

Parental Alienation Syndrome: Child Abuse or Child Abuser Scapegoat?

Recognition of PAS leaves some grateful and others up in arms.

When Joe Goldberg was 15-years-old, his mother began to severely alienate him from his father. After his father moved out, Goldberg was not allowed to speak of him in any positive way for fear of punishment. After years of cut-off contact with his father and the inability to properly mourn the loss of a parent, Goldberg's view of his father became painfully distorted and he came to believe that his father didn't care about him. Goldberg believes that he is a victim of Parental Alienation Syndrome, in which one parent alienates their child from the other parent through denigration.

He is also the founder of the Canadian Symposium for Parental Alienation Syndrome, which just held its first conference this year from March 27 to 29. Additionally, April 25 will mark the fourth annual Parental Alienation Awareness Day, proclaimed by seventeen states. The day will leave some grateful, but others furious. There is an extensive controversy in the scientific community as to whether Parental Alienation Syndrome is legitimate and whether it should be admissible in child custody court cases.

"I think PAS Awareness Day is a step back for the safety of children in this country," says Dr. Joyanna Silberg, executive vice president of the Leadership Council on Child Abuse and Interpersonal Violence. "It's 100 percent clear to me that this theory is being used by child abusers." She notes that the use of Parental Alienation Syndrome in child custody court cases often puts children into the custody of their abusers. When a child is deemed to have PAS, the testimony of that child is often discounted as a symptom of PAS, rather than proof of the abuse that the child actually may be suffering from.

"There are times when kids are caught in the middle. There are a lot of judges who are sympathetic to that," says John Hrabe, a volunteer spokesman for Justice for Children. In these cases, Hrabe says that parents become desperate in their custody cases and "latch on to a pseudo-scientific theory."

Parental Alienation Syndrome is often used as a defense in the courtroom despite its absence from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. It is also not recognized by the American Medical Association or the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

"It's not a syndrome," says Dr. Paul Fink, a past president of the American Psychiatric Association and the founder and president of the Leadership Council on Child Abuse and Interpersonal Violence. "They want to make-believe that it is a scientific entity, which it is not."

Dr. Amy Baker, the director of research at the Vincent J. Fontana Center for Child Protection, is working with a team on a proposal to put Parental Alienation Syndrome into the DSM-V, the latest edition of the manual, which is scheduled to release in 2012.

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“It shouldn’t be based on possible misuse, but that it is a real syndrome based on science,” she says. She compares PAS to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, noting veterans’ lobby for recognition and its many revisions in the DSM. “There’s reality and there’s what’s in that book. It’s not exactly aligned,” says Baker.

Silberg remains unconvinced, saying that evidence has proven otherwise, and that more often children choose to turn away from a parent for good reason. She admits that it is possible for children to suffer coercive isolation from abuse, but refuses to link those cases to a specific syndrome, which she says facilitates a less comprehensive analysis of the abuse that is actually occurring.

The term “Parental Alienation Syndrome” was first used in 1985 by Dr. Richard Gardner, a clinical professor of child psychiatry at the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University before his death in 2003. Gardner spurred public controversy with his use of the syndrome largely to defend fathers accused of child molestation, as well as his unprecedented theories on pedophilia and child sexual abuse.

Goldberg attributes the problems with advancing the study and acceptance of PAS to the politics and stigma surrounding it. He believes that speculation has discounted the plight of those who suffer from PAS. Goldberg created the Canadian Symposium for Parental Alienation Syndrome for further education and exposure of the matter. “It’s not about poor parenting, it’s about child abuse,” he says. To the latter, both sides would agree.