

Volatility of the Parental Alienation Family

By Linda J. Gottlieb, LMFT-r, LCSW

“It is common with PA that target parents are in a chronically defensive position. They are continuously defending themselves against one wild accusation after another. Instead of being proactive, they are most likely to become passive. In the face of overwhelming hostility from the other parent, target parents cope by trying not to rock the boat. The volatility of the disturbed parent decreases as long as they are getting their way. Therefore, one challenge of targeted parents is to figure out how to react appropriately. Since this is not very clear, they tend to do nothing and wait. Tension builds. Something snaps and people react. Families with PA are volatile families.”

My belated colleague, Dr. Jayne Major

The inescapable challenge to targeted parents is the necessity to sublimate their anger each and every day in which they are battered by the PA. No matter what they do, they are confronted by the crazy making double-bind phenomenon: if they insist upon and arrive for contact with their alienated children, they are accused of being insensitive to their children's wishes for no contact and of stalking their children when they arrive to observe their children engaging in their sports activities. And yet, if they do not take full advantage of their parenting time or must cut it short due to the disrespect and maltreatment by their children, they are then accused of abandoning their children. If they set appropriate parental limitations, they are accused of being abusive. But if they do not set necessary limits, they are evaluated to be ineffectual parents. The double binds amass. I do not have to tell anyone of you about that!

Lacking the resources to mount a legal case or being denied an adequate airing in court, and due to the customary situation of a unfounded order of protection prohibiting contact with the alienating parent for the purposes of discussing remedy, targeted parents have few outlets for redress. What frequently results is that targeted parents demand that their children defend them against the system as well as demand that they challenge the alienating parent. When this fails to materialize, targeted parents tend to dump their anger on their children, who have become the puppet of their ventriloquist-alienating parent. In other words, because it is as if their children's bodies, minds, and hearts have been taken over by the body-snatcher in the person of the alienating parent, the alienated child becomes the repository for the targeted parents' anger. Targeted parents look at their children and do not see their children; they see the alienating parent personified. The virtually irresistible reaction of targeted parents is to begin to dump on their children all the anger for their former partner, for the system, and for all the professionals who have abetted the alienating parent. Moreover, because of the undying love that targeted parents have for their children, they cannot understand why your children do not reciprocate.

But the alienated child is caught in a web: it is simply not safe to confront the parent upon whom they are so dependent. I recently asked an alienated parent how long it took him to end his unhappy marriage. He responded, "6 years." And in fact, most targeted/alienated parents with whom I have worked have expressed to me that they had remained in their unhappy plight for many years before exiting the marriage. So if, as an adult, possessing all the cognitive and emotional maturity and with the ability for self-sufficiency that an adult possesses, it still requires years to have the courage to move on, imagine how difficult it is for a child to do likewise. Children are so much more dependent upon the residential parent that it is unsafe to challenge that parent. Moreover, you cannot expect a child to challenge the behavior, thoughts, and feelings of their alienating parent anymore than it is valid to ask the child for input about their feelings and opinions regarding custody and the relationship with the nonresidential parent. The level of their cognitive and emotional immaturity applies to this situation as well.

Alienated children are caught, and they have no good options. They too are trapped by the crazy making double bind. To put additional pressure on them might well trigger a psychotic break. It is no accident that it was on the psychiatric ward where the child psychiatrists who later founded the family therapy movement first observed the family dynamic of the PA.

Additionally, when you do dump your anger on your children, you are playing right into the hands of the alienating parent, who has likely labeled you a person with an "anger management problem." Why give the alienator the ammunition with which to shoot you?

Instead, seek help to deal with the double bind. I highly recommend you get this support from my sister website: www.pas-intervention.com. Joan runs terrific on-line support groups for alienated parents.