

What is Parental Alienation Syndrome?

Richard A. Gardner, M.D., first introduced Parental Alienation Syndrome, or PAS, in 1985 as a way to describe what he refers to as a "cluster of symptoms" present in children who, during the process of a child-custody dispute, *reject one parent as a direct result of strong, negative claims introduced by the other parent.*

In addition, in cases of true Parental Alienation Syndrome, the negative propaganda that is being introduced to the child by the alienating parent is *not* substantiated by the alienated parent's behavior prior to the dispute.

In many PAS cases, the child enjoyed a warm, vibrant relationship with the alienated parent prior to his or her parent's divorce.

Another notable distinction in true cases of Parental Alienation Syndrome is the idea that the child so strongly adopts the alienating parent's point of view that he or she begins to vilify the alienated parent independent of the alienating parent.

Alienated vs. Estranged

Children who are estranged from one parent are typically *not* victims of PAS. In many cases, when a child is estranged from a parent, that parent *chooses* (perhaps for a variety of reasons) not to be involved in the child's life.

Alternatively, there are also situations where an older child may be estranged from a parent due to that parent's own behavior. For example, a child whose mom is an alcoholic might choose not to participate in unsupervised visitations. This is not an example of PAS, however, because there is a valid reason for the child to resist contact.

Abuse Cases

Substantiated cases of abuse - whether emotional, physical, or sexual - should be differentiated from cases of PAS as well. When there is abuse, it is reasonable for the child to reject the parent. Therefore, it does not constitute a true example of PAS.

PAS Should be Considered When a Child Consistently, and Without Reason:

- Shuns the parent in question
- Denigrates, belittles, or disparages the parent
- Appears unable to distinguish lies from the truth in regards to the parent
- Unjustly hates the parent
- Defames the parent with invented stories and lies
- Uses inappropriate language to deride the parent in public
- Views the parent as singularly bad; sees nothing good in the parent in question
- Shows extreme resistance to seeing or maintaining contact with the parent

Degrees of PAS

Parents who contribute to Parental Alienation Syndrome do so to varying degrees. Mild alienation may be perpetrated by a parent who avoids conflict with the other parent and allows pent-up anger and resentment to spill over to the children. Moderate alienation may be perpetrated by a parent who is extremely angry with his or her ex-spouse but lacks the self-control to manage his or her own behaviors. Thus, the child becomes indoctrinated in the same anger and resentment. In both mild and moderate forms, the alienators may not intend to cause harm to the child's relationship with the alienated parent and usually responds positively to education.

In cases of severe alienation, though, it is more difficult to change the alienator's behaviors. He or she

truly believes that the child is better off without the other parent, intentionally withholds the child from the other parent, and purposely uses his or her influence to destroy a once-positive relationship between the child and the alienated parent.

Parents who suspect PAS, or Parental Alienation Syndrome, must take action to prevent further damage to their relationship with their children, while also working to document and report the behaviors which limit their access to their own children. In particular, victims of PAS should:

Continue to do everything that you can to maintain your relationship with your child. Even if you suspect that your ex is intentionally creating PAS, continue to call your child and attempt to adhere to the agreed upon visitation schedule. Even if your ex is withholding visitations, do not allow him or her to claim you are making no effort to see your child.

Do not blame your child. Separate your child's actions, which are hurtful, from the child himself. What is happening is not your child's fault. He or she did not initiate or cause what is happening.

As frustrated as you may feel, it is critical that you do not take your frustrations out on your child in any way.

Document, document, document. Keep a detailed record of the behaviors you associate with PAS, as well as all canceled visits and missed phone calls. Share this information with your lawyer.

Consider working with a mental health professional. It is imperative that you work through your own feelings about what is happening. A qualified professional can provide you with necessary tools for mediating the effects of PAS and restoring your relationship with your child.

Keep a journal of writings to your child. If contact with your child has been completely cut off, consider keeping a journal of letters to him or her, with the hope of sharing them in the years to come. This can be extremely therapeutic and healing for you, and it also provides your child with some documentation of your continued love even during times when you were kept apart. You may not be able to change what is happening in the present, but keeping a journal of letters would allow your child to be able to look back later, as an adult, and see the situation from your point of view. A lot of healing and awareness can come from that.

Never give up hope. Right now you feel like your relationship with your child has been stolen from you and the future is out of your control. However, your child will eventually have the opportunity to think for himself or herself. In the meantime, you must continue to be a person of integrity and do what you can to keep the lines of communication open, firmly believing that when your child begins to question all that he or she has been taught to think, you *will* have the opportunity to share your perspective.