

Parenting Time and Child Coping: The Context of Parental Alienation

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ABSTRACT. This study examined whether discrepancies in reported court ordered parenting time and actual parenting time among families that had dissolved (i.e., divorced) was associated with the degree to which children are reported to demonstrate negative coping behaviors. It was hypothesized that (a) parents who were targets of alienating behaviors by the other parent would report having less parenting time than what the courts ordered and (b) children would engage in negative behavioral coping strategies when there were larger discrepancies between parenting time in the divorce decree versus reported parenting time. Data were gathered from surveys and audio-recorded interviews from 70 parents who reported being the targets of parental alienating behaviors. A content analysis was conducted on the interview transcripts to code for the child's behavioral outcomes, as reported by the targeted parent. Results from this study provide information on the extent to which parenting time awarded by family courts can be in conflict with what occurs, and in reality, whether such discrepancies are associated with parent-reported child functioning.

Keywords: parental alienation, gatekeeping, child coping

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Parental alienation is a problem that occurs primarily in the context of child custody disputes. It is characterized by a child displaying disproportionately negative feelings and beliefs towards one parent that do not align with actual experiences the child has had with that parent (Gardner 1999 Kelly & Johnson, 2001). To best understand parental alienation, there must be understanding of differentiation between estrangement and alienation. Estrangement and alienation are both characterized by difficulties in the parent-child relationship. However, estrangement occurs when negative feelings toward and reactions to a parent by a child are justified (such as in cases of parental abuse). With parental alienation, these feelings and behaviors are not due to the experience of abuse or neglect, are disproportionate with what is reported about struggles in that relationship, and are caused by a third party, typically the other parental figure (Harman & Biringen, 2016).

Attitudes of children towards their parents after a divorce fall along a positive-negative continuum. Few children become extremely aligned with one parent while simultaneously rejecting the other (Johnston, 2003). Indeed, a hallmark of children who have been alienated from a parent is “splitting,” where their attitudes towards parental figures are polarized, a feature not seen in estranged children or other children of divorce (Bernet, Gregory, Reay, & Rohner, 2018). There is consensus among mental health professionals that parental alienation exists in many high conflict divorce cases (Bernet & Baker, 2013), such as in contexts with ongoing mistrust of words and actions, verbal abuse, and occasional physical aggression, along with difficulty in communication and cooperation about the children. Interparental conflict is considered high when such features are described and when the conflict continues at least two to three years after the initial separation (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Rand, 1997a; Viljoen, 2013). A child is more likely to feel “caught in the middle” in situations where interparental conflict is high (Buchanan, Maccoby & Dornbusch, 1991). Research demonstrates that approximately 20-25% of children will experience extreme conflict following divorce of their parents (Viljoen, 2013). However, while parental alienation often exists in the context of high-conflict divorce, parental alienation does not occur in all high-conflict situations (Rand, 1997a).

Recent research indicates that parental alienation affects some 22 million families in the United States alone (Harman, Leder-Elder, & Biringen, 2016). Although an international poll has not been conducted, the literature suggests parental alienation is a worldwide phenomenon (e.g., Harman & Biringen, 2016). Parental alienation has been described in over 1,000 publications across 35 countries and 6 continents (Bernet, 2013) and was recently added to the International Classification of Diseases (11th revision, World Health Organization, n.d.). The current study examines whether discrepancies in court ordered versus practiced contact time (i.e., parenting time) between children and the targeted parent due to gatekeeping behaviors of the alienating parent are associated with negative child coping behaviors.

Contact Time with the Targeted Parent

Currently, U.S. family courts base their recommendations for custody and enforcement of parenting time orders on a standard of what is in the child's "best interests." This standard has been criticized as vague and subjective. The needs and best interests of the child are often reported without accuracy and completeness by social workers involved in some high conflict families (Emery, 2005; Weatherall & Duffy, 2008). Some researchers have posited that extensive contact time with the targeted parent (i.e., the parent who is the target of the alienating behaviors) can exacerbate conflict between parents and increase opportunities for the aligned parent, (i.e., the parent employing alienating behaviors) to use the child against the targeted parent (Levy & Chambers, 1981). Consequently, family courts have hesitated to order joint custody in high-conflict situations, typically giving primary custody to the mother due to a gender bias that mothers are better parents than fathers are (Bessette, 2008; Buchanan et al.; 1991; Harman & Biringen, 2016). When a child rejects a parent, family court judges, lawyers, and other legal and mental health professionals often use this sentiment as justification for why the targeted parent should not have parenting time with the child(ren) (Giancarlo & Rottmann, 2015). This justification reflects a failure to translate scientific research on estrangement and parental alienation to practice, since parental rejection is another unique feature of alienated children—estranged children (e.g., victims of maltreatment) rarely reject their abusers (Baker & Schneiderman, 2015; Johnston, Lee, Oleson, & Walters, 2005). For example, children often lie about actions of others, particularly when an adult "instigator" influences the child's statements (Lyon, Malloy, Quas, & Talwar, 2008; Wilson, Smith, & Ross, 2003). Some children also do not hesitate to report observed aggression even though they did not see the event occur, as if the event had been implanted into their memory (Clemente & Padilla-Racero, 2015). These findings underscore the fact that children being alienated from a parent may not make accounts about the targeted parent that are veridical to their actual experience and are used to justify unequal parenting time allocations.

When children exaggerate statements or make statements consistent with claims by the aligned parent (Kelly & Johnston, 2001), understanding the child's "best interests" can challenge mental health professionals and family court officials. Targeted parents are often rejected by their child and frequently struggle to have contact with them (Weir & Sturge, 2006). While some targeted parents may lack parental capabilities such as warmth, empathy, or understanding of the child's viewpoints, the intensity of the child's hatred, anger, rejection, or even fear of the targeted parent is manifested at an unreasonable level (Johnston, 2003; Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Parents who seem uninvolved with their children (due to limited or no contact) often report the alienating parent as engaging in gatekeeping behaviors such as: (a) blocking phone calls, (b) not giving letters sent by the targeted parent to the child, (c) scheduling other activities during their scheduled parenting time, and (d) not informing the targeted parent of important events (Baker, 2006; Baker & Darnall, 2006).

Recent research indicates that unequal parenting time allocation does not promote healthy outcomes for children. Contact with the targeted parent can help children resist the alienating parent's attempts to damage the relationship between the child and the targeted parent and can help children forge positive relationships with both parents (Fabricius & Luecken, 2007; Warshak, 2015). For example, benefits of contact and visitation with a noncustodial parent have been documented for young children (Fabricius & Suh, 2017). Similarly, even among adolescents, frequent contact time with parents is a predictor of relationship closeness (Aquilino, 2006; Fabricius, Sokol, Diaz, & Braver, 2012). A recent meta-analysis supported the conclusion that children who experienced shared parenting with both parents (even in situations where there was interparental conflict or where one parent did not want to share custody) fared better than children residing with only one parent (Nielsen, 2016). Research has also revealed that children had lower levels of internalizing and externalizing problems when living in joint custody situations than did children living with only one parent, even after controlling for parental worry or anxiety and socioeconomic status (Fransson, Turunen, Hjern, Ostberg, & Bergstrom, 2016).

The benefit and value both parents provide in the lives of their child(ren) suggest that both parents should have quality parenting time with them. In cases where there is suboptimal parenting, parenting time can be maintained while implementing parenting interventions (Harman & Biringen, 2016; Kelly & Johnson, 2001). Despite the positive benefits of parenting time with the targeted parent, research evidence indicates that frequency of visitation and other contacts with the targeted parent often decrease over time (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001).

One of the most common behaviors that alienating parents use to damage their relationship between their child(ren) and the targeted parent is interference with contact (Baker & Darnall, 2006), particularly with parenting time. Even in situations where parents are ordered to have shared or equal parenting time with their children, alienating parents often refuse to follow these orders and act as gatekeepers for access to the children. For example, maternal gatekeepers report making decisions about allowing their child's father parenting time based on what *they* think is best for the children and whether they believe the father is competent to care for them (Trinder, 2008). Likewise, a report by the Federal Administration for Children and Families indicates that in a study of nonresidential fathers, more than half offered accounts of maternal gatekeeping behavior ranging from refusing to grant physical access to making frequent last-minute schedule changes. These behaviors often were in response to a father's failure to provide "extra" (i.e., non-mandated) financial support above and beyond child support (Holcomb et al., 2015).

Child Coping in Situations of High-Conflict Divorce and Parental Alienation

Compared to children who are aligned with one parent, children who have affectionate bonds with both parents are reported to show more positive coping strategies, to experience greater psychological health, show less anger, and display greater ability to conceptualize complex situations (Rand, 1997a and 1997b). Children do better developmentally when they have supportive, communicative, sensitive and responsive parents (Hetherington & Stanley-

Hagan, 1999), with clear findings that parents' parenting competence predicts how children will turn out. By contrast, parental maladjustment and continued family conflict after divorce have been found generally detrimental to child well-being (Hetherington, 1979), an outcome characterized in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) as *Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress* (CAPRD; Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016). Children younger than 7 or 8 years of age seem to experience fewer negative outcomes as compared to older children after divorce, with younger children less likely to be angry toward and rejecting of one of their parental figures (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). Slightly older children, that is, between 9 to 10 years of age, are more likely to report intense anger, loneliness, a shaken sense of self identity and sense of self about the future, as well as feelings of being forgotten or even abandoned by one or both parents, compared to younger children of divorce (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976). Somatic symptoms such as headaches and stomachaches are also more likely to be expressed by children at this age (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976). Along with age, gender differences in how children cope with stressful situations have been found. Girls are more likely to reach out for social support or to try problem solving; boys are more likely to rely on avoidant or distracting coping behaviors (Eschenbeck, Kohlmann, & Lohaus, 2007; Marjanovic, Perunicic, & Todorovic, 2010).

Negative outcomes for children are often more severe when children experience parental alienation as opposed to high-conflict divorce without alienation (Rand, 1997b). Children in high interparental-conflict during divorces, which includes parental alienation, report high levels of anxiety, guilt, and secretiveness, along with aggression (Weir & Sturge, 2006). In addition to such challenges, children who experience parental alienation have difficulties in other relationships, such as with peers and authority figures (e.g., teachers, coaches), and may become overly manipulative of others (Kelly & Johnston, 2001; Stahl, 2001). Long-term consequences of experiencing parental alienation include low self-esteem or self-hatred, feelings of betrayal, depression, and drug or alcohol abuse (Baker, 2005; Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Viljoen, 2013). Children experiencing parental alienation are more likely to develop insecure or avoidant attachment styles than are children who do not experience alienation (for a review, see Harman & Biringen, 2016). Adults who have experienced parental alienation as children are more likely to have lack of trust in intimate relationships than are those adults without such experience, and are more likely to divorce and experience parental alienation later as parents (Baker, 2005).

The Present Study

Research shows it is beneficial for children to have contact with both parents (Neilson, 2017), but that the parenting time experienced by the targeted parent may decline over time (Vassiliou & Cartwright, 2001). Children who experience parental alienation show many negative consequences, with such consequences falling along a continuum of severity (Harman & Biringen, 2016). However, research has not yet examined the link between parenting time and severity of the child's negative consequences experienced, or whether violation of court ordered parenting time by an alienating parent impacts negative consequences for children. In this study, we hypothesize that (1) the targeted parent would have less parenting time with their child(ren)

than is stipulated/ordered in the court orders; (2) the majority of children experiencing parental alienation would be described as exhibiting negative behavioral coping behaviors; (3) “discrepant parenting time” (defined as discrepancies between the actual parenting time versus court ordered parenting time) will be associated with more negative and severe child coping behaviors; and (4) the association between discrepant parenting time and negative child outcomes will exist regardless of the targeted parent’s gender, or of the child’s age or gender.

Method

Participants and Procedures

The sample consisted of targeted parents who were interviewed for a larger study on parental alienation. Participants were recruited by posting survey links onto social media pages (e.g., Facebook, Meetup.com, LinkedIn) organized around parental alienation, parenting, single parenting, and family court and alimony legal reform groups. The link was also sent to mental health providers with the request that they share the link with any clients who may have been interested. Most participants were divorced, separated, or never married to their ex-partners; however, one participant was still married to the alienating parent. After completing the initial survey that collected basic demographic information and details about custody and parenting time, respondents were asked to provide an email address if they were interested in being interviewed. The research team then emailed informed consent forms and details about the interview study to parents or step-parents who stated they wanted to be contacted. Consenting participants then completed a 60-90-minute interview with one of five trained interviewers over Skype or Google Hangouts. These interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed. The transcripts were then returned to the participants for them to make any necessary corrections or additions before data analysis.

Of the 79 participants who were interviewed, nine were excluded because they were with step-parents who did not have the right to legal parenting time with their step-children ($n=4$), because the audio recording was too poor to decipher what was said, or because there was too little information provided about child coping ($n = 5$). Transcripts of interviews with 43 fathers and 27 mothers was the final sample to be analyzed.

In the interviews, targeted parents described their experiences with parental alienation and were asked to specifically explain their court ordered parenting time, the parenting time they were able to exercise, and to provide examples of how they believed their children were coping with parental alienating behaviors. Details about specific questions are provided in description of the measures (below). The transcripts were coded by two trained master’s level and advanced undergraduate students who met several times over several weeks to ensure reliability. Interrater reliabilities ranged from 57.14% to 85.71% exact agreement and coders met to discuss and clarify discrepancies.

Parents were also asked to describe their children's ages. The parents reported their children as being between the ages of 2 and 32 years (four cases were unknown), $M = 13.98$ years, $SD = 5.67$ years; there were 29 male (41.4%) and 41 female (58.6%) children. In cases where there were multiple children in the family, the interview was coded for the child the parent discussed as having the most severe parental alienation. If two or more children were discussed as being severely alienated, the child described as having the most severe behavioral outcomes was used for analysis. Behaviors involving harm to oneself, others, or property were considered the most severe, followed by internalizing (i.e. depression or anxiety symptoms) or externalizing (i.e. acting out in class, hateful speech) behaviors that impacted the child's functioning. When multiple children were described as being equally alienated and had severe behavioral outcomes, coping behaviors of the oldest child were coded. Coders were instructed to code the child's behaviors in the context of their age so that codes could accurately depict the child coping despite the wide range of child ages. Table 1 shows demographics of participants in the present study.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Demographic Variables, N = 70

Variable	N	%
Parental Role		
Father	43	61.4%
Mother	27	38.6%
Child Gender		
Male	29	41.4%
Female	41	58.6%
Child Age		
2 – 4 years	3	4.3%
5 – 7 years	6	8.7%
8 – 10 years	7	10.0%
11 – 13 years	15	21.5%
14 – 16 years	17	24.0%

17 – 19 years	9	12.9%
20 – 22 years	4	5.7%
23 years or older	5	7.1%
Missing	4	5.7%

Measures

The Parental Alienation Interview (PAI). The interview developed by Harman and Biringen (2016) focused on a broad range of topics including the children’s current custody and living situations, changes in the custody and living situations since separation and divorce, specific memories of experiences about parental alienation, involvement of other individuals in the alienation (family members, neighbors, friends), involvement of systems (the school, mental health, and legal), mental health and coping behaviors of the targeted parent, perceived motivation and consciousness of the alienating parent’s actions, and perceived coping behaviors of children. While the coding emphasized interviewee responses to specific questions (see below), each interview was also evaluated holistically in case coping strategies and other details were described in the context of other topics.

Parenting Time. Parenting time was measured by coding participants’ answers regarding current custody and living situations (in cases where there were multiple children, see participants and procedures section above) as court ordered/stipulated at the start of the separation or divorce, and how the custody and living situations had changed over time. Information about court awarded and received parenting time were coded from two of the interview questions. Specifically, these questions asked, “Can you briefly describe the current custody or living situation with your children?” and “How did the custody situation change, if at all, after your divorce?” To establish if there was a difference between actual and court awarded parenting time (that is, if there was discrepant parenting time), a dummy code of 1 was assigned when actual parenting time as less than what was ordered, and 2 was assigned for cases where there was a match. There were no cases where parents reported more actual time than was ordered by the court. Although some interviews indicated many changes over long periods of time for parents in their parenting plans (e.g., 20 years), there were others that had only been separated only a few months or years. To compare across interviews, codes were assigned for two-time points: the parenting time shortly after the interviewee’s court order and then again at the time of the interview. In situations where children were over 18 years old, the amount of parenting time the targeted parent received with the child shortly before they reached the age of majority was used. As each court order is unique, adherence to the custody order was assessed based on the initial custody order. For example, if the custody order stated the child was to be with each parent 50% of the time but the parent reported they only saw their child two days each

week, this was coded as non-adherence to the court order because the parent received less time with their child than the order described. Another parent might have a court order stating they were to have their child two days per week, so if they reported seeing their child two days each week, this was coded as adherence because the actual reported time matched the court order. Data were missing for 15 transcripts between the court awarded time and the received parenting time shortly after the order. In addition, 11 transcripts lacked information about court awarded time and current received parenting time. This missing information often occurred because the interview script did not specifically address parenting time at each time point, but more broadly asked about how parenting time or custody had changed (if at all) over time. Most commonly in situations of missing data, the participant either did not speak to, or provided unclear answers regarding, at least one of the time points.

Current amount of parenting time was coded using a 5-point scale based on the percentage of parenting time the targeted parent was experiencing. Numeric codes for this scale were 1 = no contact with children, 2 = 1-19% of parenting time, 3 = 20-29% of parenting time, 4 = 30-39% of parenting time, and 5 = 40% or more of parenting time (shared parenting). In six cases there was not enough information to do the calculation. Few parents described shared parenting arrangements ($n = 14$).

Behavioral Coping. Behavioral coping was primarily identified from the interview question, “How specifically do you see your child coping with the alienation?” Coping behaviors described in other parts of the interview were also coded. In three transcripts, not enough information was provided to code for child coping. In two of these cases, this was because the parent had no contact with their child and had not heard anything from other people about their child. Healthy behaviors, which were given a dummy code of 1, included evidence of positive functioning such as positive peer relationships, success in academic or extracurricular activities, expression of feelings, use of mental health services or other supports, maintaining positive relationships with both parents, etc. An example of one parent’s description of a child with healthy coping behaviors was that of a child starting to become more confident after being shy as a younger child. Unhealthy behaviors were given a dummy code of 0 and included any behaviors that were harmful to oneself (i.e., self-harm, suicide attempts, disordered eating, use of drugs), harmful to others (i.e., physical aggression or fighting), or destructive to property (i.e., vandalism). Unhealthy behaviors also included descriptions of mental health diagnoses or symptoms and failure to maintain positive peer or romantic relationships. An example of a parent’s description of their child’s unhealthy coping behaviors was that of a child who had been suspended for five days after a physical fight, and who later punched a trashcan resulting in an injury that required stitches. In situations with more moderate or mixed coping behaviors, unhealthy codes were given when coping behaviors seemed to have negative impact on the child’s wellbeing. Since the amount of detail provided by the parents varied considerably, total numbers of outcomes were not used because this could potentially distort or underrepresent severity of the behavioral outcomes.

Results

The first hypothesis was that when they were the targets of parental alienation, parents would report discrepancies in parenting time between what was awarded or ordered by the courts and what they were able to exercise, resulting in less actual time with their children than what they were legally entitled to. The second hypothesis was that the majority of children experiencing parental alienation would have negative behavioral coping mechanisms. The last two hypotheses were that children would be reported as having worse behavioral coping strategies when there was a discrepancy in actual and ordered parenting time with the targeted parent and that the behavioral coping of the child would be unhealthy regardless of the gender of the parent, the gender of the child, or the age of the child.

To test the first hypothesis, percentages of parents having equal or less parenting time in comparison to the court order were calculated (there were no cases in which a parent had more time than was ordered). First, percentages were calculated for differences between court awarded parenting time and parenting time received shortly after the court order. Since 15 transcripts had missing information that was necessary to calculate the difference, percentages were based on codes from 55 transcripts. Data indicated that 29.1% of targeted parents unable to exercise their parenting time as court ordered shortly after their divorce from the alienating parent.

The percentage of parents reporting discrepancies between actual and ordered parenting time at the time of the interview were then calculated. Of the 70 transcripts, 11 did not have enough information to make this calculation. The percentage of targeted parents who had less parenting time than what was ordered increased to nearly the same percentage of parents who had the same ordered parenting time initially: 69.5% of the target parents had less parenting time than what was stipulated in their court orders. Only 30.5% of the targeted parents had parenting time equal to the court order at the time of their interview. Figure 1 shows the differences in parenting time.

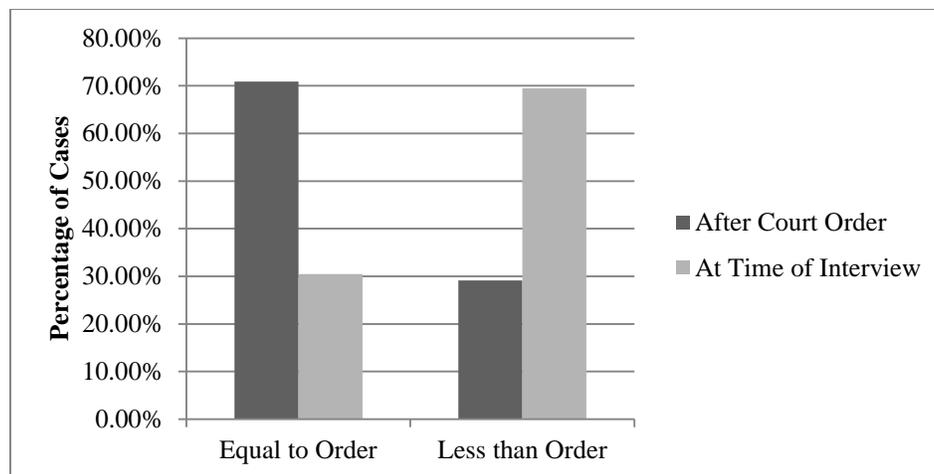


Figure 1. Discrepancies in Parenting Time from Court Order

A chi-square test of independence was used to test whether there were more unhealthy coping behaviors described by targeted parents who had interference with their parenting time than those who did not. Since there were only two cases in which parenting time changed from non-adherence to adherence, and only one of these cases was able to be coded for child coping, this group was not included in the analysis. The sample size for this analysis was 50 because 20 of the transcripts were not able to be coded for at least one variable needed in this analysis. Results indicated there were not statistically significant differences in the likelihood of unhealthy coping behaviors between the different groups, $\chi^2(2) = 2.40, p = .30$ (see Table 2). Therefore, we did not find that changes in adherence to court orders over time were significantly related to child coping behaviors.

Table 2. Chi-Square Analysis of Prevalence of Healthy or Unhealthy Coping among Targeted Parents Access to Children Over Time (N = 56)

Variable	N	Parenting Time			χ^2
		Continued Adherence	Adherence to Non-Adherence	Non-Adherence to Non-Adherence	
Child Coping					2.40
Healthy	40	5	3	2	
Unhealthy	10	10	19	11	
Totals	50	15	22	13	

Note: * $p < .05$

To test the second hypothesis, the percentage of children having healthy and unhealthy coping behaviors was calculated. Of the 70 transcripts, three did not provide information about coping behaviors of the children involved. The codes indicated that 22.4% of the children showed primarily positive coping strategies, while 77.6% of the children displayed primarily negative coping behaviors.

To test the third hypothesis, a Chi-square test of independence was conducted again to test whether there were differences in positive and negative coping strategies described by

targeted parents who had equal or less parenting time than what was court ordered. We found support for our hypothesis, in that parents who experienced less parenting time than what was ordered by the court were more likely to have reported their children as having unhealthy coping behaviors than did those parents who had the same parenting time as what was ordered, $\chi^2(1, 56) = 4.42, p < .05$. The Phi-coefficient indicated that there was a moderate effect size, $\phi = .28, p < .05$ (Cohen, 1988; see Table 3).

Table 3. Chi-Square Analysis of Prevalence of Healthy or Unhealthy Coping among Targeted Parents with Parenting Time Equal to or Discrepant to the Court Awarded Time (N = 56)

Variable	N	Parenting Time		χ^2
		Equal	Less	
Child Coping				4.41*
Healthy	13	7	6	
Unhealthy	43	10	33	
Totals	56	17	39	

*Note: *p < .05*

Next, a 2-step logistic regression was performed to test the fourth hypothesis that effects of parenting time on coping would exist above and beyond other potential predictors such as parent gender, child gender, and child age. This analysis was performed using 58 cases, as 12 lacked information for at least one of the variables. In the first step, percentage of received parenting time was entered as the predictor. In the second step, percentage of received parenting time, parent gender, child gender, and child age were entered as predictors. The chi-square test in the first step indicated the model was a good fit for the data, $\chi^2(1) = 9.13, p < .01$, indicating that percentage of parenting time reliably distinguished between healthy and unhealthy coping behaviors in children ($B = .60, SE = .21; OR = 1.81$). The odds for children to have healthier coping were 81% greater for each increased unit of parenting time.

Results from a test of the model in the second step against a constant only model were also significant and showed improvement from the first model, $\chi^2(4) = 14.86, p < .001$, only percentage of experienced parenting time ($B = 0.66, SE = 0.27$) and child age ($B = -0.30, SE =$

0.27) made a significant contribution to the prediction of healthy child coping, $p < .01$. The odds of children having healthier coping behaviors were 26% greater for each year decrease in child age ($OR = 0.74$). Younger children were described as coping in a healthier way than did older children. Similarly, for percentage of experienced parenting time, the odds for children having healthier coping behaviors were 94% greater for each unit of parenting time increase ($OR = 1.94$; see Table 4). Therefore, the amount of parenting time a targeted parent had with their child was positively associated with healthy child coping, even after controlling for other contributing factors to the model such as age and gender of the child.

Table 4. Summary of Logistic Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting the Child Coping Behaviors ($N = 58$)

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>OR</i>
Parenting Time	.66*	.27	1.94
Parent Gender	.63	.94	1.88
Child Gender	-1.48	1.01	.228
Child Age	-3.03*	.116	.738
Constant	.62	1.87	1.85

Note: $\chi^2(4, 58) = 14.862, p < .001$

* $p < .01$

Discussion

The main goal of the present study was to understand the impact of contact interference on child coping in families affected by parental alienation. Specifically, we examined how parenting time violations in which there were discrepancies in ordered versus actual parenting time affected behavioral coping of children, and whether age and gender of the child and parent matter. The first hypothesis, that targeted parents would not be able to exercise as much parenting time as what was directed by court order, was supported. After the initial court order, most of the targeted parents had parenting time that matched what was awarded to them. However, by the time of the interview, most parents were not receiving the amount of parenting

time with their children they were ordered to have due to interference from the alienating parent. These gatekeeping behaviors were not the result of a court order or external agency (e.g., child protection services) that deemed the targeted parent an unfit parent. Instead, they were typically unilateral interference from the parent or a result of the alienating parent's influence on the child to refuse or minimize contact. In either case, restriction of parenting time without court order is a violation of the targeted parent's rights (and the rights of the child to both parents) and is an alienating behavior (Baker & Darnall, 2006). No significant differences in child coping were found when changes in adherence to court orders over time were examined. Non-adherence to the court order at any time, regardless of when the reduction in parenting time occurred, is related to unhealthy coping in children. We found support for the second hypothesis, in that the majority of the targeted parent's children were described as relying (for the most part) on unhealthy coping mechanisms.

The third and fourth hypotheses that children would have worse behavioral coping strategies when they see the targeted parent less than is stipulated by the court order, regardless of age and gender of the child and parent, were supported. Results also indicated that the odds of a child showing negative coping behaviors were greater when parents had less parenting time with them, even when controlling for effects of parent gender, child gender, and child age. These results support findings of previous research (see Harman & Biringen, 2016 for a review) that it may be beneficial for children to have significant and quality amounts of contact with both parents after a divorce, particularly when a parent engages in parental alienating behaviors (Neilson, 2017). Older children were also found to have greater odds of having negative coping behaviors than did younger children. This finding may be explained by how coping strategies were coded, as older children may be more likely to engage in externalizing behaviors and are typically more involved in school, extracurricular, or peer relationships where negative behaviors may be more noticeable than they are among younger children.

For example, one older child who displayed negative coping behaviors was described as previously being very engaged in band and enjoying playing his instrument, but progressing to almost being kicked out of the activity due to aggressive behavior he demonstrated in other areas. By contrast, a child who showed healthier coping behaviors was described as growing in confidence, being outgoing, and finding humor in situations even when she could tell that her parents were not getting along. Similarly, one of the children in a post-divorce family was using healthy coping strategies (e.g., described as making an active effort to keep each parent separate in his mind and heart and enjoying his time with both), whereas the other child using a negative coping strategy was often stating things that never happened, at least in the targeted parent's descriptions (e.g., "I think you probably hit me when I was little").

Limitations

In the current study, we only were able to analyze the self-reported experiences of the targeted parents. Data from the children were not available, nor was there data from the other parent who was described as the alienator by the targeted parent. The targeted parent may have engaged in behaviors that resulted in estrangement from their children, rather than alienation. However, we believe this possibility is unlikely because the parent's experiences aligned closely to that of many other researcher's reports of parental alienation (e.g., Baker & Darnall, 2006) and many parents provided supporting evidence for their experience (e.g., court documents, psychological reports). Therefore, we believe this sample of targeted parents is in fact being alienated and is not estranged from their children. Another limitation is that some parents' ability to describe the coping behaviors of their children was limited because they had little or no contact with their children. Indeed, many parents reported not having seen their children in several years and had only heard about how their children were coping from other siblings or adults, such as teachers. Had the parents had more contact with their children, we believe support for our hypotheses would be even stronger.

Tests of the hypotheses reported in this paper were restricted to responses given as part of a larger study on parental alienation. Therefore, there were limitations to the data that we could utilize in the current set of analyses. Since the primary intent was to examine the problem more broadly, there was wide variability in the level of detail that parents provided about how their children were perceived to be coping. Consequently, more intensive coding could not be conducted on severity of outcomes or numbers of behaviors reported for the child. This variability also limited our ability to conduct qualitative analysis of the responses, since most of the reports about child coping contained only a few examples of children's behaviors and outcomes. Had further probing on this question been part of the interview protocol, the coding team could have analyzed more material to provide a more nuanced qualitative analysis.

Implications

The present study provided evidence that the majority of targeted parents in our sample are receiving less parenting time than the courts awarded them due to interference from the alienating parent. The research also revealed that most children described by targeted parents are using predominantly unhealthy coping mechanisms. Similarly, the less time the targeted parent had with their child, the greater the odds that their child was described as displaying primarily unhealthy coping behaviors.

Although it was found that the amount of parenting time the targeted parent experienced was associated with severity of a child's coping behaviors, it is still important to investigate other factors that may contribute to these outcomes. These results provide implications for future research about the impact of parental alienation and how to protect children. While many factors influence child welfare in situations of parental alienation, results of this study show that maintaining and enforcing parenting time with the targeted parent is a protective factor for a child's emotional health.

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