



Understanding why a child does not want to spend family time with a parent:

A guide to assessment

This guide was created and first issued in 2018 by Cafcass as part of the Child Impact Assessment Framework. It has been reviewed and updated during 2024-25.

It is available at www.cafcass.gov.uk for others to access. If replicating part or all of the contents of this guide, please reference Cafcass as the original source.

Some of the links contained in this guide are not live. This is because they relate to internal Cafcass guidance. Please contact us at nissupport@cafcass.gov.uk should you wish to access this internal guidance or have any other questions about the guide.

Please note: throughout this document we use the term parent when referring to a parent or carer.

Thanks are extended to members of the Family Justice Young People's Board, for their guidance on family time arrangements, which is incorporated into this guidance.

Thanks also to Cafcass Family Forum members who have provided insights from their experience and contributed their time in reviewing and providing comments.

Further thanks to Cafcass practitioners, who have also contributed from their experiences and in reviewing the guidance.

Finally, thanks to many partners who have taken time to review, provide comments and strengthen the guidance.

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Introduction

This guidance is part of the Cafcass [Child Impact Assessment Framework](#), as such it is not a standalone document, and the reader is linked throughout to other documents within the framework.

The child impact assessment framework provides guidance and practice aids to support Family Court Advisers in their thinking for children and their families in both public and private law proceedings. Family Court Advisers are required to be aware of all aspects of the framework and to use their judgement to apply the aspects which are relevant to the specific circumstances for each of the children they are assessing.

This guidance supplements the [Private Law Practice Quality Standards](#) and is aligned to the [Together with children and families Practice Framework](#).

In many private family court proceedings, the issue that the court is being asked to determine arises because the family time arrangements have broken down, need to change, are not happening consistently, or have never taken place.

In these situations, the court may order Cafcass to complete a report. When Cafcass is reporting under section 7 of the [Children Act 1989](#) or the child has been made party to proceedings under rule 16.4, the Family Court Adviser (FCA) or Children's Guardian will meet the child to understand what is happening for the child, to listen to their wishes and feelings, understand and analyse the impact of a parent's behaviour on the child, and recommend to the court the best way to support the child. This could be by recommending family time arrangements, including 'virtual, telephone or letter arrangements'¹ which are likely to be safe and beneficial for the child, or in some cases by recommending an end to proceedings with no family time.

Some children tell their FCA that they do not want to spend time with a parent, or they are reluctant to do so or have mixed feelings. The purpose of this guidance is to support Cafcass practitioners in understanding the reasons for the children's views.

FCAs and Children's Guardians are required to and are committed to reporting children's words directly to the court in line with the [Engaging with and seeing children policy](#). They are also required to explore and understand the reasons for a child's wishes and feelings and to make recommendations to the court which are in the child's best interests. There may be occasions, especially when the child has been harmed by a parent, when the child's wishes are not in line with their best interests and what is likely to be safe for them, and it is therefore not possible for the recommendation to follow the child's wishes. In this circumstance the reasons for this departure from their wishes, must always be explained to them.

¹ The FJYPB point out that from their perspective there is no such thing as 'indirect contact'. Even contact by means of telephone or letter can feel intrusive or upsetting.

The guidance should be considered within the context of the presumption of parental involvement as currently set out in the [Children and Families Act of 2014](#) which is designed to achieve two important aims: namely, when assessed and found to be safe, children are able to maintain a relationship with both their parents, and to make clear that parents who subject their child or ex-partner to domestic abuse are prevented from involvement in their children's lives, when it is assessed to be safe for the adult and child victims.

The guidance should also be considered within the context of the [Domestic Abuse Act 2021](#) ('the 2021 Act') which creates a statutory definition of domestic abuse. The term 'victim' is used in the 2021 Act to denote someone who has experienced domestic abuse. This includes children who have seen, heard, or experienced the effects of domestic abuse, and are related to either the victim of the abusive behaviour, or the perpetrator (section 3 of the 2021 Act).

In Chapter 3 of the Statutory Guidance for the 2021 Act there is a list of 'perpetrator behaviours'. Of relevance to this guidance are the following points:

- making false or vexatious allegations against victims and convincing professionals that their controlling tactics are for the victim's own safety and/or for the safety of their children.
- using the courts to continue abuse, for example not turning up to court dates, sending unnecessary and repeated legal letters and making threats around family time arrangements.
- making counter-allegations against the victim
- using children as a form of control – e.g., seeking to manipulate children's feelings towards ex-partner (the victim).

The guidance makes clear that the first step for Cafcass in assessing the reasons for a child not wanting to spend time with a parent is to consider whether domestic abuse or other forms of harmful parenting are the cause (see flowchart in section 2). Where this is the case, the [Cafcass domestic abuse practice policy](#) must be followed. This includes where a parent is coercively controlling, and a child may collude with this parent and blame the abused parent.

The guidance is clear that when the Family Court Adviser has assessed and the court has found that there has been domestic abuse and therefore the child is a victim, then it is contradictory to assess that the child's resistance to family time is due to alienating behaviour.

Practitioners should also use [the domestic abuse practice pathway and guidance](#), and the [harmful conflict guidance](#).

This guidance sets out the range of reasons why a child may not want to spend time with a parent, including anger at a parent who has left the family, dislike of a parent or their circumstances or because they are 'opting out' due to intense parental conflict. It also includes guidance to support assessment when the child does not want to spend time with a parent, when there was previously a beneficial relationship and when the reason for their views is not in line with what is known of their experience. This could include a parent disrupting or destroying their relationship with the other parent through alienating behaviours. This manipulative, coercive parenting may amount to being emotionally abusive as defined in the Children Act 1989.

The guidance sets out that Cafcass does not use or refer to the term 'parental alienation' which is often framed as a condition or syndrome. Cafcass does not focus on applying a label, but on the impact on each child of parental behaviours which may be harmful to them.

*Re C ('Parental Alienation'; Instruction of Expert) [2023] EWHC 345 (Fam) "Much like an allegation of domestic abuse; the decision about whether a parent has alienated a child is a question of fact for the Court to resolve and not a diagnosis that can or should be offered by a psychologist. For these purposes, the ACP-UK wishes to emphasise that "parental alienation" is not a syndrome capable of being diagnosed, but a process of manipulation of children perpetrated by one parent against the other through, what are termed as, "alienating behaviours". **It is, fundamentally, a question of fact.** ... What is important, as with domestic abuse, is the particular behaviour that is found to have taken place within the individual family before the court, and the impact that that behaviour may have had on the relationship of a child with either or both of his/her parents. In this regard, the identification of 'alienating behaviour' should be the court's focus, rather than any quest to determine whether the label 'parental alienation' can be applied."*

The Family Justice Council Guidance on alienating behaviour provides comprehensive information on how the courts approach these issues and as such should be read alongside this guidance. The guidance states: *"In some instances, the court may direct Cafcass / Cafcass Cymru or a social worker to meet with the child/children to determine the child's perspective. In cases where the child's view is unclear or unknown and where there are no allegations or evidence of behaviour by either party that might justify the child's unwillingness to see or stay with a parent, consider directing a Section 7 report with a specific direction for an enquiry as to those issues.*

Cafcass / Cafcass Cymru are not, however, arbiters of fact. It is a judicial function to determine the factual issues in the case. The court and Cafcass / Cafcass Cymru must remain mindful that children can form negative views about a parent without influence or manipulation from the other parent." (Family Justice Council, 2024, p. 12, para 40 and 41).

When a child does not want to see a parent, the parent's reactions to this frequently become blaming and highly contested. The reaction to these adult positions by professionals within the court system can mean that focus on what is happening for a child is lost. This frequently results in protracted proceedings and unacceptable delay for children.

It results in children's voices being silenced and their experiences being lost sight of. This guidance therefore emphasises the need for early identification of the impact of these circumstances and the risk of harm for children, and the need for confidence in early assessment and recommendations which are fully supported by evidence-based reasons.

Given the complexity of assessing the reasons why a child is rejecting a parent and the impact of potentially harmful parental behaviour as well as the risk of professional and court involvement exacerbating the impact rather than lessening this, it's vital to provide professionals and families with guidance that is reliable, and which summarises the available research and case law. This guidance aims to achieve this.

FCAs should use this guidance to develop their analysis and seek reflective supervision as required in the [Cafcass management support, supervision, and oversight policy](#).

Summary of Key Points

Sequence of the assessment.

The first step in assessing the reasons for a child not wanting to spend time with a parent is to meet that child and understand what has happened and is happening to them, considering whether domestic abuse or other forms of harmful parenting are the cause. Use the [domestic abuse practice policy](#), [Domestic abuse practice pathway and guidance](#) and the [harmful conflict guidance](#), to guide your assessment and the practice aids to gather information, analyse this and inform your recommendations.

Children's rights to be heard and understood.

- Children should always be given the opportunity to express their views in their own proceedings. It is their right to do so.
- When children are assessed as victims of domestic abuse, as opposed to merely having 'witnessed' it, then they are to be assessed as having the rights of victims.
- They should always be listened to, have their words directly reported in the report to court, and have their response to the recommendations recorded in the report, however, the expressed views of children are not necessarily determinative of their best interests.
- This fundamental cornerstone of practice does not change, even in a situation where there is a concern that the child has been manipulated or coerced into expressing views which mirror those of a parent.
- Children's wishes, feelings and behaviour should be considered in the context of what is expected for a child's age, developmental stage, and the family's socio-cultural-religious norms, as well as what we know about their lived experiences.

Understanding the reasons for a child not wanting to see a parent.

- There should be no label quickly applied to explain the issue, as there are many reasons that may account for the child not wanting to spend time with a parent. There may be more than one reason for each child.
- Refer to [Cafcass' domestic abuse practice policy](#) which states: *"When assessing the reasons why a child does not want to see a parent following separation, especially when a parent says they are experiencing alienating behaviours, practitioners must first consider whether the cause of this refusal is because the child is a victim of domestic abuse and harmful parenting or if there are other reasons for the child not wanting to spend time with that parent."*
- When children are refusing or resisting spending time with a parent, the following factors, or a combination of them must be considered in understanding the reasons for these views:
 - Being frightened of a parent due to experiencing domestic abuse, or a response to a parent's abusive behaviour, including sexual abuse, physical abuse, or neglect. The [Cafcass Child Safeguarding Policy](#) must be followed. Also use the guidance

- in the [child safeguarding section](#) of the [Child Impact Assessment Framework](#).
- It may be an expectable and developmentally appropriate reaction to separation from a main caregiver.
 - Anger at the parent who has left, dislike of a parent or their new circumstances or new partner.
 - It may be due to an alignment with a parent.
 - It may result from protracted exposure to parental conflict before and after separation. In this situation practitioners should refer to the guidance in the [harmful conflict section](#) of the [Child Impact Assessment Framework](#).
 - It may be that parental behaviours which seek to minimise or curtail the relationship between the other parent and child are taking place and these are influencing the child.
- If there has been domestic abuse, and the child as a victim of this domestic abuse does not want to spend time with a parent, then the reason for the child not wanting to see a parent should be respected and acted on. Children in this situation should not be mistakenly identified as being harmed by alienating behaviour.
 - If the child or the parent they live with has **not been the victim of domestic abuse** and there are no understandable reasons, which are in line with what is known about the child's experience for why the child does not want to spend time with a parent, then consideration should be given to whether alienating behaviour may be the reason, and whether this may amount to being emotionally abusive. Children in this situation should not be mistakenly identified as being harmed by domestic abuse.

Considering recommendations for a change of parent with whom a child should live

- If the assessment has resulted in a conclusion that a child is being harmed by manipulative or alienating behaviour, consideration should be given to the need for supervision in line with the [Management support, supervision and oversight policy](#) and a referral to the local authority, 16a risk assessment to the court and / or s.37 recommendation, in line with the [child safeguarding policy](#).
- All these steps should be considered before making a recommendation to change the primary place of residence of a child from one parent to the other.
- The significance of such a recommendation on the child should not be underestimated.
- Within these considerations, there should be full reference to the impact of change on that child, as set out in the Welfare Checklist.
- It is the court's role to determine the facts, see paragraph 40 and 41 of the [Family Justice Council Guidance on alienating behaviours](#).

Use of experts and case law

- Courts rely on Cafcass and local authority social workers to provide social work analysis to shine a light of the child's experiences and to help them make decisions in their best interests, as well as to support determination of disputed facts.
- Cafcass practitioners should review and act on the relevant guidance notes in the [Family Justice Council Guidance](#) on the use of experts.

- If the need for additional expert psychological assessment and advice is identified, only HCPC Registered psychologists have the relevant clinical experience and training to conduct psychological assessments of people.
- There is inherent risk of confirmatory bias if instructions and assessments are framed solely in terms of allegations of alienating behaviours.

Working with family members and reporting to court

- The [Together practice framework](#) is a restorative framework which emphasises the need for respectful relationships, being honest, clear, and transparent. Assessments and proceedings themselves can be used as a way of supporting parents to understand the impact of their behaviours on their child and to bring about positive change.
- The paucity and lack of availability of effective therapeutic options to support positive change is an ongoing problem with no clear remedy at this point in time. This exacerbates the difficulties for Cafcass, Local Authorities and the courts and achieving beneficial outcomes in a time scale in line with the child's needs.
- Given the complexity of the issues and the life changing consequences of decisions, the pros and cons of each option for the child must be carefully set out and analysed in making recommendations (in line with point 3 of the Welfare Checklist (Children Act, 1989), regarding impact of a change in arrangements).

Cafcass' role in minimising delay

- It is important for early assessment of harm and risk of harm to result in confident, and evidence informed recommendations at both the Work to First Hearing, and later stages if we are to support courts to avoid drift and delay and repeat assessments.
- In the context of continuing delays in the family court experienced by families it is important to keep in touch with the child during proceedings and to update assessments to consider whether risks arising from the child spending time with or not spending time with their parent have changed throughout proceedings and the impact of this on the child.
- Practitioners should consider the use of story boards as way to support families to communicate clearly with children, and the child impact timeline, which acts as a chronology.
- In planning to avoid delay, the Assessment and Child's plan is an essential tool to consider the impact of interim arrangements, to think about all potential sources of harm early in the proceedings, to gather all relevant information early and to consider the need for the appointment of a Rule 16.4 Children's Guardian early. The Assessment and Child's Plan should also be promptly reviewed where new information is available, where new planning is required, to ensure robust oversight of possible risk of delay occurring.

Guide to Assessment

The guidance should be considered in conjunction with other guidance in [the Child Impact Assessment Framework](#), namely [resources for direct work with children](#), resources for supporting the [child safeguarding policy](#), the [domestic abuse practice policy](#), the [domestic abuse practice pathway and guidance](#) and the [guidance on conflict which is harmful to the child](#). Links to these sections of the Child Impact Assessment Framework are provided where relevant.

1. What children have told us

The FJYPB have created a Practitioner Guide for arranging Safe Family Time, reflecting on their personal experiences and sharing what helps them feel safe and secure and things they would like practitioners to consider when understanding their wishes and feelings about family time and making recommendations for their time with a parent as part of family court proceedings.

Although this guidance does not relate exclusively to situations where a child does not want to spend family time with a parent, it provides an essential guide to our work with children in this circumstance and supports thinking about how to make recommendations which are grounded in the child's experiences and daily lives. The FJYPB practitioner guidance on safe family time can be found [here](#).

2. Understanding what has happened and is happening to the child

Understanding children's unique experience in the culture of their family and potential for misinterpretation of a child's presentation.

- In many countries, domestic abuse is not a criminal offence and in England legislation has only recently confirmed that both adults and children are victims of domestic abuse in law ([Domestic Abuse Act 2021](#)).
- The cultural context and beliefs of the family, for example common beliefs about who should care for children after separation and should both parents continue to play a role or should one parent take decisions and exclude the other, should be understood as part of the assessment:
- To illustrate the importance of this, here is an example from practice where the children's experience of domestic abuse was mistakenly identified as alienating behaviour:
 - During their assessment the children were volunteering information to professionals who met them about violent incidents in their home and in the homes of their friends. They talked openly and described serious incidents that

they had seen. They did so in a way that was observed to show little emotion or concern, and in a way that could be considered to be scripted.

- In the context of the proceedings where the father was stating that the children were being turned against him by their mother, this led the Family Court Adviser to be concerned about the children's presentation. It needed to be considered that they might be repeating what they had heard or talking of something that they had been asked to say or didn't have any real meaning for them.
- However, for children who have repeatedly experienced domestic abuse, and it has been part of their everyday lives it is important to be aware that they might well share their real experiences, without showing any emotions or becoming distressed.
- The way they speak about their experiences is likely to be influenced by the trauma they had experienced and the culturally based beliefs and practices and what they see as 'normal' behaviour in their home and in their community.
- Care should be taken for the child's presentation to be understood in the cultural and wider context of their experiences and not to be seen too narrowly through the lens of the parental dispute being played out through the family court.
- The presentations of both child and adult victims of domestic abuse need to be understood within the context of trauma resulting from their experiences.

At both Work to First Hearing and Work After First Hearing stages of assessment:

- Consider the cultural context of the family and how this may impact how parents and children perceive each other's behaviour and their own.
- It is also important for FCAs to be aware of their own cultural beliefs and values and how they can be different from other cultures. Use reflective supervision to consider these issues.
- Consider the child's additional needs, communication needs, disability and neurodiversity. There are resources to support you gather information about all children's lives in the [direct work section](#) of the Child Impact Assessment Framework.

Important Notes:

- Parents who are **coercively controlling** may exercise this coercion in respect of children to try and undermine the child's relationship with the other (victim of domestic abuse) parent. In practice this may result in a child identifying with the coercively controlling parent and rejecting the other parents and any brothers and sisters who remain living with that parent.
- Claims of alienating behaviours of one parent against the child are very frequently used by perpetrators of domestic abuse within proceedings to continue to abuse and is a form of coercive control used to deflect the court's attention.
- The increasing number of adults stating they are the victim of alienating behaviours in the family courts and the risk of over identification, provides a further reason for balanced, nuanced, child-centred guidance drawing on as wide a knowledge base as possible. See article by [Linda Neilson, 'Parental Alienation Empirical Analysis: Child Best Interests or Parental Rights,' 2018.](#)

3. The child's age and stage of development and previous relationships

Assess the child's experiences of being cared for and the relationship they have had with each parent:

- In meeting with the parents to explore how relationships have worked in the family, set clear expectations that the focus of your work will be on the impact for the child and that you will work with them to understand the impact of their behaviour on the child and what can be achieved to improve this.
- **Use your assessment and child's plan** to think about how you will gather information from parents, children and professionals to answer the following questions:
 - Was there a pre-existing relationship with the parent being resisted? If so, what was the quality of this?
 - Has the quality of the relationship deteriorated post-separation?
 - How were the parenting tasks and responsibilities shared before separation? (to understand how the child perceived how they were cared for)
 - What is the capacity of each parent to meet the child's developmental needs, particularly their emotional needs, considering the separation?
 - Does the child have any additional or complex needs? If so, what has been the role of each parent in meeting these needs and what will these roles be in the future?

Consider the impact of parental behaviour through the stages of childhood.

Young children:

- Tend to see things in concrete terms and may begin to blame one parent for the split – but will take their lead from what their parents say, therefore parents must be mindful and careful about the messages they are giving.
- Often show distress as fear, anxiety, anger or sadness, and may show very clear signs that they are missing the absent parent, or they may want to show you they are on a parent's 'side'.
- May be worried about their main carer and agree to anything they say to reduce their own upset and anger.
- May be frightened of spending time with the other parent but not be able to express this clearly or freely.
- May show emotions through acting them out with an intensity unrelated to the context.
- May hold dreams and fantasies about their parents getting back together and wonder what they can do to make that happen, they may struggle to understand that this is a permanent change.
- May think that they might be able to bring my parents back together, or that they somehow caused their separation/divorce, which may affect my own emotional wellbeing.
- Are likely to be profoundly distressed and emotionally harmed, if they feel they will lose one parent if they do not reject the other.

Older children and teenagers:

- When parents argue, hate, and hurt one another, older children and teenagers may internalise their behaviours and voices and may model that into their own relationships,

rejecting a parent in the same way a parent has done, or being coercively controlling and aggressive in their own behaviour.

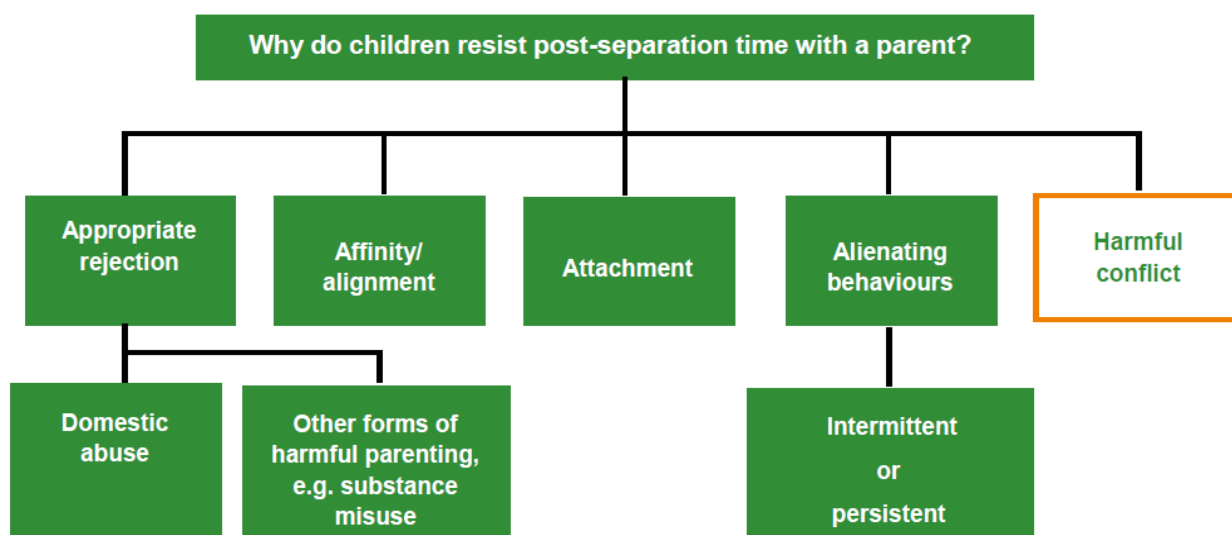
- May continue to be worried about their main carer and agree to anything they say to reduce their own upset and anger, they may become that parent's main source of support.
- May be frightened of spending time with the other parent but not be able to express this clearly or freely.
- May begin to feel anger and blame one parent for the split and for 'messing up' their life— but they will take their lead from what their parents say, the parents must be mindful and careful about messages they are giving.
- May feel ashamed or embarrassed about the separation/divorce or by the behaviour of a parent. Any public display of parental disagreement is extremely uncomfortable.

4. Understanding the reasons why a child does not want to spend time with a parent.

If the specific focus of your assessment is **to understand the reasons why a child does not want to spend time with a parent**, refer to the guidance below.

- Your analysis and understanding of the reasons for a child not wanting to see a parent can be supported by thinking about the following model:

The four As: appropriate rejection, alignment/affinity, attachment, or alienating behaviours (adapted from Fidler, Bala & Saini, 2013), as set out in the diagram and explained further in the information below.



Please note: Harmful conflict

The child may also refuse or resist a parent as a response to conflict. Kelly & Johnston (2001) identified that “**resistance can be rooted primarily in the high-conflict marriage and divorce inability to cope with the high-conflict transition**.” If this is identified as a factor at any point refer to [the tools and guidance on harmful parental conflict](#), which includes information about interventions aimed at reducing parental conflict and the impact on children.

Definition: Appropriate rejection due to domestic abuse, other forms of Violence Against Women and Girls such as so-called 'honour-based abuse', Female Genital Mutilation, physical abuse, rape, neglect or other concerns such as parental substance misuse.

Behavioural indicators to consider:

- There are concerns and / or evidence of abuse or neglect. Refer to the practice aids and resources in the [Safeguarding Children](#) section of CIAF.
- There are concerns or evidence of **domestic abuse**. If domestic abuse, including coercive control, is a concern, refer to the [practice aids and guidance on domestic abuse](#) in the CIAF. This includes where the concerns are reported, present or suspected – either now or in the past.
- The child feels unsafe or very unhappy in the care of the other parent - these feelings should be explored with the child, gaining perspective of others who know the child.
- Rejection of the other parent is due to non-existent, interrupted, or minimal involvement, inexperience, or poor parenting which may or may not reach the level of abuse or neglect.

Next steps and support: Where these factors are present, the FCA should refer to the [domestic abuse practice policy](#) and undertake an assessment using the [practice aids and guidance on domestic abuse](#) and [safeguarding children](#) in the Child Impact Assessment Framework.

The FCA should also consider the need for the court to carry out a fact-finding hearing, see Cafcass' Finding of Fact guidance.

Definition: Affinity / alignment

Affinity is where the child may not have strong negative feelings for the other parent but prefers spending time with one parent (Fidler, Bala & Saini, 2013).

Alignment between a parent and child may develop at any point during the child/parent relationship as part of naturally occurring preferences or from the other parent's non-existent, interrupted, or minimal involvement, inexperience, or poor parenting (which does not reach the level of abuse or neglect).

Behavioural indicators to consider: Resisting a parent, particularly in the early stages after separation, could result from one or more forms of 'benign post-separation parental rejection,' such as dislike of tougher rules at one house, dislike of upheaval or anger at a departing parent (Clarkson & Clarkson, 2006).

- An alliance may occur because of the child's indignation at the departed parent's behaviour and resistance to seeing that parent may be entirely understandable, at least initially.
- Older children and teenagers may resist time with a parent as part of normal adolescent behaviour and exercising increased independence and personal choice.

- Brothers and sisters may have different reasons for their acceptance or rejection of time with a parent.
- When resistance occurs for benign reasons, separated parents can mistakenly blame each other.

Next steps and support: If the reasons for the child's resistance indicates affinity/alignment, explain this to the parents and encourage them to reflect on the impact of their behaviour on their child.

- Consider how safety planning with the child and parents can support parents to reach a cooperative plan beyond the court proceedings.
- Consider local and online options for signposting the parents and children to for support and guidance on post-separation parenting.
- Complete a Parenting Plan as part of Planning Together for Children.

Definition: attachment

Age or gender appropriate reactions for resisting time with a parent for attachment reasons, including separation anxiety (Asen & Morris 2020).

Behavioural indicators to consider: From an attachment perspective, a child or young person's distress and hostility to the parent they don't live with may be interpreted as an attempt to activate care-giving responses from the other parent. If the child does not receive parent A's endorsement of parent B, it triggers 'proximity-seeking behaviours' in the child towards parent A. Proximity seeking behaviours could include crying, clinging, defiantly rejecting the other parent, aggression, withdrawing or attentively caring for Parent A.

- The child is not likely to have conscious awareness of their attachment behaviours: children do not always 'know' that they are using such strategies to protect their relationship with their primary caregiver.
- Consider the possibility that the child's behaviour and feelings may be distorted by the attachment strategy of the child as their means of maintaining loyalty to or eliciting care from the parent they live with.
- The child may feel that receiving Parent A's love and approval is 'conditional' on them rejecting Parent B.

Next steps and support: If the reasons for the child's resistance indicates attachment issues as a cause, explain this to the parents. Encourage them to reflect on how their behaviour affects their child and to think about how, for example, hand over arrangements or frequency or length of time with the other parent may be adapted to support the child.

- Consider local or online support options and use of the Parenting Plan as part of Planning Together for Children.

(With thanks to Asen & Morris 2020, for contribution to this section).

5. Impact of alienating behaviour on the child

Identify and assess the impact of alienating behaviours on the child, including emotional harm and consideration of the need for a referral to the local authority

- Cafcass does not use the term 'parental alienation'. Instead, the term 'alienating behaviour' is used to describe circumstances where there is an ongoing pattern of negative attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of one parent which have the potential or intent to undermine or obstruct the child's relationship with the other parent.
- The Family Justice Council define Alienating Behaviours as "psychologically manipulative behaviours, intended or otherwise, by a parent towards a child which have resulted in the child's reluctance, resistance or refusal to spend time with the other parent" (Family Justice Council, 2024).
- This is one of several reasons why a child may not want to see a parent post-separation.
- FCAs are required to clearly distinguish between harmful conflict, domestic abuse and alienating behaviours which lead to resistance to contact that is hard to explain, when there was a previously beneficial relationship.
- All genders can demonstrate alienating behaviours. While alienating behaviours can be demonstrated solely by one parent, it may be a combination of child and adult behaviours and attitudes, with both parents playing a role, that lead to the child rejecting or resisting spending time with one parent. The role of new partners/stepparents also needs to be taken into consideration.
- Some parents, who are unwilling to allow the child to spend time with the other parent may endeavour to delay proceedings.
- They may adopt behaviours which include negative attitudes and beliefs that denigrate, demean, malign, ridicule or dismiss the child's other parent. It includes conveying false beliefs or stories to, and withholding positive information from, the child about the other parent together with the relative absence of observable positive attitudes and behaviours (Johnston and Sullivan, 2020).
- They can also include spurning, isolating, and not responding appropriately to the child's emotional needs. These tactics can foster a false belief that the parent who has been subject to the alienating behaviour is dangerous or unworthy. Children may adapt their own behaviours and feelings to the alienating parent to ensure that their attachment needs are met (Baker, 2010).
- Even in the most extreme cases where a child is subject to alienating behaviours, the child may hold strong views of their own in addition to those they may have been coached to believe.
- Where a child is subject to alienating behaviours, it may be in their interests for the authority of the court to be used to work towards restoring the relationship, although we are aware of how difficult this can be. The court must carefully balance its decisions to support a safe plan being in place for both children and adults, for children to be able to maintain positive relationships with both parents where this is considered safe and, in the child's best interests.
- Information on the history and context of the concept of alienating behaviour can be found in the article: [Kelly, J., & Johnston, J. \(2001\). The alienated child: a reformulation of parental alienation syndrome. Family Court Review, 39\(3\), pp.249-266.](#)

Consider the impact for each child:

- Children subject to alienating behaviours can be at risk of short-term emotional distress and long-term adjustment difficulties (Fidler, Bala & Saini, 2013). Children can develop distorted belief systems that impact on their internal working models of self and others. This has the capacity to negatively impact the child's life even through to adulthood and beyond.
- Where this amounts to the child being emotionally harmed, a referral to the Local Authority, detailing the impact on the child's safety and welfare should be considered with a manager.

The potential impact on the child and their longer-term outcomes include:

- Loss of important relationships with a parent and/or wider family. For example, grandparents can be an important source of support for their grandchildren in the often-difficult time during and after parents' divorce or separation (Jappens, 2018). They can provide important insights into what a child's day-to-day life is like (their lived experiences). Grandchild–grandparent relationships can be hampered or even totally lost when parents separate, especially when alienating behaviours are present. It is therefore important to consider the dynamics between the family and their wider network, how they get on with, support and influence each other.
- The child may dislike the traits that they have inherited from the alienated parent and belief that they must be 'bad' if they share them.
- Low self-esteem and a belief that they are unloved by the alienated parent.
- Experience of severe guilt or betrayal in late adolescence and adulthood for rejecting a parent and others.
- Mental health difficulties, such as depression or anxiety.
- Although these negative long-term consequences have been reported by adults who experienced alienating behaviours in their childhood, data on prevalence is not reliably available and empirical findings about outcomes are mixed and hampered by being retrospective and not taking account of other potential explanatory factors (Drozdz, Saini & Olesen, 2016).
- Many parents and grandparents who believe they were alienated as children report lifelong impact on their mental health and their relationships. Prof. Ben Hine discusses this in Chapter 5 of his book. Parental Alienation: A Contemporary Guide for Parents, Practitioners, and Policymakers (Hine, 2023).
- Not all children exposed to alienating behaviour become alienated.
- Alienating behaviour can have a varying impact on each individual child; therefore, it is important that each individual child's needs are assessed separately from their brothers and sisters, whilst also considering the family dynamic.

Experiences of young people in their own words:

Jane: "I live with my dad now, but my sister still lives with our mum. It's my mum who has done things like change my sister's surname and stop contact between my sister and my dad's extended family who have not seen her since around 2018. She took my sister to court hearings and told her what to say. My sister would throw Christmas presents and birthday presents back in my dad's face with a grin on hers. I see my dad's pain and hurt at not seeing my sister."

Ayesha: "Being exposed to alienating behaviours feels like you've heard so many things from one [parent] it starts to become believable. Although you don't know the truth, you're made to feel like it's the only truth. You're constantly made to feel as if the other parent hates you, wants nothing to do with you. Badmouthing one another, and others getting involved agreeing [with them]. When you walk around the streets on your own, you always see that perfect family: mum, dad and two children, and you think to yourself that it'll never be you."

Consider both parent's roles and behaviour and those of others who know the child and the child's individual characteristics.

- Both parents may contribute through their behaviour to the child being alienated from one parent. For example, angry reactions by a rejected parent could result in negative views of that parent being reinforced.
- Family members, friends, professionals, and the court (particularly when proceedings are protracted), can become entangled in the harmful impact on the child. Consider what contribution people in the child's network are making. This could be a positive support for the child or more negative.
- Persistent adult behaviour, which has a cumulative effect, is likely to have more impact on the child than single incidents. How emotionally charged the alienating comments and behaviours are will also influence the degree of impact on the child.
- In gathering the evidence base for child impact consider the child's individual characteristics, personality and stage of development. Consider using [Calder's Resilience and Vulnerability Matrix](#) an analytical tool which can be used to explore the specific resilience and vulnerability factors for each individual child.
- Are arrangements for handovers safe and helpful for the child? Is the child unhelpfully influenced by who is present?
- Consider again whether there are indicators that allegations of alienating behaviours are being made as a form of post-separation abuse, as part of coercive and controlling behaviour toward both the other parent and/or the child.

6. Use of Experts²

- The decision as to whether to instruct an expert within family proceedings is the decision of the court.
- Cafcass practitioners should review and act on the relevant guidance notes in the [Family Justice Council Guidance](#) on the use of experts.
- This guidance is for court professionals in the appointment of expert witnesses in cases where there are allegations of alienating behaviours, avoiding conflicts of interest where the appointed expert recommends intervention or therapy that they or an associate would benefit financially from delivering. It highlighted that only Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) Registered psychologists have the relevant clinical experience and training to conduct psychological assessments of people and the inherent risk of confirmatory bias if instructions and assessments are framed solely in terms of allegations of alienating behaviours.
- Individuals identifying themselves as parental alienation 'experts' are unregulated and should not be appointed as psychological experts. Registered Psychologist experts are the only statutorily regulated psychologist experts in UK. The guidance states that only HCPC regulated psychologists can assess, diagnose, and recommend treatment/therapy. These are: Clinical Psychologists, Educational Psychologists, Counselling Psychologists and Forensic Psychologists
- The term 'Chartered psychologist' does not tell you their training or skills, it is non-regulatory and only applicable to academics.
- Cafcass practitioners are experts in analysing the needs of children and their families and they can assist the court by keeping the child at the forefront of the proceedings, amplifying the child's voice and making clear recommendations, in the welfare interests of that child.
- If recommending an expert, it is important for practitioners to be clear the value that an expert assessment will add and to consider the potential delay to proceedings caused if an expert is recommended, this should be considered alongside the welfare principle.
- There should be a joint letter of instruction, agreed by all parties, with input from the Children's Guardian.

² 'This section relates solely to the use of experts if alienating behaviour has been assessed as harming the child.

7. Reflecting on your analysis, including potential sources of bias

When considering your conclusions or within reflective supervision, refer to these points and questions:

- Reflect on your analysis of the reason for the child not wanting to spend time with a parent.
- Refer to the practice aids and guidance used and summarise what they have told you and what this means for the child.
- What is the specific risk to the child? Is it an understandable response by the child that should be respected? Is the risk that their relationship with a parent could be damaged beyond repair, for no good reason other than the abusive alienating behaviour of another parent? Or is it that alienating behaviours is a factor, but is so deeply entrenched that reintroducing time with the other parent a child against their expressed wishes would be harmful?
- Consider all possible forms of bias, including gender bias and the impact of personal and cultural norms on your thinking.
- Do you feel you have been disproportionately influenced or 'coerced' by the behaviour of one or more of the parties?
- Have you retained your focus on the harm and risk of harm for the child, and tried to help the parents to do the same?

8. Reporting in the child's best interest, focusing on positive change for the child

Use a balance sheet approach to inform recommendations

- The assessment needs to consider the strengths and risks posed by both parents. We are seeking to ensure that a child has a beneficial relationship with both of their parents where it is likely to be safe to do so.
- Taking a balance sheet approach to the welfare analysis, that is a systematic review of pros and cons of each option (see 'Re B-S (Children) [2013] EWCA Civ 1146') is helpful in evaluating the impact on the child of all potentially realistic options. The balancing exercise should be carried out separately for each child.
- Options could include a) a recommendation for no family time, b) a change in where the child lives c) a shared living arrangement d) re-introduction of time with the other parent (a range of frequency and duration) e) no change in arrangements.
- The list below includes some of the key factors to consider in each balancing exercise:
 - The level of intentionality, persistence and intensity of the adult behaviour and the capacity of the parent to change this.
 - Did the child enjoy a previously positive relationship with the other parent?
 - Is that parent attuned to the child's needs? Is the child progressing well educationally, socially and emotionally in the current arrangements? If so, what is the detriment to the child of the loss of the parental relationship?

- How likely is this child able to cope with the change being considered?
- If a change of where the child lives is ordered by the court, will it be possible to retain positive elements of the child's relationship with the previous main carer?

Guidance on recommendations for the child when alienating behaviour is harming the child, or there is a risk of this harm

- Consider opportunities for the court to apply its authority in respect of [enforcing existing orders](#).
- Would a period of no 'time with' the parent who demonstrated alienating behaviours, encourage positive improvements in the relationship between the child in the new arrangement?
- What impact will a change have on the child's identity needs and in respect of the child's wider family networks and any cultural differences between the two households?
- If the change involves the separation or reunification of brothers and sisters, what impact will this have on each child?
- If you are considering an indirect form of contact to maintain the possibility of a future relationship with a parent, be specific about how realistic this is, exactly what form this indirect contact should take, for example, gifts, letters, video messages. Consider how the child will be reported to receive these and how the parent sending the communications will be supported to make sure they are appropriate.
- Specify how will the parent with whom the child lives will be expected to facilitate this indirect contact and how will an order to this effect be enforced?
- Consider the view of the FJYPB that there is no such thing as 'indirect contact' - all contact has an impact.
- If the recommendation is for transition to a parent they are not currently living with, it will need to be carefully considered and reviewed by the court and managed by the local authority.
- The court may consider ordering the local authority to report under s.37.
- A referral by Cafcass to the local authority will need to be considered along with a manager.
- Consideration of Cafcass 16A duty may also be relevant.
- Where a child has been taught by a parent that spending time with their other parent would be unsafe or undesirable, this can be very difficult to change. A parent not addressing this potentially involves a collusion with an emotionally abusive situation and a distorted world view. It reinforces avoidant behaviour and may disproportionately empower a child in a negative way. In any other circumstances a parent would be expected to help the child overcome something they were avoiding, for example if a child was resistant to attending school, the parent or carer would be expected to make every effort to understand the resistance and help the child overcome it.
- Despite these risks to the emotional wellbeing of the child, the risk of forcing them into time with the other parent may be higher. This assessment of competing risks needs to be carried out for each child.

- It can, very understandably, feel wholly unjust to a rejected parent. However, regardless of how they were formed, a child's wishes and feelings may be so entrenched against time spent with the other parent (and a change of where they live is also not viable), that time with that parent is not possible.

9. Case law and children's situations

Case law: With thanks to Cafcass Legal who have summarised some key case law, which are intended to support practitioners as they work to apply the principles derived from the cases in their practice: [Case Law Summaries on Alienating Behaviours](#)

Children's situations: A series of children's situations have been adapted from real examples. They aim to provide practitioners with practical examples of the often-complex issues that arise in understanding the reasons for children not wanting to spend time with a parent. These examples can be used in training and group supervision to aid discussions and reflections around specific practice areas: [Children's Situations](#)

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Guidance Owner	Assistant Director (Principal Social Worker)
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Version	2
Amended	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 'Children's resistance or refusal to spending time with a parent' guide has been updated and re-named the 'Understanding the reasons why a child does not want to spend family time with a parent' guide. • Updates throughout include bringing the guidance in line with the new Family Justice Guidance on alienating behaviours and Cafcass Domestic Abuse Practice policy. • Case law summaries and children's situations have been added. • Practice aids have been removed and incorporated into the guidance document.
Next review	July 2026