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Supporting children through the challenges of divorce
by Amy J.L. Baker, Ph.D.

Parental Alienation Is Emotional Abuse of Children

Should children be allowed to choose one parent over the other
Published on June 28, 2011 by Amy J.L. Baker, Ph.D. in Caught Between Parents

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Parental alienation is a set of strategies that parents use to undermine and interfere with a child's relationship with his or her other parent. This often but not always happens when parents are engaged in a contested custody battle. There is no one definitive set of behaviors that constitute parental alienation but research with both parents and children has revealed a core set of alienation 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, and belittling and limiting contact with the extended family of the targeted parent.

Parents who try to alienate their child from his or her other parent convey a three-part message to the child: (1) I am the only parent who loves you and you need me to feel good about yourself, (2) the other parent is dangerous and unavailable, and (3) pursuing a relationship with that parent jeopardizes your relationship with me. In essence the child receives the message that s/he is worthless and unloved and only of value for meeting the needs of others. This is the core experience of psychological maltreatment (emotional abuse) as defined by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC).

Research with "adult children" of parental alienation syndrome (that is, adults who believe that when they were children one parent turned them against the other parent) confirms that being exposed to parental alienation represents a form of emotional abuse. Furthermore, these adults reported that when they succumbed to the pressure and rejected one parent to please the other, the experience was associated with several negative long-term effects including depression, drug abuse, divorce, low self-esteem, problems with trusting, and alienation from their own children when they became parents themselves. In this way the cycle of parental alienation was carried forward through the generations. Thus, parental alienation is a form of emotional abuse that damages the child's self esteem in the short run and is associated with life-long damage.

As is often true with other forms of abuse, the child victims of parental alienation are not aware that they are being mistreated and often cling vehemently to the favored parent, even when that parent's behavior is harmful to them. This is why, mental health and legal professionals involved in cases of parental alienation need to look closely at the family dynamics and determine what the cause of the child's preferences for one parent and rejection of the other parent are. If the favored parent is found to be instigating the alignment and the rejected parent is found to be a potential positive and non abusive influence, then the child's preferences should not be strictly heeded. The truth is, despite strongly held positions

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Amy J.L. Baker, Ph.D., researches parental alienation and children of divorce.
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of alignment, inside many alienated children want nothing more than to be given permission and freedom to love and be loved by both parents.

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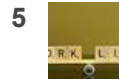
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