When Children Resist Contact with a Parent

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The Squid and The Whale
Overview

- Describe spectrum of parent-child relationship problems (handout)
- Differentiate “estrangement” from “alienation”
- Review contributing variables
- Identify where your clients fall on the spectrum of relationship problems
- Discuss Intervention with these families
- Provide a resource list (handout)
Positive parent-child relationships

- Child wants to spend time with both parents
- Child demonstrates no resistance to parenting time
- Each parent fosters a healthy relationship with the other parent
- Interventions: Rainbows Groups; school social worker
Affinity

- Feel closer to one parent than the other
- Impacted by temperament, gender, age, shared interests, sibling preferences toward parents, parenting style
- Shifts over time with changing developmental needs or other circumstances
- Child may occasionally express an overt preference, but still wants substantial contact with both parents
- Intervention: Rainbows Groups; school social worker
Alliance

- Expressing or demonstrating consistent preference for one parent and desire for limited contact with the other parent

- Child expresses ambivalence and some resistance without complete rejection

- Causes: high conflict marriage; parent encouraging child to “take sides”; one parent blamed for divorce; child perceives one parent needs their support and loyalty more than the other parent

- Interventions: Rainbows; school social worker; individual therapy for child; family therapy including both parents
Estrangement

- Exposure to family violence
- Abuse and neglect
- Poor parenting (immaturity, self-absorption, poor judgment, poor boundaries, rigidity)
- Psychiatric disturbance
- Substance abuse
Estrangement

- Presents as intensely angry, possible phobic reactions to the parent
- Presents as passive or overly compliant
- Trouble sleeping, school difficulties, aggression toward others, hyper-sexualized behavior
- Separation anxiety from aligned parent
- Strict refusal to go with other parent
- Willingness to go on visits with parameters
Estrangement
Is it estrangement, alienation, or both?

- Is rejection based on realistic estrangement?
- Children can present as estranged when there is a “kernel of truth” to their allegations
- Answering these questions if the central task for a child custody evaluator
- Court order for 604.10 asks for answer to this question in addition to recommendations for the parenting plan
Estrangement Intervention

- PTSD intervention to treat trauma first
- “Desensitization” of overwhelming feelings
- Learning to identify feelings, provide for expression of feelings
- Correcting distortions
- Only after trauma is treated, can provide intervention for distortions resulting from alienation
Alienation

- Child rejects parent without apparent guilt or ambivalence, in the absence of abuse or neglect
- Child manifests significant cognitive distortions or exaggerations
- Child refuses all contact with parent, and increasingly vilifies the rejected or targeted parent
Common Causes of Alienation

- Very high conflict divorce, with overt dispute, and protracted litigation re: parenting time and control over decision-making

- Child’s vulnerability to parent’s manipulation and control

- The favored parent directly contributes to and intensifies the alienation through statements or behaviors directed at the child
17 Strategies of Alienation

- Badmouthing the other parent
- Limiting contact
- Interfering with communication
- Interfering with symbolic communication
- Withdrawal of love (loyalty bind)
- Suggesting that the rejected parent is dangerous or harmful
- Forcing a child to choose between parents
- Telling child that the rejected parent does not love them
- Confiding in the child
17 Strategies of Alienation

- Forcing child to reject the other parent
- Asking child to spy on other parent
- Asking the child to keep secrets from other parent
- Referring to other parent by first name
- Referring to step-parent or significant other as “mom” or “dad”
- Withholding important child-related information from other parent
- Changing the child’s surname to remove association with targeted parent
- Cultivating dependency and undermining other parent’s authority
Interventions with the Alienator

- Individual therapy/coaching for alienating parent
- Limit phone contact between alienating parent and the child
- Supervised parenting time
- No parenting time (short term, with intensive residential treatment in place)
The Child’s traits and behaviors

- Reject parent whom they were previously attached to
- Show no remorse, ambivalence or guilt
- Vilify the parent
- Cognitive distortions
- Exaggerations of events
- Speaking in a manner that seems rehearsed or coached
Interventions for the child

- Individual outpatient therapy with therapist familiar with alienation (cognitive distortions; loyalty bind)
- Family therapy—focus on rejected parent and child
- Individual therapy/coaching for alienating parent (AP)
- Limit phone contact between AP and child
- Supervised parenting time with AP
- No parenting time with AP
- Intensive residential programs specializing in alienation (Family Bridges; Transitioning Families, etc.)
The Target’s common errors

- Responds in an overly aggressive, unempathic, or passive manner
- Counter-reject the children
- Accuse children of repeating what the other parent has said
- The children remind them of the other parent
- Bad-mouth the other parent
Intervention with the Target Parent

- How to respond to strong emotion (from child or favored parent)
- Developing empathy for the child
- Preparing for visits or contact with the child
- When necessary, help target to separate or take a break from the child
Systemic Factors

- High conflict, entrenched, and protracted dispute or slow court system
- Court involvement/assignment of Guardian ad Litem or Child Representative
- Professionals’ contributions to the dispute; may conclude the behavior the child is exhibiting is caused by the target parent; need to be cautious and attentive to this bias
Systemic Interventions

- Court orders supporting the treatment and/or reunification therapy
- Court orders supporting privacy for child’s contact with targeted parent
- Court orders supporting increased time share
- Swift action by court when recommendations are made by the custody evaluator
- Appoint a parenting coordinator
- Child Rep working in tandem with therapist—“good cop/bad cop”
When is a “parentectomy” warranted?

- When there is data to suggest one parent is engaging in many of the 17 alienation strategies.
- When the child’s level of distress increases to a clinical level (i.e. moderate to severe depression or anxiety; self-harm behaviors; suicidal ideation or acting out).
- When the alienating parent demonstrates lack of insight or complete unwillingness to acknowledge their role or behavior.
When is “in-patient” treatment warranted?

- If parentectomy is warranted, this level of treatment is likely needed
- Alienating behaviors are entrenched
- Lack of insight into impact on the child
- Child refuses to consider any information that contradicts their distorted belief system about malignanced parent
- The distorted belief system becomes the child’s reality
- There is nothing the therapist can do or say that will disavow the child of their distorted belief system
- Intensive milieu treatment is the last resort but sometimes a necessary option
Bibliography


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