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Surviving

Parental

Alienation

*a journey of hope
and healing*

Published by Rowman & Littlefield
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

10 Thornbury Road, Plymouth PL6 7PP, United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Baker, Amy J. L.

Surviving parental alienation : a journey of hope and healing / Amy J. L. Baker and Paul R. Fine.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.


ISBN 978-1-4422-2677-7 (cloth : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-4422-2678-4 (electronic)

1. Parent and child. 2. Parent and adult child. 3. Parental alienation syndrome. 4. Alienation (Social psychology) 5. Children of divorced parents—Counseling of. I. Fine, Paul R., 1955– II. Title.

HQ755.85.B3347 2014

302.5'44—dc23

2013045191

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

Experiences,^[12] as well as by Baker, Burkhard, and Kelly in “Differentiating Alienated From Not Alienated Children: A Pilot Study.”^[13] Even those who disagree with some of the tenets of parental alienation theory—for example, Joan Kelly and Janet Johnston^[14]—concur that these behaviors are clinically significant indicators of alienation. These eight behaviors are presented in table 1.2.

Child’s Behavioral Manifestations of Parental Alienation

Behavior	Example
Campaign of Denigration	The child behaves in a rude, arrogant, disrespectful, and entitled manner toward the targeted parent. The child has no qualms about denigrating that parent to others in the community. The child has difficulty recalling or acknowledging any positive memories of the targeted parent.
Weak, Frivolous, or Absurd Reasons for Rejecting the Targeted Parent	The child will offer reasons such as the floors being scratched or not liking the hairstyle or clothes of the targeted parent. The child will sometimes refuse to even offer a reason, claiming to have done so too many times before when that is not the case.
Lack of Ambivalence toward His/ Her Parents	The child claims to worship the alienating parent beyond what is appropriate, necessary, or realistic, while claiming to despise the targeted parent. Both responses are unrealistic and show an inability to see each parent as a mix of good and bad qualities.
Independent Thinker Phenomenon	The child strenuously insists that the alienating parent played no role in his/her rejection of the targeted parent despite the alienating parent’s obvious influence.
Lack of Guilt Regarding Poor Treatment of the Targeted Parent	While behaving in a rude and callous manner, the child fails to manifest awareness of or caring about the pain being inflicted on the targeted parent.
Reflexive Support for the Alienating Parent in All Parental Conflicts	The child sides with the alienating parent, no matter how absurd, illogical, or inconsistent that parent’s position is.
Presence of Borrowed Scenarios	The child uses words, phrases, and concepts that are not understood, cannot be defined, and are readily attributable to the ideas and beliefs of the alienating parent.
Spread of Animosity to Friends and Family of the Targeted Parent	The child cuts off and/or denigrates formerly beloved friends, neighbors, and family based on their association with the targeted parent.

These behaviors are distinctive and highly unusual for children to display in the absence of a strong external impetus. Even horribly abused children who have been beaten and molested by their parents do not exhibit these behaviors.^[15] They are typically seen only in children who have been exposed to parental alienation behaviors by one parent in order to foster a child’s unjustified rejection of the other parent. When these behaviors are present, the parent-child relationship is seriously ruptured—often for months, if not years. The breach in the relationship is a source of significant pain and suffering for the targeted parent as well as the child. In-depth exploration of the experience from the perspective of adults who were alienated as children clearly demonstrates the devastating short- and long-term negative consequences for the child’s well-being, feelings about him-/herself, and ability to function in the world and forge healthy adult relationships (as detailed in Baker’s *Adult Children of Parental Alienation Syndrome*). What has been missing from the literature is an equally in-depth exploration of the experience from the perspective of the parents left behind, the parents who spend their days searching for ways to effectively reconnect with their lost children and their nights searching for relief from never-ending pain and loss.

Subsequent research has demonstrated the validity of these behaviors. For example, in several studies, Baker and colleagues report associations between the strategies and psychological maltreatment or measures of well-being: "Adult Recall of Parental Alienation in a Community Sample: Prevalence and Associations with Psychological Maltreatment," "Adolescents Caught in Their Parents' Loyalty Conflicts," "College Student Childhood Exposure to Parental Loyalty Conflicts," "Italian College Student Childhood Exposure to Parental Loyalty Conflicts," and "To Turn a Child Against a Parent Is to Turn a Child Against Himself."^[10] Across all of the studies, the greater the number of behaviors endorsed, the lower the self-esteem, the greater the likelihood of endorsement of an insecure style of attachment, and the greater the likelihood of endorsement of psychological symptoms.

The seventeen behaviors identified as parental alienation strategies are presented in table 1.1, along with examples and a brief explanation as to how they work.

Parental Alienation Strategies

<i>Parental Alienation Strategy</i>	<i>Examples</i>	<i>Explanation</i>
Badmouthing/Denigrating the Other Parent	<p>The alienating parent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • speaks ill of the other parent to the children and within the children's hearing in a steady stream of negative messaging that is not balanced by anything positive • emphasizes the negative aspects of the other parent's personality and choices • vilifies the other parent in the children's community 	Creates the belief in the children that the other parent is unsafe, unloving, and unavailable
Limiting Contact	<p>The alienating parent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • interferes with the amount of face-to-face time the children spend with the other parent such as coming early for pick-ups and late for drop-offs • does not produce the children for the other parent's parenting time • shows up during the other parent's parenting time and monopolizes the children's attention 	Reduces the targeted parent's opportunities to show him-/herself to be safe, loving, and available, and limits that parent's opportunities to create loving memories and counter the badmouthing message
Interfering with Communication	<p>The alienating parent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • makes it difficult for the children and targeted parent to speak on the phone (or communicate by other means) during periods of separation • blocks e-mails and text messages • does not share cell phone numbers • does not answer calls • does not deliver gifts and letters 	Prevents the children and targeted parent from sharing in each other's daily lives in a meaningful way

Interfering with Symbolic Communication	<p>The alienating parent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - makes it difficult for the children to think about, talk about, or look at pictures of the other parent during periods of separation - eliminates photographs - does not discuss the other parent (unless badmouthing) - discourages the children from thinking about the targeted parent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Attenuates the children's attachment relationship and feelings of closeness with the targeted parent - Acclimates the children to greater psychological distance - Decreases the importance of the targeted parent in the emotional life of the children
Withholding Love and Approval from the Children	<p>In order to keep their attention directed toward themselves, the alienating parent becomes emotionally cold and distant when the children show positive feelings and thoughts toward the targeted parent</p>	<p>Creates anxiety in the children about losing the love and affection of the alienating parent and heightens the children's need for that parent's approval</p>
Telling the Children That the Targeted Parent Does Not Love Them	<p>The alienating parent</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - encourages the children to falsely believe that the targeted parent has done things that are hurtful and selfish because that parent does not really care about or value them - conflates the end of the marriage with the end of the targeted parent's love of the children 	<p>Creates a feeling in the children of being rejected by the targeted parent, which fosters hurt and anger toward that parent</p>
Allowing/Forcing the Children to Choose Between Parents	<p>By offering desirable alternatives to visitation and/or psychologically pressuring the children to forgo parenting time with the targeted parent, the alienating parent creates situations in which the children will feel compelled to reject the targeted parent</p>	<p>Creates a need in the children to justify their choice, which focuses them on the negative qualities in the targeted parent and incites conflict between the children and the targeted parent, who becomes hurt and angry at the children's choice</p>
Creating the Impression That the Other Parent is Dangerous	<p>The alienating parent does and says things, such as planting false memories of harm or misinterpreting events to falsely create this impression, that suggest or imply that the other parent has or will cause harm to the children</p>	<p>Creates fear and doubt in the minds of the children about the ability of the targeted parent to love them and keep them safe, and also induces hurt and anger in the children</p>
Confiding in the Children	<p>The alienating parent shares personal information with the children about the targeted parent that induces the children to feel anger or shame about that parent and protective of the parent who is engaging in this behavior</p>	<p>Creates psychological distance between the children and the targeted parent, as well as anger and hurt toward the targeted parent based on the misinformation given to them by the alienating parent</p>
Forcing the Children to Reject the Targeted Parent	<p>The alienating parent creates situations in which the children will personally inform the targeted parent that he or she has been excluded from important events in their lives</p>	<p>Incites hurt and anger in the targeted parent and pressure in the children to focus on the negative qualities in the targeted parent in order to justify their rejection of that parent</p>
Asking the Children to Spy on the Targeted Parent	<p>By such requests as asking the children to look through the targeted parent's mail, cell phone call log, or desk drawer, the alienating parent encourages or induces the children to betray the targeted parent's trust</p>	<p>Causes the children to feel angry with the targeted parent for withholding information, a sense of guilt that is then turned into a desire to avoid the parent whom they betrayed, and a need to justify the betrayal by focusing on the negative qualities of that parent</p>

Asking the Children to Keep Secrets from the Targeted Parent	By involving the children's self-interest (e.g., don't tell your father we are going to take a vacation next week because he will try to stop us), the alienating parent encourages the children to withhold important information from the targeted parent despite that parent's having a right or need to have access to that information	Creates a sense of guilt that is then turned into a desire to avoid the parent whom they betrayed, and a need to justify the betrayal by focusing on the negative qualities of that parent
Referring to the Targeted Parent by First Name When Speaking to the Children and/or Encouraging the Children to Do the Same	For example, "Frank is on the phone" or "You just need to tell Jane that you are not going there this weekend."	Conveys to the children that the targeted parent is not an authority figure and is no more important than anyone else whom the children refer to by first name
Referring to a Stepparent as "Mom/Dad" and Encouraging the Children to Do the Same	"This is your new daddy," or "Mommy and I . . ." (when the father is speaking of himself and his new wife)	Replaces the targeted parent with a stepparent and conveys to the children that the alienating parent's new family is the only real and important family to them; this also creates the impression in the children's community (teachers, coaches, and the like) that the replacement parent is the real parent, and creates hurt and anger in the targeted parent
Withholding Medical, Social, Academic Information from the Targeted Parent and Keeping That Parent's Contact Information Off Relevant Forms	The alienating parent does not share team lists, class lists, rosters, schedules, homework assignments, and the like with the targeted parent and does not put that parent's name and number on enrollment and contact forms	Deprives the targeted parent of opportunities to function as a parent and creates the impression that he or she does not care enough to attend important events in the children's lives
Changing the Children's Names to Remove the Association with the Targeted Parent	The alienating parent (if the mother) uses her maiden name or her new spouse/boyfriend's last name as the children's last name, or (if the father) creates a new nickname or uses only his portion of the hyphenated last name	Creates the impression that the targeted parent is not connected to the children in an important and meaningful way
Undermining Authority of the Targeted Parent/Inducing Dependency on Him-/Herself	The alienating parent does and says things that encourage the children to believe that he or she is the only authority figure and that the rules, regulations, and values of the targeted parent are not valid or important	Focuses the children's attention and energy on pleasing the alienating parent and reduces the importance of the targeted parent in the eyes of the children; incites conflict between the children and the targeted parent

Taken together, these seventeen parental alienation strategies create psychological distance between the child and the targeted parent such that the relationship becomes conflict ridden and eventually nonexistent, as the child is empowered (if not pressured) to cut that parent off completely. Each of these behaviors serve to

1. further the child's cohesion and alignment with the alienating parent;
2. create psychological distance between the child and the targeted parent;
3. intensify the targeted parent's anger and hurt over the child's behavior; and
4. incite conflict between the child and the targeted parent.

When exposed to these behaviors, some children eventually and unjustifiably reject the targeted parent altogether, and when that happens the child is said to be *alienated*. There are eight behaviors consistent with unjustified rejection. The labels for these behaviors were first created by noted child psychiatrist Dr. Richard Gardner^[11] and have since been validated by Amy Baker and Doug Darnall in "A Construct Study of the Eight Symptoms of Severe Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Survey of Parental