



ABPA: A New Paradigm for Parental Alienation

Many years have been wasted by the distracting controversy surrounding parental alienation. Although there is a large body of research validating its existence and documenting the detrimental effects on children and families, there has been ongoing resistance on multiple fronts towards recognizing and intervening with this form of child abuse. Parental alienation is a pathological family interaction pattern which unjustly requires children to align with one parent against a formerly-loved parent, putting the children in a destructive loyalty bind. This family dynamic is usually seen within the context of high conflict divorce.

The main source of the controversy stems from the way child psychiatrist Richard Gardner described this phenomenon in the 1980s, when he first identified this destructive family dynamic. Rather than grounding it in established psychological constructs, he described it behaviorally, and proposed a new syndrome to describe this set of behaviors. Although he valiantly risked everything to identify and stop this form of child abuse, his lack of scientific rigor in creating his Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) model led to parental alienation being seen as highly controversial. This controversy has lasted around 40 years, and has impeded the acceptance of the concept by established mental health professionals. Unfortunately, this resistance has resulted in delayed implementation of needed and proper treatment.

The exciting news is that Craig Childress, Psy.D, a developmental psychologist, has taken it upon himself to look deeper into the patterns of parental alienation and

uncover what is actually going on from a clinical perspective. He has spent over ten years dissecting and conceptualizing the root causes, and has organized that knowledge using already established and accepted psychological constructs to define its origins and treatments. His brilliant and detailed model can be found in his book titled *Foundations*, published in 2015.¹ What this means is that Dr. Childress is now providing a solution to this type of child abuse by making it clinically diagnosable, and therefore treatable.

Dr. Childress uses the knowledge base of three established psychological theories to accurately describe what he calls Attachment-Based Parental Alienation, or ABPA: Attachment Theory, Family Systems Theory, and Personality Disorder Pathology. He states that “the rejection of a parent is an attachment-related pathology.”² Children are born with an innate drive to bond to their caregivers. This instinctual bond ensures their survival. Within a secure attachment, a child is free to develop optimally and grow towards becoming a strong individual.

Childress further explains that “the attachment system *never* spontaneously dysfunctions, but *only* dysfunctions in response to pathogenic parenting, either from the targeted-rejected parent (i.e., child abuse) or from the allied and supposedly ‘favored’ parent (i.e., a cross-generational coalition with the child against the other parent).”³ In other words, a child only rejects a parent when there has been significant abuse, or when a parent creates an unhealthy alignment with the child against the other parent.

Childress’s ABPA clinical assessments will help clinicians to understand the causes of rejecting behaviors, and accurately differentiate between the possible causes. Once the root cause can be accurately identified, proper treatment can begin.

With his new model of ABPA, Dr. Childress has opened the way to put an end to the years of controversy and allow parents and children to receive the treatment they need to overcome these destructive patterns. He has said that

“children deserve a childhood free from the stress of their parents’ conflict, and parents deserve to love and be loved by their children.”⁴ Thanks to his tireless work, a new era of healing for families can begin.

by Michelle Jones, LCSW

^{1, 4} Childress, C. A. (2015). *An attachment-based model of parental alienation: foundations*. Claremont, CA: Oaksong Press.

^{2,3} Craig A. Childress, Psy.D. (2017). *The Attachment-Related Pathology of “Parental Alienation”* [Brochure]. Author.

