Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
Clinical Psychologist, Calgary, AB.
www.drgary.ca

Common Child Issues That Also Affect Alienation Reactions

A number of fairly common processes both inside the child and in the family can come into play in the denial-of-attachment/alienation symptom. In fact, there probably are more than those described below. In what follows are some common child and adolescent issues that often contribute to the emergence of an alienation reaction.

A. Emotional Resonance:

This term refers to the well known fact that children (and probably all of us more than we are aware), are affected by the feelings and attitudes of those to whom we have an important attachment. Psychologists have always noticed that young children seem to have radar for the emotional climate within and between their parents. Recent brain imaging studies have even discovered that our brains have "mirror neurons" that tend to be activated by, and fire in sympathy with, the neurons in the brain of a loved one.

It is this phenomenon of the **emotional resonance** between children and their parents that all too often has been identified as the principal, if not the only, cause of the splitting/alienation reaction. I have not found this to be an adequate explanation in the majority of cases, although the feelings and attitudes of the favored parent always need to be looked at and addressed.

In fact, this dynamic of emotional resonance seems more important in dealing with younger children who are having transfer and switching reactions, and here the dominant feature seems to be the climate between the parents far more than either parent individually. My conclusion is that children are affected more by the feelings and attitudes between their parents than to either parent individually. Maybe another way to put it is this: children seem to be able to deal and cope with emotional issues in each individual parent; but they cannot cope with ongoing emotional conflict between their parents.

B. Conflict Between the Parents:

This has, so far, been the main lens through which I have looked at and interpreted the splitting/alienation reaction. This approach focuses on the stress produced in the child by the parental conflict. Just as it would stress parents if their two children were to become committed enemies, even more so it stresses children when their two parents become committed

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enemies. This is especially true if the child is the subject and focus of the conflict. This stress is especially acute for the only child, because there are no siblings with whom to maintain some sense of family.

We have seen how the first solution to this stress is the child's ability to just **switch** attachments, which tends eventually to increase parental conflict. As the child enters adolescence at about 11 or 12, switching becomes more difficult and stress increases, as does parental conflict. As switching fails, the child's mind, in desperation, saves itself by denying the attachment to one parent. This denial is maintained by pretending the alienated parent is totally bad, and by producing amnesia for any good memories. Once this happens, only a reduction in parental conflict along with insightful and cooperative parental interventions can help the child's mind escape this reaction.

Three things will make the reaction worse:

1. Anything that increases parental conflict, principally blaming and arguments over truth.
2. **Time:** Yes, time is the enemy. Like all denial reactions, the longer the alienation goes on, the more entrenched and hardened it becomes. The child's mind gets more and more invested in the reaction. It is harder and harder to change as time goes on. This is why waiting for the child to be ready or to choose to see the alienated parent does not work.
3. **Choice:** Approaching the reaction as a choice by the child also makes the reaction worse. Making the alienation reaction a matter of choice, instead of recognizing that it is an unconscious symptomatic reaction, tends to backfire. For the child to choose to reopen attachment to the alienated parent, it would require a complete reversal on the part of the child's mind, along with the acknowledgement of a terrible mistake. This approach also fails to restore the necessary parental authority and hierarchy in the family. Not only is it counterproductive to approach the reaction as a matter of the child's choice, I believe it is also potentially very harmful. This will be explained later in the section The *Dangers of Choice in Alienation Reactions".*

C. An Attempt to Help the Family:

One useful way to look at adolescent reactions and symptoms in general is to see them as unconscious attempts to help the family in some way. For example, a teenager who begins to tell stories and lies might be trying

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to show the family, in which there is a disturbing secret going on, that "things are not the way they appear." Or, a teenager whose parents are suffering from the stress of overwork might begin letting homework and other responsibilities slide. Thus, an adolescent whose family is stressed out due to the breakdown and reversal of parental attachment (divorce and ensuing conflict) might develop a very dramatic reversal of attachment to one parent. Such a reaction would dramatize the family attachment problems and call for attention to this very disturbing state of affairs. Furthermore, the position of empowerment would be calling attention to the breakdown of parental authority in the family.

At an even deeper level, the dramatic denial and pretending involved in the alienation reaction may be trying to help the parents see that they too are engaged in massive denial maintained by demonizing the other parent.

D. **Stuck Grieving:**

The marital breakdown and separation represent a huge, even traumatic, loss for all family members. At the center of this is the loss of attachment (love) between the parents, the architects and leaders of the family. The task of the family is to grieve this loss and come to a peaceful acceptance of the loss, and then proceed to becoming a good separated family. This is a difficult transition and many things can go wrong. If the parents have not, or cannot, grieve and come to accept the loss of the marriage, symptoms of persistent anger/blaming, disillusionment, desperation, or sadness can occur. The child's splitting/alienation reaction could be seen as an alarm that appropriate grieving and family transition have not occurred. The parents are stuck in conflict, and the adolescent dramatizes this by siding with, or identifying with, the parent who is having the most trouble and difficulty.

E. **Unfinished Business of Early Childhood:**

Another key way of looking at adolescent reactions is to see them as a re-working of some unfinished emotional business of early childhood. For example, an adolescent who becomes unexplainably depressed might be re-working a period of emotional deprivation in early childhood. Thus, an adolescent as a young child may have suffered some serious attachment trauma, for example, serious marital conflict that made life insecure or fearful; or the absence of one parent due to work or separation; or any of a number of disturbing family events. We might find such a child, now an

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adolescent, reacting with a strong drama of broken attachment and felt rejection. The alienation reaction may be fuelled not only by recent parental conflict, but also by issues left over from early childhood. In the absence of a functional marriage, the child may have been for a long time the focus and source of all the love in the family. The child may have been the centre of parental conflict for a long time. The child may have become excessively empowered by the lack of parental attachment and cooperation. The splitting/alienation may be the child's way of talking about the family's failure to establish a functional and working hierarchical structure for attachment.

F. **Empowerment and Attachment:**

Attachment theorists tell us that all attachment is hierarchical—it is passed down from the top and responded to by the recipient. Attachment theorists also tell us that attachment is mediated, that is, we attach more easily when the current focus of our attachment (say mother) is positively attached to the next focus (say father). It is clear how there is a breakdown in mediating attachment in a conflicted divorce. Even very young children sense this and have transfer reactions. What is less clear is that a dysfunctional marriage and/or post-separation parental conflict can seriously disrupt the hierarchy in the family, resulting in the children becoming more and more empowered.

This issue of over empowerment of the child, in the context of attachment chaos (parental conflict), is present in many alienation cases. Sometimes the empowerment begins with each parent's fear of losing the child in the parental conflict over control. Each parent becomes afraid to cross or challenge or anger the child, for fear the child will want to go to the other parent. Once the child begins to lean one way or the other, the child's empowerment tends to be encouraged and fostered by the favored parent, who says access is all up to the child, and should be left up to the child. Child advocates often take the same approach.

However, in many areas less important to the child's development than parental attachment or family betrayal, we do not let the child choose. We require school attendance even if the child objects. We require painful medical and dental procedures. We insist on curfews and abstinence from substances we judge harmful. Yet some parents and child advocates empower the child to choose or refuse access to a good and once-loved parent. I will explain in the following section the perils I see in doing this.

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G. **Defensive Detachment:**

Attachment theorists also talk about a process they call "defensive detachment". This term describes a well-known process by which the human mind protects itself if its attachment to someone becomes too painful. It can happen in all close human relationships. For defensive detachment to become necessary, there must first be a close and meaningful attachment. The stronger this attachment is, the more painful it can become if conflicted, and the stronger the defense that will be required. The alienation reaction, as we have seen, is indeed a very powerful denial and detachment, which would not be necessary if the target—a once-loved parent—were not very important. If there were not a strong attachment or love, a strong defensive detachment would not be necessary. There is a way that the intensely engaged conflict between the parents is resulting from an inability to appropriately detach from each other and end the relationship.

H. **Connection with Other Issues of Adolescent Development:**

There are a number of common, normal reactions that children have as they enter adolescence. In a stressed divorced family, these reactions can easily lead to an escalation of parental conflict. The increased conflict, in turn, can lead to a splitting/alienation reaction. It is important to keep in mind that these normal reactions do not constitute splitting/denial-of-attachment/alienation, even though they may include resistance to access to one parent. A true alienation reaction must include four essential elements: an adamant refusal of access, an absence of guilt or anguish, amnesia for any good memories or experiences, and an exaggerated demonization or fear of the alienated parent. If these elements are not present, the parents simply need help to manage in a cooperative way the following normal reactions of early adolescence.

Early adolescence often entails some **emotional separation from mother**. The child is required by nature to make a transition from being mother's little boy or girl to being more grown up (adolescent). This change can be stressful for both the child and the mother. Sometimes a symptomatic (unconscious) solution emerges, wherein the child becomes increasingly negative and argumentative toward mother, who responds with equal confrontation. In a stressed divorced family, mother's normal difficulty is amplified by fear that she is losing her grip on the child, who may decide to go to father. A very negative pattern develops, often interspersed with periods of closeness and regression. It gives the child the illusion of growing up, while not actually doing so. There is still an

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intense engagement with mother, but now it is often negative, giving the illusion of more independence. In a married family, it is easy for father to step in, support mother, and help the child to find more appropriate and real ways of becoming more mature. In a stressed or conflicted divorced family, the child's complaints to father about mother can easily result not in support for mother and help for the child, but rather in escalating conflict between the parents. This can rather quickly proceed to a splitting reaction, as each parent blames the other for the child's reactions.

Another common way for a child's mind to deal with the stress of growing up and the required change in dependence on mother is to **resist going to father**. The child becomes increasingly negative toward and avoidant of father, who represents growing up, separation from mother, and advancement toward the adult world. In so doing, the child elicits the sympathy of mother, who wants to comfort her child and make things easier, and who feels that father is too hard on the child. In a married family, this leads to marital stress until the couple discovers, often in counseling, the real nature of the problem: namely, the child's reaction to a difficult transition in life, made more challenging by the marital stress. The parents begin to support each other and the child is helped to make the transition. In a divorced family, the child's reactions can lead to escalating parental conflict, as each parent blames the other for the problem. Attendance on a professional skilled in both conflict management and child dynamics is often required to prevent this situation from progressing to an alienation reaction.

Another normal stress of early adolescence is that of **disillusionment with parents**. This is difficult enough even in the best of times, within a married family with parents who have only normal flaws. If we add to the normal challenge events like a messy separation, parental emotional upheaval of all sorts, an affair by one parent, the taking of a new partner soon after separation, the stress of a blended family, and so on, the adolescent can become disillusioned in an overwhelming way. The child, whose childhood and world have been turned upside down, can become very angry at one parent or the other. The child can have strong feelings of being betrayed and let down, so much so that the child may begin to boycott or resist seeing one parent. The resisted parent often blames the other parent, who may well be sympathetic with the child and the child's reaction. Here again, conflict escalates, and no one pays attention to the profound crisis in the child.

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As adolescents of all ages struggle with growing up, with disillusionment about the adult world, and with developing their own identity, it is common to come into **conflict with their father**. This is because fathers represent authority, growing up, self definition, and adult responsibility. In some families where father has been the stronger parent, the divorce represents for the child a failure in his management. The child feels that father, the strong one, the one everybody depended on, (especially mother who is now devastated), should have found a way to prevent this disaster. The child is angry at father and wants to help mother. Again, such a reaction can easily inflame parental conflict. The father fears losing his child and blames mother for this. Mother is sympathetic to the child's anger and blames father.

It should be clear from the foregoing that normal adolescent stresses and challenges, in the context of a conflicted divorce, can easily lead to escalating parental conflict. As conflict becomes more and more intense around the child's reactions and difficulties, a splitting/alienation/denial-of-attachment reaction can occur. These problems are best dealt with before they reach this point.

I. Telling a Story That Must Be Told:

Like all psychological symptoms, the splitting/alienation reaction can be seen as the human mind trying to tell a story that must be told. In addition to all the other more obvious factors already discussed, the reaction is often telling a story about attachment problems that go way back in the child's life. Such children have often been conceived in, born in, and grown up in a marriage that was not really working and had underlying attachment (love) problems. Often this was hidden. Sometimes it was not. But the reality in the family was that the child was the principal repository of love. Conflict or dysfunction in the marriage, even if carefully hidden, intimately affected the child. Marital problems were the underlying pain in the child's environment. Inevitably these problems would have led to unresolved, perhaps denied, parental conflict about the child. Even if hidden and controlled, it finally erupted into enough pain that the marriage ended and an intensely conflicted divorce followed. And this conflict definitely became focused overtly on the child. First the child was the focus of love in the family. Then the child became the focus of conflict. In both cases, the child was the most powerful person in the family.

The child's alienation reaction can be seen as a very dramatic statement that attachment in this family had problems at its core, and that this

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situation has involved the child in some way for a long time. The denial and pretending processes going on in the child may be showing that denial and pretending are the family's way of dealing with attachment pain. In the drama, each parent demonizes the other, and the child demonizes one parent.

When there have been traumas in the family, like the death of a child, very powerful, even if hidden, forces can be at work. Or if the conflict between the parents involved sexual issues or sexual acting out (affairs), this too can be a story of disturbed attachment in the family that must be told. The alienation reaction is often telling a story that the adolescent's mind feels must be told.

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D., R.Psych.
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