

Beyond the High Road: Responding to 17 Parental Alienation Strategies
without Compromising Your Morals or Harming Your Child

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May 2008

PART I: INTRODUCTION

If you are concerned that you are being targeted for parental alienation by the other parent of your child, you may feel compelled to take what you believe to be is the “high road” when responding to parental alienation attitudes and behaviors. According to conversations with hundreds of targeted parents, this high road appears to be conceptualized as not confronting the alienating parent in front of the child and not saying anything that could be construed as critical about the alienating parent to the child.

The rationale for this approach appears to be three-fold. First, targeted parents seem to believe that to respond with anything short of the high road would entail behaving like an alienating parent, which would be morally and ethically wrong. They believe that they would lose their moral authority with themselves and their child. This belief is summed up in the old adage “Two wrongs don’t make a right.” Targeted parents have asked, “How can I complain about the other parent badmouthing me and then respond by badmouthing that parent?” For some targeted parents, they identify themselves as the “good” parent, the one who does not engage in alienating behaviors. To succumb to the desire to respond in kind to the alienation is to become the very thing that they hate the most.

The second reason for taking what is perceived to be the high road is the fear that should they try to point out to the child how the other parent is engaging in badmouthing and why this is wrong, they would be increasing the pressure on their child and placing him or her in an untenable position of having to explain, justify, or perhaps even defend the acts of their other parent. Targeted parents are highly attuned to what they believe to be the negative effects of the other parent’s alienating strategies and are reluctant to do more of the same to the child.

The third reason that targeted parents have for avoiding responding in kind is the belief that it would be fruitless to do so. They imagine that, at best, such comments would fall on deaf ears or would be dismissed as hypocrisy. Targeted parents imagine that, at worst, should they point out to their child the actions and attitudes of the other parent which are detrimental or counter-productive, the child would adamantly defend that other parent and perhaps become outraged at the targeted parent for daring to say anything negative in the first place.

However, by taking this so-called high road, as a targeted parent you may worry that what you are really doing is allowing the alienation to progress unfettered, which may result in complete alienation of your child and the loss of that beloved relationship. Choosing the high road, therefore, can lead to intense feelings of hopelessness and/or helplessness. You may also believe that you must avoid the low road (saying bad things about the other parent to the child or inflaming that parent with direct accusations). The course of action that appears to be the only option left is to remain passive in the face of an intensive alienation campaign against you. This option is exemplified in a story shared by a father. One day his daughter told him that she and her mommy had purchased a calendar and they decorated it together such that the days with Mommy were adorned

with sparkly stickers indicating her happiness to be home with mommy while the days she was to be with her father were left blank, conveying to the father that the mother and daughter had decided in advance that the daughter would not enjoy her time with him. He intuitively knew that what the mother had done was wrong because it gave the message to the child that she would not and should not be having any fun with her father. Only days with Mommy would be happy days. However, the father believed that to point this out to his daughter would compromise his morals, perhaps hurt his daughter, and possibly make matters worse because she might feel compelled to defend her mother and hence become even more committed to the alliance. This father became so demoralized upon hearing about the calendar that he was not able to enjoy the rest of his time with his daughter. Once his daughter returned to her mother, the father was consumed with sadness, guilt, and yearning. By not having a way to respond – other than deciding that he would take the high road – this father became depressed, distracted, and emotionally unavailable to his daughter for the remainder of their time together that visit. The day in fact had become a “blank” day, fulfilling the mother’s alienating prophecy.

Another possible response in the face of the onslaught of parental alienation is to become consumed with rage and frustration with the alienating parent and sometimes even at the child. Think for a moment of Alec Baldwin’s misdirected angry message to his daughter in response to what he perceived to be yet another alienation tactic by his daughter’s mother. This is because choosing the high road is not necessarily proactive. It tells the targeted parent what *not* to do, but not what *to* do. This may work for a while but the feelings of frustration and victimization may build and overwhelm the targeted parent who, in the absence of a better alternative, will lash out at the child and perhaps at the alienating parent, potentially inflaming an already delicate situation.

The purpose of this paper is to provide you as a targeted parent with an array of possible responses to parental alienation that, if implemented according to the principles described in Part III, will help you to maintain your moral integrity and avoid actions that are likely to harm your child. While it remains unknown whether these responses will prevent the decline in the parent-child relationship, they should at a minimum provide targeted parents with more tools and greater flexibility, which could prevent targeted parents from becoming depressed and emotionally unavailable or angry and reactive.

It is assumed throughout this paper that you have some ongoing access to and relationship with your child, which has not deteriorated to such an extent that the child is a complete and willing participant in the alienation and that you have some access to the other parent, in person as well as through mail, e-mail, and voice message.

The steps, principles, and responses offered in this paper build on the findings generated from a program of research on parental alienation conducted by the first author, notably interviews with 40 adults who believed that when they were children they were manipulated by one parent to reject their other parent (results presented in the 2007 book, *Adult children of parental alienation syndrome: Breaking the ties that bind*, written by Amy J.L. Baker and published by W.W. Norton) and surveys of close to 100 parents who believed that the other parent of their child was trying to turn their child against them

(results reported in an article written by Amy J.L. Baker and Doug Darnall in 2006, published in the *Journal of Divorce and Remarriage*). Both Richard Warshak (2001) and Doug Darnall (1998) also offer suggestions for targeted parents.

PART II: PRELIMINARY STEPS

First, targeted parents should consider the following five steps to assure themselves that what they are dealing with is in fact parental alienation.

Become Educated About Parental Alienation

The first step is to become familiar with the primary parental alienation strategies (Baker, 2007; Baker and Darnall, 2006). You can create a diary in which every seemingly objectionable action and attitude of the other parent is recorded in order for you to eventually take a step back and look at the big picture. Ask yourself, do these actions and attitudes add up to a campaign of parental alienation? What are the primary strategies that the other parent uses? Are there some strategies about which you have no idea whether that other parent is using? Is there a way to find out? Are there certain issues or times that are more likely to be problematic for both parents? Are there ways to change the structure of the interactions (i.e. curbside pick-ups if transfers are particularly tense) that could make a dramatic improvement? Once you are familiar with the range of parental alienation strategies, you will be in a better position to know what you are dealing with in your own situation.

Become Educated About Parental Alienation Syndrome

Targeted parents should also become familiar with the 8 behavioral manifestations of parental alienation syndrome (Gardner, 1998). Perhaps the other parent is exhibiting parental alienation strategies (see above) but for now your child is not exhibiting symptoms of PAS. This might suggest that what you are doing is sufficient whereas a targeted parent, who already sees the signs of PAS in his or her child, may be more inclined to change existing responses to incorporate some of what is suggested below.

Get a Reality Check

It is also important for targeted parents to get a reality check from a few trusted sources. Share with them the results of the first two steps. Do these people share your perceptions or do they believe that you are distorting reality or provoking the other parent. Targeted parents need to be certain that their assessment of the situation is accurate, that their motives are pure, and that they are not seeking an excuse to engage in either a parental alienation campaign of their own or a self-fulfilling prophesy of victimhood.

Extend a Hand to the Alienating Parent

Regardless of the results of the first three steps, the targeted parent should never overlook the possibility of improving relations and communication with the other parent. Perhaps there are things that you are doing which are making things worse (even if the other parent is also behaving very much like a typical alienating parent). It can never hurt to extend the hand of friendship to the other parent and to ask him or her if there are ways that relations and communication could be improved. How that parent responds can

provide you with additional information or confirmation of that parent's intentions. For example, if that other parent scoffs at you and ridicules these efforts, declaring that there is nothing that possibly could be done because you are so ignorant, ridiculous, morally reprehensible, or inadequate that he or she could not be bothered to spend another second with you, that would suggest that this parent is in fact committed to being an alienating parent. On the other hand, a parent might respond by saying that efforts to improve things would be welcome. Such a positive, if genuine, response would suggest greater hope for working through the problems.

Obtain Mental Health and Legal Advice

Before embarking on a radically different approach to interacting with the other parent or your child, it is suggested that you seek confirmation with mental health and legal professionals. Their advice and your best judgment should always take precedence over what is written here. For example, if you are engaged in a contracted custody conflict, it may not be legally advisable for you to invite the other parent to coffee or suggest mediation.

For some parents, the suggested responses represent a significant change from the usual responses and interaction patterns. It may be useful to participate in some role-playing with a friend or therapist prior to utilizing the responses suggested in this paper. That way you can experiment and see how it feels to use the suggested words and ideas prior to implementing them with the other parent and your child. It is possible that through role-playing, you will become aware of feelings, assumptions, and beliefs that will preclude the use of certain responses (i.e., the response represents beliefs that are too far outside your comfort zone or are not consistent with your core parenting philosophy.). Without your full understanding of and agreement with the responses, use of them could actually make the situation worse. So, do whatever you need to do to explore how they feel and to develop comfort with them, prior to actually using them.

PART III: PRINCIPLES OF RESPONDING

Be Attuned to the Developmental Level of Each Child

Many of the responses offered in Part IV involve direct communication with your child. Prior to using them, consider how they could be tailored to your own child's developmental level. The ideas and words should be considered a boilerplate that needs to be tailored and fine-tuned based on your child's developmental level. If you have children of different ages and life stages, you may opt to use some responses in relation to one child while you may find that other responses are more suitable to another child.

Be Attuned to the Unique Qualities of Each Child

Likewise, the suggested strategies and specific language cannot necessarily be taken wholesale and applied to each child and each specific situation. Targeted parents who use these ideas must tailor them to their own situation and child. If you have more than one child, you may opt to use some responses in relation to one child and find that other responses are more suitable to another child.

Be Attuned to the Unique Qualities of the Alienating Parent

Alienating parents differ along a continuum of motivations, from benignly alienating parents who are unaware of the impact of their alienating strategies on the child and targeted parent, to those who are quite clear about their desire to poison the child against the targeted parent. They also vary in the underlying personality structure that is supporting the alienation, with narcissistic, borderline, as well as compulsive and anti-social personalities being the most prominent. In selecting responses to the alienation strategies, be mindful of what you know about that parent as well as how that parent makes you feel. For example, if the alienating parent is a domineering, aggressive, forceful person who makes your heart race and your head feel muddled, recognize this about the situation and build in precautions when implementing your responses. You can role-play the responses to gain ease in saying the phrases and use relaxation techniques to reduce the likelihood that you will say or do something you do not intend. It is quite likely that your typical response to the alienating parent (be it fear of an intimidating person, or contempt of a manipulative and paranoid person, or some other response), may be signaling messages to your child that are working against you. Awareness of your typical response style may allow you to present a different picture to your child, which in and of itself could be an effective antidote to the alienation. For example, your fear of that parent may contribute to your child's fear and alignment while your contempt might contribute to the child's desire to protect that parent.

Be Clear About Your Goals and Motives

As a self proclaimed targeted parent, you must ask yourself what are your goals and motivations. It is vital that the suggested responses be used with a sincere desire to prevent the other parent's efforts to poison your child against you, not to interfere with

your child's relationship with that other parent. Explore your motivations in therapy and with trusted friends in order to make sure that you are being honest and sincere in your assessment of the situation and your objectives. If you are looking for an excuse to wage your own campaign of parental alienation, the responses could possibly backfire or exacerbate your relationships with your child and with the other parent.

Have Empathy for Your Child

At all times, it is vital that you never lose sight of the fact that your child is a victim. Alienated children can behave quite badly to their targeted parent and thus it is easy to see how a targeted parent could respond to the child with anger, disgust, frustration, and so forth. However, your child is also a victim in this scenario and you must never lose sight of that. When you start to have intensely negative feelings about your child, find a safe outlet such as a trusted friend or a therapist. It is important to express those feelings away from the child in order to prevent them from leaking out when you are with your child.

Be the Best Parent You Can Be

One of the best responses to parental alienation is to be a loving, careful, and responsive parent. It is more effective to *be* safe, loving, and responsive than to try to convince your child that you are. Ultimately what children remember from an encounter is the feeling and the emotional tone not the words or content. At all times, your primary motive and response should be to be the best parent you can be. Thus, it is suggested that you look at your own parenting skills and see if there are ways that you can improve them. This does not mean that you need to see yourself as inadequate or faulty, just that you strive to be better. As children move from one developmental level to another, parenting skills must adjust accordingly. Some stages of child development are easier for some parents than others. Thus, it is wise to always keep one eye on your own parenting style and skills and see how you can improve.

Do Not Take the Bait

It seems sometimes that children return from the alienating parent ready to do battle on behalf of that parent. They may be filled with outrageous accusations or generally be unresponsive to your attempts to relate and communicate. It is important that you do not take the bait. What the other parent wants – short of cutting off all contact – is to have your time with your child be so filled with arguments and rancor that the child comes to the conclusion “independently” that you are a parent to be avoided and that spending time with you is likely to result in conflict and negativity. Thus, your job as a targeted parent is to prevent this from happening. As much as possible use the responses below to creatively and empathically be with your child in the context of this provocation. This is not about winning an argument with your child (“*I did not steal your college funds!!!*”) but about preserving a relationship (“*I am so sorry you think I misused your college funds.*”)

One particularly challenging situation for some targeted parents is being confronted by a child who seems to be or is clearly lying. Many of the parental alienation strategies involve the child being dishonest with the targeted parent (i.e., keeping secrets, spying on the parent, saying untrue things about the parent, taking the other parent's side in inter-parental disagreements, and so forth). It feels natural for some parents to simply state that they do not believe the child or, more bluntly, that the child is lying. However, many times the child's behavior could be seen as part of the alienating parent baiting the targeted parent to say something hurtful (and maybe even unforgivable) to the child. No child likes to be called a liar. It is recommended here, and elaborated below in the "Pick Your Battles" section that as much as possible you refrain from calling your child a liar, even if you know that he or she is not telling the truth. Try to find another way to express your incredulity or to state that you really think something happened in a different way. Outright confrontation of the child and a direct criticism of his or her character can drive a deep wedge between parent and child and do real damage to the relationship. This does not, of course, mean that you should allow your child to behave unsafely or inappropriately.

Pick Your Battles

If you were not dealing with the alienation by the other parent, you might behave one way as a parent (i.e., call your child on many or most misdeeds, set very strict standards of conduct, punish routinely, and so forth). However, being a targeted parent means that you do not have the luxury of parenting however you want. Whatever you do will be exaggerated and criticized by the alienating parent; and many children will be quite willing to have one parent commiserate with them about the other parent's unfair restrictions or punishments. This does not mean that you should have no rules or never punish your child. Too lax parenting and supervision can have negative consequences as well because children want and need limits and structure. Yet, you need to be mindful of how your parenting style—especially punishments and corrections—will be perceived by the child in the context of the alienation and how your child's ambivalence about you can be exploited by the other parent. Thus, pick your battles. Be sure that when you are setting a limit or punishing your child that the issue is really important to you and that your limits are always defensible, fair, and necessary.

Do Not Take it Personally

It is hard not to feel attacked and humiliated by a child who is in the throes of parental alienation. These children treat their targeted parents badly and it can really hurt. However, it does no good to take it out on the child and, as noted throughout this paper, much harm could be done. It is recommended that you remind yourself frequently that your child is being brainwashed or programmed and is, therefore, at most only partially responsible for his or her actions and attitudes. Of course, you do not want to say this to your child, "*I know you are being brainwashed, so I am not really going to respond to that...*" because that is likely to offend your child. However, you can keep this in mind because it can help you modulate your feelings and behavior.

Follow Your Parenting Plan Even if the Other Parent Does Not

You may have every reason to believe that your child will not be made available to you for your next scheduled parenting time. Nonetheless, you should show up as if you expect to be with your child. This might require enormous strength. Of course, you will get your heart set on seeing your child; of course you will be crushed when once again your child is not available to you. However, you must always show up because you never know whether you are being set up to look like a negligent parent. The one time you do not show up could be the time that your child is waiting for you while the other parent calls the police in order to document your lack of involvement with your child. It is vital that you do not provide the other parent with any ammunition to use against you. This is something that the interviewees in *Adult children of parental alienation syndrome* spoke about repeatedly, how hard it was for them when the targeted parent did not show up for parenting time or did not write them letters. This provided the alienating parent with “proof” that the targeted parent really did not care and it allowed them to further their alienation campaign.

Get Support

Being a targeted parent is excruciating. There are no magic wands to wave over your child or the other parent to make this nightmare end. It may feel as if you are on a train helplessly watching it about to crash. You know something really bad is going to happen but you do not feel that you can do anything to stop it. Many people are highly invested in being good parents and have put a lot of effort and energy into this part of their lives, only to be faced later with the prospect of losing a child to parental alienation. Added to this heartache is the concern about what the experience of being an alienated child is doing to the child’s social and emotional development. Many targeted parents have expressed their concern about the direction of their child’s development. They do not think that their children are developing into accomplished and moral individuals, and to passively bear witness to this is quite painful. Being a targeted parent is not something that any parent should face alone. Fortunately, there are many internet support groups for targeted parents; and it is strongly advised that targeted parents join at least one. Some towns have face-to-face support groups and these can be enormously helpful as well. Members of a support group can comfort each other, commiserate, brainstorm legal strategies, as well as provide referrals for each other. In addition, simply knowing that others are going through the same thing can ease some of the pain, frustration, and shame involved in being a targeted parent.

Let us know if you want to join or start a face-to-face support group in your area and we will see if we can help you.

PART IV: RESPONSES TO PARENTAL ALIENATION STRATEGIES

The purpose of offering these responses is to empower targeted parents to be creative, energetic, and proactive in responding to parental alienation strategies. None of the responses should be taken wholesale and used without careful consideration of their potential negative consequences (i.e., inflaming the alienating parent, entrenching the child's alienation, backfiring). Subtle variations in how the responses are used (i.e., tone of voice, body posture, and so forth) can radically alter the meaning and the experience of the responses.

Strategy 1: Badmouthing

In research with adult children of parental alienation syndrome (Baker, 2007) and research with targeted parents (Baker and Darnall, 2006), badmouthing was the most commonly cited parental alienation strategy. The adults who were alienated as a child, recalled a steady stream of derogatory statements about the targeted parents, with all flaws and faults highlighted if not exaggerated, not balanced out by any positive statements. They admitted that when the alienating parent made these comments they seemed very believable to them, especially if the targeted parent did not have an opportunity to explain his or her side or show him- or herself to be different than what the alienating parent was saying.

If the other parent makes negative statements about you directly in front of your child, this provides you with an opportunity to deal with this problem head on. One possible response is for you to say to the alienating parent in front of your child, *“I see you are really hurt/angry/upset. I am really sorry that you are feeling that way. Actually, there are some things that are going on between us that are making me feel hurt/angry/upset also. How about if we go out for coffee some time and try to hash some of this out so that we can get along better for the sake of (insert name of child)?”*

This response could accomplish many things simultaneously. First of all, it can show the child that you can be empathic with the alienating parent. Second, it puts you “on the record” that you have your own list of complaints – without actually saying what they are – and, three, it may allow you to take control of the situation by offering to work things out. It is not likely that the alienating parent will agree to go out for coffee and a discussion but at least you have tried. Your child might appreciate that you made an effort to improve relations and might be less likely to conclude that all of the tension and conflict is your fault or that the alienating parent is being victimized by you.

Some children, especially young ones, may report to the targeted parent the negative things that the alienating parent is saying about him or her to the child. For example, *“Mommy says that you don't love us anymore”* or *“Dad told me that the reason he left is that you had an affair.”* These moments, as awkward and painful as they may be, provide the targeted parent with a wonderful opportunity to interact with the child and to neutralize the badmouthing. Here are some ideas if this happens to you.

First, you as the presumed targeted parent need to remain calm and hear your child out.

Second, you must be empathic with your child, perhaps by saying, *“I wonder if that was upsetting to hear. Can you tell me what that was like for you when Mommy/Daddy said that?”* In this way, you are being nurturing, empathic, and responsive to your child. This is most likely what the child will remember from the encounter, much more than the content.

Third, if the accusation is about your not loving the child, this should be addressed immediately, perhaps by saying, *“I want you to know that I love you very much. You are my special daughter/son and I cherish our relationship. I don’t want you to think for a moment that I don’t love and care for you.”*

Fourth, you can invite your child to explain how, if at all, he or she feels that you have not been as loving and available as you could have been. Hear the child out and be empathic, by saying something like, *“It may be hard for you that I moved out of the house. That makes you feel like maybe I am divorcing you not just divorcing Mommy/Daddy.”* Invite your child to always let you know if he or she is feeling unloved and to let you know how you can do a better job showing your love.

Fifth, if the accusation is related to adult situations (i.e., adultery, drug use, financial arrangements, and so forth), as a targeted parent you must use your judgment about how much to share, but it is always safe to say something like, *“You know, I have my own side to this. At some point maybe we can talk about this but for right now what you need to know is that Mommy and Daddy could not get along well enough to stay married and we are going to live in two homes but we both love you and will be taking care of you.”* Perhaps it could be added, *“Sometimes it is easier to think that something is all one person’s fault but that is not really the case.”* You could extend this conversation by making an analogy with the child about some conflict with a friend or between two friends in which the child believed that both parties contributed to the problem.

Sixth, it could also be important to try to help the child develop critical thinking skills such that he or she can process the next round of badmouthing about you that might come his or her way. You might encourage your child to think for him- or herself and decide for him- or herself what your relationship is really like, rather than accept without reservation whatever other people say and think about you. You could say, *“You might hear some bad things about me but it is important that you decide for yourself what you believe.”* Gardner’s (1984) *Boys and Girls Book about Divorce* provides parents with several examples of how to encourage children to think for themselves. You can also talk to your child using some examples of your own when your child thought for him- or herself about something. For example, perhaps a friend saw a popular movie first and declared that it was not so good. Did that mean that the child would not enjoy the movie or did he or she need to decide for him- or herself about the movie? You can explore a few examples like this and close by inviting your child to tell you other things that he or she might be hearing that are confusing.

Strategy 2: Limiting Contact

One of the most frustrating aspects of being a targeted parent is having your time with your child slowly eroded. Limiting contact can take a range of forms from the seemingly minor infringement of the alienating parent picking the child up 15 minutes early for each visit, to more extreme actions such as simply not allowing the child to go with you for scheduled parenting time (“*Sorry, Johnny can’t come today; he is not feeling well/has other plans/must finish a project...*”)

This strategy requires a three-pronged response. First, you must let your child know that you are trying to have contact, by saying something like, “*I thought we were going to get together last week but you couldn’t come.*” As much as possible try to use language that does not directly assign blame to the other parent, but does make it clear that you remain available and interested in contact.

Second, you need to document any infringement on your time and consult with an attorney. Perhaps there are ways to modify the parenting plan to reduce the likelihood that the other parent can limit contact or perhaps a parenting coordinator can be brought in to the situation to mediate disagreements and ensure that the plan is enforced. If your attorney minimizes these seemingly minor infringements, educate your attorney about parental alienation and if that does not work, consider getting a new attorney.

Third, if there is one particular trouble spot (such as the other parent coming early for pick-ups) think about a creative way to counter the alienating parent’s plan. Some examples include disabling the doorbell and simply sending the child out at the appointed time (not a minute late), or having a family ritual of going out for breakfast the morning of the pick-up and returning home just in time for the child to go with the other parent, or playing in the backyard so that the child cannot hear the doorbell or knocking.

Strategy 3: Interfering with Communication

Most children and parents like to have communication during separations. This can take the form of letters and cards, telephone calls, e-mails, instant messages, and text messages. In general alienating parents expect to have ease of access and ongoing communication with the child when the child is with the targeted parent but are much less receptive to the targeted parent’s bids for communication with the child when the child is with them. Targeted parents often complain about being hung up on when calling to speak with the child, having letters and cards thrown out, and generally being cut off from the child when the child is with the other parent.

If this is happening to you, you should probably begin by letting your child know that you are trying to communicate with him or her. You can simply ask, “*Did you get the card I sent to you?*” or comment, “*I tried calling last night but you couldn’t come to the phone.*” Avoid assigning blame or even mentioning the other parent. Simply let it be known that you have been trying to communicate.

Next, think of creative ways to get around the alienating parent's interference. For example, when your child is with you, you could spend some time together shopping for greeting cards and small gifts, which can be wrapped and taken to the post office together. They could be mailed in such a way as to be delivered when the child will be with the alienating parent. The targeted parent could let the child know that a special surprise was slipped into the envelope to maintain the child's excitement and interest. In this way, the child will know that the items were mailed and should be keen to receive them. It is not likely that the child would then believe that the targeted parent is not sending cards. Remember, it is not advised that you mention the other parent. For example, it is not appropriate or necessary to say, *"This way you know that I am telling you the truth and Mom/Dad is lying about my not sending cards and letters."*

If your child is old enough to have an e-mail account, gift certificates and coupons can be sent to the child on the computer to avoid possible interference by the alienating parent. Needless to say, communicating electronically can be quite effective because the alienating parent cannot interfere quite as easily. The important point is that the targeted parent can do many things to ensure that communication is possible without having to directly say to the child, *"Mommy/Daddy is throwing out my letters and cards."*

It is vital that communication with the child be motivated by a desire to have contact with the child, not as a way to control the child while he or she is with the other parent. Targeted parents often complain that alienating parents constantly call the child during times when the child is with the targeted parent, which feels like an attempt to intrude on their time with the child. The suggested responses should not be implemented in the spirit of interference or control. A good rule of thumb is for targeted parents to communicate with the child as much as they wish the other parent communicated when the child is with them. Thus, if you would prefer that the other parent call the child once a day for a brief conversation than that is what you should strive to achieve.

Strategy 4: Interfering with Symbolic Communication

How children make sense of separations is as important as the length of the separation. Children need "symbolic communication" with the absent parent in order to maintain positive feelings. Looking at pictures and talking about the parent in his or her absence is a vital aspect of this symbolic communication. This is not something that alienating parents are likely to be comfortable with.

If you have come to believe that your child does not have any pictures of you at the other parent's house, it is important that you address this. A first step would be to give the other parent a picture of you – in front of the child -- and ask him or her to let the child have it in his or her room. Alternatively, if you also do not have pictures in your home of the other parent, you could invite the parent – in front of the child – to exchange photos so that the child has pictures of each parent in both homes. This shows the child that you are willing to do the same thing that you are asking of the other parent. If the other parent refuses to exchange photos or throws out the pictures, the child will see that.

Another response might be to have some pictures taken of you and your child together that the child is likely to be proud of (with a special friend, taken by a professional photographer, or at an exciting location) and make extra copies for your child to have. Ideally, your child will want copies of these photographs to show to his or her friends and family. You can also send photos via cell phones and computers, increasing the likelihood that your child will see and have pictures of you. You could also create a website devoted to you, your child, and other family members. Your child could log into the website and view family pictures whenever he or she wants.

Strategy 5: Withdrawal of Love

Many of the adult children of parental alienation syndrome interviewed for the research described how the alienating parent would become emotionally distant and punishing if they showed any positive feelings for the targeted parent. They sensed, without having to be told, that the price to pay for having a relationship with the targeted parent was to lose the love, approval, and affection of the other parent on whom they had become dependent.

This is not something that your child is likely to articulate to you or that you will directly witness. However, it may become apparent to you that this is what is going on based on how anxious your child seems to avoid that other parent's anger or disapproval, even when it means denying him- or herself something or disappointing you. If it seems that the scale is always tipped in favor of that other parent, it is likely that your child is trying very hard to avoid the emotional punishment of that parent. You might want to say to your child, "*You seem awfully worried about disappointing Mom/Dad.*" Just to make manifest what is so obvious to you. But it is important that you do this in a way that does not sound as if you are attacking that parent or criticizing the child. You might also be able to ask your child, "*Is it hard for you when Mom/Dad is disappointed or angry with you? How about when I am angry or disappointed in you?*" You may be able to bring to consciousness for the child the discrepancy in how worried he or she is about disappointing that other parent compared to you, without having to directly point it out to the child (i.e., it is not necessary to say, "*You seem more worried about not having Mom/Dad mad at you than you seem about not having me mad at you*") as that may appear to be competitive with the other parent and critical of the child.

Strategy 6: Telling Child Targeted Parent Does Not Love Him or Her

A very destructive parental alienation strategy is for the alienating parent to tell the child that the targeted parent does not love him or her. For the adult children of parental alienation syndrome interviewed in the research study, this was most destructive when the targeted parent was already absent or was so passive that the child could come to this conclusion seemingly on his or her own. Needless to say, you must show and tell your child many times and with warmth and sincerity that you love him or her and cherish your relationship. Make sure that your parenting skills are good and that you have open communication with your child such that you can invite your child to let you know if there is anything that you are doing that is upsetting him or her. You might want to say to

your child, *“Sometimes when parents divorce, children may come to believe that one of their parents does not love them anymore. You may wonder about whether I love you and I want you to know that I do and that I always will. What do you think we can do to make sure that you know that I love you?”*

Strategy 7: Forcing Child to Choose

Sometimes alienating parents create situations in which the child participates in the rejection of the targeted parent. For example, the child may be the one to call the targeted parent and inform that parent that he or she will not be coming for the next planned visiting time or ask the targeted parent not to show up at a social, academic, or athletic event. Because of the child’s involvement, the targeted parent typically feels even more hurt and frustrated than usual and may respond by lashing out in the heat of the moment at the child, further damaging their already fragile relationship.

Rather than exposing one’s own frustration and vulnerability, targeted parents should immediately consult with their attorney and/or parenting coordinator to discuss appropriate steps. If the court order/parenting plan is written with sufficient specificity, there should be minimal opportunity for alienating parents to do this. However, the reality is that for many targeted parents, such last minute change in plans is a way of life. If this starts to happen to you, it is important to document every single instance of this and consider discussing with the alienating parent. This is not likely to be effective – although it is often an important first step in the process in order to assure yourself that you tried and to tell your child (perhaps later) that you tried -- and it is likely that legal intervention will be necessary if such unilateral adjustments to the parenting plan persist.

At some point, but definitely not in the heat of the moment, the targeted parent should discuss what happened with the child. Something like the following might be said, *“I am sorry that we couldn’t be together last week. I was really looking forward to being together. I had some special things planned but then you called and said that you decided not to come. I felt disappointed that we could not be together. I am wondering how that was for you. I know sometimes it must be hard to leave one home to go to the other. You might be involved in an activity and really be in the swing of things or maybe you worry that you will be missing out on something special going on there if you spend time with me. How can I help you with that?”* You do not want to put too much guilt on your child, but you can be honest with your child that his or her actions have consequences.

You should also consider explaining to the child that these decisions need to be made by moms and dads and not by children and that you will attempt to speak with the alienating parent. Do not willingly accept that your child can change plans. Try to limit your child being the one to deliver this information, as it is so likely to hurt you and make you angry or disappointed. In general it is not appropriate to have children – especially those caught in loyalty conflicts -- function as messengers.

Strategy 8: *Creating the Impression that the Targeted Parent is Dangerous*

Another form of badmouthing is for the alienating parent to imply or state outright to the child that the targeted parent is dangerous. This could be very damaging to your relationship with your child because children need to know and feel that their parents will take care of and protect them. If you hear the other parent say something like this to your child it is important that you correct this right away, but not in an aggressive or hostile manner. Act as if it is a simple misunderstanding. *“Hi (insert name of other parent). I just heard you tell (insert name of child) that I (insert deed that suggests you are dangerous). You know, I really remember that pretty differently than you do. I remember..... We both did our share of silly things in our youth. Remember when we... I am glad we are both more careful and responsible now.”* This can be said with some humor and a light touch. It is vital that you do not appear to be attacking or criticizing the other parent. When alone with the child, you might want to bring it up again by saying, *“I wonder what that felt like to hear/think that I did (insert deed). Well I just want you to know that that is not exactly what happened and that I would never do anything like that now that I am a Mom/Dad and have you in my life.”* Close with an invitation for the child to share with you anything he or she hears that may cause concern.

As always, the most important thing is to actually *be* safe with your child. Wear your seatbelt, drive the speed limits, pay your bills, stay away from drugs or excessive alcohol, and generally behave in a way that lets your child know in his or her heart that you value being safe and protecting him or her.

Strategy 9: *Confiding in Child*

Many of the adult children interviewed in the research study revealed that the other parent confided in them about the flaws and faults of the targeted parent. The children became emotionally involved in soothing and protecting the parent, and eventually adopted that parent’s worldview in which the targeted parent was responsible for the other parent’s pain and suffering. One interviewee described how he came to believe that everything wrong with the family was the targeted parent’s fault.

As a targeted parent you are likely to become aware of this through your child’s verbalizations and behavior towards you. It is not likely that the other parent will reveal to you that he or she is confiding in your child about you. Thus, the only way you will know about this is if your child reveals information that could only be obtained from the other parent or conveys an attitude that suggests an unhealthy alliance and identification with that other parent’s viewpoint.

One possible response is incredulity. You might want to say, *“I may be off here but it seems like you are developing some funny ideas about me that you must be getting from somewhere else, not based on what I am telling you or what you know to be true about me. You know, sometimes when parents get divorced one parent may talk to the children as if they were adults and not children anymore. That might feel pretty good for children, to be so important, to be trusted, and to have adult things shared with them. However, it*

also might feel scary or strange to be a part of adult conversations and business. I am going to respect that you are still a child – even though you are quite mature for your age – and will not be sharing adult matters with you. I hope that if you ever hear anything about me that makes you feel uncertain of my love for you or my best intentions towards your mom/dad, that you come to me and check it out with me. I will do my best to explain things without burdening you with too much information.”

Strategy 10: Forcing Child to Reject Targeted Parent

Many targeted parents complain about how painful it is when the other parent creates situations in which the child feels compelled to show favoritism towards the alienating parent and rejection of them. A typical example is when both parents show up to watch the child’s soccer game. Even if the game is held during the targeted parent’s parenting time, the other parent is often able to compel the child to stand with him or her when not on the field, and to not even look at or acknowledge the targeted parent until the other parent has left the premises. Sometimes, an alienated child will ignore or be openly rude to the targeted parent for hours on end and then suddenly become warm and affectionate the moment that the alienating parent has left the scene of the activity.

Targeted parents facing this strategy should try as much as possible to not let their child ignore or be rude to them. One suggestion is to stand next to the alienating parent so that the child has less opportunity or need to choose; the child can stand between and be near both parents. For some targeted parents, the alienating parent may become so toxic or the child’s rejection is so feared that he or she will willingly remove him- or herself from the activity in order to avoid the humiliation of being rejected by the child in front of friends and neighbors. However, if you do this you are handing over your power to the other parent and demonstrating to your child that it is more important for you to avoid the other parent than to attend the child’s game or event.

It is suggested here that you try to be friendly and polite to the alienating parent and as much as possible avoid emotionally pulling at the child. You could even say to the other parent within the child’s hearing, *“It might be hard for (insert child’s name) when we stand so far apart. How about if we stand closer to each other so that our child can be near both of us.”* This may not achieve your goal per se but hopefully your child will be able to see that you are trying to make it easier for him or her.

After the alienating parent has left, you might want to raise the issue with your child, just to be on the record that you see what is going on. You might want to say, *“Sometimes it seems like it is hard for you to know where to stand or who to look at when we are all together. I want you to know that as far as I am concerned, you do not have to choose between us. I know you like to be near and talk with Mom/Dad as well as me. Is there anything I can do to make it easier for you? It is important to me that you show your respect for me, even when we are all together. I know it may be hard but it is not good for you to be rude or disrespectful towards me. You probably will not feel good about yourself when you behave that way.”* Notice that there is no criticism of the other parent

while you are showing your child that you understand the conflict and still hold him or her to appropriate standards of behavior.

This is a useful place to refer back to the father whose child described the calendar with happy Mommy days and blank Daddy days. Rather than becoming demoralized, passive, and depressed by the mother's manipulation of the child to devalue time spent with Dad, this father might have considered taking his daughter to purchase a calendar for his house as well. When they sat down to decorate that calendar, they could make *all* of the days sparkly and special, but different in some way (different colors, different patterns, themed stickers) to connote that every day could be happy and valuable— albeit different — whether it is a Mommy day or a Daddy day.

Strategy 11: Asking Child to Spy on Targeted Parent

If your child is being alienated but is still spending time with you, he or she may have access to documents and information that may be of great interest to the other parent. You must be prepared for the fact that the other parent might ask your child to spy on you. Areas of interest usually pertain to spending habits and social interactions (i.e., whether you received a pay raise and, therefore, have more money, which could effect child support calculations and whether you have a new significant other in your life.)

First, do not make available to your child and do not discuss within your child's earshot anything you do not want the other parent to find out about. Do not give your child anything to report to the other parent. That also means being upfront with the other parent. If you did get a new job and it would involve a recalculation of child support, consider telling your attorney and being proactively honest and forthright about it. On the other hand, if you got a new job and it does not involve a raise, then you could share your good news with your child. *"I am so excited. I got a new job. Unfortunately, I will not be making any more money than I make now but the work will be more interesting to me and I will be closer to home so I can be home earlier to spend more time with you."* You do not have to say, *"I know Mom/Dad really want to know about this so I am telling you so you can pass it on to him/her."* Consider telling the other parent also just to clear the air and take any pressure off the child to deliver the information or spy on you. Needless to say, make sure that you never ask your child to spy on or report to you about the other parent.

If you sense that your child is snooping around on behalf of the other parent, you might want to say, *"I sense that you are looking through my private papers. I am wondering what you are looking for."* Although as noted above, it is best to secure private papers in a locked filing cabinet and make sure that nothing is available for your child to have access to. Perhaps you want to rent a post office box for your bills if your child has access to the house while you are not there (i.e., comes to your house directly from school and spends some time alone prior to your coming home from work.) In this scenario, your child will have complete access to your files and your mail. It is important that you implement these suggested responses in the spirit of protecting your child from a

destructive mission initiated by the other parent rather than in order to hide something from your child or the other parent.

Strategy 12: Asking Child to Keep Secrets from Targeted Parent

Like spying, keeping secrets is a harmful strategy because it creates psychological distance between you and your child. If your child is keeping secrets from you, he or she may feel guilty and hence resent you for creating the guilt (even though it is the other parent who actually created the opportunity for the child to do something to feel guilty about).

If you find out that your child has been keeping secrets from you, you can discuss this directly with your child. You might say, *“I think you have known for a while that (insert information that was kept secret) even though I just found out about it now. That is like keeping a secret from me. Some things are OK to have as a secret from me. Can you think of something like that? (Wait for child to come up with something such as who he or she has a crush on) but some things are not OK to have as a secret from me. (Repeat the thing that was kept as a secret from you). Do you know why it wasn’t OK to have this as a secret from me? (Wait for child to explain or tell child that it hurt your feelings, made it hard for you to make plans, or whatever the actual consequence was of the secret). I am sorry that you felt that you had to keep that a secret from me. I wonder what I can do so that you don’t feel like you have to keep secrets from me in the future. Do you have any ideas?”* Maybe your child will reveal that it was the other parent who asked him or her to keep the secret. If this is so, brainstorm with the child how the two of you can help Mom/Dad not ask the child to keep secrets.

It might also be useful to confront the other parent in front of the child. You might say, *“You know, I think (insert child’s name) was looking for some information she thought you wanted. Next time you want to know about my work schedule or salary, you can just ask me. I did get a new job but it did not involve a raise, which is the reason I did not mention it to you. Here is a copy of my paystub so you can see, just in case you would like a copy for your records.”* This needs to be done in a light and non-accusatory tone so the child sees that you are the adult doing what is necessary to get along.

Strategy 13: Referring to Targeted Parent by First Name

Alienating parents sometimes do this as a way of devaluing the status of the targeted parent in the eyes of the child. You might actually hear the other parent doing this, you might hear from other people that this is happening, or your child might start following suit and referring to you by your first name. Some children do this as an experimental phase and so you need to make sure what the source of this is before you assume that it is the other parent. Once you are sure that the other parent is the instigator, politely correct him or her in front of the child, *“Please refer to me as Mom/Dad and not by my first name and I will do the same. It may be confusing for (insert name of child) to have us start calling each other by first names.”* Also, discuss this with your child and let him or her know how special it is for you that you are that child’s Mommy/Daddy and that only

your child can call you that special name. You could even say, *“No matter what other people call me, to you I will always be Mom/Dad.”*

Strategy 14: Referring to a Stepparent as “Mom” or “Dad” and Encouraging Child to Do the Same

This can be an attempt by the alienating parent to eliminate the targeted parent by replacing him or her with a stepparent. As above, you might hear about this from the other parent, from others, or from the child. Regardless of the source, this is a serious infringement on your relationship with your child and it should be addressed immediately. It is unfortunate that in our culture and language we do not have a special name for stepmothers and stepfathers that connote the unique relationship between a child and that person. That being said, it is often a sign of parental alienation when one parent refers to a stepparent as “Mom” or “Dad,” especially if Mom or Dad is very much in the picture.

The same responses suggested above are applicable to this strategy as well. Politely mention it to the alienating parent in front of the child, *“There must be some mix up but the teacher seems to think that (insert name of stepparent) is the Mom/Dad, not me. Let’s try to be clear about this. Thanks.”* A discussion with the child is also in order. *“I know you have special feelings for (insert first name of stepparent) and it may be easier to just call him/her Mom/Dad but for now I would like to be the only person you call Mom/Dad. Why don’t you and (insert first name of stepparent) come up with a special name that only you call him/her.”*

Strategy 15: Withholding Medical, Academic, and Other Important Information from Targeted Parent/ Keeping Targeted Parent’s Name off of Medical, Academic, and Other Relevant Documents

This dual strategy is very effective because it marginalizes the targeted parent in the eyes of the child (*“If Mom/Dad really cared s/he would have come to my school assembly.”*), in the eyes of others (*“That Mom/Dad never shows up for doctor appointments, I guess s/he doesn’t really care about the child.”*), and attenuates the targeted parent’s relationship with the child by reducing parental functioning and withholding important information and opportunities for interaction.

This must not be allowed to go unchecked. First, as a targeted parent you need to make routine contact with schools, doctors, coaches, etc. to make sure that you have all updated schedules and necessary information to be informed and involved. Make sure that when you make this contact that you are not hostile, aggressive, or accusatory in any way. Some targeted parents can be off-putting because they are so inflamed at the injustice of being denied information about their child. Remember that you need these people to help keep you informed. Always be polite and make sure not to badmouth the other parent. You might say something like, *“Sometimes in divorce situations, it can get complicated for everyone to keep track of both addresses and keep both parents Informed. If it is all*

right with you I would like to call every once in a while to make sure that I have everything I need and to see if I can be of any help to you.”

Second, it is important to be proactive and continue to ask about any upcoming events you need to know about. If you continue to be denied information despite these efforts, you may want to discuss this problem with your attorney and/or parenting coordinator.

Also, you may have to confirm information that the alienating parent provides to you (unless it is a formal document produced from someone else). It is possible that you are being given incorrect information, like the father who drove several hundred miles to attend his daughter’s high school graduation only to discover that the event was held the week prior to the date given to him by his ex-wife.

Strategy 16: Changing Child’s Name to Remove Association with Targeted Parent

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).

Targeted parents need a three-prong approach to this strategy. First, if possible, have it written into relevant legal documents that each parent is required to refer to the child by his or her legal name. This should prevent the alienating parent from confusing others (teachers, doctors, etc) about who the child is or who his or her parents are. Second, politely remind the alienating parent in front of the child to please use the correct name, and third, gently correct the child when he or she uses the incorrect name as well. Remember to be empathic and say, *“It must be confusing to have your parents refer to you with different names. How can I help you to use your real name so it is not so confusing for you and everyone else?”*

Strategy 17: Cultivating Dependency

Alienated children often speak of the alienating parent as if that parent were perfect, exceptional, and in every way above reproach. They also behave as if they are dependent on that parent in a way that is not necessary or appropriate given their age and life experience. This is part of what lends parental alienation the feeling of being like a cult. Alienating parents seem to be able to develop dependency in their children rather than – as is typical of non-alienating parents – help their children develop self-sufficiency, critical thinking, autonomy, and independence. Alienating parents do not behave as if they want their children to grow up to live independent lives.

As a targeted parent you may not see this in action but get a sense of it based on how your child is behaving and what he or she says about the other parent. Perhaps your child seems obsessed with obtaining that parent’s permission or approval, or adopts ideas and

beliefs from the alienating parent without apparently questioning or even understanding them.

If you sense that this is happening, one response might be to find and promote opportunities to help your child think for him- or herself. Encourage your child to question you (although not in a disrespectful manner). Ask your child thought provoking questions, and really listen to his or her answers, reinforcing that your child has something to teach you and has an independent experience of the world. Explore ethical dilemmas with your child in a way that encourages your child's natural desire to be a truly independent thinker. Allow your child to make decisions (ordering food in a restaurant, selecting clothes to buy --as long as appropriate-- choosing which books to read, and so forth. Help build your child's pride in him- or herself as much as possible. In doing so, you may be helping your child develop an internal resistance to the alienating parent's attempts to co-opt his or her critical thinking skills and independence.

In addition, if your child suddenly alters a strongly held opinion or abandons a longstanding hobby or interest (for example quitting soccer after years of passionate enjoyment of the game) in such a way that brings the child back in alignment with the other parent's plan to maintain dependency and control, you might want to wonder out loud to the child what the motivation was and comment on how surprising it is to see him or her so readily give up something that was once beloved.

You could also periodically ask your child whether he or she is doing something simply to please you, in order to model for your child parenting that supports independence. "*I hope you are not taking violin lessons just to please me. I really only want you to do this for you.*" Of course, you must be prepared for your child to admit that he or she wants to stop the lessons.

Final Comments

To be concerned that the other parent of your child is trying to turn your child against you can provoke a range of emotions including fear, anger, disgust, worry, horror, and frustration, to name just a few. We hope that you are getting lots of emotional support as you face the seemingly endless battle over the heart and mind of your child. We also sincerely hope that the steps, principles, and suggested responses presented in this paper can be helpful to you as you navigate the complicated situation in which you find yourself. Our primary purpose in writing this paper is to show you that there are ways of responding that you might not have considered and to empower you to respond in a way that may slow the alienation process while not engaging in parental alienation strategies of your own. The high road has more lanes than you might have thought!

We know that we addressed only 17 parental alienation strategies. We recognize that there are many other strategies not discussed in this paper. Targeted parents are invited to contact us at amyjlbaker@aol.com and let us know if there are specific strategies you would like to see addressed in a follow-up paper. Also, please feel free to share responses that you have tried which you believe have been helpful. We would be happy to consider

including them in the next paper as well. We look forward to hearing from you and wish you the very best in your journey.

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