

What You Need To Know About...

Helping Your Kids and Yourself When There is Parental Alienation

If you are reading this, or attending our workshop on parental alienation, you are experiencing one of the most painful and difficult situations a parent can be in. We hope to give you strength, hope and strategies to help you deal with this situation, as well as helping your children the best you can to deal with it, and even potentially help your kids begin to see what is happening to them and their relationship with you. The strategies recommended in this workshop are designed for when you have contact with your children. If you do not have contact at this time, you won't be able to use these ideas until a later time when you hopefully DO have contact with your kids.

What is Parental Alienation?

Let's first be clear on what we mean by parental alienation (PA). There is a lot of misinformation in books and on the Internet about what this is. In addition, there are some experts in this field with opposing views about PA, which can leave anyone confused about what it is and what it isn't. For the purposes of this workshop, when we talk about PA we are talking about one parent's systematic efforts to turn your children against you. This is often for the purpose of punishing you by destroying your relationship with your children. It may also be for other purposes, such as financial gain. It is called PA when there is no valid reason for the children to be kept from you. Valid reasons might be neglect or emotional, physical, or sexual abuse. However, when a parent does not exhibit harmful behavior towards a child and yet the other parent attempts to persuade the children that they do not want a relationship with the "targeted parent," we call it parental alienation.

Although there are a lot of theories that offer definitions and criteria, those specifics are not useful in this workshop and we don't ascribe to any theory or another. Instead, our purpose is to provide you with some things you can do. There is very little you can control when you are the alienated parent, but our workshop focuses on the things you can control.

Areas you cannot control:

- The other parent's behavior and statements
- Your children's reactions to the other parent's persuasiveness
- Other people's reactions to the other parent's behavior/statements
- Decisions of the courts, attorneys, and other professionals in your children's life

When it comes right down to it, the only thing you CAN control...is YOU. This might seem like a very small thing. It can make a very big difference though, long term. Even though this seems like a small thing, you simply can't control anything else. There is no point in putting energy towards the things you can't control. Yes, you still need to do your best to protect yourself and your children – but the more matter-of-fact you are about the things you can't control, the less emotional energy you give towards those things. ***And that is important.*** Save that emotional energy for the things we are going to talk about next.

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*6901 S. Pierce St., Suite 350, Littleton CO 80128
303-801-7878*

*<https://www.lifepathscounseling.com>
info@lifepathscounseling.com*

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WHAT CAN YOU DO?

When we have worked with alienated parents, we have suggested that you remember the 4 C's© in every interaction you have with your children. We go into more detail on each of these below:

- Stay **calm** no matter what and during all the time you have with your children
- All that you say and do is designed to foster **connection** with your children
- Create an environment to develop **critical thinking skills** in your children
- Be as **consistent** in all of these things as humanly possible

Calm

You want it to always feel relaxed and just plain good during the time you and your child are together. This sounds very simple, right? But if you've been the targeted parent for any length of time, the PA you see happening makes your blood boil. Do all you can to not let your children sense these strong emotions.

That means that not only do you express your anger, frustration, despair, disappointment, anger, fear, sadness, anger, etc. *somewhere else* and *some other time* than when you are with your children – it also means that you need to actually try to compartmentalize these feelings until another time. Children sense our moods, they are very good at emotionally attuning with their parents and do this with little conscious effort. It might help you shield them from your emotions if you remind yourself that this is not your child's fault, and the best thing you can do about the situation right this second is to be calm, kind and loving with your child.

Having said all that, we realize this is not always possible to do. You will slip up and that's okay. You will also get better at this with practice and as you begin to see that your efforts can make a difference.

Connection

Although this can feel similar to remaining calm, it is just as important to also seek connection with your child whenever you are together. Here are a few ideas about what we mean:

- At times when your child has said something hurtful towards you, or rejected you, never ever stop trying to connect.
- When you want to explain what you see happening so they will "get it," attempt to simply love him or her instead and express your love for him or her in a positive way.
- Tell your children, often, that you **love them no matter what**. (At times it is also important to tell them that **you know they love you**, too)
- When you have an opportunity to simply **be** with your child, do it. Tell them it feels good to just spend time with them, no matter what you are doing.

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- Talk about how much you appreciate memories you have together, traditions you have together, qualities in your child that you enjoy. Recalling loving and positive times with your child shows them you value those moments and it also reminds them of how they felt at that time, which only serves to counteract the negative emotions your ex is trying to foster in them.

These efforts can pay off. Any action you take towards connecting with your child is going to feel good. You want to avoid negative reactions of course, and always remember that if you do, it supports what they hear from the other parent. Keep your focus on these four areas to help yourself avoid the negative reactions.

Critical Thinking Skills

Your child is under a powerful influence of persuasion and manipulation. It is important to remember how powerful the influence is, and remember that whatever age your children are, they do not yet have the critical thinking skills of an adult so they are not equipped to resist persuasion and manipulation very well. Naturally, the younger they are, the less able they are to resist.

Perhaps even more important than this is the fact that you and the child's other parent are supposed to be the people your child can trust the most. But they are now in a situation that basically requires them to choose which one of you they *cannot trust*. Think about that. The environment your child is now in requires them to accept that one of the two people that are the closest to them can't be trusted. This creates a terrible sense of insecurity. It is betrayal. This in turn complicates their ability to develop critical thinking skills.

You can't simply tell your child that the other parent is lying, and you can't rush cognitive development either. But you can definitely create an environment for your children to build critical thinking skills as well as they possible can at their age.

For our purposes here, when we are talking about critical thinking skills, we are talking about your child's ability to use logic and reasoning to discern what is or is not true about people. You might also think of this as your child's ability to figure out what commercials and ads are trying to accomplish, why salespersons might say things they do, or your child's ability to determine if someone is using persuasion/manipulation to achieve a hidden motive.

The primary idea behind this is that you want to help your child build these skills so that he or she figures out **on their own** what the other parent is doing. Combined with the other three C's, you will be doing your best to overcome the other parents' efforts to alienate you from your children.

Here is what you do: You watch for those "teachable" moments with your child. You are watching for moments to teach them these critical thinking skills. There is no way to predict when these moments come, so you have to be on alert for them. And for the most part, you can't create these situations. Here are some places and examples of where you can find opportunities to teach these skills:

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- News – notice when the writer/speaker has a bias about what they are reporting on - this gives you an opportunity to say something like, “there are usually two sides to a story, I wonder what people who think (the opposite viewpoint) would say about this topic,” and get a conversation going about.
- Commercials/Ads/Salespeople – any sales situation whether it be at your doorstep or an ad in a magazine is a chance to talk about the motivation behind the ad or pitch. You can even take advantage of the standee of a celebrity your child likes, that is prominently placed in the store to get their attention, and why sellers use something like this.
- TV/movie scenarios – situations where we as the audience realize when a character is trying to manipulate others in some way is an opportunity to ask your child how the person being “tricked” could figure out what is happening.
- Friendships – your child’s own friendships or school acquaintances are often a great source of situations that you can use to foster critical thinking – friends that use another person to get in with more popular people, friends that only are nice when they gain something, and friends that are super nice to the teacher so they can stay the teacher’s favorite are some examples.
- Believing what someone tells you – if it is too good to be true, it isn’t true; truth isn’t always black or white and this is a very important concept to watch for - people sometimes have different opinions/beliefs, sometimes people remember situations differently because of what they were paying most attention to, and sometimes people believe things without having seen or heard actual evidence of it (you want to teach your child to seek out evidence they actually see or hear, and to be skeptical when they haven’t witnessed something directly).
- Clickbait on social media – point out the words that get a person to click on an article and help your child notice how words that are heavy with emotion make you want to click on something more.

Obviously, you use scenarios that are age appropriate and have conversations that are age appropriate. You probably won’t be watching the news with very young children but high school aged kids have current events assignments and are also developing their opinions about world events, as an example.

It is even better if you can make this a game or fun.

Another big plus is when they can easily relate to the topic or the people involved.

In some of these situations, you may be able to use the scientific method. Kids start learning about this in elementary school and the idea of having a question, forming a hypothesis, observing evidence and drawing a conclusion applies to many things in life. At times, you can simply say some form of the question, “What’s the evidence?” to get your child thinking, being discerning, and being skeptical.

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Keep a couple of things in mind to guide you:

- Ask more questions than anything else – let your child do the talking and thinking, and figure things out on their own, if possible keep your comments to prompts only. Sometimes it is hard to wait while they figure out something but it is so much more valuable for them to come to a conclusion themselves. Be aware though that if it seems they aren't going to figure it out, go ahead and tell them. Remember, you want all your moments with your child to feel good, so don't push it to where your child becomes frustrated with you.
- Always give your child verbal AND non-verbal messages that you trust their ability to figure things out.
- Don't overdo it!!
- Never use their other parent in examples!!
- Your kids are likely to be much smarter and savvy about things than you give them credit for – they notice more than you think they do.

These skills are essential to being successful in life as an adult. Any development in this area is good for your child regardless of the situation you are in with PA happening. This is a great concept to remember if your child were to get so good at it that they figure out what you are doing!

Consistency

You want to be as consistent with each of the three areas above as humanly possible. Sometimes you will slip up. Every targeted parent has done it. Well...every parent has done it. Strive for consistency as much as possible.

Along with consistently staying calm, striving for connection, and teaching critical thinking skills, simply being consistent as a parent builds trust and that in turn fosters attachment. The more consistent you are in how you behave, the rules you set, the way you respond to positive and negative experiences, how well you keep promises to your kids – the results are that your children get a clear message that you are “there” for them, they matter to you, you care about the relationship you have with them, and you make them a priority.

These 4 C's are “long game” parenting. You are creating a strong foundation moment-by-moment, and striving for a lasting secure attachment with your child. For more about attachment, you might find this article on parent-child attachment interesting:

<https://www.parentmap.com/article/the-four-ss-of-parenting-dan-siegels-whole-brain-child>

Don't Forget Your Child's Perspective

It is very *normal* of you if you are sometimes angry with your child for treating you this way.

However.

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Always remember that this is not your child's fault. They are under a powerful influence! We can't emphasize this enough – a parent has a tremendous amount of influence, even on teenagers who are starting to venture out in the world with all the influences they will find there.

Along with your child being under a powerful influence, young children are not developmentally ready to fully understand what is happening. Please try very hard not to take your child's behavior towards you personally. If you have read *The Four Agreements*, by Don Miguel Ruiz, you know that one of the agreements he talks about in this book is "Don't take anything personally." This general statement absolutely is a good rule to follow in life, but especially important when dealing with your own child who is participating in alienating you.

When you are faced with a difficult situation with your ex influencing your child, and your child is asking you a direct question – when you answer, either make it about your child or ask the child what he or she thinks. For example:

If your child tells you that she isn't going to come with you on your parenting time today, don't say, "I have a right to my time with you, and the courts say you have to." Instead, say, "I know you aren't feeling like it today, but it is important for every child to have time with both of their parents to help them be the best people they can be. So that's why your mom/dad and I set things up the way we did."

If your child asks you if you took money from your ex, don't react with anger and say something like, "Did he/she tell you that? I can't believe it! I'm going to take care of this right now." This will create fear in your child, and they will stop talking to you and asking you these questions! You *want* your child to keep asking you these questions and talking to you about their concerns. Instead, say, "Huh, that must be confusing to you to hear something like that. What do you think? Does it sound like something I would do?" Your child might still say hurtful things in response to your questions. Stay calm. Remember, the other parent is a powerful influence for them and this is not your child's fault. Simply say something like, "I'm sad that you think that way of me, but I want you to know I didn't do that and I won't lie to you about anything." Whenever possible, speak only about your child, or about yourself, and not about the other parent.

Reacting in these ways allows you to stand up for yourself, without falling into the same badmouthing behavior that your ex is doing. The idea that truth isn't always black or white will also be a useful one when you are responding to direct questions from your child, or learning they have heard something from your ex that is a lie, exaggeration, etc. Explaining that you and your ex see a situation differently is a way to stand up for yourself, not badmouth the child's other parent, and also demonstrate this concept.

If you are succeeding with this, your child will keep asking questions and testing out their concerns with you. Eventually you are likely to get questions about why your ex is behaving this way. You are going to get mad at this moment. Stay calm. Remember your child loves their other parent, and the more compassion you can respond with, the better. It is okay to say you don't know, suggest your child ask that parent, or to say that sometimes people see things very differently from one another.

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There is likely to come a day when your child feels an astounding amount of guilt and shame for the way he or she has treated you. You always, always, always want to give them an “out” and a way back to you, and you always want them to know that you understand/understood the influence they were under.

For You

Please don't overlook the importance of finding ways to take care of you throughout the time when your ex is attempting to alienate you and your children. Self-care is so under-rated. Seriously! Please do two types of self care for yourself to allow you to keep coping as effectively as you can: One, build up your “in the moment” coping skills such as: Deep breathing, count to ten, listen to music, or grounding yourself (see below); and two, have a toolbox of several “long term” coping skills you are doing on a regular basis such as: Working out, engaging in a hobby, or spending regular time with people who are supportive of you.

There are several apps available that are outstanding for self-care/relaxation, some of our favorites are: Insight Timer, Virtual Toolbox, Relaxation Melodies, and Pzizz.

You can find more information on self-care by visiting the following link:

<https://www.lifepathscounseling.com/self-help-resources/>

At the top of this page, you'll find a link to our self-care handout we have created. The handout includes a section on boundaries, which is a significant part of taking care of yourself, too. Also on that page above, you'll find various resources we have found helpful, and note that there are a few at the bottom of the page on boundaries.

Grounding yourself: This is an exercise we teach people for calming yourself. It is simply a quiet moment you can do with your eyes open or closed, it can be as long or as quick as you like, and can bring you into a somewhat mindful state fairly easily. You simply notice and observe what you are sensing, in the moment, right where you are. Ask yourself: What do I hear? What do I see? What do I feel on my skin? (i.e. what are you touching, how warm/cold is it, is there a breeze, etc.) What do I smell? And possibly, what do I taste? The process of going from one to another along with being very present is an effective method of calming yourself.

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Resources

Co-Parenting with a Toxic Ex: What to do When Your Ex-Spouse Tries to Turn the Kids Against You, Amy L. Baker and Paul Fine

Parental Alienation Meetup Group – Denver, CO – monthly presentations on various topics all related to PA, run by Phillip Hendrix.

<http://www.familyaccessfightingforchildrensrights.org> - site run by Elaine Cobb, if you aren't already on her mailing list, get on it. She has a lot of good information on the site and has monthly conference calls with experts in the field.

The 4 C's® or The 4 C's Against Parental Alienation® are copyrighted ideas developed by Catherine Wilson, LPC and Barbara Sheehan-Zeidler, LPC.

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