

# HUGS TO HEARTBREAK

## A Parent's Journey Through Parental Alienation



### Are You an Alienating Parent?

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What do you think would happen if comedian Jeff Foxworthy stopped telling redneck jokes and started talking about Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS)?

For example; instead of "If you've ever cut your grass and found a car; you might be a redneck, we'd hear "If you've ever disconnected the phone so you child's other parent couldn't get through, you might be an alienating parent."

And in place of "If someone asks to see your ID and you show them your belt buckle," you might be a redneck," he'd tell us, "If you've ever intercepted the other parent's birthday present to the child and told the child 'your mother/father didn't send a gift,' you might be an alienating parent."

If Foxworthy goes from "you might be a redneck" to "you might be an alienating parent," he might not be a comedian much longer. There is nothing funny about Parental Alienation Syndrome.

The late Dr. Richard A. Gardner, a New York psychiatrist and author of *The Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Guide of Legal and Mental Health Professionals*, coined the term parental alienation approximately 20 years ago to characterize the breakdown of previously normal, healthy parent/child relationships during divorce and child custody cases.

In PAS, one parent deliberately damages, and in some cases destroys, the normal, loving relationship between his or her child and the child's other parent. In severe PAS cases' the alienating parent and child work together to successfully eliminate the previously loved Mom or Dad from the child's life.

An alienating parent's behavior stems from the parent's unresolved emotional issues. The parent uses the child to fill his or her unhealthy emotional needs at the expense of the other parent.

PAS experts have identified three levels of alienating behavior – mild, moderate and severe. In reality, these levels are nothing more than points along a continuum of behavior. The alienating parent may bounce between levels depending on his or her emotional state. And the parent's emotions are based on a variety of factors – including how well the parent is dealing with those unresolved issues; and how well the child is meeting his or her new responsibilities to the parent.

Are you an alienating parent?

We won't repeat our variation on Foxworthy's familiar "... you might be a redneck" refrain after each of the following examples, but we will say it once. You might be an alienating parent if you:

- Allow the child to talk negatively or disrespectfully about the other parent.
- Set up tempting alternatives that would interfere with the other parent's time with the child.
- Give the child decision-making power about spending time with the other parent when no choice exists.
- Act hurt and betrayed if the child shows any positive feelings towards the other parent.
- Use the child as a courier, messenger or spy.
- Ask the child to lie to the other parent or betray the parent's trust in the child.

- Share the details of the divorce settlement with the child.
- Go without dinner and then tell the child the other parent didn't give you enough money for everyone to eat dinner.
- Let the other parent worry needlessly about the child.
- Infringe on the other parent's time with excessive phone calls or scheduled activities.

If you are concerned that your behavior might make you an alienating parent, ask yourself this question: "Did I act this way before the divorce or separation?"

For example, an alienating parent may tell the other parent he or she can't see the child because the child has a cold. But before your divorce or separation, did you quarantine your child from the other parent over a cold?

An alienating parent may tell the other parent the child can't come to the phone because he or she is doing homework, watching television or playing with a friend. But when the other parent called home and asked to speak to the busy child before your divorce or separation, did you occasionally ask, "Want me to put him/her on anyway?"

Finally, an alienating parent will often call the child when the child is with the other parent and ask the child if he or she is okay – sending the child the message that the other parent isn't up to the task of caring for him or her. But when the other parent was spending time alone with the child before your divorce or separation, did you call the child repeatedly and ask, "Are you okay? Are you sure you're okay? You'd tell me if you weren't okay, wouldn't you?"

Don't engage in alienating behavior and become a bad punch line. Your children deserve better. So do you.