

Myths and Truths about Parental Alienation

Myth	Truth
Parental alienation (PA) is just a legal defense used by abusive fathers	In over half of the cases where PA was found to have occurred, there were no allegations of other forms of abuse. Research indicates that mothers and fathers are just as likely to be alienated parents: PA is a form of abuse that does not discriminate based on gender. Harman & Lorandos, 2020; Harman, Leder-Elder, Biringen, 2019
Mothers do not alienate children: They protect them from abusive fathers	Parents who use their child as a weapon against the other parent, regardless of gender, are committing psychological abuse when it results in severe PA. There are ways to protect children from abuse without causing psychological harm. Research indicates that there is a double standard to accept and justify a mother’s parental alienating behaviors while sanctioning fathers for the same behavior. Harman, Biringen, Ratajack, Outland, & Kraus, 2016; Harman, Kruk, & Hines, 2018
PA should be not be recognized because it will be misused by abusers	For any type of abuse, there is always a risk of abusers pretending to be victims. This risk creates the need for clear standards and reliable screening and assessment tools to prevent misuse. The Five-Factor Model provides that standard by requiring that abuse and neglect are not present before PA can be diagnosed. Bernet, 2020; Lorandos & Bernet, 2020
The alienated parent must be abusive for a child to reject them so strongly	Children who are abused by a parent tend to engage in behaviors to preserve and protect the relationship: they do not seek to destroy it. Children in foster care usually yearn for their birth parents and frequently minimize the maltreatment that their birth parents perpetrated against them. The rejection of a healthy parent is not normal and is an outcome that is encouraged and often rewarded by the alienating parent. Baker, Creegan, Quinones, & Rozelle, 2016; Baker, Miller, Bernet, & Adeyaho, 2019
Both parents are responsible for PA	Researchers have found that the alienated parent’s behaviors are not typically the cause of the child’s rejection. It is the alienating parent’s behaviors that are largely responsible for the child’s PA, and these behaviors are usually not reciprocated by the alienated parent. Harman et al., 2019; Warshak, 2015
Research on PA is not “scientific”	Clinical, legal, and scientific evidence on PA has accumulated for over 35 years. There have been over 1,000 peer-reviewed articles, chapters, and books published on the topic, and the empirical research on the topic has expanded greatly, leading to what has been considered a “blossoming” of the scientific field. Harman, Bernet, & Harman, 2019; Lorandos & Bernet, 2020; Lorandos, 2020
PA theory was created by a “pedophile”	Dr. Richard Gardner coined the phrase “parental alienation syndrome.” His clinical descriptions of sexually abused children have been mischaracterized by child abuse and domestic violence advocates to portray him as a pedophile. Such advocates have engaged in ad hominem attacks by taking his writings out of context to further an agenda that denies PA is real. Harman & Lorandos, 2020; Rand, 2013

Annotated References

Reference	Type of paper/methods used	General findings/conclusions
Baker, A. J. L., Creegan, A., Quinones, A., & Rozelle, L. (2016). Foster children's views of their parents: A review of the literature. <i>Children and Youth Services Review, 67</i> , 177-183.	Foster children's attitudes towards their birth parents were solicited.	The foster children minimized their birth parent's abuse towards them and still yearned to see them. They also felt anxious and worried while separated from their abusive parents.
Baker, A. J. L., Miller, S., Bernet, W., & Adebayo, T. (2019). The assessment of the attitudes and behaviors about physically abused children: A survey of mental health professionals. <i>Journal of Child and Family Studies, 28</i> , 3401-3411.	Child protection workers rated their caseloads of abused children in terms of their behaviors and feelings towards their abusive parent(s).	Children who had been abused, even severely abused, did not engage in behaviors that pushed their abuser away. Rather, they engaged in behaviors intended to enhance their relationships.
Bernet, W. (2020). The Five-Factor Model for the diagnosis of parental alienation. <i>Feedback- Journal of the Family Therapy Association of Ireland, 6</i> , 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.
Harman, J. J., Bernet, W., & Harman, J. (2019). Parental alienation: The blossoming of a field of study. <i>Current Directions in Psychological Science, 28</i> , 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, 144</i> , 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., 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, 106</i> , 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.
Harman, J. J., & Lorandos, D. (2020). Allegations of family violence in court: How parental alienation affects judicial outcomes. <i>Psychology, Public Policy, & Law</i> .	Pre-registered study examining 967 appellate court cases in the U.S. where parental alienation was alleged or found to have occurred.	Parents found to alienate their children were more likely to lose custody of their children and lose parenting time than those who only alleged to be alienated. Fathers were more likely to lose parenting time and custody of children than mothers. Parents were more likely to lose custody and parenting time if the other parent made a false allegation of abuse against them.
Lorandos, D. (2020). Parental alienation in U.S. courts, 1985-2018. <i>Family Court Review, 58</i> , 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.
Lorandos, D. & Bernet, W. (2020). <i>Parental Alienation: Science & Law</i> . 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 are presented. A full review of U.S. appellate level cases where PA was found to have occurred is described.
Rand, D. (2013). The history of parental alienation from early days to modern times. In D. Lorandos, W. Bernet, & S. R. Sauber (Eds.), <i>Parental Alienation: The Handbook for Mental Health and Legal Professionals</i> (pp. 291-321). Charles C Thomas Publisher, Ltd.	A review of the history of research on PA and the practice of professionals working with children who have been alienated from a parent.	A vocal subgroup of child abuse and domestic violence advocates have historically attempted to discredit work on PA and spread misinformation about it.
Warshak, R. A. (2015). Ten parental alienation fallacies that compromise decisions in court and in therapy. <i>Professional Psychology: Research & Practice, 46</i> , 235-249.	Detailed description of common myths about PA and the empirical support that refutes them.	Reliance on false beliefs compromises investigations and undermines adequate consideration of alternative explanations for the causes of a child's alienation.

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 to 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.