

# Parental Alienation

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## Background

*It is fairly widely accepted and entrenched in our law that both parents' involvement is the key to providing a child with greater opportunities to find his/her path to success. A secure and healthy attachment to both parents nurture the physical, emotional, and social development of a child. Healthy parental involvement and intervention in the child's day-to-day life lays the foundation for developing happy and content relationships with others in the child's adult life.*

*- F. Bezuidenhout, Acting Judge of the High Court.*

### **1. Introduction**

Parental alienation is a process by which one parent negatively influences a child's opinion of the other parent. In the process of parental alienation, one parent (the alienating parent) damages how the child views the other parent (the targeted parent). As a result, the child becomes extremely dedicated to the alienating parent while unjustly demeaning the alienated parent (Baker, 2020, Harman et al. 2019 & Kruk, 2018.).

Therefore, in the parental alienation process, an alienating parent tries to exert control over the child's life by instilling animosity between the child and the targeted parent, with the goal of creating a negative relationship between them. The difference between a child who is estranged or has a difficult relationship with his or her parent and an alienated parent is that an alienated child rejects and does not see any good attributes of the target parent whereas she/he does not see or highlight the negative attributes of the favored parent (Kruk, 2018). This results in the targeted parent being seen in a completely negative light while the favored parent is seen as perfect.

### **Alienating Behavior Manifestation**

Alienating behaviour can be observed when a child exhibits rude, arrogant, and disrespectful behaviour toward the targeted parent. The child may also come up with weak justifications or reasons for not wanting to spend time with the targeted parent. In other instances, the child may show a lack of ambivalence by completely favouring the other parent and viewing them as perfect, while being negative towards the targeted parent.

The child often claims that their rejection of the targeted parent is their own decision and that nobody has influenced them. They often try to assure others that they are not being told what

to say. The alienating child exhibits a lack of guilt, and he/she would typically reject the targeted parent without feeling remorse. They may not understand or recognise the negative impact of their behaviour.

The child displays fierce loyalty to the favoured parent, often aligning themselves with that parent's perspective and beliefs. Sometimes, the child may even use a language or argument that may not be age-appropriate or beyond their developmental understanding. For example, a child would use financial terms like "maintenance" to justify their rejection of a parent.

Lastly, a child may cut ties with close friends or family members who have a positive relationship with the targeted parent. This behaviour is aimed at isolating the child from influences that may challenge their negative views.

## **2. Alienating Tactics Used by the Alienating Parent**

Various tactics and behaviours can be associated with parental alienation. These actions are aimed at manipulating the child's perception of the targeted parent and creating a negative image of them.

Some of the tactics include:

***Badmouthing:*** The alienating parent speaks negatively about the targeted parent, providing misleading and degrading information to the child.

***Interfering with parenting time/visitation and contact:*** The alienating parent uses various strategies to disrupt the targeted parent's time with the child, such as arranging conflicting activities or making the child believe it is their choice whether to see the targeted parent.

***Limiting/interference with email or telephone contact:*** The alienating parent restricts or controls communication between the child and the targeted parent, potentially changing telephone numbers or allowing contact only through the alienating parent's phone.

***Limiting/interference with symbolic contact:*** The alienating parent may return gifts from the targeted parent or intentionally make them disappear, creating a distorted narrative about the targeted parent's behaviour and history.

***Withholding love and approval:*** The alienating parent changes their attitude towards the child when they seem to enjoy time with the targeted parent, creating confusion and emotional manipulation.

***Telling the child that the other parent does not love them:*** The alienating parent perpetuates the narrative that the targeted parent does not care for the child, using manipulative statements to undermine the child's relationship with the targeted parent.

***Forcing the child to choose:*** The child is put in a position where they have to choose between the alienating parent and the targeted parent, creating emotional distress and loyalty conflicts.

***Creating the impression that the other parent is dangerous:*** The alienating parent manipulates the child's perception by distorting the targeted parent's history and upbringing, making the child believe they may be in danger.

***Confiding in the child:*** The alienating parent discusses their disagreements with the targeted parent in front of the child, sharing one-sided information that favours their perspective.

***Using the child as a spy:*** The alienating parent interrogates the child about the targeted parent's life, seeking negative information to use against them.

***Emotional manipulation:*** The alienating parent manipulates the child's emotions by sharing misleading information and making them feel guilty about their relationship with the targeted parent.

***Undermining the targeted parent's authority:*** The alienating parent disregards the targeted parent's authority and makes the child believe that only their rules need to be followed.

### **3. Effects of Parental Alienation**

Parental alienation can disrupt children's social-emotional development, leading to difficulties in forming healthy emotional bonds and trusting relationships, as well as difficulty in expressing emotions and forming secure attachments.

Children alienated from their parents may experience depression and anxiety due to the loss of loving relationships and emotional manipulation. Parental alienation can cause impulse control difficulties in children, leading to impulsive behaviour and anger outbursts. Social isolation can result, which causes withdrawal from social activities and relationship formation.

It can also lead to low self-esteem and increased risk of substance abuse in adulthood as children internalise negative messages and believe they're unworthy of love and affection. Academic difficulties in children leading to emotional stress, demotivation and behavioural problems in the school setting can also be observed.

### **4. Addressing Parental Alienation**

Severe parental alienation can be addressed through a combination of legal, therapeutic, and educational interventions. These strategies aim to protect the child's well-being and promote a healthy relationship with both parents. Court intervention may be necessary in order to modify custody arrangements or impose consequences on the alienating parent. This could

strengthen the child's relationship with the targeted parent as well as safeguard the best interest of the child.

The best interest of the child when dealing with parental alienation becomes the primary focus, including the child's safety, well-being, and development. This may involve removing the child from an unsafe environment, providing necessary support services, and facilitating a healthy relationship with both parents, if possible.

Addressing parental alienation is crucial as it can harm the child's emotional well-being and create obstacles to their healthy development. Courts and child protection authorities may include counselling, mediation, or supervised visitations with the aim of promoting a healthy and positive relationship between the child and both parents.

In some cases of severe alienation intervention may include giving the rejected parent custody and forbidding any communication between the child and the parent who is alienating them. The alienating parent may be required to work with a mental health professional to learn what not to do and how to foster a loving relationship between the child and the formerly targeted parent. The targeted parent and child are then afforded a chance to reestablish their relationship.

The majority of suggestions for reunification in cases of extreme parental alienation do not call for the demise of the alienated parent. While switching a child's custody to the alienated parent and supervising the child's contact with the alienating parent may seem severe, the alienating parent often has plenty of opportunities to learn how to get along with their child and the other parent and eventually reclaim their parental role.

In cases whereby the child has been removed from the alienating parent and placed in the custody of the alienated parent, the child's development was found to be flourishing as a result of their relationship with that parent being restored. A child may experience short-term and long-term emotional and psychological trauma if one parent actively works to keep them apart from the other parent. The Court may alter a child's custody arrangement if "the child's present environment endangers the child's physical or emotional health or impairs the child's emotional development and the harm likely to be caused by a change of environment is outweighed by the advantage of a change to the child" (Warshak, 2015).

In other words, if a parent is able to demonstrate that the other parent is driving the child away from him or her, the targeted parent may be entitled to request a change in custody from the other parent. Removing a child from the influence of the parent who has gradually persuaded them that they do not want a relationship with the other parent may be the only option to save the relationship between the targeted parent and the child.

It is important to note that interventions in cases of parental alienation can vary depending on the specific circumstances and the jurisdiction in which the case is being handled. It is important to consult with legal and mental health professionals to determine the most appropriate interventions for your specific situation. Each case is unique, and interventions should be tailored to meet the child and family's needs.

Reunification therapy and co-parenting education are specialised treatments for alienated parents and children. Reunification therapy focuses on rebuilding relationships while co-parenting education teaches effective communication and conflict-resolution skills to improve co-parenting. Individual therapy can help a child address emotional and psychological issues from alienation, fostering coping strategies and self-esteem. Parenting coordinators facilitate communication and compliance with Court orders. Ongoing monitoring and support are necessary to ensure the child's well-being and progress in the reunification process.

## **5. Conclusion**

During parental alienation cases in Courts, mediation is encouraged and plays a major role. Mental health professionals are most likely to be successful in assisting parents and their children. It is crucial to consider the significance of the Court assigning expert advisors to serve as mediators between parents and actively pursuing reconciliation methods between the former partners.

It is also important to emphasise the long-term effects on children when making decisions in parental alienation cases. While temporal separation from the alienating parent may have short-term challenges, it is essential to consider the potential long-term benefits of reestablishing a healthy relationship with both parents. The involvement of mental health practitioners can also provide the necessary support and guidance to facilitate the healing and reunification process.

Each case is unique, and it is crucial to approach parental alienation with a comprehensive understanding of the specific dynamics and needs of the individuals involved. Collaboration between legal, mental health, and educational professionals can help create a holistic approach that prioritises the well-being and best interests of the child at all times.

## **References**

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