

PARENTAL ALIENATION

Parts 1, 2, 3, and 4 written by Mitchell Rosen for the Press-Enterprise Newspaper

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Parental Alienation Part 1 of 4

One of the most difficult and gut-wrenching types of counseling I have ever attempted involves repairing parental alienation. When a young child has been told repeatedly how bad, dishonest, evil and selfish the "other" parent is by the parent they live with, it is a huge uphill battle to try and bring the alienated parent back into a relationship with the child.

If the parent who has been pushed out of a child's life attempts to come back in, this mother or father must somehow convince the child that not only is no harm intended but that the only security the child has ever known is not at risk.

Many kids will tell the parent they do not know, "Stay away. I hate you. I know you just want back into my life so you don't have to pay child support. My mom (or dad) has told me about your tricks so don't even try and talk to me!"

Greeted with this type of hatred, many parents fire back with, "That's just your mother (or father) talking. You are being brainwashed. You can't possibly remember times when I abused you, neglected you or abandoned you because it never happened!"

A young child hearing his or her feelings being invalidated this way quickly becomes on the defensive and shouts back, "These are MY feelings, no one is telling me what to say!"

Then we have the classic stalemate of trying to repair parental alienation. If, in fact, the alienated parent did not abandon or abuse their child but was somehow kept from them either by deceit or financial manipulation of the judicial system, then the alienated parent must somehow access a child

who, very often, does not want to be accessed.

When it is clear the child is fearful that opening his or her heart will result in the custodial parent feeling betrayed, this kid is in an awful spot. The counselor must appeal to the custodial parent to be supportive of a reconciliation and basically give the child permission to love both parents.

Unfortunately, when the power struggle between parents has gone on for years and is complicated by court battles, infidelities and other troubles, it takes a Herculean effort to get the custodial parent to see they are only hurting the child by perpetuating the polarization.

When any counselor believes the alienated parent is not a threat to the child and is trying to do the right thing by re-entering the kid's life, they may recommend re-starting visitation even though the child does not wish to. This is sometimes the only way a counselor can give the child what they deserve: a mother and a father committed to being in their lives in a healthy and loving manner.

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Digging into kids' alienation

I have written frequently about parental alienation syndrome, a term used primarily in child-custody cases. Parental alienation syndrome (PAS) happens when one parent alienates or brainwashes a child against the other parent.

Therapists realize PAS may be present when the child has no ambivalence, no discomfort at all vilifying or demonizing the parent he or she has been taught to hate. The child will say things like, "My parent is always selfish, only cares about themselves, never even tries to be fair to the 'good' parent."

A child who is truly victimized by PAS has no problem being abusive toward the hated parent and often cites petty or even manufactured reasons to justify cruelty toward this parent. A boy or girl who has a parent who is truly abusive or neglectful may also feel anger and desire little or no contact, but their emotions are all over the place; riddled with longing, sadness, guilt and not usually punctuated by a pervasive desire to protect the good parent.

Most kids want to love both their parents. But when a child has been taught to hate one, the words the child uses to describe the vilified parent often show this.

Kids who have been brainwashed may use lots of profanity, simplicity and cruelty in the way they describe the parent they believe to be "all bad."

It's one of the ways therapists attempt to identify if parental alienation syndrome has taken place or if the child is justified in not wanting contact with the parent he or she professes to hate.

I have counseled hundreds of parents who claim PAS, but really they are just abusive, neglectful or self-absorbed parents. Since PAS is not yet a recognized disorder, a clever parent with an even smarter lawyer may shout PAS when the kids want little to do with them. This could be to avoid paying child support or simply to wreak vengeance on the ex.

It takes a lot of time and patience to sift through all the accusations and

counteraccusations to ferret out whether a child is wise to avoid the parent or has been indoctrinated to hate and fear this parent. Sometimes kids hate their parents for all the right reasons. But when a child is brought into my office proclaiming to totally hate one parent and sees nothing but good about the other, my radar goes up.

Often I'll see judges temporarily award custody to the parent the child prefers until sufficient counseling can occur. But unless the counseling also involves the alienated parent, any report the counselor may write is likely to be biased and probably useless. Any counseling potentially involving PAS should be done by a therapist familiar with the dynamics and not easily taken in by one side.

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Rosen column: Put kids first in divorce

Children who are victims of parental alienation syndrome are likely to become emotionally damaged. For me this is the hardest part of doing counseling in PAS cases. Children need and deserve a mother and a father. To intentionally deny a child access to a parent for bonding, love and interaction is a loss for that child.

If parents respected and enjoyed their partners, they would still be married. For that reason it is no surprise most divorces are ugly. Yet, I have seen many parents put their own pettiness aside to assure their children do not suffer. The parents make it a point to let their child know Mom and Dad can still communicate and wish their child well when it is the other parent's time with the child.

It should not be hard to understand that kids need to look up to their parents. So, when one parent bad-mouths, misinterprets or intentionally misrepresents the other, this behavior results in a confused and anxious child.

There are lots of ways that PAS messes with the minds of children. If a parent instills in a child the belief that the other parent is evil, then what does that do for the self-image of the child? He or she is then the son or daughter of an evil person and no child should be burdened with that legacy.

When a parent wrongly convinces the child the other parent is out to hurt him or her and will stop at nothing until they are bankrupt, lose custody or are physically damaged, the child learns it is now his or her role to protect the targeted parent. Children deserve innocence, and their childhood is robbed from them when they are taught to protect their parent instead of being protected.

Kids will quickly learn to play one house against the other and often discover that bad-mouthing one parent to the other is a way to get attention and affection.

Another destructive behavior in PAS triangles is a parent calling the police about alleged abuse. The children associate police officers with one of

their parents getting into trouble and it is not unusual for kids to see their mother or father led away in handcuffs.

Often the officers will enforce court orders, as they are obliged to do, but these orders may be written as temporary stopgaps until more thorough psychological evaluations can be completed. Unfortunately, these evaluations can take months to finish and the backlog in Family Court means it may be many more months before the psychologists and therapists are able to educate the court.

Meanwhile, there is a terrific tug of war with children being put in the role of savior, prosecutor, therapist and confidant. None of these are healthy roles for a child losing his or her family through an acrimonious divorce.

There are not enough inches in this column to delineate all of the ways children are victimized by PAS other than to point out, long after the divorce is complete, the kids may be left with only one parent and that parent is often the one with serious emotional problems.

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Reversing Alienation

It is almost impossible to know if a child has truly been victimized by parental alienation syndrome (PAS). There is no test for it, no X-ray can be examined and lengthy psychological evaluations have a certain amount of subjectivity regardless of the clinician's efforts to be impartial.

Assuming a parent is able to convince the court his or her child has been manipulated into hating him or her, then what? If the child is 15, 16 or 17 years old, the chances of reversing the alienation are not great. Just hearing from a court-appointed psychologist that alienation has occurred would not take away the child's anger, mistrust and apprehension.

If the alienated parent is successful in educating the court that he or she has been unfairly separated from a child, he or she then faces the choice of either leaving the child with the parent responsible for the alienation or risking further estrangement by forcing the child to move.

Story continues below

Switching custody to the estranged parent, completely and suddenly, is referred to as immersion therapy. The child is immersed into the custody of the parent he or she has been taught to fear. Not only is the child in the care of a parent he or she may not have seen for years, but an essential part of the therapy is to either limit or stop any contact with the parent the child has known as the "good" parent.

For immersion therapy to be successful, the alienating parent must either be denied any contact or have all interactions with the child monitored and supervised so further alienation cannot take place.

A therapist skilled in working with alienated children monitors all discussions about the family. It may take months, maybe even close to a year, before the child exhales and relaxes into the care of the parent he or she used to loathe and fear.

The good news is that it is possible to reverse alienation. The child must also be given individual therapy to sort through the myriad of feelings he or she will experience when understanding how the once-trusted parent could have violated his or her trust so completely.

Each child responds differently. Some, especially younger children

(younger than 10), may be able to adapt fairly quickly. Other children may need an inordinate amount of reassurance, patience and stability, with no outbursts of parental anger. Rages from the formerly estranged parent will only reinforce the notion that the child should fear the parent, that he or she really is emotionally out of control. The parent should remember this is a time when the child needs stability and consistency above all else.

No therapist who makes a recommendation for immersion therapy does so easily. The consequences are grave and the risks considerable. The only thing that could be worse would be to leave an innocent child with a parent so emotionally ill that the child will learn most of life's lessons backward.