



## Parental Alienation Vs. Loyalty Binds

October 10, 2019 by Jennifer J. Harman, PhD, Associate Professor of Psychology, Colorado State University

“High-conflict” is a label assigned to many parents who have on-going conflict after their separation or divorce. As an associate professor who has researched and published on the topic of intimate relationship dynamics for nearly 20 years, this label never quite sat well with me. When we think about conflict, the old adage “it takes two to tango” often underlies assumptions of the parties involved. Attributions of blame are regularly placed on “high conflict” parents, as if they are both responsible for the continued strife that repeatedly leads them back to family court for intervention. Exasperated legal and mental health professionals throw their hands up in the air and tell the parents “why can’t you two just get along?!” This assumption that both parents are equally responsible for conflict is naïve and reflects a poor understanding of the role of power in family violence.

Research on domestic violence has identified two basic forms:

- *Situational couple violence*, where both partners have similar levels of power, low levels of pathology, the aggression is reciprocal, and it is used as a means to an end (e.g., to stop an argument); and
- *Intimate terrorism*, where one partner has considerably more power over the other, has more pathology (e.g., narcissism), the aggression is not typically reciprocated, and the aggression is used to control and dominate the other partner over time.

It has taken many years for professionals and the general public to come to an understanding that victims of intimate terrorism (aka battery) are not equally to blame for their abuse, and that they often lack the power to protect themselves and leave their abusive relationships. We do not call families in which there is intimate terrorism “high-conflict.” We call them abusive.

These two basic types of domestic violence directly parallel the way conflict occurs in families after divorce. In families where there are *loyalty conflicts*, children are put in the middle of their parents. They are torn between placing their loyalties with one parent over the other. To have this type of influence over the child, both parents need to have similar levels of power. Children’s preferences for a parent may fluctuate over time, but the child generally still loves both parents. In contrast, families where there is *parental alienation* have a child who is heavily influenced by one parent to refuse and even completely reject the other parent. As the parental alienation becomes more severe, the child psychologically splits to such an extent that they hate their rejected parent and may ultimately refuse to have any relationship with them at all.

Parental alienation experts have opined that the power dynamics in families affected by parental alienation are unequal and therefore are less likely to be reciprocated by the less powerful parent, which would make it resemble intimate terrorism more than situational couple violence. In a new paper I published with my colleagues in *Children and Youth Services Review* (November, 2019), we provide some of the first evidence in support of this hypothesis. We conducted three national polls in the U.S. and Canada, with the samples selected to be representative of the two country’s populations. In the third poll, we sampled adult parents ( $n= 669$ ) in the U.S. who had children with someone they were no longer in a relationship with. Using an on-line survey, we provided respondents with a check-list of 18 commonly used parental alienating behaviors designed to harm the target of the behavior and their relationship with their children (e.g., *tell the child the other parent doesn’t love them*). They were asked to check off any behaviors they, and/or the other parent of their child(ren) have done. Parents also completed an empirically validated measure that assesses the parental alienation of their children.

As we suspected, parents who were moderately to severely alienated from their children were the *least* likely to reciprocate parental alienating behaviors (~39% of the sample). In other words, if the other parent of their child engaged in twice as

many or more parental alienating behaviors (average was about 7 out of 18), they were more likely to be alienated from their children than parents who were reciprocating alienating behaviors to a similar degree. Interestingly, those parents who reciprocated parental alienating behaviors (~50% of the sample) had the highest level of hostility towards the other parent-- parents who were alienated from their children had the *least* amount of hostility towards the alienating parent.

Parental alienation and loyalty conflicts both cause considerable harm to children, but our poll only assessed outcomes that are unique for alienated children. Therefore, it is important **not** to conclude from our study that if a parent wants to protect their children from parental alienation, they should start reciprocating the parental alienating behaviors of the other parent. Parental alienating behaviors, whether done by one or both parents, are psychologically abusive to children. It is also important to recognize that even if an alienated parent *wanted* to reciprocate, they often lack the power to do so, just as a victim of battery lacks the power to do anything in their abusive relationship with an intimate terrorist.

Laying blame on both parents for conflict, when about 2/5 of the time one parent is the primary perpetrator, is turning a blind eye to over 22 million parents in the U.S. who are the targets of parental alienating behaviors (an estimate also reported in our new study). It is imperative that we gain a more nuanced understanding of how power operates in post-divorce families so that practitioners and professionals are able to assess and intervene effectively to protect children from conflict.

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