



Hope or Despair: Your Attitude Matters

by

Linda J. Gottlieb, LMFT, LCSW-R

Good evening everyone. My hope is for you to *actively seek* the love and enjoyment for which you are so deservedly entitled.

Being an alienated parent is truly *sad* to be—especially during the Holidays. The alienator—along with your alienated children—have been operating diligently to zap you of your self-confidence, energy, hope, *and* your role as a parent. *Although* you have *no* control over the alienator’s behaviors, you *do* have control over how you *respond to the alienator and how you handle* your children should your children comply with any of your parenting time—and some contact may happen during the Holidays as well as at other times due to court orders with teeth.

You can choose to buy into the attacks on your self-esteem and *hopefulness*. Or you can refuse to make a self-fulfilling prophecy of defeatism.

I hope to suggest some tips to enable you to take back your life and empower you as a parent.

When you do have contact with your children, they may be defiant and disrespectful. Visits can be one of many double binds occurring in alienation. You want your visits to be fun and pleasant, and you don’t want to have to be a disciplinarian. You are often faced with gut-wrenching decisions to set limits on your children’s inappropriate behaviors when everything you had planned for the visit was to enjoy your children, to do for your children, and to please your children. But if you ignore or reward your child’s dysfunctional behaviors, you are reinforcing the wrong message—the message that it is OK for them to abuse and disrespect you.

On the one hand, however, if you respond to your child’s maltreatment by being parental in setting appropriate limits on your child’s behaviors, your child *and* the alienator will

accuse you of being abusive and controlling; and your child will inevitably slam you with, “Now you know why I hate you and hate these visits.” Regrettably, your child’s lawyer and therapist frequently interpret your appropriate use of parental authority as a basis for opining, “Both parents have contributed.” This makes the decision as to how to handle your child’s maltreatment even more difficult.

But, *on the other hand*, if you ignore or *reward* your child’s maltreatment, it feels wrong **and it is wrong**; it feels wrong because you are validating your child’s over empowerment and antisocial behaviors, and you are also reinforcing your disempowerment.

There are *does* and *don’ts* to help deal with this double bind situation—and the choices you make can be more effective than first thought. In seeking the proper response, it helps first to understand something about human nature:

Human beings are hard-wired to take advantage of anyone ***who will let them***. Sorry about that, but those are the facts. My mentor, child psychiatrist Sal Minuchin frequently opined that people in intimate relationships are ***training*** the *others* how to treat them—*for better or for worse*. And of course, the reverse training is also at play. Training *is* the word that Sal used. You can think of any metaphor for “training” that comes to mind. This concept of “co-creation” among family members is the foundation of Sal’s school of structural family therapy within the discipline of family systems therapy. Sal labeled this family dynamic as “complementarity”—NOT to be confused with complimentarity. The concept of complementarity is particularly relevant to you and your maltreating alienated child. The *nicer* you are to your child, the worse your child treats you. Anyone ever notice that? According to Sal’s concept of complementarity or family members co-creating each other, you need to be very clear with your child: namely that you will not accept your child’s maltreatment.

Unfortunately, we humans also have a penchant for repeating the same failed behaviors as we humans are creatures of habit. So we reason, “Well, if being nice to my child is not working, I know how to solve it, I will be ***even nicer and even more solicitous*** of my child.” We have a popular adage for this behavior, “Doing the same thing over and over and expecting a *different* outcome, *is... the alienator’s plan for you.*”

The reasoning that goes into repeating this failed behavior is akin to one of my big pet peeves in cases of alienation: which is, when antidepressants are not working to counter your child’s depression, the response is virtually ALWAYS, “let’s increase the dosage.” The question is virtually never explored, “Perhaps we have the wrong cause of the child’s depression; perhaps the cause of the child’s depression is NOT a *chemical imbalance*. Perhaps the cause is, *instead*, due to a family *situational imbalance*. After all, your child had not been depressed prior to the situation of divorce and the onset of the alienation. Well, I digress.

So getting back to your child’s maltreatment when you have contact. It is clear being more and more solicitous of and more and more generous towards your hostile child has

not resulted in your child interacting normally with you, is, not working and only leads to frustration and disappointment. As much as *you* are guided by the moral principle, “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you,” this *does not* work with alienated children. Unfortunately, the effect is just the opposite—another counterintuitive issue in alienation. The reality is, sadly, that the nicer you are to your child, the nastier your child treats you.

However unintentional, it is a *great disservice* to ignore, minimize, and particularly not reward an alienated child’s abnormal behaviors.

How do you know when you are being *too* unjustifiably solicitous of your child? Pay attention to the signals your body sends you when you are doing something above and beyond for your disrespectful child. If you experience that yucky feeling in your stomach that makes you feel like you are going to vomit, *stop* doing what you are doing. You should feel *only* good about yourself when you go *above and beyond* being “a good enough” parent to your child.

You cannot expect your child to respect you if you do not model self-respect.

Furthermore, the last thing your child needs is for your child’s *alienated parent to also* sanction and reward your child’s anti-social behaviors.

My suggestion is to handle your child’s misbehavior *exactly how you had handled* their behavior *prior* to the onset of the alienation. Be parental: that means, do not parent out of guilt, passivity, or bribery. ***You*** know *exactly* how to be parental with your child. You do not need to seek counsel of friends, of family members, and certainly *NOT of a* therapist, who ***can never*** know your child like you do. ***You*** are the expert on your child, and only the other parent can possibly be an *equal* expert on your child. Certainly, a stranger, *in the person of the therapist*—cannot know better than you, how parent your child—even though your child’s individual therapist often thinks and acts like he or she does know your child better than you do. This is another pet peeve with my profession. Sal Minuchin would always caution his family therapy trainees—“unless you plan on adopting the child, your job is to enable the parents to make the decisions for the child. Your job is NOT to tell the parents what to do.”

As the alienated parent, ***you*** were the more competent parent prior to the onset of the alienation. ***You*** were the parent who facilitated the establishment of healthy boundaries among the family members and the parent who set appropriate limits on your child’s behavior. ***You*** were the parent who knew exactly how to effectively discipline your child prior to the onset of the alienation. My only suggestion to you is a general one: resurrect the same parental role that you once had. Erase the tapes in your head of the alienator’s lies, denigrations, and criticisms to diminish the confidence you once had in your parenting.

If your child is unresponsive to you, don’t be an audience for your child’s misbehavior—as long it does not involve health and safety issues. People tend to stop performing if they do not have an audience.

You also must resist expressing to your misbehaving child, “You are as rotten as and just like your other parent” or “that’s just your other parent talking! Although very true, expressing this will only make your child defend and align with their alienating parent. To the contrary, **you don’t want to reinforce** the pathological enmeshment. Furthermore, consider that you have been understandably frustrated with the alienating parent’s intrusions on your parenting time. So it’s profoundly counterproductive to **invite** the alienating parent to intrude on your parenting time by involving them and referring to them.

Leave the alienating parent as far away from you and your child as you possibly can on your parenting time.

Try to avoid punishments and instead connect rewards to your child’s positive behavioral changes. Use rewards to bring about behavioral changes that you want.

Try to remind your child of memories of your relationship with photos and other mementos prior to the onset of the alienation. Normally I would suggest inviting having friends and family with whom your child had had prior meaningful relationships and who respect you to celebrate the Holidays with you. If you can do this by abiding by COVID protection standards, do so.

Resist your child’s challenges to trap you into a debate about the alienation. That will get you nowhere. You cannot deprogram your child from their cult-like adherence to their alienating parent’s brainwashing script—at least you can’t with words. But you may be able to raise your child’s cognitive dissonance between your positive behaviors and the negative programming about you. Be grateful for small positive steps your child takes and express your appreciation and even reward your child—perhaps with all the presents and other treats which the alienator prevented you from giving your child.

Should there be no hope of any contact with your child, that is so very sad. But you I hope you are able are to recognize you deserve to enjoy the Holidays. Safely surround yourself with family and friends who know you to be the loving parent that you are. The alienator wants you to be miserable. Don’t allow that to happen by surrendering even more control to the alienator.

If you are not prohibited by a restraining order, send Holiday and love wishes to your child.

And remember, where there is life, there is hope for a different outcome in 2021. God bless you all. My love and wishes are with all of you.