

# **Is There a Test for Parental Alienation?**

**William Bernet, M.D.**

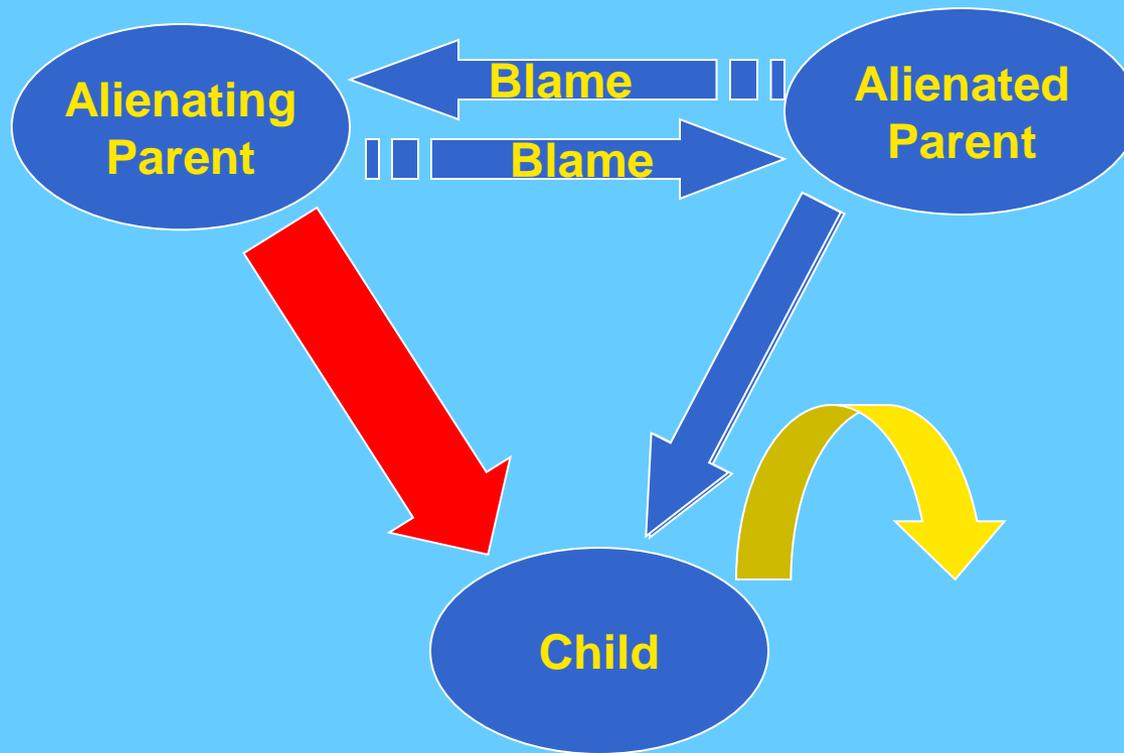
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**International Conference of Parental Alienation Study Group  
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## **Definition: “Parental Alienation”**

- **A child – usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce – allies himself strongly with one parent (the preferred parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) without legitimate justification.**

# Causing PA is Child Maltreatment



# Criteria for Diagnosis of Parental Alienation

- Campaign of denigration
- Frivolous rationalizations for criticism of parent
- Lack of ambivalence
- Independent-thinker phenomenon
- Reflexive support of alienating parent
- Absence of guilt over exploitation of target parent
- Borrowed scenarios
- Spread of animosity toward target parent's family

# Criteria for Diagnosis of Parental Alienation

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## What's the difference?

- **ALIENATION** – rejection is very strong – defense mechanism of splitting.
- **ESTRANGEMENT** – feelings toward rejected parent are ambivalent – no splitting.

Richard Gardner, *Academy Forum*, 1985

# Recent Trends in Divorce and Custody Litigation

by Richard A. Gardner, MD

During the last six to seven years there has been a burgeoning of child custody litigation. This has been the result of two important changes in child custody determinations. The first relates to the appreciation that the “tender years presumption”

used by the “loved” parent. (Again, the word *loved* is placed in quotations because hostility toward and fear of that parent may similarly be unexpressed.)

Even years after they have taken place, the child may

## **Richard Gardner, *Academy Forum*, 1985**

- **“Another symptom of the parental alienation syndrome is the complete lack of ambivalence. ... The hated parent is viewed as ‘all bad’ and the loved parent is ‘all good.’”**

## **Richard Gardner, *Academy Forum*, 1985**

- **Critics of PAS incorrectly say, “Gardner had no empirical evidence.”**
- **Gardner’s methodology – organizing clinical data into a syndrome – is what physicians have done for hundreds of years.**
- **George Huntington – chorea – 1872.**
- **Gilles de la Tourette – maladie des tics – 1884.**
- **Leo Kanner – childhood autism – 1943.**

**“Qualitative research approaches healthcare in a completely different way from quantitative research, providing important insights into health-related phenomena, generating new avenues for empirical questions.”**





Child Adolesc Psychiatric Clin N Am  
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CHILD AND  
ADOLESCENT  
PSYCHIATRIC  
CLINICS

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## Child custody evaluations

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# Assessment of Attachment

- **Inventory of affects**
- **Baby bird story**
- **Deserted island story**
- **Magician story**
- **Draw family doing something exciting**
  
- **Likes and dislikes**
  - **Estrangement = reports neglect, abuse**
  - **Alienation = reports extreme opinions**

# Likes & Dislikes

Mom = Sarah Jones

- Likes
- Dislikes

Dad = Fred Jones

- Likes
- Dislikes

# Likes & Dislikes – *INTACT FAMILY*

Mom = Sarah Jones

- Likes
  - Loves me
  - Tucks me in
  - Buys me toys
- Dislikes
  - She has headaches
  - She spansks me

Dad = Fred Jones

- Likes
  - Loves me
  - Watches me play soccer
  - Helps with homework
- Dislikes
  - When he get mad
  - When he yells

# Likes & Dislikes – *ALIENTATED CHILD* (10-year-old boy)

Mom = Martha O'Brien

- Likes:
  - Talented, very strong, very nice, very loving, very polite, easy going, easy to convince, mostly calm, always obeys the law.
- Dislikes:
  - Should stop smoking, smokes once a week, not in front of me.

Dad = Howard O'Brien

- Likes:
  - Maybe 15 times had fun, buys us shoes and toys, gives us allowance. Played football, practiced soccer.
- Dislikes:
  - Gives me stuff and wants me to go with him. He child abused me, held me over a railing on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor, he was drunk, had 8 beers.

# Likes & Dislikes – *ALIENATED CHILD* (same 10-year-old boy)

Dad = Howard O'Brien

- Dislikes:

- He pinched me in the privates with kitchen tongs. He's hit me before. He spanked me for no reason when he was drunk. He hurt Mom by hitting her. He came home drunk one night. He was stopped by the cops for speeding. He kidnapped me on the soccer field. He said Mom said to go with him, but she didn't. He hit Mom. He cusses her out all the time. He said secrets about Mom that were not true. He forced me to eat shrimp. After he kidnapped me, he said, "You'll never see your mother again." He went to strip bars when he was married, Mom told me. Mom told me how he got drunk all the time. Mom got hurt, scalded herself by accident, he was laughing. He harassed us. Etc.



# The Custody Evaluation Handbook

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Research-Based  
Solutions and  
Applications

Barry Bricklin, Ph.D.

**Barry Bricklin,**  
***The Custody Evaluation Handbook, 1995***

- **Bricklin Perceptual Scales (BPS): the child's perception of his/her relationship to the parent.**
- **32 questions about each parent.**
- **Does not directly compare the parents.**
- **Responds verbally and nonverbally.**

# Bricklin Perceptual Scales

- **For example:**

**“If you had a pet, how well would Dad do at taking care of it if you had to go away for a few days?”**

# Bricklin Perceptual Scales





# Bricklin Perceptual Scales

- **MMU = alienated children have “mind made up”**
- **NBOAI = “not-based-on-actual-interaction**
- **“Most of child’s responses will be extremely positive for the alienating parent and negative for the target parent.”**

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# **Can Child Custody Data be Generated Scientifically? Part I**

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MICHAEL H. HALBERT

*Consultant to Management, Bala Cynwyd, PA*

# Bricklin Perceptual Scales

- **Validity of BPS: about 90% agreement with multiple independent criteria:**
- **BPS vs. long-term family therapists**
- **BPS vs. Perception of Relationship Test**
- **BPS vs. independent psychologists**
- **BPS vs. courtroom judges**
- **Overall N ~ 2,300**

**Amy J. L. Baker et al.,  
*Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 2012**

*Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 53:178–193, 2012

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**Differentiating Alienated From Not  
Alienated Children: A Pilot Study**

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## **Amy J. L. Baker et al.**

- **Children referred for problems related to high-conflict divorce.**
- **Age 6 to 17.**
- **19 children – reunification therapy**
- **21 children – NOT reunification therapy**

# **Baker Alienation Questionnaire = BAQ**

- **Paper and pencil, self-administered.**
- **14 questions about each parent.**
- **“Do you enjoy spending time with your mother/father?” – objective scoring.**
- **“What are some things you don’t like about your mother/father?” – subjective scoring.**

# Baker Alienation Questionnaire = BAQ

**TABLE 1** Results of Reclassification Based on Coding of Baker Alienation Questionnaire (BAQ)

BAQ Ratings	Reunification Therapy	Not Reunification Therapy
Alienated	18	4
Not alienated	1	17

- **35 of 40 cases (87.5%) were correctly classified.**

## **Baker 4-point Assessment for PA**

- **Positive relationship with rejected parent in past.**
- **Lack of abuse or neglect by rejected parent.**
- **Favored parent employed many of the 17 alienating behaviors.**
- **Child exhibits behavioral characteristics, ideas, or feelings characteristic of alienation (score of 7 or above on BAQ).**

# William Bernet et al., *Journal of Forensic Sciences, 2017*

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**PAPER**

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**PSYCHIATRY & BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE**

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An Objective Measure of Splitting in Parental  
Alienation: The Parental Acceptance–Rejection  
Questionnaire\*

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# Characteristics of Participants and Their Parents

Family Type	Intact	Divorced	Neglected	Alienated Father	Alienated Mother
Source of participants	RM	RM	RM	FR	FR
No. of participants	35	20	16	24	21
Gender (male:female)	22:13	11:9	8:8	9:15	10:11
Mean Age (SD) of children	12.5 (2.86)	13.1 (3.07)	13.3 (2.98)	13.9 (2.07)	13.3 (2.01)
Preferred parent (mother:father)			16:0	24:0	0:21

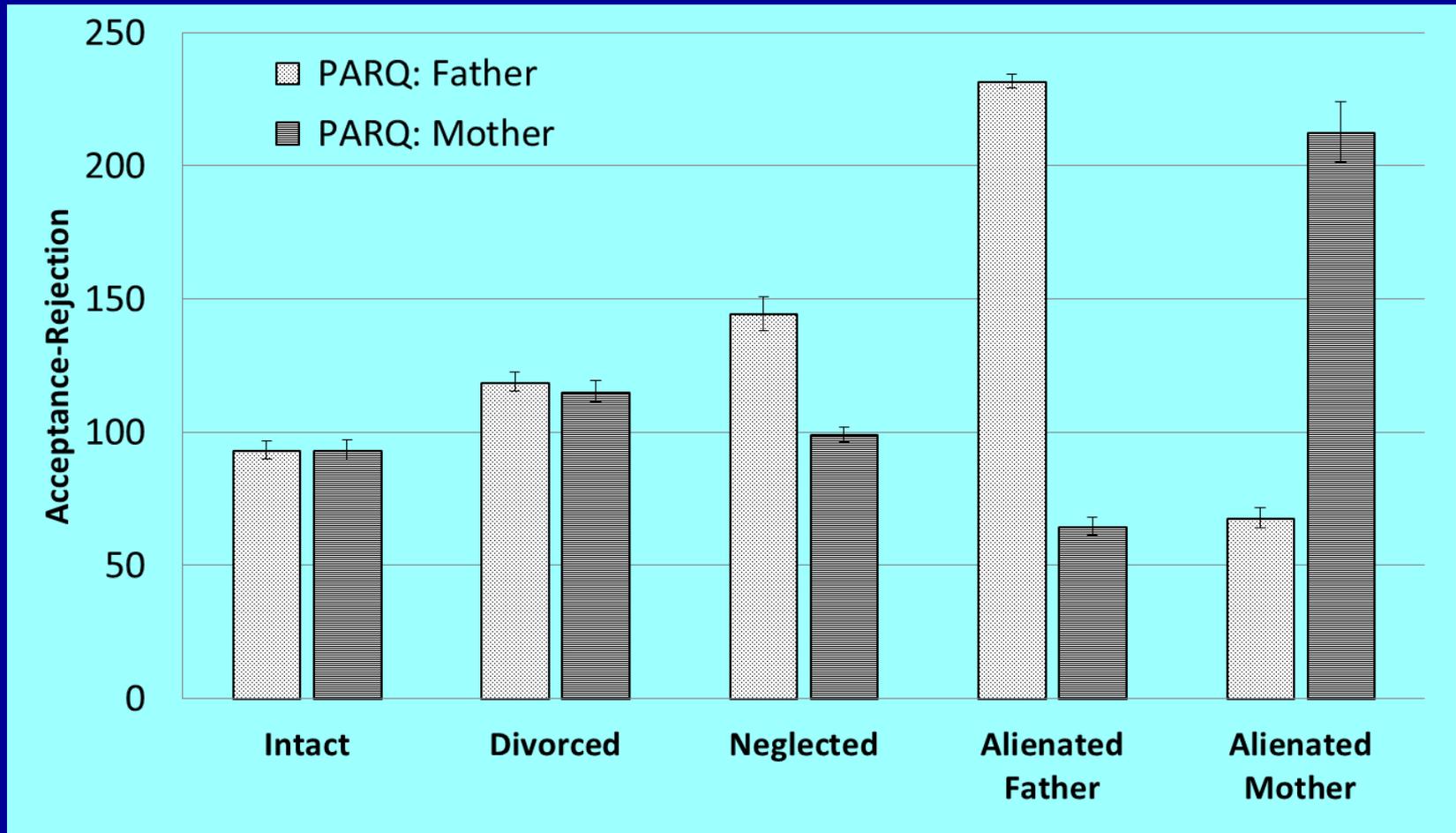
# Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire

MY FATHER		TRUE OF MY FATHER		NOT TRUE OF MY FATHER	
		<i>Almost Always True</i>	<i>Sometimes True</i>	<i>Rarely True</i>	<i>Almost Never True</i>
1.	Says nice things about me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.	Nags or scolds me when I am bad	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.	Pays no attention to me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.	Does not really love me	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5.	Talks to me about our plans and listens to what I have to say	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

# Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire

- **PARQ – self-report instrument measures children's perceptions of parental acceptance and rejection.**
- **Most items refer to parental behavior, not attitudes.**
- **Lowest possible score = 60 = very positive.**
- **Highest possible score = 240 = very negative.**

# Splitting occurs in alienated children.



**There is highly significant difference between children of alienated fathers and children of neglectful fathers (\*\*\*)  $p < .001$ ).**

		PARQ: Father			PARQ: Mother		
	n	M	SD	t (38)	M	SD	t (38)
<b>Children of Alienated Fathers</b>	24	231.88	6.43	27.81***	64.67	8.43	-14.25***
<b>Children of Neglectful Fathers</b>	16	144.38	13.32		99.06	5.71	

# THE PARENTAL ACCEPTANCE- REJECTION QUESTIONNAIRE (PARQ)

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USA

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FOR MORE INFORMATION  
VISIT THE ROHNER CENTER WEBSITE  
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## **Conclusions / Implications**

- **The PARQ is useful for both clinicians and forensic practitioners in evaluating children of divorced parents, when there is a concern about the possible diagnosis of parental alienation.**
- **This type of quantitative research helps to prove the reality of parental alienation.**
- **And helps to prove that parental alienation is a discrete condition.**

# Conclusions / Implications

- **Of course, this research needs to be replicated.**
- **Compare PARQ scores for ...**
  - **Mild parental alienation**
  - **Moderate parental alienation**
  - **Severe parental alienation**
- **Compare PARQ scores for ...**
  - **Mild neglect/abuse**
  - **Moderate neglect/abuse**
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# Conclusions / Implications

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- Compare PARQ scores for ...
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  - **SEVERE PARENTAL ALIENATION**
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  - **MODERATE NEGLECT/ABUSE**
  - Severe neglect/abuse