



Families Need Fathers Factsheet # 16
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PARENTAL ALIENATION

Introduction

Parental Alienation (PA) refers to a situation in which a resident parent (usually but not exclusively) turns their child against the non-resident parent, intentionally or unintentionally, resulting in the child's supposed desire to reject all contact with that parent. There is still much debate among medical and psychological experts as to whether this behaviour pattern constitutes a syndrome, often referred to as Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) which was initially described by Dr Richard Gardner.¹

Currently, PAS is not officially recognised although there is much activity worldwide to influence its acceptance in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, DSM- V, which is due to be published in May 2012.²

You may well find useful information in books and articles about PA *and* PAS but we advise that you do not use the term PAS in court proceedings as your arguments regarding what has happened to your children may become sidetracked into barren arguments about the use of the word *Syndrome*.

¹ Gardner, R. A. (1998), Recommendations for Dealing with Parents Who Induce a Parental Alienation Syndrome in Their Children. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 28 (3/4):1-23.]

² www.psych.org/MainMenu/Research/DSMIV/DSMV.aspx

In practice however poisoning against one parent *does* occur, and *is* a genuine problem which goes strongly against a child's best interests. This effect is being more and more recognised in the Family Courts in the UK, which is encouraging.

The question "why should children who were initially close to both parents suddenly seek to reject one of them"³ is often raised at the beginning of a Family Court case. The child is 'programmed' by the alienating parent against the other, and is used as a tool in the process of seeking vengeance on an ex-partner, emotionally harming the child by depriving them of a good parent.

Judges, CAFCASS staff, social workers, and others often fail to recognise parental alienation as a genuine case of significant emotional abuse, and these children may lose a loved and loving parent for a long time or sometimes permanently. This situation is often referred to in UK courts as '*implacable hostility*' caused by the 'controlling' parent subjecting the child to this form of emotional abuse. This can have devastating life-long effects for the children, excluded parent, grandparents or the child's extended family. As a result, these children, as they grow into adulthood, will also have to cope with the realisation that the parent causing the alienation had misled them about their other parent.

³ 'Journal of Parental Alienation', Vol. 2 No 2 – March/April 2006; Dr. L.F. Lowenstein

There are of course different degrees of severity of PA, which can involve allegations of the most destructive emotional kind. Violence and sexual abuse are some of the most common examples.

Most children want to spend more time than they are allowed⁴ with the parent that they see less of. The increasing tendency for courts and Cafcass staff to listen to children's views is not only right but good for both children and parents in separated families. In PA cases there needs to be even greater sensitivity in understanding not only what children are saying but also the reasons behind why they are saying it.

Parents who do not want their children to see their other parent, or who try to control the relationship for their own purposes, are now expected to produce acceptable reasons in court for denying the children significant parenting time with their other parent.

One of the reasons often given by the resident parent to prevent the child's contact with the non-resident parent is that the child says that they do not want to see their other parent, or that they are frightened of their other parent. The increased emphasis upon the child's wishes raises the incentive for a resident parent to impose their own views/agenda upon the child. This is one of the main characteristics of PA where the 'controlling' parent's wishes for no contact with the other parent are supported by the child.

While this poisoning can be deliberate, it may not always be. It is sometimes that the child, who naturally loves the parent with whom they live, picks up signals about what that parent wants from them. Equally, if the resident parent is having problems, the child may blame these on their other parent. For instance if the

former is lonely and distressed or does not have enough money, the fault can often be placed with the parent who 'left' or was forced to leave.

It is the parent who has primary or exclusive control of the child who is usually in a position to alienate the child. This means that most often it is the mother who turns the child against the father. However the reverse situation, where the father has the greater power, may lead to the child being alienated from the mother. It is sad that adults feel gratified if the child 'takes their side'. It is frequent, if repulsive, that any weapons, including the child, are used in disputes which are already bitter enough.

The inequality of the power base between the parents when their relationship ends can lead to PA when these parents are unable to find a way of working co-operatively together in the best interests of their children and one parent wants to 'win' the children for themselves.

The personality characteristics which drive a parent to alienate the other are found in both mothers and fathers, and also in other family relatives. The controlling, alienating individual feels the need to be right, often due to insecurities, and to have this proven by ensuring the children side with them and reject the other parent completely. Their relationships are characterised by emotionally controlling behaviour ("If you loved me you wouldn't see your father/mother") which can become paranoid and obsessive.

PA does not include instances where a child does not wish to see a parent when genuine issues of neglect or physical and sexual abuse are apparent. However PA may be at play if the child *claims to* have been neglected or abused, which can include false or unproven allegations of physical and sexual abuse, or supports the resident parent's belief of this type of

⁴ Research cited by The Children's Commissioner, March 2007

abuse, when in reality that never occurred.

PA can have tragic long-term effects on the relationship between the child and the parent causing the alienation, particularly if the child discovers later on that they had been, in effect, emotionally abused. To learn that they have been forced to exclude one of their parents, who genuinely loved and cared for them during their childhood and who in fact was a decent and worthy person, can be a very painful discovery. Their relationship with the alienating parent may never completely recover from this realisation.

Recognising PA

Not every example given below will be found in each case of PA but they are very frequently recognised in PA affected children. However, there may be reasons other than PA for these responses by children to occur.

- The child once had a happy and healthy relationship with the now-alienated parent, for example before the family divided. There is no evident reason for the change.
 - There is nothing in the conduct, character or parenting of the alienated parent to justify the child's feelings. It is very rare for a child not to want a relationship with a parent unless there are strong reasons. It is in fact, far more common for children to want a relationship even if there has been some untoward behaviour from the rejected parent.
 - The resident parent protests that they support contact, and that it is the child who does not want it. If this is combined with evidence of bitterness from the resident
- parent towards the non-resident parent, or making or having made other allegations, there are grounds for suspicion of PA.
- The child appears to take the initiative in rejecting the alienated parent, for example by writing letters or making phone calls claiming to hate that parent. Saying that they do not want to see or hear from their father/mother, do not want their gifts etc. Letters are better spelled, expressed, punctuated than one would expect from a child of that age. More often than not, a child will only act in this way if strongly influenced.
- The child reports things that the alienated parent is supposed to have done to him/her to others *that did not in reality happen*, or which have only been reported to them, or supposedly took place so long ago that they cannot or would be most unlikely to have remembered, or for it still to matter.
- The child uses words and language to express their rejection of a parent that is too advanced for their age.
- The child is ill at ease talking about the alienated parent and sticks to simple rigid forms of words, which can seem unnatural.
- If asked for reasons for not wanting to see the other parent, the child is evasive or reports the views of his or her alienating parent, or overly focuses upon the 'united state' between themselves and their alienating parent.

- The alienating parent is reluctant for the child to be spoken to alone, stays very close or is overly gushing with their 'love'.
- The alienating parent is controlling in many other respects.
- The child seems over-dependent for their age on the alienating parent.
- On visiting the alienated (non-resident) parent, the child 'melts' and enjoys the time spent together, but afterwards returns to provide the alienating parent with expressions of hostility towards their other parent.
- In cases involving more than one child, when the same phrases and points are 'parroted' repeatedly. This can be particularly obvious if there are differences in ages and maturity of the children.
- The child talks about what the alienated parent has done to the parent they live with, not what he or she has done to them personally.

Dealing with PA

It is much better prevented than cured.

PA occurs when children are unable to differentiate accurately between what they are told about their 'other parent' and their direct experience of them. It occurs during periods of no or inadequate contact. In order to prevent this *there must be insistence upon full, uninterrupted contact*. Courts and welfare officers often recommend delay 'for feelings to settle'. In cases of PA this makes the situation much worse and permits the influencing of the child to continue unhindered.

The longer the child becomes more dependant on, and has a closer identification with, the alienating parent, the less able will they be to go against the wishes of that 'controlling' parent.

The Family Courts need to be more robust in insisting on, maintaining and enforcing contact in cases of PA. This is not to go against the wishes of the child. They are simply unable to behave or respond in an uninfluenced way or without insight into what is happening to them.

In many cases these children are emotionally permitted to enjoy contact with their other parent when they know it is the Judge who has insisted that this contact with their non-resident parent takes place. They are therefore not made to feel guilty about going against the wishes of their alienating parent.

The services of specialist child and adolescent psychiatrists, psychologists and family therapy centres may be necessary, both for 'diagnosis' and treatment.

Once PA has become deeply entrenched, especially in adolescence and in children in their late teens, when they are much less dependent on their resident parent, it may be impossible to remedy except in the fullness of time.

Things to do, things NOT to do...

Never blame the child or children. They are victims.

Never give up. A common complaint of older children is 'why didn't you fight harder for us?' But be careful not to go to the other extreme either, and litigate so relentlessly that your attempts to remain in their lives feel like harassment to them.

Do not take what the children say literally. Their behaviour is a result of their

situation, where they have been emotionally forced to choose one parent over the other.

Continue to write, telephone, e-mail, text and send gifts regularly even if you get no response from your children. This will be noted and remembered.

Do not criticise their alienating parent.

The children have a right to love that parent too as it is likely that they are a good person and parent in other respects. The children should not be pressurised into taking sides. Even at quite a young age they will develop an accurate and realistic understanding of the situation, and respect you for your tact and understanding.

Get on with your own life. You need to be strong, and your children need you to be strong and fulfilled when they find their way back to you. They will want you to be thoughtful of them, but not to feel they may have been part of something that made you miserable.

Often the only way to answer unworthy accusations is to continue living your life as a decent, loving and responsible person which renders the allegations made against you unbelievable.

Join and become active in FNF and support efforts to ensure PA is more widely recognised. We would like to set up a group within the charity that specialises in PA.

Further Reading:

Dr Richard Gardner

- *The Parental Alienation Syndrome*
- *Recommendations for Dealing with Parents who induce a Parental Alienation Syndrome in their Children*
- *True and False Accusations of Child Sex Abuse*

Dr Ludwig Lowenstein

- *Parental Alienation Syndrome*
- *How to Understand and Address Parental Alienation Resulting from Acrimonious Divorce or Separation*

Dr Amy J. L. Baker

- *Adult Children of Parental Alienation Syndrome: Breaking the Ties that Bind*
- [Beyond the High Road - Amy J. L. Baker](#) (E-book providing specific advice for handling 17 of the most common parental alienation)