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## Help for the Alienated Parent

ELIZABETH M. ELLIS

*Parental alienation cases present significant challenges for the family courts and clinicians alike. At times, traditional counseling fails, judicial intervention may not be feasible, and a parent is alienated from a child or children with little to no ongoing contact for the foreseeable future. This article is organized as a guide for the clinician in offering some strategies for the alienated parent. These are organized under five headings: (1) erode the negative image by providing incongruent information; (2) refrain from actions that put the child in the middle of the conflict, (3) consider ways to mollify the hurt and anguish of the alienating parent, (4) look for ways to dismantle the coalition and convert enemies to allies, (5) never give up contact but “stand in the door and hold a cookie.”*

Over the last 25 years, as the divorce rate has climbed, the courts and family therapists have seen a rise in the number of cases in which children have become strongly allied with one parent and alienated from the other parent. Wallerstein and Kelly (1980), studying 131 children from divorcing families in California in the 1970s, found a small portion of them—about 25%—to be strongly allied with their mothers after a very conflicted divorce. They joined in with their mothers in waging a campaign of denigration and rejection of their fathers. Wallerstein and Kelly referred to these children as “refusers” and noted that the children were mostly older—between the ages of 9 and 12. Mother-son dyads were the most common pair. Many of these children appeared to be angry at the father for his contribution to the divorce. Some had never had a strong relationship with the father and were uncomfortable with fathers who made little effort to nurture, understand, or accommodate them. Richard Gardner (1987) coined the term parental alienation syndrome (PAS) to describe this pattern and the term has become part of our lexicon in describing these children. In Gardner’s cases, 90% of the children

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were in mother custody homes, were allied with the mother, and were alienated from their fathers. Gardner saw the problem as stemming in large part by active efforts on the part of the mother to sever the child's relationship with the father. He attributed this to changes in divorce law that threatened the primary and custodial control of mothers, especially stay-at-home mothers.

While PAS has been the lightning rod for controversy and has engendered much debate in the literature and on websites, little actual data is available. Dunne and Hedrick (1994) studied 16 families which met Gardner's criteria for PAS. Of the 26 children in these families, 21 were "involved in the alienation dynamic" with a parent. Mother-daughter dyads were most common. Racusin, Copans, and Mills (1994) studied 12 children who were "refusers," and found girls and boys to be equally prevalent. Most were the oldest child in the family and were likely to be oldest daughters. They also found the parents to have high levels of emotional problems. Johnston (1993) reported on 175 children seen in highly conflicted divorces, some of which formed strong "alignments" with one parent. She found alignments to be most common in the 9 to 12 age group.

Johnston and her group of researchers in California have steadfastly avoided the PAS terminology—no doubt to avoid the controversy associated with it—and have consistently referred to these cases as "children in alignments." Their original study (Johnston & Campbell, 1988) consisted of 100 children of 80 divorcing parents who were in the process of divorcing when they were referred by the courts for counseling and mediation. Their second sample (Johnston, 1992) consisted of 75 children who were referred by the family courts whose divorced parents had been involved in domestic violence or protracted post-divorce disputes for several years. Johnston (1993) described the process of how children form alliances. She found that a portion of the children in the 9 to 13 age group, having been exposed to the inter-parental conflict for several years, began to "make strong alliances, these being overtly hostile, unshakeable stances in which the child may stridently reject and refuse to see or visit one parent" (p. 123). She reasoned that the children began to do so because of a convergence of several factors. The children in this age group were old enough to be aware of and to understand some of the complex dynamics of their parents' conflict, they had a tendency to adopt a polarized moral view of the situation, and they often were under some subtle, or not so subtle, pressure from family members to "take a stand." Comparing their sample with the Wallerstein and Kelly sample, they found that these cases also occurred more frequently where the litigation was "chronic" and the hostility was "unremitting." Thus their group of children ages 9 to 12 had been exposed to intense levels of conflict for several years. Twenty-five percent to 40% of them had formed an alignment with one parent and were consistently denigrating and rejecting the other parent. In extreme cases the child's distortion of reality and perceptions of the alienated parent as particularly evil and horrible took on a bizarre quality.

They referred to these strong alignments as “closely related to PAS” as defined by Gardner.

### PAS DYNAMICS

Johnston and Campbell (1988) further elaborated what they saw to be the dynamics of how PAS develops. With samples of children of various ages they were able to chart the responses of children to conflicted visitations and inter-parental hostility and note how the response patterns change with development. Six to eight year olds were characterized by intense emotional distress over trying to be loyal to both parents. Some of this distress dropped off as they got older and “were old enough to take a stand.” Thus, forming an alliance with one parent and rejecting another was seen as a way to reduce anxiety and confusion. This is a key insight into working with these children in that the PAS, while an irresolvable conundrum for the courts and family therapists, is not the *problem* for the child but rather the *solution* to the problem. Thus it is not ego dystonic, and the child is not eager or typically willing to give it up.

Johnston and Campbell also found that these children had typically been compliant children who had overly close, enmeshed, even dependent relationships with their mothers. The mothers appeared to not have recovered emotionally from the divorce but were still hurt, angry, and depressed. The parents’ separation, in their sample of highly conflicted divorces, was particularly traumatic and had involved physical abuse, abandonment, or betrayal. The mothers had experienced unusual degrees of humiliation, demoralization, fear, and/or helplessness. In many of these cases, the injured parent communicates to the children, subtle or overtly, that the children’s loyalty to her are “all I have.”

In the post-divorce custodial household, the alienated parent began to be seen in increasingly negative terms as the “all bad” parent. The injured parent projected all blame for the divorce on the other parent in an attempt to salvage their own dignity and self-esteem. The children in these households increasingly began to mirror the alienating parent’s emotions, actions, and statements. Every angry, retaliatory action taken by the alienated parent, in his attempt to gain access to the children, was used as further evidence that he was cruel, unsympathetic, and villainous, and that the mother-child unit was being victimized. As the children grew increasingly allied with the injured parent, the injured parent grew stronger and the children were seen as less distressed. So, for the alienating parent as well, the PAS problem was not the *problem* but the *solution* to the problem.

The alignment was often fueled by people in the community allying with the alienating parent, to form strong “coalitions” allied against the alienated parent. These were naturally the alienating parent’s relatives and attorney, which is to be expected. However, caseworkers, teachers, even coaches,

and the child's therapist were often drawn into the coalition by submitting affidavits to the court, colluding to block contact between the child and alienated parent, suppressing information about the child's whereabouts and the child's day-to-day activities.

In terms of its developmental course, they found that children who were very young when their parents divorced were more likely to become aligned than those whose parents divorced later. These children had no positive memories of the intact family, had no history of a positive bond with the alienated parent, and thus had never formed such a bond. They also found these children, due to their enmeshment and alignment, had not developed good boundaries and a coherent sense of self. These alliances were extremely resistant to intervention and often persisted through adolescence. They had no data on the eventual outcome of these cases. As of this writing, there exists no data on the long-range outcome for these children as they move into young adulthood.

### INTERVENTION BY THE COURTS

These cases have posed considerable problems for the courts as they seem impervious to change. In the past, referring the families for counseling and mediation has been standard practice. However, success rates, where they have been measured, have been quite low. Dunne and Hedrick (1994) found that in 3 of their 16 cases (involving 26 children), the court intervened immediately to change custody and that this was successful in "eradicating the alienation." In the other 13 cases, all the usual treatment methods were tried: assignment of a guardian ad litem, individual therapy for the parents, couples therapy for the parents, child play therapy, and parent-child therapy. In 2 of the cases, the child was rated as "somewhat improved." However, in 9 of the cases there was no improvement, and in 2 of the cases the children were rated as functioning "worse" than prior to the initiation of treatment.

Gardner (1987) has maintained that only the mild and some moderate cases will respond to counseling, education, and benign judicial intervention. For those cases judged to be severe, only extreme interventions, such as judicial intervention to remove the child from the alienating parent's care and place the child in the custody of the targeted parent, will resolve the PAS problem, according to Gardner. He has perhaps the lengthiest history of anyone in the field in rendering evaluations and recommendations to the court in PAS cases. Gardner (2004) personally contacted parents in 99 cases in which he had been involved over an unspecified time period. In all these cases, he had recommended that the alienating parent's time with the child be reduced or custody transferred to the targeted parent. In the 22 cases where this order was implemented, the PAS problem was eliminated in 100% of the cases. In the 77 cases in which this recommendation was not followed, children in 70 of the cases were still alienated from the targeted parent. While

the informal survey was obviously biased, and perhaps even self-serving, the results are in line with those of Dunne and Hedrick and are not surprising to those who work with PAS cases.

This, in fact, has been the conclusion of an increasing number of experts in the field when confronted with cases in which the resistance to visitation is extreme, the alienating parent is actively encouraging the alienation (even continuing to make false allegations to the court), and the child's functioning is becoming impaired as a result. (see Sullivan & Kelly, 2001, for an excellent review). These three criteria can serve as a standard for the courts as to when to effect a change of custody.

### WHEN NO COURT INTERVENTION IS POSSIBLE

But what is to be done in the significant portion of cases when court intervention is simply not feasible? Many parents, particularly fathers, lose any meaningful relationship with their children for a variety of reasons. In some cases the courts are simply reluctant to intervene, relying on the testimony of mental health experts who assert that a change of custody would be too traumatizing. In many cases, the child is of legal age to decide custody and elects not to have any contact with the alienated parent, shutting out that parent permanently. Here in Georgia the legal age is 14, but judges have the leeway to give children as young as 11 the right to make that election if the court sees the child as sufficiently mature and able to make a reasonably informed decision. In a great many cases, the alienating parent simply moves away to a geographically distant location to further marginalize the alienating parent's role in the child's life. I have had professional involvement in cases in which a mother moved the children to Ireland, to France, and even a remote part of Africa, making communication all but impossible. In unusual cases, the courts may place an older child or teenager with a relative or order that the child be enrolled in a boarding school, in order to provide a neutral zone for the adolescent. Though rarely done, such a placement allows the teen to separate from the enmeshed relationship with the alienating parent, while not undergoing the shock of an abrupt transition to the rejected parent.

What is the alienated parent to do in such cases? Such parents, usually fathers, always ask, "Should I fight for contact or should I walk away from the table?" "Are my children better off having contact with me, though it is surrounded by conflict, or not seeing me and having no conflict?" "If I fight for them, do I have any chance of prevailing in the courts, or am I likely to squander a life savings with no hope of positive resolution?" The stakes are quite high. The children, though they may not be distressed by the separation, do lose one parent if he simply walks away. They may grow up with only one parent who may continue to be emotionally troubled and unable to allow the children to separate and individuate. The children lose all

the resources—emotional, economic, and educational—of the second parent and his relatives as well. The outcome for the father is devastating. As several have said, “My children are lost to me forever.”

## STRATEGIES FOR THE CLINICIAN

Alienated parents, again usually the fathers, do present for individual counseling with the request for help. They may still have some contact with their children, though it may be brief, infrequent, and erratic. At those visits the children may be particularly hostile or rejecting, rebuffing any attempt he might make to develop a rapport with them. Or the father may have had no contact with his children for months or years. The alienated parent may have had some minimal visitation restored by the courts after a long absence from the children’s lives. Occasionally, they are able to bring the children in for family sessions, but more often than not, they are unable to do so, because the children refuse to attend and the alienating parent supports this refusal. The dynamics of PAS (or of “strong alignments,” depending upon one’s preferred terminology) suggests several principles to keep in mind in charting an overall strategy. General strategies for the clinician are in bold type. (Direct advice for the alienated parent is in italics.)

**(1) The alienated parent must make every effort to erode the image of being the evil villain by acting in such a way as to provide incongruent information.** Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that people cannot hold in their mind two incongruent (mutually exclusive) beliefs. They have to give up one or the other.

*You must be extraordinarily kind, patient, and sympathetic, especially in the face of the child’s verbal attacks, acting out, and noncompliance.* Many parents succumb to these attacks and are thus “baited” into rancorous arguments about the divorce and its aftermath. The result is seldom one of positive resolution but usually results in the alienated parent undergoing more rejection. Therefore, the alienated parent must gently deflect these attacks and keep the focus and the conversation on neutral ground. He should be patient and tolerate their anger without reacting. These children are typically “good” children who are only disrespectful toward the alienated parent and no one else. Remind your parent that they are “being loyal soldiers” for the alienating parent.

*Be sympathetic and understanding of their situation. Do not take their attacks personally.* The children are in a no-win situation. If they are friendly to the alienated parent they betray their mother. If they are to continue to be loyal to the alienating parent, they have to resist contact with the father. They cannot be loyal to both. Rejecting the one parent is the best solution they have found so far for getting out of the middle and reducing their internal distress.

Examples:

“I understand how hard this is for you.”

“I understand how stressful these visits must be for you. I feel bad about it. Sometimes I wonder if you’re better off not seeing me.”

“I don’t mind you being loyal to your mom. I know you’re all she has and she needs you.”

*Be willing to apologize to the children for your mistakes. Admit to the part that is true.*

Accusation: “Mom said you didn’t care about us. You worked all the time. All you cared about was money.” Apology: “Yes, I did work long hours and neglect the family when I was building a business, and perhaps it was wrong.”

Accusation: “Mom said you were an alcoholic.” Apology: “Yes, I did drink too much in the early years of the marriage.”

Accusation: “You went out with other women. That was wrong.” Apology: “Yes, I was unfaithful once many years ago. It was wrong and I deeply regret it.”

Accusation: “You didn’t care about us. You moved away, you left us.” Apology: “Yes, I was offered a job in another city and I thought that taking the job was the best thing for everyone. Perhaps it wasn’t.”

*You can make a gracious apology that doesn’t acknowledge any wrongdoing.”*

Ex. “I don’t know what I’ve done to cause your mother so much pain, but I am truly sorry if I caused her any harm. Ex. “I deeply regret that the divorce has been so hard on you kids. I never meant for it to cause you any grief.” Ex. “I took your mom back to court because I thought it was the best thing. I never meant for it to cause you so much stress and I am sorry for what you’ve gone through.”

*Continue to erode the negative image of you by drawing on past memories of good times together.* Show photos of previous vacations, birthdays, Christmases. Recall funny stories of when the children were little. Tell old jokes the children used to love.

**(2) The alienated parent must withdraw from any actions that put the children in the middle and cause them to feel they must take sides.** Arguments and confrontations only force the child to take a side in the conflict. Naturally the child is going to ally even stronger with the parent on whom they are emotionally dependent and/or the one who is more needy and dependent on them as well.

*Don’t vent anger at the alienating parent—ever. Even if justified, even if it is rational, just don’t go there.* Any anger that is expressed (i.e., “Your mother is nuts! She should go to jail for this!”) is used as evidence to bolster the belief that the alienated parent is a villain and mom is the victim. The targeted parent should be cautioned to vent his anger somewhere else. Even phone calls to the alienating parent are overheard by the children. The targeted

parent should monitor the comments of relatives as well. Often it is the aunt, uncle, or grandmother who announces, “Your mother is an evil person and we’re going to take her back to court, and this time we’re going to win,” and so on. These people will have to comply with strict limits to follow the same guidelines as those set out here for the targeted parent or their contact with the child should be stopped.

*You must help the children to compartmentalize.* Children who do master the difficulties of transitioning back and forth between warring parties have coping skills that serve them well. They may ignore questions about the other parent, redirect the conversation onto a neutral topic, or filter out any mention of the other parent in their conversation. As one child said to me, “When I’m with dad, I shut the mom half of my brain and open up the dad half of my brain, and when I’m with mom I open up my mom brain and shut my dad brain.” The alienated parent can assist this process by not asking questions about the other parent, redirecting the conversation to easy subjects, even allowing the child several hours of quiet alone time to adapt to being in dad’s care again.

*Be willing to make positive statements about their mother.* It is not enough just to refrain from saying negative things. Making positive comments eases the black-white polarization that is the reality for these children. The targeted parent need not make false statements but only what is true and genuine. He should be reminded that he once married this parent because he deeply respected and cared for this person.

Ex. “You’re good at math just like your mom.”

“Does your mom still cook great lasagna?”

“Does your mom still help you with English papers? She was always better at that than I was.”

*Don’t make reference to court actions, show them court papers, or any legal information.* Older children and teens may demand information on detailed legal arrangements as they attempt to get at “the truth.” While this may seem like a reasonable effort to explain the truth to them, it forces them to review the issue of whose side they will be on. Many become mired in the nuances of the various agreements, the difficult language, the conflicted accounts of what the court agreements actually mean. One would do better to redirect them and again help them compartmentalize.

*Don’t argue with your child in an attempt to get him to give up his view of reality.* Don’t say, “You’ve been brainwashed by your mom” or “These aren’t your words. These are your mom’s words.” This is insulting and humiliating to children and teens, even if it is true. Listen to them as they express their opinions. Accept, acknowledge, and try to understand. Redirect or change the topic of conversation.

*Don’t challenge their loyalty to mom. The more you challenge it, the more they will resist. Go with it. Support them in their enmeshment.* There is a principle in psychotherapy called, “Go with the resistance.” Often when we

go with the resistance, the person feels no further need to defend it and can eventually consider giving it up.

Ex. "I'm proud of you, how you take good care of your mom."

"I'm proud of you that you're good kids and you don't cause your mom any trouble."

*Listen for signs of growth and gently support them.* Rather than try to drive a wedge between the children and the alienating parent, listen for any disagreement between them and the alienating parent. These are signs of growth and an effort toward separation and individuation. Capitalize on them whenever possible.

Ex. "So you and mom had a disagreement. What was it about?"

Ex. "So I guess you and mom don't see eye to eye about this boy you're interested in. Tell me about it."

Ex. "I understand these are your feelings, not your mom's. I accept that. I know you're capable of having your own opinions about many things. So give me an example of how mom tries to influence to change your mind on something and she isn't able to."

**(3) The alienated parent can consider ways in which to mollify the hurt and anguish of the alienating parent.** This may require some soul-searching and acts of conciliation. Recall that the custodial parent in these cases often feels unusually humiliated, betrayed, and helpless. Have your client consider what he can do to bolster the alienating parent's self esteem.

*Be open to apologizing.* This is no time to be proud or blame the ex-spouse for all the wrongs in the marriage. Much litigation and thousands of dollars in attorney's fees can be avoided with the judicious use of an "I'm sorry." This is not an easy task when the parent feels he/she did nothing wrong. One key is to apologize for any wrongdoing that has a kernel of truth. You might have the alienated parent send the other parent a card with a note or letter. You can help your client craft an apology that is somewhat vague, admits to partial wrongdoing, and apologizes for the outcome more than the actions.

Examples:

"I don't know what I have done to cause you so much pain that it has lasted so long and affected all of us so much. For however I have hurt you so deeply, I am truly sorry."

"We both made mistakes in the marriage. I know I said and did some things which were reckless, and/or self-centered, or hurtful. I deeply regret them. I had no idea that they would cause such harm to all of us."

"I regret the hurt you and the children have gone through these last few years. I have grown through all of this and feel I am a better person now and can give more to the children. Please forgive me."

*Have your new wife be deferential to the children's mother.* This honors the mother's unique role in the children's lives, is ego enhancing, and heals

some of the humiliation. It also sends the message that she is valued and important and her role is not threatened. Examples: "Would you mind if I take them to get their hair cut?" "Would you mind if I attend their game?" "You're such a great mom to have such wonderful kids. It's a privilege to be their stepmother. You must be so proud of them. I envy you."

*Delay remarriage as long as possible.* Remarriage, before the other parent remarries, reinjures that parent's wounded ego and intensifies the feelings of rejection, humiliation, and betrayal. The alienated parent would do better to keep the new relationship a secret.

**(4) The alienated parent must realistically appraise the coalition and its strength and look for ways to dismantle the coalition, even convert some of the enemies to allies.**

*Make allies where possible.* By rejecting the members of the coalition, the alienated parent often acts to strengthen and tighten these coalitions and they unite against the hostile father. A better strategy is to be very positive and complementary toward these people and thus build bridges. This also works to dismantle the coalition as the various parties have difficulty seeing the alienated parent as an evil person since he is "so nice."

Examples. Send cards and letters to the grandparents of the children, thanking them for taking such good care of the children. Offer to meet with the children's therapist. Be extremely conciliatory and thank the therapist for working hard on the children's behalf. Meet with the children's teacher and/or coach and ask about the children's progress. Follow up with a thank you note, card, or small gift as a way of saying "thanks for all you do" or "Thanks for being there for (my child). Being in your class has helped him through the divorce."

**(5) The alienated parent should be advised to never give up contact altogether.** Absence of contact is often interpreted by children as abandonment.

*In the words of Janet Johnston (1994), "stand in the door and hold a cookie."* By "standing in the door," the parent remains at a physical distance and does not attempt to exercise visitation or have a face-to-face meeting with the child/teen. Instead the parent may wish to have a brief meeting at the courthouse, or in the therapist's office, and say their good byes. Such a meeting may not be feasible for a variety of reasons. If so, the alienated parent may send the child/teen a letter explaining how it is their wish not to put the child through any further distress or court actions by pursuing contact through the courts. The letter should not be antagonistic but sympathetic to the child's position.

To "hold a cookie" is to continually offer small acts of kindness, concern, and thoughtfulness. Here are some examples:

- Letters which are positive and upbeat in tone and do not refer to the alienating parent, to court battles, etc.

- Photographs
- A newspaper or magazine article on a subject of interest to the child or teen (a piece about a rock group, a baseball player, a movie actress, etc.)
- A subscription to their favorite magazine
- A clipping about a show, concert, or sporting event that will be coming to town and an offer to buy tickets
- A travel brochure and an invitation to go on a trip together
- A funny joke sent in an email or an email greeting card
- A small box of fudge cookies sent through the mail
- A touching or humorous card
- A ring or bracelet with the note, "Wear this and know that my love surrounds you."
- A note with a Bible passage
- A pressed flower, river stone, shell, or bird feather found while walking or hiking
- A postcard sent while traveling

One parent I interviewed gave up contact when his daughter was 14 but, from time to time, went to a sports event in which his daughter was playing and watched from high up in the stands. He wrote notes to her, signed, "Your secret admirer." Years later the daughter said she kept every note he sent her and treasured them. She said it was very important to her to know that her father wasn't angry at her and that he still cared about her. Once she left home for college she contacted him and renewed a relationship with him. She thanked him for being so understanding. "I just couldn't see you when I lived with mom," she explained. "It would have hurt her so much."

In the most severe cases, even cards, letters, and small gifts will be refused. The phone number may be unlisted, the internet service provider changed. The alienating parent and child may move and not give out their address. Naturally, there is little the targeted parent can do in these cases. The alienated parent might then refer to strategy (4) and look to the coalition for help. A prudent move would be to send the "cookies" to a relative of the alienating parent who is not part of the coalition but somewhat neutral in the struggle. Hopefully this person can make contact with the child at some point and pass the items on to them.

*Have hope that when the alienated teen is old enough to leave home, he or she will be able to be their own person and no longer loyal to the alienating parent. They will be able to reach out to you if a connection, however minimal, has been maintained and nurtured over the years.*

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