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Edward Kruk Ph.D.
Co-Parenting After Divorce

The Life of the Alienated Parent

Coping with the Trauma of Parental Alienation

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According to the work of Dr. Craig Childress, parental alienation is first and foremost an [attachment-based trauma](#). Attachment-based parental alienation is essentially a role reversal of a normal, healthy parent-child relationship. Instead of serving as a “regulatory other,” which involves providing stability and meeting the child’s emotional and psychological needs, alienating parents use their children to meet their own needs, violating boundaries and seriously compromising and damaging the child’s healthy development.

Enduring the experience of parental alienation is also a profound form of psychological trauma experienced by targeted parents. It is both acute and chronic, and externally inflicted. It is thus a type of [domestic violence](#) directed at the target parent. The fact that children witness such abuse of a parent also makes alienation a form of child abuse. This is perhaps the principal source of [anxiety](#) for the alienated parents, who witness the abuse of their children, and are prevented from protecting them.

This psychological trauma of alienated parents differs from what groups like combat veterans face when they develop [PTSD](#), yet the experience of targeted parents is a form of trauma as debilitating as any other. Although not all parents who are victims of parental alienation experience trauma, as the same event that plunges one parent into trauma may not do so with another, those who are closely attached to their children and were actively involved in their lives most certainly do.

Parental alienation is also a form of complex trauma. It is no coincidence that the pathology of the parent who engages in alienation is often born in complex trauma from the [childhood](#) of that parent, and that the current processes of attachment-based parental alienation are transferring onto the targeted parent a form of complex trauma. The childhood trauma experience leads to the development of the aggression behind parental alienation. From a psychodynamic perspective, the processes of parental alienation represent a reenactment of the childhood attachment trauma of the alienating parent into the current family [relationships](#). The trauma reenactment narrative represents a false drama created by the pathology of the alienating parent, in which the targeted parent is being assigned the trauma reenactment role as the “abusive parent;” the child is being induced into accepting the trauma reenactment role as the supposedly “victimized child;” and the alienating parent adopts the role of the “protective parent.” None of this false drama, however, is true. The [parenting](#) of the targeted parent is entirely in normal range, and the child is in no danger and does not need any protection from that parent.

A major impediment for victimized parents is that the problem is largely systemic in [nature](#), as support services for alienated parents are virtually non-existent, and support services for their children are also in short supply. When parents of alienated children attempt to bring their concerns to child welfare authorities, as parental alienation is a form of child abuse and thus a child protection matter, these agencies often disregard the problem, and when they do become involved, rarely share their findings in family court child custody hearings, despite the fact that this information will serve the best interests of the child.

In parental alienation situations the targeted parent is put on the defensive, and must continually try to prove to therapists and others that he or she is not “abusive” of the child. The targeted parent is often blamed for the child’s rejection, even though he or she did nothing wrong: “You must have done something wrong if your child

rewarded within the current adversarial system), thus has the upper hand. In this upside-down world, your child is being taken from you, and no one seems to care or understand. The emotional trauma inflicted on the targeted parent is severe, and the grief of the targeted parent is deep.

The trauma experience captivates the psychology of the targeted parent, as the world of the targeted parent revolves entirely around the trauma experience and the false drama. Repeated court dates, lawyers, therapists, custody evaluations, that all occur in the context of continuing parent-child conflict, consume the targeted parent. Yet it is vital for targeted parents to find ways of coping with the attachment-based complex trauma of parental alienation. They must strive to achieve the triumph of light over the darkness of trauma, and find their way out of the trauma experience being inflicted upon them. They must free themselves from the imposed trauma experience, restoring their psychological health within the immense emotional trauma of their grief and loss.

As much as targeted parents desperately want to save their children, they cannot rescue their children from the quicksand by jumping into the quicksand with them. If they do, they will both perish. Instead, they must have their feet firmly planted on the ground, steady in your own emotional and psychological health, and then extend your hand to retrieve your child. But even then, given the nature of parental alienation and its profoundly damaging effects on a child, a child may not grasp the parent's hand.

References

Childress, C. A. (2013). Reconceptualizing parental alienation: Parental personality disorder and the trans-generational transmission of attachment trauma. Retrieved from <http://www.drcachildress.org/asp/Site/ParentalAlienation/index.asp>

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