that therapist can understand the dynamics and become part of the treatment team
6. In the most extreme examples, in which nothing seems to be working and the child appears to be at significant risk, it may be necessary to help the alienated parent therapeutically disengage from the child until such time that the child can more adequately re-establish the relationship. From the perspective of the child, this may actually be a less-damaging recommendation than a change of custody

If we understand that alienation is caused by splitting within the family. it is critical that those who try to work with the family (the attorneys, the judges and the mental health professionals) are in agreement in their approach to the family. If we recognize that alienated family systems are emotionally powerful. it is easy to see how the professionals involved can become split

amongst themselves. In more extremely alienated families, the case manager will watch that the professionals do not succumb to the family's splitting, inadvertently escalating the split.

Parentectomies: Do They Help?

As indicated earlier, perhaps the most controversial element of all the alienation literature has been stimulated by Dr. Gardner's recommendation for a swift change of custody in those families identified as exhibiting severe parental alienation. There may also be a severe limitation on the child's contact with the alienating parent, at least for the first few months after the change of custody. While there are certainly times when an evaluator might recommend a change of custody from one parent to the other, doing so solely on the basis of a finding of severe parental alienation may not be in the child's best interest. When a child has a strong attachment, even if it is an unhealthy one, to the alienating parent, it can be emotionally damaging to the child if the relationship is abruptly terminated.

It is important to remember that children in these families are often in an enmeshed relationship with the alienating parent and often feel a strong need to protect that parent. They may be in a hostile-dependent relationship with the alienating parent. An abrupt change in custody may cause significant problems for the child. We must be careful that the proposed solution to alienation does not cause more problems for the child than did the alienation. I have never seen a change of custody by itself lead to a reduction in conflict and improvement in the situation for the child. While it may temporarily help the relationship between the child and the alienated parent, it often comes at an exorbitant price for the child.

Even with case manager and therapeutic support, many of these children continue to long for a relationship with the alienating parent. Sometimes these dynamics will resurface several years later. Rather than a complete change of custody, I believe that a more balanced time-share in which the child has time to be with each parent for a relatively equal period of time in larger chunks (such as two-week blocks or most of the summer) may be more beneficial to the child. Even when this is difficult to achieve, I would always consider the impact to the child of the change of custody and whether this solution will be worse than the alienation that is occurring.

For some families, it will be impossible to help the alienated parent ever have a viable relationship with the child, in spite of the best therapeutic and structural efforts. Some courts are taking to punishing children, placing them in juvenile halls and psychiatric hospitals because they do not see a parent. I do not agree with this approach. I believe that these children should be in therapy, with part of the therapeutic work centered on the alienated parent withdrawing from the child's life. It is important to do this carefully so that the child does not feel abandoned by the alienated parent. The alienated parent needs to be taught to say the following to the child (in his/her own words, but with the overall intent completely clear):

“I know how hard it is for you when you feel pain. I know that you and I do not see things the same way and maybe we never will. I am sorry for whatever I have done to cause you to feel pain and I know that our divorce has been terrible for you. I love you and do not want you to be in the middle of the war between your

(mom/dad) and me. I know it is terrible for you and rather than have you continue to experience that pain, I am going to withdraw for a while.“

“I want you to remember three things. First, I do love you and want what is best for you. Second, I will always be there for you if you need anything. Third, if you ever change your mind and want to rebuild our relationship, nothing could make me happier. I am only withdrawing for now to help you feel less pain and take you out of the middle of our war. I will keep in contact with you every few months or so. I will keep sending you birthday and Christmas cards. I hope you get them and I hope you will write back. I will always make sure you know where I am and how to reach me if I move. More than anything, I want you to have peace in your life and some day, I hope I can be a part of it. I love you and I always will.”

While this is a painful thing for an alienated parent to do, sometimes it is the only viable solution for an intractable situation. I would certainly encourage such a child to remain in therapy, at least periodically, to explore how the situation is working out. I would also encourage the parent to continue sending the cards, inviting a reunification with the child. At the present time, there is no research on these children and families to know if this actually helps but anecdotal evidence for some children suggests that it might.

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