



Letting Go-Saying Goodbye to Say Hello

From Affiliation to Alienation-a Context for Letting Go in Parental Alienation

Parental alienation is an extreme presentation of attachment behaviours between children and parents. It lies at the extreme end of a spectrum ranging from affiliation, which is a normal and healthy relationship between children and both parents, to alienation in which children form harsh and unreasonable views of one of their parents whom they reject without valid reason due to actions and behaviours of the other parent. It is also normal for children to form strong alignments with one of their parents without necessarily rejecting the other parent. Children may also estrange themselves from a parent who has been abusive to them or to their other parent whom they love.

Children maintain ambivalent relationships with both parents when they are affiliated with each of them or aligned with one of them. When the child is estranged from an abusive parent, they are no longer ambivalent for very valid reasons that warrant no further explanation here. However, an alienated child has lost their ambivalence to the loving parent whom they have rejected without due cause, and because of the actions of an alienating parent. Such children often take on the alienating parent's view of the rejected parent as though they had formed that view on their own. This is sometimes called the "independent thinker phenomena".

These affiliation styles are discussed in more detail elsewhere on my websites www.speakeasycounselling.com.au and www.dialogueingrowth.com.au. The essential difference between parental alienation and other forms of affiliation are that for parental alienation to occur:

- There must be a parent actively or passively interfering with the relationship between a child and a loving parent,
- A child has formed adverse, harsh, unreasonable, irrational views of the alienated parent, and,
- An alienating parent displays certain entrenched personality styles and behaviours that are organised around changing their children's relationship and the children's perception of the other loved parent without regard for their children's welfare.

To put it simply, when we assess that parental alienation is involved, we have a perpetrator who is the alienating parent, we have a primary victim who is a child and we have a secondary victim who is the alienated (or target) parent. Sometimes the target parent inadvertently contributes to the alienation of their children. However, this is peripheral to the actions and behaviours of the alienating parent, although important to deal with none the less, for the children and to deny advantage to the alienating parent.

Other forms of affiliation where a child is estranged from a parent in the context of abuse are not parental alienation. This is protective parenting and is not the subject of letting go.

There may be other complex manifestations of affiliation between children and parents in which letting go might be a consideration. However, letting go is especially important in the context of parental alienation because it is the final and sometimes the most effective tool available to an alienated parent to address the issues of an alienated child, that have become intractably harmful to the child and to the alienated parent.

In parental alienation, the child is the primary victim enmeshed in a conflict over which they have little or no control, used by one parent against the other. It is child abuse. The research and statistics consistently suggest a higher probability of adverse life outcomes in various domains for adult survivors of child abuse.

This is why letting go is important in the context of parental alienation. It is the alienated parent who is the ultimate target. By removing yourself from the alienating parent's crosshairs, you are doing the best you can to stop your children being abused, even though the sacrifice can be high.

What differentiates you as the alienated parent from the alienating parent is that your focus is on the children's best interest.

What is Letting Go?

Sometimes it is easier to define letting go in the negative. That is, defining what it is not, rather than what it is. Sometimes it is also easier to define it in relation to giving up. Here I will try to define it on its own terms.

Letting go means releasing yourself from the attachment you have with the actual fighting process of attempting to keep a relationship going with your children, once you realise that this process of fighting constantly for the children to have you in their lives becomes counter-productive. That is, you end up doing more harm to the children by attempting to stay in their lives than the alienating parent has done by removing you.

Letting go is also affirming that whilst you and in particular your children have suffered a terrible and outrageous loss, you and your self-esteem are not destroyed and not solely dependent upon a relationship between you and your children. The alienating parent often cannot own this. Letting go is your opportunity to differentiate yourself completely from the alienating parent rather than simply being the opposite.

Letting go is the point at which you stop being a powerless victim. It is the point when you realise that you have to draw a line under a relationship (or loss of a relationship) with your children that has become futile, that cannot develop any further and which the alienating parent is defining by their emotional manipulation.

Letting go is an opportunity for you to change the game. It is about saying goodbye to a relationship with your children that has come to an end with the possibility of saying hello to a new one at some point in the future when you and especially your children are in a different space.

Your alienated children may well be adults by that time, may be more independent and differentiated and may even have families of their own. Sometimes significant life events in your children's lives, and indeed your own, such as re-partnering, ending a long-term relationship, children, or loss of a loved one may trigger a re-evaluation of how you arrived at the place you are now at.

A new relationship cannot always be built on the wreckage of the old one. Metaphorically, it is sometimes better to demolish the house and build a new one rather than to attempt to renovate a house that is already condemned.

Letting go, leaves your children with the provocative question about how they could love you at the same time acknowledge and assume responsibility for the awful things they have done to you. They will have to engage this question for their own mental and emotional health at some point in their lives. This is your opportunity to have some power in the game and to empower your alienated children. You can do this by making a decision to let go at the same time reinforcing your children's responsibility for their choice.

Giving up is none of this. When you give up you abandon your alienated children to their fate, leaving you and them disempowered victims. Giving up affirms your powerlessness and your weakness in the face of the overwhelming power and influence of the alienating parent. It demonstrates to the children that they were not worth your love and demonstrates to yourself that you are not worth much either.

When you give up you shut the door on the possibility of a new and different relationship later in the children's lives. It is final. It is very difficult to explain to your children later in their lives why you abandoned them.

Why Let Go

Remember that your mission in letting go is to let go with your heart at peace and at the same time, leave your door ajar for your children. A key message for your children is that you want to be in their lives and you want them in your life but you do not need them to make you feel better about yourself or to otherwise serve your own emotional needs.

Always remember that your severely alienated children have to hold within themselves incompatible experiences of you the alienated parent. On one hand, they have memories of the loving relationship they once had, but on the other hand, they have an unreasonable cruel and irrational hatred and rejection of you. This may cause deep and unresolved internal conflicts that may eventually cause them to suffer as they inexplicably reproduce this same dynamic of unreasonable hatred and rejection in their own lives, and in their own relationships.

Your alienated children may be predisposed to this because they already have the experience of disposable, dispensable love in which they can simply delete (or as some alienated parents evocatively describe, amputate) a loving parent and a loving person from their lives. This is why it so important that you let go but do not give up because one day there is always the possibility that you will be the one safe haven they have in their lives. You may not be able to save them from their destiny. Indeed, if you are considering letting go, then it is likely that you have not been able to save them at all, despite your heroic efforts. However, you can help them assume responsibility for changes later in their lives.

Just as many of you as alienated parents have in your formative years and in your own family of origin antecedents to your experience of alienation so to do your alienated children.

Your alienated children need to get the message that you are okay, you are getting on with your life, and there is a place in your heart for them. It is vital that you hold your children to account without shaming your children or finding them guilty for their actions. Remember that they are the victims. This will make it easier for them as alienated adult children to reconcile their unresolved and disassociated feelings for you, without fearing a confrontation with you or face an impossible conflict in themselves once they realise they love you and that they have unreasonably, irrationally and cruelly rejected you.

There is a final consideration.

Letting go may be the last and best thing you can do for your alienated children. Letting go is not about making your alienated children comfortable nor validating their unreasonable and irrational behaviour toward you.

At some point, you and your alienated children have to stop being victims. Letting go is about affirming that both you and your alienated children are making a decision for which each of you must assume responsibility and accept its consequences. Until now, your children have not experienced any consequences for their behaviour toward you. Letting go lets them know that they are choosing this outcome and therefore they also have the choice to choose differently. This is the example that you are setting. There is plenty of research now that demonstrates that sometimes the one thing that helps alcohol and drug dependent people, people trapped in cults and others enduring self-destructive behaviours is a choice and responsibility to live differently, to reject the programming from others.

Parental alienation is sometimes called the 'cult of parenting'. This is because alienated children end up believing unquestionably the alienating parent and reject totally and unreasonably, any other perspective just as though they were in a cult and following without question a cult leader who totally defines their world. This is sometimes called the 'independent thinker' phenomena. There is enough research to show that the best outcomes for cult members occur when they finally take responsibility for their lives and leave the cult. No amount of shouting to them from the outside is as effective as taking personal responsibility.

In the final analysis, letting go is about you choosing to live your life, to be available for your children at a different phase and stage of their lives, it is about assuming responsibility for your decisions and demonstrating that the children need to assume responsibility for theirs.

One of the most powerful effects of letting go is that it disempowers the alienating parent because it removes you as the target of what you might have experienced as their obsessive attention. Above all, it stops the alienating parent from using the children as a weapon against you in which the weapon is ultimately consumed.

Think about it, what would an alienating parent do if you, an alienated parent, were no longer available as their target?

When to Let Go

There is no rulebook to tell you when to let go, when to stop, and when to postpone your efforts to a future time when there might be more hope to reunite with your children. However, here are some considerations to inform a decision that only you can make:

1. Your children are implacably alienated from you, hostile, harsh, unrelenting, and irrationally rejecting of you.
2. Your children are emotionally impacted, and it is traumatic for them for them to make the necessary choices to have you in their lives
3. You have exhausted all channels, legal, psychological and any other possibility to change the situation for them.
4. Your legal case has failed insofar as the family court have either made impossible orders or have left the children in the care of the alienating parent.
5. You may already have a new family, a new partner who will suffer disproportionately emotionally and financially if you keep fighting.
6. Your alienating ex-partner has demonstrated a history of mental and emotional disturbance in their extreme alienating behaviour that gives you cause to be concerned for your children's welfare if you are keep fighting.
7. You have tried every other possibility, researched extensively, engaged a parental alienation consultant or a counsellor specialising in parental alienation but to no avail.
8. You feel unsafe with your children, especially if they have made false allegations against you or have obtained intervention orders that make the possibility of contact with them very difficult if not impossible.

How to Let Go

Once again, there are no rulebooks to tell you the actual process of letting go and how or what you tell your children. Ideally you would have the opportunity for a one-on-one conversation with the children, perhaps with a counsellor or a mediator to make sure the children understand exactly what you are doing and why. Sometimes the family court can order this. An extreme alienating parent will do everything they can to prevent this happening because it directly threatens the relationship between them and the children whom they have alienated from you and upon whom they are dependent.

Consider ways you can get this message directly to the children without having to pass through the alienating parent. Alienating parents can sometimes intercept mail. Sometimes the alienating parent has access to the children's mail or forces the children to open their mail in their presence. Consequently, the children can feel forced to have the reaction that the alienating parent allows them.

Consider delivering your message in multiple ways and by multi media. For example, you may create a DVD or a digital story that conveys your message to the children in a very powerful visual and empathic way in a manner that words sometimes cannot. This could be your last chance, and only chance to present your message in the most powerful and, influencing manner possible.

Some issues to consider:

1. Include a summary review of your relationship with time they were born or from when you came part of their lives to now.
2. Whatever the means used to convey your letting go message, make sure you emphasise how pleasurable it has been for you to be their parents.
3. Include memories of the times both you and your children enjoyed yourselves together. This will remind them of the bond you once used to enjoy.
4. Acknowledge that they are rejecting you, at the same time; find a way of expressing your love for them. Do this in a manner that shows them you understand that this is a choice that they are making for reasons that may not be apparent now.

5. Explain to your children that whilst it is possible for you to keep fighting to see them that it may be better for everyone and in their best interests if for now, you were to cease fighting. Be careful how you word this. It is important to acknowledge the impact ongoing conflict has upon the children and to place yourself in the moral position of being the one to stop the fighting.
6. Make it clear to them that you have decided not to keep trying to make contact with them and why.
7. Make appropriate, genuine and meaningful expressions of your grief and outrage (if appropriate) that matters have turned out this way. In particular, assume responsibility for your part in creating these relationship conditions. You can do this by emphasising that you are grieving and outraged on their behalf that they have been caught up in this and you are exercising your choice to make sure that you are not part of this anymore for their sake.
8. Now may be the only time that have left in which you can address any lies, false allegations, or “borrowed” or “parroted” statements or beliefs that your alienated children hold about you. Remember that they may read or access your communication when they are older and more prepared to question what they have come to believe in isolation. However, you must back this up with hard evidence. You risk being very wrong if you presume to know what your alienated children believe unless you actually know!
9. Let them know that they may contact you in the future when they are ready.
10. Consider saying “goodbye” to this phase of your lives together that has clearly ended this way and say “hello” to the possibility of a new relationship with them at some time in the future. In this way, you can keep hope alive and maintain an expectation for you and the children of a different relationship in the future. Remember that you may have no way of knowing what is going on for the children right now and how they are processing their strong rejection of you.

11. Let them know that you will keep them updated about your contact details in the hope that one day they may reach out. In particular, it is important with teenagers and young adults to emphasise that the choice is now with them and that it is within their sphere of responsibility to choose a different future and a different relationship with you.
12. If possible, identify a third party with whom the children have a relationship. This could be a trusted relative or friend who can provide you with a discrete channel to communicate with the children. This could be useful to both maintain tabs on a situation over which you no longer have a connection and especially useful if you are certain that your communications to your children are intercepted or blocked.
13. Consider affirming your ongoing love for them and that perhaps you will send them a birthday card every year to remind them of their place in your heart.
14. Consider setting up a social networking page or a website, so that your children will know that they will be able to find you with a simple internet search for your name. Sometimes alienated children may allow you to “friend” them. This gives alienated children a comfortable and non-threatening way of maintaining a distant relationship with you until they are ready. However, whatever you do, do not push it!
15. Consider also setting up a social networking page or website under an alias. This is a useful and anonymous way of being able to follow their web and social networking presence, especially if they have gone so far as to block you. Do not friend them from these sites. They will know who you are and then have the power to block you if you 'friend' them from your alias site. You would be surprised how little regard young people have for privacy.
16. Sometimes it is appropriate to keep making low-key attempts to attend the key events in your children’s lives. Sporting events, school graduations can provide opportunities for you to attend (unless you are prohibited by court order). Sometimes you can even have the odd telephone call. Ambivalent children will be able to tolerate this and may respond very favourably to your subtle and unobtrusive presence, especially if you are able to find a way of congratulating or otherwise acknowledging them.

Severely alienated children who are implacably, unreasonably and cruelly rejecting you may find all this difficult and may even object. Frankly, it is not your role as a parent to be their friend. If they need to feel uncomfortable with their irrational, unreasonable and cruel decision in order to engineer a change in their attitude then so be it. It is especially important for teenagers and young adults to experience the consequences of their decisions.

Further Reading

In preparing these considerations, I am indebted to the work done by the following authors and recommend their publications to you.

1. Warshak. Dr. Richard .A. "Divorce Poison, How to Protect your Family, from Badmouthing and Brainwashing". Harper Publishing. New York USA 2010.
2. Baker. Dr. Amy.J.L, "Adult Children of Parental Alienation Syndrome". Norton Publishing. New York USA. 2007.
3. Kelly. Joan.B and Johnston. Janet. R, "The Alienated Child-A Reformulation of Parental Alienation Syndrome". Family Court Review Volume 39, Number 3, July 2001. Sage Publications