

When squabbling parents turn kids into weapons – and victims

Teaching a child to hate and reject the other parent is not just wrong, it can also harm the child in the long run.



Chong Siew Ann

For most parents, their children are the world to them, whose interests they would go to great lengths to protect. But the same passions can also bring out the worst in feuding partners in divorce cases when the children become the subject of a bitter tug of war. It becomes not just a case of "who loves you more" but "why you should love only me", delivered with a litany of pent-up grievances against a former spouse. There is a term for this: "parental alienation".

Ironically, the toxic effects of "parental alienation" most harm the child, whose interests both parents claim to be upholding in their fight for care and control. It is for this reason that the courts here have stepped in with measures to protect the child from the damaging effects of the tussle, which could persist in the long term. In short, when parents fight to get a child on their side – and against the other parent – it is the child who is the biggest victim.

I recall a patient who was in his early 20s when he sought help for his depression. His parents divorced when he was 12 years old, following years of escalating conflict. His mother, who retained primary custody, often openly disparaged his father, portraying him as untrustworthy and emotionally distant. She would sometimes share private details about their marriage and financial disputes.

Over time, this led to my patient feeling increasingly alienated from his father, despite their previously close relationship. He felt guilty spending time with his dad because it felt like a betrayal of his relationship with his mother. The internal conflict tormented him and made him depressed.

There is a substantial body of scientific evidence on the detrimental effects of divorce on children, including increased anxiety, depression, lower

academic performance, and difficulties in forming secure relationships.

One of the most powerful unconscious fears harboured by a child is being deserted and abandoned by one or both parents. To have this frightening fantasy made real by a divorce is distressing enough without being turned into pawns in a complicated power struggle between embittered parents.

In the annals of the Singapore Family Justice Court, there is the 2020 Ten versus Teo in the Court of Appeal where two parents had been embroiled in a protracted dispute, each seeking sole custody and care of their young daughters.

The mother alleged that the father had engaged in extensive "parental alienation" causing the children to reject her. The father, in turn, claimed that the children genuinely feared their mother, a claim he supported with reports from a private clinic.

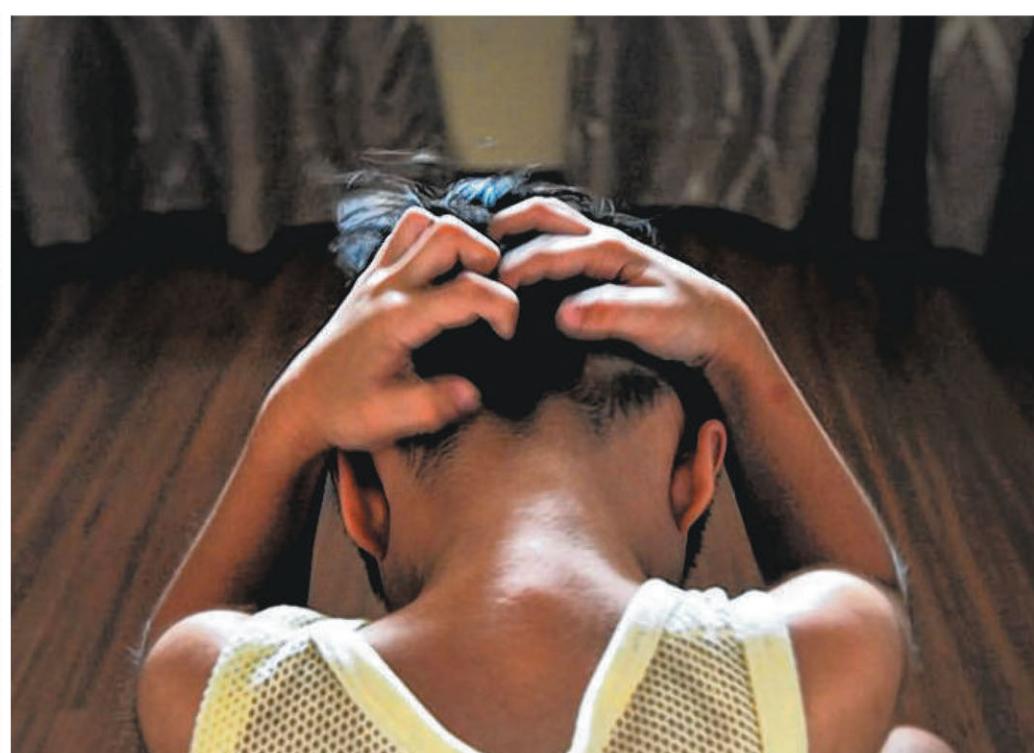
In this contest of competing accounts, the court deliberated and ruled that in the best interest of the two children joint custody should be maintained (https://www.elitigation.sg/gd/s/2020_SGHCF_20).

In this instance – as in other child cases – the present and future well-being and welfare of the child is the priority. The truth is that children, no matter how much they may appear indifferent or feign a lack of concern over their parents' split-up, cannot ever emerge from it completely unscathed.

PROTECTING THE CHILD

Against this backdrop of a deeper understanding of the consequences of divorce involving child custody, the Ministry of Social and Family Development has introduced a series of new legal measures since the beginning of 2025.

Under the revised regulations, the parent with custody of the child must now provide justification for any denial of court-ordered access – shifting the burden away from the non-custodial parent, who previously had to fight for access. The courts will have greater enforcement authority, including the power to compel cooperation



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when one parent obstructs the other's court-ordered access to their children, and could award make-up access, giving extra time to the parent who was unfairly denied.

Parents breaching these orders may face mandatory counselling or mediation to address emotional issues and work towards healthier co-parenting. To ensure compliance, courts may require performance bonds as financial guarantees. And persistent non-compliance without any good reason could result in fines or imprisonment for the obstructing parent.

PARENTS 'ALL GOOD' OR 'ALL BAD'

It was a Columbia University professor of clinical psychiatry, Richard A. Gardner, who first formulated the "parental alienation syndrome" in the 1980s. Gardner was often called upon as an expert witness in child custody cases – by the end of his career, he had testified in more than 400 of these cases – where he would almost always push his theory of parental alienation syndrome.

He argued that a vindictive parent – usually the mother (in

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his opinion) – who accused the spouse of abusing the child was probably lying and had deliberately and maliciously turned the child against the non-custodial parent.

In one of his books, Gardner stated that mothers in these situations might have a variety of motivations to programme their children against fathers, the most common one relating to the old saying, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned".

Over time, and particularly after his death by suicide, Gardner's original formulation fell out of favour, with the "syndrome" element largely discarded. However, the underlying concept remains relevant, now more commonly referred to as "parental

alienation".

Those who engage in adversarial child custody disputes often encounter cases where one parent deliberately seeks to undermine or sever the child's relationship with the other parent.

Several tactics are used to indoctrinate the children: they could be asked to choose between parents; the other parent could be demeaned or maligned; the child's contact with the other parent could be limited (gatekeeping); the child could be told that the other parent doesn't love them or the child could be asked to spy on the targeted parent.

The manipulated child may learn to reject the targeted parent and feel no remorse for

doing so. A thoroughly alienated child's views of both parents are often distorted and such children tend to see the favoured parent as "all good" and the rejected parent as "all bad". They may not understand what is truly in their best interest, but all they know is that they must remain aligned with and stay close to the favoured parent.

THOSE TO WHOM EVIL IS DONE

The recently implemented reforms seek to prioritise the child's best interests and ensure they feel loved and supported by both parents. But matters can become agonisingly complex when allegations of parental alienation arise.

Establishing the existence of parental alienation is fraught with difficulties. There is no universal or scientific definition, making it hard for a psychiatrist – who may be called upon in child custody cases as an expert witness – to diagnose if it is happening.

And there are other vexing questions to be answered.

How much does one know for sure that the child who is condemning a parent is not distorting the truth? What if their mother or father is using accusation of parental alienation to hide their own abuse or neglect? Would it be more harmful to the child to have ongoing contact with an abusive parent? And, at this time, there is limited evidence for the types of effective interventions to help a child who has been severely manipulated and undo all those harms.

Parental alienation, where children are cynically deployed as weapons, is neither innocuous nor inconsequential; it is pernicious and unhealthy. It is a form of abuse that can undermine a child's psychological development that could leave an enduring imprint. As adults, they may view others through a lens shaped by their early experiences with parents or primary caregivers. If these early significant adults were inconsistent, untrustworthy, unreliable, or deceitful, the individual may come to suspect, if not expect, that these characteristics lie hidden in all people. This often leads to persisting issues with self-esteem, relationships, and other aspects of mental health, including depression and substance abuse.

And there is that transgenerational effect. As the English poet W.H. Auden wrote, "I and the public know / What all schoolchildren learn, / Those to whom evil is done / Do evil in return." A child who was once manipulated and alienated may grow up to become an alienating parent and perpetuate that cycle.

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