

# Parental Alienation: The Attachment Theory

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A while ago I posted about Parental Alienation Syndrome. Shortly after posting it on this blog I received a phone call from a man in Las Vegas. He left me a message and I called him back. He said he had read my blog post on Parental Alienation Syndrome and informed me that there was an alternate theory and further research on Parental Alienation which I should look into. He went on to explain that he was a targeted parent in a Parental Alienation situation. He had read everything he could read to understand why his children were turning on him after his divorce when he had done everything he could to be loving and kind to them. I took my caller from Las Vegas up on his suggestion and read a lot about Parental Alienation. It is a fascinating, deeply psychological topic which takes a dedicated reader to understand. I admit, I still do not fully understand the entire Parental Alienation process, but I have gained a tremendous amount of insight into this phenomena.



## Dr. Craig Childress

I want to be clear that 95% of this blog post will be the thoughts, ideas, and words of Dr. Craig Childress. He is a licensed clinical psychiatrist who specializes in Parental Alienation. He explains how and why Parental Alienation occurs through explaining the Attachment System. You can find Dr. Craig Childress at [clicking here](#). If this blog post inspires you, I encourage you to go to Dr. Childress' site to learn more.

## The Attachment System

“The central child symptom associated with what has traditionally been referred to as “parental alienation” involves a prominent disruption to the child’s attachment system, in which the child entirely rejects a relationship with one parent, the targeted-rejected parent, and shows a corresponding hyper-bonding motivation toward the allied and favored alienating parent”.

So the child hyper bonds with the alienating parent and rejects the other parent completely. Why would a child do this? To understand the why you have to understand how children bond to their parents depending on if the parent is nurturing or withdrawn and how the children manifest that bond to the world. If a parent is overwhelmed, anxious, and withdrawn the child will develop an insecure and anxious attachment to that parent and will attempt to be low-demand and overly compliant so as not to worry or stress the overwhelmed parent. The child will exhibit hyper bonding where they will desire to remain in continual proximity with the parent and will be reluctant to engage in normal exploratory functions away from the parent. On the other had, if a parent is nurturing and available the child will develop a secure attachment to that parent and will have an increased comfort with separation from the parent and an greater exploratory behavior away from the “secure base” of the parent.

## What Happens With Parental Alienation

With Parental Alienation the anxious and overwhelmed alienating parent will send the child signals that the alienating parent perceives a risk with the child’s independent relationship with the other parent and that

that relationship is a threat to the child. These signals are given to the child through emotional signals of over-anxious concern regarding the child's separation from the alienating parent, especially during the child's visits with the other parent and through dismay displayed by the alienating parent at the supposed inadequate parental care the child is receiving from the other parent.

The alienating parent also communicates their perception of a threat from the other parent by a high rate of "parental retrieval behaviors" such as frequent text messages, emails, and phone calls made to the child while the child is on visitation with the other parent and by emotionally supporting the child whenever the child expresses reluctance to go on visitations with the other parent. These signals trigger the child's own attachment motivations to stay close to the alienating (protective) parent and to actively avoid and flee from the other parent (the threat). The alienating parent essentially labels the other parent as being "the predator" as far as the child's attachment system motivations are concerned.

This distorted family relationship created by the alienating parent creates the foundation for the child's symptoms he/she displays. The child withdraws from normal-range exploratory behavior of forming an independent relationship with the targeted parent (the perceived source of the threat) and begins rejecting visitations with the other parent.

## **How Does the Alienating Parent Begin the Parental Alienation?**

The alienating parent begins to get the child to reject his/her other parent by "eliciting through over-anxious and subtly directive questioning" a child's criticism of the other parent or a description of a minor parent-child conflict with the other parent. The alienating parent then responds to these elicited child criticism with exaggerated parental responses of outrage and concern, thereby distorting and inflaming the child's criticism of the other parent into supposed "evidence" of the "abusive" parental inadequacy of the targeted parent.

The alienating parent never offers the initial criticism of the other parent, but instead, elicits the criticism from the child. This, then, leads the child to believe (falsely) that they independently offered the criticism of the other parent and that the alienating parent is only responding with supportive understanding for the child's expressed grievances.

The alienating parent hides his/her own motivational agenda behind the child, who is placed in the lead of having to initiate the rejection of the other parent so that the alienating parent can be perceived as the nurturing parent who is "just listening" to the child. The alienating parent then presents this "nurturing-protective parent" image to others through subsequent enactments of the alienation drama to receive social validation that they are the all-wonderful, perfectly nurturing and caring parent.

## **The Child's Symptoms**

The child's symptoms act as a lens into the personality disorder traits of the alienating parent. The child's symptoms often include:

1. **Grandiosity:** an inappropriately elevated sense of grandiosity in which the child perceives himself or herself to be of elevated status in the family hierarchy above that of the targeted parent that allows the child to feel entitled to sit in judgment of the targeted parent's adequacy.
2. **Entitlement:** A prominent sense of child entitlement in which the child feels justified in expecting that every child desire be met by the targeted parent to the child's satisfaction. If these expectations are not met, the child feels justified in enacting revenge on the targeted parent.
3. **Absence of Empathy:** a complete absence of normal range empathy for the suffering inflicted by the

child on the targeted-rejected parent.

4. Haughty-Arrogant Attitude: a contemptuous disdain for the targeted-rejected parent.

5. Splitting: a splitting dynamic of polarized relationships where the alienating parent is perceived by the child as being ideal and perfect, while the targeted-rejected parent is entirely disvalued and demonized as fundamentally inadequate, and therefore “abusive”.

## **So WHY does the Alienating Parent Do It?**

At the time of divorce, the attachment networks of the alienating parent are activated in response to the loss of the attachment of the spousal relationship and the dissolution of the family. This, in turn, activates the alienating parents narcissistic and borderline personality disorder processes of being insecure, anxious, and disorganized. The core of the alienating parents processes involve an intense feeling of primal inadequacy which produces a narcissistic over-inflation of self as a defense against the feeling of inadequacy. The divorce threatens to collapse the alienating parent’s narcissistic defense against this inadequacy and activates their fear of abandonment. This creates an overwhelming sense of intense anxiety for the alienating parent. The alienating parent lacks the insight and self-reflective capacity to understand that his/her intense anxiety is associated with activated attachment trauma and instead misinterprets the experience of intense anxiety associated with the divorce as representing an emotional signal of an actual threat posed by the other parent, who, as the abandoning/rejecting attachment figure, is the trigger for activating the alienating parents attachment networks and anxieties.

## **So WHY does the Child Do It?**

While the alienating parent is experiencing intense anxiety, which leads them to alienate the targeted parent, the child experiences intense grief and mourning due to the loss of the targeted parent. Under the influence of the alienating parent, the child misinterprets their sadness and grief at the loss of an affectional relationship with the targeted parent as falsely representing emotional “evidence” for the supposedly “abusive” parenting practices of the other parent. This misinterpretation of the child’s grief and mourning is supported by the corresponding rises and falls of sadness they experience by the presence or absence of the targeted parent.

When the child is with the targeted parent, the increased availability of the beloved-but rejected targeted parent increases the child’s affectional attachment motivations for bonding, thereby also increasing the child’s corresponding grief response at the failure of the child’s attachment motivation to achieve completion. On the other hand, when the child is away from the targeted parent and is in the care of the alienating parent, the attachment motivation is less with the targeted parent since the targeted parent is not available, and the child’s attachment motivations are not triggered to they have a reduction in sadness and grief.

The child is led to misinterpret authentic experiences of sadness and grief for the loss of the bonded relationship with the targeted parent as instead a product of supposedly “abusive” parenting practices by the targeted parent. The rise and fall of sadness and grief also creates an avoidance response in the child, in which the child seeks to avoid the increased experience of sadness associated with being in the presence of the targeted parent.

The more kinder and affectionate the targeted parent becomes, the more hostile and rejecting the child becomes. This happens because when the targeted parent becomes kinder and more affectionate the child’s motivations for attachment bonding become stronger, which then produces a stronger more intense grief response at the loss of the relationship with the targeted parent. The child misinterprets these acts of kindness and affection as abuse because of the emotional pain they are authentically experiencing.

## **So What Can YOU Do If You Are the Targeted Parent:**

Therapy that targets eliciting greater degrees of kindness and understanding from the targeted parent towards the child, without also targeting the child's misinterpretation of their authentically felt grief and sadness, will be ineffective in restoring the parent-child relationship.

In order for treatment to be effective, the therapy must account for the delusional processes at work. The alienating parent is misinterpreting his/her anxiety while the child is misinterpreting his/her sadness and grief. Resolving the child's false belief system and misinterpretation will be difficult as long as the child's false misinterpretations are receiving support and validation from the alienating parent. Protective Separation from the alienating parent is a must to fix this issue. The child is essentially in a hostage situation with a psychologically disturbed and highly controlling narcissistic parent, who can unleash anger and rejection towards the child if the child expresses any love or affection towards the targeted parent.

It is DANGEROUS for the child's psychology to attempt "therapy" while the child is still in the alienating parent's custody and control. "Turning the child into a psychological battleground will destroy the child". No therapist should attempt reunification therapy without first obtaining protective separation from the alienating parent.

I repeat, reunification therapy with moderate and severe cases of Parental Alienation does not work and has the potential to become a disaster. Steve Miller, M.D. has stated that with severe cases of Parental Alienation the only solution is to reverse custody so the targeted parent has full custody with an order that the alienating parent has NO contact with the child for at least 90 days.

## **Attorneys Thoughts:**

I, admittedly, do not know everything about Parental Alienation. I am trying to understand it though. It is vital to educate judges and rely on their wisdom to recognize the child's true psychological and emotional parent, the parent who is willing to relinquish the child (is being rejected and abandoned by the child) because the parent is unwilling to destroy the child in order to possess the child. Judges must recognize that the alienating parent is willing to psychologically and emotionally destroy the child in order to possess the child as a symbol of his/her victory over the other parent

I am an attorney who cares deeply about the well-being of the child. I will strive to educate judges and the Court about Parental Alienation and the Attachment theory that Dr. Craig Childress writes about. [Please visit Dr. Childress' website by clicking here.](#)