



I36 Causing Parental Alienation is a Form of Child Abuse

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After attending this presentation, the attendees will understand the concept of parental alienation, how parental alienation comes about, and why parental alienation should sometimes be considered an example of emotional or psychological child abuse.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by increasing the awareness of mental health and legal professionals regarding parental alienation; increasing the knowledge of mental health and legal professionals regarding emotional and psychological child abuse; and perhaps leading to the adoption of the proposal that causing parental alienation should be considered an example of child abuse.

Parental alienation is a serious mental condition that sometimes occurs in a child when his or her parents are engaged in a high-conflict divorce. In parental alienation, the child allies himself or herself strongly with one parent (the preferred parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) without legitimate justification. Parental alienation should be considered a mental disorder because the child's rejection of the alienated parent is driven by the false or illogical belief that the parent is evil, dangerous, or not worthy of love. In contrast, parental estrangement is normal behavior, not a mental disorder. Estrangement is the rejection of a parent for good cause, e.g., abuse or neglect.

In some instances, parental alienation is brought about by the indoctrination of the child by the preferred parent against the rejected parent. If the preferred parent has indoctrinated the child in a knowing, purposeful, persistent manner to hate and avoid the alienated parent, that behavior should be considered emotional or psychological abuse of the child. In practice, these cases are complex: Parent A might accuse Parent B of physically abusing the child, so it is normal for the child to dislike Parent B. However, Parent B might accuse Parent A of indoctrinating or brainwashing the child, so the child's dislike for Parent B is based on a false belief.

Although emotional/psychological abuse of a child is not currently included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, it is included in the *International Classification of Diseases*. Emotional/psychological abuse typically includes behaviors such as: rejecting the child; isolating the child from normal social experiences; terrorizing the child verbally and with threats of assault; berating the child; and overpressuring the child. Indoctrinating a child to dislike and reject a parent should be considered emotional/psychological abuse.

There is considerable international research to support this proposal. The work of psychologists, psychiatrists, and legal professionals from Canada, Germany, Italy, Spain, South Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States will be summarized. In some instances, state and national governments have taken totally opposite positions regarding parental alienation. For example, the governments of Brazil and of the state of Querétaro, Mexico, have made it illegal to induce parental alienation in a child. In some cases, the European Court of Human Rights has recognized the serious nature of parental alienation. In contrast, the legislature of California has considered doing exactly the opposite, that is, making it illegal for a court to consider parental alienation in a child custody proceeding. It is important that parental alienation be understood and recognized by mental health and legal professionals.

Parental Alienation, Child Maltreatment, Emotional/Psychological Child Abuse