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ABSTRACT. Parental alienation syndrome continues to be a term that is widely used in child custody conflicts but which is also controversial. Previous authors have defined the term but have not established a standardized assessment process for PAS. The author emphasizes the importance of focusing on the child's behavior, then proceeding through a three step process: (1) determining if the refusal of contact with the parent is extreme and the alienation is severe, (2) determining if there is no basis for the extreme fear and anger toward the parent, (3) then determining if the child meets at least 10 of the 15 criteria that are proposed. The assessment process for each of the 15 criteria is outlined in detail with examples of each. Novel strategies and interview questions are suggested. The author includes a supplemental section for interview techniques that might be used with the alienating parent. doi:10.1300/J190v04n01_03 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.]

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With the divorce revolution of the 1970's came a rising increase in courtroom litigation over children who refused to have scheduled visitations with their non-custodial parents, usually their fathers. These children were often frightened, angry, defiant, and eager to tell their stories to court officials. Anxious to protect children, the courts typically have halted visitations and ordered investigations into the children's allegations that the alienated parent was dangerous, abusive, neglectful, or immoral, etc. When the facts of the case haven't supported the children's claims, the courts have been in a quandary as to how to proceed. How are we to account for allegations of maltreatment that are determined to be highly exaggerated or false altogether? Is it in the children's best interests to order that the visitations go forward as scheduled, despite the children's intense emotional distress?

This complex of problems was given the name parental alienation syndrome by psychiatrist Richard Gardner in 1987 and further elaborated by him in 1992. In Gardner's original formulation, he focused exclusively on the alienating parent (usually the mother) as the causative factor in inducing alienation in the children. Also, in his description of PAS, he included many elements the child's behavior, as well as the history of the case, along with the alienating parent's behavior, to construct a picture of how PAS develops. This approach has muddied the waters, so to speak, as far as constructing a method by which investigators can determine if a child's behavior is due to PAS or to some other factors.

Subsequent researchers, most prominently, Janet Johnston (see: Johnston, 1993; Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Kelly & Johnston, 2001) have expanded Gardner's conceptualization and sought more clarity about what PAS is and is not. First, this group of clinician/researchers prefer to avoid the term "syndrome" for good reason. There are no data establishing incidence rates, familial patterns, course of the problem over time, sex differences, or prognosis. They prefer to use the terms "alienated child" or "children who refuse visitations" or "parent-child alignment."

Secondly, they take issue with the matter of Gardner's etiology. They refer to the "considerable clinical research" that indicates that while many parents in high conflict divorce engage in "brainwashing" behaviors, only a small proportion of children actually become alienated. They further point out that some children, especially adolescents, may develop a strong alliance with one parent against the other in the absence of alienating behaviors on the part of the custodial parent (Johnston, 1993). In their earlier book (Johnston & Campbell, 1988) they constructed an elaborate model of causation which takes into ac-

count the history of post divorce conflict, the alienating parent's emotional distress, the child's growing distress and need to placate and soothe the distressed parent, as well as the alienated parent's ineptness at parenting, to account for this phenomenon.

Thirdly, and building on the above point, it is important to distinguish between the child's behavior and the parent's behavior when evaluating for PAS. This point may be subtle, but it is an important one, because it contributes to confusion in this field (Ellis, 2000, Chapter 8). A disorder, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), for example, refers to a set of symptoms and behaviors observed in the child. It does not refer to characteristics of the parent, the home environment, or the teacher-child relationship. However, Bone and Walsh (1999), for example, gave four criteria for PAS—two that describe the actions of the alienating parent, one that describes the history of the relationship between the alienated parent and child, and one that describes the child's behavior in regard to the first three elements. Gardner (1999) provided a schema with which to determine PAS that was based almost entirely on the characteristics of the alienating parent.

Kelly and Johnston (2001) asserted that a definition of this phenomenon must focus on the alienated child rather than on parental behaviors. With this in mind, they define an alienated child as “one who expresses, freely and persistently, unreasonable negative feelings and beliefs (such as anger, hatred, rejection, and/or fear) toward a parent that are significantly disproportionate to the child's actual experience with that parent” (p. 251). In conducting an evaluation of a child or children for PAS, *it is important to consider the point that not all children who refuse visitation are necessarily alienated children*. In their delineation the authors suggest that some children may simply feel a strong alliance with one parent over the other. These allied children do not reject the other parent or refuse all contact with that parent. In fact, they feel ambivalent toward the other parent and are able to recall positive memories and experiences with that parent. These are most typically older children whose assessment of the breakdown of the marriage was that the alienated parent was at fault or acted in an immoral fashion or that the wronged parent needs support and protection.

Likewise many children have become estranged from the targeted parent as a result of that parent's past behavior. These *estranged children* may be experiencing anxiety or resentment toward the targeted parent because they have witnessed marital violence in the past or hostile outbursts during the breakdown of the marriage. They may also have become estranged due to the targeted parent's history of substance

abuse, emotional abuse of the children, the parent's mental illness, or to prolonged periods of lack of contact due to geographical distance. In other words, there is a clearly identifiable reason for the child's resistance to visitation.

Therefore, the first step in conducting an evaluation is to answer these questions: (1) Is there a readily identifiable reason for the alienation? (2) Or do the allegations appear to be false and/or highly exaggerated? (3) Third, is the child(ren)'s rejection of the other parent severe and does the child acknowledge no love, affection, or positive feelings for that parent at all? If the answer is no to the first question, and yes to the second and third questions, then the child is most likely an *alienated child*.

Next, the evaluator might determine if the child's behavior is congruent with at least 10 of the following 15 criteria (adapted from Ellis, 2000). It must be acknowledged that there is no empirical data to support the 15 criteria listed below. The criteria are drawn from a variety of early sources on what constitutes features of parental alienation syndrome in children. These are tentative only and are offered as a beginning toward standardization of the evaluation for PAS.

As in child custody evaluations, the material should be gathered from a variety of sources, and the evaluator should be able to verify intersecting lines of information. Case material refers to the review of documents, letters, affidavits, email correspondence; reviews of medical records, police records, school records, and mental health records; reviews of depositions, court transcripts, and court orders; reviews of audiotapes, videotapes, and photo albums; interviews with collateral witnesses; and interviews with the attorneys in the case and the guardian ad litem; also histories provided by interviews with the parents.

THE CRITERIA

1. The child maintains a delusion of being persecuted by a parent who is viewed in exceptionally negative terms. This delusion is plausible but appears to have no basis in reality.

Case material. Review the allegations. Do they have merit? Have all allegations of physical/sexual abuse been thoroughly investigated? Have allegations of domestic violence been verified or proven to be unsubstantiated? What in fact is the targeted parent's history in these areas? If there is legitimate reason to suspect maltreatment, or estrangement, then you are not dealing with a PAS case.

If there is no basis for the allegations, and there is no basis for estrangement, then proceed to the following question: Do the children's allegations seem trivial, exaggerated?

Interview of the child. Ask the child for evidence of abuse, neglect, maltreatment, etc. Be prepared to present contradictory information which may demonstrate efforts on the part of the targeted parent to kind, thoughtful, concerned, etc.

Example:

Q. "Why is your dad trying to see you?"

A. "Because he hates us." "Because he's mean." "Because he wants us to suffer."

Q. "Tell me how he's mean to you."

A. "He makes us eat our broccoli before we can have dessert."

Q. "Tell me what else he does that is mean?"

A. "He makes us pose for pictures when we go on a trip together."

Q. "Tell me one more thing he does that is mean."

A. "He makes us spend the whole time on homework. We can't have any fun when we go over there. We have to sit there and do it over and over until every question has the right answer."

Q. "How long does that take?"

A. "Forever. A whole hour."

Example:

Q. "Why did he come all that way to see you?" or "Why did your dad go to court to ask the judge if he could spend more time with you?"

A. "Just to make my mom suffer." "Just to make my mom spend all her money on lawyers so she would be poor and we would have nothing to eat."

Q. "Your dad went to a lot of trouble and expense to see you. Why would he do that unless it really meant a lot to him to see you?"

A. "He doesn't care what he has to spend to make us suffer."

Example:

Q. "Your dad called you ahead of time and asked you what you would like to do on your next visitation, before he made any plans. Doesn't that mean he cares about you?"

A. "No. It means he was too lazy to make any plans for our weekend together."

Q. "Your dad bought tickets to the game on Saturday. Doesn't that mean he cares about you?"

A. "No. It means he's always trying to control us, to force us to do stuff we don't like."

Q. "But I thought you liked basketball (soccer, hockey, etc.)?"

A. "I would like seeing the game with anyone but him. I would hate seeing it with him. He's mean to make us go with him."

2. *The child uses the mechanism of splitting to reduce ambiguity.* The alienating parent is viewed as all good, and any negative traits are denied. Likewise, the targeted parent is viewed as all bad, and any positive traits are denied.

Interview of the child. When interviewing the child, ask questions which would elicit ambiguity. Note the child's responses. Present the child with information that contradicts the all-good, all-bad scenario. Often the child's vilification of the targeted parent generalizes to all members of his family, his type of car, his home, his pet, etc. (Lee & Olesen, 2001). Gently inquire about the child's feelings toward the family members of the targeted parent.

Q. "If you could change one thing about your mother, what would it be?"

A. "Nothing. She is absolutely perfect. She is the greatest mom in the world."

Q. "What are some things that you and mom disagree about?"

A. "Nothing. We agree about everything."

Q. "Tell me one thing you don't like about your mom? Tell me one thing she did that you didn't like."

A. "I like everything about her. She's never done anything I didn't like."

Q. "Does your mom still have a drinking problem?"

A. "She doesn't have a drinking problem. That time she got drunk and wrecked the car and I bumped my head was just a mistake. Everybody makes mistakes."

Q. "Tell me what you remember about when your parents were together. Tell me what dad was like when times were good? What is the best time you ever had with him?"

A. "I don't remember any good memories about my dad. They were all terrible." "Nothing good ever happened when my parents were together. My dad was mean to us all the time."

Q. "Tell me what you like about your dad."

A. "Nothing. I don't like anything about him, not one thing."

Q. "Tell me one way that you and dad are alike." "Tell me one thing that you and your dad both like to do that mom doesn't like to do."

A. "Nothing. I'm not like him at all." "I don't like to do anything with him."

Example:

Q. "I understand that you dad is quite a builder and that he built that two million dollar home for all of you."

A. "Yes, and it's falling down, too."

Q. "But his partner said you used to enjoy riding around in his truck with him going to his jobsites."

A. "He lied. Trucks are stupid."

3. *The child's behavior toward the targeted parent is incongruent from one situation to another.* The child maintains an attitude of hatred toward the targeted parent under two conditions: (a) when the alienating parent is present, or (b) when a key person, such as the evaluator, is observing—i.e., when there is a suitable audience present. However, the tension and hostility dissipate considerably under two conditions: (c) when the child is alone with the targeted parent for a period of time, and (d) when no key people are watching.

Case material. Other observers, such as a teacher, coach, or religious instructor have observed the child being relaxed and comfortable with the targeted parent. Photographs and videotapes of family outings and vacations verify this as well. In some cases, the guardian ad litem may also have seen the targeted parent and children at an outing and observed a normal relationship between them.

Interview with the targeted parent. Question the targeted parent about the child's resistance. Is it greatest when the alienating parent is present? How long does it take before the resistance dissipates? Is it less so in neutral conditions (when the alienating parent is not present), such as a pickup from school or the caregiver's home?

Interviews with collaterals. Question the targeted parent's spouse, the children's aunts and uncles and grandparents, or neighbors. They may also have observed and verified this. You may want to question other adults in the child's life such as teachers, coaches, church members, etc., who have observed the child and the targeted parent together.

Observations. The evaluator may have to "stage" observations in order to observe the children with the targeted parent under two conditions: when they are being watched, and when they aren't. One technique is to have the targeted parent and children arrive for the appointment, then announce you have an important phone call to return and will be out to get them in a few minutes. Put out some puzzles, books, train set, etc., exit the waiting room, leaving your door open, and listen to the ensuing contact for 10 to 15 minutes. In cases of alienation, the child and targeted parent may engage in play with no tension, but the

child is likely to become more distant and guarded when the evaluator enters the room and begins to observe their interaction.

A second strategy is to set aside two full hours or more for a parent child observation. Notify the parent in advance that you are scheduling an unusually long appointment and that you may not be in the room for parts of the meeting. Let the parent know that you will be listening and observing however, throughout the session. Have the parent bring a snack or sack lunch and a game or model to assemble. Get the parent and child involved in a project for the first hour, such as assembling a model car, playing a board game. After an hour or less announce, "You both seem well into this project and I don't want to make you stop now, but I've got to make a phone call (or write up some notes, check for an important message on the answering service, eat a snack, etc.). I'm going to go in the other office for a few minutes. I'll be back in a bit." Leave the office but listen from the next room. Step into the office briefly from time to time to monitor the activity. Suggest more activities, such as a game of darts, a battle with bataka bats, Lincoln logs, assembling the Brio train set, putting together a puppet show, etc. Continue to listen from a nearby room, glance into the room, and pop in and out briefly. In cases of alienation, the longer the two are together, and the longer the evaluator is out of the room, the more the tension and hostility will dissipate.

A third strategy is to observe the targeted parent and child in the office after they have been together for a prolonged period of time, at least 24 hours, to determine if the child's alienation is lessened. Lee and Olesen (2001) assert that such meetings between the alienated child and the targeted parent are problematic as they "might result in trauma to the child." However, inasmuch as the fear of the targeted parent has been determined to be phobic in nature, and not arising out of an experience of real danger, the tension that may exist under conditions of direct observation often dissipates quickly and the child welcomes the opportunity to engage the targeted parent.

A fourth strategy is to observe the targeted parent and child on a visitation, in such a manner that the child is not readily aware of the evaluator's presence, such as sitting in the stands at a soccer game, observing the parent and child during a church activity, or observing them at the bowling alley or at the zoo. If possible, it may be even more revealing to observe say, at a game with the targeted parent only, versus at a game where both parents are in attendance. The alienated child's interaction with the targeted parent is likely to be very different under the two conditions. The alienated child will be comfortable with the targeted parent when the alienating parent is not present, yet distance him/herself from the targeted parent when the other parent is nearby.

4. *The child denies any positive feelings for the targeted parent.* Any evidence to the contrary, such as gifts, cards, or photos, is met with denial, minimization, or rationalization.

Interview with the child. In interviews with the child, confront the child with direct evidence that is contrary to the alienation.

Example:

Q. "Look here at this picture of you and your dad at Disneyworld (the beach, grandma's farm, etc.). You are both smiling. Why are you smiling if you don't like him?"

A. "He made us smile. He forces us, he pinches and squeezes our arm till we smile."

Example:

Q. "Look here. You made a card for him on his birthday that said, 'I love you, dad.' Why would you do that if you didn't like him?"

A. "I didn't mean it. I only did it to get him to leave us alone."

Example:

Q. "But the guardian said he went to the bowling alley and saw you and your dad having a good time bowling and you were smiling and laughing and having a good time together."

A. "That's because we were afraid of him. We were afraid of what he'd do to us. We were only pretending."

Example:

Q. "But grandma and grandpa took a video of your boat ride on the lake and you were laughing and playing together and having a good time with your dad."

A. "We only had a good time for one minute that was on the tape. The rest of the day we were miserable and they didn't take a video of us then."

Example:

Q. "Look at this photo album of your ski trip with dad. It looks like it was a wonderful trip."

A. "He forces us to go on those trips. We hate them."

Q. "How did he make you go?"

A. "He would grab us by the wrist and pull us."

Q. "I heard you got a special gift from your dad on your birthday."

A. "I didn't want it. He forced me to open it."

5. *The attribution of negative qualities to the targeted parent may take on a quality of distortion or bizarreness that borders on loss of touch with reality.*

Interview with the child. These examples aren't elicited with specific questions but arise out of interview material with the child.

Example:

Q. "Now tell me again what your dad did?"

A. "We were at the lake and I fell out of the boat. The boat was drifting closer to me. I know dad wanted the motor to cut my head off, but my uncle pulled me out of the water before it got too close."

Q. "I heard you had an asthma attack at your dad's house on your last visit."

A. "Yes. He must have put something in his house that made me have an attack. And I looked for my inhaler and I couldn't find it. He must have hid it because he wanted me to suffer."

Example:

Q. "I heard you got in some trouble with your dad."

A. "Yes, he didn't like what I said at the dinner table and he glared at me with that evil look in his eye that meant he wanted me dead."

Example:

Q. "Do you go to church with your dad?"

A. "No. He doesn't go to church. He believes in Satan."

6. *The child offers as evidence of the targeted parent's bad character recollections of events that occurred out of the child's presence so that the child could not have witnessed it; or before the child would have been old enough to remember them; or are highly implausible.* These "recollections" may come from material that is overheard from the alienating parent or her relatives. The source material may be confabulated over time with enhancements. The child sincerely believes the memory is true and accurate.

Interview with the child. Review the child's allegations, as they are reported in the case material, selecting out those which allegedly occurred before the child was four years old, or those that occurred when the child was not present. Gently question the child about them.

Example:

Q. "So tell me about these bad memories you have of your dad."

A. "One time when I was a baby he dangled me over a balcony and threatened to drop me."

Q. "How can you remember what happened to you as a baby? Do you think maybe you heard that story somewhere?"

A. "No. I do remember it. I really do."

Example:

Q. "I don't understand. You're eleven and you never told anyone about these memories [of your dad molesting you at the age of 18 months] before."

A. "I've just started remembering them. My counselor says they are called 'recovered memories.' If I close my eyes, I can remember one right now. Watch." (closes her eyes).

Example:

Q. "Wait a minute. The night your mom and dad had the big fight and dad was supposed to have thrown the telephone at mom and punched a hole in the wall, you weren't there, you were spending the night at your aunt's house, so you couldn't have seen it, right?"

A. "No, that's not true. I must have been there. I can close my eyes and see the whole thing, the yelling, the telephone flying, the hole in the wall. I was there. My aunt is lying."

Q. "I'm all mixed up. That time you said your dad beat your mom. You weren't born yet, right?"

A. "Yes, I was in my mom's tummy, but I know it happened."

7. When the children's story is not internally logical, the child alters the story or the explanations in an attempt to make them consistent.

Observations. The child says, "Dad was nice up until a year ago. Then he became mean." At a later point, child says, "We never liked any of the trips with him."

Q. "If he was nice up until a year ago, how come you never liked the trips with him before, when he was nice?"

A. "Well, I liked them up until a year ago."

Example:

Child says, "Dad is mean because he had a bad childhood. He has a sickness."

Q. "If he's always had a sickness, because he had a bad childhood, how could he have been nice up until a year ago?"

A. "I don't know."

Example:

Q. "You say you're scared to see your dad because he molested you when you were 18 months old. Yet, you enjoyed seeing him for five years, and you only started not wanting to see him one year ago. I can't figure that out."

A. "I don't know. I guess I just started remembering it a year ago."

Example:

Q. "Would you be willing to go to an amusement park with dad?" (child answers yes). "Would you be willing to go to the Mall with him and go shopping?" (Child says yes).

Q. "But you said you didn't want to go to dad's house because you were afraid of him. I don't understand. How come you would be afraid of him at his house but not at Six Flags or the Mall?"

8. *The child's hatred and sense of persecution by the targeted parent have the quality of a litany.*

Observations. The children come in the office and spontaneously begin an anecdotal story of how bad the targeted parent is, before any questions are asked. The children are overly eager, even excited, to give the most recent account of the badness of the targeted parent. ex. "You won't believe what he did this time . . ."

The evaluator should write down key phrases verbatim. The phrases should be compared with key phrases used by the alienating parent. Also, the phrases should be scrutinized to determine if they sound like adult vocabulary and content.

Examples of adult issues. "Our dad is not a Christian." "Our dad is not a family man." "Our dad is too controlling." "Our dad was abusive to our mom." "The child support is not enough." "Dad committed adultery, and that's a sin." "Dad had a bad childhood." "Dad hasn't withdrawn the divorce papers."

Examples of children's issues. "Our dad never took us anywhere." "Our dad was always on the internet and never did anything with us." "Our dad came to get us and he brought his girlfriend and her little boy, and he never told us he was bringing somebody with him." "Dad won't let us bring the hamster to his house."

9. *The child, when faced with contact with the targeted parent, displays a reaction of extreme anxiety, including panic attacks, stomach-aches, vomiting, hysterical crying, falling to the floor, clinging, hyperventilating, clutching transitional objects, and wailing.*

Case material. This may be reported to you by the alienating parent, the targeted parent, collateral people who witness the transitions, or observed in the office.

Interview with the child. Question the child about his/her possible reactions if the child were to have a visitation with the targeted parent or be ordered to reside with the targeted parent.

Example:

Q. "How would you feel if your dad walked in this office in the next few minutes to see you? What would you do?"

A. "I would die! I would run away! I would kick him in the knees! I would kill myself!"

Q. "What if he had a present for you?"

A. "I would smash it! I would throw it away!"

Example:

Q. "The judge might decide for you to stay with your dad for a month to get to know him better (or live with your father, etc.). How will you feel about that?"

A. "I won't go. I will run away from home. I will die."

10. The child has a dependent and enmeshed relationship with the alienating parent.

Case material. Example: Mother indicates that the child resists going to the father's home because he resists having a bowel movement anywhere but in her presence. This is so she can clean his bottom. The child is seven and half years old. Child confirms this in interviews.

Example: Twelve year old girl indicates that she has never spent the night at a friend's house because she would miss her mother too badly.

Example: Medical history indicates the mother takes the child to the physician excessively and for routine ailments. Child indicates she is afraid she will "get sick" away from the mother's presence.

Example: Mother and ten year old son sleep together. Son resists going on visitations because his father would have him sleep in his own bed.

Interview with the child. Ask questions which probe for evidence of independence and autonomy from the alienating parent. Ask questions which would provide evidence of a separate identity from the alienating parent. Ask about age-appropriate developmental steps toward separation from the alienating parent.

Example:

Q. "What are some ways that you and mom are different? Aren't there some things that you like that mom doesn't like, and vice versa?"

A. "No. We always like the same things. My mom is my best friend. We go everywhere together."

Q. "Do you like to go to friends' houses for sleepovers? Do you go away to camp in the summer?"

A. "No. I don't like to be away from home or away from my mom. I just like to be with my mom. I wouldn't like to be away from her to go to camp."

Q. "Do you like to go on campouts with the Girl Scouts? or away trips with your school?"

A. "No. I only do those things if mom is one of the parents that is coming on the trip. I don't like to go unless mom goes too. She loves me a lot and protects me."

Q. "Do you think about what it would be like to be a teenager and have a car? To go away to college?"

A. "No, not really. I don't think about those things. I would like to always be near my mom."

Q. "Do you sleep with your mom?"

A. "Yes, sometimes. Dad didn't like it but we do it anyway. We miss her at night. She likes having us close to her."

Q. "How will you feel when mom gets a boyfriend?"

A. "She would never do that."

11. The child is highly compliant, cooperative, and adaptable with all adults other than the targeted parent.

Case material. Have both parents and teacher complete standard behavior checklists, such as the Child Behavior Checklist by Achenbach or the Behavior Assessment Scales for Children. Typically the alienating parent and the teacher will indicate no evidence of oppositional or disruptive behavior but may note some problems with Anxiety, Depression, or Somatization. Review the report cards for conduct grades. Typically, they will show no indication of disruptive behavior problems.

Observations. View child in the office with both parents. With targeted parent, the child is likely to be oppositional, defiant, and disrespectful. Requests are ignored. Child may make offensive remarks such as, "Why should I do what you say? You're stupid." With the alienating parent, the child is likely to be very compliant and approval seeking.

Interview with the alienating parent.

Example:

Q. "What kind of discipline problems do you have with your son/daughter?"

A. "None. I've raised her/him to be very well behaved. She/he doesn't give me a bit of trouble."

Interview with the child. Ask the child for evidence of ordinary acting out behavior with the alienating parent. Ask the child to explain the child's different demeanor when with the two parents.

Example:

Q. "At home, what kinds of things do you get in trouble for?"

A. "Nothing. I would not be bad to my mom."

Q. "Do you ever get in trouble at school?"

A. "No. I wouldn't do anything like that."

Q. "If you're good for your mom, and good at school, why would you act up and be bad when your dad comes to see you?"

A. "Because he's mean to us."

12. The child views the alienating parent as a victim—as having been persecuted by the targeted parent and having suffered greatly as a result of that parent’s actions.

Interview with the child. Ask the child questions which elicit the child’s perspective on the divorce. Note projection of blame onto the targeted parent and/or the presence of paranoid conspiracies.

Q. “Whose fault was the divorce?”

A. “My dad’s. He was mean to my mom. He left us. He didn’t want us any more.”

Q. “But I thought it was mom who told him to leave.”

A. “Yes, but that was because he was so mean she had to make him leave.”

Q. “It looks like the judge was pretty mad at your mom. He seemed to think it was her fault when she didn’t let your dad see you.”

A. “That’s because the judge was mean to her too.”

Q. “But the guardian, who looks out for you, she thought you should see your dad too.”

A. “That’s because the guardian is being mean to her too.”

Q. “So, everyone is being mean to you and your mom?”

A. “Yes, dad, his lawyer, the judge, the guardian, everyone. If they cared about us, they would just leave us all alone and never make us go see our dad. Mom has suffered so much she may have to move us somewhere far away from here.”

Q. “But the guardian and the judge both agreed that you should see your dad every other week. They wouldn’t do that if they thought you would be in any danger when you’re with your dad.”

A. “That’s because my dad paid them a lot of money to say that. He bribed them.”

13. The child maintains a complete lack of concern about or compassion for the targeted parent but instead holds an attitude of exploitation toward the targeted parent. The child objectifies the targeted parent as merely a source of money and material goods. The child is not able to view the situation from the vantage point of the targeted parent or imagine what the targeted parent might feel.

Interview with the child. Ask the child questions which would elicit the child’s capacity for empathy for the targeted parent.

Q. “So, let me see if I’ve got this right. You feel your dad should send the child support money but never see you?”

A. “Yes, that’s right. He should send it because the law says he has to. My mom needs the money.”

Q. "But he doesn't even get to see you. Is that fair?"

A. "I don't care if it's fair. He owes us the money. He should send us more money."

Q. "But your mom isn't working. The judge said she should get a job. What do you think about that?"

A. "She shouldn't have to work. Dad makes plenty of money. He should send more money so she wouldn't ever have to work. She wants to stay home with us. She loves us."

Q. "Your dad said he called you on your birthday and you hung up the phone on him? How do you think that made him feel?"

A. "I don't know. I don't care. He should just leave us alone."

Q. "And you don't want him to come and see you play in your game on Saturday? He's really looking forward to it."

A. "No. He should just stay away. I don't like him being there."

Q. "Even if he sits far apart from mom so they don't get into an argument?"

A. "Yes. He should do me a favor and just stay away. He gives me the creeps when he watches me."

Q. "If you could be the judge and do the right thing in this case, what would you do?"

A. "I'd make him pay more money and stay away from us."

14. The significance of the targeted parent in the child's life is minimized. The children insist on calling the targeted parent by his first name, referring to their stepfather as "dad." They may insist they should be the ones to decide whether they see the targeted parent.

Observations. Children refer to targeted parent by his first name, refer to stepfather as "dad." Alienating parent permits it without protest, says, "It is the children's choice." Children refer to targeted parent in derogatory terms. Alienating parent passively permits this with no correction.

Children are adamant that they will not have contact with the targeted parent. The alienating parent is passive and states, "There's nothing I can do about it."

The children maintain they should have a choice as to whether to go on the visitation. The alienating parent is again passive and does not contradict them.

Interview with the child. If these behaviors have not been observed, ask about them.

Q. "Does your mother tell you that you have to go?"

A. "She tells us it's our choice whether we go or not. We shouldn't have to go if we don't want to."

Q. "Do you know that the judge says now that you have to go? The judge said it is not your choice."

A. "The judge should stay out of our business. It's not his place to tell us what to do. It should be up to us whether we go or not."

Q. "But many people, including the judge, feel it is very important for children to know both of their parents, to have two parents who love and care for them. Kids can learn more things if they have two parents to teach them. They can get more of what they need if they have two parents who can help pay for stuff like soccer uniforms, piano lessons, braces on their teeth, and a car."

A. "No, they don't. One parent is enough." or "But we have two parents. We have a step dad now. We don't need a father any more. There is nothing we need from him."

15. The child's belief system is particularly rigid, fixed and resistant to traditional methods of intervention.

Case material. The record indicates that the child has been in individual counseling or psychotherapy for some time with no improvement in the child's relationship with the targeted parent. The child and targeted parent may have been seen in family counseling for some time with no improvement. Often the child is resistant to attending the joint sessions. Typically, the parents have submitted to mediation with still no improvement. The resistance has been recurring, with no change, for over a year.

THE ALIENATING PARENT

Case material. The literature on PAS is replete with lists of actions that are taken on the part of the alienating parent which are intended to marginalize the role of the targeted parent in the child's life. Typically, access is blocked by canceling visitations, failure to be accessible at the pickup time, claims that the child is too ill to go, claims that the child "doesn't want to go," etc. In some cases, the alienating parent simply moves to a distant location to make access difficult. Communicating with the child is often blocked by failure to respond to phone calls, or failure to give the children a prompt to call the targeted parent. Information about the children is rarely forwarded to the targeted parent. The alienating parent typically does not prompt the children to send the tar-

geted parent a card, a gift, or a thank you note. Gifts to the children from the targeted parent may be refused. Information forms at the school and the pediatrician's office omit the name and phone number of the targeted parent. In some cases the children's last names are even changed on records to be that of the stepparent. (For a fuller description of actions on the part of the alienating parent see the work by Gardner and Johnston).

Interview with the alienating parent. While interviews with the alienating parent are not crucial to the evaluation of PAS in children, they may be helpful in establishing some of the background factors out of which the PAS arose. The alienating parent is likely to show personality traits and coping mechanisms of defensiveness, denial of wrongdoing, excessive virtuousness, and projection of blame. They view themselves as all-good and the vilified ex-spouse as all-bad. They are also likely to have rigid thinking, and to have difficulty viewing issues from more than one perspective. Those who attempt to reason with them—therapists, social workers, attorneys, judges—find them exasperating, because they do not seem capable of taking in new and contradictory information, considering it carefully, and incorporating it into their existing belief system. Evidence that is contrary to their belief system is simply discarded. They are particularly egocentric in that they are capable of imagining the impact of events only on themselves. They are noted for their inability to separate their own needs from the needs of their children. One is highly unlikely to see the alienating parent display guilt or remorse over their actions or a sense of responsibility for the failure of the marriage. Data from numerous studies suggests their MMPI-2 profiles are likely to show an elevation on K in the range of 66-67 and a peak on scale 6. They also show frequent elevations on scales 3, 4, and 9. (See: Ellis, 2000, chap. 9, for a review of research on MMPI-2 results).

The following is a list of questions for the alienating parent. They are designed to elicit the cognitive style of the alienating parent and to determine if she/he can tolerate ambiguity, empathize with the child, and see the situation from more than one perspective. Included are common responses given by alienating parents.

Q. "What do you see as (the other parent's) strengths as a parent?"

A. "Well, I'd have to think a while about that question." "Well, he is their father, that's all." "I guess he pays the child support mostly on time."

Q. "What are some of your child's traits or talents which he gets from (the other parent)?" (Note whether these are only negative traits or a mixture of both positive and negative traits.)

Q. "What do you see that your child gets from (the other parent) that is an asset?"

A. (Parent struggles for an answer, or the positive traits veers off into the negative).

Q. "If someone were to make a video of your child when he is with (the other parent) what do you think you would see? How would you expect the two to be acting around each other?"

A. "I don't know, I never thought about it. I don't think she'd be smiling."

Q. "If the video showed your child enjoying his/her interaction with (the other parent), how would you account for this?"

A. (Parent hesitates). "I guess she would be smiling because she would be afraid not to."

Q. "All parents have strengths and weaknesses. What are some aspects of being a parent that you're not very good at, but your ex-spouse seems to handle better than you?"

A. "I can't think of any." "I know I am too giving to my children to a fault but their dad can say no to them over the smallest little thing they ask for . . ." (Answer veers off into describing self in positive terms again, and targeted parent in negative terms).

Q. "What does (the other parent) feel he/she has to offer the children?"

A. "I don't know. I think he just wants to control me and control the children."

Q. "I noticed that the children made derogatory statements about (the other parent) and you did not intervene to correct them. Why is that?"

A. "They have the right to express themselves."

Q. "Have you considered the possibility that your child may be exaggerating some of his/her complaints about (the other parent) because your child wants to please you and to be loyal to you? or even because your child doesn't want to hurt your feelings?"

A. "No, I really haven't." (Parent is often taken aback by the question and puzzled by it.)

Q. "Why do you suppose that your ex-spouse has spared no expense in attempting to exercise his/her visitation with the children?"

A. "To get back at me for leaving him." "To avoid paying child support."

Q. "Have you considered the possibility that (the other parent) sincerely believes that the children's needs are best served by having access to both parents?"

A. (Parent has trouble with the question as it assumes the parent can see the situation from the perspective of the other parent).

Q. "If the court was to place the children with (the other parent) and they were refusing to see you, would you support their right to choose to go on a visitation?"

A. "That would never happen." (Parent can't imagine that turn of events).

Q. "Children often change loyalties over time, especially in the early teen years. If your child were to choose to live with (the other parent) and were refusing to see you at all, would you still support his/her right to choose?"

A. "That would never happen."

Q. "If your child/ren never saw (the other parent) again, what do you feel would be the impact on him/her? Do you feel that he/she would miss out on any important life experiences?"

A. (Parent struggles for an answer). Ask questions which assess the degree of enmeshment between the parent and alienated child.

Q. "What do you and your daughter disagree about?"

A. "Nothing. We're the best of friends. We're like sisters. We like the same kinds of clothes and music."

Q. "Now that your daughter is (11, 12, 13) she must have secrets she doesn't share with you. Do you find your relationship has changed?"

A. "Oh, no. She tells me everything. I am her confidant."

Q. "What kind of discipline problems do you have with your son/daughter?"

A. "None. I've raised her/him to be very well behaved. She/he doesn't give me a bit of trouble."

Q. "Have you encouraged her to go on overnight school trips, or Girl Scout camping trips, or to summer camp?"

A. "No, she doesn't care for those things and I don't make her go. I'm not sure she's safe with strangers. I'm comfortable having her here with me and she feels safe with me."

Q. "Your daughter has said that she wants to live with you forever. Do you find that troubling?"

A. "Oh, no. I was the same way when I was 14. In fact, I lived at home until I married at 21, and I still talk to my mother every day."

Ask questions which determine whether the parent supports contact with the targeted parent or whether the relationship with the targeted parent is marginalized.

Example:

Q. "What do you think about the children's reactions to the visitations?"

A. "The children should not have to see their father if they don't want to."

Q. "Do you think the children should be allowed to decide whether they go to school, to the doctor, to grandmother's house on Christmas Day, etc.?"

A. "Well, of course not."

Q. "Do you not feel that the decision to see their father is in the same category?"

A. "No, I don't. It's not in the same category at all. It should be their choice." (Alienating parent sees no contradiction here.)

Q. "Do you make it very clear to them that they must go?"

A. "I let them know it is up to them. If they choose not to go, I will support them."

Q. "How have you tried to enforce the visitations?"

A. "I talk with them and encourage them."

Q. "Have you made it clear to them that you will punish them if they resist the visitations?"

A. (usually the response is one of shock, confusion).

Q. "But the court has ordered that they go, and you could be in contempt if you don't enforce visitation. Do you make it clear to them that it is not their choice at this point?"

A. "Yes, I told them the court is making them go. It is out of my hands now. I can't protect them any longer, or I will go to jail."

Example:

Q. "What have you done to encourage a relationship with their father?"

A. "I tell them when it's time to go see their dad and that they have to go." "I have them send him a card at Christmas." (Efforts are minimal).

Q. "It seems that dad's phone calls aren't being returned. Do you have the children return his calls?"

A. "They have their own phone. They know when there is a message on the phone. They can return the call any time." (Efforts to get phone calls returned are minimal).

Q. "It seems that when you have to go away from home and arrange child care, you hire a sitter rather than give dad the opportunity to keep the kids for some extra hours outside your custodial arrangement. Why is that?"

A. "I stick to the court agreement. He doesn't have them one hour less nor one hour more than the court says. I'm doing exactly what the judge said to do."

SUMMARY

The concept of parental alienation syndrome now has a 20 year history, yet it continues to be controversial. While clinicians and evaluators working in this arena understand and agree that the phenomenon exists, the lack of any standardization of a method with which to describe the problem has prevented experts from coming to a consensus as to what it is and what it is not. In this paper, it is proposed that the evaluator use a stepwise method of assessment. First, the evaluator should focus on the child's behavior, and exclude the actions of parents and related individuals. Next, the evaluator must determine if the child's alienation is such that he refuses all contact and whether there is a realistic basis for the refusal. If there is, the child is *estranged*, not *alienated*. If there is no basis for the extreme fear and rejection of the targeted parent, then the child is most likely an alienated child. From there, 15 criteria are described in detail along with methods to use to assess whether the child meets the criteria. These criteria have not been empirically derived. They are offered as a beginning platform for future research. Hopefully custody evaluators will use the 15 criteria as a checklist in their PAS cases. Those with large caseloads can address these questions: (1) How well does each criterion contribute toward the final determination of a "yes" (parental alienation) or "no" (not parental alienation) conclusion? (2) Which items overlap to such an extent as to be redundant? (3) Are the criteria clearly *not* present in cases of alignment or estrangement? In other words, do the criteria clearly discriminate between the three cases of visitation resistance?

A short section has been added which includes methods of review of case material and interview questions for the parent who appears to have a role in alienating the child. No criteria have been offered here. There is less agreement among experts as to whether the alienating parent plays a more active and intentional role (Gardner, 1987, 1999) or a more subtle, indirect role (Johnston, 1993; Johnston & Campbell, 1988). No information is included on the targeted parent. As of yet there are no general descriptions of the targeted parent.

Another area which remains unexplored is the future outcome of children and adolescents who have become alienated from a parent as a result of a hostile parental divorce. In some cases it is the targeted parent who seeks counseling with the goal of improving the relationship with the child if it is severely strained, or maintaining some form of communication with the child who has become completely alienated in case he/she will tolerate contact in the future. Ellis (2005) of-

fers several strategies for coaching and advising the targeted parent. Often the courts seek a reunification plan after a lengthy period in which the targeted parent and child have had no contact. There is yet no resource on this subject.

Often, experts are asked “What is the likely outcome for this parent and child who are alienated at this time and having no contact?” Gardner (2001) followed up 99 cases of parental alienation syndrome to determine whether custody was changed to the targeted parent and also to determine whether PAS symptoms were reduced or eliminated. The study is singular in its pursuit of long term data but marred by the fact that all of the cases were those of one evaluator, Gardner, and the categorization of outcomes was also done by Gardner. There is as yet no answer to this question. Hopefully, if a standardized form of assessment can be adopted, custody evaluators may be able to pool data and track outcomes of children and adolescents on into young adulthood.

A second reason for the controversy over PAS may be the fact that few other emotional/behavioral disorders play such a large role in highly charged, courtroom cases. Child custody cases are intensely emotional battles, and attorneys are eager to use phenomena such as PAS for bargaining position in divorce wars. Children who live with mother but who for normal developmental reasons express a desire to live with their father are often said to be “the victims of poisoning by their father against their mother.” Children who are clearly estranged from the father due to the father’s violent behavior are said to be “brain-washed by their mother into hating their father and refusing to have a relationship with him.” A young child who transitions willingly from one home to the other and enjoys a reasonably good relationship with both parents, even though one parent may be deliberately trying to alienate the child from the other, is also said to be “alienated,” though no alienation yet exists. Given the tendency of the adversarial process to polarize the parents’ positions, and to result in each parent making a villain of the other, it is inevitable that terms such as PAS often become used as weapons. Experts in the child custody area must be careful not to allow psychological/behavioral disorders to be misused in the courtroom as agents of harm toward parents who are already extremely distraught and vulnerable (Ellis, 2007; Johnston & Roseby, 1997, pp. 23-24). Hopefully, a standardized process will diminish some of this confusion and misuse of terms such as PAS for courtroom advantage.

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