

New Definition of Parental Alienation

What is the Difference Between Parental Alienation (PA) and Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS)?

by Douglas Darnall, Ph.D.

Published 1997

In Dr. Richard Gardner's second edit of parental alienation syndrome, he defined PAS as "a disorder that arises primarily in the context of child-custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child's campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from the combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent's indoctrination and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the targeted parent." He went on to emphasize the point that if "true parental abuse and / or neglect is present" and the child's animosity is justified, PAS would not be an appropriate explanation for the children's feelings.

Gardner describes what the severely alienated child will look like. To better understand PAS and help prevent the damage its causes children and families, I am suggesting that parents and the courts must understand the process that leads to PAS. Therefore I am defining parental alienation (PA), rather than PAS, as any constellation of behaviors, whether conscious or unconscious, that could evoke a disturbance in the relationship between a child and the other parent.

My definition of Parental Alienation is different from Dr. Gardner's original definition of PAS in 1987: "a disturbance in which children are preoccupied with deprecation and criticism of a parent-denigration that is unjustified and/or exaggerated." I am placing the emphasis on the brainwashing process while Dr. Gardner's definition goes a step further to explain that the term is similar in meaning to brainwashing except that he adds the additional component of the child becoming active participant in the denigrating the targeted parent. In effect, the child has been successfully brainwashed.

With either definition, the motivation for the alienating parent has both a conscious as well as "a subconscious or unconscious" component.

The children themselves may have motivations that will make the alienation worse. Their hedonistic outlook for immediate gratification or their desire to avoid discomfort makes them vulnerable allies for siding with the alienating parent. The children become an advocate for the alienating parent by becoming the spokesperson for their parent's hatred. They become the soldiers while the alienating parent is the general directing the action in the background against the targeted parent. The children are frequently unaware of how they are being used. It is most important to understand that if the child is angry and refuses to visit the targeted parent because of actual abuse or neglect, the child's behavior is not a manifestation of PAS. This is why the issue of false allegations is so important.

Another difference in what I am outlining in my book ("Divorce Casualties: Protecting Your Children From Parental Alienating") is my emphasis on the alienating parents rather than on the severity of symptoms. I believe this is important because parents (both mothers and fathers) must be able to honestly look at their behavior, identify the symptoms of alienation (not just the symptoms of PAS), and learn strategies for preventing PA regardless of whether the parent is the alienator or the targeted parent. I believe that alienation is a reciprocal process where both parents get caught up in alienation.

Dr. Gardner's most controversial solution for dealing with severe alienation was to remove the children from the alienator's home and place the child with the targeted parent. Later, however, he recanted his recommendation, saying that the children "are likely to run away and do everything possible to return to [the alienating parent's] home (Gardner, 1992)." Dr. Gardner then recommended "transitional sites" such as friend or family member's house, a community shelter, or hospital. Each site would have a different level of supervision and resources to help the children and targeted parent. Hospitalization would be used only as a last resort.

Dr. Gardner's definition emphasized the point that the child must be an active participant with the alienating parent in degrading the targeted parent. My definition of Parental Alienation (PA) focuses more on the parent's behavior and less on the child's role in degrading the victimized parent, because alienation can occur well before the parent's hatred for the other parent permeates the child's beliefs about the victimized parent. This definition is necessary if parents are going to recognize the risk they have for unconsciously falling into a pattern of alienation if they don't take corrective action. By the time the children have come to agree with the alienating parent's propaganda, it can be too late to prevent the significant damaging effects of the alienation. *(See Note at the end of this article for an important new finding.)

Also, Dr. Gardner's definition states that the criticism of the other parent must be unjustified and/or exaggerated. I do not believe this is necessary. One parent can alienate the children against the other parent simply by harping on faults that are real and provable. Divorced parents need to understand that their children need to love both parents if at all possible, even if they themselves have years ago ceased to love their ex-spouse or ex-partner. They should help the children to dwell on the other parent's good points rather than the faults.

It is important to keep in mind that that alienation is not about the horrible parent or "bad guy," versus the targeted parent or "good guy." The "bad guy-good guy" roles rotate. The same parent can be both the alienator and the victim, depending on how he or she is behaving. It is not uncommon for a targeted parent to retaliate with alienating behavior against the other parent. At this point, the parents have reversed their roles. This process can occur well before PAS manifest itself. The problem now is that the alienation escalates back and forth, each parent retaliating against the other. What does this do to your children? It is this vicious cycle that must be prevented or stopped.

You can't assume that the targeted parent is without fault. Targeted parents can become alienators when they retaliate because of their hurt. Now they are in the role of the alienator and the other parent becomes the victim. The roles become blurred because it's now difficult to know who is the alienator and who is the victim or targeted parent. Often both parents feel victimized. Alienation is a process, not a person.

Understanding parental alienation is paramount for a child's welfare and a parent's own peace of mind. Divorced parents, grandparents, judges, mediators, attorneys, and mental health workers all need to understand the dynamics of parental alienation, recognize the symptomatic behavior, and execute tactics for combating the malady.

If you would like to read more [Parental Alienation Articles](#), please visit Keeping Families Connected.