

THE ALIENATION TIPPING POINT

In the book *The Tipping Point*, journalist Malcolm Gladwell highlights features of the messenger, the message, and the context within which the message is heard that help to create an unstoppable force. Some of these features are particularly relevant to alienation.

1. **“Stickiness” of the message.** Although we are bombarded with thousands of messages daily, only a few “stick” with us. There are ways to package information to make it more or less irresistible, and sometimes small tweaks to the message can have a big impact on its effectiveness. Tweaking is what marketers do when they field-test new campaigns to craft the most compelling message.
2. **“Field testing”.** Alienating parents may do this to find the message that will stick with their children. Perhaps the most compelling message is that the other parent is crazy or a monster or has rejected the child. Alienating parents can try out different messages until they find the one that takes hold inside the child. Most likely it will be the one that resonates with the child’s own experiences of the targeted parent. For example, the alienating parent can take an actual event or quality of the targeted parent and reinterpret it for the child as evidence of that parent’s rejection.
3. **Presenting in a narrative format.** A narrative format includes characters and a plot that has a beginning, middle, and end. Children are hardwired to receive information in this manner. Narratives help children integrate disparate events, actions, and feelings into a single structure, a coherent whole that helps them make sense of the world. Once the outline of the story has been established, new information is incorporated in a way that is consistent with the original narrative. If the alienating parent is able to package the alienation as a “story” in which he is the hero, the child is the victim, and the other parent is the villain, the child will be primed to see unfolding events according to the storyline. The targeted parent will have a hard time counteracting the negative message once it is internalized as the child’s story of his family.

4. **Difficulty in assimilating contradictory information.** Once the storyline is set. It is difficult to assimilate contradictory information. This is because the “deep need to repress inner contradictions is a fundamental property of the human mind.” Once children are certain of the story, they stop listening to the part of their brain that says it might be wrong. A schemata of the family becomes embedded in the child’s mind and information that does not fit that schemata is selectively ignored and actively rejected. Most people when directly confronted by evidence that they are wrong, do not change their point of view or course of action but justify it even more tenaciously.
5. **Being uncertain is uncomfortable.** Uncertainty is extremely uncomfortable for our brains. The greater the uncertainty, the worse the discomfort. In this way, the negative message the alienating parent wants the child to absorb about the targeted parent “sticks” in their brain.
6. **The art of persuasion.** Persuasion is a skill the alienating parent is good at, having a powerful sense of how to make their message irresistible. This trait makes people who meet him/her want to agree with him/her no matter what comes out of their mouth.
7. **The effectiveness of the messenger.** The messenger’s effectiveness is more important than the sticky message. According to classic social persuasion theory, the qualities of the speaker account for the vast majority of the message conveyed to the listener. Evidence indicates that how people respond to the communication is greatly affected by perceptions about the communicator’s intentions, expertness, and trustworthiness. The listener’s interpretation of the knowledge and character of the speaker determines, to a large extent, whether the content of the message is absorbed.
8. **Body language, emotions, and feelings.** Another nonverbal way to convey the sticky alienation message is through body language, emotions and feelings. Through the force of their personality, alienators know how to make their ideas compelling to children-to the extent that their ideas override actual experiences. Gladwell states “part of what it means to have a powerful or persuasive personality, then, is that you can draw

others into your own rhythms and dictate the terms of the interaction.” The alienating parents crafted their sticky message so that it would seem like the targeted parent didn’t love the child. They sold it to the children through the effectiveness of their persuasion. The art of persuasion is so compelling that the person experiences the implanted idea as authentic rather than as forced upon them from an external force.

7 Amy J. L., Baker and Paul R. Fine, editors, *Surviving Parental Alienation, a journey of hope and healing* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowan & Littlefield, 2014) pgs. 78 to 81