

Avoiding Parental Alienation

By Susan Gammage ¹

With the high incidence of divorce these days; it's becoming quite common for one parent to pit their children another against the other, causing the child to express unjustified hatred or unreasonably strong dislike of one parent, making access by the rejected parent difficult or impossible. These feelings can be caused by negative comments by the other parent or grandparents.

This can occur when one parent actively undermines the other by making derogatory remarks, telling the child that the other parent is responsible for the separation, or telling the child that the other parent is the cause of financial difficulties. Indirect alienation occurs when one parent fails to support access or contact with the other parent or tacitly accepts the child's negative behaviour and comments towards the other. For more information about the founding of a parental alienation awareness group see:

https://canadiancrc.com/PARENTAL-ALIENATION-CANADA/Parental_Alienation_Awareness_Day_April_25.aspx

And to see more resources explore: <https://pasg.info/>

A Bahá'í friend once told me:

Our Assembly was discussing my divorce and considering the balance of rights and responsibilities of the parents when one of the members said: "We all know what the writings say about mothers..."

The common "misunderstanding is that men could be chucked to the trash and it wouldn't affect the children much, since the mother's role is so high and important and predominant!

We simply don't understand the Writings. ... Also of help is the 1990 memorandum from the BWC on Preserving Baha'i Marriages as it emphasizes a new context of sanctity for marriage.²

The Kitáb-i-Aqdas says that if a parent fails in the discharge of their parental responsibilities then it is the duty of the Assembly to assume these responsibilities.

Another friend asked me if I had any information or had come across grandparents who are dealing with grandparent alienation.

When you consider that the purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation was to bring unity to the world, it's obvious that any actions taken to alienate a parent or grandparent from a child is against the Bahá'í Teachings. Let's look specifically at the guidance to see what it says.

Effects on the Children:

¹ Prepared by David Bowie (2023) for posting, with permission of author, at https://bahai-library.com/gammage_various_essays

² <https://bahaimarriage.net/PreservingBahaMarriagesMemoResearchDept1990.pdf>

Divorce WILL influence your children's lives and happiness:

He was very sorry to hear that you and your husband are still so unhappy together. It is always a source of sorrow in life when married people cannot get on well together, but the Guardian feels that you and your husband, in contemplating divorce, should think of the future of your children and how this major step on your part will influence their lives and happiness. If you feel the need of advice and consultation he suggests you consult your Local Assembly; your fellow Bahá'ís will surely do all they can to counsel and help you, protect your interests and those of the Cause. (Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 392, #1308)

Young minds ARE affected by the choices parents make for their own lives:

What needs to be appreciated in this respect is the extent to which young minds are affected by the choices parents make for their own lives, when, no matter how unintentionally, no matter how innocently, such choices condone the passions of the world—its admiration for power, its adoration of status, its love of luxuries, its attachment to frivolous pursuits, its glorification of violence, and its obsession with self-gratification. (Universal House of Justice, to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 28 Dec. 2010, #33)

Divorce concerns the children's entire future and their attitudes towards marriage:

The presence of children, as a factor in divorce, cannot be ignored, for surely it places an even greater weight of moral responsibility on the man and wife in considering such a step. Divorce under such circumstances no longer just concerns them and their desires and feelings but also concerns the children's entire future and their own attitude towards marriage. (Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 392, #1309)

All children of divorced parents suffer from conflicting loyalties, for they are deprived of the blessing of a father and a mother in one home, to look after their interests and love them jointly:

He feels that you should by all means make every effort to hold your marriage together, especially for the sake of the children, who, like all children of divorced parents, cannot but suffer from conflicting loyalties, for they are deprived of the blessing of a father and a mother in one home, to look after their interests and love them jointly. (Shoghi Effendi, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 227, #79)

Unity:

The unity of the family should take priority over any other consideration:

In considering the problems that you and your wife are experiencing, the House of Justice points out that the unity of your family should take priority over any other

consideration. Bahá'u'lláh came to bring unity to the world, and a fundamental unity is that of the family. Therefore, we must believe that the Faith is intended to strengthen the family, not weaken it. (Universal House of Justice, The Compilation of Compilations vol. II, p. 453, #2336)

Where unity exists in a given family:

- everyone makes progress
- they prosper
- their concerns are in order
- they enjoy comfort and tranquillity
- they are secure
- their position is assured
- they come to be envied by all

Note ye how easily, where unity existeth in a given family, the affairs of that family are conducted; what progress the members of that family make, how they prosper in the world. Their concerns are in order, they enjoy comfort and tranquillity, they are secure, their position is assured, they come to be envied by all. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 279)

Without unity, countless ills are the consequence:

...countless ills, which in the final analysis, are the consequences of the disunity afflicting the human family. (The Universal House of Justice, Century of Light, p. 97)

Nothing attracts God's blessings and grace more than unity and nothing is more destructive than divisions and misunderstandings:

Nothing will attract God's blessings and grace more than the unity of the friends, and nothing is more destructive of their highest purpose than divisions and misunderstandings. Cling therefore to unity if you desire to succeed and abide by the will of your Lord Bahá'u'lláh; for that is the true objective of His Mission in this world. (Shoghi Effendi, The Compilation of Compilations vol II, p. 421, #2252)

Parents with full custody, who belittle the importance to the Bahá'í laws and teachings, contribute to the corrosive forces which are so rapidly destroying home life and the beauty of family relationships, and tear down the moral structure of society:

People separated from each other, especially if one of them has had full custody of the children are only too willing to belittle the importance to the Bahá'í laws and teachings, combat these corrosive forces which are so rapidly destroying home life and the beauty of family relationships, and tearing down the moral structure of society. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 369, #1235)

Education

The root cause of all wrongdoing is lack of education. Good character must be taught:

The root cause of wrongdoing is ignorance, and we must therefore hold fast to the tools of perception and knowledge. Good character must be taught. Light must be spread afar, so that, in the school of humanity, all may acquire the heavenly characteristics of the spirit, and see for themselves beyond any doubt that there is no fiercer hell, no more fiery abyss, than to possess a character that is evil and unsound; no more darksome pit nor loathsome torment than to show forth qualities which deserve to be condemned. (Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 136)

Single parents often need training in how to interact effectively with the estranged parent, if there is voluntary or mandated contact, as well as education in what the needs of the children are in relation to the attitudes and behaviors of the parents:

Single parents often need training in how to be a single parent and how to interact effectively with the estranged parent, if there is voluntary or mandated contact, as well as education in what the needs of the children are in relation to the attitudes and behaviors of the parents. (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence, p. 130)

Rights and Responsibilities:

Every member of the family has rights which must not be transgressed and the unity of the family must be sustained:

The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed. The rights of the son, the father, the mother—none of them must be transgressed, none of them must be arbitrary. Just as the son has certain obligations to his father, the father, likewise, has certain obligations to his son. The mother, the sister and other members of the household have certain prerogatives. All these rights and prerogatives must be conserved, yet the unity of the family must be sustained. The injury of one shall be considered the injury of all; the comfort of each, the comfort of all; the honor of one, the honor of all. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 168)

The task of bringing up a Bahá'í child is the chief responsibility of the mother:

The task of bringing up a Bahá'í child, as emphasized time and again in Bahá'í Writings, is the chief responsibility of the mother, whose unique privilege is indeed to create in her home such conditions as would be the most conducive to both his material and spiritual welfare and advancement.

The mother has a right to be financially supported by her husband:

A corollary of this responsibility of the mother is her right to be supported by her husband—a husband has no explicit right to be supported by his wife. (Messages From The Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 471)

The father has a responsibility for education his child, and if he fails to exercise it forfeits his rights of fatherhood:

...although the mother is the first educator of the child, and the most important formative influence in his development, the father also has the responsibility of educating his children, and this responsibility is so weighty that Bahá'u'lláh has stated that a father who fails to exercise it forfeits his rights of fatherhood. (Messages From The Universal House of Justice: 1963-1986, p. 472)

It is intended that, if possible, the mother should be with the baby to train and nurture it in its earliest days and months, during this intensely formative time when it is growing and developing faster than it ever will again during the whole of its life. As the child grows older and more independent, the father can play a greater role:

The great importance attached to the mother's role derives from the fact that she is the first educator of the child. Her attitude, her prayers, even what she eats and her physical condition have a great influence on the child when it is still in womb. When the child is born, it is she who has been endowed by God with the milk which is the first food designed for it, and it is intended that, if possible, she should be with the baby to train and nurture it in its earliest days and months. This does not mean that the father does not also love, pray for, and care for his baby, but as he has the primary responsibility of providing for the family, his time to be with his child is usually limited, while the mother is usually closely associated with the baby during this intensely formative time when it is growing and developing faster than it ever will again during the whole of its life. As the child grows older and more independent, the relative nature of its relationship with its mother and father modifies and the father can play a greater role. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 627, #2120)

Consultation:

Family consultation employing full and frank discussion, and animated by awareness of the need for moderation and balance, can be the panacea for domestic conflict:

Bahá'u'lláh also stressed the importance of consultation. We should not think this worthwhile method of seeking solutions is confined to the administrative institutions of the Cause. Family consultation employing full and frank discussion, and animated by awareness of the need for moderation and balance, can be the panacea for domestic conflict. Wives should not attempt to dominate their husbands, nor husbands their wives. (Universal House of Justice, The Compilation of Compilations vol II, p. 453, #2336)

Husbands and wives should seek counsel from those they trust and in whose sincerity and sound judgement they have confidence:

You have asked, however, for specific rules of conduct to govern the relationships of husbands and wives ... If, God forbid, they fail to agree, and their disagreement leads to estrangement, they should seek counsel from those they trust and in whose sincerity and sound judgement they have confidence, in order to preserve and strengthen their ties as a united family. (Universal House of Justice, The Compilation of Compilations vol II, p. 456, #2341)

Include children in family consultations:

You mention your concern over your eldest daughter. It is suggested that you include her and perhaps your younger children in family consultations. As Bahá'ís we understand the importance of the consultative process and we should not feel it is to be used only by the Spiritual Assemblies. (Universal House of Justice, The Compilation of Compilations vol II, p. 453, #2337)

The keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation:

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, not arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. (Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'í Administration, p. 63)

The greatest means for the union and harmony of all is Spiritual Meetings which are a magnet for divine confirmations:

To be brief, it hath been decided by the Desire of God that union and harmony may day by day increase among the friends of God and the maid-servants of the Merciful One, in the West. Not until this is realized will the affairs advance by any means whatever! And the greatest means for the union and harmony of all is Spiritual Meetings. This matter is very important and is as a magnet for divine confirmation. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 413)

There are times when a wife should defer to her husband, and times when a husband should defer to his wife:

In any group, however loving the consultation, there are nevertheless points on which, from time to time, agreement cannot be reached. In a Spiritual Assembly this dilemma is resolved by a majority vote. There can, however, be no majority where only two parties are involved, as in the case of a husband and wife. There are, therefore, times when a wife should defer to her husband, and times when a husband should defer to his wife, but neither should ever unjustly dominate the other. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 226, #751)

Custody Agreements:

It is preferable that the couple amicably agree on the custody of the children and submit their agreement to the Assembly for endorsement:

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...

2.3 Usually custody arrangements continue until the child comes of age unless, of course, new circumstances transpire during this period which call for a review of the arrangements. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 402, #1336)

This agreement should be guided by the following principles extracted from guidance from Universal House of Justice, dated Jan 5 1983 found in, Lights of Guidance, p. 402, #1336:

- Normally in the case of very young children custody is given to the mother
- Regardless of which parent is given custody, the children should be educated to develop a proper Bahá'í attitude towards, and due regard for, both parents.
- Fair and practical arrangements should be made to protect the rights of the parent not having custody to associate with the children and spend time with them
- Usually custody arrangements continue until the child comes of age unless, of course, new circumstances transpire during this period which call for a review of the arrangements.

Proper Attitudes:

Harmony, unity and love are held up as the highest ideals in human relationships:

Wherever there is a Bahá'í family, those concerned should by all means do all they can to preserve it, because divorce is strongly condemned in the Teachings whereas harmony, unity and love are held up as the highest ideals in human relationships. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 394, 1313)

Strife and dissension are entirely unworthy of our station:

With the utmost unity, and in a spirit of perfect fellowship, exert yourselves, that ye may be enabled to achieve that which beseemeth this Day of God. Verily I say, strife and dissension, and whatsoever the mind of man abhorreth are entirely unworthy of his station. (Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XCVI, p. 196)

Neither husband nor wife should unjustly dominate the other:

Also wives, in some cases, have a tendency to exert an unjust degree of domination over their husbands which, of course, is not right, anymore than that the husband should unjustly dominate the wife. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 226, #750)

Instead of taking each other to court, we need to manifest magnificent patience during every calamity and hardship:

If one of thy relations oppress thee, complain not against him before the magistrate; rather manifest magnificent patience during every calamity and hardship. Verily thy Master is the Lord of Faithfulness! Forgive and overlook the shortcomings which have appeared in that one, for the sake of love and affection. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'í World Faith, p. 375)

Bahá'ís should not readily give up on a family relationship:

Bahá'ís should not readily give up on a marriage or family relationship. (National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies on Domestic Violence, p. 121)

Seek professional therapy in addition to counselling from your Local Spiritual Assembly:

The House of Justice is pleased to learn from your letter that both you and your husband are receiving professional therapy, in addition to the counselling you are receiving from your Local Spiritual Assembly. (From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, 22 July, 1987)