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Aaron J. Hands & Richard A. Warshak

To cite this article: Aaron J. Hands & Richard A. Warshak (2011) Parental Alienation Among College Students, *The American Journal of Family Therapy*, 39:5, 431-443, DOI: [10.1080/01926187.2011.575336](https://doi.org/10.1080/01926187.2011.575336)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01926187.2011.575336>



Published online: 15 Sep 2011.



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Parental Alienation Among College Students

AARON J. HANDS

University of Texas at Dallas, Richardson, Texas, USA

RICHARD A. WARSHAK

University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center, Dallas, Texas, USA

A sample of 50 college students responded to a questionnaire measuring perceptions of alienating behaviors on the part of their parents and their current relationship with each parent. Data revealed a higher degree of alienating behavior by divorced parents when compared to non-divorced parents. Mothers and fathers were rated about equally likely to engage in such behaviors. A higher incidence of alienated parent-child relationships in divorced homes approached, but did not reach, statistical significance. Students who were alienated from one parent report higher levels of alienating behaviors on the part of their parents. The results suggest that parental alienating behaviors, and the phenomenon of a child becoming alienated from a parent after divorce, are departures from the norm and worthy of attention and concern.

The emotionally taxing process of divorce can leave a damaging imprint on children caught in the crossfire of parental conflict. Verbal attacks between the parents can reflect perpetual strife, leaving the children struggling to make sense of the changing framework of family relationships. Interparental conflict, carefully managed by parents, does not necessarily damage children (Buchanan, Maccoby, & Dornbusch, 1991). But, when the children are exposed to the conflict, or used to express it, they feel caught in the middle and do suffer harm (Kelly, 2000).

A particularly pernicious expression of interparental hostility occurs when the behavior of one parent conveys to the child that the other parent is unworthy of the child's love, respect, and loyalty (Warshak, 2010a). Such

We thank Professor Candace Mills for valuable suggestions regarding the study's design and earlier drafts of this article, and Professor Sandford Braver for graciously making available the Parental Alienating Behaviors Scale.

Address correspondence to Aaron J. Hands, 317 Crestover Drive, Richardson, TX 75080.
E-mail: ajh095020@utdallas.edu

behaviors have been labeled parental alienating behaviors, because they carry the potential to alienate the child's affections from the other parent (Darnall, 1999; Fidler & Bala, 2010; Gardner, 1998; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). In some families, conflict and anger declines in the years following the divorce. In other families, though, conflict continues or escalates. Hetherington and Kelly (2002) report that six years after divorce 20–25% of former spouses bad-mouth each other, fight openly in front of the children, and try to undermine the child's relationship with the other parent. In some cases the bad-mouthing is mutual. Experienced therapists, mediators, and arbitrators, though, caution against assuming that intense post-divorce conflict is necessarily a bilateral interaction between two angry parents equally responsible for the problems (Kelly & Emery, 2003; Warshak, 2010b). According to Kelly and Emery, "It is not uncommon to find one enraged or defiant parent and a second parent who no longer harbors anger, has emotionally disengaged, and attempts to avoid or mute conflict that involves the child" (p. 353).

Using the Parental Alienating Behavior Scale (PABS) to measure the prevalence of alienating behaviors on the part of parents as reported by parents and their young adult children, Braver, Coatsworth, and Peralta (2007) report a significant amount of alienating behaviors on the part of both parents in both family structures, with about three times more in divorced homes compared to intact families. The young adult children reported that mothers engaged in alienating behaviors slightly more than did fathers.

Despite being exposed to parental alienating behavior, not all children succumb to the negative influence and reject the parent who is the target of bad-mouthing. Warshak (2010b) observes, "With diplomatic finesse, some maintain warm feelings toward both parents despite pressures to take sides." In some cases, bad-mouthing backfires. Some children resent the bad-mouthing, defend the criticized parent, and reject the parent who pressures for alignment (Hetherington & Kelly, 2002).

When children do absorb a parent's negative attitudes toward the other and reject the criticized parent, they feel alienated from the rejected parent. It is important to emphasize that not all children who are alienated from a parent are acting under the influence of the preferred parent. Discord in the parent-child relationship can occur for a variety of reasons and is justified in response to severe emotional torment, physical abuse, or sexual abuse.

When the child's alienation from a parent is not proportionate to the rejected parent's treatment of the child, children generally show a cluster of signs that was first elucidated by Gardner (1985) and subsequently described by Kopetski (1998), Kelly and Johnston (2001), Warshak (2001), and Fidler and Bala (2010), among others. Irrational alienation from a parent involves behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions (Kelly, 2010). The alienated child acts either unreasonably fearful toward the rejected parent or treats the rejected parent disrespectfully, resists contact, and in some cases is violent and destructive toward the parent and the parent's possessions. The

alienated child displays no love or affection or interest in mutual interaction. Cognitively, the alienated child sees the rejected parent in an unrealistically negative light, holds highly polarized views of the parents, and suspends critical thinking about the parents.

Despite being generally accepted as a well-recognized phenomenon among mental health and legal professionals (Bow, Gould, & Flens, 2009), the conceptualization of parental alienation is a topic of controversy (Bernet, von Boch-Galhau, Baker, & Morrison, 2010; Warshak, 2001). One aspect of the controversy concerns the extent to which becoming alienated from a parent is a normal and expected reaction to divorce, or merely a minor aberration, versus an unhealthy pathological disturbance that needs attention. Some critics believe that irrational alienation is a normal reaction to the divorce process. Based on the lack of normative data from intact and low-conflict divorce families, Roseby (1997) argues that parental alienation does not yet warrant classification as abnormal. Bruch (2001) believes that the concept of parental alienation is confused with common and predictable developmental responses to divorce. She cites a telephone conversation with Judith Wallerstein reporting that, in her study of 60 families who responded to an offer for free counseling in the early 1970s, every child who rejected a parent ($N =$ approximately 23) reunited with the parent by the age of eighteen and most within one or two years.

Aside from her reported telephone conversation with Bruch, in print Wallerstein offers the following report based on her research, "When one or both parents act the Medea role, children are affected for years to come. Some grow up with warped consciences, having learned how to manipulate people as the result of their parents' behavior. Some grow up with enormous rage, having understood that they were used as weapons. Some grow up guilty, with low self-esteem and recurrent depression. . . ." (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989, p. 196).

Baker (2005) reports similarly worrisome outcomes. In her study of 38 adults who believed they were the victims of parental alienation, 70% reported significant episodes of depression caused by the feeling of being unloved by the victimized parent. Low self-esteem and self-hatred were found among two-thirds of the sample. Other adulthood difficulties included drug and alcohol problems, lack of trust, and being alienated from their own children. Many of the respondents were disheartened by the realization of losing a perfectly adequate parent-child relationship. In addition, they felt their depression was exacerbated by the inability to mourn the loss of the rejected parent for fear of angering the parent committing the alienation. Baker concludes that many of the psychological problems reported in her sample were the result of parental alienation, but the design does not establish causal links.

Regarding the duration of alienation, Baker (2007) found that in all cases the disrupted parent-child relationship lasted for at least six years and in half

of her sample, the alienation continued for more than 22 years. Gardner (2001) reported 33 cases in which a child's alienation continued for more than two years.

Another source of data on the normality versus pathology of a child rejecting a parent is found in surveys of adolescents (Bezilla, 1988; Offer, Ostrov, Howard, & Atkinson, 1988). These surveys report that only a very small percent of teenagers are estranged from a parent. Nevertheless, few reliable statistics exist on the prevalence of parental alienating behavior and on the incidence of alienated parent-child relationships in intact versus divorced families (Fidler & Bala, 2010). Such data could inform the debate about whether to view alienated parent-child relationships as a departure from the norm. Data on the prevalence of alienation from a parent among college students from intact and divorced families would shed light on the normative versus non-normative nature of alienated parent-child relationships, and on the issue of whether alienation resolves itself by age 18, as reported by Bruch (2001), or whether it lasts beyond the high school years.

In addition to disagreement about the normality of parental alienating behaviors and alienated parent-child relationships, questions remain about the roots of a child's rejection of a parent. A consensus in the literature sees the problem as resulting from multiple contributions, including a link between a parent's bad-mouthing of the other parent and the child's rejection of the target of bad-mouthing (Fidler & Bala, 2010). But, advocates for victims of domestic violence maintain that children do not reject a parent unless that parent's behavior has driven the child away (Walker, Brantley, & Rigsby, 2005).

The present study expands on Braver et al.'s work to assess the incidence of alienating behaviors by mothers and by fathers in intact and divorced families as reported by college students. It also investigates the extent to which this population of young adults from intact versus divorced families report being alienated from a parent, and analyzes the link between parental behaviors and alienated parent-child relationships. Based on the current literature, the study tests the hypotheses that: 1) alienating behaviors are more prevalent among divorced parents than those whose marriages remained intact; 2) subjects who grew up in a divorced family are more likely to be alienated from a parent than subjects who grew up in intact families; and 3) subjects who report being alienated from a parent are more likely to report being exposed to parental alienating behavior while growing up.

METHODS

Participants

The subjects in this study were 50 undergraduate psychology students from the University of Texas at Dallas and University of North Texas who

volunteered to participate. Data were collected anonymously from students ranging in age from 18 to above 50. Thirty-two of the subjects grew up with both parents in the same home; Seventeen were raised in divorced families.

Materials

The instrument for collecting data in this study was a questionnaire with closed-ended items designed to assess the participants' perceptions of their parents' alienating behaviors and the relative quality of the participants' relationship with each parent. The instrument contained basic demographic questions such as age, gender, and family status (raised in intact versus divorced family), questions designed to assess the subject's perception of their parents' alienating behavior, and questions used to determine the subjects' alienation status (alienated versus non alienated).

The 12-item Parental Alienation Behavior Scale (PABS) (Braver et al., 2007) followed the demographic questions. An example of a PABS item is, "My mother wanted me to respect and admire my father." These items were measured on a 0–8 scale with responses ranging from "Not at all" to "Extremely." A limitation of the PABS is that it measures perceptions of the parents' behaviors in the past with no differentiation between the periods prior to and after divorce.

Following the PABS, fourteen supplemental questions were presented. Eight of these questions tap the subjects' perceptions of additional aspects of parental alienating behavior ("How much do you feel that your father wanted your mother to be involved as a parent in your life?," "How much did your father interfere or make it difficult for you to spend time with your mother?," "How much did your father complain about, criticize, or speak badly about your mother in your presence, or otherwise engage in behavior that could undermine your positive regard for your mother?," and parallel questions for the mother's alienating behavior.) Subjects from divorced homes were instructed to respond to these items for the time period after the divorce. The other six questions tap subjects' attitudes toward each parent ("Overall my relationship with my mother/father is." "I usually treat my mother much better than my father." "I usually treat my father much better than my mother." "I am much more disrespectful to one parent than the other." "I am reluctant to spend time with one parent but not the other."). The answers to these questions allowed subjects to be categorized as alienated or not alienated from a parent.

Procedure

Each subject was asked to participate in a project to assess the incidence of alienating behaviors among parents and the quality of parent-child relationships. Subjects were assured of anonymity. After giving informed consent,

the subject responded to the written questionnaire. Completion of the questionnaire took no more than 5–10 minutes.

RESULTS

The incidence of alienating behaviors on the part of either the mother or father was assessed with both the PABS and the Supplemental Scale. PABS data for one subject, and Supplemental Scale data for two subjects were not included in the analyses because of incomplete data. Thus, the N for the PABS analyses was 49; the N for the Supplemental Scale analyses was 48.

The PABS items were scored on a scale from 0 to 8, and the Supplemental Scale items were scored from 0 to 4. Therefore, the PABS had a potential total score range of 0 to 56 for each parent, while the Supplemental Scale's range was from 0 to 16 for each parent. Both scales included reverse coded question items.

A 2×2 ANOVA was conducted on each scale to compare the reported incidence of alienating behaviors of mothers versus fathers in intact or divorced homes. On the PABS, subjects who grew up in divorced homes reported higher levels of alienating behavior on the part of their mother and father than did subjects who grew up in intact families (see Figure 1). Differences between intact and divorced groups on reported alienating behavior of parents were found to be significant both for the mother, $F(1,45) = 23.62$, $p < .001$, and the father, $F(1,45) = 8.485$, $p < .01$. Further, mothers

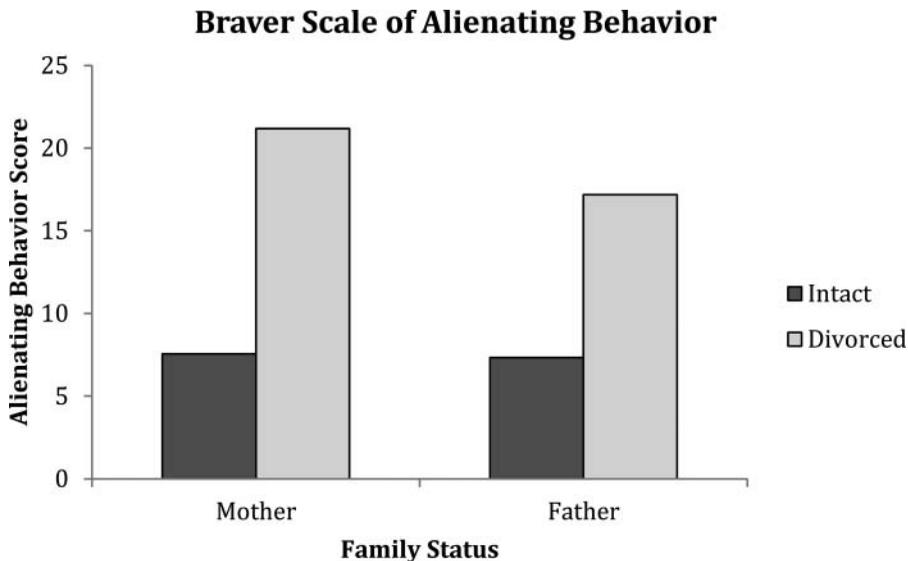


FIGURE 1 Mean parental alienating behavior scores on PABS.

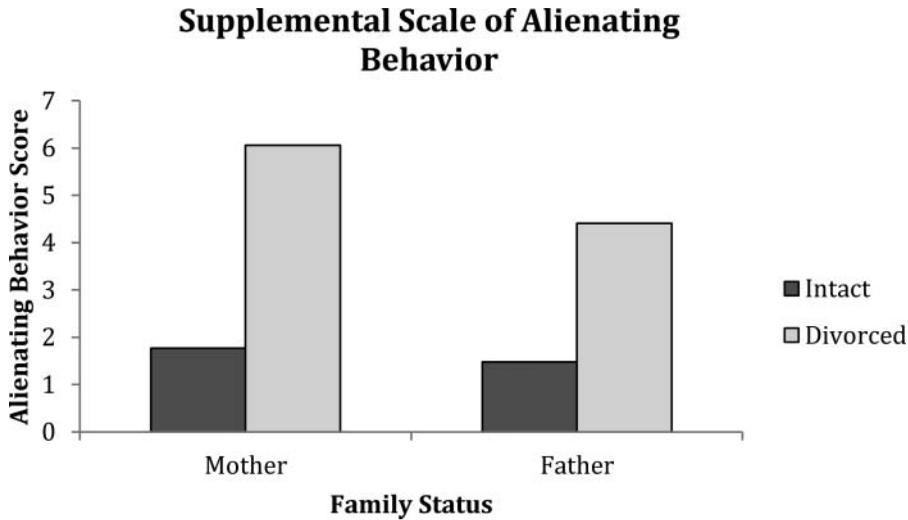


FIGURE 2 Mean parental alienating behavior scores on Supplemental Scale.

($M = 12.29$) engage in a slightly higher amount of alienating behaviors than fathers ($M = 10.76$) as measured by the PABS, a difference that is not statistically significant.

The Supplemental Scale measure of alienating behavior yielded substantially similar results to the PABS. Subjects who grew up in divorced homes reported a higher level of alienating behavior than did subjects who grew up in intact families (see Figure 2). The ANOVA revealed significant levels of reported alienating behaviors for mothers, $F(1,44) = 19.784$, $p < .001$, and fathers, $F(1,44) = 4.012$, $p < .05$ in divorced versus intact families. This measure also revealed a similar lack of difference in reported alienating behavior of mothers versus fathers. The mean was again slightly higher for mothers ($M = 3.29$), fathers ($M = 2.52$), but not a statistically significant difference. In summary, both scales found significantly higher levels of reported alienating behavior among parents in divorced families when compared to parents in intact families.

Chi square was used to analyze the incidence of alienated parent-child relationships. This was accomplished by categorizing subjects as “alienated” or “non alienated” depending on their responses to questions about the quality of their relationships with each parent. Subjects classified as alienated reported strong negative feelings for only one parent (a score of “3” or “4” on a scale from 0 to 4 on the question, “Overall my relationship with my mother/father is”) and at least one significantly strong response on items concerning the differential treatment of the two parents (a score of “3” or “4” on a scale from 0 to 4). After subjects were classified as alienated or non-alienated, they were divided into four categories (Alienated-Intact, Non Alienated-Intact, Alienated-Divorced, Non Alienated-Divorced). Of the total

participants who could be classified ($N = 48$, data for two were not considered due to incomplete data), 4 out of 31 (12.9%) from intact families were classified as alienated, while 5 out of 17 (29.4%) from divorced families were classified as such. Although the percent of alienated parent-child relationships was double in the group from divorced homes, because of the relatively small sample size, this difference failed to reach significance, $\chi^2(df = 1) = 1.96$, $p > .10$. With an alpha level of less than .16, the trend is noteworthy that coming from a divorced home is associated with higher reported instances of being alienated from a parent.

The link between having an alienated relationship with a parent and being exposed to alienating behavior on the part of the favored parent was analyzed by comparing the PABS scores and the Supplemental Scale scores for the alienated versus non-alienated groups. The results indicate that college students who are classified as alienated from a parent, when compared to those classified as not alienated, report much higher levels of alienating behavior on the part of their parents both on the PABS ($M = 35.67$, $M = 20.20$, $p < .02$), and on the Supplemental Scale ($M = 9.289$, $M = 4.87$, $p < .02$).

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the incidence of parental alienating behavior, the incidence of alienated parent-child relationships, and the link between the two as self-reported in a population of college students from intact and divorced families. It was hypothesized that subjects who grew up in a divorced family would be more likely to report higher levels of alienating behavior on the part of their parents than subjects who grew up in intact families. This hypothesis was confirmed with both the PABS and Supplemental Scale. A significant difference in level of alienating behavior was found between divorced and intact families. Using the PABS along with the Supplemental Scale proved to be beneficial as it provided a measure of consistency. The results of this study replicate Braver et al. (2007), thus contributing to the validity of the finding as well as the validity of the PABS.

Although higher levels of alienating behavior were reported for divorced parents, it should be noted that such behaviors were not experienced by all subjects from divorced families. This suggests that, even among divorced families, parental behaviors that could undermine the quality of the child's relationship with the other parent are not inevitable. Many divorced parents appreciate the importance of the child's relationship with both parents.

Despite alienating behaviors being more common in divorced homes, such behaviors by parents were also seen in intact families, suggesting the phenomenon can occur in either type of household. One explanation for this could be the existence of an unhappy, conflict-ridden marriage where

the parents are reluctant to seek a divorce. In this instance, one parent may attempt to obtain the favor of a child at the expense of the other parent, yet do so without the underlying motive of acquiring full custody as may be seen in some custody litigation.

Additionally, evidence from both scales supported the hypothesis that alienating behavior occurs fairly equally among mothers and fathers. Given the turmoil surrounding high-conflict divorces, this finding makes sense. In the course of a heated divorce the potential for either parent to engage in alienating behavior is shared. Based on these results, it is inaccurate to assume that only mothers or only fathers are victims of parental alienation.

This study also predicted that subjects who grew up in divorced families would be more likely to be alienated from a parent than subjects who grew up in intact families. Data showed a notable trend in support of this hypothesis, but failed to reach a significant level. A likely reason for the failure to achieve statistical significance could be the relatively small sample size. Out of 48 people who provided completed questionnaires, 17 came from divorced homes.

Not all subjects who observed high degrees of alienating behavior on the part of one or both parents report being alienated from a parent. This supports the common observation in the literature that a child's rejection of a parent has multiple roots (Fidler & Bala, 2010; Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Warshak, 2010a).

The strong link between the extent of parental alienating behaviors and the likelihood of a young adult being alienated from one parent does support the observation that a child's alienation occurs in the shadow of a parent's negative attitudes and bad-mouthing of the other parent (Warshak, 2010c). Many factors may influence a child's alienation from a parent. But these results suggest that one of these factors is being exposed to parental alienating behaviors such as those tapped by the PABS and the Supplement Scale.

One limitation of this study is that it relied solely on a self-report from only the child. Ideally, reports from both parents as well as direct observation would be used to gain a more in-depth picture of the degree of alienating behaviors. The questionnaire has certain limitations. It assessed the incidence of alienating behaviors, but could be expanded to gauge the extent of these behaviors. Additional questions might also include a more sensitive measure to classify subjects as "alienated" or "non alienated." This study classified subjects as alienated when they reported a negative relationship with only one parent. This is consistent with the literature on parental alienation in divorced homes. The literature is concerned with children who align with one parent against the other. Future studies could include subjects who are alienated from both parents. This would allow a measure of the extent to which parental bad-mouthing may result, not in allegiance to one parent at the expense of the other, but to children being disappointed in both parents

for not doing a better job of shielding the children from the expression of parental conflicts.

Other future studies might analyze the types and extent of alienating behaviors perpetrated by mothers and fathers. For example, are fathers or mothers more likely to interfere with the child's contact with the other parent or does this occur equally among the two groups? Also, future studies might address the question of whether a certain parenting style is more likely to be associated with a child's subsequent rejection. An equal prevalence of alienating behavior by the former spouse may not result in equal chances of becoming alienated. For instance, Warshak (2010c) notes that being aware of a spouse's alienating behavior, yet taking a passive stance, may increase one's susceptibility to becoming alienated from a child. Additional areas for future research include further exploration of the links between parental behaviors and children's psychological status and relationships with parents. The empirical literature revealing a correlation between parental alienating behavior and adverse child behaviors would help resolve disputes about the legitimacy of parental alienation as a problem worthy of concern.

IMPLICATIONS

The relatively high incidence of alienating behavior by divorced parents, both fathers and mothers, reported by our subjects suggests the need for effective parent education programs early in the divorce process (Fackrell, Hawkins, & Kay, 2011; Sigal, Sandler, Wolchik, & Braver, 2011). One goal of such programs would be to reduce the extent to which parents expose their children to potentially alienating behavior. Information about the possible lasting damage to a parent-child relationship, and associated psychological problems, may help motivate some parents to do a better job of supporting their children's relationship with the other parent.

The finding that 29% of the college students from divorced homes in this study were alienated from a parent suggests that clinicians should exercise caution about postponing interventions; the expectation that an alienated parent-child relationship will heal with the passage of time may not be warranted. Clearly, some alienated children fail to outgrow the problem by the end of High School. For some children, alienation may be a lifelong struggle. Future research may help clinicians do a better job of distinguishing between normal short-term reactions to divorce and incipient signs of alienation that may endure and merit attention and intervention.

When a parent and child seem poised to lose a loving relationship, they should have opportunities to repair their damaged relationship when the problem is in its early stages and before it becomes more entrenched and resistant to treatment. Findings about the long-term nature of a child's

alienation from a parent may inform courts facing decisions about the necessity and timing of interventions to remedy the problem.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study contributes to the literature demonstrating that parental alienating behavior is more prevalent in divorced families than in intact families, and that such behaviors occur about equally between mothers and fathers. The latter finding is especially significant given some of the politics surrounding the criticisms of the concept of parental alienation (Rand, 2011). Critics express concern that parental alienation is merely a tactic used by abusive fathers in a custody dispute to deflect blame for their children's rejection. Given that alienating behavior is seen in both mothers and fathers, we cannot conclude that the problem is restricted to one gender. Both men and women can be culpable.

Moving beyond the controversies about parental alienation, most people would agree that no child should have to suffer growing up feeling estranged from a good and loving parent. All children deserve adequate love and parenting. Identifying the elements of parental alienation early in the process can contribute to the prevention of some of the negative outcomes of going through life feeling unloved by a parent and unable to give love to a parent.

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