

## CHILDREN WHO RESIST CONTACT WITH A PARENT

Howard Hurwitz

In separated families, an increasing phenomenon being seen by mental health and family law professionals is where a child refuses contact with a parent. These are troubling situations because everyone in the family is concerned about this situation. The concerns are varied and may include the following. The parent not having contact is worried that the child is being influenced to not have contact by the other parent. The parent that has contact with the child fears that the child is refusing contact because of problematic behavior of the other parent. Often the concerns are for the child's physical safety or mental health particularly if the child is forced to see that parent. The child may be telling the parent whom they are having contact with that they do not want to see the other parent because of a variety of reasons.

Labelling the dynamic of the child refusing contact can also be part of the problem or part of the solution. For example, the parent who is not having contact (and/or their lawyer) may believe that the child's is being alienated. The inclination to label this situation 'alienation' without a full assessment by a mental health practitioner trained in high conflict situations, is highly problematic. The reason for this is that there could be a whole host of possible explanations for the child not wanting to have contact with the other parent. Alienation is only one explanation and the social science literature about alienation states that the frequency of verified cases of alienation in divorcing families is relatively small. Instead, there are various other more viable explanations for the child's lack of parental contact that must be considered. Incorrectly diagnosing alienation when there is no clinical basis for this could be harmful to the child and each parent's relationship with that child.

Consider the following situation. In one family situation where I was involved, the father had had multiple extra-marital relationships, some in the matrimonial home while the child was purportedly asleep, and the mother was out of town on a business trip. The child was aware of the father's activity. When the parents separated, the child no longer wanted to have contact with the father. The father was convinced that the mother was 'alienating' him from his daughter. In actuality, the daughter was angry at the father. The 'reintegration therapy' provided involved sessions with each person within the family to assess the nature of the disrupted contact and then sessions between the mother/daughter and father/daughter to heighten each other's understanding of the situation. Ultimately, the daughter and father resumed contact. Also, the father was no longer blaming his ex-wife for 'alienating' him and he was able to accept responsibility for his role in contributing to his daughter not wanting contact. More importantly, all members of the family reported less strain on each other from the conflict that intensified because of the child's lack of contact with the father.

Instead of labelling a child's refusal to have contact with a parent as 'alienation', we need to more accurately label it as 'a child refusing to have contact'.

Other factors which can also explain a child's resistance to contact include the following:

### 🕒 Alignment

- Alignment are those situations where a child has a closeness to one parent because of developmental or psychological reasons where they identify more with one parent. For example adolescent boys may identify more closely with their father while an 8 year old girl may relate easier to their mother. Sometimes, children may have a similar

temperament with one parent which causes them to have a closer relationship because of this.

⌚ Realistic estrangement

- These are situations where a child may choose to limit contact with a parent because there are concerns and fears about that parent's behavior. This is common in situations where there is domestic violence and the child has observed one parent to be violent to the other. The child may choose to intensify their relationship to the parent that has been abused out of protectiveness or fearing the other parent.

⌚ Alienation

- In actual cases of alienation, the child enjoyed a positive historical relationship with the parent they now refuse to see. In these situations, the parent that is having the relationship with the child makes deliberate efforts to prevent the child from having contact with the other parent. Often the child is told that the other parent is bad or is to be feared. Also, the child is dissuaded from having any contact with the extended family members of the other parent.  
As previously stated, there are situations where alienation does occur. While they are rare, when they happen, they are highly problematic for the child and can have life-long emotional and psychological consequences. Amy Baker (2010) in her book "Adult Children of Parental Alienation" conducted research on the long term effects of alienation from following up with adult children who experienced alienation as children. She notes the pattern of emotional harm that these adults suffered as children.

In summary, understanding the source of the disrupted contact is important because treating situations of alienation is different from treating realistic estrangement. Choosing the right therapist who understands the differing dynamics is critical to repairing the relationships between all family members. Everyone is impacted when a child refuses contact with a parent. Even the 'favored' parent who has a relationship with the child is impacted by the child's refusal to have contact. In order to help the family 'move forward', correctly assessing the situation is essential for developing a therapeutic treatment plan.