

## **Parental Alienation: Child Abuse? --- Reportable?**

by

Robert A. Evans, Ph.D.

Florida, as virtually every state, has a law that pertains to abuse of children. In Florida, it is referred to as Chapter 39 Proceedings Relating to Children. Within Chapter 39 is section 39.01(2) which provides the definition of Abuse and it includes, among other things:

“Abuse” means: any willful act or threatened act that results in any physical, mental, or sexual abuse, injury, or harm that causes or is likely to cause the child’s physical, mental, or emotional health to be significantly impaired.

Those of us who have been working within the field of Parental Alienation recognize that Parental Alienation is in fact a form of abuse. So, doesn’t it logically follow if the professional field recognizes Parental Alienation as child abuse then, by definition, it should be reportable to child protection and law enforcement organizations?

The research on Parental Alienation suggests that the incidence of Parental Alienation can be as high as 86% as indicated by the authors of the book *Children Held Hostage: Identifying Brainwashed Children, Presenting A Case and Crafting Solutions* (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013) published by the American Bar Association.

I am providing a brief introduction of Parental Alienation and the rationale and logic for it clearly being child abuse. Therefore, Parental Alienation is a form of child abuse and needs to be reported to child protection agencies. These agencies need to be trained about the significant, abusive consequences that can wreak havoc on children, our next generation. Some people in our society are saying our future is looking dim because of the breakdown of the American family. Perhaps, as part of that breakdown, we are witnessing the consequences of a Parental Alienation epidemic and hostile aggressive parenting which is not an especially rare event.

### **Parental Alienation**

Parental Alienation includes a child displaying a strong alignment with one parent while rejecting or resisting a relationship with the other. The rejection is unwarranted based on a child’s actual experience with that parent. In addition, prior to the child’s rejection there is evidence of a prior normal, loving, warm relationship with the rejected parent. Parental Alienation is also active when the tactics or strategies used to alienate a child are present but the child has not rejected the parent as of yet. This is a critical distinction in that frequently observers may conclude that alienation is not present because the child is maintaining a relationship with the targeted parent. However, if the situation continues uninterrupted the child’s rejection is surely to follow. The reason for this lies in the fact that the child cannot continue to be responsive, affectionate, and overtly loving to the targeted parent for fear of being rejected by the alienating parent. Parental Alienation is most usually apparent when there is a high level of conflict surrounding the relationship breakdown of the parents, or at some later stage in the relationship demise.

Parental Alienation refers to specific behaviors that an individual (the alienating parent) engages in that are intended to disrupt and even terminate a relationship between a parent and a child or his or her children. These behaviors have been described by a number of authors as *brainwashing, programming, indoctrination*, etc. As the "brainwashing" process persists in the presence of a child or is directed on to a child, the child begins to accept the programming thoughts as his or her own. According to Dr. Stephen Ceci (1995) in his book *Jeopardy in the Courtroom*, young children "are vulnerable to source misattributions when they are repeatedly encouraged to think about or visualize events that never occurred. Many of them appear to think that they actually experienced events that they had only imagined (p.222)." In addition, Dr. Ceci (1995) discussed scripts in children's reporting. He stated, "...if children are persistently interviewed, they may actually acquire facts or scripts about the alleged event, even if they had no previous knowledge of this information prior to the series of interviews (p. 257)." One can easily substitute "interviewing" and replace it with "told or instructed" and the result will be the same, a false memory.

The alienating behaviors include forms of visitation blocking or interference, false allegations of abuse, harm, or neglect; a noticeable deterioration of the relationship between the targeted or rejected parent and child; and a child's exaggerated fear of the alienating parent. The exaggerated fear of the alienating parent can include a fear of being rejected by that parent, a fear of displeasing or upsetting that parent, or even a fear of physical harm in some extreme cases.

As the accommodation and assimilation of these alienating behaviors proceeds, the symptoms of Parental Alienation emerge. There are eight specific symptoms of Parental Alienation and these are:

**The campaign of denigration** refers to a child's view of the "hated" or targeted parent. First, the campaign of denigration is executed by the accusing or alienating parent in his or her indoctrination of the child. The other component is the child's own contribution in this denigration process. The reason "hated" is in quotes is because these children actually do not hate their parent, regardless of what words they use referencing them. They have to say that they "hate" their parent because they fear the alienating parent; they are literally held hostage.

**Weak or frivolous rationalizations for the deprecation** refers to a child not wanting to be with a parent for reasons that do not warrant such a position.

**Lack of ambivalence** refers to the alienated child's "all good" portrayal of the alienating parent and "all bad" portrayal of the rejected or targeted parent.

**The “Independent Thinker” phenomenon** is where the child maintains that his or her criticisms of the rejected or targeted parent are his or her own independent thoughts and not the product of coaching by anyone especially the alienating parent.

**Reflexive support of the alienating parent in the parental conflict** refers to the child’s consistent loyalty to the alienating parent’s position, never defending or siding with the rejected/targeted parent.

**Absence of guilt over cruelty to and/or exploitation of the rejected/target parent** represents a diminishing and ultimate extinction of the child’s ability to empathize with others and not just with the targeted parent. It is tied to conscience and moral choice and may set a lifelong pattern of reacting to stress and threatening situations.

**Presence of borrowed scenarios** refers to the making up of stories and incidents in the furtherance of the vilification of the rejected/target parent. The quality of the stories and the details of the incidents often reflect that of the alienating parent, hence the “borrowed” nature of the scenarios.

**Spread of animosity to the extended family of the rejected/target parent** refers to a child being alienated not only from the rejected/target parent, but from the rejected parent’s entire life, his or her activities, and his or her loved ones such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc. As with the rejected parent, these children had a history of having a loving and caring relationship with the extended family members.

Parental Alienation in families where there are a number of recognized symptoms, as stated above, is nothing short of child abuse in the form of Psychological Maltreatment. In a study entitled “Unseen Wounds: The Contribution of Psychological Maltreatment to Child and Adolescent Mental Health and Risk Outcomes” (2014), conducted by J. Spinazzola, et.al., psychologically maltreated children exhibited equivalent or greater levels of behavioral problems, symptoms and disorders compared with physically or sexually abused children.

The “*Practice Guidelines*” of The American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) (2017) defines Psychological Maltreatment as Child Abuse. According to the Practice Guidelines, “Child maltreatment” is a precise synonym for “child abuse and neglect (p. 14).” The Practice Guidelines of the APSAC cite the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as providing a further definition focused on caregiver behaviors. “The CDC states, ‘Child maltreatment is any act or series of acts of commission or omission by a parent or other caregiver that results in harm, potential for harm, or threat of harm to a child (p. 14).’ Child Abuse and neglect means ‘any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation, or any act or failure to act (emphasis added) which presents an imminent risk of serious harm (p. 15).’” Alienation, a form of Psychological Maltreatment,

Robert A. Evans, Ph.D. is a licensed school psychologist in Clearwater FL. His practice is exclusively Forensic Psychology focusing on child custody and parental alienation in family law cases. He can be reached at [drevans@drbobevans.com](mailto:drevans@drbobevans.com).

as will be discussed shortly, is well documented to cause emotional disturbances in children and even great harm as they mature (A. Baker, 2007).

The APSAC guidelines go on to define the term Psychological Maltreatment as a “repeated pattern or extreme incident(s) of caretaker behavior that thwart the child’s basic psychological needs (e.g., safety, socialization, emotional and social support, cognitive stimulation, respect) and convey a child is worthless, defective, damaged goods, unloved, unwanted, endangered, primarily useful in meeting another’s needs, and/or expendable (p. 147).” “Psychological Maltreatment includes acts of commission (e.g., threats by a caregiver toward a child) and acts of omission (e.g., repeatedly ignoring a child’s bids for attention or for comfort when distressed) (p. 147).” While there are six subtypes of Psychological Maltreatment, the most relevant to Parental Alienation are Exploiting/Corrupting, Terrorizing, Isolating, Mental Health, Medical, and Educational Neglect.

Exploiting/Corrupting is when a caregiver’s acts encourage a child to develop inappropriate behaviors and attitudes. Encouraging a child to reject another parent or setting the stage via the use of specific strategies would fall under this form of maltreatment. Included in this form of maltreatment is the restricting, interfering with, or directly undermining the child’s important relationships. Restricting communication with the other parent or telling the child the lack of communication is due to the other parent’s lack of love for the child are specific Parental Alienation examples.

Terrorizing is when a caregiver threatens or is likely to physically hurt the child or place the child’s loved ones in recognizably dangerous or frightening situations. Specifically cited under this form of maltreatment is placing the child in a loyalty conflict by making the child unnecessarily choose to have a relationship with one parent or the other.

Isolating is when the caregiver’s acts consistently and unreasonably deny the child opportunities to meet their needs for interacting/communicating with adults inside or outside the home. An example related to Parental Alienation is placing unreasonable limitations or restrictions on social interaction with other family members.

The consequences of Parental Alienation are very significant and not very well recognized by either mental health or legal professionals. According to Clawar and Rivlin, authors of *Children Held Hostage: Identifying Brainwashed Children, Presenting a Case and Crafting Solutions* published by the American Bar Association (2013), “the influence and impact of programming/brainwashing on children and their families is never benign.” The authors cite possible effects of this dynamic as: conflicts with parents; loneliness; memory loss; school dysfunction; conflict with peer relationships; anxiety; regressive behaviors; social identity problems; diminished attention span; heightened fantasy life; sibling conflict; lack of friends; increased technology use as an escape; feeling of isolation; psychosomatic

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disorder; diminished activity; poor executive functioning; disheveled living space; weight issues; eating disorders; poor eating habits; poor body image; sexual promiscuity; speech problems; substance abuse; sleep problems; and depression.

The specific strategies or tactics an alienating parent may employ were alluded to earlier; Baker and Fine (2013) identified the strategies listed below in *Working with Alienated Children and Families* by A. J. L. Baker & P. R. Fine (2013).

### **Badmouthing**

Alienating parent uses verbal and non-verbal communications that convey to the child that the targeted parent is unloving, unsafe, and unavailable. Existing flaws are exaggerated, and non-existent flaws are manufactured. Statements are made frequently, intensely, with great sincerity, and unbalanced by anything positive.

### **Limiting contact**

The alienating parent violates parenting plans and/or takes advantage of ambiguities in the plan to maximize time with the child. The targeted parent has fewer opportunities to counter the badmouthing message, leading to the attenuation of the parent-child attachment relationship. The child acclimates to spending less time with the targeted parent and the court might even reward the alienating parent by instituting the new "status quo" as the permanent schedule.

### **Interfering with communication**

The alienating parent demands constant access to the child when the child is with the targeted parent but does not reciprocate when the child is with him/her. Phones are not answered, e-mail messages are blocked, and messages are not forwarded. The targeted parent has fewer opportunities to be a part of the child's daily world and share with the child the small moments that make up a child's life.

### **Interfering with symbolic communication**

Thinking about, talking about, and looking at pictures of a parent while away can help a child feel close and connected to an absent parent. The alienating parent creates an environment in which the child does not feel free to engage in these activities with respect to the targeted parent. Alienating parents, however, are able to make their presence felt to the child even when the child is with the targeted parent. The child is preoccupied with thoughts of the alienating parent, making frequent calls to check in, following rules imposed by the alienating parent, worrying that the alienating parent will be upset or angry. The child's mind and heart are preoccupied with the alienating parent and there is no room left for the child's thoughts and feelings about the targeted parent.

### **Withdrawal of love**

Alienating parents make their approval of paramount importance to the child; so much so that the child would do anything to avoid the loss of love that is experienced when the child has disappointed or angered that parent. Typically, what angers and hurts the alienating parent most is the child's love and affection for the targeted parent. Thus, in order to secure the love of one parent, the child must relinquish the love of the other. Although this is not something likely to be explicit to the child, it will be apparent to the targeted parent that the child lives in fear of losing the alienating parent's love and approval.

### **Telling the child that the targeted parent is dangerous**

A particular form of badmouthing, this involves creating the impression in the child that the targeted parent is or has been dangerous. Stories might be told about ways in which the targeted parent has tried to harm the child, about which the child has no memory but will believe to be true nonetheless, especially if the story is told often enough.

### **Forcing child to choose**

The alienating parent will exploit ambiguities in the parenting plan and create opportunities to seduce/compel the child away from the targeted parent by scheduling competing activities and promising valued items and privileges. If both parents are present at the same time/location the child will favor the alienating parent and ignore or be rude to the targeted parent.

### **Telling the child that the targeted parent does not love him or her**

Another specific form of badmouthing occurs when the alienating parent allows or encourages the child to conclude that the targeted parent does not love him or her. The alienating parent might make statements that conflate the end of the marriage with the end of the parent's love of the child (i.e. Mommy left us, or Daddy doesn't love us anymore). The alienating parent will foster the belief in the child that he/she is being rejected by the targeted parent and distort every situation to make it appear as if that is the case.

### **Confiding in the child**

The alienating parent will involve the child in discussions about legal matters and share with the child personal and private information about the targeted parent that the child has no need to know. The alienating parent will portray him/herself as the victim of the targeted parent, inducing the child to feel pity for and protective of the alienating parent, and anger and hurt toward the targeted parent. The confidences are shared in such a way as to flatter the child and appeal to his/her desire to be trusted and involved in adult matters.

### **Forcing child to reject the targeted parent**

Alienating parents create situations in which the child actively rejects the targeted parent, such as calling the targeted parent to cancel upcoming parenting time or request that the targeted parent not attend an important school or athletic event. Not only is the targeted

parent being denied something that she/he truly desires but she/he is being delivered the news by the child, leading to feelings of hurt and frustration. The targeted parent may respond by lashing out at the child, further damaging their already fragile relationship. Further, once children have hurt a parent, the alienation will become entrenched as the child justifies his/her behavior by devaluing the targeted parent.

### **Asking the child to spy on the targeted parent**

The targeted parents usually have information in their files, desk, or computer that is of interest to the alienating parent, such as paystubs, receipts, legal documents, medical reports, and so forth. An alienating parent might suggest directly to a child or hint that the targeted parent has information that she/he is not sharing with the alienating parent. The alienating parent will likely create the impetus in the child by linking the information to the child's desires (i.e., if we knew whether Daddy got a raise we could ask for more money and buy a new dog for you). Once children betray a parent by spying on them, they will likely feel guilty and uncomfortable being around that parent, thus furthering the alienation.

### **Asking the child to keep secrets from the targeted parent**

The alienating parent will ask or hint that certain information should be withheld from the targeted parent in order to protect the child's interests. Such as, "If Mommy knew that we were planning on taking a trip she would take me to court and try to stop it. Let's not tell her until Saturday, when it will be too late for her to interfere." Like spying, keeping secrets creates psychological distance between the targeted parent and the child who may feel guilty and uncomfortable with the targeted parent. Obviously, when the targeted parent discovers that the child withheld the information the parent will be hurt and/or angry with the child.

### **Referring to the targeted parent by first name**

Rather than saying "Mommy/Daddy" or "your mommy/your daddy" the alienating parent will use the first name of the targeted parent when talking about that parent to the child. This may result in the child referring to the targeted parent by their first name as well. The message to the child is that the targeted parent is no longer someone whom the alienating parent respects as an authority figure for the child and no longer someone who has a special bond with the child. By referring to the targeted parent by their first name, the alienating parent is demoting that parent to the level of a peer or neighbor.

### **Referring to a stepparent as "Mom" or "Dad" and encouraging child to do the same**

Once the alienating parent is remarried, she or he will speak of the new partner as if that parent were the only mother or father of the child. This parent will be introduced to others (teachers, coaches, parents of friends) as the "mother/father" rather than as the stepparent. The alienating parent will refer to that parent as the mother/father to the child

and create the expectation that the child will do so as well. If the targeted parent should find out that the child is doing this, he/she will be hurt and angry with the child.

### **Withholding medical, academic, and other important information from targeted parent/keeping targeted parent's name off medical, academic, and other relevant documents**

All-important forms from school, sports, religious education, and so forth ask for information about the child's mother and father. The alienating parent will not provide information about the targeted parent in the appropriate place on the form and may not include the information at all. In this way, the targeted parent will be at a decided disadvantage in terms of accessing information, forging relationships, being contacted in emergencies, being invited to participate, being provided with changes in schedules/locations, and so forth. Further, the alienating parent will not provide the targeted parent with schedules, reading lists, notices, and the like from the school, coach, doctor, and so forth. Taken together, these twin strategies marginalize the targeted parent in the eyes of the child and important adults in his/her life. They also make it considerably more difficult for the targeted parent to be an active and involved parent.

### **Changing child's name to remove association with targeted parent**

If the alienating parent is the mother, she may revert to using her maiden name after the divorce and will institute a practice of using that name for her children as well. If the alienating parent is a mother and she remarries, she will assume the surname of her new husband and will institute a practice of using that new surname for her children as well. If the alienating parent is the father, he may start referring to the child with a new nickname (convincing the child that she or he has always been called by this name) and in this way forge a new identity for the child in which the alienating parent is the most important parent. The targeted parent may feel distant and awkward with the child who now refers to him or herself with a new name. The targeted parent may feel that the name change represents a rejection of him/her and will experience hurt, sadness, and frustration.

### **Cultivating dependency/undermining the authority of the targeted parent**

Alienated children often speak of the alienating parent as if that parent dependency/undermining were perfect, exceptional, and in every way above reproach. They also behave as if they are dependent on that parent in a way that is not necessary or appropriate given their age and life experience. Alienating parents are able to develop dependency in their children rather than (as is typical of non-alienating parents) help their children develop self-sufficiency, critical thinking, autonomy, and independence. At the same time, they will undermine the authority of the targeted parent in order to ensure that the child is loyal to only one parent. Examples include instituting rules that the child must follow even when with the targeted parent and mocking or overwriting the rules of the targeted parent. The alienating parent becomes elevated in the eyes of the child while the targeted parent becomes less important and less meaningful.

Robert A. Evans, Ph.D. is a licensed school psychologist in Clearwater FL. His practice is exclusively Forensic Psychology focusing on child custody and parental alienation in family law cases. He can be reached at [drevans@drbobevans.com](mailto:drevans@drbobevans.com).

In some circles, the phenomenon of Parental Alienation is illegitimate because it is not in the DSM-5. Depending on the individual characteristics of the child and family this condition may be diagnosed as a Parent-Child Relational Problem (V61.20) or Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress (V61.29). In some cases, the behaviors of a caregiver may be defined as Child Psychological Abuse (995.51). (APA, 2013, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders DSM-5)

### **Consequences of Parental Alienation**

Research has identified increased clinical emotional and behavioral problems in alienated children as well as risks to a child's psychological and emotional development. Alienated children may display anger, withdrawal, aggression, defiance, rigidity, and school refusal at a level that is higher than those children who maintain a relationship with both parents. Depression, somatic complaints, and sleep disturbance have also been identified. Children may exhibit symptoms of anxiety or panic reactions when asked to spend time with a rejected parent and there may be a fear of leaving the alienating or favored parent or concerns for the future and safety of this parent. Severely alienated children may act out being rude, swearing, attacking a parent, destroying property, or stealing. Conduct disorder or oppositional defiance may be evident (Baker, 2005; Baker & Darnall, 2007; Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Dunne & Hedrick, 1994; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Gardner, 1985; Johnston, 2003, 2005; Johnston, & Campbell, 1988; Kopetski, 1998; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980a).

In addition, research has identified that children who experience alienation are more likely to have an impaired ability to sustain effective, healthy relationships throughout their life-course, including work and social relationships, as well as an increased prevalence of mental health and psychiatric disorders and substance misuse (Baker, 2005a; Baker & Verrocchio, 2013; Bernet, 2010; Cartwright, 1993; Johnston, 2005; Johnston, Walters & Olesen, 2005).

Parental Alienation has been conceptualized as existing on a continuum from mild to severe, with therapeutic and legal interventions in response reflecting the severity and complexity (Burrill, 2006; Fidler, Bala & Saini, 2012; Rand, 1997; Rand & Kopetski, 2005).

Alienation is often exacerbated in cases involving third parties, such as social care, therapists, support agencies and the legal system. Lack of knowledge and understanding by these practitioners can lead to inadvertent collusion with the alienation process, particularly where information and history is garnered from one parent's perspective only (Garber, 2007; Johnston & Kelly, 2001; Kopetski, 1998).

Ultimately, the solution to this problem is education. Those who receive reports of abuse and investigate those allegations need to be educated about Parental Alienation. Without specialized training child protection investigators will frequently make inadequate recommendations. Courts who hear motions and pleadings and, in the end, order litigants to participate in resolutions of some kind need to be educated. Parental Alienation is a counter intuitive phenomenon. That is, what is presented to the Court is not what is actually going on in a case. This misperception and misrepresentation often leads to failure at the children's expense. Mental health professionals who are often the recipients of these cases need to be trained because their clinical training can mislead them in a direction that often exacerbates the dysfunction.

So, in the end, is Parental Alienation child abuse and as such is it reportable? The evidence is clear but we're a long way from doing the right thing.

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Robert A. Evans, Ph.D. is a licensed school psychologist in Clearwater FL. His practice is exclusively Forensic Psychology focusing on child custody and parental alienation in family law cases. He can be reached at [drevans@drbobevans.com](mailto:drevans@drbobevans.com).

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