

The Explosive Question of Parental Alienation: A Summary

Ever since Dr. Richard Gardner, a New York psychiatrist, came up with the term “parental alienation,” it has become a not-uncommon and definitely red-hot accusation in contested child custody battle. One---sometimes, even both!---parents may allege that a deliberate attempt is being made by one parent to sabotage his/her relationship with the child(ren). It is an accusation that is easily made, and not so easily disproven---or, for that matter, proven. The child(ren) in these cases emphatically voice their objections to the disfavored parent, sometimes even to the point of refusing to have any contact whatsoever.

As is often true with theories, the thinking about PAS always seems to be evolving. From assuming that any child who refused interaction with a parent was *prima facie* exhibiting PAS, most professionals now look at the situation more critically. The key question is this: what was the relationship like between the now-disfavored parent and the child(ren) before the divorce? It is a *possibility* that the child(ren)’s present animosity is only an extension of some conflict that predated the divorce or perhaps even events subsequent to it. Of course, it is also likely that it is a result of a loyalty conflict that is being fueled (if not instigated) by the favored parent. It is the presence of these polar opposite hypotheses that makes PAS so difficult to establish or dismiss.

The problem of ascertaining just which of these is really the case is made even more difficult because the causes of any behavior are generally multifaceted. Billy may not want to see Mom because 1) she is too strict and Dad is more lenient and/or 2) Mom is verbally abusive to him and also constantly bad-mouths Dad to Billy and/or 3) Dad keeps telling Billy that now “it’s just us guys. We have to watch out for each other. And besides, if Mom really loved you, she would never have left us.” He may even not want to see her because being with her reminds him of the loss of his family, and causes too much pain. How do we apportion causation for Billy’s reactions? And this doesn’t even begin to explore any personal problems that may be impacting Billy’s attitude as well! Finally, all of these factors may be causing Billy’s attitude or any combination of them can!

One thing does seem clear, however. While Billy definitely seems alienated from Mom (for whatever reasons), it's misguided to call this problem a syndrome. That word is reserved for a set of symptoms that lead to a specified outcome, and since we can be sure neither of the reasons behind Billy's attitude, nor what the ultimate outcome will be, this is obviously not a syndrome in the same way that the symptoms of spots and fever lead to a diagnosis of measles or chicken pox.

No one disputes that parents sometimes engage in behaviors that are intended (consciously or not) to alienate the child(ren) from the other parent. And similarly, no one disputes that such alienation is ultimately very damaging to a child's emotional well-being. It is to everyone's benefit to resolve the estrangement, but at times, it is so entrenched that the services of a professional are required. A sensitive exploration of the dynamics involved must be undertaken to understand the roots of the disaffection and its nuances in this particular family.

One article in particular may be of help in untangling the knotted skein of reasons for a child's animosity towards a parent. In the January, 2005 issue of The Journal of Child Custody, Drozd and Olesen offer a decision tree designed to tease apart whether a child's behavior is more likely to be abuse, alienation or estrangement (which they define as a child having rational reasons for avoiding parental contact).