

What is Parental Alienation

What is the definition of Parental Alienation?

There is no formal definition in law although CAF/CASS recognise it exists and define it as “when a child's resistance or hostility towards one parent is not justified and is the result of psychological manipulation by the other parent.

Therapists who specialise in the treatment of children and adults who are victims or perpetrators of parental alienation may call it psychological splitting.

Beware... there are many reasons why a child may reject a parent. Do not jump to the conclusion it is parental alienation without soul searching and the advice of professionals. Children may reject their parents due to your domestic violence, alcoholism, drug taking or other unacceptable behaviour.

How do perpetrators alienate their children against the other parent?

- They repeatedly denigrate, demean, and devalue the other parent in the presence of the child and others. They often insist a child stops calling their parent “mum” or “dad” or even prevents them talking about the other parent. They bad mouth the other parent, criticise their parenting and deny their value to their children.
- They isolate the other parent from friends and family. They act as a gatekeeper, preventing children from spending time with the other parent, from talking on the phone, or messaging. They break agreed arrangements and court orders. They may insist friends “choose” between them.
- They cause financial hardship by refusing to communicate or decide other than through solicitors or the family court. They barter child-parenting time, offering to increase time, or threatening to reduce it, depending on money exchanged.
- They interfere with parental responsibility – failing to consult on medical or educational issues and relay important health and schooling information. They may unlawfully change a child's name to eradicate a parent from the child's life and identity.
- They make false allegations of abuse, fitness to parent, substance abuse or mental health difficulties – reporting these to the police or social services – in order to prevent a parent from being with their child. False allegations are also made to employers, friends and on social media to damage reputation and impact on financial stability and job security.
- They interfere with child-parent time by arranging appointments, events and activities. They may continually text or face-time your child while they are with you, or ask the police to make repeated welfare checks.
- They will destroy or dispose of gifts, mementos, photographs, and letters given to children by a loving parent, fostering a belief that the other parent is not important or does not love a child. They may tell the child the other parent does not love them or is dead. The aim is to remove all references of the alienated parent from the child's life.

- They burden their child with their emotional outbursts – crying or appearing fearful, anxious or angry when a child spends time with the other parent. In this way, a child comes to feel responsible for their parent’s emotional regulation and stability.
- They may steal the other parent’s money, regulate their pocket money, or raid joint bank accounts, credit cards or demand cash for time with your child.

What are the effects of Parental Alienation on the children?

- Extreme negative views toward the parent, including denying past positive experiences, and lack of investment or interest in improving the relationship.
- Frivolous or absurd reasons for hurt and anger with the parent.
- Seeing one parent as all good and the other as all bad.
- Always siding with the favoured parent, no matter what he or she says or does.
- A lack of remorse for hurting the rejected parent’s feelings.
- Claiming to reject the parent but not being influenced by the favoured parent, even though that parent is an obvious influence.
- Repeating the favoured parent’s words without always understanding what they mean.
- Becoming cold and hostile toward friends and family of the rejected parent.

Why do perpetrators do it?

The reasons are not always clear and depend on the extent of the abuse and the perpetrator, for the victim, the best strategy is to concentrate on how not to be influenced by the alienating behaviour and how to protect your children,

Naïve alienators. Are parents who generally have a good working relationship with the other parent but occasionally take out their anger, frustration or feelings of injustice and disappointment by occasional alienating remark. E.g. “Tell your father to be on time next week”, “No you can’t have new shoes, your father doesn’t pay me enough” etc. Generally, these alienators are unaware of the effect their words have on their child and if the child maintains their relationship with the other parent they will struggle through the separation or divorce successfully.

Active alienators. They believe their children should have a good relationship with their other parent but have difficulty keeping their own pain and frustration under control and will lash out at or about the other parent in front of the children and may be rigid and uncommunicative with their ex. This can cause pain and confusion for children around how they should feel about or act toward the other parent. These alienators will occasionally become aware of how their behaviour affects their child and attempt to moderate the effect by elaborating on their separation experience or even apologising. This does not always help the child with the emotional turmoil they are experiencing.

Obsessive alienators. Obsessive alienators actively try to win the child to their side and aim to prevent or destroy any relationship with the other parent. They feel anger, hatred, or fear toward their former partner, and they assume or decide the child must feel the same, and so they choose to “protect” their child at all costs. The child may begin to parrot what this parent is doing and saying, and his or her negative feelings toward the rejected parent can become extreme. These alienators know what they are doing but believe it is in the best interests of their child.

Can children and adults recover from Parental Alienation?

While a child spends time with both parents, throughout the alienating process child victims struggle to make sense of what is going on. They *can* make sense of things. They can understand, even at a young age, that one parent is different to the other and needs to be accommodated in different ways. They can understand there are different rules for different parents. It is the role of the non-alienating parent to assist the child in this process. Not by lecturing, which might well have the opposite of the intended effect, but by gentle nurturing so the child develops their own resilience.

For adult victims there is often a sudden and shocking realisation that they have been victims for many years and been unable to recognise what was happening. There is no point beating yourself up over this. It is one of the most insidious and difficult forms of abuse to recognise because perpetrators are so good at hiding it in public. It is also the most difficult to recover from. Without any self-confidence left you often find yourself trapped in inaction. Therapeutic support is often the best and quickest route to recovery. Parents of alienated children have a big responsibility to rescue their child from the emotional trauma.

What Can I do to help my child recover from Parental Alienation?

Read as much as you can about the subject. There are lots of books, self-help pamphlets and guides available. Although it is interesting to discover about why parents resort to alienating behaviour it is not a fruitful journey to take while your child is still suffering. The truth is you will probably never know for sure why your ex turned into a perpetrator. However, you *can* find out how to prevent your child from experiencing the worst effects and guarantee they have a happy healthy future.

Strategies to help your child build resilience to alienation.

- Conjure situations where you can demonstrate your consideration of other's feelings or needs.
- Say "I wonder if Mrs (old lady up the road) is OK. Perhaps she would like us to check and maybe do her shopping in this hot weather.
- Help your child share toys with visiting friends by describing and showing how it will work before they arrive. Perhaps let them hide their favourite.
- Describe how to behave when other children are selfish towards them. E.g. not everybody understands how to share like you, or, some people bully others when they are unhappy.
- Talk about TV characters who have been unfortunate in empathetic terms. "I hope they live happy ever after", "I wonder if the big bad wolf ever learned to be kind".
- Don't deny the feelings of your children by immediately correcting them when they repeat lies or inaccuracies, they have picked up from your ex.
- Remind yourself that your child is a victim of abuse and what you see and hear are the symptoms of that abuse.
- Always be aware that your role is to rescue your child from the abuse by helping them become immune from the brain washing that is parental alienation.
- Ensure that anger or vengeance has no role in your time with your child.
- Encourage yourself to be empathetic in situations where you may have little patience. E.g. do not shout at other drivers instead say "Woops they weren't concentrating"
- Don't immediately correct your child's words or feelings even if they were implanted by your ex. For them, these feelings are real.

- Don't force a communication impasse by the immediate correction of repeated lies. Your child will think you have not taken them seriously so avoid this. They will believe you don't understand the extent of their unhappiness.
- Use a range of strategies, over a period of time, to weaken your child's triggered responses. Failure to be patient can ruin your chances of long-term success.
- Paradoxically you get rid of your child's feelings of hatred by first showing you understand them and treat them as real and with respect. However, you don't tolerate rudeness or repeated expressions of hatred.
- If your child clams up in response to your questions about feelings. The "I don't know" syndrome. Then don't pursue your questioning. Wait for an opportunity when your child is more responsive.
- Strangely if your child says "I don't know" you can illicit a reply by saying "Yes... but what if you did know".
- Read a kid's book together about divorce. You can ask "Is that how you feel" when you get to a poignant comment. If your child is too old for reading books with Dad... leave it in the toilet.
- Do not remove all traces of your ex from your home. Ensure pictures of the family together before the breakup feature predominantly and presents received are on view.

This is not a definitive guide on how you deal with developing parental alienation and is only useful if you are seeing or talking to your children. If you don't see your children and only have indirect contact (letters and gifts), then your strategy will need to be different.

How do I combat Parental Alienation if I don't see my children?

This is one of the most difficult positions to be in. You may be in the middle of a court case with allegations of domestic violence against you and you may be alleging parental alienation. Most courts will not allow parenting time if the allegations have not been fully investigated. That is no reason not to ask for time with your children of course, but a refusal only allows time for PA to develop further. Or you may be at the end of a long court battle and the final order may be that you can only have indirect contact, but whatever the reason do not abandon hope.

If you are only allowed "letters and small gifts" make sure you do not miss any opportunity to communicate with your child. Do not entertain any of the following frequently heard arguments.

- There is no point, my ex will take the letters and my child will never see them.
- My child has said she never wants to see me, so I can't win.
- I'll wait till s/he is 18 and they can find me.

None of these arguments will get you to see your child. If you can write letters do so, regularly and with small gifts. They may not get to your child, but you can build a file of your letters and photos of gifts for the future. And there is always the chance your child will find the letter on the door mat addressed to her and read it. Pocket money through a child's account can be tracked so can Amazon vouchers.

If the claim is your child says she never wants to see you, that may well be a coached reply. A reply repeated by CAF/CASS and the order for indirect contact was based upon. Even if you

have that view in your child's handwriting it is not true for ever. Keep writing your letters. Children can hang onto the idea that despite the difficulties at home, there is a rock called Daddy who I can rely upon even if they never reply to your letters.

If you give up and wait for your child to contact you, the reunion may not be all love and roses as you expected. Your child might come to ask you "Where the hell were you when I needed you. You abandoned me to that mad woman...." Or "My father drove me mad and you abandoned me. I never want to see either of you again". Or worse, your child may arrive unexpectedly at your door emotional damaged. This could have been avoided if you have more of a presence in their life. Social exclusion, no education, unemployment, drug addiction, crime, mental illness are all more likely in children raised by single parents.

What do I write in my letters?

The purpose of your letters is to provide an alternative to the emotionally demanding and manipulating atmosphere of your child's home. Total normality. Describe what you did that week, what you had for tea, talk about old friends your child may have had, about relatives and their lives and end on an upbeat note. Ask questions to elicit a reply. Don't be critical of the other parent. Say "Hope Mum is well", or "Send my best wishes to Dad". This will be in stark contrast to the rhetoric your child hears about you at home.

Your letters will help build an understanding of what has happened to them. Always remember your child will never stop loving your ex despite your feelings. Any direct critical comment about them will be like a dagger to their heart and will put your reunion off, possibly for many years.

Gifts depend on the age of the child. If they are young there are colouring pens, stickers, books, glitter, bubbles paints etc. If they are older a Go Henry account, or similar, means you can track pocket money. Amazon vouchers can also be tracked. Don't be tempted to go for the expensive glamour gift. It is more likely to end up on ebay than in your child's toy cupboard.