

HUGS TO HEARTBREAK

A Parent's Journey Through Parental Alienation



Repairing the Child-Parent Relationship After a Traumatic Separation, Alienation

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The concept of Parental Alienation Syndrome 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.

Richard A. Gardner, a private practitioner and attending psychiatrist at New York's Presbyterian Hospital, coined the term Parental Alienation Syndrome almost 20 years ago to describe the breakdown of previously normal, loving parent/child relationship during divorce and child custody cases. However, the United States judicial system pays little, if any, attention to PAS. The legal and psychological communities, not to mention family members and well-meaning friends, 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 PAS in their futures.

In a severe PAS case, unresolved psychological and emotional issues are at the foundation of the alienating parent's destructive actions toward the previously loved other parent. "During a divorce, the alienating parent feels an intense level of abandonment and betrayal," said David Israel, a Connecticut clinical psychologist who specializes in child advocacy and family mediation. "This parent's main missions become filling the void left by the divorce and destroying a relationship that is loved and cherished by the other parent.

"The alienating parent uses his or her child to fill the emptiness in order to keep from feeling abandoned," he added. "Emotionally speaking, 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 OK. 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."

The targeted parent is left mourning the loss of the child. The child isn't dead, but a loving, caring, sensitive child is now an angry, bitter extension of the alienating parent. The love the alienated parent and child shared is gone. The alienated parent is desperate—willing to try anything to repair the relationship with the child. However, repairing that relationship with old behaviors and traditional family therapy is virtually impossible.

"The common goal of traditional family during a divorce is to help the divorcing spouses co-parent for the best interests of the child," Israel said. "However, in PAS families, the parents do not have—nor do they share—that common goal. The severely alienating parent and child have their own agenda—they want to keep the targeted parent out of the child's life. They may initially convince a competent therapist of the righteousness of their position, but a good clinician will discover inconsistencies in their story. When the parent and child realize the clinician is challenging them instead of passively listening and supporting them, they stop cooperating. At that point, the therapist must recommend more dramatic measures."

How dramatic? In order for a severely alienated child to rebuild his or her relationship with the alienated parent, the child must be removed from the alienating parent's sphere of influence. The child must live full-time with the alienated parent. The child can't call, visit or have any contact with the alienating parent—until the child is strong enough to withstand that parent's negative and destructive influence.

And the sound you just heard was many judges gasping in indignation and disbelief.

In today's courtrooms, judges are unlikely to award custody of the child to the targeted parent and remove the child from the only place the child considers home. They believe such a radical course of action will somehow damage the child. Despite the fact that there is no clinical evidence to suggest that placing a severely alienated PAS child with his or her one emotionally healthy parent will harm the child, most judges would rather not further upset a child already reeling over the breakup of his or her family.

"No judge will take the necessary steps to address a severe case of PAS until a case is so bad that the child is completely alienated from the parent," said Pamela Hoch, founder of the Rachel Foundation, a non-profit organization in Gaithersburg, Md., that specializes in reintegrating alienated children and parents. "Many times I tell a parent, 'It must get worse before it can get better.' Usually the child will act out excessively about visiting the alienated parent. The child may send the most toxic hate mail imaginable to the parent. A judge usually must see that type of behavior before he or she will consider taking the necessary draconian steps to successfully resolve the case."

Reintegrating an alienated child and parent takes extensive physical contact—normal day-to-day contact—between the child and parent. The alienated child must rediscover a healthy, loving relationship with the alienated parent in order to eventually have loving relationships with both parents on his or her own terms. "In our program we take the view that alienated children aren't unhealthy," Hoch said. "These children are just trying to survive as hostages in an alienation situation. We don't believe these children are sick."

Any reintegration program first must overcome the child's acting out and mistrust. Second, it must focus on education rather than therapy. Then the child and parent must rediscover good communication skills. Finally, the child must build bridges to a new life that includes the formerly alienated parent, the parent's extended family and friends and, one day, the alienating parent.

The process begins after the judge gives the alienated parent full custody of the child. Transferring the child from the alienating parent to the alienated parent is often the most difficult, and stressful, part of the process for both child and parent.

In many cases, the local police department and child welfare agency must be notified before a transfer. A controlled environment during the transfer is essential on the practical, psychological and law enforcement levels. All children refuse to go in the beginning. A severely alienated child will scream during a transfer, "I'm being kidnapped; I'm being abducted." A parent needs strong, knowledgeable and trained people along the route to ensure an orderly transfer to the parent's home, a rented facility or even a hotel room. The goal should be to get the child into the new environment safely and as quickly as possible.

The alienated parent shouldn't take part in the transfer. This way, the child doesn't have the familiar target against whom to direct his or her anger and bad behavior. Instead, the child should deal with a facilitator—a neutral third party. A facilitator may be a mental health professional or may be someone working with a mental health professional. Typically, the Rachel Foundation uses someone older—a non-threatening grandfather or grandmother type—to explain to the child in very concrete, no-nonsense language, "This is happening, and there is nothing you can do about it. We know this is unpleasant for you, and we're here to help you get through it. But that doesn't mean it isn't going to happen or be any less unpleasant."

Naturally, the facilitator must overcome the child's mistrust. The child also needs to cool off and regain control of his or her emotions. A child may need anywhere from two hours to two weeks to cool down. During this part of the process, the facilitator should focus on education rather than on therapy. The facilitator needs to inform the child in age-appropriate language what will happen next. Much like a project manager in a business meeting, the facilitator should outline the goals, objectives and parameters of the project—breaking down larger objectives into smaller, more manageable tasks.

The alienated parent may or may not have contact with the child during the cooling-off period. However once the child calms down, the alienated parent should always be in the picture. The biggest hurdle is breaking down the child's false beliefs about the alienated parent (i.e., the parent isn't the violent, dangerous and untrustworthy monster the child believes the parent to be). The facilitator and other adults should take on this task through a series of age-appropriate reality checks. They must lead the child and parent through simple, normal everyday activities. And the tasks should be simple—getting dressed, doing laundry, making dinner, eating dinner together, cleaning up, going to movies, parks and museums. The child and parent should also watch each other interact with other people. This process benefits the parent as much as the child. Don't forget, in some cases the parent and child haven't been together in the same room for years. The parent often believes the child is the same child he or she knew before the alienation. That isn't the case.

"In reality, no one can break down a child's false reality except the child. But by engaging the child and parent in normal activities, the child gets to see for him or herself that the parent doesn't fit the child's long-held beliefs. That's when the child's false belief system starts to crumble," Hoch said.

The parent and child's work doesn't end here. The two still must address the issues that led to their current relationship. The two can't be fully reintegrated as long as one or both of them continues to sweep unresolved issues under a rug.

Bringing these issues out in the open is tricky. Negative comments about the alienating parent are never a good idea. In fact, the parent may resist saying anything that could damage the new, fragile parent/child relationship. And the child may not feel safe saying anything. Enter the facilitator. The facilitator should act as a communication conduit between the parent and child. When the child starts questioning the differences between his or her distorted memory and his or her new reality, the child will typically broach the subject with someone other than the parent first.

Ultimately, no one – not the facilitator, parent or anyone else—can change the child's mind about what did or didn't happen in the past. The only person who can do that is the child. And the only way the child can realize that his or her perception of the parent is wrong is to compare that perception with the new reality in front of his or her eyes. "It could take the child as much as a year for the child to open up to the parent about how he or she felt during the lost time. And finishing that conversation could take years," Hoch said.

A successful reintegration does not guarantee a successful long-term relationship. The key to long-term success is the child and parent's pre-PAS relationship. Were the two close? Did they have a healthy and strong bond? If the parent/child relationship was good, then their future looks bright.

Even when the child and parent shared a healthy pre-alienation relationship, their future could be complicated by something Hoch called "the pendulum effect." If the court allows a child to re-establish contact with the alienating parent too soon, the child begins swinging wildly between the two parents. According to Hoch, the formerly alienated parent must remain calm during these swings and continue sending the child messages filled with love and support.

Another key factor in the long-term success of the reintegration process is bridge relationships. For example, a child alienated from his or her mother may have stayed close to an aunt—the mother’s sister. The aunt becomes the bridge relationship. Siblings also make excellent bridges. Bridge relationships are important because the “bridge” person has loving relationships with both the alienated child and the parent. The bridge person provides a much-needed reality check for a reintegrated child experiencing the pendulum effect. These relationships become particularly important to the long-term success of the reintegration process once the formerly alienated child turns 18 years old and is beyond the court’s jurisdiction.