



Preferred, Estranged or Alienated?

Divorce, when children are involved, is a common but complex process. Quite often the request for a custody and access assessment comes hot on the heels of one parent alleging that the other parent is undermining or obstructing access. The parent who feels wronged will claim they are being alienated. The term “parental alienation,” was first coined by the late psychiatrist, Dr. Richard Gardner. According to his theory, the child is brainwashed by one parent against the other so that the child rejects the other parent as if it were the child’s own idea. Further, in these scenarios, allegations of abuse are posited against the rejected parent but there is no tangible evidence to support the abuse allegations. Parental alienation is different though from estrangement. With estrangement, the rejected parent has acted in a tangible way so as to reasonably elicit their child’s rejection, whether or not the rejected parent takes responsibility for their actions.

The reality is, that children can prefer or reject a parent for many reasons, including the child’s temperament, gender issues, simple preferences, siding with the custodial parent, anger at the rejected parent’s behaviour or any combination thereof.

For instance, a 9-year-old boy has enjoyed a good relationship with his mother. His father has been marginal, often busy with work. The boy has been sheltered from the distancing in the marital relationship between his parents. The boy learns of his mother’s affair and witnesses his father’s anguish when he learns of his wife’s infidelity.

Upon marital separation, the child relentlessly seeks to reside with his father and in pursuit of this objective displays a disdain for his mother. His mother, through a Court process alleges the father has poisoned the boy against her as retribution for the affair. On the surface her allegation is plausible and serves as the basis of a hotly contested battle wherein the boy becomes entrenched in his position while the father takes a passive position resting his case on the stated desires of the child.

It is easy to get caught up in the issues and emotions of the affair as well as the stated desire of the child. For the parties involved (and those around them), it is difficult to take a step back from the emotion of the situation. However, if one takes a step back and

examines the situation outlined above more deeply, then it would be reasonable to say that the boy may harbour a wish (secret or otherwise) to have more time with his father, who previously had been marginal in his life. It is not unreasonable for this boy to want “more time with my dad”. This is a gender-based, developmental issue. Living with his father suits the child’s psychological need to connect more with his father. Additionally, given the boy’s age, moral outrage at his mother is appropriate in view of her affair. While she may have provided for and appropriately met her son’s needs, the boy is dealing with her betrayal of moral standards. This is legitimate source of upset to the boy, and thus an issue of estrangement by virtue of her behaviour. And finally, the father does contribute indirectly to the son’s rejection of mother by taking a passive stance and not helping his son to resolve his upset with his mother.

Litigation often serves to exacerbate these situations as the positions become polarized and focussed on the contributions of the parents. These legal battles do not help the child. Instead, the focus must be child-centred. In this case example the child does need to enrich his relationship to his father and resolve his anger to his mother, such that over time he may come to enjoy a relationship with both without having to reject either for the other. In so doing, the child learns to better manage conflicted feelings and desires which in turn better equips the child for the demands of adult intimate relationships.

Preferred, Estranged or Alienated? The truth is, often the issues are multi-faceted. In high-conflict situations where there is great difficulty resolving parenting arrangements, consider an assessment with a well-qualified assessor who is acquainted and able to tease out the possible multitude of dynamics and propose treatment strategies to improve matters for the children now and for their future.

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