

SCHOOL AND CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

CHILDREN AND TEENS WHOSE PARENTS ARE GOING THROUGH A SEPARATION OFTEN EXPERIENCE LOYALTY CONFLICTS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS. MOST SEPARATIONS RESULT IN A FUNCTIONING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CHILDREN AND THE PARENTS. HOWEVER, THERE IS SOMETIMES A HIGH RISK THAT CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS WILL ADOPT ONE PARENT'S NEGATIVE ATTITUDE TOWARDS THE OTHER, WHICH CAN HARM THEM WELL INTO ADULTHOOD.

Schools should be a sanctuary for children with problems at home, but there are many examples where schools unintentionally exacerbate the situation for these children. This document was created to help school staff support affected children and parents in Sweden. It also describes the rights and obligations of schools and parents regarding, for example, the exchange of information about the child.



SCHOOL'S RESPONSIBILITY

Together with parents, the school has a responsibility for the student's schooling, learning, and development. The school must also regularly keep parents informed about the student's progress and situation at school. This is usually done through information letters and at least one review meeting per semester.

Parents with joint custody have the same right to information. Parents who are not guardians also have the right to information about their child's schooling and development. However, they do not have the right to sensitive information or to be present at performance review meetings.

If there is a risk that information about a child may be misused, the information may be deemed as confidential and should not be disclosed without special assessment. This applies whether the parent is a guardian or not. For information and examples, see Chapter 7 in the book "Sekretess och anmälningsplikt i förskola och skola" (Confidentiality and Reporting Obligation in Preschool and School) by Staffan Olsson, Studentlitteratur 2019.

PARENTAL ALIENATION

Sometimes, one parent tries to remove the other parent from the child's life, leading to a complex relational trauma known as parental alienation. Parental alienation means that a child distances themselves from a parent they previously had a loving relationship with. Furthermore, it requires that the other parent and child show behaviors associated with alienation. Parental alienation can occur either consciously or unconsciously.



In cases of alienation, the child is manipulated by one parent to turn against the other parent. The manipulating parent speaks ill of, or spreads lies about the other parent, such as stating that he or she is dangerous or mentally unstable. It may also include withholding information about the child, their schooling and health. Other examples include:

- Claiming that the ex-partner does not listen to and understand the child's needs.
- Referring to the child's wishes and their right to choose a parent.
- Claiming that something dangerous must have happened because the child refuses to meet the other parent.
- Claiming the child is suffering because the other parent won't leave them alone.
- Stating that they cannot force the child against their will to interact with the other parent.
- Repeatedly sabotaging the child's time with the other parent, such as picking up the child early from school on the days they are due to spend time with that parent.

WHAT BECOMES HARMFUL is when the child aligns with the alienating parent and adopts that parent's behavior. The child then sees its parents in black and white, where they describe all characteristics of the alienating parent as positive and those of the other parent as negative. In scientific literature, this polarized phenomenon is called "splitting". The child idealizes the alienating parent.

The other parent, to whom the child previously had a healthy attachment, is portrayed as wholly bad, and the child may show contempt and a lack of empathy. Between these two extremes there can be different degrees of alienation. What helps an alienated child is to re-establish contact with the parent they previously had a normal relationship with.

Children subjected to abuse, such as physical violence, neglect, or addiction, do not display splitting.

The child's behavior is a way to cope with one parent alienating the other parent. When the child adopts values from the alienating parent, an unhealthy enmeshment is created. At the same time, the child needs to hide its shame and guilt towards the parent they have loved. The child cannot differentiate between its own feelings and those of the alienating parent. This results in a harmful parent-child relationship, and the child is deprived of the opportunity to develop an independent identity, a healthy self-esteem and independent thinking in relation to its parents.

Alienation leads to severe consequences with both physical and psychological disorders that can persist into adulthood, requiring interventions from BUP (Child and Adolescent Psychiatry in Sweden), and later adult psychiatry. Examples of this include anxiety, depression, difficulties with schoolwork, problems with social relationships, and a lack of trust in oneself and others. Children also feel guilt and shame and may react with worry, anger, or aggressive behavior.

Parental alienation is not a gender issue. Both fathers and mothers can alienate. The behavior is also found in same-sex couples.

WHAT SCHOOL USUALLY CAN DO

The support that independent adults can provide to affected children is important to mitigate the effects of alienation. Separated parents who have joint custody are expected to cooperate and exchange information about their children, which does not happen in these situations. It is important to understand that one parent may be sidelined and thus cannot help their child, which can be misinterpreted as a lack of commitment.

THE SCHOOL MUST RECOGNIZE BOTH PARENTS AS IMPORTANT IN THE CHILD'S LIFE. This means to:

- Ensure that both parents are informed about the child's development in school.
- Ensure that both parents are consulted on all issues that arise around the child.
- Ensure that both parents are welcomed and invited to all open school events. A child should never have to decide which parent should participate or not.
- Offer separate review talks for each parent.

Such an approach helps the child without the school having to choose sides between parents.

ADVICE TO SCHOOLS

When these issues are brought into the school's domain, we have the following observations and advice from therapists, affected parents, and others:

- It is not uncommon for affected children to have high absenteeism for vague reasons. In such cases it is crucial to contact the parents early on.
- There are also children who continue to perform well and hide what's going on unless the environment is sensitive and understands the family dynamics.
- An alienating parent may keep the child at home if the other parent intends to participate in an event or meeting at school.
- Children can create a big scene when being picked up. They often need time to adjust to the other parent.
- An alienated child may give different more or less relevant reasons for not wanting to see one parent. The child can also convey distancing and disgust.
- If the child conveys distancing or disgust for one parent, it suffices to reply: "Yes, and now you have told me." Don't question that the child feels that way as it can worsen the situation. A neutral approach is good.
- Never tell a child: "You are almost 12 years old and can choose which parent you want to live with." It is not a decision for a child to make.
- Almost all children who get the right help can regain a strong attachment to their rejected parent.
- Parental alienation exists worldwide and occurs regardless of religious or cultural affiliation.
- Everyone working with children should also have access to people knowledgeable about NPF (neuropsychiatric variations) and the autistic spectrum. A child with NPF may have more difficulty handling the situation and may need extra support.

SUGGESTED READING

Parental Alienation: A Contemporary Guide for Parents, Practitioners, and Policymakers Prof. Benjamin A. Hine

"Offers an in-depth examination of the repercussions on children, parents, extended family members, and new partners." (June 2023)

From VBU:s chat in December 2022:

"I work as a teacher and have done so for 20 years. I've seen parental alienation many times but didn't understand what it was about. The most common is that staff think it's bad that the parents don't agree on things affecting their child. It's often noticeable because they can't attend development talks together. When you get a new class, one of the parents may be very keen to call and tell something "important". The important thing is to explain how bad a parent their ex is. However, the most common thing is that the children don't want to meet or live with one of the guardians. Now that I know what lies behind this, it becomes very clear that it's parental alienation. Principals, counselors, special educators, teachers, school health services know nothing about this. When I look back, I have seen countless examples of this over the years. When I reported to the school's student health team, I received no response. Then I reported to social services, but all cases were closed."



The Association for Custody, Residence, and Access in Sweden (VBU) is a non-partisan and religiously independent non-profit member association that works for children's right to both parents. The association runs activities such as support, meetings (both live and on-line), education and a support phone.

Read more www.vardnad.se



facebook.com/vardnad.se