

Parental Alienation Syndrome expert Dr. Kathleen Reay

Interview Q&A

1. In your opinion, what are the three most common alienating behaviours?

The first most common alienating behaviour is the child expresses a profuse rejection and hatred for the target parent and engages in a lot of bad-mouthing. Second, the child bases his/her denigration on rationalizations that are often weak, frivolous or absurd. For example, “she snores in her sleep.” Statements such as these are often made with a complete lack of ambivalence by the child plus the alienating parent, as well, does not question such statements as the bases for denigration. The alienating parent uses the child’s statements as evidence of the alienated parent’s inadequacy and resists or refuses to cooperate by not allowing the child to talk or see the other parent. Third, the alienating parent is perceived by the child as encompassing only positive qualities whereas the target parent is believed to encompass only negative qualities. This negative attitude is generalized to events that the child and alienated parent have shared. Even events that the child once enjoyed are remembered as being coerced, not enjoyed, or never even remembered.

2. In your experience, what sets off this behaviour?

PAS is a syndrome that is typically set off by a heightened level of conflict. The children in PAS families are present not only in the conflictual situation (in this case the denigration of one parent) but often contribute additional conflict to the situation. These conflicts tend to occur in conjunction with high-battle divorce and lengthy custody proceedings.

3. Is there a particular age at which a child will be more vulnerable to accepting the alienating parent’s point of view?

Children are vulnerable at any age. However, those between nine and twelve years of age typically are the most vulnerable to PAS primarily because they are old enough to have established a strong alignment with one parent. In this age range, children have the cognitive and social ability to try to resolve loyalty conflicts by picking one parent over the other.

4. In families with more than one child, do you tend to see the same level of alienation in all children or do personalities, gender and ages play a role?

In the majority of cases that I’ve worked with, the same level of alienation is seen amongst each and every sibling in the family. I’ve not noticed any gender differences. In terms of personality, one child, for example, may be more introverted and less easy-going than the other, but the alienating behaviours are still present. The only exception

to this question is when there are distinct age differences among siblings and one or more of the older children have already left home, live independent lives and may be married or have their own offspring. In the latter cases, they have not for various reasons been brainwashed by one parent to denigrate the other parent. Thus, they do not contribute to the denigration of the allegedly hated parent and have difficulties understanding why their younger siblings do. Interestingly enough, in these cases, the older siblings are not able to convince their younger siblings that they have been programmed to denigrate the rejected parent. In some cases when the latter has occurred, the programmed siblings choose to become estranged from their older, non-programmed siblings.

5. In your book you dedicate an entire chapter to taking swift action; why is this so important?

The seeds of PAS can sprout quickly. Mild PAS in a child or youth can quickly progress into moderate and severe levels. The greater the level of severity, the harder it is to reverse. It is absolutely necessary for an alienated parent to take swift action to help stop the progression by enlisting support and assistance from an experienced family law lawyer. Unfortunately, but true, PAS can be exacerbated by the adversarial system of child custody dispute adjudication. It's not uncommon for courts to adjourn, alienating parents to fire lawyers, or lawyers to fire alienating parents creating more complexities, including prolonging the process. When the latter situations occur, children's best interests are not taken to heart. Additionally, to help stop the progression of PAS, it is absolutely necessary for an alienated parent to enlist the support and assistance of an experienced mental health professional who has specialized training in the techniques that these families require.

6. What are some typical symptoms and behaviours experienced by alienated children?

Overall, children who are victims of PAS tend to exhibit a variety of symptoms and behaviours. These include the following: disconnections in their relationships, clinging and separation anxiety, an inability to tolerate anger or hostility, conflicts with authority figures, impulse control issues, developing fears and phobias, anxiety and panic attacks, obsessive-compulsive behaviours, and a lack of self-confidence and self-esteem. Additionally, PAS children tend to reveal psychosomatic symptoms, depression and suicidal ideation, sleep and/or eating disorders, psychological vulnerability and dependency, involuntary bodily functions such as bedwetting, educational difficulties, drug abuse and self-destructive behaviours, poor peer relationships, excessive guilty feelings, and an unhealthy sense of entitlement for one's age that leads to social alienation in general.

7. Can children ever fully recover for being alienated, particularly in the case of severe alienation?

In 2007, I conducted a quantitative research study to examine the long-term effects of PAS. The study's findings demonstrated that adult children of divorce who perceived experiencing greater levels of PAS also perceived experiencing greater levels of psychological distress such as depression, anxiety, hostility, interpersonal sensitivity, obsessive compulsivity, paranoid ideation, phobic anxiety, hallucinations, delusions, and the presence of certain physical symptoms such as feelings of numbness, soreness, tingling, and heaviness in various parts of the body. To date, most researchers agree that alienated children, primarily in severe PAS cases, are less likely to re-establish a bond later in life with their rejected parents. Although not common, some children, youths and adult-children do change their minds. Some, for instance, eventually acknowledge that they have been programmed by an alienating parent and after intensive treatment interventions are able to reconcile their relationship with the rejected parent. Anything is possible.

8. Have you ever seen a case where a child is fully cognizant of the alienation taking place but the child doesn't buy into the lies?

Quite honestly, no I haven't seen any case like that. I've clinically treated many individuals ranging from young alienated children to adult-children of divorce who perceived experiencing PAS in earlier years. In some cases, depending on how old they were at the time, they recall being fairly cognizant in the beginning stages and were aware that the alienating parent forced them to stop loving their other parent. During the mild stage of alienation, the child knew it was wrong but felt he/she had no choice but to become swept up by their alienating parent's backbiting remarks about the other parent. Many adult-children I've worked with have also stated that they didn't want to be taken seriously nor want the relationship to end in spite of the rejection of a parent but they still were programmed to buy into the lies.

9. Are teenagers likely to be as susceptible to alienation as younger children?

Yes, absolutely. For example, a 16-year old female adolescent I once knew was given the choice to decide which parent she wanted to live with after her parents divorced. She had a good, loving relationship with both parents, but she chose to remain in the family home with her mother. Her father took it well and moved into a condo on the other side of the city. Even though this teen chose to spend fairly equal time with each parent after the divorce, her mother began bad-mouthing and denigrating her father each time the two of them spent time alone. This 16-year old teen was brainwashed by her mother and began bad-mouthing her father, too. The alienation escalated quickly and within *three and a half weeks*, the 16-year old expressed a profuse hatred for her father and she estranged him. This teen did not express any feelings of guilt about the circumstances surrounding the relationship with him. This lack of guilt was related to the brainwashing done by her mother. Moreover, the rejected parent's extended family also became included in the animosity. The paternal grandparents attempted to counter

the denigration of her father, but the teenager saw it as an attack on her own beliefs and ended her relationship with them, too.

It's important to point out that even when alienation begins prior to age twelve, adolescents between twelve and seventeen years of age typically continue to align with one parent over the other in PAS cases. Although most youths have the ability to take a more mature and independent view of their parents' arguments, a significant proportion will uphold their alignment and continue to reject one parent in favour of the other parent.

10. Does economic status play any role in the likelihood of alienation occurring?

In the vast majority of cases, men continue to hold greater economic power over women today. During the separation, divorce, and/or post-divorce processes, many mothers living apart from their partners or ex-partners experience significant financial hardship, which in and of itself can ignite the start of PAS. These mothers may barely be able to afford to put food on the table so hiring an experienced, skilled attorney is out of the question. Driven by a sense of vulnerability and socio-economic inequality, it is not uncommon to see some mothers turn into alienators and program their children against their fathers.

It is also not uncommon for alienating men to withhold spousal support and/or child support payments because they feel so enraged with anger. It's a way of getting even with the mother of the children. In these cases, PAS tends to escalate even further when the alienating father is court-mandated to make back payments for spousal and/or child support. Additionally, it is not uncommon when court-ordered to pay spousal and/or child support payments that the alienating father will suddenly fight for sole custody as a way to not have to pay the support. Given our economic climate, it's also common for fathers to be laid off from jobs such as those in the construction industry, etc. Suddenly, they are not able to pay spousal and/or child support. I've seen some of these men turn into alienators and program their children against their mothers. These types of battles tend to ensue for a very long time whereby the alienated children are the ones who really end up paying for it.

11. In your practice, have you seen this alienating behaviour more in men or women?

I do not see any significant gender differences in who becomes an alienated or target parent. Both mothers and fathers have an equal chance of being alienated.

12. Typically speaking, have alienating parents exhibited some sort of psychological disorder prior to the alienation?

Yes, after completing a comprehensive assessment of all members of an alienated family, it seems apparent that, for the most part, alienating parents have exhibited some type of psychological disorder or distress prior to the alienation. This may include, but

is not limited to, prior engagement of child maltreatment, alcohol/substance abuse or dependence and/or a personality disorder.

13. Are you for the inclusion of PAS in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)? Please explain your reasoning.

I completely support the inclusion of PAS in the DSM as a mental disorder, a syndrome or a stand-alone severe parent-child relational problem. PAS is scientifically valid and is a burgeoning phenomenon. Although it's been described as a controversial issue, PAS is not new. As a matter of fact, it has been described in both psychiatric and psychological literature for over 60 years. The concept has been understood and widely agreed upon by mental health professionals who evaluate and treat alienated children in at least 30 different countries around the world. It's important to keep in mind that Posttraumatic Stress Disorder was not included in the DSM until 1980 and yet from a historical perspective, it was a very real, legitimate and controversial phenomenon, too. The key to understanding the scientific basis and clinical expression of PTSD is the concept of "trauma". The key to understanding the scientific basis and clinical expression of PAS is also the concept of "trauma" and "child abuse".

14. How do you see PAS handled differently if it is included in the next edition of the DSM? For example, do you believe there would be any changes to how PAS is diagnosed?

If the DSM-V Task Force of the American Psychiatric Association were to adopt parental alienation as a "mental disorder", then it would be advantageous to list it as a disorder rather than a syndrome. Dr. William Bernet, a psychiatrist, submitted, along with a large committee of mental health and legal experts, a proposal to the DSM-V Task Force stating that Parental Alienation Disorder should be the diagnosis if the child's symptoms are persistent enough and severe enough to meet the criteria for that disorder. I completely concur with Bernet and the rest of the committee's proposed diagnostic criteria, which includes Dr. Richard A. Gardner's original eight manifestations of PAS as well as some additional criteria including: the duration of the disturbance must be at least two months; the disturbance causes clinically significant impairment or distress in academic (occupational), social, and other important areas of functioning; and the child's refusal to have contact with the targeted parent is legitimate and unjustifiable in nature.

Moreover, if parental alienation were to be included in the DSM, it would likely prompt insurance companies to provide coverage for alienated families, stimulate more global scientific research studies on this very important topic, stimulate the development of standardized psychological tests that measure and determine whether parental alienation is truly occurring, stimulate the development of training programs for psychology students in graduate schools, and increase the likelihood that children will get timely and effective mental health treatment.

15. If PAS were to be included in the DSM, do you believe the court system process would become easier for alienated parents, or change in any way?

That's a difficult question to answer. It's my hope that if PAS were to be included in the DSM, then the court system process would become easier for alienated parents. The judicial system would likely pay more attention to scientific facts and likely heed psychologists' recommendations for taking swift action and working in the best interests of these children. It's my hope that a greater number of judges throughout the country would expedite court ordered visitation rights between the alienated parent and the child and hopefully not allow alienating parents and their legal representatives to prolong the process.

16. Do you believe that alienated parents should face any legal consequences for their actions? If so, what?

When it's proven that alienation has taken place, then alienated parents need to be accountable for their actions. In mild cases of alienation, alienators need to be court-mandated to take parenting classes, work with a parenting coordinator and engage in psychotherapy to help deal with their underlying issues, negative thoughts, emotions and behaviours that have contributed to the alienation in the first place. Additionally, in mild cases of alienation, I strongly believe that the alienating parent needs to be court-mandated to pay for the alienated parent and the child's counselling sessions.

With moderate PAS cases, greater legal consequences are necessary. In general, the alienating parent needs to take responsibility and pay for intensive therapeutic interventions for all members of the family. This would include paying for a combination of individual and family counselling sessions for all parties including him or herself.

In some severe PAS cases, it's necessary for the child to be removed from the alienating parent for a minimum of one year and transferred to the care of the targeted parent. Additionally, in the latter situations, the alienating parent should be court-ordered to pay child support to the rejected parent as well as pay for all legal and treatment intervention fees that have incurred. In other severe PAS cases, it would be appropriate for the alienated parent to be court-ordered to pay for Reunification Therapy, a specialized therapy that requires the entire family's involvement with a court-appointed mental health professional who is responsible for monitoring and reporting information to the court including non-compliance issues. Or, the alienated parent should be court-ordered to pay for an intensive treatment program out of the country that reunites the child and rejected parent. They both undergo intensive interventions to help deprogram the child. All in all, when an alienating parent engages in any form of non-compliance, then the legal consequences need to be even stricter such as banning the parent from having any contact with the youth until it is proven that he/she no longer engages in alienating behaviours.

17. If legal consequences were instituted for alienators, do you believe the incidences of alienation would decrease at all, in other words, do you think severe legal consequences would be a deterrent?

It's my opinion that the incidences of alienation would decrease. Clear, consistent, severe and forceful judgements will deter potential alienating parents from even starting the alienation process as they may immediately lose custody of their children. This, of course, would only be probable if the judge is fully informed of PAS as a syndrome or disorder and if it has been clearly identified in each case. The court requires sufficient time to assess each case in order to determine the best interests of the child. Once identified as a PAS case, then the court needs to make speedy judgements and mete out severe legal consequences in order to stop the alienation process immediately.

18. In your experience, if a child was alienated, is there a higher probability that he/she will become an alienator with their own children?

No, I cannot recall ever seeing that occur. I've seen the opposite occur. That is, based on clinical experience, there appears to be a higher probability that an adult-child who perceives experiencing alienation in earlier years may eventually become an alienated parent.

19. Numbers seem to suggest that parental alienation syndrome is on the rise. Why do you think this is?

This is an interesting question because PAS is not new and we don't know the exact prevalence of it. It's been described in psychiatric, psychological and legal literature for over 60 years. Since the 1970's there has been an emergence of child custody battles because the divorce laws in most western nations recognized fathers as real parents and both parents as financially responsible. Prior to the 1970's child custody battles were almost unheard of in the United States and Canada. In the 1980s, Dr. Richard A. Gardner, a child and forensic psychiatrist, championed the term parental alienation syndrome. He referred to it as a child-custody litigation phenomenon. Since that time, PAS has gained increased recognition in both the mental health and legal fields. By 2002, there had been no less than seventy-two rulings that cited PAS in law courts in countries throughout the world. Beginning in early 2000, the PAS satisfied the necessary criteria for admissibility in certain courts of law in the United States and all of Canada. Moreover, numbers seem to suggest that alienation is on the rise because more and more countries around the world are producing psychological and legal literature on the topic. Many mental health professionals worldwide have recognized Gardner's criteria for PAS and have primarily applied his criteria when working with high-conflict divorce cases and other cases involving repeated false allegations of various forms of child abuse or domestic violence.

The development or occurrence of alienation seems to be triggered by hate, anger, or a sense of seeking revenge towards one parent by an alienating parent or some

combination of these. Currently, it is estimated that approximately one-quarter million children are exposed to or suffer from PAS each year in the U.S. alone. This is truly a heartbreaking statistic because the prevalence of PAS has often been too overlooked by the judiciary, mental health professionals, and the media. There are far too many children in society who are suffering from this very real form of abuse and yet have not been identified as experiencing it.

In more recent time, numbers seem to suggest that parental alienation syndrome is on the rise because we are beginning to see the topic highlighted in the press and media more often. Celebrities like Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger, Halle Barry and Gabriel Aubry, Mel and Kim Gibson, Christie Brinkley and Peter Cook as well as many other Hollywood couples have allegedly engaged in toxic divorce battles involving the highly complex continuum of parental alienation.

20. Given your historical research as outlined in your book, do you believe that changes in divorce and child custody laws would have any affect on the incidence of parental alienation?

At present, I don't feel overly optimistic that changes in divorce and child custody laws would have a significant effect on the incidence of parental alienation. It seems very clear that unmasking and repairing this horrible form of child abuse requires a multifaceted approach not only within the formal court system but outside of it, too. One thing that could potentially be beneficial and could possibly have an effect on lessening the impact of parental alienation is creating a mandatory intermittent reporting requirement into the initial child custody order. In doing so, parents would be forewarned at the beginning of a custody and visitation order that their adherence to the agreement and their interaction with their children and each other will be systematically monitored by a court-appointed mental health professional. Any form of non-compliance would likely expose alienation practices at an early stage. Alienating parents would be made aware of their abuse of power and in some cases it might deter further alienation. No matter what swift action for remediation would be necessary on the part of the courts and mental health professionals involved in the case. This particular mechanism may translate into an eventual savings of court time and help minimize or avoid harm to children. Clearly, new solutions are needed to stop alienation and repair the damages seen.

21. In your book, you mention the benefits of cognitive behaviour therapy. How is CBT effective for the alienated parent as well as the alienator?

The answer is CBT has been extensively used for treating depression; anxiety disorders such as panic disorder and agoraphobia, social phobia, post-traumatic stress, obsessive-compulsive disorder; eating disorders; addictive disorders; certain chronic illnesses; personality disorders; and some forms of psychoses. Many alienated parents experience one or more types of psychological distress such as grief, helplessness, hopelessness, depression, acute or chronic stress, anxiety, fear, worry, panic, low tolerance for frustrating and difficult situations, anger, post-traumatic stress, and addiction among

other types. Emotion and behaviour are greatly influenced by cognition. CBT acts directly on the symptoms that create distress. Not only is there widespread recognition that distorted or maladaptive cognitions play a prominent role in the cause of psychological distress, but there is also widespread recognition that distorted or maladaptive cognitions play a prominent role in the perpetuation of psychological distress. The overwhelming body of literature reviews on the effectiveness of CBT as a therapeutic approach for treating various types of psychological distress, including relationship difficulties, lends support for treating not only alienating parents but alienated parents and children, too.