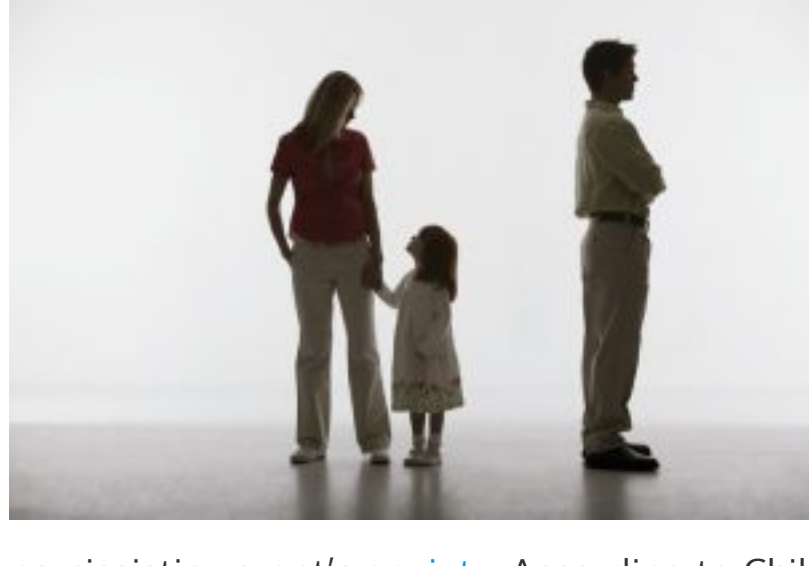


Child or Weapon? The Psychological Dynamics of Parental Alienation

June 15, 2017 • By [Sharie Stines, PsyD](#), GoodTherapy.org Topic Expert



Parental alienation syndrome (PAS), a term coined by Richard A. Gardner in the 1980s, describes a condition—usually generated in the context of [divorce](#) or child custody disputes—in which a parent creates an alliance with their child against the other (non-abusive, nurturing, protective) parent. The child, influenced in part by the alienating parent, contributes to the dynamic by denigrating the targeted parent.

PARENTAL ALIENATION AS CREATED DRAMA THEORY

According to Dr. C.A. Childress, [attachment](#)-based parental alienation is created when a person with [narcissistic](#) tendencies gets their child to reject the other parent as a way to modulate the narcissistic parent's [anxiety](#). According to Childress, this anxiety is threefold:

1. **Narcissistic anxiety:** Tremendous anxiety over the threatened collapse of the narcissistic defense against the experience of deep personal [inadequacy](#).
2. **Borderline anxiety:** Intense anxiety surrounding overwhelming fear of [abandonment](#).
3. **Trauma anxiety:** Reactivated anxiety (emotional flashback) of childhood attachment [trauma](#).

In essence, the parent with narcissism is trying to resolve these anxieties by creating a drama involving themselves (the perceived "competent/good" parent), the other parent (the "abusive" parent), and the child (the "victim" of the "abusive" parent). (Quotation marks are used to emphasize these are perceptions being created by the person with narcissism.)

The other parent is pitted against their child in order to regulate the anxieties of the alienating parent. The parent with narcissism essentially uses the child as a regulatory object to assuage deep anxieties via this created drama, wherein the narcissistic parent gets to be perceived as the "normal" or "good" parent while "rescuing" the child from the other, "crazy," alienated parent.

The created drama "resolves" the alienating parent's childhood unconscious narrative of [abuse](#) whereby the person, as a child, had to split off their perception of the abusiveness of their own parent(s) from cognitive recollection—thereby divorcing themselves from having to feel the rejection of their own misattuned parent(s).

GoodTherapy uses cookies to personalize content and ads to provide better services for our users and to analyze our traffic. By continuing to use this site you consent to our cookies.

this drama? Because they mistake normal feelings of grief as a sign the non-abusive parent is causing the child to feel bad because of the non-abusive parent's supposed abuse.

Why does the child go along with this drama? Because they mistake normal feelings of [grief](#) as a sign the non-abusive parent is causing the child to feel bad because of the non-abusive parent's supposed abuse.

When a child's family experiences divorce or separation, the child typically experiences feelings associated with grief. The parent with narcissistic tendencies is able to capitalize on these negative feelings by attributing them to the so-called abuse of the other (non-narcissistic) parent. The alienating parent will wage war against their ex in order to temper feelings of [rejection](#) and inadequacy, using the child as a pawn.

PARENTAL ALIENATION AS DOMESTIC VIOLENCE BY PROXY THEORY

Parental alienation syndrome is not recognized as a disorder within mental health or legal circles, and not everyone agrees it is a "thing." Tina Swithin of One Mom's Battle describes what occurs as [domestic violence](#) by proxy. In other words, the alienating parent is really just trying to abuse their ex by using children as weapons.

While the parent with narcissism, prior to divorce, could not have cared less about the children's school events, etc., post-separation they act like "super parent," showing great attention to activities previously ignored. This is impression management.

Domestic violence by proxy is a pattern of behavior rather than a set of specific actions. The underlying motives for abusers are [power](#) and [control](#). While in the relationship, the abusive person can abuse in more ways than one, usually directly. Once separation occurs, the children become the most effective means of abuse.

According to this theory, the abuser knows they are abusing and the actions are specific and intentional. Other people, such as therapists, attorneys, or child protection agents, are often duped by the narcissistic person's behaviors and may come out against the non-abusive parent. An abusive parent may even end up with primary custody of children as a result.

WHAT AN ALIENATED PARENT CAN DO

If you are the target of parental alienation, what can you do to protect yourself and salvage your relationship with your children?

Realize you must keep yourself strong and hopeful and do not become defeated. Be creative in your strategies, keep your energy strong, and never let your ex or your children know how victimized you feel. Many people with narcissism are to weakness as sharks are to blood. You may get eaten alive if you let your children or your ex know how defeated you feel.

Don't let your fears keep you from action. Don't catastrophize. Stay in the present and try the strategies below:

- **Never react in anger.** This only reinforces the alienating parent's point of view you are unstable.
- **Empower yourself.** Do not allow yourself to take the position of helplessness. Persevere and never give up. Let your children see you believe in yourself.
- **Live a victor's life.** Do not see yourself as a victim. Take care of yourself and live well.
- **Stop triangulating.** Do not put your children in the middle. Let your child love the other parent without influence.
- **Take initiative in solving the problem.** It may only get worse if you don't, and no one else is going to do it for you.
- **Document everything.** For legal purposes, make sure you keep accurate records of any violations you experience with the alienating parent.
- **Keep your cool.** As mentioned above, any evidence you are upset can and likely will be used against you. Can't you just visualize the other parent gloating, "I told you she was crazy?"
- **Always take the "high road," but be as sly as a fox in the process.** Do not allow yourself to be unethical or naïve.
- **Do not underestimate the parent with narcissism.** They may stop at nothing to "win" this battle for their children's allegiance.
- **Be the best parent you can be.** Incorporate a parenting style that balances discipline, clear family structure, and flexibility.
- **Be an example and teacher to your children.** Because they are exposed to narcissistic qualities, your children may have a skewed view of reality. Teach them healthy relationship skills, particularly empathy. In addition to this, teach them healthy morality and character development skills.
- **Enjoy your children.** When they are with you, be a safe presence for your children to relax with.
- **Consider therapy.** If the emotional toll becomes too burdensome, [reach out to a mental health professional](#) who can help you develop coping strategies and a plan of action.

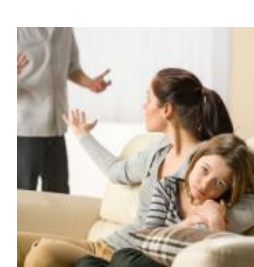
References:

1. Childress, C.A. (2015, May 28). *An attachment-based model of parental alienation: Foundations*. Claremont, CA: Oaksong Press.
2. Major, J. A. (n.d.). *Parents who have successfully fought parental alienation*. Retrieved from <http://www.breakthroughparenting.com/PAS.htm>
3. Simon, G. (2011). *Character disturbance*. Marion, MI: Parkhurst Brothers Publishers Inc.
4. Swithin, T. (2017, February 4). Domestic violence by proxy. Retrieved from <https://onemomsbattle.com/2017/02/04/domestic-violence-by-proxy>

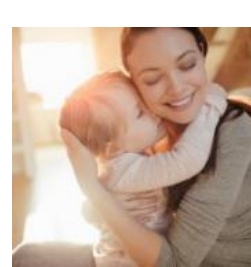
© Copyright 2017 GoodTherapy.org. All rights reserved. Permission to publish granted by [Sharie Stines, PsyD, therapist in La Habra, California](#)

The preceding article was solely written by the author named above. Any views and opinions expressed are not necessarily shared by GoodTherapy.org. Questions or concerns about the preceding article can be directed to the author or posted as a comment below.

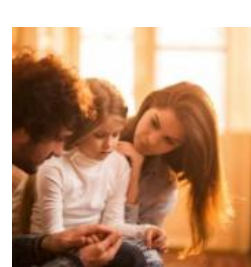
READ MORE



[When One Parent Alienates a Child from the Other Parent](#)



[The Hidden Trauma of Parenting: Caring in Contrast to Your Past](#)



[What You Can Do to Raise Awareness of Child Abuse](#)

10 comments Leave a Comment



Heather

June 15th, 2017 at 8:40 AM

Good grief if you are using a child as a weapon then you don't even deserve to have one
But unfortunately I am sure that this is done on a regular basis

[Reply](#)



Billy D

June 17th, 2017 at 9:17 AM

My ex wife has completely turned both of our kids against me. They do not ever want to have anything to do with me and it feels so forced the time that we do have that we spend together. I know they don't want to be there. It has made it hard for me to have any kid of relationship with them because who wants to work so hard when you know that it is all one sided.

I never thought that she would do this to me.

[Reply](#)



ana

June 21st, 2017 at 11:31 AM

Yep – this is cruel punishment to the targeted parent (the other loving parent) and is theft to the child's integrity to who they are in their parent-child relationship with you. I suffer from Maternal Alienation in which my children (3 girls) have been brainwashed by their father (very much a covert narcissist, whose alter ego portrays him to being their mother) meaning I, as a mother, am no longer needed since he is both dad and mom. He's gone further to split my children's maternal side of the family, deceiving my family into believing I am dead (a drama they have taken on to give him honor as if he were entitled to replace me within the family nucleus). This drama allowed him to take my children last summer to go visit my family, without my consent or approval (screwing up everyone else as a result of his deception, and to which they all betrayed their family loyalty to me, knowing I its a lie because I am not dead). He is threatening to do the same again this summer – its nothing but a game of manipulation and control for what he does not have, since the trust has been broken. "Hang in there, and stay strong" because your children will one day recognize their grave mistake to dishonoring you, they will see true love of who you are to them and will come find you. My children are in darkness still, but I have faith they will find light. Hope is what keeps me in contact with my children from a distance (emails and texting) whether they block it or not, because if they don't read it immediately I know they eventually will; it is my hope they will care to share the value and love of their parent-child relationship with me (their other loving parent). I hope the same is for you, so take it to heart, the pronlem is not you (the targeted parent), rather its your ex (the alienator, to who is turning your children away from you). STAY STRONG! :

[Reply](#)



lexi

June 19th, 2017 at 2:15 PM

It is sad but there are children who were raised being used as a weapon against the other parent and now they do the same thing to their own children because this is the version of normal that they grew up with when they were younger.

Now even though they are old enough to have children of their own, they have never been taught that this is wrong.

[Reply](#)



Ryder

June 25th, 2017 at 8:24 AM

Usually I don't look to Hollywood to know what is right or wrong but it seems that recently there are some clear parenting goals that some are setting for the rest of us. See Chris Martin and Gwyneth Paltrow. This is how co parenting should be done. I know that we only get the parts of the story that they want us to hear but I do think that they are both making a strong effort to not let their divorce come between raising their children in a thoughtful and loving environment with both of them equally involved.

[Reply](#)



Tammy y.

July 6th, 2017 at 1:35 PM

This is being done to my brother and our entire family by my brother's daughters mom ,it's truly sad that a parent would lie and use a child like this.She is afraid of us even her own brother.My brother doesn't want to be with her so this is what she does.

[Reply](#)



Daniel N.

July 12th, 2017 at 12:04 AM

My ex has turned narcistic took into her custody our only daughter. It's one year now never seen my daughter, i wonder whether i've to go court in order to support my family.

[Reply](#)



Kenyada T

January 25th, 2019 at 7:59 PM

My ex husband is doing this as of now and has been for the last 13yrs but what I dont get is he is abusive to the new girl as he was to me and he's also been arrested for possession recently so I don't understand why the courts continue to drag me and my daughter along with his escapades. He decided to make attempts to hurt me and refused her last year breaking her heart and now he wants back in and she does not want anything to do with him so now he's trying to force visits through court's since his daughter refuses to text or call him back and tells the court's I am refusing him to see her. I dont know what to do , I left him due to abuse and now he's using my daughter as an access to abuse

[Reply](#)



Margo

June 27th, 2019 at 12:21 PM

I know a woman who actually hired a surrogate (because she had lost her uterus after her first child and had a child) with a man five years into their marriage, simply to get even with him. She brought her son up from day one to distrust and fear his father. The father and his entire family were not allowed to hold or touch the child. Only when she filed for divorce did the father have any actual possible influence with the son. By then it was too late. The child was 5 and the hate for his father was palpable. In this case both the mother and father are highly NPD and the poor kid seems to suffer with it too. Anyone accidentally getting involved with either parent in a romantic relationship are in for some serious twisted, completely ridiculous and hateful scenarios.

[Reply](#)



Sherine P

September 24th, 2019 at 4:12 AM

I am a grandparent, and this is happening to me : (

[Reply](#)

Leave a Comment

By commenting you acknowledge acceptance of GoodTherapy.org's [Terms and Conditions of Use](#).

Name:*

Email address:*

Comment:*

☐ I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA
Privacy - Terms

- ☐ Notify me when new comments are added.

- ☐ Subscribe me to the GoodTherapy.org public newsletter.

[Submit Comment](#)

* Indicates required field.

ABOUT GOODTHERAPY

- About Us
- Mission and Vision
- Advertise
- Press Room
- GoodCause

- Therapist Membership
- Tx Center Membership
- Student Membership
- Partnership Information
- Contact Us

RESOURCES

- Find a Therapist
- Explore Therapy
- Elements of Good Therapy
- Modes of Therapy
- Dear GoodTherapy

- Find a Treatment Center
- What Is Therapy?
- Types of Therapy
- Issues Treated in Therapy
- Warning Signs in Therapy

FOLLOW GOODTHERAPY



SUBSCRIBE TO NEWSLETTER



Grow your practice with GoodTherapy!

[JOIN NOW](#)

GoodTherapy

SEARCH OUR BLOG

[Search](#)

- ☒ Title ☐ Content ☐ Author

BROWSE BY CATEGORY

- Therapy News
- Featured
- Issues Treated
- Dear GoodTherapy
- Uncategorized

[See more](#)



NOTICE TO USERS

GoodTherapy.org is not intended to be a substitute for professional advice, diagnosis, medical treatment, or therapy. Always seek the advice of your physician or qualified mental health provider with any questions you may have regarding any mental health symptom or medical condition. Never disregard professional psychological or medical advice nor delay in seeking professional advice or treatment because of something you have read on GoodTherapy.org.