

## **ALIENATION OF CHILDREN BY PARENTS: A TRAGEDY FOR EVERYONE**

**By Dr. Larry W. Waterman, Registered Psychologist**

Situations in which a child is alienated from a parent are becoming increasingly frequent to the detriment of both the child and parent. However, as with many concepts that gain public recognition, not everything is as simple as it seems. A large part of the difficulty in my opinion, is the confusion regarding what happens in a highly contested and very litigious separation and divorce and what happens in a true alienating situation involving a child and a parent.

We know that in approximately one percent of separations, married or common-law, things get very nasty and situations occur that are not good for the children or parents. Such situations tend to spiral downwards in an ongoing litany of accusations, anger, denied access, withheld child support and other expressions of each parent's anger and increasing hatred of the other parent. In such situations, elements that occur in true alienating situations can be identified but that does not necessarily mean that true alienation is in fact taking place.

In the twenty-six years that I have been conducting Section 15/Custody and Access assessments for the Courts, I have heard many parents, usually men, claim that the child's mother is trying to alienate the child from the father. I should note that in some situations it is the father who is accused of alienating the child from the mother but this is fairly rare. However, when I investigate the situation and assess what is going on, it is clear to me as an objective assessor that in fact the process that is occurring is a result of the anger and frustration that both parents are experiencing. To understand this, it's important to be aware of some very important concepts.

When parents separate and there are children involved, there are two sources of power and control. The first source is the child or children of the relationship and the second is financial. In our society, it's still true that the majority of children stay with their mother when parents separate while the father moves out of the house and continues working to provide for the family. When mothers are working, they often have to cut back their hours thereby reducing their financial stability and ability to provide for the children. That makes the mother more dependent on the father which also is a source of frustration and anger. Due to the case law and practices that have developed over the years, the father's access to the children typically is reduced to one evening a week and every second weekend. As more fathers are

increasingly involved in their children's upbringing, this is a significant reduction in parenting involvement and for such fathers a "slap in the face" leaving them also feeling angry and frustrated. When these variables are put into a situation in which each parent is trying to get what they believe is "fair" from the other parent, it's not hard to see that the situation is ripe for misinterpretation and disaster. Typical scenarios that are often observed are as follows. In the first case, when the mother does not believe that the father is providing adequate financial support, she will withhold access to the children from the father as a way of "bringing him into line". When the father does not receive what he believes is fair access to the children, he will withhold financial support in order to force the mother to provide what he thinks is appropriate access. In both cases, the big loser is the child or children.

A variable that comes into play when there is a bitter divorce situation are allegations of sexual abuse made against one parent by the other parent, typically the mother alleging sexual abuse by the father. In these situations, typically the Ministry acting for the protection of the child and the police become involved which can increase the complexity of the situation being assessed. To some extent, making a false allegation of sexual abuse against the other parent can be considered to be the ultimate alienating situation. Even if there is absolutely no information or evidence found to support the allegation, it can permanently impact on the accused parent's reputation and ability to parent the children.

Another variable that has become increasingly important is the political nature of the divorce process. The topic of family violence has become increasingly prominent in the separation and divorce research literature and appropriately so. It is interesting that new research is starting to demonstrate that while the majority of family violence is perpetrated by men, the amount of family violence perpetrated by women may in fact be significantly higher than was originally thought. Family violence is important to understand in the parental alienation literature because some women's groups have successfully argued in the Courts that when father's claim alienation, they are actually trying to cover up physical and other forms of abuse against the mother. That is why it is important that anyone practicing in this area be sensitive and understand such topics as family violence, alienation, the process of destructive divorces and allegations of sexual abuse.

On the other hand, it's important to recognize that not all men involved in separation and divorce are abusive toward their partner. Relationships do break down, people do grow

apart and there are many reasons why separations and divorces take place. However, when men do not obtain regular access to their children, they tend to become angry and there is a higher incidence of allegations of alienation in such situations. It is important to note that there are also a number of reasons why the family's overall financial situation may deteriorate. First, a single income may now have to be stretched over two households. Sometimes the father who is often the main financial support for the family becomes depressed and is unable to work for a period of time. At times, the father may in fact be so angry at the mother that he withholds financial support to "teach her a lesson" instead of focusing on the importance of providing adequate financial support for the children. As anyone who has been through a separation and divorce knows, emotions run high, rational and logical thought deteriorates, and cooperation between parents deteriorates significantly. However, that does not necessarily mean that a situation involving parent-child alienation is in fact taking place.

The concept of parental alienation was first identified by Dr. Richard Gardner, a psychiatrist in the US. Unfortunately, Dr. Gardner entitled his discovery "Parental Alienation Syndrome" which has provided opponents of his concept with ready ammunition. Situations involving parental alienation between children and a parent are not a true "syndrome" but rather a situation that develops over a period of time with quite well defined characteristics. To argue that the whole concept of alienation should be dismissed is akin to throwing the proverbial "baby out with the bathwater". In my years of practice, I have seen very well defined situations involving alienation of children from parents and unfortunately, the frequency appears to be increasing.

The eight characteristics associated with alienation involving a child being alienated from a parent are as follows: The child is aligned with the alienating parent in a campaign of negativity and hatred against the target parent, with the child making active contributions to the situation; rationalizations for making negative statements about the target parent are often weak, frivolous or absurd and little or no evidence to support these statements are found upon investigation; animosity toward the target parent lacks the ambivalence that is typically found in human relationships; the child asserts that the decision to reject the targeted parent is the child's own in what Gardner referred to as the "Independent Thinker" phenomena; the child reflexively supports the parent with whom the child is aligned without question; the child does not express any guilt or remorse for how the targeted parent may be feeling no matter what

information is made available to the child about the impact of the child's statements; the child's statements reflect themes and terminology used by the alienating parent; and animosity by the child is directed toward the targeted parent as well as that parent's extended family and friends regardless of how good a relationship may have existed previously. Obviously, depending on when the alienating situation is assessed, some of these characteristics may not be fully developed. However, the majority of such characteristics typically need to be present in order for an alienation situation to be identified.

In summary, does alienation of one parent by another parent happen? Absolutely! It typically occurs in situations in which the emotional dysfunction is very high, a personality disorder may be present, there is an escalating situation involving hatred and anger between the parents, and the children are the ones who are negatively impacted to the greatest degree. Despite all of the research that is now available demonstrating that children need access to both their mother and their father, some parents conclude that a child does not need the other parent. Is this abuse? In my opinion, yes! Is it an example of family violence? To some extent, yes! Does the situation tend to be tolerated or ignored by the legal process until it becomes very severe and almost impossible to reverse? In my experience, that typically happens all too often. It is becoming increasingly obvious to anyone who practices within the area of family law that the direction we need to take is to reduce conflict, keep matters out of the Court if at all possible, facilitate ongoing relationships between children and both of their parents, and develop better ways of dispute resolution than by always ending up in front of a Judge. If we are not successful in this quest, we are going to see increasing numbers of children who are negatively impacted by an ongoing acrimonious relationship between their parents.

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