

Children and Divorce Articles

PARENTAL CONTROL



Stop parental alienation by separating fact from opinion when discussing your ex with the children.

By Jayne A. Major, Ph.D.

When people are in conflict, it is easy to get into the blame game, to feel superior, and see oneself as a victim. Unfortunately, far too many parents lack boundary control. They share their feelings of misery and anger with their children. But when one parent speaks poorly about the other to their child and encourages the child to believe that the target parent is less worthy and less important, parental alienation syndrome (PAS) can occur. For your children, the results can be tragic.

You may think that your ex is the lowest, most vile, bottom dwelling snake in the swamp. But no matter how you feel about ex, you must reach deep into your character and be disciplined enough to behave responsibly and act according to what is best for your child. There is a big difference between fact and opinion. *Facts* are true. There is evidence or proof of what happened. *Opinions* are feelings. They're a spin that someone puts on facts. There is no proof that your ex actually is *the lowest, most vile bottom dwelling snake in the swamp*. This is an opinion. Proof would be something that is documented.

You may be profoundly disappointed that things didn't work out in your marriage. You may feel superior in the situation; nevertheless, this *is* the person that you chose to be your child's parent. Accept responsibility for that. Take the high road, get a grip, and filter out what is helpful from what is damaging to say to your children. Use discretion in the facts you share with your children. Let your child make up his or her own mind. Just because your child is always there and convenient to you, don't use him or her as your private therapist. Share your opinions and negatives feelings with an adult who can handle them. Also, be careful to not talk on the telephone within earshot of a child as you dump out your latest irritation at your supreme tormentor—the awful ex. You need to unload the heavy, angry feelings: just don't do it in a way that involves your children. If you do, you will be guilty of parent alienation.

These conversations help illustrate the difference between fact and opinion when discussing your ex with the children:

Fact: "Johnny, Dad is expected at 4:00 p.m. to pick you up, but now it is 5:30 p.m., and we don't see him. I got his answer machine and left a message. Hopefully, we'll hear soon."

Opinion: "Johnny, the jerk is late again. He'll be late to his funeral. You can't count on him ever being on time."

Fact: "Sally, your dad and I don't agree on the custody plan. We are seeing a judge to help us work it out. I'll let you know what the judge says."

Opinion: "Sally, who do you want to live with? Wouldn't you want to stay here more than with your dad? If you spend too much time with your dad, you are going to miss it here. If you have a chance to talk to the judge, you should say that you want to live with me more."

Fact: "Jerry, your mom has a new boyfriend called Brian."

Opinion: "Jerry, your mom sleeps around with any guy who will have her. Brian is the latest sucker. It is too bad. Let me know if he does anything bad to you."

Parental alienation syndrome poisons a child's mind against the targeted parent. It destroys the child's belief that he or she is a good person and prevents the child from making up his or her mind about the character of the parent. If children are exposed to a parent's toxicity, they are easily overwhelmed with the difficulty of the situation. They can't solve the parent's problems. Being forced to take sides in the parent's conflict isn't fair to them. Adults are the ones who need to figure this out; they are the mature ones, not the children. Children need parents to take care of them, love them, and help them develop a strong foundation for their own life.

Parental alienation is the reason that so many children do not thrive when their parents divorce. We know that when parents can communicate and solve problems for the sake of their children, the outcome in dissolution can be positive. Children are still forming their sense of self; an important part of this process is to bond with and love both parents. They have a right to make up their own mind about the character of the other parent.

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