



Adult report of childhood exposure to parental alienation at different developmental time periods

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The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between exposure to Parental Alienation (PA) at different developmental time periods and psychological maltreatment. Three hundred and sixty-one adults in Chieti, Italy completed an anonymous and confidential paper and pencil survey regarding their childhood exposure to twenty PA behaviours across three developmental time periods as well as a measure of psychological maltreatment by each parent. Results revealed that exposure to PA at each time period was significantly associated with psychological maltreatment. Moreover, the number of time periods of exposure to PA (from 0 to 3) was associated with psychological maltreatment. This was true for PA by mothers and PA by fathers. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

Practitioner points

- Mental health professionals can use the results of this study to guide their intervention efforts
- Co-parenting educators can incorporate these results into their routine efforts to help parents be aware of PA and its effects
- Targeted parents can use these findings to make the case for timely legal and mental health interventions

Keywords: parental alienation; developmental periods.

Destructive inter-parental conflict can negatively affect children. These effects occur both cumulatively over time and across developmental stages (Cummings and Davies, 2002). The impact of inter-parental conflict on children's functioning and wellbeing is well

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established (Barletta and O'Mara, 2006; Buchanan, Maccoby and Dornbusch, 1991; Buehler and Welsh, 2009; Cummings and Davies, 1994; Cummings, George, McCoy and Davies, 2012), especially conflict that involves the children (Amato and Afifi, 2006; Buehler *et al.*, 1998; Grych and Fincham, 1990; Pruett, Williams, Insabella and Little, 2002; Schick, 2002). The research literature also suggests that children do not habituate to chronic conflict. In fact, negative reactions can become amplified due to repeated exposure. This is because children's responses to inter-parental conflict are influenced by their need to maintain emotional security and regulate their emotional states (Davies and Cummings, 1994), a need that does not attenuate over time. In fact, Cummings, Schermerhorn, Davies, Goeke-Morey and Cummings (2006) found support for the belief that 'emotional security may be even more important for pathways relating to externalizing problems as children get older, entering adolescence' (p. 140). Chronic conflict and extended activation of the emotional security system can drain psychological resources and increase children's vulnerability to developing psychological symptoms (Davies, Sturge-Apple, Bascoe and Cummings, 2014).

Parental alienation (PA) represents a specific form of inter-parental conflict. PA behaviours are likely to foster a child's unjustified rejection of the other parent (Baker and Fine, 2013; Lorandos, Bernet and Sauber, 2013; Warshak, 2010). Examples of PA behaviours include denigrating the other parent to the child, limiting contact between the child and the other parent, allowing the child to decide whether to spend time with the other parent, forcing the child to reject the other parent, undermining the other parent's authority, and the like (Baker and Chambers, 2011). Moreover, PA behaviours involve the most harmful elements of inter-parental conflict, that is, conflict that is about the child and conflict in which the child plays a role. Thus, the specific behaviours that alienating parents engage in are the very behaviours that prior research has established are the kinds of expressions of inter-parental conflict most likely to be harmful to children. One parent's pressure on the child to reject and withdraw from the other parent can cause confusion and self-blame in the child as well as eventual denigration and rejection of an otherwise loving and normative parent (Cummings, Goeke-Morey and Papp, 2001; Grych, 2005).

Studies have widely reported the negative impact of parental alienation on children, with outcomes ranging from the development of psychopathology (e.g. depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and

conduct disorders) to declines in academic performance and low self-esteem (e.g. Baker, 2007; Ben-Ami and Baker, 2012; Saini, Johnston, Fidler and Bala, 2016; Verrocchio, Baker and Bernet, 2016; Verrocchio, Marchetti and Fulcheri, 2015). Verrocchio *et al.* (2016), for example, demonstrated that reported exposure to parental alienation behaviours was associated with anxiety both directly (i.e. a statistically significant correlation between the two variables) and indirectly (that is, mediated through psychological maltreatment).

In fact, several studies, with community and student samples, have found associations between exposure to parental alienation behaviours and reports of psychological maltreatment (PM) with both a strong degree of statistical significance and moderate effect sizes (Baker, 2010; Baker and Eichler, 2014; Baker and Verrocchio, 2013). For example, Baker and Verrocchio (2013) found a strong connection between PA and PM over and above the effects of age and parental bonding, suggesting an independent contribution of parental alienation behaviours to the child's experience of being psychologically maltreated. Subsequently, Verrocchio and Baker (2015) confirmed the association between parental alienation and psychological maltreatment for both genders, in intact and non-intact families, and in a sample of students as well as adults, establishing support for the generalizability of this association. That is, children who were exposed to parental alienation strategies experienced themselves as being emotionally abused and/or emotionally neglected (i.e. rejected, socially isolated, exploited, terrorized, and denied emotional responsiveness).

Previous studies have shown stable levels of children's and adolescent's exposure to inter-parental conflict among the general population (Kouros, Cummings and Davies, 2010; Barton *et al.* 2016). However, no study as yet has explored the stability specifically of exposure to parental alienating behaviours over time. Likewise, although research has consistently found associations between PA and psychological maltreatment, the stability of this association over developmental periods has not been established. Studies on the chronicity of child abuse show that up to one-half of parents who commit abuse before the child's entry to school will be referred for abuse again during the child's early school years (Thompson and Wiley, 2009). Thus, it seems plausible that both PA and PM may be stable as well, but this is not yet known. Documenting stability of exposure to parental alienating behaviours and psychological maltreatment could contribute to improving interventions for families involved in high conflict.

Rationale and aims

This research study was carried out to further contribute to the knowledge about exposure to parental alienating behaviours and its association with psychological maltreatment across three childhood time periods.

The research questions addressed in this paper were: (1) what is the pattern of exposure to parental alienation across three different childhood time periods? And (2) is the association between PA and psychological maltreatment cumulative across childhood?

Method

Procedures

Between May 2015 and March 2016, 505 adults were invited to participate in the anonymous and confidential survey about childhood experiences of the adult participants. These individuals were identified through a group of psychology students who promoted the study to their colleagues, friends and family. Research collaborators also searched for voluntary participants in employment, recreational and university settings, stating to potential participants that a researcher in the Clinical Psychology Laboratory at University of Chieti was searching for anyone over the age of 18 to take part in a study on recall of childhood relationships with parents. Interested people identified additional potential participants via snowball sampling to participate in the study. Such people were invited to contact the researcher via telephone or email. Once individuals came to the laboratory they were informed of the voluntary nature of their participation and their right to withdraw at any time. All participants received and signed an informed consent. Individuals who provided consent were escorted to a private area where they could complete the written questionnaires.

In all, 505 people were invited to participate, 395 of whom agreed to participate (78.2 per cent response rate). Of those who agreed to participate, all but 34 actually completed the survey (91.4 per cent completion rate).

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not required based on the policy of the university of the first author; however, appropriate informed consent procedures were used and all US guidelines for the protection of human subjects were followed (i.e. the US Code of

Federal Regulations 45 part 46). No financial compensation was provided to participants.

Sample

Three hundred and sixty one individuals completed the survey. The sample was 64.7 per cent females, ranging in age from 18 to 61 years (mean= 30.4, SD=12.5). Approximately 30 per cent of the subjects were students, 18 per cent of the sample had divorced or separated parents and 16 per cent reported that at its worst, their parents' marriage was 'very bad'. No other demographic data were available on the participants.

Measures

The paper and pencil survey consisted of a series of standardized measures, two of which were examined for this study.

Baker Strategy Questionnaire (BSQ) (Baker & Chambers, 2011). The BSQ is a twenty-item measure comprised of a list of nineteen specific behaviours and one general behaviour that parents might engage in to induce a child to unjustifiably reject the other parent. The items on this scale were derived from quantitative (Baker and Darnall, 2006) as well as qualitative research (Baker, 2007) and subsequently field tested and validated (Baker and Chambers, 2011). Total scores on the scale have been found in other studies to be statistically significantly associated with relevant measures of children's wellbeing, including self-esteem, abuse, and self-sufficiency (e.g. Ben-Ami and Baker, 2012; Baker and Eichler, 2014). A seven-item short-form version has been found to be statistically significantly associated with psychological maltreatment and depression (Baker and Brassard, 2013). In this study, respondents answered each item on a five-point scale from never (0) to always (4) for each of three time periods in their childhood. A summary score of total exposure to the behaviours was created for each of the three time periods for each parent. In order to ascertain internal reliability of the measure, the coefficient of Cronbach's alpha was calculated (alphas above .75 are considered indicative of sufficient internal consistency to warrant the creation of summary scores). For mother PA 0–7, Cronbach's alpha was .90 (mean=1.81, SD=5.3); for PA 8–12, Cronbach's alpha was .91 (mean=2.54, SD=6.0); and for PA 13–18, Cronbach's alpha was .91

(mean=3.52, SD=7.3). For fathers: PA 0–7, Cronbach's alpha was .94 (mean=1.19, SD=5.0); for PA 8–12, Cronbach's alpha was .90 (mean= 1.81, SD= 5.1); and for PA 13–18, Cronbach's alpha was .92 (mean= 2.82, SD = 6.5). Because these variables were skewed, all analyses were also run using dichotomous variables. Where the findings differed, it will be noted.

Psychological Maltreatment Measure (PMM). A five-item measure of respondent exposure to behaviours by a parent that meets the definition of psychological maltreatment was developed by Baker and Festinger (2011). The measure was modelled on the definition of psychological maltreatment endorsed by the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (Binggeli, Hart and Brassard, 2001; Hart, Brassard, Baker and Chiel, 2016) with one item each related to spurning, terrorizing, isolating, exploiting/corrupting, and denying emotional responsiveness. In prior research the measure was validated against four established measures of psychological maltreatment (including the Conflict Tactic Scale and the Childhood Trauma Questionnaire), with statistically significant correlations indicating good validity (Baker and Festinger, 2011). In this study, we used the Italian version of the measure, which was translated into and validated in Italian. Reliability and validity properties of the Italian version of the measure were demonstrated (Verrocchio, Marchetti and Baker, 2014). Each of the five items was rated separately for mother/stepfather and father/stepmother on a five-point scale from never (score of 0) to very often (score of 4). Total scores could range from 0 to 5. In this sample the reliability of the total score was established for

TABLE 1 *Pattern of exposure to PA by parent (n=361)*

	PA by mothers		PA by fathers	
	N	%	N	%
No PA	152	42.1	196	54.3
PA at age 0–7 only	16	04.4	8	02.2
PA at age 8–12 only	3	00.8	6	01.7
PA at age 13–18 only	41	11.4	38	10.5
PA at age 0–7 and age 8–12	16	04.4	6	01.7
PA at age 0–7 and age 13–18	5	01.4	7	01.9
PA at age 8–12 and age 13–18	13.6	45	12.5	
PA at all three age periods	79	21.9	55	15.2

TABLE 2 *Proportion who reported PA across developmental periods (n=361)*

	PA by mothers	PA by fathers
Proportion PA at 0–7	32.1%	21.1%
Proportion new cases at 8–12	21.2%	17.9%
Proportion new cases at 13–18	21.2%	16.2%

both mothers (Cronbach's alpha=.84) (mean= 1.1, SD=2.6) as well as fathers (Cronbach's alpha= .82) (mean= 1.55, SD=3.0).

Results

Pattern of PA across childhood

To address the first research question – what is the pattern of exposure to parental alienation across childhood? – we began with a frequency distribution of presence/absence of any PA within each time period. The frequency distribution of these data is presented in Table 1 for PA by each parent.

As can be seen, about half of the sample experienced no PA, fewer than 5 per cent experienced it only when they were 0–7 years of age or only from 8–12 years of age; about 10 per cent experienced it only from 13–18 years of age; fewer than 5 per cent experienced it at both 0–7 and 8–12 time periods or from 0–7 and 13–18; about 12 per cent experienced it from 8–12 and 13–18; and about 15 per cent experienced it at all three time periods.

Next, we asked about the likelihood of experiencing PA at each subsequent time period given not experiencing it in the prior time period. These data are presented in Table 2.

Results showed that for PA by mothers, 32.1 per cent reported experiencing PA from 0–7. Of the 245 who did *not* report PA from 0–7, 52 (21.2 per cent) reported experiencing PA from 8–12. Of the 193 youth who did not report PA from 0–7 and 8–12, 41 (21.2 per cent) reported PA at 13–18. Thus, an additional 20 per cent of the sample report PA in each subsequent time period. For PA by fathers, 21.1 per cent of the full sample reported PA from 0–7. Of the 285 who did *not* report PA from fathers at 0–7, 51 (17.9 per cent) reported PA by fathers at 8–12. Of the 234 who did not report PA by fathers at either 0–7 or 8–12, 38 (16.2 per cent) reported PA by fathers at 13–18. For each subsequent time period, about another 20 per cent of new cases of PA were reported.

We also asked the question, for those who reported PA what proportion of the cases continued PA into the next time period? For PA by mother, about 80 per cent of the cases of PA at 0–7 were reported to have PA in the 8–12 time period. Likewise, about 80 per cent of the PA cases at 8–12 also reported PA at 13–18. Of those who reported PA at 0–7, 86 per cent reported PA at one or both subsequent time periods. For fathers, 80 per cent of those who reported PA in 0–7 also reported PA at 8–12 and of those who reported PA at 8–12, 89 per cent reported PA at 13–18. Of those who reported PA at 0–7, 89 per cent reported PA at one or both subsequent time periods. Thus, once PA was reported to have been experienced, it was highly likely that it would be reported to be present for the rest of the individual's childhood.

The next set of analyses asked whether utilization of the specific PA strategies varied over time periods. To address this question we looked at the proportion of respondents who reported exposure to each PA strategy at each time period, by mother and father separately. For these analyses, we examined the subset of 209 cases that reported any exposure to PA. That is, we asked: do respondents who report any exposure to PA report differences in specific strategies based on the time period in question? Twenty general linear model equations were conducted with a repeated measures design for maternal data and twenty were conducted for paternal data. In each, the proportion of cases reporting presence of a strategy at each time period was analysed. These data are presented in Table 3. In order to control for multiple comparisons, a Bonferonni correction was applied, resulting in a designated significance level of .0025 for each test.

Of the twenty analyses conducted for maternal data, fourteen were statistically significant at the .0025 level (and an additional four were significantly significant at the .01 level). Of the twenty analyses conducted for the paternal data, twelve were statistically significant at the .0025 level (and an additional four were significantly significant at the .01 level). A few notable patterns appeared. For some of the PA strategies, the proportion reporting exposure increased steadily across the three time periods. For example, the proportion reporting that their mothers engaged in denigration went from 22 per cent for 0–7 years of age, 39 per cent from 8–12 years of age, and 52 per cent from 13–18 years of age. This pattern was found in seven of the maternal variables and eight of the paternal variables. A second pattern found in five of the maternal variables and four of the paternal variables was a significant rise from the first to the second time

TABLE 3 Proportion of respondents who reported exposure to each of the PA strategies by time period

	0-7	8-12	13-18	F
<i>Maternal data (n=209)</i>				
Made negative comments	22	39	52	27.3***
Limited contact	22	6	9	14.8***
Withheld or blocked messages	28	6	2	33.5***
Made communication difficult	4	9	4	4.5**
Discomfort at other parent	5	8	12	4.6**
Upset at child's affection father	8	11	12	11.9**
Said parent was unloving	3	9	20	22.2***
Made child choose	4	6	21	17.2***
Said parent was unsafe	5	11	11	9.2***
Confided in child	9	28	29	35.6***
Required favoritism of child	5	11	22	21.0***
Asked child to spy	4	10	12	06.3**
Asked child to keep secrets	7	19	24	21.4***
Called father by first name	6	6	12	6.9***
Referred to new spouse as Dad	7	4	5	1.8
Encouraged reliance on herself	13	28	29	22.2***
Encouraged disregard of father	7	10	17	10.2***
Hard to be with extended family	8	10	8	.45
Fostered anger/hurt at father	4	15	10	15.5***
Tried to turn against father	4	7	15	11.8***
<i>Paternal data (N=165)</i>				
Made negative comments	13	31	44	36.1***
Limited contact	10	5	7	4.2**
Withheld or blocked messages	21	4	1	20.4***
Made communication difficult	4	10	6	5.4**
Discomfort at other parent	7	10	15	4.7**
Upset at child's affection mother	7	12	24	14.2***
Said parent was unloving	2	7	18	13.5***
Made child choose	5	8	25	17.4***
Said parent was unsafe	5	10	12	4.7**
Confided in child	6	20	22	19.7***
Required favoritism of child	6	15	27	18.8***
Asked child to spy	5	7	9	1.7
Asked child to keep secrets	4	17	19	18.3***
Called father by first name	4	5	7	1.5
Referred to new spouse as Mom	6	4	5	.70
Encouraged reliance on herself	14	25	34	19.7***
Encouraged disregard of mother	6	11	21	12.6***
Hard to be with extended family	9	7	8	.50
Fostered anger/hurt at mother	5	14	15	10.8***
Tried to turn against mother	6	8	20	13.2***

***= p<.0025

**p<.01

TABLE 4 Multiple linear regressions on psychological maltreatment of PA at each time period controlling for parental marital status and quality of marital relationship

	B	SE B	β	t	Sig.
<i>Maternal data</i>					
Constant	1.0	.34	2.9	.004	
Quality of marriage	-.30	.11	-.14	-2.7	.008
Marital status	-1.09	.36	-.16	-3.0	.003
PA 0-7	.08	.04	.15	1.88	.06
PA 8-12	-.05	.05	-.12	-1.20	.23
PA 13-18	.17	.03	.48	6.8	.001
Num periods	.22	.13	1.0	1.8	.08
<i>Paternal data</i>					
Constant	1.4	.35	4.1	.001	
Quality of marriage	-.37	.12	-.16	-3.1	.002
Marital status	-.31	.38	-.04	-.83	.41
PA 0-7	.11	.05	.15	2.20	.03
PA 8-12	.03	.06	-.04	-.50	.64
PA 13-18	.16	.04	.32	4.3	.001
Num periods	.32	.15	.12	2.2	.03

periods and then a levelling off. For example, for the variable confiding in the child, 6 per cent of the sample reported this to be present by fathers at birth to 7, 20 per cent reported it for 8-12 years, and 22 per cent reported it for 13-18. Thus, there was a significant jump from the first to the second time period and then a levelling off between the second and third time periods. These patterns indicate that depending upon the specific PA behaviour, there might be changes in the likelihood of being exposed to that behaviour based on the age of the child.

PA and Psychological Maltreatment

The second research question addressed the association between PA at different developmental periods and psychological maltreatment. To answer this question we conducted two linear regression analyses, one with mother data and one with father data. In each analysis, we entered first a variable representing the quality of the marital relationship and a variable indicating whether the respondent's parents had divorced or separated during the respondent's childhood. Next we entered three PA variables, one for each time period. We forced the entry by developmental period such that PA at 0-7 was entered first, followed by PA at 8-12 and then PA at 13-18. This allowed us to

ask whether PA at each subsequent time period was statistically significantly associated with psychological maltreatment. These data are presented in Table 4.

As can be seen in Table 4, for the maternal data (relationships between reports of mothers engaging in PA and reports of mothers being psychologically maltreating), PA at age birth to 7 was marginally statistically significantly associated with psychological maltreatment over and above the quality of the marital relationship and whether the parents had got divorced or separated. PA at age 13 to 18 was statistically significantly associated with psychological maltreatment over and above the quality of the marital relationship, whether the parents had got divorced or separated, and PA at birth to 7 years of age. Moreover, there was a trend for the number of different time periods PA was experienced and psychological maltreatment.

With respect to fathers, PA from birth to age 7 was statistically significantly associated with psychological maltreatment over and above the quality of the marital relationship and whether the parents had got divorced or separated. PA at age 13 to 18 was also statistically significantly associated with psychological maltreatment over and above the quality of the marital relationship, whether the parents had got divorced or separated, and PA from birth to 7 years of age. Moreover, the association between the number of different time periods PA was experienced and psychological maltreatment was statistically significant.

Discussion

Limitations

Prior to discussing the findings, a few limitations of the study should be mentioned. First, the cross-sectional data precludes establishment of the temporal sequence of variables as well as inferences about causality. It will be important to rule out potential variables that could account for the associations found between alienating behaviours and psychological maltreatment in order to more definitively document the causal linkages. A longitudinal research study could be conducted that would rule out alternative explanations for the pattern of findings that could be artifacts of the retrospective nature of the data. Second, the retrospective nature of the data collection may lead to recall bias. However, there is evidence supporting the acceptable validity of retrospective recall of adverse childhood events (Hardt and Rutter, 2004). Third, the data collected on exposure to

parental alienating behaviours and psychological maltreatment were only based on the awareness of the respondent and did not necessarily reflect the full complement of these dysfunctional patterns of parenting to which the person had been exposed. The measurement from the perspective of the adult child precludes the full accounting of exposure to alienating behaviours because certain parental behaviours by definition (i.e. blocking messages, withholding mail) occur outside the child's level of awareness. However, adult's perceptions of childhood exposure to parental alienating behaviours and of psychological maltreatment may be more important than whether a parent actually had engaged in those harmful behaviours. Moreover, the data were not analysed within various subgroups such as whether the parents were separated/divorced. It is likely that rates of reported PA would be higher in this subsample and this could be the focus of future work. Additional future work could explore the impact of parental alienation both before and after the dissolution of the marriage and examine the differential impact of parental alienation by one or both parents.

Major findings

A number of findings emerged from this study. First, once PA was initiated by a parent, it was highly likely to continue. The intractability of parental alienation has been described in the clinical literature (e.g. Baker and Fine, 2013) and is now empirically documented as well. Once a parent begins using the primary parental alienation strategies, it seems that it is unlikely the parent will stop. This means that mental health and legal professionals should probably not give parents engaging in these behaviours multiple opportunities to change their behaviour without some form of incentive or sanction. In light of the negative effects of PA on children and the strong association with psychological maltreatment, there probably needs to be firmer enforcement and more consistent sanctions for parents who have been found to be engaging in these behaviours. This suggestion was confirmed by a recent review (Templer, Matthewson, Haines and Cox, 2017) demonstrating that therapeutic interventions with court sanctions for non-compliance are most effective in addressing parental alienation.

Second, new cases of PA were reported for each of the three developmental time periods examined. This means that just because a parent has not engaged in PA to date does not mean that they will not start doing so. Practically speaking this means that all parents should

be aware of the primary parental alienation strategies and be aware of whether they and/or their spouse are engaging in any of them. At no point should a parent assume that since it has not happened yet, it cannot or will not start happening. The literature suggests that many parents – especially those going through a divorce (a context ripe for PA to occur) – can be educated to improve the quality of their parenting and co-parenting and that this leads to positive outcomes for children (Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik and Braver, 2011). In order to prevent PA, parent education needs to focus not just on what PA is, how to avoid it, and how to detect it, but also on the very strong need to be vigilant throughout a child's development. Even parents of teens who have never engaged in PA before may suddenly start doing so. Future research should aim to identify the development-specific triggers of PA. For example, what causes a parent of a 13-year-old to start engaging in PA behaviours when she or he had not done so up until then? Possible triggers could be the end of the marriage, the remarriage of the spouse, the increasing autonomy of the child which might be destabilizing for the parent, and the belief that older teens will be more likely to be heard by the courts.

A third and related finding is that different strategies were used at different time periods. Certain PA strategies were more likely to emerge later in a child's development, such as confiding in a child or asking the child to keep secrets, behaviours that require a certain level of cognitive maturity and behavioural control on the part of the child. These data suggest that parents are tailoring their use of PA strategies to the level of maturity of the child. If this is in fact the case, efforts to counter the alienation and/or inoculate a child against the alienating efforts of a parent need to also be tailored to the age and developmental level of the child and need to take into account that the specific alienating behaviours the child is exposed to may change over time.

Also notable is that PA was statistically significantly related to the child's reports of psychological maltreatment. This was true for PA from birth to 7 years of age, 13 to 18 years of age, and for the overall number of time periods in which PA occurred. PA from 8 to 12 years of age (over and above 0 to 7 and 13 to 18) was not associated with psychological maltreatment, which represents an interesting puzzle that could be explored in a future study. What the data do show across both maternal and paternal data is that PA at the earliest time in life and PA in the teen years was strongly associated with the experience of being maltreated by the parent engaging in the alienation. This finding is consistent with the numerous prior studies

demonstrating this relationship (e.g. Verrocchio *et al.*, 2016) but also extends those findings by demonstrating the cumulative effect of exposure to PA.

Taken together, these data should add a sense of urgency to the treatment of high conflict families where a parent is engaging in PA. The effects start early, remain impactful and accumulate over time. The association between PA and PM was present over and above the overall quality of the marriage and demonstrate the specific ways in which inter-parental conflict can harm children.

Implications

The findings add weight to the call for education of parents involved in or likely to be involved in conflict (for example, divorcing and divorced parents). Even if most or all alienated children come around and re-establish contact with the rejected parent (an idea for which there is no credible data), the data show that exposure to PA in and of itself is harmful to children. As noted above, parents need to be made aware of what PA is, how damaging it can be and what to do about it. Likewise, mental health and legal professionals working with families affected by parental alienation should be alert to the possibility that it is occurring, knowledgeable enough to educate their clients, and highly skilled in handling these cases in a way that does not allow the child to continue to be exposed to PA. The data are clear: once on the road to alienation, parents are not likely to stop of their own accord. Perhaps if legal and mental health professionals were aware of the strong association between PA and PM they would be motivated to hold the alienating parent accountable for their harmful behaviour. Thus, the major implication of these and related data is the need for more PA-informed training for parents as well as the legal and mental health professionals working with them. It is time for all parties to know what PA is, be able to detect it and know how to respond accordingly. Only then can children be protected from this insidious and persistent form of child abuse.

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