

The Alienated Child in the Midst of a High Conflict Divorce: A New Approach to Parental Alienation Syndrome

TASA ID: [2905900](#)

The alienation of a child from a parent following separation and divorce has drawn significant attention in custody disputes. The clinical presentations of the child's adamant rejection of a parent, which is generally accompanied by strong resistance or refusal to visit with the parent, was originally described by Richard Gardner in the 1980's as **Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS)**. Richard A. Gardner proposed parental alienation syndrome based on his clinical experience with the children of divorcing parents.

Gardner's theory was widely held for a few decades, and PAS was used frequently in custody disputes as a defense against allegations that one parent is abusive to the child.

The most critical aspect of Gardner's PAS is the role of the alienating parent, who launches a campaign of denigration and rejection, which, in turn, alienates the child from the other parent. This campaign of denigration is often described as *programming* or *brainwashing* a child to believe that the targeted parent is dangerous and unsafe. Gardner notes that the indoctrinating parent is usually the mother and that false allegations of sexual abuse are common.

The description of the term PAS as a syndrome has been subject to still-unresolved debate. Critics of PAS state that there is no empirical research that supports Gardner's theory and that there are cases where a child is alienated from a parent without "alienating" behaviors by the other parent.

Further, Parental Alienation Syndrome does not add any information that would enlighten the court, the clinician, or the family, all of whom would be better served by a more specific description of the child's alienation in the context of all the dynamics within the family.

When PAS is used as an explanation for children's outcries of abuse, there is rarely a healthy resolution. These cases take up an inordinate amount of legal time, and the matter is rarely settled because there is no realistic way to resolve PAS unless the child is removed from the home of the alienating parent. This is a drastic measure and is often not in the best interest of the child.

Since Gardner proposed his theory on parental alienation, other researchers have suggested focusing less on diagnosing a syndrome and more on what has been termed, the "**Alienated Child.**" In understanding the alienated child, one has to examine all of the dynamics that have contributed to the alienation.

The research of Kelly and Johnston (2001) has drawn attention to The Alienated Child as a complex problem in which all family members play a role. Their theory suggests that alienating behaviors by both parents are the norm in high-conflict divorces.

Kelly and Johnston theorize that the rejected parent, usually the father (but not in all cases), tends to lack warmth and empathy with the child, engages in rigid parenting, and displays critical attitudes. The rejected parent may also be passive, depressed, anxious, withdrawn, and controlling; characteristics that promote rejection.

Kelly and Johnston use the term, *Alienated Child*, to describe the child who is caught in the cross fire of a highly contentious divorce and aligns with one parent. In these cases, the *Aligned Parent* may engage in alienating behaviors by undermining the other parent, referred to as the *Alienated Parent*.

Kelly and Johnston define an alienated child as one "who expresses, freely and persistently, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs, such as anger, hatred, rejection, and/or fear toward a parent that are *significantly disproportionate* to the child's actual experience with the parent." Their theory takes into account the characteristics and behaviors of the alienated child, the alienating parent, and the alienated parents.

The Alienated Child:

Unfortunately, in these cases, the children are the true victims. Prolonged acrimony, the contentious relationship between their parents, and the pain of divorce, complicate the emotional landscape of the most vulnerable members of the family. These children literally feel as if they are in a war and must choose sides. When children are brought into the tug of war between the parents, they respond with a diminished ability to maintain healthy boundaries and relationships.

The effect of alienation is dramatic on children. Children become overwhelmed, anxious, depressed, and confused. These children often develop an unhealthy sense of entitlement that leads to social alienation and behavior problems. Somatic complaints, conflicts with authority figures, and difficulty in forming intimate relationships are often present.

Children who have witnessed domestic violence in their parents' marriage often act as a "protector" for the abused spouse, and, after the separation, continue to act in this manner. Further, if the child perceives that he or she, and the mother, have been abandoned by the father, that child is vulnerable to become alienated. In some cases, separation followed by long periods of no contact between the child and the non-residential parent exacerbates the child's sense of abandonment, and can lead to alienation.

Children who are psychologically vulnerable to alienation often have had emotional problems prior to the separation. They may lack the resiliency to cope with the pressures of divorce, and, for these children, it is often easier to deal with this anxiety by aligning with one parent.

The Aligned Parent:

The aligned parent, formerly called the alienating parent by Richard Gardner, often comes under scrutiny by the legal profession. The alienating parent is often used as a defense for the parent accused of child abuse, and, in many of these cases, the alienated parent takes no responsibility for the estrangement.

Richard Gardner believed that these parents systematically programmed their children to believe that the alienated parent is abusive. However, as research has shown, this explanation does not fully explain the child's alienation.

The aligned parent may or may not coach the child to make certain statements, but their behaviors and attitudes toward the alienated parent certainly effects the child's attitudes and feelings toward that parent.

The aligned parent may have had traumatic experiences with the other parent, such as domestic violence, abandonment, affairs, etc. and, therefore, harbor intense feelings of anger, fear, and betrayal about the other parent. These feelings are transmitted consciously or unconsciously to the children. Even though the parent may not directly speak poorly about the other parent, children are exquisite barometers of emotions, and they can sense fear, anxiety, depression and anger in their parents.

The aligned parent tends to engage in the following:

- Merge feelings with the child, making "we" statements instead of allowing the child to have his or her own feelings,
- Deny the importance of the relationship between the alienated parents and the child,
- May engage in direct or indirect behaviors which thwart the relationship between the child and the alienated parents,
- Engage in intrusive behaviors such as frequent phone calls when the child is visiting the other parent,
- Encourage the child to act as a informant about the other parent's home,
- Inform the child about adult issues such as child support and the reason for the divorce,
- Force the child to be a messenger of communication,
- Making derogatory or blaming statements about the other parent,
- Extending the conflict to other friends, family members, and legal professionals.

It is interesting to note that the aligned parent often has a cadre of supporters such as grandparents, friends, and new relationships to bolster their indignation and anger at the alienated parent. This further alienates the estranged parent and adds to the anxiety, confusion, and acrimony between the parents.

It is not uncommon, therefore, in the paradigm of the alienated child to see a wide range of legal professionals involved in these cases, each taking a stand and defending one side or the other, complicating the difficult landscape of these cases.

The Alienated Parent:

Alienated parents in this paradigm often do not take any responsibility for the child's alienation. They view the alienation as a direct result of the aligned parent's campaign to denigrate them and destroy their relationship with their child.

However, in exploring the history of the relationship between the alienated parent and the child, it is apparent that this parent often had a minimal role in the caretaking of the child prior to the divorce.

In exploring the history of the relationship between the alienated parent and child, researchers have found that there is a general absence of quality in the relationship in the formative years of the child's development.

These parents may have been workaholics who were often absent from the home and not involved in the day-to-day caring of their child. They may quickly get into a new relationship rather than giving their child time to adjust. Overall, these parents are fairly insensitive to their child's needs, and they lack the sufficient empathy to help their child through these difficult time.

The alienated parents tend to have the following characteristics:

- Defensive
- Avoidant of relationships
- Externalize blame
- Have a difficult time seeing their own behaviors as contributing to the child's alienation
- Controlling and powerful
- Used to having their own way in relationships
- Less child-centered and more self-centered
- Less empathy for others
- Quick to blame others for their problems
- Place their own needs above the needs of their children

The Solution:

Acknowledging that the problem of the Alienated Child lies within the framework of a high conflict divorce, and involves the child and both parents, leads to the formulation of a comprehensive treatment plan. This treatment plan involves the courts, a parenting coordinator, and therapists. It is important to note that unless the family is following this treatment plan, the allegations of abuse and the alienation *will increase* and continue to create disruption in the courts.

From the Legal Side:

The court's order in these situations should recognize the value of on-going contact between the parent and the alienated parent and establish a structure to make that happen. It is important that changing custody should not be used as a corrective measure with child alienation. This only serves to exacerbate the conflict, and further alienates the parent.

Along with this order, it is highly recommended that a **parenting coordinator** be set in place who can monitor the cooperation with the court order, have the authority to enforce compliance, and report to the court when one parent is not cooperative.

Therapy for the Alienated Parent:

Therapy for the alienated parent is critical. These parents need to develop the necessary insight into their behaviors and understand how these behaviors impact their children. They often have a lack of empathy and are not particularly child-centered. Therefore, exploring their own childhood histories and how their relationships with their own parents formed the basis for how they interact with their own children is essential in helping them build empathy for their children.

As an adjunct to the individual therapy with the alienated parent, parenting coaching and/or parenting classes can help the alienated parent develop more effective parenting skills, build empathy, and become more child-focused.

Therapy for the Alienated Child:

Engaging a therapist who is trained in child alienation is highly recommended. Alienated children often have an unrealistic sense of their own importance and can internalize much of their anxiety and anger into destructive behaviors toward themselves and others. They may become self-absorbed and aggressive with siblings and peers. They spend a lot of energy creating and maintaining their alienation for the "other" parent, and this campaign is mentally exhausting. They are like tiny soldiers in a war, choosing sides and intensifying the conflict. Their sense of safety and stability is significantly marred. In fact, children who are alienated from a parent whom they have vilified are often very sad and depressed and exhibit behaviors and symptoms that look like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

Therapy for the Aligned Parent:

It is important for the aligned parent to have support and understanding during this process. The aligned parent needs to resolve the anger, fear, and frustration towards the other parent.

However, it is essential that the aligned parent understand the impact that his or her behavior will have on the child. Often the aligned parent denies any sort of intentional alienation; however, many of the behaviors that alienate children are unintentional and unconscious. The aligned parent's fear of the other person, the hyper vigilance, and the anxiety are often unwittingly transmitted to the child. Children are sensitive to their environment and their parents' emotions, and even if the aligned parent is not directly telling the children to be afraid, the signals are being sent.

Reunification Therapy:

The reunification therapist should be separate from the individual therapists for each family member. However, it is critical that the reunification therapist receive feedback from the individual therapists to help guide them in resolving critical issues. Reunification therapy should focus on healing the fractured relationship between the child and the alienated parent. This therapy can also help the alienated parent practice the parenting skills he or she is learning.

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