



Board of Behavioral Sciences

# Memo

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**To:** Committee Members

**Date:** January 3, 2022

**From:** Steve Sodergren  
Executive Officer

**Telephone:** (916) 574-7904

**Subject:** Presentation on Request to Add Coursework in Parent Alienation to the Educational Requirements for Licensure

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Ron Berglas, Dr. William Bernet and Dr. Lynn Steinberg will be presenting information about parental alienation.

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# Parental Alienation is Real

**What is PA?** Parental alienation (PA) occurs when a child aligns with one parent and rejects their other parent for reasons that are *not* legitimate. This is different from estrangement, when a child’s resistance to have a relationship is for justifiable reasons. ***PA is child psychological abuse.***

Bernet, 2010; Lorandos & Bernet, 2020; Warshak, 2019

**What causes PA?** Abusive parents often use their children as weapons to harm the other parent and manipulate them. Domestic violence researchers call this behavior a form of coercive control. Scientists who study PA call this ***very same behavior*** parental alienating behavior. They are two terms describing the same phenomenon.

Harman, Kruk, & Hines, 2018; Harman & Matthewson, 2020

**Is research on PA “scientific?”** Clinical, legal, and scientific evidence on PA has accumulated for over 35 years. There have been over 1,000 scholarly papers published on the topic, and the empirical research on the topic has expanded greatly over the last few years, leading to what has been considered a “blossoming” of the scientific field.

Harman, Bernet, & Harman, 2019; Lorandos & Bernet, 2020; Lorandos, 2020; Marques, Narciso, & Ferreira, 2020

**Are there recognized criteria for the diagnosis of PA?** Yes. There is a great deal of conformity among authorities on PA as to there being clear and discernible diagnostic criteria. These criteria are found in a simple Five-Factor Model.

Bernet, 2020; Lorandos & Bernet, 2020; Freeman, 2020

**How many children are alienated from a parent?** At least 3.9 million children in the U.S. are moderately to severely alienated from a parent. Other estimates of prevalence produce similar estimates. More than three times as many children in the U.S. are alienated from a parent than there are children with autism.

Bernet, 2010; Harman, Leder-Elder, & Biringen, 2019;

**How serious is PA for children?** Parental alienation is a serious form of psychological abuse and results in the same types of outcomes that other abused children experience: stress and adjustment disorders (e.g., PTSD, anxiety), psychosocial problems and externalizing behaviors (e.g., substance abuse, suicidality).

Baker & Verrocchio, 2016; Godbout & Parent, 2012; Harman et al., 2018

**How does PA affect alienated parents?** Alienated parents are unable to get closure and have unresolved grief with the loss of their child(ren). They also suffer from being the target of abusive behaviors of the alienating parent. They have high levels of depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms, and many become suicidal.

Harman et al., 2019; Lee-Maturana, Matthewson, & Dwan, 2020; Poustie, Matthewson, & Balmer, 2018

**What can be done to stop PA?** Legal and professional recognition of the problem (e.g., adding parental alienation to child abuse statutes). Funding for research to promote identification of effective assessment, prevention, and intervention programs. Funding for training of legal and mental health professionals.

# Annotated References

Reference	Type of paper/methods used	General findings/conclusions
Baker, A. J. L., & Verrocchio, M. C. (2016). Exposure to parental alienation and subsequent anxiety and depression in Italian adults. <i>The American Journal of Family Therapy</i> , 44, 255–271.	Survey of adults who were alienated as children regarding their alienating parent’s behaviors and current anxiety and depressive symptoms.	The greater exposure to parental alienating behaviors as a child, the more anxiety and depression that the individual felt, even into adulthood.
Bernet, W. (Ed.). (2010). Parental alienation, DSM-5, and ICD-11. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas.	A book describing parental alienation as a serious mental condition in the child, and the empirical basis for considering an important issue for clinical diagnosis and treatment.	Influencing a child to develop a false belief that a parent is bad and dangerous results in the child’s loss of one of the most important relationships in their life.
Bernet, W. (2020). The five-factor model for the diagnosis of parental alienation. <i>Feedback- Journal of the Family Therapy Association of Ireland</i> , 6, 3-15.	Article describing the Five-Factor model for use in the assessment of parental alienation.	Five factors aid in the differentiation of PA: evidence of resistance/refusal of a relationship, having had a previously positive relationship, no evidence of abuse or seriously deficient parenting, patterns of parental alienating behaviors, and manifestations of PA in the child.
Freeman, B. (2020) The psychosocial assessment of contact refusal. In D. Lorandos, & W. Bernet, <i>Parental alienation: Science &amp; Law</i> , 44-81. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, LTD.	A comprehensive book chapter distilling peer-reviewed studies on assessing child/parent contact refusal.	Describes a scientific consensus of research into a Five-Factor model for the differential diagnosis of PA.
Godbout, E., & Parent, C. (2012). The life paths and lived experiences of adults who have experienced parental alienation: A retrospective study. <i>Journal of Divorce &amp; Remarriage</i> , 53, 34-54.	Qualitative study of adults who were alienated from a parent in the past.	The adults reported experiencing externalizing problems, problems with school, and having internal psychological issues due to their parental alienation.
Harman, J. J., Bernet, W., & Harman, J. (2019). Parental alienation: The blossoming of a field of study. <i>Current Directions in Psychological Science</i> , 28, 212-217.	Review of the scientific literature and theoretical development in the field of PA.	Research in the field has moved from largely descriptive studies of PA across many countries and contexts, to greater theoretical model development and testing.
Harman, J. J., Kruk, E., & Hines, D. (2018). Parental alienating behaviors: An unacknowledged form of family violence. <i>Psychological Bulletin</i> , 144, 1275-1299.	Systematic review of the scientific literature on parental alienation and the behaviors that cause it.	Parental alienating behaviors that have been documented in the scientific literature meet criteria for definitions of family violence: both intimate partner violence (IPV) and child abuse.
Harman, J. J., & Matthewson, M. (2020). Parental alienating behaviors. In D. Lorandos and W. Bernet (Eds.), <i>Parental Alienation- Science and Law</i> , pp. 82-141. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas Publisher.	Review of parental alienating behaviors using the Duluth Model Power and Control Wheel as a framework.	Parental alienating behaviors that have been documented in the scholarly literature fit clearly into power and control wheel categories that detail coercive controlling behaviors of abusive parent. Alienating parents are abusive parents towards children and the other parent.
Harman, J. J., Leder-Elder, S., & Biringen, Z. (2019). Prevalence of adults who are the targets of parental alienating behaviors and their impact: Results from three national polls. <i>Child &amp; Youth Services Review</i> , 106, 1-13.	Three national polls in the U.S. and Canada using survey panels selected to represent the nations’ demographic characteristics.	Over 22 million adults in the U.S. are the targets of parental alienating behaviors and there are <b>no gender differences</b> in who is likely to be an alienated parent. Over 3.8 million children in the U.S. are moderately to severely alienated from a parent, so not all children ultimately become alienated.
Lee-Maturana, S., Matthewson, M., & Dwan, C. (2020). Targeted parents surviving parental alienation: Consequences of alienation and coping strategies. <i>Journal of Child &amp; Family Studies</i> , 29, 2268-2280.	Interviews conducted with alienated parents about their experiences and coping strategies.	23% of the alienated parents had attempted suicide, and they were social isolated, suffered across financial, emotional and psychological domains, such as being depressed, anxious, having PTSD symptoms, and adjustment disorders.
Lorandos, D. & Bernet, W. (2020). Parental alienation: Science & Law. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, LTD.	A comprehensive book of the empirical literature and U.S. legal cases to date on PA.	Extensive descriptions of the scientific literature on PA and its causes, assessment, and treatment. Full review of U.S. appellate level cases where PA was found to have occurred.
Lorandos, D. (2020). Parental alienation in U.S. courts, 1985-2018. <i>Family Court Review</i> , 58, 322-339.	Thirty four years of legal cases reviewed and summarized.	PA was found to be material, probative, relevant, and admissible in court cases across all 50 U.S. states.
Marques, T. M., Narciso, I., & Ferreira, L. C. (2020). Empirical research on parental alienation: As descriptive literature review. <i>Children &amp; Youth Services Review</i> , 119, 1-12.	Systematic review of the scientific literature published in the English language through 2018.	The scientific literature on PA has expanded considerably in the last few years, with a focus on assessment tools and the impact of parental alienation not just on children, but on all parties involved.
Poustie, C., Matthewson, M., & Balmer, S. (2018). The forgotten parent: The targeted parent’s perspective of parental alienation. <i>Journal of Family Issues</i> , 39, 3298-3323.	Over 100 alienated parents provided details about their experience being alienated from their child by the child’s other parent.	Alienated parents describing having poor mental health and suffering substantial financial and psychological costs. The alienating parent’s behaviors were characterized as severe family violence.
Warshak, R. A. (2019). When evaluators get it wrong: False positive IDs and parental alienation. <i>Psychology, Public Policy &amp; Law</i> , 26, 54-68.	Review of common mistakes that evaluators make when assessing parental alienation.	Evaluators often mistake estrangement for PA and fail to apply recent scientific advances in assessment and treatment decisions.

The Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) is a large organization of international scholars, practitioners, and civil society members devoted to developing and promoting research on parental alienation. The National Parents Organization (NPO) is a large organization of advocates for the promotion of shared parenting and family court reform with chapters across the U.S. The International Council on Shared Parenting (ICSP) is a council representing scientists, mental health professionals, and civil society members devoted to the dissemination of scientific knowledge about the needs and rights of children whose parents live apart and formulate recommendations about the implementation of shared parenting initiatives. Parental Alienation Syndrome International (PASI) is a large non-profit dedicated to addressing parental alienation, custodial interference, coercive control, and hostile and aggressive parenting. VictimToHero.com is a platform that provides resources and support for alienated parents and raises public awareness on parental alienation.



## Parental Alienating Behaviors are Family Violence

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<b>What is family violence?</b>	<p>Family violence refers to all types of abuse that occur in families, including physical, sexual, psychological, and financial abuse, as well as neglect.</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, &amp; Henry, 2006</p>
<b>What are parental alienating behaviors?</b>	<p>Parental alienating behaviors are a parent’s persistent use of patterns of behaviors over time to harm the child’s relationship with their other parent. Alienating parents use many different behaviors, such as badmouthing the alienated parent to the child and others, interfering with their contact, and enlisting the child as an “ally” against them.</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Baker, 2020; Harman, Kruk, &amp; Hines, 2018; Harman &amp; Matthewson, 2020</p>
<b>Parental alienating behaviors are child abuse</b>	<p>Making a child believe a parent abandoned and does not love them, or that the parent is dangerous or bad, is psychological abuse. Alienated children’s developmental needs are also often neglected by alienating parents. In severe cases, children need protection from these psychologically abusive behaviors.</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Baker, 2020; Warshak, 2015</p>
<b>Parental alienating behaviors are intimate partner violence</b>	<p>Parental alienating behaviors are direct and indirect attacks made by an alienating parent toward the alienated parent to harm and control them. The children are used as weapons in these attacks, and they become collateral damage in the process. Domestic violence researchers label these <i>same behaviors</i> as a form of coercive control.</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Harman, Kruk &amp; Hines, 2018; Harman &amp; Matthewson, 2020</p>
<b>Parental alienating behaviors are coercively controlling</b>	<p>The alienating parent’s intent is to manipulate and control the alienated parent’s actions and outcomes. The alienated parent experiences negative outcomes if they do not comply with the alienating parent’s demands or threats, such as not being able to see their children. The coercively controlling behavior of the alienating parent leads to their having greater control and dominance over the alienated parent, limits the alienated parent’s ability to make decisions, and undermines their parental authority.</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Hamberger, Larsen, &amp; Lehrner, 2017; Harman &amp; Matthewson, 2020</p>
<b>Most families affected by parental alienation are not "hybrid cases"</b>	<p>Compared to other forms of abuse, coercive controlling behaviors are not often reciprocated by the victim. This form of abuse creates power imbalances such that the victim has little power or influence in the family. Describing such families as “hybrids” implies that both parents are to blame—the alienated parent is then blamed for being the victim of the alienating parent’s coercive controlling behaviors.</p> <p style="text-align: right; font-size: small;">Harman, Leder-Elder, &amp; Biringen, 2019; Hines &amp; Douglas, 2018</p>

# Annotated References

Reference	Type of paper/methods used	General findings/conclusions
Baker, A. J. L. (2020). Parental alienation and empirical research. In D. Lorandos and William Bernet (Eds.), <i>Parental Alienation- Science and Law</i> , pp. 207-253. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas Publisher.	Book chapter reviewing the empirical literature that supports the use of the Five-Factor Model for the assessment and consequences of PA, and to address misinformation about PA.	The extant literature supports the core tenets of PA theory, that a child should be considered alienated only when all five factors of the Five-Factor Model are present in a family, and that PA is child psychological abuse.
Hamberger, L. K., Larsen, S. E., & Lehrner, A. (2017). Coercive control in intimate partner violence. <i>Aggression &amp; Violence Behavior, 37</i> , 1-11.	A literature review of how coercive control has been conceptualized, defined, operationalized, and measured. Summary and critique of measures used to assess coercive control in intimate partner violence research.	At least three facets of coercive control are identified: 1) intentionality or goal orientation in the abuser (versus motivation), 2) a negative perception of the controlling behavior by the victim, and 3) the ability of the abuser to obtain control through the deployment of a credible threat.
Harman, J. J., Kruk, E., & Hines, D. (2018). Parental alienating behaviors: An unacknowledged form of family violence. <i>Psychological Bulletin, 144</i> , 1275-1299.	Systematic review of the scientific literature on parental alienation and the behaviors that cause it.	Parental alienating behaviors that have been documented in the scientific literature meet criteria for definitions of family violence: both intimate partner violence (IPV) and child abuse.
Harman, J. J., Leder-Elder, S., & Biringer, Z. (2019). Prevalence of adults who are the targets of parental alienating behaviors and their impact: Results from three national polls. <i>Child &amp; Youth Services Review, 106</i> , 1-13.	Three national polls in the U.S. and Canada using survey panels selected to represent the nations' demographic characteristics.	Parents who were the <i>non-reciprocating</i> target of parental alienating behaviors were more likely to be moderately to severely alienated from a child than those who were the primary perpetrators or were mutually engaged in the behaviors.
Harman, J. J., & Matthewson, M. (2020). Parental alienating behaviors. In D. Lorandos and W. Bernet (Eds.), <i>Parental Alienation- Science and Law</i> , pp. 82-141. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas Publisher.	Review of parental alienating behaviors using the Duluth Model Power and Control Wheel as a framework.	Parental alienating behaviors that have been documented in the scholarly literature fit clearly into power and control wheel categories that detail coercive controlling behaviors of abusive parents. Alienating parents are abusive parents towards children and the other parent.
Hines, D. A., & Douglas, E. M. (2018). Influence of intimate terrorism, situational couple violence, and mutual control on male victims. <i>Psychology of Men &amp; Masculinity, 19</i> , 612-623.	A critical review of research on victims of different forms of intimate partner violence: intimate terrorism, situational couple violence, and mutual control. Two studies were reported on the impact of violence on male victims.	Intimate terrorism (aka coercively controlling violence) is characterized by abusive behaviors that are low in mutuality. Men who are victims of intimate terrorism were found to have worse outcomes than those who reciprocated the abuse.
Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2013). SF3.4: Family violence. Retrieved from <a href="https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/SF3_4_Family_violence_Jan2013.pdf">https://www.oecd.org/els/soc/SF3_4_Family_violence_Jan2013.pdf</a>	Summary of International Crime Victims Survey and national surveys on forms of family violence, including physical sexual, psychological, and financial abuse, as well as neglect.	International incidents of violence vary by country and populations. Less than 2% of the population overall report intimate partner violence in the countries surveyed. Women and men both suffer from violent acts inflicted by their partner.
Tolan, P., Gorman-Smith, D., & Henry, D. (2006). Family violence. <i>Annual Review of Psychology, 57</i> , 557-583.	Review of the scientific literature on all forms of family violence (e.g., domestic violence, elder abuse, child abuse), their patterns, risk factors, and interventions.	Research on major forms of family violence has been largely segregated and preoccupied with controversies about conceptualization, definition, and assessment within areas, and have largely ignored overlapping similarities and issues.
Warshak, R. A. (2015). Ten parental alienation fallacies that compromise decisions in court and in therapy. <i>Professional Psychology: Research &amp; Practice, 46</i> , 235-249.	Detailed description of common myths about PA and the empirical support that refutes them.	In severe cases of PA, courts have acted to protect children from abuse by requiring supervision or monitoring of the child's contacts with the alienating parent.

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# Myths and Truths about Parental Alienation

Myth	Truth
<b>Parental alienation (PA) is just a legal defense used by abusive fathers</b>	In over half of the cases where PA was found to have occurred, there were no allegations of other forms of abuse. Research indicates that mothers and fathers are just as likely to be alienated parents: PA is a form of abuse that does not discriminate based on gender.  Harman & Lorandos, 2020; Harman, Leder-Elder, Biringen, 2019
<b>Mothers do not alienate children: They protect them from abusive fathers</b>	Parents who use their child as a weapon against the other parent, regardless of gender, are committing psychological abuse when it results in severe PA. There are ways to protect children from abuse without causing psychological harm. Research indicates that there is a double standard to accept and justify a mother’s parental alienating behaviors while sanctioning fathers for the same behavior.  Harman, Biringen, Ratajack, Outland, & Kraus, 2016; Harman, Kruk, & Hines, 2018
<b>PA should be not be recognized because it will be misused by abusers</b>	For any type of abuse, there is always a risk of abusers pretending to be victims. This risk creates the need for clear standards and reliable screening and assessment tools to prevent misuse. The Five-Factor Model provides that standard by requiring that abuse and neglect are not present before PA can be diagnosed.  Bernet, 2020; Lorandos & Bernet, 2020
<b>The alienated parent must be abusive for a child to reject them so strongly</b>	Children who are abused by a parent tend to engage in behaviors to preserve and protect the relationship: they do not seek to destroy it. Children in foster care usually yearn for their birth parents and frequently minimize the maltreatment that their birth parents perpetrated against them. The rejection of a healthy parent is not normal and is an outcome that is encouraged and often rewarded by the alienating parent.  Baker, Creegan, Quinones, & Rozelle, 2016; Baker, Miller, Bernet, & Adeyaho, 2019
<b>Both parents are responsible for PA</b>	Researchers have found that the alienated parent’s behaviors are not typically the cause of the child’s rejection. It is the alienating parent’s behaviors that are largely responsible for the child’s PA, and these behaviors are usually not reciprocated by the alienated parent.  Harman et al., 2019; Warshak, 2015
<b>Research on PA is not “scientific”</b>	Clinical, legal, and scientific evidence on PA has accumulated for over 35 years. There have been over 1,000 peer-reviewed articles, chapters, and books published on the topic, and the empirical research on the topic has expanded greatly, leading to what has been considered a “blossoming” of the scientific field.  Harman, Bernet, & Harman, 2019; Lorandos & Bernet, 2020; Lorandos, 2020
<b>PA theory was created by a “pedophile”</b>	Dr. Richard Gardner coined the phrase “parental alienation syndrome.” His clinical descriptions of sexually abused children have been mischaracterized by child abuse and domestic violence advocates to portray him as a pedophile. Such advocates have engaged in ad hominem attacks by taking his writings out of context to further an agenda that denies PA is real.  Harman & Lorandos, 2020; Rand, 2013

# Annotated References

Reference	Type of paper/methods used	General findings/conclusions
Baker, A. J. L., Creegan, A., Quinones, A., & Rozelle, L. (2016). Foster children's views of their parents: A review of the literature. <i>Children and Youth Services Review, 67</i> , 177-183.	Foster children's attitudes towards their birth parents were solicited.	The foster children minimized their birth parent's abuse towards them and still yearned to see them. They also felt anxious and worried while separated from their abusive parents.
Baker, A. J. L., Miller, S., Bernet, W., & Adebayo, T. (2019). The assessment of the attitudes and behaviors about physically abused children: A survey of mental health professionals. <i>Journal of Child and Family Studies, 28</i> , 3401-3411.	Child protection workers rated their caseloads of abused children in terms of their behaviors and feelings towards their abusive parent(s).	Children who had been abused, even severely abused, did not engage in behaviors that pushed their abuser away. Rather, they engaged in behaviors intended to enhance their relationships.
Bernet, W. (2020). The Five-Factor Model for the diagnosis of parental alienation. <i>Feedback- Journal of the Family Therapy Association of Ireland, 6</i> , 3-15.	Article describing the Five-Factor Model for use in the assessment of parental alienation.	Five factors aid in the differentiation of PA: evidence of resistance/refusal of a relationship, having had a previously positive relationship, no evidence of abuse or seriously deficient parenting, patterns of parental alienating behaviors, and manifestations of PA in the child.
Harman, J. J., Bernet, W., & Harman, J. (2019). Parental alienation: The blossoming of a field of study. <i>Current Directions in Psychological Science, 28</i> , 212-217.	Review of the scientific literature and theoretical development in the field of PA.	Research in the field has moved from largely descriptive studies of PA across many countries and contexts, to greater theoretical model development and testing.
Harman, J. J., Kruk, E., & Hines, D. (2018). Parental alienating behaviors: An unacknowledged form of family violence. <i>Psychological Bulletin, 144</i> , 1275-1299.	Systematic review of the scientific literature on parental alienation and the behaviors that cause it.	Parental alienating behaviors that have been documented in the scientific literature meet criteria for definitions of family violence: both intimate partner violence (IPV) and child abuse.
Harman, J. J., Leder-Elder, S., & Birngen, Z. (2019). Prevalence of adults who are the targets of parental alienating behaviors and their impact: Results from three national polls. <i>Child &amp; Youth Services Review, 106</i> , 1-13.	Three national polls in the U.S. and Canada using survey panels selected to represent the nations' demographic characteristics.	Over 22 million adults in the U.S. are the targets of parental alienating behaviors and there are no gender differences in who is likely to be an alienated parent. Over 3.8 million children in the U.S. are moderately to severely alienated from a parent, so not all children ultimately become alienated.
Harman, J. J., & Lorandos, D. (2020). Allegations of family violence in court: How parental alienation affects judicial outcomes. <i>Psychology, Public Policy, &amp; Law</i> .	Pre-registered study examining 967 appellate court cases in the U.S. where parental alienation was alleged or found to have occurred.	Parents found to alienate their children were more likely to lose custody of their children and lose parenting time than those who only alleged to be alienated. Fathers were more likely to lose parenting time and custody of children than mothers. Parents were more likely to lose custody and parenting time if the other parent made a false allegation of abuse against them.
Lorandos, D. (2020). Parental alienation in U.S. courts, 1985-2018. <i>Family Court Review, 58</i> , 322-339.	Thirty four years of legal cases reviewed and summarized.	PA was found to be material, probative, relevant, and admissible in court cases across all 50 U.S. states.
Lorandos, D. & Bernet, W. (2020). <i>Parental Alienation: Science &amp; Law</i> . Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas, LTD.	A comprehensive book of the empirical literature and U.S. legal cases to date on PA.	Extensive descriptions of the scientific literature on PA and its causes, assessment, and treatment are presented. A full review of U.S. appellate level cases where PA was found to have occurred is described.
Rand, D. (2013). The history of parental alienation from early days to modern times. In D. Lorandos, W. Bernet, & S. R. Sauber (Eds.), <i>Parental Alienation: The Handbook for Mental Health and Legal Professionals</i> (pp. 291-321). Charles C Thomas Publisher, Ltd.	A review of the history of research on PA and the practice of professionals working with children who have been alienated from a parent.	A vocal subgroup of child abuse and domestic violence advocates have historically attempted to discredit work on PA and spread misinformation about it.
Warshak, R. A. (2015). Ten parental alienation fallacies that compromise decisions in court and in therapy. <i>Professional Psychology: Research &amp; Practice, 46</i> , 235-249.	Detailed description of common myths about PA and the empirical support that refutes them.	Reliance on false beliefs compromises investigations and undermines adequate consideration of alternative explanations for the causes of a child's alienation.

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# Important differences between two recently published papers regarding parental alienation, Meier et al. (2019) and Harman and Lorandos (2020)

Did the authors....	Meier et al., (2019)	Harman & Lorandos (2020)
<p><i>Post their research design on the Open Science Framework so other scientists could see what was planned and if the study was executed as planned?</i></p> <p>Lack of transparency makes it impossible to know if the Meier team changed their research design as they collected and coded data, which would lead to biases.</p>	✗	✓
<p><i>Pre-register and embargo their hypotheses so they could not adjust their hypotheses to fit their data after the fact?</i></p> <p>The Meier team could have changed their hypotheses to match their findings after running their statistics, making their study just exploratory and not a true scientific test.</p>	✗	✓
<p><i>Define in a replicable way what was meant by "alienation cases"?</i></p> <p>If it is not clear what an "alienation" case was, we cannot know what cases were actually included in the Meier team's study and whether other scientists would have agreed with the definitions used by the investigators.</p>	✗	✓
<p><i>Detail the coding process and explain how discrepancies in coding were resolved?</i></p> <p>To prevent biases, the research design should have processes in place to ensure the coders do not know the hypotheses of the study and detail how disagreements in coding were resolved. The Meier team did not provide any details about this and so the objectivity of the coders is questionable.</p>	✗	✓
<p><i>Have all their cases and coding documentation available or provided on request?</i></p> <p>Without a list of the cases included in the study, it is impossible to know whether the Meier team actually included cases where parental alienation occurred or was alleged, and verify whether the way their coders applied their codes was not biased.</p>	✗	✓
<p><i>Clearly describe why all cases were included or excluded?</i></p> <p>Without knowing what cases were excluded and clearly knowing why, the Meier team may have cherry picked the cases they wanted to include in their study to support their hypotheses. We also then don't know if the Meier team's cases are comparable to all cases at the US appellate level.</p>	✗	✓
<p><i>Show the statistical models that were used to draw conclusions?</i></p> <p>We cannot know whether the Meier team's analyses were appropriate for use with their data without seeing the models, nor can we tell how many cases were included in each analysis or what the magnitude of their effects were.</p>	✗	✓
<p><i>Thoroughly describe what variables were included in all statistical models?</i></p> <p>When you add variables to a model, it changes the outcomes. Many unethical scholars add variables to models until they get the results they want. The Meier team provides no specific information about all the variables in their models.</p>	✗	✓
<p><i>Describe the statistical results accurately and not exaggerate the findings?</i></p> <p>The Meier team often reported odds ratios as probabilities, which exaggerates the findings.</p>	✗	✓

Adapted from Harman, J. and Lorandos, D. (2020) Allegations of Family Violence in Court: How Parental Alienation Affects Judicial Outcomes. Psychology, Public Policy and Law, 1 - 25. Published online December. 2020 - <https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2020-96321-001.html> Table 1.

Meier, J. S., Dickson, S., O'Sullivan, C., Rosen, L., & Hayes, J. (2019). Child custody outcomes in cases involving parental alienation and abuse allegations (GWU Law School Public Law Research Paper No. 2019-56). SSRN. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3448062>.



**PARENTAL ALIENATION – TOP TWELVE  
PEER-REVIEWED PUBLICATIONS, 2016–2021  
William Bernet, M.D. – January 4, 2022**

Although “parental alienation syndrome” was first described by Richard A. Gardner in 1985, most contemporary researchers and writers simply refer to “parental alienation.” Since the time of Gardner, a vast literature regarding parental alienation has been published in journal articles, book chapters, and books, which can be reviewed at the Parental Alienation Database (<https://ckm.vumc.org/pasg/>, at the Center for Knowledge Management, Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Nashville, Tennessee). In recent years, the pace has picked up for the publication of both qualitative and quantitative research regarding parental alienation. This brief review of relevant literature—published in peer-reviewed journals—only covers the last six years.

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Bernet, W., Wamboldt, M. Z., Narrow, W. E. (2016). Child affected by parental relationship distress. *Journal of American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 55(7):571–579.

Children are affected by parental relationship distress. The clinical presentations of CAPRD include four common scenarios: children may react to parental intimate partner distress; to parental intimate partner violence; to acrimonious divorce; and to unfair disparagement of one parent by another. Reactions of the child may include the onset or exacerbation of psychological symptoms, somatic complaints, an internal loyalty conflict, and, in the extreme, parental alienation, leading to loss of a parent–child relationship.

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Bernet, W. (2020). Parental alienation and misinformation proliferation. *Family Court Review* 58(2):293–307.

A remarkable amount of misinformation has been promoted regarding parental alienation—falsehoods published in professional journals, presented at conferences, and distributed through internet websites and blogs. This article explains five examples of published misinformation regarding parental alienation. The writers of the misinformation were from Sweden, Tunisia, Spain, and the United States, which illustrates the international scope of PAS/PA. The misinformation reached the U.S. House of Representatives and was almost included in a formal resolution adopted by that body.

\* \* \*

Bernet, W., Gregory, N., Rohner, R. P., Reay, K. M. (2020). Measuring the difference between alienation and estrangement: The PARQ-Gap. *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 65(4):1225–1234.

Alienated children, who were not abused, tend to engage in splitting and lack ambivalence with respect to their parents; estranged children, who were maltreated, usually perceive their parents in an ambivalent manner. A psychological test—the Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ)—was 99% accurate in distinguishing severely alienated from nonalienated children. This test may be useful for both clinicians and forensic practitioners in evaluating children of separating and divorced parents when there is a concern about the possible diagnosis of parental alienation.

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Bernet, W., Baker, A. J. L., Adkins II, K. L. (2022). Definitions and terminology regarding child alignments, estrangement, and alienation: A survey of custody evaluators. *Journal of Forensic Sciences* 67:279–288.

This study tested the extent of consensus in the field regarding the basic tenets of PA theory, i.e., definitions of “contact refusal,” “parental alienation,” “parental estrangement,” the “Five-Factor Model,” and other terms. An on-line survey was created to assess level of agreement regarding these key terms among custody evaluators. Results revealed that roughly 80% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with each of the 11 definitions, which indicate a high degree of consensus regarding this phenomenon.

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Bernet, W. (in press). Recurrent misinformation regarding parental alienation theory. *American Journal of Family Therapy*. DOI: 10.1080/01926187.2021.1972494

This article discusses a specific example of misinformation regarding parental alienation, i.e., variations of the statement: *Parental alienation theory assumes that the favored parent has caused parental alienation in the child simply because the child refuses to have a relationship with the rejected parent, without identifying or proving alienating behaviors by the preferred parent.* The same misinformation was found in journal articles, books, and presentations by critics of parental alienation 40 times between 1994 and 2020. This trail of recurrent misinformation is not trivial; it is a major misrepresentation of basic tenets of parental alienation theory.

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Bernet, W. (in press). The Five-Factor Model for the diagnosis of parental alienation. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

Parental alienation is a mental state in which a child—usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce—allies strongly with one parent (the favored parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) without a good reason. The components of the Five-Factor Model are: (1) The child manifests contact resistance or refusal, i.e., avoids a relationship with one of the parents. (2) The presence of a prior positive relationship between the child and the rejected parent. (3) The absence of abuse, neglect, or seriously deficient parenting on the part of the rejected parent. (4) The use of multiple alienating behaviors on the part of the favored parent. (5) The child exhibits many of the eight behavioral manifestations of alienation.

\* \* \*

Harman, J. J., Bernet, W., Harman, J. (2019). Parental alienation: Toward the blossoming of a field of study. *Current Directions*. doi: 10.1177/0963721419827271.

There is consensus among researchers as to what parental alienating behaviors are and how they affect children and the family system. This study reviewed the literature as to what parental alienation is, how it is different from other parent–child problems such as estrangement and loyalty conflicts, and how it is perpetuated within and across different social systems. We conclude that parental alienation should be considered and understood not only as abusive to the child but also as a form of family violence directed toward both the child and the alienated parent.

\* \* \*

Kruk, E. (2018). Parental alienation as a form of emotional child abuse: Current state of knowledge and future directions for research. *Family Science Review* 22(4):141–164.

Parental alienation is far more common and debilitating for children and parents than was previously believed. In extreme cases, one can make the argument that parental alienation is a serious form of emotional child abuse. The research literature consistently identifies two core elements of child abuse: parental alienation as a *significant form of harm* to children that is *attributable to human action*.

\* \* \*

Lorandos, D. (2020). Parental alienation in U.S. courts, 1985 to 2018. *Family Court Review* 58(2):322–339.

This study examined the extent to which courts in the United States have found the concept of parental alienation material, probative, relevant, and admissible. Results illustrate increasing awareness of the concept and document its admissibility in every one of the United States. During 34 years, 1,181 cases were identified in trial and appellate courts in which judges admitted testimony regarding parental alienation.

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Maturana, S. L., Matthewson, M., Dwan, C., Norris, K. (2018). Characteristics and experiences of targeted parents of parental alienation from their own perspective: A systematic literature review. *Australian Journal of Psychology* 71:83–91.

Targeted parents report consistent stories about the nature of the alienation tactics used by alienating parents. They expressed dissatisfaction with legal and mental health system services available to them. Despite feeling despair, frustration, and isolation, targeted parents appear to be resilient and seek out positive coping strategies.

\* \* \*

Rolands, G. A. (2018). Parental alienation: A measurement tool. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 60(4):316–331.

The Rowlands Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS) captured the following factors: (a) campaign of denigration toward the alienated parent, (b) the independent thinker phenomenon, (c) reflexive support, (d) presence of borrowed scenarios, (e) spread of animosity to extended family, and (f) lack of positive affect toward the alienated parent. Parents who reported that a court evaluation or court findings confirmed the presence of parental alienation scored significantly higher on all six RPAS factors.

\* \* \*

Templer, K., Matthewson, M., Haines, J., Cox, G. (2017). Recommendations for best practice in response to parental alienation: findings from a systematic review. *Journal of Family Therapy* 39(1):103–122.

This study aimed to systematically review the literature regarding parental alienation to determine best practice for therapists and legal practitioners. Ten articles were included in the review. It was found that changes in custodial or residential arrangements in favor of the targeted parent are effective in ameliorating parental alienation. Specialized family therapy addressing the alienation is effective in restoring family relationships and family functioning.

## 14 Psychological Tests for Parental Alienation

PASG PAI Newsletter – 01/2020

### 5 Factor Model:

**Parental Alienation – The Five Factor Model** by Bill Bernet, Amy Baker, Philip M. Koszyk, MD et. al.

The five-factor model provides us with one consistent and coherent evidence-based model to conceptualize and understand the presence and indicators of parental alienation dynamics in a family at a given moment in time. More importantly, it helps us to differentiate between PA and true estrangement thus, privileging the welfare and safety of children and young people.

The five-factor model presents an opportunity for professionals across the social, legal and mental health professions to achieve clarity regarding what parental alienation is and what it looks like in a simple and straight forward evidence-based manner. It provides us with a common framework to inform our practice with families and young people.

1. Contact refusal.
2. Positive relationship prior to contact refusal.
3. Absence of abuse or neglect on the part of the alienated parent.
4. Alienating behaviors of the preferred parent.
5. Child manifesting symptoms of Parental Alienation.

**Baker Strategies Questionnaire.** Baker and Chambers (2012) developed the BSQ, a standardized measure that could be used to collect reliable and valid information about the specific alienating behaviors that a child had been exposed to and/or a parent was currently engaging in. After several rounds of piloting, the BSQ was developed, which measures 17 primary alienating behaviors.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/26904586.2021.1960231?journalCode=wjcc21>

**Baker Alienation Questionnaire.** Baker, Burkhard, and Albertson-Kelly (2012) introduced the BAQ, which is intended to identify alienated children using a paper-and-pencil measure that is short, easy to administer, and easy to score objectively. In their pilot study, Baker et al. found that children who had been court-ordered for reunification therapy—specifically for PA—consistently responded in a polarized fashion in which one parent was denigrated and the other was idealized. Baker et al. found that the BAQ discriminated well between alienated and nonalienated children.

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/26904586.2021.1960231?journalCode=wjcc21>

**Bricklin Perceptual Scales.** The BPS, which were developed specifically for use in child custody evaluations, define and quantify children's attachment to and perceptions of their parents (Bricklin, 1984). Estranged children are likely on the BPS to manifest ambivalence toward both

parents. Alienated children, on the other hand, are likely to see the preferred parent as totally good and the rejected parent as totally bad. Although Bricklin did not use the term “splitting” in his discussion of the BPS, that appears to be what he was measuring. . <https://village-publishing.com/cep/bricklin-perceptual-scales>

**Dr. Richard Gardner** identified 8 behaviors to distinguish alienated from abused children. His work was the pre-cursor that helped show a pattern of behaviors related to parental alienation, <https://parentalalienation.eu/awareness/8-symptoms-of-parental-alienation/>

**Parental Acceptance–Rejection Questionnaire.** The PARQ is a questionnaire that children complete regarding their perceptions of their mothers’ and fathers’ accepting–rejecting behaviors (Bernet, Gregory, Reay, & Rohner, 2018). A study of the PARQ Gap (the absolute difference between the child’s PARQ: Mother and PARQ: Father scores) found that this test was 99% accurate in distinguishing alienated from nonalienated children (Bernet, Gregory, Rohner, and Reay, in press). ). <https://csiar.uconn.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/494/2021/08/Introduction-to-Interpersonal-Acceptance-Rejection-Theory-IPARTheory-and-Evidence.pdf>

**Red Flag Behaviors, Color Coded Calendar and 3 Strikes YOU’RE OUT! Program.**

Created by Joan T. Kloth-Zanard with the assistance of Linda Gottlieb, Brian Ludmer, Catherine MacWillie and Xiaojie Zheng. These tools use numbers and colors to help show a pattern of behavior. One is called Red Flag Behaviors and the other is called Color Coded Calendar. These coupled with a program called 3 Strikes YOU’RE OUT! Help the courts to determine if there is a pattern of behavior and whether a parent is going to cooperate with the courts orders or not. [Kloth-Zanard, Joan, 2012, Where Did I Go Wrong? How Did I Miss the Signs? 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Lulu Press.](#)

**The remaining list is in alphabetical order:**

**Alienated Family Relationship Scale.** Kathleen Laughrea (2002) developed the AFRS, which is administered to children. A factor analysis and reliability analysis confirmed that the two alienation scales (father alienating against mother and mother alienating against father) were reliable. Scores on this scale were related to other measures in a theoretically consistent manner indicating good validity of the measure.

[https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J035v17n01\\_05](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1300/J035v17n01_05)

**Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test.** Blagg and Godfrey (2018) administered the BAFRT to a population of children in the United Kingdom. The BAFRT (developed by Eva Bene and E. James Anthony in the 1950’s) is a projective test that explores indirectly children’s perceptions of their relationship with family members. Blagg and Godfrey concluded that “children in the alienated group who had not been abused or neglected by their target parent expressed almost exclusively negative (hostile) feelings towards them, while also expressing almost exclusively positive (affectionate) feelings towards their preferred parent.”

<https://pasg.info/app/uploads/2018/12/Blagg-2018-Family-Relations-Test.pdf>

**Hands-Warshak Scale of Alienating Behaviors.** Hands and Warshak (2011) adapted the PABS by adding 14 additional questions which tap “the subjects’ perceptions of additional aspects of parental alienating behavior” and “subjects’ attitudes toward each parent.” They concluded, “Parental alienating behaviors, and the phenomenon of a child becoming alienated from a parent after divorce, are departures from the norm and worthy of attention and concern.”  
<https://nebula.wsimg.com/5fa5dc1bdd3675232926282e8dcc22e6?AccessKeyId=82C5CAB9CA79C92AC751&disposition=0&alloworigin=1>

**Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory–2.** The MMPI-2 is well-established psychological test, which is commonly used in parenting time evaluations. Siegel and Langford (1998) found that alienating mothers were more likely to complete MMPI-2 questions in a defensive manner, striving to appear as flawless as possible. Gordon, Stoffey, and Bottinelli (2008) found that parents who induced alienation in their children manifested higher scores (in the clinical range) on the MMPI-2 than control mothers and fathers (scores in the normal range), indicating primitive defenses such as splitting and projective identification. The scores of targeted parents were mostly similar to the scores of control parents.  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK557525/> (ONE ISSUE WITH THIS TESTING IS THAT UNLESS THE EVALUATOR IS SPECIFICALLY TRAINED IN ALIENATION, ALIENATORS ARE REALLY GOOD AT WORKING THIS TEST TO THEIR ADVANTAGE. NOT SURE IF WE NEED TO MENTION ANYTHING ON THIS OR NOT.)

**Parental Alienating Behaviors Scale.** Braver, Coatsworth, and Peralta (n.d.) described and tested the PABS, although this work was not published in a journal. The PABS, which consists of 6 items regarding each parent, was administered to mothers, fathers, and adult children to determine the presence of parental alienating behaviors.  
[https://archive.uea.ac.uk/swp/iccd2006/Presentations/tues\\_pm/ps12%20High%20conflict%20%20Enforcement/Braver%20summary.pdf](https://archive.uea.ac.uk/swp/iccd2006/Presentations/tues_pm/ps12%20High%20conflict%20%20Enforcement/Braver%20summary.pdf)

**Parental Alienation Scale.** Cunha Gomide, Camargo, and Fernandes (2016) developed the PAS, a questionnaire to be completed by evaluators familiar with the family. The questions pertain to both the parents’ and the child’s activities and behaviors. This test distinguished alienating parents from target parents and alienated children from nonalienated children. ).  
<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2016-50448-003>

**Rowlands’ Parental Alienation Scale.** The RPAS is a questionnaire for parents designed to capture the manifestations of PA in their children, which had previously been described in the literature (Rowlands, 2018). Six significant factors were extracted representing the eight traditional behavioral symptoms of PA. <https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2018-60478-001>



**Parental Alienation as a Form of Emotional Child Abuse:  
Current State of Knowledge and Future Directions for Research**

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines the current state of research on parental alienation, which reveals that alienation is far more common and debilitating for children and parents than was previously believed. In extreme cases, one can make the argument that parental alienation is a serious form of emotional child abuse. Careful scrutiny of key elements of parental alienation in the research literature consistently identifies two core elements of child abuse: parental alienation as a *significant form of harm* to children that is *attributable to human action*. As a form of *individual* child abuse, parental alienation calls for a child protection response. As a form of *collective* abuse, parental alienation warrants fundamental reform of the family law system in the direction of shared parenting as the foundation of family law. There is an emerging scientific consensus on prevalence, effects, and professional recognition of parental alienation as a form of child abuse. In response, the authors discuss the need for research on effectiveness of parental alienation interventions, particularly in more extreme cases. This paper argues for more quantitative and qualitative research focused on four pillars of intervention at micro and macro levels, with specific recommendations for further study of child protection responses, reunification programs, and other therapeutic approaches.

*Keywords:* parental alienation, child abuse, family intervention.

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## **Parental Alienation as a Form of Emotional Child Abuse: Current State of Knowledge and Future Directions for Research**

### **Introduction**

Parental alienation, which most commonly occurs in the context of child custody disputes during and after parental separation, involves the “programming” of a child by one parent to denigrate the other “target” parent, in an effort to harm, damage, and destroy the relationship between a child and the target parent, whereby the target parent is demonized and undermined as a parent worthy of the child’s love and attention (Harman, Kruk, & Hines, In Press). Such denigration results in the child’s emotional rejection of the target parent and the loss of a capable, loving parent from the child’s life. Parental alienation is manifested through a child’s reluctance or refusal to have a relationship with a parent for illogical, untrue, or exaggerated reasons. Parental alienation is distinct from parental estrangement, which encompasses behaviors through which a parent damages her or his relationship with a child, typically because of the parent’s own shortcomings (Drozd & Olsen, 2004).

Parental alienating behaviors lie on a continuum, ranging from mild, subtle forms of badmouthing to more severe forms of aggression and coercive control that result in the child’s complete rejection and refusal of contact with the target parent. Such behaviors also span the range from isolated events to an ongoing pattern of abuse aimed at the target parent. There are no gender differences in regard to who is the perpetrator and who is the target of parental alienation. Custodial status, however, is a strong predictor of who is likely to alienate a child from a parent (Baker & Eichler, 2016; Harman, Kruk & Hines, In Press).

The arena of parental alienation is fraught with controversy, particularly regarding the question of whether parental alienation is a form of child abuse and family violence. Problems related to distinguishing among abuse, estrangement, and alienation, and to legal reforms and therapeutic interventions needed to address alienation, pose considerable challenges for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers (Drozd & Oleson, 2004).

There are also widely differing views toward the current state of research on the alienation phenomenon. According to Emery (2014), *no* high quality studies of parental alienation have been published to date. The idea that parental disparagement equals alienation, he writes, is an hypothesis that needs testing, not an established fact. Similarly, in their chapter on empirical studies of alienation, Saini et al. (2016) similarly maintain that parental alienation remains a hypothesis needing further empirical testing, even though their literature review included only a fragment of the existing research, totaling 45 papers and 13 doctoral dissertations. By contrast, parental alienation researchers point to more than *one thousand* existing studies on the phenomenon (Vanderbilt University Medical Center, 2017). Although most studies of alienation use qualitative and mixed research methods, some argue that the depth of the parental alienation experience can be captured only by qualitative research (Balmer, Matthewson, & Haines, 2018; Kruk, 2010).

Analysis of parental alienation research over the past decade reveals that parental alienation is more common and debilitating for children and parents than was previously believed. Despite the views of those who doubt the concept itself, an emergent scientific consensus on the definition and prevalence of parental alienation and its effects on parents and children is emerging. For example, parental alienation is recognized as a manifestation of three disorders identified in the DSM-V (American Psychiatric Association, 2013): “Parent-Child Relational Problem,” “Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress,” and “Child Psychological Abuse.” Parental alienation is related to two symptom clusters identified in the DSM: “impaired functioning in behavioral, cognitive, or affective domains” and “negative attributions of the other’s intentions, hostility toward or scapegoating of the other, and unwarranted feelings of estrangement” on the child’s part of the child. The current draft of the World Health Organization’s *International Classification of Diseases* also contains a specific definition of parental alienation (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016).

Moreover, research evidence of the many facets of parental alienation is much more robust than is often assumed. The most recent quantitative research raises some serious alarms. Harman (2017) found a staggering 13.4% of U.S. parents reporting they had been victimized by parental alienation at some point in their lives. The large body of research by Baker and colleagues (Baker & Eichler, 2016; Bernet & Baker, 2013), which focused on perspectives of now-young adult child victims of alienation and of targeted parents, details strategies of alienating parents and short- and long-term consequences of alienation. There is also concordance in the clinical and research literature in regard to core components of alienation (Clemente & Padilla-Racero, 2015). Slowly but surely, the misunderstanding and denial surrounding parental alienation is being washed away. A survey conducted at the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts 2014 conference reported 98% agreement in support of the basic tenet of parental alienation: children can be manipulated by one parent to reject the other parent, who does not deserve to be rejected (Warshak, 2015b).

At the same time, however, it is clear that significant research gaps in the field of parental alienation persist (Saini et al., 2016). The need for research on the effectiveness of different approaches to parental alienation intervention at macro and micro levels (Kruk, 2013; Kruk, 2016) is pressing. Therefore, the first part of this article reports results of research on the effects of parental alienation on fathers and mothers, along with parental perceptions of the effects of alienation on children, the perspective of those most negatively affected by parental alienation. This includes a review of recent research on parents’ experiences of severe alienation, situations where parents and children have had no contact with each other for a prolonged period. The case will be made that in such extreme cases, parental alienation is indeed a serious form of emotional child abuse. The second part of the paper focuses on the need for research on the utility and effectiveness of existing and emergent approaches to intervention in the alienation arena.

### **Current State of Knowledge: Emergent Scientific Consensus on Parental Alienation as a Form of Emotional Child Abuse**

The current state of knowledge reflects emerging scientific consensus on the definition, prevalence, and effects of parental alienation. Saini et al. (2016) acknowledge there is basic agreement that parental alienation commonly refers to the experience of a child who has been influenced to reject and hate one parent by the other parent, and to parental behaviors that poison the child's relationship with the other parent. Parental alienation is characterized as a form of "programming" of the child: an unjustified campaign of denigration against a parent resulting in the child's own unjustified rejection of that parent (Bernet & Baker, 2013). In situations of parental alienation, children's views of the targeted parent are almost exclusively negative, to the point that the parent is demonized and seen as evil or, in extreme cases, forgotten about altogether. For the child, parental alienation is a serious mental condition based on a false belief that the alienated parent is unworthy to be a parent (ibid.).

Citing earlier work by Drozd and Oleson (2004), Saini et al. (2016) declare there are no reliable instruments to distinguish parental alienation from justified estrangement, i.e. cases where a child or parent has been victimized by child abuse or family violence, and the child fears and rejects the parent as a result. They argue that this leads to a major flaw in most parental alienation research. However, there is a vast body of child abuse research demonstrating that even the most physically abused children rarely reject an abusive parent with the vehemence that alienated children display (Clawar & Rivlin, 2013). Gottlieb (2012, p. 52) summarizes the clinical perspective of the child protection field:

Despite the abuse and neglect suffered by the three thousand foster care children who had been under my care, it was extremely uncommon for those children to refuse contact with a parent—even with an overtly abusive parent. Rather, abused children tend to protect and cling to the abusive parent. Moreover, in the rare cases in which that did appear to happen, there was always some evidence of indoctrination or programming (typically by foster parents who had the surreptitious goal of adopting the child). Thus, it is counter-instinctual for a child to reject a parent—even an abusive parent. When a professional observes a child strongly reject a parent in the absence of verified abuse, neglect or markedly deficient parenting skills—which should never be assumed based on the child's self-reporting—one of the first thoughts should be that the other parent is an alienator. Moreover, one should never assume that, because a child has rejected a parent, the parent must have done something to warrant it. Having observed thousands of genuinely-abused children during a period of twenty four years, I have concluded that a child's innate desire to have a relationship with his or her parents is one of the most powerful of human instincts, surpassed only by the instinct for survival and the instinct to protect one's young; among normal children, in the absence of an alienating influence, that instinct is seldom suppressed because a parent exhibits relatively minor flaws, deficiencies, or idiosyncrasies.

Children's identification with and protection of an abusive parent is evident in parental alienation situations. The child will align with rather than reject the alienating/abusive parent (Lorandos, Bernet, & Sauber, 2013).

The emergent state of knowledge about parental alienation indicates that parental alienation may well be a serious form of emotional child abuse connected to both physical abuse and child neglect. From a definitional perspective, the two core elements of parental alienation (for the child, a serious mental condition resulting from a series of alienating strategies of alienating parents) correspond to the two core components of child abuse. First, child abuse and parental alienation represent a significant form of harm and pose a serious threat to the well-being of a child. Second, the source of the abuse is attributable to human agency; it is the result of human action. This may be at the hands of an individual parent or a caregiver, and/or a form of collective action. For example, there can be social, legal, political, and economic factors that compromise children's well-being. As the result of a parent's individual action, parental alienation is a form of individual child abuse. Insofar as adversarial legal systems routinely remove a parent from the daily routines of parenting, parental alienation may also be considered to be a form of collective abuse (Giancarlo & Rottman, 2015).

### **Two Core Elements of Parental Alienation as a Form of Child Abuse (Cooper, 1993; Finkelhor & Corbin, 1988)**

- Parental alienation involves a set of *abusive strategies* on the part of a parent to foster the child's rejection of the other parent, whereby children are manipulated by one parent to reject the other.
- Parental alienation is the child's unjustified campaign of denigration against a parent, in which children's views of the targeted parent are almost exclusively negative, to the point that the parent is demonized. For the child, parental alienation is a *significant mental disturbance*, based on a false belief that the alienated parent is a dangerous and unworthy parent.

### **Abusive Strategies**

The first defining feature of parental alienation as a form of emotional child abuse centers on behavior of the alienator. This involves implementation of a set of abusive strategies on the part of the alienating parent to foster the child's rejection of the other parent. Children are manipulated to reject the other parent in an effort to undermine and interfere with the child's relationship with that parent. Such strategies include (a) bad-mouthing, (b) limiting contact, erasing the other parent from the child's life and mind, (c) forcing the child to reject the other parent, (d) creating the impression that the other parent is dangerous, (e) forcing the child to choose between the parents by threatening withdrawal of affection, and (f) belittling and limiting contact with the extended family of the targeted parent (Baker & Darnell, 2006; Viljoen & van Rensberg, 2014). A recent study of 126 targeted parents by Poustie, Matthewson, and Balmer

(2018) identified tactics of (a) emotional manipulation, (b) encouraging defiance and alliance, (c) disrupting time between targeted parent and child, (e) withholding information, (f) defamation of the targeted parent, and (g) erasure. Such denigration leads to the child's emotional rejection of the targeted parent and the loss of a capable and loving parent from the child's life. Tactics of alienating parents are tantamount to extreme psychological maltreatment of very young and of older children. These include spurning, terrorizing, isolating, corrupting or exploiting, and denying emotional responsiveness (Baker & Darnell, 2006).

### **Seventeen Strategies of Alienating Parents (Baker and Darnell, 2006)**

1. **Badmouthing:** The target parent is portrayed as unloving, unsafe, and unavailable. Flaws are exaggerated or manufactured. Such statements are made frequently, intensely, and with great sincerity.
2. **Limiting contact:** The target parent has few opportunities to counter the badmouthing message.
3. **Interfering with communication:** Phones are not answered, e-mail messages are blocked, and messages are not forwarded.
4. **Interfering with symbolic communication:** Thinking about, talking about, and looking at pictures of a parent are prohibited. The alienating parent creates an environment in which the child does not feel free to engage in these activities. The child's mind and heart are preoccupied with the alienating parent and there is no room left for the child's thoughts and feelings about the target parent.
5. **Withdrawal of love:** What angers the alienating parent most is the child's love and affection for the target parent. Thus, the child must relinquish the love of the other. The child lives in fear of losing the alienating parent's love and approval.
6. **Telling the child that the target parent is dangerous:** Stories might be told about ways in which the target parent has tried to harm the child.
7. **Forcing child to choose:** The alienating parent will compel the child away from the target parent by scheduling competing activities and promising valued items and privileges.
8. **Telling the child that the target parent does not love him or her:** The alienating parent will foster the belief in the child that she is being rejected by the target parent and distort every situation to make it appear as if that is the case.

9. Confiding in the child: The alienating parent will involve the child in discussions about legal matters and share with the child personal and private information about the target parent. The alienating parent will portray him/herself as the victim of the target parent, inducing the child to feel pity for and protective of the alienating parent, and anger and hurt toward the target parent. The confidences are shared in such a way as to flatter the child and appeal to his/her desire to be trusted and involved in adult matters.
10. Forcing child to reject the target parent: Alienating parents create situations in which the child actively rejects the target parent, such as calling the target parent to cancel upcoming parenting time or request that the target parent not attend an important school or athletic event. Further, once children have hurt a parent, the alienation will become entrenched as the child justifies his/her behaviour by devaluing the target parent.
11. Asking the child to spy on the target parent: Once children betray a parent by spying on them, they will likely feel guilty and uncomfortable being around that parent, thus furthering the alienation.
12. Asking the child to keep secrets from the target parent: The alienating parent will ask or hint that certain information should be withheld from the target parent in order to protect the child's interests. Like spying, keeping secrets creates psychological distance between the target parent and the child.
13. Referring to the target parent by first name: Rather than saying "Mummy/Daddy" or "Your mummy/Your daddy" the alienating parent will use the first name of the target parent when talking about that parent to the child. This may result in the child referring to the target parent by first name as well. The message to the child is that the target parent is no longer someone whom the alienating parent respects as an authority figure for the child and no longer someone who has a special bond with the child. By referring to the target parent by first name, the alienating parent is demoting that parent to the level of a peer or neighbour.
14. Referring to a step-parent as "Mum" or "Dad" and encouraging child to do the same: The alienating parent will refer to that parent as the mother/father to the child and create the expectation that the child will do so as well.
15. Withholding medical, academic, and other important information from target parent/keeping target parent's name off medical, academic, and other relevant documents: The target parent will be at a decided disadvantage in terms of accessing information, forging relationships, being contacted in emergencies, being invited to participate, being provided with changes in schedules/locations, and so forth. This marginalizes the target parent in the eyes of the child and important adults in his/her life. They also make it considerably more difficult for the target parent to be an active and involved parent.

16. Changing child's name to remove association with target parent: The target parent may feel that the name change represents a rejection of him/her and will experience hurt, sadness, and frustration.
17. Cultivating dependency/undermining the authority of the target parent: Alienating parents develop dependency in their children rather than help their children develop self-sufficiency, critical thinking, autonomy, and independence. At the same time, they will undermine the authority of the target parent in order to ensure that the child is loyal to only one parent.

According to Baker and Darnell (2006), each of the 17 strategies serves a number of functions: (a) to further the child's cohesion and alignment with the alienating parent, (b) to create psychological distance between the child and the targeted parent, (c) to intensify the targeted parent's anger and hurt over the child's behavior, and (d) to incite conflict between the child and the targeted parent should the targeted parent challenge or react to the child's behavior.

Parental alienation exists on a continuum from mild to extremely severe and can be reciprocal and non-reciprocal. In some cases children and parents reunite; in others, they do not. As a group that is perhaps the most negatively affected by parental alienation, completely estranged parents have been the focus of recent research (Kruk, 2010a, 2010b, 2011, 2018). In three separate studies of such parents (i.e., 78 fathers and mothers who had no contact with their children for at least one year), narrative inquiry and grounded theory analysis uncovered the following as the most common indicators of severe parental alienation and as characteristics of alienation perpetrators. These constitute more serious forms of abuse when compared with less severe alienation. Less common and recognizable than the behaviors that Baker and Darnell identified, these reflect a much greater degree of pathology on the part of the alienating parent.

### **Indicators of Extreme Parental Alienation as Child Abuse: Characteristics of the Alienating Parent (Kruk, 2018)**

1. Seizing the child by force.
2. A belief in one's entitlement as the primary or sole parental figure in the child's life, and lack of validation or recognition of the salience of the other parent as a parent.
3. Insensitivity to and disregard for the impact of one's behavior on children; lack of regard for and attunement to children's needs. Willingness to engage in conflict in front of the children. Lack of emotional depth and emotional responsiveness in relationship with one's child. Parentification of the child.



4. Overt or covert obsession with the other parent, and with hurting the other parent, to the extent that the obsession prevails over one's parental responsibilities.
5. Willingness and enthusiasm to engage in adversarial combat, and skill in the adversarial arena.
6. Refusal to communicate, or engage in a negotiation process.
7. Refusal to accept responsibility for one's own contribution to the problem situation or conflict.
8. Readiness to accuse the other party of wrongdoing.
9. Lack of guilt or remorse for one's behavior.
10. Exaggeration and dishonesty; an attitude of, "the end justifies the means."
11. Badmouthing of the other parent in front of the child, or avoiding any mention of the other parent in an attempt to erase that parent from the child's memory.
12. Monitoring and questioning the child in regard to the child's relationship with the other parent.

First and foremost, according to targeted parents, seizing the child by force includes contact denial and misuse of the legal system to undermine the other parent's participation in the child's life, aimed at removing the parent from the child's life entirely. Essentially, severely alienated parents define parental alienation as forced physical separation of parent and child: the idea of "by their actions you shall know them." Identifying alienation is simple and straightforward: an alienator is a parent who removes a parent from the life of a child. Second, belief in one's entitlement as the primary or sole parental figure in the child's life, and lack of validation or recognition of the salience of the other parent as a parent, is a feature of alienating parents' behavior. Third is a lack of understanding, attunement, and empathy to children's needs and perceptions: insensitivity to and disregard for the impact of one's behavior on children. This is evident in (a) the parent's willingness to engage in conflict in front of the children; (b) lack of emotional depth and emotional responsiveness in relationship with one's child; (c) parentification of the child, where a child is made to feel responsible for his or her parent's well-being. Fourth is overt or covert obsession with the other parent, and with hurting the other parent to the extent that the obsession dominates one's parental responsibilities. An alienating parent's need to hurt and seek revenge prevails over the child's need for the other parent's love and nurturing. The parent's hatred of the other parent essentially overrides their love for their child. Fifth is willingness and enthusiasm to engage in adversarial combat, and skill and use of power over tactics in the adversarial arena: readiness to engage in and risk a "winner take all" process. Sixth, simple refusal to communicate or engage in a negotiation process, either directly or with

third party intervention such as family mediation, is often present among alienating parents. Lack of good faith in any involvement in such processes is a common problem. Seventh is refusal to accept responsibility for one's own contribution to the problem situation or conflict: an insistence on being "right" in all matters or disagreements with the former spouse. Lack of accountability in regard to the problem situation or conflict is also evident. Eighth is readiness to accuse the other party of wrongdoing; alienating parents are quick to blame and place responsibility for the problem situation or conflict onto the other parent.

Remaining strategies include lack of guilt or remorse for one's behavior, or regret over one's actions; exaggeration, dishonesty, and an attitude of, "the end justifies the means;" badmouthing of the other parent in front of the child or avoiding any mention of the other parent in an attempt to erase that parent from the child's memory; and, monitoring and questioning the child in regard to the child's relationship with the other parent. These last strategies correspond to experiences of less severely alienated parents.

### **Effects on Child**

Thus the first element of the definition of parental alienation as a form of child abuse relates to the abusive behavior of the alienating parent. The second constituent of the definition focuses on profoundly harmful effects on the child. In the most severe cases, these effects are profound (Balmer, Matthewson & Haines, 2018; Mone & Biringen, 2012; Mone, MacPhee, Anderson, & Banning, 2011). First, teaching hatred of the other parent is tantamount to instilling self-hatred in the child. Self-hatred is a particularly disturbing feature among alienated children, and one of the more serious and common effects of parental alienation. Children internalize hatred aimed at the alienated parent, are led to believe the alienated parent did not love or want them, and experience severe guilt related to betraying the alienated parent. Their self-hatred (and depression) is rooted in feelings of being unloved by one parent and in separation from that parent while being denied the opportunity to mourn the loss of the parent, or even to talk about the parent (Warshak, 2015b). Hatred of a parent is not an emotion that comes naturally to a child. In parental alienation situations, such hatred is taught on a continual basis. With hatred of the parent comes self-hatred, which makes children feel worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, and only of value in meeting another person's needs (Baker, 2005, 2010).

Second, numerous studies show that alienated children exhibit severe psychosocial disturbances. These include disrupted social-emotional development, lack of trust in relationships, social anxiety, and social isolation (Baker, 2005, 2010; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012; Friedlander & Walters, 2010; Godbout & Parent, 2008). Such children have poor relationships with both parents. As adults, they tend to enter partnerships earlier, are more likely to divorce or dissolve their cohabiting unions, more likely to have children outside any partnership, and more likely to become alienated from their own children (Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012).

Low self-sufficiency, lack of autonomy, and lingering dependence on the alienating parent are a third characteristic of alienated children. Garber (2011) found this manifested in three ways: adultification (the alienating parent treating the child as an adult); parentification (the child taking responsibility for the parent, in a role reversal); and infantilization (the *folie a deux* relationship that develops renders the child incompetent and incapable of the life tasks of adulthood).

Alienated children are more likely to play truant from school and leave school at an early age. They are less likely to attain academic and professional qualifications in adulthood. They tend to experience unemployment, have low incomes, and remain on social assistance. They often seem to drift aimlessly through life. Alienated children experience difficulties controlling their impulses, struggling with mental health, addiction, and self-harm (Otowa, York, Gardner, Kendle, and Hetteema, 2014). They are more likely to smoke, drink alcohol, and abuse drugs, often succumb to behavioral addictions, and tend to be promiscuous, foregoing contraception and becoming teenage parents (*ibid.*).

### **Indicators of Parental Alienation as Child Abuse: Characteristics of the Alienated Child**

1. Poor self-esteem, depression and self-hatred
2. Disrupted social-emotional development: withdrawal, isolation, social anxiety
3. Low self-sufficiency; lack of autonomy; dependence on parent
4. Poor academic achievement
5. Poor impulse control; struggles with mental health, addiction and self-harm

Of the four types of child abuse, physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect, parental alienation is usually considered a form of emotional or psychological abuse (Bernet et al, 2016, Clawar & Rivlin, 2013; Von Boch-Galhau & Kodjoe, 2006). However, parental alienation often co-occurs with the three other types of child abuse. First, there is neglect, because alienating parents' hatred of the targeted parent is stronger than their love from their child (they are less attuned to and thus neglect the needs of the child). There is also physical and sexual abuse, because children in situations where one parent is absent from their lives are at significantly greater risk than are children who have meaningful relationships with both parents. Therefore, alienated children (a) are five times more likely to have experienced physical and sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment (Cawson, 2002); (b) are exposed to one hundred times higher risks of fatal abuse (Daly & Wilson, 1988); (c) have higher risks of physical health problems, psychosomatic health symptoms, and illnesses such as acute and chronic pain, diabetes, asthma, headaches, stomach aches, and feeling sick (Dawson, 1991; Lundbert, 1993; O'Neill, 2002); (d) run greater mortality and morbidity risks; (e) are more likely to die as

children (Lundbert, 1993); (f) live an average of four years less over their life span (Ringbäck Weitoft, Hjern, Haglund, & Rosén, 2003); (g) are more likely to experience sexual health problems (Ellis, 2003; O'Neill 2002; Wellings, Nanchahal, & MacDowall, 2001) and to contract sexually transmitted infections (Wellings et al., 2001).

Research on the impact of father absence is extremely robust, to the point where causal effects of father absence have been identified (McLanahan, Tach, & Schneider, 2013). These include youth crime (85% of youth in prison have an absent father), poor academic performance (71% of high school dropouts have an absent father), and homelessness (90% of runaways have absent fathers). Fatherless children have higher levels of depression and suicide, delinquency and promiscuity, behavior problems, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy (Stein, Milburn, Zane, & Rotheram-Borus, 2009).

In addition, parental alienation is also becoming recognized as a form of domestic violence (Harman & Biringen, 2015; Kruk, 2013). Children witnessing this form of violence against a parent is itself a form of child abuse. There is considerable research on the devastating effects of alienation on targeted parents. The highest levels of depression occur among adults who have children under age eighteen with whom they are not living or actively involved (Evenson & Simon, 2005). The most salient loss for non-resident parents is that of their children and their parental identity (Kruk, 2011). Such parents routinely report increasing isolation, loss of employment, and inability to form or sustain new relationships. These impacts are connected to more disturbed patterns of thinking and feeling including shame, stigma and self-blame, and learned helplessness and hopelessness (Kruk, 2010a; Kruk, 2010b). A “suicide epidemic” has been identified among divorced fathers without their children in their lives (Kposowa, 2010: 993; Sher, 2015).

### **Future Directions for Research**

There is an emergent scientific consensus on the reality, definition, prevalence and effects of parental alienation. Given the expanded knowledge base on this phenomenon, the need for effective intervention is pressing. The biggest gap in parental alienation research and the priority for future research is evaluation of existing and emergent intervention methods, models, and policies in regard to understanding and addressing parental alienation as a form of emotional child abuse.

Concerning intervention at individual, family, group (micro), community, and social policy (macro) levels, there are four basic pillars of intervention, all seen as necessary and fundamental to combating parental alienation (Kruk, 2018). These pillars fall under the headings of individual harm reduction, prevention, treatment and enforcement.

**Priorities for Future Parental Alienation Research: Four Pillars of Intervention**

1. Harm Reduction: Research on effective approaches in addressing parental alienation as a form of individual child abuse, and as a child protection matter.
2. Prevention: Research on addressing parental alienation as a form of collective child abuse: the impact of a rebuttable legal presumption of shared parenting on parental alienation.
3. Treatment: Reunification programs and therapeutic services for alienated parents and children: best practices and effectiveness of treatment approaches.
4. Enforcement: Addressing parental alienation as a form of domestic violence, and as a criminal matter: best practices and effectiveness of policies and practices.

First is the level of individual harm reduction. Some suggest that alienated children are no less damaged than are other child victims of extreme conflict, such as child soldiers and other abducted children who identify with their tormentors to avoid pain and maintain relationships with them, however abusive such relationships may be (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011). Parental alienation as a serious form of emotional child abuse, which is linked to child neglect and physical and sexual abuse, clearly makes it, a child protection concern (ibid) above all else. At the same time, targeted parents routinely encounter professional misunderstanding of and indifference from professional service providers, especially child protection authorities, to alienation reports (Poustie, Matthewson and Balmer, 2018). First and foremost, we must recognize parental alienation as a form of individual child abuse requiring a child protection response. Research on effective child protection responses to parental alienation as a form of individual child abuse is a first priority. This includes effectiveness of family support/preservation programs and child removal interventions on the part of child welfare authorities.

Parental alienation as a form of child abuse is not only the result of the individual actions of a parent. It also stems from social, legal, political, and economic policies (Giancarlo & Rottman, 2015). There is strong association between legal child custody determination processes and emergence of parental alienation, since parental alienation flourishes in situations where one parent has exclusive care and control of children after parental separation (Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, 2016), and where primary residence of children is often granted to parents with serious psychological problems who make the stronger case in the adversarial arena (Kruk, 2013; McMurray & Blackmore, 1992). Legal systems that remove a parent from a child's life by means of sole custody or primary residence orders are not only contributing to parental alienation; they may also be engaging in a form of alienation (ibid.). Parental alienation thrives in an adversarial "winner-take-all" legal system where parents must denigrate the other parents as much as possible to prove they are the superior parents and more worthy of receiving sole custody or primary caregiver status. Parents seek to win their cases by disparaging the other parent as a

parent, in effect engaging in alienating behaviors. The system thereby encourages and produces alienating behavior (Kruk, 2013; Giancarlo & Rottman, 2015).

Whether parental alienation is in fact more likely to occur in jurisdictions where child residence is granted to one parent only, and less likely to occur in jurisdictions which have legislated a presumption of shared parenting, is an important question for further research. According to parents themselves, shared parenting law, a legal sanctioning of the fact that children have two primary parents, is a bulwark against parental alienation (Kruk, 2011; Kruk, 2013). The need for more robust longitudinal research is pressing in this regard.

Thus, the second pillar is that of prevention: preventing parental alienation as a form of collective child abuse through fundamental reform of the family law system. Specifically, a rebuttable legal presumption of shared parenting is needed to prevent parental alienation from occurring in the first place. Shared parenting as a legal presumption, rebuttable in situations of family violence, is strongly associated with both parents' active involvement in the day-to-day parenting of children. This, in turn, is associated with children's well-being, emotional security and positive adjustment to the consequences of divorce (Baude, Pearson & Drapeau, 2016; Fabricius, Sokol, Diaz & Braver, 2013; Kruk, 2013). At the same time, shared parenting is associated with reduction of conflict between parents and prevention of first-time family violence during the divorce transition (Bauserman, 2012; Kruk, 2013; Nielsen, 2018). Therefore, a second focus for research is effectiveness of shared parenting legislation as a means to preventing parental alienation.

The third pillar is that of treatment. It is widely recognized that research on the effectiveness of therapeutic programs, including reunification programs along with therapeutic programs for children as victims of child abuse and alienated parents as victims of domestic violence, are very much in their infancy (Balmer, Matthewson, & Haines, 2018).

The core elements and working methods of effective reunification programs have yet to be determined. However, existing programs emphasize the clinical significance of children coming to regard their parents as equally valued and important in their lives, while at the same time helping enmeshed children relinquish their protective roles toward their alienating parents (Smith, 2016). The research makes it clear that reunification efforts should be pursued in cooperation with service providers who have specialized expertise in parental alienation reunification (Darnell, 2011). Several models of intervention have been developed. The best known is Warshak's (2010) Family Bridges Program, an educative and experiential program focused on allowing the child to have a healthy relationship with both parents, removing the child from the parental conflict, and encouraging child autonomy, multiple perspective-taking, and critical thinking. Sullivan's Overcoming Barriers Family Camp (Sullivan, Ward & Deutsch, 2010), which combines psycho-educational and clinical intervention in an environment of milieu therapy, is aimed at development of agreement regarding the sharing of parenting time, and a written aftercare plan. Friedlander and Walters' (2010) Multimodal Family Intervention provides differential interventions for situations of parental alignment, alienation, enmeshment, and estrangement. When applied to reunification, family therapy and other practice theories such as

parallel group therapy and exposure-based cognitive behavioral treatment (Garber, 2011; Reay, 2015; Toren, Bregman, Zohar-Reich, Ben-Amitay, Wolmer, & Laor, 2013) use various treatment methods and report preliminary results of treatment effectiveness. More research is needed, however, before we can make significant headway in development of best practice: the core components of effective reunification programs in cases of parental alienation.

Child and family practitioners in mental health and legal fields encounter fathers and mothers, along with extended family members, who are routinely affected by parental alienation. The clinical literature in the field emphasizes the importance of validating alienated parents' identity as parents, and of encouraging them to persist and never give up in their quest to reestablish relationships with their children. In the face of hostility and rejection from their children, parents are advised to respond with loving compassion, emotional availability, and absolute safety. Patience and hope, unconditional love, and being there for one's child, are suggested as the best means to respond to children, even in the face of the sad truth that this may not be enough to bring those children back into the parents' lives. Warshak (2015b) suggests that wherever possible, alienated parents should try exposing their children to people who regard them, as parents, with honor and respect, to let children see that their negative opinion, and the opinion of the alienating parent, is not shared by the rest of the world. This type of experience will leave stronger impressions than anything the alienated parent can say on his or her own behalf. Alienated children benefit from education about dynamics of parental alienation (ibid). These are all important precepts, but there needs to be much more research on effective treatment methods, interventions and strategies at the individual, family and group levels with children and their parents.

Enforcement, the final pillar, is perhaps the most contentious area of intervention as divergent legal and criminal justice responses have been advanced, ranging from incarceration and custody reversal to family therapy and leaving the situation alone. There is little or no research on methods of dealing with parents who continue to alienate children despite court orders to the contrary. Some commentators (Lowenstein, 2015) argue that continued exposure to the alienating parent will be counterproductive to reunification methods. Others (Kruk, 2010) suggest that using alienation from a parent to punish or deter alienation seems counter-intuitive, and that shared parenting benefits children in high conflict families (but not in situations of domestic violence). However, the most current research indicates that therapeutic interventions are most effective when there are strong legal sanctions for non-compliance with shared parenting orders (Templer, Matthewson, Haines, & Cox, 2016). There is considerable discussion on awarding primary parental responsibility to the targeted parent when parental alienation is severe as an important step in ameliorating parental alienation (ibid.). However, there is little conclusive research evidence on effective means of enforcement.

According to Poustie, Matthewson and Balmer (2018), current findings indicate that with regard to family violence, it may be helpful to consider alienating behaviors as a form of crime on par with physical abuse. Indeed, countries such as Brazil have already criminalized parental alienation. Research suggests that court judgments that are swift, clear, and forceful are likely to have the best chance at curbing alienation.

### Conclusion

When it comes to the empirical study of parental alienation, the state of knowledge has advanced considerably. There has been an explosion of qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods research on parental alienation over the past decade, generating more than one thousand research and clinical studies reported in scientific and professional journals, books, and book chapters (Bernet et al., 2016; Vanderbilt University Medical Center, 2017). The research may be considered robust in regard to definition and characteristics of parental alienation, incidence and prevalence rates, and most importantly, effects of parental alienation on children and parents (Templer et al., 2016). Abundant research suggests that parental alienation is a serious form of both emotional child abuse and domestic violence (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Bernet & Baker, 2013; American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Gottlieb, 2012).

Given the social science consensus on the reality of parental alienation (Warshak, 2015a; Harman & Biringer, 2016), the need for research on the effectiveness of different approaches to intervention is urgent. This includes research on the four pillars of parental alienation intervention: (a) addressing parental alienation by means of a child protection response (the harm reduction pillar); (b) effectiveness of family law reform in the direction of shared parenting as preventive of parental alienation (the prevention pillar); (c) treatment and reunification programs, which are rapidly being developed in response to increased professional recognition of parental alienation and its effects (the treatment pillar), and (d) the enforcement pillar, different approaches to dealing with parental alienation as a breach of the law. Given the strong foundation of research on the existence, prevalence, and effects of parental alienation, along with continued controversy surrounding directions for child and family policy and practice, and best practices in legal and therapeutic fields, the road to future parental alienation research is clear.

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# New England Psychologist

## Long term results of parental alienation to the alienated child

By Sharie Stines, Psy.D.  
October 7th, 2020

*(Source: Dr. Lori Love, Custody Evaluations 101: Allegations and Sensitivities)*

### **What are the long-term effects of parental alienation on the child who has been alienated?**

The results are devastating for the alienated child and can last a lifetime. Not only does the child miss out on a lifetime of having an enjoyable and fulfilling relationship with the parent they have been conditioned to reject, they also develop some serious pathological behaviors and attitudes that carry in to their adult lives.

Following are descriptions of some of these disturbing effects:

- **Splitting:** This is the psychological phenomenon of seeing people as either “all bad” or “all good,” or “black or white.” Everything is polarized and the person has an inability to see shades of gray. Think of the borderline personality disordered person who has to split in order to cope with relationships and life in general. This is not a disorder you want your child to possess and leads to endless problems.
- **Difficulties forming and maintaining relationships:** Alienated children struggle with developing healthy relationships because they have been conditioned to “get rid of people” whenever they experience a perceived threat. Since most people are flawed, the alienated child would need the skill of knowing how to accept flaws in others in order to maintain the relationship. Skills such as flexibility, acceptance, forgiveness, do not exist when you reject people outright for minor infractions, as alienated children have been trained to do. Whenever someone causes a perceived threat to this person, he/she is triggered to remember, “I know how to handle this,” and they proceed to reject the other person easily. Their mind tells them, “You just hurt my feelings. I’m going to close you out and now you’re done.”
- **Lack of ability to tolerate anger or hostility:** Alienated children as adults (and as children) have a very low tolerance for any kind of anger or hostility, which are always interpreted by the person as abuse. They have a difficult time when someone is upset with them. Alienated children as adults have a very difficult time owning their part in a problem, taking responsibility, or making amends to others. They actually get panicked or triggered by any type of perceived disapproval. In order to have healthy relationships, a necessary level of tolerance for others’ negative feelings is essential.
- **Conflict with authority figures:** Because these individuals have learned how to go around an authority figure with a “campaign of denigration,” they will carry this habit into their adult lives. You can see this in the workplace if the alienated child has a boss he/she doesn’t like. He/she will create a crusade against this manager by rallying coworkers against the boss with a smear campaign.

• **Unhealthy entitlement to a sense of rage:** They have been rewarded for being hostile and angry towards one of their parents, and this rage stays there and can be triggered at any time. Yes, the psychological damage to a child who is trained by one parent to reject another parent has serious and profound negative effects on that child's ability to form any type of healthy intimate attachments in adulthood.

Obviously, it is important to interrupt the alienating process during childhood by removing the child from the alienating parent and rewarding the child for attachment-enhancing behaviors toward the rejected parent, before it is too late.

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## CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGY & NEUROPSYCHOLOGY | NEW PERSPECTIVE

# Denial of ambivalence as a hallmark of parental alienation

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**Abstract:** Parental alienation is a construct which describes a campaign of disenfranchisement from children on the part of one parent against another, particularly during divorce. It has been at the forefront of child custody research aimed at explaining its short- and long-term effects on the children affected by it. During a time when tension between parents is at its highest and conflict regarding parenting responsibilities and parenting time arises, parents resort to parental alienation in an effort to control and hinder the emotional relationship the children would otherwise forge with the other parent. This paper is a review and integration of established ambivalence and parental alienation theory incorporating clinical examples. The clinical examples are cited from real interviews conducted by the authors from 2010 to 2016. The purpose and diagnostic utility of the examination of this subject matter is to exemplify the need for making a fine grain clinical analysis of ambivalence in order to most accurately assess the existence of parental alienation in a clinical situation with children. Specifically, the expressed lack of ambivalence as manifested by the alienated child serves as an observable defining characteristic of the presence of parental alienation. The understanding of this phenomenon provides predictive criteria for clinicians and forensic experts to establish or rule out the existence of parental alienation in clinical and forensic settings with implications for treatment and custody recommendations.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alan M. Jaffe, clinical and forensic psychologist, is an assistant professor of Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine in the Department of Psychiatry for the last 35 years. Jaffe's expertise has been in the areas of family dysfunction, divorce-related issues, custody evaluations, and addictive disorders. In collaborative effort with Melanie Thakkar and Pascale Piron the research into parental alienation serves to advance the knowledge of child custody, child abuse assessment, and family issues.

An international author of articles and book chapters dealing with forensic psychology, psychological testing, substance abuse, and compulsive disorders, Jaffe is a leading expert witness in the psychological evaluation of individuals involved in legal matters. A consulting editor to *Complete Guide to Women's Health*, an American Medical Association Publication encyclopedia, his work as an expert witness has been noted by his recognition in the *Jury Verdict Reporter*.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

The number of divorces is progressively increasing in Western countries. When divorce proceedings are tense, the change in family structure can be particularly challenging for children. In difficult cases, children are pulled into disagreements affecting the family as a whole. They find themselves in situations of having to side with one parent against the other at the detriment of their own well-being. Through the use of clinical examples and data from forensic evaluations, this paper explores the role of ambivalence in the parent-child relationship, describes the concept of parental alienation, manipulation, and the effect it has on children. When children no longer present with mixed feelings or contradictory ideas regarding one of their parents, this lack of ambivalence may signal the presence of parental alienation. This presentation can aid in identifying cases of parental alienation during clinical assessments and psychological evaluations and help with treatment recommendations and parental responsibility suggestions.

**Subjects: Development Studies, Environment, Social Work, Urban Studies; Social Sciences; Behavioral Sciences; Development Studies**

**Keywords: parental alienation; ambivalence; divorce; family; child custody; identifying parental alienation; alienated parent; denial of ambivalence**

### 1. Introduction

Divorce is a particularly difficult time in families, where parents and children, as well as extended family are negatively affected. The conflict occurring between parents and the observed negativity of one parent toward another affects children's perception of their parents and sets the landscape for conflicted loyalty. While the tension during and after divorce generally subsides two to three years post-divorce, there are instances where parents are unable to decrease the conflict. The ongoing negative parental relationship is considered more hurtful to children than the actual divorce. Children that are part of highly contentious divorces find themselves divided in allegiance between their parents (Moné & Biringen, 2012).

Research indicates that in 11 to 15% of divorce cases, parental alienation has found to be present ranging from mild to extreme cases. It is estimated that 1% of children are subjected to some form of parental alienation with an equal distribution between fathers and mothers being alienated and doing the alienation (Bernet, von Boch-Galhau, Baker, & Morrison, 2010; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Kruk, 2011). Parental alienation has been described as the psychological manipulation of children by one parent, in an effort to distance the other parent.

Additional statistical data points to a prevalence of 20–25% of parents engaging in parental alienation tactics even six years after their divorce (Lowenstein, 2013). The presence of parental alienation in families can manifest itself in themes of complete rejection of one parent by the children, a lack of finding anything positive to say about the alienated parent, and no longer presenting mixed feelings toward the parent (Gardner, 1998). In order to understand the underpinnings of this presentation within divorce settings, the aim of this study is centered on a theoretical examination based on supportive clinical data regarding the exploration of ambivalence and the lack thereof in cases of parental alienation.

### 2. Parental alienation

As a way to guard or distance themselves and stay unaware of negative feelings and thoughts, individuals are equipped with defense mechanisms to help circumvent disorganization and psychological pain (Jaffe, 1981). Individuals in a position of lesser power, stripped of independence, and their lives under full control of a dominating figure, so are the lives of dependent children looking to their parents for all basic needs of survival. As victims of hostage situations struggle for survival, children during a time of divorce do the same, relying on and identifying with the one that holds the power, the captor in the former, parent in the latter (De Fabrique, Romano, Vecchi, & Van Hasselt, 2007).

Research indicated that alienation is prevalent in both genders with the most common age range stated as between 9 and 15 years old. Due to their developmental stage, adolescents are typically more likely to be alienated from a parent than younger children (Fidler & Bala, 2010; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). The most common parental alienation strategy is when the alienating parent uses the child to constantly express negativity toward the target parent. Baker (2005), Baker and Ben-Ami (2011), and Ben-Ami and Baker (2012), consider parental alienation as a way to psychologically abuse children. Alienation tactics can range from mild to severe, and along this range, children continue to be exposed to the conflict between their parents, especially in cases where divorce is litigious.

Parental alienation is further described as the programming of children to distance themselves emotionally, and to learn to despise the targeted parent (Kruk, 2011). In cases where there is prolonged divorce litigation and the court's long-lasting involvement centers on issues of parenting time and responsibility, instances of parental alienation are the most rampant, manifesting itself in

a variety of forms. As a working model, parental alienation presents when children think in black and white patterns about their parents, idolizing one, rejecting the other, including patterns of erasing the past experiences (Baker, Burkhard, & Albertson-Kelly, 2012).

In mild cases, parental alienation presents as passive-aggressive comments by one parent about the other parent in the presence of the children, blocking some forms of communication, or ensuring periodic unavailability of the child to visit with the alienated parent. At the onset, mild parental alienation forms the foundation upon which moderate and severe cases of parental alienation can further extrapolate. In moderate cases of parental alienation, children get caught up in the arguments between the parents, often guilted into taking sides with the alienating parent, and pushed into pathological alignment (Lowenstein, 2013). In the more severe cases of alienation, the parent is determined to undermine the relationship between the children and the other parent that they will go to great lengths to put pressure on the children to reject the other parent entirely and demand allegiance.

Other examples of parental alienation present as children during high conflict divorces suddenly reject a parent they once adored. In one instance, the alienating parent will indoctrinate the child by criticizing the absent parent, sharing information relating to the conflict between the parents, pointing out where the targeted parent falls short, extending the shortcomings to the extended family, and the child, losing any ambivalence, and forced into survival, aligns with the alienating parent.

While the concept of parental alienation was first termed by Richard Gardner, it was classified by him as a specific syndrome rather than a process. Gardner defined Parental Alienation Syndrome as having eight criteria encompassing a campaign of denigration of the nonresident parent, a lack of sense of guilt, the presence of borrowed scenarios, absurd reasons for the behavior, independent opinion of the child, reflexive support of the resident parent, extension of the hostility to the family of the nonresident parent, and lack of ambivalence (Viljoen & van Rensburg, 2014). Here, the focus centers on understanding parental alienation as a process as it offers distinct advantages both in the identification and recognition of its presence. As a process parents undertake a series of actions and steps in order to achieve a particular end and as such the presence of parental alienation tactics are more readily transparent.

Parental alienation is a process that transcends multicultural and diverse groups. Research conducted by Bernet confirmed the presence of parental alienation in 30 different countries (Giancarlo & Rottmann, 2015). The study by Baker and Verrocchio (2013) centered on the self-reports of Italian college students and the presence of experienced parental alienation during their parent's separation and divorce as well as the effect on their mental health in adulthood. Overall the process of parental alienation is a global issue that can be found in multicultural families where parental conflict is at the forefront of separation rather than the well-being of the children.

### **3. Problems caused by parental alienation**

The process of parental alienation obstructs the ability to foster a practical and cooperative parenting arrangement. As parents fight, children suffer emotionally and psychologically, and more so as they are subjected to continuous conflict (Baker, 2005). Several studies focused on the long-term effects of being subjected to parental alienation in childhood. The outcomes revealed that the more severe the experienced alienation, the more children were at risk for substance use disorders, depression, anxiety, relational issues, impulse control issues, and self-esteem issues in adulthood (Lowenstein, 2013).

Research centered on the effects of parental alienation points to serious mental health issues later in life and long-term negative harmful consequences due to learning hostile and manipulative behavior in relationships. The relationship between the children and the targeted parent is damaged through the alienating behaviors by the parent that spends the most time with the child, holding the power in their hands, and as a result affecting the future close relationships forged by the child (Moné & Biringen, 2012).

The inability of parents to separate themselves from the conflict with their spouse or partner is at the basis of their unhealthy attachment to their children. In turn, the children cannot effectively develop healthy attachments to their parents, and are unable to please either parent. This process leads to negative long-term effects on the children's mental health. Based on the psychological maltreatment, it is hypothesized that children exposed to parental alienation will develop unhealthy attachment patterns, low self-regard and self-sufficiency, and be at higher risk for depression in adulthood (Baker, 2005; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011). Adults that were exposed to parental alienation techniques as children reported having adjustment issues in their relationships and a higher incidence of mental health issues.

Baker (2005) conducted a qualitative retrospective study involving adults subjected to parental alienation during childhood. The researcher interviewed 38 participants between the ages of 19 and 67 years old and found six areas of concerns. Participants who experienced parental alienation reported having low self-regard, depression, substance abuse, trust issues, alienation from their own children, and were also divorced themselves. These outcomes were believed by the participants to be related to the parental alienation they experienced as children.

Furthermore, adults who endorsed a higher number of parental alienation strategies reported having lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression, as well as having insecure attachment styles. Baker and Ben-Ami (2011) compiled 19 previously empirically studied parental alienation strategies and used their self-developed Baker Strategy Questionnaire (BSQ) to determine the frequency and impact of these strategies on the adult participants. They found that 90% of participants indicated that bad-mouthing was the primary parental alienation strategy. As children, the participants reported that they internalized the message that the targeted parent did not love them and that they were unlovable.

Additionally, the children internalized the negative feedback related to the targeted parent as their own negative attributes. Baker and Ben-Ami (2011) stated that their study confirmed an association between the degree of exposure to parent alienation, insecure attachment styles, and psychological negative self-regard.

Finally, participants with lower self-esteem were more likely to state that the alienating parent contributed to their low self-esteem and reported higher rates of major depressive disorder. Ben-Ami and Baker (2012) examined the degree of conflict between parents during divorce proceedings and the effects of parental alienation techniques on adult children. Their study was important for understanding how past parental behavior affected the children in the present and found that participants reported long-term negative psychological effects. Studies further highlighted that prolonged conflict results in higher levels of psychological, behavioral, and educational issues for the children, including negative attitudes relating to future relationships rooted in aggression and low self-regard (Toren et al., 2013).

Further research points to a connection between the experience of parental alienation techniques in childhood and a higher self-reported prevalence of low self-esteem, low self-sufficiency, insecure attachment styles, and higher levels of depression. The conclusive data point to the inability of children to develop in normative ways. Instead of being able to fully express their love and concern for their parent, and believe that their home environment provides a safe psychological environment, the children have to learn to deny their own instincts in the ways they would like to communicate with their parents (Baker, 2010; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Ben-Ami & Baker, 2012). In turn, the evidence points to the link between an inability to trust oneself and low self-esteem, as well as depression and low self-esteem. The more that parental alienation techniques experienced by the participants were endorsed, the lower self-esteem, the higher depression, and the poorer attachment styles were reported (Baker, 2005).

As children learn that they cannot trust their own instincts, they end up with poor identification and self-esteem problems. These children internalize the hatred of the targeted parent, and as they realize that they are genetically part of that parent, they identify with the hatred they project. The rejection of the alienating parent toward the targeted parent is also internalized as a rejection of self. This effect is intensified if the child and the targeted parent are the same gender, and the child bears strong physical resemblance to that parent. When parental alienation takes place at a very young age, children incorporate the negative self-feelings into the core of their self-worth (Baker, 2005).

#### 4. Ambivalence

Ambivalence is defined as uncertainty or fluctuation, especially when caused by an inability to make a choice or by a simultaneous desire to say or do two opposite or conflicting things. In the field of psychology, it is referred to as the coexistence within an individual of positive and negative feelings toward the same person, object, or action, simultaneously drawing him or her in opposite directions.

Historically, Eugen Bleuler introduced ambivalence as a consequence of schizophrenic association disturbance. He argued that there is a propensity for people with split personality to experience and apply different feelings or affective ambivalence, intentions or ambivalence of the will, and thoughts or intellectual ambivalence to situations, objects, or people. A hallmark example is experiencing love and hatred for the same person. Bleuler described ambivalence as one of the four primary symptoms of schizophrenia and defined it as experiencing both positive and negative emotions at one and the same time (Corradi, 2013; Thylstrup & Hesse, 2009). It is inherent that affective ambivalence is the most commonly understood, however all of the above-mentioned forms are present in an individual. Bleuler sustained that in neurotic populations, ambivalence was present and manifested as procrastination (Corradi, 2013).

As a psychoanalytical view of ambivalence, Sigmund Freud offered that ambivalence is the simultaneous existence of love and hate toward the same object. The presence of ambivalence can be found intertwined in all stages of Freud's psychosexual development theory. It is most notably present in the oedipal stage where the feelings of a child toward the same-sex parent are highly ambivalent. Freud regarded ambivalence as inherent in the active and passive aims of the pre-oedipal instinctual drives, and as representing the struggle between the drives of life and death (Corradi, 2013).

Kurt Lewin's view of ambivalence was present in his approach and avoidance viewpoint, elements of stress theory. According to Lewin, individuals are driven to simultaneously desire success and avoid failure. Lewin conceived that goal objects in life have positive or negative valences, thus attracting or rejecting, and creating a dynamic conflict as a result of mismatched valences. The push and pull of the approach and avoidance creates an internal conflict when events produce simultaneously positive and negative characteristics. As such, the events can be at the same time desired and undesired by individuals (Elliot, 1999).

However, the implication of ambivalence in the context of parental alienation is best viewed through Freud's love and hate model. Ambivalent feelings are present in the pre-oedipal stages between mothers and children, but most importantly present during the oedipal stage between both parents and the child. It is at this time that children develop feelings of hostility or rivalry toward their same-sex parent. When a son's attachment to his mother becomes stronger, he develops negative feelings toward his father, whereas a daughter's feelings for her father strengthen and she becomes jealous of her mother. The coexistence of the negative feelings alongside the affection for the same-sex parent results in ambivalence for the child. Concurrently, the negative feelings create anxiousness in a child, and fearing repercussion of the same-sex parent, the child activates defense mechanisms of identification, thereby identifying with the same-sex parent (Corradi, 2013).

One of the development tasks for humans is to balance the primary love and hate drives as to tolerate ambivalence toward a loved object. When this task is unsuccessfully accomplished, psychopathology can ensue. Individuals with Borderline Personality Disorders fail to accomplish the task of ambivalence. They are unable to be simultaneously angry at someone they love, without destroying the love (Corradi, 2013). This construct is equally present in parental alienation. Children are unable to tolerate the ambivalence, and are indoctrinated to choose. Despite feeling love for their alienated parent they let go entirely of the loved object. This creates an occasion for the development of ego defenses in the child referred to as “splitting.”

As a way of understanding splitting, a common feature of Borderline Personality Disorder, is described as “a pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation” (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 663). The presence of conflict can be evidenced as the perception of a person as either all good or all bad, or split between two individuals, one good and the other bad. Individuals may idealize caregivers or partners, demanding to spend a lot of time together, sharing extremely intimate details at the early onset of the relationship, to swiftly and drastically turn, and suddenly devaluing the very same individuals. Additionally, they are prone to abrupt changes in their opinion of others, seen as either beneficent supporters or as malevolent and punitive. These shifts may reflect disillusionment with primary caregivers as their nurturing qualities had previously been idolized or expecting their rejection and abandonment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The lack of being able to tolerate ambivalence and the intolerance for conflicting feelings toward one same individual, manifests as the process of splitting, and pushes borderline individuals to destroy the relationship. They are unable to tolerate the feelings of love and hate which triggers defensive movement. As such, the inability to trust presents itself and these individuals are laden with a legacy of failure and abandonment expectations. Since the primary caretaker failed them, they cannot trust anyone in current or future relationships, and acted out through transference, these individuals express the results of ambivalence in splitting (Corradi, 2013). Borderline individuals and parentally alienated children share similar characteristics of object relatedness to specific love objects.

As one of the most important core defensive operations in the ego, serving to keep object representations of opposite affective valences separated, both forms of splitting, i.e. self and others’ images are highly prevalent in individuals with Borderline Personality Disorder (as well as children whose splitting defense has been actively facilitated by an alienating parent). Primitive psychological defenses or borderline defense mechanisms are projection, denial, dissociation, or splitting. Splitting can be a useful defense as children face traumatic experiences, specifically when caused by the adults that they are insecurely attached to or dependent on (Perry, Presniak, & Olson, 2013).

Denial as a strategy of dealing with ambivalence was investigated by Anna Freud within the context of the primitive defense psychoanalytical theory. Freud described that the infantile ego, for a good many years, can free itself through denial, of any unwelcome facts all while keeping reality testing unimpaired. This power is used and applied to a world of fantasy both in thinking and acting out. Freud classified denial as a mechanism of the undeveloped mind, conflicting with the ability to learn from reality and subsequently developing appropriate coping mechanisms. She theorized that children will deny reality by means of fantasy, transforming reality to fit their own purposes, through use of fantasy or play. It is then, at that point and only then, Freud claims, that children can accept their reality (Freud, 1966).

It is very common to experience ambivalence about people, situations, and all types of things. In fact, it is normative and even desirable to have mixed feelings about much of what we perceive in the world, including parents. Identifying mixed feelings represents the individual’s ability to accurately perceive the world as possessing many coexisting conflictual attributes. However, many of us are taught to believe that we should be confident in our life experiences and feelings about



relationships with others, especially our families of origin. Many of us are also taught at an early age that our first loyalty is to our parents and that negative feelings toward them are forbidden and are certainly an insular affair not to be shared with the outside world. We are typically taught to suppress the negative feelings that accompany positive ones, and to deny ambivalent thoughts and feelings we naturally experience toward parents and family. The psychologically healthiest of parents encourage their children to accept their ambivalent experiences as normally expected occurrences. Despite the dissonance that ambivalence creates for us, and as undesirable as it may feel at times, ambivalence has long been considered to be a normal experience even by the earliest psychoanalysts.

Ambivalence may be defined as a peculiar mental state, being dominated by both a negative and positive emotional tone, and these opposite tendencies not infrequently in conflict with each other. Ambivalence may be purely an affective or intellectual type, although such differentiation is not often possible. Such phenomena are observed not only in the abnormal but in the normal. (Bleuler, 1914, p. 466)

Sigmund Freud's adoption of the term ambivalence to describe a hypothesized normal developmental function shifted the concept of ambivalence away from the original description of a symptom. Bleuler had said that ambivalence was found in normal people but Freud later said that it was expected, even necessary, that everyone experiences ambivalence (Costello, 1993). Mahler subsequently held that ambivalence toward the parent or caretaker on the part of the toddler is normal. She claimed that normative ambivalence was related to a "fear of reengulfment" (Mahler, Pine, & Bergman, 1975).

"Normal affection seems to Freud an adequate explanation for cases of normal and ordinary ambivalence. But, Freud also tells us that there are abnormal types—extraordinary cases when the contradictory feelings are pushed to the list of hatred and veneration" (Oughourlain & Lefort, 1978, p. 362). This denial of acceptable ambivalence is the type that is typically seen in cases of parental alienation where normal affection is substituted with unrelenting devaluation and negative bias.

### **5. Denial of ambivalence illustrated**

Gardner highlighted denial of ambivalence as a hallmark of parental alienation, and normalized ambivalence as being present in all relationships between individuals, parents, and children being no exception. Within the construct of parental alienation, varying feelings are non-existent, and while the alienating parent is all good, the targeted parent is all bad. Usually, children will be able to provide qualities for each of their parents, however in parental alienation cases the list will contain only negative attributes for the alienated parent. In contrast, the indoctrinating parent will only be ascribed the best qualities. Despite the bond that may exist between the children and the alienated parent, and despite the loyalty and dedication displayed over the years by this very parent, the attachment disappears instantly when parental alienation is taking place. Additionally, where ambivalence was once present toward the indoctrinating parent, this too transforms instantly, however here into idealization. Lack of ambivalence can feel comfortable and familiar to children, the good versus bad characterization in many children's stories, therefore decreasing their feelings of uncertainty and putting them more at ease with their alignments (Gardner, 1998).

Following is an adapted case example taken from a sample of forensic child custody interviews court ordered and conducted by the authors between 2010 and 2016 in a private practice setting. Below is the excerpt from Amy's clinical interview:

The examiner asked, "What can you say that's positive about your mother?" Amy responded, "She's not ugly." The examiner stated, "About her as a person." Amy stated, "The last evaluator asked the same question." Amy paused then stated, "I'm trying to think of a nice thing; she doesn't have empathy, she can walk into a room full of people crying and not feel anything." Amy continued, "She provided food for us and didn't kick me out of the house." The examiner asked, "That's it?" Amy

responded, “Everything I have to say is a backhanded comment.” Amy stated, “She knows how to use retail therapy.” The examiner asked, “Did you identify anything positive about your mom in the previous evaluation?” Amy replied, “I think I said nothing.”

Amy is unable to list anything positive about her mother (Margaret) as a person. In fact, as Amy states above, the only qualities she can describe have a “backhanded” feature to them. “Sometimes the lack of ambivalence presents itself with the kind of symmetry that is so attractive to children” because it lessens “the confusion they often feel about their lives” (Gardner, 1998, p. 95). The father, Thomas, is conflict averse and gratifies the wishes of his children in order to avoid being in conflict with them. By adopting this position with his children he is perceived by them as “good” while Margaret is perceived as “bad.” The memories of any positive experiences that Amy may have had with Margaret have been relegated to her unconscious.

“Many children involved in parental alienation proudly profess that their decision to reject the targeted parent is their own. They deny any contribution from the programming parent, who supports this ‘independence’ vociferously. Alienators often claim that they want the child to visit with the other parent and profess recognition of the importance of such involvement, however the indoctrinator’s actions indicate otherwise” (Gardner, 1998, p. 96). As such, these children lessen the guilt of the alienating parents and protect them from criticism of others. In turn, the indoctrinating parent will remind the children that having a mind of their own is important and that they are brave to state how they feel. Furthermore, the refutation of the alienating parent regarding the child’s opinion of the alienated parent serves to encourage and support the child’s illusion of their own independent thoughts (Gardner, 1998).

The following is an excerpt from Amy’s clinical interview:

The examiner asked, “Are you worried that if you say anything nice to us or anyone about your mom or if you’re nice to her that the courts will force you to spend time with your mom?” Amy stated, “No, I just wouldn’t go.” Amy expressed, “I don’t care what this report or any other says.” Amy stated, “I’d say, grab and drag me there.” Amy stated, “If I’m nice to my mom she’ll have a delusion or irrational thinking and think we have a relationship when we don’t, it’s a lie.” The examiner asked, “Have you ever had a relationship with your mom?” Amy responded, “No, never.”

The one person from whom Amy learned her “rights” in the form of rebellion and by stating she simply “wouldn’t go” if the courts forced her to spend time with her mother, is her father, Thomas, whom she is clearly mimicking. “Programming parents who induce the independent thinker phenomenon in their children often invoke their ‘rights’ in the service of this goal. The programming parent who repeatedly denies that he has programmed his children contributes to the independent thinker phenomenon” (Gardner, 1998, p. 96). Basically, Thomas is telling the children that “the animosity is not coming from him (the programming parent) and therefore it must be coming from them, because where else could it have come from?” (Gardner, 1998, p. 97). This mechanism has been further intensified due to the fact that per his clinical interviews Thomas has made comments such as:

I’ve said to Amy for many years, I always said your mother loves you ... uh ... the way she knows how. Before the divorce Margaret never hugged the kids or said I love you, since this started she’s been doing it more, I don’t know if it’s a fake it to make it.

I think if I look at Amy, she’s gone through grieving, I think she always hoped she would have a relationship with Margaret like her friends had with their moms. All children need acceptance from their moms and dads.

I think my children don’t believe when bad things happen to them. Our son Daniel committed or tried to commit suicide when he was younger. He thought he was drinking bleach but he wasn’t. He couldn’t take it anymore with Margaret. Amy tried to commit suicide in July, she has no relationship with her mother.

The kids need quality experiences with their mom. We have babysitters who have horror stories about Margaret, she would just walk in and play with the dog.

It should be noted that collateral statements from former nannies and caretakers discredit Thomas's notion of any "horror stories" having taken place due to Margaret.

In cases with parental alienation, children may claim that one parent is enough, or that all negativity that was present in their lives is due to the alienated parent. Even if proof of a once strong parent-child alliance is presented to these children, they will deny it happened, claim it forgotten, or sustain it an obligation at that time. This lack of ambivalence not only presents as an internal factor, but manifests in denial of any previous relationship, pleasure, connection, or experience. During clinical interviews, questions that elicit a child to share positive and negative information about their parents might bring to the foreground borrowed-scenario language. This type of language will stand outside the normative level of development for the child, and is indicative of indoctrination by older children and adults, geared at distancing the targeted parent (Gardner, 1998).

The primary manifestation of parental alienation is the child's campaign of defamation against a parent, a campaign, which has no justification. This results from the combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent's indoctrinations and the child's own contributions (and scenarios of disparagement) to the vilification of the target parent. Parental alienation is applicable only when the target parent, Margaret, has not exhibited anything close to the degree of alienating behavior that might warrant the campaign of vilification exhibited by the child. The hallmark of parental alienation is the exaggeration of minor weaknesses and deficiencies. Typically, children involved in situations of parental alienation provide irrational and often ludicrous justifications for their alienation from the targeted parent. The child may justify the alienation with memories of minor altercations experienced in the relationship with the estranged parent, even years after they have taken place. These are often trivial and are experiences that children quickly forget (Gardner, 1998). During her clinical interview, Amy stated the following:

Miss T., our babysitter who cooks for us now said that Daniel and I used to scream constantly when my mom was around. From age 4-8 we were babysat by her. We would then cry anytime my mom walked in the room. At 4 years old, why would I cry? I don't remember it.

Amy stated to the examiner that she did not recall that any of these incidents had occurred, yet she provided this example to the examiner to substantiate her justification for being alienated from her mother. When this examiner asked Amy to give more compelling reasons for her rejection of Margaret, she was unable to provide them. Thomas shared the belief with Amy that these professed reasons justify the ongoing animosity that Amy has toward her mother. This examiner's observations of the interaction between Thomas and Amy revealed a disturbing appearance of an egalitarian relationship. Amy had an extremely manipulative and overly familiar relationship with her father.

Following is an excerpt from Stacey's clinical interview, Amy's younger sister:

The examiner asked, "You went to a concert, where was it and who did you see?" Stacey responded, "Taylor Swift." Stacey stated, "My mom, my friend Megan, and her friend." The examiner asked, "Ellie didn't go?" Stacey reported, "She kept texting and changing her mind, she didn't go." The examiner asked, "But she was informed?" Stacey stated, "Yeah, my mom got the tickets." The examiner asked, "Was it fun?" Stacey reported, "Yeah it was really fun." The examiner asked, "What about your mom?" Stacey reported, [recovering from a positive statement about Margaret] "... she cooks, but she doesn't even cook what I like." Stacey stated, "I tell her I don't like tomatoes or potatoes." Stacey expressed, "My sister knows that I don't like that stuff and my mom doesn't." Stacey stated, "It's not nice." Stacey further stated, "My mom never let Amy go to concerts on weeknights." The examiner asked, "Did Amy say anything to you?" Stacey reported, "We were talking and Amy said that she can [now] go to concerts on weeknights too."

This is a clear example of a weak and unreasonable rationalization. Stacey reported that she had fun at a concert that she attended with her mother, yet almost in the same breath, when asked about her mother, Stacey begins to describe that her mother does not cook certain things she likes and also stated Margaret will not let her watch television during dinner. This is an example of how normal, healthy parenting behavior on the mother's part is perceived as malevolently motivated and is then converted into a reason to justify feelings of alienation. Furthermore, Stacey brought up the fact that Amy was not allowed to go to concerts on weeknights. It would be common for a seventh grader to choose to attend a pop concert during a weeknight in the absence of good parental judgment and supervision. Stacey is no exception. The fact that Stacey invokes Amy to buttress her position is not only absurd, but it is clear evidence that Amy has and continues to exert a large amount of influence on her younger siblings. Irrationality is one of the important manifestations of parental alienation. In addition, in situations involving parental alienation younger children often become the parrots of their older siblings (Gardner, 1998).

Michael, the youngest child, also reported a number of frivolous and absurd excuses for non-visitation. Per his clinical interview, Michael stated the following:

At dad's house we're more free. At mom's house there are specific rules like breakfast at mom's. Their all opposites, like no iPad at mom's, but iPad at dad's. Need to be dressed in the morning before I use electronics. I don't always do that at dad's, but dad gets me dressed. Mom doesn't care about us as much.

The following is an excerpt from Michael's clinical interview:

When asked, "Do you like spending time with your mom?" Michael stated, "Yeah." Michael further stated, "But I want to go when I want, because all my stuff is at my dad's." The examiner asked, "What if your stuff was at your moms?" Michael stated, "My mom has a townhouse, my dad has a big house; I need space."

In cases involving parental alienation, older children can often be relied upon by the programming parent to program the younger children, down the line. Based on reports, observations, and clinical interviews Michael and Stacey are able to relax, forget their scenarios, and involve themselves benevolently with Margaret when they visit their mother, due to the fact that the older children, Katie (two years younger than Amy and two years older than Stacey) and Amy are not present. An older, well-programmed child can serve as a monitor to the younger ones and prevent any "relapses" (Gardner, 1998). Amy is obsessed with the "hatred" of her mother, yet there are still a number of tender and loving feelings felt toward the allegedly despised parent, Margaret, that are not permitted to be expressed. Amy continues to denigrate Margaret without embarrassment or guilt and has a profound yet detrimental influence over the younger children.

The following is an excerpt from Amy's clinical interview:

The examiner asked, "Tell me about your siblings." Amy stated, "Michael is eight, he's the happiest I've seen him the past week." Amy reported, "He gets angry very fast, but this week he's been on better behavior I think because he hasn't seen my mom for awhile." Amy stated, "He's going to see her soon though and he gets upset." Amy further stated, "Also, she'll buy him stuff so of course he likes that."

In this case, Margaret has been reduced to bribing or buying Michael's affection. It is Thomas and subsequently Amy who has labeled these efforts in this way, a label that was picked up by Amy as a borrowed-scenario element in Thomas' campaign of denigration. There is no appreciation by Thomas or the older children, that overtures such as buying concert tickets, or getting something for Michael represents anything but a desperate attempt on Margaret's part to maintain her loving relationship with her children.

During the course of this evaluation, the presence of borrowed scenarios witnessed during observation sessions and clinical interviews have made it abundantly clear that parental alienation is taking place. Not only was there a rehearsed quality to the children's litanies, but in addition, phrases were uttered that are not commonly used by children. Proof of alienation is established when expressions by children are identical to those used by the indoctrinating parent (Gardner, 1998).

The following is an excerpt from Amy's clinical interview:

This examiner asked, "... To your mind, what is this [the current evaluation] all about?" Amy stated, "I think it means someone thinks the first evaluator's report isn't truthful, valid, I don't know it seemed fair, but I didn't read it." Amy stated, "So either my mom, dad, lawyers, someone didn't like it." The examiner asked, "You didn't get any inkling about the first evaluator's report?" Amy responded, "I heard that she really liked us so she wrote the report fast, she tried to get things going quickly."

A teenager would only be aware of such information if he/she was inappropriately provided with the information by the indoctrinating parent.

Per her clinical interview, Amy stated the following:

I know how I talk about my dad and my mom seems like parental alienation but it's not. My mom alienates my dad. My dad tried to paint my mom in the best light. There is NEVER a time when I had a good relationship with my mom. Emotional and physical abuse; she didn't beat us all the time, but she'd push me into the wall and say she didn't do it.

The fact that Amy brought up and was even aware of the phrase "parental alienation" indicates that parental terms and phrases such as this one have been scripted into Amy's vocabulary.

Frequently alienating parents will exhort their children to tell them the truth regarding whether they really want to visit with the alienated parent. The child will usually appreciate that "the truth is the profession that they hate the vilified parent and never want to see him (her) ever again" (Gardner, 1998, p. 98). The children who have been effectively alienated from Margaret therefore provide that answer, (the alleged "truth") which protects them from alienating Thomas. If any of the children were to ever state the real truth that perhaps they would prefer to have a good relationship with Margaret, they would invoke the withdrawal of parental love and rejection from Thomas (Gardner, 1998). It is important to note as it is common to psychological indoctrination, after a sufficient period of programming, the children no longer know what the truth is anymore and can come to actually believe that Margaret deserves the vilification being imposed upon her. This is unfortunately the case with the older children and this places all of the children in a psychological state of endangerment.

When the children are upset Thomas has very limited resources with which to deal with their distress. In order to avoid becoming the object or target of the children's negative feelings he deflects them in a very subtle and insidious way toward Margaret. He "helps" them to understand that their problems are somehow due to their mother, and that if only she were more emotionally responsive she would (unrealistically) gratify whatever their wishes, desires, or needs are in that moment. However, consistent with this position, due to the fact that Margaret is a responsible parent and does not gratify their every wish she is defined as being disinterested, uncaring, and emotionally underinvested in them. In order to maintain his good guy persona Thomas avoids engaging in behaviors that would cause him to be perceived as an authority figure. This naturally compromises his ability to effectively parent his children in a meaningful way.

During the observation sessions, it was apparent that the children relate to Thomas as if he is a peer, mocking him, deriding him, and being generally very chummy with him. Thomas deals with this

treatment by smiling sheepishly and shrugging his shoulders. The net result of this interpersonal interaction is that particularly the older children have developed a cavalier, confrontational, and grandiose approach to adults in general. They consider themselves as having peer status with adults at best, and at worst they are disrespectful and condescending. This disrespect and condescension is acted out in a dogmatic fashion toward Margaret, which serves to keep Thomas out of the line of fire. In order to maintain their overly familiar relationship with their father they are unconsciously required to share a common illusion, that is, that their mother does not love them. This illusion justifies expressions of anger toward Margaret that are both verbally and aggressively violent at times, as highlighted by the examples given above.

## **6. Utilizing evidence of denial of ambivalence**

As the practice of forensic psychology differs in important ways from more traditional practice areas, Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychologists were developed by the American Psychological Association and informed by the Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct. These guidelines serve to increase the quality of psychological services in the area of forensic evaluations and assessments and to provide guidance on professional conduct within the legal system (American Psychological Association, 2013).

The guidelines stipulate that forensic practitioners strive for accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness in the science and do not provide services that might be misleading or inaccurate. Furthermore, they “are encouraged to recognize the importance of documenting all data they consider with enough detail and quality to allow for reasonable judicial scrutiny and adequate discovery by all parties. This documentation includes, but is not limited to, letters and consultations; notes, recordings, and transcriptions; assessment and test data, scoring reports and interpretations; and all other records in any form or medium that were created or exchanged in connection with a matter” (American Psychological Association, 2013, p. 8).

The guidelines further highlight the use of appropriate methods, procedures, and multiple sources of information. Forensic practitioners are guided to avoid relying on one source of data, and substantiate important data when possible (Jaffe & Mandeleew, 2008). Additionally, “when relying upon data that have not been corroborated, forensic practitioners seek make known the uncorroborated status of the data, any associated strengths and limitations, and the reasons for relying upon the data” (American Psychological Association, 2013, p. 14).

Evidence of the denial of ambivalence can be used by clinicians to identify parental alienation. As outlined in the Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychologists, meaningful data must be collected to ensure ample and satisfactory discovery. The clinical interviews with children serve to understand their reaction to the divorce, their awareness of their role in the divorce, their perception of their parents, their view of how the divorce has affected their relationship with their family and friends, their understanding of a new social life, and how they are coping with the separation. During the interview rapport is created, the children’s ability to answer questions is assessed, interview ground rules are explained, practice questions are asked, and specific topic questions are introduced through open-ended and more directive questions (Ackerman, 2010). While children may not be used to this style of questioning at first, allowing the child to offer up this information spontaneously and in his or her own time during the interview tends to allow for more detailed descriptions of the events in question as well as longer responses (Thakkar, Jaffe, & Vander Linden, 2015).

Questions that elicit ambivalence are geared toward understanding if children can share something negative but also something positive about their parents with regard to their personality. Children might share details they perceive as negative when it pertains to a normative form of discipline. Furthermore, questions can be asked to draw a general explanation of how the children perceive their parents, or if one parent interferes with the relationship of the other parent, and where themes of a lack of ambivalence can be uncovered.

The observation of children with parents is another key element in the assessment of lack of ambivalence. Here the construct of time can be crucial to allow for a longitudinal viewpoint. It is essential to see the children interact with both of their parents at the onset of the evaluation and over durations of weeks and even months. Given that children may be coached by the alienating parent, with time the impact of the coaching may lessen to give way to less guarded behavior in observation. Time also allows for a deviation of present negative behavior when compared with past positive behavior.

Collateral reports are part of gathering data for an evaluation and are to be considered valuable information specifically if the content is unfavorable (Ackerman, 2010). Using collateral information in the context of observable denial of ambivalence will help to discover maladaptive behavior from one parent toward another. Attention can be drawn to the frequency and recency of events.

It is important when examining cases of potential parental alienation to review the history of the relationship between children and parents. It is commonly revealed that the un-ambivalent posture of the child vis-a-vis the despised parent has a discernible point of origin. Most often the rupture in the relationship between the parent and child corresponds temporally to the first occurrences of the empathic break between mother and father's deteriorated relationship. When examining the parent-child relationship over a timeline the astute clinician observes a notable contrast between past and present behavioral attitudes of the child as well as differences in the quality of the interaction with the negatively perceived parent. This proves to be true in spite of the child's often observed protestations to the contrary; claims that the relationship with the alienated parent have never been remotely satisfactory for even the shortest period of time.

## 7. Conclusion

The observable absence of normally expected ambivalent feelings toward a parent should be considered a high probability diagnostic indicator of the presence of parental alienation process. The likelihood of the existence of an active campaign of parental alienation when denial of ambivalence is represented by children is heightened further if a divorce action is the backdrop of a clinical investigation. Clinical evaluators, guardians ad litem, and judges are too often in a position of attempting to discern whether or not parental alienation can explain a deteriorated relationship between a child and a parent. Being aware of the subtle nuance of the persistent denial of ambivalence on the part of a child can provide valuable clues into the developmental genesis of a child's negativistic perceptions. Ambivalence is a normal experience, and it is expected for children to have both positive and negative perceptions and feelings toward their parents. When these normal range experiences of parents are absent in the representations of children, it must lead the clinician to consider the hypothesis that parental alienation has been taking place.

There are a number of diagnostic factors that should be taken into consideration to determine whether or not parental alienation can be accurately assessed. It is our position that the presence of a child's denial of ambivalence toward a parent is a hallmark of parental alienation, and should therefore be considered very seriously in the evaluation process. Denial of ambivalence, (when parental alienation exists), is a particularly reliable clinical phenomenon when evaluating children, because it is a construct too subtle and abstract for children to deliberately edit and misrepresent in the clinical assessment process. Therefore, clinician evaluators should be actively testing for manifestations of denial of ambivalence in order to most accurately assess parental alienation for the purpose of determining the best interests of children.

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