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Parent-child Alienation: Terminology

When I first considered cases of parent-child alienation, I got hung up on vocabulary. What kind of problem were we talking about? Referring to every child in these situations as alienated obscured important differences but describing children as mildly, moderately, or severely alienated didn't capture the nuances either. How should we refer to the parent whom the children preferred? As the alienating parent? The alienator? Those terms implied the parent was doing something wrong – but how accurate would that be if influences other than the preferred parent were pushing the children away from the parent they were rejecting? And what about cases where a parent's behavior was so egregious that it was entirely reasonable for children to reject them? What labels would differentiate those situations from ones where the children's rejection of a parent weren't justified by that parent's behavior? Articles about the problem of parent-child alienation used different terms and didn't provide clear direction. Similarly, parents and children affected by the problem had the same difficulty; they stumbled when trying to describe what was going on, they didn't have a standard vocabulary. It appeared that the field needed an accepted nosology: a system to classify or categorize different dimensions of the problem.

The result of my discussions with Dr. Rick Warshak about this need was a new terminology, first introduced to the professional community in his article in the January 2010 edition of *Family Court Review*, providing an efficient, common-sense set of labels and terms that accurately captured the problem. Briefly, we arrived upon three terms to categorize the severity and nature of the problem: *Disillusioned*, *Alienated* and *Estranged*; a term for each parent: the *Favored Parent* and the *Rejected Parent*; and two terms to describe the origin of the problem: *Unreasonable Parent-child Alienation*, and *Reasonable Parent-child Alienation*. We also added another term, *Blowback*, to describe what happens when children reject a parent who is trying to alienate them from the other parent.

In addition to introducing this terminology to the professional community for its consideration, we believed it would be important to introduce it to parents and children affected by the problem of alienation. So important, in fact, that Chapter One of our educational video, *Welcome Back, Pluto*, describes and illustrates each term. We have been gratified by how family members' received it. Parents feel reassured: "Now we have a name for this problem, I know how to describe it, I don't feel so crazy anymore." Children have been particularly responsive to the three categories of alienation. One teen commented after seeing Chapter One: "I guess I was estranged for awhile, alienated a whole lot, but today I think I'm more disillusioned than anything else." Like their

parents, the children feel reassured; they have words to describe what they've been feeling and how they've been acting.

Learning about anything new means first learning the relevant language. Parents, children, professionals and everyone else affected by the problems of parent-child alienation will find that language in *Welcome Back, Pluto*.