An illustration showing a family of four stick figures. On the left, a parent figure has a speech bubble that says "I am doing everything I can to make them see you." In the center, two child figures stand together, with a broken red heart between them. On the right, another parent figure has a speech bubble that says "I can't force them to see you." and a broken red heart next to them.

I am doing everything I can to make them see you.

I can't force them to see you.

Parent-Child Trauma, Coerced Attachment, and Alienation

Parent-Child Trauma, Coerced Attachment and Alienation occurs when coercive control and alienating behaviours undermine the bond between a child and their other parent or family member. These behaviours can be perpetrated by anyone, including parents, stepparents, grandparents, and non-family members.

At EMMM, we recognise that these cases are complex and advocate for a better understanding of this form of abuse. It is essential to assess each situation individually rather than follow polarising views. Our mission is to research the complexities, their effects on the child's well-being, and the need for early interventions and evidence-based programmes to manage these situations. These situations impact family relationships, extending to connections with siblings, grandparents, and other relatives.

This abuse can lead to harmful processes such as adultification, parentification, infantilisation, and learned helplessness, often using tactics like gatekeeping, denigration, programming, and brainwashing. These methods can be reinforced through classical conditioning, operant conditioning, and observational learning, with non-verbal cues like negative facial expressions and body language also playing a role in the manipulation.

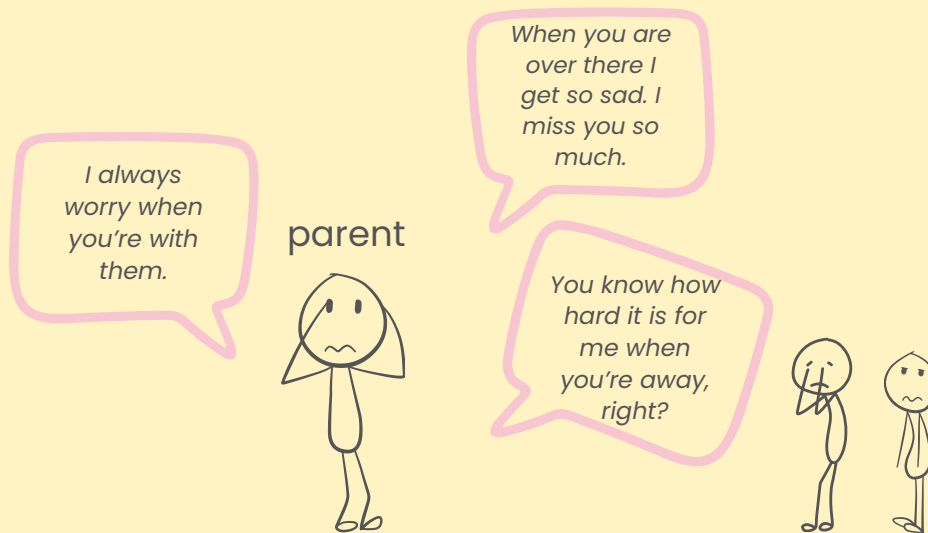
This resource concentrates on the following topics:

- **The Child is Burdened with Guilt**
- **The Conflicted Mind of the Child**
- **The Child is Pressured to Conform**
- **The Trauma Bond with the Parent or Caregiver**
- **The Child's Fear of Retaliation**
- **The Defiance in the Child**

Let's peel away some layers and take a closer look at the targeted child's position.

**Parental Alienation
Awareness Day
12th October**

The Child is Burdened with Guilt



Burdening the Child with Guilt

Children often face the burden of guilt when they try to enjoy time with the other parent or family member. They may be constantly reminded of their 'duty' to stay loyal to the primary parent, even when simply visiting or spending time with the other parent. For example, after a visit, the child might hear things like, "I'm so disappointed you didn't call me back" or "When you are over there I get so sad. I miss you so much." This tactic plants seeds of guilt, making the child feel they've betrayed the primary parent just by having a relationship with the other parent or family member.

Additionally, the problematic parent may hijack the child's visit by constantly texting them, demanding updates and expressing disappointment if the child doesn't respond quickly. This not only disrupts the child's time but also reinforces feelings of guilt and obligation, making it even harder for them to enjoy their time away.

The Child is Burdened with Guilt

How this May Present

Constant Checking-In The child might frequently check their phone during visits with the other parent, feeling a need to respond immediately to texts or calls from the primary parent. This can make them appear distracted or anxious during their time with the other parent.

Downplaying Enjoyment They may hesitate to share positive experiences or memories from their visit with the other parent, worrying that it could upset the primary parent. For example, they might minimize their excitement about activities or gifts, saying, "It was okay" or "It wasn't that fun."

Withdrawing Emotionally The child might become more reserved or distant during visits with the other parent, as they fear that expressing affection or happiness could be seen as disloyalty. They might avoid physical affection, like hugs or sitting close, to avoid feeling like they are betraying the primary parent.

Anxiety and Nervousness The child may display signs of anxiety, such as fidgeting, a tense demeanour, or worrying about time spent away from the primary parent. They might ask to cut visits short or express concern about how the primary parent will react to the time they're spending with the other parent.

Feelings of Guilt The child might explicitly express guilt or concern, saying things like, "I don't want to make Mum/Dad upset" or "I shouldn't have had so much fun." This reflects their struggle to reconcile their enjoyment with the sense of duty they feel towards the primary parent.

Seeking Reassurance After visits with the other parent, the child may feel the need to excessively reassure the primary parent of their loyalty, saying things like, "I missed you so much" or "I wish I could have stayed home with you instead."

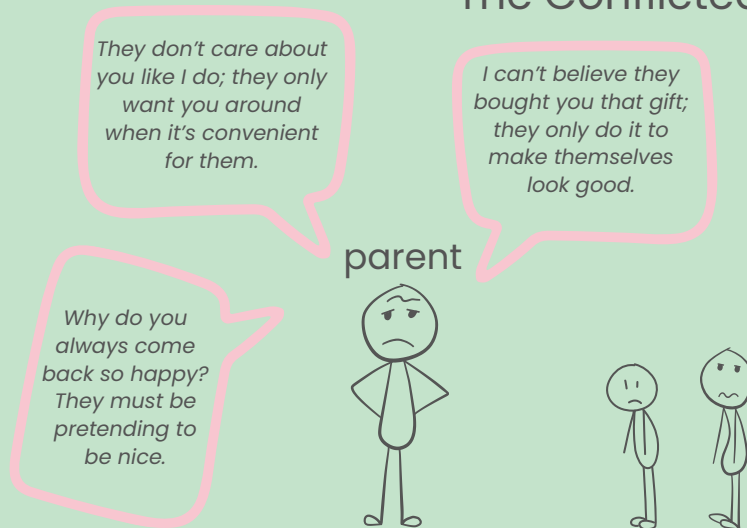
Tension in Transitions The child may become upset, tearful, or overly quiet during transitions between parents. This can be due to the emotional weight they carry, knowing that they might face scrutiny or disappointment from the primary parent afterward.

Difficulty Expressing Their True Feelings The child may find it challenging to express their feelings openly, as they are constantly monitoring themselves to ensure they don't say anything that could be perceived as a betrayal. This can lead to confusion and frustration, as the child struggles to navigate their own emotions.

Physical Signs of Stress In some cases, the child might exhibit physical symptoms of stress, such as headaches, stomach aches, or trouble sleeping, as they internalise the emotional conflict between their desire for connection with both parents and the guilt they feel.

Loss of Interest in Visits The child may start to show a reluctance to spend time with the other parent altogether, even if they previously enjoyed those visits. This can be a coping mechanism to avoid the guilt and anxiety that follows.

The Conflicted Mind of the Child



Conflicted Thinking

Children can experience cognitive dissonance when what they hear about the other parent, or family member, doesn't match their actual experiences. The primary parent might insist that the other parent is unkind or unloving, but this conflicts with the child's personal experience of being treated well or receiving thoughtful gestures from the other parent. For example, they may hear statements like, "You don't really like spending time with them, do you?" or "They only buy you gifts to make themselves look good." These contradictory messages create confusion and emotional turmoil as the child struggles to reconcile these differing perspectives.

Additionally, children often find themselves in loyalty binds, feeling pressured to choose sides between their parents. This is especially problematic when one parent expresses disappointment or frustration about the child's relationship with the other. The child might feel guilty for enjoying time with the other parent, fearing that doing so could hurt the primary parent's feelings. As a result, they may suppress their own emotions and experiences to align with the expectations set by the primary parent, deepening the internal conflict.

The responses to this situation can be varied; children may withdraw emotionally, exhibit increased anger or frustration, or show signs of confusion and anxiety. They might also feel guilt for their enjoyment of time spent with the other parent, leading to behavioural changes such as acting out or declining academic performance. Some may become overly compliant, seeking reassurance from the primary parent, while others might internalise the conflict, resulting in sadness or low self-esteem. These emotional and psychological responses underscore the significant impact that cognitive dissonance and loyalty binds can have on children, complicating their ability to navigate their relationships with both parents in a healthy manner.

How this May Present

Emotional Withdrawal Children might pull away from one or both parents as they try to cope with the conflicting messages. They could become less communicative, especially when discussing their experiences with the other parent, as they struggle to make sense of the mixed signals.

Anger or Frustration The internal conflict can build up and manifest as irritability or anger, often directed towards either parent. They may react defensively or angrily when asked about their time with the other parent, reflecting their struggle to manage the conflicting narratives.

Confusion and Anxiety Children may seem visibly anxious or uncertain, particularly when talking about their time with the other parent. They might hesitate or stumble over their words, unsure of what is "safe" to say, and fear the repercussions of their honesty.

Guilt and Self-Doubt A child might express guilt for enjoying time with the other parent, saying things like, "I shouldn't have had fun with them" or questioning their own feelings. This guilt can weigh heavily, causing the child to doubt their own perceptions and feelings.

Behavioural Changes The emotional strain may result in noticeable changes, such as a decline in academic performance or, conversely, a drive to overachieve. Some children might struggle to focus, leading to lower grades, while others might immerse themselves in their studies as a way to gain control or validation in an otherwise confusing situation.

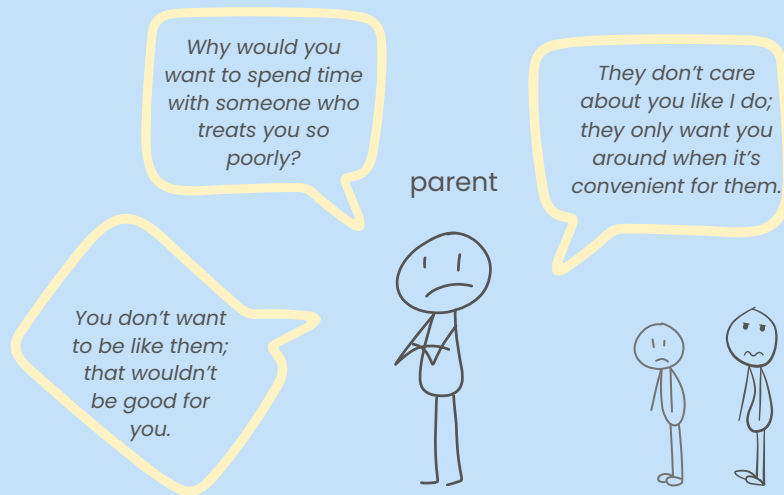
Overly Compliant Behaviour Some children may try to appease the primary parent by becoming overly agreeable, adopting the negative views expressed about the other parent. They may mimic the primary parent's words, even if they don't fully understand or believe them, as a way to seek approval and avoid conflict.

Sadness or Low Self-Esteem The pressure to suppress their own feelings and conform to the primary parent's perspective can lead to sadness or even depression. They may begin to feel that their own emotions are invalid, leading to a diminished sense of self-worth.

Avoidance of the Other Parent As the internal struggle intensifies, the child may start avoiding the other parent, not because they genuinely want to, but as a way to avoid the inner conflict and potential disapproval from the primary parent. This can lead to a strained relationship with the alienated parent.

These responses highlight the deep internal struggles children face when caught between conflicting narratives and loyalty binds. The emotional turmoil they experience can have a lasting impact on their self-perception, relationships, and overall well-being, making it difficult for them to develop a balanced and healthy understanding of their relationships with both parents.

The Child is Pressured to Conform



Children Under Pressure to Conform

Children may feel pressured to reject their natural feelings of love for the other parent, or other family member, to align with the negative views imposed by the primary parent. They're often told they shouldn't care for or enjoy time with the other parent because they're labelled as 'bad' or 'unworthy.' The same can happen towards other family members. This creates a significant internal struggle, as the child tries to conform to the expectations set by the primary parent while simultaneously battling their own feelings and experiences.

The impact of this pressure can be profound. Children may experience heightened anxiety and confusion, feeling torn between loyalty to the primary parent and their genuine affection for the other parent. This internal conflict can lead to emotional distress, manifesting as behavioural changes such as withdrawal, anger, or compliance. Over time, the child may struggle with trust issues, low self-esteem, and difficulty forming healthy relationships, as they internalise the notion that their feelings are invalid. Additionally, the child may face challenges in developing a balanced understanding of both parents, complicating their emotional landscape and hindering their overall well-being.

By feeling forced to deny their authentic emotions, children risk long-term psychological consequences, including difficulties with self-identity and the ability to navigate complex emotional situations in the future.

The Child is Pressured to Conform

How this May Present

Withdrawal The child might become emotionally withdrawn, avoiding discussions about the other parent or even refusing to engage in activities they used to enjoy with them. They may appear distant or disinterested, struggling to express themselves openly.

Anger or Irritability The internal conflict can lead to frustration, which may be directed towards both parents. They might lash out verbally or show irritability when the topic of the other parent arises, reflecting their struggle to reconcile conflicting emotions.

Excessive Compliance In an effort to please the primary parent and avoid conflict, the child may become overly compliant or agreeable, adopting the negative views expressed by the primary parent, even when these views don't match their own experiences.

Guilt and Self-Blame The child may express feelings of guilt for liking or wanting to spend time with the other parent, saying things like, "I shouldn't feel this way" or "Maybe it's my fault they don't get along." This can be a sign that they are internalising the pressure to conform.

Anxiety and Nervousness The child might show signs of anxiety, such as nail-biting, fidgeting, or difficulty sleeping, especially before or after visits with the other parent. They may worry excessively about how their time with the other parent will be perceived.

Reluctance to Visit the Other Parent As the pressure increases, the child may start to resist visits or express reluctance to see the other parent, not because of a lack of interest but as a way to avoid the internal struggle and potential disapproval from the primary parent.

Emotional Outbursts The child may experience sudden outbursts of crying or anger, often triggered by feelings of being caught in the middle or not knowing how to satisfy the expectations of both parents.

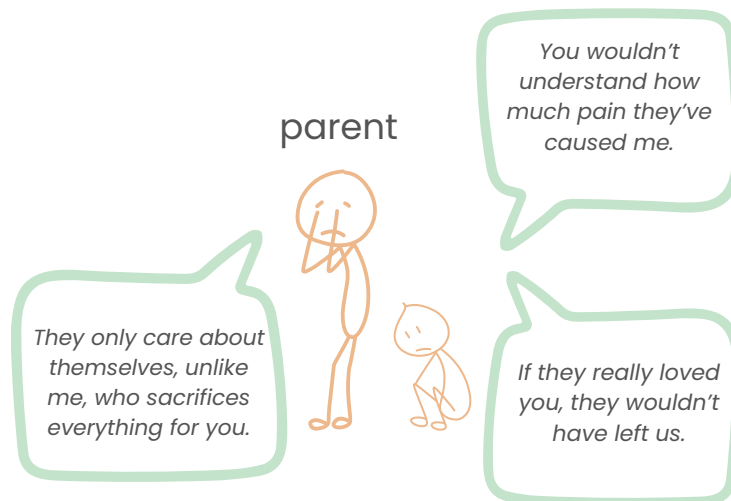
Confusion and Mixed Messages They might give contradictory statements, like saying they love spending time with the other parent but immediately following it with a negative comment that seems to mimic the primary parent's views. This reflects their struggle to align their true feelings with the imposed narrative.

Low Self-Esteem Over time, constantly having their feelings questioned or invalidated can lead to a diminished sense of self-worth. The child may struggle with self-doubt, believing that their feelings are wrong or unimportant.

Difficulty Forming Trusting Relationships The child may have trouble trusting others, including peers and other family members, as they've learned that showing affection or care can come with criticism or consequences. This can make it harder for them to build healthy connections outside the immediate family.

Hypervigilance Some children might become highly attuned to the moods and reactions of the primary parent, always trying to gauge whether they are saying or doing the "right" thing. This can make them seem overly cautious in expressing any independent thoughts or feelings.


The Trauma Bond with the Parent or Caregiver



The targeted child forms a detrimental emotional attachment, referred to as a trauma bond. This phenomenon draws parallels to observed behaviours in environments such as cults, hostage situations, human trafficking, intimate partner violence and child abuse. Trauma bonding manifests as a consequence of interpersonal trauma within relationships characterised by violence or exploitation, as outlined by Reid et al. (2013).

A child might develop a trauma bond with the primary parent or caregiver, feeling the need to defend them even when it means accepting negative and sometimes false beliefs about the other parent. This bond can be rooted in the child's desire to protect the primary parent, especially if they perceive them as vulnerable or as having suffered due to the other parent. To maintain the bond, the child may adopt the negative narrative given by the primary parent, clinging to the belief that the other parent has done 'bad' things or is unworthy of their love and trust.

The impact of a trauma bond on the child can be significant. Emotionally, they may feel intense loyalty to the primary parent, experiencing guilt, anxiety, or fear at the thought of questioning the negative views they've been taught. Over time, this dynamic can distort the child's understanding of relationships, making it difficult for them to assess situations objectively. They may become defensive or dismissive when someone challenges their beliefs about the other parent, even if their experiences contradict what they have been told.



The Trauma Bond with the Parent or Caregiver

How this May Present

Defence of the Primary Parent or Caregiver The child may frequently speak up in defence of the primary parent, even if it means adopting or repeating criticisms of the other parent that they don't fully understand.

Internalised Negative Beliefs The child might begin to believe and express that the other parent is unreliable or harmful, even if their direct experiences suggest otherwise.

Avoidance of the Other Parent The child may start to avoid spending time with the other parent, feeling conflicted or anxious about showing any sign of affection or enjoyment during those visits.

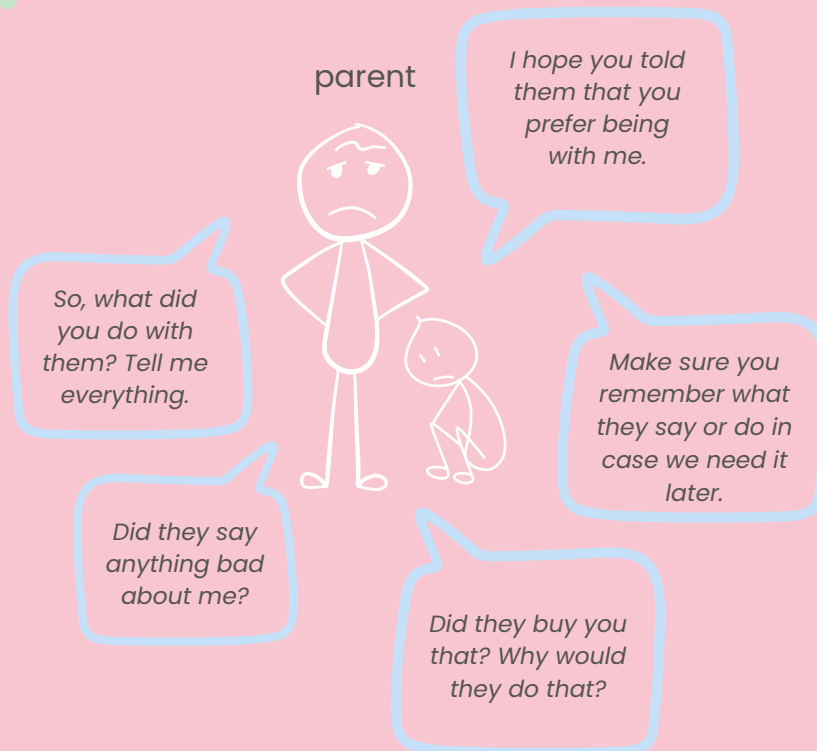
Guilt and Anxiety When the child does spend time with the other parent, they may experience feelings of guilt or anxiety, as if they are betraying the primary parent. This can manifest in nervous behaviour or constant attempts to check in with the primary parent during visits.

Rigid Thinking The child may develop a black-and-white view of the situation, seeing the primary parent as completely good and the other parent as entirely bad, with little room for nuance or empathy.

Isolation The child might feel isolated from friends or other family members who do not support the negative view of the other parent, further deepening their reliance on the primary parent for emotional validation.

The trauma bond can have long-term consequences on the child's emotional health, including difficulties in forming balanced, healthy relationships and challenges in recognising manipulation or control in their interactions with others. It can also inhibit the child's ability to process and understand their own feelings, as they are pressured to prioritise the needs and emotions of the primary parent above their own.

The Fear of Retaliation



Children can become fearful of being open about their time with the other parent, or family member, because they understand that whatever they share might be used against the other parent, family member or themselves. After a visit, the primary parent might interrogate the child for every detail, turning innocent moments into ammunition for future conflicts or arguments. This creates an environment where the child feels like they must constantly monitor what they say and how they act around both parents, as any enjoyment or positive experiences with the other parent could result in accusations or conflict later.

The impact of this fear can be significant. Children may begin to hide details about their time with the other parent or downplay their enjoyment to avoid upsetting the primary parent. This can lead to feelings of anxiety, guilt, and divided loyalty, as the child is caught between wanting to be honest about their experiences and fearing the repercussions of sharing those experiences. They may become hyper vigilant, carefully choosing their words to avoid triggering negative reactions, which can be emotionally exhausting.

How This May Present

Withholding Information The child might become secretive or vague when discussing visits, choosing not to share details for fear of how they will be interpreted or used later.

Downplaying Enjoyment They may downplay positive experiences with the other parent, like saying they didn't have much fun or dismissing special moments, to avoid making the primary parent feel hurt or jealous.

Fear of Conversations The child may feel anxious or stressed during conversations with the primary parent after a visit, knowing they will be questioned about what happened.

Feeling Responsible for Conflict The child may feel that they are responsible for the tension between their parents, believing that what they say could spark arguments or accusations.

Tension During Visits The fear of having to report back might cause the child to feel less relaxed during visits with the other parent, as they worry about what they might say later.

Hyper vigilance The child might pay close attention to everything that happens during visits, feeling pressured to remember specific details that they think the primary parent would want to know.

Emotional Exhaustion Constantly managing their words and actions can leave the child feeling emotionally drained and overwhelmed, as they feel unable to freely express their thoughts or feelings.

Avoidance of Topics The child may avoid talking about the other parent altogether to prevent difficult conversations, creating a sense of division and isolation.

This dynamic can have long-term effects on the child's emotional well-being, including difficulties with trust and open communication. As they grow up, the habit of concealing their true feelings can impact their ability to build genuine relationships, leaving them feeling misunderstood and isolated. It also erodes the child's ability to process their own experiences, as they feel forced to prioritise the emotions of the primary parent over their own.



The Defiance in the Child

When a child develops a sense of deviance or rejection toward a targeted parent or family member, it is often a result of pressure, manipulation, and conflicting messages received from the primary parent or caregiver. This dynamic can occur in situations where parental alienating behaviours are present, leading the child to adopt negative views or attitudes about the other parent that do not align with their own direct experiences. The child may be exposed to repeated criticisms, negative stories, or subtle yet consistent pressure to side with the primary parent's perspective, which portrays the other parent or family member as untrustworthy, unloving, or harmful.

Over time, this can create cognitive dissonance for the child—a mental conflict between the negative portrayal they hear and the more positive or neutral interactions they experience with the targeted parent. To resolve this internal conflict, many children align their beliefs and feelings with the narrative of the primary parent, as doing so can reduce their anxiety and maintain the security of their attachment with that parent. In extreme cases, the child might begin to reject the targeted parent or family member outright, expressing unwarranted hostility, fear, or anger towards them.

This process is not necessarily a reflection of the child's true feelings but rather an adaptation to the pressure and loyalty binds they experience. They may believe that siding with the primary parent is a way to maintain that relationship or to protect themselves from emotional conflict and guilt.

Understanding these behaviours is crucial for practitioners, parents, and other family members. Recognising that a child's rejection or negative attitudes may not be based on genuine feelings but rather a coping mechanism or adaptation to manipulation can guide more empathetic and effective responses. It can also help in creating strategies that prioritise the child's emotional well-being and support the restoration of balanced and healthy relationships.

How This May Present

Verbal Rejection or Hostility The child may express negative statements or harsh criticisms about the targeted parent or family member, often repeating phrases or ideas they've heard from the primary parent. For example, they might say things like, "You don't care about me," or "You only care about yourself," despite no direct evidence of such behaviour from the targeted parent.

Emotional Withdrawal The child may become distant or refuse to engage with the targeted parent or family member. They might reject invitations to spend time together or refuse to share their thoughts and feelings, appearing emotionally closed off.

Defensiveness Towards the Primary Parent The child may become defensive when questioned about the primary parent's behaviour, justifying their actions even when they seem inappropriate or harsh. This can be a sign of a trauma bond, where the child feels a need to protect the primary parent at the expense of their relationship with the other.

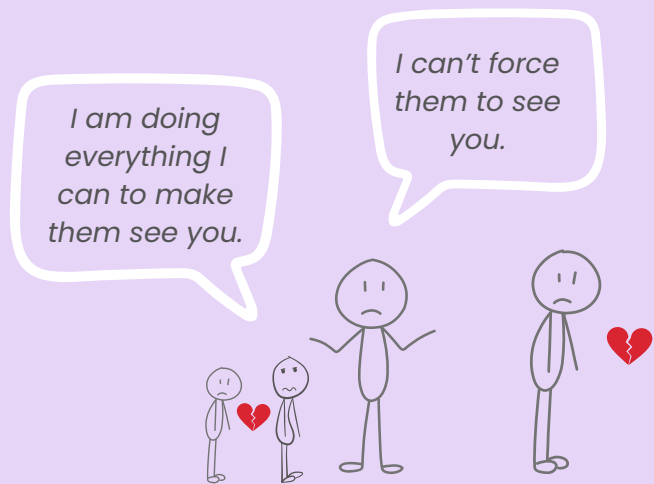
Distorted or Exaggerated Beliefs The child may adopt beliefs or stories that seem exaggerated or untrue, such as claiming that the targeted parent "never loved" them or "was never there for them," despite evidence of positive interactions in the past. These beliefs reflect the internalisation of the primary parent's narrative.

Anxiety and Guilt The child may display signs of anxiety, particularly when around the targeted parent, or show feelings of guilt for enjoying time with them. They might seem tense, uneasy, or avoid discussing any positive experiences they had during visits.

Extreme Loyalty to the Primary Parent The child might display excessive loyalty to the primary parent, feeling the need to align with their views or defend them in conversations, even when it means contradicting their own past experiences with the targeted parent.

Acting Out or Behavioural Issues Some children may act out more around the targeted parent, exhibiting behaviours like defiance or tantrums. This can be a way of testing the targeted parent's limits or expressing their inner turmoil and confusion.

Overly Compliance Towards the Primary Parent's Views Alternatively, the child may seem overly compliant or eager to agree with the negative characterisations of the targeted parent. This compliance can indicate their attempt to meet the primary parent's expectations and maintain their approval.



Parent-Child Trauma, Coerced Attachment and Alienation cannot be formally diagnosed as a clinical condition, but the behaviours involved can be recognised as manipulative and emotionally abusive actions that profoundly affect a child's emotional, psychological and developmental progress. These behaviours align with patterns of coercive control, emotional manipulation, and attachment trauma seen in clinical practice, leading to symptoms often associated with complex PTSD, anxiety disorders and attachment disruptions. The impact on the child's relationships, emotional regulation, and decision-making abilities can mirror the effects of trauma, affecting their ability to form healthy attachments and interact appropriately with others.

Identifying these behaviours is critical for intervention and prevention, much like addressing other forms of child abuse. If left unaddressed, these behaviours present significant risks to a child's overall mental health, developmental trajectory and future relational functioning. Early recognition and intervention, guided by attachment and trauma-informed clinical frameworks, are essential to mitigate the long-term psychological harm and promote healthier developmental outcomes.

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