

## **Question: What is Parental Alienation Syndrome?**

Over half of all marriages today end in divorce. Years ago mothers automatically retained custody of the child and the father got visitation. This is due to what was called the tender years presumption. About 20 years ago the laws were changed to make it easier for a father to obtain custody. This change was brought about due to the new "best interests" of the child statutes. Although at first blush this looked like a progressive change in the law, it has caused many problems. What has occurred is an increased competition between parents to gain custody. Because now either parent has a chance for custody. This competition can become extremely bitter and often results in creating false accusations of physical or sexual abuse. This phenomena has been examined and researched and has now been given the name "parental alienation syndrome".

The parental alienation syndrome is found when one parent constantly denigrates the other and works to brainwash the child against the denigrated parent. The parental alienation syndrome is properly described where this campaign of denigration by one parent against the other takes root in the child and the child then denigrates the other parent with criticisms that are unjustified or exaggerated. In this way a polarization takes place and it appears that the child has one loved parent and one hated parent. Laymen can very easily see the manifestations of parental alienation. The child always sides with one parent against the other. What is not so easy to see is the mechanism by which one parent, the loved parent, can alienate or turn the child against the other parent, the hated parent.

Years ago Professor Richard Gardner of Columbia University described four causes of parental alienation.

First, brainwashing by the loved parent. Secondly, subconscious and unconscious programming by the loved parent. Third, contributions which come wholly from within the child. Fourth, what he called situational factors.

It would take an hour to describe in detail which is involved in each of these four areas. But here is a shorthand description. Brainwashing is the mechanism known by most laymen. Brainwashing is the conscious programming of the child by the loved parent against the hated parent. This is done by a campaign of denigration against the hated parent by calling him an abandoner, an adulterer, an irresponsible home breaker and so on and so forth. The actual underlying reasons for the divorce are never talked about with the child. The child is informed that the hated parent does not love the child, never spends money on the child, is an alcoholic, is violent and uses drugs. In brainwashing the loved parent is fully aware that they are attempting to turn the child against the hated parent.

Another mechanism is described as unconscious factors. Often unconscious factors are more effective than brainwashing. The loved parent or the parent who is causing the alienation can profess a total innocence about what they are doing because they in fact do not realize the damage they are causing. There are thousands of unconscious factors that can turn a child against one of its parents. These would include such things as speaking in a frightened voice when talking about the ex-spouse, frivolous reasons for missing visitation such as a headache or purposely scheduling events during ex-spouse's visitation time, adultifying the child by giving them the decision on whether or not to have visits and then supporting them when they do not want the visit, making the children feel guilty about time spent with the ex-spouse by telling them how much they will be missed if they go, by having continuous arguments with the ex-spouse in front of the child concerning visitation or money and that old one about physically examining the child after visits with the father. Another major alienation factor is moving away from hated parent to find better employment when the true underlying reason for the move is to destroy the amount of time that the ex-spouse can spend with the child. A long campaign of subconscious programming is more effective than overt brainwashing as it destroys the bond between the ex-spouse and the child.

Another fact that influences a child to make denigrating comments and false accusations is one that is not normally recognized. This involves factors within the child that are independent of the parents. This child who has a basic psychological bond with one parent that is stronger than that with the hated parent may go to great lengths to maintain that bond between the loved parent and the child. Remember the child feels that they were once abandoned by the hated parent when the divorce occurred. The child does not want to be abandoned a second time by taking sides against the loved parent and will do anything to maintain that bond with the loved parent. One of the ways this is done is by making complaints against the hated parent. The child then gathers support from the loved parent. Often we find that the child is fearful of expressing love for the hated parent for fear that it will displease the loved parent even though in actuality they do love the parent. This process can cause complaints that can start out as minor, but when a child custody battle becomes ferocious, the small complaints can escalate into accusations of child abuse.

Situational factors are another mechanism of parental alienation. In difficult custody circumstances we often see a false accusation made at one of two moments. One of these moments is just prior to the hearing on child custody. Another is just prior to the wedding of the ex-spouse to another woman or man. These events can challenge the status quo of the child and precipitate a false accusation. You would be amazed at the gullibility of people who believe that a father for 12 years with no prior molest allegations would molest his daughter a week before a child custody hearing.

In order to understand parental alienation one must understand the motivation of

the alienating parent. It is not love for the child, but revenge against the ex-spouse that motivates alienators in these circumstances. If the alienating parent really loved their children they would realize that having a healthy relationship with both parents is what's in the best interests of the child. Instead they continue the war with the ex-spouse through the child. The obsessive love for the child is a cover for the feeling of hatred towards the ex-spouse. We use the parental alienation process and the research that supports this description to show that there is another explanation for the accusations that have been made.