

Three Types of Parental Alienators

Parental alienation varies in the degree of severity, as seen in the behaviors and attitudes of both the parents and the children. The severity can be of such little consequence as a parent occasionally calling the other parent a derogatory name; or it could be as overwhelming as the parent's campaign of consciously destroying the children's relationship with the other parent. Most children are able to brush off a parent's offhand comment about the other parent that is made in frustration. On the other hand, children may not be able to resist a parent's persistent campaign of hatred and alienation.

Preventing or stopping alienation must begin with learning how to recognize the three types of alienators because the symptoms and strategies for combating each are different. The three types should not be considered diagnosis but instead are a heuristic way of understanding alienation. Keep in mind that the source of alienation behavior can come from mothers, fathers, stepparents, relatives and even babysitters. *Naive alienators* are parents who are passive about the children's relationship with the other parent but will occasionally do or say something to alienate. All parents will occasionally be naive alienators. *Active alienators* also know better than to alienate, but their intense hurt or anger causes them to impulsively lose control over their behavior or what they say. Later, they may feel very guilty about how they behaved. *Obsessed alienators* have a fervent cause to destroy the targeted parent. Frequently a parent can be a blend between two types of alienators, usually a combination between the naive and active alienator. Rarely does the obsessed alienator have enough self-control or insight to blend with the other types.

The Naive Alienator

"Tell your father that he has more money than I do, so let him buy your soccer shoes."

Most divorced parents have moments when they are naive alienators. These parents mean well and recognize the importance of the children having a healthy relationship with the other parent. They rarely have to return to court because of problems with visits or other issues relating to the children. They encourage the relationship between the children and the other parent and their family. Communication between both parents is usually good, though they will have their disagreements, much like they did before the divorce. For the most part, they can work out their differences without bringing the children into it.

Children, whether or not their parents are divorced, know there are times when their parents will argue or disagree about something. They don't like seeing their parents argue and may feel hurt or frightened by what they hear. Somehow, the children manage to cope; either by talking out their feelings to a receptive parent, ignoring the argument or trusting that the skirmish will pass and all will heal. What they see and hear between their parents does not typically damage the children of the naive alienator. They trust their parent's love and protection. The child and the parent have distinct personalities, beliefs and feelings. Neither is threatened by how the other feels towards the targeted parent.

The characteristics of **naive alienators** are:

- Their ability to separate in their minds the children's needs from their own. They recognize the importance for the children to spend time with the other parent so they can build a mutually loving relationship. They avoid making the other parent a target for their hurt and loss.
- Their ability to feel secure with the children's relationship with their grandparents and their mother or father.
- Their respect for court orders and authority.
- Their ability to let their anger and hurt heal and not interfere with the children's relationship with their mother or father.
- Their ability to be flexible and willing to work with the other parent.
- Their ability to feel guilty when they acted in a way to hurt the children's relationship with their mother or father.
- Their ability to allow the other parent to share in their children's activities.
- Their ability to share medical and school records.

Naive alienators usually don't need therapy but will benefit from reading this book because of the insight they will gain about how to keep alienation from escalating into something more severe and damaging for all. These parents know they make mistakes but care enough about their children to make things right. They focus on what is good for the children without regret, blame or martyrdom.

The Active Alienator

"I don't want you to tell your father that I earned this extra money. This miser will take it from this child support check that will keep us from going to Disneyworld. You remember he's done this before when we wanted to go to Grandma's for Christmas."

Most parents returning to court over problems with visitation are active alienators. These parents mean well and believe that the children should have a healthy relationship with the other parent. The problem they have is with controlling their frustration, bitterness or hurt. When something happens to trigger their painful feelings, active alienators lash out in a way to cause or reinforce alienation against the targeted parent. After regaining control, the parent will usually feel guilty or bad about what they did and back off from their alienating tactics. Vacillating between impulsively alienating and then repairing the damage with the children is the trademark of the active alienator. They mean well, but will lose control because the intensity of their feelings overwhelms them.

The characteristics of **active alienators** are:

- Lashing out at the other parent in front of the children. Their problem has more to do with loss of self-control when they are upset than with a sinister motivation.
- After calming down, active alienators realize that they were wrong. They usually try to repair any damage or hurt to the children. During the making up, such parents can be very comforting and supportive of the child's feelings.
- Like naive alienators, they are able to differentiate between their needs and those of the children by supporting the children's desire to have a relationship with the other parent.
- Like naive alienators, active alienators allow the children to have different feelings and beliefs from their own. During the flare-ups of anger, however, the delineation between the child and parent's beliefs can become very blurry until the parent calms down and regains control. For the most part, older children have their own opinions about both parents based upon personal experience rather than what they are told by others. To keep peace, the older child usually learns to keep their opinions to themselves. Younger and more trusting children become more confused and vulnerable to their parents' manipulations.
- They have the ability to respect the court's authority and, for the most part, comply with court orders. However, they can be very rigid and uncooperative with the other parent. This is usually a passive attempt to strike back at the other parent for some injustice.

Active alienators are usually willing to accept professional help when they or the children have a problem that does not go away. They are sincerely concerned about their children's adjustment to the divorce. Harboring old feelings continues to be a struggle, but active alienators continue to hope for a speedy recovery from their pain.

The Obsessed Alienator

"I love my children. If the court can't protect them from their abusive father, I will. Even though he's never abused the children, I know it's a matter of time. The children are frightened of their father. If they don't want to see him, I'm not going to force them. They are old enough to make up their own minds."

The obsessed alienator is a parent, or sometimes a grandparent, with a *cause*: align the children to his or her side and together, with the children, campaign to destroy their relationship with the targeted parent. For the campaign to work, the obsessed alienator enmeshes the children's personalities and beliefs into their own. This is a process that takes time but one that the children, especially the young, are completely helpless to see and combat. It usually begins well before the divorce is final. The obsessed parent is angry, bitter or feels betrayed by the other parent. The initial reasons for the bitterness may actually be justified. They could have been verbally and physical abused, raped, betrayed by an affair, or financially cheated. The problem occurs when the feelings won't heal but instead become more intense because of being forced to continue the relationship with a person they despise because of their common parenthood. Just having to see or talk to the other

parent is a reminder of the past and triggers the hate. They are trapped with nowhere to go and heal.

The characteristics of **obsessed alienators** are:

- They are obsessed with destroying the children's relationship with the targeted parent.
- They having succeeded in enmeshing the children's personalities and beliefs about the other parent with their own.
- The children will parrot the obsessed alienator rather than express their own feelings from personal experience with the other parent.
- The targeted parent and often the children cannot tell you the reasons for their feelings.
- Their beliefs sometimes becoming delusional and irrational. No one, especially the court, can convince obsessed alienators that they are wrong. Anyone who tries is the enemy.
- They will often seek support from family members, quasi-political groups or friends that will share in their beliefs that they are victimized by the other parent and the system. The battle becomes "us against them." The obsessed alienator's supporters are often seen at the court hearings even though they haven't been subpoenaed.
- They have an unquenchable anger because they believe that the targeted parent has victimized them and whatever they do to protect the children is justified.
- They have a desire for the court to punish the other parent with court orders that would interfere or block the targeted parent from seeing the children. This confirms in the obsessed alienator's mind that he or she was right all the time.
- The court's authority does not intimidate them.
- The obsessed alienator believes in a higher cause, protecting the children at all cost.
- The obsessed alienator will probably not want to read what is on these pages because the content just makes them angrier.

There are no effective treatments for either the obsessed alienator or the children. The courts and mental health professionals are helpless. The only hope for these children is early identification of the symptoms and prevention. After the alienation is entrenched and the children become "true believers" in the parent's cause, the children are lost to the other parent for years to come. I realize this is a sad statement, but I have yet to find an effective intervention, by anyone, including the courts that can rehabilitate the alienating parent and child.