

# Parental Alienation Syndrome



Understanding it--Strategies to  
Fight It

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# What is Parental Alienation Syndrome or PAS?

PAS is a very old family interaction pattern known by different names. In the 1950's, the child psychiatrists who later founded the various schools of family therapy initially identified a cross-generational coalition between a parent and a child to the deprecation of the other parent and which was observed occurring when their hospitalized patients were visiting their families.

# Triangulation

This "crazy making" pattern is called  
**Triangulation**  
or what Murray Bowen called  
the Pathological Triangle.

**Three Roles:** Victim, Rescuer, Abuser

I know nothing of hatred,  
intolerance, racism, sexism,  
bigotry, indoctrination,  
homophobia, and prejudice.

I don't yet understand things  
like love, compassion,  
Integrity, tolerance, human  
decency and truth.

For the first, most important  
formative years of my life,  
all I will know  
IS WHAT YOU TEACH ME.



# Parental Alienation Syndrome

## **Dr. Richard Gardner**

“ The parental alienation syndrome arises primarily in the context of child-custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child’s campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from a combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent’s indoctrination and the child’s own contribution to the vilification of the targeted parent.”

Gardner, R. A. (1988). The Parental Alienation Syndrome, Second Edition

# 8 Signs Gardner Observed

1. A Campaign of Denigration
2. Weak, Frivolous, or Absurd Rationalizations
3. Lack of Ambivalence
4. The "Independent Thinker" Phenomenon
5. Reflexive Support of the Loved Parent in the conflict
6. Absence of Guilt
7. The Presence of Borrowed or Scripted Scenarios
8. Spread of animosity to the Extended Family

# Amy Baker, P.h.D.

**Amy Baker**, Caught Between Parents: Supporting Children through the challenges of divorce, (Psychology Today, June 28, 2011)

“Parental Alienation is a set of strategies that parents use to undermine and interfere with a child's relationship with his or her other parent. This often but not always happens when parents are engaged in a contested custody battle. There is no one definitive set of behaviors that constitute parental alienation but research with both parents and children and revealed a core set of alienation strategies, including **bad-mouthing the other parent, limiting contact with that parent, erasing the other parent from the life and mind of**

## Amy Baker, cont:

**the child (forbidding discussion and pictures of the other parent), forcing the child to reject the other parent, creating the impression that the other parent is dangerous, forcing the child to choose, and belittling and limiting contact with the extended family of the targeted parent.**

Parents who try to alienate their child from his or her other parent convey a three-part message to the child:

- (1) I am the only parent who loves you and you need me to feel good about yourself,**
- (2) the other parent is dangerous and unavailable, and**
- (3) pursuing a relationship with that parent jeopardizes your relationship with me.**

## Amy Baker, cont:

In essence the child receives the message that he or she is worthless and unloved and only of value for meeting the needs of others.

This is the core experience of psychological maltreatment (emotional abuse) as defined by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC).”



**NO CHILD**  
SHOULD BE CALLED  
**A TRAITOR**  
SIMPLY FOR  
LOVING THE  
"OTHER" PARENT

PARENTAL ALIENATION  
IS CHILD ABUSE

# Dr. Raymond Havelicek, PhD, forensic psychologist

"PAS is a valid syndrome...[and] is prevalent to some degree in about 75 percent of all divorce cases." "It is the unreasonable rejection of a parent. The extent of the child's resistance to a relationship with that parent is out of proportion to reality. The child's view is not supported by anything that the parent had done. It is a campaign of denigration that is initiated by the custodial parent."

# DSM-V Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders

## **New Manual published in May 2013**

Parental Alienation Expert Dr. William Bernet, professor of psychiatry at Vanderbilt University In Nashville, TN, who was on the Task Force for the new edition of the DSM-V, was able to help add Two New Diagnoses to define symptoms and behaviors of PAS:

- 1. Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress**
- 2. Child Psychological Abuse**

# New Relational Diagnosis:

These disorders describe the characteristic family dynamic of the PAS, and should have a significant impact on the diagnosis of this pattern, which is so detrimental to the child.

## Child Affected by Parental Relationship

**Distress:** When the focus of clinical attention is on the negative effects of parental relationship discord, (e.g. high levels of conflict, distress, or disparagement) on a child in the family, including effects on the child's mental or other physical disorders. Cognitive problems in the parent-child relational problem "may include negative attributions of the other's intentions, hostility toward or scapegoating of the other, and unwarranted feelings of estrangement."

# New Relational Diagnosis:

**Child Psychological Abuse:** is a new diagnosis 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."

**In many instances, the behavior of the alienating parent constitutes child psychological abuse.**

# Common Behaviors of Alienators

(Douglas Darnall, 1998, *Divorce Casualties: Protecting your children from parental alienation*):

- Supporting the child's refusal to visit the other parent without reason;
- Allowing children to choose whether or not to visit a parent, even though the court has not empowered the parent or children to make that choice;
- Telling the children about why the marriage failed and giving them the details about the divorce settlement;
- Refusing the other parent access to medical and school records or schedules of extracurricular activities;
- Blaming an ex-spouse for not having enough money, changes in lifestyle, or other problems in the children's presence;

# Common Behaviors of Alienators

- Refusing to acknowledge that the child has personal property and denying the child control over taking personal possessions to the other parent's home;
- Rigid enforcement of the visitation schedule for no good reason other than getting back at the ex-spouse;
- Assuming the ex-spouse is dangerous because he or she had made threats in the past during an argument;
- False allegations of sexual abuse, drug and alcohol use or other illegal activities by the other parent;
- Asks the children to choose one parent over the other;

# Common Behaviors of Alienators

- Reminding the children that the children have good reason to feel angry toward their other parent;
- Suggesting adopting or change in name should a parent remarry;
- Giving children reasons for feeling angry toward the other parent, even when they have no memory of the incident that would provoke the feeling, and especially when they cannot personally remember the incident or reasons for being angry;
- Special signals, secrets, words with unique meanings, or a private rendezvous arranged between the child and one parent;
- An intention to use children as witnesses against their other parent;
- Asking the children to spy or covertly gather information to be used later against the other parent;

# Common Behaviors of Alienators

- Setting up temptations that interfere with visitations
- Giving the children the impression that having a good time on a visit will hurt the parent;
- Asking the children about the ex-spouse's personal life;
- Rescuing the children from the other parent when there is no danger.

**"Any Attempt at alienating the children from the other parent should be seen as a direct and willful violation of one of the prime duties of parenthood."**

# Dr. Michael Bone and Michael R. Walsh

## Parental Alienation Syndrome: How to Detect It and what to Do About It

In the Florida Bar Journal: Vol, 73, No. 3, March 1999, p 44-48

Dr. Bone and Dr. Walsh suggest four specific criteria that can be used to identify potential PAS. In most instances, these criteria can be identified through the facts of the case, but also can be revealed by deposition or court testimony. Even when these behaviors exist and the child is not successfully alienated it is still very harmful and these behaviors should not be viewed as neutral by the court.

# Dr. Bone and Dr. Walsh, cont.

**The following Four Criteria can be used to guide the attorney in deposing of witnesses as well as in their examination in court:**

1. Access and Contact Blocking
2. Unfounded Abuse Allegations
3. Deterioration in Relationship Since Separation
4. Intense Fear Reaction by Children

# Access Blocking: Dr. Michael Bone



# Access and Contact Blocking

Criteria I involves the active blocking of access or contact between the child and the absent parent.

The rationale used to justify it may well take many different forms. One of the most common is that of **protection**. It may be argued that the absent parent's judgement is **inferior** and therefore the child is much worse off from the visit. Or It could take the form of allegations of child abuse, quite often sexual abuse.

On a more subtle level, an argument heard from the blocking of visitation is that seeing the absent parent is “**unsettling**” to the child, and that they need time to “adjust.”

# Access and Contact Blocking

The message is that the absent parent is treated less like a family member and more like an annoying acquaintance whom the child must see sometimes. Over time, this pattern can have a seriously erosive effect on the child's relationship with the absent parents. Or that visitation is "inconvenient," thereby relegating it to the status of an errand or chore. Again the result is the erosion of the relationship between the child and the absent or target parent. Often any deviation from the schedule is used as a reason to cancel the visitation entirely.

# Access and Contact Blocking

The message to all these tactics is that one parent is superior and the other is not, and therefore, should not be valued in the child's life. **The alienating parent is not being an appropriate gatekeeper for the child to see the absent parent.** Over time, the child is given the message that one parent is superior to the other. Each parent is given the responsibility to promote a positive relationship with the other parent. When this principle is violated in the context of blocking access on a consistent basis, one can assume that Criteria I has been unmistakably identified.

# Criteria II: Unfounded Abuse Allegations

Now that we falsely accused Daddy in Family Court, we can have ice cream for supper, play video games and go to the park all day, and wait for the support checks to roll in!

You won't even miss him!



## Criteria II: Unfounded Abuse Allegations

The most harsh accusation is the false accusation of sexual abuse. It has been well studied that the incident of false allegations of sexual abuse account for over half of those reported when parents are in divorce or post-divorce conflict. **When there is even one false accusation in the records, the interviewer is well advised to look for other expressions of false accusations.** Less common are accusations of physical abuse because it can leave a mark. It is easier to falsely accuse someone of something that leaves no mark and has no third party witnesses. Or emotional abuse, which is often just a disagreement about discipline styles.

## Criteria II: Unfounded Abuse Allegations

If abuse does happen, a normal responsible parent will tend to err on the side of denial, trying to give the other parent the benefit of the doubt before reporting.

In contrast, the alienating parent will jump on any opportunity to accuse the other parent.

**When this theme is present in a clear and consistent way, this criteria for PAS is met.**

# Criteria III: Deterioration in Relationship Since Separation

This is a critical component of PAS. The experts need to do a very careful examination of the *preseparation* relationship.

**Parent/child relationships do not naturally decline on their own. It is one of the most important indicators of the presence of alienation.**

If a father had a good relationship before divorce and he is still trying to maintain positive contact with his children and the children do not want to see him or have him involved in their lives, then one can only speculate that an alienation process may have been in operation.

# Deterioration In Relationship Since Separation: Dr. Michael Bone



# Criteria III: Deterioration in Relationship Since Separation

Children do not naturally lose interest in and become distant from their nonresidential parent simply by virtue of the absence of that parent. Healthy and established parental relationships do not erode naturally on their own.

**They must be attacked.**

Therefore, any dramatic change in this area is virtually always an indicator of an alienation process that has had some success in the

# Criteria III: Deterioration in Relationship Since Separation

Professionals can do great harm by non-critically hearing about abuse and taking it as truth without carefully assessing the situation. Often professionals get caught up in the drama of the moment and become professional rescuers, and recommend distance from the parent. They then become part of the alienating system.

# Deterioration in Relationship

All mental health professionals are not aware of nor know how to treat the PAS phenomenon. In fact, when a mental health professional unfamiliar with PAS is called upon to make a recommendation about custody, access, or related issues, he or she potentially can do more harm than good.

**If that professional is not also sensitive to the subtleties of access and contact blocking as its motivator, he or she may potentially support it, thereby contributing to the PAS process.**

**Failure to do an accurate assessment could cause irreparable harm to the case and to the children.**

## Criteria IV: Intense Fear Reaction by Children

The fourth criteria necessary for the detection of PAS is more psychological than the first three. It refers to an obvious fear reaction on the part of the children, of displeasing or disagreeing with the potentially alienating parent in regard to the target parent.

Simply put, an Alienating parent is often controlling and operates with the adage, “My way or the highway.” If the children disobey, especially in expressing positive approval for the absent parent, the consequences can be very serious.

# Intense Fear Reaction: Dr. Michael Bone



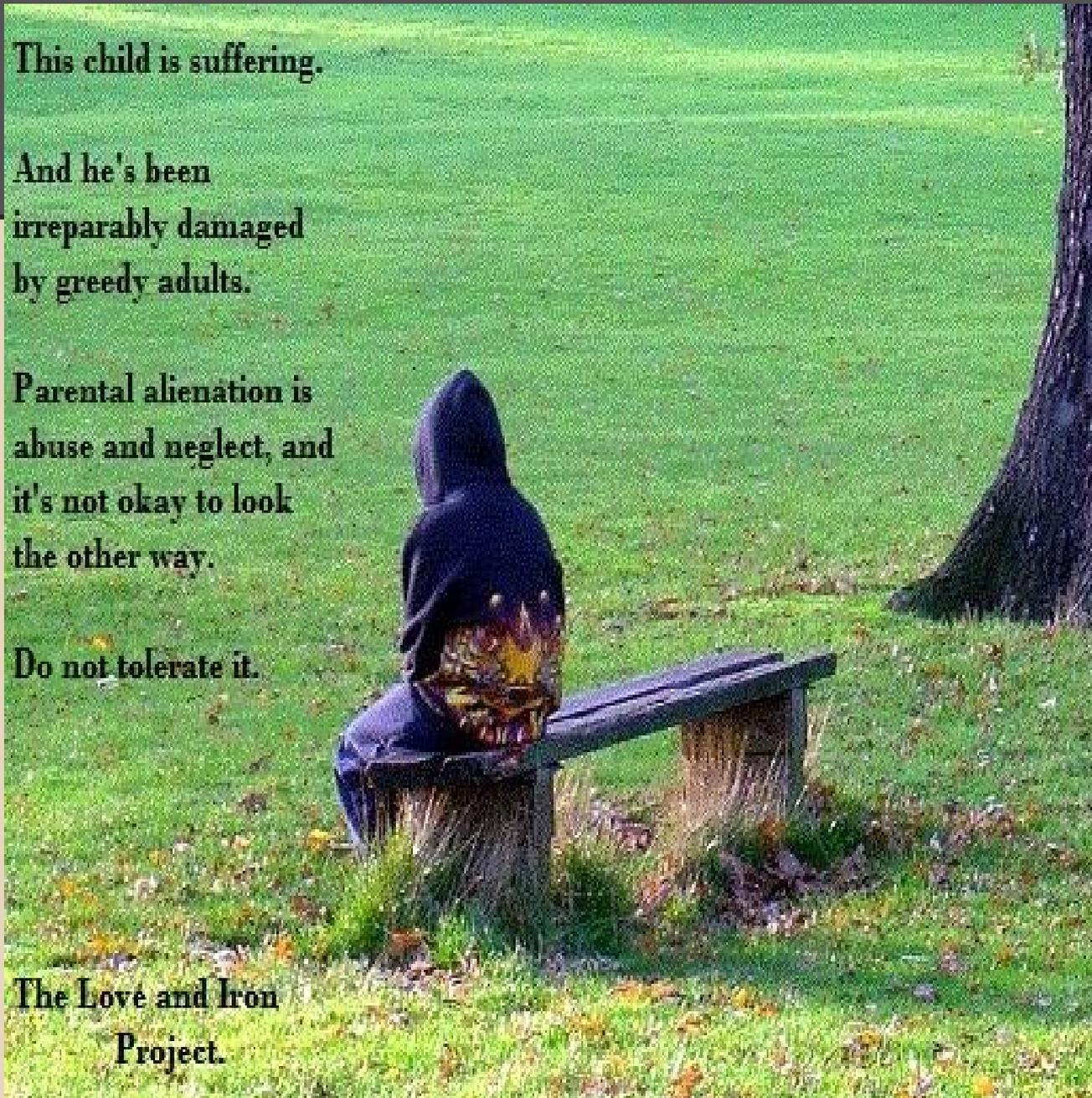
**This child is suffering.**

**And he's been  
irreparably damaged  
by greedy adults.**

**Parental alienation is  
abuse and neglect, and  
it's not okay to look  
the other way.**

**Do not tolerate it.**

**The Love and Iron  
Project.**



# Intense Fear Reaction by Children

In order to fully appreciate this scenario, one must realize that the PAS process operates in a “fear based” environment. It is the installation of fear by the alienating parent to the minor children that is the fuel by which this pattern is driven. This taps into what psychoanalysis tells us is the most basic emotion inherent in human nature--**the fear of abandonment.**

They live in a state of anxiety and upset and the threat of reprisal. If they defy the parent, they quickly learn that there is a serious price to pay. They learn to be vigilant about not displeasing the “favored” parent. Sometimes this is manifested by a child suddenly changing his or her decision to visit and loudly protests a visit that was not complained about earlier.

# Intense Fear Reaction by Children

Most often the favored parent acts bewildered, regarding the sudden change and professes that they are being supportive and trying to convince the child to go. It exposes, if only for an instant, the fear based core of the alienation process. **Any time the child is given a significant choice in the visitation, he or she is put in the position to act out a loyalty to the favored parent's wishes by refusing to go on the visit.** Failure to do so puts them in the position to being abandoned by the parent they spend the most time with. Children under these circumstances, will simply not opt on their own choice. The court must thus act to protect them and employ a host of

# Still Face Experiment



# Effects On The Child

The effect on children, it teaches them to manipulate. They learn to play one parent against the other to gain some advantage. **Often the stress is so high that children no longer manipulate to gain advantage, these children learn to manipulate just to survive.** They learn to read the emotional environment, telling partial truths, and then telling bold lies. They are forced to learn these in order to keep peace at home and avoid emotional attack and rejection. Often it is just easier to take on and echo the alienating parent's perceptions of the absent parent. Again, professionals need to be very sensitive to the fear based quality of these complaints and not take them at face value as the child's voicing his/her own inner feelings

# Effects On The Child

**They learn to please others and care-take their victim parent.**

**Their growth is stunted as they are surviving, not safe enough to develop properly.**

**They learn it's okay to lie and keep secrets.**

**They learn to be manipulative and exploit others.**

**They learn to suppress their emotions.**

**They learn to hate themselves. Often ending up with substance abuse problems, low self esteem, early pregnancies, relational problems.**

**They are not happy. They have hidden grief.**

**They are emotional reasoners, not critical thinkers.**

**It is not reinforced for them to think for themselves.**

**They are kept dependent on the alienating parent.**

**They are afraid of abandonment.**

**They want the love and approval of the alienating parent and often trauma bond with them.**

# Effects On The Child

**They have a selective attention filter to only see the bad in the targeted parent and only the good in the other parent.**

**They show no guilt or remorse.**

**They lack of gratitude for gifts.**

**They have suppressed guilt for treating their parent badly.**

**They are vulnerable to depression and learned helplessness.**

**They are being emotionally abused.**

# Effects On The Child

Hating my other parent  
is like hating part of me.



your  cards  
someecards.com

# Effects On The Child

**Dr. Burkhard, co-founded Child and Family Psychological Services discusses the effects of PAS:**

**“These children do not follow rules; they are out of control; they are basically naughty and lack limits. These children behave as if they have license to do whatever they want. It may have begun as a breakdown in not having to respond to for the authority of and respect for the other parent. In the cases of treatment or court failure to reunite, we have seen the lack of respect for authority figures including the favored parent, school, and the law. Among the cases where reunification efforts have failed are children who have dropped out of school, become addicted to drugs, born children out of wedlock addicted to drugs, and engaged in other antisocial behaviors. This is not a good outcome.”**

## **Dr. Burkhard, cont:**

**“Childhood is a time to develop a sense of responsibility. It is a time to develop a conscience. Children who become alienated have this fundamental aspect of their development derailed. They are not only not held accountable for their mistakes and misdeeds, they may be encouraged to tell lies or exaggerate the truth, and otherwise act in ways that are disrespectful of others. that these behaviors are reinforced by a trusted parent further undermines normal moral development as well as the development of their ability to develop normal relationships.”**

# Dr. J. Kelly

**“Because it is anti-instinctual to hate and reject a parent, the child must develop an elaborate delusional system consisting of spurious, frivolous, and absurd rationalizations to justify the hatred and rejection.**

**Eventually, the child comes to believe all the absurdity. The double-bind situation of being unable to have, love, and to be loved by both parents can lead to psychosis.”**

# Understanding Alienators

## Why Would Someone Do This????

Parents who engage in alienating behaviors are stuck in the first stage of child development where survival skills are learned. This is usually a consequence of their own child abuse. Having total control over their child feels like a life and death matter.

Because they don't understand how to reciprocate in relationships, any effort to do so always has strings attached. They don't give, only take. They don't play by the rules and are not likely to obey a court order.

Often they do not see their children as separate human beings, but as extensions of themselves. They are objects that belong to them. They are often described as being “overly involved with the child, or enmeshed.”

# Understanding Alienators

They don't allow or encourage a child to be independent of themselves. They require the child to take care of them--parentification. They may make their child into their therapist. Often they can have unstable moods and be harsh and controlling and intimidating to the children.

New research shows that people with personality disorders have an adult form of an attachment disorder. They are often superficial in relationships, charming and lack accountability. They are manipulative, entitled and feel they should always win. Often they manipulate by playing the victim.

# Understanding Alienators

They may have a personality disorder, being narcissistic (self-centered), where they presume that they have a special entitlement to whatever they want. They think that there are rules in life, but only for other people, not them. They are often unable to see a situation from another person's point of view, especially their child's point of view. They believe it is okay to lie.

They lack empathy. It is hard to educate people like this, they respond to boundaries and consequences, not insight.

# Three Types of Alienators

1. **Naive:** They are more passive in the relationship with the other parent, but occasionally slip and say something to reinforce alienation. Most are well-meaning and self correct when they understand it's hurting the child.

2. **Active:** They know better than to alienate, but have difficulty containing their emotions. When they get triggered they lose control over what he or she says to the children.

3. **Obsessed:** They have a fervent mission to destroy the targeted parent's relationship with the children. Their beliefs are irrational and even delusional. They are relentless.

# Alienation is Gender Neutral

**PAS is an opportunistic syndrome, and it is generally mothers who are afforded this opportunity. The opportunity arises because the judicial system in this country is more likely to grant residential custody to the mother, even if joint legal custody is simultaneously granted. Access to the child by the alienator, and well as lack of access by the alienated parent is the environment which permits the PAS to grow and thrive. The longer the custodial parent can block access to the target parent, the more damage will be done.**

# Levels or Categories of Alienation

## Yellow/Mild

**Dr. William Bernet of Vanderbilt University** describes the three stages or levels of Parental Alienation including Yellow, Orange, and Red categories. His list is combined below with **Dr. Douglas Darnall's** description of three categories of Parental Alienation, including Mild, moderate and severe.

**(Yellow) Mild:** The child may briefly resist contact with the alienated parent, but does have contact and enjoys a good relationship with the targeted parent once they are together. When it is mild, the child may have a strong, healthy relationship with both parents, even though the children recites criticisms of the alienated parent. The alienator is usually naive. The alienators are ignorant of what they are doing and are willing to be educated and change.

# Levels or Categories of Alienation

## Orange/Moderate

**(Orange) Moderate:** The children may persistently resist contact with the alienated parent and will continue to complain and criticize the alienated parent during the contact. The child is likely to have a mildly to moderately pathological relationship with the preferred parent. The alienating parent is an active alienator. When they are triggered, they lose control of appropriate boundaries. They are volatile and lose control, but won't admit it.

# Levels or Categories of Alienation

## Red/Severe

**(Red): Severe:** The child strongly and persistently resists contact and may hide or run away to avoid seeing the alienated parent. The child's behavior is driven by a firmly held, false belief that the alienated parent is evil, dangerous and or worthless. The child is likely to have a strong, severely pathological relationship with the preferred parent, perhaps sharing a paranoid worldview. The alienating parent is obsessed with breaking down the attachment between the target parent and child. They come from a delusional system where they are committed to destroying the relationship and doing a "parentectomy" of the targeted parent.

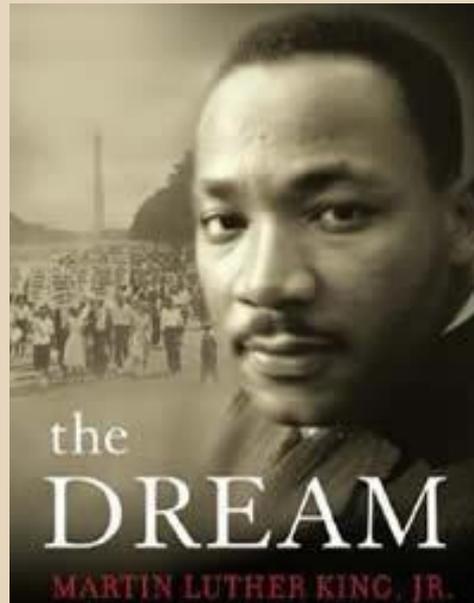
# Therapeutic Treatment for PAS

Linda Gottlieb, LMFT, LCSW in her book: The Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Family Therapy and Collaborative Systems Approach to Amelioration

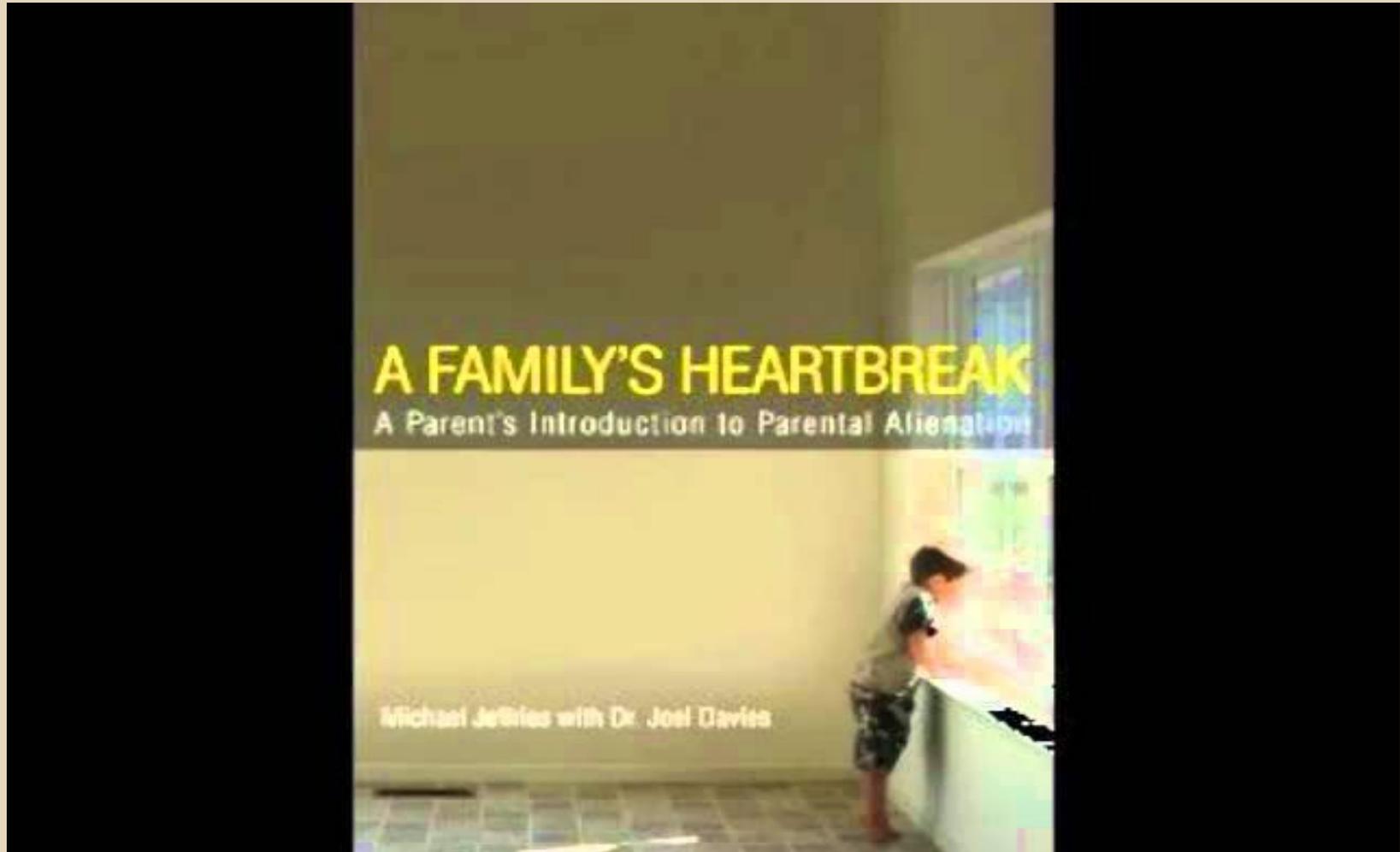
- \*Individual Therapy is a waste of time
- \*Only trained family therapists can correct this, as it is a family system's problem
- \*The Healing has to be done in the context of the relationship with the alienated parent.
- \* Treatment Progress happens much more quickly when the Alienating parent is on board, usually by court-order.

## Taking the Higher Road....And Beyond

“Alienation is your call to evolve to become the kind of person who can be calm in the face of the worst kind of abuse. Think of Martin Luther King’s lunch counter children. Think of the violence, degradation, and abuse such pioneers on the forefront of a cause faced. You are on the forefront of a newly discovered form of intentional, highly targeted marginalization, organized prejudice and discrimination. The question becomes: ‘How will YOU rise to the occasion?’” **Judge Michele Lowrance, Parental Alienation 911 Workbook, 2012, p.58**



# “A Family’s Heartbreak” author Mike Jeffries



# Taking the Higher Road...And Beyond

$$PXR=S$$

Pain times Resistance = Suffering

**Acceptance**

# Taking the Higher Road...And Beyond

## What Can A Targeted Parent Do?

1. Take Care of yourself--No one else can do this for you. (Body, Mind, Spirit, Emotions)
2. Practice not taking things personally. (This drains your energy, the energy you need to fight this battle. Learn to be centered and find your power.)
3. Act, Don't React. Be even-tempered. **A person who reacts in anger is proving the alienator's point that he or she is unstable. Don't let them take your power.**
4. Be careful what you put in writing.
5. Be compassionate. Make sure your behaviors always exude love, support, and compassion. You can prove your former spouse wrong with your consistent loving actions.

# Taking the Higher Road...And Beyond

6. Don't harbor a victim mentality. This breeds hostility, entitlement, and revenge, helplessness and desperation. Focus on what you can do, instead of what is outside your control.
7. Gain Knowledge. Knowledge is power. Learn about their strategies and how to combat them. Learn about your child's behaviors and development, and the reasons and needs behind them. Learn about how the court process works.
8. Become the best parent you can be. Improve your skills. Learn to focus less on winning an argument and more on preserving and repairing a relationship. Take a breakthrough parenting class.
9. Help your children develop critical thinking skills and develop true independent thinking skills. This can build resiliency. "I don't want to choose program" Baker 2009

# Taking the Higher Road...And Beyond

10. Keep children out of adult matters. Don't use your child as your confidant/therapist.
11. Spend time with people who treat you nicely. Help the children see rejected parents through the eyes of those who like the parent.
12. Follow your parenting plan and obey court orders.
13. Document, document, document!
14. Keep contacting your children by emails, phone calls, texts, pictures, etc.
15. Correct false beliefs without adding tension or criticizing the other parent.
16. Make a good parenting plan that shows how the child would be well taken care of in your care.