Married vs Divorced Parents
Which is better for children?

It is parenting behaviors, not marital status, which determine children’s adjustment and outcomes in adulthood.

(Boschee et al., 1994; Cheifetz et al., 1995; Blitwood & Holberg, 1995; Powell et al., 2005; Ross and Whyte, 2010; Scrice, 2002; Vivesch & Kline, 2015)

Is it parental alienation or justified estrangement?

Parental Alienation
- There is a documented history of a negative relationship between the child and parent.
- There are no valid factors (e.g., abuse, neglect) that explain why a child rejects a parent.
- The child is not ambivalent about not wanting much if anything to do with the parent.
- There is evidence that alienation tactics are being used.

Estrangement
- There are valid, verifiable reasons that a child might reject a parent.
- There is no evidence of a parent using alienation tactics.
- Many children who have been abused show ambivalence about the abusive parent and still want a relationship with that parent.

Domestic Violence

- Typical Indicators of DV
  - Physical Aggression
  - Sexual Abuse
  - Severe Neglect
  - Economic Deprivation
  - Emotional Abuse (*PA)

- Common Themes of DV
  - Control
  - Domination (complete)
Domestic Violence and Parental Alienation

- An extension of DV after divorce is the parent who tries to control the other parent via the children by seeking to alienate the kids from this parent.
- One parent (FP) continues harassing and controlling the other parent (TP) by manipulating the children to reject the TP.

(Wanish, 2010)

FP = Favored Parent  
TP = Target Parent

Parental Alienation Tactics

- Derogating comments
- Limiting contact/access
- Interfering in communication
- Interfering in symbolic communication
- Withdrawal of parental love
- Telling the child that the TP is dangerous
- Forcing the child to choose one parent
- Telling the child that the TP doesn’t love him/her

*IP = Target Parent

Why Do Some Parents Alienate?

1. Significant psychopathology.
2. Revenge.
3. Fear of losing the child(ren).
4. Proprietary perspective.
5. Jealousy.
6. Child support.
7. Loss of identity.
8. New spouse or significant other’s influence.
10. Control and domination of everyone.

Parental Alienation Tactics cont.

- Confiding in the child (adult and/or legal matters)
- Forcing the child to reject the TP
- Asking the child to spy on the TP
- Asking the child to keep secrets from the TP
- Referring to the TP by his/her first name to the child
- Cultivating dependency on the FP undermining the authority of the TP

*IP = Favored Parent

Parental Alienation Tactics cont.

- Withholding medical, educational, or other information from the TP
- Referring to step-parent as “mom or dad” & encouraging the child to follow suit
- Changing the child’s name to remove association with the TP
**Most Frequent Alienation Tactics**

1. Denigrating and negative reference to the IP (7% of AP do this)
2. Creating impression IP is dangerous (63%)
3. Confusing child about court case (46%)
4. Telling child the IP doesn’t love him/her (45%)
5. Limiting possession & access (27%)
6. Forcing child to reject the IP (27%)
7. Intercepting calls or messages (23%)
8. Denigrating IP to teacher, other adults, or professionals (20%)
9. Not providing IP with medical, educational info (19%)

**Most frequent reason to file a modification in court**

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**Mild Parental Alienation**

The child resists contact with the target parent, but enjoys the relationship once he/she is under the care of the target parent.

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**How is Parental Alienation Conceptualized by the Psychological Research?**

- 1. **Mild** Parental Alienation
- 2. **Moderate** Parental Alienation
- 3. **Severe** Parental Alienation

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**Child’s Psychological Reactions to Mild Alienation**

1. Feeling confused.
2. Feeling anxious.
3. Increased behavioral issues.
4. Experiencing **tonal loyalties**.
5. Feeling guilty.
6. Difficulty transitioning to target parent’s home during his/her period of possession.

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**Moderate Parental Alienation**

The child more strongly resists contact with the target parent and exhibits distance during the periods of possession, creating chaos and conflict in the target parent's home.

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**Child’s Psychological Reactions to Moderate Alienation**

1. Won’t easily greet or communicate with the target parent.
2. Criticizes almost everything about the target parent and what he/she can do nothing to the child’s satisfaction.
3. Experiences some guilt some of the time.
4. Maintains “secrets” of favored parent which increases anxiety.
5. Uses “we” when asked for a personal opinion or personal fact about target parent.
6. Views his/her world dichotomically as “all bad” when with the target parent and “all good” when with the favored parent.
**Severe Parental Alienation**

*The child persistently and adamantly rejects any contact with the target parent. He/she may run away or hide to avoid contact.*

*The favored parent is obsessed with the objective to destroy the target parent’s relationship with the child.*

*The favored parent has no insight or willingness to consider that he/she is poisoning the child against the target parent.*

**Severe Parental Alienation Tactics**

1. Favored parent rewrites reality such that the child no longer has an accurate memory of the target parent or his/her positive, happy experiences with the target parent.
2. Favored parent creates and promotes tears of the target parent.
3. Favored parent intrusively and manipulatively uses psychological control (e.g., fear, coercion).
4. Blurs the psychological boundaries with the child to promote dependence and obedience towards the goal of complete alienation.

**Child’s Psychological Reactions to Severe Alienation**

1. Rejects completely the target parent.
2. Profusely praises the favored parent while only making hateful, toxic comments about the target parent.
3. Behaves overtly hostile, disrespectful, and belligerent towards the target parent.
4. Exhibits grossly exaggerated “fears” of the target parent.
5. Exhibits no guilt whatsoever for being so egregiously hateful towards targeted parent.

**How Parental Alienation Affects A Child Psychologically**

Parental alienation creates a deeply conflicted within the child. To manage the loyalty conflict, the child aligns with one parent against the other parent.

Parental alienation erodes the child’s cognitive skills such as analytical thinking skills, memory, and problem-solving skills. Initially, the child “pushes back” against the effects of alienation, but over time, he/she succumbs to the effects and simply parrots and verbalizes what he/she sees and hears.

A child’s perception of his/her self-concept is half mom’s and half dad’s. If he/she comes to believe through alienation tactics that one parent doesn’t love him/her, self-hated, decreased self-confidence, and decreased self-worth are the result.
As children, these elevated children exhibit many deleterious effects:

1. Overall lack of respect towards adults, lack of response to authority and rules.
2. Elevated anxiety and brain-based changes in the autonomic system.
3. Decreased ability to genuinely feel remorse for behavior.
4. Lack of trust in people, especially adults.

5. Decreased moral development and conscience.
6. Parentified and adultified behavior.
7. Decreased problem-solving skills in relationships.
8. Decreased conflict resolution skills with anyone.

9. Decreased overall accountability in life (it's always the other guy’s fault).
10. Using lying as a coping mechanism to deal with life.
11. Overall sense of entitlement because he/she is “special.”
12. Increased anxiety towards alienating parent (can't disappoint him/her).

Children's Responses to High Conflict Divorce

- 65% had anxiety severe enough to require counseling
- 56% developed an attachment disorder
- 48% had abnormal fears and phobias
- 44% became physically aggressive
- 31% had sleep disorders

- 20% withdrew from loved activities
- 15% developed oppositional, behavior or rage
- 21% engaged in early sexual activity
- 13% began bed-wetting
- 10% developed dissociative disorder
Stress and the developing brain

- What Happens?
  - Stress hormones
  - Heart rate
  - Blood pressure

- Results of Chronic Stress
  - Depression
  - Anxiety
  - Memory/learning

*Brain consequences of chronic stress can be lifelong

Chronic Stress: The Priming Effect

*Chronic stress creates a brain that remains "hyper-aroused."

*Stress thereafter, even minor stress, creates a much larger neurobiological response than a brain that is not "primed."

Alienated Children As Adults

The consequences of alienating children from one parent are staggering.

These adults have an altered, incomplete self-identity.

They feel guilt, sadness, and anger at having lost significant amounts of time with their other parent.

By the numbers as adults:

70% experience depression.  
(Compared with 8% of general population)
65% have decreased self-worth.

50% are alienated from their own children.  
(Compared with 11% of general population)

40% can't trust people.  
(Compared with 33% of general population)

35% struggle with addictions.  
(Compared with 10% of general population)

Are these factors present in one of your families?

- One parent makes negative, pejorative comments to the child about the other parent?
- One parent interferes in communication or contact between the child and the other parent?
- One parent controls the other parent as dangerous to the child?
- One parent interferes in the child's custody time with the other parent?
- One parent presents the other parent as dangerous to the child?
- One parent contacts the other parent regularly?
- One parent tells the child that he/she doesn't have to follow the rules of the other parent?
- One parent has the child spy on the other parent and report back?
- One parent denies the other parent custody time altogether?
- One parent doesn't tell the other parent about activities or things that most parents would want to attend?
- One parent refers to the other parent by his/her first name to child?
DSM 5 and Parental Alienation

V56.20 Parent-Child Relational Problem
- Focus is the quality of the parent-child relationship
- Associated with impaired functioning in behavior, affect, or cognition
- Includes unwarranted feelings of estrangement

V56.35 Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress
- Focus is the negative effects of parent discord on a child's mental or medical functioning, including:
  1. High parent conflict
  2. High parent distress
  3. High parent disparagement

What is Not Effective?
Counter-intuitively, traditional therapy or reunification has not been shown to be particularly effective in parental alienation cases, especially in severe alienation families. While there may be psychopathology present, the effects of parental alienation do not respond well to traditional psychological interventions and often make the situation worse by aggravating the entire family dynamic.

What Can Be Done?
1. Recognize that parental alienation is a factor in the overwhelming majority of custody cases.
2. Recognize that the child's cognitive skills have been negatively affected to the degree that he/she doesn't even think critically anymore about what is happening to him/her or whether or not what he/she is being told is really the case.
3. Recognize that asking the TP to "take the high road" and ignore the child's egregious behavior in the hopes that the child will eventually "come around" is counter-intuitive, the wrong advice, and the wrong approach.
4. Recognize that the TP needs a specialized educational approach to learn how to stop the alienating behavior.

Resetting the Family Educational Programs for Parental Alienation and Co-Parenting

Sequence of Resetting the Family Programs
- Make Evaluation Process
- Child and Dad
- Child and Mom
- Intensive Program (1 week/day)
- Parent Intensive
- Child Intensive
- Refresher Half-Day Program (6 weeks later)
- Parent Refresher
- Child Refresher

Resetting the Family Educational Programs for Parental Alienation

Mild Alienation

Moderate Alienation
Sources (partial list)

Divorce Poison. Richard Warshak (2001)

