

How to Recognize Parental Alienation

Becoming aware of parental alienation is the first step in overcoming it.

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KEY POINTS

- Parental alienation occurs in about 11 to 15 percent of divorces that involve children.
- Tactics include speaking badly about the other parent, limiting communication with the other parent, and threatening to withdraw affection.
- Parents concerned about parental alienation may want to file a motion for psychological evaluation and keep records of their communication.

What children of divorce want most and need most is to maintain strong and healthy relationships with both of their parents. Children have an innate desire to love, and be loved, by their mother and father.

Some parents, however, for a variety of reasons, become determined to make their children love them at the exclusion of the other parent. Parental alienation is the maneuvering or manipulation of a child by one parent (alienating parent) to fear, disrespect, and hate his or her

other parent (rejected parent) in an effort to disrupt the child's relationship with that parent. This can lead to long-term or even permanent estrangement of the child from the rejected parent. Parental alienation is unhealthy and traumatic for the child.

Research shows that parental alienation likely occurs in 11-15% of divorces involving children (Fidler and Bala, 2010). As such, it is a relatively frequent phenomenon that attorneys and judges must face.

Let us be clear from the outset: Reasonable estrangement due to a parent's real problems is different from alienation. For example, it is reasonable for a child to not want to see a parent if that parent is an alcoholic who regularly drinks around the child. This is not alienation. This is a reasonable reaction by a concerned child.

Common Tactics of Parental Alienation

Parental alienation involves a set of maneuvers and behaviors by the alienating parent. These often include:

- Bad-mouthing the other parent
- Capitalizing on and exaggerating complaints by the child about the other parent

- Limiting phone calls, video calls, texts, and emails between the child and other parent
- Creating the narrative that the other parent is mean, inadequate, and/or dangerous
- Promulgating the belief that the child is a victim of the other parent and must be protected
- Threatening to withdraw affection from the child if the other parent is not rejected
- Belittling and limiting contact with the extended family members of the other parent
- Falsely accusing the other parent of verbal, physical, or sexual abuse of the child or of the alienating parent

Red Flags for Parental Alienation

It is often difficult to determine if parental alienation is occurring. It is perplexing because the maneuvers of alienation are often hidden and actively denied by the suspected parent. The child is often a pawn who is largely unaware of the inappropriateness and unhealthiness of the phenomenon.

There are a number of red flags for identifying the presence of parental alienation. These include:

- Extreme denigration of the rejected parent by the child
- Weak or inadequate reasons for the denigration by the child
- Absence of ambivalence and guilt in the child
- The rejected parent is seen as “all bad.”
- Total alignment with the alienating parent, who is seen as “all good.”
- Claims of “independent thinking” by the child and the alienating parent
- Child’s animosity is spread to extended family members, friends, and others of the rejected parent

Roadblocks in Identifying Parental Alienation

Being able to identify parental alienation in a family has frequent roadblocks. The alienating parent’s attorney often believes his or her client will stonewall the use of a psychological evaluation. The rejected parent’s attorney believes his or her client and does not even consider the possibility that he or she has real problems—and thus it is not alienation. The guardian ad litem (GAL) believes the child, because the child’s statements are powerful and compelling, and does not consider the possibility that parental alienation is lurking and operating behind the scenes.

Many attorneys and judges do not understand the phenomenon of parental alienation. Some deny its presence because it is not a DSM-5 diagnosis. Others turn a blind eye because it is difficult to prove in a court room. Others believe that parental alienation is overblown and exaggerated as a real problem.

Initial Steps to Take

Tackling a case of parental alienation requires having the right attorney. It calls for an attorney who is psychologically minded, verbal, aggressive, and focused on the child's best interest. In a parental alienation case, there is no room for indecisiveness, lack of clarity, or passivity.

The rejected parent's attorney should file a motion for a psychological evaluation for both parents and the child. Even if the motion is denied, the rejected parent should pursue a psychological evaluation so that the parental alienation can be exposed.

Documenting examples of parental alienation is vital. Keeping text messages, emails, pictures, and recordings can help put together an accurate narrative.

Asking the alienating parent to stop certain maneuvers and behaviors is important. If you do not speak up and ask

for change, it will appear that you are condoning the harmful and hurtful process. Put your requests for change in writing.

Parental alienation is a powerfully disruptive and pernicious phenomenon. It must be identified and exposed. It must be attacked and defeated when possible. It can be done.

References

Fidler, B. and Bala, N. (2010). "Children resisting postseparation contact with a parent: Concepts, controversies, and conundrums." *Family Court Review*, 48 (1), 10-47.

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