

When Children Reject Their Parents

By Peter Favaro and Charles Ferzola

In extreme circumstances, a child may disavow a parent. Sometimes, such a rejection results from one parent's outrageous behavior toward the other parent. At other times, the rejection of a parent results from obvious or subtle manipulation by the other parent.

Parent Alienation

Children are alienated from a parent for a number of reasons. First, they fear losing the acceptance of the custodial parent or the parent they are closer to. Parents, especially custodial parents, influence children by example. If a parent is negative about the other parent, the child will imitate or adopt that attitude, sometimes with little or no pressure.

Add to this the child's realization that the strongest of all human bonds-marital bonds-have been severed in his or her family. Divorce sends a message to them that no matter how sacred, any relationship can be broken. If the child can be convinced-rightly or wrongly-that one parent is bad or evil, the child can "divorce" that parent. Another reason children reject their parents is because the parent gives them reason to. Although the parent's behavior may not be adequate to generate such hatred, the other parent's insistence makes it so.

Consequences to the Child

Aside from the serious consequences of separating a child from a caregiver, parental alienation disturbs a child's capacity to relate to people in general. Although walking away from relationships that damage or demean us is sometimes necessary, no relationship is perfect. We must all learn to resolve conflicts with others, especially those who love us. "Disowning" a parent, especially one who has done little wrong, leaves the child unable to develop the essential building blocks of human relationships: empathy, forgiveness, and trust.

Many psychologists initiate "therapeutic visitation," to reconcile a parent and child. During these sessions, discussion will center on things the parent may have done wrong with the goal of reestablishing open communication, trust, and respect between parent and child.

