



## DIVORCE FALLOUT

# Parental Alienation Syndrome:

*What it is. How it happens and what you can do about it.*

*by Jayne A. Major, Ph.D.*

Nothing stirs up passions more than the controversy generated when parents are at war over the custody of a child. A controversy is an issue where evidence on both sides can make a compelling case. Child custody and divorce is never black and white. When people have their emotions aroused, issues quickly migrate to polar opposites. Fear overtakes reason. Incomplete facts become evidence. Court calendars become jammed with repeat visits to a judge to try to bring sanity to a situation that is likely never to be sane. Courthouses become your family's second home.

What can you do when one parent is intractable and vitriolic? What can you do when the child becomes caught up in the fight and starts taking sides? To begin with you need to understand the dynamics of Parental Alienation Syndrome or *PAS*.

PAS abuse is manipulation by one parent used to turn the child against the other parent. **Neglect or abuse from the parent being alienated (made out as the villain) does not exist.** When emotional, physical or sexual abuse exists, the child's anger is justified. Justified anger is not PAS.

Likewise PAS does not exist if the child enjoys a positive relationship with both parents despite the fact one parent is attempting to alienate the child from the other. The determining factor of PAS is the child's part, his or her reaction and behavior to the situation.

Understanding gives you the ability to see the scope of the situation and what you are up against. Once you know what is causing the problem, you can begin to solve it.

## WHAT IS PAS?

Gardner's definition of PAS is:

- ❑ The Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) is a disorder that arises primarily in the context of child-custody disputes.
- ❑ Its primary manifestation is the child's campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification.
- ❑ It results from the combination of a programming (brainwashing) of a parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the targeted parent.

Excerpted from: Gardner, R.A. (1998). *The Parental Alienation Syndrome*, Second Edition, Cresskill, NJ: Creative Therapeutics, Inc.

Translation: Gardner is saying is that in the course of the animosity that arises between divorcing spouses over the children, one parent can inadvertently or purposely begin

conditioning the children against the other parent. At the same time the children, dealing with their own anger, hurt and insecurities amplify their own feelings and begin directing them at the targeted parent. This state of confusion creates the perfect atmosphere for manipulation. To learn more about manipulation, read: *How to Avoid becoming a victim of Emotional Blackmail*

## WHAT IS THE CHILD'S PART IN PAS?

Gardner notes that the PAS is more than brainwashing or programming, because the child has to actually participate in the denigrating of the alienated parent. A combination of several or all eight behaviors listed below will be apparent in children experiencing PAS:

1. **EXPLETIVES AND BAD-MOUTHING:** The child denigrates the alienated parent with foul language and severe oppositional behavior.
2. **EXCUSES WITHOUT FOUNDATION:** The child offers weak, absurd or frivolous reasons for his or her anger.
3. **CONSISTENTLY NEGATIVE:** The child is sure of him or herself, never swaying from a negative connotation. He/she doesn't demonstrate confused emotions (i.e. love and hate) for the alienated parent, only the negative hate.
4. **SELF-RIGHTEOUS:** The child exhorts that he or she alone came up with ideas of denigration. The "independent-thinker" phenomenon is where the child asserts that no one told him to do this.
5. **PROTECTIVE:** supports and feels a need to protect the *alienating* parent.
6. **LACK OF EMPATHY:** the child does not demonstrate guilt over cruelty towards the alienated parent.
7. **LYING & EMBELLISHING:** the child uses borrowed scenarios or vividly describes situations that he or she could not have experienced.
8. **ANGER:** Animosity is spread to the friends and/or extended family of the alienated parent.

In severe cases of parent alienation, the child is utterly brainwashed against the alienated parent. The alienator can truthfully say that the child doesn't want to spend any time with this parent, regardless of court orders or the parent's desire. The alienator typically responds, "There isn't anything that I can do about it. I'm not telling him that he can't see you. He doesn't want to."

## PAS IS AN ESCALATION OF PARENTAL ALIENATION (PA)

Dr. Douglas Darnall in his book *Divorce Casualties: Protecting Your Children from Parental Alienation*, describes three categories of PA:

### **MILD: Naïve alienators**

Naïve alienators are ignorant of what they are doing and are willing to be educated and change.

### **MODERATE: Active alienators**

When triggered, active alienators lose control of appropriate boundaries. They go ballistic. When they calm down, they don't want to admit that they were out of control.

**SEVERE: Obsessed alienators**

Obsessed alienators operate from a delusional system where every cell of their body is committed to destroying the other parent's relationship with the child.

In the case of the Obsessed alienator, no treatment exists other than removing the child from their influence.

### Which gender is most likely to initiate PAS?

Gender doesn't play a role in instigation. The time with the child is the critical factor. Mothers are more often responsible for creating and nurturing PAS because the parent initiating must have substantial time with the child. Today in male dominated societies or with changing attitudes toward parenthood in the Western world, as more fathers receive custody, an increasing number have instigating PAS.

For Example: In one case the father had no control over his obsession to trash the mother. Numerous professionals told him, including the mother that he could have shared custody if he would be willing to follow the rules. He didn't have the self-control to do this.

When he lost custody because of his aberrant behavior, he became a celebrity in the father's rights movement and took his campaign into national circles. No one would know from hearing him speak about his situation that there was serious pathology going on (PAS) or how hard the professionals worked to stabilize it.

In cultures where women traditionally have no tangible rights, alienation by the father can be severe. I've met divorcing women whom have been prevented from learning how to make a living to support themselves. At the time of separation all access to financial resources ceased and the children were removed from her care. These women report severe alienation of affection.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF OBSESSED ALIENATORS

Alienators will display many of the below characteristics. Anger, frustration and hurt feelings can cause even the most upstanding and stable parent to act like a psychopath during a custody battle. Occasionally in such situations he/she may temporarily resemble the warning signs. The difference is when faced with court orders, friends and pressure from their peer group or the pain of their own children, non-obsessive alienators will change their behavior and always put their children's welfare ahead of their own. Depending upon the degree, he or she may need counseling to work through the anger.

Obsessed alienators are incapable of changing. You want to look for sustained examples of these behaviors over a period of time, not isolated instances to decide if you are dealing with an Obsessive alienator (in which case the children need to be removed from

this persons custody as soon as possible for their own protection) or a rational adult with hurt feelings and unexpressed anger.

### **OBSESSED ALIENATORS ARE:**

**NARCISSISTIC:** The alienator presumes special entitlement to whatever he/she wants. Rules in life are for other people, not for them.

**INDIVIDUATE BEHAVIORISTS:** the alienator is unable to see the child as a separate human being. He/she is often described as being "overly involved with the child" or "enmeshed".

**SOCIOPATHS:** The alienator has no moral conscience and is unable to have empathy or compassion for others. They are unable to see a situation from another person's point of view, especially their child's point of view. They don't distinguish between telling the truth and lying in the way that others do.

**DEPENDENCY FOSTERERS:** Instead of promoting independence, the alienating parent encourages continued dependence. The parent may insist on sleeping with the child, feeding the child ("It's easier if I do it"), and taking care of these rites of passage longer than normal child development calls for. This "spoiling" may not feel right to the child, but they do not have enough ego strength to do anything about it.

### **If You are the Alienated Parent:**

#### *What you can Do*

First, it takes a sophisticated mental health professional to be able to identify that PAS is occurring. Most forensic evaluators such as psychiatrists and clinical psychologists at the Ph.D. level (not the MA or MS level) have studied the disorder and are able to recognize it.

Forensic evaluators diagnose PAS by having the parents take a battery of psychological tests, doing a detailed case history and by observation. They make recommendations as to what to do. After the evaluator has written a report on the family and made recommendations, nothing will happen to resolve the crisis without court intervention.

The alienated parent has to take the report to a judge who must then be convinced that the child is being alienated and that it is not in their best interest to stay in such an environment.

It is rare however that judges have any degree of mental health training. They most often learn about PAS from the bench. It usually takes several trips to court to point out how badly a child is being treated before a judge is willing to act.

## **HOW ARE PAS CASES RESOLVED LEGALLY?**

Judges are inevitably conservative in their orders. Even when the evidence is overwhelming that the alienation is occurring, the court order may still end up saying, "the parents are to make joint decisions about the child's welfare," when this is impossible to do.

This is further evidence that the judge doesn't understand the magnitude of the problem. The judge in one of the most severe PAS cases I worked on was from the old school. He was tired of having the litigants continue to appear before him. One day he said, "Why don't the two of you go out in the hallway and kiss and make up." This is an example of how frustrating these cases are for judges. Indeed, these are the hardest cases to decide.

Judges have been slow to place serious sanctions on the alienating parent. If there is no threat of severe fines, jail time or sole custody to the targeted parent, the chances are remote that the out-of-control parent can be stopped. It usually takes a dramatic situation where court orders are broken to force the court to change primary custody. Often it is only a matter of time before alienating parents become desperate and their unstable mental health gets the better of them. People in an official position start to recognize the alienating parent as being out of line, and become supportive of the targeted parent.

## **What is the best way to deal with PAS?**

The parents I know who were successful in getting primary custody of their children in a PAS situation shared the following characteristics:

- ❑ They completed a comprehensive parenting course and stuck with it until they rated excellent in the knowledge, skills and methods taught. Their parenting skills became superior.
- ❑ They were even-tempered, logical and kept their emotions under control. They never retaliated. A person who reacts in anger is proving the alienator's point that he or she is unstable.
- ❑ The children are their primary concern. No matter how awful the harassment got, the fear of keeping their daughter or son in that environment kept them going. They were driven to continue trying to get the court to understand the seriousness of the issues and to change primary custody to them.

- ❑ They were willing and able to go to the financial expense of seeing it through.
- ❑ They got help from a skilled family lawyer who had experience with parent alienation syndrome.
- ❑ They became good at understanding how the courts work and the law as it applied to their case. In many cases, because of excessive expenses, parents even ended up as pro per (called pro se in some states) where they were representing themselves without a lawyer.
- ❑ They had a case where a forensic evaluator made a strong statement about the alienation and recommend changing legal and primary custody to the alienated parent. Some parents had to go back to the evaluator to demonstrate that his or her earlier recommendations were not working.
- ❑ They persevered in demonstrating that they were rational, reasonable, and had the best interest of the child at heart.
- ❑ They provided the court with an appropriate parenting plan that showed how the child would be well taken care of in their care.
- ❑ They understood the nature of the problem and focused on what to do about it, even though they and their children were being victimized. (Alienated parents who got caught up in "how terrible it all is" and spent time judging the situation, went under emotionally.)
- ❑ They didn't live a victim's life.
- ❑ They were proactive in seeking constructive action.
- ❑ They avoided adding to the problem. One father expressed it like this: *"I don't know how to make it better with the mother, but I do know how to make it worse."*
- ❑ They kept a diary or journal of key events, describing what happened and when.
- ❑ They documented the alienation with evidence that was admissible in court.
- ❑ They always called or showed up to pick up their children, even if they knew that the children would not be there. This was often very painful, but necessary. You must be able to document that you tried. The alienator alleges that you have no interest in the child.

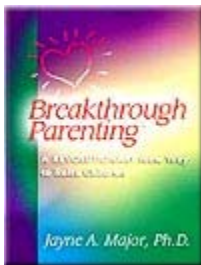
- ❑ They focused on enjoying their children's company and never talked to their children about their case. They always took the high road and never talked badly about the other parent to their children. They absolutely never showed a child any court orders or other sensitive documents. They didn't let the children overhear inappropriate conversations on the telephone.
- ❑ They didn't violate court orders. They paid their child support on time and proved that they could live within the letter of the law.
- ❑ They were truly decent, principled people. It was obvious that they loved their children.

### **CAN THE ALIENATION OF CHILDREN BE REVERSED?**

As children get older, the alienation can be reversed with proper psychological care. However, it won't work if the alienating parent is not contained. PAS is among the most severe types of emotional child abuse. There will be scars and lost opportunities for normal development. The child is at risk of growing up and being an alienator with an alienating parent as the primary role model.

**THIS IS AN EDITED VERSION OF THE FULL ARTICLE: [PARENTS WHO HAVE SUCCESSFULLY FOUGHT PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME](#) BY DR. JAYNE MAJOR.**

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**If you find yourself in this situation** and live in Southern California, Dr. Jayne's company *Breakthrough Parenting* teaches courses specifically geared at men and women caught within a PAS situation. If you live outside of Southern California, she may be able to provide you with resources in your part of the country. Visit her web site for more information at <http://www.breakthroughparenting.com>.

Dr. Major is the author of six books on family issues including *Creating a Successful Parent Plan: A Step by Step Guide For The Care of Children of Divided Families*, also available [as an e-book](#). She has worked with more than 15,000 parents going through difficult times with their children, and did her Ph.D. research at UCLA in the field of parent education. She is the author of [Breakthrough Parenting: A Revolutionary New Way to Raise Children](#).

