

Family Separation Clinic

Information sheet



Family
Separation
Clinic

Children's rejection of a parent after family separation

It is widely accepted that the children who fare best after divorce or family separation are those that are able to maintain positive, meaningful relationships with both of their parents.¹ Most families manage to achieve this and, despite some occasional difficulties, children are supported to retain relationships with their primary attachment figures and all of the other significant adults in their lives. However, this is not always the case and, in some circumstances, a child will lose one or more of their significant attachment figures. This may be a result of one parent preventing a child from having a relationship with their other parent or it may be because one parent chooses not to, or is unable to, maintain the relationship. In a minority of cases, children themselves will reject one of their parents and, for professionals who work with families, this can present a number of challenges.

The phenomenon of children's rejection of a parent after divorce or family separation may be regarded as a spectrum problem. Whilst some children are able to tolerate a tenuous and infrequent relationship, or are able to maintain a limited indirect relationship, with the rejected parent, others display apparently phobic reactions to the prospect of spending time with that parent and will often be uncomfortable even talking about them.

In a minority of cases, the rejection may be said to be *justified*. However, in the majority of cases, a child's rejection of a previously loved parent is a sign of a conflicted dynamic within the family. In such cases, blame for the estrangement is projected onto the rejected parent either by the parent with whom the child lives and is aligned or, more problematically, from the child, themselves. This blame, when it is levelled by children, is often vehement and will be accompanied by justifications that range from the trivial or implausible to much more serious accusations of abuse or harm.

The problem of children's rejecting positions is a reaction to conflict, the roots of which usually stem from unresolved issues in the relationship experienced by one or both parents, sometimes even before the separation.² Whilst many parents may be hostile to a child's relationships with their other parent, not all children succumb to the pressure that this places upon them. Children who adopt a rejecting position, however, are likely to have either at least one implacably hostile parent, or parents who are in ongoing conflict.

Good practice requires that children's voices are heard. However, in cases of rejection of a parent after divorce or separation, the voice of the child is one which must be listened to with great care. Research shows that, in high conflict separations, children's stated wishes and feelings can be extremely unreliable and that the apparent maturity or intelligence of a child is not a guide to the reliability of their expressed resistance.³ In such circumstances, it is often what is not being said as much as

what is being said which gives away the reality of the awful dilemma that the child faces⁴ which is to lose one parent to satisfy the spoken or unspoken demands of the other.

When a rejection reaction is complete, a child will present in ways that demonstrate that they have split their feelings for each of their parents into two stark and distinct positions. For one parent they feel only profound love, for the other a deep hatred and sometimes fear. These feelings are often very real to children, who experience them as being based upon 'facts' that they will repeat to observers and which, when challenged, may escalate.⁵ Underneath, however, the child has utilised a coping mechanism which has enabled them to withdraw from the intolerable position of having to relate to two parents who are either in conflict with each other or who are in a conflicted position created by one parent's determination to get rid of the other.

In this regard, all children who are in a rejecting position are extremely vulnerable both in emotional and psychological terms and are signalling that something is wrong in the family system. Children who are displaying these signs (sometimes referred to as *alienation*), may also be showing signs of attachment disorder; the reflexive support for a parent often being related to *parentification* in which a child is compelled to take care of a parent. This phenomenon is also known as *spousification*⁶ and can create conditions in which the child is elevated to the top of the family attachment hierarchy by a parent and given the choice and the responsibility for taking care of the aligned parent by rejecting the other.

Professionals who are confronted by a child who is displaying signs of rejecting a parent or

of alienation, especially where the child is expressing concern for the well being of the parent to whom they are aligned, should be on the look out for role reversal which is denoted by *parentification* and *spousification*. Fixed views from an aligned parent, projection of blame and an insistence that a child is making their own decisions are all signs that a child may be trapped in a conflict of loyalty to the aligned parent.

Most important of all, it is essential to remember that it is extremely unusual for a child to sever a primary attachment and that in cases that you may encounter where this has occurred, the expressed views and feelings of the child cannot be relied upon, alone. Any child who has severed attachment to a previously loved parent is likely to be in a highly conflicted position and care must be taken to ensure this is not compounded by a failure to recognise that the rejection stems from a psychological coping mechanism in response to parental conflict or implacable hostility.

References:

- (1) Bauserman, R. (2002) Child Adjustment in Joint-Custody Versus Sole-Custody Arrangements: A Meta-Analytic Review, Administration/Department of Health and Mental Hygiene; Journal of Family Psychology, Vol 16, No. 1.
- (2) Kelly J (2010) in Fidler et al (2012) Children who resist Post Separation Contact. London. OUP.
- (3) Weir, K. (2011) Intractable contact disputes - the extreme unreliability of children's ascertainable wishes and feelings. Family Court Journal. Volume 2 No 1.
- (4) Baker et al (2013) Working with alienated children and families. New York and London: Routledge.
- (5) Gottlieb, J. L. (2012) The Parental Alienation Syndrome. Illinois: Charles Thomas.
- (6) Minuchin, S. & Fishman, H. C. (2004). Family Therapy Techniques. Harvard University Press: Cambridge.