

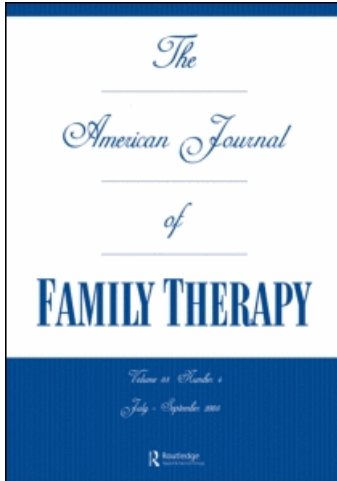
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Motivational Models for Spontaneous Reunification With the Alienated Child: Part I

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This study identified significant variables associated with spontaneous reunification between an estranged or alienated child and a rejected parent. Four motivational models are reviewed describing the dynamics of successful spontaneous reunification. A review of 27 case studies identified a crisis as a motivating event that set reunification in motion.

When children are alienated or estranged from a parent, both the rejected parent and child must deal with the reality that the loss may be permanent. Yet, the court, using mental health professionals, may try to force reunification, believing it to be in the best interests of the child. Not wanting to give up on the parent child relationship, family court officers and mental health professionals are involved in the business of hope, but unfortunately, forced reunification and traditional therapy rarely succeeds with severely alienated or estranged children (Darnall, 1998; Clawar and Revlin, 1991; Dunne and Hedrick, 1994). Most written approaches toward reunification focus more on case management or mediation rather than specific treatments (Sullivan & Kelly, 2001; Garrity & Barris, 1994; Bone & Walsh, 1999). Now, authors and researchers are proposing specific treatment interventions but without yet having sufficient data supporting the efficacy of the intervention (Johnston, Walters, & Friedlander, 2001; Darnall, 1998; Warshak, 2001). This includes forcing a change of custody from the alienating parent to the rejected parent. There may be anecdotal examples when this approach helps reunification with the rejected parent, but data does not yet exist validating the variables to consider when making this decision. Until this happens, courts understandably will hesitate forcing a change of custody to the rejected parent.

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The rejected parent of an alienated or estranged child may come to believe that there is little or no hope of ever repairing the relationship with their child. However, 27 children and their parents have been identified by the authors who have experienced reunification without any substantial intervention from the court or by a mental health professional. The questions to be answered are: How and why did spontaneous reunification occur for these families? What is learned from their anecdotal stories that offer insight for others about what facilitates reunification and why some reunifications failed? Also, knowing that spontaneous reunification can occur gives hope to soothe and comfort a parent's despair.

DEFINITION FOR SPONTANEOUS REUNIFICATION

Spontaneous reunification occurs when the child *initiates* contact with the rejected parent without prodding, court orders, or forced therapy. However, a child's request for reunification with a rejected parent can be channeled through an officer of the court, a mental health professional, or a family member, such as a step parent, a sibling, or even the identified alienating parent.

Successful reunification must be more than a rejected parent's reestablishment of contact and an accepting relationship with the alienated or estranged son or daughter. The goal of reunification should include a child having a reciprocal relationship with *both* parents so the child is not once again caught in the middle. Children at any age should not have to choose one parent over the other. Therefore, reunification is not choosing the rejected parent over the alienating parent. However, both parents must respect the child's dignity and right to have a reciprocal accepting relationship with the other parent, without interference and without exposing the child to further alienating or estranging behaviors from either parent.

Richard Gardner (2001) conducted a follow-up study comparing the outcome of 99 cases in which he consulted about issues of parental alienation syndrome. There were severe limitations in his study. Gardner acknowledged that he did not conduct follow-up telephone interviews with the identified alienating parent, leaving in doubt the child's relationship with the alienating parent after the court action. Implied in Gardner's study is that successful reunification did not include a positive relationship with both parents because only the rejected parent was interviewed. Exchanging one parent's involvement with a child at the detriment of the other parent should not be considered a favorable reunification.

Dunne and Hedrich (1994) and Lampel (1986) had similar limitations in their study. They found with their very limited sample size that transferring custody or limiting the child's access to the alienating parent rather than providing traditional psychotherapy was more effective in stemming the alienation.

SAMPLE

Over a seven-year period from 1996 through 2003 the authors collected data for 27 children who made spontaneous requests for reunification with their previously rejected parent. The children's ages at the time the alienation began ranged from four to 17 years, and the length of time having no contact with the rejected parent ranged from three months to nine years. In the sample 13 were boys, and twelve were girls. Nine were oldest siblings; three were middle children, and 12 were the youngest child. One child was an only child.

The data source came from archival records, interviews with children or adults that met the criteria of having been alienated from the rejected parent, and rejected parents. These families and the children came to our attention from requests for success stories via the Internet from both of the authors' professional web sites, parents bringing to the authors' attention successful reunification, and from follow-up inquiries to family members in cases previously served. In this sample three of the rejected parents were mothers, and the remaining 24 were fathers.

The children's request for reunification came from different avenues. Two initiated their requests through a minor's counsel (Guardian Ad Litem) who had previously represented them in court. Seven channeled their request through a therapist, either their own or the therapist of their other parent; 14 requested reunification through a family member, a step parent, sibling or through the alienating parent. The remaining six children initiated reunification without assistance by making direct contact with the rejected parent.

The criterion for selecting the subjects of this study came from observations, interviews, and self-reports from both parents and the child. All cases displayed some degree of both estrangement, because of the parent's behavior, and alienation. Parental alienation and Parental Alienation syndrome are not always black and white because there are degrees of the behaviors. A parent's response to the alienation can contribute to the parent/child problem. All the children in this sample displayed or reported some behaviors consistent with Gardner's description of parental alienation syndrome and/or estrangement (Kelly and Johnston, 2001). There were 10 cases in which the rejected parent actively contributed to the impaired relationship because of their own behavior. Regardless of the motivation or reason for the impaired relationship, the child's behavior toward the rejected parent was characterized by the following criteria observed in the child.

- Openly expressed dislike (hatred) towards the rejected parent and insisted that the decision was their own.
- Idealization of the aligned parent.
- Symbiotic emotional relationship with the aligned parent.

- No reported memories of positive experiences with the rejected parent.
- No guilt about the denigration toward the rejected parent.
- Age inappropriate knowledge of adult themes and issues about the divorce or ex-spousal issues.

Estrangement exists in a parent-child relationship when the child expressed dislike toward that parent because of how the parent has behaved. Reasons identified by the sample explaining estrangement were failure to bond, evidence of family violence and abuse, evidence of substance abuse and/or chemical dependency, evidence of mental illness, absence or minimal presence in the child's life during formative years, ineffective/overly punitive parenting, lack of warmth and affection, and marked cultural and/or value differences.

MOTIVATION FOR REUNIFICATION

All the children in this study were engaged in some form of crisis or significant change in their life that motivated them toward reunification. Some of the crises were generated by external events or situational changes in the child's life such as a new significant other entering the parent's life, another divorce, a serious illness, death of a family member, a brush with the law, a traffic accident, loss of a scholarship, or no money for college.

Other critical moments in the child's life were caused by intrinsic changes in the child. A child's maturation or a reframing of a prior irrational belief was a strong motivation for reunification. The reframing of a child's irrational belief from "*You are useless and deserve to be hated!*" to "*Can you help me with college?*" often has a narcissistic or self-serving quality. Even hormonal changes and maturation can motivate reunification. One preteen daughter wanted a renewed relationship with her father because she was blossoming into womanhood and desired her father's affirmation.

Recognizing the opportunity that comes with a crisis is not easy for the rejected parent. Timing or ripeness (Pruitt & Olczak, 1995) in response to the crisis was found to be crucial if a spontaneous request for reunification occurs. Not knowing what is happening in their child's life is a serious obstacle for the rejected parent. The rejected parent is at a disadvantage unless the parent has some access to information about what is happening in the child's life. The correct timing for reunification usually came about from an event that directly affected the child and to a lesser extent the parent. When the crisis occurred, some rejected parents were more receptive to reunification than others. Others expressed fear of again being hurt by another rejection or used. The risk was too great. Some aligned parents who previously engaged in alienation were receptive to the reunification, but most were initially reluctant to encourage the child to reconnect with the other parent.

The crises were as unique for each child as each child was unique. The only commonality among all the children was a crisis that caused the child to recognize having an emotional or logical need for the rejected parent. Also, reaching out usually involved a plea for help, whether it was for money, emotional support, or authoritative assistance. Some children wanted to keep their wish a secret from the other parent while others were able to sell the idea to the other alienating parent, professing to “use” or to “get back” at the rejected parent. Other children maintained their original argument justifying the alienation or estrangement by suggesting to the alienating parent that they wanted to exploit the rejected parent to get what they wanted. They rationalized their argument by saying they didn’t want to hurt the alienated parent.

MOTIVATIONAL MODELS

Zartman and Aurik (1991) described four circumstances that are pertinent in understanding spontaneous reunification when feuding parties are ripe or become motivated to resolve their differences because of a crisis. Though their writings focus on international conflicts, what they offer in theory is applicable for high-conflict parents. These circumstances include a Hurting Stalemate, a Recent Catastrophe, an Impending Catastrophe or Deteriorating Position, and an Enticing Opportunity.

Hurting Stalemate

Both parents must come to the realization that they are in a “*no win*” situation, and if they persist in arguing their position, both parents as well as the child will suffer.

Recent Catastrophe

A shared crisis (Kreisberg & Thorson, 1991) will bring people together who have been fighting for years. Science fiction movies have made use of this theme in the films “War of the Worlds” and, more recently, “Independence Day.” Both plots involved aliens who threatened the existence of the earth so the nations of the world united against a common enemy. People sharing a catastrophe or crisis will put differences aside for their common purpose

Impending Catastrophe or Deteriorating Position

Both parents are more likely to break their stalemate when they agree that any inaction on either part will lead to a crisis that will hurt their child. An

example is a child being injured in an accident and both parents must make a decision about medical treatment.

Enticing Opportunity

An opportunity may arise for their child that demands the parent's cooperation or their working together. This requires the parents to think about what is best for the child rather than their own narcissistic needs. The opportunity may be completing the college financial statements for scholarships, graduation or an important family event. For the narcissistically injured parent, he or she must feel a stronger empathy for their child's need rather than wallow in the pit of their own hurt or rage.

RESULTS

Success can take many forms, not just reconciliation but also a change in the parent and child's beliefs or perceptions of each other. The source of motivation for the 27 cases was distributed over the four motivational models described by Zartman and Aurick (1991) as follows:

- Hurting Stalemate 9
- Recent Catastrophe 5
- Impending Catastrophe/Deteriorating Position 5
- Enticing Opportunity 8

Frequently there is some degree of crossover between the motivational models. Reasons for why a child is motivated to seek out the rejected parent are not always definitive. A successful reunification was not always easy to assess because the length of time varied since the inception of reunification, and some relationships tend to waver in intensity with time. The results from the follow-up of these cases found that one-third ($n = 9$) had successful reunification, meaning there was a continuing on-going relationship between the child and both parents. Age was not a factor in predicting success. Also, by self-report these formerly alienated and/or estranged children indicated that they were satisfied with their parent-child relationship and felt accepted by each of their parents.

The other relationships ($n = 18$) in this sample were not as successful. Another third ($n = 9$) still had contact between the rejected parent and the alienated or estranged child, but the children did not describe the relationship as "close." The remaining third ($n = 9$) indicated that currently there is no further contact with the rejected parent after the initial reunification though they all agreed that the opportunity existed for continued contact if either the parent or child desired.

Parents and children in the not successful group (9) suggested that the reunification was unsuccessful because the rejected parent did not meet the child's expectations. Also, the child did not believe that the parent really cared if the reunification was successful. Some of these children complained that the rejected parent only wanted to blame their other parent for past problems rather than focusing on how to improve their relationship. This made some of the children extremely uncomfortable. For them, it renewed feelings of being once again caught in the middle and of having to defend one parent against the other.

Parents successfully unifying with their child knew better than to try convincing the child that their interpretation about past events was accurate. They had the insight to know that alienation should not be discussed unless the child initiates the conversation. Alienated children typically do not want to discuss what and why alienation occurred with the rejected parent because the conversation will likely conjure up old hurts and anger. If the child chooses to talk about what happened, their memory or interpretation of past events will rarely agree with the rejected parent's memory. Pushing the issue will spell disaster for any hope of reunification.

Several children described being victimized by alienation as a continuing factor in the cessation of their relationship with their rejected parent. Even though their alienating parent had initially supported reunification, their acceptance stopped when the rejected parent once again became a significant person in the child's life. This may have been caused by the rejected parent becoming too intrusive in the alienating parent's life. This is not uncommon. The alienated parent often complains that the rejected parent is being too controlling. The child then felt obligated to return to the status quo meaning limited or no contact with the rejected parent.

In two cases the children were continually exposed to alienating behavior after they reunified with the rejected parent. Their relationship with the rejected parent thrived because they had the maturity to sustain their relationships with each parent. They rejected the alienating parent's urgings.

In summary, of the 27 spontaneous reunifications reviewed at least nine between a rejected parent and an alienated or estranged child were considered successful because the child felt a bond and was accepted by both parents. The 18 remaining spontaneous reunifications were not considered as successful because contact between the child and both parents was not bilateral, and in some cases with the rejected parent was severely limited or had completely stopped.

In some of the less successful reunifications the rejected parent's behavior towards the child lacked empathy or emotional availability for the child. For this group there was limited contact after the initial reconciliation. A few of the parental rejections had been previously viewed exclusively as alienation generated by the other parent when the rejected parent had also created some of the dysfunction in the parent-child relationship. These

estranged parents may have had a punitive parenting style, or an inability to set aside their own emotional needs in deference to the child's or no knowledge about how to form an attachment.

Parental alienation was identified as a factor in some of the children's rejection because of continued alienating behavior. Although the overt negative behaviors by the alienating parent ceased to support the child's initial reunification efforts, in some situations, the cessation was brief. When the alienating behaviors resumed, the reunification process slowed and in some cases stopped completely. However, for two children this did not impact their renewed relationship with their rejected parent. For several others the intense exposure to the alienation caused the child to end the renewed relationship. As one 14-year-old described, "It was just too much hassle for me. Life was easier when I just stayed away."

DISCUSSION

The ability to generalize the results of this study is limited because of the small sample size. That is not to say that the study does not have value because of what is learned from parents that have been alienated from their children. The motivation models help explain some of the theory about why a crisis can facilitate reunification. Both parents and the children have something to contribute to our understanding about reunification. All of the families had in common a rejected parent who had given up hope for reunification with an alienated or estranged child that no longer looked to the court for a solution. The aligned parent did not always support reunification that caused problems for the child. Crisis from the child's perspective did create an opportunity for reunification though there are varied degrees of success.

There are anecdotal examples of judges creating a crisis in the courtroom breaking a stalemate between two hostile parents. After learning the mother coached their daughter to make false allegations against the father, the judge wisely ordered both parents to jail. The father understood what the judge was doing and was not bothered by going to jail. He smiled when hearing the judge's order. After four hours, the parents returned to the courtroom and from then on had uninterrupted visits with his daughter.

A second judge in Virginia recognized that the mother was hindering reunification, and the father was being obstinate. They could not speak long enough to agree on anything. He ordered both attorneys to ask their clients for a name of a responsible adult to take custody of the children. The judge was not bluffing. He created a crisis for the parents. There was no argument or debate. Now the parents had to either work together or lose their child. The judge's actions broke the stalemate caused by severe alienation and father's estrangement.

Many of the problems that occur between a parent and child do not just disappear because there is a crisis and an attempt at reunification. A parent's long standing personality problem or obnoxious behaviors can again raise dormant issues for the child and spawn anxiety over the connection that was wrongly identified as alienation. Though the reunification in all these cases was not ideal, the lines of communication were opened between the child and the rejected parent, allowing them to make an informed decision about where to go with the relationship in the future.

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