

Parental Alienation Syndrome – The Parent/Child Disconnect

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Divorce and separation can breed bad blood between parents and children when one partner uses the children to target the other partner.

Among the many areas of concern for social workers working with divorced or separated couples with children are two related problems: parental alienation, or the efforts on the part of one parent to turn a child against the other parent, and parental alienation syndrome, or a child's unwarranted rejection of one parent in response to the attitudes and actions of the other parent. Social workers may encounter these problems in a number of settings, such as family service agencies, schools, and family court, as well as in private practice working with high-conflict divorcing couples, parents who believe that the other parent has or will turn the children against them, alienated children refusing to see a parent, adults who are still alienated from a parent, or elders who have "lost" their children to parental alienation.

While some social workers may be unaware of the name for this particular phenomenon, they have probably dealt with it over the course of their careers. For example, clients may enter individual therapy presenting with anxiety, depression, or relationship problems and later reveal that they have been cut off from one parent by another parent. These clients may be unaware of the meaning of the lost relationship and may even minimize its effect on their growth, development, and current mental health concerns.

Children referred to a school social worker for acting out or experiencing academic problems may casually reveal that they have no contact with a "hated" parent. When questioned about the absent parent, these children may vehemently denounce the parent as "good riddance to bad rubbish." The family of such a child may be maneuvering behind the scenes to exclude the other parent from the child's school life by misrepresenting that parent's intentions to school staff, withholding information from that parent to create the appearance of a lack of interest, and removing contact information from school records.

A third scenario is represented by clients who enter therapy consumed with fear that the other parent is turning the children against them. Such parents will be desperate for advice and guidance about how to cope with the chronic provocation of the other

parent. These parents live with anxiety, depression, and helplessness, as well as feelings of victimization by the other parent, the child, and myriad systems (legal, mental health, school) that are not always responsive to the needs of targeted parents.

In all these cases, social workers may formulate a hypothesis that one parent has engineered the child's rejection of the other parent. However, unless the social worker is familiar with parental alienation and parental alienation syndrome, he or she is missing a useful conceptual framework for understanding how one parent is able to poison a child's relationship with the other parent in the absence of just cause.

Parental alienation is a set of strategies that a parent uses to foster a child's rejection of the other parent. Parental alienation syndrome develops in children who come to hate, fear, and reject the targeted parent as someone unworthy of having a relationship with them. Richard Gardner, PhD, who coined parental alienation syndrome, described in ***The Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Guide for Mental Health and Legal Professionals*** that there are eight behavioral components that have been validated in a survey of 68 targeted parents of severely alienated children (Baker & Darnall, 2007).

Eight Manifestations of Parental Alienation Syndrome

1. A Campaign of Denigration

Alienated children are consumed with hatred of the targeted parent. They deny any positive past experiences and reject all contact and communication. Parents who were once loved and valued seemingly overnight become hated and feared.

2. Weak, Frivolous, and Absurd Rationalizations

When alienated children are questioned about the reasons for their intense hostility toward the targeted parent, the explanations offered are not of the magnitude that typically would lead a child to reject a parent. These children may complain about the parent's eating habits, food preparation, or appearance. They may also make wild accusations that could not possibly be true.

3. Lack of Ambivalence about the Alienating Parent

Alienated children exhibit a lack of ambivalence about the alienating parent, demonstrating an automatic, reflexive, idealized support. That parent is perceived as perfect, while the other is perceived as wholly flawed. If an alienated child is asked to identify just one negative aspect of the alienating parent, he or she will probably draw a complete blank. This presentation is in contrast to the fact that most children have mixed feelings about even the best of parents and can usually talk about each parent as having both good and bad qualities.

4. The "Independent Thinker" Phenomenon

Even though alienated children appear to be unduly influenced by the alienating parent, they will adamantly insist that the decision to reject the targeted parent is theirs alone. They deny that their feelings about the targeted parent are in any way influenced by the alienating parent and often invoke the concept of free will to describe their decision.

5. Absence of Guilt about the Treatment of the Targeted Parent

Alienated children typically appear rude, ungrateful, spiteful, and cold toward the targeted parent, and they appear to be impervious to feelings of guilt about their harsh treatment. Gratitude for gifts, favors, or child support provided by the targeted parent is nonexistent. Children with parental alienation syndrome will try to get whatever they can from that parent, declaring that it is owed to them.

6. Reflexive Support for the Alienating Parent in Parental Conflict

Intact families, as well as recently separated and long-divorced couples, will have occasion for disagreement and conflict. In all cases, the alienated child will side with the alienating parent, regardless of how absurd or baseless that parent's position may be. There is no willingness or attempt to be impartial when faced with interparental conflicts. Children with parental alienation syndrome have no interest in hearing the targeted parent's point of view. Nothing the targeted parent could do or say makes any difference to these children.

7. Presence of Borrowed Scenarios

Alienated children often make accusations toward the targeted parent that utilize phrases and ideas adopted from the alienating parent. Indications that a scenario is borrowed include the use of words or ideas that the child does not appear to understand, speaking in a scripted or robotic fashion, as well as making accusations that cannot be supported with detail.

8. Rejection of Extended Family

Finally, the hatred of the targeted parent spreads to his or her extended family. Not only is the targeted parent denigrated, despised, and avoided but so is his or her extended family. Formerly beloved grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins are suddenly and completely avoided and rejected.

In a recent study (Baker & Darnall, 2007); targeted parents rated their children as experiencing these eight behavioral manifestations in a way that was generally consistent with Gardner's theory. Parents reported that their children exhibited the eight behaviors with a high degree of frequency. One exception was alienated children being able to maintain a relationship with some members of the targeted parent's extended family, which occurred in cases where that relative was actually aligned with the alienating parent. This suggests that the context of the contact with the targeted parent's extended family (that relative's role in the alienation) needs to be understood prior to concluding whether this component is present in the child.

Study of Adult Children of Parental Alienation Syndrome

Gardner identified parental alienation syndrome only 20 years ago. However, researchers and clinicians have been concerned about these cross-generational alliances for much longer. For example, divorce researchers such as Wallerstein and colleagues (2001) have noted that some children develop unhealthy alliances with one parent while rejecting the other. Family therapists have observed that, when a child is "taller" than a parent (i.e., able to look down on), it is usually because he or she is standing on the shoulders of the other parent (i.e., being supported by).

Although this problem has long been of concern to mental health practitioners, little research has been conducted on the specific problem of children rejecting one parent due to the overt or covert influence of the other. In contrast to the dearth of research, demand for knowledge about parental alienation and parental alienation

syndrome is overwhelming. There are several Web sites devoted to this problem, many of which receive tens of thousands of visits each year. The few books on divorce that discuss this problem are best sellers, and there are several Internet chat groups comprised of anxious parents who fear that the other parent of their child is turning their child against them. Saddest of all are the parents who have already lost their child to parental alienation syndrome and want to know whether they will ever get the child back.

This is the question that guided the current study on parental alienation syndrome of adults who as children had been turned against one parent by their other parent (Baker, 2007). In order to participate in the study, the individuals needed to have been alienated from one parent as a child and had to believe that the alienation was at least in part due to the actions and attitudes of the other parent. Forty adults participated in in-depth, semi structured telephone interviews. A content analysis was conducted. Some of the major themes and research findings relevant to the work of social workers are the following:

Findings

Different Familial Contexts

Parental alienation syndrome can occur in intact families, as well as divorced families, and can be fostered by fathers, mothers, and noncustodial and custodial parents. The prototypical case is a bitter ex-wife turning the children against the father in response to post divorce custody litigation. That is one but not the only pattern. Mental health professionals should be aware that other familial contexts exist within which parental alienation syndrome can occur so as to avoid ruling out parental alienation syndrome as an explanation because the family context does not fit the prototype.

Emotional, Physical, and Sexual Abuse

Many of the interviewees revealed that the alienating parent had emotionally, physically, or sexually abused them. These data should help put to rest the prevailing notion that all children (in their naive wisdom) will ally themselves with the parent better able to attend to their needs. The people interviewed appeared to side with the parent on whom they had become dependent and whose approval they were most afraid of losing, not the parent who was most sensitive or capable.

Apparent Psychopathology

A related finding is that many of the alienating parents appeared to have features of narcissistic and/or have a borderline or antisocial personality disorder, as well as being active alcoholics. Thus, social workers providing individual therapy with a client who may have been alienated from one parent by the other should be aware of the importance of exploring these other abuse and trauma factors in the client's early history.

Cult Parallels

Cults offer a useful heuristic for understanding parental alienation syndrome. Alienating parents appear to use many emotional manipulations and thought reform strategies that cult leader's use. Awareness of this analogy can help individuals who experienced parental alienation syndrome (and their therapists) understand how they came to ally with a parent who was ultimately abusive and damaging. The analogy is also helpful for understanding the recovery and healing process.

The research and clinical literature on recovery from cults offers useful ideas for therapists working with adult children of parental alienation syndrome. For example, the way in which a person leaves a cult has ramifications for the recovery process. Cult members can walk away from a cult, be cast out of a cult, or be counseled out of a cult. Those who walk away (come to the realization on their own that the cult is not healthy for them) and those who are counseled out (those who are exposed to a deliberate experience designed to instigate the desire to leave) tend to fare better than those who are cast out (those who are rejected from the cult for failing to meet its regulations and strictures) (Langone, 1994).

Regardless of how the cult is abandoned, leaving represents only the beginning of the recovery process. Considerable time and effort is required (usually in therapy) to process the experience and undo the negative messages from the cult that have become incorporated into the self. The same may be true of adult children of parental alienation syndrome.

Different Pathways to Realization

There appear to be many different pathways to the realization that one has been manipulated by a parent to unnecessarily reject the other parent. Eleven catalysts were described by the interview participants. This represents both good and bad

news. The good news is that there are many different ways to evolve from alienation to realization. The bad news is that there is no silver bullet or magic wand to spark that process. For some participants, it was a matter of time and gaining life experience. For others, it was the alienating parent turning on them and, for others; it was becoming a parent and being the target of parental alienation from their own children. For most, the process was just that—a process.

There were a few epiphanies, but most experienced something like a slow chipping away of a long-held belief system, a slow awakening to a different truth and a more authentic self. Most gained self-respect and a connection to reality and were grateful to know “the truth.” At the same time, they acknowledged that this truth was hard won and quite painful. Once they were aware of the parental alienation, they had to come to terms with some painful truths, including that the alienating parent did not have their best interest at heart, that as children they had probably behaved very badly toward someone who did not deserve such treatment, and that they missed out on a relationship that may have had real value and benefit to them.

Long-Term Negative Effects

Not surprisingly, the adult children with parental alienation syndrome believed that this experience had negative long-term consequences for them. Many spoke of suffering from depression, turning to drugs and alcohol to numb the pain, failed relationships and multiple divorces and, most sadly, becoming alienated from their own children later in life. In this way, the intergenerational cycle of parental alienation syndrome was perpetuated.

Wide Range of Alienation Tactics

The adult children with parental alienation syndrome described a range of alienating strategies, including constant badmouthing of the targeted parent, chronic interference with visitation and communication, and emotional manipulation to choose one parent over the other. These same strategies were confirmed in a subsequent study of close to 100 targeted parents (Baker & Darnall, 2006). More than 1,300 specific actions described were independently coded into 66 types, 11 of which were mentioned by at least 20% of the sample. There was considerable but not complete overlap in the strategies identified by the targeted parents with those described by adult children.

Working with Targeted Parents

Social workers counseling parents who are facing parental alienation need to offer support, education, and guidance. The social worker's primary role is to help the client become educated about parental alienation (what are primary behaviors that turn a child against the other parent) and parental alienation syndrome (what are the behavioral manifestations of an alienated child) so the parent can determine whether this is in fact the problem. These clients must be encouraged to look at themselves and their relationship with their children prior to blaming the other parent for their difficulties.

If the conclusion is that parental alienation is at work, the targeted parent should be taught a series of responses to parental alienation that can allow the targeted parent to maintain the high road while not becoming overly passive or reactive. Such parents need ongoing validation and support in dealing with the pain and suffering associated with parental alienation.

Working with Alienated Children

Social workers who come into contact with children currently alienated must be self-reflective and aware so that they do not ally with the child against the targeted parent. A second concern is avoiding becoming intimidated or manipulated by the alienating parent. The child should be helped to develop critical thinking skills in order to enhance his or her ability to resist the pressure to choose sides. The targeted parent and the child's relationship with that parent must be validated for the child. The social worker can be a role model who values and respects the targeted parent in order to counter the ongoing message that this parent is inadequate and someone to be discarded.

In private practice, family service agencies, and school settings, social workers may work with clients affected by parental alienation. Some of these individuals may even be unaware of the source of their pain and suffering and/or uninformed about the name and nature of this phenomenon. Familiarity on the part of the social worker is the first step in providing the client with information, guidance, and hope when dealing with this complicated and painful issue.

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