



Cognitive Distortions in Parent-Child Alignment and Rejection:

Understanding the Impact on Children

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Children exposed to disrupted parent-child relationships, such as those shaped by trauma or coercion, are often influenced by unhelpful and inaccurate ways of thinking. These patterns can cause confusion and emotional distress, placing children at greater risk for psychological difficulties if not addressed. As children absorb and internalise these negative thought patterns, their emotional health and ability to form healthy relationships may be affected.

This list details common cognitive distortions seen in children influenced by a parent's cognitive distortions. Identifying these patterns is essential for understanding their effects and providing effective interventions to support the child's mental health.

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TYPE OF COGNITIVE DISTORTION	PROBLEMATIC PARENT'S COGNITIVE DISTORTIONS	CHILD'S INTERNALISED DISTORTIONS
Polarised Thinking (Black-and-white thinking, all-or-nothing)	This parent engages in black-and-white thinking, depicting themselves as entirely good and the other parent as entirely bad.	The child adopts a black-and-white view, seeing one parent as entirely good and the other as entirely bad, with no middle ground.
Negative Conjecture (Being cynical, turning positives into negatives)	This parent presumes the worst about the targeted parent's intentions, interpreting even neutral actions as negative.	The child automatically assumes the worst about the targeted parent's intentions or actions, interpreting even neutral or positive behaviours as negative without real evidence.
Jumping to Conclusions (Mindreading, making assumptions and predictions)	This parent claims to know the targeted parent's thoughts or future actions without evidence.	The child presumes they know what the targeted parent is thinking, feeling, or planning, confidently making predictions and assumptions without factual basis.
Selective Filtering (Focusing on the negative, disregarding positives, including exaggerated or fabricated negatives)	This parent focuses solely on negative aspects of the targeted parent, even if these negative aspects are exaggerated or fabricated, and disregards any positive behaviours.	The child focuses only on negative interactions or traits of the targeted parent, accepting exaggerated or fabricated negatives and ignoring any positive behaviours that don't fit the negative narrative.
Emotional Reasoning (Confusing subjective feelings with objective truth)	This parent uses their own emotional state as evidence of reality, teaching the child to equate their feelings with facts.	The child believes that their emotional reactions are a reflection of reality, assuming that because they feel a certain way, it must be true. They confuse their subjective feelings with objective truth.
Labelling and Stereotyping (Assigning judgement instead of recognising who made the mistake)	This parent labels the targeted parent negatively based on limited evidence or isolated incidents.	The child applies negative labels to the targeted parent based on limited information or single incidents.
Attribution of Blame (Playing the victim and holding others responsible for the pain)	This parent attributes all family problems and conflicts to the targeted parent, portraying themselves as the victim and shifting responsibility for pain and difficulties onto the targeted parent.	The child adopts the belief that the targeted parent is responsible for all family problems and conflicts, including those they are not directly involved in. The child sees the targeted parent as the cause of all family pain and difficulties, mirroring the problematic coercive parent's victim mentality and blame-shifting behaviour.
Personalisation (Taking actions personally and seeing them as attacks on oneself and others)	This parent perceives the targeted parent's actions as personal attacks, leading the child to adopt this belief.	The child believes the targeted parent's actions are deliberate attacks on them personally and on the problematic coercive parent, seeing them as a way to harm both.

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Catastrophising (Magnification and minimisation)	This parent exaggerates the negative impact of the targeted parent's behaviour while minimising any positive attributes.	The child imagines exaggerated negative consequences of having a relationship with the targeted parent, while downplaying their positive qualities.
Overgeneralisation (Focusing on a single event and making broad conclusions)	This parent consistently highlights and emphasises negative aspects of the targeted parent, often based on isolated incidents.	The child makes sweeping negative judgments about the targeted parent based on a few isolated or limited experiences. They generalise these negative traits or behaviours to all interactions with the targeted parent, forming an overall negative view from minimal evidence.
Should Statements (Feeling obligated to agree with and endorse the problematic coercive parent's negative views)	This parent imposes their negative views on the child, making them feel obligated to agree with and endorse these views.	The child feels compelled to adopt and internalise the problematic coercive parent's negative opinions of the targeted parent. They believe they should conform to these views and align their own beliefs with those of the problematic coercive parent, even if it contradicts their own experiences or feelings.
Fortune Telling (Predicting negative outcomes about future interactions with the targeted parent)	This parent predicts adverse outcomes if the child maintains a relationship with the targeted parent, instilling this fear in the child.	The child engages in "fortune telling" by predicting that continuing a relationship with the targeted parent will result in negative consequences or problems. They make unfounded, pessimistic predictions about the future, based on limited or past experiences, which affects their current attitudes and behaviours towards the targeted parent.
External Control Fallacies (Believing one's emotions or experiences are controlled by others)	This parent teaches the child to believe that their emotions and experiences are controlled by external factors, including the targeted parent. This can create a perception of being a passive victim of circumstances.	The child believes that their emotions and experiences are entirely controlled by external factors or the actions of others, particularly the targeted parent. They feel powerless to influence or change their own emotional state, believing that their feelings are dictated by how others treat them.

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Comparisons (Reinforcing negative views through constant unfavourable comparisons)	This parent consistently compares the targeted parent negatively to others, highlighting perceived shortcomings and failures.	The child makes constant negative comparisons between the targeted parent and others, reinforcing and justifying their own negative views of the targeted parent. This comparison helps to solidify the problematic coercive parent's narrative and affects the child's perception of the targeted parent.
Setting Unrealistic Expectations (Expecting perfection or faultlessness from the targeted parent)	This parent promotes an image of the targeted parent as incapable of meeting idealised standards, fostering an expectation of perfection or faultlessness.	The child sets unrealistic and excessively high expectations for the targeted parent, expecting them to be perfect or flawless. When these expectations are not met, it leads to disappointment and frustration, reinforcing the child's negative views and the problematic coercive parent's narrative.
Fallacy of Fairness (Belief that life should be based on fairness and equal treatment)	This parent promotes a belief in absolute fairness, suggesting that the targeted parent should meet certain standards of fairness and equality.	The child believes that life and interactions should be governed by fairness and that the targeted parent should always adhere to these standards. When the targeted parent fails to meet these expectations, the child perceives this as an injustice, leading to frustration and reinforcing negative views.
Fallacy of Change (Belief that others should change to meet one's own needs or expectations)	This parent encourages the child to believe that the targeted parent should change to meet the child's needs or preferences, promoting the idea that these changes are necessary for the relationship to improve.	The child believes that the targeted parent should change their behaviours or attitudes to align with the child's expectations or desires. The child feels that if the targeted parent were to change, the relationship would improve, leading to frustration and disappointment when these changes do not happen.
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