

TOP TEN TIPS WHEN A CHILD IS RESISTING CONTACT WITH A PARENT

Robin Deutsch, Ph.D.
Matthew Sullivan, Ph.D.

1. Most cases of “alienation” have more going on: alienation vs. estrangement. The most common case might be called “hybrid cases” and must be understood from a family system’s perspective
2. Always evaluate systemically, consider child development, parental abuse, parenting problems, the effects of highly conflict coparenting, contextual factors (litigation, financial issues, extended family, etc).
2. Reunification with the non-custodial parent is not the primary goal of intervention, but a by-product of individual and relationship work with family members.
3. Clear court orders for access and intervention are necessary but not sufficient for effective intervention:
 - Mandate information exchange, coparent structures you would expect in shared legal custody, regardless of the physical custody timeshare (even if no contact is occurring with a rejected parent).
4. External influences cannot mirror the conflicted process of the family system: Collaborative professional intervention is necessary for change. Ongoing adversarial legal processes tend to be detrimental to successful outcomes.
5. Any mental health professional in the community won't do: Professional who work in these cases need to have specialized experience and skill.
6. Custody change requires risk analysis and should not be a punitive measure or based only on the evidence of a parent engaging in alienation.
7. An ounce of early intervention when evidence of a child resisting visitation is worth a pound of legal and mental health interventions when these problems become entrenched.
8. Parenting Coordination is almost always a necessary role for case management in these cases, unless the judicial officer is willing and able to intensively manage the case.
9. Some coercive court authority is often needed to support compliance with treatment and motivation (risk of court sanctions) if court ordered contact is not occurring.
10. Sometimes a parting message with an open door is the least detrimental alternative.

March, 2014