

# Parental Alienation Syndrome

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*Editor's Note: While the author has taken a position regarding parental alienation as a "syndrome" ("PAS"), we note that no such designation has been made to date by the Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders ("DSM") and that the concept, introduced by the late Dr. Richard Gardner, has been widely criticized by legal and marital health scholars.*

## Description of PAS

Parental Alienation Syndrome is a psychological situation in parental separation/divorce conflicts where one parent manipulates the children so that they are indoctrinated with a denigrated view of the other parent that is a distortion of reality. Beliefs, attitudes and memories are manipulated by one parent until the children dislike, disrespect and even fear the formerly loved parent. The formerly caring parent who nurtured and protected the child is now turned against by this child without foundation. The alienating parent seems to suffer no guilt as he or she spreads the denigration to the extended family of the alienated parent. This practice is symptomatic in high conflict custody cases.



The child suffers severe inner conflict blocking out positive memories of the alienated parent. The child begins to doubt his own thoughts and feelings and may cut off all ties with the alienated parent. The child experiences fear, identification with the alienating parent and dependence on that parent. When the child is with the alienated parent alone, he or she may react positively toward the parent, but when the other alienating parent is on the scene, like a light switch, the child transforms to ally himself or herself with the alienator. The alienated parent suffers extreme feelings of rejection, of failure as a parent, and a loss of authority.

Ignorance of this phenomenon in family courts can further lead toward destruction of the mental health of the family. Parental influence processes need to be fully understood to prevent the long-term consequences of PAS. With psychotherapy the scapegoated parent can regain feelings of positive self-worth, remembering all he or she had done for the children. With psychotherapy the child may regain a realistic view of both parents. This is contingent upon both the therapist and the lawyer being familiar with this form of emotional abuse or else s/he may be co-opted by the alienating spouse into the denigration.

## The Children

Children impacted by this form of abuse lose the capacity to tolerate the anxiety of mixed feelings that naturally form toward each parent. They find the alienator above reproach and the alienated repulsive. There is black and white thinking with no in between. This may affect the child's ability to eventually think logically with good judgment in other situations, thus producing an emotionally based cognitive deficit. In addition, as the child learns to loathe the alienated parent, the child, in turn, also loathes himself or herself because that parent is a part of them internally. The result is a fragile self-esteem and possibly, especially in teenagers, an identity disorder. In the extreme, the child is remorselessly cruel to the denigrated parent, believing the brainwashing by the alienator that the alienated parent has been abusive.

The child involved in PAS can be viewed as both victim and victimizer. The child is turned against his or her inner self (Austin, 2006).<sup>1</sup> Judgment is severely compromised. Self-doubt and an ineffective moral base may be found. Some believe that PAS should be an official diagnosis in the DSM-IV which presently can be inferred under the diagnoses, Parent-Child Relational Problem or the Disintegrative Childhood Disorder. It is thought that if PAS was a primary diagnosis, it would become more readily understood and identified by psychotherapists and lawyers in the family court system. This would help the children burdened by deep loyalty conflicts that result in possible school difficulties and self-esteem problems.

## The Legal System

Legally, alienators have sought justification for their vilification of their ex-spouse using a First Amendment argument for the right to free speech with the child. Family courts in New York have recognized parental alienation, opining on the legitimacy of claims put forth that the children's views of one parent were unrealistic and cruel. Forensic psychiatrists reported the unhealthy cloistering of the children from a normal social life along with the alienating parent's influence on the dismissal by the children of the good times they spent with their alienated parent. Custody arrangements were changed to reflect this finding. The family law system upheld the protection of the best interests of the children (Lorandos, 2006).<sup>2</sup>

It is essential that family law professionals prevent practices that support the alienating parent from unethical

behaviors that include, but are not limited to, filing false abuse charges and coercing children to make false accusations. Litigation battles in which targeted parents must defend themselves against unsupported accusations need a remedy. Articles such as this one are needed from the mental health community to inform lawyers and judges of the existence of this syndrome. Otherwise, common practices of awarding child custody to the alienator will occur. The judge hears the children say they hate their alienated parent and, not knowing this is a symptom of the brainwashing or PAS by the alienator, the judge awards custody to the denigrating parent.

## The Alienated Parent

The task of alienated parents is multi-fold. It is important they do not begin believing the castigations and accusations sent their way. This is very difficult when the alienator and children request investigation by Child Protective Services as a ploy to undermine the alienated. CPS usually does report that after investigation the case is unfounded, but during the process the self-respect and self-worth of the alienated parent is hard to hold on to. First, the alienated parent needs support from other parents who are friends who have seen the good parenting of the alienated parent. Second, the alienated parent needs to not surrender emotionally to the alienating spouse. This can be done by empathizing with the children about the bind they are in rather than start defending themselves against accusations. That is, the alienated parent can point out to his or her child how hard it is to be in a severe loyalty conflict. The parent can remind the child of the good times they had and how this parent took good care of them. The parent needs to remind the children that she or he loves them regardless of their current views. In this way the alienated parent holds on to the connection with the child. When children visit the alienating parent, then leave and return to the alienated parent, they may not speak to the latter and turn their head and body away. It is helpful if the alienated parent does not read this as if he or she is a failure or is unloved and rejected. Most likely, the children are numb from the experience of the alienating parent denigrating their other parent whom they love. They can't allow themselves to feel the affection and love offered by the parent they are returning to because this puts them into deep conflict. However, after a few hours pass, the children may be able to reclaim the love and affection they dismissed earlier in the day.

## The Alienating Parent

The alienating parent is a troubled person who sees himself or herself as the center of his or her children's lives. He or she loses sight of the complex nature of his or her children and ex-spouse and sees them in a one-

sided fashion fulfilling the requirements of what he or she needs them to be. This process of denigration of the ex-spouse usually begins long before the separation and divorce. The alienator has pulled at least one child away from the other parent by inducing the child into believing the other parent is malevolent, worthless and possibly even dangerous. The alienating parent also seeks control of his or her spouse long before the divorce. He or she may come from parents who also sought to control him or her. The extended family of the alienator supports their adult child in his or her efforts to discredit the ex-spouse. This dismantling of the daughter- or son-in-law relationship may have a long history. The alienating parent and his or her original family may be characterized by an absence of guilt or shame as well as a lack of sympathy and empathy.

## Conclusion

While I have described the individuals in the family separately, they are each actually in an interlocking family system where one targeted parent is scapegoated to maintain a new equilibrium after the family suffers a divorce. Either or both, the crisis of divorce or former interlocking pathologies of family members, may lead to interactions that result in PAS. For example, perhaps the child was early on too dependent on and infantilized by one parent. The child may have slept with that parent or gone out alone with that parent to the movies frequently. The younger the child, the easier the inducing process. During the crisis of separation and divorce that child may be pulled even closer to the parent who has already induced him or her into scapegoating the other parent. In any possible scenario, the seeds that pre-existed the divorce are further exacerbated by it. In conclusion, both the mental health community and the judicial system need to become aware of the parental alienation system to help the family succeed in negotiating their changed circumstances in an emotionally healthy and legally ethical way. Overcoming ignorance of PAS is the first step.

## Endnotes

1. Austin, R., *PAS as a Child Against Self* in The International Handbook of Parental Alienation Syndrome (R. Gardner, S. Sauber, D. Lorandos, eds.), Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 2006.
2. Lorandos, D., *Parental Alienation Syndrome in American Law* in The International Handbook of Parental Alienation Syndrome (R. Gardner, S. Sauber, D. Lorandos, eds.), Charles C. Thomas Publisher, 2006.