

Parental Alignments and Rejection: An Empirical Study of Alienation in Children of Divorce

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This study of family relationships after divorce examined the frequency and extent of child-parent alignments and correlates of children's rejection of a parent, these being basic components of the controversial idea of "parental alienation syndrome." The sample consisted of 215 children from the family courts and general community two to three years after parental separation. The findings indicate that children's attitudes toward their parents range from positive to negative, with relatively few being extremely aligned or rejecting. Rejection of a parent has multiple determinants, with both the aligned and rejected parents contributing to the problem, in addition to vulnerabilities within children themselves.

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The dilemma posed by a child's strident rejection of one parent, generally accompanied by strong resistance or refusal to visit or have anything to do with that parent after divorce, has increasingly troubled family courts, professionals, and parents alike. The phenomenon was first recognized by Wallerstein and Kelly^{1,2} in their seminal study on children of divorce. They described it as an "unholy alliance" between a narcissistically enraged parent and a vulnerable older child or adolescent who together waged battle in efforts to hurt and punish the other parent. Later, Gardner^{3,4} coined the term "parental alienation syndrome" (PAS) to describe a psychiatric disorder in a child that arises almost exclusively in the context of a custody dispute. He defines it as "the child's campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification," resulting from "the *combination* of a programming (brainwashing) parent's in-

doctrinations and the child's own contributions to the vilification of the target parent" (Ref. 5, p xix; emphasis in original). Subsequently, the term "parental alienation" (PA) has been used more broadly to include all negative, alienating behavior of parents, regardless of the child's response,⁶ and sometimes as an explanation for the child's refusal to visit, regardless of the parenting behavior.

The Controversy

Allegations of PAS and PA have become a legal strategy in numerous divorce cases when children resist contact with a parent. Largely on the basis of the formulation and recommendations of Gardner,^{5,7,8} attorneys have vilified the aligned parent and argued for court orders that are coercive and punitive, including a change of custody to the "hated" other parent in severe cases. In the wider community, the concepts of PAS and PA have generated both enthusiastic endorsement and strong negative response along gender lines. Fathers' rights groups have embraced the concepts in lobbying for more favorable child access and support policies in response to former wives who have not allowed them contact with their children. In custody proceedings, PAS and PA have been used to defend divorcing men against

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allegations of domestic violence and sexual molestation. Women's advocates have rejected Gardner's formulation as indicative of typical social biases that victimize women and children by ignoring and rationalizing abuse perpetrated by men. This debate has entered the media, creating high-profile cases that have further polarized the legal and mental health communities.⁹⁻¹⁵

Prior Research

Although a large body of clinical literature has described variations on the theme of parental alignments and alienation, providing some consensual validation for its existence as a phenomenon,^{4,16-25} the scientific basis for PAS as a diagnostic entity has been challenged by both mental health and legal professionals, and the syndrome has not been accepted as a psychiatric diagnosis in DSM III or IV.^{22,26-31} This controversy has occurred in the virtual absence of empirical support for the reliable identification of PAS as a diagnostic entity and the determination of its correlates and causes.^{24,32} Although there are numerous references in the literature that make claims and counterclaims and there are reports of expert testimony in the courtroom about the phenomenon, the number of studies that offer empirical data are preliminary and largely descriptive.

In a book commissioned by the American Bar Association, Clawar and Rivlin³³ studied 700 divorcing families over a 12-year period in which they identify "PAS" in an unspecified number of children. Their findings are heavily descriptive, and procedures for data gathering and measures are not described. In a study of two samples of high-conflict litigating families ($n = 80$ and $n = 60$), Johnston³⁴ tentatively identified the correlates of normal and pathological refusal of visitation among 175 children but provided limited data. In another two studies by Dunne and Hedrick³⁵ and Kopetski,^{36,37} Gardner's criteria have been used to identify PAS clinically without much evidence as to the reliability of the measures used. In one small study in which standardized psychological measures were used, Lampel³⁸ compared psychological attributes of parents and parent-child relationships in aligned children with those in non-aligned children in a sample of 44 families who were undergoing custody evaluation. In sum, though there is evidence for parental alignments and alienation among children of divorce, the extent of the problem is unknown. There is also an urgent need to

investigate the many factors that may contribute to the problem of children who resist or refuse contact with one of their parents.

A Theoretical Model

Critical of the "overly simplistic focus on the brainwashing parent as the primary etiological agent and the frequent misapplication of Gardner's PAS theory to many diverse phenomena occurring in child custody disputes" (Ref. 39, p 250), Kelly and Johnston have recently proposed a theoretical model of the multiple factors that have been hypothesized as precursors and correlates of children's attitudes and behavior toward parents after divorce. Figure 1 illustrates this model and the set of factors that were subjected to empirical test in this study. It should be noted that in the ensuing debates, the terms PAS and PA have acquired ambiguity of meaning and confusion as to precursors. Common to these terms, however, is the child's alignment with one parent and corresponding rejection of the other. Hence, alignment and rejection are the terms used herein to describe the bilateral balance in the children's behavior and attitudes toward their parents.

In the theoretical model shown in Figure 1, in accordance with prior clinical observations,^{4,5,34,35} children's relationships with their parents after separation and divorce are viewed on a continuum from positive to negative, with the majority of children having positive relationships with both parents. However, in contrast to Gardner's^{4,5} view, the milder forms of parental alignment with one parent and mild rejection of the other are seen as relatively normal. By reason of temperament, age, gender, shared interests, parents preferred by siblings, and parenting practices, children can gravitate toward one parent more than the other, although such affinities usually shift over time with changing developmental needs and situations.

More unusual are children in whom a moderate degree of rejection of one parent develops after divorce. These are children who demonstrate a clear alignment or preference for one parent during marriage or separation and want limited contact with the nonpreferred parent after separation. Most aligned children do not completely reject the other parent or seek to terminate all contact; rather, they tend to express some ambivalence toward this parent, including anger, sadness, and love.

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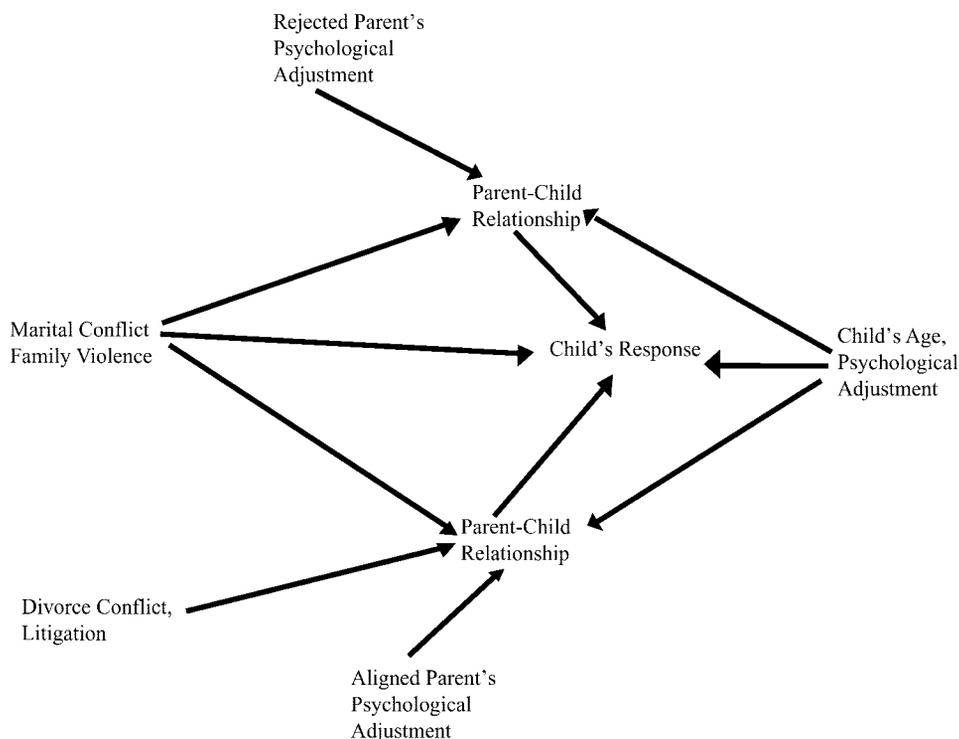


Figure 1. Theoretical model factors predicting child's response to parent after divorce.

At the far end of the continuum are children who have extreme alignments with one parent after separation and divorce and who express their rejection of the other parent stridently, without apparent ambivalence or guilt. They strongly resist or completely refuse contact with a parent who is undeserving of rejection. While this extreme stance more often occurs in high-conflict custody disputes, it is hypothesized to be an infrequent occurrence among the larger population of divorcing children.^{3,34,35}

The background factors in Figure 1 are those that are hypothesized to influence the child, directly or indirectly, through the parent-child relationship. Background factors include a history of intense marital conflict and subsequent divorce conflict and litigation that can be fuelled by professionals and relatives in an extended family. They also include the personality predispositions of aligned parents, specifically their vulnerability to the loss and rejection inherent in marital separation that leaves them feeling humiliated, emotionally distressed, and bereft. As a consequence, it is hypothesized that such parents can be spiteful and vindictive, consciously or unconsciously, and behave in emotionally abusive ways that are likely to damage the child's relationship with the other parent.^{33,36,37} Specifically, they use the child

for their own emotional sustenance and as a weapon in the conflict with the former spouse. They often harbor intense, abiding distrust of the other parent and hold convictions that the other parent is at best irrelevant and at worse a pernicious or dangerous influence on the child. Such parents interfere in the parenting of their former spouses and see their children as being in need of their protection.

Also among the background factors are the typical personality predispositions of the rejected parent, such as passivity and withdrawal in the face of family conflict and a tendency to be self-centered and immature. These attributes are associated with a range of parenting limitations—in particular, diminished empathy for and warmth toward the child and a preoccupation with the adult's own interests and concerns.³⁸ Furthermore, rejected parents are often overly critical, demanding, and counter-rejecting in response to the child's rejection.³⁴

Principal characteristics of a child that are hypothesized to predict directly and indirectly the rejection of a parent after divorce are age and cognitive capacity. Preadolescent and adolescents are likely to be more susceptible because they have achieved a developmental stage when they are more pressured by loyalty demands from their opposing parents and are

more able to rebel against parental authority. At this age, they can maintain a consistent stance of anger and are more likely to make rigid moral judgments of a parent.² Younger children are not usually fully and consistently rejecting, unless they have older siblings whom they emulate or who keep them under strict partisan control. In addition, children who are temperamentally vulnerable—*anxious, fearful, dependent, or emotionally troubled*—are those who are less able to withstand the inordinate stress inherent in being in the middle of a high-conflict divorce.^{3,4} Instead, they are more likely to be drawn into an aligned stance.

It is generally agreed that it is critical to distinguish developmentally expected and understandable factors that contribute to a child's negative views and behavior toward a parent. In particular, separation anxieties in young preschool children are not unusual or abnormal and can be manifested in emotional distress and protest at the time of the transition from the primary or preferred caretaker to the other parent. Also, normal and expected are children who are realistically estranged from one of their parents as a consequence of that parent's history of violence, abuse, or neglect or other deficit in parenting.^{4,34,40} For this reason, a history of family violence and separation anxieties are included as variables in the empirical test of the model in Figure 1. Gender differences in alignments or rejection and cross-gender and same-gender parent-child alignments or rejection were also explored. Alignments with mother and rejection of a father have been observed to be more common than the converse, possibly because of the predominance of mother-custody.^{2,3,4,16,34}

Empirical Study

Sample and Methods

The sample of children from divorced families for this study was drawn from an archival database of families within three San Francisco Bay area counties that focused on processes within families, especially parent-child relationships. Most of the children were studied within 12 months of the filing for divorce/custody (baseline) and again between one and two years later (follow-up). The data were originally collected over a 10-year period from 1981 through 1991, with subjects referred from two sources: the general community and family courts. All families agreed to participate in the research in exchange for

preventive counseling and mediation services. The community referrals were obtained by means of letters sent to all parents who had recently filed for dissolution and by community outreach to professionals and institutions that serve divorcing families (schools, attorneys, pediatricians, mental health professionals, for example). The family court referred families who were in a high state of conflict and/or violence. All were litigating custody after failing to settle their disputes in mandatory mediation. Attempts were made to exclude substantiated cases of direct child abuse and molestation. Twenty families referred by community sources were found to be litigating custody, and for this reason they were transferred to the litigating subgroup.

The total database consisted of 372 families with 600 children aged 18 years and under. Further selection criteria were applied. To ensure independence between subjects, the oldest or only child was selected for study. To avoid assessing the child and family during the upheaval of the separation period and at the time of the counseling, only the follow-up data were used. Since the litigating families included only children between the ages of 3 and 12 years at baseline, only this age group was selected from the community sample. Finally, for about 35 percent of eligible children from the litigating sample and 40 percent from the community sample, follow-up data were unavailable. Comparison of demographic characteristics (age, gender, socioeconomic status, income, ethnicity, custody, and visitation plan) revealed only one significant difference: attrition was greater when fathers had lower socioeconomic status.

The final sample consisted of 215 children, 108 girls and 107 boys, aged 5 to 14 years at follow-up (91 from the community and 124 from the referrals who were in custody litigation). The modal family size in the community sample was two children and in the litigation sample it was one child. A history of family violence was reported in 37 percent of the community group and in 76 percent of the litigating group.

In terms of living arrangements, 56 percent of children were in the custody of the mother (mother-custody), 16 percent were father-custody, 27 percent were in joint custody, and 1 percent were with another relative. On average, children saw the noncustodial parent (or, in joint custody, the least seen parent) 8.3 days per month (SD, ± 5.8). These custody and access arrangements were fairly similar between community- and court-referred subjects. The major-

ity of children (81%) were white, and the remainder (19%) were African American, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, or Native American. The Average length of the parents' marriage was 10 years (SD ± 5.5), and the average length of separation was 20 months at baseline (SD, ± 26). Median income was reported as \$25,000 for fathers and \$18,000 for mothers. On the Hollingshead seven-point occupational index,⁴¹ the fathers' mean rating was 3.1 ± 1.8 (SD) and the mothers' mean rating was 4.2 ± 1.9 .

Procedure

The procedures for all families involved parents and their children being seen, separately and together, for about six sessions at baseline, during which time they received free counseling services. In general, each family member was seen for one session at the one- to two-year follow-up. Clinicians dictated detailed process records from notes taken during each session that were then transcribed. A structured clinical summary was completed at the end of the baseline counseling. Follow-up interviews were recorded in the same manner. At each assessment period, family members were evaluated separately by a battery of measures that included self-report history questionnaires, structured parent-child observation sessions, standardized psychological measures, projective tests such as the Divorce Apperception Test, and sentence-completion tasks that have been described elsewhere.⁴²

Experienced clinicians (three psychologists and four clinical social workers) made independent clinical ratings of parents, children, and parent-child relationships, using all the interviews and measures just described, after follow-up data had been collected. Inter-rater reliabilities were calculated by using the conservative intraclass correlations (ICCs) on 24 randomly selected cases and were adequate (range, 0.57–0.76). To construct many of the measures, clinical ratings of the multiple items tapping each concept were reduced by factor analysis. Principal components analyses with varimax rotation were used. Factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained and, for each factor, items that loaded at a value greater than 0.40 were retained. The items loading on each factor were then averaged, because they were all measured on five-point scales. Since these ratings and the factor analysis were completed more than a decade ago, prior to the current debate about paren-

tal alienation, the clinical raters and data analysts were blind to the hypothesis to be tested in this study.

An empirical test of the family processes that induce alignments and alienation in children as hypothesized in Figure 1 was constrained by the availability of archival data that were common to all subsamples and collected for other purposes. However, many indicators of the concepts in the theoretical model could be developed from the data. Note that marital conflict, humiliating separation, and aligned professionals and family were not directly examined in this research. Also, sibling relationships and birth order were omitted because such a large proportion were only children, and the oldest child was preselected for study in multichild families. The specific measures used in this study, together with sources of information and brief descriptions of items and their psychometric properties, are summarized in the following section.

Dependent Variables: Child's Response

Ratings of the child's attitude and behavior toward each parent were derived from two sources: direct observations in office visits to which each parent brought the child for a joint interview in which they were required to "draw a family" together, and from parental reports of the child's behavior at the time of transition between homes as well as the child's general attitude and behavior at other times.

- Degree of Rejection of Mother/Father (M/FRReject): This clinical rating was a composite of two items, each on a five-point scale (ranging from very low to very high)—namely, "child reluctant/refuses to see parent" and "child looks forward to seeing other parent, i.e., is excited, pleased about prospect." The score was inverted for the second item and then the two items were averaged ($r = 0.58$, ICC = 0.58).
- Aligned with Mother/Father (M/FAligned): This was a clinical rating of one item on a three-point scale (none, some, or much evidence) of the "child's behavioral and verbal preference for one parent with varying degrees of overt or covert negativity toward other parent." It correlated with Degree of Rejection of Mother/Father ($r = -0.65$; ICC = 0.59).

Independent Variables: Background Factors, or Exogenous Variables

- Social/Emotional Well-being of Mother/Father (M/FWell-being): This factor derived from

clinical ratings of parent adjustment comprised five items, each on a five-point scale (ranging from very low to very high)—supportive network of friends, social relationships, pleasurable experiences, lack of isolation, and sense of well-being. This factor correlated with other factors derived from clinical ratings (Effective Coping, $r = 0.63$; and Anger and Emotional Distress, $r = -0.56$) and parental reports on the Brief Symptom Inventory⁴³ ($r = 0.29$; $\alpha = .86$; ICC = 0.60).

- Litigation (Litigate): This factor was a dummy variable indicating whether the case derived from high conflict litigating custody sample rather than the community sample (1 = yes, 0 = no).
- Length of Separation (measured in months) (LnghSep). This variable was included because of its considerable variance, with the hypothesis that alienation in children is more likely to develop in longer term or chronic post-divorce custody disputes.
- Family Violence History (FamViol) was a dummy variable indicating whether physical aggression was reported to have ever occurred between parents. It was coded from parents' reports on the Hostility Conflict Checklist⁴⁴ in the community sample and from the Conflict Tactics Scale⁴⁵ in the high conflict litigating samples (1 = yes, 0 = no).
- Age of Child (in years).
- Behavioral Problems of Child (BehProbs): an average of parents' rating (total T score) from the Child Behavior Checklist⁴⁶ (CBCL; 118 items, three-point scale), which has well established psychometric properties and norms. Intercorrelation of parents' ratings was $r = 0.24$.
- Social Competence (SocComp): This factor derived from clinical ratings of the child's emotional-relational style. It was the average of eight items, each on a five-point scale (ranging from very low to very high)—for example, able to withdraw strategically, able to reason and rationalize own needs in relation to others, moves in and out of peer relationships with security and comfort, and age-appropriate responsibility. The correlation of this factor with Social Involvement (clinical rating) was $r = 0.64$, and with CBCL,⁴⁶ the Social Competence T score was $r = 0.33$ ($\alpha = .73$; ICC = 0.61).

Parent-Child Relationship Characteristics: Intervening Variables

- Warm-Involvement Mother/Father (M/FWarm-Inv): This factor, from clinical ratings of the quality of parenting, was made up of 10 items, each on a five-point scale (ranging from very low to very high)—involved in child's activities; able to show warmth and love; understands child's situation and feelings; shows confidence in self as parent; able to experience joy, pleasure, and fun; has capacity for concern; attempts to enrich child's life; encourages verbal exchange and use of reasoning; and has a parenting mode that is adequate for needs of child. The Warm-Involvement factor correlated with Parent Models Ego Control, another factor from clinical ratings ($r = 0.47$; $\alpha = .92$; ICC = 0.65).
- Uses Child in Conflict/for Emotional Support Mother/Father: This factor from clinical ratings of the parent-child relationship comprised 10 items, each on a five-point scale (ranging from very low to very high)—uses child to ward off depression, attempts to turn child against other parent, overburdens child with emotional demands, demands child's approval for parent, and demands that child share parent's feelings. This factor correlated with Parental Boundary Problems, another factor from the clinical ratings ($r = 0.78$; $\alpha = .92$; ICC = 0.69).
- Sabotage by Mother/Father: This factor derived from clinical ratings of the coparental relationship and was made up of six items, each on a five-point scale (ranging from very low to very high)—interferes with other parent's time with child, withdraws affection or punishes child for affection shown to the other parent, sends messages through the child and pumps child for information regarding the other parent, and controls the child's activities at the other parent's house. This factor correlated with Coordinated Parenting, another factor from clinical ratings ($r = -0.59$; $\alpha = .84$; ICC = 0.76).
- Child Used/Sabotage by Mother/Father (M/FUseSabot): Since the prior two factors from clinical ratings (Uses Child in Conflict/for Emotional Support by Mother/Father and Sabotage by Mother/Father) correlated highly ($r = 0.83$), the scores for the two factors were averaged to create a composite variable. (It is interesting that this variable correlated highly with

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Table 1 Frequency of Child Aligned with and Rejection of Father/Mother

Extent of Alignment	Community (<i>n</i> = 91)		Litigating (<i>n</i> = 124)		Total (<i>n</i> = 215)	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
None	76 (83%)	74 (81%)	82 (66%)	99 (80%)	158 (73%)	173 (81%)
Some	9 (10%)	9 (10%)	27 (18%)	15 (8%)	36 (17%)	24 (11%)
Much	6 (7%)	8 (9%)	15 (12%)	10 (8%)	21 (9%)	18 (8%)
Mean rejection (SD)	1.81 (0.67)	1.75 (0.67)**	1.88 (0.83)	2.08 (1.0)**	1.85 (0.76)	1.94 (0.89)

** $t = 2.72, p < .01$.

clinical ratings on two items of the Narcissistic Injury of the divorce: $r = 0.59$ for mothers and $r = 0.44$ for fathers.) This new composite variable was then used in all the multivariate analysis as a measure of the extent to which each parent engaged in deliberate or unconscious attempts to undermine the child's relationship with the other parent ($\alpha = .88$; ICC = 0.73).

- Separation Anxieties from Mother/Father (M/FSepAnx): This clinical rating (one item on a five-point scale ranging from very low to very high) was the degree to which the child experiences anxiety about separation from the parent (ICC = 0.57).

Results

Descriptive statistics showing frequency and extent of alignments with one parent and the corresponding degree of rejection of the other were first examined and are shown in Table 1. In accordance with the hypothesis, the majority of children were not aligned with either parent in the total sample (73% and 81% showed no evidence of alignment with mother or father, respectively). Furthermore, overall mean scores for rejection of a parent were low (1.94 on a five-point scale for fathers and 1.85 for mothers). Extreme alignments were relatively uncommon in the total sample (8% to 9%). However, children in litigating families showed more evidence of being aligned with their mothers and demonstrated correspondingly more rejection of their fathers ($t = 2.72, p < .01$), whereas the incidence of child aligned with father and related rejection of mother was not significantly different between community and litigating groups.

The descriptive statistics and matrix of correlations for all variables are shown in Table 2. Because the distribution of aligned children was markedly skewed, whereas the distribution of Degree of Rejec-

tion was more normal, the latter was chosen as the dependent variable in the correlation and multivariate regression analyses. Note that correlations among the independent variables ranged from zero to moderate, with Mother or Father Use/Sabotage being most highly related ($r = 0.57$). Caution should therefore be used in interpreting the β coefficients for these variables in the following multiple regression analysis because of the problem of multicollinearity.

To examine which of the independent variables are significant predictors of children's rejection of a parent and their relative weight as predictors when controlling for one another, a series of multiple regressions of the dependent variables (Degree of Rejection of mother and father) on all independent variables was undertaken for the total sample. To explore possible differences between cross-gender and same-gender child-parent rejection, these analyses were then undertaken for boys and girls separately. The results are shown in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, the multiple regression analysis indicates that in the total sample, Degree of Rejection of father was predicted by 5 of the 13 independent variables in the following order of importance: father's lack of Warm-Involvement, Separation Anxieties from mother, Mother Use/Sabotage, Age of child, and mother's Warm-Involvement. For the subsample of boys, four of these variables predict Degree of Rejection of father but in a slightly different order of importance: Father's lack of Warm-Involvement, Age of child, Child Used/Sabotage by mother, and Separation Anxieties from mother. For the subsample of girls, Degree of Rejection of father was predicted by Separation Anxieties from mother, lack of Warm-Involvement by father, lack of Child Used/Sabotage by father, and Child Used/Sabotage by mother.

The significant predictors of Degree of Rejection of mother showed a markedly different pattern com-

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations Among Variables

	Mean	SD	FRej	MRej	Age	BehP	SocC	L-Sep	Litig	F-Viol	FWell	MWell	FWar	MWar	MUseS	FUseS	FSep	MSep
FReject	1.94	0.89	1.00	0.04	0.06	0.14*	0.13	0.18**	0.13	-0.26**	-0.13	-0.33**	-0.01	0.27**	0.20**	-0.13	0.28**	
MReject	1.85	0.76	1.00	1.00	0.15*	0.17*	0.13	0.04	0.05	-0.11	-0.11	-0.07	-0.39**	0.17*	0.17*	0.17*	-0.09	
AgeChild	9.20	2.76			1.00	0.02	0.09	-0.13	-0.05	-0.05	0.10	0.01	-0.14*	0.03	0.02	-0.21**	-0.38**	
BehProbs	52.44	11.32				1.00	0.08	0.28**	0.12	-0.19**	-0.23**	-0.29**	-0.25**	0.25**	0.15*	0.03	0.09	
SocComp	2.56	0.70				1.00	-0.04	-0.34**	-0.15*	0.19**	0.27**	0.41**	0.36**	-0.24**	-0.15*	-0.11	-0.33**	
LnghSep	38.10	26.00				1.00	1.00	0.40**	0.23**	-0.01	-0.05	0.06	-0.06	0.31**	0.26**	0.16*	0.17*	
Litigate	0.60	0.49					1.00	1.00	0.39**	-0.29**	-0.20**	-0.19**	-0.11	0.38**	0.42**	0.29**	0.38**	
FamViol	0.58	0.49						1.00	1.00	-0.28**	-0.20**	-0.14*	-0.06	0.26**	0.36**	0.06	0.15*	
FWell-being	3.02	0.70							1.00	1.00	0.17*	0.51**	0.16*	-0.20**	-0.41**	-0.01*	-0.05	
MWell-being	3.18	0.69								1.00	1.00	0.24**	0.40**	-0.13	-0.13	-0.07	-0.18**	
FWarmInv	3.05	0.70									1.00	1.00	0.33**	-0.16*	-0.21**	0.04	-0.06	
MWarmInv	3.19	0.67										1.00	1.00	-0.36**	-0.18**	-0.05	0.08	
MUseSabot	2.39	0.82											1.00	1.00	0.57**	0.21**	0.30**	
FUseSabot	2.30	0.77												1.00	1.00	0.33**	0.26**	
FSepAnx	1.57	0.90													1.00	1.00	0.52**	
MSepAnx	1.77	1.02														1.00	1.00	

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$ ($N = 215$).

pared with those that predicted Degree of Rejection of father. Most noteworthy, child adjustment factors were significant predictors and Use/Sabotage were not. Specifically, in the total sample, Degree of Rejection of mother was predicted by the following independent variables in order of importance: mother's lack of Warm-Involvement, Separation Anxiety from father, and both Behavior Problems and Social Competence in the child. The boys' Degree of Rejection of mother was most strongly predicted by her lack of Warm-Involvement, followed by Behavior Problems in the child and Litigation. Girls' Degree of Rejection of mother was strongly predicted by lack of mother's Warm-Involvement and also by the girls' Social Competence and Separation Anxiety from father.

Finally, a path analysis was undertaken to test the theoretical model shown in Figure 1. First, each dependent variable (Degree of Rejection of Father/Mother) was regressed on all independent variables. Next, working backward, each intervening variable (parent-child relationship factors) was regressed on all background variables. Figures 2 and 3 illustrate the results of these path analyses, where the statistically significant paths are diagrammed with connecting lines, together with standardized β coefficients to demonstrate the relative strength of each path. Independent variables that have direct effects have uninterrupted paths (illustrated by thicker lines), and those that have indirect effects are those that have pathways through the parent-child relationship variables to the dependent variable.

As shown in Figure 2, Degree of Rejection of father was directly predicted by lack of father's Warm-Involvement, presence of mother's Warm-Involvement, Separation Anxiety from mother, extent of Use/Sabotage by mother, and Age of child. There were a number of indirect effects of the background variables through these significant parent-child relationship variables. Lack of father's Warm-Involvement with the child was related to the father's diminished Social/Emotional Well-being and to the extent to which the child lacked Social Competence. The extent of mother's Warm-Involvement with the child was related to her own Social/Emotional Well-being and younger Age of child. The child's Separation Anxiety from mother was related to the presence of Litigation, younger Age and less Social Competence of the child. The extent to which the child was

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Table 3 Multiple Regression on Independent Variables (Standardized β Coefficients) of Degree of Child's Rejection of Parents after Divorce

	Rejection of Father			Rejection of Mother		
	All	Boys	Girls	All	Boys	Girls
<i>N</i>	215	107	108	215	107	218
Child Factors						
AgeChild	0.16*	0.27*	0.08	0.05	0.16	-0.09
BehProbs	0.02	-0.04	0.12	0.16*	0.26*	0.03
SocComp	0.04	0.05	0.03	0.19*	0.12	0.25*
Background Factors						
LngthSep	0.06	0.01	0.09	0.09	0.12	0.09
Litigate	-0.05	-0.10	-0.03	-0.08	-0.19†	-0.03
FamViol	0.02	0.04	0.04	0.01	0.03	0.00
MWellbeing	-0.00	-0.06	0.06	0.03	0.09	-0.07
FWellbeing	-0.11	-0.03	-0.18	-0.08	-0.04	-0.14
Parent/Child Factors						
MWarmInv	0.16*	0.15	0.22	-0.43***	-0.40***	-0.41***
FWarmInv	-0.31***	-0.32***	-0.28**	0.05	0.08	0.03
MUseSabot	0.21*	0.25*	0.26*	-0.04	-0.12	0.02
FUseSabot	-0.08	0.03	-0.27*	0.06	0.13	-0.07
MSepAnx	0.28***	0.24*	0.35***	—	—	—
FSepAnx	—	—	—	0.17*	0.10	0.29**
<i>R</i> ² for model	0.21***	0.14**	0.27***	0.19***	0.19***	0.21***
<i>df</i>	11,203	11,95	11,96	11,203	11,95	11,96

† $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .0001$.

Used/Sabotage by mother was related to the relative absence of her Social/Emotional Wellbeing, the presence of Litigation, and a longer Separation period.

As shown in Figure 3, Degree of Rejection of mother was directly predicted by the lack of mother's Warm-Involvement, the Social Competence and Behavior Problems of the child, and Separation Anxiety from father. Indirect effects of the background variables through these significant parent-child relationship variables were as follows: Lack of mother's Warm-Involvement was related to her diminished Social/Emotional Well-being, in addition to the child's lack of Social Competence and older Age of child. Separation Anxiety from father was related to the presence of Litigation and younger Age of child.

It is interesting to note the variables that were not significant in either model. Although the extent of Use/Sabotage by the father is predicted by his diminished Social/Emotional Well-being, a history of Family Violence, a longer Separation period, and the presence of Litigation, Use/Sabotage by father was not significantly related to Degree of Rejection of either the mother or father.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although this research constitutes one of the few empirical studies of multiple individual and family factors that predict children's rejection of their parents after divorce, it is preliminary and exploratory. There are a number of methodological limitations that should be discussed prior to interpreting the findings and drawing conclusions. First, the measures used are largely new ones, drawn from clinical ratings of case records, albeit from unusually detailed ones. Only a limited amount of data were available directly from parents, and none directly from the children. Although inter-rater reliabilities were adequate, agreement could have been achieved because raters were evaluating clinicians' reconstructed views of families rather than family relationships directly. Although there is some evidence of the predictive validity of many of these new clinical measures in previous studies,⁴⁷ there is limited evidence of their concurrent validity with other standardized psychological instruments. In particular, the measures of alignment and rejection were limited to several items available in the data archives.

Second, this study was a concurrent analysis of family relationships and did not allow for a more

Johnston

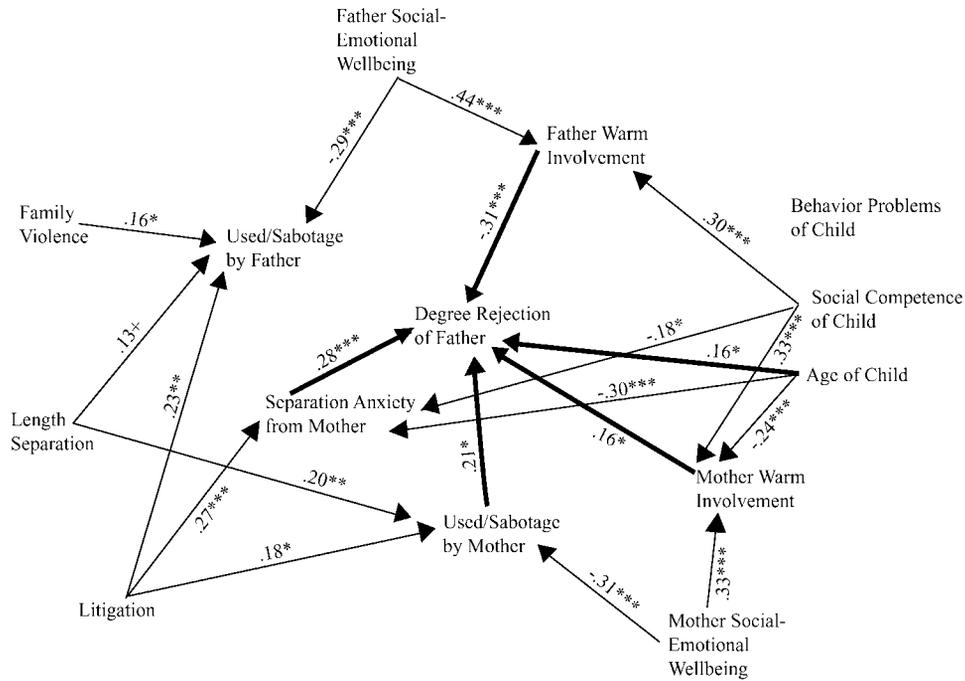


Figure 2. Theoretical model of child's rejection of father after divorce: path model of significant β coefficients.

definitive test of the causal predictions in this model. For example, lack of warm, involved parenting was the strongest predictor of the degree of the child's rejection of both mother and father, but this could well be a consequence of the child's being difficult and rejecting the parent. Anxieties about separation

from an aligned parent may arise because children are frightened by the intensity of their anger toward the rejected parent and their fear of counter-retaliation. An interactional model, showing bidirectional influences, is a better model to evaluate, although a far more complex one.

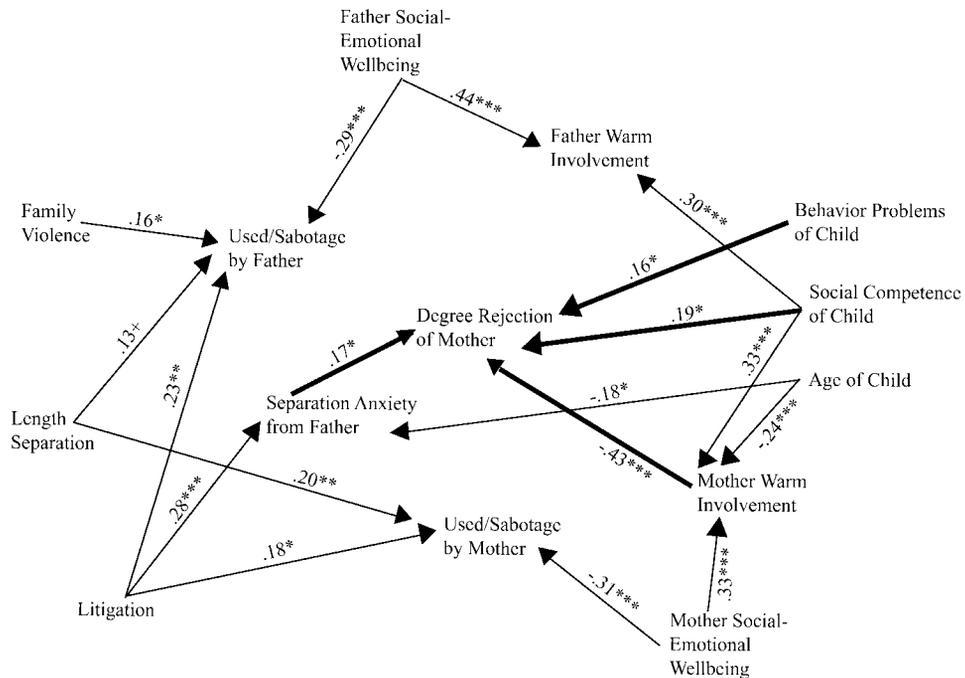


Figure 3. Predictors of child's rejection of mother after divorce: path model of significant β coefficients.

Third, the methods of recruitment to the study may have resulted in a nonrepresentative sample, making generalization of the findings problematic. On the other hand, since there were broad variations within the variables studied and because multivariate analysis was used, this threat to external validity should be reduced. Fourth, other demographic variables and social-psychological characteristics of the family not included in this study could have been responsible for some of these findings (e.g., family size; custody arrangement; sibling relationships; and role of new partners, extended family, and professionals in the dispute). Moreover, the counseling and mediation services that all families received at baseline may have attenuated the outcomes at follow-up.

In further research on this sample, the role of critical incidents of family violence should be explored and distinguished as a realistic basis for children's negative attitudes toward, or estrangement from, an abusive parent, as distinct from unreasonable negative responses of aligned children. Finally, the results described herein are aggregate or common patterns and must be used judiciously in interpreting any specific family situation. In fact, a well conducted custody evaluation of a particular family is likely to be far more valid, and it may reach very different conclusions from those reported in this study. With these caveats in mind, the following conclusions are drawn from the research findings.

According to clinicians' ratings, the typical family dynamics of children who show little or no pleasure in spending time with their fathers and who resist or refuse visitation include a father who tends to be deficient in parenting capacities—lacking in warmth, empathy, and cognitive understanding of the child's viewpoint. He is less able to communicate with the child, less involved in the child's daily activities, makes fewer attempts to enrich the child's life, and tends to have less pleasure, joy, or fun in relating to his child. Whether the father's limitations in parenting are largely a reaction to his child's rejection of him could not be determined in this study. In the very least, the father has not been able to respond well under the circumstances. The mother, by contrast, is more competent in these domains of parenting, especially with her younger children. However, in the relative absence of a supportive coparent, the mother is likely to be more dependent on her child for approval and support. She tends to use the child to ward off her own depression and for her own emo-

tional needs. She is likely to sabotage the child's relationship with the father by attempting to turn the child against him, by interfering with and trying to control his activities and time with the child. She is more likely to send messages and pump the child for information and to withdraw her affection or punish the child should he or she show affection toward the father. The deficiencies and problematic parenting of both mothers and fathers are related to their own diminished social and emotional adjustment and sense of well-being after the divorce. Older children appear to be more vulnerable to these dynamics and are more likely to reject their fathers. It is perhaps not surprising that children who resist or reject visitation with their fathers have anxieties about separation from their mothers. Though these separation anxieties are in part developmentally normal responses of younger children, separation anxieties are exacerbated in those vulnerable children who are less socially competent and by the stress of chronic custody litigation that continues long after the parents have separated. The typical family relationships are fairly similar for girls and boys who demonstrate negative attitudes and behavior toward their fathers.

According to clinicians' ratings, the typical family dynamics of children who show diminished pleasure and resist or refuse contact with their mother are somewhat different. In this case, the mother appears to be her own nemesis in that she is lacking in parenting skills, or alternatively, her parenting has been compromised by the child's rejection and related family dynamics. Specifically, she is deficient in warmth, empathy, capacity to communicate, and understanding of her child's feelings and ideas. She is less able to enrich the child's life and is less involved in his or her daily activities. The capacity to experience pleasure, fun, and joy are relatively absent in her relationship with her child. These limitations of parenting are linked to difficulties the mother has in her own social and emotional adjustment. That the parenting capacities of the father appear to be unrelated to the child's negative attitudes and behavior toward the mother is interesting. Also, the child's rejection of the mother is not related to attempts made by either the father or mother to use the child for emotional sustenance or to sabotage the child's relationship with the other parent. However, children's separation anxieties from their fathers are associated with rejection of their mothers, and these anxieties are

likely to be compounded by ongoing entrenched custody litigation or vice versa.

There are some gender differences. Boys who are psychologically more troubled—as indicated by their having more emotional and behavioral problems—are more likely to reject their mothers. This rejection may indicate a negative cycle of mutual rejection between the mother and a son with behavioral difficulties. Girls that demonstrate more social competence and those who experience more anxieties at separation from their fathers (especially the younger ones) are more likely to have resistant, negative attitudes toward contact with their mothers. These girls may have the capacity to distance themselves from an unhealthy relationship or from chronic loyalty conflicts, but the fallout of asserting their independence by rejecting the mother and taking the mother's place in the father's affection increases their anxiety and fear of reprisal.

In summary, the principal findings of this study support common clinical observations that children's attitudes toward both parents after divorce are best described on a continuum from positive to negative, with relatively few children being extremely aligned or rejecting. However, in contrast to PAS theory that views the indoctrinating parent as the principal player in the child's alienation, this study finds children's negative behavior and attitudes toward a parent have multiple determinants. Both the aligned parent and the rejected parent are implicated in the problem, in addition to vulnerabilities within children themselves. Rejected parents, whether father or mother, appear to be the more influential architect of their own alienation, in that deficits in their parenting capacity are more consistently and most strongly linked to their rejection by the child. Alternatively, they have been rendered powerless to parent the child effectively by the alliance against them. On the other hand, these findings support the idea that aligned parents (mothers in particular) contribute to alienating a child's affection from the father. The mother's behavior can sabotage the father-child relationship more effectively than can the father's behavior sabotage the mother-child relationship. This may reflect a more dependent bond of children with their mother, or it may be because women have more access to their children and more opportunity to exert such influence. There are few gender differences in children's attitudes toward their parents.

The phenomenon of children who align with one parent and reject the other without apparent good cause has been previously and variously described as "parental alienation syndrome" and "parental alienation." The findings of this study, which purports to address this phenomenon, point to the need for therapeutic interventions that are family-focused and include all parties involved in the dynamics—the child and both the aligned and rejected parents—with collaborative mental health and legal professionals who seek to avoid ongoing litigation as described more fully elsewhere.^{48,49} With respect to further research, it is hoped that this preliminary, correlational study of the dynamics of parent-child relationships will stimulate others to develop these and similar measures and test similar and more complex models to untangle one of the most complex issues in divorce: that of a child's alienation from a parent after divorce. Most important, longitudinal studies are needed to trace what happens to these children over the long term, as they develop, as family relationships change, after the remarriage of a parent, and in response to the influence of others outside their immediate families.

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