

## Blog

### Parental Alienation - Still a Thing?

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by Susan J. Smith

Divorce can have many repercussions. But can divorce cause a child to become alienated from a parent? With the right mix of factors, it certainly can.

Back in 2001, this topic was addressed in [“The Alienated Child, A Reformulation of Parental Alienation Syndrome.”](#) Citing much of the research from the previous decades, the authors sought to clarify the complex factors that can lead to alienation in the hope of developing “an effective plan and structure for legal, judicial and therapeutic interventions.”



The article alleged that the nature of the divorce, parent behaviors, child age and vulnerability were all factors that could contribute to alienation. Unlike estranged children, who are distanced because of a history of violence, abuse or neglect, alienated children reject a parent seemingly without cause. The article noted that the alienation is in “extreme disproportion between the child’s perception and beliefs about the rejected parent and the actual history of the rejected parents’ behaviors and the parent-child relationship.”

#### **Risk Factors for Alienation**

The article noted that a child can be heavily influenced by a parent, and that repeated angry and negative comments can play a role. Also, the alienating parent could truly believe that the other parent is dangerous, and then block access to the child. As a result, the rejected parent may withdraw from contact, falsely reinforcing the idea that he or she does not love the child.

Other risk factors for alienation include an intense marital conflict that directly involves the child, a jarring and/or humiliating separation, bitter and lengthy legal proceedings, and new partners perceived to be responsible for the breakup.

Children’s ages also play a part. “For children to form alignments with an angry parent and correspondingly reject the other parent, they need sufficient cognitive and emotional maturity,” according to the authors. They cite the most common ages as between 9 and 15.

#### **Parent Alienation Syndrome as a Legal Strategy**

At the time that the article appeared, Parent Alienation Syndrome (PAS) was considered a big deal. Originally designated as a syndrome, which has medical diagnostic implications, PAS has since been broken down and discredited by various professions and rejected by numerous courts. Is this really (or still) a ‘thing?’ Possibly.

Williams Family Law has worked with psychologist [Steven Cohen, PhD](#) as an expert on a number of challenging custody cases. He has said, “it is not the case that a child’s feelings are either genuine or a result of a parent’s subtle or direct communications. Feelings can be a product of the influence and behaviors of the parent over many years, and so incorporated into the thinking of the child, that for the child, the feelings are genuine.”

Dr. Cohen notes that parent-child relationships fall within nuanced categories on a continuum as described in *The Alienated Child*. These range from positive relationships with both parents to affinity to one parent, alliances with one parent, estranged and alienated relationships. He advocates for an equally nuanced, and age appropriate, assessment of children for custody disputes.

If you have questions about Parent Alienation Syndrome, child custody issues or other issues related to divorce in Pennsylvania, we can help. Call us at 215-340-2207, or email [info@bucksfamilylawyers.com](mailto:info@bucksfamilylawyers.com).

