

Distinguishing the Difference between Transition Difficulties and Alienation with children During Divorce

If a child is showing transitional difficulty and signs of alienation it is important to know what to do and what not to do. Below are some suggestions as to what to do and not do in coping with the behaviors that children show when they are in the process of being alienated.

| Do | Don't |
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| <p>Address a child's angry behavior in ways that prevent escalation – be curious about it rather than attacking it. Make statements and avoid questions. "You seem angry; I've never heard those words before". Statements are far better than 'how dare you talk to me like that or you can't speak to me that way". If a child says "I hate you", know that they are expressing an emotion that they are feeling, not a fact. Respond with "you seem upset, confused, and angry, etc." and allow them to respond. Silence works well in these situations after you say that. Most people, including children, have trouble with silence, so they have to say something.</p> | <p>Don't attack the child when they show anger toward a parent. Avoid the trap of being angry in return as it increases the child's anxiety and increases the emotional temperature. Try to remember that they are dealing with confusing emotions and really don't know how to cope with their feelings about being trapped in an alienation scenario. Also, they don't know really what's going on and a parent who thinks they are deliberating doing this is mistaken. Avoid "why" questions. "Why are you always so angry; why do you speak to me that way"? Why questions always puts people on the defensive so that in response they have to defend their statements or position.</p> |
| <p>Relax the boundaries slightly letting the child get away with a little bit more than the parent usually would however, hold the new boundary firmly. Remember it's a parent's role to discipline a child and the definition of discipline is learning new behavior not punishment.</p> | <p>Because the rejected parent is dealing with an emotionally charged situation do not tighten boundaries or limits too much so that the child feels squashed and punished for their behavior. Doing so will give the alienating/favored parent an opportunity to escalate the alienation.</p> |
| <p>Give the child simple answers to questions they might ask about a parent's private life. Tell the child "there are things that adults should not talk to children about; or these issues are adult matters". Such responses are far better than scolding the child for asking inappropriate questions.</p> | <p>Avoid shaming the child for asking any questions, even if they're inappropriate. Keep in mind that the child is being used as a conduit and does not understand that what they are being use and manipulated.</p> |
| <p>It is certainly acceptable to clarify in simple terms the truth about</p> | <p>Do not counter attack the favored parent by telling the child that they</p> |

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| <p>any lies or misunderstandings that they are being told. Make sure that a parent's behaviors do not confirm the lies that they are being told. Telling the child that a parent did not hurt the cat when they were a baby and that they would never hurt the cat then or now, is better than telling them that they cannot possibly know and that they are being told lies.</p> | <p>are being told lies. Avoid any negative talk about the other parent. If a child experiences another parent attacking the favored parent they find themselves in a double bind of not knowing which parent to believe. Concentrate on letting them feel comfortable, watch self-body language, facial expressions tone of voice and behavior. Reassure them through simple rebuttals and calming repetitions of the truth.</p> |
| <p>Help the child to understand that there are always two or more sides to everything they are told. Show them how different people see things differently at different times. Find some Escher pictures, these are terrific ways to show how the same picture can be seen different ways and everybody sees them differently.</p> | <p>Do not tell them they are alienated or that they are being influenced by the other parent. This only drives them into a defensive place and increases the alignment with the favored parent.</p> |
| <p>Check the child's verbally abusive behavior in assertive not aggressive ways. Assertive is being firm as opposed to aggressive which is always hurtful, getting even, etc.</p> | <p>Don't match their aggression with aggression, it simply confirms for them what the favored parent is saying.</p> |
| <p>Learn empathic responding skills (also referred to as active listening) and use them at all times. This will take some practice but the payoff is worth the effort. A terrific book on this technique is <u>How To Talk So Kids Will Listen and Ho to Listen So Kids Will Talk</u> by Faber and Mazlish. Pay attention to the times when the child drops the rejecting stance and name it and let them know how nice it is to see them relaxed and happy.</p> | <p>Do not tell the child there is something wrong with them and reduce verbal criticisms. These will only distant a parent from the child while reinforcing the negative input they're getting from the favored parent.</p> |

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| <p>Make sure that the child spends time with the extended family (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, etc.) as much as possible. A significant component to the alienation process it eliminates an entire side of a family including pets and favored activities. Make sure the child gets with the extended family as much as possible.</p> | <p>Do not Isolate the child because their behavior is upsetting, embarrassing, disrespectful, etc. Such isolation from their extended family because of their outbursts or unpleasantness is reinforcing the favored parent's power over them, keep sharing with the child, alert everyone in the family about the problem and get them to help out too.</p> |
| <p>Be aware that favored parents will use "trigger events" to seize the opportunity to enhance the alienation of the child. Trigger events are those which the child and the favored parent can use to "justify" withdrawal. In many respects when a child is being alienated any event can become a trigger. Document times with the child, take photographs, videos, notes, text and email messages, etc. in case there is a need to challenge distorted reports of events that have occurred. A text message or email to the child saying how much everyone enjoyed the weekend doing some activity can memorialize a fun time and could counter a claim of how miserable the child was when visiting.</p> | <p>Make sure that the child knows that they are loved and welcomed at all events and that the child shares in recording events such as weddings and parties and outings. Talk to the child about the things a parent is doing and help them to share in creating memories so that they are participating in those things. This helps if a child subsequently says that they were unhappy with a parent or that an event distressed them. It also allows a parent to do a reality check with the child on a regular basis.</p> |
| <p>Allow a child who is recounting negative things that they have been told. Listen to them without comment. When they have finished, reassure them that what they believe is not true but do it as simply and easily as possible and then move on. Show them how things that they are saying cannot be true if you can by simple explanations, then reassure and move on to doing something else.</p> | <p>Do not get into detailed and complicated discussions about what a child is saying when they are offloading things they have been told. Do not challenge them on every point and force them to go through things over and over again. This will only serve as "practice" and ultimately reinforce their delusions. In addition, a parent's resistance will also strength the favored parent's position.</p> |

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The source of much of this information is Karen Woodall. I've added some of my own thoughts as well, but I thought this was an important article. Karen is a specialist in working with families affected by Parental Alienation in York, GB, she has a book, [**The Guide For Separated Parents: Putting Your Child First**](#) with more help and suggestions, follow her on her website. Remember children need both parents.

I've also co-authored a book, "[**The Essentials of Parental Alienation Syndrome**](#)", by Drs. Evans and Bone.

For more information about Parental Alienation, visit my [**blog**](#), or [**website**](#).