

## **Parental Alienation Syndrome (a.k.a. Parental Alienation)**

### **When Children Do Not Want Contact with a Parent**

When a child does not want to see a parent, and alleges mistreatment by that parent, the rejected parent often asserts that the child has been turned against them by the other parent. Many evaluators, law guardians and judges almost automatically disbelieve allegations of mistreatment of a child that occurs within the context of custody battles, stating that it is simply a matter of what Richard Gardner called “parental alienation syndrome”. (Rand 1997 a, b; Warshak 2001). There certainly are many children who are placed under pressure by a parent to reject the other parent. However, badmouthing the other parent generally backfires, unless the other parent behaves in very problematic ways. Research has failed to support the common practice of ignoring abuse allegations made within the context of a custody dispute. Accusations of abuse must always be taken seriously. (Thoennes 1990; Everson 1989; Association of Family and Conciliation Courts Research Unit 1988).

There are a number of factors that can make a child reluctant to visit the non-custodial parent. In high conflict divorces the transition between the parents can be difficult. When the child’s temperament does not match well with the parenting style of the non residential parent, or when the non residential parent is harsh or ignores the child on visits, a child will often not want to visit. A child may be reluctant to leave a residential parent whom they see as vulnerable and needing their support and presence. When the non residential parent has a new partner the child may not want to visit either because the step parent does not get along well with them or out of a sense of loyalty to the residential parent who is being replaced. When a child has a negative attitude toward a parent it is far more likely that the issue is estrangement as a result of that parent being harsh or unempathic, than the result of alienation.

There are a variety of factors that can help the evaluator to differentiate between cases of abuse and parental alienation syndrome. If the alleged abuser is found to have a history of impulsive and aggressive behavior and to not cooperate with the evaluation, while the

accusing parent supports evaluation and the maintenance of contact with the alleged abuser under safe circumstances it is likely that abuse, rather than alienation is occurring. On the other hand, if the abuse is alleged to have suddenly begun after separation, the accusing parent avoids evaluation and the accused parent has no history of impulsivity or aggression then alienation seems more likely. In addition, alienated child will appear to have been coached, and to often need reminders from the accusing parent in order to tell the story of the bad things that were done, while a truly abused child will need only a few reminders (Gardner 1999).

Many children are abused by parents and need protection. Nevertheless, parents who allege abuse are not only frequently ignored, but if they continue to push the issue they are seen as manipulative and psychologically unstable. Those who have not done extensive work with domestic violence, abuse and trauma do not realize that the anxiety and pressure of these individuals is the normal response to being victimized and to having to stand by as one's child is placed in the situation of being victimized. Parents find themselves in the painful position of being threatened with losing their child and handing them over to the abusing parent if they do not force their hysterical children to go to the abusive parent. These situations need extensive evaluation by people trained in evaluating abuse.

### **Further Reading**

Kelly, J.B. & Johnston, J.R. (2001). The Alienated Child: A Reformulation of Parental Alienation Syndrome. *Family Courts Review*, 39 (3), 249-266.

Sullivan, M. & Kelly, J.B. (2001). Legal and psychological management of cases with an alienated child. *Family Courts Review*, 39 (3), 299-315.\*