

About Parental Alienation Syndrome

By Amy J. L. Baker, Ph.D

Parental Alienation: An Overview

Parental alienation is the term used to describe the overall problem of children being encouraged by one parent -- the favored parent -- to unjustly reject the other parent -- the targeted parent. The specific behaviors that they engage in are referred to as parental alienation strategies. Parental alienation often but not always occurs in divorced families.

Parental Alienation Strategies

There are seventeen primary parental alienation strategies that have been identified through research studies with adults who were alienated as children and with targeted parents. These 17 PA strategies have been validated in a series of subsequent studies. The 17 primary parental alienation strategies fall into five general categories: (1) poisonous messages to the child about the targeted parent in which he or she is portrayed as unloving, unsafe, and unavailable; (2) limiting contact and communication between the child and the targeted parent; (3) erasing and replacing the targeted parent in the heart and mind of the child; (4) encouraging the child to betray the targeted parent's trust; and (5) undermining the authority of the targeted parent. Taken together these parental alienation strategies foster conflict and psychological distance between the child and the targeted parent. When one parent engages in these behaviors they can be considered a toxic ex.

Not all children who are exposed to these parental alienation strategies succumb to the pressure and become alienated. Some children are able to resist the pressure to choose one parent over the other. When they cannot resist the pressure they are said to be alienated. That is, they reject the targeted parent without justification; their relationship with the targeted parent is based on the emotional manipulation of the favored parent rather than based on the actual experiences with the targeted parent.

Parental Alienation Syndrome

Children who reject one parent to please the other parent are referred to as alienated or as having the parental alienation syndrome. They will express most if not all of the 8 behavioral manifestations: (1) campaign of denigration of the targeted parent (2) weak, frivolous, or absurd reasons for the rejection of the targeted parent; (3) lack of ambivalence towards both parents in which one is viewed as all good and the other as all bad; (4) lack of remorse for the poor treatment of the targeted parent; (5) reflexive support for the favored parent; (6) use of borrowed scenarios; (7) the "independent thinker" phenomenon; and (8) spread of animosity towards the friends and family of the targeted parent.

Agreement in the Field

While PAS is not in the American Psychiatric Association's manual of diagnoses (the DSM-5) it does meet the APA's definition of a syndrome. Moreover, there is virtually no disagreement that some children align with one parent against the other in response to post divorce parental conflict and that when they do, they exhibit certain unique behaviors as described above.

Long-Term Effects of PA and PAS

Research has established that children exposed to the 17 primary parental alienation strategies and those who become alienated suffer in the long run, as do their parents. Targeted parents living in the nightmare of parental alienation need strategic guidance so that they can more effectively co-parent with a toxic ex before their children turn against them. For parents whose children are already alienated, they need compassionate support and advice on their parental alienation journey.

Dr. Baker is a nationally recognized expert in parent child relationships, especially children of divorce, parental alienation syndrome, and emotional abuse of children.

Dr. Baker is available as an expert witness and for print, radio, and television interviews.

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Dr. Baker has a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology from Teachers College of Columbia University.

Her areas of research include parental alienation, child welfare, parent involvement in their children's education, early intervention, and attachment. She is the Director of Research at the Vincent J. Fontana Center for Child Protection.

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