



Family Law

Rosemarie Boll

New View of an Old Problem – Parental Alienation Syndrome Reconsidered

In 1985, child psychiatrist Richard A. Gardner developed a concept which the world came to know as Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS). He said PAS occurs in children caught in custody battles when one parent (usually the mother) deliberately targets the other parent by making unfounded allegations. Her goal is to preoccupy her children with criticizing and scorning their father. Then, once the syndrome takes hold, the children totally alienate him.

By labelling it a 'syndrome', Gardner implies that the child suffers an actual mental disorder. PAS attracts both supporters and critics, but over the years, the challengers have largely won out. Medical and legal communities say PAS lacks scientific validity. No professional association has recognized it as a valid mental disorder. It is not included in the *American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and it is not recognized by the World Health Organization.

The new view of adolescents who estrange themselves from one parent is that they undergo a 'splitting' or 'alienation' reaction. Both parents are to blame for the reaction because each plays a role – the favoured parent says the child is making a legitimate choice because the other parent is a bad parent, while the refused parent calls it brainwashing. The child ends up caught in an escalating, intolerable conflict between the two most important people in her life – her mother and father. She wants to love and be loyal to both of them, but she can't. In self-defence, she automatically and unconsciously reacts by 'splitting off' or 'alienating' one parent. These profoundly conflicted children exhibit three characteristics:

- the child seems remarkably free from guilt, anguish, or remorse about the estrangement;
- the child cannot remember any good times with the rejected parent; and
- the child complains that the rejected parent 'failed as a parent' or 'did not care,' even if there is evidence of a previously good relationship with a warm and healthy attachment.

Psychologically, the reaction makes sense, because it works. The child has ended the marital conflict. The intolerable stress is gone, and she appears relaxed and happy. School work, behaviour, and social life often improve. The favoured parent approves of her 'choice,' and life is good – or so it seems.

But underneath that smiling face, the child is suffering great psychological harm. She's in a place she doesn't want to be. The estrangement *is* less painful than living in unending turmoil, but it's not psychologically healthy. Some psychologists¹ have gone

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so far as to compare it to the emotional torture the Nazis inflicted on some parents entering the camps — you have two children; choose one. Does the parent ever escape the agony and torment of that betrayal?

The solution can't come from the child, because she is not at fault. It is the parents who must give up the fight. They must co-operate. The favoured parent must support and enforce access even in the face of the child's anger. The rejected parent must accept visits with an angry child, and be patient and believe in the bond. Above all, the parents must stop blaming each other. Over time, the child can give up the alienation reaction, because psychologically, she no longer needs it to survive.

Not surprisingly, the desperate, rejected parent will do anything to re-establish the relationship including giving up the belief that everything is the other parent's fault. But the favoured parent may vehemently resist any attempt to change the status quo. These are the cases that end up in court.

Judges can be helpful because they have authority, but it's not easy. They have three options:

- find ways to convince the favoured parent that it is in *everyone's* best interest to fix the problem by giving up the fight. Education, treatment, and counselling may help, but the favoured parent must accept the need to change.
- strictly enforce the access, even if it has to be supervised. The longer the estrangement continues, the more entrenched it gets. Waiting for the child to come around rarely works.
- talk to the child. Assure her it is not her fault. Tell her that she doesn't get a choice about the access. Just as she must attend school or get a vaccination, she must see the rejected parent even if it is hard or it hurts.

As adults, 80% of alienated children disclosed that they secretly wanted the alienation detected and stopped. Parents are in charge of their children's physical and psychological well-being, and almost all of them do a reasonable job even in stressful times. But when parents are consumed by marital conflict, it may take a judge to re-unify a family.

*Rosemarie Boll is Staff Counsel with the Family Law Office of Legal Aid Alberta in Edmonton, Alberta. She is the author of a young adult novel about family law and domestic violence entitled *The Second Trial*, published by Second Story Press, Toronto, ON 2010.*

Notes

1. Dr. Gary J. Kneier, PhD, a clinical psychologist practising in Calgary, Alberta. This article is based on two papers presented at the 2010 National Family Law Conference in Victoria, B.C. — “Adolescent Children Refusing Access” by Dr. Gary Kneier, and “Parent Alienation: The Need for a Clear and Unequivocal Response” by Robert V.T. Boyden, Q.C.