



Parental Alienation - Hurting Your Child Instead of Your "Ex"

By Dr. Linda Hancock

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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When a couple goes through separation or divorce, there is frequently a tendency for one or both parents to "bad mouth" the other parent to the children. Dr. Richard Gardner, an American child therapist and forensic psychiatrist developed two terms that he believed described this situation.

The words "Parental Alienation" involve behaviours of a parent in his/her attempts to discredit the other parent and influence the child not to be with that parent.

"Parental Alienation Syndrome" is a term that was used by Dr. Gardner to describe the resulting behaviours and attitudes in the child after Parental Alienation had occurred. According to him, it is a form of "mind control" that the child cannot resist which results in strong rejection of the other parent by the child. Dr. Gardner's writings state that diagnosis of this syndrome could take up to several months.

At times parents and lawyers in other countries have argued in child custody and access cases that "Parental Alienation Syndrome" exists. In fact, some internet websites claim that judges have actually moved children from the care of the parent who is alienating the children into the home of the other parent.

There is, however, a great deal of controversy about Dr. Gardner's work with some professionals supporting it and others describing it as "misleading at best, and dangerous and damaging at worst" (intermedia-inc.com/title.asp?sku=DE06&subcatID=25).

Neither of these terms is found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV-TR (DSM-IV-TR)* which is published by the American Psychiatric Association and used across North America as a standard for diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. Dr. Gardner committed suicide in May 2003, apparently without leaving a successor to carry on his work or answer questions. Because of this, there are very few professionals who would consider diagnosing the child or children with this syndrome. There also appears to be little documentation of this syndrome being used either as a diagnosis or as one being used in Court settings, particularly in Canada to date.

Separation and divorce are very stressful times for parents and their children. Being able to identify one specific reason for a child's reluctance to spend time with one of the parents would be extremely complex, if not impossible.

When children are experiencing stress they need to have the support of as many healthy adults as possible. "Bad-mouthing" another parent limits the child's resources.

This fall I attended a workshop on "Restructuring Family Therapy". The instructor who is a Registered Psychologist stated that he explains alienation to his clients in this fashion. If one parent speaks negatively about the other, the child initially feels s/he can only trust the one who is doing the alienating. As the child matures, however, s/he realizes that the other parent has strengths and then begins to lose trust in the parent who did the bad-mouthing. Now the child has lost trust in both of the parents!

This therapist then tells his clients "Don't worry. There is always a 37 year old on the internet who will tell your child that the child can trust him". Pretty scary, isn't it?

You may not like the behaviours or choices of the child's other parent but do you trust him or her less than the internet predator?

Be very careful! It seems that using the term "Parental Alienation" actually results in the child losing the relationship with both of the parents in the long-term.

Life is choices. I hope you make good ones when it comes to ensuring that your child's needs are met and who will meet them.