

FIRST EDITION

Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis



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Parental Alienation Study Group, Inc.

**PARENTAL ALIENATION THEORY:
OFFICIAL SYNOPSIS**

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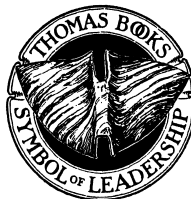
**PARENTAL ALIENATION THEORY:
OFFICIAL SYNOPSIS**

By

PARENTAL ALIENATION STUDY GROUP, INC.

pasg

(With 16 Contributors)



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PRAISE FOR *PARENTAL ALIENATION THEORY*: *OFFICIAL SYNOPSIS*

A clarifying and helpful book on all aspects of parental alienation. As a lawyer, therapist, high-conflict case consultant, and speaker to family law judges, I heartily recommend this book. While I see much or most alienating behavior as unconscious rather than an intentional “campaign” of denigration, I agree with the dynamics of alienation and the effect on the child that this book describes. This is an important field of knowledge for everyone involved in family law cases and should not be ignored or disparaged. This book acknowledges the need for family violence professionals and alienation professionals to understand and collaborate with each other on solving these resistance and refusal cases. Here is the essential information on alienation that should become part of the knowledge base of all family law professionals.

Bill Eddy, LCSW, Esq.

Author of *Don't Alienate the Kids: Raising Resilient
Children While Avoiding High-Conflict Divorce*

What a helpful tool for attorneys working in the family law field to understand the psychology, theory, and criticism of parental alienation. One of the big challenges in these cases is helping clients see the problem for what it is and educating the jurists to the damage that results and possible solutions. This synopsis puts so many resources at your fingertips. I wish I had this available when I had my first PA case almost 20 years ago. Very grateful for this and I cannot wait to pass it along to other practitioners.

Helen Sfikas Rogers, Senior Partner
Rogers, Shea & Spanos, PLLC
Nashville, Tennessee, USA

Congratulations to the Parental Alienation Study Group for producing a thorough, complete, and non-argumentative treatment of parental alienation theory. It was refreshing to read such a balanced and impeccably informed treatment of parental alienation in its social, psychological, legal, and medical contexts.

Ronald P. Rohner, Ph.D.
Professor Emeritus and Director
Ronald and Nancy Rohner Center for the Study of
Interpersonal Acceptance and Rejection
University of Connecticut, Storrs, USA

This is an important book. The Parental Alienation Study Group has collaborated to produce an authoritative and concise volume highlighting current understanding of what parental alienation is and is not. This book will help the various professionals who work in the area of difficult divorce to be able to identify this extremely damaging phenomenon, appreciate its complexity, and limit its impact on children and alienated parents.

John Sargent, M.D.
Professor of Psychiatry and Pediatrics
Tufts University School of Medicine
Boston, Massachusetts, USA

This summary of current thinking on parental alienation is a uniquely valuable resource. It brings together a wide array of experts with different perspectives yet manages to present a coherent view of the relevant research on one of the more fraught areas of forensic science. It should be at the elbow of every family practitioner.

Christopher Slobogin, J.D., LL.M.
Milton Underwood Professor of Law
Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, USA

This book is a succinct, yet comprehensive, overview of parental alienation theory broadly conceived. Intended to be regularly updated in future editions, this volume offers a valuable foundation for understanding key concepts of parental alienation. As an easily accessible resource, it will benefit the general public, practitioners, and researchers by accelerating research and commentary in the field, promoting consensus, and contributing to the maturity of parental alienation scholarship.

Richard A. Warshak, Ph.D.

Author of *Divorce Poison: How to Protect Your Family from Bad-mouthing and Brainwashing*

WELCOME

From Nashville, Tennessee, USA

The author of this book is the Parental Alienation Study Group, Inc., a non-profit corporation that promotes research on all aspects of parental alienation and educates mental health and legal professionals and the public regarding this topic. Our members hope that *Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis* will accomplish two goals.

First, that practitioners, researchers, educators, and policymakers will find this summary of the principles of parental alienation theory to be helpful. This is a complex topic, and there is a need for a concise presentation of its most important components.

Second, that this book will become a platform for building a consensus among scholars who have an interest in this topic. We hope to reduce the polarization that damages this field of study by inviting readers to provide their suggestions and corrections, which will be incorporated into future editions. Interested individuals can submit their comments by following the link to “Contact Us” at our website, www.pasg.info.

William Bernet, M.D.

Former President, Parental Alienation Study Group

BIENVENIDO / WELCOME

From Buenos Aires, Argentina

Damos la bienvenida a esta nueva obra sobre el fenómeno de la alienación parental, la cual será de gran utilidad a nivel mundial. Los principales destinatarios de este importante libro son los niños, la humanidad en ascenso.

La alienación parental es una grave disfunción familiar que debe ser plenamente reconocida en todos los países del mundo. Ello permitirá su abordaje terapéutico oportuno, mediante un diagnóstico precoz realizado por profesionales competentes. Si esta problemática no se detecta a tiempo y alcanza un grado avanzado de gravedad, el niño corre el riesgo de perder su condición de sujeto de derecho, viendo anulada su voluntad al ser objeto de una instrumentalización perversa. Por ello, la labor de terapeutas y jueces debe estar orientada a garantizar, mediante una intervención rápida y eficaz, el cese del maltrato que padecen los niños cuando son víctimas de esta anomalía familiar. De lo contrario, enfrentarán una nueva forma de sufrimiento: el maltrato institucional derivado de los órganos judiciales.

* * * * *

We welcome this new work on the phenomenon of parental alienation, which will be of great value worldwide. The primary beneficiaries of this important book are children—the rising humanity.

Parental alienation is a severe family dysfunction that must be fully recognized in all countries across the globe. Such recognition will facilitate timely therapeutic interventions through early diagnosis conducted by competent professionals. If this issue is not detected in time and reaches an advanced stage of severity, the child risks losing their status as a subject of rights, with their will effectively annulled as they become an object of perverse instrumentalization. Therefore, the efforts of therapists and judges must be directed toward ensuring, through swift and effective intervention, the cessation of the abuse suffered by children who fall victim to this family anomaly. Otherwise, they will face a new form of suffering—institutional abuse resulting from judicial bodies.

Mauricio Luis Mizrahi, Doctor of Law and Social Science
Former National Judge of the Republic of Argentina

VELKOMMEN / WELCOME

From Copenhagen, Denmark

Folketinget i Danmark har vedtaget, at forældrefremmedgørelse skal have betydning i familieretslige sager fra den 1. januar 2025. Folketinget har hermed understreget, at forældrefremmedgørelse ikke er tilladt, og erklæret forældrefremmedgørelse er en realitet i samfundet. Kontaktbevarende samvær skal sikres for barnet inden for 4 uger i forhold til det bedste for barnet og samfundet.

Når 10-30 procent af alle børn, afhængig af hvilket land og hvilken kultur vi ser på, mister kontakt til en forælder, har vi en stor udfordring i samfundet. Den mistede kontakt kan skyldes flere årsager; manglende forældreansvar og kompetencer, helbred, misbrug, vold eller død, men en af de væsentlige årsager i dag er forældrefremmedgørelse ved skilsmisser. Dette er en realitet i samfundet.

Vi takker for denne vigtige bog og PASG-forskningen om forældrefremmedgørelse, som laves af forskere i mange lande, målrettet nationale og internationale lovreformer.

* * * * *

The Danish Parliament has decided that parental alienation shall have effect in all family court decisions starting January 2025. The Parliament has hereby clearly emphasized that parental alienation is not allowed, and stated parental alienation is a reality. Immediate contact shall be ensured for the child within four weeks in the best interests of the child, parents, and society.

When 10–30 percent of all children, depending on which country and culture we look at, are losing contact with a parent, we have a major challenge in society. The lost contact can be due to several reasons: lack of parental responsibility and skills, health, abuse, violence, or death, but one of the major reasons today is parental alienation during divorces. This is a reality in society.

We welcome this important book and PASG research on parental alienation by many people in many countries, targeting national and international law reforms.

Jesper Lohse, MBA

Strategic advisor for international organizations

G'DAY

From Adelaide, Australia

Firstly, let me say I was honoured to be invited to contribute to this important, potentially life-saving publication. Since being elected, I have worked diligently and earnestly to draw attention to parental alienation, but also to set about making change.

In an early speech to the South Australian Parliament in 2022, I outlined the three documented levels of alienation, their typical behaviours, and subsequent impacts. I have since called for an inquiry into this unwelcome—but extraordinarily under-publicised and too-often-ignored—phenomenon, and will continue my advocacy for as long as I remain in public office.

This book—*Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis*—provides a pathway to resolve this most trenchant issue for parents and children. It is essential to address this presentation by improving the education of this nation's family law and family violence professionals and the judiciary.

Parental alienation is a worldwide problem and no country, including Australia, is exempt. Unfortunately, One Nation still appears to be this nation's only prominent political party willing to shine some light on this issue.

Hon. Sarah Game, MLC

South Australia Legislative Council

Former veterinarian and teacher, mother of three children

FOREWORD

The scenario of a stridently angry child or an anxious, avoidant child—reciting unjustified or exaggerated convictions about, and refusing contact with, a parent—is one that resonates with the experience of family justice professionals across national borders. A 2023 survey of 1,200 legal and mental health professionals from the two leading family law organizations in North America found overwhelming agreement with the statement, “[Parental alienation] is a valid, multifactor construct with [parental alienating behaviors] a common occurrence that manifests across family structures. Furthermore, [parental alienating behaviors] and [parental alienation] were distinguished from other pernicious kinds of family dynamics and viewed as highly destructive within the family” (Pruett, Johnston, Saini, Sullivan, & Saini, 2023, p. 380).

The theoretical development of the understanding of any phenomenon must be differentiated from the validity and legitimacy of the phenomenon itself. This official synopsis of parental alienation (PA) theory by the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) demonstrates the impressive progress scholars have made in refining our understanding of the PA phenomenon. As can be seen by the ongoing controversies that exist regarding PA theory, it is still a work in progress. The development of theories about various forms of family violence (intimate partner violence, child maltreatment, and coercive and controlling coparenting behaviors) has been a process of arduous scholarly work. These activities have sometimes been collaborative and consensual and sometimes more controversial and adversarial, due to the strong advocacy pulls in the social, cultural, and legal context that surrounds families suffering from the impact of family violence. The controversies and lack of consensus that still exist about some aspects of parent–child contact problems (PCCPs)—regarding terminology, theory, and models of intervention—should not be used as a weapon to discredit the legitimacy of work on understanding and intervening with PCCPs, but as further motivation to advance our scholarship in this area.

The mission of the PASG is laudable and evident in publishing this official synopsis of PA theory: to create a platform to build more precision and

consensus among relevant professionals regarding PA theory. I highlight two ongoing, mutually reinforcing threats to all family law professionals in our efforts to support and protect the welfare of families and children and the encouraging responses to these threats provided in this synopsis.

Misinformation and Disinformation about Parental Alienation

There has been a proliferation of inaccurate and harmful information to parents and family law professionals about PA. Some contributions to this destructive impact on our field have been from (1) sources of easily accessed, unvetted information on the internet; (2) extreme advocacy groups who exploit misinformation to support their positions; (3) the “echo-chamber” phenomenon in which participants increasingly listen only to information that supports their already held views on an issue; and (4) the erosion of confidence in science in our “post-truth society.”

This synopsis provides an antidote to this issue by offering a concise, comprehensive summary of current information about PA grounded in the impressive accumulation of evidence from social science about this complex area of family law. It counters information on PA from sources that lack rigorous social science methodology and/or propagate advocacy positions without an evidence base.

Polarization of Advocacy Groups Addressing Parental Alienation

It is not surprising that “polarization” was the Merriam–Webster Word of the Year for 2024. Polarization is defined as “division into two sharply distinct opposites.” It is a destructive relationship dynamic that has become more prevalent particularly with complex, challenging issues, where advocacy groups adopting more extreme, adversarial positions can easily thrive. PA is such an issue.

One antidote to polarization in any context (socio-political, scholarly, in family courts, and within the family) is to support engagement in respectful and constructive conversations among groups that have different views. This synopsis highlights several initiatives, some supported by the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC), to create forums for professionals from different, often adversarial, viewpoints to engage in scholarly, constructive conversations about PA. This shift away from polarized engagement at the professional level is essential to helping children and families manage PA.

I encourage you to engage in your personal conversation with this synopsis, having these perspectives in mind.

Matthew J. Sullivan, Ph.D.

CONTRIBUTORS

The author of *Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis* is an organization, the Parental Alienation Study Group, Inc. (PASG). This is a large, international, nonprofit corporation consisting of mental health professionals, legal professionals, targeted parents and grandparents, adult children of alienation, and child and family advocates who are interested in the topic of parental alienation. PASG owns the copyright for this book; all royalties belong to PASG.

This book was written and edited by 16 contributing authors. The editors and authors are members or former members of the Board of Directors of PASG. Readers with comments, corrections, or suggestions may use the Contact Us link on the organization's website (www.pasg.info) or contact any individual listed below.

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Angel N. Acosta's work in the field of divorce and separation has inspired her continued pursuit of a master's degree in clinical mental health counseling at the University of Houston–Clear Lake. She has a commitment to making a lasting impact in the lives of those who need it most.

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Tessie Robins, an alienated parent, holds a master's of arts in leadership and an undergraduate degree in social work. Following a successful 30-year career in sales, she recently retired to focus on writing her upcoming book, *HOW?? Coping with Parental Alienation*.

Robert Samery, who came from authoritarian Eastern Europe after WWII, describes his life's work as combating injustice in various relationship areas. In 2004, he turned his attention toward protecting children from alienation by building several educational and advocacy organizations internationally, focusing on North America, while also building organizations combating gender inequality.

Matthew J. Sullivan, Ph.D., was the president of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) during 2019–2020. He is the co-founder of Overcoming Barriers, Inc., which has developed a variety of professional training programs to intervene in parent–child contact problems.

Michael P. Thomas is the president of Charles C Thomas, Publisher, Ltd. This company has published several important books regarding parental alienation.

INTRODUCTION

The mental health and legal literature regarding parental alienation theory is vast. The Parental Alienation Database—on our website, www.pasg.info—contains more than 1,000 journal articles, book chapters, and books. Many of the articles are peer-reviewed and authoritative; however, they generally focus on a very specific aspect of this very broad field of study. Some books on this topic are encyclopedic, almost overwhelming, and difficult to fully comprehend. There is a need for a succinct overview and explanation of parental alienation theory. This synopsis summarizes the key features of parental alienation theory and includes references to source material for readers who want more detailed information.

This book—*Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis*—is called “official” because it was (1) developed by leading clinical and legal writers in this field of study and (2) published on behalf of the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG), the foremost scholarly organization devoted to research on, interventions for, and education regarding parental alienation. No other organization of professionals or family advocates has undertaken this task. The organizations that have endorsed this project are listed at the end of the book. If a group of mental health or legal professionals wants to join us in creating a subsequent edition of this book, we welcome their collaboration.

What is a “theory”? In this document, we are using “theory” to mean a set of principles on which the practice of an activity is based. For example, “a theory of education” and “the theory of evolution.” Also, “theory” refers to a scientifically acceptable general principle or body of principles offered to explain phenomena. “Parental alienation theory” refers to a set of principles that explain the phenomenon of parental alienation.

The chapters in this book are divided into two parts. Part One consists of core concepts, the basic information about parental alienation theory that researchers and practitioners—both mental health and legal—need to know. Part Two addresses additional topics that many readers will find interesting and useful. This book has about 280 references. They are all located at the end of the book instead of after each chapter. The Top Twenty references—in

the opinion of the contributing authors—are indicated with an asterisk. The following abbreviations are used throughout the book:

- PA = parental alienation
- AB = alienating behavior
- PCCP = parent–child contact problem
- DV = domestic violence
- DSM = *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*

Printed copies of this book can be purchased from the publisher and from typical booksellers. Also, the PDF of this book is available on our website (www.pasg.info) at no cost. Researchers and family advocates may want to translate this book into other languages. To make arrangements, contact Michael P. Thomas, President, Charles C Thomas, Publisher, Ltd., Springfield, Illinois, USA. Mr. Thomas may be reached at mthomas@ccthomas.com.

Readers of this book, who have an interest in parental alienation scholarship and advocacy, may want to join PASG. To do that, simply visit our website and click on the link for “Membership.” There are no dues or financial obligations in joining PASG.

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**PARENTAL ALIENATION THEORY:
OFFICIAL SYNOPSIS**

Part One

CORE CONCEPTS

Part One consists of core concepts, the basic information about parental alienation theory that researchers and practitioners—both mental health and legal—need to know. This part addresses definitions and terminology, diagnosis, assessment procedures, prevention of parental alienation, and interventions for alienation.

Chapter 1

DEFINITIONS AND TERMINOLOGY

Any discussion of parental alienation theory needs to be clear about definitions and terminology. Otherwise, there will be confusion among researchers and editorial chaos in journal articles and book chapters. The authors of this book agree on the following definitions of terms related to parental alienation theory.¹

Core Definitions

Parental alienation theory holds that some children who reject a parent do so because they have been manipulated by the favored parent to maintain false and distorted thoughts and feelings about the rejected parent. The principles of this theory pertain to the causes of parental alienation (PA), manifestations of PA, consequences of this condition for the child and their family members, prevalence of PA, prevention of and interventions for PA, sociopolitical perspectives, legal implications, similar and related psychological phenomena, and qualitative and quantitative research.

Parental alienation is a mental condition in which a child—usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce—allies strongly with one parent (the favored parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the alienated parent) without a good reason. PA also refers to the impaired relationship between the child and the rejected parent.

Alienating behaviors (ABs) are the words and actions of the favored or alienating parent, which contribute to the child's rejection of a relationship with the alienated parent.

1. This chapter is based partly on Bernet (2020a).

The **alienating parent** is the parent who is indoctrinating or influencing the child to fear or shun the other parent. The alienating parent is sometimes called the loved parent, the favored parent, and the preferred parent.

The **alienated parent** is the parent the child rejects and/or refuses to visit or communicate with. The alienated parent is sometimes called the rejected parent, the hated parent, and the targeted parent.

The **alienated child** is the victim of ABs by the alienating parent, which influence the child to inappropriately reject the alienated parent.

The **Five-Factor Model**—also known as the Baker Five-Factor Model—is a systematic method for identifying and diagnosing PA in a child or a family. (For further discussion, see Chapters 2 and 13.)

Related Terms and Distinctions

“Alienated parent” vs. “targeted parent.” An alienated parent is not exactly the same as a targeted parent; it is possible to be targeted but not alienated. For example, Parent A might engage in many alienating behaviors, so Parent B would be considered a targeted parent. However, it is possible that Parent B still has a good relationship with their child, so Parent B has been targeted but is not alienated.

“Alienation” vs. “estrangement.” Estrangement refers to a child’s rejection of a parent for a good reason, such as a history of abuse, neglect, or severely deficient parenting. Alienation refers to a child’s rejection of a parent without a good reason, i.e., as a result of indoctrination by the favored parent. These distinctions—proposed by Kelly and Johnston (2001)—have become widely adopted terms of art by clinical and legal writers.

Parent-child contact problem (PCCP)—also called “contact refusal” and “resist/refuse dynamic”—refers to a child’s refusal to visit with or have a relationship with one or both parents. PCCP is a broad, general concept because it embraces all the different reasons why a child might manifest contact refusal.

PA vs. PCCP. PA is a particular mental condition in a child, manifested by a specific set of behavioral signs in the child and caused by specific, visible ABs of the favored parent. PCCP, on the other hand, is

a general term that includes not only PA but also other possible causes of contact refusal. (See Chapter 2 for further discussion of PCCP.)

Hybrid case refers to a case of PCCP that has multiple causes acting and interacting at the same time. Regarding prevalence, the proportion of PCCP cases that are predominantly PA, predominantly estrangement, hybrid, or some other family dynamic is not known.

Consensus Among Professionals

These definitions related to PA theory are widely accepted among mental health practitioners who conduct parenting plan evaluations and family law professionals. For example, a survey of child custody evaluators revealed a strong level of endorsement regarding terminology related to PA theory (Bernet, Baker, & Adkins, 2022). This includes definitions for terms such as “contact refusal,” “parental alienation,” “estrangement,” “alienating parent,” “alienated parent,” and the “Five-Factor Model” for the diagnosis of PA.

Bonus Information: Evolution of Terminology

The proliferation of fluctuating terminology related to PA theory has an interesting history. Over time, the phenomenon we call “parental alienation” has had many different names, listed below.

- Aligned children (Wallerstein & Kelly, 1976)
- Strong alignment (Johnston, Campbell, & Mayes, 1985)
- Brainwashing (Benedek & Schetky, 1985)
- Parental alienation syndrome (Gardner, 1985)
- Medea syndrome (Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989)
- Not-based-on-actual-interaction (NBOAI) (Bricklin, 1995)
- Alienated child (Kelly & Johnston, 2001)
- Pathological alienation (Warshak, 2003)
- Parental alienation disorder (Bernet, Boch-Galhau, Baker, & Morrison, 2010)
- Child affected by parental relationship distress (Bernet, Wamboldt, & Narrow, 2016)

It is common for medical and psychological terms to evolve in this manner. For example, the following expressions regarding the condition

Bridging the Divide: A Unified Approach to Parental Alienation

Family law is fraught with conflict, and few issues spark more debate among mental health and legal professionals than parental alienation. When a child aligns strongly with one parent while rejecting the other—often due to indoctrination rather than legitimate reasons—the consequences can be devastating for families. Yet, professionals remain deeply divided on how to define, diagnose, and address this issue, creating further polarization in both policy and practice.

Parental Alienation Theory: Official Synopsis is a bold step toward consensus. This concise text brings together a group of experts who have developed a shared framework on definitions, terminology, diagnosis, prevention, and intervention. Designed as a foundation for ongoing dialogue, this work invites contributions from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to refine and expand upon its principles in future editions.

By fostering collaboration and standardizing approaches, this book seeks to bridge professional divides and offer families a clearer path to resolution.

