Talking Badly About Your Co-Parent Backfires:
Young Adults & Siblings Feel Less Close to Parents Who Denigrate the Other Parent

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The impact of parental conflict on children has been an important area of study for nearly four decades. While conflict between parents is perhaps the most toxic aspect of divorce for children (Amato & Keith, 1991; Emery, 1982), the increasing frequency of cohabitation and non-marital childrearing in our society has fueled additional interest in developing recommendations for best practices for co-parenting from different homes.

Research has consistently shown that conflict before, during, and after parental separation is highly predictive of children's psychological and emotional well-being (Amato & Keith, 1991; Cumming & Davies, 2011; Emery, 1982). For example, conflict between parents is associated with a variety of problems in children, including delinquency, antisocial behavior, conduct problems (Dadds, Atkinson, Turner, Blums, & Lendich, 1999; Emery & O'Leary, 1984; Harden et al., 2007), depression (Dadds et al., 1999; Johnston, Gonzales, & Campbell, 1987), anxiety, and emotional insecurity (Cummings & Davies, 2011). Beyond the development of emotional disorders, children of conflictual parents often also suffer from more subtle internal symptoms of distress, including painful feelings of loss and blame (Laumann-Billings & Emery, 2000).

Some damaging aspects of conflict include putting children in the middle of parental disagreements (Buchanan et al., 1991; Buehler et al., 1997), and parentification, where children assume developmentally inappropriate roles, such as trying to resolve parental disputes, protecting distraught parents, and serving as confidants (Peris, Goeke-Morey, Cummings, & Emery, 2008; Vuchinich, Emery, & Cassidy, 1988). Another problematic pattern is the deliberate denigration of one parent by the other parent to their child(ren). This pattern is indicated clinically, for example, when children reveal to the therapist that their mother has told them their father doesn't really love them or that he is a bad person.

Parental alienation

Parental alienation (PA), a term coined by forensic psychiatrist Richard Gardner in 1982, occurs when one parent deliberately attempts to convince the child that the other parent deserves to be rejected. According to Gardner's theory, the child has been brainwashed by the other parent out of malice, and the rejected parent does nothing to merit rejection (Gardner, 1985, 1992). The concept of PA has been the subject of controversy over the past 30 years; some scholars assert that the rejected parent is a loving caregiver who has done nothing wrong (Darnall, 1998; Gardner, 2002), while others argue that the rejected parent contributes to his or her "alienation" via difficult interpersonal characteristics and poor parenting (Kelly & Johnston, 2001).

Though PA has attracted a great deal of interest from

clinicians and legal professionals, very little research has tested the construct empirically (Dallam, 1999; Bruch, 2002; Emery, 2005; Johnston et al., 2005; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Hoult, 2006). Given the limited quantity and quality of research, Bob Emery of the University of Virginia and I sought to investigate how often parents make disparaging remarks about their co-parent in front of their children. We called this phenomenon parental denigration, a descriptive term that avoids the implied outcome of "parental alienation."

In our first study, Rowen and Emery (2014) examined denigration identified retrospectively by young adult children about their parents. Young adult children from both married and divorced families reported parental denigration. Those who reported more frequent parental denigration also reported less closeness with parents, poorer quality of communication with parents, and increased feelings of isolation. Rowen and Emery (2014) also found a very small number of cases (4% of all participants) where young adults reported denigration by only one parent, with no reciprocation by the other parent. Even in these few cases, however, there was no evidence to indicate that this denigration behavior resulted in distancing or alienating children from the denigrated parent.

In our second study (Rowen & Emery, under review), we further tested the validity of the parental alienation concept by examining denigration reports across sibling pairs. Specifically, we investigated whether denigration is reciprocal, distancing children from both parents (as is typical of parental conflict), or whether denigration is one-sided, distancing children only from the parent who is denigrated (consistent with the parental alienation construct). Additionally, this study examined the consistency of denigration reports within families, and investigated whether sibling denigration reports were associated with parent-child relationship quality and psychological well-being.

The frequency and consistency of parental denigration

Parental denigration was reported by adult children to occur in married, divorced, and never married families, with greater frequency in divorced and never married families. Across all types of families, mothers were reported to denigrate significantly more frequently than fathers. This finding, which was especially strong in divorced families, may be due to the fact that children generally spend more time in their mother's care. Alternatively, it may be that mothers are more likely than fathers to engage in conversations about the other parent or about the family as a whole with children.

Results indicated that sibling reports of parental denigration were highly consistent in married, divorced, and never married families. Sibling reports of attachment to parents, closeness with parents, and reports of conflict were also highly consistent. When sibling reports about parental denigration differed, reports of closeness and attachment to both parents were significantly different as well. Taken together, these finding indicate that siblings, regardless of age, witness similar parental behaviors. Moreover, these negative parental behaviors affect siblings in consistently negative ways.

The reciprocal nature of parental denigration

Consistent with our previous work (Rowen & Emery, 2014), our second study (Rowen & Emery, under review) found that denigration was largely reciprocal, indicating that both parents usually engage in denigration behaviors. This contradicts the theory of parental alienation, which suggests that one parent is the sole perpetrator who is set on destroying the child's relationship with the other parent.

Moreover, young adults who reported experiencing more frequent parental denigration also reported feeling less close to both parents. More specifically, young adults

who reported denigration reported less mutual trust, poorer communication quality, and increased feelings of isolation from both parents. While denigration behaviors distanced children from both parents, children felt especially distanced from the denigrator parent. This finding also directly contradicts the main hypothesis of parental alienation, which theorizes that children become aligned with the denigrator parent and reject the denigrated parent.

The negative impact of parental denigration on children

Additional findings from (Rowen & Emery, under review) highlight the negative impact of parental denigration on children. Young adults who reported more frequent parental denigration also reported higher levels of depressive symptoms, less satisfaction with life, and more frequent parental conflict. Further, children from divorced families reported experiencing more painful feelings about divorce, including feelings of loss and abandonment, maternal or paternal blame, and an increased propensity to see life through the filter of divorce. Importantly, children tended to blame the divorce on the parent who denigrated the other parent (the denigrator), rather than blaming the parent who was the target of criticism (the denigrated).

Clinical Implications

These results hold several important implications for practice and research. Perhaps most importantly, we found no support for the alienation hypothesis among mothers or fathers, married or divorced families, in self- or cross-sibling reports, or in group- or individual-level analyses. Indeed, we found support for the opposite of the alienation predictions. In what we term a "boomerang effect," denigration clearly is more strongly related to emotional distance in children's relationship with the parent who does the denigrating than to the parent who is the target of denigration. While we continue to believe that alienation can occur, it may be an exception to the boomerang rule, and potentially a rare example of alienation. In any case, it is clear that alienation is not occurring with the frequency which some proponents claim, so judges and legal professionals may want to examine alienation testimony with renewed caution.

A second major implication is that the present findings show that parental denigration is an important form of conflict, one requiring further study. Empirically, we envision research on children of different ages, as well as with parents involved in litigation and other conflict-ridden circumstances. Conceptually, the present findings on the relationship between parental denigration and both parent-child closeness and individual well-being seem generally consistent with Cummings' emotional security hypothesis (Cummings & Davies, 2011), which states that "…maintaining a sense of protection, safety, and security is a central goal for children in family settings, including contexts of marital conflict" (p. 30).

A third and final implication of the research is that children do not have to directly observe parental disputes in order to be affected by them. We believe broader, family systems concepts are needed in order to understand how children are affected by parental disputes (Emery, 2012). Children feel angry, torn, and confused when their parents are in dispute. The reasons for this are not easily explained by modeling, inconsistent discipline, or even by the emotional insecurity hypothesis. We believe these all are important contributors. However, conflict is distressing because children love both their parents, it is painful to hear negative things about either parent, and the implicit push to "side" with one or the other parent disrupts the homeostatic balance of children's family relationships. The resulting confusion and pain can lead children to

withdraw from one or both parents. Thinking of parental denigration (and parental conflict) more systemically should aid future research and help mediators, parent educators, and therapists to more effectively identify denigration and intervene.

Practical Tips for Parents

In summary, parents who put down their co-parent appear to negatively impact their own relationship with their children, not alienate children from their co-parent. Here are some practical tips for avoiding, shifting, or reducing conflict between co-parents.

1. Discuss boundaries around communication and keep communication limited to child-related issues. Co-parents function most constructively when they agree on how frequently to communicate and keep the content of communication child-centered. This will reduce the likelihood of engaging in blame, negativity, and rehashing old arguments.

2. Keep kids out of the middle of the conflict. Messages should not be relayed to the other parent through children, and children should not witness conflict between co-parents. Feeling caught in the middle or triangulated by parents is very stressful for kids and is one of the most harmful aspects of parental conflict for children.

3. Create a parenting plan that is feasible and flexible. It is important to have some type of custody plan in place so that both parents have a clear understanding of when they will spend time with their children. A plan also provides a resource for parents to refer to in times of disagreement and reduces conflict. A consistent parenting plan can also help kids feel like they have a weekly or biweekly routine, which may aid with adjustment. If you and your co-parent feel unable to create a co-parenting or custody plan, mediation is an excellent option that facilitates collaborative problem-solving.

4. When talking directly with your children or within earshot of your children, discuss your co-parent with kindness. As demonstrated by the finding of the research presented above, children often feel sad and hurt when parents put each other down because they love both of their parents and often have traits that reflect both parents. It can be tempting to make negative comments about the other parent, but it is not a healthy choice for your kids, and it ultimately backfires.

5. Remember that your children's well-being is your primary focus. When co-parenting becomes difficult, envision how you would like your children to look back on their childhood in 20 years. Bringing the focus back to what is best for your children always helps parents make healthier short-term decisions because, at the end of the day, parents just love their kids and want what's best for them.

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