

Am I causing my child to become alienated from the other parent?

The term 'parental alienation syndrome' was coined by Dr Richard Gardner (1992), a child psychiatrist. In working with children caught in their parents' fights, he noticed that when one parent encouraged the child to reject the other parent, the child often did. With time, the child refused to visit the other parent. parental alienation does not, of course, include those situations where children refuse to be with a parent who has abused and hurt them. Refusing access under these conditions is 'appropriate and to be expected.

In parental alienation syndrome, with little or no evidence a parent is convinced the child is better off without the other parent. The parent lets the child know that she hates the other parent. She does this either subtly, by her attitude, or overtly, through her behaviour and words. She conveys to the child her disgust with the other parent. The parent sending these messages to the child is called 'the alienation parent.' The alienating parent can be either parent, although it is more commonly the parent with whom the child lives. The other parent is called 'the alienated parent."

Parental alienation syndrome develops easily in the emotionally unsettled period after separation. It does not spring up suddenly one day; rather, it arises slowly out of small, hardly significant behaviours: badmouthing, polarizing, manipulating, delaying, and so on. Overtime, these behaviours add up to a corrosive family problem. Parental alienation is misnamed: it should be called 'child alienation syndrome,' because it is really the child who becomes alienated.

It is absolutely critical that you in no way do anything to create this horrible situation for your child.

Not that you would deliberately do so. But it can arise from behaviours that you are not aware of, so *beware and be aware*. Study the list below and check off any behaviours you do. If you are not sure of the answers, consult with a trusted, objective friend.

1. Denigrating the other parent
2. Blaming the other parent
3. Talking at length about the other parent, even if it is 'just explaining.'
4. Making excuses for the other parent
5. Not insisting that the child spend time with the other parent by letting it be 'the child's choice.'
6. Not respecting the child's time with the other parent by being late, or early, or by not organizing what the child takes with him.
7. Not allowing for differences in parenting
8. Trying to correct the other parent's parenting
9. Telling the other parent how to parent
10. Having a fight with your ex in front of the child
11. Having a fight with your ex on the phone within the child's earshot
12. Always adding your two cents to what the child says about the other parent
13. Confirming the child's negative feelings about the other parent
14. Not wanting to share the child
15. Telling the child how much you miss him when he goes to the other parent

16. Damning the other parent with faint praise
17. Thinking you are the better parent
18. Encouraging the child to have your point of view
19. Rolling your eyes when the other parent's name is mentioned or when he is on the phone, or when he is late
20. Explaining the problems between you and your ex in such a way that the child takes your side
21. Giving the child information he should not have: knowledge about your fighting, your court proceedings, your finances, your shared past, the cause of the marital break down.
22. Making the child choose between you
23. Making the child feel guilty for loving the other parent'
24. Setting up interesting activities when the child is going to the other parent's.

Important Note:

Some of the items on this list may seem small and insignificant (like No. 19), but the effect of these behaviours is cumulative. We should add here that married parents are at times similarly disrespectful with each other and are therefore just as damning to their children. It is not good for children when parents, married or divorced, engage in power struggles.

If you have ticked off ten items on the risk, you are on the way to seriously jeopardizing your child's attachment to the other Parent.

Remember: The best way to love your child is to support his love for the other parent. This teaches him to love you.

When you undermine his love for the other parent, you are teaching him not to love you.

Adapted from "Putting Children First: A Guide for Parents Breaking Up" by Hanna McDonough and Christina Bartha, University of Toronto Press, 1999