The Science Underlying Parental Alienation

Amy J.L. Baker, Ph.D.
www.amyjlbaker.com
amyjlbaker@aol.com
Parental Alienation

A child's **unjustified rejection** of a **formerly loved** parent, expressed as a set of specific **child alienation behaviors**, based on the **alienating behaviors** of the favored parent.
“Since we don’t have any children, my ex turned the cats against me”
The Four-Factor Model

1) Prior positive relationship with now rejected parent
2) Absence of abuse or neglect on the part of the now rejected parent
3) Use of alienating behaviors by the favored parent
4) Exhibition of alienation behaviors by child
How Can we Tell if a Child is Alienated or Estranged

Not all children who reject a parent are alienated– even though the two groups have some features in common.

Why does it matter whether a child is alienated or estranged?
The Four-Factor Model

Takes into account the behaviors of all parties.

Ensures that an abused child is not mistaken for an alienated child.
Factor 1:

Factor 1: Prior positive relationship between the child and the now rejected parent.

Takes into account normative flaws of rejected parent – all parents are imperfect.
Factor 2:

Absence of abuse or neglect on the part of the now rejected parent.

Rules out alternative explanations for the child’s rejection of the targeted parent.
Factor 3

Favored parent used many – not necessarily all – of the 17 primary parental alienation strategies.

Evidence that the favored parent has engaged in the very behaviors that we know can result in a child’s rejection of the other parent.
Factor 4:

The child exhibits many of the 8 behaviors of alienation.

Evidence that the child is exhibiting behaviors that are unique and specific to alienated children.
The Science: Alienating Behaviors

Some children are susceptible to undue influence.
Influence

Visual Cliff research: Infants can be coaxed across what looks like a dangerous cliff through positive cues from a parent. Will override their own perception.

Steven Ceci: Children can be led to believe that things happened to them when they did not, will embellish the false memory and will resist hearing that it was a false memory.
Influence

Elizabeth Loftus: People can be influenced to remember things incorrectly through the types of questions asked about an event. History can be rewritten.

Shaw and Porter: 75% of teens were coaxed into remembering a highly salient false memory. What “might have been” became “what was.”
Influence

**Solomon Asch**: People will mistakenly report the length of a line in order to conform to a group.

**Stanley Milgram**: People will inflict high voltage electric shocks to people when told to do so by an experimenter.
Mechanisms of Influence

Social pressure
Visualization
Suggestive questioning
Repetition
Persuasion/manipulation
Patternicity
Confirmation bias
Mechanisms of Influence in PA

The 17 primary parental alienation behaviors of the favored parent.

Induce in the child the distorted belief that the other parent is unsafe, unloving, and unavailable and the distorted belief that the favored parent is the only one who truly loves and understands him/her.
Alienating Behaviors....

Result in cohesion/enmeshment with the Favored parent.

Result in the child being willing to forgo the relationship with the targeted parent in order to please the favored parent on whom the child is now dependent.
Baker (2007) study of 40 adult children of parental alienation syndrome, asked, “How did the other parent turn you against your other parent?”

Baker and Darnall (2006) study of 97 targeted parents, asked, “How is the other turning your child against you?

Baker and Chambers (2011) study codified these behaviors into a reliable and valid measure, the BSQ.
BSQ Research

8 different samples
13 published papers
2,567 participants
New York, Texas, Chieti
Adults and teens

In every study: BSQ reliable and valid
Other Research on Alienating Behaviors

Hands and Warshak (2011)

Laughrea (2002)

Lopez, Iglesias, and Garcia (2014)
The Science of Alienated Behaviors of a Child

8 Behavioral manifestations of alienation in children:

Campaign of denigrations
Weak, frivolous and absurd reasons
Lack of ambivalence
Lack of remorse
Reflexive support
“Independent thinker” phenomenon
Use of borrowed scenarios
Spread of animosity
Behaviors of a Child: Clinical Observations

Gardner’s (1985) observations

Other clinicians

Wallerstein and Kelly (1976)

Kelly and Johnston (2001)
Measuring the Child’s Behaviors

Baker and Darnall (2006)

Baker, Burkhard and Kelly (2012)

Baker and Eichler (2016)

Bernet, Gregory, Reay, & Rohner (2017)
Abused Children Do Not Exhibit These Behaviors

1. Clinical writings
2. Rat research
3. Harlow’s research
4. Foster children research
5. Memoirs
6. Clinician ratings of abused children
Support for the Four-Factor Model

Baker (in press)

68 mental health professionals rated 1 of 16 vignettes.

.91 inter rater reliability

100% of the pure alienation vignettes were coded as alienation.

81% of the pure non-alienation vignettes were coded as not alienation.
Research on the Long-Term Effects of PA

Depression
Anxiety
Low self-esteem
Substance abuse
Insecure adult attachments
Difficulties becoming self-sufficient
Directions for Future Research

BSQ studies conducted by other researchers around the world.

More studies about the behaviors of alienated children.

Validation of the classification of “targeted parents” through document review and collateral contacts.

Address issue of directionality of effects.

Identifying factors that allow children to resist PA efforts by a parent.

Efficacy of different types of treatment for different levels of PA.

Efficacy of prevention efforts!

There is always more to learn.....