



Schools and Children's Relationships with Parents: Understanding Coercion and Forced Alignment



This guide explores how school practices impact children's relationships with separated parents in challenging family situations, focusing on unequal treatment, coercive alignment, and disregard for legal decisions.



Unequal Information Sharing

Schools may unintentionally or intentionally provide information to one parent while excluding the other.

This can manifest as:

School Reports: One parent receives regular updates; the other does not. 

Communication about School Events: One parent is informed about school trips, performances, and meetings; the other is not.

Access to Online Portals: One parent has full access to online systems and communication tools; the other is excluded.

When it Happens: Often when there is a history of conflict, one parent actively restricts the other's involvement, or the school inadvertently defaults to communicating primarily with one parent.

Disregarding Legal Decisions

Schools may fail to acknowledge and comply with court orders regarding parental access, communication, or decision-making.



This can include:

Ignoring Custody Arrangements: Ignoring or undermining court-ordered custody or visitation schedules.

Disregarding Communication Orders: Failing to facilitate communication as directed by a court order.

Non-Compliance with Parental Agreements: Neglecting to respect agreed arrangements concerning school involvement.

When it Happens: When there is a lack of understanding of legal requirements or when one parent attempts to circumvent the legal process.

Promoting Open Communication

Schools should prioritise clear, consistent, and equitable communication with both parents, ensuring:



Regular Updates: Providing both parents with regular updates on the child's progress.

Open Dialogue: Encouraging open and collaborative communication.

Written Correspondence: Maintaining written records of all communications.

When to Implement: At all times, especially when concerns arise.



Coerced Attachment and Forced Choices

Children might be subtly or overtly pressured to favour one parent over the other.

Examples include:

Implicit Bias: School staff unconsciously favouring one parent's perspective.

Open Favouritism: Staff explicitly showing preference for one parent.

Children's Statements Taken at Face Value:

Accepting a child's negative statements about one parent without further investigation.

Activities and Events: Children are only encouraged to participate in events with one parent.

Name Changes: Schools sometimes allow or facilitate name changes reflecting only one parent's preference.

When it Happens: Frequently in high-conflict situations, particularly when allegations of abuse or neglect exist (requiring thorough investigation), or when one parent actively alienates the child from the other.

The Need for Professional Development

Comprehensive and ongoing professional development for school staff is essential for effectively managing challenging family situations and supporting children's well-being and positive relationships with both parents.



Maintaining Neutrality

Schools should remain impartial in parental disputes, avoiding taking sides:

Objective Observations: Documenting observations objectively, without bias.

Balanced Interactions: Treating both parents with equal respect and professionalism.

Respecting Legal Processes: Following court orders and legal processes diligently.

When to Implement: At all times, in all interactions.



Eeny Meeny
MINEY-MO FOUNDATION

Created by Amanda Sillars BPsycSc. ©

emmm.org.au

A Child's Emotional and Psychological Well-Being Must be Paramount

Prioritising a child's well-being requires a proactive approach. Schools must equip staff to identify signs of coercion and forced alignment, enabling timely referrals to mental health professionals where necessary. Creating a safe and supportive school environment is crucial for all children, particularly those navigating challenging family situations.

Alienating Behaviours in Schools: Identifying Problematic Parental Interactions



This guide identifies key behaviours alienating parents may use within the school environment to undermine the other parent's relationship with their child. Recognising these patterns can help mitigate their impact and support children's well-being.



Manipulating Information & Communication

Withholding Information: Failing to inform the school of the other parent's contact details, address, or other relevant information. This prevents the school from easily contacting the other parent about the child.

Providing False Information: Deliberately providing inaccurate or misleading information about the other parent's involvement in the child's life (e.g., claiming the other parent is absent, neglecting the child, or a danger to the child).

Controlling Communication: Insisting on being the sole point of contact for all school communications, thus preventing the other parent from receiving crucial information about their child's progress, school activities, and well-being.

Interfering with Communication: Intercepting and manipulating communication between the school and the other parent (e.g., deleting emails, intercepting phone calls).

Misrepresenting School Events: Presenting a distorted picture of school events to the child, emphasizing positive interactions with the alienating parent while downplaying or ignoring involvement with the other parent.

Fabricating Incidents: Making false allegations about the other parent's behaviour towards the child or school staff, creating a negative perception of that parent.

Selective Disclosure of Information: Sharing only positive aspects of their own involvement with the child and only negative aspects of the other parent's relationship with the child.

Manipulating the Child



Coaching the Child: Directly instructing the child to lie or provide false information about the other parent to school staff.

Pressuring the Child: Putting pressure on the child to align solely with the alienating parent and distance themselves from the other parent (e.g., through emotional manipulation or threats of love withdrawal).

Creating a False Narrative: Using the child to relay false or exaggerated accounts of the other parent's behaviour to school staff.



Manipulating School Procedures and Processes



Forging Documents: Creating false or altered documents (e.g., forged enrolment forms, medical records, or permission slips) to exclude the other parent from the child's schooling or school activities.

Exploiting School Policies: Taking advantage of school policies or procedures (e.g., flexible attendance, flexible pick-up/drop-off) to restrict the other parent's access to their child or to undermine their authority.

Misusing Emergency Contact Information: Providing only their own contact details as the emergency contact, ignoring court orders or other agreements that dictate both parents should be listed.

Obstructing Access to Records: Preventing the other parent from accessing their child's school records, reports, or other relevant documentation.

Creating Barriers to Involvement: Making it difficult or impossible for the other parent to participate in school events, meetings, or parent-teacher conferences.

False Accusations of Abandonment: Making false claims to the school that the other parent has abandoned the child, thereby attempting to limit the other parent's rights and involvement.



Using External Influences

Seeking Support from School Staff: Gaining the support of particular staff members by selectively sharing information, thereby building a bias against the other parent.

Involving External Authorities: Involving external authorities (e.g., Child Protection Services, police) with unsubstantiated allegations against the other parent to further restrict their involvement in the child's life.

Influencing Other Parents



Targeted Social Isolation: Spreading negative information about the other parent to other parents, creating social isolation for them.

Coalition Building: Forming alliances against the other parent to limit their involvement.

Problematic Parent Works at the School



Power Abuse: Misusing position to access information, influence policies, or create an unfair advantage.

Internal Coalition Building: Recruiting staff allies to support their narrative.

Biased Environment Creation: Manipulating the child's school experience to favour their narrative.