



Vinita Mehta Ph.D., Ed.M.
Head Games

The Devastating Effects of Parental Alienation

Anger, guilt, grief, disconnection, and low self-esteem.

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Parental alienation is a form of child abuse that we are only beginning to recognize. Technically speaking, it's when a child aligns with one parent and rejects its other parent for reasons that are not warranted. According to The Parental Alienation Study Group, at least 3.9 million children in the United States are "moderately to severely" alienated from a parent. Put another way, there are three times as many children in the

United States who are alienated from a parent than there are children with autism.

This is, obviously, a staggering number. But what are the effects of parental alienation on children? This was the question of a study conducted by psychologists Caitlin Bentley and Mandy Matthewson of the University of Tasmania.

In order to pursue this inquiry, they recruited adult participants who had a history of parental alienation. From there, they conducted semi-structured interviews, asking a series of exploratory questions about the alienation. Their narratives were then analyzed for themes.

The results were striking. Seven themes were identified, revealing the breadth and depth of the effects of alienation well into adulthood. A selective overview of the study's findings is provided below.

Alienating Behavior and Impact

Adult children reported a multitude of alienating behaviors that damaged their relationship with the Target Parent and their own well-being. This theme broke down into seven sub-themes:

- **Abuse and control.** Participants were emotionally and physically abused by the Alienating Parent. For example, they were made to feel fear or guilt when they didn't comply with the Alienating Parent's view of the Target Parent.
- **Denigration of the targeted parent**—to the point where it damaged the child's bond with the Target Parent.
- **Adultification**—in which their parent inappropriately disclosed information and sought support during custody disputes.
- **Disrupting alienated adult child and targeted parent relationship.** The bond between children and the Target Parent was damaged. Some moved to different states or overseas, making a relationship or even communication with the Target Parent difficult. Others were told that the Target Parent didn't love them.
- **Perceptions of the Alienating Parent's characteristics**—including self-absorption, criticalness, and lacking in empathy and insight into how their behavior impacts others—even when confronted by their child.
- **Neglect.** Basic needs and safety were disregarded.
- **Alienated adult child experience suppressed.** Participants pushed down their thoughts, emotions, and memories, particularly regarding the Target Parent.

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Mental Health

Adult children reported mental health struggles both as children and adults. This theme consisted of three sub-themes:

- **Mental health difficulties.** All of the participants experienced mental health issues, ranging from anxiety and PTSD to suicidal ideation, which they traced to their Alienating Parent's abuse.
- **Self-esteem.** Participants reported having low self-esteem and low confidence in themselves and their abilities.
- **Substance use.** Alienated adult children disclosed using alcohol and drugs, for some at an early age, in order to cope with the abuse.

Relationship Difficulties

Participants described having difficulties across friendships and romantic relationships. Five sub-themes surfaced:

- **Difficulty relating to peers.** Participants felt different from and unable to confide their experience of parental alienation with other children.
- **Fear of loss.** Most participants expressed fears of losing a relationship, causing them to avoid conflicts in relationships or even entering relationships.
- **Difficulty trusting.** Participants had difficulty believing that someone would support them, and thus they hid their difficulties from others.
- **Dysfunctional and abusive relationships.** Adult children often chose partners that were as abusive as their Alienating Parent, sometimes in a desperate effort to feel loved. Others stayed in unhealthy partnerships to avoid divorce at all costs.
- **Struggle to maintain healthy relationships.** Participants felt that a lack of positive role models, mental health problems, and poor relationship skills made relationships challenging.

Learning and Development

Participants believed that the alienation stunted their development and capacity to learn. Two sub-themes emerged:

- **Identity.** Being told that the Target Parent was bad, children were conscious of the ways in which they were like the Target Parent and felt shame about it.
- **Education and employment.** Most participants had difficulty with learning and focusing on school, which altered the course of their lives. They felt blocked from fulfilling their academic potential at school because the Alienating Parent's needs came before their own.

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Grief and Loss

Participants felt a pervasive sense of grief and loss, which was tied to their experience of alienation. Five sub-themes were found:

- **Anger and emotional pain**—largely for the "injustice" and "the mess" their parents made.
- **Feeling they missed out**—on a childhood, including learning basic skills (e.g., cooking) and an early loss of innocence.
- **Guilt.** Most participants felt the Alienating Parent made them feel guilty. They also felt guilty about the ways they treated the Target Parent, even though they knew they weren't to blame.
- **Grieving the loss of the relationship with the Targeted Parent.** One participant shared: "Most of my childhood memories are just, 'Oh God, even up until the age of 40, I just want my dad, I just want my dad.'"
- **Disappointment with their relationship with the Target Parent.** Some participants felt the Target Parent had moved forward with a new relationship or family, gave up on them too soon, or was disinterested in them.

Disconnection and Dysfunction

Participants described "segregated" family lives. Two sub-themes were identified.

- **Disconnection.** Participants felt they had abnormal family lives, with isolated childhoods and limited or irregular contact with extended family. Some had cut off contact with the Alienating Parent.
- **Intergenerational transmission of trauma.** Participants observed that their parents had dysfunctional relationships with their own parents, and that the dysfunctional behavior had been learned.

Coping and Healing

Participants shared how they coped with alienation, giving rise to four sub-themes:

- **Coping and resilience.** While many participants coped by themselves, others leaned on the Target Parent. Some developed a bond with a caring and protective person.
- **Reunification attempts.** Many participants tried to reunite with their Target Parent. For some, this was healing, while others were ambivalent about reconnecting.
- **The healing process.** Participants found that making sense of their pasts, with some seeking therapy. Some tried to identify their experience as parental alienation was healing: "As I got a bit older, I decided to go see a therapist and that started to put things in place, and break the normalization... You start to realize that what you've gone through was abuse."
- **Parental alienation awareness.** Participants felt it was important to raise awareness from intervention, and how they might have benefited from intervention.

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References

Caitlin Bentley & Mandy Matthewson (2020): The Not-Forgotten Child: Alienated Adult Children's Experience of Parental Alienation, *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, DOI: 10.1080/01926187.2020.1775531



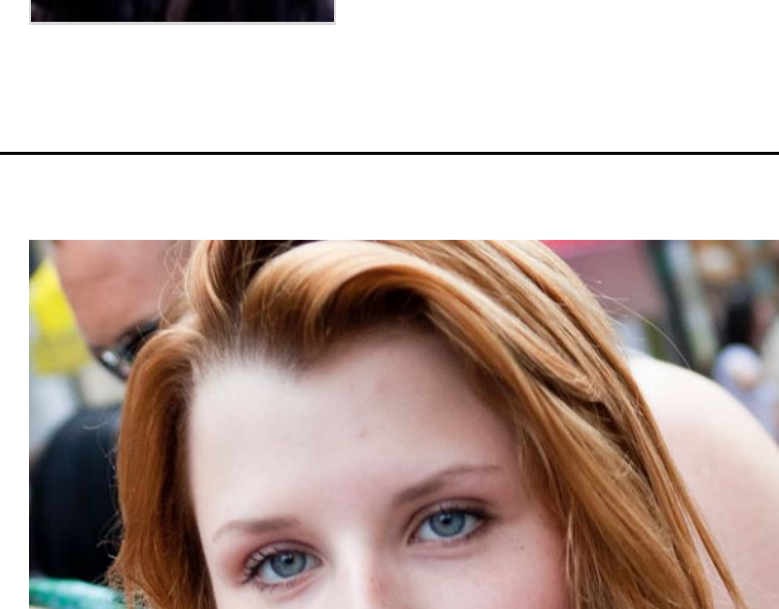
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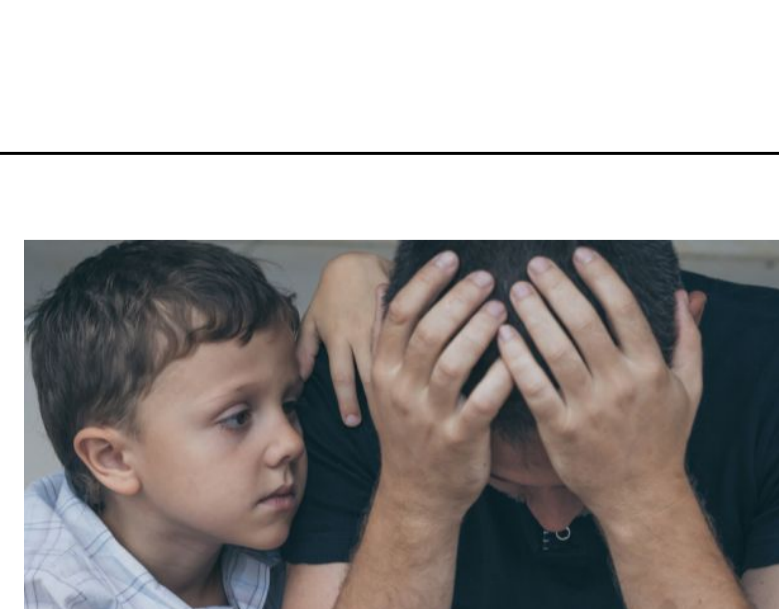
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