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Gardner, R. A. (1996). *Psychotherapy with sex-abuse victims: True, false, and hysterical*. Cresskill, NJ: Creative Therapeutics.

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Response to Gardner

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I will respond in part to Richard A. Gardner's (1998 [this issue]) lengthy letter critiquing my article, "The Parental Alienation Syndrome: What Is It and What Data Support It?" (1998). First, Gardner takes issue with the fact that I pose these questions in the article's title. He states that the question mark indicates bias. I think the questions are legitimate ones and do not suggest any particular responses. That this is Gardner's interpretation of the title suggests he missed the primary points of the article. Gardner has offered a hypothesis about allegations against one parent in divorce. He has then elevated the hypothesis to a theory, which he then calls a *syndrome*. His hypothesis is taken as fact not only by himself, but also by others. Thus, legitimate lines of inquiry are the particulars of the theory, its etiology, and any empirical support for it.

Skepticism that derives from Gardner's parental alienation syndrome (PAS) has had far-reaching consequences for children and their parents. In many cases, it has resulted in automatic assumptions that allegations of sexual abuse in divorce are false and the consequences of collusive interactions between the children and the concerned parents. As a result, children may be left at risk and concerned parents may be punished. Many professionals, including myself,

think that a range of hypotheses should be considered when allegations of sexual abuse or other maltreatment arise and the parents are divorcing or divorced.

Moreover, interventions Gardner recommends when he diagnoses PAS may exacerbate rather than resolve difficulties. These include putting the child in the room with the alleged offender and allowing the alleged offender to confront the child, threat therapy in which the child is required to happily go for visits with the alleged abuser or else the concerned parent will go to jail, and change of custody to the alleged abuser. For example, in a recent Michigan case for which Gardner testified, the judge, in his opinion, said of Gardner's interview, "I have never seen an interviewing technique that I found so outrageous as what I saw in those tapes of bringing these children in—he (Gardner) was acting like a goofball, as far as I was concerned. Bringing those children in and having them get involved in these factual disputes . . . He didn't let go until he got what he apparently wanted to hear out of her mouth . . . As far as I'm concerned, if he didn't have immunity because he's a witness, Mr. Krieger ought to sue him. That too is an exaggeration" (*Krieger v. Krieger*, 1996). Another example is a recent Pennsylvania case. Gardner recom-

mended and the judge ordered threat therapy for three boys whose father allegedly physically assaulted the mother and the boys; the oldest boy was depressed, in part because of his father's success in the courts. He hung himself (Carpenter, 1998).

Second, Gardner challenged my interpretation of his writings about PAS in which I say that among the alienating behaviors, in most cases, is an allegation of sexual abuse. In his letter, he states that he believes only 10% to 15% of PAS cases involve false allegations of sexual abuse. I have read his work and did not find that statistic anywhere in his writings. His first book on PAS is titled, *The Parental Alienation Syndrome and the Differentiation Between False and Genuine Child Sexual Abuse* (Gardner, 1987). Most of what he writes about PAS links it to allegations of sexual abuse or characteristics of false allegations of sexual abuse. For example, consider the following maternal characteristics in the Sexual Abuse Legitimacy Scale (Gardner, 1995) (renamed by Gardner, *Protocols for Sexual Abuse Evaluation*): "the presence of a child custody dispute and/or litigation (pp. 66-67), . . . the presence of PAS (p. 316), . . . and direct programming of the child in the sexual abuse realm (p. 274)," all of which indicate a false allegation. His Web site (rgardner.com/refs/)

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PAS), which was updated in May 1998, does moderate this view by stating that he is convinced that *some* allegations of sexual abuse in child custody disputes are false; certainly, Gardner is entitled to change his views.

Third, again he missed the point of my discussion about whether PAS is a syndrome. He lists eight symptoms of PAS both in his letter and on his Web site, as if their meanings were self-evident:

1. A campaign of denigration
2. Weak, absurd, or frivolous rationalizations for the deprecation
3. Lack of ambivalence
4. The "independent-thinker" phenomenon
5. Reflexive support of the alienating parent in the parental conflict
6. Absence of guilt over cruelty to and/or exploitation of the alienated parent
7. The presence of borrowed scenarios
8. Spread of the animosity to the friends and/or extended family of the alienated parent

Gardner says these symptoms occur in a cluster in PAS. I think they are supposed to be found in the child. The fact of the matter is that these characteristics can have a range of possible causes, including actual abuse by the alienated parent. The possibility of PAS only helps to understand the characteristics if the professional knows there has been no abuse. Their presence does not help determine whether there has been abuse. In my article, I cite John Myers (1993), a noted scholar of the legal aspects of child maltreatment, who has described PAS as a nondiagnostic syndrome because it is not useful in deciding the likelihood of abuse.

Fourth, Gardner directs me to his Web site, stating, "There are data if Faller wishes to avail herself of the opportunity to answer that ques-

tion for herself" (p. 311). I reviewed the information on Gardner's Web site and did not find data there. It does include material to defend PAS and Protocols for Sex-Abuse Evaluation (formerly known as the Sexual Abuse Legitimacy Scale). For example, there is a list of 31 court cases, with a heading "Testimony concerning the Parental Alienation Syndrome has been admitted in courts of law in many states Richard A. Gardner, M.D." Another heading is "Articles in Peer-Review Journals on Dr. Richard A. Gardner's Protocols for Sex-Abuse Evaluation." It includes 12 articles by him. However, six are in law journals, which are generally not peer reviewed but rather edited by law students. Four are articles in *Issues in Child Abuse Accusations*, which is not a juried periodical. One is in an edited book. Chapters and articles in edited books are typically not peer reviewed but reviewed by the books' editors (rgardner.com/refs/PAS). His Web site also contains a list of articles by others, which he says "focus significantly on the PAS." Again, many are published in *Issues on Child Abuse Accusations*. In addition, most are not data-based articles. One article is data based, the study conducted by Thoennes and Tjaden (1990) for the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts Research Unit. These researchers examined 9,000 custody disputes from 12 jurisdictions. Of these, they found 169 with allegations of sexual abuse. Half of the cases were determined likely, one third were unlikely, and the remainder were uncertain. They examined case record material for indications of maliciously made false allegations and found eight such cases. Their research did not specifically examine any role that children might have in false allegations. These data do not lend much

support for PAS (rgardner.com/refs/PAS).

Finally, perhaps I should say that my intent was not to deny that the dynamics of divorce may result in negative feelings and hostile reactions by children toward one or both parents and by the parents toward one another. Divorce experiences generate a wide range of feelings and behaviors in the individuals involved. However, the fact of a divorce should not be used to automatically discount allegations of sexual abuse or endangering behavior by parents.

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