



Reaffirming Individual Dignity: Exposing Coercive Control

CAUTION: If you suspect that your loved one or a parishioner is a victim of abuse, proceed cautiously and remember that your own safety (and that of your own family) is also at risk.

Note that abuse counselors customarily have security measures in place before they attempt to help a victim. Others ordinarily have no such protection. Your own reputation, psychological well-being, and physical safety could be targeted when you help someone who is a victim.

Listen to podcasts that allow victims to tell their dating & domestic violence stories to become aware of the risks that could be involved in controlling relationships. Reach out to Cleveland's Family Justice Center, or other domestic abuse organizations, for guidance when you help a victim. One of the least risky ways that an outsider can help prevent coercive control and abuse is to encourage every person (no matter their marital status) to maintain historically important relationships meaningfully and independently.

For help, contact the **Cuyahoga County Family Justice Center** at 216-443-7345 or the National Domestic Violence Hotline 1-800-799-7233. Read USCCB's "[When I call for Help](#)" for more information on the Church's response to domestic violence.

Segment #6

Grandparent Alienation

A growing trend in the western world – including in Catholic communities - is the development of grandparents being unjustly cut off from relationships with their grandchildren. These grandparents and grandchildren silently suffer a 'living grief' which the Catholic community can soften by recognizing that these situations exist and by offering knowledgeable support to those suffering from its effects. This can also be referred to as "grandchild alienation".

Artificially imposed dislike and alienation from one's family of origin is a well-known tactic in spousal abuse/coercive control and in other cult-like situations. It is a cruel ploy of control and isolation that leads to the suffering of many innocent victims well beyond the target spouse. One-sided therapy sessions can exacerbate the situation.

In spousal abuse situations, a controlling daughter-in-law or son-in-law alienates children from the grandparents on the target spouse's side of the family. This is accomplished by deliberately distorting a grandparent's normal, imperfect behavior into monstrous behavior. Commonly, the children are alienated solely from the target spouse's set of grandparents /family, while the other set of grandparents /family is extolled, visited, and lauded. This bullying, dividing tactic can lead to confusion and grief for the alienated grandparent, the grandchild, and extended family. Occasionally, the children are in fact alienated from family on both sides.

A common control tactic is to misuse the concept of "boundaries". In therapeutic, clinical use, boundaries are mutual agreements that facilitate healthy relationships, mutual respect, and negotiation. In unreasonable alienation, "boundaries" morph into one-sided demands with no reciprocity, are used to end trust, to stop normal discussion and to justify relationship cut offs.

A culture that encourages the breaking of intergenerational bonds is neither healthy nor sustainable. Despite this, there are situations where safety requires separation.

Delineating unreasonable alienation from reasonable estrangement is necessary:

- **Unreasonable alienation** is an artificially imposed, irrational separation from a previously positive relationship that is disproportionate to the actual experience with that person. The relationship had been a close and loving bond prior to the current breach. Alienation typically involves a target separating from several previously positive relationships for vague reasons. Typical alienating behaviors practiced by a controlling spouse against a target grandparent may include: denigrating the target grandparent; limiting contact with the target grandparent; interfering with communication with the target grandparent; undermining grandchild's relationship with target grandparent; interfering with target grandparent visits by imposing invasive, irrational, numerous, and frequently varying rules then asking the grandchild to spy on/report on the grandparent's inability to flawlessly comply with the multiple rules; emotionally manipulating the grandchild to reject the grandparent in order to be loved. (The grandchild may suppress their love for their grandparent because it is emotionally safer for them to conform to the alienating parent's version of reality). It has been found that people who are unreasonably alienated from a generally good parent/grandparent tend to completely sever the relationship, imposing no contact, little explanation (other than one-sided accusations) and no room for normal discussion or authentic reconciliation.
- **Reasonable estrangement** is a voluntary separation from a person who has been enduringly and severely abusive. Reasonable estrangement typically involves separating from only the one person who is abusive, and is done for specific, persistent, and serious reasons. The estranged person generally removes themselves from places that the abusive person may be. It has been found that people who are reasonably estranged from severely abusive parents/grandparents actually work to *keep the relationship*, but to *just stop the abuse* – so they likely will maintain some kind of limited contact or visits, leaving room for discussion and authentic reconciliation, while still being mindful and resistant to any bullying dynamics. This is evidenced by adult children visiting a severely abusive parent in prison. Generally, people do want to know and see their family of origin.

Noting the difference between authentic reconciliation and a performance of 'reconciliation' is warranted. It is paramount that spiritual leaders can assess the difference for the sake of those they advise.

True reconciliation facilitates mutual healing; it is a reestablishment of trust and authenticity on both parts. It is an invitation to a deeper connection, and a renewal of recognition of the dignity of each individual involved. An authentic reconciliation grows slowly, and it becomes stronger with time and honesty. It builds two-way responsibility and offers space and care.

A performative 'reconciliation', on the other hand, is a thin reestablishment of contact for the purposes of further coercive leverage or exploitation of the relationship. A sign of a performative 'reconciliation' is that the target is not allowed to disagree, not allowed to discuss the past, and not allowed to set boundaries themselves. There is lopsided power and rules are imposed by one party only. Performative 'reconciliation' is typically focused on public image management and is transactional: it coincides with a public event (such as just before a baptism, wedding or other family event) or it coincides with a sudden need (babysitting or money). Performative 'reconciliation' is a reestablishment of control over the target wrapped in pious words. This kind of 'reconciliation' tends to be renewed and revoked easily and repeatedly. Furthermore, with each revocation, the punishment of alienation becomes more and more cruel and limiting. Performative 'reconciliations' do not uphold the dignity of each individual involved.

Remember: in cases of clear abuse, ongoing exploitation or unrepentant cruelty, advise must be focused on safety, not forgiveness.

What are the signs of an alienated grandchild?

We can learn from Bill Eddy, LCSW, JD in his work on alienated children in divorce situations. These children are unreasonably alienated from a good parent by an upset parent using false claims of abuse or misbehavior. It becomes important for attorneys, counselors, judges, and mediators (including spiritual leaders) to understand signs of abuse versus signs of alienation. The below are excerpts and summaries from Bill Eddy's book "Don't Alienate the Kids: Raising Resilient Children While Avoiding High Conflict Divorce" (pg 43, 271, 288, 289)

An unreasonably alienated child is one who expresses, freely and persistently, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs toward a parent that are significantly disproportionate to the child's actual experience with that parent. These children have not been abused or mistreated, but nevertheless have emotionally intense feelings with vague, superficial, or minor reasons for them. The child may complain of being afraid of the rejected parent, however the child's behavior shows

just the opposite. It becomes clear that the child feels confident in blaming or rejecting the parent without any fear or remorse. These behaviors *are different from those of truly abused children*, who are often extra careful *not to offend* an abusive parent, hesitant to disclose abuse and often recant even though it's true.

Unreasonably alienated children generally show intensely negative emotions and an absence of ambivalence. The child develops intensely negative emotions toward anyone an upset parent dislikes, but the child does not consciously know why. This may explain the vague or minor reasons given by alienated children for intensely rejecting a good parent.

On the contrary, Mr. Eddy notes that children of obviously violent and abusive parents (such as parents in prison for violent crime against the other parent) usually continue to feel an attachment to that violent, imprisoned parent and in many cases, are eager to go to the prison to see that parent. He has found that most abused kids want their parents to stop the abuse, *but want to keep their relationship*. The request to give up the relationship entirely is rather unique to unreasonable alienation cases. Although abuse can cause a child to cut off contact with a parent, many times Mr. Eddy has found that the child still wants to maintain the relationship, but just stop the abuse. Whereas in alienation, the entire relationship is more likely to be cut off. Intense rejection can be a sign of unreasonable alienation rather than abuse, though must be taken as just one fact and thoroughly investigated.

Children in high-conflict families are like prisoners in a war zone. They will say and do whatever they think is necessary to survive. All of their reactions are based on their fear of the abusive parent. Children will say everything is fine, when it really isn't. And they say everything is awful with a parent who they feel secure with, in order to placate a parent with whom they feel insecure. If professionals don't realize this, they will make matters much worse, rather than better.

Approaches by professionals fail when they are too aggressive *or too passive* in the situation of alienation. The children are the victims of the ongoing conflict. Assertiveness, awareness, setting limits and imposing consequences upon the abuser is needed. Supporting victims in being authentic, gaining agency and having clarity on the situation is helpful. Read Bill Eddy's books to learn more.

Bill Eddy, "Don't Alienate the Kids: Raising Resilient Children While Avoiding High Conflict Divorce", copyright 2010.

Empirical Studies of Alienation, 2nd Ed, for more information.

Below is a Canadian website that is informative and supportive on the subject of grandparent grief over grandchild alienation :

<https://cdndifferencemakersga.weebly.com/>

Another helpful resource is Families Divided TV on YouTube; here an informational video by social worker and attorney Bill Eddy explaining the difference between reasonable estrangement and unreasonable alienation:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eu4EGs88lhs>

A research study on the effects on a family of origin when a loved one is a victim of a cult or cultish relationship: *Journal of Family Violence* (June 2025) "Caring in the Shadows: Emotional and Caregiving Challenges Faced by Families of Individuals in Coercively Controlling Groups and Relationships", by Almendros, Gonzalez-Espejito, Najera, Garcia-Sanchez