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Family Man

Parental Alienation Syndrome

By Michael Wayland

Dear IF readers,

I want to talk to you about Parental Alienation Syndrome. It sounds like a fancy diagnosis but it is a simple to understand phenomenon. It varies from mild to severe. You may have experienced it if you have been through a divorce.

Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) is when one parent attempts to sway the child into favoring the initiating parent and despising the target parent. Usually this occurs when one parent has custody and the other (target) parent has less time with the child. It can be purposeful or it can be subconscious.

It is usually only seen in custody situations. In most instances the mother is the instigating parent and the father is the target or victim, although certainly not always. Mainly the extent to which a child is consciously or unconsciously being programmed by the alienating parent to reject the targeted parent determines the presence of PAS. It is found more frequently in cases where a parenting schedule is forced on the parties by a judge than when the parties engage in a mediated divorce where a mediation session leads to a custody arrangement that satisfies both parents. A decision imposed by a judge through a trial process leaves the parties out of control and feeling as if the outcome was forced on them.

Jayne A. Major, Ph.D. says in years past, the courts assumed that a child was better off with the mother due to maternal instincts. In the 1960's and 1970's the equality and women's rights movement took place. The emphasis began to shift to women entering the work place rather than rearing kid. Fathers at this time were either voluntarily or forced by circumstance to take on greater childcare roles. As the fathers roles with the children expanded, so did their desire to continue the relationship with the children post divorce. As a result courts began to move toward joint custody and shared parenting models where the mother was not necessarily the custodial parent.

A pattern began to emerge which was first observed in the early 1980's. Dr. Richard Gardner made the diagnosis popular in 1985. It continued to grow through the 1990s and is now accepted by many courts in considering custody issues although not without controversy. Due to the growing exposure, opponents, primarily women's groups, argue that it is an excuse to cover up abuse by the father and that is why the children do not like the father. While it is true that some real child abusers have attempted to deflect the abuse charge by claiming PAS, that does not seem to be the majority of cases, but is worthy of consideration when evaluating the merit of a PAS claim.

J. Michael Bone and Michael R. Walsh in the Florida Bar Journal (March 1999) identifies the following criteria for PAS:

Criteria I: Access and Contact Blocking

This involves the active blocking of access or contact between the child and the absent parent. The rationale used to justify it may well take many different forms. One of the most common is that of protection. It may be argued that the absent parent's parental judgment is inferior and, therefore, the child is much worse off from the visit. In extreme cases, this will take the form of allegations of child abuse, quite often sexual abuse.

Criteria II: Unfounded Abuse Allegations

The second criteria are related to false or unfounded accusations of abuse against the absent parent. The most strident expression of this is the false accusation of sexual abuse. It has been well studied that the incident of false allegations of sexual abuse account for over half of those reported, when the parents are divorcing or are in conflict over some post dissolution issue. A simpler form is claims of abuse that when analyzed are really just parenting issues such as the father "lets her stay up later on a school night and that is abuse" because it could impact grades or one spouse introduces the child to a new significant other sooner than the former spouse believes is appropriate and deems it emotional abuse of the child.

Criteria III: Deterioration in Relationship Since Separation

This has to do with the existence of a positive relationship between the minor children and the now absent or nonresidential parent, prior to the marital separation; and a substantial deterioration of it since then. Such a recognized decline does not occur on its own. It is, therefore, one of the most important indicators of the presence of alienation as well as a full measure of its relative "success."

Criteria IV: Intense Fear Reaction by Children

The fourth criteria necessary for the detection of PAS are admittedly more psychological than the first three. It refers to an obvious fear reaction on the part of the children, of displeasing or disagreeing with the potentially alienating parent in regard to the absent or potential target parent. Simply put, an alienating parent operates by the adage, "My way or the highway." If the children disobey this directive, especially in expressing positive approval of the absent parent, the consequences can be very serious. It is not uncommon for an alienating parent to reject the child(ren), often telling him or her that they should go live with the target parent.

Time Magazine (Sep. 14, 2006) notes that convincing children that their parents don't love them is a brutally effective way to secure children's allegiance. While this is often seen in long-term kidnappings, it is being studied in relationship to how a parent pulls off PAS.

Dr. Robert A. Evens in the Florida Bar Journal (April 2006) updates the previous criteria and identifies additional criteria:

1. Campaign of denigration against one parent.
2. Weak rationalizations for the denigration on the part of the child.
3. Lack of ambivalence by the child. That is, there are no mixed feelings with these children; the targeted parent is all "bad" and the alienating parent is all "good."
4. The "Independent Thinker" phenomenon: The child proudly professes that his or her rejection of the targeted parent is his or her own doing. They will deny any contributions from the alienating parent.
5. Reflexive support of the alienating parent: The child automatically takes the position of the alienating parent; even the alienating parent may not present the argument as forcefully as the supporting child.
6. Absence of guilt: A PAS child typically has no guilt or remorse over the exploitation of the targeted parent.

7. Presence of borrowed scenarios: The child's presentation carries a rehearsed quality. They use language and expressions that are clearly not their own. Their verbalizations appear to be coached and rehearsed, and the only source of the borrowed scenarios appears to be the alienating parent.

8. Animosity toward the extended family of the alienated parent:

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

1. The mild category he calls the naïve alienators. They are ignorant of what they are doing and are willing to be educated and change.

2. The moderate category is the active alienators. When they are triggered, they lose control of appropriate boundaries. They go ballistic. When they calm down, they don't want to admit that they were out of control.

3. In the severe category are the obsessed alienators or those who are involved in PAS. They operate from a delusional system where every cell of their body is committed to destroying the other parent's relationship with the child.

Clawar and Rivlin writing for the American Bar Association found in a longitudinal study of 700 "high conflict" divorce cases followed over 12 years, it was concluded that elements of PAS are present in the vast majority of the samples. On of the best ways to avoid high conflict divorce is to use divorce mediation (see [International Family Mag April](#))

PAS is a worldwide phenomenon. The Pro tem Organization Against Parental Alienation (Pemalik) of Kuala Lumpur and Selangor is striving to address problems faced by separated spouses and their children. They are attempting to educate the Malaysian courts of the existence PAS, how to recognize it and what to do about it in custody cases. Similar groups exist in Europe, South and Central America and throughout the world.



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