

Children's Three Basic Reactions to Conflicted Divorce

A family is a network of attachments. Family is both the original purpose of human love and the place where it develops and grows. Attachment is fundamental to the survival and development of our species, and thus is programmed deep into our nature. A major part of each human being's development depends on and derives from the journey of attachment within the family. Human attachment is always hierarchical and mediated. It flows from top to bottom, and depends on a clear structure. Especially in a family, the flow of attachment can become seriously disrupted in the absence of a clear hierarchical structure (authority).

A divorce represents a breakdown of one of the major attachments in the family—the attachment or love between the father and mother. It was this attachment that created the family. It was in the context of this attachment that each child formed an attachment with each parent, beginning with the mother. Each infant arrived in the world with strong and fundamental instincts to attach to and love its principal caretakers, usually its biological parents. When the attachment between the parents is broken, it sends an earthquake through the attachment life of every family member.

Children react in three basic ways to disturbance or stress in their attachment atmosphere. These reactions are instinctive and automatic, not the result of conscious decisions. Unfortunately, all three of these reactions, which are a response to parental conflict or stress, tend to amplify or escalate that conflict. It is crucial that parents become aware of the nature of these reactions, so that the child's reactions do not cause increased conflict, but rather increased cooperation. **Knowing and being able to interpret these reactions** are the principal ways that professionals—lawyers/mediators/counselors, parent coordinators, and mental health professionals—can help parents to avoid escalating conflict and to begin cooperatively to help their children. As children's reactions diminish, so does parental conflict.

A. Transfer Reactions:

The first basic reaction I call **transfer reactions**. These can occur at all ages, but are the most problematic with very young children, age five and under. In general, transfer reactions stem from the stress the child experiences in transferring his or her attachment from one parental world to the other. When this transfer is not lubricated by attachment, or at least friendliness and ease, between the parents, it is stressful and challenging for the child. Attachment theorists tell us that all attachment is hierarchical and mediated—attachment to a new person flows from and through the child's perception of attachment between the giving caretaker and the receiving caretaker. The more abrasive the atmosphere between the parents, the more stressful it is for the child. When these reactions are not intense, the

parents usually recognize them as such and find ways to help and encourage the child's transfer. However, there are two forms of **intense transfer reactions** that tend to escalate parental conflict.

Intense transfer reactions in very young children usually take the following form. The child goes off to father with little or no reluctance or reaction. The child has a fun and good time with father and transfers back to mother with little or no reaction. Then the child is all out of sorts and reacts intensely when back with mother: maybe becoming very clingy and weepy; maybe depressed and tired; maybe angry, uncooperative and tantrums; maybe unable to settle or sleep; etc. Mother is convinced this has to do with some sort of bad experience with, or poor parenting by, father. She believes access should be decreased. Father, who knows things were great during the visit, believes either that mother is lying in order to take the child from him, or that the child is reacting because of mother's unreasonable fears or exaggerated emotionality. Conflict escalates, as do the transfer reactions. And all we really have is a young child reacting in very common ways either to the stress of transferring in a toxic and abrasive atmosphere, or just to the challenge of adjusting to abrupt changes in a divided world, where normal attachment processes have been disrupted.

While this interpretation may seem hard to accept, it is amazing how quickly and easily these reactions diminish or disappear as the parents find ways (usually with the help of a professional) to show the young child that mother and father are okay with each other, can smile at each other, can directly hand off the child to each other, and can be interchangeable just like the good old days (pre-separation).

Intense transfer reactions in older children (age 8 – 12) are different but equally dramatic. The child digs in and refuses to transfer, often launching all sorts of complaints about, or fear of, the receiving parent. These intense transfer reactions by children for whom **“switching”** (to be discussed next) has become exceedingly stressful are often mistaken for **splitting/alienation reactions**.

It is important to remember that they are transfer reactions. The child must have reached at least early adolescence (11 – 13) to have a true splitting reaction. **These intense transfer reactions of older children differ from splitting** in this way—once the transfer is made, the child is able to “switch” and fit with the receiving parent. In an adolescent with a splitting/alienation reaction, the “switch” or fit does not occur, or only minimally so, even when the transfer is finally accomplished. These intense transfer reactions are often a precursor to splitting and should be seen as a serious warning alarm. The remedy, and the best insurance against proceeding to full-blown alienation, is to get the parents together, with a professional, interpret the children's reactions as a response to their long-term toxic atmosphere, and help them to proceed to a less polarized and

more cooperative atmosphere. There are then fairly simple ways of helping their children.

B. Switching:

As the parents compare notes in treatment sessions, they will discover the second basic reaction of children to conflicted divorce—“**switching.**” **Switching** is a process that occurs in all preadolescent children. It is an internal psychological process whereby the child fits in with the adult world caring for him/her at the time. This process derives from a very strong instinct that has evolved in human children. Human children are far more dependent on their parents, and for a far longer time, than the offspring of any other species on earth. The survival of our species requires preadolescent children to fit with and attach to their parental (and other caretaking) settings easily and automatically. If we offer children an attachment world that is tensely divided or conflicted, we will find them automatically fitting with each parent in turn. In so doing, they will change how they feel, what they want, how they react, and what they remember. They will not be aware of this process. If you talk to enough of them and help them to become aware of it, the word they most often use to describe it is “switching.” Thus, I have adopted this word as a technical term.

Unless the parents are communicating well about the child, they will not notice the switching until it begins to cause conflict. Then, the child’s differing desires and preferences, or complaints about the absent parent, or fluctuations in behavior will become evident.

The remedy or treatment for switching is twofold. First and foremost, the parents need to realize that it is occurring—that their child is changing dramatically as he or she goes back and forth in a divided world. They must come to realize that this is happening because their polarization is very stressful for their child. They must come to realize that their child’s reaction is fueling and increasing their conflict. They must stop arguing about which is the “real” child—the one mother sees or the one father sees. They must especially give up the notion that one is telling the truth and the other is lying—or worse yet, that the child is lying. It is not about lying: it is about switching, which is equally real in both worlds, automatic, outside the child’s control, and impossible for the child to stop.

“**Arguments about truth**” are the most potent cause both of switching and later of splitting/alienation reactions. The second most potent cause is incessant **blaming** between the parents. Parents often need professional help to recognize the switching and to remedy the processes that are causing it. Once this is done, there are a number of fairly simple strategies that parents can employ to show their child that his or her two worlds are not so divided and polarized, and that there is “fresh air” flowing between the two worlds. These strategies will reduce switching dramatically, and consequently, they will also reduce parental conflict.

Once the parents have made progress in conflict reduction and in their responses to the switching, they can move to helping the child directly. They can let the child know that they are talking to each other, that they have become aware how difficult their conflict is for the child, that they have noticed how the child changes without even knowing it, and that they are aware of the child's complaints about each parent. They can help the child become aware of the switching process, which is automatic and beyond the child's control, without ever making it an issue of "truth or lie." Most of all, the parents can let the child know they understand it all happens because the child loves both parents and finds it difficult that the parents do not love each other. They can acknowledge the problem is about love, not about truth or lies, good or bad, guilty or innocent. Hopefully, the child's reactions will then accomplish their real purpose—the development of a more peaceful, compassionate and loving family. Switching will then become less necessary and the child's personality development can proceed in a more healthy way.

Switching is both good news and bad news for the child. On the one hand, it is a capacity given by nature to help the child cope with a divided life in a conflicted attachment world. On the other hand, it tends to fuel and increase the parental conflict. But worst of all, it is a very poor preparation for adolescence.

C. Splitting or Parental Alienation:

We have seen how young children are designed by nature to bond with and attach to their parental world. They are designed to arrive in and attach to a world of peace and cooperation. We have seen how, because of this design, if we offer children a non-peaceful and non-cooperative world, they will develop transfer reactions, especially when very young. Gradually, their nature causes them to develop switching reactions. Generally, as they learn to switch and fit with each parent in turn, their transfer reactions subside. All of this happens because nature tells young children that the primary purpose of their lives, on which their survival depends, is to fit with and attach themselves to their parental world.

Alas, we know, but the child does not, that nature is going to change this message. With the arrival of adolescence, at age 11 or 12, nature begins giving children a new message, and begins deleting the old one. It is as if nature begins saying to the child, "The joke is on you, kid. It is not the purpose of your life to fit with your parents. The purpose of your life is to grow up, have your own ideas and opinions, form a stable personal identity, and become more independent. In order to help you with this, I am going to prune away a lot of your instinct to fit with your parents, and I am going to grow an ability to think for yourself and even to criticize your parents. Sorry, but it will appear that your parents are becoming increasingly stupid."

If in preparation for this change, a child has been relying for years on switching, he or she will experience four problems over and above the normal problems of

adolescence. First of all, as the ability to switch decreases, the child will experience increased difficulty in living a divided life. Second, the child will have a less developed sense of self and thus be more vulnerable to the pressures of adolescent life. Third, normal adolescent disillusionment with the adult world will be heightened as the adolescent notices the longstanding family problems and dysfunction. “Arguments over truth” will likely intensify. Finally, since adolescent problems often represent a reworking of the unfinished emotional business of early childhood, the child is more likely to develop dramatic problems and issues.

All of these factors result in increasing stress for children entering, or already in, adolescence, within the context of a divided life between conflicted and polarized parents. Switching begins to fail. Transfers are more and more stressful. Parental arguments over truth intensify. Often parental fears and personality problems also come into play. The experience of attachment within the family becomes stressed to the breaking point. Rather than break from all this stress, the adolescent’s mind protects itself in the only way it can. It **splits off** from one parent and world and attaches itself strongly to the other parent and world. This is not a conscious decision but an automatic self-protective reaction by the child’s mind. It happens in the context of total hierarchical breakdown in the family. Parental authority and structure are lost, and the child becomes exceedingly powerful.

The splitting reaction is often preceded by a particular intensification of the switching reaction as the child approaches adolescence (about age 9 – 11). This intensified switching reaction takes the form of the child complaining about the absent parent. As the child gets older and switching gets more difficult, the child’s mind often resorts to such complaints. This helps make the switch easier. Generating, emphasizing, or remembering negative things about the absent parent helps both to say goodbye to that parent, and to align with the present parent. The more there are negative attitudes between the parents, and the more divided the child’s life is, the more likely it is that this reaction will occur. If parental structure and cooperation are not equal to this challenge, the child’s complaints, and the child, will become more and more powerful. It is still a switching reaction, because the child expresses complaints to both parents, and because the child can be all right with each parent in turn. But if the parents are not talking and comparing notes, and the child’s two worlds are very isolated and polarized, this complaining reaction quickly intensifies parental conflict, especially arguments over truth. The stage is set for the splitting/alienation reaction as adolescence arrives.

When the **splitting/alienation reaction** begins to occur, the parental conflict escalates dramatically. The child perceives one parent as good, the other as bad. The child’s mind begins to generate fear of, avoidance of, resistance to, and complaints about one parent. The fears and complaints find a sympathetic ear in the favored parent, and the child attaches strongly to this parent. Each parent

intensely blames the other for what is occurring. Very quickly the splitting/alienation reaction hardens.

The child steadfastly refuses to see the split-off parent. Great fear, or anger, is generated. All positive memories vanish, as the child's mind feeds on and nurtures whatever negative memories or experiences it can. The poor split-off parent is outraged, blaming the favored parent for what is happening. The favored parent, meanwhile, is sympathetic to the child's complaints, fears, and distress. It seems obvious to this parent that the other has caused the child's reaction, and that the child needs support. Often the child resists access in spite of the favored parent's encouragement of access. Sometimes, but not in the majority of cases, and often not in the beginning, the favored parent does encourage and welcome the child's avoidance of the other parent.

D. Distinguishing Splitting/Alienation from Realistic Estrangement:

The reader will notice that this splitting process has been described as a non-volitional reaction of the child's mind, not as a choice and not as brainwashing. The splitting reaction is seen as a true psychological symptom (see above *The Nature of Psychological Symptoms*). As such, it should not be seen or treated as a choice (see below *The Dangers of Choice in Alienation Reactions*). While this is true in the vast majority of cases in my experience, resistance to or refusal of access is not always an alienation reaction. Sometimes, there is a **realistic estrangement** from one parent, due to a history of poor or conflicted attachment, real and serious parenting problems, or serious mental problems in the refused parent. The child will have mixed feelings and both positive and negative memories. There will be some regret or concern about not seeing the refused parent. There will be some hope or opening for a change. And there will be a realistic description of that parent: one that is not totally negative or demonizing, and one that is consistent with an objective assessment of the parent and the family history.

The **splitting/alienation reaction**, on the other hand, while it can take many forms, (fear, anger, abuse allegations, blame, hurt feelings), **always seems to include four strange characteristics that mark it as a symptomatic (non-conscious) reaction.**

1. First, the reaction requires adolescent development (age 11 or 12 and usually older), such that switching cannot and does not occur, and such that the refusal is not just a transfer reaction.
2. Second, the child seems remarkably free of any guilt, anguish or remorse about the reaction. It is as if some part of the child's mind knows it is not really a choice.
3. Third, the child cannot remember any good times with the alienated parent, and will deny any such if evidence is produced. It is as if some part of the child's mind knows that this is not about facts but about the need to clarify and simplify the world.

4. Finally, the child will complain that the alienated parent “did not care” or failed in some way. Yet when it is pointed out that the offence taken implies a wish for the parent to love or care, this is immediately denied, and then ignored. It is as if some part of the child’s mind knows that attachment is there, but it cannot and must not be acknowledged or experienced at this time.

Another noteworthy aspect of this splitting or alienation reaction is that it works. It is a symptomatic reaction of the child’s mind, the purpose of which is to reduce the stress in the child’s life. Almost always, the child appears happier and more relaxed. School work often improves, as do behavior and social life. All of these changes confirm for the favored parent the belief that the problems were being caused by the alienated parent, and that the child has wisely decided not to see that parent. What is not so obvious is the great harm occurring invisibly inside the child’s mind and heart.

As in most things psychological, if there are two possibilities, **realistic estrangement or parental alienation**, it is possible and often the case to have some of both going on. Unfortunately, it is part of the alienation reaction that both the child and the favored parent will present it as a realistic choice. Most often, however, this is not the case, even though there may be some problems in the parenting of the refused parent. In my view, unless it is clearly a case of realistic estrangement, the safest and most accurate approach is to see the refusal (alienation) as principally a psychological reaction and not as a choice. This approach can include treatment for the refused parent’s problems, and often there are some issues that need attention.

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