

PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME

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“The Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) is a burden that a child is forced to bear when one parent fails to recognize their child's strong need to love and be loved by the other parent”

Alienated Parent (name withheld by request).

Parental Alienation Syndrome: The Problem

The Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) is the extreme end of a custody battle gone “real bad”. PAS is a most negative consequence of an increasing number of high conflict divorces. In these cases, children become the victims of a relentless and destructive “tug of war” between their parents. It is a war that children cannot win or defend themselves against. It is a war where the “enemy” (the alienating parent) is someone whom the children dearly love and depend upon for their needs to be met.

For children, PAS is about loss, insecurity, fear, confusion, sadness, hopelessness and despair. In fact, some experts consider PAS to be a form of child abuse because:

- it robs children of the security that the bond they once shared with the targeted parent
- it embeds in children’s minds falsehoods about the targeted parent that are injurious to their own psyche and their sense of self (i.e., “Mom/Dad never really loved you”; “Mom/Dad is dangerous”; “Mom/Dad has done inappropriate things to you”)
- the process of aligning children against the targeted parent often involves threats, lies, manipulations, deprivation and even physical abuse

For the alienating parents, PAS can have several motivators such as:

- feeling betrayed or rejected by the targeted parent
- revenge
- jealousy
- fear
- insecurity
- anger
- money – using the children as a pawn to get a better divorce settlement

Defining Parental Alienation Syndrome

The Parental Alienation Syndrome has been variously defined. But here is the definition I tend to rely upon because it is based on my observations of and experiences with divorcing families:

"The Parental Alienation Syndrome is the deliberate attempt by one parent (and/or guardian/significant other) to distance his/her children from the other parent and in doing so, the parent engages the children in the process of destroying the affectional ties and familial bonds that once existed..."

The alienating process develops over time and the distancing between the children and the targeted that occurs includes some or all of the following features:

- The alienating parent speaks badly or demeans the targeted parent directly to the children - the disparaging comments made by the alienating parent to their children about the targeted parent can be implicit ("I am not sure I will be able to afford to send you to camp because "Mom" or "Dad" does not realize how much you enjoy it") or explicit ("Mom/Dad" left us because he/she never cared enough about you to keep our family together").
- The alienating parent speaks badly or demeans the targeted parent to others in the presence (or within audible distance) of the children.
- The alienating parent discusses with the children the circumstances under which the marriage broke down and blames the targeted parent for its failure.
- The alienating parent exposes the children to the details of the parents' ongoing conflict, financial problems and legal proceedings.
- The alienating parent blames the targeted parent for changes in life style, any current hardships; his/her negative emotional state and inability to function as before and conveys this to the children.
- Allegations of sexual, physical and emotional abuse of children are often made.
- Alienated children come to know that in order to please the alienating parent, they must turn against the targeted parent.

These features exemplify the diagnostic criterion set out by the late Dr. Richard Gardner in his discussion of the Parental Alienation Syndrome. Dr. Gardner's early writings are now supported by empirical research on PAS conducted by numerous academics, thus adding credence to PAS's validity and existence. Nevertheless, there are some who have chosen to misinterpret Dr. Gardner's writings by suggesting that he advocated pedophilia and placing children at risk with their abusers. This clearly is not true since Dr. Gardner stipulates in his papers that allegations of abuse that are frequently made in custody disputes must have no prior history, nor upon investigation are they to be found to have any basis. These types of criticisms are reflective of misguided thinking, ignorance and an ideological perspective that is extremely narrow and resistant to reason.

The Genesis of Parental Alienation Syndrome

It is believed that PAS arose out of changes to the divorce laws in western society. Starting the 1970's, family courts began to recognize that both parents had rights and responsibilities when it came to providing for their children post divorce. Out of that recognition, the concept of "joint custody" was born where both parents were allowed to continue in their roles as "legal" parents just as they had been during the marriage. Today, joint custody is considered the norm in most western countries. However, along with this progressive move in divorce laws, there has also been an increase in the incidence of PAS - where children have unfortunately become pawns in their parents' struggles for alimony, support, the marital home and other assets of the marriage.

Parental Alienation Syndrome has only recently been recognized in the divorce literature as a phenomenon occurring with sufficient frequency and with particular defining characteristics as to warrant recognition. Today, the PAS as a byproduct of custody battles is attracting the attention of divorcing parents, child protective agencies, doctors, teachers, clergy, divorce attorneys and divorce courts.

The Politics of Parental Alienation Syndrome

Because the Parental Alienation Syndrome has been linked to the increase in joint custody awards, it is also an issue that has fuelled considerable debate concerning the validity of its existence. Opponents and critics of PAS continue to argue that it does not exist simply because of its absence in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Version IV) or the DSM-IV.

While there is no dispute that this argument has face validity, it nevertheless neglects the following alternative salient argument: - As with any phenomenon, there is always a lag period between the times it is first identified and when it is fully embraced by the community at large. There are many examples of this such as:

- schizophrenia (it was originally thought that people with this disorder were smitten by the devil)
- cancer
- attention deficit disorder
- dyslexia
- HIV and AIDS

There is no doubt that these conditions existed long before they were acknowledged in textbooks or by academic and legal authorities. However, their absence from these authoritative sources did not imply that didn't exist or lacked validity. What it meant is that for some of these conditions, there was a lengthy lag periods – in some cases, almost a century. Hopefully, this will not be the case for PAS because modern technology makes it possible for the publication of research and transmissions of information to occur much quicker than ever before. But in the meantime, if we are to discount the existence of PAS, we are turning our backs on children who are being deprived on their right to love and be loved by both parents.

Regardless of the arguments put forth to discount Parental the PAS's existence and validity, it is difficult to explain how a previously strong, intact, positive and loving relationship between a child and his or her parent quickly disintegrates and transforms into outward hostility toward that parent, usually following separation or some other significant family reorganization involving high levels of conflict.

In spite of the divisiveness concerning the validity of the Parental Alienation Syndrome, one issue that few will debate is the fact that too many children are now caught in a "tug of war" between their separated parents.

The Consequences of Parental Alienation Syndrome

Children who are exposed to the ongoing conflict and hostility of their parents suffer tremendously. The guilt they experience when their parents' first separate, is exacerbated by the added stress of being made to feel that their love and attachment for one parent is contingent on their abandoning the other. Although children are powerless to end the struggle between their parents', they come to believe that if they turn against one in favor of the other, the unhappiness they experience on an ongoing basis will also end.

And if the alienating process is at all successful, its long term consequences for children victimized by it may be even more profound. The main concerns rest in their ability to form healthy and lasting intimate relationships with others as well as how it may negatively influence their self esteem, self concept and general outlook toward life in general. We owe it to children to do what is necessary to prevent this from happening.

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Dr. Reena Sommer is an internationally recognized divorce and custody consultant, writer and speaker. She has also been recognized in Canadian and U.S. courts as an expert in the Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS).

Dr. Sommer is a strong advocate of children's right to maintain their relationship with both parents post divorce. She has been an invited speaker to academic, government and lay audiences in Canada and the U.S.

In May, 1998, Dr. Sommer was invited to testify before the Joint Senate-House of Commons Committee on custody and access. More recently in April 2002, she was invited once again by the Canadian government to participate in a panel of experts from Canada and the United States to revisit the findings of the Joint Senate-House of Commons Committee.

Dr. Sommer acts as a consultant to attorneys and their clients on PAS and other custody related concerns

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