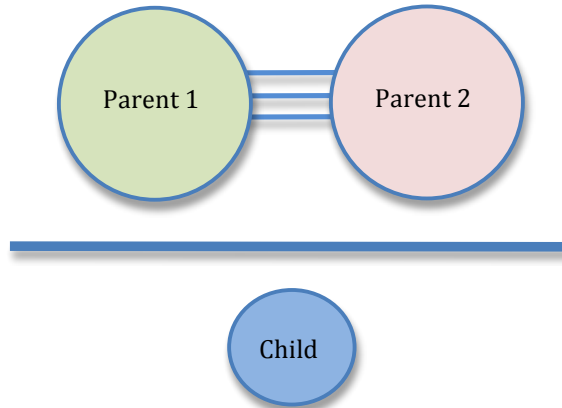


Structural Family Systems¹ Constructs

C.A. Childress, Psy.D. (2012)

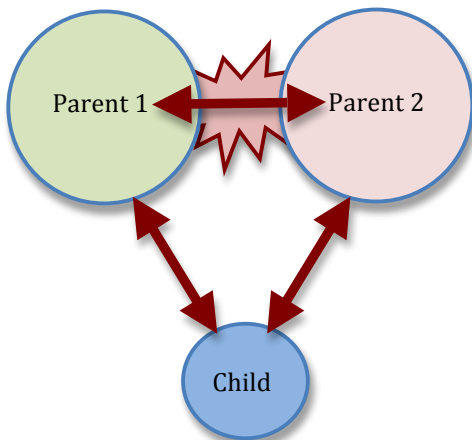
Healthy Parent-Child Family System



Hierarchy: A healthy family structure involves a hierarchy in which the parents are in charge.

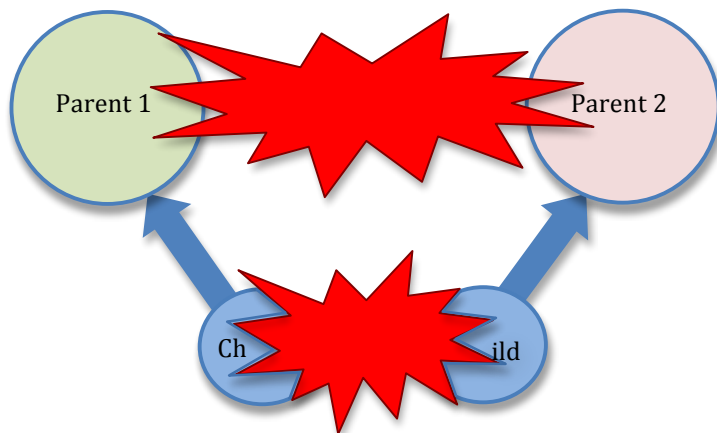
In a healthy family, the parents judge the children's behavior as appropriate or inappropriate, and the parents deliver guidance and discipline as warranted by their parental judgment.

Family Conflict – Triangulation of the Child



Triangulation: When a spousal conflict develops, the child can sometimes become inappropriately involved in the spousal conflict through a process called "triangulation."

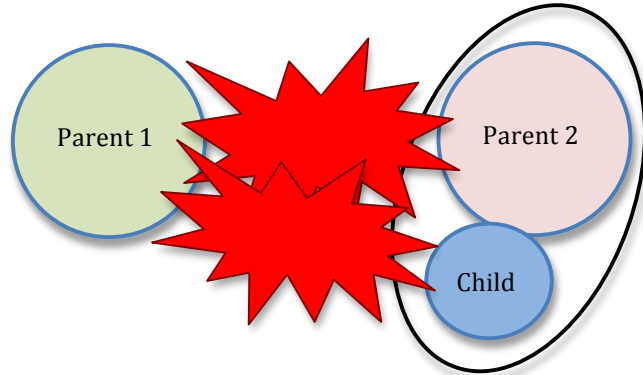
Child's Psychological Conflict



Psychologically Torn Apart: A child who has become inappropriately triangulated into the spousal conflict will be psychologically torn apart by the love the child holds for each parent, and the child becomes the battleground for the spousal conflict.

¹ Salvador Minuchin (1974). *Families and Family Therapy*. Harvard University Press.

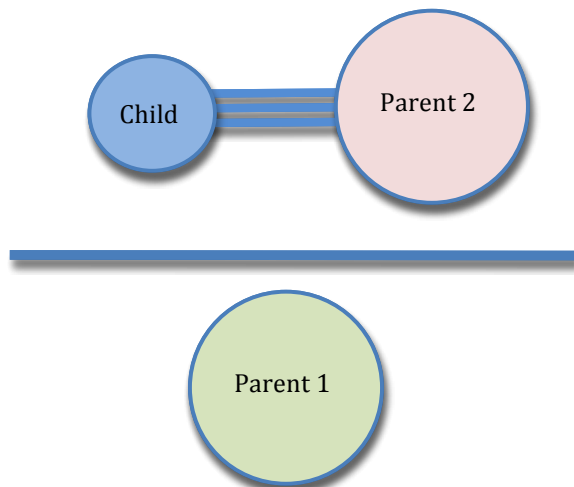
Child Psychological Coping - Alliance



Alliance: In some cases of family conflict, the child copes with the inner psychological turmoil of being triangulated into the spousal conflict by choosing sides in the conflict, so that the child allies with one parent against the other.

This coping response externalizes the inner psychological conflict into the outer relationships, so that the child is no longer psychologically torn apart by love for both parents, but now must lose one parent for the sake of the other parent.

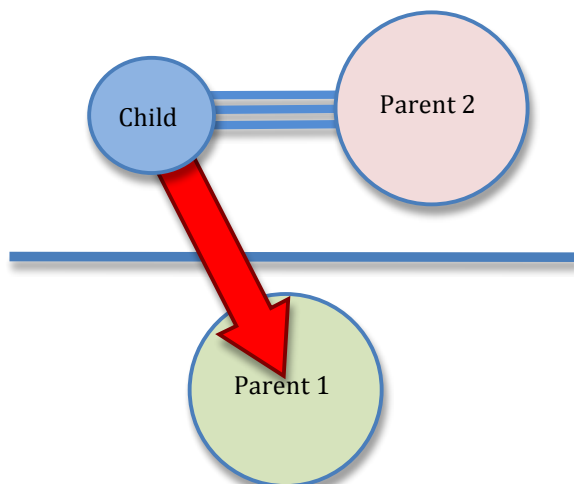
Child's Elevated Status in Family Hierarchy



Elevation in Hierarchy: The child's alliance with one parent against the other parent inappropriately elevates the child in the family hierarchy above the position of the other parent.

The children often enjoy this elevated status position, and the allied parent often acts overly deferential to the elevated status position of the child.

Child Judges a Parent and Retaliates toward a Parent

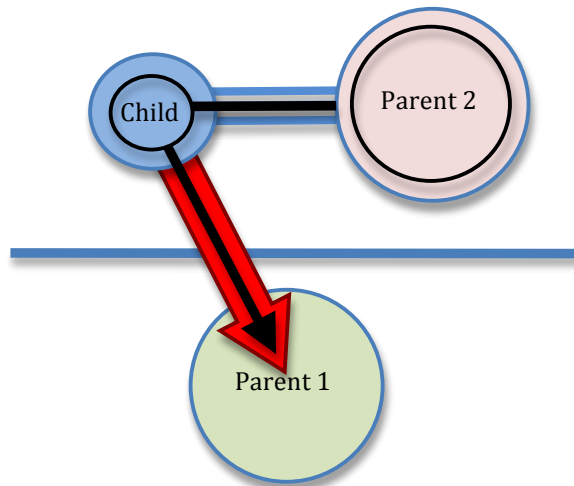


Child Judges Parent: The elevated status of the child within the family hierarchy allows the child to **sit in judgment** of the other parent, as both a parent and as a person.

Not surprisingly, the child's judgment is the same as that of the allied parent.

The child's elevated status allows the child to then feel justified in **retaliating** toward the other parent for the judged inadequacy of that parent (judged inadequacy as both a parent and as a person).

Source Origin of Judgment



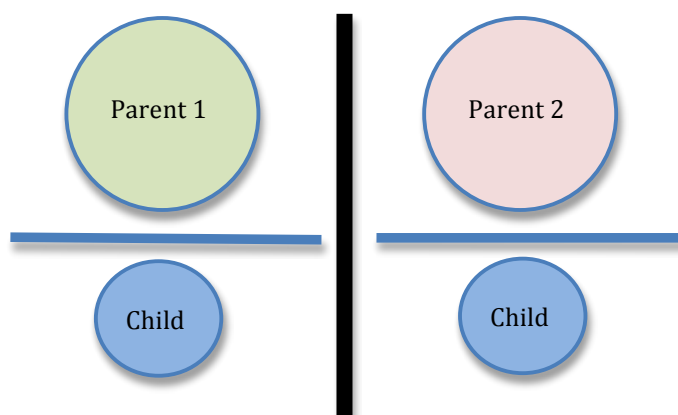
Origin of Judgment: In healthy families, parents judge children's behavior as appropriate or inappropriate, and parents deliver guidance or discipline as appropriate to their parental judgment.

In the case of a dysfunctional triangulation-alliance process within the family, the child's elevated status and power achieved through the alliance with one parent inverts the parent-child hierarchy relative to the other parent and thereby allows the child to judge the other parent, both as a parent and as a person.

The origin of the child's ability to judge one parent is the child's alliance with the other parent, and the resulting elevation of the child in the family hierarchy that is achieved through this alliance.

It is the allied parent's own legitimate authority within the family hierarchy that over-empowers and elevates the child in the family hierarchy, which, in turn, allows the child to then judge the other, targeted, parent.

The Solution – Separate Triangulation and Restore the Healthy Hierarchy

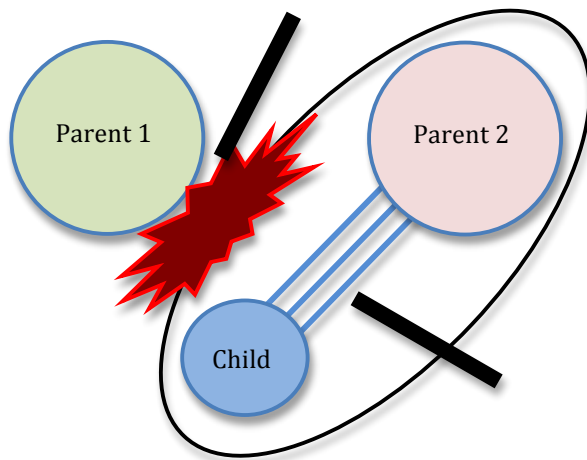


The Solution: Restoring the family conditions necessary for healthy child development when triangulation-alliance processes are present following divorce requires two features:

1. **Ending the Triangulation:** The parents must stop triangulating the child into the spousal conflict. This involves establishing two SEPARTE parent-child relationship systems.
2. **Restoring the Healthy Hierarchy:** Healthy child development requires that the child accept a healthy role-relationship relative to both parents, in which the parent in each family system is acknowledged to be the legitimate authority directing that family system.

Healthy Role Relationships: In healthy family role relationships, parents are in charge. Children follow adult-parental leadership.

Challenges Associated with Pathogenic Parenting & Parental Alienation



The problem associated with parental alienation family dynamics is that the allied parent will not allow the formation of two separate parent-child relationships and insists on becoming involved in the parenting received by the child at the other household.

This represents a boundary violation within the family whereby the child continues to be triangulated into the spousal conflict by the actions of the allied parent.

The allied parent continues to triangulate the child into the spousal conflict in three primary ways:

1.) Active Triangulation

The allied parent actively intrudes into the parent-child relationship of the other parent. This can occur through conflicts over child custody exchanges, calls made to the child while in the care and custody of the other parent, allegations of abuse made by the allied parent about the other parent (or toward a step-family member of the other parent's household), and other intrusions into the time of other parent with the child.

2.) Manipulative Triangulation

In manipulative triangulation the allied parent presents to the child as an injured victim of the other parent. For example, the allied parent may assert to the child that the child cannot participate in a valued activity or have a valued item because the allied parent cannot afford the expense because of a lack of adequate child support payments from the other parent (although the other parent is actually making the designated child support payments). Or if the allied parent is the one making the payments to the other parent, the same complaint about low finances restricting desired activity is made, only this time the assertion is that the other parent is undeservedly receiving too much in alimony or child support and should be contributing more to his or her own expenses, thus supporting a narrative that the other parent is selfishly taking financial advantage of the "victimized" allied parent. In either type of scenario, the allied parent presents as the victim.

In another type of manipulative triangulation, the allied parent schedules a valued child activity for the other parent's custody time, so that the other parent must either relinquish custody time to the allied parent to take the child to the activity, or the targeted parent must take the child to the activity instead, which will then restrict and limit the parent's time spent with the child, or the targeted parent must refuse to either relinquish custody time or to take the child to the activity, in which case the allied parent then asserts to the child that the other parent doesn't care for the child because the other parent is denying the child the valued activity for the parent's "own selfish reasons" (unlike the allied parent who "always puts the child first").

3.) Passive Fostering of Triangulation

The passive fostering of the triangulation is typically always a part of the pathogenic parenting involved in parental alienation processes, whereby the allied parent allows the child (encourages the child) to report on negative events or relationship interactions the child has with the other parent,² which allows the allied parent to then make displays of concern, condemnation, and anger over the parenting or personhood of the other parent. Once this interpersonal process between the child and the allied parent begins, the child comes to recognize his or her role in maintaining this shared social experience with the allied parent, and this “bashing” of the other parent becomes a valued source of bonding with the allied parent, and elevates the child in the family hierarchy so that the child is allowed, supported, and encouraged to judge the adequacy of the other parent

This process of passively fostering the triangulation of the child can be evident in therapy, forensic evaluations, and court testimony of the child whereby the child eagerly displays to therapists, evaluators, or attorneys this process of almost enthusiastically recounting the evils and deficiencies of the other parent without any apparent emotional distress, and with an actual appearance of relaxed, self-assured pleasure in “trashing” the one parent. The absence of displayed emotional distress by the child is because this recounting of the other parent’s deficiencies simply represents a re-enactment of the familiar social exchanges the child has with the allied parent involving the negative reporting on the other parent, and the child is well practiced in this negative reporting activity.

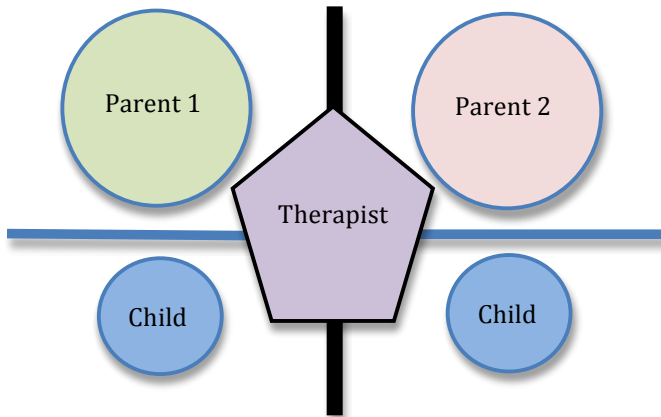
The rote nature of this negative reporting by the child can be highlighted if the new adult recipient in any way challenges or questions the child’s “report-of-deficiencies.” If challenged or questioned, the child will become disoriented and will become unable to offer more elaborated discussions of the issues. This is because the child has always had the “report-of-deficiencies” fully accepted by the allied parent, and the child is simply replicating this interpersonal dance fully expecting a similar sympathetic response from other adults as well.

In the passive fostering of the triangulation, the allied parent does not have to directly say bad things about the other parent, it is the child who is reporting the negative things about the other parent. The allied parent is simply “showing concern and understanding” for the child who is complaining about the bad parenting being received from the other parent. Enlisting the child to make the complaints also provides the allied parent with “justification” for the boundary violation of intruding into the other parent-child relationship, ostensibly to “protect the child.”

Passive triangulation makes Court orders or therapist directives to both parents “not to say bad things about the other parent in front of the child” irrelevant. In the passive fostering of the child’s continued triangulation into the spousal conflict, it is the child who is saying the bad things to the allied parent about the other parent. The allied parent is then able to simply adopt the stance of a “concerned and understanding parent” relative to the child’s reports of “abusive parenting” by the other parent.

² The child’s reporting to the allied parent on interactions with the other parent represents a boundary violation that continues the child’s triangulation into the spousal conflict and effectively undermines any therapy, since therapy requires a separation of family relationships into two distinct and separate parent-child relationships.

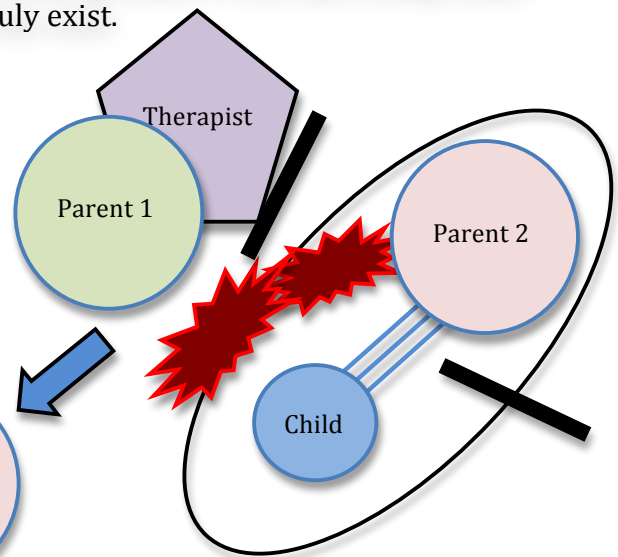
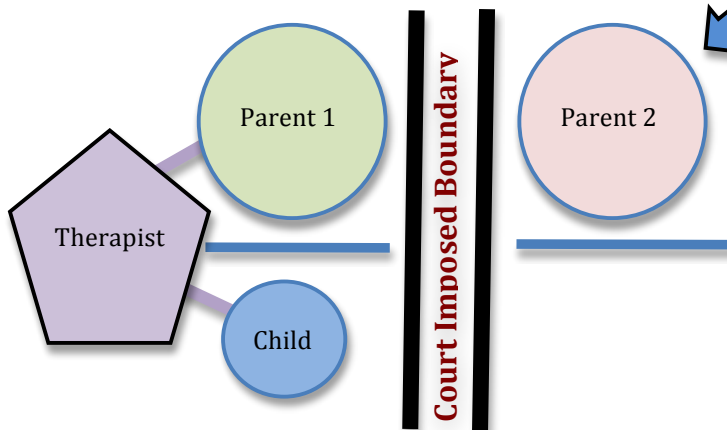
De-Triangulation in Response to Alienation



The Solution: The solution to the child's triangulation into the spousal conflict is to separate the relationships into two distinct and separate parent-child relationships with **NO** boundary violations.

If the child has concerns about the parenting of one parent, these issues should be discussed **ONLY** with the therapist, NOT with the allied parent. It is the therapist's responsibility to address parenting issues, if such parenting issues truly exist.

If boundary violations continually occur, then it may become **essential** to successful therapy that the Court intervene to impose a more complete boundary integrity which will allow therapy to progress.



Once therapy has successfully de-triangulated the child, and has restored normal-range balance to the parent-child relationship, then the formerly allied parent can be reintegrated into the family structure.

Continued monitoring of the child's response to the reintegration of the formerly allied parent can ensure that the triangulation of the child does not resume.

