

When parents act badly: Book explores 'parental alienation'

by Anne Ju Manning | January 5, 2016 12:05 PM

The children of divorcing or separating parents are often proverbially "caught in the middle." What's worse is when one parent tries to turn the child against the other parent, through bad-mouthing, lying or withholding contact.

Sound familiar? That behavior – deliberately trying to sabotage a child's relationship with the other parent – has a name: parental alienation. It's a topic familiar to most people, but in social, psychological and legal realms, it's understudied, and under-discussed.

[1] Harman



Colorado State University social scientists Jennifer Jill Harman and Zeynep Biringen want to bring attention to the prevalence, implications and dangers of parental alienation. They've written a book, "Parents Acting Badly: How institutions and societies promote the alienation of children from their loving families," [2] self-published Jan. 1. The book is available on Amazon [3].

"There is so much more to this than just two parents fighting," said Harman, associate professor of psychology in CSU's College of Natural Sciences. "It's a systemic, social problem."

[4] Biringen



Harman is a social psychologist who studies intimate relationships, and Biringen, a professor of human development and family studies in CSU's College of Health and Human Sciences, is a developmental psychologist who studies parent-child relationships, attachment theory and emotional availability [5]. The research, which they've termed the Colorado Parental Alienation Project, was a natural cross-section of their interests, as well as an important, understudied topic that affects families all over the world. They plan to continue publishing different aspects of their parental alienation research in coming months.

Parental alienation as a social problem

Most of the people who have researched parental alienation have done so from a clinical perspective, by studying children in therapy who are traumatized by what's happening. Harman and Biringen wanted to reframe the problem through the lens of social psychology theory. [6]

Alienation, Harman emphasizes, is different from estrangement. Estrangement is what happens when the parent is actually doing something bad or abusive, and the relationship with the child is justifiably strained or broken. Parental alienation, on the other hand, is when the child's emotional separation from the alienated parent is fueled by untruth or exaggeration from the other parent.

The book, written for a general audience, contains stories from interviews conducted with more than 80 parents who had responded to a survey. "We had a response rate that neither one of us has seen in any of our research projects," Biringen said.

They also conducted a representative poll in collaboration with Sadie Leder-Elder of High Point University to gather data on how familiar people are with the concept of parental alienation.



Stepparents, grandparents are affected, too

Throughout their research, conducted over the last two years, Harman and Biringen found that both mothers and fathers alienate, but the custodial parent (who is more likely to be the mother) has more opportunity to do so. They also found that it's not just parents – grandparents are victims too, as are stepparents.

The topic isn't without controversy. Parental alienation is not an accepted syndrome listed in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, because the alienation results from something being done to the child – it's not an inherent behavior in the child. But alienation, more generally, is a type of abuse, Harman points out.

She likens the lack of understanding around parental alienation to domestic violence – it used to be seen as a private problem between two people. But once domestic violence was proved to be a systemic issue that impacts society and causes devastation in families, "that's when people started to take it seriously," she said.

In the same way, Harman and Biringen are trying to reframe parental alienation as something that affects society as a whole, not just individuals, couples and families.

Reshaping attachment theory

Biringen also said that their findings may lead to a reshaping of the widely studied attachment theory of parenting, which is the social psychological theory in which interactions between parent and child determine the quality of the relationship. Because parental alienation is done to a child, as opposed to being a direct child-to-parent interaction, the definition of attachment may need to be expanded or reexamined.

Parental alienation happens in intact families, too, Biringen added. During the authors' research, many divorced or separated interview participants recalled instances of alienation long before the breakup, but either did not recognize it as such, or gave the benefit of the doubt, because they wanted the relationship to work out.

As a stepparent, Harman says she herself has suffered parental alienation, and it was this personal experience that inspired her to undertake the scientific study. The more she delved into it, the more she realized the book needed to be written.

Harman was selected for a March 5 CSU TEDx Talk on the subject of parental alienation.

Order the book here[7].

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Endnotes:

1. [Image]: <http://source.colostate.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/harman.jpg>
2. "Parents Acting Badly: How institutions and societies promote the alienation of children from their loving families,": <http://www.parentsactingbadly.com/>
3. Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/Parents-Acting-Badly-Institutions-Alienation/dp/1519675526/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1451679932&sr=8-1&keywords=parents+acting+badly
4. [Image]: <http://source.colostate.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/biringen.jpg>
5. emotional availability: <http://www.emotionalavailability.com/about/>
6. [Image]: <http://source.colostate.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/parentsBookCover.jpg>
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