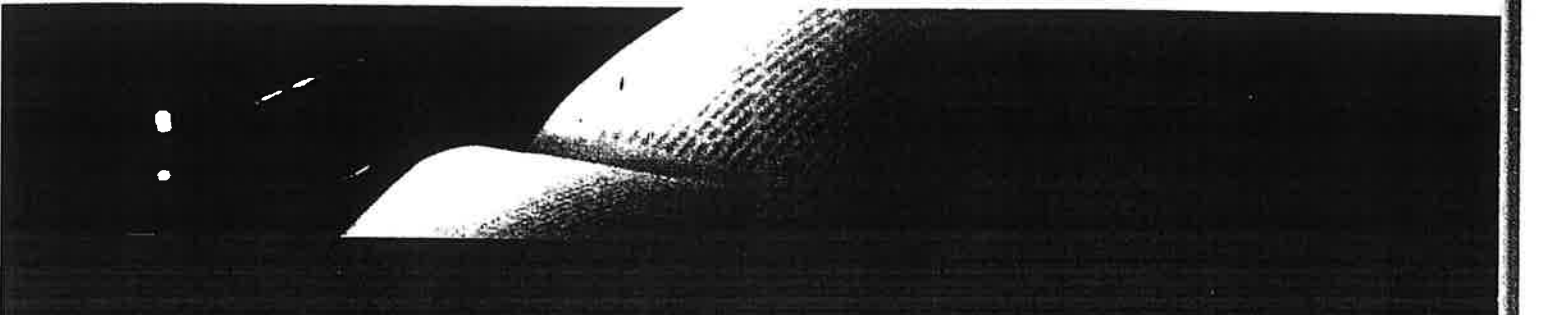


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# The Alienated Child

Brian O'Sullivan\*

"I wanted one life, you wanted another, we couldn't have our cake, so we ate each other." As a psychotherapist working with families and children for a number of years, I have witnessed circumstances where a child viciously denigrates a previously loved parent in the course of a high conflict separation or divorce. In attempting to understand this phenomenon, I reviewed the international empirical literature around this issue. It seems that as we embrace the voice of the child in proceedings that affect them in Ireland, it is helpful to look behind the statements of a child who seeks no contact with a previously loved parent rather than simply accepting a child's strident rejection at face value as somehow being a negative reflection on a parent's capacity or competency. I have chosen the term "alienated child" as this places the focus away from the parents and on to the child and his or her observable behaviours. I believe this facilitates a less adversarial and more neutral framework for understanding why a child is now rejecting a parent and refusing contact.

## Introduction

Marital breakdown has become a significant social phenomenon in Ireland. In 2011, the Central Statistics Office described an increase of 150 per cent in the rate of marital breakdowns in Ireland over the previous 10 years. The Courts Service of Ireland describes 2,273 court orders granted in relation to the Guardianship of Infants Act 1964 and a total of 1,738 court orders granted in relation to custody and access during 2011. These figures do not reflect those parents who did not have the financial, emotional or psychological resources to go through the court process. The experience of children being caught in the crossfire between divorcing parents is not new to Ireland. What is new, however, is that the view of the child is now given more status. This may have presented a new dynamic through which the child may be drawn further into the painful divorce process. One emerging phenomenon that faces families, social workers, judges and mental health professionals relates to cases where a child venomously rejects and denigrates a previously loved parent following a high conflict separation or divorce.

The purpose of this article is to introduce, for consideration, some of the contributions put forward by a number of authors, to explain this phenomenon; to identify clinical presentations of an alienated child; and to identify the impact of alienation on children. Some legal and mental health professionals may be superficially child-centred. If the child indicates that they want no contact with a parent with whom they have had a previously happy relationship,

these professionals may conclude the child's views are valid, must be respected and acted upon. In these circumstances, there is a need to understand a child's strident rejection of a parent in terms of an enhanced inclusive framework rather than simple parental inadequacy.<sup>2</sup> Research indicates that the issues underlying parental attachment<sup>3</sup> or estrangement are complex<sup>4</sup> and do not lend themselves to easy answers.<sup>5</sup> There is a large body of literature around this.<sup>6</sup> This suggests an intense interest around this issue.<sup>7</sup>

## What is Alienation?

A number of terms have been put forward to explain this phenomenon, such as: parental alienation syndrome, alienated child, parental alienation (no syndrome), divorce-related malicious mother syndrome, over-burdened child, medea syndrome, parental alignments, and programmed and brainwashed children.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of what label is chosen, there is widespread agreement among experts in the international family law and mental health arena as to the existence of a distinctive cluster of divorce-related symptoms in a child that may result in psychological disturbance for that child. Alienation can be described as an observable constellation of hateful behaviours on the part of a child who venomously rejects and directs undeserved anger towards a previously loved parent during or following a separation or divorce.<sup>9</sup> Child-alienation is partially explained by the alienating behaviours on the part of an emotionally needy and aligned parent who is in role reversal with the child and who offers the child warm and involved care in exchange for his or her allegiance.<sup>10</sup> A primary feature of alienation is where a child, usually one, whose parents are engaged in a high conflict divorce, allies himself or herself strongly with one parent and rejects the other parent without legitimate justification. A primary behavioural symptom is of a child who refuses contact with a parent and is characterised by extreme withdrawal or contempt.<sup>11</sup> While it is agreed that parental programming may have a causal effect and that the child makes an active contribution to this dynamic, there is somewhat less agreement in relation to the roles of the aligned and the rejected parent and the kinds of interventions that may be utilised. There are multiple factors both within the marriage and the separation, such as: age, developmental level, psychological vulnerability of the child, the behaviours or personalities of both parents, sibling dynamics, the re-marriage situation and the adversarial nature of the custody battle, to explain why some children reject a parent.<sup>12</sup>

It is important to distinguish alienated children from those who demonstrate differential preferences for one parent based on expectable, normative reasons.<sup>13</sup> Some children have good reasons to be hostile and avoidant towards a parent. This is viewed as realistic estrangement, whereas an alienated child is described as expressing freely and persistently unreasonable negative beliefs which are

disproportionate to the child's actual experience with that parent. The following checklist is provided to aid in the consideration or elimination of alienation in a child.<sup>14</sup>:

- Is there or was there a high conflict divorce/separation or a protracted battle in relation to custody or access?
- Is the child's anger, hatred or rejection disproportionate to any "crime" the parent is accused of?
- Did the child have a loving relationship with the now rejected parent?
- Is the rejection accompanied by extreme resistance to visit the rejected parent?
- Does the child shun the parent in public?
- Do the child's perceptions lack duality? Are they black and white?
- Does it seem there is only "bad" in the parent with no gratitude or affection for the parent?
- Are the child's reasons for rejection of a parent scripted, lacking substance and accurate detail?
- Has the child added to and embellished the script with his or her own contributions to the rejected parent's badness?
- Does the child insist he or she has not been influenced by anyone, but that he or she has independently chosen his or her own behaviour and opinions?
- Does the child protect and idealise the aligned parent?
- Do the actions of the aligned parent suggest an agenda of anger, negativity or destructiveness towards the rejected parent?
- Does the child appear to be functioning normally in other settings, but upon closer inspection, has other problematic interpersonal relationships?
- Is there a distinct outward lack of guilt or remorse on the part of the child?

### **A Clinical Presentation of an Alienated Child**

A typical clinical presentation of an alienated child is provided.<sup>15</sup> This presentation is reported as consistent with the observations of a child's behaviours and emotional responses.<sup>16</sup> There is extreme disproportion between the child's perceptions or beliefs about the rejected parent and the actual history of the rejected parent's behaviours and the parent/child relationship.<sup>17</sup> The alienated child freely expresses hatred and an intense dislike for the rejected parent which contrasts with most estranged children. They demonise and vilify the rejected parent, they frequently point to trivial reasons to justify their hatred and they are usually not shy about broadcasting the perceived failings of the rejected parent to others. The child cannot see duality and

is unable to put the good and bad qualities of a parent together. In the child's mind there is only bad. Common behaviours that have been identified as consistent with that of an alienated child are their strong resistance to contact with the rejected parent, their absolute refusal to see the parent in any setting and their determination to terminate the parent/child relationship. These children strongly articulate their right to choose not to see the rejected parent. They insist this decision is theirs and theirs alone. Other common behaviours identified are around the child's story. Their allegations about the rejected parent are mostly identical to those of the aligned parent's. The story is scripted and repeated endlessly with little or no underlying detail to support the allegations, unlike children with true histories of abuse or neglect. The alienated child has adopted the allegations. The alienated child's story sounds rehearsed with frequent use of adult phrases and language. There is no obvious guilt as the child continues to viciously denigrate the rejected parent. Alienated children have been given permission to be powerful, hostile and rude to the rejected parent and his or her extended family. Even previously cherished pets living with the rejected parent are discarded and denigrated, with proud descriptions of their new perfect replacements provided by the aligned parent.<sup>18</sup>

The alienated child idealises the aligned parent. They will not contemplate any suggestion to the contrary. They may describe how the aligned parent has been harmed physically, emotionally or financially by the rejected parent.

The aligned parent may believe their child does not need the rejected parent in his or her life. The aligned parent may insist the child is free to contact the rejected parent; however, attempts to contact or visit the child are viewed as harassment. Phone calls, messages or letters are not passed to the child. Information about school, medication, special events or sports days, communions, confirmations, and such like, are not passed on to the rejected parent. All references to the rejected parent are removed from the residence, including pictures which may be torn up in front of the child. Most children quickly learn not to speak of the rejected parent. The rejected parent is effectively shut out of the child's life. The aligned parent will strongly support their angry child's right to make their own decisions in relation to contact with the rejected parent.

The alienated child may present as very distraught and angry and yet appear, at least superficially, to be functioning adequately. They present as well adjusted in other settings such as school, sports, hobbies and such like. However, the child's black and white views coupled with harshly strident views and feelings are usually reflected in their dealings with their peers and with those in authority. The behaviour of the alienated child within the home of the rejected parent may be severely problematic. They may destroy property or act in obnoxious ways. They prefer to be in contact

constantly with the aligned parent, frequently speaking in code and whispering hostile observations about the rejected parent's behaviours, meals, personality and words. When the alienated child is refusing contact with the rejected parent, all efforts by the rejected parent to communicate directly with the child may be to no avail. The alienated child may demand that the rejected parent never contact them again. They may demand that the rejected parent stop "harassing" them with presents and cards, which likely remain unopened and are discarded. They may demand that the rejected parent stop their useless legal efforts and court appearances.

Four criteria are provided by Bone and Walsh which may be used as a guide in the process of considering the presence or absence of alienation.<sup>19</sup> The first is around the blocking of access and contact between the child and the targeted parent. Sometimes the aligned parent will cite that access is "unsettling" on the child. Any deviation to schedules is used as a reason to terminate access. Access between the child and the targeted parent is relegated to a "chore". The absent parent is to be treated less like a key family member. This sends a clear but unspoken message to the child that one parent is "senior" to the other. This results in the erosion of the child's relationship with the absent parent.

The second criterion is in regard to unfounded allegations of emotional abuse. The authors suggest that this may occur as a result of one parent allowing a child to stay up later than the other parent would or one parent introducing the child to a "significant other" before the other parent feels they should, or one parent enrolls the child in an activity that the other parent disagrees with. It is suggested that this is a matter of simple differing parental judgement rather than emotional abuse. The authors suggest it is easier to allege emotional abuse as there is no physical evidence or third-party witnesses. Caution is advised where one parent is eager to hurl allegations of abuse rather than a parent who is cautious, careful and even reluctant to do so. They argue the latter approach is one of a parent who is mindful, supportive of and encouraging of a relationship between the child and the absent parent. For Bone and Walsh, the responsible parent will only allege abuse after he or she has tried to rationalise why the issue at hand is not abusive. They conclude that the alienating parent will not miss an opportunity to hurl allegations against the absent parent.

The third criterion provided is referred to as the deterioration of the parent/child relationship since a separation. They advocate for a close evaluation of the pre-separation relationship between the child and the now absent parent. They suggest that if this evaluation is omitted, there may be an assumption made by professionals that the current parent/child relationship is a reflection of the true parent/child relationship. This may result in the

professionals subsequently recommending reduced contact between the absent parent and child. This may add to the alienation process, albeit unwittingly so, on the part of the professionals.

The final criterion refers to the child's intense fear reaction. They suggest that the child is frequently being put through loyalty tests, thus forcing the child to choose a parent. They suggest this is characterised by the child who begins to loudly protest when the appointed time of access arrives. The aligned parent presents as bewildered in relation to the child's sudden change in feelings. The aligned parent will frequently appear to support the child's relationship with the absent parent. They conclude that this is an example of the child being placed in a position to act out their loyalty to the aligned parent.

### **The Impact of Alienation on the Child**

The impact of alienation on the child is well documented in the empirical literature. The inner self of the child may disappear as the child is brought up to fulfil the needs of the aligned parent. This may result in the child sacrificing their authentic desires, needs and characteristics. The inner reality of the child is likened to victims of emotional abuse. Buried beneath the hostility and rejection, the child feels the loss of a once warm and nurturing parent with guilt over their rejection.<sup>20</sup> Some other examples include diminished self-esteem, which is associated with overly dependent behaviour, depression, insecure attachment style, difficulties with identity, development and psychosomatic illness.<sup>21</sup> Children of parents in high conflict divorces experience painful loyalty conflicts which create guilt, sadness and depression.<sup>22</sup> Triangulation is one of the main elements of marital breakdown that is harmful to the child's long-term adjustment.<sup>23</sup>

Critics of this phenomenon broadly fall into two categories.<sup>24</sup> The first category suggests the concept of alienation has been invented to excuse neglectful or abusive parenting. The second category accepts the existence of the phenomenon but disputes the scientific formulation of it. Supporters of the concept of alienation suggest that healthy, established parental relationships do not erode on their own and that they must be attacked.<sup>25</sup> They suggest that children do not naturally lose interest in, and become distant from, their non-resident parent simply as a result of the absence of that parent. They argue allegations of neglect or abuse should be fully investigated to ensure the safety of the child. They suggest that in cases of alienation the allegations will be unsubstantiated. They argue that there is a crucial need to distinguish between real estrangement and alienation.<sup>26</sup> Other supporters suggest alienation is real and has been independently observed by many different contributors.<sup>27</sup> They argue that systemic research indicates the diagnostic criteria, demonstrates both test-retest validity

and inter-rater reliability.<sup>28</sup> Other supporters suggest the concept is universally accepted by health professionals who work with children of high conflict divorces, despite controversies in relation to its terminology and etiology.

### Conclusion

Currently in Ireland, there is a focus to give more status to the child's voice in proceedings that affect them. If we consider a 2006 study of adults who had been alienated as children and, in particular, the participants' disclosures that, despite their protestations of hatred toward one of their parents, they still held on to good feelings about that parent

and the participants' hopes and wishes that the targeted parent did not or would not believe the anger and hatred they, as children, were directing towards them.<sup>29</sup> There are findings in relation to unsubstantiated allegations of neglect and abuse within the Canadian family law courts<sup>30</sup> and conclusions<sup>31</sup> that unsubstantiated allegations of neglect and abuse do seem to occur more frequently in access and custody disputes.<sup>32</sup> It would seem the international experience demonstrates the concept of the alienated child is helpful in some circumstances to provide legal, social and mental health professionals with a more inclusive view of a child's strident rejection of a previously loved parent.

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