

The FUTURE Series - VI

Family Unification Techniques: Unique Relationship Enhancement

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HOW CHILDREN ARE LED TO BE ALIENATED AND/OR ESTRANGED

1. While the use of deliberate lies about the target parent is frequent, the use of more subtle methods that create alienation are even more common. Any MHP involved in cases like those described here, must devote a huge amount of time and energy to recruit any alienating parent in understanding the information in this FUTURE paper, and launching corrective actions. This is a challenging task, since APs usually believe they are not hurting their children by demonizing the TP, but protecting them.

2. One subtle method has been reported upon by the intelligence services of various countries that study methods of propaganda and brainwashing. It involves the use of highly selected truths, and, of course, the omission of other truths that would either lessen the effects of the selected truths, or perhaps even tell a very different story. This is a “favorite” of alienators, since it does not require the outright telling of lies, depending as it does, on the telling of selected truths. The alienating parent pays attention to, and emphasizes to the children, every single flaw a target parent may have and neglects to point out the assets. When support *is* offered, it is bland and non-specific: “Well, he can be nice at times.”

3. Another subtle method occurs when the alienator agrees with any negative statement a child makes about the target parent, even though the child’s perception may have been based on partial evidence or even on grossly distorted evidence. This technique is exceedingly successful (unfortunately), especially with very bright children. In general, the subtle methods of alienation work the most successfully with bright children, since a bevy of false and misleading information sneaks in under the radar.

4. Another subtle method occurs when the alienating parent mixes lies in with truths. This may take the form of the alienator reciting a list the target parent’s flaws to a child and making sure that some of the items on the list are truthful. Because the child can verify these particular items, the child may not realize that many other items on the list are based on lies.

5. We have listed a way to categorize observed and/or reported parental behaviors elsewhere in the FUTURE series. Category 1 includes parental behaviors that are blatantly bad, like overt and sustained abuse. Category 2 lists behaviors like yelling and so forth that are not wise in the long run, but quite typical in normal families. Category 3 contains parental behaviors a child just happens not to like (for example, rigid adherence to chore responsibilities) and Category 4 parental behaviors that are manifestly

“good” (affection, warmth, consistency, etc.). A prime subtle method of alienation occurs when a parent reacts emotionally to a TP’s behavior as though it represented Category 1 behavior when in fact the behavior belongs in Category 2 or 3. The alienator thereby validates these misguided emotional reactions of the child by accepting them as evidence of the child’s “accurate” perception. Hence we have a situation where a child is crying and catastrophizing about a target parent’s behavior that is essentially normative (for example, yelling and making threats—behaviors that are strategically unwise but still typical in normal families), and the alienator, instead of challenging and correcting the child’s perceptions, reinforces the child’s “rightness” in believing they are demonic.

One could summarize this very important point by saying that the most serious and insidious alienating behavior occurs when the alienating parent encourages a child to believe this to be true every single Category 2 and 3 behavior the target parent displays, and fails to challenge them, or at least point out to the child other more benign interpretations of these behaviors.

A long list of alienating strategies are listed in the *Custody Newsletter*, Issue 9, published by *The Professional Academy of Custody Evaluators* (PACE). The article is authored by Peggie Ward, Ph.D. and J. Campbell Harvey, J.D. They range from “mild” to “severe.” (However, the impact on a given child may be “severe” even though a MHP may judge the alienating behavior as “mild.” Some children are far more vulnerable to *any* kind of alienation-causing behaviors than are others.) The list in the article includes such alienating behaviors as these: luke-warm encouragement for the child to have sustained contact with the target parent; a failure to point out to the child, and continually reinforce, the values of the other parent to the child; the use of subtle accusations, for example, “Your father has two personalities—he can be nice, but, oh boy, when he’s the other personality, watch out!”

6. There are a host of attitudes and beliefs a child may hold that can prevent him or her from loving a TP regardless of how many therapeutic strategies a MHP may utilize, and regardless of how hard the TP may try to earn an alienated child’s affection. These attitudes and beliefs may flow from both psychological as well as intrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors refer to faulty multiple-perspective skills that lead to black-white thinking, thinking in which only one position can be right. In such thinking, the person holds no mental category in which two sides of an issue both can be right.

7. The classic PAS scenario is one in which the child believes that loving the TP would be a betrayal of the values and beliefs of the AP.

8. A closely related scenario is one in which the child believes that the AP needs and depends on his or her undying love and loyalty. This is characteristic of cases in which the AP feels betrayed and/or abandoned by the TP, and additionally has taken few (or no) steps to build a post-divorce life (a life which would involve a new companion, new interests, renewed passions, hobbies and so forth). The child in this scenario often becomes a guilt-ridden, unconsciously bitter, parentified caretaker of the parent seen as needy and impaired.

9. Another related scenario, a so-called slippery-slope situation, is one in which the child believes something like the following (in this example, assume the TP is the father): “If I let myself love him even a little bit, I may end up loving him a lot, and then I might want to spend more time with him than with my Mom.”

10. A desire to reduce the tension following from observed high-conflict incidents between the parents is a leading cause of the following scenarios. In a desire to reduce the bewilderment and confusion of trying to decide who is “right” in the countless battles the child observes between the warring parents, he or she decides to conclude that one of them is “right” and the other “wrong.” This spares the child the agony of having to ponder this issue every single time a negative incident between the parents occurs. It is as if the child has said to him- or herself: “It’s just too hard to have to think about who is the “righter” person in incident after incident; I’m going to choose one as the “right one” and stick to that choice no matter what the details of any particular incident happen to be.”

11. Another more “emotional” variation of black-white thinking occurs when a person decides that in certain interactions there has to be a “winner” and a “loser.” An example was given before, in which a 15-year old girl decided that her Father treated every interaction as motivated by an intense desire to get what he wants, in other words, to “win” every interchange. She came to believe that to have even *any* interaction with him, including those monitored by a MHP, would constitute a “win” for him and therefore, by virtue of her own twisted inner definition, a devastating “loss” for her. The MHP pointed out to her that even if he was manipulative, and did like to “win” interchanges, she did not have to go along by accepting this “rule” of interaction. To make matters worse, she even believed that if he inwardly “felt” he “won,” he *did* “win.” She not only let him set up the rules-of-exchange, but further gave him the power to decide who “wins” any interaction. She could not see how her black/white thinking was having such a bad effect on her.

12. It is very difficult for a MHP to address *any* of these scenarios therapeutically, at least in traditional forms of therapy. For one thing, in each scenario noted, the child absolutely and totally considers his or her perception of each parent, the AP and the TP, as well as each observed situation, to be accurate. The child will see no reason to have a therapeutic interchange about the people or events involved, since this could lead to the child’s being asked to consider if there might not be another way to think about what is actually going on in each situation. The child reacts to a request from the MHP to “talk things over” or to consider the observed situations from another perspective, to be as stupid a request by the MHP as if the MHP was asking the child to see night when it’s day.