

Whether direct or indirect, parental alienation harms families

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In one particular form of family violence, a parent tries to damage a child's relationship with the other parent. The outcome of these behaviors is called parental alienation, and it can result in a child's ultimate rejection of a parent for untrue, illogical or exaggerated reasons.

Jennifer Harman, a Colorado State University social psychologist who studies [parental alienation](#) and its consequences, has published new research showing that mothers and fathers use slightly different tactics when engaging in these destructive behaviors.

Harman's latest analysis, published in the *Journal of Family Violence*, examined [gender differences](#) in many types of alienating behaviors. She and co-authors found that mothers used significantly more alienating strategies the researchers label as "indirect," while fathers used similar levels of both "indirect" and "direct" strategies. A substantial portion of parents in the researchers' samples—13.79% of fathers, and 19.61% of mothers—used nearly equal amounts of both forms of aggression.

The study included data from interviews with parents who reported being targets of alienating behaviors, as well as a database of family law appellate court rulings in which parental alienation was found to have occurred. Their samples did not include same-sex couples; Harman hopes to increase representation of same-sex couples in future studies.

Direct or indirect

Examples of direct aggressions can include when the alienating parent hits the targeted parent at child exchange time; alienating parent blocks parenting time with the child; alienating parent sends hostile emails and texts to the targeted parent; alienating parent blocks or changes phone numbers so the targeted parent cannot reach the child; and alienating parent makes unilateral decisions about the child, in violation of court orders.

By contrast, indirect aggressions can include when the alienating parent badmouths the targeted parent to the child; alienating parent calls the police to get the targeted parent arrested based on a false claim; alienating parent turns friends and family against the targeted parent; alienating parent tells children false stories from the past about the targeted parent; alienating parent tells children details about the court proceedings; alienating parent yells at the targeted parent in front of the children; and alienating parent lists stepparent as the biological parent on school records.

Why are gender differences important when assessing alienating behaviors?

"Because when custody evaluators or others are intervening with the family to understand what is going on, they are often trying to determine if abuse is happening, or if alienation is happening," said Harman, an associate professor in the CSU Department of Psychology who has devoted

several years to studying the issue. "Alienation is hard to assess when the majority of the behaviors are indirect. These behaviors are harder to prove and document."

Harman also noted that if mothers and fathers tend to alienate differently, gender biases in custody cases can result; for example, indirect aggressions like spreading false rumors, perpetrated by a mother, might go unrecognized by a lawyer or judge.

When such behaviors are successful and the [child's relationship](#) with the targeted parent is damaged, they can create what social psychologists call an "enmeshed identity" with the alienator, resulting in the child essentially acting as a proxy for the perpetrator. The researchers thus considered alienated children's acting out on behalf of the perpetrator as another form of direct aggression against the targeted parent.

"Indirect behaviors are more circuitous," Harman said. "Alienators lie to manipulate, spread rumors and make false claims." Such claims might be grounded in truth, but details are twisted or exaggerated, and can be challenging for a custody evaluator to unravel.

The study includes work by co-authors Demosthenes Lorandos, a Michigan-based legal scholar; Zeynep Biringen, professor in the CSU Department of Human Development and Family Studies; and psychology graduate student Caitlyn Grubb.

Underscoring the prevalence of the problem

A separate study led by Harman is published in *Children and Youth Services Review* and seeks to replicate previous results by Harman and Biringen that were based on a 2016 poll of North Carolina adults. For the latest study, the researchers conducted several polls representative of the adult North American population with children. They found that 35.5% of U.S. parents and 32% of Canadian parents felt they were the targets of alienating behaviors by a partner or ex-partner. Nearly 60% of respondents also said such behaviors had resulted in negative effects on their

relationships with their children.

Based on their most recent counts, the researchers estimate that 22 million American adults, and close to 4 million children, have been victimized by parental alienating behaviors. They also found that 47% of moderately to severely alienated parents had contemplated suicide within the past year. Furthermore, victims of alienation reported more post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and higher rates of depression than [parents](#) who had not been alienated.

"The main takeaway here is that not all post-separation conflict is the same," Harman said. "We can't treat all these families the same. We need a nuanced understanding of what's going on before we can apply interventions."

More information: Jennifer J. Harman et al. Gender Differences in the Use of Parental Alienating Behaviors, *Journal of Family Violence* (2019). [DOI: 10.1007/s10896-019-00097-5](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10896-019-00097-5)

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