

# Exploring Parent–Child Relationships in Alienated versus Neglected/Emotionally Abused Children using the Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test

Children subject to parental alienation dynamics often present with psychological splitting and lack the ambivalence towards their parents which can be observed in other groups of children, even those who are emotionally abused and neglected. This paper used the Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test to explore differences between alienated and neglected/emotionally abused children's views and feelings towards their mothers and fathers. Results confirmed that alienated children engaged in splitting, idealising their preferred parent and demonising their target parent without legitimate justification. Conversely, neglected/emotionally abused children presented with greater ambivalence, sending both positive and negative messages to their mothers and fathers; although overall in this study, they displayed a tendency to idealise their parents despite the maltreatment that they had suffered. The results highlight the importance of not taking children's expressed wishes at face value and the need for in-depth multimodal psychological assessments to establish children's ascertainable rather than expressed wishes. © 2018 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## KEY PRACTITIONER MESSAGES:

- The Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test is an invaluable clinical tool for exploring children's feelings about their family relationships.
- Children's expressed wishes about their parents are paradoxical in cases of both alienation and neglect/emotional abuse.
- Assessments of children need to identify their ascertainable rather than expressed wishes. This requires a comprehensive multimodal psychological assessment involving all family members, cross-referencing information from all sources from a longitudinal perspective.

KEY WORDS: Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test; parental alienation; emotional abuse; neglect

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**‘Explore[s] differences between alienated and neglected/emotionally abused children's views and feelings towards their mothers and fathers’**

**‘There is a lack of consensus among mental health and legal professionals about an overarching definition of parental alienation’**

**‘The term splitting has been widely used in psychological and psychiatric literature since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century’**

## Introduction

Currently, there is a lack of consensus among mental health and legal professionals about an overarching definition of parental alienation due to both its immense complexity and the heterogeneous terminology used to describe the phenomenon (Fidler *et al.*, 2013). In broad terms, it can be understood as a relational dynamic in which a child (whose parents are typically separated/divorced) aligns themselves with one parent, the alienating/preferred parent, and rejects the other parent, the target parent, without legitimate justification (i.e. in the absence of abuse, neglect or a history of markedly deficient parenting), while expressing trivial, tangential or frivolous reasons for their stance. Parental alienation is entirely different to justified estrangement, where a child rejects a relationship with a parent for good reason, for example, if they have been abused or neglected (Kelly and Johnston, 2001).

Gardner (1985) proposed the notion of a ‘Parental Alienation Syndrome’ manifested by eight behavioural factors observable in the child (Table 1). However, it should be noted that the term parental alienation has not been included in the leading classification systems of mental disorders, and is not used within the fifth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Currently, parental alienation can be encompassed within appropriate broader categories (i.e. V61.29 ‘Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress’ and/or V61.20 ‘Parent-Child Relational Problem’ and/or 995.51 ‘Child Psychological Abuse’ (Bernet *et al.*, 2016)).

One of Gardner’s (1985) proposed factors, lack of ambivalence towards the rejected parent, sometimes referred to as splitting or black-and-white thinking, has been quantitatively assessed in children using the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (Bernet *et al.*, 2017).

The term splitting has been widely used in psychological and psychiatric literature since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Breuer and Freud (1955, p. 12) described ‘splitting of consciousness’ as a dissociative state in hysterical patients. Bleuler (1911, p. 363) regarded splitting in psychosis as a ‘fragmentation of thinking processes’ and coined the term schizophrenia. However, the term splitting was also used by Freud (1991) to describe a way of resolving ambivalence ‘by splitting the contradictory feelings so that one person is only loved, another one only hated’ (Fenichel, 2005, p. 157). This use of the term was adopted and developed by Klein (1996) who argued that infants’ earliest experiences are split between wholly good and entirely bad and that as children develop they struggle to integrate these experiences and develop a more nuanced, balanced view of their world. Some individuals do not achieve this and continue to use

**Table 1.** Gardner’s (1985) eight behavioural factors of ‘Parental Alienation Syndrome’

- (1) A campaign of denigration
- (2) Weak, frivolous or absurd rationalisations for the deprecation
- (3) Lack of ambivalence by the child towards the rejected parent
- (4) The ‘independent thinker’ phenomenon
- (5) Reflexive support of the alienating parent
- (6) Absence of guilt over cruelty to the alienated parent
- (7) Presence of borrowed scenarios from the favoured parent
- (8) Spread of rejection to extended family and friends of the alienated parent

splitting as a dysfunctional, non-adaptive defence mechanism (Vaillant, 1992). This is seen in individuals with borderline personality disorder (Kernberg, 1967; Widiger and Mullins-Sweatt, 2008) and narcissistic personality disorder (Siegel, 2006) who view relationships or events in all-or-nothing terms in order to avoid feelings of rejection.

While definitions of splitting are diverse, in alienated children the term is widely used to describe a cognitive strategy whereby the child classifies feelings, emotions and thoughts about their parents into two mutually exclusive polarised categories. Alienated children tend to idealise their preferred parent (describing them as all good) and demonise their rejected parent (describing them as all bad). Such rigidly contrasting views may arise from the inability to tolerate normal ambivalence in interpersonal relationships (Kopetski, 1998) and/or as a way of resolving distressing cognitive dissonance or feelings of anxiety (Bernet *et al.*, 2017). However, such polarised views may also be expressed and maintained even when they are not genuinely felt. Extensive literature in social psychology highlights the multiple individual and interpersonal pressures to maintain a cognitive stance once it has been expressed (Festinger and Carlsmith, 1959; Jelalian and Miller, 1984; Warshak, 2010). Additionally, children who are caught in a contentious situation between their parents may engage in splitting as a form of self-protection against the conflict and/or against the possibility of abuse or rejection by their preferred parent if they are seen to express any positive sentiments towards the rejected parent (Garrity and Baris, 1994). Interestingly, children who have been abused and/or neglected by their parents typically maintain a degree of ambivalence in their family relationships and describe some positive features and feelings about their abusive parent (Baker and Schneiderman, 2015).

The Bene-Anthony Family Relations Test (BAFRT; Bene and Anthony, 1957) is a projective test that is widely used by professionals to explore indirectly a child/adolescent's perception of their relationships within their family by assessing their feelings (positive and negative) towards each person and how they feel others regard them. There are a number of published papers where the BAFRT has been used to assess children's relations with their family following parental separation. Shiller (1986) reported that in comparison to children in shared care arrangements, children in sole maternal custody (having at least monthly contact with their father) assigned fewer outgoing negative feelings to their mother. In two separate studies, Lampel (1996) categorised children subject to custody litigation as 'aligned' or 'non-aligned' to their parents based upon the distribution of positive and negative messages assigned to each. In one of the studies, all of the children categorised as 'aligned' sent no positive messages to their non-preferred parent (who happened to be fathers). The second study indicated preferred parents received a far greater number of positive postings than the non-preferred parent.

The BAFRT was used extensively in research until the mid-1970s (Parkin, 2001), although relatively few studies focused on children who had been abused or neglected. Sternberg *et al.* (1994) reported that children who had been exposed to domestic violence assigned more negative items to the abusive parent, although no difference was noted in the number of positive messages sent to each parent. Stern *et al.* (1996) informed that children who had been sexually abused assigned a greater number of negative messages to their mother. Interestingly, splitting was not reported in these

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studies or in a study by Hyman and Mitchell (1975) where the children had been physically abused.

The present paper focuses on BAFRT response profiles in two groups of children: (1) those who have suffered neglect/emotional abuse; and (2) those who have rejected one parent (target parent) without legitimate justification (alienated children). It was hypothesised that children in group one would show ambivalence towards their parents by assigning both positive and negative messages to them, indicating that neglect and emotional abuse per se do not lead to splitting. It was further hypothesised that children in group two would demonstrate an absence of ambivalence by assigning almost exclusively positive messages to their preferred parent and overwhelmingly negative messages to their target parent, supporting the notion that parental alienation leads to splitting.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants (total  $N = 33$ ,  $M$  age = 9.8 years,  $SD = 3.06$ ) were selected from cases that had been referred by the UK family courts for psychological assessment by an independent expert witness working as part of a private psychology practice. All cases referred to this expert (a chartered psychologist) over a 36-month period (January 2015–December 2017) that conformed to the following groups were included in the study:

- (1) *Children who had been neglected/emotionally abused*: 17 children from nine families. Among the participants, seven were boys and ten were girls, ranging in age from four to 16 years ( $M$  age = 9.5 years,  $SD = 3.76$ ). The children came from families where threshold criteria had been met (as defined by section 31 of the Children Act 1989). As is often the reality in cases of child abuse/neglect, in all families studied, both parents were found to be responsible for the harm suffered by their children, and consequently the children had been removed from their parents' care under interim or full care orders and were residing in foster or kinship care. At the time of the assessment, they were attending regular supervised contact with their parents and, in spite of their history of abuse and neglect, were not estranged from their parents. Cases involving alleged or confirmed sexual or physical abuse were excluded. Children who had not included one of their parents in the BAFRT on the basis that they knew little about them and had never enjoyed a relationship with them were also excluded.
- (2) *Children who had rejected one parent (target parent) without legitimate justification (alienated children)*: 16 children from nine families. Among the participants, 11 were boys and five were girls, ranging in age from five to 14 years ( $M$  age = 10.2 years,  $SD = 2.29$ ). In this sample, by coincidence rather than design, all 16 children were aligned with their mother and rejecting their father. Children were classified as 'alienated' when the psychological assessment determined that the relationship with the target parent had entirely broken down without legitimate justification. At the time of the assessment, the period of no contact with the target parent ranged from two to 36 months ( $M$  months = 18.9,  $SD = 12.14$ ), and 14 of the 16 children were continuing to refuse any contact. However, two of the 16 children were involved in an early trial of supervised contact.

The independent expert witness who collected the data on the neglected/emotionally abused group was not involved in determining which

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children belonged to this group. These children were subject to public law proceedings and, prior to the instruction of the expert, a judge had determined that threshold criteria had been met to initiate care proceedings under the categories of neglect/emotional abuse. In contrast, the determination of which children belonged to the alienated group was informed by the independent expert witness assessment in the context of private law proceedings. The expert was instructed by the court on behalf of all parties and their report in each case was subject to scrutiny and cross-examination by the court.

### ***Measure***

The BAFRT (Bene and Anthony, 1957) is a clinical tool that consists of 21 mailboxes with outlined figures, which under suggestion the child selects to represent different members of their family, including one for self. There is also a figure to represent Mr Nobody (an outlined drawing of a man with his back turned), to accommodate any messages that the child feels unable to send to anyone in their family. The examiner reads messages from a series of small postcards and the child has to decide who in the family is the most appropriate person to receive each message. These messages convey either affectionate (positive) or hostile (negative) feelings and can be mild or strong in their intensity. There are separate messages to reflect the child's feelings towards others and their perception of how others feel towards them. Some of the cards contain maternal overprotection and maternal or paternal overindulgence messages, which are not assigned a positive or negative value. There are two versions of the test, one for older children aged eight years and over and one for younger children aged five to seven years. The latter contains fewer messages and uses terminology more accessible to a younger age range.

In a healthy home environment, the clinical expectation of a child's response to this activity is that the primary carer (usually the mother) will receive the most postings, indicating that this is the most significant emotional relationship. Whether the postings are negative or positive reveals the nature of that involvement. It is expected that primary carers will receive some mildly negative messages associated with normal discipline/boundary setting. Siblings usually receive fewer messages and more distant relatives receive the least messages, reflecting less involved emotional relationships.

### ***Procedure***

A chartered psychologist, registered with the Health and Care Professions Council, administered the BAFRT to each child as part of a court-ordered psychological assessment. As part of the assessment process, the children also completed other psychometric tests and their informal views on their family circumstances and history were explored. The BAFRT was scored by the administering psychologist or an assistant psychologist, with a BSc (Hons) psychology undergraduate degree, under clinical supervision.

With regard to the ethical basis for the study, direct informed consent was not obtained as the data were gathered in contentious and adversarial legal proceedings and were not initially intended for research purposes. Confidentiality has been ensured by analysing retrospective aggregated data which do not draw on individual case or contextual material that would allow

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participants to be identified. In addition, the psychologist who gathered the data is one of 18 within the private psychology practice and has not been identified within this study. Hence, individual cases could not be identified by linking them to the psychologist who was instructed by the court.

Independent sample t-test analyses were used to compare data between the two study groups. Paired sample t-test analyses were used for within group comparisons. A confidence interval of 99 per cent was employed on all tests. For purpose of the analysis, each BAFRT message was weighted as one, although maternal overprotection and maternal/paternal overindulgence messages were excluded from the analysis as these are not assigned a positive or negative value.

## Results

As shown in Table 2, alienated children sent significantly more positive messages to their preferred parent than to their target parent and significantly more negative messages to their target parent in comparison to their preferred parent. These results support our hypothesis that alienated children would show signs of splitting, tending to idealise the preferred parent and demonise the target parent. As shown in Table 3, neglected/emotionally abused children did not differ significantly in the number of positive messages or negative messages sent to either parent. Based on their BAFRT profiles, these children did not reject their neglectful/emotionally abusive parents, but showed signs of idealising their parents (sending mainly positive messages to them) rather than the more ambivalent position that we predicted (with a more even distribution of positive and negative messages to each parent).

Comparison between the samples revealed that alienated children appeared to perceive their target parent significantly more negatively than neglected/emotionally abused children perceived their fathers ( $t(31) = 6.91$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and mothers ( $t(31) = 6.27$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Likewise, neglected/emotionally abused children appeared to perceive their fathers ( $t(31) =$

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**‘Neglected/emotionally abused children appeared to perceive their fathers and mothers significantly more positively than alienated children perceived their target parent’**

**Table 2.** Alienated children (group 2): Messages sent to their parents

	Positive messages			Negative messages		
	M	SD	t (15)	M	SD	t (15)
Preferred parent	21.63	6.55	10.24 ( $p < 0.001$ )	1.88	2.36	8.82 ( $p < 0.001$ )
Target parent	2.75	3.68		11.44	4.88	

M = Mean; SD = standard deviation; t = t-test.

**Table 3.** Neglected/emotionally abused children (group 1): Messages sent to their parents

	Positive messages			Negative messages		
	M	SD	t (16)	M	SD	t (16)
Mothers	11.35	7.74	0.89 ( $p = 0.388$ )	1.71	4.01	-0.10 ( $p = 0.923$ )
Fathers	9.59	6.62		1.82	2.92	

M = Mean; SD = standard deviation; t = t-test.

–3.63,  $p = 0.001$ ) and mothers ( $t(31) = -4.04, p < 0.001$ ) significantly more positively than alienated children perceived their target parent.

## Discussion

This study aimed to explore alienated versus neglected/emotionally abused children's perceptions of their parents using the BAFRT. Alienated children were expected to show signs of splitting, whereas neglected/emotionally abused children were predicted to demonstrate greater ambivalence. The findings largely corroborate these hypotheses, although analysis of the neglected/emotionally abused sample revealed a tendency towards idealisation of their parents despite these children having suffered significant harm to the point where they had been removed from them for their own protection.

Attachment theory offers a framework to understand the tendency of neglected/emotionally abused children to convey overwhelmingly affectionate feelings towards their parents. Children are biologically wired to seek interaction with adults in their environment and form attachments to their parents (Bowlby, 1973, 1982). Only in the most extreme circumstances of pathogenic care will infants fail to attach to their caregivers (Zeanah and Smyke, 2009). When neglected or emotionally abused, children typically adapt their attachment style to maintain proximity to their parents while also keeping themselves safe (e.g. they may become more avoidant and self-reliant and develop an insecure avoidant attachment style, or they may amplify aspects of their behaviour to be noticed and attended to as seen in children with an insecure ambivalent attachment style). Some children may adapt to their abusive parenting, regarding this as normal and hence may not feel they have been maltreated. In such circumstances, they may experience a sense of loss/distress at being separated from their parents, heightening a desire to be reunited with them. Baker and Schneiderman (2015) note that children who have been mildly or moderately maltreated often remain ambivalent towards their parents because they hope that they will change and become more consistently available and loving. In this regard, the idealised feelings expressed by the neglected/emotionally abused children in the present study may also have been reinforced by their previously neglectful/abusive parents becoming more attentive and available to them in the safe, supported and time-limited circumstances of supervised contact.

The study found that children in the alienated group who had not been abused or neglected by their target parent expressed almost exclusively negative (hostile) feelings towards them, while also expressing almost exclusively positive (affectionate) feelings towards their preferred parent (see Table 2). This lack of ambivalence is consistent with Gardner's (1985) third indicator of parental alienation (see Table 1) and the definition of splitting in alienated children provided earlier in this paper. The findings also support the splitting tendency reported by other professionals working with alienated children (Bernet *et al.*, 2017; Gottlieb, 2012; Warshak, 2015), and highlight this defensive cognitive strategy as a seemingly consistent manifestation of alienated children.

Gardner (1987), Garrity and Baris (1994) and Turkat (1994) argue that alignment with the preferred parent can be understood via a manipulation-driven model, where the preferred parent uses overt and subtle tactics to influence the child's thoughts and feelings against the target parent so that they

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become hostile towards and avoidant of them. At the same time, the preferred parent establishes an underlying threat of abandonment, heightening the child's attachment insecurity and drawing them ever closer to the preferred parent in what can become an enmeshed relationship (Baker, 2007). From an attachment perspective, it is biologically counterproductive for a child to hate and completely reject a parent, and splitting provides a cognitive defence mechanism both to justify the rejection and cope with the loss of a loving parent (Gottlieb, 2012).

The findings from the present study can be more fully understood by reference to Childress' (2015) Attachment-Based Model of Parental Alienation which integrates Family Systems Theory with Attachment Theory and personality pathology. Following a marital breakdown, both parents may become less available to their children as they each try to adjust to the transition from married life to their new circumstances (living alone or with a new partner). This could heighten the child's attachment insecurity and activate their attachment system to ensure their needs are met, leading to alignment with the preferred (typically resident) parent. Childress (2015) argues that the preferred parent may have a narcissistic or borderline personality with associated core attachment vulnerabilities arising from their own dysfunctional childhood. Memories of the latter triggered by the marital breakdown can result in the preferred parent using the child as an object to stabilise and regulate their own emotions, triangulating them into the marital conflict and placing them in a cross-generational alliance where they adopt a partner-like role against the target parent. In this dynamic, the child's attachment bonding motivations towards the target parent are suppressed and their hostility towards the target parent, observed within splitting, represents an expression of spousal anger rather than their own authentic feelings.

Whether the splitting tendency highlighted in the current study represents the children's authentic views or rather expressed but not genuinely held views cannot be clarified from the BAFRT findings alone. However, analysis of the messages posted to each parent can highlight issues for further exploration as part of a multimodal holistic assessment of the child's circumstances and family dynamics. For example, within the alienated sample, there were rare instances of children who sent overwhelmingly hostile messages but one strongly affectionate message to the target parent (e.g. 'I wish this person in the family would care for me more than for anybody else'), raising questions about the authenticity of their other expressed feelings. Instances of this kind were fully explored within the holistic clinical assessments but did not lend themselves to quantitative analysis for the purposes of this study given their low frequency of occurrence.

### *Limitations*

There are a number of limitations to this study.

The sample sizes were relatively small and not necessarily representative of the larger population of alienated and neglected/abused children. In addition, all of the children in this study were from families involved in court proceedings, raising questions about the applicability of the findings to children in similar family circumstances outside this arena.

With respect to the neglect/abuse group, it was not possible to explore whether splitting would occur in children who had been neglected/emotionally abused by one parent and were living with their non-abusive/protective parent as cases of

this kind are typically resolved without coming before the court. In addition, children who had experienced sexual or physical abuse were specifically excluded from the study and hence it was not possible to compare children's relationships with their parents in response to different forms of abuse. However, the above issues would be useful areas for future study.

With respect to the alienated group, by coincidence, the target parents were all fathers, making it difficult to generalise with confidence the findings to children who are alienated from their mother and aligned with their father. Also, the alienated group was not classified into children who had experienced mild, moderate or severe alienation, and hence it was not possible to compare children's feelings towards their parents in relation to severity of the alienation. Again, both issues would be useful areas for future study.

Finally, while membership of the neglected/emotionally abused group was determined prior to the involvement of the expert witness who gathered the BAFRT data for this study, this did not apply to the alienated group. Membership of this group was determined by the assessment of the expert witness, which included the BAFRT, thereby introducing the risk of researcher bias. Confidence in the findings from this study would be increased if they could be replicated using samples of children independently assessed as alienated prior to the researcher collecting BAFRT data.

### ***Implications for Practice***

In our experience, in the family court, children's expressed views and feelings about their parents are often cited as reasons to promote or restrict their contact with either parent. For example, children who vehemently reject a parent are often assumed to have been the subject of some form of abuse by that parent and their stance upheld by professionals. However, findings from this study caution against taking children's expressed wishes and feelings at face value in both the alienated and neglected/emotionally abused groups, and highlight the need to recognise and assess multiple possible sources of influence on a child that may impact on their expressed views. Recent case law in relation to parental alienation appears to recognise this and is re-emphasising that the correct approach should involve establishing children's 'ascertainable' rather than expressed wishes and feelings (Wiley, 2016). This also applies to children who have been neglected and abused, separated from their parents and placed in long-term care when considering contact arrangements with their birth family.

Establishing a child's ascertainable rather than expressed wishes is a complex matter in any family case but is particularly difficult in parental alienation cases, given the unusual dynamics. These cases require an in-depth, comprehensive multimodal psychological assessment of the child(ren) and all parental figures and sources of influence (including grandparents and step-parents), with information gathered from all sources cross-referenced and analysed from a longitudinal perspective.

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## Parent–Child Relationships: Alienation vs Neglect

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