

What is Parental Alienation?

Parental alienation sometimes occurs when parents engage in a high-conflict separation or divorce. Parental alienation means that the child has become enmeshed with one parent (the preferred parent) and has rejected a relationship with the other parent (the target parent) without legitimate justification.

Parental alienation is the term used when a child unreasonably rejects 1 parent as the result of conscious or unconscious negative influence by another. The alienating parent cultivates an attitude of obsessive hostility in the child towards the alienated parent. The hatred the child holds towards the alienated parent usually extends to that parent's entire family, often negating any positive benefits from being part of the extended family. In relationship breakdowns that involve infidelity or do not end mutually, one parent frequently uses the child as a weapon to hurt the other parent.

Since the vast majority of custody cases favor the mother, the father is far more frequently the alienated parent. While there is some criticism of the Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) that it excuses abusive men, family lawyers, psychologists and social workers all support the concept as something that happens frequently in practice. A case where a child naturally prefers one parent to another does not count as pathological alienation.

Parental Alienation Syndrome does not extend to fathers who are legitimately abusive or demonstrably unfit. Children are aware that they are genetically made of 50 percent of their mother and 50 percent of their father. When one parent verbally denigrates and dehumanizes the other parent in front of the child, their emotional and psychological identity is damaged, as they can come to believe they are made of the same terrible qualities.

There are many documented negative effects of fatherlessness and if the father is not harmful to the child's development, they should be involved as much as possible. While economic support is very important, social and emotional support to a child's development and well being is essential. Spite, vindictiveness and spousal relationship baggage should not extend to the parent-child relationship. The alienated parent frequently faces increased rates of substance abuse and depression.

The age of the child at divorce, alignment of other family and institutional workers, and presence of siblings can all affect the likelihood that a child will become alienated from a parent.