

## THE SPECTRUM OF PARENTAL ALIENATION SYNDROME PART III: THE KOPETSKI FOLLOW-UP STUDY

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*The purpose of this study was to evaluate the efficacy of structural and therapeutic interventions for interrupting parental alienation syndrome (PAS) toward the severe end of the spectrum. Follow-up was obtained on 45 PAS children from a custody evaluator's practice. The child's adjustment and relationship with both parents at evaluation and follow-up were compared. Children who had enforced visitation with the target parent, or were in target parent custody, maintained relationships with both parents unless the alienator was too disturbed. In the completed alienation outcome group, the alienating parent had custody before and after the evaluation, and was able to violate court orders with impunity. Therapy as the primary intervention was ineffective and sometimes made things worse.*

"The purpose of any custody or visitation evaluation is to give an opinion regarding the best legal and practical structure for the relationship between the child and each parent after separation and divorce."

*—From Kopetski's informed consent for evaluations*

The purpose of this study was to provide research-based information on the efficacy of various interventions for interrupting or preventing parental alienation syndrome (PAS) in cases toward the severe end of the spectrum. Follow-up was obtained on 45 PAS children who were at risk for losing one parent in the divorce, often the one with whom a healthier relationship was possible. The study includes a number of alienating parents who levied false allegations of child abuse, or went so far as to abduct the child, in their efforts to sever the child's relationship with the target parent.

The study was conceived in February of 2000, when Deirdre and Randy Rand met with a group of experts from across the country in Washington D.C. The group drew up a series of research objectives pertaining to PAS and a follow-up study was at the top of the list. The Rands knew that Kopetski had compiled descriptive statistics on 84 PAS cases (1, 2), drawn from more than 20 years of practice as a custody evaluator in Colorado, until

health problems forced her to retire in the mid 1990s. They contacted Kopetski about utilizing her cases as the basis of a follow-up study. In August of 2000, the Rands traveled to Kopetski's home in Montana, where the three of them met for the first time and the project got underway.

### **KOPETSKI'S WORK ON PAS**

Throughout her career, Kopetski sought to integrate science with her training as a clinical social worker (3). Early alienation cases, encountered in the 1970s, caused her to question traditional clinical assumptions, such as primary parent theory, which she and other evaluators had accepted as axiomatic. Initially, Kopetski thought of the alienation families simply as disturbed. Terms such as "parental alienation" were not yet in common use and did not become popular until Gardner introduced the term parental alienation syndrome to describe a divorce specific psychological disturbance of the child which was occurring with greater and greater frequency (4-7).

Kopetski was concerned about the fact that children in alienation scenarios typically lost one parent when custody decisions were based on primary parent theory, which assumes that children have a primary attachment to only one parent, which must be preserved at all costs, even if the relationship is pathological. In her view, a better paradigm was needed, one which honored the contribution of both parents to the child's development. She began actively searching for new ideas and decided to focus on Bowlby's work. Bowlby had developed a successful treatment for separation anxiety and school phobia (8, 9). Kopetski found this approach useful with children who seemed to have developed a phobic reaction to one parent. Her ideas about PAS continued to evolve as she integrated the divorce research coming out in the 1970s and 80s into her clinical work, learning from experience what worked and what did not when it came to interrupting alienation. In 1987, Kopetski learned of Gardner's work, astonished to find that their independently derived observations of the characteristics of PAS families were remarkably similar.

In 1991, Kopetski presented her work on PAS, including descriptive statistics on 84 cases, at the 15th Annual Child Custody Conference in Keystone, Colorado (1). Narrative portions of the paper were eventually published in *The Colorado Lawyer* (10, 11). Her data on 84 cases was developed

into an article on incidence, gender and false allegations of child abuse in PAS, co authored with the Rands (12). In 2003, The Kopetski Follow-up Study was presented at the 19th Annual Conference of the American College of Forensic Psychology (13).

Kopetski utilized the scientific method in her work as a custody evaluator, exploring alternative hypotheses, checking interview data against information from other sources, and utilizing psychological testing as a second opinion within the evaluation, to help control for bias. Kopetski and a psychologist colleague performed evaluations as a team, developing a team model for custody evaluations which became the standard in their state. In their protocol, carefully structured observations of the child with each parent was a cornerstone of the evaluation. The team met on a weekly basis to discuss the information gathered and reconcile questions and inconsistencies before the report was finalized.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The largest long-term study of divorcing parents who enlist their children to do battle against the other parent remains that of Clawar and Rivlin (14), with a sample of 700 divorce families, studied over 12 years. Clawar and Rivlin anchored their work in established concepts of social psychology, using terms such as "brainwashing" and "programming" to describe parental behaviors which affected the child's perceptions of the other parent. Clawar and Rivlin reported that traditional interventions such as outpatient therapy and gradual reintroduction of the target parent were largely ineffective and that therapy sometimes made things worse. Increased time with the alienated parent was ordered in approximately 400 cases, and 90% of the time the child showed improvement, not only in relationship to the target parent, but in other areas as well. Children interviewed after increased time was ordered often expressed relief, saying that they could not have reestablished their relationship with the alienated parent on their own.

Clawar and Rivlin found that courts were often reluctant to change custody or restrict the AP's access, waiting until the child had deteriorated to a dangerous level before giving custody to the target parent or restricting the alienating parent's access. They cited the example of a boy in the custody of his alienating mother who had to be hospitalized before custody was changed

to the father. The AP mother had the child in treatment for an array of physical and psychological problems, which miraculously disappeared when the boy was placed with his father. It is worth noting that The Kopetski Follow-up Study contained two similar cases in which children under the age of 10 had to be psychiatrically hospitalized before the court was willing to take the strong action needed (see Families 5 and 8). Clawar and Rivlin are currently working on the second edition of *Children Held Hostage*, which will include more than 300 new families, as well as follow-up on some of the 700 families in the original study (Personal communication with Brynne Rivlin, LCSW).

Kopetski's Survey of 84 PAS Cases (1) can be considered a pilot for the Kopetski Follow-up Study. According to Kopetski, 84 of 423 families she evaluated from 1975 to 1990 were PAS cases. There were 49 cases in which alienation seemed to be interrupted, 15 in which alienation was completed, eight still in litigation, and 12 with outcome unknown. In 18 of the 49 interrupted cases, the court either placed the child with the target parent or ordered enforced visitation with that parent. In the remaining interrupted cases, the parents reached a stipulated agreement on custody and visitation. In the cases where alienation was completed, the alienating parent retained sole custody and continued to litigate until visits with the target parent were terminated. It was common to find that a therapist was involved in supporting the alienation, based on the premise that separating the child from a disturbed, symbiotic relationship with the alienating parent would be harmful to the child.

Dunne and Hedrick (15) examined the efficacy of various legal and clinical interventions in remedying PAS, based on a sample of 26 children from 16 families who met Gardner's criteria for severe PAS. Alienation was interrupted for four of the 26 children, three of whom were placed in the custody of the target parent, with restrictions on the alienator's access. The fourth child was one of three siblings, who were ordered to meet with the target father in a therapist's office. The boy became increasingly interested in spending time with his father, which so enraged the mother that she sent her son to live with the father, claiming that the boy was abusive and incorrigible. The boy's sisters remained completely alienated.

Like Clawar and Rivlin, Dunne and Hedrick found that orders for traditional therapy and gradually increased visits with the target parent were ineffective and that therapy sometimes made things worse. Dunne and Hedrick sounded a note of caution to professionals working in the divorce arena.

Failure to appropriately identify and intervene in the early stages of these cases may result in the alienating parent being given support for his/her position, reinforcing the child's need to maintain or expand complaints about the alienated parent. This has the capacity to more firmly entrench the syndrome and to enhance the severity (15, p. 37).

In response to the call for a PAS follow-up study at the February 2000 meeting in Washington D.C., Gardner conducted a follow-up study of 99 PAS children from his practice (16), focusing on the question, Should courts order PAS children to visit/reside with the alienated parent? A statistically significant difference was found between the 22 cases in which the target parent was given custody, or the alienator's access was reduced, and the 77 cases in which the alienator retained custody and "no change" was ordered. In the first group, the child's PAS symptoms were reduced or eliminated and the child had a relationship with the target parent at follow-up. Of the 77 children in the second group, all but four had no contact with the target parent. The four children who had contact with the target parent at follow-up were adolescents who had reconciled with the target parent on their own (Cases 27, 28, 85), including one young woman who had reconnected with her father at 18, after living apart from her mother for a year (Case 96).

Berns obtained a grant to study PAS and whether fathers who alleged PAS were being backed by fathers' rights groups (17). She reviewed 108 divorce judgments in Brisbane, Australia, identifying 31 cases in which the issue PAS was raised, either directly or indirectly. She had her assistant go through the cases for PAS as well and found a high level of interrater reliability. Parental alienation was substantiated by the court in 23 of the 31 cases. This is the first study in which more fathers than mothers were found to be alienating. The involvement of father's rights groups was negligible, estimated at 2%.

Berns reported that several of the alienating fathers had a documented history of domestic violence or stalking. When father was the alienating par-

ent, mother usually gained or retained custody and in some cases, the father's access was restricted or denied. There were two cases in which the target father was awarded custody, and two in which custody was split. In one case, the non-custodial alienating mother was denied access. Where mother was the alienating parent and retained custody, the court ordered liberal visitation for the father. According to Berns, change of residence was ordered in 10 of the 23 cases where PAS was substantiated. This study provides insight into the custody and visitation orders which judges in that jurisdiction considered appropriate in PAS cases.

Braver et al. (18) studied the impact of relocation decisions, using a sample of 602 college students whose parents had divorced. The students whose divorced parents remained in the same geographical vicinity had more positive outcomes than those who had a parent relocate, either with or without the children. The students who did not experience the relocation of a parent were more likely to view their parents as a source of emotional support and to receive financial help from their parents. These findings build on those of an earlier study by Braver et al. (19), which found that the less time spent with the non-custodial parent, the weaker the parent-child relationship.

## METHODOLOGY

### Sample

Kopetski was able to obtain follow-up on 45 PAS children from 25 families whom she evaluated over a period of 20 years, starting in 1976. Mother was the alienating parent (AP) in 18 cases and father was the alienator in seven. The cases ranged from moderate to severe, including five APs who abducted the child, and 10 who made false allegations of sex abuse in an attempt to sever contact with the target parent (TP). Allegations of physical abuse and neglect by the AP were also common. The families in the study came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Target parents were current on their child support payments. The children ranged in age from 3 to 16 years at evaluation and half were adults at follow-up.

### Defining PAS

Kopetski viewed PAS as a form of psychosocial pathology in the AP's relationship with the child (10, 11). The alienator's distorted, negative views

of the other parent are shared with the child, who becomes increasingly identified with the AP until the child begins reflecting the AP's distorted perceptions about the other parent as the child's own version of "the truth," what Gardner referred to as the "independent thinker" phenomenon (5-7). Meanwhile, the AP attempts to attenuate, control, or exclude contact with the other parent through behavior such as removing the child from physical proximity of the TP, aligning themselves with worthy causes then accusing the TP of violating them, and engaging in repeated litigation to enforce exclusion. Kopetski recognized that TPs are not perfect but the distinguishing characteristic in the alienation cases she encountered was that the TP was more supportive of the child having a relationship with the other parent, more flexible, more willing to acknowledge personal problems, and to work on resolving them.

#### **Confidentiality and Informed Consent**

Kopetski obtained informed consent from parents who gave follow-up interviews. To protect confidentiality, she prepared a summary of each case prior to the collaborative work, deleting identifying information and altering extraneous details. Kopetski was retired when the follow-up was obtained and had not been involved in the cases for five years or more.

#### **Procedures**

Information obtained at follow-up was used to place children in one of three outcome groups: Interrupted Alienation, Mixed Outcome, or Completed Alienation (see Table 1). The Interrupted Group was comprised of children who had a robust bond with the TP, free from the alienator's influence, and able to benefit from relationships with the TP's extended family. Mixed Outcome was the designation given to families with two or more children in which alienation was interrupted for at least one child, or to a family with an only child who had a mixed outcome because the efforts to interrupt alienation were flawed, resulting in an attenuated relationship with the TP. The Completed Group was comprised of families in which alienation was completed for all children in the family at follow-up. Children for whom alienation was completed typically exhibited the classic PAS symptoms described by Gardner (4-7) and others, such as irrational hostility toward the TP, reflexive support for the AP, and spread of animosity to the TP's extended family.

Children's adjustment and relationship with both parents at evaluation served as the baseline. The efficacy of various interventions, such as orders for therapy, custody and visitation was measured by the child's adjustment and relationship with both parents at follow-up.

**Table 1. Demographics for the Children in Each Outcome Group**

Outcome Group	Boys	Girls	Total Children in Each Group
Interrupted Alienation Families 1 to 12	9	11	20
Mixed Outcome Group Families 13 to 17	6	5	11
Completed Alienation Families 18 to 25	4	10	14
Totals	19	26	45

### **Limitations of the Study**

The Kopetski Follow-up Study has many of the common limitations found in clinical research conducted in real life settings, such as nonrandom sample, data analyzed retrospectively, and use of descriptive statistics rather than mathematically calculated comparisons. The custody evaluations in this study are not necessarily representative of all evaluators. Children's need to maintain relationships with both parents after the divorce was the fundamental, underlying principle of the team's evaluations, while some evaluators prefer to rely on the primary parent theory, which assumes that the child has a primary attachment to only one parent. According to Kopetski, the team recommended custody to mothers and fathers equally, whereas some evaluators in her area recommended custody to the mother 90% of the time. Kopetski's team model for custody evaluations is not necessarily the standard in jurisdictions outside Colorado, though Keilen and Bloom (20) found that 48% of evaluators surveyed endorsed a team approach.



## RESULTS

### INTERRUPTED ALIENATION OUTCOME GROUP

The Interrupted Group was comprised of 20 children from 12 families in which alienation was interrupted for all children in the family at follow-up (see Table 2). For the purpose of examining interventions, families are discussed under three headings, depending on the age of the children at evaluation: young children 3 to 5 years (Families 1 to 6); latency age children 6 to 10 years, some of whom were being drawn into alliances with the AP (Families 7 to 10); and older children 11 to 16 years who were aligned with the AP (Families 11 and 12). Family 10 was discussed in the section on latency age children, as two of the three children fell in that age group.

The post evaluation orders in the Interrupted Group were either for TP custody, or enforced visitation with the TP, with strong backing from the court to gain the AP's compliance. This backing took a myriad of forms, including sanctions, threatening the AP with loss of custody, and close monitoring by the court until normal visitation with the TP was established and going smoothly. Contrary to what some have alleged (21, 22), the rationale for placing children with the TP was not limited simply to the AP's alienating behavior, though that was an important factor. In some instances, the TP had custody going into the evaluation, usually because the AP was psychologically disturbed and the child needed to be protected. The team had similar concerns about problems with the AP's behavior and mental status in the cases where change of custody to the TP was recommended.

**Table 2. Pre and Post Evaluation Custody Orders for Interrupted Group**

Custody At Evaluation	Child's Age At Evaluation	Evaluation Task	Custody Orders Post Evaluation
6 AP mothers	6 Young (3 to 5)	10 Custody	2 AP mothers, enforced visits w/TP father
1 AP father	8 Latency (6 to 10)	2 Visitation	1 AP father, enforced visits w/ TP mother
4 TP fathers	6 Older (11 to 16)		8 TP fathers
1 TP father w/ shared custody of an only child			1 TP custody of younger children, AP mother custody of oldest

## CHILD'S ADJUSTMENT AND RELATIONSHIP WITH BOTH PARENTS AT EVALUATION

### Children Who Were 3 to 5 at Evaluation

In Families 1 and 2, the TP father had custody going into the evaluation. In Family 1, the child had been living with her father for more than a year but spent several days a week with her mother. The AP mother had several episodes of homicidal rage and her obsession with sex abuse by the father was making the girl extremely anxious. The child was very comfortable with her father. They were warm and spontaneous when seen together and talked easily about a variety of topics, including the divorce. The team recommended sole custody to the father and supervised visits for the AP mother. In this case, long-term supervised visitation made it possible for the child to have the benefits of a relationship with her mother without the drawbacks.

In Family 2, the TP father had temporary custody with liberal visitation for the mother. Mother was extremely paranoid, with suicide and homicide ideation. Sole custody to the father was recommended, with supervised visits for the mother. Mother's behavior during the visits was angry, inappropriate, and out of control. The boy developed serious behavior problems, but the supervised visits continued. Eventually, the court put a stop to the visits and gave father permission to move out of state, where the boy's adjustment problems disappeared.

In Family 3, the parents had shared custody, but the AP mother wanted to move away. The child would have had intense separation anxiety from her mother but for the fact that she felt secure when she was with her father and had never spent more than a few days apart from either parent. Sole custody to the TP father was recommended, with liberal visitation for the mother. Mother moved to a distant state and refused to visit in the child's hometown, so father brought the child for extended visits in the mother's community.

In Family 4, the AP mother had temporary custody while the parents were trying unsuccessfully to reach a stipulated agreement, which was the reason for a custody evaluation. Mother was found to be fostering separation anxiety in the child, who was well past the age when separation anxiety is considered normal. Father's interaction with the girl was more appropriate. Initially, the team recommended primary custody to the mother, with liberal visitation for the TP father, working toward a goal of shared custody. Mother

responded by alleging sex abuse. After a thorough investigation, the charges were not substantiated, but there was a cessation of contact with the father during which time the girl's functioning deteriorated dramatically. The team recommended that the child be placed in the custody of her father, with equal time for the mother. Mother sought to regain custody when the child was older, but the court upheld the girl's placement with her father.

In Families 5 and 6, the TP father was seeking visitation after a prolonged period of restricted access, due to false allegations of abuse by the AP mother. When normal visitation was ordered in Family 5, the AP mother escalated her allegations against the father until the child became so stressed that she had to be hospitalized. The judge threatened mother with loss of custody if there was one more false allegation of abuse. Mother decided to cooperate with the visitation, but moved away. Father was able to see his daughter regularly, by doing all the transportation.

When normal visitation was ordered for the TP father in Family 6, the AP mother repeatedly refused to produce the child. The judge sanctioned her with jail time and ordered an evaluation. The parents were litigating in five different arenas and the team opined that reducing the level of conflict was necessary for visitation to work. The child was quite resilient, despite the intense conflicts between the parents, and obviously enjoyed spending time with her father. The team recommended that the parents and their new partners be ordered to meet weekly in a therapist's office, not for therapy per se, but to work out practical issues pertaining to the visitation. The court agreed to monitor the situation closely until visits were going smoothly, which took about a year.

#### **Children Who Were 6 to 10 at Evaluation**

In Family 7, the AP mother was seeking custody upon her return from a year in residential treatment. The children had adjusted quite well during the long separation from their mother but became stressed when she returned, because of the litigation and her aggressive attempts to prove abuse by their father. The team recommended that the TP father retain custody, with liberal visitation for the mother. Mother continued making false allegations of abuse against the father until he sued her for harassment and she agreed to stop, illustrating the need for setting limits on the AP's behavior. Communication

between the parents improved after that, and the children were finally able to enjoy their time in both homes.

In Family 8, the AP mother had a history of hospitalization for mental illness. Father had custody at evaluation and was seeking to reduce the mother's time. Mother was seeking custody and putting intense pressure on the child to reject his father. Sole custody to the TP father was recommended, with restricted access for the mother. The court was reluctant to curtail mother's visits until the boy had a breakdown and was hospitalized as a danger to self and others. Supervised visits were attempted, but the AP mother was so disturbed that the court eventually terminated visits.

In Families 9 and 10, the AP mother had custody. The two girls in Family 9 had a warm and affectionate relationship with their mother, who obviously cared about them, but was prone to reporting factitious events and was quite inappropriate at times. Seen without any parents, the girls expressed enthusiasm about seeing their father and step-mother. Custody to the TP father was recommended, with liberal visitation for the mother, who decided to accept the recommendations after the team met with each parent to discuss their findings.

The three siblings in Family 10 all had serious emotional problems which predated the divorce. At evaluation, the oldest was an early adolescent who was completely aligned with his mother, and quite disturbed. The younger children were rejecting the TP father as well, but the team believed that their alienation was not entrenched and recommended that the younger children be placed with him. Mother retained custody of the oldest, who was not required to see his father.

#### **Older Children Aligned with the AP at Evaluation**

In Family 11, the TP mother had initially stipulated to AP father custody, believing that she would have regular visitation and that the boys would work through their anger at her for the divorce. Publicly, the boys were adamant about not wanting to see their mother. Privately, they expressed the wish that she would return home and their fear of losing both parents. The team recommended primary residence with the AP father, and enforced visitation for the mother, with a clear understanding that alienation was to stop

immediately, or custody would be changed. The boys began seeing their mother on a regular basis and reestablished their close relationship with her.

The children in Family 12 were aligned with the AP mother. Initially, the team recommended custody to the mother, and father decided to accept this recommendation. Six months later, when the family was reevaluated, physical care of the children had deteriorated, along with their social and academic functioning. They were even more strident in their rejection of their father. The team made a tentative recommendation for custody to the TP father, but the court was reluctant to order this and allowed the mother to retain custody. Soon after winning the custody battle, mother abducted the children. With the help of law enforcement, the children were eventually recovered and the court placed them in the custody of their father. They saw their mother regularly, on a visitation basis.

### **CHILD'S ADJUSTMENT AND RELATIONSHIP WITH BOTH PARENTS AT FOLLOW-UP**

#### **Children Raised in TP Custody**

Children in TP custody had relationships with both parents, unless the AP was too disturbed. Children who were having behavior and adjustment problems at evaluation had typically improved, and many could be described as thriving at follow-up, e.g. doing well in school, involved with friends and extracurricular activities, and free to love and be loved by both parents. One of the children in Family 12 had gotten in trouble for delinquent activity after being placed with the TP father and was put on probation. Father attended certain classes with his son, which was a condition of the boy's probation, and by late adolescence, the boy had turned his life around and gone off to college.

Children in TP custody who had frequent and continuing contact with a relentless AP were prone to periods of attenuation in their relationship with the TP and more likely to have problems with anxiety and depression, similar to the "overburdened child" described by Wallerstein (23). This was particularly true for only children, who felt more torn, and for the oldest child of several siblings, who tended to identify more with the AP. Children in TP custody did best when contact with the AP was structured so that the child could have the benefits, without the drawbacks.

The boy in Family 8 who had been hospitalized continued to have significant problems until the supervised visits with his mentally ill mother were terminated. The court allowed the TP father to move away, so he could be closer to his family. The boy began to settle down, making friends in school and enjoying his new found relationships with father's extended family. Mother continued her relentless attacks against the father and step-mother, until their marriage failed. At follow-up, the boy was losing his family again and symptomatic for social, emotional and academic problems, only now he was in his teens.

Adult children raised in TP custody had normal emancipations and were typically enrolled in college, or had already graduated. One young woman had obtained some college credits, but decided to put her education on hold. At follow-up, she was working and had the AP mother living with her. She maintained contact with her father, but was not as close to him as her siblings.

#### **Children Raised In AP Custody**

The four children in AP custody who had enforced visitation with the TP had a meaningful relationship with the non-custodial TP at follow-up, even if it was not as robust as that of children raised by the TP. The girl in Family 6, whose parents and their new partners developed a good working relationship, was truly free to love and be loved by both parents and was developing normally. In Family 5, the AP mother moved away after losing on the issue of father's visitation, but tolerated her daughter having contact with her father. At follow-up, this young woman was a high academic achiever but had significant problems in peer relationships, for which she sought guidance from her father.

The boys in Family 11 were also high academic achievers. The oldest was going to college, after an angry, guilt ridden emancipation from his AP father, who insisted that because of the divorce, he could not contribute financially to his son's education. This young man had social and emotional problems at follow-up, but the rift with his father was resolving and he had contact at will with both parents. His younger brother seemed well adjusted, and had pretty much resolved his feelings about the divorce.

### Spontaneous Reconciliation with the TP in Adulthood

In Family 10, where the younger children were raised by the TP father, the oldest boy remained living with the AP mother until he graduated with honors from college. The siblings who had a good relationship with their father provided "bridge relationships," which facilitated the young man's reconciliation with his father (24, 25), who helped his son emancipate. The Rands have a multiple case study on parent-child reconciliation in press (26).

### MIXED OUTCOME GROUP

The Mixed Outcome Group was comprised of 11 children from five families (see Table 3). Of the five children for whom alienation was interrupted at follow-up, two were younger children who had been placed in TP mother custody following the evaluation, and three were children latency age or older who participated in enforced visitation with the TP mother. There were three children who had an attenuated relationship with the TP at follow-up, and three who remained completely alienated, including a young man who was alienated from both parents.

**Table 3. Pre and Post Evaluation Information for the Mixed Outcome Group**

Custody At Evaluation	Child's Age At Evaluation	Evaluation Task	Custody Post Evaluation
1 AP mother	3 Young (3 to 5)	4 Custody	1 AP mother, therapy and gradually increased visits w/ TP ordered
2 AP fathers	4 Latency (6 to 10)	1 Visitation	
2 TP mothers	4 Older (11 to 16)		2 AP fathers, enforced visits w/TP, only youngest child complied
			2 TP mothers, liberal visits w/ AP father

## **CHILD'S ADJUSTMENT AND RELATIONSHIP WITH BOTH PARENTS AT EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP**

### **Children Who Were 3 to 5 at Evaluation**

In Family 13, the AP father focused his anxieties on his first born son, and was encouraging the boy to be aggressive toward his mother. The boy was so anxious that his behavior was disorganized and out of control. His younger sister had no difficulty with either parent and seemed to be unaffected. The team recommended sole custody to the TP mother and restricted access for the AP father, but father persuaded the court to give him equal time. At follow-up, the boy had social, academic and behavioral problems. Mother had tried several times to get help for her son, but father blocked her efforts. The boy spent several days a week with the AP father, who continued to foster a clingy, enmeshed relationship with his son. The boy's relationship with his mother had improved somewhat, but was still attenuated. His younger sister was developing normally.

The boy in Family 14 was an only child with intense separation anxiety from the AP mother, with mild separation anxiety from his father, as well. Seen with his mother, the boy was unusually aggressive. Mother was unable to structure her son's behavior and participated in his aggressive fantasy play. Father was able to structure the boy's behavior and had a mutually enjoyable relationship with his son. The team made a strong recommendation for custody to the TP father. Mother contested the evaluation and ended up with sole custody. The court ordered therapy for the child and gradually increased visits with the father, at the therapist's discretion. After eight years of therapy, the therapist continued to insist that the boy was not ready for overnights with his father. The boy saw his father frequently for day visits, but was chronically anxious, afraid that engaging with his father would be disloyal to his mother. The boy was artistically gifted and did well in school, but had social and emotional problems at follow-up.

### **Children Who Were 6 to 10 at Evaluation**

In Family 15, there had been an initial determination of custody to the TP mother, who had remarried and wanted to move away. The father and stepmother were obsessed with the idea that the children had physical and psychological problems and that mother was neglectful and endangered



them. At evaluation, the children seemed to be developing normally and had affectionate relationships with both parents. The team recommended that the TP mother retain custody and be allowed to move away, with long summer visits with the AP father. Father was a relentless alienator, and the children became increasingly aligned with him as they grew older, especially the older brother, who identified with his father and demanded to live with him. Mother became seriously ill and decided to "let go." The children went to live with their father, who made new allegations of abuse and got custody in juvenile court. A few years later, father fell into a deep depression when the stepmother left and threw the children out. The daughter reconciled with her mother, graduated from college, and was doing well at follow-up. Her relationship with her father was attenuated. Her brother was angry at both parents and wanted nothing to do with anyone in the family. He obtained a college degree but had no friends and was socially isolated. At follow-up, he was on medication for depression.

#### **Older Children Aligned with the AP at Evaluation**

In Family 16, both parents had psychological problems during the marriage which affected their parenting. The three boys were aligned with the overindulgent AP father, who condoned their abusive treatment of their mother. The older boys were in their teens and had serious social, emotional and school problems at evaluation. The youngest boy was trying to imitate his older brothers, but was still in grade school. Mother had turned her life around, but was afraid of the children and unable to manage their aggression. The team recommended primary custody to the AP father, and structured visitation time with the mother, in the hopes that the children would gravitate toward her as her circumstances improved. The youngest boy began seeing his mother regularly and chose to live with her in adolescence, when he developed problems with school failure and delinquent behavior. The AP father rejected him, but he enjoyed being part of the new family with his mother and stepfather. At follow-up, the boy was back on track and expected to graduate from high school. His older brothers were going to college. One had chosen a college near his mother and was beginning a rapprochement. The other was pursuing the same self-indulgent, self-destructive lifestyle as the AP father and continued to reject his mother.

In Family 17, the TP mother had primary custody of the three children following the divorce. Several years later, she fell on hard times and agreed to let the father and stepmother take custody while she got back on her feet. The children became aligned with their father, especially the girls, who were in their teens. Mother obtained an order for enforced visitation. The youngest child began seeing his mother regularly. One of his sisters began seeing her mother sporadically, going to her mother's when she was mad at her father, and going back to his house when she was mad at her mother. The other sister adamantly refused to have anything to do with her mother. The boy chose to live with his mother in adolescence, when he began failing in school and getting into trouble, and had contact with his father at will. At follow-up, he was working and getting his GED. The sister who saw her mother sporadically in adolescence emancipated and reestablished a good relationship with her mother. She had social and emotional problems at follow-up, and was grappling with an abusive relationship. The sister who was completely alienated had dropped out of high school and had a child out of wedlock. She and the baby were living with the AP father, who was alone now that he and the stepmother were divorced. The young woman remained hopeful that her parents would get back together and let her mother see the baby, hoping this would entice her mother to remarry her father.

#### **FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH DIFFERENT OUTCOMES FOR CHILDREN IN THE SAME FAMILY**

##### **Children For Whom Alienation Was Interrupted at Follow-Up**

Of the five children for whom alienation was interrupted, three had been placed in TP mother custody (see Table 4). The other two had enforced visitation with the TP mother, and eventually chose to live with her, even though one boy was rejected by the AP father as a result. It is interesting to note that two custodial TP mothers in the Mixed Outcome Group allowed the AP father to take custody when the mother was having difficulties (Families 15 and 17). In both cases, the youngest child in the family eventually reconciled with the mother, while an older sibling remained alienated into adulthood. All things being equal, the youngest child seemed better able in the short term to benefit from what the TP had to offer than did older siblings, who were more identified with the AP.

**Table 4. Post Evaluation Custody Orders and Status of Mixed Outcome Families at Follow-up**

Interrupted Alienation at Follow-up	Attenuated Relationship w/ Target Parent	Completely Alienated at Follow-up
Youngest child in Family 13, TP mother custody, resilient child who spent half time w/ disturbed AP father	Oldest child in Family 13, TP mother custody, vulnerable child who spent half time w/ disturbed AP father	
	Only child in Family 14, AP mother custody, boy w/ sep anx from AP, therapy enabled alienation, visits w/ TP were never increased	
Youngest child in Family 15, TP mo custody, AP eventually got custody, AP rejected kids, girl reconciled w/ TP mom		Oldest child in Family 15, TP mo custody, AP fa got cust, fa rejected kids, boy alienated from both pas
Youngest child in Family 16, AP fa custody, enf visits w/ mom, boy chose to live w/mom in adolescence, rejected by AP	Older sibling in Family 16, AP fa custody, mom gave boy permission not to visit, beginning rapprochement in adulthood	Older sibling in Family 16 AP fa custody, mom gave boy permission not to visit, alienated into adulthood
Youngest child in Family 17, TP mo custody, fa got custody, enf visits w/ mom, boy chose to live w/ her in adolescence		Older sibling in Family 17, TP mo custody, fa got cust, girl resisted enforced visits, alienated from TP mom into adulthood
Older sibling in Family 17, TP mo custody, fa got custody, enforced visits w/ TP sporadic, girl reconciled w/ mom in adulthood		

#### **Children Who Had an Attenuated Relationship with the TP at Follow-Up**

Two of the children who had an attenuated relationship with the TP at follow-up had intense separation anxiety from the AP at evaluation (Families 13 and 14). The orders for custody and access perpetuated this unhealthy relationship. In Family 13, the court refused to restrict the AP father's access. In Family 14, the court gave the AP mother sole custody. Gradually in-

creased visits with the father were ordered, but the visits were never increased, which stunted the boy's relationship with his father.

#### **Children Who Were Completely Alienated at Follow-Up**

The oldest child in Family 15, who had been so eager to live with his father, was rejected by his father when the stepmother left. On the threshold of young adulthood, he had no one to rely on but himself, since his mother had been unable to care for him either. Understandably, he was angry with both parents. The older sister in Family 17 was in a similar situation. This girl had been the closest to her mother of the three siblings. She had suffered the loss of her family because her mother wanted a divorce. A few years later, she felt even more abandoned by her mother, when she and her siblings went to live with their father. The older brother in Family 16 had been seduced by the AP father's pleasure seeking, self-indulgent lifestyle, which reinforced the bond between father and son. Mother had rejected this lifestyle when she left the marriage.

The three children who remained completely alienated had serious problems in adulthood. The young woman in Family 17 was unable to emancipate from her father and had limited her life prospects by having a baby and dropping out of school. The young man in Family 15 was angry at the world and could not bring himself to have a relationship with anyone. The young man in Family 16 was enjoying his life, but the self-destructive nature of his activities was bound to catch up with him at some point, just as it had with his father, when the mother filed for divorce.

#### **COMPLETED ALIENATION OUTCOME GROUP**

The Completed Alienation Group was comprised of 14 children from eight families in which alienation was completed for all children in the family at follow-up (see Table 5).

The outstanding feature of the Completed cases was that the AP had legal or de facto custody going into the evaluation and, for one reason or another, retained custody afterward. Orders for therapy and gradually increased visits with the TP were readily sabotaged by the AP. There were no consequences for the AP's behavior, which was another distinguishing feature. One AP mother perjured herself, but the court refused to convict her because perjury carried a

mandatory jail sentence. Four APs in the Completed Alienation Group abducted their children but were allowed to retain custody.

Some children in the Completed Group were high academic achievers, in spite of their psychological and family problems. Others were unable to maintain their academic functioning and had problems with under achievement, absenteeism, school failure, and dropping out. Children in the Completed Group often had difficulty emancipating from the AP, and tended to have more social and emotional problems at follow-up than did children for whom alienation was interrupted.

**Table 5. Pre and Post Evaluation Custody Orders for Completed Alienation Group**

Custody At Evaluation	Child's Age At Evaluation	Evaluation Task	Custody Post Evaluation
6 AP mothers	2 Young (3 to 5)	4 Custody	6 AP mothers
2 AP fathers	7 Latency (6 to 10)	4 Visitation	2 AP fathers
	5 Older (11 to 16)		

### **CHILD'S ADJUSTMENT AND RELATIONSHIP WITH BOTH PARENTS AT EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP**

#### **Children Who Were 3 to 5 at Evaluation**

Family 18 was evaluated soon after the parents separated. The children were bright and engaging and longed to see their father, who had a closer, more affectionate relationship with them than did the mother. Alienation could and should have been prevented. The team made a strong recommendation for custody to the TP father, but the court gave sole custody to the AP mother, who abducted the children soon after. At follow-up, the older children were completely alienated. The youngest wanted to spend more time with his father, but mother had obtained court orders which kept their relationship physically attenuated. The children continued to do well in school, but the girls were lonely and depressed at follow-up. Their younger brother was hyperactive and on medication for attention deficit disorder.

### **Children Who Were 6 to 10 at Evaluation**

There was a tragic death in Family 19, which led to the divorce. The AP father alleged abuse by mother and obtained sole custody. The evaluation question was whether the child should have therapy. The girl was having difficulties with social, emotional and academic functioning, and a recommendation for therapy was indicated. The therapy reinforced the child's alliance with her father and accelerated the child's rejection of her mother. She adopted the AP father's delusional beliefs about the mother and stopped seeing her mother upon reaching adolescence. On the threshold of young adulthood, the girl was socially isolated, except for the exclusive relationship with her father.

The parents in Family 20 were involved in drugs before the divorce, with domestic violence by the father. Mother tried several times to leave, and finally got away, leaving the child with the AP father. Father disappeared with the child and kept her hidden for several years before mother located them and filed for custody. Father had remarried and the girl had formed a sturdy bond with the stepmother. Both parents had overcome their problems with substance abuse. In the team's assessment, the least detrimental alternative was to leave the child with the AP father, with therapy and gradually increased visits for the mother. Mother was disappointed, but handled her grief separately. Reunification therapy never materialized. The child was reportedly doing well at follow-up.

The boy in Family 21 was young when his parents divorced. The TP father had visitation at will for years, until he made plans to remarry and the boy aligned with the AP mother (27). The boy had longstanding adjustment problems at school, because of separation anxiety from his mother. He sought negative attention by behaving in babyish, dependent, and dramatic ways. He threatened to run away if he had to be with his father, but was more spontaneous and appropriate when observed with his father than with his mother. The team recommended a progression of visits, with intensive therapy for mother and child. Mother ignored the orders for therapy, sabotaged the visits, and litigated until they were stopped. The boy got farther and farther behind developmentally, and was very disturbed at follow-up.

### **Older Children Aligned with the AP at Evaluation**

The children in Family 22 had been refusing visitation with the TP father for a year. Family therapy for the children with their father was ordered. The girls were cruel to their father in the sessions, determined to hurt him as much as they felt he had hurt them by deserting the family. The oldest child was depressed and socially isolated. Her younger sister was self-confident but socially immature. The children were protective of their mother, concerned that she could not manage on her own. The team gave the children a choice, live with their mother and visit their father or a change of custody would be recommended. The children remained adamantly opposed to visits. Father felt it was better not to push the issue, and withdrew. He sent the girls cards, which they accepted. The children continued to do well in school, and one had been offered a large scholarship.

In Family 23, the father was supposed to have visits every other week, but encountered resistance from the AP mother and her parents. Father obtained an order for supervised visits, but mother sabotaged them, claiming they were harmful. The children were excellent students, but had serious social and emotional problems. The team recommended that the children have structured visitation time with their father, and family therapy with the father and stepmother. The father felt the therapy was helpful, but the children continued to resist visitation and he gave up. Their academic functioning was excellent, but their social and emotional problems remained unchanged.

In Family 24, the AP mother gained custody by stipulated agreement, then abducted the children and alleged sex abuse. Abuse was not substantiated, but the inability to make a definitive finding that it had not occurred led to continuous, exclusive focus on that question. Before the divorce, the children had a much more affectionate relationship with the TP father than with their mother, but the team felt their relationship with him was destroyed. Therapy for the children and gradually increased visits with their father were recommended. During a weeklong supervised visit, the children began to enjoy themselves, but things never went any further, because mother terminated anyone who was serious about improving the children's relationship with their father. The children were well mannered and well adjusted prior to the divorce, but their functioning had deteriorated dramatically since then. At

follow-up, they were hanging out with the wrong crowd and doing poorly in school. One girl had dropped out to get married.

The boy in Family 25 was abducted by his mother when he was in grade school and had no contact with his father for four years. Mother wanted to terminate father's parental rights so the stepfather could adopt the boy. Father was seeking visitation. Mother was demanding and aggressive, and the boy deferred to her in everything. The team recommended regular visitation with the father. The court ordered the visitation, but was unwilling to enforce it, partly because of the boy's age. The boy had a detached, exploitative relationship with his father, and visited sporadically. He dropped out of school and remained living with his mother, frozen in time and unable to emancipate from her.

#### **Factors Associated with Completed Alienation at Follow-Up**

The children in Family 18 were young at evaluation, and alienation could have been prevented if the TP father had been given custody, as the team recommended. Alienation could also have been interrupted if the AP mother had lost custody after she abducted the children, which is what happened to the AP mother in Family 12.

Custody and visitation orders in the Completed Group favored the AP for one reason or another: the AP was considered by a mental health professional or the court to be the primary parent, especially if the children were young; the intensity of the child's relationship with the AP was viewed as evidence of the child's primary attachment; the TP was seeking normal visitation, not custody; a mental health professional or the court believed that alienation could be interrupted by ordering therapy and gradually increased visits; the child had been with the AP for so long that a change of custody was viewed as detrimental even if the AP had gained control of the custody by foul play; the children were believed to be too old and too alienated to change; belief that older children aligned with the AP should be allowed to make their own decisions about who they want to live with and whether or not to visit the TP.

According to Kopetski, the team made their share of mistakes, such as giving the girls in Family 22 the choice of living with their mother and visiting their father, otherwise custody would be changed. They should have given the AP mother the choice, stop the alienation immediately, or the chil-



dren would be placed with their father. Kopetski acknowledged her mistakes and was always striving for improvement. As a result, this intervention was used successfully in Family 11, where the AP father was given two alternatives to choose from, retain custody if the boys saw their mother on a regular basis, or continue the alienation and lose custody.

### CONCLUSION

The results of this study suggest that evaluator recommendations for custody and visitation can make the difference between interrupted and completed alienation in PAS cases toward the severe end of the spectrum. The court's decisions with respect to custody and visitation were essential for interrupting or preventing alienation. Therapy as the primary intervention was ineffective for interrupting alienation and sometimes made things worse. These findings are consistent with those of other studies which examined the efficacy of various interventions in PAS (14-17). There is a growing body of data which indicates that moderate to severe PAS requires structural interventions in the form of orders for custody and visitation which protect the child's access to both parents.

Following a careful assessment of the family, placing the child in the custody of the TP was found to be the most effective means of helping children in alienation scenarios maintain relationships with both parents. For children in AP custody, orders for enforced visitation with the TP were essential for interrupting alienation, particularly if the children were younger, however, orders for enforced visitation did not work in all cases. Giving sole custody to the AP increased the risk of completed alienation, especially when there were no consequences for AP behavior such as visitation interference and refusal to comply with court orders. Sanctions and other consequences were often needed to gain the AP's compliance.

In a small number of cases, the AP was severely disturbed and unable to control their behavior even when visits were monitored. This caused intense anxiety for the child, who developed behavior problems and other symptoms of stress. The court was reluctant to restrict the AP's access until the child had deteriorated to a dangerous level. Once visits were terminated, the child's adjustment typically improved. Some children needed protection

from a disturbed AP. It is important that the court recognize this and act decisively to protect the child.

The goal of the AP is to sever the child's bond with the other parent. The goal of the TP is to remain in the child's life and to participate in child rearing, taking responsibility for raising the child if the other parent is emotionally disturbed or unable to meet the child's needs. Target parents, whatever their problems, are typically more motivated to facilitate the child having a relationship with the other parent, as long as the contact is not destructive for the child.

If the goal is to help children maintain relationships with both parents, then the ability of a parent to support the child's relationship with the other parent is an important criteria for deciding who should have primary custody. Custody decisions based on traditional concepts such as primary parent theory and the child's primary attachment, assume that only one parent is crucially important to the child and that the child's expressed preference for one parent is independent of the AP's influence. These assumptions are incompatible with the idea that children of divorce, like children in intact families, need both parents. Commitment to a scientific framework in making these important decisions means having the courage to acknowledge what works and what does not when it comes to interrupting and preventing alienation.

As Carl Sagan observed, "It seems to me what is called for is an exquisite balance between two conflicting needs: the most skeptical scrutiny of all hypotheses that are served up to us, and at the same time a great openness to new ideas. If you are only skeptical, then no new ideas make it through to you. You never learn anything new....If you are open to the point of gullibility and have not an ounce of skeptical sense in you, then you cannot distinguish useful ideas from worthless ones (28)."

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