

# Book Shows Reality, Destructive Effects Of Parental Alienation Syndrome



December 20th, 2012 by Robert Franklin, Esq.

Linda Gottlieb's excellent book, "The Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Family Therapy and Collaborative Systems Approach to Amelioration," serves to take down all objections to the concept of parental alienation itself and its many deleterious effects on children. Those include the

objections of the American Psychiatric Association to PAS inclusion in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual as well as the specious ones of NOW and various other organizations and individuals opposed to fathers having contact with their children post-divorce. But that's not its point. It's main function is to explain to mental health professionals and others, like attorneys and judges, what PAS is, what it looks like, why it happens, who does it, why and why, for the good of children, it must be stopped.

Gottlieb takes examples from her own lengthy practice of psychology, but she also interviews many other clinical practitioners. She also gives a forum to family law attorneys who of course have their own tales to tell about PAS and the judicial system's response to it.

PAS can be identified by the symptoms it manifests in families and children.

There are eight basic conditions that must be met for a diagnosis of PAS, although strict adherence to all eight isn't necessary. (I don't intend to discuss all eight, but hopefully what I say about the first three will give an idea of the depth and persuasive value of the book.)

The first of course is the “campaign of denigration” against the targeted parent. Dr. Amy Baker has identified five ways in which this campaign typically comes about – persistent character assassination, creating fear in the child of the targeted parent, impugning the targeted parent’s love for the child, withdrawal of love for the child who fails to shun the targeted parent and obliteration of the targeted parent from the emotional and physical life of the child.

Therefore, the alienating parent demands, as a condition of continued love, that the child see a loving parent as unloving, a parent with integrity as corrupt, a kind parent as dangerous, etc. In short, the child is required to distort reality to conform to the alienating parent’s wishes about the other parent who of course should play a vital part in the child’s life and development. As one psychologist quoted by Gottlieb explained to an alienator, “This is the basis for the development of psychoses. The child is learning to manipulate reality due to enmeshment with the alienating parent.”

Just so. Remember that the next time someone soft-peddles the ill effects of parental alienation.

Given this campaign of denigration, it’s no surprise that the child quickly learns to accede to the wishes of the alienator, or at least appear to. (I’ve seen one video, shot at the behest of an alienating mother, that showed a four-year-old girl screaming desperately when her father came to pick her up. But once she believed she was out of her mother’s view, she happily took her father’s hand as they walked along together.) The child therefore adopts “weak, frivolous and absurd rationalizations” for denigrating the targeted parent.

PAS children remain armed with a laundry list of vague injustices, deceptions, and disappointments which were allegedly inflicted upon them by their targeted parent.

But when a therapist asks for particulars, the children often can't come up with anything or, if they do, the infraction by the parent utterly fails to warrant the extreme denigration by the child. The alienating parent and the child become partners in the crime of PAS. They collaborate on fantastic tales of injustice by the other parent that they then present to the world (e.g. the therapist, the court, etc.). In that way, they develop a symbiotic and sustaining bond; each develops a stake in the continuation of the fantasy both have created.

One of Gottlieb's interviewees reported that a child told her "He beats me, but I can't remember when, but it happens all the time. It happens so much I can't think of a single time." Clearly, the mother had convinced the child that the father was an abuser and, eager to agree, the child repeated the tale to the therapist. But when asked for examples, the child had none to offer.

Inappropriate rationalizations for denigrating or separating from the targeted parent are legion. A 16-year-old girl was miffed that her Sweet-16 party didn't meet her standards. A boy claimed to have been humiliated because his father asked to speak to the manager of a supermarket.

Lies told in court readily become subjects for parental alienation. Therefore, a mother who'd received all the child support the court had ordered told the child the father refused to pay, was responsible for their precarious living conditions and this was proof of his lack of affection for the child. Some 49 out of the 56 children discussed in the book "were ensnared by their alienating parent into the financial conflicts with the other parent."

The third symptom of PAS is "Lack of Ambivalence." Few human beings have black/white feelings about the important people in their lives; there are always shades of gray. Not so with the alienated child. To prove his/her devotion to the cause of alienation, he/she expresses only the most extreme and hateful feelings for the targeted parent. There's no middle ground, no 'A

but also B.' Absolute certainty about the bad character of the targeted parent is one of the hallmarks of the alienated child. And of course the same is true of the child's expressions about the alienating parent except all his/her traits are admirable.

PAS children can be predicted to recite a long list of deficits about their targeted parent while minimizing or refuting any positive attribute or redeeming quality of that parent.

That leads the child to entirely discount the many positive contributions the targeted parent made to the child's well-being prior to- and post- divorce. In the child's narrative, the targeted parent, "never attended a soccer game, ... did not coach a baseball team,...never made their birthday party,...never took them to a movie or to a dinner or to the park, and so on." PAS children, when confronted with, for example, a family video of them enjoying themselves with the targeted parent at, say, a birthday party, simply deny the whole thing or say they were only pretending to be happy.

One of the mental health professionals interviewed by Gottlieb pointed out that this denial of objective reality leads to "cognitive distortion" that can lead to "an undermining of cognitive maturation, frequently to emotional disturbances and quite often to dysfunctional peer relationships." Again, PAS has profound negative effects on the child, not only at the time of the alienation, but well into adulthood.

This enforced fealty of the child to the alienating parent can have profound effects.

Nothing he did for them was seen in a positive light; and nothing selfish and irresponsible that their mother did could debunk their perception of her as Mother Theresa – not her screaming and cursing at them, not her

hitting them, not her allowing her extended family to verbally abuse them, not her failing to show interest in their education, not her showing more interest in her social life than in them, and so on.

How can the detrimental effects of that sort of brainwashing be denied?

Worse, how can it be countenanced by organizations like NOW that pretend to act for women, many of whom become targets of just that sort of alienation? How can it be ignored by family courts that one and all loudly proclaim that their every word and deed is in “the best interests of the child?” And how can a profession that claims to treat mental illness and emotional disturbance turn a blind eye to such plainly pathological behavior?

Finally, Gottlieb makes clear the role the courts play in all this alienation.

The PAS is an opportunistic syndrome and it is generally the mother who is afforded this opportunity. The opportunity arises because the judicial system in this country is more likely to grant residential custody to the mother... And access to the child by the alienator – as well as lack of access by the alienated parent – is the environment which permits the PAS to thrive.

To Gottlieb, the adversarial system of family law is an open invitation to the alienating parent, and courts’ preference for maternal custody must be changed to joint custody as the default position.

In short, the refusal by courts to grant meaningful parenting time to fathers is the petri dish in which the PAS pathogen can grow. But Gottlieb doesn’t stop with courts and judges; she’s adamant that there’s a whole system – connected to the courts but apart from them – that aid and abet the alienating parent.

Those include parents who alienate, mental health professionals who refuse

to see alienation or, worse, ally themselves with the alienating parent, family attorneys who exacerbate conflict between parents, child protection personnel who "rush to judgment" of the targeted parent and police who "too frequently assume that the father is the obstructionist, who must prove himself to be innocent."

Linda Gottlieb has written a fine and necessary book. It should be required reading for everyone who is in any way involved with child custody cases.

The well-being of our children depends on our acknowledgement of PAS and our willingness to confront it. Gottlieb is on the front lines of the fight to do just that and for that she should be admired and her book read.