



Parent Alienation Awareness Day

Did you know that Wednesday April 25 is Parent Alienation Awareness Day? What the heck is that and why should I care?

Do you care professionally or personally to a family going through a separation? Are you going through a separation (40-50% of Canadian couples are)? Do you know that at least 80,000 children in Canada are affected by family separation every year? Do you know that 40,000 of those children will lose their involved, close relationship with their father within 2-3 years of the separation? Does it surprise you that most of those children lose their close relationship with their grandparents and extended family?

The answer to the ‘why should I care’ question is captured in the preceding questions and facts.

Parent Alienation Syndrome (PAS) is a fancy clinical name, acknowledged as real, but still not officially accepted by the mental health world. It is when a parent (usually with custody of the children following a separation) turns a child against the other parent through subtle behaviors, comment or outright lies and manipulations. In its most extreme form the behavior by the offending parent is almost pathological, long term and may only be reversible through years of therapy.

The classic films on separation and divorce ‘The War of the Roses’ and recently ‘The Squid and the Whale’ portray warring couples in an unimaginable relationship; but unfortunately the unimaginable is not uncommon and permanently scars too many children, parents and grandparents.

In the past few days the on-going 6-year feud between celebrities Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger was front and center on CNN and other news services. The couple’s 11-year-old daughter was again victimized by one or both parent’s anger toward the other parent. The father was frustrated that his daughter was unavailable at the prescribed time for his telephone call. After repeated efforts to reach her, he lost it, and left an angry message making accusations/statements about his daughter’s behavior.

Their case and this mini episode capture a not uncommon scenario. A telephone call has incredible importance to a non-custodial dad trying to keep a limited and long distance relationship going with their child. Because this conflict has gone on for so long the wounds are deep. His daughter is now eleven and the dad doesn’t understand that she appears to be indifferent to his needs or their relationship. He knows in his heart that she is a victim but his anger is triggered and he temporarily loses his perspective and he verbally lashes out. The mother has abandoned taking any responsibility to ensure her daughter takes the call and is probably willing to allow or even offer temptations to take precedent over the father’s call. She simply wants dad to disappear, to become a non-person at this time in her life.

The following is a checklist for separated parents and grandparents; these are moderate symptoms and are offered as early warning signs of full-blown PAS and help you recognize that you may be dealing with PAS.

- Does the custodial parent communicate to the child her/his dislike of the child visiting with you?
- Does the custodial parent refuse to hear positive things about you from the child?
- Does the custodial parent delight in hearing negative news about you?
- Does the custodial parent refuse to speak or otherwise communicate directly with you?
- Does the custodial parent refuse to allow you to be nearby at pick up or drop off?
- Does the custodial parent make negative comments about you and then deny making them?
- Does the custodial parent destroy memorabilia that belongs to you?
- Does the custodial parent engage in subtle accusations to the child- Your dad/mom was never around much when you were little. Now we are both abandoned!
- Does your child mimic your words, expressions and attitudes toward the other parent?

Parent Alienation Syndrome is a horrific form of child abuse and its consequences are so destructive to so many people. It turns lives upside down and children, loving parents and grandparents may never recover from its devastation.

The roots of Parent Alienation Syndrome are **not** to be found in gender-based explanations!

In Canada most primary care parents (90%) are mothers and as such most offending PAS parents are mothers. Again, it is wrong headed, dangerous and even self-serving to make the same gender based mistake that is so often done when trying to explain that the ‘deadbeat parent’ problem is a ‘deadbeat dad’ (in Ontario 95-97% of payers are dads) problem.

The PAS Mom and the Deadbeat Dad are the disastrous outcomes of our gender- based approach to separation, custody and access issues.

Solutions to PAS rest in not allowing the emotionally damaged parent to continue with their offending behavior. The Courts must hold a PAS parent accountable; social workers, therapists, Family and Children Services, Office of the Children’s Lawyer, Family Law lawyers, mediators and others in this field must exercise their professional responsibility or the deadly negative outcomes will continue.

Prevention will only take place if the offending party is held accountable, sooner rather than later, for their behavior and in doing so that parent will also gain the opportunity to a healthier, long term relationship with their children. Denying the existence of parental alienation only ends up enabling the transgressing parent and damaging children for a lifetime.

Hostile Aggressive Parenting (HAP) can be viewed as the pathway to PAS and the following scenarios are commonplace. Probably every separated parent does the wrong thing once in a while, but repeated failings are too damaging and must be acknowledged for what they are.

Consider the following scenarios or behavior patterns:

- Blaming the other parent for not having enough money, changes in lifestyle, and other problems in the child’s presence.
- Refusing a parent access to medical and school records or scheduled extracurricular activities.
- Allowing children to choose whether to visit another parent even when they are not legally empowered to do so.

- Deny a parent hospital visitation to their child on a non-access night; threatening to withdraw a child from activities if the other parent comes to watch the child participate.
- Children are provided biased legal information by one parent.
- A parent tacitly approves belligerent/rude behavior by the child toward the other parent.
- Using access time as leverage against the other parent.
- Deliberately setting up temptation alternatives for children on access time with the other parent.
- Providing children with inappropriate details about the relationship's failure.
- Asking the children about the other parent's personal life.
- 'Rescuing' the children from the other parent when there is no danger.

The triggers for Parental Alienation are not found in gender. Mothers and fathers are more than capable of taking out their anger against the other parent by striking out and hurting them in a way in which they are most vulnerable, through their children.

The most significant fear for a separated parent with children is the loss of their children. Fathers are often the parent experiencing this loss, close-up from the moment of separation; mothers fear that they could lose their children to dad's home and often feel a need to hold their children even closer. This can result in the child taking on the responsibility for that parent's emotional well being or lead to separation anxiety for the child.

Children need and deserve two loving, involved and supportive parents in their daily lives. Their development into healthy, responsible and loving young adults demands that parents and all the adults entrusted with their welfare accept their responsibility to make that happen.

Kids 'n' Dad Shared Support has seen the unnecessary damage caused by PAS and related behaviors.... and it is all so unnecessary.

Taking active steps will lead to **making a difference... for several lifetimes.**

Kids 'n' Dad services families in the Waterloo Region. Its goal is to ensure that children from a separated family have two parents co-operating and actively supporting them as they develop and mature into adulthood.

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