

Parental Alienation: Diagnostic Considerations from a Systemic Perspective

Adapted from *Divorce Doesn't Have to Be That Way: A Handbook for the Helping Professional*
Jane Appell, Ph.D.

Parental alienation is a term coined by many authors to describe a phenomenon that occurs when a child becomes allied with one parent and disparages or rejects the other. Generally, this occurs in cases of high conflict divorce. In extreme cases, the child may refuse to see the rejected parent, who is most often, but not always the non-custodial parent. Most often, children who fully reject a parent are preadolescent or adolescent, but younger children may display many rejecting behaviors toward a parent.

An important critical entry point occurs when a helper becomes aware of a situation in which a child of a high-conflict divorce spends progressively less time with one parent and/or voices strong objection to being with that parent. The helper's response can be crucial in the maintenance of the parent-child relationship. To determine an appropriate response, it is important for the professional to diagnose fully the reasons for the parental rejection. As with other aspects of the divorce, it is crucial to look at the big picture.

A common cluster of symptoms in such families prompted Gardner, (1989, 1999, 2002) to coin the term "parental alienation syndrome" or PAS. Depending on the severity of the problem, a child who allegedly suffers from PAS may exhibit all or some of the following behaviors, as described by Rand (1997):

- The child is aligned with the alienating parent in a campaign of denigration against the target parent, with the child making active contributions.
- Rationalizations for deprecating the target parent are often weak, frivolous, or absurd.
- Animosity toward the rejected parent lacks the ambivalence normal to human relationships.
- The child asserts that the decision to reject the target parent is his or her own.
- The child reflexively supports the parent with whom he or she is aligned.
- The child expresses guiltless disregard for the feelings of the target or hated parent.
- Borrowed scenarios are present, i.e., the child's statements reflect themes and terminology of the alienating parent.
- Animosity is spread to the extended family and others associated with the hated parent.

Gardner's notion of a "syndrome" sparked controversy in the psychological community because the term implies a discrete set of symptoms with a consistent constellation of causes. Gardner placed the blame for PAS squarely on the shoulders of an alienating custodial parent. In contrast to this one-dimensional approach, Kelly and Johnston (2001) have proposed that not all children of divorce who reject a parent do so because they are influenced by the other parent. Rather, the rejection is likely to have multiple causes. These authors suggest that the child's post-divorce affinities with the parent(s) lie on a continuum, as described below. These five categories can

also be viewed as the stages through which a child might pass as she grows progressively estranged from one parent. They are:

- Positive relationships with both parents
- Affinity with one parent
- Allied child -- child has formed an alliance with one parent
- Estranged child -- child has become distant from one parent, with corresponding negative attitudes
- Alienated child -- relationship with one parent has broken down completely

This author agrees that the reasons for parental rejection are often multiple and complex. While the rejection of one parent may sometimes result from the deliberate machinations of the other, frequently the problem is multi-causal. As with other aspects of divorce, it is helpful to look at the intrapsychic dynamics of the individual, the interactive dynamics of the family, and the influences of the wider social sphere to fully understand all of the contributing factors to parental alienation in any given case.

When working with families in which there is alienation or estrangement, it is useful to obtain as clear a picture as possible of the following issues regarding each family member:

The allied parent

Allied parents vary in their individual dynamics. Some parents deliberately retaliate at the other parent in a high conflict divorce by limiting access to the child, while some act out their anger unconsciously by making negative comments and/or by their non-verbal gestures in regard to the other parent. A number of parents are genuinely anxious about the child seeing the other parent due to their experience of the other parent as abusive or neglectful. For some, their concerns are appropriate, but for others, they are overblown. Anxious parents may fear letting go of their children because of their own sense of vulnerability. Sometimes the parent has a history of being victimized earlier in life and carries this sense of victimization to the present. In some cases, the allied parent is not able to tolerate and appropriately respond to the child's full range of feelings because any anger the child might express toward the allied parent or positive feelings toward the other parent can feel like a personal betrayal. There is agreement among professionals that negative input from the allied parent is a major factor in alienation, but not all agree that it is a necessary ingredient for the complete rejection of a parent to occur.

The rejected parent

Some rejected parents have historically been involved parents, for whom the accusations of the child and other parent are ill-founded. Others, however, have personality deficits, are lacking appropriate parenting skills, and/or have previously been only minimally involved in their children's lives. In these latter cases, it may be that the child's feelings about the parent are reality based, at least to some extent. Most experts would concur that such cases are better viewed as cases of estrangement rather than alienation. Therefore, it is important to assess whether there is real evidence of long-term psychopathology. It is also helpful to ask the following questions: How is *this* parent adjusting to the divorce? Has this parent historically been involved with the child? Can the parent empathize with the child and understand the stress that the child experiences? What is this parent's view of the other parent and of the child? How well does this parent control his impulses?

The child

Children may vary in their thoughts and experiences that lead to their rejection of a parent. The following are diagnostic questions for children: What is the child's developmental history? What is his relationship history with each parent? How has his internal view of the rejected parent changed over time? Does the child display anxiety, and is this anxiety focused on the target parent or does it apply in other aspects of his life? If there are questions of abuse, does the child have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder? Can the child express a full range of emotions? Does the child mirror the allied parent's words when describing the alienated parent? Does the child's explanation of events make sense or are there holes and contradictions? Are his reactions appropriate to the stated "crimes" of the alienated parent? Does the child have flip-flopping views of the parent(s)?

Children who reject a parent are often highly anxious. Sometimes this is appropriate to the situation because the child has experienced or witnessed one or more traumatic events. However, in many cases the level of anxiety is greater than one would expect given the events that transpired. Often, it is not clear which is the case, but an appropriate plan for treating the child is contingent on trying to understand the dynamics leading to the parental rejection.

Even though children who refuse contact with a parent often play the rejecting role themselves, it is common for them to assimilate a view of the rejected parent as not caring about them. The child both mirrors the perceived rejection and filters input from the parent in a way that reinforces the perception of not being cared about. It is not surprising that children in this relational dilemma often have deep-seated feelings that they are not worthy of their parents' affection.

Some children flip-flop in their view of a parent depending on whom they are with. Garber (2004) refers to such children as "chameleons." Chameleon children may appear to be allied with whichever parent they are with at a particular time. They will provide negative reports about the other parent to the current parent and may indeed believe them to be true at the time. After they transition to the rejected parent's home, their behaviors and their internal views shift. Such children have difficulty holding divergent views of their parents at one time. When chameleon children move from home to home, their transitions can be full of pain and conflict. In one extreme case, for example, two girls were told by their father that their mother, with whom they resided, was extremely emotionally disturbed. When they came home to mother's house, they would refuse to take off their coats and would scrutinize their mother's every move until they were certain that she was safe to be with. It generally took two full days for the girls to be able to trust her. By their third day home, they were happily ensconced with their mother, trusted her, and believed that their father was "mean" to her.

Family Dynamics

The interactions between family members hold important clues as to why a parent is being rejected. It is useful to explore the current and past dynamics of the various "interactive subsystems" of a family.

The couple

What were the dynamics of the couple prior to divorce? How did the couple break up? What have been the divorce dynamics? What are the current legal issues between them? Have there

been incidence of domestic violence. If yes, what form of violence and how severe? Has the violence been unidirectional or bidirectional. Have the children been abused or witnessed abuse? It is important to do a thorough evaluation of the alleged abuse and its severity.

It is also important to assess the current level of conflict and how it manifests in the legal struggle between the couple. In the case of the boy who believed his father did not care about him because he would not pay for hockey, the parents had been embroiled in litigation for over a year and a half about money. In addition to litigation in family court, the mother was suing the father in civil court for \$500,000.

The sibling subsystem

Do all the children in the family feel/act the same way toward the affected parent? Have they bonded together? Is one child allowed to have her own opinion about the parent or is there an unwritten rule that they must view things the same way?

In polarized families, siblings sometimes, but not always, present a unified front against the rejected parent. Sometimes it feels safer for a child to join with the others in opinion and action. On the other hand, children may vary strongly in their history and affections regarding the alienated parent. One child in a family, for example, may have always allied with one parent, while a sibling may have allied with the other. The current alienation dynamic is a heightening of this polarization. In such cases the children may develop conflicts with *one another* that mirror the conflict between the parents.

The allied parent-child subsystem

What has been the relationship over time? How has it changed? What is the nature of their attachment? Does the child have difficulty separating from the parent? Does this parent say negative things about the other parent to the child? Does this parent use the child as a confidant? Does the child mirror the parent's words? Is the parent emotionally or physically abusive to the child?

Allied parents and children tend to have close relationships, but sometimes children fear the consequences if they individuate from the allied parent. In some cases, the child feels protective of the parent perceived as having been wronged in the marriage. In other cases, the parent has been the child's protector from an abusive parent. Some children have an insecure attachment to the allied parent, who is most often the primary caretaker, and may fear abandonment by that parent. In some cases, the child has become a companion to the allied parent who is having trouble feeling whole on her own.

The rejected parent-child subsystem

How has *this* relationship changed over time? Does the interaction between parent and child change over time when the child is alone with that parent? Does the parent make comments to the child about the other parent? Can the parent empathize with the child or does she impose her own point of view? Is there credible evidence of physical or emotional abuse to the child?

It is useful to get a full history of the child's relationship with the rejected parent from the point of view of the child, each parent, and others who may know the family. The current relationship may be an extreme of what existed before, or it may be a new dynamic. When the relationship

has changed dramatically, it pays to explore the events surrounding the change. Children who have had a positive history with a parent are more likely to regain it than children whose previous relationship has been minimal or conflicted.

The parent A-parent B-child subsystem

In what ways does the child play into the parental conflict? Has the child historically been the focus of parental conflict? What happens before, during, and after the child transitions from one parent to the other? In some families, one or more of the children have been the focal point of parental conflict. As a high-conflict divorce progresses, the child's polarization becomes more solidified.

It is also crucial to learn how the parents interact at the time of transition. In one case, the parents exchanged the child at a local restaurant because the mother was afraid of a confrontation with the father. The two had agreed not to talk with one another during the transition. The mother did not make eye contact or say hello to the father. Despite the mother's *words* of encouragement about the child going with the father, her body language relayed resentment and fear. The child clung to the mother and frequently would not go with the father.

External Influences

We can also examine the interplay between family members and the service professionals or other parties that influence them. Such influencers include the extended family, the legal system, friends, and such helpers as the child's school counselor, therapists, custody evaluators, etc. As these external forces become involved, they often reinforce the thinking of the parent and/or children with whom they personally have relationships. It is not unusual for one parent and his "team" of allied family members friends and professionals to cast the other parent as an abuser, while the other parent's "team" counters with accusations of parental alienation. Each side can present a convincing argument when seen in isolation.

Extended family

Extended family members frequently exert influence over the situation. It is important to explore the following questions: What is each parent's relationship with extended family? What kinds of attachments has the parent had to her family members? Were family members actively involved with the couple and/or a source of conflict in the marriage? What is the attitude of one parent's family about the other? Has the parent come to rely more on her family since the separation? What do family members believe and say about the ex-spouse? How involved are they with the polarized children?

Extended family can become embroiled in the conflict as a couple comes apart. Sometimes family members are already a major influence in the family and may be a source of conflict. When couples break up, the parties often turn to these family members for emotional or financial support. Old family alliances can deepen and new ones form. For instance, a grandmother who now babysits for daughter's children may badmouth the father who she never much liked anyway. Family members may become involved in the couple's dispute over money as grandparents try to protect grandchildren by helping to secure assets.

How to help

Interventions at critical points can be important in the *prevention of* parent alienation. It is paramount that professional helpers take care not to unwittingly feed family polarization. Rather, they need to maintain a neutral stance with regard to the parental conflict and take the time to fully diagnose the family dynamics. When doing so, it is crucial that they support an interim plan that includes at least some ongoing contact between the child and the rejected parent. When professionals spot the warning signs of parent alienation with their clients, it is important for them to avoid the acceptance of a unilateral view of events. As with all issues that arise in high-conflict divorce, it is impossible to understand the causes of a pattern of behavior without a full assessment of the entire family system..

Parental alienation is far easier to forestall than it is to reverse once it has become full blown. There is a good deal of controversy over how to work with families in which there appears to be pathological alienation. Once it has become entrenched, it often takes a team of professionals along with court intervention to remediate the situation. A systemic approach to treatment is paramount.

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