

## Parental Alienation: a critical construct for psychotherapy

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### Introduction

25 million moms and dads are fighting for the opportunity to be a parent to their own children. Chances are that you've never heard the term parental alienation yet there's an even greater chance that you or someone you know is living this nightmare. In fact, out of hundreds of social workers, counsellors, lawyers, law enforcement people, child advocates, school counsellors, judges and everyday people surveyed 70 cent people reported never hearing the term yet 70 per cent said knowing someone experiencing it once explained, so what exactly is parental alienation.

Parental Alienation is the intentional and strategic indoctrination of hate and/or guilt by one parent against the other, with the sole purpose of serving the bond spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically with the other parent, thus gaining total power over the child, and ultimately the alienated parent.

Parental Alienation is a form of psychological abuse that undermines a loving parent-child relationship. A child is taught to hate and or fear a parent once loved through tactics such as isolation, fear, undermining authority, erasing and false memory implantation and encouraging betrayal. A child who endures parental alienation can suffer lifelong consequences as a result. Besides losing a loving relationship with a parent the result of parental alienation may cause a child to live in a persistent state of fear to no longer have the ability to regulate emotions and stress, no longer reach developmental milestones no longer have the ability to develop regular social interactions and to no longer have the ability to receive love. Children who endure psychological love abuse are more prone to depression, suicidal thoughts, low self-esteem, addictions, suicide, and mental health issues.

Parental alienation is something that has been discussed a lot in some different arenas, both in the therapy world and in the legal world. There's not a lot of consensus around exactly what it is. We have agreed that calling it a syndrome no longer really applies. It's got some murky history with the person who first coined the term. But this is something where somebody has some influence over the way that a kid thinks and speaks and relates to other people doesn't seem so controversial.

### Parental Alienation - An Evidence-Based Science

Not everyone recognizes it. And 'recognize' has at least two meanings. It could mean to recognize it exists at all. Or it could mean to recognize it in a given case, so the problem is you've got both of those issues. For the people who don't recognize that it exists, it's so clear, that it's not a legitimate position. All the word means, alienation or parental alienation, is that a child has resisted contact with a parent or rejected a parent for no legitimate reason. And, usually, the definition includes a result of undue influence. So, when you say you don't believe in parental alienation, and by that, the equivalent is that any parent ever undermines the other parent with a child.

In terms of recognizing it in a given family or child, here, again, let's clarify the terms. Parental Alienation can mean a bunch of things. It could be a family dynamic, which involves at least three people. It could be the behaviour of a parent, an alienating parent, or it could be the result of that behaviour in a child, an alienated child. So, anyone who's looking to identify it needs to look at the big picture and consider all three corners of a triangle - parent, parent, child.

Professionals in mental health, legal professionals and other professionals, including judges and people who make important decisions. For one thing, it requires certain types of thinking that are not commonly taught to professionals. Some advanced medical concepts, for example, reasoning backwards from effect to cause and conditional probability, which is the probability of one thing given another thing, or the probability of one event given that another event has already occurred. So, not to get too technical, that's the first point. It requires special expertise. And that expertise is not necessarily common among the people who deal with these cases. The field itself and the phenomenon are very counterintuitive. It may or may not run counter to professional intuition. But there, the professional intuition has to be at a specialist level. It's counterintuitive for someone who is a specialist in this area just like quantum physics.

If you're a normal person, it is. The average lawyer and the average psychologist don't believe that right from the start, especially if they're senior people who have been doing it a long time. That's not one of the better examples, but it lays a little foundation. Another example is that it's very difficult to get a child to reject the parent. Children are instinctual creatures, and to reject their parent is counter-instinctual. If something's counter-instinctual, children won't do it unless they're being induced to do it, manipulated to do it or encouraged to do it by someone. So, when you see a child who's rejecting one parent, especially strongly, and you see a child, the same child, is strongly aligned with the other parent, probably, that's an alienated child, not an estranged one. This is evidence-based science, you don't just get to make it up. It's important to distinguish between science in a belief system, science in an ideology, or science in speculation. Not only is it counter-instinctual for the child to reject the parent, but children don't even reject abusive parents or physically abusive parents.

Non-specialists tend to mistake something called pathological enmeshment with healthy bonding and they will do that almost every time if they don't specialize in alienation, estrangement, enmeshment and particular, how to tell them all apart. So, to define that term, pathological enmeshment, in this context, is a family dynamic in which the parent has essentially engulfed the child. The net result is that the parent has obliterated the normal, healthy, interpersonal boundaries that should exist between a parent and a child, obliterated or erased those boundaries. The child loses his or her identity, sense of self individuality, independence, autonomy, critical reasoning skills, and other important characteristics and this is unhealthy is a child. It's even worse if you realize that the primary problem is a very severe boundary violation. So, the child grows up not understanding normal boundaries, which is a huge problem in itself. And when you look at the parents, they tend to have a great deal of psychopathology. For a start, they're almost always pathologically dependent. They're using the child to meet their own needs. They are exploiting the child and corrupting the child. They're often using the child as a proxy to do their bidding and to further their goals and objectives. And this terrible. But when non-specialists see it, what you see is a child who seems close to mom or close to dad, they can sit in an interview, and the parent is rubbing the child's back and holding hands and the child tell's you how great the parent is and how bad the other parent is. Anyone who doesn't have speciality level expertise is liable to leave that interview thinking, what a great relationship.

Another example presented of something that's very counterintuitive is that the alienating parents tend to present very well. And the alienated parents or targeted parents tend to present not well or poorly. And there's a specific reason for that. What's going on here is the alienating parent tends to be a master manipulator, often an accomplished liar, brilliant at managing impressions and so on, and is the aggressor, who's winning. The other parent is a trauma victim. So, the alienator presents with the four C's he or she is calm, cool, convincing and charming. By contrast, the alienated parent, the target parent, had the four A's, he or she is anxious, agitated, angry, or afraid. And if you don't know to look for that pattern, and you interview each one, and you think you've got it all figured out after all the first interview with each person. If you do recognize that pattern, then you know, maybe the other way around. Pattern recognition turns out to be a big deal in these cases. If the professional doesn't have speciality level pattern recognition, or better yet, subspeciality level pattern recognition, you're liable to make a lot of mistakes and miss the important patterns. When you're talking about severe cases, almost always, the 'almost' is important there. When we talk about moderate alienation or moderate emulators, then it would mostly say that at the time, the parent has some type of personality disorder. There's significant psychopathology there. Usually, when you're dealing with alienation it's one of three types or a combination. Borderline personality disorder,

Narcissistic personality disorder, or some type of sociopathic personality disorder. And they're not mutually exclusive, those personality disorders. So, one can have all three or meet the criteria for all three. That's another striking finding. But it's also important to keep in mind that those three personality disorders are associated as part of the core pathology, with first, being charming in most cases, and second, being manipulative.

#### **Characteristics of Secure Attachment**

- Validation
- Intimacy and when we say intimacy, we don't mean sexuality we are talking about the ability to know and to be known by another person and this is important in all relationships and the person needs
- Safety
- Consistency
- Encouragement and support
- responsiveness
- Authenticity
- Love

#### **Interventions needed in Parental Alienation**

- Creating safety in the physical world as well as in the inner world of the child
- Developing secure attachments with the wounded child
- Validating and comforting the wounded child
- Recognizing current behaviour as manifestations of the injured child
- Grieving the lost childhood / parental relationship and other secondary losses
- Working through guilt from a context - based, trauma informed perspective

Parental alienation is, at it's core, psychological abuse and the feeling and beliefs that resulted must be processed to integrate that experience and fully grieve associated losses. Parental alienation disrupts the core attachment relationship and is traumatic for the child and will impact physically, effectively, cognitively, environmentally (and financially) and relationally.

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Acknowledgements – Nil; Source of Funding – Nil; Conflict of Interest – Nil