



— WHAT TO DO —

# WHEN YOUR EX BEGINS BADMOUTHING YOU TO YOUR KIDS

The Loving Parent's Practical Guide Through  
The Legal Jungle Known As "Parental Alienation"

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**What to Do When Your Ex Begins Badmouthing You to Your Kids:  
The Loving Parent's Practical Guide Through The Legal Jungle Known As  
"Parental Alienation"**

**First Edition**

By

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# Introduction

Divorce can be awful and stressful whenever children are caught in the middle, even when both spouses strive to act compassionately towards one another and protect the children at all costs. Unfortunately, not all divorces are so peaceful. When one parent uses emotional manipulation and brainwashing to turn a child against another parent, this is known as **parental alienation**.<sup>1</sup>

This devastating process shatters families, sometimes forever, unless intervention occurs in a timely and sensitive manner. This book explains what you need to know about parental alienation as well as how to deal with it on both a psychological and legal level. (However, the information in this book does not constitute legal advice; nor should it substitute for a qualified attorney's advice.)

Here is a bird's eye view of what we will cover in this book:

## **Section 1: Overview of Parental Alienation**

First, we will discuss the nature of parental alienation (hereinafter may be referred to as PA), defining key terms and ideas as well as the typical methods of alienation used by instigating parents. We will also go over a history of PA and introduce critical concepts from thought leaders in the field, such as Dr. Richard Gardner, Dr. Michael Bone, Dr. Robert Evans, Dr. Douglas Darnell, and Dr. Richard Warshak.

## **Section 2: FAQs**

In the next section, we will address common FAQs regarding PA. For instance: What makes children susceptible to the emotional manipulation of an instigating parent? How might social media create opportunities for

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<sup>1</sup> Some people refer to the condition as "parental alienation syndrome," a term popularized by Dr. Gardner. For technical reasons, this term has been controversial since its inception. In addition, many states (including Florida) have a robust line of anti-syndrome case law. It's perhaps more resourceful to think about parental alienation existing on a continuum. And practically speaking, when handling cases in court, it's simpler and safer to just use the term "parental alienation." In addition, no one really disputes that in contentious divorces, one parent may attempt to manipulate their child(ren) to demean or reject the other parent (regardless of the strength of that parent's relationship with the child(ren)).

If parental alienation has affected you or someone you love, please reach out to our compassionate, effective team at (561) 478-0312 for a consultation about your options.

PA? What is the difference in dealing with PA when your children are young vs. when they're teenagers? Is PA considered child abuse? What should you do if one of your children is exhibiting alienation toward you, but another is not? We'll also cover questions regarding therapy, the courts, and dealing with your child(ren) and your ex.

### **Section 3: How to Find and Leverage Much Needed Help**

If you're a victim of PA, you will likely need help to re-establish a relationship with your child(ren) and get your life back on track. We'll discuss how to find people, resources and services to regain balance. You'll learn how to find a qualified attorney and maintain a productive relationship with him or her as well as how to find a therapist and financial advisor to navigate your way forward.

We hope this short book gives you a sense of clarity and restores hope about your situation. No matter what's happened, retain faith that you can emerge from your situation stronger and with loving relationships and peace in the future...

## Section One: An Overview of Parental Alienation

*You've got to be taught before it's too late,  
Before you are six or seven or eight,  
To hate all the people your relatives hate,  
You've got to be carefully taught!*

“You’ve Got To Be Carefully Taught” – Rogers and Hammerstein

### **History of “Parental Alienation” As a Concept**

The term Parental Alienation entered the cultural lexicon in 1987, when Dr. Richard Gardner coined it. The concept was widely disregarded at the time as being without scientific merit. However, the history of PA actually precedes Dr. Gardner’s work by several decades:

- In 1949, in the case of *Lynch v. Lynch* in California, Wilhelm Reich argued that a father had engaged in “child stealing.”
- In 1974, Salvador Minuchin, an early family systems theorist, discussed the concept of a “cross-generational coalition” involving a parent and child conspiring against a third person in the family.
- In 1977, researcher Jay Haley redubbed this coalition as a “perverse triangle.”

However, despite attempts by these and other researchers to define what PA is (and, crucially, what it is *not*), authorities have had an intense, protracted debate over naming this phenomenon. Neither “Parental Alienation” nor “Parental Alienation Syndrome” were specifically included in the recent American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5). That said, the new DSM-5 *did* include general definitions that include the broad concept of PA.

Here's how journalist Barbara Kay, writing for Canada's *National Post*, put the situation back in May 2013: "In the DSM-5, launched last week, PAS is now almost logged as an official disorder. I say "almost" because those exact words are not in the DSM-5 (this was a deliberate and much-discussed decision). However, the new broader category of "child psychological abuse" is defined as "non-accidental verbal or symbolic acts by a child's parent or caregiver that result, or have reasonable potential to result, in significant psychological harm to the child."

Why is this debate important for you to know about as a targeted parent?

The at-times ugly debate touches on sensitive political themes. According to Dr. Douglas Darnall, who writes frequently on this topic, the alienating parent is often the mother. This is not *always* true, but many contested cases have involved allegations that the father committed abuse or neglect as well as counter allegations that the mother engaged in alienation.

So who's right – the "abused" mother or the "unfairly alienated" father? Obviously, the answer depends on the specific facts of each situation! But hopefully you can see how this divide might lead to prickly gender politics questions.

For instance, the National Organization of Women (NOW), a feminist group, has often criticized advocates of Parental Alienation, leading predictably to angry responses from them suggesting that NOW's stance is "anti-father... anti-intellectual [and] anti-justice."

In a March 2013 paper published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatric and the Law*, "Parental Alienation, DSM-5, ICD-11; Response To Critics," Dr. William Bernet and Dr. Amy Baker address what they call "four common misunderstandings regarding parental alienation," including:

- "Lack of research to support it as a diagnosis;
- Adopting Parental Alienation as a diagnosis will lead to serious adverse consequences;

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- That the advocates of Parental Alienation are driven by self-serving or malevolent motives;
- And that Richard Gardner should be criticized for self-publishing his description of Parental Alienation Syndrome.”

Again, we don't need to get lost in the weeds. The bottom line is that both the courts and the medical profession recognize that a dynamic described as “Parental Alienation” can occur during high conflict marriages or contentious divorces. The issues are: When does it occur? How frequently does it occur? What are its manifestations? How should it be treated?

### **Basics of Parental Alienation**

Loosely defined, **Parental Alienation** occurs when one parent deliberately or unconsciously turns a child or children against another parent. This process typically happens during a custody battle. How does the alienating parent operate?

Some common tactics include:

- **Saying bad things about the other parent** in front of the child or within the child's hearing;
- **Ignoring or undermining timesharing/visitation orders**, so the child doesn't see or talk to the other parent much;
- **Withdrawing emotionally from the child** if he or she shows affection for the other parent;
- **Telling the child he or she must choose** between the two parents;
- **Making the child believe the other parent is a danger or threat** using verbal persuasion and sometimes engaging in more extravagant activities, such as faking bruises (to pretend to have been beaten),



soliciting other trusted adults to ratify made-up stories, or even employing drugs or alcohol to make the child more persuadable;

- **Making fun of the other parent's family and friends**, and keeping the child's contact with them to a minimum (or avoiding contact with them entirely).

Such actions can turn even a loving, empathetic child against a parent. The extent of the damage caused by PA depends on many factors, including the child's natural disposition, the child's past relationships with both parents, the duration of the persuasion, the stress/uncertainty in the child's life and other X Factors, such as diet, health and the influence of peers. (We'll discuss how and why children might be susceptible in more detail later.)

The child can react in many ways to these attempts. He or she can resist the persuasion, turn against the targeted parent to avoid losing the affection of the care giving parent, or come to believe in the inherent "badness" of the targeted parent and start inventing reasons to validate this perception.

The psychological turmoil created by the alienating behavior unsurprisingly can damage the parent-child relationships. Unwinding the harm done is not often simple. Studies suggest that the damage is harder to reverse the longer the alienation is allowed to continue.

The first indications that PA may be occurring usually arise when a child begins speaking and thinking badly of one parent, usually with no justification. According to theory, the child does this because of the "programming"; essentially, the instigating parent brainwashes the child into accepting a negative narrative about the other parent.

Many journalists have compared this to Stockholm Syndrome, which Merriam-Webster defines as "the psychological tendency of a hostage to bond with, identify with, or sympathize with his or her captor."

A 2013 BBC article, "What Is Stockholm Syndrome?" explains the curious origin of this phenomenon:

“While the term is widely known, the incident that led to its coinage remains relatively obscure. Outside Sweden few know the names of bank workers Birgitta Lundblad, Elisabeth Oldgren, Kristin Ehnmark and Sven Safstrom. It was 23 August 1973 when the four were taken hostage in the Kreditbanken by 32-year-old career-criminal Jan-Erik Olsson - who was later joined at the bank by a former prison mate. Six days later when the stand-off ended, it became evident that the victims had formed some kind of positive relationship with their captors. Stockholm Syndrome was born by way of explanation.”

Why, exactly, a captive would positively identify with his or her captor has been the subject of much scholarly (and public) debate. But a similar set of phenomena may be at play with alienation.

What’s interesting from a clinical perspective, if maddening for the targeted parent, is that the child will often begin thinking bad things about the other parent *independently*. It’s almost as if the instigating parent forces the child to wear red-shaded glasses all the time; and to compensate, the child really begins to see the world only in red.

### **Common Techniques Used by the Instigating Parent**

In Dr. Gardner’s model, three types of reinforcement used are:

- Positive reinforcement;
- Negative reinforcement; and/or
- Partial reinforcement.

In **positive reinforcement**, the instigating parent rewards the child with gifts and praise for reporting anything that could be remotely construed as wrongdoing during a visit with the targeted parent.

In **negative reinforcement**, the instigating parent reacts negatively: yells, screams, uses foul language, and/or even threatens the child whenever he or she wants to talk to or visit the targeted parent. The child often eventually wants to stop having contact with the targeted parent just so

this bad behavior will stop.

In **partial reinforcement**, both positive and negative tactics are used randomly, so the child never knows what to expect. This causes confusion, prompting the child to take sides with the instigating parent just to regain a sense of equilibrium.

### **Why Do Some Parents Do This?**

Why on Earth would parents do this? Typical reasons include:

- **They want to get revenge** on the targeted parent for a real or perceived slight, such as a request to get divorced;
- **They want to extract a concession during a negotiation.** An insecure parent might want a “bargaining chip” during a custody battle;
- **They worry about losing the affection of the child** -- for instance, maybe the child has a better time at the other parent's house, so they decide to “strike first” to win loyalty;
- **They genuinely believe a child in a divorce must choose sides;**
- **They suffer from a mental illness(es) or drug/alcohol addiction,** or they have a personality disorder or other psychological condition.

### **Treating the Problem**

Unsurprisingly, family members may need extensive counseling to recover. The targeted parent, for obvious reasons, may need therapy to process the abuse and the attendant depression and anxiety. The child, meanwhile, often needs help to unwind damage caused by the mind games. Finally, the instigator may need help to understand the root cause of his or her actions.

Originally, Dr. Gardner recommended that the child be removed from the home of the instigating parent and placed with the targeted parent. He

later changed his opinion on this subject, realizing that the alienated child might just run away. Instead of abandoning this framework, he reformulated his solution to recommend “transitional sites,” such as a house belonging to a friend or family member, community shelter or a hospital. Each site would have a different level of supervision and resources to help the children and the targeted parent. Dr. Warshak modified this ideal in his “Family Bridges” program for reunification for extremely alienated children. Other forms of therapeutic intervention may be appropriate for less alienated children.

You want a mental health professional involved who is educated and experienced in observing and treating PA. Here’s why. Even veteran therapists are often unfamiliar with PA and only vaguely cognizant of its roots and what can be done to effectively deal with it.

As Mary Lund wrote in her article *A Therapist’s View of Parental Alienation Syndrome (1995)*, “conflict often escalates outside of the immediate family to include the system of attorneys and therapists... Therapists, especially individual child therapists, can unwittingly become part of the system maintaining PAS, because very few therapists know about it...

Often therapists only see the child with the loved parent and avoid contact with the other parent because of their own fear of conflict. These therapists take children's statements at face value and do not realize that the children of divorce will say different things depending upon which parent they are with.”

Later, Lund expands on this idea: “because therapists can become part of the warring factions that contribute to PAS, it is important that there be communication and collaboration among therapists in the family. Often parents will try to block communication between therapists as part of the conflict. Court orders allowing communication will facilitate treatment.”

### **Diagnosing the Problem**

A child may exhibit one or more of the following behaviors:

- **The child mirrors or joins in with the instigating parent** in making disparaging remarks about the targeted parent;
- When asked why the child doesn't like the targeted parent, **the child's reasons are frivolous or even absurd to the rational listener**;
- The child **insists the decision to reject the targeted parent was his or her own** and has nothing to do with the instigating parent;
- **The child exhibits no guilt** about hating the targeted parent;
- **The child often repeats the same phrases and language** used by the instigating parent against the targeted parent;
- **The child may reject family and friends of the targeted parent**, as well.

Florida law addresses PA in child custody agreements. The court wants the best interests of the child to prevail. A majority timesharing (custodial) parent found to be instigating PA with a child may lose majority timesharing (custody) of that child or may lose all timesharing with the child until certain conditions are met. If a parenting plan (custody agreement) has not yet been reached, a judge may strongly consider evidence of PA when establishing custody and timesharing parameters.

## **Section Two: FAQs**

*Children must be considered in a divorce valuable pawns in the nasty legal and financial contest that is about to ensue.*

- P. J. O'Rourke

### **What makes children susceptible to the emotional manipulation of PA?**

Research suggests that, in general, the younger the school-age child, the more susceptible to PA that child will be. Why? First of all, younger children depend tremendously on their caregivers. If the primary caregiver – the custodial parent, for instance – expresses displeasure or threatens to withhold affection, the child will have motivation to please that caregiver to meet fundamental needs not being met.

But there also appears to be a neurologic component at play. Researchers at Harvard University noted the following key insight in a 2008 article:

*“Research during the past 10 years, powered by technology such as functional magnetic resonance imaging, has revealed that young brains have both fast-growing synapses and sections that remain unconnected. This leaves teens easily influenced by their environment and more prone to impulsive behavior, even without the impact of souped-up hormones and any genetic or family predispositions.”*

Older children appear to be a little less susceptible to manipulation and persuasion. However, they may still go along with a “hate campaign” to obtain peace at home or to try to help the instigating parent feel better.

But for all their pretenses at independence, teenagers often lack the mental and emotional hardware to resist a relentless parent’s quest to alienate:

*“Human and animal studies... have shown that the brain grows and changes continually in young people—and that it is only about 80 percent developed in adolescents. The largest part, the cortex, is divided into lobes that mature*

*from back to front. The last section to connect is the frontal lobe, responsible for cognitive processes such as reasoning, planning, and judgment. Normally this mental merger is not completed until somewhere between ages 25 and 30."*

### **Is there any "cure" for PA?**

If allowed to go on for too long and to become entrenched, the condition can be quite challenging to reverse or undo, since the child will have ingrained the negative paradigm as reality, and he or she may carry these beliefs into adulthood. In such cases, effective treatment may only occur in programs such as "Family Bridges."

However, if noticed and treated at the outset, PA can be more easily reversed. The instigating parent generally must participate in this process for it to be effective. The court may order the instigating parent to attend counseling with you and the child. Therapy may not be effective if the instigating parent continues to instigate, for obvious reasons.

If counseling fails to stop an uncooperative or obstinate instigating parent, the court may award sole parental responsibility (and majority timesharing)/full physical custody to the targeted parent to reverse and cure the brainwashing. This may be the only chance for that parent to restore a previously good relationship with the child.

### **What should you do if you suspect that your ex is brainwashing your child against you?**

Take action right away. Collect and preserve evidence to back up your side of the story, and connect with a sensitive, respected attorney who's handled similarly delicate cases effectively. Your attorney will suggest possible avenues of action. You may need to go before a judge and get an order for a psychological evaluation of your child. If the psychologist believes PA is taking place, he or she may recommend more intensive therapy for the child, you, and your ex in order to roll back the damage that has been done.

In the meantime, comply with all court-ordered obligations, while you wait for your hearing date and the psychological evaluation order. Do not stop paying child support. Do not stop your regular visits or phone calls with your child (or at least, don't stop *attempting* to visit or talk to your child). Continue paying spousal support to your ex, if the court ordered it.

In general, the more you cooperate and do what you are supposed to do regarding the divorce, the better your actions will look to the court.

### **How can you prove parental alienation in court?**

Getting a psychologist to corroborate your belief that PA is occurring is the best way to prove it in court.

To get the court to order the psychological evaluation, you need to come equipped with evidence that your child is displaying signs of PA. Witness statements supporting your position can help, particularly if the witnesses directly heard or otherwise observed evidence that indicated PA (e.g. your sister heard your ex telling lies to your child(ren) about you or a neighbor saw your ex scream at your children after a visit at your home). *Hearsay testimony* – in which a witness testifies to overhearing another person say that he or she saw evidence of PA -- is much less valuable. Document every instance where your child displays signs of PA, and record the date and time of each instance. Admissible photographic or video evidence of PA can also obviously be useful.

Judges will take your evidence into serious consideration when ordering a psychological evaluation, but the opinion of the psychologist will likely powerfully influence the court's decisions and actions.

### **Is Parental Alienation considered child abuse?**

The short answer is: it depends. As we discussed in the introduction, PA exists along a continuum. Severe and chronic cases can, indeed, qualify legally as child abuse. After all, PA is clearly psychologically damaging to a



child. Children naturally want to love both parents. It can be emotionally scarring for a child to be pitted by one parent against another.

**What's the difference between understandable extreme *estrangement* (e.g. a child rejecting a parent for being abusive or neglectful) and *alienation* (e.g. a child rejects a parent to gain favor with another parent)?**

Per Dr. Gardner, children can exhibit eight specific behaviors that suggest that alienation has occurred or is occurring.

**What are these 8 behaviors?**

Dr. William Bernet and Dr. Amy Baker, in their article in the *Journal of American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, "Parental Alienation, DSM-5, and ICD-11: Response to Critics," catalogued them as follows:

1. "Frivolous rationalizations for the child's criticism of the target parent;
2. Lack of ambivalence;
3. The independent-thinker phenomenon;
4. Reflexive support of the alienating parent against the target parent;
5. Absence of guilt over exploitation;
6. Mistreatment of the target parent;
7. Borrowed scenarios;
8. Spread of the child's animosity toward the target parent's extended family."

**What are the three types of parental alienators?**

Dr. Douglas Darnall, who writes frequently on the issue of PA, defined three types of alienators during his early work. This division may seem somewhat simplistic or arbitrary, but it provides some characteristics of various types of alienation and alienators that we see in family court.

As Darnall himself wrote in 1999, “these three types should not be considered a “diagnosis,” but instead are a heuristic... [a] way of understanding alienation.”

### **1. Naive alienators.**

These parents generally mean well, and they understand that it is important for their children have good relationships with the other parent. They only occasionally do or say things that alienate.

For instance maybe the mother might say: *“your father can afford his own four bedroom house, so why don’t you let him buy the giant Lego set?”*

Naive alienators tend to be able to separate their children’s needs from their own, respect the authority of the court, cooperate with the other parent by sharing records, and do empathetic repair after alienation has been done. They may feel guilty or embarrassed by the alienating behavior. Per Darnall, “these parents know that they make mistakes but care enough about their children to make things right. They focus on what is good for the children without regret, blame or martyrdom.”

### **2. Active alienators.**

These parents impulsively lose control over their behavior. They often feel very ashamed or guilty later on, but their intense passion in the moment blinds them. For instance, a parent might say, *“Don’t tell your dad that I got this extra check from my boss, or he’ll cut back on child support, and you and I won’t be able to go to DisneyWorld for vacation. Remember what he pulled last Thanksgiving, when we wanted to go see my sister?”*

Active alienators have a tendency to “lash out” at the other parent in front of children. They can be very rigid, controlling and angry towards the other parent at most times. On the other hand, they are able to understand that their needs are different from their children’s needs. They experience moments of repentance, provide support and comfort to the child and sometimes accept professional help. However, they don’t always respect the court’s authority, and they may not be able to stop or even identify when they are in alienation mode.

### **3. Obsessed alienators.**

*“My children are my heart and soul. If the court won’t keep them away from their father, then I will. Nothing is going to stop me!”*

The obsessive alienator is a very different breed – a parent or sometimes a grandparent who operates under the assumption that the target parent is an evil person and that the child’s relationship with him or her must be severed for the health of the child.

The obsession can take an almost a quasi-religious fervor. As Darnall writes: “their belief sometimes [becomes] delusional and irrational. No one, especially the court, can convince obsessed alienators that they are wrong. Anyone who tries is the enemy.”

Obsessed alienators are not intimidated by the authority of the court, and, per Darnall “have an unquenchable anger, because they believe that the targeted parent has victimized them and whatever they do to protect the children is justified. The obsessed alienator will often bring quasi-political groups and other supporters into the fold and will not cooperate with additional types of therapy.” This kind of alienation can be very difficult, if not impossible, to reverse, which is why early detection and intervention is critical.

### **What are the three levels of parental alienation?**

Just like the alienators can be loosely categorized into three classes; so, too, can the *type* of alienation be categorized into three basic classes, (depending on the psychopathology of the alienating parent, the length and severity of alienation, and the characteristics of the child and other factors). This continuum contains mild, moderate, and extreme/severe alienation.

### **1. Mild parental alienation.**

In this case, the “loved parent” doesn’t have any serious psychological or emotional problems, and the goal is to lower the amount of conflict between the two parents, alleviate the child’s guilt by modifying the order for timesharing (visitation), and provide reassurance to the primary parent that the bond between him or her and the child won’t be threatened. Per Dr. Gardner, the main intervention is court ordered/enforced visitation.

### **2. Moderate parental alienation.**

In this more complex situation, the alienating parent uses verbal and non-verbal strategies alike to teach the child to despise or act out against the other parent or be scared of that parent.

Dr. Gardner suggests a more potent response that involves therapy to inform the structure of the visitation along with court ordered visitation. The therapy should serve several purposes, including:

- Helping the targeted parent understand the child’s rejection and develop coping strategies;
- Undoing the child’s brainwashing;
- Helping the alienating parent understand and deal with the root cause of the drive to alienate.

### **3. Severe parental alienation.**

Scientific literature suggests that mild to moderate cases of PA can be unwound with appropriate interventions. However, in extreme cases of alienation – which, fortunately, are more rare – more extreme interventions may be needed. Dr. Gardner originally advocated that the alienating parent be removed for a period of time from the child’s life, so that the manipulation or “programming” can be successfully unwound and un-done.

A similar approach is still used today. The basic idea is that, if a severely alienating parent is involved in the deprogramming, the process will likely drag on and become painful and prone to failure. Dr. Richard Warshak’s “Family Bridges” program – which we will cover in more detail shortly – offers an evidence-based solution for severe cases of Parental Alienation.

Often, the primary caregiver exhibits “severe psychopathology,” which drives obsessional and delusional behavior. For instance, the patient may be extremely depressed or even suicidal to the point that the child stays home from school because he or she doesn’t want to see the parent come to harm. Or the parent might be legitimately schizophrenic, for instance.

### **What 3 elements must be present for Parental Alienation to occur?**

Per Warshak (2001), the following components must be present:

- 1) The alienating parent engages in an **ongoing campaign against the other parent** by rejecting him or her or saying bad things or spreading rumors. A single remark – or even the occasional insult – does *not* constitute PA.
- 2) The **child irrationally or unreasonably rejects the parent**. For instance, if you hit or neglect your child, and then the child doesn’t want anything to do with you, that would constitute *estrangement*. But if you did nothing wrong, and the child rejects you, that would lead to an assessment of *alienation*.

- 3) **The child's rejection is at least partially because of the other parent's campaign.** You can still classify the situation as alienation, even if the child has legitimate grievances with you, as long as the other parent influenced or contributed to this behavior.

### **What are the common strategies that alienating parents use to “turn” children?**

Baker and Darnall (2006) catalogued over 66 strategic behaviors that alienating parents can use, which can roughly be clumped into the following categories:

- **The parent badmouths you.** *Dad is dangerous because he keeps a gun in his house and because he votes Republican.*
- **The parent limits your parenting time unfairly or interferes with it.** *Sweetie, I know you're supposed to be at dad's house right now, but let's sneak away for a few hours and go to the mall.*
- **The parent limits phone or email contact.** *FYI, I deleted the emails dad sent you earlier. Don't worry about it.*
- **The parent interferes with symbolic contact with you.** *How many times have I asked you not to say his name here? You're to refer to John as “Dad” in this house!*
- **The parent interferes with information that passes between parents.** *You tell your father that I'm not giving him the school consent forms. He can get those himself if he really wants them.*
- **The parent engages in emotional manipulation.** *Seriously, who do you really love more, me or dad? Isn't it more fun and warm and cozy over here? I'm the one who's always here for you.*
- **The parent creates unhealthy alliances and fosters dependency.** *Next time you're at Dad's, I want you to get me the scoop on what's-her-name --*

*Janine? – and tell me all the dirt you can find about her. Maybe you could become her Facebook friend, and we can look at her profile together!*

- **The parent engages in miscellaneous kinds of alienation.** *[talking to child's doctor] Do you know how awful her father has been during this divorce? He's just been this selfish animal who never feeds her well and who's always too busy to listen to her. No wonder she got sick!*

### **How might PA impact a child's personality and mental health?**

Many factors can be relevant to this question, such as:

- The child's pre-existing relationships with both parents;
- The alienating "strategies" the parent uses;
- Whether or not the alienating parent gets support from parents, therapists or other authority figures;
- The child's relationships with his or her peers;
- Even the child's diet and overall health could play a role.

The developmental stage might be crucial. Preschool-age children, for instance, do not show much reaction to the efforts of PA. However, they do react once they reach school age. In high conflict divorces, children may strive to escape the conflict by aligning themselves with one parent. This typically begins happening around the age of 9.

Just because the child doesn't demonstrate negative impact from the efforts of alienation doesn't mean that harm isn't being done. Over time, as the child develops, continued efforts will likely have a detrimental effect.

Dr. Douglas Darnall once offered this powerful insight that speaks to this point: "[I believe there should be] an emphasis on the alienating parents rather than on the severity of symptoms. I believe this is important because

parents (both mothers and fathers) must be able to honestly look at their behavior, identify the symptoms of alienation... and learn the strategies for preventing PA, regardless whether the parent is the alienator or the targeted parent. I believe that alienation is a reciprocal process where both parents get caught up in the alienation.”

**What are possible reasons why a parent might experience rejecting behaviors from a child that do not involve active alienation of by someone else (e.g. a parent, grandparent, a step-parent, etc)?**

Per Dr. Robert Evans, from his article *Not All Parent-Alienation is Parental Alienation*, many problems can contribute to a child’s rejection of a parent. While he believes “the solution will probably still be a court order for continued contact between parent and child... the [following] problems can develop into a phobic-like reaction to the alienated parent:”

**1. Natural separation.**

If you remember dropping your child off at pre-school, you probably remember moments of real sadness. The child screamed and cried for you and begged you not to go. This is because pre-school children often have major cognitive and emotional challenges understanding what separation means. Will the parent go away forever? Will mommy or daddy ever come back? He or she needs reassurance to reduce stress and anxiety. If you are not constantly in your child’s presence – if timesharing (visitation) is spotty or if there are long stretches in between visits – a similar type of anxiety might take hold that has nothing to do with alienation.

**2. The non-custodial parent has trouble with parenting.**

Parenting requires a very particular set of skills and a compassionate constitution. Even the most giving, empathetic parents can be tested by a lack of sleep, lack of money, lack of support, an illness, etc. Unfortunately, poor parenting skills can lead a child to reject a parent. A naïve or overworked father, for instance, may prefer typing on the computer to



having substantial conversations or play time with his kids; the kids, over time, may thus develop an aversion to him.

### **3. The child may engage in natural “oppositional behavior.”**

Pre-teens and teenagers are notorious for needing to assert their autonomy and authority. Even the most well behaved children go through paroxysms of emotional and physical development that can be tough on the whole family. A child’s natural “teen rebellion” may lead him or her to harbor feelings of anger or resentment against the parent.

### **4. High conflict and high stress divorces can provoke a backlash.**

A child can react to the stress of a conflict by naturally gravitating towards one parent over the other, even if no genuine PA is occurring. Maybe, for instance, one parent goes on a post-divorce dating binge, bringing home partner after partner, creating an unstable environment. The child may want to exit that environment to get stability.

### **5. Serious problems not related to abuse or neglect can cause rejection.**

For instance, maybe a parent has an explosive personality or an illness that makes communication very difficult. Maybe the parent is an alcoholic or drug addict. Perhaps the parent has a psychiatric disturbance or just an impossible work schedule that prevents him or her from engaging with children in a compassionate way.

### **6. Child abuse or neglect can obviously lead to rejection.**

Physical, emotional, or verbal abuse or neglect can, quite understandingly, lead a child to want to avoid a parent or even to hate that parent.

### **What are 4 common treatments for alienation?**

Dr. Richard Gardner suggested a strategy to treat PA that he described as “case management.” It consists of four components that can be deployed, depending on the severity and duration of the alienation.

**1. Therapy sessions between the parent and the child.**

The targeted parent will meet with the child, and a therapist facilitates the sessions. The child can also meet with the preferred parent separately, depending on the type of alienator the parent is and the degree of harm done, so that the “loved parent” can assist in unwinding the damage.

**2. The parents each go to individual therapy sessions.**

Both parents can contribute to the atmosphere of hostility and mistrust. The preferred parent often needs to get in touch with his or her un-met needs and develop strategies of coping that don’t involve blaming all the ills of the world on other parent. Conversely, the alienated parent might also need to self-reflect to understand what went wrong in the marriage and what inspired behaviors that set the other parent on the warpath.

**3. A mediator assists the family.**

During challenging or pathological divorces, children caught in the middle are often recruited to serve as intermediaries – they communicate messages between parents and even weigh in with opinions about what should be done. That’s obviously not healthy. A mediator might be able to resolve the root frictions between the parents driving the alienation.

**4. The family’s therapists talk to one another.**

Alienation often leads to “warring factions” that sweep up not just family members but also attorneys and therapists. To drill down to find the truth about the situation, therapists might consult with one another to come up with more resourceful strategies for the family.

However, this case management system can be very expensive and very lengthy process. Because of these factors, it may not be a practical solution for many alienated cases.

### **What is Family Bridges? Can this special program really address severe alienation?**

Dr. Richard Warshak developed an innovative educational program known as Family Bridges (available in both the United States and Canada) designed to help moderately or severely alienated children and their families come to terms and to reunify.

Two professionals lead sessions over four consecutive days to help restore normalcy in the relationships. Per Dr. Warshak's website: "the program teaches children how to think critically and how to maintain balanced, realistic, and compassionate views of both parents. The program also helps children develop skills to resist outside pressures that can lead them to act against their judgment -- a valuable lesson for teens. Parents learn how to sensitively manage their children's behavior, and the family learns tools to effectively communicate and manage conflicts."

This workshop is private. Families don't go through it with other families. It has strict enrollment criteria. For instance, it refuses to intervene in a situation in which the rejection "is reasonable, proportionate to and warranted by the history of child's relationship with the rejected parent."

Some of the goals of "Family Bridges" are to:

- "Facilitate, repair, and strengthen the children's ability to maintain healthy relationships with both parents;
- Help children do what they can to avoid being in the middle of their parents' conflicts;
- Strengthen children's critical thinking skills;

- Protect children from unreasonably rejecting a parent in the future;
- Strengthen the parents' skills in nurturing their children by setting and enforcing appropriate limits and avoiding psychologically intrusive interactions;
- Strengthen the family's ability to communicate effectively with each other and to manage conflicts in a productive manner."

The Family Bridges workshop has actually been subjected to substantial scientific research. Many interventions in severe cases of PA fail. However, Family Bridges may be the exception to the rule. One study analyzed 165 children who participated in the program over 18 years: "At the workshop's conclusion, 95% of the child participants recovered a positive attitude with the rejected parent. On follow-up, 82% of the sample... continued to enjoy good relationships with the parents they had rejected."

Other peer reviewed studies of this methodology have found similar positive results: "By the end of the workshop, 22 out of 23 children had restored a positive relationship with the rejected parent and most of those children – 18 out of 22 – maintained a positive attitude."

## **Section Three: How to Find and Leverage Much Needed Help**

*Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'* — Martin Luther King Jr.

Being on the receiving end of alienation is no picnic, even if you're psychologically skillful and you have a good support network. And disappointing surprises may yet await you.

For instance, let's say that your ex-wife, who has been alienating your two school age children against you, convinces a mutual close friend of her lies. Or maybe your brother-in-law – with whom you once had an excellent relationship – now refuses to talk with you and hear your side of the story.

In addition, therapists, attorneys and other seemingly neutral stakeholders can get swept up into the conversation, leading to Kafka-esque scenarios where the more you protest, the more guilty you appear to them to be.

In this chapter, we'll discuss how to find and leverage help.

### **Getting Clear on What You Need**

Step One is to determine your projects and priorities. Before you hire an accountant, therapist, financial analyst or career coach, identify what's going on in your life now. What's true now in your world? What would you like to be true in your future?

Here's a quick exercise to help you obtain clarity along those lines.

Clear five hours from your schedule. Then spend that time writing down all the various commitments you have about everything in your life on paper or on a computer document.

Include nitty-gritty items like “I need to buy dog food” as well as urgent items like “I need to rework the visitation schedule in light of my new job” as well as amorphous items like “do something about Kelly.” Just spill everything out onto paper.

Just by doing this exercise, you will probably feel a surge of a relief and a renewed sense of control. Why? Most of us walk around thinking that we have “millions” of things to do. But the reality is that even the busiest people usually only have a few hundred projects at one time. Once you see these commitments all laid out on paper, you will see that your list of projects is *not* endless. And that’s a huge comfort for most people.

Next, you need go to through these items, organize and prioritize them, and take action on them.

For each item, you may find it useful to ask two questions:

- 1. What is the ideal outcome I’m trying to achieve with this?**
- 2. If I had to take action on this immediately, what would be the very next thing I’d do?**

For instance, an ambiguous item like “do something about Kelly” might be translated in the following way:

- **OUTCOME:** I want to get Kelly to stop saying terrible things about me to Ryan and to monitor her behavior going forward so I can prevent any brainwashing in the future.
- **NEXT ACTION:** Finish reading this ebook, so I can understand Parental Alienation from a 20,000-foot perspective.

Next, prioritize and assign projects to people to get them off your plate.

Along those lines, strive to dream up “best case scenario” outcomes for your projects. When you’ve been through the ringer of a divorce or a

timesharing/custody battle -- particularly one characterized by nasty allegations and your children taking sides in the battle -- it's really hard to "think positively." However, as the old saying goes, "you can't do a don't."

Rather than defining your goals in terms of the negative – what you *don't* want to happen – figure out what you *do* want in your life. Brainstorm and speculate! Spend time trying to imagine an ideal world – for instance, a best case resolution for your alienation case. What would your relationship with your children look like? How would you relate to your ex-spouse? Will you be remarried? Etc. For instance, here is a good example list:

- Kelly and I are on cordial, even pleasant terms, and we are both happily remarried.
- Ryan splits his time equally between us;
- Ryan and I play softball at the park every Sunday again;
- I have apologized to Kelly's mom for the mean things I said to her over Thanksgiving, and we are back on good terms.
- Etc.

Developing this vision of a brighter future can help find the right people to achieve that vision. If your goal, for instance, is to repair the relationship with your ex-wife to make it cordial, you may want someone like a mediator to help you sort through the divorce issues and find "win-win" solutions. If you don't care about the relationship – you wouldn't mind never speaking to her again – you might not need a mediator.

### **Getting More Insight into Your Situation and Needs**

You have two basic options. First, you can engage in various forms of "self-help," such as journaling, meditation, prayer and introspection. Second, you can get outside help, such as group meetings, therapy or working with a mediator or an attorney.

Let's briefly cover a few of these options:

## **Journaling**

Journaling can help you get clear about your goals, work through problems, vent your feelings, or just track what's going on in your relationships over time. Here are a few exercises and tools you might find resourceful:

- The 5 Whys
- Journaling prompts
- Reflective journaling
- Art journaling

If you do journal or intend to journal, then discuss this practice and what you should do to protect your privacy with your attorney.

## **Mindfulness Meditation**

Powerful new research science suggests that meditation can help manage problems like depression and anxiety, and it can also improve executive functioning and feelings of equanimity – good skills to have when you face challenges like a PA case.

In fact, meditation may be as helpful as antidepressants at treating anxiety and depression in certain patients. And even skeptics often find this practice useful.

In case you've never tried it before, here's a brief primer on how to get started. Sit cross-legged on the floor or with both feet flat on the ground. Make sure you're in a quiet place, where you won't be disturbed. Sit with a straight but relaxed back and neck, and focus on the breath that comes in and out of your body. You don't need to breathe deeply or hold the breath

If parental alienation has affected you or someone you love, please reach out to our compassionate, effective team at (561) 478-0312 for a consultation about your options.



in any way. You just want to watch it and pay very close attention to how it feels as the breath goes through your nostrils, into your lungs and chest, then pauses and reverses. Whenever distracting thoughts occur – and they will occur in droves – just acknowledge them and let them go, almost as if you’re a child letting a balloon go into the sky.

Hundreds of mindfulness techniques abound, but that simple, five minute exercise is a good way to get started.

### **Talk Therapy**

An effective therapist can help you work through issues related to PA and divorce. When selecting a therapist, do due diligence. Find a sympathetic practitioner who has experience working with clients in your situation.

Cultivate a moment-to-moment awareness about what you think, feel and notice, so your therapist can help you sort through things. You might find it useful, for instance, to write down relevant thoughts throughout the day, whenever you have them, so that you don’t get preoccupied. Keep a notepad by your bedside or in the car; then later compile all those thoughts and share them with your therapist in an email or at a session.

### **Nonviolent Communication**

Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, a well-known psychologist and negotiator, developed a special process for facilitating better communication between challenged parties that he called “nonviolent communication” or NVC. Dr. Rosenberg describes NVC as a “process language” designed to help individuals get in touch with their feelings and needs -- to avoid seeing each other in terms of “enemy images.”

Dr. Rosenberg used this process to, among other things, negotiate conflicts in Israel and the Palestinian territories as well as in war-torn parts of Africa. The language of NVC is designed to get us in touch with our feelings and needs – to recognize the humanness in ourselves and in other people.

**Step One: Make a clear observation.** Imagine if you were a video camera recording a scene. What, objectively, is going on? Critically, you want to separate observation from how you feel about a situation or what you want someone to do about it.

**Step Two: Relate that observation to a feeling.** You can mention how you're feeling about the situation or guess what another person might be feeling about it. The goal is take ownership of your own feelings and, at the same time, to avoid taking ownership of other people's feelings.

**Step Three: Connect the feeling to a need.** Perhaps there's a need that's being met that's leading to a positive feeling... or maybe there's a need not being met that's causing a negative feeling state.

**Step Four: State a positive, actionable request.** What do you want the other person to do to make life more wonderful for you?

This is a basic framework to facilitate a more empathic and compassionate way of being with other people. Often, people have a difficult time opening up and listening to rational arguments, if they're coming from a defensive or hurt place – if they worry that their core needs for things like safety and respect won't be met. Empathic communication can be quite useful in getting what you want, even after a relationship has gone through trauma.

Let's walk through a concrete example of these concepts in action.

Let's say your alienated child, Max, comes to visit you, per a court order. Instead of greeting you with a hello, Max throws his backpack into the corner, gives you a glare, storms to his room and slams the door. A typical parent might react in a number of ways to this behavior:

- **He might reprimand Max:** *you can't behave that way in this house!*
- **He might ignore it,** thinking to himself, *you'll come down when you get hungry.*

- **He might sympathize with it** – in other words, try to relate it back to how he is feeling or has felt. *This is my one day to be with you this week, and I want it to be fun, and you're ruining it!*
- **He might tell stories:** *when I was your age, my dad was a mean SOB, and I used to storm around his house just like you just did.*

All these approaches, while understandable, make a crucial mistake: they steal attention away from Max and make the situation all about the father. *Empathy*, on the other hand, allows you to shine a spotlight on the child instead of yourself. An emphatic reaction, per Nonviolent Communication, might be something along the lines of the following:

*When you came in earlier today, you threw your backpack into the corner, ran upstairs and slammed the door [objective observation]. I'm guessing you're furious [guessing at Max's feeling], because you need to feel safe and comfortable, like you do at your mom's [guessing at Max's needs]. Was I reading you clearly? [Positive request].*

Let's say in this example, you guessed wrong. Max just had a bad day at school -- maybe a kid bullied him, and he's feeling mad about *that*.

By addressing his situation in an empathic fashion – by not making it all about you – you are much more likely to understand what's truly troubling him and to improve communication going forward. It takes practice to learn to think and act empathically, but even clumsy attempts to engage in this process can pay dividends in terms of less friction and more honesty and camaraderie in the relationship.

Consult with an attorney. The above suggestions will help you prioritize your goals and may help you become better centered and have better communication skills with your child and with your spouse or former spouse. However, in order to be successful in dealing legally with parental alienation, you will need to consult an attorney. You should attempt to find an attorney who is experienced in dealing with parental alienation and who

will be able to work with you to create a game plan to combat the parental alienation that is occurring in your child's life.

## Conclusion

This book has taken you on a whirlwind tour of the frustrating constellation of issues that is Parental Alienation. We discussed PA's academic origins as well as the debate over how to label it, understand it, treat it and troubleshoot when damage cannot be easily unwound.

We also discussed different strategies for how to leverage help, no matter where you are in the process or what's happened in the past with your children or the other parent.

We hope this ebook has been helpful and insightful and that it has given you some inspiration for how to proceed and reunite your family. The team at The Law Firm of Charles D. Jamieson, P.A. would be happy to provide a detailed, private consultation about your potential Parental Alienation case. Please get in touch with us today at (561) 478-0312, or learn more about us at our website, <http://www.cjamiesonlaw.com/>.

We wish you and your family the best, as you heal from the wounds of the past and build towards a brighter future.

## Disclaimer

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