



ASSOCIATION OF
FAMILY AND
CONCILIATION COURTS



eNEWS

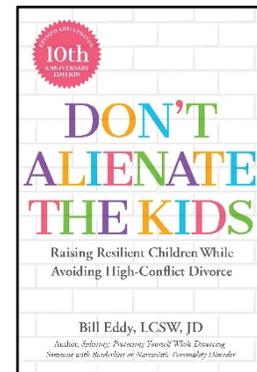
April 2020
VOL. 15 No. 4

Ten Things to Understand About Alienation (Resistance or Refusal to See a Parent)

Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.

Bill Eddy is co-founder, Chief Innovation Officer, and Vice President of High Conflict Institute, a training and consulting firm helping professionals understand and manage high conflict disputes and challenging people.

The 10th anniversary edition of his seminal book, *Don't Alienate the Kids: Raising Resilient Children While Avoiding High-Conflict Divorce*, is now available. We thank Bill and [High Conflict Institute](#) for supporting AFCC as a Platinum Sponsor of the cancelled 57th Annual Conference.



1. Alienation is the resistance or refusal of a child to spend time with one parent for no good reason (with whom there was a previously decent relationship), while extremely favoring the other parent. This is different from estrangement, where there is a proportionate reason for this resistance, such as extreme physical child abuse.
2. Alienation is not a typical result of separation or divorce, but reportedly occurs in 10-20% of cases and appears to be increasing. Alienation is not a common symptom of child abuse or domestic violence. Most children want the abuse to stop, but also want a relationship with both parents. Alienation is not a gender issue, as both fathers and mothers have been the rejected parent, and grandmothers and grandfathers have been rejected too.
3. Alienation is not a syndrome, such as parental alienation syndrome, as neither the mental health community nor the legal community has agreed on one single cause of alienation. However, there is general agreement among professionals that alienating behaviors can contribute to alienation. For this reason, courts generally consider evidence of behavior, but generally won't hear testimony regarding a syndrome.

4. Alienation is a family systems issue commonly associated with high-conflict divorce, which often involve a parent with a pattern of all-or-nothing, unmanaged emotions, extreme behaviors, or a preoccupation with blaming the other parent. The other parent may have good parenting skills and a previously secure relationship with the child; or may reinforce the conflict with anger and similar blaming behavior; or reinforce the rejection with passivity or withdrawal.
5. Alienation appears to be primarily driven by *emotional repetition in isolation*, as one or both parents lacks emotional boundaries and repeatedly passes intense emotions to the child regarding the other parent. When a child is isolated with such a parent, this emotional repetition may become absorbed by the child with neither the parent's or the child's conscious awareness. For this reason, non-contact orders should be avoided, using supervised contact if there are safety concerns. Parents who have been cut off by the child may send cards and letters to the child sharing life events and positive life lessons so the child knows they still care.
6. Treatment of alienation requires a family systems approach, with family counseling for both parents and the children, to teach and reinforce flexible thinking, managed emotions, moderate behavior, and checking oneself rather than blaming others. Child counseling alone or reunification counseling just between the rejected parent and child consistently fail because the family system remains unchanged.
7. Professionals often join the family system in alienation cases by contributing their own all-or-nothing thinking, unmanaged anger, and blaming behavior, which is then passed to the child by one or both parents because of their lack of emotional boundaries. Thus, alienation usually grows during litigation. Professionals need to manage themselves with significant emotional self-restraint and care in these cases.
8. Courts can reduce the risk of alienation from the start of a case by asking parents to name three positive qualities of the other parent; by saying three ways they will protect the child from their upset emotions during the case; and by admonishing parents to avoid an itemized list of potentially alienating behaviors.
9. In severe cases, consideration should be given by the Court to temporarily suspend contact with the favored parent when interventions with the goal of reconnecting a child and rejected parent have been undermined by the favored parent. Intensive weekend programs or camps for the child with the rejected parent have been found to show promise in reuniting them.
10. There are many cases of success in reunifying children with their rejected parent with a family systems approach as described here. Careful management of cases as early as possible can help.

Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq., is a lawyer, therapist, mediator, and the co-founder of the High Conflict Institute. He is the developer of the *New Ways for Families*® method of teaching conflict resolution skills to both parents and children in counseling, coaching, and online formats. He is the author of several books, including *Don't Alienate the Kids: Raising Resilient Children While Avoiding High Conflict Divorce, 2nd Ed.* (2020). His website is www.HighConflictInstitute.com. Alienation is a controversial issue and the above tips represent the views of the author.

