

In 2019, about 138.2k children in the UK were involved in applications made to Family Court¹ because parents could not agree on arrangements for their child after separating.

No official figures are kept but about 18.5k of those children will have been manipulated to reject (emotionally cutoff) a loving, 'good enough' parent and extended family members².

A survey of young people³ found 34% had been stopped from talking to a parent, 65% agreed things one parent said about the other didn't match their own feelings or knowledge of that parent. 52% felt expected to choose between parents. 24% admitted saying they didn't love one parent to make the other happy.

Despite this dynamic being recognised in psychology and UK law, a child's relationship with a 'good enough' parent can be severed with little investigation and support for families.

Children can experience lifelong mental health problems as a result of parental separation.

This short guide explains the impacts on children and rejected parents, why people manipulate a child to reject a parent, how it happens, how organisations can help and available solutions.

Impacts on the child

Parental separation is one of the most common Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)⁴. The more ACEs a child experiences the greater the likelihood of victimisation and perpetration of abuse, the poorer lifelong health and opportunity.

Putting a child in the middle of parental conflict (triangulation) has devastating lifelong impacts^{5 6 7 8 24}. A child may experience:

- Depression/sadness.
- Anxiety/agitation.
- Low self-esteem.
- What looks like ADHD/ASD/conduct disorder symptoms but no neurological basis for the symptoms exists⁹.
- Risk taking behaviours e.g. substance abuse, alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity etc.
- Eating disorders e.g. anorexia, obesity etc.
- Inability to maintain relationships.
- Personality disorders. This may be preceded by 'splitting' where they see one parent as all good and another as all bad. It is a strong indicator a child may have been manipulated to reject a parent.
- Guilt in adult years for rejecting a parent, treating them with hostility and for the time that was lost to them.
- Suppressed and repressed memories of time spent with the rejected parent.

- Suicidal ideation sometimes stating they will kill/harm themselves if they have to spend time with a parent.
- Sleeplessness.
- Inability to think critically.
- Lack of focus.
- Inability to describe their emotions.

Triangulated children may adapt their attachment strategy, developing increasingly coercive and controlling or compulsively compliant strategies to cope^{6 7}. Some may do well in school and seem older than their years. Others may display protest behaviours e.g. shouting, swearing, hitting, kicking and damaging property. They may display a lot of anger towards the rejected parent and extended family members, often with a lack of guilt. This may extend to other authority figures e.g. teachers or the police.

It may be claimed a child is afraid of the parent they have rejected but children who are really afraid of a parent do not behave in attacking, arrogant and haughty ways that risk that parent's anger^{7 8}.

The pattern of triangulation and emotional cutoff may be repeated across generations in a family, impacting on a child's future family relationships¹⁰.

Impacts on parents

Loving, 'good enough' mums and dads who are rejected by their children may experience:

- Depression.
- Suicidal thoughts. In 2018 there were 6.5k suicides in the UK¹¹. Parent's grief stricken by the loss of a child after family breakdown are one of the groups at risk of committing suicide¹².
- Financial hardship. Court cases can take years to resolve, some can spend £365k+¹³ with no guarantee they will see their child.
- Emotional cutoff. Years of trying to maintain contact with a child who is rejecting you, is hostile and visibly emotionally harmed, takes its toll. Dealing with professionals who don't understand this family dynamic leaves parents angry and powerless to protect their children¹⁴. Many give up.
- Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Constantly dealing with situations that arise causes chronic stress. The brain adapts to cope with the stress, eventually the brain starts to deteriorate and the body follows suit¹⁵.

For parent and child, the loss of a key attachment bond, results in mourning. Without appropriate support, mourning can become prolonged or chronic¹⁶.

Extended family members can be impacted in similar ways. It is hard to witness and support family members going through an emotional cutoff.

Why do people manipulate children in this way?

Often, it stems from their own childhood experience where there was insufficient comfort or protection.

Individuals who triangulate a child into parental conflict struggle to put their child's emotional and psychological development above their own needs. They may have:

- Insecure attachment strategies which are activated by perceived danger and attachment anxiety when parents separate^{6 8}.
- Abandonment issues, the pattern of emotional cutoff can run in families¹⁰.
- A need for revenge against their ex who they blame for the family breakdown.
- A personality disorder⁸.

Most often it is the person resident with the child that drives the rejection but in rarer cases it may be other family members, a step parent or the non-resident parent.

How does it happen?

Coercive and controlling strategies are employed that create conflict between parent and child. Conflict inevitably leads to the child rejecting the parent^{8, 17}. It may include:

- Making threats that they will never see the child again.
- Badmouthing or denigrating the parent, empowering the child to do likewise.
- Limiting contact and isolating the child to only people they approve of.
- Interfering with communication e.g. blocking calls or removing photos of the parent from the home.
- Withdrawal of love or approval from the child.
- Telling the child the parent doesn't love them or loves their new family more.
- Encouraging the child to see time with the parent as optional or arranging activities for the child at a time when they should be seeing the parent.
- Creating a false impression the parent is dangerous and not looking after them properly.
- Confiding in the child about adult issues to instil fear or anger in the child e.g. telling the child about court related matters or financial settlements.
- Forcing the child to reject the parent.
- Asking the child to spy on the parent or keep secrets from them, thus betraying the parent's trust.
- Referring to the parent by their first name and to a step parent as "mum" or "dad" to reduce the significance of the other parent's role in the child's life.
- Withholding medical, social or academic information from the parent, interfering with their parental responsibility.
- Asking professionals to limit a parent's role without appropriate court orders.
- Changing the child's name to remove their association with the parent.
- Undermining the parent's authority and cultivating the child's dependency on themselves.
- Causing financial hardship, forcing the parent to go to court or bartering the child's time for more money.
- Threatening to call the police to make false allegations.

Such strategies are emotionally harmful to a child and the parent they are used against. It is usually one parent driving the conflict and the other reacting to the strategies employed. Some strategies may be evident prior to parental separation.

Children **never** emotionally cutoff from a normal-range parent without being influenced⁸. The human attachment

system developed over millions of years to ensure children bonded with parents to protect them from predators. So it is rare that a child rejects a parent. A child is more likely to work harder to align with an abusive parent in order to stop the abuse, and reject the more sensitive/least fearful parent^{7 8}.

Things to Look For

Child resists spending time with a 'good enough' parent or rejects them⁸. They may also reject their entire side of the family.

Child displays narcissistic behaviours acting in grandiose, entitled, arrogant and haughty ways, uses splitting, and lacks empathy for parent's emotional pain and suffering. Or may show phobic anxiety with persistent unwarranted fear, severe anxiety and avoids the parent^{7 8}.

Child describes abuse that did not occur or exaggerates events to make them sound worse than they were^{7 8}. They may omit details of their own actions.

Timelines may show:

- Evidence of coercive and controlling strategies.
- Court orders have been ignored⁸ or disguised compliance is used e.g. advice is only followed whilst the case is active or parent agrees to an action but does not follow through.
- Allegations of abuse increase as aligned parent's power and control is reduced by the court.

Signs the aligned parent is triangulating the child into parental conflict or a role-reversal relationship. Seeking to place the child in front of professionals who are asked to listen to the child's voice with a view to empower the child to reject the parent or decide on contact. Suggesting the child shouldn't be "forced" when talking about opportunities to spend time with a 'good enough' parent⁸.

Child calls the parent by their first name instead of 'mum' or 'dad'. The aligned parent's new partner may replace them in this role⁸.

Requests may be made to exclude the parent from events in the child's life⁸ or restrict sharing of information about the child.

The child may describe an unforgivable past event to assert the parent "deserves" to be rejected. They may demand an apology but nothing the rejected parent does or says is good enough to earn the child's forgiveness⁸.

The rejected parent may be described as a "liar" or 'fake'. The child may suggest the parent is too controlling, neglectful or too angry over supposedly minor incidents⁸.

Excessive texting and phone calls between aligned parent and child while in the other parents care⁸.

Coercive and controlling individuals may make false or exaggerated allegations about a parent to get organisations or individuals to withdraw support from them. It may delay

court proceedings designed to arrange contact with the child and block the other parent from successfully performing their duty of parental responsibility.

A study into false allegations of physical and sexual abuse in contested family law cases¹⁸ found in a sample involving 107 children, 65% included no allegations at all. Where allegations of abuse had been made, 70% were found to be false on the best available evidence and a further 24% were unsubstantiated. 14% of children had been coached to make allegations.

“...we know that people game the system, and the classic example of that is one of the bits of LASPO is you do get legal aid if there’s an allegation of domestic violence...”

Former President of the Family Division Sir James Munby¹⁹

Parents who become emotionally cutoff from their children tend to be passive⁷. They may have ignored or put up with coercive and controlling behaviour prior to the family breakdown. When coercive and controlling strategies are employed to break their child’s attachment bond with them, they may not take action quickly enough.

Over time, a rejected parent may react with increasing anger as they are denied a relationship with their child, falsely accused of not loving their child or being portrayed as a bad parent. They may react angrily to the child’s hostile behaviours.

Showing anger in front of a child gives “evidence” of why the child is right to reject them. This is usually quickly seized on by family court assessors that may not understand this dynamic, the anger that comes from fear of losing a child or the unjust behaviours such parents are being subjected to.

A parent being rejected may not pick up on the awful situation the child has been placed in or that the child is actually feeling completely unloved. Based on the child’s outward behaviours such parents may believe the child really hates them. This is not true, the child loves them. The child is hiding their feelings of love and doing what they must to cope with the situation they are in.

To protect children, it is important to assess each family on a case by case basis to ascertain what allegations are true, how severe they are and what support the family requires.

How can organisations help?

Parents have primary responsibility but the community has a part to play to help separating parents reduce conflict.

Early intervention can lead to better outcomes for children and significantly reduce the amount of long-term support required by the family members from state and private services. Organisations can help by:

- Understanding that having a relationship with both parents, where it is safe, is important for a child’s long-term wellbeing and prospects. Children need as much love from both parents as possible.
- Staying neutral. Both parents have a right to be informed about their child’s progress and be involved in making important decisions about their welfare. Only a court order can limit or remove parental responsibility.

- Not assuming a child’s poor behaviour is due to neurological reasons. Attachment assessments are required to understand what the child is adapting to^{6,9,22}.
- Not assuming a child who is doing well at school is doing ok emotionally. Sometimes, the only way they can cope with feelings of loss is through compulsive performance^{6,22}.
- Publishing a Separated Parent Policy which is communicated to parents.
- Improving communication systems to include all those with parental responsibility in decisions and issues relating to their child.
- Ensuring the child’s right to their identity is maintained. Nobody should be changing a child’s name without the permission of everyone with parental responsibility or a court order allowing it.
- Educating teenagers to recognise the signs of toxic relationships and talking about the impacts of parental separation on children.
- Training staff who work with children going through family separation about this dynamic.
- Recommending the right interventions. Professionals may make things worse by aligning with one parent and making recommendations that entrench a child’s position, furthering the abuse of the rejected parent e.g. pressuring the parent to apologise to the child for something they have not done or suggesting waiting for the child to be ready for contact.
- Reporting concerns that a child is experiencing emotional harm as a result of parental separation to social services, as you would for any other form of suspected abuse. It is a child protection matter.
- Canvassing your MP to ask for change to better recognise this problem across all government services in order to develop solutions for the UK.
- Keep and use statistics about services users and outcomes to help to inform your organisation’s policies and improve services for children.

Family relationships are protected by human rights:

- Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights gives people the "right to enjoy family relationships without interference from government. This includes the right to live with your family and, where this is not possible, the right to regular contact...'
- Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child advises 'States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests.'

Where the court is involved, robust case management is required. A judge can intervene early to reduce emotional harm to the child by requesting assessment of the family by a suitably experienced expert who can develop a treatment plan. Judges can enforce orders where arrangements have been broken.

In severe cases it is child psychological abuse and a form of domestic abuse by proxy, using the child as a weapon to hurt an ex. Judges can use child protection measures to temporarily or permanently transfer residence of the child to the rejected parent whilst allowing therapeutic support to ensure the child maintains a relationships with both parents.

Solutions for severe cases

Despite childhood psychological abuse being as harmful as sexual or physical abuse²⁰, action is rarely taken to protect children from psychological abuse.

Great store is placed on a child's wishes and feelings. However, in cases where a child has been manipulated to reject a parent their stated wishes and feelings are highly unreliable, it is not their authentic voice²¹.

If early intervention doesn't take place and an emotional cutoff occurs, it is unlikely to be resolved without the help of the court and specialists. There are solutions that can help restore the relationship between an emotionally cutoff child and a rejected parent at any age but they are expensive.

The UK leads the way in some areas of human rights but it is way behind on tackling this form of child abuse and domestic abuse by proxy. At present there is insufficient investment in services that promote co-parenting or restore attachment bonds after parental separation.

The longer children remain emotionally cutoff from a 'good enough' parent, the more psychological damage will be done, the greater the support required in later years by state and private services. It is a false economy not to intervene early.

It is vital for separated families at risk of a child having an emotional cutoff to get appropriate assessment and support, even if contact between parent and child is currently in place.

Assessment by a registered psychologist skilled in the attachment system, family systems, personality disorders and complex trauma⁹, or an assessment using the Dynamic-Maturational Model of Attachment and Adaptation²² is recommended for families where a child is at risk of emotional cutoff. Parents need a treatment plan and support to provide the best lifelong outcomes for their child. Without understanding this dynamic and the potential impacts on children, requests for such intervention may be denied, even when a family is willing to fund the support required themselves.

No child should be left in a state of rejecting a 'good enough' parent or using splitting as a coping mechanism. Giving the child time is the worst thing that can be done in this scenario. It is a child protection issue where the authentic voices of children are being lost²³ and the impact of such loss may become apparent sooner or later²⁴.

Information sources used for this leaflet

¹ Family Court Statistics Quarterly <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/family-court-statistics-quarterly>. Only cover England and Wales. Freedom of Information requests indicate about 3 700 children in Northern Ireland and 3 500 in Scotland are subjects of family court applications each year.

² Prevalence of parental alienation drawn from a representative poll [2016] by Jennifer J. Harman, Sadie Leder-Elder and Zeynep Biringen

³ Young People and Family Separation in Scotland 2020 Survey undertaken by Erin Campbell MYSP Scottish Government Youth Parliament

⁴ Responding to Adverse Childhood Experiences [2019] by Public Health Wales

⁵ An Objective Measure of Splitting in Parental Alienation: The Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire By William Bernet, M.D.; Nilgun Gregory Ph.D.; Kathleen M. Reay, Ph.D.; and Ronald P. Rohner, Ph.D.

⁶ Raising Parents Attachment, representation and treatment [2015] by Dr Patricia Crittenden

⁷ Parental alienation or justifiable estrangement? Assessing a child's resistance to a parent in the UK [2017] by Dr Sue Whitcombe

⁸ Strategic Family Systems Intervention for AB-PA: Contingent Visitation Schedule [2017] by C.A. Childress, PSY. D.

⁹ Attachment & Family Therapy [2014] by Patricia Crittenden, Rudi Dallos, Andrea Landini & Kasia Kozłowska

¹⁰ Family Healing: Strategies for Hope and Understanding [1998] by Salvador Minuchin and Michael P. Nichols

¹¹ Suicides in the UK: 2018 Registrations <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/suicidesintheunitedkingdom/2018registrations>

¹² Men and Suicide Why it's a Social Issue [2012] by the Samaritans

¹³ C v S [2022] EWHC 800 (Fam) <https://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWHC/Fam/2022/800.html>

¹⁴ Powerless to parent; Powerless to protect: The experiences of alienated parents in the UK [2017] by Dr Sue Whitcombe

¹⁵ The Body Keeps Score: Mind, Brain and Body in Transformation of Trauma [2015] by Bessel van der Kolk

¹⁶ Attachment and Loss: Volume 3 Loss, Sadness and Depression [1998] by John Bowlby

¹⁷ Beyond the High Road: Responding to 17 Parental Alienation Strategies without Compromising Your Morals or Harming Your Child [2008] by Amy J.L. Baker Ph.D and Paul R. Fine LCSW

¹⁸ False allegations of child abuse in contested family law cases: The implications for psychological practice [2014] by Tommy MacKay, University of Strathclyde

¹⁹ Sir James Munby addresses the Families Need Fathers 2017 Annual Conference <https://fnf.org.uk/news-events-2/public-affairs/meetings-with-sir-james-munby/2-uncategorised/429-munby-transcript-2017>

²⁰ Child psychological abuse as harmful as sexual or physical abuse [2014] by American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2014/10/psychological-abuse>

²¹ Intractable contact disputes - the extreme unreliability of children's ascertainable wishes and feelings [2011] by Dr Kirk Weir

²² Assessing attachment for family court decision making [2013] by Patricia McKinsey Crittenden, Steve Farnfield, Andrea Landini and Ben Grey

²³ Top tips for parents who are separated by the Family Justice Young People's Board <https://www.cafcass.gov.uk/family-justice-young-peoples-board/>

²⁴ New approaches to divorce with children: A problem of public health by Vittorio C. Vezzetti

For access to these sources and further information visit www.righttolove.uk.