



The Estranged Child versus the Alienated Child

By
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In very rare cases, I have encountered an estranged child—a child who had rejected a parent for cause. But the rejection was *not* the consequence of abusive or neglectful treatment of the child by the rejected parent. Instead, the rejection was a consequence of the rejected parent’s abusive treatment of the other parent—such as in domestic violence. In cases in which one parent seriously maltreats or abuses the other parent, the child instinctively sides with the abused parent. For example, in a case that I can reasonably label as “estrangement,” the father had made a false allegation of domestic violence against the mother and had the mother arrested in front of their son. The boy was witness to his mother being taken away in handcuffs by the police, and the mother was further prevented from returning home for more than a week. The frantic, traumatized boy did not know what had happened to his mother, who had been detained in jail for a week; nor did he know if or when he would see his mother again. To exacerbate the trauma, the father and his extended family held a series of parties in the family home during the mother’s absence, thereby indicating to the boy that the mother’s arrest was something to celebrate.

In some situations, in which foster children had been abandoned by a parent subsequent to their removal from their homes, the children defended against the rejection by exclaiming they had no interest in seeing their parents; the rejection was transformed from the child being the “rejectee” to being the “rejector.” Nevertheless, whenever a parent did re-appear, virtually every child eagerly welcomed the contact.

The estranged child presents in therapy dramatically differently than how an alienated child presents. Estranged children enthusiastically anticipate the therapy are appreciative that their parent is willing to make a commitment to therapy and to them. Estranged children express optimism that the therapy will lead to reconnection, and they are eager to see their parents again—in a protective environment. Estranged children grant their parent benefit of the doubt regarding the parent’s motivation; they minimize or even deny their parent’s abusive or neglectful



behaviors; they are responsive to their parent’s efforts of affection. Estranged children will accept trivial expressions of remorse and nominal apologies. In the face of even trifling efforts by their parents, estranged children are submissive, deferential, polite, grateful, accepting, and eager to forgive.

When an abusive parent apologizes—no matter how half-heartedly—for the maltreatment and misdeeds, estranged children enthusiastically welcome the apology—looking for any excuse to forgive. Estranged children will readily seek affection from their parents and initiate contact—especially subsequent to their enthusiastic acceptance of the apology.

When the alienated parent apologizes—no matter how passionately and affirmatively—for minor misdeeds resulting from not having been a perfect parent, alienated children rebuff the apology. Typical responses for the rebuffing are: “The apology was not sincere,” “the apology is too late,” “the apology is too little too late,” the apology does not address all misdeeds,” “You see, I was right after all; you are a terrible parent,” etc. Alienated children predictably create a double bind for the alienated parent by first criticizing the parent for having failed to offer apologies sooner but then rejecting *carte blanche* any apology that is provided. Alienated children, as opposed to estranged children, create all kinds of excuses for why *not* to accept the apology.

Estranged children are careful not to provoke their abusive parents—clearly not wanting to risk a repeat of the abuse. Instead, they are timid and obsequious. Although alienated children typically express fear of their alienated parents, their behaviors belie any fear at all. Alienated children are provocative, angry, critical, hostile, and sometimes physically abusive of their parents—hardly the way a child acts if fearful of someone.

Alienated children will *spontaneously and enthusiastically* volunteer a voluminous litany of false, exaggerated, and/or frivolous deeds attributed to their alienated parent. Alienated children, however, lack credibility because their rejection is totally out of proportion to anything they proclaim their alienated parent to have done. In



other instances, alienated children allege false claims against their alienated parent involving horrific examples of child abuse and even child sexual abuse. Even in the face of multiple investigations by Child Protective Services that result in the allegations being unfounded, these children will vociferously and adamantly insist upon their veracity. What makes alienation such a pernicious form of child abuse is that the children come to believe that the abuse had actually occurred. And falsely believing that a parent had abused them leads to the same PTSD as if the abuse had actually occurred. Typically, alienated children's body language and affect do not support the horrific tales and woes that they are proclaiming.

Truly abused and neglected children are, to the contrary, extremely reticent about sharing details about their parent's abusive behaviors. Should the interviewer persist for details, these children are highly resistant to giving up their parents. Should these children eventually comply with the request for details, they will only parsimoniously reveal over a protracted period of time. One particularly relevant factor is worth noting: when a child acknowledges parental abuse, the child is simultaneously conceding the self-perception of being bad—why else would a parent be abusive—the child wonders? Intuitively, it is anti-instinctual to telegraph to oneself—and certainly not to a world of strangers—the message, “I am bad.” On the other hand, alienated children need not fear exposure to the horrific message, “I am bad,” because they know that the abuse has been fabricated.

The affect of estranged/abused children corroborates their reporting: their affect reveals sadness, embarrassment, guilt, and reticence. The affect of alienated children belies their reporting. Very often alienated children will smile when reporting allegedly horrific abuse. Other times, their affect is totally flat—disconnected from the horror of the abuse they are reporting. Other times they may be unable to stop themselves from laughing when reporting their preposterous stories. They avoid eye contact—often out of guilt for their misrepresentations and outright lies. However, in some cases, because of the great exertion of energy involved in lying about a loving parent and to repress the powerful instinct to need a parent—especially when in the presence of the alienated parent, alienated children may become suddenly morose, even to the point of spontaneously crying and/or having to leave the room.



This reaction also occurs in the forensic evaluation because the questions stir up so much emotion about the need to fabricate preposterous, even bizarre, abuse by the alienated parent.

Body language of estranged children is congruent with their feelings and words. They do not sit in a manner that supports aggression, hostility, or defiance but sit rather unassuming and layback. On the other hand, the alienated child's body language confirms a sense of entitlement, power, and aggression. Some alienated children are so empowered that they will stand up, tower over their alienated parent, make hostile gestures at them with fingers and hands, and even violate their parent's space by going nose to nose with them.

In short, alienated children are transparently not credible in their presentation; their affect, verbal communication, and body language all contradict each other. Estranged children, however, present with all three indicators being consistent with each other.