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To cite this article: Amy J. L. Baker & Jaclyn Chambers (2011) Adult Recall of Childhood Exposure to Parental Conflict: Unpacking the Black Box of Parental Alienation, *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 52:1, 55-76, DOI: [10.1080/10502556.2011.534396](https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2011.534396)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10502556.2011.534396>



Published online: 07 Jan 2011.



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Adult Recall of Childhood Exposure to Parental Conflict: Unpacking the Black Box of Parental Alienation

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One hundred and five undergraduate or graduate students completed a computer-based survey regarding their recollection of exposure to 20 parental alienation behaviors, current depression, and current self-esteem. Results revealed that 80% of the sample endorsed at least 1 of the 20 parental alienation behaviors, indicating some exposure to parental alienation, with 20% of the sample reporting that 1 parent tried to turn them against the other parent. Participants whose parents divorced or separated before they were 18 years old were much more likely to report exposure to parental alienation strategies than participants whose parents remained married during their childhood. No relationship was found between recalled exposure to parental alienation and current depression or self-esteem.

KEYWORDS *divorce, parental alienation, parental conflict*

The impact of divorce on children is a topic of much concern that has been widely studied. There is general consensus in the field that it is not so much divorce, per se, that is associated with poor outcomes for children; rather, it is exposure to and involvement in parental conflict that has been indicated as particularly harmful to children for several reasons (Bing, Nelson, & Wesolowski, 2009; Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991; Gagné, Drapeau, Melançon, Saint-Jacques, & Lépine, 2007; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007; Shaw & Emery, 1987).

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First, exposure to any parental conflict—even when it does not reach the level of overt violence and aggression—is harmful simply because of the intensity of the negative emotions being displayed by a child's attachment figures (e.g., Davies, Sturge-Apple, Cicchetti, & Cummings, 2008). Beyond that, involvement in parental conflict can lead children to wrongly assume that the divorce of their parents was their fault. From the egocentric perspective of children, if the parents were not fighting about them, they would have stayed together. This obviously faulty but quite compelling logic could lead to a variety of outcomes, including sadness, shame, and self-blame (Wallerstein, 1983).

Another reason that involving children in parental conflict is harmful is that it represents a form of parental alienation, defined as the intentional efforts on the part of one parent to turn a child against the other parent (Gardner, 1998). Thus, when parents involve children in their conflict, they are explicitly or implicitly creating an expectation that the child will agree with one parent at the expense of the other. Each parent wants the child to view him or her as right and justified and the other parent as flawed and problematic. Because it is emotionally challenging to sustain a loyalty conflict (i.e., feeling good and bad about both parents and feeling pulled between them), some children will become allied with one parent against the other parent to cope with being torn between two opposing and mutually exclusive polarities. Thus, exposure to parental conflict increases the likelihood that children will take sides to resolve an untenable loyalty bind (Ellis, 2005). It is also important to note that some children ally with one parent against the other for other reasons, such as abusiveness or poor parenting.

Research on children's exposure to and involvement in parental conflict has looked most closely at two aspects of this dynamic: denigration of one parent by the other and confiding in the child about the other parent. Speaking negatively about an ex-partner is certainly a common experience for many divorced couples. For example, in a study of 700 divorced families commissioned by the American Bar Association, Clawar and Rivlin (1991) found that some element of parental programming or denigration of the other parent was present in about 80% of the cases. Likewise, some parents confide in their child following a divorce, seeking reassurance, support, and comfort. In doing so, they burden the child with emotional demands as well as information about the marital relationship and divorce. Peris and Emery (2005) defined this behavior as boundary dissolution and asserted that it is a form of intimacy that is confusing and inappropriate. It, too, is quite common in postdivorce households. In one study, Koerner, Wallace, Lehman, and Raymond (2002) found that 85% of adolescents with divorced parents reported that their mother confided in them about flaws in and anger toward their father, with 40% of the adolescents saying that this happened in a way that revealed "quite a bit of detail" regarding the complaint (comparable data

were not reported about the extent to which adolescents believed that their fathers engaged in the same activity).

Children's involvement in parental conflict goes well beyond denigration and confiding, as indicated by research in the emerging field of parental alienation. Baker (2007) and Baker and Darnall (2006) identified at least 17 ways that parents can involve children in their conflict: limiting the child's contact with the other parent; interfering with communication between the child and the other parent; limiting mention and photographs of the other parent; withdrawal of love or expressions of anger if the child indicates positive feelings for the other parent; telling the child that the other parent does not love him or her; forcing the child to choose between his or her parents; creating the impression that the other parent is dangerous; forcing the child to reject the other parent; asking the child to spy on the other parent; asking the child to keep secrets from the other parent; referring to the other parent by his or her first name; referring to a stepparent as "Mom" or "Dad" and encouraging the child to do the same; withholding medical, social, or academic information from the other parent; keeping the other parent's name off of such records; changing the child's name to remove association with the other parent; cultivating dependency; and denigration of the other parent.

Taken together, these behaviors are likely to create psychological distance between the child and the parent who is "targeted" such that the relationship can become conflict ridden and eventually nonexistent. Each of these behaviors serves to (a) further the child's cohesion and alignment with the parent exhibiting these behaviors, the "alienating parent"; (b) create psychological distance between the child and the "targeted parent"; (c) intensify the targeted parent's anger and hurt over the child's behavior; and (d) incite conflict between the child and the targeted parent should that parent challenge or react to the child's behavior.

To date these variables have only been examined via qualitative research methods, producing a useful but inherently incomplete knowledge base. Quantitative data are required to systematically document the frequency of children's exposure to the spectrum of parental alienation behaviors. Such a study could also ascertain the prevalence of these behaviors in intact families, as it is quite likely that some elements of parental conflict and parental alienation are present there as well. This dynamic might exist in intact families because some high-conflict couples choose to remain married, and in other couples, the presence of these behaviors precedes or precipitates the divorce. A recent study by Baker (2010) offers some empirical support for this contention but with only a single item from a larger study. Baker found that 28% of the total adult sample in a study of adults working in a social service agency reported that when they were a child one parent tried to turn them against the other parent. Endorsement of this single item was statistically significantly associated with standardized

measures of psychological maltreatment, suggesting that the experience was psychologically damaging. However, data were not collected regarding the specific behaviors exhibited in service of that goal, nor was it possible to compare rates in divorced versus intact families.

Also in need of further investigation is a determination of the outcomes of exposure to these specific types of parental alienation behaviors. As noted earlier, theory and some data support the notion that exposure to parental conflict in general is one of the most important causal agents of poor outcomes for children of divorce (Buchanan et al., 1991; Gagné et al., 2007; Sarrazin & Cyr, 2007). For instance, in their review of the existing literature, Sarrazin and Cyr found that exposure to parental conflict and hostility was related to a range of negative outcomes for children, including lower self-esteem, higher levels of stress and anxiety, and higher rates of childhood illnesses.

What is missing from the literature is an examination of the outcomes of exposure to forms of involvement in parental conflict beyond bad-mouthing and confiding in the child. Qualitative data from a study of adults who reported childhood exposure to a range of such behaviors suggest that long-term outcomes include low self-esteem and depression. In one study of adults exposed to these behaviors as children, over half of the sample reported some problems with low self-esteem. Baker (2007) attributed this lower self-esteem to the child internalizing the negative messages about the other parent and thus viewing any part of him- or herself that resembled the other parent as bad; concluding that the other parent did not love him or her; and guilt and shame from succumbing to pressure from one parent to betray and reject the other parent.

Seventy percent of the adults in Baker's (2007) study also reported depression as an adult, which was viewed as a result of the conditional love of the parent who engineered the child's rejection of the other parent. This finding was consistent with past research that links adult depression to early parent-child relationships, specifically parental rejection (Crook, Raskin, & Eliot, 1981) and parental loss (Bowlby, 1980). Baker proposed that the depression in her sample resulted from the children's inability to make sense of and mourn the loss of the targeted parent, as the parent exhibiting the alienation behaviors failed to recognize the child's grief and stifled any expression of the child's mourning for the other parent.

Thus, initial data suggest that children exposed to parental alienation behaviors (defined as behaviors that involve children in parental conflict and might result in them rejecting one parent to please the other) might experience both low self-esteem and depression as adults due to the traumatic separation from one parent, from their inability to express and work through their feelings about the loss, and from feeling unloved by one or both parents. However, these links have yet to be established with quantitative data.

This study was designed to build on the existing knowledge and address the following questions:

1. What was the rate of exposure to 20 parental behaviors that involved children in their conflict—referred to herein as parental alienation behaviors?
2. What were the rates of exposure present in intact families, and how did those rates compare to those found in divorced families?
3. Were rates of exposure associated with current reports of depression and self-esteem?

METHOD

Sample

A convenience sample of 133 students was recruited from either a metropolitan school of social work ($n = 126$) or a northeastern U.S. liberal arts university ($n = 7$). Twelve cases were eliminated due to incomplete data, and an additional 15 participants were excluded because they were male, only had one parent, or both, and therefore could not answer all of the questions. Thus, the final sample was made up of 106 women with at least two parents. They ranged in age from 18 to 56 years ($M = 28.23$, $SD = 8.473$). In the final sample, 82% ($n = 87$) of the respondents were graduate students.

Survey Instrument

A questionnaire was developed specifically for this study, which included 58 questions relating to (a) basic demographics, 6 items; (b) recall of exposure to parental alienation behaviors, 20 closed-ended questions and 2 open-ended questions not reported on in this article; (c) current depression, 20 items; and (d) current self-esteem, 10 items. The six demographic questions included age, gender, student status, marital status of parents (recoded as 0 = *not separated/divorced before participant reached age 18*, 1 = *separated/divorced before participant reached age 18*), and two questions about participant's parents, the responses to which were used to determine whether each participant had two alive parents during his or her childhood (deemed a necessary precondition to be included in the final sample; recoded as 0 = *did not have two parents alive during entire childhood*, 1 = *did have two parents alive during childhood*).

The next portion of the survey included 20 items pertaining to exposure to parental alienation behaviors, described as “things that one or more

of your parents or stepparents might have done while you were growing up.” The items were derived from research with both “adult children of parental alienation syndrome” (Baker, 2007) and with parents who were concerned that the other parent of their child was trying to turn their child against them (Baker & Darnall, 2006). Each item is presented here as it appeared on the survey, followed by a brief descriptor which is used in the tables and for the remainder of the article: Made comments to me that fabricated or exaggerated the other parent’s negative qualities while rarely saying anything positive about that parent (made negative comments); limited or interfered with my contact with the other parent such that I spent less time with him or her than I was supposed to or could have (limited contact); withheld or blocked phone messages, letters, cards, or gifts from the other parent meant for me (withheld or blocked messages); made it difficult for me and the other parent to reach and communicate with each other (made communication difficult); indicated discomfort or displeasure when I spoke or asked about or had pictures of the other parent (indicated discomfort about other parent); became upset, cold, or detached when I showed affection for or spoke positively about the other parent (upset child affectionate with other parent); said or implied that the other parent did not really love me (said parent was unloving); created situations in which it was likely or expected that I choose him or her and reject the other parent (made child choose); said things that indicated that the other parent was dangerous or unsafe (said parent was unsafe); confided in me about “adult matters” that I probably should not have been told about (such as marital concerns or legal issues) that led me to feel protective of him or her or angry at the other parent (confided in child); created situations in which I felt obligated to show favoritism toward him or her and reject or rebuff/ignore the other parent (required favoritism of child); asked me to spy on or secretly obtain information from or about the other parent and report back to him or her (asked child to spy); asked me to keep secrets from the other parent about things the other parent should have been informed about (e.g., upcoming plans, my whereabouts, etc.; asked child to keep secrets); referred to other parent by his or her first name and appeared to want me to do the same (called other parent by first name); referred to his or her new spouse as Mom or Dad and appeared to want me to do the same (referred to spouse as Mom or Dad); encouraged me to rely on his or her opinion and approval above all else (encouraged reliance on him/herself); encouraged me to disregard or think less of the other parent’s rules, values, and authority (encouraged disregard of other parent); made it hard for me or made me feel bad about spending time with the other parent’s extended family (hard to be with extended family); created situations in which it was likely that I would be angry with or hurt by the other parent (fostered anger/hurt at other parent); and tried to turn me against the other parent (tried to turn against other parent).

Participants were asked to rate the frequency of their exposure to these behaviors on a 5-point Likert scale with points at 0 (*never*), 1 (*rarely*), 2 (*sometimes*), 3 (*often*), and 4 (*always*). Total scores were calculated as sum scores, ranging from 0 to 80. A Cronbach's alpha indicated good internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$).

The second measure in the survey was the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). Participants were given a list of 20 statements regarding their feelings and were asked to rate how often they had experienced each one during the past week. The responses were scored on a four-point Likert scale with points at 0 (*rarely or none of the time*), 1 (*some or a little of the time*), 2 (*occasionally or a moderate amount of the time*), and 3 (*most or all of the time*). Scores were used as continuous summary scores as well as recoded into dichotomous scores of not depressed (scores below 16) and depressed (scores of 16 and above; Radloff, 1977). The CES-D has established internal consistency and validity (Radloff). For example, higher scores on the CES-D have been found to correlate with posttraumatic stress symptoms (Zatzick et al., 2006) and clinical depressive episodes in adolescents (Aebi, Metzke, & Steinhausen, 2009). In this sample the alpha for the CES-D was .90.

The final measure was Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1979). This measure included 10 items asking participants to rate their feelings about themselves. The responses were scored on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*strongly disagree*) to 3 (*strongly agree*). Participants' scores were calculated as sum scores, and the possible range of scores was 0 to 30. A higher score indicated higher self-esteem. In this sample the alpha was .90.

Procedures

The Office of Student and Alumni Affairs at a metropolitan school of social work sent an e-mail invitation in the spring of 2009 to the student body (approximately $N = 1,270$). In addition, a professor at a small northeastern U.S. college sent an e-mail invitation to 40 undergraduate psychology students. The e-mails directed interested students to an online survey host.

Once potential participants clicked the link provided in the e-mail, they were presented with the project summary statement, which included information about the purpose of the study, what participation entailed, and what type of questions they would be asked. Individuals who decided to participate indicated their agreement to do so by clicking an "I Accept" button at the bottom of the Web page, which brought them to the survey. The computer program does not allow for an estimate of the number of people (if any) who went to the Web site but chose not to participate. All surveyes were completed between February 24, 2009 and March 21, 2009.

RESULTS

To address the first research question regarding rates of exposure to parental alienation behaviors, the proportion of respondents who endorsed each of the 20 behaviors was calculated with frequency distributions. These data are presented in Table 1.

As can be seen, all 20 behaviors were endorsed by at least some participants. Looking at the proportion of endorsers of each behavior, regardless of the strength of the endorsement, it can be seen that four behaviors were endorsed by between 1% and 10% of the respondents (withheld or blocked messages, said parent was unloving, referred to other parent by first name, and referred to new spouse as Mom or Dad). Six of the parental alienation behaviors were endorsed by between 11% and 20% of the respondents (made communication difficult, indicated discomfort about other parent, said other parent was unsafe, asked child to spy, fostered anger/hurt with other parent, and tried to turn against other parent). Four of the behaviors were endorsed by between 21% and 30% of the respondents (limited contact with other parent, upset when child affectionate with other parent, made child choose, and made it hard to be with extended family). Three of the behaviors were endorsed by between 31% and 40% of the respondents (asked child to keep secrets, encouraged reliance on himself or herself, and

TABLE 1 Proportion Reporting Exposure to Each of the 20 Parental Alienation Strategies

Strategy	Never	Rarely	Some times	Often	Always
Made negative comments	32.1	30.2	15.1	13.2	09.4
Limited contact with other parent	76.4	13.2	03.8	05.7	00.9
Withheld or blocked messages ^a	96.1	02.0	01.0	01.0	00.0
Made communication difficult	83.0	08.5	05.7	01.9	00.9
Indicated discomfort about other parent	82.1	04.7	07.5	02.8	02.8
Upset child affectionate with other parent ^b	71.4	11.4	09.5	05.7	01.9
Said parent was unloving ^b	93.3	02.9	01.9	01.0	01.0
Made child choose	76.4	09.4	09.4	03.8	00.9
Said parent was unsafe ^b	83.8	09.5	03.8	02.9	00.0
Confided in child	47.2	18.9	13.2	14.2	06.6
Required favoritism of child ^b	59.0	19.0	15.2	04.8	01.9
Asked child to spy	87.7	03.8	06.6	01.9	00.0
Asked child to keep secrets	68.9	16.0	08.5	03.8	02.8
Called other parent by first name	96.2	02.8	00.9	00.0	00.0
Referred to spouse as Mom or Dad	94.8	03.1	00.0	01.0	01.0
Encouraged reliance on himself or herself ^c	62.5	13.5	15.4	04.8	03.8
Encouraged disregard of other parent	67.9	14.2	10.4	03.8	03.8
Hard to be with extended family ^b	75.2	10.5	06.7	02.9	04.8
Fostered anger/hurt with other parent	81.1	08.5	08.5	00.0	01.9
Tried to turn against other parent ^b	80.0	05.7	10.5	00.0	03.8

Note. $N = 106$.

^a $n = 102$; ^b $n = 105$; ^c $n = 104$.

encouraged disregard for the other parent). One parental alienation behavior, required favoritism, was endorsed by 41% to 50% of the respondents; one, confided in child, was endorsed by 51% to 60% of the respondents; and one, made negative comments, was endorsed by 61% to 70% of the respondents. The two parental alienation behaviors that were endorsed by the highest percentage of the respondents as having ever occurred (confided in child and made negative comments) were also the two that were endorsed by the highest percentage of respondents as having occurred “always.”

An examination of how many of the parental alienation behaviors each respondent endorsed was also conducted. A summary score was created indicating the number of different behaviors endorsed, regardless of the strength of the endorsement. Thus, this variable ranges from 0 (none endorsed) to 20 (all 20 endorsed). The frequency distribution of this summary variable is presented in Table 2.

As can be seen, 80% of the sample endorsed at least 1 of the 20 parental alienation behaviors, indicating some exposure to parental alienation, with 30% of the sample reporting exposure to at least six different behaviors. Another way to examine exposure to parental alienation was to create a summary score across the 20 items, ranging from 0 (a score of 0—*never*—on all 20 items) to a score of 80 (a score of 4—*always*—on all 20 items). Table 3 presents the frequency distribution of this summary score.

As seen in Table 3, 80% of the sample reported exposure to parental alienation during their childhoods. About 25% of the sample reported exposure to what could be considered no or very little parental alienation (scores of 0 or 1), 20% had scores between 2 and 4, roughly 25% had scores between 5 and 10, about 20% had scores between 11 and 30, and the remaining 5% had scores between 31 and 65. These data indicate that the vast majority of the respondents experienced some exposure to parental alienation, with more than one fourth of the sample reporting what could be considered severe levels, indicated by scores over 10. To have a score of 11 or greater, the respondent had to report multiple behaviors at a frequency greater than “rarely.” For example, a score of 11 was achieved by two items being rated as rarely, three items rated as sometimes, as well as a single item rated as often. Another way to achieve a score of 11 is to have rated six items as

TABLE 2 Number of Strategies Endorsed

Number endorsed	<i>n</i>	%
0	21	19.8
1–5	50	47.2
6–10	20	18.8
11–15	10	9.5
16–20	5	4.7

Note. *N* = 106.

TABLE 3 Frequency Distribution of Summary Score

Summary score	<i>n</i>	%
0	21	20.0
1	7	6.7
2	11	10.5
3	10	9.5
4	2	1.9
5–10	27	25.7
11–20	9	8.6
21–30	11	10.4
31–40	2	1.9
41–50	3	2.9
51–60	1	0.9
61+	1	0.9

Note. *N* = 105. One case is missing more than 2 of the 20 items.

rarely, one item as sometimes, and one item rated as often. Both combinations of 11 represent what appears to be a pattern of exposure that extends well beyond isolated behaviors at a low dose.

The next set of analyses focused on the 20th item in the survey, which asked participants if one of their parents tried to turn them against their other parent. The two questions addressed here were (a) what proportion of the sample endorsed this item, and (b) were those who endorsed Item 20 more likely to endorse the other 19 items on the survey than those who did not endorse Item 20. First, a frequency distribution of this variable was calculated. Results revealed that 80% of the sample said that this did not happen, 5.7% said that it happened rarely, 10.5% said that this occurred sometimes, and 3.8% said that it happened always. Thus, 20% of the sample reported that this happened to some extent.

Next, a series of chi-squares were calculated to determine whether the 20% who reported that this happened were more likely to report exposure to the other 19 behaviors than the 80% who said that it never happened. Results are presented in Table 4.

As can be seen, those who endorsed Item 20 (tried to turn against other parent) were statistically significantly more likely to endorse the other 19 parental alienation behaviors than those who did not endorse Item 20. Participants who said that one parent tried to turn them against the other parent were more likely to report every other behavior than participants who did not report that one parent tried to turn them against the other parent. Every respondent who reported that one parent tried to turn him or her against the other parent also reported that one parent made negative comments about the other parent (compared to only 60% of the participants who did not endorse Item 20) and reported that one parent confided in

TABLE 4 Proportion of Endorsers of “Tried to Turn” Endorsing Each Parental Alienation Strategy

Strategy	Did not try to turn	Did try to turn	χ^2	Sig.
Made negative comments	60.0	100.0	12.4	.001
Limited contact	16.5	52.4	12.0	.001
Withheld or blocked messages	1.2	14.3	7.8	.024
Made communication difficult	10.6	42.9	12.4	.001
Indicated discomfort about other parent	8.2	57.1	27.4	.001
Upset child affectionate with other parent	18.5	68.2	20.7	.000
Said parent was unloving	3.5	19.0	6.5	.027
Made child choose	11.8	71.4	33.2	.001
Said parent was unsafe	8.2	47.6	19.4	.001
Confided in child	41.2	100.0	23.4	.001
Required favoritism of child	28.2	90.5	27.1	.001
Asked child to spy	4.7	42.9	22.8	.001
Asked child to keep secrets	21.2	71.4	19.8	.001
Called other parent by first name	1.2	14.3	8.0	.024
Referred to spouse as Mom or Dad	2.4	14.3	5.3	.052
Encouraged reliance on himself or herself	28.2	71.4	13.5	.001
Encouraged disregard of other parent	21.2	76.2	23.3	.001
Hard to be with extended family	15.3	61.9	19.8	.001
Fostered anger/hurt at other parent	8.2	61.9	31.7	.001

him or her about the other parent (compared to only 41.2% of the participants who did not endorse Item 20). Over 90% of the Item 20 endorsers also endorsed requiring favoritism (compared to only 28.2% of the nonendorsers) and between 70% and 80% of the Item 20 endorsers also endorsed made child choose, asked child to keep secrets, encouraged reliance on him- or herself, and encouraged disregard of other parent (compared to less than 20% of the nonendorsers). Between 60% and 70% of the Item 20 endorsers also endorsed upset child affectionate with other parent, hard to be with extended family, and fostered anger/hurt at other parent (compared to less than 20% of the nonendorsers). Around half of the Item 20 endorsers also endorsed limited contact, made communication difficult, indicated discomfort about other parent, said parent was unsafe, and asked child to spy (compared to less than 20% of the nonendorsers). Around 20% of the Item 20 endorsers also endorsed withheld messages, said parent was unloving, called other parent by first name, and referred to new spouse as Mom or Dad (compared to 3% of the Item 20 nonendorsers).

Thus, those who reported that one parent tried to turn them against the other parent were statistically significantly more likely to report the 19 other parental alienation behaviors. At the same time, even among those who endorsed Item 20, there was some variation in the number and type of other behaviors reported. Looking more closely at this subset of respondents, it was found that they reported between 5 and 18 different behaviors and had

total scores between 7 and 64. No two participants reported the same exact pattern of parental alienation exposure.

We also tested whether those who endorsed Item 20 endorsed statistically significantly more behaviors overall, which they did, $M = 11.6$ ($SD = 4.1$) versus $M = 3.1$ ($SD = 3.0$), $t(104) = 11.13$, $p < .001$, and whether they had statistically significantly higher summary scores, which they did, Mann–Whitney U ($n = 105$) = 6.48, $p < .001$.

The second research question in this study asked whether participants whose parents separated or divorced during their childhood endorsed more of the parental alienation behaviors or had higher summary scores than participants whose parents remained married throughout their childhood. We began with a crosstab of the item divorced or separated versus not divorced or separated and Item 20 (one parent tried to turn the child against the other parent). Results revealed that 45% of those with divorced or separated parents reported that one parent tried to turn them against the other parent, whereas only 13.6% of the nondivorced or separated group reported that being the case. This difference was statistically significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 103) = 10.8$, $p < .002$.

To determine whether those with divorced or separated parents reported experiencing a greater number of parental alienation behaviors, an independent t test was conducted. Results revealed that, as expected, those with divorced or separated parents reported exposure to nearly three times as many parental alienation behaviors ($M = 9.6$, $SD = 4.9$) than those whose parents did not divorce or separate ($M = 3.6$, $SD = 3.9$), $t(101) = 6.03$, $p < .001$. Because the summary score was not normally distributed, a Mann–Whitney test was conducted to determine whether those with divorced or separated parents had higher scores than those without. Results revealed a statistically significant effect, Mann–Whitney U ($n = 102$) = 285, $p < .001$.

Next, the two groups were compared on presence or absence of each of 19 parental alienation behaviors (one item, referred to new spouse as Mom or Dad, was not included as it was not relevant for the group whose parents did not divorce). To that end, 19 chi-square analyses were conducted. These results are presented in Table 5.

As can be seen, participants whose parents separated or divorced during their childhood were statistically significantly more likely than participants whose parents did not divorce or separate to endorse 17 of the 19 parental behaviors. The two for which there was not a statistically significant group difference were referred to other parent by first name (the incidence was quite low in both groups) and encouraged reliance on him or herself (which was in fact marginally statistically significant). Within the divorced or separated sample, rates of exposure to the parental behaviors were quite high and statistically significantly higher than in the nondivorced or separated group. Of the participants from separated or divorced families, over 90% of

TABLE 5 Proportion of Divorced/Nondivorced Respondents Endorsing Each Parental Alienation Strategy

Strategy	Nondi- vorce	Divorced	χ^2	Sig.
Made negative comments	61.7	95.5	9.2	.002
Limited contact	18.5	45.5	6.8	.009
Withheld or blocked messages	1.2	13.6	7.1	.008
Made communication difficult	12.3	36.4	6.9	.009
Indicated discomfort about other parent	7.4	59.1	30.7	.000
Upset child affectionate with other parent	18.5	68.2	20.7	.000
Said parent was unloving	2.5	22.7	11.2	.001
Made child choose	14.8	59.1	18.5	.000
Said parent was unsafe	9.9	36.4	9.3	.002
Confided in child	48.1	72.7	4.2	.040
Required favoritism of child	29.6	81.8	19.5	.000
Asked child to spy	6.2	36.4	14.3	.000
Asked child to keep secrets	27.2	45.5	2.7	.100
Called other parent by first name	3.7	04.5	0.03	.856
Encouraged reliance on him/herself	32.1	54.5	3.7	.053
Encouraged disregard of other parent	23.5	63.6	12.8	.000
Hard to be with extended family	17.3	54.5	12.7	.000
Fostered anger/hurt at other parent	12.3	45.5	12.1	.000
Tried to turn against other parent	13.6	45.5	10.8	.001

the participants endorsed made comments, compared to 61.7% of the nondivorced or separated group; 81.8% endorsed required favoritism, compared to 29.6% of the nondivorced or separated group; and 72.7% endorsed confided, compared to 48.1% of the nondivorced or separated group. Two parental behaviors, upset at affection and encouraged disregard, were endorsed by 61% to 70% of this group, compared to around 20% of the nondivorced or separated group. Four parental behaviors were endorsed by 51% to 60% of the participants from divorced or separated families—indicated discomfort at other parent, made child choose, encouraged reliance on him- or herself, and made it hard to be with extended family—compared to less than 33% of the nondivorced or separated group. Four parental behaviors were endorsed by 41% to 50% this group of participants—limited contact, asked child to keep secrets, fostered anger/hurt at other parent, and tried to turn against other parent—compared to less than 28% of the nondivorced or separated group. Two, made communication difficult and said other parent was unsafe, were endorsed by between 31% and 40%, compared to less than 13% of the nondivorced or separated group. One parental behavior, said parent was unloving, was endorsed by 21% to 30% of the divorced or separated group, compared to less than 3% of the nondivorced or separated group. The parental behavior withheld or blocked messages was endorsed by 13.6% of the divorced or separated group compared to less than 2% of the nondivorced or separated group. One parental behavior was endorsed

by so few participants in each group that there was no statistically significant difference, referred to other parent by first name.

Thus, participants whose parents were divorced or separated during their childhood reported statistically significantly more exposure to parental alienation, exposure to a greater number of parental alienation strategies, and greater exposure to 17 of the 19 specific parental behaviors assessed.

The third research question asked whether there were associations between reported exposure to the parental alienation behaviors and current functioning, specifically self-esteem and depression during the past week. Depression was examined as both a dichotomous variable (above and below the cutoff for clinical depression) as well as continuous (summary score from 0–60). Parental alienation behaviors were examined as both a dichotomous variable (exposed to any of the 20 behaviors or not exposed to any) and continuous (summary score of 0–80). Thus, four analyses were conducted: (a) a chi-square with both variables as dichotomous; (b) a *t* test with parental alienation as dichotomous and CES–D as continuous; (c) a logistic regression with parental alienation as continuous and CES–D as dichotomous; and (d) a correlation with both variables as continuous. None of the analyses was statistically significant. Interestingly, 40% of the participants in the total sample met the clinical cutoff for depression.

Next, scores on the RSE were assessed for associations with exposure to the parental alienation behaviors. RSE was treated as a continuous variable indicating degree of self-esteem, with values ranging from 0 to 30. This variable was correlated with the number of parental behaviors, with no statistically significant results. In addition, a *t* test was conducted with exposure to the parental alienation behaviors treated as a dichotomous variable, which also did not result in a statistically significant effect. Although the RSE can also be treated as a dichotomous variable with scores below 15 indicating low self-esteem, too few of the sample ($n = 8$, 7.9%) met this criteria to warrant analyses with the variable in this way.

DISCUSSION

This study was designed to address three questions pertaining to adult recall of exposure to childhood involvement in parental conflict, defined as 20 different parental alienation behaviors. The first question focused on rates of exposure to these behaviors as reported by the adults in the sample. We found that about 80% of the sample as a whole reported exposure to some parental alienation, and the proportions exposed to each of the individual strategies ranged from a low of 3.9% (withheld or blocked messages) to a high of 67.9% (made negative comments about the other parent). Of the 20 behaviors assessed, 10 were endorsed by between 3% and 20% of the sample, 7 were endorsed by between 21% and 40% of the sample, 2 items

were endorsed by between 41% and 60% of the sample, and 1 was endorsed by over 60% of the sample. In terms of number of behaviors endorsed, half of the sample reported exposure to between 1 and 5 behaviors, about 20% reported exposure to between 6 and 10 behaviors, and 15% of the sample reported being exposed to 11 or more behaviors. These data indicate that the vast majority of adults in this study recalled exposure to some parental alienation behaviors of their parents.

About 20% of the sample reported exposure to parental alienation at what we would consider high rates, indicated by endorsement of Item 20, "tried to turn me against the other parent." These same participants had the highest scores on the summary variable and reported exposure to the greatest number of behaviors. These participants had parents who probably could be described as the "obsessed alienators" in Darnall's (1998) categorization, defined as parents who intentionally have a goal of destroying their child's relationship with the other parent. About 20% of the sample did not endorse Item 20 or any of the other parent behaviors. These participants were not exposed to parental alienation (or were so defended against acknowledging it). The remaining 60% of the participants, although not endorsing Item 20, did endorse at least one other item. They probably had parents who can be described as Darnall's "naive alienators" (make infrequent and minor slips but in general support the child's relationship with the other parent) or "active alienators" (generally understand the importance of the child's relationship with the other parent but do let their anger get in the way of being consistently supportive).

Twenty percent of the sample endorsed the item "tried to turn me against the other parent," a slightly lower proportion than in Baker (2010), who found that 28% of a sample reported endorsement of a very similar item. It might be that the difference between 28% in that study and 20% in the current study is not meaningful and is due only to normal variation between samples. The sample here of slightly more than 100 participants is somewhat smaller than the Baker (in press) sample of 253, which could be considered a more stable estimate. There are also differences in sample characteristics that might be important. Clearly, additional studies should be conducted with larger samples to derive a stable and generalizable estimate. That being said, confidence is warranted in the belief that in the general adult population at least 20% of adults will report that one parent tried to turn them against another parent.

In the subsample of divorced or separated families, the rate of endorsing the variable "tried to turn" increased to 45%. In fact, rates of almost all of the parental alienation behaviors were higher in the group whose parents divorced or separated when they were under the age of 18 than in the group whose parents remained married for the duration of the respondent's childhood. Everyone in the group of participants with separated or divorced parents reported exposure to at least one other parental alienation behavior

in addition to tried to turn, and the total number of behaviors endorsed was higher than in the nondivorced or separated group. These data are consistent with a body of knowledge regarding the prevalence of parental alienation within divorcing families (e.g., Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Gardner, 1998). The data from this study confirm and build on these findings by documenting this problem from the perspective of adults and by providing additional detail and insight into the nature of this experience for the adult children. Behaviors endorsed at a particularly high rate in the divorce group included required favoritism of child, upset child affectionate with other parent, made child choose, encouraged reliance, encouraged disregard of other parent, hard to be with extended family, and fostered anger.

The low incidence of some of the strategies, even within the sample of divorced families, suggests a few explanations, one of which is that these events did not occur. An alternative explanation is that some behaviors might be outside the awareness of children. For example, it seems quite likely that one parent could interfere with communication and block and withhold messages without the child ever being aware that this was happening. Unless the child inadvertently finds the undelivered gifts and mail or is told by the targeted parent about the undelivered items and blocked communication, he or she has no way of knowing whether this occurred. These parental alienation behaviors are usually strongly endorsed by targeted parents and are the cause of chronic frustration (e.g., Baker & Darnall, 2006); therefore, it seems possible that lack of knowledge, as opposed to lack of occurrence, was a factor contributing to the low level of endorsement of this item by the participants in this study. Thus, in future research, information should be obtained from both the targeted parent and the "adult child" if the purpose is to assess actual exposure to this behavior and determine whether, in fact, some of these events occur outside the awareness of children (as opposed to not occurring at all). However, if the purpose is to assess adult perception of this childhood experience, then the current approach is acceptable.

Interestingly, even those who did not endorse Item 20 reported exposure to other items. Of this group, 60% reported that one parent "made comments to me that fabricated or exaggerated the other parent's negative qualities while rarely saying anything positive about that parent"; 40% reported that one parent "confided in me about 'adult matters' that I probably should not have been told about (such as marital concerns or legal issues) that led me to feel protective of him or her or angry at the other parent"; and close to 30% endorsed "created situations in which I felt obligated to show favoritism toward him or her and reject or rebuff/ignore the other parent." This pattern of data suggests a few possible interpretations, one of which is that although the parents did engage in some of these behaviors, they did not represent and were not perceived to be part of a larger effort on the part of one parent to turn the child against the other parent. This would be consistent with Darnall's (1998) notion of naive alienators,

parents who intermittently engage in some of these behaviors but with not real intention to damage the child's relationship with the other parent. Perhaps in the context of the relationship, the child still felt support by one parent in having a relationship with the other, despite some denigration and confiding.

A second explanation is that some respondents were able to acknowledge exposure to specific behaviors but did not acknowledge or understand the intention behind those behaviors (that one parent was trying to turn them against the other parent). As with other forms of abuse, assessment of parental alienation might require asking about specific behaviors rather than asking about a general construct, as it might be simply too threatening to admit the poor intentions of a parent. Research on adult recall of other aspects of parent-child relationships supports this notion, especially for memories of emotionally charged childhood experiences. For example, adults participating in the adult attachment interview (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985) provided positive adjectives to describe a particular parent-child relationship when asked to recall that parent in general, but offered examples and stories that belied these adjectives when asked to describe a specific memory of that parent. The adjectives represented the socially acceptable and ego-syntonic beliefs, whereas the specific stories reflected what actually occurred on a day-to-day basis. For this reason, responses to specific items might not be consistent with responses to items that require endorsement of abstract concepts, especially if those concepts are threatening.

Rates of exposure to parental alienation were relatively high in intact families as well, although the rate was much lower than in the group of participants whose parents separated or divorced while the participants were under the age of 18. Close to half of the participants with parents who remained married throughout their childhood endorsed the item confided in child, and about one fourth endorsed asked child to keep secrets, encouraged reliance on him- or herself, encouraged disregard of other parent, and required favoritism of child. These data are consistent with clinical wisdom and theory regarding dysfunction within some families involving cross-generational alliances and intergenerational boundary dissolution, such as confiding, keeping secrets, undermining the other parent's authority, and so forth (Minuchin, 1974, 1993). These data also suggest that in some families parental alienation behaviors predate the divorce such that even in the nondivorced group there are participants whose parents divorced after the participant's 18th birthday, following their childhood exposure to some of the behaviors assessed.

Despite the theoretical linkages and the initial supportive data, the data in this study did not find evidence of associations between exposure to parental alienation and rates of current depression and self-esteem. Several reasons for this are explored next.

First, rates of depression were fairly high in the sample as a whole and within the divorced and not divorced groups equally (about 40%). The relatively high rates of depression found in the sample for this study might be due to the population from which the sample was drawn. Siebert (2004) found that rates of depression in social workers were quite high, with 19% of the National Association of Social Workers affiliated participants in her study scoring above the CES-D cutoff for depression and 60% rating themselves as either currently depressed or formerly depressed. Therefore, recruiting the participants for this study from a population of social work students might have resulted in an unusually high rate of depression in our sample, making associations with parental alienation not likely to be found.

Second, in the Baker (2005, 2007) study of long-term effects of exposure to parental alienation behaviors, the participants revealed negative outcomes as experienced over the course of their lifetime, not necessarily within the past week. It is quite possible that none of Baker's participants would have scored in the clinical cutoff range during the week of the interview, but their responses to the interview questions indicate that they probably would have scored above the clinical cutoff for depression at some point over the course of their life. Thus, it is quite possible that those in the sample here who had been exposed to parental alienation could have met the clinical cutoff for depression at some point earlier in their life, just not within the past week. Perhaps a better test of the hypothesis would be a quantitative measure of depression over the course of a lifetime as opposed to within a narrowly proscribed time frame.

Another reason for the lack of association between parental alienation and either depression or self-esteem is that examining exposure to parental alienation behaviors might not be as powerful as examining the participants' response to these behaviors. The Baker (2005, 2007) study sample was made up of participants who experienced both exposure to parental alienation and Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), defined as the child's unwarranted rejection of one parent to please the other. That is, they all succumbed to the pressure of one parent and became turned against the other parent. It is possible that it was this experience (including the loss of the relationship with the targeted parent, guilt over the treatment of that parent, shame at having participated in the loss of the relationship, belief that the targeted parent no longer loved him or her, etc.) as opposed to the exposure to the parental alienation per se that was the causal agent for their reported subsequent depression and low self-esteem. Within this study, the participants reported only on their exposure to parental alienation and not whether they had actually become alienated from the targeted parent. No study yet has assessed the independent and combined contribution of parental alienation and PAS to negative outcomes for individuals.

A fourth explanation as to why this study failed to find a relationship between exposure to parental alienation behaviors and current depression

and self-esteem is that the participants were recruited from a population that was biased in favor of high-functioning people. The sample for the original Baker (2005, 2007) study on which this hypothesis was mainly based was made up of people with a range of current functioning, including people who had done fairly well for themselves and people who had not yet developed a self-sufficient and healthy lifestyle. On the other hand, the sample for this study was made up entirely of individuals who had already achieved a certain degree of life success in that they had all attended college and most were in the process of obtaining an advanced degree from a prestigious institution. Although they had rates of current depression that were high (40%), they were not necessarily still suffering the long-term effects of whatever damaging parenting to which they had been exposed. It is likely that becoming a mental health professional afforded them opportunities to process their early life experiences, decreasing the likelihood of associations between parental alienation and mental health outcomes.

Several areas for future research and practice suggest themselves from these data. First, additional research should be conducted to replicate these findings in other samples to arrive at a valid and reliable estimate of exposure to parental alienation in the general population. Second, additional studies should be conducted to confirm the original Baker (2007) findings regarding the long-term impact of PAS on children's social and emotional development. Using measures that assess outcomes as experienced over a longer period of time—rather than just within the past week—are clearly warranted. Obviously, measures of additional outcomes including achievement of self-sufficiency, quality of adult romantic relationships, and issues of trust and identity should also be included in future studies.

Developing valid cutoffs and categorizations of exposure to parental alienation would also be a fruitful area of future research. In this study, three different measures were examined: endorsement of Item 20 (one parent tried to turn child against other parent), number of different strategies endorsed, and total summary score. Ideally the data from these variables could be combined to classify the participants into meaningful groupings that could be used in future research and for identifying at-risk children for targeted interventions.

Clinical and practice implications are also suggested. For example, although the data did not support a connection with depression and self-esteem, the data do reveal that a significant portion of children of divorce as well as children from intact families are exposed to a variety of parental alienation strategies that might damage the child's relationship with the other parent and might create stress and emotional conflict for the child. The types of behaviors endorsed in this study are the very behaviors that divorce researchers have found to be associated with greater difficulty in postdivorce adjustment.

Children need to be given tools to respond to these behaviors. Not all parents who engage in these behaviors will or can stop should they be identified and asked to do so, especially those involved in protracted custody disputes. There appears to be a portion of parents who—probably due to personality disorders—are unable to respect the child's need for a positive relationship with the other parent (Baker, 2007). Other parents are in such pain and turmoil from a difficult divorce or problematic marriage that they simply cannot refrain from exhibiting the types of behaviors studied here. Thus, a logical location of prevention efforts is with the children themselves, especially those who have not yet developed emotional or behavioral problems that would lead to participation in mental health treatment. These children are at risk for problems and hence appropriate for prevention efforts (Cowen, Hightower, Pedro-Carroll, Work, & Wyman, 1996; Durlak, 1995).

Although many divorcing parents are required to attend a divorce education program, not all children of divorce are afforded the same opportunity to receive education and support. Many divorce education programs are general, short-term, and do not provide sufficient detail about the types of behaviors most likely to be stressful for children (although there are some exceptions). According to a recent review of the content of such programs (Goodman, Bonds, Sandler, & Braver, 2004), neither the short-term universal nor the long-term targeted programs focus specifically on parental alienation strategies (other than discussing the negative impact of bad-mouthing the other parent in front of the child). Children of divorce need more targeted, child-focused support and psycho-education, as do children whose parents are not divorced, and the school setting appears to be a likely avenue for this type of support. Because most children attend school, that setting is ideally suited for delivering psycho-educational materials and support for children whose parents are engaged in parental alienation efforts. Currently there are school-based divorce groups, but they do not incorporate the latest research and theory regarding parental alienation and do not include a component for children whose parents are not divorced. For example, CODIP (Pedro-Carroll & Cowen, 1985) is a school-based program for children of divorce that shows evidence of effectiveness but does not delve as deeply into the issue of loyalty conflicts as might be warranted. These data suggest that some revision and expansion of existing programs would be a meaningful response to the problem of children being exposed to parental efforts to turn them against their other parent.

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