

## ***CHILDREN WHO RESIST PARENTAL CONTACT***

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Many of the referrals we receive for child custody evaluations include an allegation of parental alienation. This allegation requires in-depth examination to determine its veracity. If true, specific interventions should be offered to address the conflict between the child and parent. In this article, we identify the major steps that should be taken to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of alienation claims.

For the purpose of this article, we use Kelly and Johnston's\* definition of an alienated child as one "... who expresses, freely and persistently, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs (such as anger, hatred, rejection, and/or fear) toward a parent that are significantly disproportionate to the child's actual experience with that parent."

Prior to beginning an evaluation, it is essential for the evaluator to suspend judgment until the allegations have been investigated, fully and completely. Evaluators should forego making the hasty assumption that an allegation is true or not true based on the context in which it has been made, its timing or the initial presentation of either parent or child. Furthermore, a child has not necessarily been alienated from a parent simply because the child resists contact with that individual, such as might be the case where a child has been abused. Or, it might not be correct to assume that simply because a child is not resisting contact with one parent that the child has not been subjected to efforts by the other parent to alienate the child.

Estranged children often display similar characteristics to alienated children, including rigidity in their attitude toward and opinion of the ostracized parent, and a negative, polarized and unambivalent view of that parent. In order to distinguish alienated children from those who are estranged it is necessary to determine whether a child has been subjected to emotional, physical or sexual abuse or neglect, extremely deficient parenting or has witnessed violence between the parents. To make this determination, an examiner must carefully interview both parents and the child. In situations where alienation appears likely, even if the child is not currently resisting contact, the examiner must assess the child's alignment with each parent in order to submit appropriate recommendations to the court.

What factors are important to consider in evaluating the child? The most obvious consideration involves the attitudes and opinions the child expresses about each parent, and particularly about the parent from whom the child is allegedly alienated. What is the nature of the comments the child makes about this parent? Is there a credible basis for the child's feelings and attitudes, or are they exaggerated, fabricated or severely distorted? Is the child willing or able to say anything positive about the parent, or is the child's attitude completely polarized? Is the alienated parent perceived as bad or evil, while the other parent is seen in unrealistically positive, virtuous terms? Has this always been the nature of the child's feelings toward the parents, or was there a time when the child felt differently toward one or both of them?

Attention must also be paid to the child's behavior with both parents. For example, does the child speak negatively about the alienated parent in the residential parent's presence, but warmly engage the alienated parent when the other parent is not present? Or, does the child behave negatively toward the alienated parent regardless of the circumstance or who is present? It is not uncommon for one parent to insist that a child does not want to see the other parent, while the other, with equal fervor, insists that the child is fine once the other parent is no longer present. Discrepancies like this can often be resolved by observing the child interact with each parent and gaining firsthand data about these relationships.

It is also important to ascertain whether one parent is seeking to alienate the child from the other, through direct or subtle means. For example, the residential parent might directly communicate to the child that s/he is in danger when with the other parent and that "everything will be better" once the child has returned "home." Indirect communication might involve the residential parent calling the child numerous times to make sure the child is safe, or telling the child that a loving parent would not force the child to visit.

Each parent should be interviewed to gather a history of that parent's relationship with the child, to gain understanding of the current dynamics of the parent-child relationship and to investigate any allegations of violence and abuse. If such allegations have been made, it is important to receive an account from each party and to review any third-party collateral information that might exist, such as medical records, police or Protective Service reports, or eyewitness accounts. If investigation reveals that a child has been subjected to abuse or has witnessed violence between the parents, the child's estrangement from the offending parent has a legitimate basis in reality. Such a situation would signal a need for appropriate concern for the child's safety in any contact with the offending parent.

The parent who is the object of the alienation effort may also play a role that requires clarification in this dysfunctional dynamic. Kelly and Johnston have identified several behaviors by rejected parents that contribute to the alienation process. These include passivity and withdrawal, counter-rejection, harsh and rigid parenting style, self-centered and immature behaviors, critical and demanding traits, and diminished empathy. The presence of such behaviors is important to evaluate, even though, by themselves, they are usually inadequate justifications for a child's resistance to maintaining parental contact.

Courts often experience substantial frustration dealing with families where a child resists contact with one parent. The decision-making process can be facilitated by reports that propose highly specific parenting time schedules and exchange procedures, as well as recommendations for therapy. Reports should also include recommendations for how future parental disputes can be managed, how to exchange information on the child, how to monitor compliance, and how to deal with non-compliance.

If you are involved with a family where a child is resisting contact with a parent, or if you would like more information about this topic, please feel free to contact our office.

Reference:

Kelly, Joan B. & Johnston, Janet R. (2001) A Reformulation of Parental Alienation Syndrome. *Family Court Review*. Vol. 39, No. 3. Pp. 249 – 266.

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