

Re: The Pathology of “parental alienation” in High-Conflict Divorce

I am Dr. Craig Childress. I am a clinical psychologist in Southern California and my area of specialty is family relationships prior to and surrounding divorce. In this letter I will be describing one prominent type of family conflict following divorce in which children are led into rejecting a relationship with one parent – called the targeted parent – by the negative parental influence applied to the child by the other parent – the allied parent.

In the popular-culture, this type of family dynamic following divorce is called “parental alienation.” The correct clinical psychology terms for this form of family pathology are the child’s **triangulation** into the spousal conflict through the formation of a **cross-generational coalition** with one parent (the allied and supposedly “favored” parent) against the other parent (the targeted-rejected parent). This type of family process is extensively described in the family systems literature by such preeminent family systems therapists as Jay Haley (1977) and Salvador Minuchin (1974).

There are two primary motivations of the allied parent in establishing a cross-generational coalition with the child against the other parent following divorce:

1. **Spousal Retaliation:** One motivation is to seek revenge against the other **spouse** for the emotional hurts associated with the divorce. In this type of motivational agenda, the allied and supposedly “favored” parent uses the child (and the child’s rejection of the other parent) as a weapon to inflict suffering on the other **spouse** for the divorce.

Allied Parent: “How dare you reject me by divorcing me. I’ll show you. I’ll make you suffer by destroying your children’s affection for you. The children will choose me and they will reject you <I’ll do this by forcing the children to choose sides in the spousal conflict>. I’ll make sure the children blame you for the divorce and I’ll make sure they’ll reject you. You’ll be sorry you divorced me.”

This motivational agenda is often evidenced by narcissistic fathers whose narcissistic pride was damaged by the divorce (called a “narcissistic injury”). This narcissistic parent seeks to restore his or her narcissistic defense of self-worth which was damaged by the divorce, by making the other spouse (the other parent) into the rejected spouse (into the rejected parent).

2. **Abandonment Fears:** A second motivational agenda for the allied parent in forming a **cross-generational coalition** with the child against the targeted parent is to resolve the allied parent’s own **fears of abandonment** surrounding the divorce. By taking sole possession of the children, this insecure anxious-fearful parent (called a “borderline” personality structure) can feel that they are not being abandoned by the children, thereby soothing the parent’s own fears of abandonment that were triggered by the divorce

Allied Parent: “I’m not the abandoned spouse (parent). You are. You’re the abandoned parent. I’m the beloved and never-to-be-abandoned parent. The children will never abandon me. I’m not being abandoned.”

This type of motivational agenda is often evidenced by a borderline personality ex-wife whose intense insecurity and feelings of inadequacy are triggered by the spousal rejection and their perception of abandonment surrounding the divorce. They seek to restore their damaged *spousal* self-worth by emphasizing their roles as the supposedly “all-wonderful” and “protective” mother, while denigrating and demonizing the parenting of the other spouse as the supposedly all-bad parent.

Children’s Neutrality

- Children have the right to love both parents, and to receive the love of both parents in return.
- Whenever there is a divorce, children should not be made to choose sides in the spousal conflict. Children are neutral territory.
- Whenever a supposedly “favored” parent and an apparently rejected parent emerge following divorce, this is a potential *diagnostic indicator* that the child’s neutrality has been broken by the allied and supposedly “favored” parent, who seeks to adopt the role as the “good parent” in contrast to the role being manipulatively imposed on the other parent as the supposedly “all-bad parent.”

Steps to Forming the Alliance

The cross-generational coalition with the child is not created by directly bad-mouthing the other parent. It is a much subtler and more manipulative process.

- **Creation of the Victimization Role:** Central to creating the child’s rejection of the targeted parent is allied parent convincing the child that the child is supposedly being “victimized” by the allegedly “bad parenting” of the other parent.
- **Eliciting a Criticism from the Child:** The false narrative of the child’s supposed “victimization” is created by first eliciting from the child a criticism of the other parent through motivated and directive questioning from the allied parent.
- **Inflaming the Criticism:** Once a criticism of the other parent has been elicited from the child, the allied parent then responds to this elicited criticism with exaggerated and inflammatory displays of distress and alarm, thereby distorting the normal-range parenting of the other parent into apparent indications of the child’s supposed “victimization” by the “bad parenting” of the other parent.
- **Hiding Behind the Child:** The child quickly learns the routine of offering criticisms of the targeted parent, after which the allied parent can then hide behind the child’s elicited criticisms with the refrain of: “It’s not me, I’m just listening to the child.” To all external appearances, it’s not the allied parent who is criticizing the other parent, it’s the child who appears to be criticizing the other parent. But this show is all a subtly constructed manipulation of the child by the allied and supposedly “favored” parent.

Use Caution; Maintain Balance; Avoid Taking Sides

Family relationships following divorce are complex, and understanding the complexity is often not easy. Members of the general population, such as teachers, coaches, and family friends, should exercise considerable caution in accepting at face value the surrounding narrative of a child’s rejection of one parent and the apparent identification of a supposedly “favored” parent following divorce. Sometimes things are as they appear. Other times, things are not as they appear. Caution and a balanced approach is advisable.