

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

www.drgary.ca

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Refusal of Access/Parental Alienation/Splitting **A Summary of the Problem for Judges (or Parents)**

Background and Frame of Reference: Often pre-adolescent and adolescent children in high-conflict separated families develop a very serious reaction. They begin to refuse access to one parent, usually their father. This reaction has been called **parental alienation** by those who attribute it to the influence of the favored parent. It has been called **splitting or denial-of-attachment** by those who see it more as a reaction of the child's mind to the family conflict. Mental Health professionals and child advocates, who often become involved in various roles, raise and argue various positions about the cause and treatment of this problem. With adolescent children over about 13, the issue of the child's choice is particularly argued. The court is often asked to decide what to do.

Most of the ways that agencies, children's advocates, the legal system, and even many therapists attempt to deal with this problem tend to make it worse. This is because the problem is not what it appears to be. In order to help effectively, we must know the nature of the problem.

1. **What It Looks Like:** The child refuses access to one parent. The child complains about that parent and has only negative memories about that parent. The child shows a lack of guilt or any concern, and tends to be happy and well adjusted with the favored parent. It seems as though the child has **chosen** to reject the alienated or split-off parent, because the child talks about not wanting to go and adamantly refuses to do so. Often, great fear and demonization are generated both by the child and by the favored parent. The child's mind is strongly denying its attachment to one parent by pretending that parent is bad, uncaring, and never was any good.

The parents are engaged in intense and protracted conflict. Each parent blames the other for the child's refusal of access. There are intense arguments about what is the truth. Parental **arguments about truth and mutual blaming** are hallmarks of this problem. I will argue that these are the principal causes of the child's reaction.

2. **Erroneous Assumptions:** Both parents and most professionals make erroneous assumptions about what is going on. The alienated parent believes the reaction is caused by the influence of the favored parent. The favored parent believes it is caused by all the bad things the alienated

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parent has done. Some professionals, especially child advocates, side with the favored parent and the child's complaints, assuming the child has made an appropriate choice to deal with a very disordered parent. They see the refusal of access as a matter of **realistic estrangement**. Other professionals side with the alienated parent and assume the child has been influenced and manipulated by the favored parent. They see it as a matter of brainwashing and malicious alienation. As long as interventions focus on one of these two polarities, they usually will not help and will tend to make the problem worse.

In what follows, I am assuming that the judge has become convinced that the child's refusal is not principally a matter of realistic estrangement, but rather a matter of the denial-of-attachment/alienation reaction. (*See the section above about distinguishing between these.*)

- 3. What It Really Is:** This phenomenon of a child becoming apparently alienated from, or split off from, denying any attachment to, or refusing access to one parent (all these are terms used for the same phenomenon) occurs in high-conflict divorced families. It is a **symptomatic reaction**, i.e., a reaction that occurs spontaneously in the child's mind. Symptomatic reactions, like panic attacks, phobias, temper tantrums, and the like, have several well-known characteristics. They occur spontaneously: you do not choose them; they happen to you. They occur as a solution to some hidden problem that is very stressful or threatening. And they are trying to tell a story: they are trying to reveal something that cannot yet be expressed in any other way.

To help a child, or anyone, with a symptomatic reaction, you need to do three things. First, you need to realize that the problem did not start with a choice: it happened to the person. So you cannot approach the problem as if the person can choose to be rid of it. Second, you need to find out what kind of stress or pain or threat the reaction is trying to solve. Finally, the symptom will tell you something about the world that the sufferer has experienced and is experiencing.

This particular symptomatic reaction—alienation/splitting/refusal of access/denial-of-attachment—occurs (happens) in the child's mind as a solution to the intolerable stress of living a divided life between two very polarized parents, in the context of authority breakdown and over-empowerment. It is incredibly stressful and painful to try to love and be loyal to two parents, on whom you depend, and whom both nature and society have said you

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must love at all costs, when these parents do not love but despise each other. The parental conflict both stresses the child and dramatically empowers the child. These are the principal causes of the alienation reaction. Once the reaction begins to occur, it amplifies and escalates parental conflict very quickly. Each parent blames the other for the child's reaction, and so the conflict that gave rise to the reaction escalates quickly. In no time at all the family is locked into the symptom, with the parents and child each doing their part. And, of course, the symptom is telling a story about divorce, about family breakdown, with love, respect, and authority gone awry.

4. **Mistakes to Avoid:** In this context, it is true that the alienated parent makes some mistakes, and the favored parent does have some influence. But if we forget that the principal cause is the conflict itself, we will not help but will make matters worse by siding with one parent or the other, which means blaming the opposite parent. If we forget that it is a symptomatic reaction, we will fall into the trap of thinking it is a matter of choice. If we do this, we will then unwittingly further empower the child and burden the child with the implication that the child has betrayed love, loyalty, and decency. Nothing could be further from the truth—the reaction occurs **because** the child has a loving and decent heart, and because this heart depends on a hierarchical family structure. That is why the parental conflict became so painful and stressful for the child. We must not approach the problem as a matter of the child's choice, because if we do we run a very grave risk of damaging the child's love and self-respect, exposing the child to serious emotional conflicts later in life. (For more about these dangers, see my two other papers about *The Dangers of Choice in Alienation/Splitting Reactions*.)
5. **How to Help:** The problem derives from the parental conflict, so treatment has to deal with this conflict. The child cannot and will not solve the problem. We should not try, and it does not work, to expect the child to return to the same parental atmosphere that produced the problem. Treatment depends on four things: **First**, the parents must both see and agree that the alienation reaction is very harmful and must be remedied. The favored parent may need the help of the court to realize this. **Second**, once both parents are committed to the treatment, blaming must stop. Both parents must stop blaming the other for the child's reaction. They must realize that their blaming and their arguments over truth, along with their lack of decency and respect toward the other parent, are the principal causes of the reaction. **Third**, each parent must do his or her part. The

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avored parent must be prepared to insist and require that access occur, even in the face of strenuous resistance by the child. If the child becomes angry with the favored parent, this is all right, because it immediately puts both parents in the same position. The child is angry with both and the polarization in the child's mind is decreased, and parental authority begins to return to the family. The alienated parent must be patient, not argue with the child, validate and relate to the problems that are very real to the child, be firm but not confrontational, and give space for the child's mind to exit the symptom. **Fourth**, the child must constantly get the message that the treatment and access are not a matter of choice, even though the child will argue strenuously for choice. The parents and therapist must remember that the idea or experience of choice is the poison (See *The Dangers of Choice...*), and that over-empowerment of the child is part of the problem. Any treatment of the child will be based on the notion that the child has a handicap—a dysfunctional divorced family—requiring the child to learn unusual and difficult ways to cope with this.

- 6. How the Court (Judge) Can Help:** The judge can be very helpful, once it has been determined that the problem is principally an alienation/ splitting reaction (and not principally a matter of realistic estrangement), such that it is in the child's best interest to remedy the alienation and resume a viable relationship with both parents.

The judge can help in three crucial ways. **First**, the resistance of the favored parent is the hardest part of the treatment. The judge needs to find ways not only to convince the favored parent that remedying the problem is best and wisest, but also to make it in that parent's interest to do so. The judge can manage the case and impose sanctions for resistance. In essence, the judge represents the return of authority to the family. **Second**, the judge can mandate treatment or professional monitoring, or both, as the case may require. **Third**, sometimes the judge can talk to the child or children involved. The judge can let the children know that the problem was not really their choice. And neither is the solution. It is like going to school or the doctor—it must be done because it is determined to be best and necessary. Again, the judge delivers adult authority and structure back into the family. (See my accompanying *Guidelines for Judges Talking to Alienated Children.*)

Dr. Gary J. Kneier, Ph.D.
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