

In 2022, about 144k children in the UK were involved in applications made to Family Court because parents couldn't agree on child arrangements or parental responsibility¹.

No official figures are kept but tens of thousands of UK children a year are manipulated to reject (emotionally cutoff) a loving, "good enough" parent and extended family.

A survey of young people 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 happy².

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 difficulty as a result of parental separation.

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

Impacts on the child

Parental separation is a common Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE)³. The more ACEs a child experiences, the greater the likelihood of victimisation and perpetration of abuse, the poorer their lifelong health and opportunities.

Putting a child in the middle of parental conflict (triangulation) can have the following lifelong impacts^{4 5 6 7 8}:

- Depression/sadness.
- Anxiety/agitation.
- Low self-esteem.
- ADHD/ASD/conduct disorder like symptoms but no neurological basis for the symptoms exists.
- 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. 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 has been manipulated to reject a parent.
- Guilt for rejecting a parent, treating them with hostility and the time they have lost.
- Suppressed/repressed memories of times with the rejected parent.
- Suicidal ideation sometimes stating they will kill/harm themselves.
- Sleeplessness.
- Inability to think critically.
- Lack of focus.
- Inability to describe their emotions.

A triangulated child may adapt their attachment strategy, developing increasingly coercive and controlling or compulsively compliant strategies to cope^{4 5 22}. They will be emotionally dysregulated. Some may do well in school and seem older than their years. Others may show protest behaviour 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 such as 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^{5 6}.

The pattern of triangulation and emotional cutoff may be repeated across generations in a family, impacting on a child's future family relationships⁹.

Impacts on parents

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

- **Depression.**
- **Suicidal thoughts.** In 2022 5.6k people committed suicide in the UK¹⁰. Those grief stricken by the loss of a child after family breakdown are at risk of suicide¹¹.
- **Financial hardship.** Court cases take years to resolve, some can spend £365k+ without a successful outcome¹².
- **Emotional cutoff.** Years 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 children¹³. Many give up.
- **Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.** Constantly dealing with the dynamic causes chronic stress. The brain adapts to cope, eventually the brain starts to deteriorate and the body follows suit¹⁴.

For parent and child, the loss of a key attachment bond results in mourning. Without appropriate support, mourning can become prolonged or chronic¹⁵. Extended family members may be similarly impacted as it is hard to witness.

Parents who become emotionally cutoff from their children tend to be passive⁵. They may have put up with coercive and controlling behaviour prior to the family breakdown. They may not take action quickly enough as attempts are made to break their child's attachment bond with them.

Over time, a parent targeted for rejection may react with increasing anger as they're denied a relationship with their child, falsely accused of not loving their child, being portrayed as a bad parent and dealing with the child's hostile behaviours. Showing anger in front of a child gives "evidence" of why the child is "right" to reject them. Family Court assessors may misunderstand the anger that comes from fear of losing a child or being subjected to hostile, coercive and controlling behaviour as their calls for help are ignored.

A parent 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, the parent may believe their child hates them. This isn't true, the child loves them but they hide their feelings of love to cope with the situation they are in and to avoid feelings of guilt, grief and fear.

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. If you're in Family Court it's likely one parent has:

- An insecure attachment strategy which is activated by perceived danger and attachment anxiety arising from separation with an ex^{4 6}. 56% of adults in the UK have an insecure attachment style. The more severe the attachment style, the less likely a parent can recognise their child's needs and the more likely they are to be in Family Court¹⁶.
- Abandonment issues. The pattern of emotional cutoff tends to run in families⁹.
- A need for revenge against their ex who they blame for the family breakdown⁶.
- A personality disorder⁶. 1 in 20 adults in the UK have a personality disorder¹⁷.

Often, it's the resident parent using psychological control to drive the child's rejection but in some cases it may be other family members or the non-resident parent.

Coercive and Controlling Strategies

A parent with an insecure attachment style/personality disorder is likely to employ strategies that create conflict between parent/child which inevitably leads to an emotional cutoff^{6 18}. It may include:

- Making threats that they will never see the child again. It must be taken seriously, parent and child may be at risk.
- Limiting contact and isolating the child to only people they approve of.
- Creating a false impression the parent is dangerous and not looking after them properly.
- 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.
- Confiding in the child about adult issues to instil fear or anger in the child e.g. telling the child about court/financial settlements.
- Forcing the child to reject the parent.
- Withholding medical, social or academic information from the parent, interfering with their parental responsibility.
- Changing the child's name to remove their association with the parent.
- 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 in the child's life.
- Asking professionals to limit a parent's role without appropriate court orders.

- 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.
- Badmouthing or denigrating the parent, empowering the child to do likewise.
- Asking the child to spy on the parent or keep secrets from them, thus betraying the parent's trust.

Such strategies are emotionally harmful to a child/parent. Usually, one parent drives the conflict and the other reacts to strategies employed. Strategies may be evident prior to parental separation.

Children **never** emotionally cutoff from a "good-enough" parent without being influenced⁶. The human attachment system developed over millions of years to ensure children bonded with parents to protect them from predators. It's rare that a child rejects a parent. A child is more likely to work harder to align with an abusive parent to stop the abuse and more likely to reject the more sensitive/least fearful parent^{5 6}. In public law cases, where a child is removed from an abusive parent, the child usually wants to maintain a relationship with the abusive parent yet in private law cases, children are rejecting "good enough" parents.

Things to look for

Dr Craig Childress, a registered Clinical Psychologist in the US, uses an assessment protocol to diagnose child psychological abuse in Family Court cases⁶.

It uses 3 diagnostic criteria:

1. **Attachment System Suppression.** Child resists spending time with a "good enough" parent.
2. **Personality Disorder Traits or Phobic Anxiety.** Child displays narcissistic behaviours of grandiosity, entitlement, haughty arrogance, splitting and lack of empathy. Or may show phobic anxiety with persistent unwarranted fear.
3. **Encapsulated Persecutory Delusions.** Child maintains a fixed and false belief of their "victimisation" despite evidence to contrary. False allegations of abuse are made. Events may be exaggerated to sound worse than they were.

Cases may include a number of Associated Clinical Signs (ACS) which aid as red flags for Family Court professionals:

ACS 1. Use of the word "forced" about spending love and bonding time with a "good enough" parent.

ACS 2. Empowering the child to reject. The aligned parent asks professionals to listen to the "child's voice". The child is empowered to reject the parent or decide on contact. This triangulation of the child into parental conflict creates a parent/child role-reversal relationship.

ACS 3. Exclusion demand is made by the child to block the parent from events and restrict information about them being shared*.

ACS 4. Parental replacement. Child refers to the parent by their first name or to the aligned parent's new partner as "mum" or "dad"*

ACS 5. Unforgivable event when no authentic abuse occurred.

ACS 6. 'Liar' or 'Fake' is used by the child to describe the parent.

ACS 7. Themes for rejection e.g. alleges parent too angry/controlling, doesn't feed the child, wasn't involved enough prior to separation, has a new partner etc.

ACS 8. Unwarranted use of the word "abuse".

ACS 9. Excessive texting and email. The insecure parent needs contact with the child to regulate their anxiety. This also serves to interfere with the other parent's love and bonding time.

ACS 10. Role reversal use of the child. Uses psychological control to get the child in a victim mind-set. The child parrots the aligned parent's views to assessors. It's a sign of enmeshment and a parent/child boundary violation. It is extremely damaging for children.

ACS 11. Deserves to be rejected. When a child indicates a parent "deserves" rejection, it's a sign of lack of empathy.

ACS 12. Disregard of court authority. The aligned parent or child breaks court orders.

* Dr Childress suggests when these ACS are present, the 3 diagnostic criteria will always be met.

Timelines and court documents will likely show evidence of:

- ACS. Several may show in impacted families¹⁹.
- Coercive and controlling strategies being employed.
- Disguised compliance where professional advice is only followed whilst the case is active or parent agrees to an action but does not follow through.
- Allegations of abuse increasing as the aligned parent's power and control is reduced by the court.
- The child rejecting all extended family on the rejected parent's side.

Coercive and controlling parents may make false or exaggerated allegations to get organisations or individuals to withdraw support from the other parent. It may delay court proceedings designed to arrange contact with the child and block the other parent from successfully performing their parental responsibility. A study on false allegations of abuse in family law cases found 65% included no allegations at all. Where allegations were made, 70% were false on best available evidence, 24% unsubstantiated and 14% included a child that had been coached to make allegations²⁰.

"...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 Munby²¹

Tips for organisations

Early intervention leads to better outcomes for children and significantly reduces the long-term support required. Help by:

- Recognising having a relationship with both parents, where safe, is important for a child's long-term wellbeing and prospects.
- Stay 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 parental responsibility.
- Don't assume a child's poor behaviour is due to neurological reasons. Children adapt their attachment style based on the situation they are in^{4 7 22}.
- Don't assume 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^{4 7 22}.
- Publish a Separated Parent Policy to aid parents and staff. Follow government guidelines relating to parental responsibility.
- Improve communication systems to include all those with parental responsibility.

- Ensure a child's right to their identity is maintained. Nobody can change their name without the permission of everyone with parental responsibility or a court order.
- Educate teens on the signs of toxic relationships. Talk about the impacts of parental separation on children.
- Don't assume if contact between parent/child is in place, that child psychological abuse isn't occurring. Coercive and controlling behaviour is often employed both prior to parental separation and a child's emotional cutoff. Assessment and intervention is still required.
- In Family Court, robust case management is needed. A judge can:
 - Request assessment of the family by a suitably experienced and skilled expert who can diagnose the problem and develop a treatment plan.
 - Enforce orders where arrangements have been broken. Increasing contact can help reduce the risk of emotional cutoff.
 - In severe cases, use child protection measures to temporarily or permanently transfer residence of the child to the rejected parent, whilst allowing therapeutic support to cultivate a child's relationship with both parents.
 - Avoid orders for supervised or indirect contact to maintain a relationship between a "good enough" parent and child. It adds unnecessary emotional and financial burden. The child needs direct contact to experience the parent as a caregiver. There is no evidence indirect contact resolves attachment malfunction.
- Recommend the right interventions. Don't make things worse e.g. asking a parent to apologise to the child for something they haven't done, reducing contact or waiting for the child to be ready. This furthers abuse of the target parent, increases likelihood of emotional cutoff and impacts on the success of appropriate interventions.
- Report concerns a child is experiencing emotional harm as a result of parental separation to social services. It is a child protection matter.
- Keep and use statistics about services users and outcomes. This helps to inform policies and improve services for children.
- Share this leaflet with staff that work with children.
- Canvass your MP for change across government services in order to develop solutions for the UK.
- Protect family relationships in line with 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.'

Solutions for severe cases

The solution to this problem lies in mental health. Parents should aim to avoid Family Court because it's the wrong system for attachment malfunction and likely to make things worse.

Alternatives include Family Systems Therapy, coaching or courses in co-parenting, and mediation. Beware where a

parent refuses to participate, participates but sabotages or uses it as mechanism to delay contact. There is a short window of time to avoid a full emotional cutoff and the parent being targeted for rejection must choose between going to court to ask for specialist support and losing their relationship with their child. Both carry risk of emotional harm to the child and parent.

It is not the child's fault they are being manipulated to reject a parent. Frightened, emotionally dysregulated children need regulated adults to help them learn to soothe themselves. Parents should consider building up empathetic parenting skills to deal with a child's hostile behaviours.

Despite childhood psychological abuse being as harmful as sexual or physical abuse²³, action is rarely taken to protect a child from psychological abuse. Emphasis is placed on a child's wishes and feelings. Where a child has been manipulated to reject a parent it's not their authentic voice²⁴⁶.

Currently, there is little investment in services tackling child psychological abuse and intimate partner violence that uses a child as a weapon. Few services are available to promote co-parenting or successfully restore at risk attachment bonds after parental separation.

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

Dr Childress maintains, only severely abusive, narcissistic parenting can produce an emotional cutoff. "Good enough" and even somewhat problematic parenting is not enough to cause a young child to reject a parent. To protect children it's necessary to assess each family on a case by case basis to ascertain: where parents sit on the parenting practices scale, the family dynamics which are being driven by personality/insecure attachment styles, what allegations are true, how severe they are and what treatment the family requires to improve outcomes for the child. Assessment by a registered psychologist skilled in the attachment system, family systems, personality disorders and complex trauma is required⁶. 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 by family court professionals. Recommending intervention without proper diagnosis leads to selection of the wrong interventions which will cause iatrogenic harm.

When decisions are made to separate a child from their parent, it causes the child harm²⁵. 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 lost²⁶ and the impact of such loss will become apparent sooner or later⁴⁵⁶⁷⁸⁹¹⁴¹⁵²²²³²⁵.

References

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¹² [C v S \[2022\] EWHC 800 \(Fam\)](#)

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¹⁸ [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

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²¹ [Sir James Munby addresses the Families Need Fathers 2017 Annual Conference](#)

²² [Assessing attachment for family court decision making \[2013\]](#) by Crittenden et al.

²³ [Child psychological abuse as harmful as sexual or physical abuse \[2014\]](#) by American Psychological Association.

²⁴ [Intractable contact disputes - the extreme unreliability of children's ascertainable wishes and feelings \[2011\]](#) by Dr Kirk Weir

²⁵ [The Effect of Separation from Parents on Children \[2023\]](#) by P. M. Crittenden and S. Spieker

²⁶ [Top tips for parents who are separated](#) by the Family Justice Young People's Board

For access to these sources and other information visit <http://www.righttolove.uk>.