

HUGS TO HEARTBREAK

A Parent's Journey Through Parental Alienation



A Father's Day Wish for the Alienated Dad

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I remember the last Father's Day I spent with my son. He presented me with a baseball glove so we could practice together. I had bought him a glove the month before when, for the first time, he showed an interest in my favorite sport. Now he gave me a glove to replace the Willie Mays model I had used since, well, Willie Mays played the game.

My baseball-themed Father's Day was three years ago. Today the glove sits in a filing cabinet in my office. The glove's leather still shines – not a scuffmark anywhere. I can slip the glove over my hand and imagine my son's 30-mile an hour "fastball" hitting the glove's pocket – but I don't. I haven't put my fingers inside the glove's fingers since my coaching dreams disintegrated into the nightmare of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS).

The concept of PAS is pretty simple – one parent deliberately damages, and in some cases destroys, the previously healthy, loving relationship between his or her child and the child's other parent. In a severe PAS case the alienating parent and child work together to successfully eliminate the previously loved Mom or Dad from the child's life.

Dr. Richard A. Gardner, author of *The Parental Alienation Syndrome: A Guide for Mental Health and Legal Professionals*, coined the term Parental Alienation Syndrome almost 20 years ago to characterize the breakdown of previously normal, healthy parent/child relationships during divorce and child custody cases. Yet the United States judicial system pays little, if any, attention to PAS. The legal and psychological communities often mistakenly dismiss PAS as the typical rancor associated with high conflict divorce and child custody cases. With one of every two marriages ending in divorce, approximately 20 million children are already victims of mild, moderate or severe alienating behavior. Twenty-five million more children will likely face some form of alienating behavior in their futures.

"The key factor that is characteristic in all PAS families is the alienating parent's real or perceived fear of abandonment," says David Israel, a Connecticut clinical psychologist who specializes in child advocacy and family mediation. "During a divorce, the alienating parent's main mission becomes filling the void left by the divorce and destroying a relationship that is loved and cherished by the other parent."

I know what you're thinking – a normal, healthy parent/child relationship doesn't go from hugs to heartbreak overnight. I believed the same thing. I was wrong. PAS is like a train barreling through a dark tunnel with its lights off. You don't want to be standing in the middle of the tracks when the train emerges from the darkness.

On July 15, 2000, my attorney hadn't even finished drafting my divorce complaint when my future ex-wife started screaming at me within earshot of our son. The line between fact and fiction disappeared. Nothing was too inappropriate for a young boy's ears. According to her I was solely responsible for our impending divorce. "Your father is abandoning us," she told him.

My son cried. He blamed me for the divorce. "That's not true," I cried back, "I love you. We'll get through this together," I promised. But my pleas fell on deaf ears.

While I searched for the words that I hoped would bring order to chaos, my wife threw fuel on the fire. She called me every name she could think of, and she encouraged our son to repeat everything she said. He did. I asked him not to talk to me that way - I was still his father. But my wife told him he could talk to me any way he wanted. She told him he didn't have to listen to me; he didn't ever have to talk to me again.

I felt like I was driving past a gruesome car wreck - the kind of wreck where you automatically turn away because your brain can't process what your eyes would see. My brain couldn't comprehend what I was living through. Nor could my brain have ever imagined what I was going to live through.

My wife had our son sleep in her bed that night. He was still sleeping in her bed when I moved out of the house one month later. "I need you to protect me," she kept telling him.

Before I moved out, I couldn't even get him to have dinner with me. "Please don't leave me," Mom begged him. "I don't want to be alone."

I've learned a lot about PAS since those first nights. I've had a lot of time on my hands. As I write this, I haven't spent any time alone with my son in almost three years. I haven't even seen him in two years; even though he lives ten minutes away.

The most important thing I've learned is that PAS isn't just a crime against a parent, but three crimes against the child.

The first crime is that the alienating parent doesn't acknowledge that every child is one half of each parent. Every time the alienating parent tells the child how horrible the other parent is, the alienating parent is telling the child that half of him (or her) is horrible.

The second crime is that the alienating parent teaches the child that cutting off contact with people is an acceptable way to handle anger, hurt and disappointment. The world is full of people. One day the child will be an adult. The child who believes that alienating behavior is acceptable will grow up without the skills to have normal, healthy relationships with other adults.

The third crime is that one-day the child will look back on the alienating parent's behavior from an adult perspective. He or she will then realize that the alienating parent robbed the child of something very precious - the love and attention of the other parent. The child turned adult will realize that the trust placed in the alienating parent was misplaced. He or she will feel betrayed. At that point the adult will not just have one damaged relationship with a parent, but damaged relationships with both parents.

The third crime is the worst crime of all.

It is also a crime that Moms and Dads suffer the daily heartache of PAS. For an alienated parent, Mother's Day and Father's Day aren't the Kodak moments shown in advertisements. Instead the days serve as an additional reminder that the love we once shared with our children is gone.

I'll wish my Dad a Happy Father's Day this year. I'll probably buy him a gift too. However my most heartfelt Father's Day wishes go to the Dads who are victims of PAS. So Happy Father's Day to the alienated Dad:

In the airport, may someone meet you with a big hug.

In the mall, may a toddler look up at you from a stroller and smile.

At a ballgame, may you catch a foul ball and enjoy giving the ball to the kid sitting closest to you.

At work, may you enjoy your job.

At the supermarket, may you get a group “thank you” from the Scout troupe for buying something you didn’t really need.

At home, may you have the information you need to order your child’s school picture; and the strength you need to keep the photo where you can see it.

On vacation, may you get through an entire chapter of your book without thinking about the child who refused to come with you.

Holding the remote control, may you come across actor Rick Schroeder in a rerun of NYPD Blue rather than The Champ.

Volunteering as a Big Brother, may you see signs of your positive influence.

Listening to the radio, may the station play Harry Chapin’s Cats in the Cradle and Will Smith’s Just the Two of Us when you’re out of the room.

Cooking dinner, may you have a reason to increase the ingredients of your favorite recipe.

Picking up the ringing phone, may you have a wonderful surprise on the other end of the line.