

Parental Alienation Top Ten Peer-Reviewed Publications, 2016-2021

by William Bernet, M.D.

Although “parental alienation syndrome” was 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/>).

In recent years, the pace has picked up for the publication of both qualitative and quantitative research regarding parental alienation. This brief review of relevant literature—published in peer-reviewed journals—only covers the last six years. We may repeat this article next year. If readers have a favorite peer-reviewed article that they nominate for the Top Ten, send the information to william.bernet@vumc.org.

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. (in press). The Five-Factor Model for the diagnosis of parental alienation. Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0890856721020463?via%3Dihub>

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.



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.

Rolands, G. A. (2018). Parental alienation: A measurement tool. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage* 60(4):316–331.

The Rowlands Parental Alienation Scale (RPAS) captured 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.

Harman, J. J., Bernet, W., Harman, J. (2019). Parental alienation: Toward the blossoming of a field of study. *Current Directions*. doi: 10.1177/0963721419827271.

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. We 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.

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.

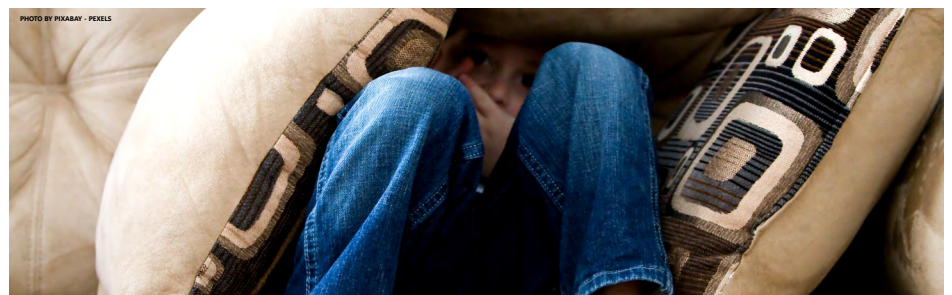
Parental alienation is far more common and debilitating for children and parents than was previously believed. In extreme cases, one can make the argument that parental alienation is a serious form of emotional child abuse. The research literature consistently identifies two core elements of child abuse: parental alienation as a significant form of harm to children that is attributable to human action.

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.

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.



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