

Parental Alienation Syndrome: What Do You Do When Your Child Stops Seeing You as Mom or Dad?

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Imagine observing a normal, healthy, loving parent/child relationship one week, and watching the child profess to hate, refuse to see, or speak with the parent the following week. Mental health professionals can certainly identify inappropriate anger or immaturity issues in children. But just like doctors in the 1970s recognized flu-like symptoms—fever, headaches, nausea and vomiting—without understanding that their patient had AIDS, many mental health professionals recognize Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) symptoms without understanding what drives the alienating parent and child's behavior.

The concept of PAS is pretty simple—one parent deliberately damages, and in some cases destroys, the previously healthy, loving relationship between his or her child and the child's other parent. In a severe PAS case the alienating parent and child work together to successfully eliminate the previously loved Mom or Dad from the child's life. Their campaign is aimed at destroying Mom or Dad's position as a loving parent and responsible adult.

The late Dr. Richard A. Gardner, author of *The Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Guide of Legal and Mental Health Professionals*, coined the term Parental Alienation Syndrome almost 20 years ago to characterize the breakdown of previously normal, healthy parent/child relationships during divorce and child custody cases. Yet the United States judicial system pays little, if any, attention to PAS. The legal and psychological communities often mistakenly dismiss PAS as the typical rancor associated with high conflict divorce and child custody cases. With one of every two marriages ending in divorce, approximately 20 million children are already victims of mild, moderate or severe alienating behavior. Twenty-five million more children will likely face some form of alienating behavior in their futures.

"The key factor that is characteristic in all PAS families is the alienating parent's real or perceived fear of abandonment," says David Israel, a Connecticut clinical psychologist who specializes in child advocacy and family mediation. "During a divorce, the alienating parent feels an intense level of abandonment and betrayal. This parent uses his or her child to fill the void left by the divorce and destroy a relationship that is loved and cherished by the other parent."

"Emotionally speaking," Israel adds, "the child sees the parent as a victim and feels obligated to take care of the parent. The child takes on much more than he or she should take on - worrying about the parent, defending the parent, and making sure the parent is okay. During this time, the child becomes emotionally dependent on the alienating parent - looking to the parent for acknowledgement and praise on how well he or she is performing the new responsibilities. So you have a very unhealthy situation where the parent is emotionally dependent on the child and vice versa. This unhealthy dependency between parent and child is the foundation of PAS."

A targeted parent trying to break the unhealthy dependent bond between an alienating parent and alienated child is in for a shock. The parent can't reach the child with logic. The child no longer shares the parent's "logical" viewpoints. Nor can the parent fall back on previously successful parenting skills. The alienated child now operates under a new set of rules - rules that no longer recognize the targeted parent as Mom or Dad. The parent can't even reach the child with memories of happier days. The child has those memories buried so deep in his or her subconscious that the parent can't find them with a map. As hard as it is for an alienated parent to believe, the love the parent and child shared is gone.

“The change in an alienated child’s behavior is the hardest concept for a targeted parent to accept,” according to Israel. “The transition from loved and respected parent to hated and despised parent happens rather quickly.”

The child’s change of behavior is rooted in anger. All children are initially angry with their parents during a divorce. After all, the parents broke up the child’s home and caused him or her pain. That’s normal. It is also normal for a child to act out his or her anger.

However on top of the normal anger an alienated child has another layer of anger. This child is angry with the targeted parent for hurting the parent the child considers the victim. In PAS there are no boundaries separating the alienating parent’s emotional perspective from the child’s emotional perspective. What the parent feels, the child feels.

Another factor fueling the child’s position, according Patricia Simpson, a licensed Maryland counselor who conducts custody evaluations for the courts, is fear.

“An alienated child is afraid he or she will lose the parent that he or she depends on,” Simpson explains. “The child rationalizes, ‘If I show the targeted parent any love, then my other parent, the one who takes care of me, will get angry and withdraw his or her love and support.’”

Rationalization is an alienated child’s best coping mechanism. “When a parent keeps a child away from the other parent,” Simpson adds, “and inundates the child with false or inappropriate information about the other parent, the child rationalizes that what the parent says must be true. After all, the alienating parent is taking care of the child. The child depends on this parent. The child knows he or she can’t depend on the targeted parent because the alienating parent says the child can’t.”

A targeted parent on the receiving end of disrespectful behavior from an angry, alienated child is often at a loss to explain it. How, this parent asks, could a previously well-behaved, sensitive, considerate child behave so poorly?

“An alienating parent sends the child all sorts of verbal and non-verbal signals that the child can act any way he or she wants without consequences,” Israel says. “In a relatively short period of time the targeted parent sees the child’s behavior become more defiant, oppositional and confrontational. The child tests the limits and discovers that there are no limits anymore. The alienating parent reinforces the child’s perception by allowing the inappropriate displays of anger towards the targeted parent to escalate.”

“And in his or her own way,” Simpson adds, “the child’s bad behavior towards the targeted parent is the child’s way of telling the alienating parent, ‘I’m acting this way to prove I love you so you won’t abandon me.’”

In a sense, the child stops seeing the targeted parent as Mom or Dad and starts seeing this parent as someone to be despised and disrespected. The child makes the distinction from the parent that once was to the parent who caused so much pain. How does a targeted parent manage a child who no longer accepts the parent? The answer is simple - the parent doesn’t.

PAS is not a situation that can be managed or controlled. An alienated parent is powerless without successful family therapy or court orders designed to repair the parent/child relationship. All this parent can realistically do is reinforce positive messages to the child—“I love you. I’m still your mother/father. I will always be here for you.” The parent should try and remain calm. He or she shouldn’t raise his or her voice or use force.

“Absent of mediation designed to repair the relationship, an alienated parent must deal with a loss that he or she feels was wrongfully stolen away,” Israel explains. “Unfortunately, the loss stays with the parent as long as the parent is separated from the child. The parent’s goal shouldn’t just be restoring the relationship, but also coping with the loss.”

Mental health professionals say intellectual understanding PAS is an alienated parent's best coping tool. When a targeted parent understands PAS, that understanding provides the parent with an emotional anchor. The parent sees that PAS is not about whether he or she was a good parent. Rather, the parent understands that PAS is about the other parent's struggles with unresolved abandonment issues.

On many different levels, healthy distractions prevent the targeted parent from obsessing over a situation over which he or she has no control. Physical outlets allow the parent to reduce the stress and tension that people tend to carry around during difficult times. Writing in a journal or diary helps the parent offload the emotional impact of his or her situation. Social or recreational activities and volunteer work also helps. Just because PAS exists in a parent's life doesn't mean the person can't ever have fun or do something rewarding.

"On a daily basis, alienated parents must know their limits regarding their abilities to deal with events that serve as painful reminders of relationships that no longer exist," Israel concludes. "Talking to other people about these feelings is a very important way of letting go and moving forward. Feelings acknowledged ultimately disappear. Feelings denied often result in little to no change. Alienated parents must also acknowledge that acceptance is a process that takes time and effort."