

CUSTODY/VISITATION

Threatened Mother Syndrome (TMS): A Diverging Concept of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS)

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During the 1970s, Richard Gardner formulated the concept of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), which involves a cluster of child symptoms developed during parental divorce. The syndrome is described as a combination of the alienating parent's influence and the allegiance of the offspring to that parent upon whom they are most dependent. The affected child not only shows a compulsive allegiance to the alienating parent, but becomes an active contributor to the campaign of denigration against the alienated/target parent. The alienating parent solicits the child's allegiance through devious means and manipulates a campaign to malign the father.

As PAS became more readily identified in contested custody cases, fathers became quicker to proclaim and accuse the mother on less clear grounds of PAS. A major backlash to PAS developed in which mothers were put on the defensive any time a child showed any negative reaction to visitation with the father or any time a mother showed upset at the turmoil of a divorce. Mothers became especially targeted when their intense emotional reactions were seen as evidence of PAS and unfitness to parent.

The Threatened Mother Syndrome (TMS) is the reaction the major caretaker of the child

manifests when the bond to the young dependent offspring is threatened. Maternal responses to such perceived threats include rage, screaming, manipulativeness, intolerance, subterfuge, irritability, and even aggressiveness. This reaction is uncharacteristic of the day-to-day general nature of the mother and is only provoked by the primitive instinct to protect and safeguard the welfare of her helpless young. This well-recognized response in animals carries over to the human species, but is altered and modified by cultural and social influences. Lack of recognition and understanding of this syndrome may lead to unfair appraisal of a mother and result in what is not in the best interest of a child.

SEPARATION FROM PROTECTIVE BOND

As any wildlife guide in Africa knows, the most dangerous thing one can do is to get between a mother wild animal and its young offspring. The most common cause of wild animal attacks is when the animal mother feels the welfare and safety of her offspring are threatened. This threat provokes a wild rage and unrelenting attack by the mother, often resulting in maiming or death for the intruder.

This primitive aggressive response is unrelated to the intention of the intruder, who may have wandered unknowingly between the mother and offspring.

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It is all the more threatening to the human species' mother when the perception is that the divorcing father or other agents are designed to separate her from the continuous protective bond to her cultivated since the child's birth. When the threatened mother responds with rage, impulsivity, or aggression, it is ready grist for the legal mill to charge her with Parental Alienation Syndrome, or unfitness to parent.

What distinguishes TMS is that the mother's design is to protect the bond between herself and offspring and not to alienate the offspring from the father. In PAS, there is a calculated campaign to separate the father from the offspring, to protect the bond between the mother and offspring.

Another distinguishing characteristic is that TMS must be a response out of character to the mother's general nature. A caustic, hostile virago continues in character when there is a divorce action. In contrast, TMS is one in which a generally socially acceptable-behaving woman develops the protective reaction of becoming over-controlling, aggressive, manipulative, and hostile to protect her young. Once the threat is no longer present, the reaction subsides so that the mother re-

verts back to her characteristic personable and appropriate self.

DISTINGUISHING CHARACTERISTICS

Exhibit 1 is a list of distinguishing characteristics between TMS and PAS.

TMS must also be distinguished from the pathological and deranged parent who is a real threat to others. Characteristics often found in such parents include alcoholism and drug abuse, prior criminal behavior and violent behavior history. Manic disorders with violent outbursts are also occasionally found in such parents.

Responses include rage, screaming, manipulations, intolerance, subterfuge, irritability, even aggressiveness.

It is unfortunate that when TMS is unrecognized, the mother who is reacting solely to protect the maternal child bond actually jeopardizes the very bond she is trying to protect. This is all the more so with current sensitivity given to allegations of PAS. For

this reason, it is most important to identify and understand this syndrome so that the overall best interest of the child can be preserved.

Treatment for this syndrome involves communicating with the mother such that there is recognition and delineation of the syndrome and how her feelings are provoked. It is necessary for her to understand that the natural protective instincts can lead to self-defeating and counterproductive consequences. Consultations with a psychiatrist may be required to use medications to alleviate the intense compulsions evoked in the threatened mother.

Guardians and judges need to understand that the reaction is an unusual one for the mother and not indicative of her general manner of relating. This is important because all too often, assessment of motherhood characteristics is prejudicial when the syndrome is unrecognized. Inexperienced guardians and clinicians may turn in reports disfavoring a mother because observing the enraged, out-of-control, hostile mother biases their appraisal. Without an evaluator recognizing that these are deeply felt primal and protective responses, injustice results.

POTENTIAL EVALUATOR PREJUDICE

Evaluators may become prejudicial and side with the contrastingly more self-controlled father. They may erroneously conclude that it is understandable that the father presents the mother as an unfit parent. A campaign begins whereby the father, in concert with a guardian, will look to malign the mother by exploiting her TMS reaction. Both may feel personally pro-

Exhibit 1.

	TMS	PAS
Duration	Subsides after threat gone	Alienation efforts persist
Pattern	Episodic	Continuous
Manner	Impulsive and reactive	Calculating, designed behavior
Purpose	Protect mother/child bond	Alienate father
Consistency	Uncharacteristic reaction	Characteristic personality
Involvements	Mother alone, more often	Solicits and manipulates others
Relationship	Maintain same relationship w/child	Solicits child as accomplice
Father	Accepting of mother's prior mothering	Resentment about her attitude of being primary parent
Anger	More uncontrolled quality	More focus on father

voked because of the mother's defiance, hostility, and even aggressiveness. They may feel personally offended by a diminished sense of self-importance and power as the mothers appear impervious to their requests. They resent having a lack

of control over the threatened mother who may ignore and defy recommendations. TMS mothers are easy to dislike, and prejudice results.

The fact that there are general characteristics of TMS does not exclude the nuances that may

vary from mother to mother as much as any two individuals can differ. However, it is important to understand the general nature of the syndrome, and its potential for bias, so that the judicial outcome can protect the best interests of the child.