

Change for Children

A network of leading experts on Parental Alienation and Child Psychological Abuse

Domestic Abuse Bill 2021 Briefing: House of Lords Committee Stage

Parental Alienation

Produced by:

Dr Jennifer Murray BSc (hons), D Clin Psych, C Psycholⁱ,
Hilary Underwood, LLB (hons)ⁱⁱ,
Brian Ludmerⁱⁱⁱ,
Philip Marcus LL.M.^{iv}

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1. Background

- 1.1 At the Second Reading of the Domestic Abuse Bill held on Tuesday 5 January 2021, the issue of parental alienation arose in the speeches made by a number of peers in two forms.
- 1.2 Some peers proposed that parental alienation should be included formally in the Bill, as it is a form of domestic abuse. Others expressed the view that parental alienation, if it existed at all, was deliberately and systematically used by abusive fathers in the context of the Family Courts to commit further abuse against the mother who was protecting her children.
- 1.3 This short briefing paper, produced by a range of international and UK experts in several professional fields after consultation with other professionals and stakeholders, sets out:
 - What parental alienation is and why it is a form of both domestic abuse and child psychological abuse, and,
 - Why suggestions that it does not exist and/or that it has no scientific foundation and/or that it is systematically used by abusive fathers are unfounded.
- 1.4 We hope that this information is useful to peers when the subject is raised at the Committee Stage, and, it is hoped, of use more widely.

2. Executive Summary

- 2.1 Parental alienation is a description of an array of behaviours, processes and outcomes as *“when a child’s resistance or hostility towards one parent is not justified and is the result of psychological manipulation [through a range of abusive behaviours] by the other parent.”*
- 2.2 It is both child psychological abuse and domestic abuse, with the latter clearly being coercive and controlling behaviour. Fathers and mothers, and also other family members can be and are perpetrators and victims; the child is always the victim.

- 2.3 There is a wide range of alienating behaviours, which may occur at the same time as other forms of domestic abuse against a background of parental disputes and disorders, and the inability of one or both of the parents to work to restructure the family in a healthy manner after separation.
 - 2.4 Some writings on parental alienation in the UK and elsewhere are flawed and biased, and work against recognising and supporting those mothers, fathers, grandparents and children who are victims of parental alienation.
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3. Parental Alienation

- 3.1 There is much debate on a single definition for parental alienation, but it is simpler to understand and describe it as a range of abusive behaviours which are both child abuse and domestic abuse.
- 3.2 Parental alienation is therefore a descriptive term that refers to a range of abusive behaviours, the process that is undertaken and the outcome – it is not a diagnostic label.
- 3.3 It affects both the children who are victims of parental alienation and the alienated parent (sometimes called the targeted parent).

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- 3.4 In the context of abusive behaviour against children, parental alienation, according to the definition of parental alienation used by CAF/CASS is “*when a child’s resistance or hostility towards one parent is not justified and is the result of psychological manipulation [through a range of abusive behaviours] by the other parent* (We add the insertion, to make clear that there is a range of abusive behaviours). The behaviour may be unintentional, in the sense that the alienating parent is unaware of the likely results, but when identified such behaviour must be recognized and remedied.
- 3.5 Both parents are responsible for the healthy development of their child, including promoting a proper loving relationship, which includes frequent regular contact, between the child and both parents and their extended families. This is the rule of nature, and the use of the term "pro-contact culture" by Dr Adrienne Barnett and others to deny it is against the interests of children. Alienation adversely affects the psychological development of the child, in that it prevents a natural, healthy bond and relationship with a parent.
- 3.6 Parental alienation usually develops when parents are engaged in separation or divorce and the child allies strongly with one parent (the ‘preferred parent’ or ‘alienating parent’) and rejects a formerly healthy relationship with the other parent (the ‘alienated parent’), without legitimate justification connected to the welfare of the child. There are cases in which the abusive behaviour of one of the parents is so extreme that a complete rupture of the relationship with the child is justified, but these cases are very rare.
- 3.7 The impact on a child’s psychological development results from the behaviour of the alienating parent. This child, who has been convinced that one of the parents is bad or violent or unworthy, and has not observed normative parenting, may believe that s/he him/herself is in some way unworthy, having internalised the denigration of that parent,

who is part of the child. This may lead to difficulty in forming relationships and bonds with partners and/or with her/his children.

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- 3.8 Using the description in paragraph 3.4, parental alienation is a form of domestic abuse against the alienated parent, because the abusive behaviours, process and outcomes are aligned with the coercive and controlling behaviours in the Serious Crime Act 2015.
- 3.9 This often takes place in the same context as described in 3.6 when parents are engaged in a separation or divorce, often but not always within the Family Court setting.
- 3.10 It also important to note that within proceedings following separation in the family courts, false allegations of domestic abuse and/or parental alienation are sometimes made. Each allegation must be carefully examined by the court. Sometimes there is both psychological abuse by alienation and physical or sexual abuse in the same family. There is no reliable evidence (as opposed to anecdotes by parents who regard court decisions as being wrong) that men or women are more likely to raise false allegations or that courts systematically prefer fathers over mothers or vice-versa, or that allegations of one kind of abuse trump allegations of abuse of other types. There are rare cases in which abuse of a child is so egregious as to prohibit any form of contact between the child and the perpetrator, but it is unconscionable that the mere allegation of abuse should preclude contact of any kind.
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4. Alienating Behaviours and Impact

- 4.1 It is relevant and beneficial to explore ‘alienating behaviours’. These behaviours, which are gender neutral, have been observed by mental health professionals, family law judges and lawyers, across the UK and the world for many decades. There are hundreds of articles, book chapters and other pieces of scientific descriptive, qualitative and quantitative research around the phenomena, which have appeared in peer-reviewed publications.
- 4.2 These behaviours are, therefore, both:
- the observable and measurable evidence within families of the process (and therefore evidence that Parental alienation exists, whichever descriptive term one prefers to use);
 - the cause of the weaponising of children and the emotional /psychological damage and harm to children, hence a form of domestic abuse/family violence/child abuse.
- 4.3 Children who are exposed to parental conflict on a regular basis are likely to suffer emotional harm. The fact that the parents are separated does not make the impact of harm any less concerning. It is not only overt violent and aggressive dynamics that impact negatively on child development; hostility and conflict between parents that is frequent, intense and unresolved can also have an adverse impact, creating toxic stress within the child which will manifest over time, as psychological disturbances and even psychiatric illness. This is an Adverse Childhood Event (ACE), and is a public health issue of deep importance. The longer the child is without contact with a parent, the deeper the damage; this means that allegations of interference with child-parent contact must be dealt with swiftly, so as to prevent exacerbation. Recognizing and defining parental alienation as child and domestic abuse will give the courts and child welfare authorities the powers needed to intervene immediately.

4.4 The range of alienating behaviours, which may involve wider family members, especially grandparents, as well as parents, include triangulation – making the child align with one of the parents and reject the other. The abuse, of the child and of the parent and his family, consists of a pattern of behaviours, sometimes of different kinds. These are some examples:

- Creating a false narrative by telling the child falsehoods and/or distorting the child's memories about the alienated parent's behaviour
- Constantly painting the alienated parent in a negative light to the child without foundation
- Providing false information to third parties to harm the alienated parent
- Telling the child the alienated parent is coming to pick them up, knowing that is not true, and making the child wait for hours for a parent who does not come
- Pressuring the child to feel allegiance/loyalty to them, for example, telling the child they will not love them anymore if they 'choose' the alienated parent
- Pressuring/rewarding the child to reject the alienated parent or to be defiant, violent or disruptive towards the alienated parent, and/or sanctioning the child for non-compliance with the wishes of the alienating parent
- Coaching and coercing the children to say or write negative or false things about the alienated parent to Cafcass reporters and authorities
- Treating the child like a best friend, seeking comfort from the child when feeling upset, placing the child in the middle as communicator and mediator, exposing the child to details of legal proceedings (Parentification or Adultification)
- Allowing the child to refuse contact with a parent on the basis of a trivial or perceived problem

4.5 The impact on the alienated parent includes:

- The fear of no longer being allowed to have a meaningful relationship with the children and the fear of never seeing them again, leading to acute psychological and emotional harm
- The psychological damage of unwanted rejection and through having the child turn against the parent and withhold affection,
- The social stigma of being recognised as a “rejected” parent
- Increased levels of anxiety and depression; in the more severe cases, alienated parents have been known to take their own lives, or attempt to do so.
- The financial burden of having to seek continual legal redress to maintain contact and to prove that Parental alienation is taking place
- Poor performance at work or studies, and disruption of personal life and relationships, arising from ambiguous loss

5. **Dr Adrienne Barnett's Writings**

5.1 As stated, there is a large body of published academic and professional research on Parental alienation and alienating behaviours in the UK, USA and across the world. The Center for Knowledge Management at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in the USA has over one thousand papers, book chapters and other resources pertaining to parental alienation.

- 5.2 The writings of Dr Adrienne Barnett, who was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice to create a literature review, have formed the basis of briefings to peers and a range of other charities and commentators.
- 5.3 Analysis of these writings, which conclude that parental alienation “*is not an equal counterpart to domestic abuse, it is a means of obscuring domestic abuse, and should be recognised as such*” shows that they are based on selective unscientific methodology and reveal bias and other flaws. They also assume that court decisions which accept fathers' claims of parental alienation or reject mothers' allegations of abuse are ipso facto wrong. The gender agenda also acts against women who are related to the alienated father, who are affected by the alienation of the child.
- 5.4 The voices of male victims of domestic abuse and parental alienation were not included in the research nor the literature review itself. Research of cases featured female victims and male perpetrators. This one-sided view can be seen through the review by the reference to mothers and not parents.
- 5.5 The underlying theme of these writings is that when fathers claim they are victims of parental alienation, their claims are all mendacious and are intended as a means of carrying out further abuse on the mother. But the writings do not even accept the possibility that allegations by a mother of domestic abuse, or of PA, which may be no less common than allegations by fathers, may be untrue. There is no evidence that men are more likely than women to manipulate the system by making false allegations, or vice-versa, and judicial experience shows no differences. Courts make their decisions on the basis of the totality of evidence, in the best interests of the child.
- 5.6 It is a matter of serious concern if such non-inclusive, unscientific, one-sided writings are taken, by the political and the justice community, to be to be academically valid and conclusive research.

6. Case Study: In the words of an alienated father.

The process of traumatisation and alienation starts in the family home... Control of children by rewarding for bad behaviour, gifts, physical isolation, exclusion from meals and shopping trips, school pick-ups intercepted, removal from any combined activities or tasks...

The process of alienation out of the house... Unresolved grief, the day-to-day pain of not seeing your children, not being ‘allowed’ to be in your own home... The excuses; "not available", "not convenient", "they are busy", "they are too tired... The criticism; you didn't take them to the park, you upset them, the lies...

The end-game... They don't want to see you, they are suffering from stress, anxiety, PTSD, fear; the absurdity of being frightened by their once loved parent... The communication channels continually eroded, monitored, denial of privacy, landline disconnection, mobile blocking, WhatsApp blocking, robot replies by email, written by ‘taken’ children. Returned birthday and Christmas presents... No thank you cards, or thank calls, or thank you emails, savagely ungracious behaviour... No birthday cards received, no Father's Day cards received,

Father's Day the hardest day of the year, acute loneliness and re-alienation by society. The pain of being erased...

The realisation that not only have your children been abducted but their minds have been abducted too.

7 Conclusion

- 7.1 The consensus, among the vast majority of academic researchers, practitioners in the mental health professions and judicial officers around the world, is that parental alienation is a form of child psychological abuse and of domestic abuse; that its effects on children are severe and last into adulthood; that its effects on alienated parents are devastating; and that there is no statistically significant difference between women and men as perpetrators and victims.
- 7.2 There can be no doubt that judicial decisions in cases involving children must take account of all aspects of the family dynamic, including all types of abuse. There is a need for qualified professionals to assist the court in assessing whether there is abuse, and if so its severity and how it should affect child-parent residence and contact arrangements.
- 7.3 The attempt to exclude parental alienation from consideration as a form of domestic abuse and child abuse has no foundation and should be resisted.
- 7.4 Parental alienation should be included in the Domestic Abuse Bill as a form of domestic abuse.

For further information please contact Dr Jennifer Murray: Jennymurray@berkshirepsychology.co.uk

Produced by:

Dr Jennifer Murray BSc (hons), D Clin Psych, C Psychol,
Hilary Underwood, LLB (hons),
Brian Ludmer,
Philip Marcus LL.M.

ⁱ Dr Jenny Murray, BSc (hons), D Clin Psych, C Psychol. is a Clinical Psychologist working in the NHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service) and private practice (Berkshire Psychology). She is a certified expert witness assisting Family Courts in private law and public law proceedings since 2010.
Jennymurray@berkshirepsychology.co.uk

ⁱⁱ Hilary Underwood LLB (hons) has been a practising solicitor in the UK since 1999. She specialises in family law with particular experience within the field of complex children matters, parental alienation issues/emotional abuse of children/relational trauma and false allegations <https://www.linkedin.com/in/hilary-underwood-98b18939/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Brian Ludmer is a lawyer who practices in Canada and consults worldwide on parental alienation cases
brian@ludmerlaw.com

^{iv} Philip Marcus. LL.M. is a retired Judge of the Family Court in Jerusalem, Israel, who has published widely on Family Law, Family Courts and prevention of child-parent contact problems including parental alienation
www.philip-marcus.com