

DENTAL ALIENATION

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People have asked me how someone can alienate a child against someone else. Actually, it's easy. It only takes 10 steps and a few other people. Here's how you can do it, for example, with the child's dentist. In each of the following steps, use lots of emotion and let the child have the final say.

You: "Johnny, it's time to go to the dentist. Put your jacket on and get in the car."

Johnny: "No! I won't go. I refuse to see the dentist."

1. SOUND ANXIOUS AND MISTRUSTFUL

You (concerned tone of voice and pained facial expression): "Why. Did the dentist ever hurt you?"

Johnny: "Yes! She made me open my mouth when I didn't want to. She brushed my teeth so hard, my gums bled a little. She gave me a shot and pulled out a tooth. It felt sore for a couple days. That's why I don't want to go!"

You (very concerned now): "And did anything else happen?"

Johnny (irritated): "No. What do you mean? Isn't that enough!"

2. MAKE IT INTO A NEGOTIABLE ISSUE

You (very concerned tone of voice): "Why that's awful! I didn't realize that!"

Johnny: "Yes. Please don't make me go."

You (looking very ambivalent): "Well, I'm not sure."

Johnny (now in tears): "Please, please don't make me go!"

3. USE THE WORD "FORCE" TO HELP BUILD RESISTANCE

You: "Now, now, Johnny. Don't worry. I can't force you to go. In fact, I won't force you to go!"

Johnny: "Thank you, thank you so much. You're the only one who really understands me and cares."

4. SEEK OFFICIAL PERMISSION TO SAY CHILD DOESN'T HAVE TO GO

You: "Well, you know the school requires that you see a dentist once a year. I'll talk to the principal and try to get an exception for you. First, I'll need to talk to an attorney to get help in persuading the principal."

Johnny: “Thanks! I feel better already, knowing that you are helping me fight against having to go to the dentist. I knew there was something wrong with that idea.”

5. ASK AN ATTORNEY TO HELP YOU ADVOCATE FOR AN EXCEPTION

Attorney: “Well, I imagine the Principal won’t make an exception, unless the situation is really, really bad.”

You: “Oh, let me assure you that Johnny feels really, really strongly about this. We’ve talked about this several times, and now he cries and kicks and screams and locks himself in his room when I talk about it.”

Attorney: “Oh, okay. Well let me write down everything you have observed about Johnny’s resistant behavior. We’ll submit this to the Principal.”

6. GET AN ATTORNEY APPOINTED FOR THE CHILD

Principal (to you and your attorney): “You know, I’m really concerned about how upset Johnny seems to be. On the other hand, Johnny really needs to see a dentist once a year in order to have healthy teeth. You know what, I am going to appoint an attorney for Johnny to see if this is really what Johnny wants and to assess whether he is mature enough to make such a decision to avoid seeing the dentist.”

Attorney for the child (to Johnny): “Wow. You really are frightened and angry about seeing the dentist. I’m going to recommend that you see a therapist. When the therapist recommends that you’re ready to see the dentist, then I’ll recommend to the principal that you should go. Until then, I’ll recommend that you don’t have to go.”

7. GET AN INDIVIDUAL THERAPIST FOR THE CHILD FOR A YEAR

Therapist for the child (to himself): “At the start, I know I have to develop a therapeutic alliance with Johnny by agreeing with his resistance to seeing the dentist. I will slowly turn him around.”

Therapist for the child (to Johnny, after a year): “I’ve worked with you for a year now, to help you overcome your fear and anger at the dentist by discussing these emotions a lot. Now your attorney, the Principal, and your parent want to know if you’re ready to see the dentist yet. What do you think?”

Johnny: “Please, please, please, don’t make me go. You promised me at our first session that you wouldn’t force me to go. Now I feel it more strongly than ever! You have to keep your promise!”

Therapist for the child: “Oh, don’t worry. You know I won’t force you to go. I’ll try to talk your parent out of pressuring you to go. But I think it would be a good idea for you to meet with a reunification counselor and the dentist. I will help prepare you for that meeting, so that you can feel safe.”

8. HAVE CHILD MEET WITH A REUNIFICATION COUNSELOR AND THE DENTIST*

Reunification Counselor: “Now Johnny, please tell the dentist why you don’t want to see her. My job is to help you feel comfortable with the dentist. I won’t force you to actually go to the dentist’s office, until you are ready. In the meantime, I want to help you talk to each other. Tell the dentist why you don’t want to see her.”

Johnny (eyes to the ground, speaking softly): “You ruined my life. I have been fearful ever since I last saw you.”

Dentist: “Thank you Johnny for telling me how upset you are. Can you be more specific about what I did. I’d really like to know.”

Johnny (angrily): “You made my gums bleed a little! You gave me a shot I didn’t want! You pulled one of my baby teeth!”

Dentist: “Thank you for telling me that. I can understand how upsetting that must have been for you. However, that’s my job. While it hurts and bleeds briefly, it’s so that you can have healthy teeth for the rest of your life.”

Johnny (sullen): “I still don’t want to see you.”

[*Resist any efforts to have YOU meet with Johnny in counseling. Since it’s all the dentist’s fault, any counseling with you would only reinforce the idea that it wasn’t all the dentist’s fault. Plus, everyone knows they can’t force you to do anything anyway.]

9. ENCOURAGE EVERYONE TO ARGUE A LOT OVER WHO’S AT FAULT

You: “It’s all the dentist’s fault that Johnny won’t go. Look at how inappropriate she has been.”

Johnny: “It’s all the dentist’s fault. I hate her.”

Your Attorney: “It’s all the dentist’s fault. Johnny shouldn’t have to go.”

The child’s attorney: “It’s in the child’s best interest not to be exposed to this conflict any further. I think he’s mature enough to make this decision now. The dentist can work with him when he’s an adult.”

The child’s therapist: “Johnny just isn’t ready yet. Until the dentist takes full responsibility for her actions and how she has traumatized Johnny, it is unlikely that he will ever be ready. He needs another year.”

10. THEN, HAVE EVERYONE GIVE UP

Dentist: “Well, if you really don’t want to see me I won’t force you to. I guess there’s nothing I can do. I won’t even bother you with those little reminder notes every year.”

Reunification Counselor: “Then, I guess there’s nothing that I can do, either.”

Attorney for the child: “And I guess there’s nothing that I can do, either.”

Principal: “And I guess there’s nothing that I can do, either. I’m granting you an exception and I won’t require you to ever have to go to the dentist again.”

You: “What a relief. Now Johnny isn’t anxious anymore and we get along better than ever!”

There you have it: Dental Alienation! It may be 20 years before this child ever sees a dentist!

Bill Eddy is a lawyer, therapist, mediator, and the co-founder and Training Director of the High Conflict Institute, a training and consulting company focused on dealing with difficult people in high-conflict disputes. For more, www.HighConflictInstitute.com.