



Connections

Practical Parent Education

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Practical Parent Education

Working Together to
Strengthen
Today's Families

Coparenting Post Divorce: Understanding and Preventing Parental Alienation

~Amy J.L. Baker, Ph.D.

Parents making the transition from parenting in an intact marriage to coparenting with a former spouse and partner need to be aware of parental alienation (efforts to turn a child against the other parent) in order to avoid it in themselves and to detect it early should it emerge as a problem with the other parent of the child(ren). Left unchecked, parental alienation can result in long-term inter-parental conflict as well as the loss of the relationship with the child.

Research with adults who reported that when they were children they were turned against one parent by the other parent reveals that this experience is extremely damaging. These individuals reported high rates of depression, low-self-esteem, and inability to trust, as well as high rates of divorce and substance abuse as a result. One of the most damaging aspects of the experience was the belief that they must somehow be unworthy and unacceptable because the hated parent was a part of them, summarized in the statement, "If Dad hates Mom so much and Mom is part of me, then I must be pretty bad as well." If you want your child to feel loved and accepted, he or she must feel that both of his or her parents are acceptable as well. Accepting the other parent is an important part of accepting your child.

How not to be an alienating parent

Be honest with yourself

We each only have control over ourselves. Thus, first and foremost you must check your own tendencies to behave in an alienating fashion. This may come easily to some but others will struggle with this. There may be anger, shame, and resentment at your former spouse regarding the issues that led to the dissolution of the marriage. Such feelings may cloud your judgment about your ex and his or her competency as a parent. Second, you may be feeling vulnerable and may have a heightened need for the love and affirmation from your children that makes it difficult for you to share them or have them spend time with the other parent. Some parents use the time away from the children to heal and rejuvenate while others find themselves unmoored and disoriented outside of the parenting role. It also may be difficult to separate your own feelings about your former spouse from the children's feelings about their father or mother.

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It may be hard to remember that even crummy spouses can be decent and valuable parents. For all of these reasons, some people may be tempted to utilize parental alienation strategies to punish their former spouse, shore up their own shaky self-esteem, and avoid the loss and sadness of having the children spend time with the other parent.

The first step in not becoming an alienating parent is self-awareness and honesty. You will need to take a good look at yourself and honestly appraise your motivations and desires regarding the relationship between the children and your former spouse. You need to ask yourself whether you support the children's relationship with the other parent or are you secretly hoping that he or she will simply disappear or fade out of the picture. It may help to be mindful of the fact that in general children fare better if they have a relationship with both parents. If you admit that you may be tempted to try to turn the children against their other parent, you need develop some checks and balances such as having a close friend or therapist give you a reality check about your reactions and responses. Don't be afraid to apologize to the children or your former spouse if you find that you did not behave your best. Remember that this is a process and a journey and it is OK to be imperfect at times.



*See the best in the other parent
(Don't exaggerate flaws)*

It may be hard to remember now that you once loved this person and chose to have a family with him or her. At one point in your life, you saw something good in him or her. It is likely that some of those same qualities are still present. If your ex does something that you do not like, try to think about how you would respond to that same action if the two of you were still married. For example, if the other parent has to cancel plans with the children, instead of saying, "I wish your Mom/Dad respected you enough to keep his/her word." you could say, "Sometimes grown ups have to change plans but that doesn't mean your father/mother doesn't love you." Everyone has flaws and if you didn't exaggerate them

while you were married to the person there is no need to do so now that you are divorced. At the same time, you can be empathic with your children should they have difficulty with an aspect of the other parent's behaviors and actions. Encourage them to be honest with the other parent with the intention of helping to improve that relationship.

*Respect the privacy of the other parent and the
boundaries of your children
(Don't share information)*

Following a divorce some parents talk to and rely on their children in a different way than before. It may be tempting to think of them as a confidant or friend now that there is no other adult in the home. It is important to remember, though, that the divorce is as stressful and fraught with uncertainty for them as it is for you. Children should not become the parents of their parents. It is simply asking too much and taking away too much away from them, even if they act as if they want adult information and the increased attention. In the end, the children will suffer under and possibly resent the burden that this role places on them. An important rule of thumb is to not share information with them (about the legal aspects of disputes or about the private life of the other parent) that would not be shared if the marriage were still in tact. In other words, if you have not told your children yet that their father had a drug problem as a teenager, there is probably no need to divulge that information now.

*Share the children
(Don't create loyalty conflicts
and don't compete for them)*

Sharing a child with an ex-spouse is one of life's most challenging tasks. That being said, it must be done unless there is bona fide abuse or neglect that justifies termination of parental contact. It is important to remember that children are separate beings with their own needs and perceptions. They are not merely extensions of their parents. You may be disgusted, frustrated, or repelled by your ex, but the children probably still love him or her. It is not enough to simply tolerate the other parent; the children must be actively given the message that it is OK to love both parents. That means they should never be placed in a situation in which they feel that they must choose between their parents. For example, if both

parents show up for a soccer practice, they should try to stand near each other so that the children do not have to worry about which parent to go to first and which parent will feel snubbed or betrayed by coming second. Try to put on a happy face as the children prepare to spend time with the other parent. Avoid letting them know that their departure will cause you great pain and suffering (although of course it is appropriate to let them know that they will be missed).

Support the other parent's authority (Don't undermine it)

The general rule of thumb is that consistency between homes is a good thing for children. It is hard for them if the rules at each house are very different. As much as possible parents should agree on discipline, chores, bedtimes, eating habits, and so forth. However, this is not always possible, even for married couples. If you find that your ex is making parenting decisions that you do not agree with, it is very important to still support that parent's parental authority. A standard phrase could be, "I see. I guess that is how Mommy/Daddy does things at that home." And if the child complains about one parent to the other, the stock reply should be, "You need to talk about that with Mommy/Daddy." Unless the child is revealing behavior that is unsafe or illegal (i.e., one parent is abusing substances or neglecting



the children), each parent should support the other. Even if the other parent is doing something that strays from an agreed upon approach, it is better for children to deal with the inconsistency in rules than to deal with negative messages from one parent about the other. Of course, it is always an option to discuss the matter with the other parent outside the earshot of the children.

Find something nice to say about the other parent

Avoid badmouthing the other parent and try to find something nice to say about him or her. This will allow the children to bask in the glow of your acceptance and will reveal the generosity of your spirit. Try to be genuine in your compliments and do not feel obligated to praise something that you truly find abhorrent. Look for something positive and make a point to let the children know about it.

Make contact easy

Many divorced parents quickly find out that there is significant grey area in most parenting plans and little or no sanctions for parents who do not follow the agreed upon parenting times. Thus, as a co-parent you must make a concerted effort to not obstruct access or visitation with the other parent. That means not making competing plans on access time, not withholding the children due to fabricated or exaggerated reasons (health, studying), and generally being true to your word.

Facilitate communication

As a general rule of thumb, one parent should not interfere with the child's communication with the other parent. Letter, cards, and gifts should be delivered; phone messages should be saved and shared with the child. The child should be allowed to speak to the other parent on the phone with privacy and without being made to feel that this is terribly inconvenient or prohibited. Older children should be given e-mail accounts and cell phones and allowed to text, call, and message the other parent without feeling that this is a betrayal or violation.



Keep photographs and allow discussion

If you had photographs of your former spouse in your home prior to the divorce, it is probably a good idea to maintain some photographs following the divorce, especially pictures of that parent with the children. The children's room and the family albums are important places where pictures of the other parent should remain. Equally important is creating an atmosphere where children feel that they can talk about and think about the other parent without fear of punishment or withdrawal of love.

Accept the child's love of the other parent

Show your child that you know and accept that s/he loves the other parent. Accepting the child's love for the other parent will allow the child to develop as an integrated person, not one who has to hide or cut off aspects of him/herself to be accepted.

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Upcoming Training Opportunities

Initial Parent Educator Training

October 15-17, 2008 - Plano, Texas
October 28-30, 2008 - Copperas Cove, Texas
November 17-19, 2008 - Richardson, Texas
December 16-18, 2008 - Plano, Texas
January 14-16, 2009 - Plano, Texas
February 17-19, 2009 - Ft. Worth, Texas
March 4-6, 2009 - Plano, Texas
April 22-24, 2009 - Plano, Texas

Building Bright Futures: Parenting the Child With Attention Deficits

December 2, 2008 - Kilgore, Texas
March 24, 2009 - Plano, Texas

Me, You and Everyone Else - Diversity Training

March 25, 2009 - Plano, Texas

Nurturing Families Through Divorce

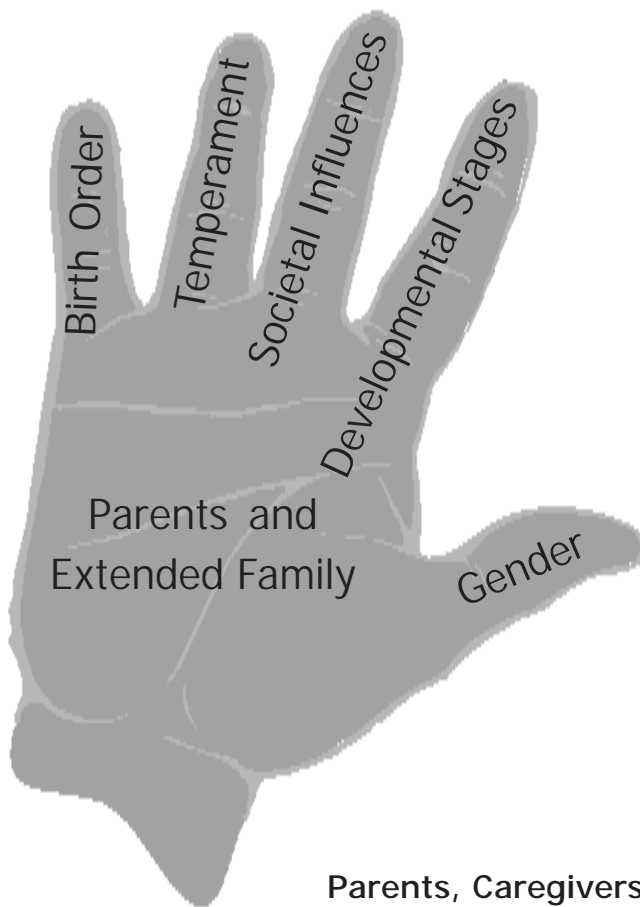
March 26, 2009 - Plano, Texas

Parent Involvement: Moving Beyond Rhetoric

March 27, 2009 - Plano, Texas

Registration forms available at www.practicalparent.org
To schedule a training in your area,
please call 877.340.6262

Factors That Have a Hand in Molding a Child



Those who have attended the PPE Initial Parent Educator training in the past few years are familiar with the “factors that have a hand in molding a child” concept. This visual represents that concept. Each PPE curriculum module addresses at least one factor. Parent educators can use the breakdown below to create a parenting series based on one of the six factors.

Parents, Caregivers and Extended Family

(Empowering, educating and encouraging parents in their role as head of the family)

- ❖ 1.1 Understanding the family system as a whole
- ❖ 1.2 Recognizing traits in a healthy family
- ❖ 1.3 Identifying your role as the primary role model for your child
- ❖ 2.1 Developing and maintaining trusting relationships within the family
- ❖ 2.2 Understanding attachment and bonding between parent and child
- ❖ 2.4 Parenting from a distance
- ❖ 3.4 Identifying family communication patterns
- ❖ 3.6 Dealing with anger in the family
- ❖ 3.8 Defusing family disagreements
- ❖ 4.3 Building and nurturing self-esteem in parents
- ❖ 5.1 Establishing authority as a parent
- ❖ 5.2 Choosing effective discipline techniques
- ❖ 5.3 Giving children responsibility for themselves
- ❖ 5.6 Developing teamwork in a child’s educational experience
- ❖ 5.7 Resolving homework issues
- ❖ 5.8 Understanding how parenting patterns in the early years set a course for the future
- ❖ 5.12 Creating family memories: Traditions, Rituals, & Routines

Gender

(Addressing and recognizing gender differences within the family)

All lessons weave gender into them

- ❖ 4.8 Helping children learn to handle competition
- ❖ 4.11 Understanding the complexities of bullying and social cruelty in children
- ❖ 6.7 Strengthening the father/child relationship

Developmental Stages

(Life span changes and unexpected change within the family)

- ❖ 3.1 Communicating effectively with children at all stages
- ❖ 3.3 Expressing and communicating feelings and emotions
- ❖ 5.10 Recognizing and responding to child behavior outside the norm
- ❖ 6.1 Understanding developmental stages in children
- ❖ 6.2 Moving through the stages of parenting
- ❖ 6.5 Easing transition into adolescence
- ❖ 6.9 Parenting the second time around: Grandparents raising grandchildren
- ❖ 7.1 Coping with mobility and relocation
- ❖ 7.2 Helping children cope with change and loss
- ❖ 7.3 Growing through single parenting
- ❖ 7.4 Growing through step parenting
- ❖ 7.5 Understanding the complexities of teenage parents
- ❖ 7.6 Balancing parenting and a career
- ❖ 7.7 Meeting the need of the family with a special child
- ❖ 7.8 Building resiliency in children
- ❖ 7.9 Creating cultural harmony in the family: Balancing the challenges of bi-cultural parenting

Societal Influences

(Combating the negative influences)

- ❖ 3.5 Communicating with children about sexuality
- ❖ 3.7 Helping children learn to manage and resolve conflict peacefully
- ❖ 4.7 Teaching children kindness and respect for other children
- ❖ 4.9 Understanding the powerful influences of gangs on children
- ❖ 5.9 Building a powerful parenting role to prevent youth substance abuse
- ❖ 5.11 Raising children of character
- ❖ 6.3 Dealing with stress in the family
- ❖ 6.4 Helping children handle peer pressure
- ❖ 7.10 When pop culture collides with family values
- ❖ 7.11 Are our children growing up too fast?

Temperament

(Recognizing and accepting each member of the family as a unique individual)

- ❖ 4.1 Building and nurturing self-esteem in children
- ❖ 4.2 Knowing and valuing the child as an individual
- ❖ 4.4 Encouraging your child's growth in social skills
- ❖ 4.5 Helping children make healthy choices
- ❖ 5.5 Encouraging motivation in children
- ❖ *Parenting the Strong Willed Child* curriculum-a 4-lesson series

Birth order

- ❖ 5.4 Dealing with sibling rivalry
- ❖ 5.5 Encouraging motivation in children

??? Frequently asked questions ???

“How do I get through the holidays with my sanity intact?”

~Cynthia Garrison, M.S., CFLE, CAMS

A few years ago, I received this email titled “Womans Work” from a friend: *Mom and Dad were watching TV when Mom said, “I’m tired, and it’s getting late. I think I will go to bed.” She went to the kitchen to make sandwiches for the next day’s lunch, rinsed out the popcorn bowls, took meat out of the freezer for supper the following evening, checked the cereal box levels, filled the sugar container, put spoons and bowls on the table and started the coffee pot for brewing the next morning. She then put some wet clothes into the dryer, put a load of clothes into the wash, ironed a shirt and secured a loose button. She picked up the game pieces left on the table and put the telephone book back into the drawer. She watered the plants, emptied a wastebasket and hung up a towel to dry. She yawned and stretched and headed for the bedroom. She stopped by the desk and wrote a note to the teacher, counted out some cash for the field trip, and pulled a textbook out from hiding under the chair. She signed a birthday card for a friend, addressed and stamped the envelope and wrote a quick note for the grocery store and put both near her purse. Mom then washed her face, put on moisturizer, brushed and flossed her teeth and trimmed her nails. Hubby called, “I thought you were going to bed.” “I’m on my way,” she said. She put some water into the dog’s dish and put the cat outside, then make sure the doors were locked. She looked in on each of the children and turned out a bedside lamp, hung up a shirt, threw some dirty socks in the hamper, and had a brief conversation with the one up still doing homework. In her own room, she set the alarm, laid out clothing for the next day, straightened up the shoe rack, and added three things to her list of things to do tomorrow. About that time, the hubby turned off the TV and announced to no one in particular “I’m going to bed”, and he did. Can you relate to this?*

Our lives as parents are so busy every day. We barely find the time to do the normal items on our “to do” list without giving up on something else. Then, about this time each year, we discover our thoughts turning toward the holidays. Will we have enough time to get all the planning, cooking, creating, decorating, shopping, visiting, preparing, packing, wrapping, worshiping, cleaning, helping, making, traveling, more shopping, writing, mailing, hosting, and getting? Even just thinking about all that needs to be done during the holiday season makes one tired.

So what can you do to get through the holidays with sanity intact? Here are some helpful suggestions:

1. Remember that you don't have to compete with others such as neighbors, family or friends. What you do with your own family means more than trying to impress people outside the family.
2. Focus on what you want your family to remember about this holiday season. Do you want them to remember the joy, the worship, the time spent in positive activity or will they remember the stress, angry feelings, and disappointment of the season.



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Parent educator Cynthia Garrison M.S., CFLE, CAMS, answers questions frequently asked during her parenting sessions. If you have a question, send it to us at ppe@practicalparent.org and look for answers in future editions of *Connections*. Visit Cynthia’s website at www.cgresources.org.

3. Delegate some of the responsibility to other members of the family. They may do the job differently from you, but it will still be done and you will have more time to enjoy those moments.
4. There is no perfect gift other than your love and time. Your children will ask for the latest and greatest gizmo or gadget, but if you choose not to fall prey to these trappings, you can still give them an important gift: yourself.
5. If certain traditions no longer have special meaning, create new traditions which the entire family supports.
6. Keep it simple. If you try to do too much in one day, the following days become stressed and pressured as well. Trim back on your things to do. Sometimes getting rid of a project or what you as the parent might think is the most important item on your list may relieve so much stress that you find you have more time for more enjoyable items.
7. Lastly, choose your priorities according to what is best for your own family.

“Feeling Strung Out?” is a *Parenting Quick Tip* on this topic.

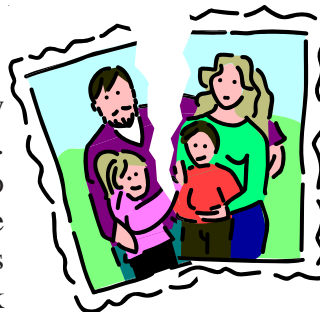
Coparenting Post Divorce continued

Don't Ask the Child to Spy on the Other Parent

Your child might be privy to or have access to information that you would like to have such as his or her involvement in new relationships, spending habits, legal documents, pay raises and so forth. It may be tempting to ask your child to find out something and report back to you about the other parent and yet this creates a terrible problem for children. Should they comply with your request, they may suffer from the guilt and shame for a long time. No information is worth it.

Don't Ask the Child to Keep Secrets from Other Parent

Like spying, keeping secrets is a harmful strategy because it creates guilt and shame on the part of the child. It places the child in an untenable position of having to choose which parent to hurt (if the secret is divulged the child hurts one parent and if the secret is kept the child is hurting the other parent). This is simply too much to ask of a child.



Ice breaker

Wanted: Live-in Nanny

A Manhattan mom wrote an unusually honest ad for a live-in nanny which stated in part:

- ✘ My kids are a pain.
- ✘ I can be a tad difficult to work for as I'm loud and pushy, but I pay well.
- ✘ I have all sorts of theories on how to stack my dishwasher.
- ✘ If you cannot multitask or communicate without being passive aggressive, don't bother replying.
- ✘ If you are fundamentally unhappy with your life, you will be more unhappy if you accept this job, so go to the Rockies instead.
- ✘ And, if you are judgemental about Ritalin for ADHD, or think such things are caused by too much sugar...DEAL BREAK CITY!



Have each participant write their own humorously honest ad for a live-in nanny...share.

Respect the Other Parent's Parental Role

Some parents refer to the other parent by his or her first name. This may seem like a harmless thing to do and yet it conveys a powerful message to the child that the other parent's parental role is being diminished. When children are encouraged to refer to a parent by his or her first name, the child is being encouraged to disrespect and devalue that person. Unless the parent asks to be called by his or her first name, one parent should not unilaterally encourage this behavior in the child.

Likewise, parents who have remarried may be tempted to ask the child to refer to the new stepparent as "Mom" or "Dad." However, this too can give the child the impression that his/her other parent is not as important and can in fact be replaced by this new stepparent. It is suggested that stepparents and stepchildren develop special nicknames for the stepparents that do not compete with or erase the other parent.

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Share Medical, Academic, and Other Important Information with Other Parent

In some post divorce families it is easier for one parent to gain access to relevant medical, academic, and extracurricular activities information. For example, the parent who picks the child up from school or the parent whose address is on the contact form may be the recipient of more information. This information must be openly shared and in a timely fashion. It may be tempting to withhold the information for a variety of reasons (for example, their presence at an event would be disagreeable to you). However, it can harm the child to experience the absence of one parent from important events in his or her life and can lead to low self esteem and depression.

Don't change the child's name

Sometimes alienating parents find a way to refer to the child (and have the child refer to him- or herself) with a different name than the one that both parents have called the child from birth. Alienating mothers may do this by using their maiden name rather than the father's last name. But alienating fathers can do this as well (by creating a new nickname for the child or by using just the father's portion of a hyphenated last name). This is not acceptable because it conveys to the child that the other parent is expendable and not inextricably linked to the child. It also creates a discontinuity in the identity of the child, which can undermine self esteem and confidence.

Encourage critical thinking and independence

Unfortunately, it is possible for children to be manipulated to believe something that is not true and to reject one parent in order to please the other. The best way to prevent this is to encourage your children to think for themselves. If you sense that you have been overly influencing them, you can shift your parenting style by using everyday opportunities to promote critical thinking. Simply by asking your child, "What do you think about that?" can go a long way to doing so. It gives your child the message that s/he has his or her own thoughts, that you don't always see eye to eye and that this is acceptable.



Final comments

To be in a position of having to share a child with a former spouse is a daunting challenge. Many parents in this situation will be tempted to employ a range of parental alienation strategies in order to undermine the child's relationship with the other parent. Parental alienation has many short term advantages (revenge, less time away from the children) but can also lead to long term damage to the children who are raised to believe that one of their parents (and hence part of themselves) is worthy of disgust, fear, and rejection. Parents have enormous power to interfere with or support the child's relationship with the other parent. You have an important choice to make about which path you will take; and you are urged to follow the advice provided here for the sake of the children.

If you are doing everything outlined here but are dealing with alienation from the other parent, it is recommended that you read a companion paper entitled *Beyond the High Road: Responding to 17 parental alienation strategies without compromising your morals or harming your child*. The paper will provide you with concrete suggestions for managing what is surely a very painful and difficult situation. It is available at www.amyjlaker.com.

In the aftermath of Hurricanes Gustav and Ike, PPE developed a *Parenting Quick Tip* to address some of the trauma that families in the affected communities have suffered. See page 10 for *Helping Children Handle Disasters*.



Helping Children Handle Disasters

The images of death and destruction that children get during national disasters can make them very anxious and tense.

Children need to be assured that the adults in their lives will keep them safe.

- Talk to your children. Encourage them to express their feelings by talking, drawing or playing. Be open and honest.
- Limit television time. Young children think that the disaster is recurring – not just being reported over and over again.
- Reassure your children that they are safe and that you will do your best to keep them safe.
- Get everyone back to normal activities as soon as possible.
- Watch for changes in your children's behavior that may indicate that they need support in dealing with what they have seen and heard.
- Be a role model for your children. Talk about your feelings calmly and openly. Show care and concern for people who have been hurt by the disaster even if they made poor choices.
- Spend time with your children. Listen to them. They may need extra time and comforting in order to fall asleep.
- Find ways for your children to volunteer to help others. This will give them a sense of control.

Parenting

Quick Tips

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