

MATCH Fact Sheet No. 10: Parental Alienation Syndrome

Parental Alienation Syndrome

- Dr. Richard Gardner is the American psychiatrist who first defined the term PAS in 1984 in his book, *The Parental Alienation Syndrome*. Many professionals disagree about the definition; many doubt its existence. Affected parents or interested researchers must make up their own minds until such time as PAS is recognised. See <http://www.rgardner.com>
- PAS has been quoted in many American and Canadian cases. As far as we know, it has only been mentioned once in the UK. See *The Times*, Law Report 2, 21 June 2000 <http://www.times-archive.co.uk>.
- Few solicitors know about PAS but one prominent barrister, Caroline Wilbourne, who appeared on BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* (5 April, 2001) in a discussion with MATCH Chairman, Patricia Bailey, acknowledges it. See more about Ms. Wilbourne on <http://www.kennedyguidebarristers.com>.
- A pioneering American organisation, The Rachel Foundation is the very first in the world "*dedicated to providing re-integration programmes and services to re-build parent-child bonds that have been damaged or destroyed by abduction, alienation, separation and divorce.*" Pamela Stuart-Mills Hoch, the Director of Programs, has extensive personal experience of PAS, being the first person in Canada to have PAS quoted in Canadian law in her own case. Write or e-mail:

The Rachel Foundation

P.O. Box 368

Damascus MD 20882

U.S.A. <http://www.rachelfoundation.org>

- Useful PAS resources and case studies are in MATCH member, Penny Cross's book, *Lost Children: A Guide for Separating Parents* (ISBN 0-9538392-0-6), available to order through all bookshops. Read reviews on <http://www.amazon.co.uk> and elsewhere on the MATCH web site, as well as on <http://www.familyonwards.co.uk>

The following two extracts were taken from Dr. Richard Gardner's website <http://www.rgardner.com> in August 2001. Dr. Gardner believes it is important to differentiate between **PAS** and **Parental Alienation**, the latter being explained in the second extract. This is crucial to any understanding of, or discussion of, alienation.

Parental Alienation Syndrome

"PAS is a childhood disorder that arises almost exclusively in the context of child-custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child's campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from the combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent's

MATCH Fact Sheet No. 10: Parental Alienation Syndrome

indoctrinations *and* the child's own contributions to the vilification of the target parent."

Parental Alienation

"Children may become alienated from a parent because of physical abuse, with or without sexual abuse. Children's alienation may be the result of parental emotional abuse, which may be overt in the form of verbal abuse or more covert in the form of neglect.

Children may become alienated as the result of parental abandonment. Ongoing parental acrimony, especially when associated with physical violence, may cause children to become alienated. A child may be angry with the parent who initiated the divorce, believing that that parent is solely to blame for the separation. These and many other parental behaviours can produce children's alienation, but none of them can justifiably be considered PAS."

Dr. Richard Gardner

The explanation of Parental Alienation Syndrome that follows is a personal definition by MATCH Member Penny Cross, based on her *"own interpretation of my experience, Dr. Gardner's interpretation, as well as the experiences of other parents I have interviewed."*

- A child suffering from PAS rejects a good, caring parent with whom, prior to marital breakdown, he/she has had a normal, loving relationship.
- The rejection is for no good, understandable reason.
- The child declares he/she has not been influenced by anyone.
- The child claims to have only negative memories of the rejected parent.

How PAS can occur

PAS needs a highly volatile breeding ground: disturbing circumstances, unstable people, frequently—but not always—*Type A* personalities. In 1959, two cardiologists, Drs. Meyer Friedman and Ray Rosenman, summarized decades of research to come up with the much publicized *Type A* personality who:

- "has a chronic sense of time urgency. Rushed and hurried, this person is always *"on edge."*
- has quick and abrupt speech, often interrupting others.
- is very competitive - even in non-competitive situations.
- is a hard-driving, achievement-oriented, and status-conscious person.
- frequently becomes hostile and aggressive."

David Gershaw, PhD¹.

¹ Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, West Publishing, 1995, pp 354-362.

MATCH Fact Sheet No. 10: Parental Alienation Syndrome

The combination of such personalities AND the early, turbulent, furious pre-separation circumstances can release pent up emotions like fizz from a bottle. One partner may be entirely unprepared for, or entirely unwilling to agree to, separation or divorce. This partner may become, initially, unbalanced for a time, but later skilfully devious. Revenge for the ending of a relationship is now a priority.

The child will naturally be deeply upset at the family splitting up. One deeply disturbed, unstable parent will find it relatively easy, at this early stage, to formulate a strategy to destroy the child's relationship with the other parent, as well as relationships with extended family members or the spouse's supportive friends.

PAS can also occur when parents are living together. One parent may be emotionally unstable, or have a paranoia, or problems that threaten other individuals in the family unit. If this parent is challenged, he/she may decide that the solution is to destroy the child's relationship with his/her other parent. He/she may be even more motivated to do so if his/her own relationship with the spouse is unsatisfactory or is ending.

How PAS can grow

If no pre-separation discussion has taken place between parents to prepare either one partner or children for life-changing circumstances, vulnerable children are suddenly thrust into a powerfully intense adult drama where grievances, genuine or perceived, built up over years, may be explosively released. To one parent, this out-pouring of explanations or grievances is necessary to rationalize or justify the ending of a relationship.

To the other parent, any explanations or actions to end the relationship are profoundly upsetting. He/she is too wounded to retaliate – for the moment. The break-up may have occurred abruptly. It is shocking to be rejected after one, two or three decades of marriage. Consequences will affect home, possessions, status, and finances. The children begin to realise how the changes will affect them, and may begin to grow angry too.

Daddy/Mummy wants to change my life, to leave me, to go away with a stranger, to have a baby with the stranger, to move far away, perhaps to a new country. Daddy/Mummy is really, really, really unhappy at this potential change, and spends a lot of time crying and threatening.

A typical PAS-abuser

According to Dr. Gardner a typical PAS abuser may have a history of paranoia. He/she may have been an immature parent, with poor parenting skills. But this PAS-abusing parent has powerful and destructive capabilities.

If affection or love has been taken away from him/her, he/she will set out to take the children's love away from the offending partner. He/she may plot, plan and, ultimately, stage-manage a situation to dominate the children's love.

MATCH Fact Sheet No. 10: Parental Alienation Syndrome

The final aim is total annihilation of the children's love, affection or regard for the other parent. If PAS has not already developed at the separation phase of the marriage break-up, it will now begin to grow in the less frenzied, but equally unstable circumstances after one parent has left home, leaving children behind.

The parent who wants to 'own' the children

Suffering bereavement-like symptoms ranging from anger, denial to disbelief, the parent left behind will describe herself/himself as having been 'abandoned', and will draw in the child's sympathies so that the child is convinced he/she has been abandoned, too. Resentment builds, alliances are formed, barriers go up.

Unable to come to terms with the ending of a relationship, unable to believe that his/her partner has fallen in love with someone else, disbelief will soon turn to anger. He/she realises, despite pleading, bargaining, that he/she is impotent. Feelings of betrayal and humiliation are aroused at the failure of the relationship. He/she has lost all power over the spouse and feels embarrassment at the public humiliation.

Planning, plotting, scheming, he/she suddenly realises that he/she is not impotent after all. There is still the children's affection for the other parent to be manipulated. Ultimate power and public status can be regained if the children's love, regard or affection for the 'offending' partner can be killed outright.

How children can be PAS abused

It is relatively easy to gain a frightened child's sympathy. The PAS-abusing parent, in a fog of anger and resentment, will ignore the child's emotional needs. The child may be used as a peer group member, and may have to listen to inappropriate adult-based grievances stored up over the years.

The child will start to align himself/herself with one parent. The situation will be black and white, a good guys v. bad guys argument. Very soon the child's good, positive memories of the other parent will evaporate.

How children begin to withdraw from one parent

Children may become quiet and withdrawn or badly behaved. Attention seeking, negative or positive, may occur. Two wise parents will explain how the family world is changing, using vocabulary or phrases to limit the damage. Two wise parents will draw on accumulated adult life skills, experience, and insight, to cope with their changing world and protect their children. But one angry parent can do incalculable damage.

Shell-shocked children do not have appropriate vocabulary. They witness Daddy or Mummy being tearful, angry, possibly expressing suicidal intentions. Growing tensions, fears, anxieties fill each day, mounting in pressure, creating an intolerable burden on the child who begins to feel anger for the parent who is changing the family world. The child grows closer to the wounded parent.

All children want their parents to be together. They're distressed when parents despise one another. Everyday they witness Mummy or Daddy's sadness, tears,

MATCH Fact Sheet No. 10: Parental Alienation Syndrome

anger, excessive drinking or smoking. They may naturally side with the rejected partner who has not initiated the change in family circumstances. Children's anxieties may begin to grow that this parent, too, may also leave them.

A fully PAS-abused child

The normal, previously loving relationship between parent and child will now end as the child ceases to have any positive memories of one parent. The child is now fully PAS-abused, and has one PAS-abusing parent, the one who cannot come to terms with the ending of the relationship/marriage.

The child's alienation and hostility may extend to grandparents, other family members, and friends, indeed anyone who supports the despised parent. The child may send hate mail, tear up photos or possessions that are reminders of the parent who has left. In short, everything will be done to cease communication with the despised parent.

The child may explain, convincingly, that he/she is acting independently, with maturity, and without pressure or influence from anyone. If challenged he/she may persuasively claim to CAFCASS officials [previously Family Court Welfare Officials] or to solicitors or judges or indeed to anyone who asks, that he/she has no good or positive memories of that parent.

Have I 'abandoned' my child?

In a war, weapons are essential. Two crucially effective weapons are children and words. Emotive words like '*abandon*', '*desert*', and '*rejection*' are frequently used to wound the parent who has, seemingly, left the family home.

Parents who cannot stay in a marriage, and who decide to leave home without taking children with them, usually leave them in the family home for the best possible reasons: emotional security, familiar surroundings, physical comfort, proximity to school, friends, and extended family. These parents take it for granted they'll continue to play a significant part in their children's lives forever.

Some parents who leave do not have a choice. In the case of domestic violence, I have known some mothers to run out of the house in fear of their lives, taking nothing with them, leaving children behind. Later, those children and often extended family members, will accuse these parents of having 'abandoned' their children as well as their responsibilities.

The 'abandoned' children will draw closer to one parent, fearing he/she may leave too. Often, too, the extended family will support one parent and 'freeze' out the other. Within a short while, and with great ease, one parent is able to convince the children, and the rest of the world, that the other parent did abandon them. The parent who left is rejected outright, and all contact ceases, sometimes for years.

The parent who is PAS-abused

If there has been time to prepare the child, the parent leaving the family home may have gone to great lengths to explain some of the reasons gently, rationally,

MATCH Fact Sheet No. 10: Parental Alienation Syndrome

and sensitively, making it abundantly clear that he/she is leaving an unsuccessful marriage, not the child.

That parent's intention is to retain regular, meaningful and loving contact with the child, whether face to face, by telephone, e-mail or letters. That parent's paramount objective is to continue to be fully in the child's life. In spite of everything that parent will soon face accusations of 'abandonment'.

Ultimately, the parent who left is rejected outright, will be burdened with guilt and filled with sorrow at the emotional abuse being experienced by his/her children. The final emotions will be comparable to bereavement, but an on-going bereavement suffered every day by being apart from beloved children.

Penny Cross

Other useful sources of PAS information:

Stan Hayward
Families Need Fathers
134 Curtain Road
London EC2A 3AR
<http://www.fnf.org.uk/stan.htm>

Peter Weaving
Equal Parenting Council
38 - 40 Gloucester Road
London SW7 4QU
E-mail: [http://council@equalparenting.org](mailto:council@equalparenting.org)
Telephone: 020 7590 2709 Fax: 020 7584 4230

Books

The Parental Alienation Syndrome, Richard Gardner. Can be obtained in the United Kingdom from Smallwood Publishing (01 304 226 900) or from Amazon Books <http://www.amazon.com>