

PARENTAL ALIENATION

Parental alienation refers to the process of manipulating a child to reject one parent or another. In the eyes of the law, children need to have a good relationship with both parents. In order to achieve this, each parent should have access to quality time with the child. Unfortunately, parental separation and divorce are often ugly affairs, where many parents allow their own feelings of anger, rejection, hurt, inadequacy, jealousy or disappointment to spill over into the lives of their children. When a parent either consciously or subconsciously takes steps to isolate their child from the other parent, or to change their child's feelings about and/or relationship with the other parent in a negative way, it is referred to as parental alienation¹.

A key feature of parental alienation is a child's strong alignment with one parent, whilst rejecting a relationship with the other, despite having had a normal, warm and loving relationship with this parent previously. Parents who consciously or subconsciously try to alienate their child from the other parent provide the child with the following three-part message: *"I am the only parent who loves you and you need me to feel good about yourself; your other parent is dangerous and/or unavailable; pursuing a relationship with your other parent will jeopardise your relationship with me"*. Ironically, the blaming parent is often projecting their own weaknesses or insecurities onto the other parent².

The process of parental alienation involves the ongoing use of strategies such as: bad-mouthing the other parent; limiting contact with that parent; forbidding the discussion of the other parent; removing visual reminders, such as pictures of the other parent, from the child's primary home environment; forcing the child to reject the other parent; creating the impression that the other parent is dangerous; forcing the child to choose between parents by means of threats of withdrawal of affection; and/or belittling and limiting contact with the extended family of the targeted parent³.

Children who have gone through severe parental alienation often experience life-long feelings of guilt, shame and resentment. They are also likely to experience higher rates of behavioural problems; lower self-esteem; poor self and family identities; increased risk for depression; lower academic achievement; increased criminal behaviour; and increased levels of alcohol and substance abuse⁴.



Alienated children are no less damaged than other child victims of extreme conflict, such as child soldiers and victims of childhood abduction, who identify with their tormentors in order to avoid pain and maintain a relationship with them, however abusive that relationship may be³.

For a list of references and links to more information on this topic please visit <http://www.christineslabbert.co.za/Psych-Ed/psych-ed.html>

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