

SUPPORTING CHILDREN AFTER SEPARATION AND AVOIDING PARENTAL ALIENATION

What is parental alienation (PA)?

PA describes the act, by one parent, of making their child reject the other parent. An act of PA can be as simple as engaging a child in discussions in which the other parent is denigrated. It can also involve engaging in behaviours that discourage a child having contact with the other parent, asking the child to report on the other parent and sabotaging visitations.

PA can be passive or active. Passive PA includes subtle passive-aggressive behaviours that undermine the child's engagement, or makes them feel guilty for having contact, with the other parent.

The level of PA increases in situations where one parent is angry with the other parent. Here the PA becomes more overt and the child is expected to choose between parents. This results in the child's feelings and loyalty being torn between parents. The child is placed in a no-win situation and feels stressed and guilty irrespective of whether they are loyal to one parent or continue to try to maintain loyalty to both parents. They either feel they must ignore the parent who is being alienated or betray the parent who is engaging in the alienating behaviours. Where a child's opportunities to access the other parent are restricted, this demonstrates a moderate level of alienation. The alienating parent, however, might deny they are engaging in PA.

In severe cases of PA, there is consistent loathing of the other parent. The child is consistently subjected to discussions or behaviours denigrating the other parent. It is very clear to the child that the alienating parent does not want them to have a relationship with the other parent. Any relationship with the other parent is perceived by the child as betraying the alienating parent. To have a bond with the one parent that is providing the child with love and support means the child must adopt that parent's beliefs, even if that is the outright rejection of the other parent. The child may come to believe the other parent was no good and with time rejects them completely. They may develop resentment and hatred towards the alienated parent but not be able to articulate the reason for those feelings other than repeating information provided by the alienating parent.

How does PA affect children?

PA can cause significant emotional and behavioural problems for children. While single-parenting can be done effectively, conflict after separation tends to have a range of negative effects on children. Negative effects can include poor school performance, difficulty making friends and increased risk of behavioural problems, antisocial behaviour and substance abuse.

It is hypothesised that as children develop and form their identity, they model from their parents behaviour and internalise their attributes. When a parent is alienated, the child may internalise this split causing fragmentation in their sense of self. Hence, they may fail to develop significant aspects of self that might be associated with the alienated parent.



What is PA syndrome (PAS)?

The syndrome (PAS) is characterized by eight symptoms a child might present with after being subjected to PA from one parent over time. These symptoms are:

- ◊ A hatred toward the alienated parent.
- ◊ Weak reasons for the hatred toward the alienated parent.
- ◊ Little or mixed emotions toward the alienated parent.
- ◊ Denial the rejection of the alienated parent due to the parent who instigated PA.
- ◊ An automatic, instinctive feeling of idealised support toward the parent who instigated PA when there is conflict.
- ◊ Little or no guilt or remorse over how the alienated parent feels or is treated in conflict by the parent who instigated PA.
- ◊ Using situations and discussions that came from the alienating parent as support for their own negative feelings toward the other parent.
- ◊ Strong irrational dislike for, and alienation from, other acquaintances, friends and family of the alienated parent.

How do courts deal with PA?

Family courts treat PA differently. PAS is somewhat controversial as it is not listed in the current version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM V) which is used to categorise and standardise psychological and mental disorders. Courts, however, are obligated to consider the best interest of the child.

Due to significant delays in initiating and finalising court processes, parental rights can be adversely affected. When children are older this can mean that parents are unable to pursue the matter in court and have it resolved before the child reaches an age of consent and is able to make their own decisions. The problem is that even when the child can make their own decisions the PA process will prevent them making an appropriate, informed decision. Sadly, in such cases the alienated parent has little recourse or ability to exercise their rights as a parent. Parents who are alienated need support to manage this very distressing situation.

Helping a child subjected to PA?

The severity and duration of PA will influence the degree to which the child has been affected. Bonding again with the alienated parent will take time and effort. The alienated parent must consistently demonstrate unconditional love. The alienated parent must also avoid blaming the child or showing any negativity towards the other parent who alienated them from the child.

The following strategies do not work:

- ◊ **Waiting:** The child and alienating parent are unlikely to change on their own.
- ◊ **Negotiating:** The alienating parent is not likely to be reasonable and any attempt to negotiate may just inflame the situation and increase conflict.
- ◊ **Appeasing:** The alienating parent cannot be appeased because they seek reassurance through enmeshment with the child and are committed to sabotaging the bond with the other parent.
- ◊ **Mediation:** Mediation will only be effective if both parents are willing to commit to their child's best interest. They must place the interest of the child before their own. An alienating parent who is angry and spiteful might have difficulty suspending these feelings to place the interest of the child first. They might have a very black and white perspective and perceive any negotiation as a threat to their own bond with the child.

How can separated parents prevent PA?

Prevention is the best cure for avoiding PA or PA syndrome. Parents should approach their separation with a child-centered approach to parenting to prevent PA before it begins. A loving relationship with both parents and a strong parent/child bond are critical elements to avoiding the negative consequences of divorce on children.

The following guidelines help parents reduce and prevent the damaging effects of PA:

- ◊ Never ask your child to provide information about the other parent,
- ◊ Never speak negatively about the other parent in front of the child,
- ◊ Always encourage your children to love and respect the other parent,
- ◊ Always respect the child's time with the other parent,
- ◊ Never argue with the other parent in front of the child, and

- ◊ Be on time for custody exchanges and respect the child's visitation time with the other parent.

How do parents approach children subject to PA from the other parent?

Separation is very difficult. It involves significant change, loss, emotion and adjustment. Families experiencing PA should seek counselling from a registered psychologist with experience in relationship counselling. Being alienated from your child is distressing. It can lead to feelings of anger which expressed to the child can further alienate you. If you ignore the child, however, this also sends a message to the child that you have abandoned them. Parents need support to manage the experience of PA and in some cases, it might also be appropriate for the child to receive individual support.

Here are some tips for supporting your child:

- ◊ Learn to manage your feelings to avoid acting irrationally or having a negative influence on the child,
- ◊ Let your child know you love them and will always support them unconditionally,
- ◊ Maintain any form of contact you can and be positive,
- ◊ Don't get angry or blame children as they are being manipulated,
- ◊ Do not retaliate against the other parent,
- ◊ Keep accurate records and journal events,
- ◊ Seek legal advice, and
- ◊ Seek psychological counselling.

How a psychologist can help

Parental alienation needs to be avoided for the interest of all parties but especially the children affected by separation. Separation is difficult but ultimately everybody will have a better quality of life if the separation process is optimised so that parental relations can best support children associated with the relationship.

Through discussion and assessment with the relevant parties we assist to open and improve communication between family members to achieve better outcomes.

When to seek professional help

If you or your child is affected by parental alienation or you are separating and want support as an individual or couple call iflow psychology.

If separation is affecting a family members work, school, home life or relationships, psychological assistance should be considered. A GP can also organise a referral to a registered psychologist through the Better Access to Mental Health Care items. You may print a referral form from our website to assist your doctor.

iflow psychology can assist. **Just call 0431 564 257 or book an appointment online at www.iflowpsychology.com.au**