



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 & 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 & 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 & 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 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.
Lee-Maturana, S., Matthewson, M., & Dwan, C. (2020). Targeted parents surviving parental alienation: Consequences of alienation and coping strategies. <i>Journal of Child & 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 & 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 & 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.