

Parental Alienation (1 of 7)

Understanding Parental Alienating Behaviours (PABs)

Important Definitions

Before reviewing the following tip sheets, it is **essential** to understand key definitions related to **Parental Alienating Behaviours (PABs)**. These concepts provide a foundation for recognising and addressing alienation dynamics in family law and psychological assessments.

What Are Parental Alienating Behaviours (PABs)?

PABs are **deliberate actions** by one parent that contribute to a child's **unjustified rejection** of the other parent. These behaviours can **cause significant emotional harm** and interfere with a child's ability to maintain a healthy relationship with both parents.

Parental Alienation is the **outcome** of these behaviours, where a child **who previously had a positive bond** with a parent begins expressing **unwarranted negativity** towards them.

Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) vs. PABs

Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) was an early concept introduced by Richard Gardner, focusing on the child's behaviour as the defining feature of alienation. This framework was highly controversial and was not accepted by major psychological organisations because:

- Lack of Scientific Recognition – PAS was never included in the DSM or ICD due to insufficient evidence.
- Misplaced Focus – It placed emphasis on the child's behaviour rather than the parent's actions.
- Risk of Misuse – It was sometimes used in court to dismiss legitimate concerns of abuse or neglect.

Parental Alienating Behaviours (PABs) represent a modern, evidence-based approach. Rather than focusing on the child's responses, PABs assess the specific actions of the alienating parent and their impact.

Research over the past two decades has explored the various forms PABs can take, their impact on children's well-being, and the development of effective intervention strategies.

Targeted Parent vs. Alienated Parent

The term **Targeted Parent** is preferred over **alienated parent** because it highlights that these behaviours are deliberate actions aimed at damaging the child's relationship with one parent.

This terminology aligns with how other forms of abuse or harassment are described—emphasising the intentional nature of these behaviours rather than framing the issue as an inherent problem within the child.

Key Considerations

- PABs are **specific, observable actions** that may lead to a child's **unjustified rejection** of a parent.
- Unlike PAS, modern research recognises that alienation results from a parent's influence, rather than an internal psychological disorder in the child.
- Assessing PABs provides professionals with a structured approach to evaluate family dynamics and develop appropriate interventions.

Parental Alienation – What It Is, What It Isn't (2 of 7)

A Legal and Psychological Reality – But Not a Syndrome

What Are Parental Alienating Behaviours (PAB)?

- **Parental alienation** occurs when one parent's behaviours contribute to a child's **unjustified rejection or vilification** of the other parent. These **Parental Alienating Behaviours** can significantly damage the child's relationship with the **Targeted Parent** and impact their overall well-being. Parental alienation is the outcome of these behaviours, where a child—despite having previously had a positive relationship with the rejected parent—expresses unjustified negativity or hostility towards them.
- This behaviour pattern is a **complex family dynamic, not an individual mental health disorder**. It is essential to differentiate these behaviours from cases where a child's **estrangement is a justified response** to abuse, neglect, or other legitimate safety concerns.

Key Factor	Parental Alienating Behaviours	Justified Estrangement	Other Influences (Attachment Issues, Parental Conflict, Peer Influence, etc.)
Reason for rejection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Driven by the alienating parent's influence, not by the child's own independent experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on the child's own direct experiences of abuse, neglect, or parental harm. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can result from developmental attachment difficulties, exposure to conflict, or outside influences (e.g., extended family, new partners, peers).
Child's perception of rejected parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Absolute rejection—child views the alienated parent as "all bad" with no redeeming qualities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child may have nuanced feelings—can acknowledge both positive and negative aspects of the estranged parent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May show situational or mixed emotions, fluctuating between positive and negative views depending on circumstances.
Parental behaviours involved	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alienating parent reinforces rejection, interferes with contact, or portrays the targeted parent as unsafe without evidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejected parent has demonstrated harmful behaviours, leading to the child's own decision to withdraw. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-conflict parental dynamics may unintentionally pressure the child to take sides.
Child's emotional response	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lacks guilt or ambivalence about rejecting the targeted parent; rejection appears rigid and extreme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child may express fear, anxiety, or anger, but typically still has emotional complexity regarding the estranged parent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May feel conflicted, pressured, or confused, with shifting loyalty depending on context.
Consistency of rejection across settings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejection of the targeted parent is global and persistent—child avoids all contact, even in neutral settings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child's reaction may be situational—may still seek out the estranged parent when feeling safe or in distress. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rejection may be inconsistent, influenced by changing external circumstances (e.g., living arrangements, family dynamics, friendships, etc.).
Influence of the favoured parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favoured parent may encourage rejection, subtly or overtly, and discourage contact. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favoured parent may encourage a relationship, but child refuses due to their own negative experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental conflict, negative narratives, or outside influences may affect the child's views.
Reunification prospects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Child resists reunification efforts, even with court-ordered therapy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reunification is possible with appropriate interventions addressing past harm. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship may improve with parenting interventions, reduced conflict, or therapy.

Why This Matters in Legal Cases

- **Misidentification of Parental Alienating Behaviours** can lead to **inappropriate custody recommendations**.
- **False claims of Parental Alienating Behaviours** can **discredit legitimate concerns about abuse**.
- **Psychologists and courts must apply a forensic, evidence-based lens** to distinguish Parental Alienating Behaviours from other causes of parental rejection.

Parental Alienation – The Controversy Explained (3 of 7)

Alienating Behaviours: Do They Exist? Addressing the Debate

Common Challenges to PABs and Why They Do Not Stand Up

While PABs are widely discussed in family law and forensic psychology, they have also faced significant criticism. Below is a detailed breakdown of the major objections raised against PABs and the scientifically grounded counterarguments.

Challenge to PABs

1. PA is not a recognised mental health disorder in the DSM-5-TR or ICD-11.
2. Children reject parents for valid reasons, not due to alienating behaviours.
3. There is no universal definition of PA.
4. PA is a legal strategy used to undermine abuse claims.
5. PA disproportionately targets mothers.
6. Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) was discredited.
7. No "gold standard" test for PA exists.
8. PA is not universally accepted by courts.
9. PA claims are difficult to prove.
10. PA is a theory, not an empirical fact.
11. Courts misuse PA to remove children from protective parents.
12. PA research is biased and lacks scientific credibility.
13. PABs are not recognised as a form of child abuse.
14. PA interventions (e.g., reunification programs) are coercive and harmful.
15. Children who reject a parent always know what's best for them.

Counterpoint

- Correct, but irrelevant. PA is a family dynamic, not a psychiatric diagnosis. Courts deal with non-diagnostic concepts all the time (e.g., coercive control, family violence, psychological abuse).
- True in cases of justified estrangement (e.g., abuse, neglect). However, PA occurs when a child rejects a parent without legitimate cause.
- PA is a broad concept like "family violence" or "psychological abuse." The absence of a single definition does not mean it does not exist.
- False claims do occur, just as false abuse claims exist. Courts must rely on evidence-based assessments to determine credibility.
- While early research focused on mothers as alienators, current studies show both parents engage in PABs. Gender biases should not prevent legitimate PA assessments.
- Correct. PAS (as proposed by Gardner) had methodological flaws. However, PABs remain a recognised issue in family dynamics.
- PA is assessed through behavioural patterns and multi-source evaluations, similar to how coercive control and psychological abuse are assessed in legal cases.
- Many courts do recognise PABs as a factor in custody disputes, even if they avoid using the term parental alienation directly.
- True, but so are many forms of psychological abuse. This does not mean they do not exist—it means courts must carefully weigh evidence and expert opinion.
- Incorrect. Decades of empirical research support the existence of PABs in high-conflict custody cases.
- In some cases, misuse of the PA concept has occurred, but this does not mean PA does not exist. Courts should evaluate claims critically rather than rejecting the concept outright.
- While early research had limitations, current studies use validated methodologies. PABs have been examined across multiple disciplines, including psychology, law, and child development.
- Incorrect. Many jurisdictions, including Spain, Brazil, and Italy, recognise PABs as a form of psychological abuse.
- Some interventions have been controversial, but well-designed interventions focus on restoring healthy relationships rather than coercion.
- Not necessarily. Children can be influenced or pressured, especially in high-conflict family situations.

Why Parental Alienation Is Not a Mental Health Disorder (4 of 7)

Parental Alienating Behaviours and the DSM-5-TR

PABs, while a recognised pattern of family dynamics, are not classified as a formal mental health disorder in the DSM-5-TR or ICD-11. This has led to confusion and debate in forensic and legal settings. While PABs can cause psychological harm, it is best understood as a family systems issue, rather than an individual clinical disorder.

Why Aren't PABs in the DSM-5-TR?

- PABs are not classified as a mental disorder because they describe a relational pattern involving an alienating parent, an alienated child, and a targeted parent. Unlike mental health diagnoses, which focus on individual pathology, PABs do not present as a distinct symptom cluster within an individual but rather as a coercive family dynamic.
- Mental disorders in the DSM-5-TR have specific diagnostic criteria and treatment pathways. PABs, however, are not a singular condition but a behavioural pattern that disrupts family relationships.
- While not a mental illness, PABs are recognised as manipulative and emotionally abusive. They align with coercive control, emotional manipulation, and attachment trauma seen in clinical practice. Children affected may show symptoms resembling complex PTSD, anxiety disorders, and attachment disruptions.

Existing DSM-5-TR Categories That Capture Aspects of PABs

PABs do not meet the criteria for a DSM-5-TR disorder but are acknowledged through existing classifications addressing relational harm and psychological abuse.

- **Child Affected by Parental Relationship Distress (CAPRD)**
 - Applied when parental conflict harms a child's well-being.
 - Recognised as a relational issue, not a standalone disorder.
- **Psychological Child Abuse**
 - Defined as severe parental behaviour causing emotional harm.
 - Includes coercion, manipulation, and undermining a child's relationship with a parent.
- **Parent-Child Relational Problem**
 - Used when conflict leads to a breakdown in the parent-child bond.
 - Applied when a child persistently rejects a parent without a clear mental health diagnosis.

Why This Matters in Legal Cases

- PABs are real, but not a disorder. Courts should focus on behavioural patterns and documented impact, rather than seeking a DSM diagnosis.
- A lack of DSM classification does not mean PABs should be dismissed. Many legal and psychological concepts—like coercive control—are not in the DSM but have clear forensic relevance.
- Assessments should focus on evidence, not diagnostic labels. Structured evaluations can determine whether a child's rejection of a parent is due to alienation, justified estrangement, or other family dynamics.

Recognising Parental Alienation – Key Behavioural Patterns (5 of 7)

Parental Alienating Behaviours in Action: What They Look Like

Parental alienating behaviours are identified through patterns of action, rather than a single defining act. A stepwise forensic assessment helps differentiate alienation from justified estrangement.

Common Behaviours of an Alienating Parent

<u>Behaviour</u>	<u>Impact on Child</u>
Vilification of the other parent (e.g., "Your father/mother doesn't love you.")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leads to fear, resentment, or rejection of the targeted parent.
Forcing the child to take sides	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourages loyalty conflicts, making a child feel guilty for loving both parents.
False allegations against the targeted parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creates mistrust, often leading to legal interventions or supervised contact.
Blocking contact and undermining visits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Denies opportunities for bonding, reinforcing rejection.
Sharing adult issues (e.g., financial or legal disputes)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases the child's emotional distress and alignment with the alienating parent.
Rewarding rejection of the targeted parent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthens the child's resistance to contact.
Cognitive distortions and half-truths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Children alter information to appease parents. Interrogation after visits leads to twisted stories. False narratives create confusion and distrust. Gaslighting erodes the child's confidence in reality.

Common Behaviours of an Alienated Child

- **Unjustified hatred** or fear of one parent.
- **Rigid alignment** with the alienating parent.
- **Echoing the alienator's language** (e.g., using adult concepts).
- **Lack of guilt or ambivalence** about rejecting the parent.
- **Absolute rejection** of extended family on the alienated parent's side.

Differentiating from Justified Estrangement

Alienation **is not** present when rejection stems from:

- Parental abuse or neglect
- Documented safety concerns
- The child's independent decision-making

Why This Matters in Legal Cases

- Judges and legal professionals must look beyond what a child says to examine behavioural patterns and context.
- Alienating behaviours may not be intentional, but they still have harmful consequences.
- Parental Alienation should not be assumed—but also should not be dismissed.

Evidence-Based Approaches for Identifying Parental Alienation (6 of 7)

The Challenge of Identifying Parental Alienation

Parental alienation (PA) is often subtle, complex, and difficult to distinguish from other legitimate reasons for parent-child rejection. A scientifically robust, multi-method approach is essential to determine whether PA is present. No single test or tool can diagnose PA—rather, a comprehensive forensic assessment is required.

Evidence-Based Methods for Assessing Parental Alienation

Comprehensive Clinical Interviews

- *Child Interviews:* Examine reasoning for rejection, inconsistencies, and signs of coaching.
- *Parent Interviews:* Assess parenting behaviours, conflict patterns, and potential manipulation.
- *Collateral Interviews:* Gather input from teachers, extended family, and professionals.

Historical & Pattern Analysis

- Review legal documents and past assessments to track shifts in parent-child relationships.
- Identify abrupt, unexplained changes in the child's attitude absent allegations of abuse.

Structured Parent-Child Observations

- *If the child engages in interaction:* Assess whether the child's engagement is genuine or forced.
- *If the child refuses interaction:*
 - Examine emotional response (e.g., distressed vs. indifferent).
 - Determine if refusal is context-specific or absolute across all settings.
 - Evaluate the rejected parent's behaviour to rule out situational causes.

Distinguishing from Justified Estrangement

- Does the child express individualised concerns or broad, rehearsed, extreme language?
- Watch for rigid, all-or-nothing thinking (one parent idealised, the other demonised).

Psychological Testing (Supportive, Not Standalone)

- Certain validated tools (MMPI, PAI, MCMI) can assess bias, impression management, and personality factors.
- Caution: PA-specific tools lack strong empirical support and should not be used in isolation.

Cross-Validation of Findings

- Integrate multiple data sources to ensure conclusions are objective, legally defensible, and free from speculation.

Key Takeaways

- Parental alienation requires a structured, evidence-based evaluation—not speculation.
- A single test or checklist is insufficient—PA assessments must be comprehensive.
- Differentiating PA from justified estrangement is critical to avoid misclassification.
- Forensic psychologists must use well-validated assessment methods to ensure reliability.

Evidence-Based Approaches for Identifying Parental Alienation (7 of 7)

Identifying Parental Alienation in Child Interviews

Multiple validated models assess child resistance or rejection in family law cases. While each model differs, key behaviours consistently indicate parental alienation rather than justified estrangement.

Key Behaviours to Assess for in Interviews

Rigid, Absolute Rejection of One Parent

- The child expresses extreme negativity toward one parent with no ambivalence or nuance.
- Statements lack typical parent-child conflict dynamics and appear black-and-white.

Use of Adult-Like Language & Borrowed Scenarios

- The child describes events in sophisticated, adult-like terms beyond their developmental capacity.
- Narratives include legal or psychological jargon, or statements mirroring the favoured parent's views.

Disproportionate or Exaggerated Complaints

- The child exaggerates past issues or reframes minor parenting flaws as serious offences.
- Complaints about the targeted parent are often vague, scripted, or lack specific details.

Lack of Guilt or Ambivalence

- The child shows no distress or remorse about rejecting the targeted parent.
- They do not recall any past positive memories with the targeted parent, even when prompted.

Reflexive Support for the Favoured Parent

- The child consistently sides with the favoured parent, even when their behaviour is problematic.
- They defend or justify the favoured parent's actions without critical evaluation.

Rehearsed or Coached Responses

- The child appears programmed in their responses and repeats rehearsed phrases.
- Uses identical wording to the favoured parent or makes statements that lack emotional depth.

Unfounded Fear or Resistance to Contact

- The child refuses contact with the targeted parent without reasonable justification.
- Fear appears out of proportion to any past experiences with the targeted parent.

Hostility Toward Extended Family

- The child rejects not only the targeted parent but also their relatives.
- This rejection is not based on direct negative experiences but rather by association.

Cognitive Distortions & Half-Truths

- The child engages in distorted thinking and twists facts when describing past events.
- They struggle to provide coherent or verifiable explanations for their rejection.

Justification for Rejection is Superficial or Contradictory

- The child's stated reasons for rejecting the parent are minor or inconsistent.
- They change their story over time but maintain the same level of rejection.