



Reasons for the Apology Letter by Linda J. Gottlieb, LMFT, LCSW-R

The Apology Letter is required, first and foremost, based on the Standard of the Best Interests of the Child. There are a number of reasons that the apology letter complies with this standard, and these reasons follow in priority order:

- 1) On some level, alienated children know they have abused/maltreated/rejected a parent, and they suffer tremendous guilt for their entire lives for having done so—until and unless **fully** exonerated of these behaviors. This is probably one explanation for why the 17,500 children in a recent study (Baker, Miller, Bernet, 2019) did not reject their abusive parents but instead sought connection to them. We know the guilt alienated children bare from the research of Amy Baker (2007), from other studies, and from my evidence-based practice working with approximately 700 alienated children. Even if these children do not immediately recognize and acknowledge their abusive and/or maltreatment of a parent, they eventually will be adversely affected when they come to realize it—or when the recognition occurs unconsciously. There is no way that alienated children can avoid being punished by unpardoned guilt. Even though, as part of the TPF treatment protocol, the alienated parent forgives the child and attempts to exonerate the child from this guilt, the alienated parent’s pardon is not generally sufficient—although necessary.

To complete the exoneration cycle of the child’s guilt, the alienating parent **must** accept full responsibility for the child’s rejection and maltreatment of the alienated parent. Only if this occurs is there hope that the alienated child will be sufficiently exonerated for the manner in which she or he had treated their alienated parent.

Let us examine some examples of alienating parents’ feeble apologies in which they attempt to obfuscate their responsibility for having caused the alienation: “It was wrong of me to listen to my child’s complaints against the other parent and not check it out with the other parent before I withheld contact.” “I thought I was protecting my children due to what *they* were reporting about the other parent. I realize now that my child had misinterpreted what the other parent was doing.” “I was only complying to my child feelings. I now understand it was wrong to give them a choice about visiting.” “I should not have acted solely on what my child was saying about

the other parent.” “My child was complaining of abuse by the other parent. I realize now I should not have taken my child’s word at face value before I withheld contact.”

The above comments are typical of the comments I have received from alienating parents. These comments do not convey genuine acceptance of responsibility for their behaviors; such comments reprehensibly project the alienating parents’ behaviors onto to their children. The child cannot heal from feeble and insincere apologies like these and for being made to blame for the alienation.

I do not expect at the beginning of the TPFf intervention that alienating parents are capable of writing a satisfactory apology letter which takes full ownership for having caused the alienation—if the alienating parent were capable of doing this, the case probably would not have been court-referred to TPFf in the first place. I request at the beginning of the intervention only that the alienating parent write a letter expressing genuine *support* for the reunification along with providing reasons why the alienated parent must be meaningfully in their child’s life. This is why I may initially express to the alienating parent that they do not have to admit to committing child abuse or even admit to the term “alienation.” At the beginning of the intervention, the alienating parent needs to express only genuine support for the reunification and that the child is safe in the care of the alienated parent. The TPFf treatment protocol attempts to be sensitive to and motivating of the alienating parent in hopes that the parent will sufficiently comply so, that at the end of the alienating parent’s treatment, two parents can be meaningfully involved in the child’s life.

The apology letter—typically written near the end of the alienating parent’s treatment—is an effective measure for judging the alienating parent’s genuine support for the reunification as well as for exonerating the child from guilt. It bears repeating that the research demonstrates (Lorandos & Bernet, 2020; Warshak, 2015, 2018; Reay, 2015; Miller, 2013; Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Gottlieb, 2012, 2013, etc.) that relapse it is a virtual 100% certainty should the child have contact with an unreformed alienating parent.

In general, I do not require alienating parents to write that they had committed child abuse when they accept responsibility for having engaged in alienation; (one reason being legal objections and another reason being I do not wish to humiliate the alienating parent.) But the alienating parent still must acknowledge that they had unjustifiably engaged in behaviors to sever or damage the relationship between the other parent and their child. There *could* be a rare exception to not requiring acknowledgment of child abuse—such as cases resulting in exceptionally traumatic and/or potentially irreversible harmful consequences to the child from the alienation.

It is also helpful to mitigating the child’s guilt when the alienating parent apprises the child that *the child* did nothing wrong and was actually being obedient by complying with the alienating parent’s parental authority. In fact, the child should be acknowledged for having abided by the values they had been taught, by having

complied with their alienating parent's authority. The alienating parent must, nonetheless, take full responsibility for having required the child to behave as the child did towards the alienated parent.

Anything less than alienating parents taking full responsibility for their behaviors will undermine any hope of relieving the child from a lifetime of torturous guilt. Few other behaviors a child could do would be more guilt-provoking than to maltreat and reject a parent. Alienated children have enough to deal with; they should not have to live with this **guilt** for the rest of their lives because the alienating parent does not accept full responsibility for having caused the alienation.

The apology letter is, therefore, not about being punitive of the alienating parent; it is about doing what is in the child's best interest.

- 2) Humans learn by example rarely by words—which are often easily forgotten and generally ignored. The best way for alienating parents to teach children to take responsibility for their mistakes and sometimes cruel behaviors, is to model taking responsibility for their own behaviors. A well-defined apology letter accepting responsibility for causing the alienation is therefore essential to teaching children how to accept responsibility for their mistakes and other unacceptable behaviors.
- 3) Children need to hear from their alienating parent that their alienated parent had not abused them nor placed them at risk. Children must hear from their alienating parent that they are safe in the care and custody of their alienated parent—otherwise the court would not have given custody of the child to the alienated parent. Although the TPF intervention helps to correct the child's erroneous perceptions of the alienated parent, the alienating parent, and of the child's profoundly incorrect beliefs about the family dynamics, it is the alienating parent who has the ability to *convincingly* correct the child's distorted belief system. The apology letter is a profoundly important step in this process. We know from research, including the ACE studies, that there are short and long-term profound damages to children from the belief that a parent has abused, maltreated and/or abandoned them. When the alienating parent apologizes for having created and instilled in the child such distortions, untruths, and utterly fabricated allegations of child abuse etc., such apologies go a long way to reducing the child's risk potential for major dysfunction across the behavioral, cognitive, emotional, and interpersonal spectrums. Most importantly, the alienating parent's apology will significantly counter the propensity of alienated children to “seek love in all the wrong places” and to engage in repetitive behaviors of entering abusive relationships because of the erroneous belief that their alienated parent had abused them.
- 4) It is a requirement of family therapy, in general, that there be acceptance of and apologies given for violating the rights of other family members and for encouraging and allowing children to have done the same. Alienating parents are also more likely to model acceptance for their mistakes if the alienating parent has apologized for his or her mistakes. It is very difficult for alienated parents to apologize for their actual

mistakes given the context of having had to continuously defend against false allegations of horrific behaviors that frequently involve child abuse and child sex abuse. When there is an apology from the alienating parent for having made false allegations of any kind against the alienated parent, the alienated parent is likely to accept responsibility for her or his misdeeds. The child needs to observe both parents' willingness to accept responsibility for their mistakes and misdeeds.

It is surprising to me that Courts have difficulty requiring the alienating parent to apologize for misdeeds. The responsibility of the judicial system is, first and foremost, to assure that its citizens abide by cultural norms and laws. The judicial system has a primary responsibility to children, most of all, to teach them compliance with laws as early as possible. What message is the judicial system sending to children if alienating parents are not required by the judicial system to comply with the law, atone for having broken the law, and apologize for having encouraged and permitted their children to go along with breaking the law. Should this message not be corrected for the child?

REFERENCES

- Anda, R. F., Felitti, V. J., Bremner, J. D., Walker, J. D., Whitfield, C., Perry, B. D., Giles, W. H. (2006). The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood. *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience*, 256(3), 174-186.
- Baker, A. & Fine, P. (2007). *Adult children of parental alienation syndrome: Breaking the ties that bind*. New York: Norton.
- Baker, A. & Schneiderman, M. (2015). *Bonded to the Abuser*. New York, NY
- Baker, A. & Sauber, R. (2013). *Working with Alienated Children and Families: A Clinical Guidebook*. Routledge.
- Baker, A., Bernet, W., Miller, & S., Adebayo, T. (2019). "The Assessment of the Attitudes and Behaviors about Physically Abused Children: A Survey of Mental Health Professionals." *Journal of Child and Family Studies*.
- Clawar, S. S., & Rivlin, B. V. (2013). *Children Held Hostage: Identifying brainwashed children, presenting a case, and crafting solutions* (Second ed.). U.S.A.: American Bar Association.
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Marka, J. S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245-258.
- Gottlieb, L. (2012). *The parental alienation syndrome: A family therapy and collaborative systems approach to amelioration*. Springfield, Il: Thomas
- Gottlieb, L. (2013). "The Application of Structural Family Therapy to the Treatment of Parental Alienation." In A. J. L. Baker & S. R. Sauber (Eds.), *Working With Alienated Children and Families: A Clinical Guidebook*. New York: Routledge, 209-231.
- Lorandos, D. & Bernet, W. (2020). (Eds.) *Parental alienation: Science and law*. Springfield, Il.: Thomas.
- Miller, S. G. (2013). Clinical Reasoning and Decision-Making in Cases of Child Alignment: Diagnostic and Therapeutic Issues. In A. J. L. Baker & S. R. Sauber (Eds.), *Working With Alienated Children and Families: A Clinical Guidebook*. New York: Routledge, 8-46.

- Nurius, P., Green, S., Logan-Greene, P., Borja, S. (2015.) "Life course pathways of adverse childhood experiences toward adult psychological well-being: A stress process analysis." *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 45: 143-153.
- Reay, K. M. (2015). Family Reflections: A Promising Therapeutic Program Designed to Treat Severely Alienated Children and Their Family System. *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 1-11.
- Spinazzola, J., Hodgdon, H., Liang, L., Ford, J. D., Layne, C. M., Pynoos, R., . . . Kisiel, C. (2014). Unseen wounds: The contribution of psychological maltreatment to child and adolescent mental health and risk outcomes. *Psychological Trauma*, 6(S1), S18-S28.
- Warshak, R. (2006). Social science and parental alienation: Examining the disputes and the evidence. In R. Gardner, R. Sauber, & D. Lorandos (Eds.), *International handbook of parental alienation syndrome*. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, 352–371.
- Warshak, R. (2010). *Divorce poison*. New York: Harper.
- Warshak, R. A. (2010). Family bridges: using insights from social science to reconnect parents and alienated children. *Family Court Review*, 48(1), 48-80.
- Warshak, R. A. (2015). Ten Parental Alienation Fallacies That Compromise Decisions Court and in Therapy. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 1-16.
- Warshak, R. (2018). "Reclaiming Parent–Child Relationships: Outcomes of Family Bridges with Alienated Children." *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*. Published online: 11 Oct 2018.