

PARENTAL ALIENATION THEORY – THE TOP TWENTY

Provided by Parental Alienation Study Group (www.pasg.info) – July 2023

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/>).

The list provided here pertains to qualitative and quantitative research regarding parental alienation, which has been published in peer-reviewed journals. Books and book chapters are in a separate bibliography.

* * *

Baker, A. J. L., & Chambers, J. (2011). Adult recall of childhood exposure to parental conflict: Unpacking the black box of parental alienation. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 52(1), 55–76.

One hundred and five undergraduate or graduate students completed a survey regarding their recollections of exposure to parental alienation behaviors by a parent during their childhood. Results revealed that 80% of the sample reported some exposure and those whose parents were divorced reporting statistically significant higher levels of exposure.

* * *

Baker, A. J. L., & Darnall, D. C. (2007). A construct study of the eight symptoms of severe parental alienation syndrome. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 47(1-2), 55–75.

Sixty-eight parents were surveyed about the behaviors of their children from whom they reported to be alienated. Results revealed general support for the presence of the eight behavioral manifestations of alienation as well as windows of opportunity when even the most alienated children demonstrate “cracks in the armour,” pointing toward avenues for intervention.

* * *

Baker, A. J. L., & Eichler, A. (2016). The linkage between parental alienation behaviors and child alienation. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 57(7), 475–484.

One hundred and nine college students completed a survey about their recollections of childhood exposure to alienating behaviors by their parents and their recollection of their own behaviors toward their parents. Results revealed statistically significant associations between parental alienation behaviors and the behaviors of the child. That is, a parent’s alienating behaviors affected the child’s negative behaviors toward the other parent, over and above that parent’s own parenting capacity.

* * *

Bentley, C., & Matthewson, M. L. (2020). The not-forgotten child: Alienated adult children's experience of parental alienation. *American Journal of Family Therapy* 48, 509-529.

This study shows that adults who were alienated as children experienced abusive behaviours perpetrated by the alienating parent. The alienation negatively impacted their mental health, social development, educational attainment and relationship functioning.

* * *

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.

* * *

Bernet, W., Greenhill, L. (2022). The Five-Factor Model for the diagnosis of parental alienation. *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* 61(5):591–594.

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

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.

* * *

Bernet, W., & Xu, S. (2022). Scholarly rumors: Citation analysis of vast misinformation regarding parental alienation theory. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*. doi: 10.1002/bsl.2605

This article describes the *same misinformation* regarding parental alienation theory, that is, variations of the statement: “Parental alienation theory assumes that the favored parent has cause parent alienation in the child simply because the child refuses to have a relationship with the rejected parent.” Ninety-four examples of the same misinformation were identified and subjected to citation analysis, which displays the links between citing material and cited material.

* * *

Greenberg, L. R., Fick, L. D., & Schneider, R. A. (2016). Catching them before too much damage is done: Early intervention with resistance-refusal dynamics. *Family Court Review* 54(4), 548–563.

This article discusses the need to intervene with children before things escalate out of control because of the delays inherent in the legal system. They found that children’s ability to regulate themselves or function worsened, and thus affected any future interventions. The authors recommended coping-focused, multisystemic child-centered conjoint therapy as a model.

* * *

Harman, J. J., Bernet, W., & Harman, J. (2019). Parental alienation: Toward the blossoming of a field of study. *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 28(2):212–216.

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. The authors 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.

* * *

Harman, J. J., Leder-Elder, S., & Biringen, Z. (2019). Prevalence of adults who are the targets of parental alienating behaviors and their impact. *Children and Youth Services Review* 106 (104471), 1–13.

The authors reported on three nationally representative on-line survey panels from United States and Canada to determine the mental health impact of parental alienating behaviors. Results from the first two polls indicate that the prevalence of parents who feel they are being alienated from their children is higher than originally estimated: 35.5% (of 273) in the U.S. and 32% (of 397) in Canada. Using another means of assessment for the third poll, 39.1% (of 594) of parents in the U.S. are the non-reciprocating targets of parental alienating behaviors, which is over 22 million parents.

* * *

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.

* * *

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) captures 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.

* * *

Spinazzola, J. et al. (2014). Unseen wounds: The contribution of psychological maltreatment to child and adolescent mental health and risk outcomes. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 6(Suppl 1), S18–S28.

This study reviews and measured the psychological trauma of children and how it effects their lives. It was compared against sexual and physical abuse, which showed higher levels of behavioral problems, symptoms and disorders in the psychologically abused. This study also discusses these implications in the context of mental health treatment.

* * *

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.

* * *

Walters, M. G., & Friedlander, S. (2016). When a child rejects a parent: Working with the intractable resist/refuse dynamic. *Family Court Review* 54(3), 424–445.

This article examines the guidelines both in and out of court for dealing with resist/refuse dynamics in families. It explains the program of Multi-Modal Family Intervention.

* * *

Warshak, R. A. (2019). Reclaiming parent–child relationships: Outcomes of Family Bridges with alienated children. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 60, 645–667.

The author reported outcomes based on a study of 83 children who went through the Family Bridges Program. Positive results were reported by 90-95% of parents of the families who engaged in the program.