

## **Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS): Its Causes, Cures, Costs and Controversies**

by Jayne A. Major, Ph.D.

### **Introduction**

In no other area of family law do people become more polarized than in cases involving parental alienation (PA) and parental alienation syndrome (PAS). And though volumes have been written on this subject, there still exists enormous confusion as to what the real problem is. Because there is rarely enough accurate information to make an informed opinion, most bystanders as well as trained professionals eventually give up trying to figure out which parent in a high-conflict family is "right." The "he said/she said" quagmire is simply too shaky a place from which to sort out the truth.

In high-conflict families, one or both parents may be guilty of allowing their anger toward the other parent to be expressed in a way that tragically involves their children. Parental alienation (PA) is the term used to describe the attempts by one parent to undermine the relationship a child has with the other parent. Because children are suggestible, many will eventually succumb to the relentless programming or "brainwashing" by an alienating parent toward a target parent. When a child aligns with a disturbed parent and becomes a representative of that parent's agenda by also behaving in aggressive and hateful ways toward the target parent, parental alienation syndrome (PAS) has developed. A child with PAS becomes an alienator in their own right, independently creating their own scenarios of how horrible the target parent is. These imagined scenarios are often bizarre and bear little resemblance to the truth.

My purpose in writing this article is to share the knowledge I have gained firsthand working as a practitioner with such high-conflict families and to provide a more in-depth understanding of this very serious issue, in particular by offering insight into the causes of PA/PAS, its severe costs, and the controversies that surround it. As you will see, the fallout from PA/PAS is far-reaching. A tremendous amount of community resources are used trying to stabilize these high-conflict families. My focus, therefore, is on the top 15% of chronically litigating parents, as they use an inordinate amount of court time to try to resolve their family issues and are most likely to 1) force their children to take sides with them and 2) obstruct shared custody and mutual decision-making.

### **Causes of PA/PAS**

There are three degrees of PA that can result in PAS.

A *mild* and very common form of parental alienation is when one parent speaks negatively about the other parent, over what might be the smallest of issues, so that a child hears what is being said. This can be somewhat unintentional. Parents may be so upset at each other that they simply don't realize that they are inappropriately involving a child in adult affairs. Parent education is often needed to teach these parents to have boundaries that protect their children from upsetting feelings. Without such boundaries, parents are contributing to the psychological insecurity of their children.

In the *moderate* category of parental alienation are conflicting parents who exercise little control over their anger and go ballistic when they are upset, without any consideration of how their anger affects other family members. The suffering that this ugly behavior causes children and the target parent is severe. Many parents look to the court to stabilize what is a chaotic family system. These are families where there is little ability to use mediation to work out a reasonable parenting plan for their children. But using a court to resolve high-conflict family disputes such as where PA/PAS is present has had limited success at best. The outcome depends almost entirely upon a judge's ability to understand the nuances of PA/PAS and to make appropriate orders to contain the problem -- not an easy thing to do.

In this category, PAS develops as children find the need to protect the angry, alienating parent. To avoid further triggering the parent's rage, they stop expressing positive feelings for the target parent. They become caught in a vicious cycle of trying to figure out how to be safe while also sorting through the demonizing attacks made toward the target parent.

Falling into the *severe* category of parental alienation are those parents who become obsessed with destroying the child's relationship with the other parent and that parent's family and friends. Dr. Frank Williams describes this goal of cutting a parent out of a child's life as a "parentectomy." In these cases, a child will succumb to the alienator's programming or brainwashing and experience fear, anger, and hatred toward the target parent. When parental alienation is severe enough, children have no choice but to align with the disturbed parent against the target parent, thus destroying their relationship with the target parent. These children no longer have free will or the ability to continue loving the target parent. PAS describes the child's behavior in response to the brainwashing that has occurred; it does not describe actions on the part of a parent. The focus of this article is on children who are being severely alienated or who are already experiencing PAS.

How can obsessed parents be effective in erasing a child's love for a parent who showed the child only love and not abuse? In her book *Adult Children of Parental Alienation Syndrome: Breaking the Ties that Bind*, Dr. Amy J. L. Baker provides solid qualitative research using 40 adults who experienced PAS as children. The subjects of the study reported five primary mechanisms that were used to manipulate their thoughts and feelings as children:

- (1) relentless bad-mouthing of the character of the target parent, in order to reduce their importance and value
- (2) creating the impression that the target parent was dangerous and planned to hurt the child, in order to instill fear and rejection of that parent
- (3) deceiving children about the target parent's feelings for them, in order to create hurt, resentment, and psychological distance
- (4) withdrawing love if the child indicated affection or positive regard for the target parent, in order to heighten the need to please the alienating parent
- (5) erasing the other parent from the life and mind of the child through minimizing actual and symbolic contact (Baker 2007)

The outrageous behavior by the disturbed parent is often so shocking that people don't want to believe it. Their dramatic justifications for their aberrant behaviors defy reason.

Few people understand the psychological underpinnings of PA and why a parent would treat a child so badly. Gregory Lester, Ph.D., describes possible causes that can account for the severity of the psychological disturbance seen in severely alienating parents. They demonstrate egocentricity to a fault and exhibit bullying behavior. He suggests that their brain may be partially wired. He describes them as assuming that they are entitled to special treatment and expect others to take care of them, including their children. They don't engage in the normal give and take that is customary in social relationships. They are takers, not givers. If they give something, the gift is likely to have strings attached. They talk a fine game, but they don't deliver.

Drama replaces reason. Individuals with these problems do not solve problems by being rational, but rather by escalating ordinary events into dramatic episodes. They have exaggerated mood swings. A person once revered and respected can suddenly become an object of hatred and contempt. This black-and-white, highly polarized thinking is called "splitting" and is typical of these types of personalities. They are unpredictable -- one day loving and cooperative, and the next attacking ferociously. They have no internal conflict, because they truly believe they are right. Like Teflon, nothing sticks to them. If a problem arises, it is always someone else's fault. People comment, "How can they lie like that? How are they able to justify in their own mind any behavior, no matter how excessive?" This is because they are able to make up the truth to suit themselves and then passionately believe the story they made up. They can be very convincing because they themselves are convinced!

They are masters at projection, the strategy that refers to when another person's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are reversed and used to describe the person making the complaint. For example, in Sharon's declaration she described Jack's irresponsible behavior. Jack's declaration came back with exactly the same allegations about Sharon. Now Sharon has to defend herself about being abusive, neglectful, and out of control. Jack managed to level the playing field by using projection. Individuals using these tactics do not seem to have an observing ego or consciousness to witness their own mistakes. Therefore, if something is wrong it must be the other person's fault. In our example, the fact that Jack has no evidence that Sharon behaves the way he does is irrelevant to him.

Often people who exhibit this level of nastiness have come from a disastrously dysfunctional family or have experienced a serious trauma that went untreated. They are unreasonably demanding and resist any discussion or negotiation to make a situation better. They must have their way and are rigid about expecting others to comply with what they want. (Gregory Lester, 2002)

Our court processes are based on the assumption that individuals are law-abiding citizens. However, these abusive people believe that rules and laws apply to other people, but not to them. If they don't agree with a judicial decision, they are likely to see a court order as a recommendation and not something they must obey. Actually, these disturbed parents are like little children who haven't reached the age of reason; however, they do respond to rewards and punishment. Sadly, their excessive behavior is constantly rewarded by the way our family law courts are structured. Unfortunately, PA/PAS cases can be stalled for months, even years, with no resolution. This is rewarding to them and easily used to their advantage to advance alienation in their children. Seldom in family law court are sanctions of fines, jail time, or community service applied to individuals for contempt of court orders.

### Can PAS Be Cured?

It is safe to say that the average person is utterly perplexed about how to react to such aberrant behavior on the part of the alienating parent. They quickly run out of techniques that would work with a rational person. Furthermore, because so little is known about PA/PAS, target parents often do not even know that there is a name for their child's increasingly hostile behavior. Unfortunately, this is also true of many therapists who are called upon to help families in crisis. Without a proper understanding of PA/PAS, it is easy to take sides and even provide evidence that the truly abusive person is a wonderful parent. Many therapists are not able to discern if what they are being told is true. Few psychologists understand rules of evidence used in family law courts or are trained in how to work with cases as difficult as these.

In exasperation, target parents often want to "cure" the toxic parent with medication or therapy. The problem with medication as a solution is that it is very difficult to get another person to take it consistently. After all, in their mind, there isn't anything wrong with them. In fact, the suggestion that they need medication is more likely to be turned on whoever is suggesting it! For example, Jerry said that the raging mother of their son was guided to take psychotropic medication by her family. When she had stabilized, she was profusely apologetic to Jerry for her outrageous behavior. She thanked him for being such a good father and said that they would have no trouble with joint custody. Only three months of peace went by before she decided that she was all better and stopped taking the medication. She quickly deteriorated, becoming more vicious than she had been before.

What about therapy? Surely a therapist can fix them! Individuals who will brainwash a child are the worst candidates for therapy, because therapy implies that a person realizes that there is something wrong with them and that they are motivated to do something about it. These people do not have the ability to self-correct behavioral or emotional errors. The wiring of their brain will not permit it. Therapy doesn't work because ***one can't have a conversation about the problem when the problem is doing the answering!*** As soon as a therapist suggests that they behave better or that what they are doing is harming their child, splitting occurs. The therapist then becomes the bad guy and the parent leaves, taking the child with them. They do not form trusting relationships with others unless they believe that they are getting their way.

Therapy can, in fact, make these troubled individuals worse. Since they do not feel moral emotions of empathy, sympathy, or compassion, the therapist may unwittingly teach compassionate gestures and language that their client can use to more effectively manipulate people. They are most likely to be a warm body sitting in a chair for the required number of times; they may even be patronizing about how the therapist is saving their life. However, the end result is that they are unfazed by the efforts to make them healthier.

In spite of what they say, they are unable to act in the best interests of their child. It takes a truly disturbed and obsessed person to harm a child by brainwashing them, to remove from a child's life a loving parent and their extended family and friends who care deeply about the child. The programming of a child is done for personal gain. These are not people with good parenting skills. Children are in their lives to serve them and to help them get their way. They are not nurturing and attentive to their child's needs, nor do they know how to nurture their child emotionally. A child is not allowed to grieve for the loss of the target parent, extended family, and friends; they are kept busy taking care of the disturbed parent.

In family law procedures, we rely heavily on evaluators to assess the psychological underpinnings of a family. However, it is rare in psychological evaluations to see a specific diagnosis regarding the disturbed parent's mental health. You might see a comment that there was an elevation in borderline, narcissism, or hysteria, but these labels are rarely used specifically. The reason is that when different psychologists attempt to diagnose a disturbed person, they are likely to arrive at different conclusions. Also, making a diagnosis is tricky, as there are rarely clean-cut distinctions that can be made. Most disorders may also be compounded by complications from drug abuse or alcoholism, post traumatic stress disorder, situational hormonal fluctuations, or obsessive compulsive features. Furthermore, courts rely on evidence, not labels. However, one label is commonly used, although not necessarily by evaluators. Because alienating parents are socially maladaptive and have no moral conscience, they are called "sociopaths." Although they may know how to act the part, they are unable to have empathy, sympathy, or compassion for others. Unlike rational people, they do not distinguish between telling the truth and lying. *Therefore, they may not know when they are lying.* They can get worse by becoming so obsessed that they disassociate from reality and become psychotic -- experiencing delusions and hallucinations.

In spite of admonitions from judges and mental health professionals to stop alienating, they cannot. One of the most difficult ideas for the target parent to understand is that the mentally disturbed parent is unable to act differently; nor can a child experiencing PAS act differently. The obsessed parent and child are likely to be experiencing a shared psychosis. There is no protocol to fix the alienating parent -- not legally, not therapeutically, and not by reasoning with them. It is also unlikely that they will ever stop trying to perpetuate the alienation, because *it has become a gut-wrenching survival issue to them!* Douglas Darnall, a leading expert in PAS, points out that we do not have a protocol to treat these people. (Douglas Darnell, 2000)

However, if a child can be isolated from the toxic parent, there are protocols, developed by Dr. Richard Gardner, for reversing the alienation. Others have also developed ways to reverse the programming. In one sense, alienating parents have built a house of cards, as the child really wants to love both parents. If the severe alienator is legally prevented from being able to poison their minds, many children can be brought back with the right treatment; however, traditional talk therapy has not proven to be helpful. The most effective procedure to date is what has been used to deprogram individuals involved in cults. In some cases, though, it is simply too late and unlikely that the child will ever understand what happened. (Richard Gardner, 2001)

Of course, the significance of this result is that PA/PAS is often inner-generational and, once grown, those damaged are at risk of passing the problem on to their own children. These individuals are inclined to continue into adulthood the practice of seeing people in black and white. They are likely to be self-loathing, which creates horrific issues of low self-esteem. To compensate for how badly they feel about themselves, they may desperately attempt to have others see them as special and more important than other people. They have missed out on the social skills they need to gain respect and to get their needs met without having to resort to heavy-handed control and bullying.

Without legal intervention to limit an alienating parent's access to a child and to have the brainwashed child deprogrammed by a specialist, it is unlikely that a child will ever recover from PAS. The tragedy is that they have lost their free will and ability to make rational choices over their lives. They are likely to experience serious psychiatric disorders, have poor social relationships, and of course pass the problem on to their children. For a greater understanding of the long-term impact of PA/PAS, I highly recommend Dr. Baker's book, listed in the bibliography.

## Costs of PAS

Consider the resources required by families afflicted with PA/PAS. Seeing their once-loving relationship with their child eroding away, many target parents will use all the financial resources they can muster to pay for legal representation to try to preserve their relationship with their children. This is risky. Mounting attorney fees, court evaluations, and multiple other costs involved in making the case that they are a good parent and deserve to be in their child's life quickly deplete financial reserves. Target parents are likely to borrow against credit cards, siphon money from pension plans, liquidate the equity on a house, or ask extended family to help pay for an escalating and increasingly expensive conflict. Declaring bankruptcy and paying for these costs for years isn't uncommon. Even still, sadly, all too often there is little to show for such an investment.

Additionally, target parents involved in these difficult cases find that every minute of their spare time is spent preparing legal documents, worrying about whether the next visitation with their child will occur, and managing increasing frustration at not being able to resolve their problems. Trying to communicate with the other parent to resolve issues that are vitally important to their child only results in more stress. In these cases, joint custody simply does not work because one parent refuses to negotiate or change their point of view.

Working parents involved in a high-conflict child custody case find it hard to focus on the job. Court dates and family emergencies repeatedly cause missed workdays. Employers carry a serious liability as their valued employee becomes less able to meet deadlines, makes more errors, and increases the risk of accidents at the workplace. Company profits can be deleteriously affected.

Furthermore, families experiencing PA/PAS consume an enormous amount of community legal and mental health resources. Numerous calls may be placed to the police. The department of social welfare is likely to become involved, requiring an investigation of abuses to children. Therapists are called upon to stabilize the family. Family law judges find their courtrooms repeatedly clogged with chronic litigators.

No one can experience this level of stress and anxiety without suffering serious mental health problems. This population is at high risk for post traumatic stress disorder, depression, suicide, domestic violence, and homicide. Issues of deteriorating physical health arise as stress takes its toll.

Children are likely to suffer academically as their concentration is undermined. Their social relationships are compromised and they often exhibit adjustment disorder. An interesting situation that occurs among many PAS children is that while initially they struggle in school, many are likely to eventually excel academically as well as in sports. One reason is that school and sports offer them logic and stability, and through this, a way to escape the chaos at home. The child's successes are likely to be seen as evidence that the disturbed and alienating parent is doing a good job of parenting, when this is not the case. Problems related to divorce will continue long after the final decree is signed and the last court appearance is over. The psychological damage to children and the target parent is unlikely to ever be reversed.

## PA/PAS Controversies

Understanding the raging controversies surrounding PA/PAS is extremely difficult. "Thinking" people don't have the advantage of living with the certainty of seeing things as only black and white. Since rational people aren't sure what the truth is, they don't want to take sides until they can decipher the facts. They will research an issue. They realize that people may be solidly convinced of their opinions and that they

present their opinions as facts. Thinking people wait, investigate, and figure things out. They realize that they will have to live in mystery until the facts are clear; whereas, for non-thinking people there is no mystery, so real is their certainty.

Polarized, "win/lose" thinking is systemic to our society. There are those who live with the certainty of right and wrong -- what is true or false, black or white. People who think in absolutes can easily find others who think as they do. Together they are able to reinforce each other's beliefs and present a united front about what they perceive as true. "Rigor mortis of the brain cells" has been used to describe their stuck position. Their calcified thinking does not allow them to be bothered with exceptions. The complex issues around PA/PAS invite simplistic thinking. Many people seem to need someone else to do their thinking for them. It is easy to jump on the bandwagon of highly charged issues such as preventing the sexual molestation of children and ending domestic violence. Gender wars are common; one gender sees the other as the enemy. The issue is about human rights, protecting not only children's rights, but also mother's and father's rights. It is about being fair and logical and letting reason, not drama, make appropriate decisions.

To understand current controversies that surround PA/PAS, we need to go back to the 1980s, when a series of events greatly contributed to the problems of today. In 1980, Jim Cook single-handedly lobbied the California legislature to pass a law stating that there is a presumption of joint custody when parents divorce. California became the leader in joint custody laws, and most of the other states followed this lead. Prior to 1980, if there was a disagreement between mother and father about the custody of their child, the mother retained sole legal custody and was allowed to make all of the decisions, including whether her children would have a father in their life.

At the same time, with the rise of feminism in the 1960s, rigid roles for men and women were breaking down. Women had more voice over their lives and were attending college and entering the business world in increasing numbers. Most men were doing some domestic chores and, of course, taking care of their children some of the time. This meant tending to all of children's needs, including changing diapers -- a task once considered solely women's work. In many families, sharing domestic duties became the order of the day. Most men gladly accepted some responsibility for the care of their children. Computers had made their way into people's homes, and dads enjoyed working from home while tending to their children. In some families, women became the primary breadwinner.

When parents divorced, many liked the idea that "the best parent is both parents" and were able to share the decision-making and their children's time. However, with others the idea of shared custody didn't go over so well. Some women thought that, as before, children should be their sole property. Even though Dad had proven that he was fully capable of caring for his children, some moms stated that he was only a babysitter. Fathers going to family law court to get shared custody caused a burgeoning of family law cases. If a mother refused to share a child, court was a father's only opportunity to be involved in his child's life.

In 1983, a tragedy happened in Manhattan Beach, California. Judy Johnson made an allegation that Ray Buckey, the 25-year-old son of Peggy Buckey, who owned McMartin Preschool, had molested her 2½-year-old son. On September 7, 1983, Ray Buckey was arrested and sent to prison. After Police Chief Harry Kuhlmeier arrested Ray Buckey, he sent a letter to 200 McMartin Preschool parents informing them that Ray Buckey was suspected of child abuse and asked them to question their children about having experienced acts such as oral sex, sodomy, having their pictures taken while naked, and being tied up. Chief Kuhlmeier asked the parents to keep the letter strictly confidential. His request for confidentiality exploded into headline news across the country.

Ray Buckey was never charged, but he was held under the suspicion that he had done heinous crimes against children. Everyone who worked at the McMartin Preschool became suspect of bizarre and horrific acts against children. Judy Johnson's reports of misbehavior became increasingly bizarre, claiming that Ray's mother was involved in satanic rituals and that horrible things had been done with babies, animals, and sexual acts in front of the children who attended the preschool. Nine months later, Judy Johnson died due to complications from alcoholism. She had also been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia. Day after

day the public was bombarded with details of bizarre allegations of what had happened to the children at the McMartin Preschool. Mass hysteria had taken over.

All preschools became suspect. Workers were told to never touch children, to have two people go to the bathroom with a child, to install glass doors at the front of the building so anyone who wanted to could see in. Parents were allowed to visit unannounced at any time to see what was going on. To make matters worse, Kee McFarlane, a consultant at Children's Institute International, interviewed children at McMartin Preschool using anatomically correct dolls, leading questions, and rewards for answers that they had been molested. She testified that 384 McMartin students had been abused.

After two trials, no substantial evidence was found against the owner or staff at McMartin Preschool, including Ray Buckey. Five years had passed before Ray Buckey was allowed to leave prison, never having been charged with a crime. The government spent \$15 million investigating and prosecuting the case over a seven-year period that involved two trials that led to no convictions. The fate of Ray Buckley foreshadowed what was going to happen to many fathers fighting for shared custody of their children.

What responsibility do journalists have to report the truth? As in the case of the McMartin Preschool, the media engaged in "pack journalism," slanting heavily toward the prosecution, which provided sensational headlines day after day and almost never seriously questioned the allegations. Today, we have a media that continues to focus on lurid and scary news involving children. Politicians can easily exploit parents' fears about the safety of their children, implying that they are the law-and-order people who will protect their children. Mark Foley was quoted in the Washington Times in 2005 as saying, "We need to stand together and unite cities, communities, and states in the effort to stop the assault on America's children." What assault? Mark Foley, who is now a disgraced congressman for his sexually inappropriate contact with high school pages, used this rhetoric for personal political gain. He was exploiting parents' worst fears about the safety of their children. The problem with media reports of bad things that happen to children is one of proportion. Bad things do happen to children. The media can easily whip people's emotions into a frenzy by exaggerating such events as happening more frequently than is the case. The mass hysteria unleashed by Judy Johnson in 1983 is still with us today.

The 1980s is a significant decade because of the colliding of joint custody laws and the hysteria of the McMartin Preschool trial. Fathers found that a mere allegation of being sexually inappropriate with a child was enough to have him kicked out of his home. Countless fathers became childless as they tried to prove what didn't happen -- what REALLY didn't happen.

In 1983, at the beginning of the McMartin Preschool fiasco, there was a sharp rise in the number of reports of sexual molestation of children. Suddenly, people were hyper-vigilant about the issue. Elaborate tests were developed to determine whether a man had pedophilia tendencies and was likely to molest children. There is still a belief by many that children don't lie about abuse. Kee McFarlane has been widely criticized for leading children to the conclusions that she wanted to hear, ultimately proving how suggestible children can be.

If a mother was driven to be vicious, the climate of hysteria about the sexual molestation of children became a powerful tool to gain her ends. All she had to do was say that she thought the father had molested their child. The tragedy of this kind of parentectomy continues today.

In 1985, Dr. Richard Gardner first introduced a phenomenon found in family law cases called parent alienation syndrome. He pointed out that PA/PAS is related to highly litigious court cases where there is a win/lose mentality. Ultimately, a desperate and obsessed parent could win in court by programming a child to despise the other parent, resulting in a parentectomy, and there was little that anyone could do about it. Dr. Gardner took on this difficulty, and he wrote volumes about how to understand the complexities of these highly volatile cases. He was first to identify the eight characteristics that PAS children display as a syndrome. He published extensively on how to identify false allegations of sexual molestation. He also wrote the book Therapeutic Interventions for Children with Parental Alienation Syndrome to describe a protocol for deprogramming children. His contributions have been profound in helping us understand PA/PAS. He has written and testified extensively about false allegations of sexual abuse that had become common during this period. In this respect, he was a pioneer. Those of us who

had the good fortune to know Dr. Gardner, to hear his lectures and read his books, are appreciative of his contributions. In addition to his groundbreaking insights about PA/PAS, he had a long and illustrious career as a psychiatrist specializing in children. (Richard Gardner, 2001)

Litigation over issues of parental alienation of children became common in family law courtrooms. Initially, mothers had more time with children and were the primary cause of PAS in children. A person who programs a child must have a lot of time with that child in order to be effective in the programming. As disturbed, narcissistic fathers gained more child custody, they proved to be just as capable of initiating PAS. Soon, PAS became a hot issue in gender wars, especially when women began losing legal custody of their children when a court ruled that they were guilty of alienating a child against the father.

PA/PAS has been a tragic issue that has polarized men and women. On one side, malicious mothers who often have legal precedent for primary child custody on their side take children away from good fathers by alienating them. On the other side are vicious fathers whose purpose is to take children away from good mothers. Women have claimed that men are predators on women and children. Men are livid that they have been so labeled and frequently accused of sexually molesting children. The frequency of false allegations of child molestation against fathers has had a backlash from fathers against mothers. Some mothers lost custody because the evidence showed that they were coaching their child to participate in inappropriate behaviors toward the father. These mothers are quick to respond that all a father has to do is say she is guilty of PA/PAS and he will get custody of the child whom she was only trying to protect. It is also claimed that fathers have been awarded primary legal custody when they have in fact been guilty of domestic violence or have molested a child. This has created another backlash of mothers wanting to get back at fathers. No matter who is doing the alienating, it is terribly wrong. It isn't a gender issue, as both men and women are guilty of initiating PAS in children. It is a human rights issue.

We've already seen that parents who alienate can be an angry, difficult group of people. When they go through a trial and a judge issues a court order giving sole legal custody to the other parent and limiting physical access to a child, these parents are not likely to roll over and passively obey. This leads to chronic litigation, as no matter how convincing the evidence against them or what the judge's decision, they do not let go of the idea that they are right.

Unfortunately, angry, disgruntled women who are in fact guilty of severe parental alienation have found a sympathetic ear in the domestic violence community. Domestic violence groups have been successful in making domestic violence a crime and thus reducing its frequency. In most states, it is against the law for men to hit women, nor can women hit men without the possibility of being arrested. Interestingly, it is still allowed that adults may hit children. Hitting children is also domestic violence, but unfortunately, we haven't progressed that far in our consciousness.

In an article in *Newsweek*, journalist Sara Childress stated, "It is... hard to fathom how a judge could award custody to a parent accused of abuse." Fortunately, the logic and rules of evidence that are necessary to remove a child from a seriously psychologically disturbed parent are extensive. Judges don't just wake up in a bad mood, disregard all evidence, and say, "Let me take a child away from a good mother." This makes for good drama, but not good logic. (Childress, *Newsweek*, October 2006)

The mendacity of non-thinking people creates a maelstrom of trouble in sorting out what is true. Too many members of the domestic violence community will assume that an accusation or allegation is true. Many do not understand the standard of evidence that is needed to turn an allegation into proof. The irony is that unthinking members of this community fan the flames of injustice and contribute to the most unspeakable kinds of violence against children, that of PA/PAS. No innocent father, or man such as Ray Buckley, should be recklessly accused of something he didn't do. False allegations of sexual misconduct with children and the brainwashing of children where PA/PAS occurs are the worst kinds of domestic violence. The irony is that the very people who are against domestic violence contribute to it by denying the existence of PA/PAS.

Unfortunately, Richard Gardner has been relentlessly slandered, demonized, and dismissed as a pedophile by those who are threatened by his work and by others who have never read his articles and books and have not taken the time to realize that he was on the side of truth and justice in these complicated cases.

This aggressive behavior on the part of so many has contributed to the mass hysteria that has done great damage to those parents and children who are impacted by PA/PAS.

There is no greater example of this hysteria than the denunciation of "so-called" parental alienation syndrome in the declaration by the National Organization of Women (NOW). See Appendix A. This declaration from NOW sums up the arguments against the very existence of PA/PAS. Of course, there is no mention of the unfairness of what happens to fathers, the need for a child to have a father, or the very real problem of PAS in children. There is no mention of the countless numbers of mothers who have been victimized by PA/PAS. The problem is not caused solely by one gender against another. It is caused by very disturbed people who have to get their way at all costs. Amazingly, the declaration claims that PA/PAS is non-existent! But anyone can use ordinary observation to find repeated examples of its existence.

Current debate over whether the child has experienced a "syndrome" has created a smokescreen that attempts to ignore the fact that children are, in fact, being manipulated and brainwashed into such states of confusion that their perception of events and people around them is severely distorted. It doesn't matter what the tragedy is called; it is still a tragedy for children and the target parent.

This is an example of making simple that which is very complex with a manoeuvre of killing the messenger. Dr. Gardner's contributions have been taken out of context and twisted to imply that he encouraged inappropriate sexual behavior. For example, he said that if a society has no social prohibition for molesting children sexually, then sexual molestation is common. This has been translated as saying it is okay to sexually molest children if no one says not to. The fabrications about Dr. Gardner are so extensive that it is an example of brainwashing in itself. He is the scapegoat for people who desperately need an enemy to blame. No group is more anti-Gardner than are the domestic violence community and the National Organization for Women.

PAS is the result of terrible domestic violence toward children and target parents. The irony is that those people whose stated purpose is to prevent domestic violence contribute to it by putting the whole body of Dr. Gardner's work out for target practice, not for analysis. Those of us who appreciate and support Gardner's contribution and understand that PA/PAS is serious violence to children and the target parent would never support awarding custody of a child to a pedophile or aggressor. The domestic violence community and those who want PA/PAS stopped should be rowing their respective boats in the same direction, instead of engaging in a bizarre tug-of-war characterized by the black-and-white thinking of who is right and who is wrong. Truth suffers. To take a child's free will and mind away is violence from which they are likely never to recover.

The leadership in women's groups has a responsibility to come to terms with the injustice of this slander of Gardner, and realize that their organization attracts disgruntled women who can easily find a sympathetic ear for how they were victimized by the father of their child and the court system. Just because someone has a dramatic story to tell doesn't mean that they are telling the truth. The domestic violence leaders need to bring logic and reason to these issues.

Unfortunately, their efforts against any recognition of PA/PAS are relentless. They lobby for laws that would prevent PA/PAS from being used in family law court as a justification for modifying custody. They have successfully influenced the publishers of the 2006 edition of *Navigating Custody and Visitation Evaluations in Cases with Domestic Violence: A Judge's Guide* -- a publication of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges -- to include anti-PA/PAS information. To the undiscerning eye, information published in such a prestigious document must be true. This is most unfortunate and tragic for the families impacted by these issues. (National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, 2006)

Both sides of the debate have stated that their mission is the same -- to protect people from the excesses of violent, disturbed individuals. Unfortunately, much of the domestic violence community focuses only on violence perpetrated by men, rather than also including the violence perpetrated by women against fathers and children. Violence is wrong, no matter who is committing it. The result is that domestic violence has been turned into a gender issue, when the truth is that both men and women are capable of doing serious damage to their children and to each other.

## Conclusion

It is unfortunate that too many people will believe a dramatic story more than they will listen to evidence. Drama is the hallmark of people who are psychologically disturbed. Individuals with these severe mental health issues are under-diagnosed. We need more research and clarity on the effects of PA/PAS. The costs are staggering to children, the target parent, and that person's family. The damage is severe and has long-reaching effects.

The whole fabric of our society is undermined by the behaviors of these severely disturbed individuals. Both men and women with obsessed thinking create PA/PAS situations with children and their target parent. Their irresponsible behaviors siphon off a staggering amount of social resources to stabilize the chaos they create. Any protocol that we use for the regular population is woefully inadequate in making them normal. Every year, hundreds of thousands of children and parents are experiencing the phenomenon of PA/PAS and the resulting devastation it causes. Millions of people are ending up damaged because, up to now, we have not even recognized the phenomenon or truly considered its impact. We all need to take action to educate and help people who have this terrible problem that does such severe damage to children.

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## Appendix A:

From the National Organization for Women (NOW)

WHEREAS, the term Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) was created by psychiatrist Richard Gardner. It is used as a tactic in courts by litigating attorneys as a defense strategy for batterers and sexual predators that purports to explain a child's estrangement from one parent, or explains away allegations against the estranged parent of abuse/sex abuse of a child, by blaming the protective parent; and

WHEREAS, there are no data to support PAS; and

WHEREAS, mothers are primarily pathologized and blamed for interfering with their children's attachment to their fathers and PAS is used by many evaluators and courts to discount children's fears in hostile and psychologically abusive situations as a form of entrapment, keeping the child from the protective parent; and

WHEREAS, abuse is continued via the court system thru a series of ruthless assaults from all angles strategically planned over time by an abuser, his criminal-divorce-personal injury attorneys and PAS therapists to fully discredit, blame and control a protective parent with the sole purpose of hiding abuse, infidelity, finances and to "win" possession of the child(ren), while proponents of PAS profit; and

WHEREAS, as documented in the PBS film Breaking the Silence: The Children's Stories, there are epidemic levels of abuse and dysfunction in our courts system where espoused judges repeat Richard Gardner's unsubstantiated doctrine and make binding recommendations in conjunction with PAS therapists and PAS attorneys; and

WHEREAS, the newly revised, 2006 edition of "Navigating Custody and Visitation Evaluations in Cases with Domestic Violence: A Judge's Guide," published by The National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, includes a strong statement condemning the use of PAS which it calls a "discredited" syndrome that favors child abusers in custody determinations;

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the National Organization for Women (NOW) denounces Parental Alienation Syndrome and recommends that any professional whose mission involves the protection of the rights of women and children, denounce its use as unethical, unconstitutional, and dangerous.

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Jayne A. Major, Ph.D. is the founder of Breakthrough Parenting Services, Inc. and the author of Breakthrough Parenting: Moving Your Family from Struggle to Cooperation. She is nationally recognized as an award-winning expert in family education and parental alienation. She can be reached at (310) 823-7846. Visit her websites at [www.breakthroughparentingonline.com](http://www.breakthroughparentingonline.com) and [www.stopparentalalienation.org](http://www.stopparentalalienation.org).