



## Barking up the Wrong Tree;

### *Understanding Why a Child May Resist Contact with a Parent*

With the increase claims of parental alienation in custody disputes, family lawyers must understand the fine distinctions between true parental alienation and other forms of visitation refusal. Otherwise, you may claim parental alienation on a case or end up defending against it without fully understanding other options. To avoid barking up the wrong tree, it is imperative to understand the difference between full blown parental alienation, alignment, estrangement, enmeshment, alienating behaviors without resistance and normal developmental visitation refusal. Parental alienation is a very complicated process and cannot be adequately addressed in a brief article. However, the questions below may assist you in recognizing and differentiating parental alienation.

#### **1. What is Parental Alienation?**

**Parental Alienation:** Simply defined, Parental Alienation is “when parents attempt to alienate the child and it results in the child’s strident rejection of a parent accompanied by strong resistance or refusal to visit with the alienated parent.” (*Wallerstein & Kelly -1976*) The rejection is without legitimate justification. The alienation causes clinically significant distress or impairment in social, academic or other areas of functioning. Research indicates that most alienated children become most resistant around 11 years of age.

#### **2. What is Not Necessarily Parental Alienation?**

**Alienating Behaviors:** “Parents may behave in alienating ways consciously or unconsciously; in a mild or server manner, in a purposeful or inadvertent manner and fail to support the child’s relationship with the other parent when there is no basis to that reality.” (*Leslie Drozd 2010*) Depending upon age and many other factors the child may or may not become alienated from the other parent.

**Enmeshment:** According to Janet Johnston (2011), enmeshment develops from an inappropriate closeness between a parent and child, where boundaries become blurred. The two parties become over-involved. The child’s sense of self becomes totally dependent upon that parent. A few examples include, spending all leisure time together with little to no age appropriate friends, sharing too much information without respect for parent/child boundaries. The child may be resistant to spend time with the other parent but is still able to do so. However, depending upon the age and other circumstances this child may very likely become fully alienated over time.

**Alliance or Alignment:** When a parent child relationship causes a dysfunctional triangle it is referred to as alignment. The term “Triangulation” refers to a situation in which one family member will not communicate directly with another family member, but will communicate with a third party (such as the child) which can lead to the third family member becoming part of the triangle. Triangulation can also create “splitting” in which one family member plays the third member against the one they are upset with. Often the member doing the splitting engages in character assassination with both parties. The aligned child may or may not resist visitation however, they can become fully alienated over time. Alignment or triangulation is not family nor divorce specific. It can occur with any group of three or more.

**Estrangement:** When the parent’s past real behaviors have created an uncomfortable situation for the child. Unlike parental alienation where there is no valid or realistic reason for the rejection, estrangement has a reasonable reason for the resistance. The child may experience anxiety or resentment due to witnessing domestic violence, parental history of drug or alcohol abuse, emotional or physical abuse, intrusiveness/control, inept or neglectful parenting, mental illness, or due to prolonged periods of lack of contact due to geographical distance or disinterest. The child may become estranged due to **mis-attunement** which is when a parent is not attuned to their child. They lack knowledge in child development have unrealistic expectations and insensitivity towards the child. Estrangement always includes a clear, realistic and identifiable reason for the resistance to visitation.

Now that we have looked at the more complicated reasons for possible visitation refusal consider those reasons for visitation resistance or refusal that may fall under normal or developmental explanations.

### **3. What are Other Possible Reasons for Visitation Resistance?**

**A few examples of developmental/normative factors include:**

- Adolescent/developmental issues (i.e. social life)
- Greater social opportunities at one home versus minimal friends available.
- Lack of continuity between homes (i.e. activities)
- Preference for new and “intact step-family”
- Resistance to new step family.
- Opposition to non-custodial parent' style of parenting
- On-going stress of loyalty binds

**Affinity** is a child’s preference for a particular parent and is a normal developmental phenomenon due to temperament, gender, shared interests, identification with one parent’s physical or psychological attributes or parenting style. The child still has a positive relationship with the other parent. This alone does not constitute PA. This phenomenon is also not divorce-specific.

### **4. Can There be More than One Answer?**

Professionals have begun to recognize that there are situations that may fall into more than one category. Consider the possible combinations of these terms.

- Alignment +/- Enmeshment
- Alignment + Parental Alienation
- Affinity + Alignment (also known as Alliance)
- Affinity + Estrangement
- Estrangement
- Estrangement + Alienating Behaviors
- Enmeshment
- Enmeshment + Estrangement
- Enmeshment + Parental Alienation
- Parental Alienation (with visitation refusal)
- Parental Alienating Behaviors without visitation refusal (PAB)

## **5. How do You Differentiate PA?**

Some basic questions may help you differentiate between parental alienation and other potential reasons for visitation refusal:

- Is there a valid or realistic reason why the child would resist visitation? Such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, domestic violence, poor parenting or neglect?
- Does the child love the so-called targeted parent?
- Does the child spend time with the targeted parent without too much resistance?
- In spite of one parent attempting to alienate their child, does the child continue to have a positive relationship with the other parent?

If you answer yes to any of these questions, you are not looking at a case for true parental alienation. It is likely estrangement, alignment, affinity or normal development reasons for the impaired relationship. When multiple factors are involved the two most complicated factors are when estrangement co-exists with alienating behaviors. Although this may not meet the criteria for parental alienation the targeted parent may be responsible for an estranged relationship while the other parent contributes to the resistance with alienating behaviors. They make take full advantage of the estrangement and alien with the child against the parent. Although these behaviors may be alienating, this case would not be classified as a true alienation case. It would be a hybrid form of alienation that requires treatment goals for both contributions.

The more complicated cases the more questions to be explored such as:

Is the child far too dependent upon the other parent? Has the targeted parent been left out of parenting throughout the marriage? Does the child have strong social connections? Does the parent have a life outside parenting? Does the parent homeschool? Does the parent make negative comments about the other parent when the

child can overhear? Does the parent make unilateral decisions without discussing issues? Does the child have a strong relationship with their stepfamily? Has the child felt displaced by a remarriage or step siblings? Does the visitation schedule interfere with the child's activities or adolescent social life?

## 6. What are Some Typical “Red Flags” for P.A.?

Assuming there are no other factors such as a realistic reason found in estrangement or other factors the following are typical characteristics and behaviors noted by an alienating parent.

### Typical Characteristics of the Alienating Parent:

- Emotionally fragile
  - Sensitive to narcissistic injuries
  - Over-focused on right and wrong
  - Revengeful, bitter
  - Potentially dependent on their child
  - Indulges and empowers their child
  - Highly defensive and projects blame
  - Lack insight into their own behaviors and the impact on others.
  - They may reward, not admonish children for inappropriate behaviors.
  - They hold malicious or strongly believed allegations of abuse that have not been substantiated after repeated investigations.
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|------------------------------------|
| Emotionally impaired typically BPD |
| Need for control and power         |
| Rigid black and white thinking     |
| Enmeshed with their child          |
| Role reversal                      |
| Compromised ability to parent      |
| View themselves as flawless        |

### Exclusionary Behaviors of Alienating Parents:

- They teach their child the other parent is totally unacceptable
- Present themselves as the only “good” parent
- Repeat negative comments about the other parent
- Claim “separation anxiety” to withhold visits
- Adheres to rigid time-sharing
- Uses illness to block access
- Interrupt the child's time with the other parent
- Sabotage the child's visits ie: calls multiple times per day
- Magnify parental flaws
- Use negative names to describe other parent
- Use “us” language to refer to the divorce
- Openly blames the other parent
- Destroy physical reminders of the other parent
- Make loaded comments while claiming to encourage visitation
- Assume a “neutral” role
- Employ guilt, manipulation and fear to force the child to choose them over the co-parent
- Withhold mail, gifts and calls from the child
- Imply the other parent is dangerous
- Use religious or racial differences to discourage the relationship with the parent
- Make false claims of neglect or abuse

- May encourage the child to use the mother's maiden name.
- May home school as a means of control.

### **Characteristics of the Alienated Child:**

- Vulnerable yet highly attuned to alienating parent's needs
- Fear showing any signs of love or affection because it will be seen as betrayal
- Dependent yet claim to be "independent thinkers"
- Anxious/fearful and often enmeshed.
- Complete support of the alienating parent
- Poor coping and reality testing
- To cope with shifting loyalty they will align with one parent- the parent more likely to reject them if they do not take sides.
- History of separation anxiety/insecure attachments
- Will spread animosity to extended family and friends of the targeted parent.
- Express guilt feelings about their parent's divorce
- Center of parental warfare
- Identify with or play the rescuer of the AP
- Assume caretaking roles of a parent
- Feels conditionally loved
- Abused child (psychological mistreatment)

### **The Child's Exclusionary Behaviors:**

- Uses "us" language when describing the divorce
- Lacks appreciation for gifts or other signs of affection from the targeted parent
- Frequently claim the targeted parent breaks promises. Views this as hostile
- Distorts past or demonstrates selective amnesia regarding the former relationship
- Preoccupation with overwhelming sense of "hatred" and may denigrate the parent.
- View's targeted parent as all bad and loved parent as all good.
- Maintains a clear distinction between two households.
- Profess their decision to renounce is their own choice.
- Use rehearsed phrases when making allegations and uses "borrowed scenarios"
- Provide illogical and exaggerated reasons for hatred
- Unquestionably accepts allegations of loved parent
- Disregards the feelings of the targeted parent
- Ignores or rejects targeted parent when in the company of the "loved" parent
- When alone with the targeted parent they experience emotions ranging from animosity to mild affection
- Professes hatred for the extended family of the targeted parent.
- May manipulate to reduce anxiety or gain power.

## **7. What Options Exist for Finding Professionals to Make a Clinical Determination?**

When you are not clear that you are dealing with PA, seek the advice of an expert in the field of parental alienation. Other options of course, include having a mental health provider meet with

all parties to ascertain if your case is an alienation case or a hybrid form of alienation. To obtain the necessary cooperation between parties you may need to have the court appoint a neutral professional to answer this question. Unlike a custody evaluator who will be doing testing among other tasks, this professional explores the dynamics of the parental behaviors, the targeted parent's history of parenting involvement and the types of behaviors exhibited by the child. This requires a professional with a family systems background to assess the dynamics from each perspective. It is not necessary to submit the parties to psychological testing. Meeting with all parties, including the children, alone and in dyads and reviewing documents will typically provide the necessary answers. An expert in alienation will find the answers quicker and with less cost than to appoint a custody evaluator or guardian ad litem.

## **8. What Can Courts do for P.A. Cases?**

After the Court recognizes a case for parental alienation their first intervention is typically to often order the child and “targeted parent” to attend reunification therapy to help rebuild their relationship. However, experience has shown that the alienating parent will typically escalate their negative behaviors as soon as the child and targeted parent make improvements. The only way in which reunification therapy will succeed is with the appointment of a parenting coordinator to manage and monitor the family case. ([www.parentingcoordinationatlanta.com](http://www.parentingcoordinationatlanta.com))

Due to the pathology typically involved in Parental Alienation cases, family attorneys should recognize that no amount of therapy, medication, or education will change the alienating parent's thinking or their destructive behaviors. In many severe cases the only intervention is a change in custody and a period of time with no contact between aliening parent and child. This may seem far too risky, however, in severe cases it is worth the risk to give the child a chance to develop in healthy relationship. Clawar and Rivlin 1991 found that children who were forced to change custody “expressed relief to be able to save face and lay blame for seeing the other parent on someone else.” Lampel 1996 reported that 18 out of 26 cases reported significant improvement with a change in custody. According Amy Baker, children who grew up being alienated experienced several negative long-term effects. Furthermore, these adults report that “they succumbed to the pressure and rejected one parent to please the other.” No matter how you look at parental alienation, it is a real phenomenon, a form of emotional abuse that is harming our children and their families.

**Author:** Susan Boyan LMFT is the founder of Family Solutions Counseling Center and the Cooperative Parenting Institute which provides services for separating and divorcing families such as co-parenting groups, mediation, collaborative services, parenting coordination and expert testimony. Susan has co-authored *The Cooperative Parenting and Divorce; A parent guide to effective co-parenting*, *The Psychotherapist as Parenting Coordinator in High-Conflict Divorce* and *Crossroads of Parenting and Divorce; 5 Steps to Prevent Divorce Abuse*. She offers seminars and training to professionals in Atlanta and abroad. [www.cooperativeparenting.com](http://www.cooperativeparenting.com)

