

# Children Who Resist Parental Contact

by [Dr. Dan Swerdlow-Freed](#) on April 14, 2017

Many referrals that we receive for child custody evaluations include allegations of parental alienation (also commonly referred to as 'child alienation'). This is a serious allegation that requires thorough, in-depth examination to determine the reason(s) that a child is resisting or refusing contact with a parent. If there is a legitimate basis for a child resisting contact with a parent, specific therapeutic interventions should be formulated to address the problem. In this article, we discuss essential steps that should be taken when conducting a comprehensive evaluation of alienation claims.

For this article, we use Kelly and Johnston's (2001) definition of an alienated child as one "... who expresses, freely and persistently, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs (such as anger, hatred, rejection, and/or fear) toward a parent that are significantly disproportionate to the child's actual experience with that parent" (p. 251).

## Begin by suspending judgment

Prior to beginning an evaluation, it is essential for the evaluator to suspend judgment until the allegations have been carefully and completely investigated. Evaluators are wise to forego making the hasty assumption that an allegation is true or not true based on the context in which it has been made, its timing or the initial presentation of either parent or child. Furthermore, a child has not necessarily been alienated from a parent simply because the child resists contact with that individual, such as might be the case where a child has been abused. Or, it might not be correct to assume that simply because a child is not resisting contact with one parent that the child has not been subjected to efforts by the other parent to alienate the child.

Estranged children may display similar characteristics to alienated children, including rigidity in their attitude toward and opinion of the ostracized parent, and a negative, polarized and unambivalent view of that parent. To distinguish alienated children from those who are estranged it is necessary to determine whether a child has been subjected to emotional, physical or sexual abuse or neglect, extremely deficient parenting or has witnessed violence between the parents. To make this determination, an examiner must carefully interview both parents and the child. In situations where alienation appears likely, even if the child is not currently resisting contact, the examiner should assess the child's alignment with each parent to submit proper recommendations to the court.

## What factors are important to consider when evaluating the child?

One consideration involves the attitudes and opinions the child expresses about each parent, and particularly about the parent from whom the child is allegedly alienated. What is the nature of the comments the child makes about this parent? Is there a credible basis for the child's feelings and attitudes, or are they exaggerated, fabricated or distorted? Is the child willing or able to say anything positive about the parent, or is the child's attitude completely polarized? Is the alienated parent perceived as bad or evil, while the other parent is seen in unrealistically positive, virtuous terms? Has this always been the nature of the child's feelings toward the

parents, or was there a time when the child felt differently toward one or both parents?

Attention must also be paid to the child's behavior with both parents. For example, does the child speak negatively about the alienated parent in the other parent's presence, but eagerly engage the alienated parent when the other parent is not present? Or, does the child behave negatively toward the alienated parent regardless of the circumstance or who is present? It is not uncommon for one parent to insist that a child does not want to see the other parent, while the other, with equal fervor, insists that the child is loving and affectionate once the other parent is no longer present. Discrepancies like this are often resolved by observing the child interact with each parent and gaining firsthand data about these relationships.

### **Is there evidence that a parent is trying to alienate the child?**

It is also important to ascertain whether a parent may be seeking to alienate the child from the other parent, through direct or subtle means. For example, does one parent communicate to the child that s/he is in danger when with the other parent and that "everything will be better" once the child has returned "home." Indirect communication could also involve a parent calling the child numerous times during the other parent's time to make sure the child is "safe," or telling the child that a loving parent would not force the child to visit or do anything else the child does not wish to do.

Each parent should be interviewed to gather a history of that parent's relationship with the child, to gain understanding of the current dynamics of the parent-child relationship and to investigate any allegations of violence or abuse. If such allegations have been made, it is important to receive an account from each party and to review any third-party collateral information that might exist, such as medical records, police or Protective Service reports, or eyewitness accounts. If investigation reveals that a child has been subjected to abuse or has witnessed violence between the parents, the child's estrangement from the offending parent would have a legitimate basis. Confirmation of abuse or exposure to a pattern of domestic violence would justify concern for the child's safety and warrant a safety plan if the child was going to continue having contact with the offending parent.

### **What about the other parent?**

The parent who is the object of the alienation effort also plays a role in the family dynamic, and this requires clarification. Kelly and Johnston have identified several behaviors by rejected parents that contribute to the alienation process. These include passivity and withdrawal, counter-rejection, harsh and rigid parenting style, self-centered and immature behaviors, critical and demanding traits, and diminished empathy. It is important to determine if such behaviors are present even though, by themselves, they are usually inadequate justifications for a child's resistance to maintaining parental contact.

Courts often experience great frustration dealing with families where a child resists or refuses contact with a parent. Resolution of these time-consuming, difficult cases can be facilitated by child custody evaluation reports that propose detailed and specific parenting time schedules and exchange procedures, as well as recommendations for other interventions. Reports should also include

recommendations for how future parental disputes can be managed, how to exchange information about the child, how to monitor compliance with court orders, and how to deal with the issue of non-compliance.

If you are involved with a family where a child is resisting contact with a parent, or if you would like more information about this topic, please feel free to contact our office.

[For more information about Child Custody Evaluations click here.](#)

**Reference:**

Kelly, Joan B. & Johnston, Janet R. (2001) A Reformulation of Parental Alienation Syndrome. Family Court Review. Vol. 39, No. 3. Pp. 249 – 266.

For more information or to make an appointment, please call Swerdlow-Freed Psychology at (248) 539-7777. Our offices are conveniently located at 30600 Northwestern Highway, Suite 210, Farmington Hills, Michigan 48334, and 55 North Pond Drive, Suite 6, Walled Lake, Michigan 48390.