Attachment and Alienation

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Two issues these days that are getting more attention in high conflict families are “attachment” and “alienation.” At High Conflict Institute, we are working on a new theory of alienation based on recent brain research, parent-child communication patterns, and attachment theory.

Attachment Theory

First, a little background. If you’ve been in one of our seminars, you know that attachment theory has been around since the 1950’s and has a lot to teach us about personality development. John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth established attachment theory while researching the behavior of infants and young children, and how they develop a “secure attachment” or an “insecure attachment” with each parent. Later, Mary Main recognized a “disorganized attachment” style as well. From birth, children “turn on” the attachment behavior of seeking physical closeness and soothing emotional attention from their parents and other significant adults, as needed. When they feel secure enough, they “turn off” their attachment behavior and explore their environment. [1]

But this isn’t just anybody who can meet these needs. Our brains are hard-wired to seek a secure attachment relationship with our parents to help us be safe, feel safe, and develop the following life-long social skills: a sense of confidence in yourself; a sense of confidence in the world around you; the ability to manage your own emotions; the ability to reflect on your own behavior to adapt successfully to your environment; and the ability to “read” the likely intentions, moods and potential behavior of others in day-to-day interactions.

Children’s attachment styles (secure, insecure, disorganized) are identifiable by 12 months old and generally continue throughout childhood and into adulthood. Children with insecure attachments or disorganized attachments often live life seeking a secure attachment, so they can develop a sense of confidence in themselves and the world around them, calm their emotions, etc. Of course, factors in the child’s life can improve their attachments or make them less secure. Some insecurely attached children at 12 months may have a secure attachment at 24 months, or even later in childhood, if an adult figure is in their lives who can balance a sense of reassurance with encouragement to explore the world.

Child Alienation

Child “alienation” is a term used to describe children’s resistance or refusal to spend time with one parent after a separation or divorce. For the past 20 years, this alienation has been commonly referred to as “Parental Alienation Syndrome,” a term coined by Richard Gardner, a child psychiatrist. However, this term has been controversial from the start, because it was
almost exclusively used to blame mothers for intentionally turning their children against their fathers. Later, it was broadened to also describe fathers who intentionally turned their children against their mothers. In either case, it was seen as intentional behavior to gain a legal advantage in the separation or divorce. [2]

Advocates against child abuse, such as Carol Bruch, have reacted strongly to PAS by saying that there is no such “syndrome,” and instead it is often seen as the rejected parent’s (usually the father’s) own abusive behavior which caused the child to appropriately feel estranged from that parent, including: child sexual abuse, physical abuse, or simply extremely poor parenting. [3] However, it is interesting to note that most children are not alienated or resistant to contact with an abusive parent, even though they may have mixed feelings. [4] In general, courts have straddled this issue by rejecting PAS as a syndrome, but frequently finding that one parent has engaged in alienating behavior in some cases or that the other parent engaged in abusive behavior or poor parenting in others.

Over these past 20 years, the alienation-versus-abuse debate has raged in separation and divorce cases, driving thousands of court battles over which parent is at fault for the child’s resistance or rejection. In 2001, two researchers on parenting in divorce, Joan Kelly and Janet Johnston, redefined this issue as one of “child alienation,” meaning we are describing the child’s behavior without assuming a cause. While this has been an important step, it still has not really explained what is causing this resistance and refusal in so many separation and divorce cases. Thus the argument rages on, with the issue affecting 20-27% of custody-litigating families. [5]

Unconscious Learning

There has been a lot of brain research over the past several years which can be applied to family conflict, although few people have been focusing on this. Since February, 2007, we have been teaching a new, third theory as an alternative to the “alienation-versus-abuse” debate. It is based on this more recent research on the brain, parent-child communication, and attachment theory.

Child alienation may actually start very young. In some families, one or both parents have some of the following traits: a tendency to see the world in all-or-nothing terms, a tendency to have frequent extreme emotions, and a tendency to fear new situations and fear trying new behaviors. This all gets unconsciously absorbed by the child through their attachments with the parents. As the child grows up (long before there is any alienation against one or the other parent), these tendencies are unconsciously learned by the child.

Coping with these traits interferes with secure attachment. Parents with these traits tend to treat the child with all-or-nothing responses, such as clinging to the child when the child is ready to explore or rejecting or ignoring the child’s needs for reassurance. One researcher, Marsha Linehan, calls this an “invalidating environment.” [6] Such parents may frighten the child with their extreme emotions, and have a hard time soothing the child with calm emotions. They may lack the flexibility to teach the child to have confidence in new situations and to try new behaviors. Such reactions would contribute to an insecure or disorganized attachment.
As children grow older in a secure attachment relationship, they don’t need to turn on their attachment behavior (seeking, crying, clinging, etc.) as often and for as long, because they easily feel secure. They can be quickly reassured and then turn off their attachment behavior and explore their environment again. However, in an insecure or disorganized attachment relationship, their attachment behavior may need to be turned on constantly in a desperate effort for reassurance that is very hard to get. Since children naturally seek secure attachments for survival, they will work very hard and unconsciously at altering their own behavior in hopes of achieving some level of reassurance with an insecure parent. This pattern is learned very early in life.

At any age, a child may sacrifice his or her drive to explore the environment to calm down a parent who has all-or-nothing thinking and emotional extremes. Such children may develop a rigid view of the world, which often includes seeing people as all-good or all-bad. A common family value (possibly shared by both parents or possibly just one), is that the world is dangerous and there are not many people you can trust.

Resisting a Parent

Now that the child is extremely sensitive to one or both parent’s all-or-nothing thinking and extreme moods, when the parents separate or divorce, a natural resolution of the parents’ upset emotions is for the child to take an all-or-nothing solution and see one parent as all-bad and the other as all-good. This calms down the parent whose side the child takes. When the rejected parent is furious about his, it reinforces the child’s decision to avoid the rejected parent’s emotions and at the same time to soothe the favored parents emotions.

On the other hand, when the rejected parent gives up and accepts the rejection, it also reinforces the child’s unconscious decision. Both parents have, in fact, supported the all-or-nothing solution of alienation as an appropriate and acceptable. Because this process is unconscious for the child, the child will usually have intense emotions about this, but really weak or strange reasons for resisting or refusing to see the “all-bad” parent (he embarrasses me with his hair; she’s no good at helping me with my homework; etc.).

Therefore, instead of seeing this resistance to the “all-bad” parent as intentional parental alienation or abuse which justifies a child feeling estranged from a parent, the driving force appears to be much more of an unconscious outgrowth of insecure or disorganized attachments which the child is trying to resolve based on the most fundamental biological drives for survival. The problem isn’t a single disparaging remark in the divorce; it’s the thousands of intensely emotional, all-or-nothing remarks and behaviors, and the unconscious insecure attachment with one or both parents from birth which is the problem. It’s “1000 little bricks” which built this wall between the child/ren and one parent. The solution is to address this all-or-nothing thinking, these extreme emotions, and this rigidity of behavior by one or both parents – and often relatives, friends and even professionals – that unconsciously drives child alienation.

While it is clear that many parents engage in knowingly alienating behavior some of the time, and other parents are abusive, it appears to be these unconscious behaviors and attachment difficulties which drive this desperate behavior. This theory takes into account the reality that many parents in alienation cases are still trying to resolve their own early childhood insecure
attachment difficulties in their present-day relationships with their children. At High Conflict Institute, we believe that combining recent brain research, an understanding of unconscious parent-child communication, and an understanding of attachment relationships from birth will help us address this problem in new ways.

References


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