

## WHAT IS "PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME" AND WHY IS IT SO OFTEN USED AGAINST MOTHERS?

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Psychological and medical syndromes play an important role in understanding behavior and providing treatment to victims of abuse. Unfortunately, there is one so-called syndrome that, in my opinion, does tremendous harm to many children and their parents, particularly mothers seeking custody in family court. I speak of psychiatrist Richard Gardner's Parental Alienation Syndrome (1987.) Gardner writes:

"One outgrowth of this warfare (over custody) was the development in children of what I refer to as the Parental Alienation Syndrome. Typically, the child viciously vilifies one of the parents and idealizes the other. This is not caused simply by parental brainwashing of the child. Rather the children themselves contribute their own scenarios in support of the favored parent. My experience has been that in about 80 to 90 percent of cases the mother is the favored parent and the father the vilified one." (1989, p. 2)

Gardner is an outspoken critic of certain aspects of the child protection system. Apparently, Gardner believes America is in the throes of mass hysteria over child sexual abuse.

He writes that "sex-abuse hysteria is omnipresent" (1992, p. xxv). In his 1991 book titled *Sex Abuse Hysteria: Salem Witch Trials Revisited*, Gardner is harshly critical of an unspecified portion of the mental health professionals, investigators, and prosecutors trying to protect children. For example, Gardner accuses some prosecutors of gratifying their own sexual urges and sadistic tendencies through involvement in sexual abuse cases. Gardner goes so far as to say that "there is a bit of pedophilia in every one of us" (p. 118). It seems clear that Richard Gardner cannot claim to be balanced or objective when it comes to allegations of child sexual abuse.

Gardner's Parental Alienation Syndrome has not, to my knowledge, been subjected to empirical study, research, or testing. Nor to my knowledge, has the syndrome been published in peer reviewed medical or scientific journals.

Rather, the syndrome is simply Richard Gardner's opinion, based on his clinical experience. Of course, the fact that Parental Alienation Syndrome is based on one man's experience does not imply there is something wrong with the syndrome. Nevertheless, it is clear that the syndrome is not accepted as a scientifically reliable way of telling whether an allegation of sexual abuse is true or false. Moreover, in my opinion, much of Gardner's writing, including his Parental Alienation Syndrome, is biased against women. This gender bias infects the syndrome, and makes it a powerful tool to undermine the credibility of women who allege child sexual abuse. Because parental alienation perpetuates and

exacerbates gender bias against women, I believe the syndrome sheds much more darkness than light on this difficult issue.

In the final analysis, parental alienation syndrome is little more than a scientific-sounding label for conduct that judges and lawyers have known about for years. In some custody battles, one parent attempts to turn the child against the other parent. The child becomes a pawn in the struggle over custody. Such parental behavior is inexcusable and should not be tolerated. In view of the damage inflicted by parental alienation syndrome and its bias against women, however, the wiser course would be to discard the syndrome and confront unethical behavior head on.

Another term coined by Richard Gardner is "Sex Abuse Legitimacy Scale." Of this scale, Lucy Berliner and Jon Conte write:

"A specific and disturbing example of using (behavioral) indicators as determinative of true versus false cases is that of the Sexual Abuse Legitimacy (SAL) Scale. This "scale" claims to be able to discriminate between 'bona fide' and 'fabricated' cases by indicating the presence or absence of a series of characteristics of cases. There are 26 dealing with the alleged victim, 11 dealing with the accuser (usually the mother), and 13 dealing with the accused (usually the father).

"The criteria are divided into those which are very valuable (worth 3 points if present), moderately valuable (2 points), and low but potentially valuable (1 point). Separate scores are generated for the child, the accused, and accuser. Scores in the range of 50 percent of the maximum or more are highly suggestive of bonafide sexual abuse and those quite low (below 10 percent) are fabricated. Sample criteria are: for the child, very hesitant to divulge the abuse or if no quality of a litany; for the accuser, appreciates importance of relationship between child and father or initially denies abuse; for the accused, allegation not in the context of divorce or career choice involving children. The SAL Scale suffers many of the problems that all indicator approaches suffer and a number which are unique. It is based entirely on the author's personal observation of an unknown number of cases seen in a specialized forensic practice. Although reference is made to studies carried out "between 1982 and 1987" they are unpublished, not described, and are of unknown value. There are no studies which have determined if the scale can be coded reliably. Many of the criteria are poorly defined. There have been no scientific tests of the ability of the SAL Scale to discriminate among cases. There is no evidence that the numerical scores have any real meaning. Indeed, to our knowledge, the entire scale and Parent Alienation Syndrome upon which it is based have never been subjected to any kind of peer review or empirical test. In sum, there is no demonstrated ability of this scale to make valid predictions based on the identified criteria" (1993, p. 114).

If you are a woman and you allege child sexual abuse, expect to be attacked with Richard Gardner's Parental Alienation Syndrome. Gardner's writing is popular among attorney's who represent men accused of abuse, and among some mental health professionals. Your

attorney must be prepared to counteract the misleading and destructive effects of Parental Alienation Syndrome and the Sex Abuse Legitimacy Scale.

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