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Estrangement and Alienation – JP Boyd

Estranged and Alienated Children

To *alienate* means to make separate. To *estrange* means to make indifferent. In family law, both terms relate to a breakdown in a child's relationship with a parent.

Children can become estranged from one parent for a good reason that has nothing to do with the behaviour of the other parent. In some cases, a child's relationship with one parent can be damaged by the actions of the other parent, sometimes in the course of a custody battle and sometimes intentionally. These children are said to have been alienated from the other parent.

This section will provide an introduction to the problem of alienated and estranged children, and discuss what the experts have to say about a largely discredited theory called Parental Alienation Syndrome. It will also look at ways of dealing with alienated and estranged children during parenting disputes, and provide a selection of helpful online and printed resources.

Introduction

The end of a romantic relationship is always difficult for parents. It can be just as difficult, if not worse, for their children. How children deal with the end of their parents' relationship has to do with two things: the age and maturity of the children, and how their parents manage the breakdown of their relationship.

Children don't see things in terms of "custody" or "parental responsibilities" when their parents' relationship ends. All they know is that something has gone wrong. Mom and dad are yelling at each other a lot, and then, one day, mom or dad isn't there anymore. Young children won't understand these adult problems. Children who are in primary school will have a better idea, since they'll have friends whose parents have separated. Pre-teens and teens will have a much more grown-up grasp of things as they'll have lost relationships of their own, and be able to appreciate the idea that their parents' relationship has ended. How children cope with their parents' separation changes as they grow older and more mature.

Things are a lot different for parents. A significant relationship has ended, and in the midst of all of the emotions that go along with that — grief, anger, jealousy, love and loss — they might find themselves also having to deal with some extremely difficult legal issues. It's even worse where the parents wind up fighting about things in court.

Litigation can have a very profound impact on people. At its core, litigation is an adversarial process: each parent is fighting the other in order to "win," and where there's a winner there's always a loser. This sort of approach to a dispute often polarizes parents and encourages them to take extreme positions. What makes this so much worse is that the parents are both fighting about something they cherish dearly, their children, and they are both fighting against someone whom they used to deeply love.

In circumstances like these, it can be easy to forget how important it is that the children maintain a positive, loving relationship with the other parent. It can also be easy to overlook the importance of managing the children's exposure to and perception of their parents' conflict. One parent's view of the other becomes clouded by hatred, malice and spite, and nothing the other parent can do is ever right. This attitude is almost impossible to shield from the children. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the children are inevitably exposed to these negative views which, without interference, can come to colour the children's own views of the other parent.

Children's experiences of separation

It is important to remember that while one parent's thoughtless comments about the other parent can have an impact on how a child sees the other parent, so too will the child's own experience of the separation. This can include:

- blaming the parent who left for breaking up the family,
- seeing a parent as injured by the actions of the other parent,
- sympathizing with an emotionally upset parent, and
- missing and feeling sad for the parent that they see less often.

These feelings may have nothing at all to do with any blameworthy conduct on the part of either parent, but they can cause a child to feel closer to one parent than the other. Further, there a number of normal reasons why a child might feel closer to one parent even in families that haven't separated, such as:

- similarities in the temperament of the child and one of the parents,
- the parent's gender,
- interests the child shares with a parent, and
- how the parent handles discipline.

There are, of course, ways that parents can behave, intentionally and unintentionally, that will encourage a child to drift towards one parent and away from the other that are blameworthy. Remember, however, that there are normal reasons why a child's experience of divorce may align with one parent over the other that have nothing to do with a parent's conduct.

Resisting visits with a parent

When a child begins to drift apart from a parent, the first sign that this might become a serious problem often occurs when the child begins to express a reluctance to spend time with the other parent. It is important to distinguish a simple reluctance from a more serious problem like estrangement or alienation. It is also important to distinguish between a reluctance that stems from a child and a

reluctance that is fostered by a parent. In a sense, this is the key difference between estrangement and alienation.

Normal reasons why a child might resist parenting time or contact include:

- age-appropriate separation anxieties,
- inability to cope with the transition between homes, especially where there is a lot of conflict between the parents,
- not wanting to leave an upset parent at home, and
- not liking the other parent's parenting style.

Of course, any resistance to separation is difficult for both parents. For the parent sending the child on the visit, it can be heart wrenching to force the child out the door. For the parent receiving the child, it can be devastating to hear — from the other parent or the child — that the parenting time or contact is unwelcome, and to experience the rejection that this entails.

These "normal" reasons why a child would be reluctant to see a parent can be aggravated by the unintentional conduct of each parent. Separated parents have a positive duty to nurture their child's relationship with the other parent. In the context of parenting time and contact, this means encouraging the child to look forward to seeing the other parent. In general, this means actively fostering the child's relationship with the other parent and refraining from making negative remarks about the other parent.

In high-conflict situations, even parents who understand this basic duty can unconsciously telegraph their feelings about the other parent to the child. Children are not stupid; they know something's not right. Even young children will pick up on non-verbal clues to a parent's feelings.

This sort of unintentional communication of emotion includes:

- making faces, grimacing, groaning, cringing or shuddering when the other parent is mentioned,
- arguing with the other parent when the children can see or hear the dispute,
- making negative comments about the other parent when the children are within earshot,
- using an emotionless or negative tone of voice when speaking to the children about the other parent, and
- reacting in a flat or negative manner when the children discuss the other parent or their activities with that parent.

Even though in these examples nothing is actually being said to the children to discourage their relationship with the other parent, they will pick up on the implications these behaviours suggest: there is something bad about one parent which is hurting the other parent. This sort of behaviour will inevitably encourage and reinforce any resistance the child might have to seeing the other parent.

When a child begins to express a reluctance to visit the other parent, both parents must act to stop the problem from getting worse.

For the parent who has the child most often, this means that you must:

- work harder at encouraging the child to look forward to the visits,

- make sure that you are not a part of the problem by unconsciously telegraphing your problems with the other parent,
- make an effort to remind the child about the other parent's positive traits,
- consider getting the child in to see a counsellor about the separation, and
- seriously consider taking a parenting after separation course.

For the parent whom the child is resisting seeing, this means that you must:

- work harder at making the child feel welcomed and listened to in your home,
- re-examine your approach to parenting issues, particularly if you were the disciplinarian during your relationship with the other parent,
- make sure that you are not insulting or mocking the other parent when the child is within earshot, and
- seriously consider taking a parenting after separation course.

None of these solutions may be effective if the child's opinion and emotions are too entrenched, if the parents are simply too angry with one another to cooperate effectively, or if one of the parents is actively working to undermine the other parent's relationship with the child.

When things go too far, or when a problem is left unchecked, a child's simple preference for one parent can develop to an extreme point, where the child is estranged or alienated from the other parent.

Knowing when there's a problem

An otherwise "normal" resistance to parenting time or contact can cross the line when the child's opinion of the parent and his or her emotional attachment to that parent begins to change. Temper tantrums about a visit, and expressions of rage and hate should send a loud and clear signal that both parents have to work a lot harder to help the child through his or her experience of the separation.

Mild expressions of a change in the child's attachment to a parent include:

- Expressing ambivalence about visiting the parent (not caring one way or the other about seeing the parent).
- Grumbling about having to go to see the other parent.
- Stating a preference for an activity (playing a game, seeing friends and so forth) over seeing the other parent.

More serious expressions of a change in the child's attachment to a parent include:

- Expressing a preference for one parent over the other, and a general ambivalence about the other parent.
- Expressing a preference for one home over the other.
- Expressing a worry about missing the parent the child is leaving.
- Being upset that an activity (playing a game, an outing, seeing friends and so forth) will be interrupted by the visit.
- Stating that visits with other parent are boring.
- Being reluctant to speak to the other parent on the telephone.

Still more serious expressions of a change include:

- Stating that he or she "doesn't like" the other parent.
- Occasionally putting the other parent down.
- Expressions of concern for the well-being of the parent the child is leaving for the visit (older children).
- Crying before the visit (younger children).
- Complaining that "it's not fair" to have to visit (older children).
- Offering promises (studying harder, doing more chores and so forth) in exchange for not having to go on the visit.
- Claiming that the other parent doesn't parent properly (bad food, unfair discipline, unwanted outings and so forth).
- Refusing to talk to the other parent when he or she telephones.

The most serious expressions of a change in the child's attachment to a parent include:

- Pitching temper tantrums before leaving for the visit (younger children).
- Becoming enraged about being forced to go to the other parent (older children).
- Stating that he or she "hates" the other parent.
- Threats about running away or involving the police (older children).
- Pleading to do anything except go on the visit.
- Making bizarre and unlikely claims about the other parent's conduct (abuse, neglect and so forth).
- Constantly making insulting comments about the other parent or putting the other parent down ("he's such a jerk," "she can't do anything right," and so forth).

Even mild indications that a child is growing emotionally distant from a parent are disturbing and warrant some attention by both parents. When a child is clearly heading from feeling ambivalent about a parent to feeling hatred towards that parent, parents should seriously consider getting the child professional help from counsellors who specialize in helping children cope with and adjust to the separation of their parents. It is often helpful for the parents themselves to find some counselling and guidance on how to approach parenting time and contact issues with the child.

Estranged children

The difference between an estranged child and an alienated child is that an estranged child has grown apart from the parent for reasons that are, to be blunt, reasonable and realistic. An alienated child, however, is the victim of one parent's efforts to destroy the child's relationship with the other parent.

An estranged child is either absolutely ambivalent about the other parent or enraged by the other parent. These feelings are, however, justified by the child's experience of the separation or by the child's experience of that parent.

These children are usually estranged as a result of:

- witnessing violence committed by that parent against the other parent,
- being the victim of abuse from that parent,

- the parent's persistently immature and self-centred behaviour,
- the parent's unduly rigid and restrictive parenting style, and/or
- the parent's own psychological or psychiatric issues.

The point here is that the child's experiences make the child's rejection of a parent *reasonable*, and are an adaptive and protective response to the parent's behaviour.

The feelings of alienated children, however, are neither reasonable nor the result of the rejected parent's conduct.

Alienated children

Alienated children reject a parent without guilt or sadness and without an objectively reasonable cause. Their views of the alienated parent are grossly distorted and exaggerated.

Alienation is most easily defined as the complete breakdown of a child's relationship with a parent as a result of a parent's efforts to turn a child against the other parent. Typically, alienation is only a problem when the parents are involved in extremely bitter and heated litigation as a result. Not every case of high conflict litigation involves alienation, but it does happen. A 1991 study by the American Bar Association found indications of alienation in the majority of 700 high-conflict divorce cases studied over 12 years.

This sort of intentional alienation is absolutely wrong and virtually unforgivable. In some circumstances, alienation can amount to child abuse. As J.M. Bone and M.R. Walsh put it in their article "Parental Alienation Syndrome: How to detect it and what to do about it," published in 1999 in the Florida Bar Journal, 73(3): 44-48:

"Any attempt at alienating the children from the other parent should be seen as a direct and willful violation of one of the prime duties of parenthood."

The parent most likely to attempt to alienate a child from the other parent is the parent who has the child for most of the time, usually because of an interim order or some other sort of temporary arrangement.

The sorts of behaviours that suggest an intention to alienate a child from the other parent include, among other things:

- making negative comments about the other parent to the child,
- stating or implying that the child is in danger when with the other parent,
- grilling the child about his or her activities, meals and living conditions when with the other parent,
- stating or implying that the activities, meals and living conditions offered by the other parent are deficient or problematic,
- setting up activities that the child will enjoy during times when the child is with the other parent,
- telling the child that it's up to him or her to decide whether to visit the other parent, and
- stating or implying that the child is being abused or maltreated by the other parent.

The consequences of parental alienation or attempted alienation can be quite profound. Alienation at its best is a form of psychological programming; at worst, it's brainwashing. Alienation may result in the permanent destruction of a child's relationship with a parent and in long-lasting psychological problems.

In their article, Bone and Walsh conclude that when alienation has been identified, the solution is to deal with it immediately:

"When attempted [parental alienation syndrome] has been identified, successful or not, it must be dealt with swiftly by the court. If it is not, it will contaminate and quietly control all other parenting issues and then lead only to unhappiness, frustration, and, lastly, parental estrangement. ... While any application which flows from a suspicion of alienation will be costly and worsen the conflict between the parents, it is urgent that the alienation be stopped immediately if its long-term impact is to be avoided."