

WHAT IS PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME?

LAW AND JUSTICE INTERIM COMMITTEE
SARA HESS - MAY 2024

OVERVIEW

The concept of parental alienation syndrome has been a source of controversy among legal and mental health professionals for many years. Some refer to the term “parental alienation syndrome (PAS)” as it was originally coined by Dr. Richard Gardner in the 1980s to describe a set of symptoms displayed by children, while others use the term “parental alienation” to refer to a dynamic or set of behaviors employed by one parent against another. Some believe it is important to distinguish between the two terms, while others use them interchangeably.

The purpose of this report is to provide an understanding of the concept of parental alienation syndrome, as there is no universal term or definition on which professionals can agree.

BLACK’S & THE DSM-5

Black’s Law Dictionary, 11th Edition, the most cited legal dictionary, defines the term “**parent-alienation syndrome**” as “a situation in which one parent has manipulated a child to fear or hate the other parent.”¹

Black’s acknowledges the controversy surrounding use of the term as a psychological syndrome.

Much of the skepticism from mental health professionals is due to the term’s absence from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5), the authoritative diagnostic manual used by practitioners to diagnose and classify mental disorders. Advocates have attempted to get the concept added to the DSM, but the American Psychiatric Association has thus far declined to do so. Critics of parental alienation syndrome say the concept lacks evidence and is not widely accepted by the scientific community, while proponents argue that the “spirit” is present in the DSM-5 in diagnoses like “Parent-Child Relational Problems” or “Child Psychological Abuse.”²

Parent-alienation syndrome. (1990) A situation in which one parent has manipulated a child to fear or hate the other parent; a condition resulting from a parent’s actions that are designed to poison a child’s relationship with the other parent • Some mental-health specialists deny that this phenomenon amounts to a “psychological syndrome.” – Abbr. PAS. – Also termed *parental alienation syndrome*.

Black’s Law Dictionary, 11th Ed.

COMMON THREADS THROUGHOUT DEFINITIONS

Though terminology and definitions vary, most appear to have the following factors in common.

- Parental alienation occurs most often in cases of family divorce or separation.
- It involves *unjustified* rejection of one parent by the child, often fueled by the other parent.

¹ *Black’s Law Dictionary* (11th ed.). (2019). Thomson Reuters.

² Domitrovich, Stephanie. (2015). The parental alienation controversy: two opposing views. *Judges’ Journal*, 54(3), 21-21.

SAMPLE DEFINITIONS

“The *parental alienation syndrome* (PAS) is a disorder that 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 the *combination* of a programming (brainwashing) parent’s indoctrinations and the child’s own contributions to the **vilification of the target parent**.”³

“[Parental alienation] is a mental condition in which a child—usually one whose parents are engaged in a **high-conflict separation or divorce**—allies himself strongly with one parent (the preferred parent or alienating parent) and **rejects a relationship with the other parent** (the target parent) **without legitimate justification**.”⁴

“[Parental alienation syndrome is] a child’s experience of being **manipulated by one parent to turn against the other (targeted) parent** and resist contact with them.”⁵

“[Parental alienation is] the efforts on the part of one parent to **turn a child against the other parent**...and [Parental alienation syndrome is] a child’s **unwarranted rejection of one parent** in response to the attitudes and actions of the other parent.”⁶

“Parental alienation is a strategy whereby one parent intentionally displays to the child **unjustified negativity aimed at the other parent**. The purpose of this strategy is to damage the child’s relationship with the other parent and to turn the child’s emotions against that other parent.”⁷

³ Houchin, T. M., Ranseen, J., Hash, P. A. K., & Bartnicki, D. J. (2012). The parental alienation debate belongs in the courtroom, not in DSM-5. *The Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law*, 40(1), 127–131. <https://jaapl.org/content/40/1/127.long>

⁴ Bernet, William. (2015). Parental alienation: misinformation versus facts. *Judges' Journal*, 54(3), 23-27.

⁵ American Psychological Association. (2023, November 15). *Parental alienation syndrome (PAS)*. APA Dictionary of Psychology. Retrieved April 11, 2024, from <https://dictionary.apa.org/parental-alienation-syndrome>

⁶ Baker, A. J. L. (2008). Parental Alienation Syndrome — The Parent/Child Disconnect. *Social Work Today*, 8(6), 26. <https://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/102708p26.shtml#:~:text=Parental%20alienation%20is%20a%20set,haveing%20a%20relationship%20with%20them>

⁷ Lewis, K. (n.d.). Parental Alienation Can Be Emotional Child Abuse. National Center for State Courts. https://www.ncsc.org/_data/assets/pdf_file/0014/42152/parental_alienation_Lewis.pdf