PARENTAL ALIENATION
And the Effects on Children

By Michelle Garneau & Dr. Kent Taylor

Marriages in Canada ending in divorce have risen to as much as 50% and the rate of separation for those who have been living in common law relationships may be even higher. The number of situations where parental alienation has become an issue has also increased. Parental Alienation is a term used to describe a situation where one parent, often the parent the child resides with but not always, attempts to turn the child against the other parent following a separation. In this situation, the parent strongly dislikes the other parent and is unable to distinguish between their spousal issues and parental issues.

Alienation of a child from a parent can occur consciously or unconsciously and can range from mild to severe. There are a number of ways a child can be alienated from a parent.

1) A parent tells a child that they will not force him or her to see the other parent.
2) A parent phones the other parent and is told that the child is not in or does not want to talk with him or her when this is not true.
3) A parent plans a favorite activity or getaway that the child is fond of at a time when the child is scheduled to be in the care of the other parent.
4) In severe cases, a parent's negative feelings of hatred and fear toward the other parent are instilled in the child.
5) A child may be kept from seeing a parent because there is alleged emotional, physical or sexual abusive toward the child. In some cases, this may be true. This is a very difficult situation and the parent may only be able to see the child under specific conditions (i.e. limited supervised contact).

There are a number of reasons why a parent may alienate a child from the other parent.

1) They may want to get revenge on the other parent for having an affair or for ending the relationship and shattering their dreams of having a "family unit".
2) They may have remarried or are in a new relationship and wish to remove the other parent from the child's life in order to make room for the step parent and cement the new relationship.
3) In some cases, for their own security, they may become so dependent on the child that they need the child to be loyal to them only.

An alienated parent may become helpless, frustrated, and may engage in counterattacks with the other parent. On some occasions, an alienated parent may use gifts and trips to gain the child's affection, or going the other extreme, they may "bully" the child into spending time with them. In some cases, the parent

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who is being alienated may withdraw and stop making attempts to see the child.

An attempt to remove or withdraw a parent from a child's life can have detrimental effects on their behavior. The child may see the alienated parent as "all bad" and the other parent as "all good". They may be disrespectful toward the alienated parent such as being rude or hostile. The child may use phrases or language that appear rehearsed or not reflective of the child's age or level of language development. They may give irrational or illogical reasons for not wanting to see the alienated parent.

The loss of a supportive and caring parent and all the memories of a good relationship with them can have serious temporary or long-term effects on a child. They can experience anger, loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, sleeping or eating disorders, educational difficulties, or other destructive behaviors.

In other cases, the child may pretend to dislike the alienated parent when in fact they do not feel this way. As the child grows older, they can become aware that they have the power to manipulate the parent attempting to alienate them from the other parent. This can be done by following or going against this parent's wishes with regard to the alienated parent. The attempt to turn a child against the other parent can backfire if the child realizes what this parent has been doing and they may shift their loyalties toward the alienated parent. Feelings of guilt may occur for the child once they figure out what the parent has been doing.

Parental Alienation can be prevented by recognizing the difference between one's own needs and the needs of the child. There is value in both parents being involved in the child's life and educating oneself through books and articles about parental alienation. There are ways of repairing the bond between the child and the parent who has been alienated. In mild and moderate cases, one could engage in therapy for the child and the parents, or they could seek out a Divorce Coach or Family Mediator. It is important to remember that children are entitled to a healthy relationship with each of their parents. Parents need to resist becoming involved in any alienating behavior for the sake of their children.

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