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# Behaviors and Strategies Employed in Parental Alienation: A Survey of Parental Experiences

Amy J. L. Baker  
Douglas Darnall

**ABSTRACT.** A survey study was conducted of adults who self reported being targets of parental alienation. Three research questions were addressed: (1) What alienating strategies were identified by the targeted parents and to what extent were these behaviors consistent with those identified by adult children of PAS? (2) Was gender of the targeted parent associated with number and/or type of strategy identified? And (3) What child and parent characteristics were associated with level of PAS (mild, moderate, severe) as described by the targeted parents? Ninety-seven individuals completed a written survey. One section of the survey asked participants to list every type of behavior that they believed the alienating parent used to effectuate the alienation. From prior research and review of the responses, a list of possible strategies was developed. The 1,300 actions described by the 97 participants were independently coded. Results revealed 66 types of strategies, 11 mentioned by at least 20% of the sample. There was considerable but not complete overlap in the strategies identified by the targeted parents with those described by adult children (from another study). There were no statistical differences in the number or type of strategy mentioned based on the gender of the tar-

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Amy J. L. Baker, PhD, conducts research at the New York Foundling Hospital (E-mail: amyb@nfoundling.org). Douglas Darnall, PhD, is a psychologist in private practice.

Address correspondence to: Amy J. L. Baker, 1165 West Laurelton Parkway, Teaneck, NJ 07666, or Douglas Darnall at: 2980 Belmont Avenue, Youngstown, OH 44505.

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geted parent or the gender of the target child. Level of severity of PAS (mild, moderate, severe) as perceived by the targeted parent was associated with age and gender of the target child, with girls and older children being more likely to be reported as more severely alienated. These results provide a systematic examination of the different types of alienation strategies known to targeted parents and as such they offer several avenues for clinical interventions and future research. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS:** Divorce, children and divorce, parents and divorce, parental alienation, divorce conflicts

Forensic psychiatrist Richard Gardner (1985) defined the parental alienation syndrome as a “disorder that arises primarily in the context of child-custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child’s campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification. It results from a combination of a programming (brainwashing) parent’s indoctrinations and the child’s own contributions to the vilification of the targeted parent.” Darnall (1998) differentiates a parent’s alienating behavior towards the child for the purpose of harming the relationship with the targeted parent (PA) from the resulting alienation the child experiences from the targeted parent (PAS). He defines parental alienation as “any constellation of behaviors, whether conscious or unconscious that could evoke a disturbance in the relationship between the child and the other parent.” Thus, Gardner’s definition of parental alienation syndrome focuses on the children’s behavior after they have been successfully alienated from the targeted parent while Darnall focuses on the parent’s behavior.

Currently, there is both widespread acceptance as well as heated debate regarding the validity of this conceptualization (see for example Johnston & Kelly, 2001). One contributing factor to the debate is the lack of sufficient empirical data. As Turkat (2002) has noted, the current literature is only about 20 years old and, thus, relatively still in its infancy. The majority of books and articles on the parental alienation syndrome and parental alienation are theoretical, descriptive, or prescriptive. The works of Darnall (1998), Rand (1997), Waldron and Joanis (1996), Walsh and Bone (1997), and Warshak (2001) are examples of such theoretical efforts in the field to define or describe alienat-

ing behavior. To date, there is no reliable and valid measure of either PAS or the behaviors that alienating parents engage in order to turn their children against the other parent.

The current study was undertaken to begin to “unpack” this concept of alienation by examining in detail the types of behaviors or strategies that alienating parents are thought to exhibit. Gardner (1998) outlined four general aspects of parental alienation syndrome: brainwashing, subtle programming, factors arising within the child, and situational factors, only the first two of which are attributable to the behaviors and actions of the alienating parent. The first was defined as “conscious acts of programming the child against the other parent” including but not limited to denigrating the other parent in front of the child, making statements that the other parent abandoned the children when in fact the purpose of the divorce was to separate from the adult, and exaggerating minor flaws in the targeted parent. The second, a subtle and unconscious process of programming was defined by Gardner as attributing negative aspects of the targeted parent without actually saying them and sabotaging visitation through guilt inducement and passive discouragement. These two factors, although a useful first step, have not yet been empirically validated nor have they have been explicated in sufficient detail. Although a helpful description, this list is both too broad and not sufficiently inclusive to be clinically useful. In order to move the field forward, a more detailed and comprehensive listing of the strategies alienating parents utilize to effectuate the alienation is necessary. Such information could form the basis of checklists for therapists, child custody evaluators, and targeted parents in order to heighten their awareness of the types of behaviors likely to result in alienation.

Baker (in press) undertook an initial step in developing a list of parental alienation strategies by interviewing adults who had experienced parental alienation syndrome as a child. From these rich and descriptive interviews 32 strategies were identified, 12 of which were mentioned by at least 20% of the sample: (1) general bad mouthing of the other parent, (2) limiting actual contact, (3) withdrawing love/getting angry if child showed positive regard for targeted parent, (4) bad mouthing targeted parent by saying s/he doesn’t love the child, (5) forcing the child to choose between his/her parents, (6) bad mouthing targeted parent by saying s/he is dangerous, (7) confiding in child about marital relationship (8) limiting mention and photographs of the targeted parent, (9) forcing child to reject the targeted parent (10) limiting contact with/ belittling extended family of targeted parent, (11) belittling targeted parent in front of child, and (12) inducing conflict between child and targeted parent.

These behaviors are likely to represent common alienating strategies but even the full list of 32 strategies may not be an exhaustive catalog because it is quite possible that the alienating parents were able to commit alienating behaviors outside the awareness of their children. For that reason the study participants may not have known about the full extent of the alienating behaviors they had been subjected to. Thus, in order to develop a definitive list, parents who are targets of alienation need to serve as a source of information because they may be aware of behaviors used by the alienating parent that are outside of the child's awareness. Until now the targeted parents have not been the focus of any systematic study of parental alienation. In fact, Vassiliou and Cartwright (2001) conducted the only study to date, but with a relatively small sample ( $n = 6$ ). In addition, identification of alienation strategies per se was not the stated purpose of their study. Nonetheless, several important themes were brought to light in this work, including the sense of powerlessness and frustration targeted parents feel.

The current study was designed to build on these earlier efforts to address the gap in the knowledge base and increase the rigor of the scientific inquiry in the field. It was with this goal in mind that the current investigation was undertaken. Three sets of questions were explored: (1) What strategies are targeted parents aware of and are these the same strategies described by adult children of PAS? (2) Is the gender of the parent or child associated with number and type of strategies described? And (3) Is gender of targeted parent or child, age of child, or number of strategies associated with the severity of PAS of the targeted child—as described by the targeted parent?

### **METHODS**

A survey study was conducted in January-February of 2005. Subjects were recruited from postings on the Internet, through three avenues: (1) The second author posted an invitation on his website which directed interested people to the first author's e-mail address for additional information. (2) The first author sent a personal invitation to approximately 35 people who had earlier indicated an interest in the issue of PAS. And (3) The first author joined several dozen internet groups for divorced parents and posted an invitation on their message boards. In all three cases, parents believing that the other parent attempted to alienate their children against them were invited to participate. Interested parents were instructed to contact the first author via e-mail. In response to these queries

the first author sent a copy of the survey. Informed consent was obtained through completion of the survey. The first section of the survey stated the purpose of the survey (to obtain a comprehensive listing of parent alienation strategies) and described the voluntary nature of the study and the ways in which the confidentiality of the data would be preserved. Only those people who agreed to these terms proceeded to complete the survey. In all, 127 parents responded to the posting within the specified time frame and received a copy of the survey. These responses were received between January 26, 2005 and February 15, 2005. Of the 127 surveys sent out, 6 e-mails were not valid, reducing the total to 121; Of these 97 were completed. Thus, the response rate was 80%.

### ***Sample***

Table 1 provides basic demographic information on the survey respondents.

Participants were between 22 and 63 years of age ( $M = 42.4$ ,  $SD = 7.8$ ); 60 were male and 37 were female. The majority (83.5%) of the survey respondents had been married to the alienating parent. Forty percent were currently non-custodial parents, 23.7% had joint custody, 6.2% were custodial parents, and the remaining respondents described their custody arrangements as "other." About half of the respondents had two children with the alienating parent and the target child was on average 12.6 ( $SD = 5.4$ ) at the time of the survey. The vast majority of the respondents ( $n = 88$ , 90.7%) reported that the alienating parent was a level 3 alienator (see below for description of how these judgments were made). The level of the target child's alienation according to the survey respondents was as follows: 24.2% were described as mild, 31.5% were described as moderate, and 44.2% were described as severely alienated (see below for a description of how these judgments were made.)

### ***The Survey***

The survey comprised 14 questions and fit on one side of one page. The first set of questions asked for demographic information including age and gender of the respondent; how the person heard about the study, the number of children shared with the alienating parent; the age and gender of the child most affected by the alienation (called the target child throughout the remainder of the survey); the current custody status for the target child (1 = primary custodial parent, 2 = non custodial parent with visitation or parenting time, 3 = split custody, 4 = non custodial

TABLE 1. Background Characteristics of the Survey Sample

	N	%
Age of Respondent		
22-30	05	05.2
31-40	37	38.1
41-50	41	42.3
51-63	14	14.4
Gender of Respondent		
Male	60	61.9
Female	37	38.1
Number of children		
1	26	26.8
2	50	51.5
3+	21	21.6
Age of target child		
0-5	06	06.5
6-10	28	30.1
11-15	38	40.1
16-20	15	16.1
21+	06	06.5
Missing = 4		
Gender of target child		
Male	48	51.6
Female	45	48.4
Missing = 4		
Custody status		
Custodial parent	06	06.2
Non custodial parent	40	41.2
Joint custody	23	23.7
Other	28	28.8
Marital status		
Divorced/separated	81	83.5
Never married	11	11.3
Other	05	05.2
Type of alienation		
Active	09	09.3
Obsessed	88	89.7
Level of PAS		
Mild	23	24.2
Moderate	30	31.6
Severe	42	44.2
Missing = 2		

with supervised visits, 5 = other); and marital status with the alienating parent (1 = married and now divorced, 2 = married and now separated, 3 = never married, not living together, 4 = Other).

The next section of the survey focused on the alienation and included the following questions: (1) the date the alienation began, (2) how old the target child was at that time, and (3) the date the child first seemed affected by the alienation.<sup>1</sup> The respondents were also asked to rate the alienating parent's attitude toward the targeted parent's relationship with the child, selecting one of three choices (derived from Darnall, 1998). (Option 1 = S/he means well and recognizes the importance of you being an active participant in your child's life and encourages the relationship. Communication between the two of you is generally good. On occasion s/he says or does something negative about you that creates bad feelings between the target child and you. Option 2 = S/he means well and recognizes the value of your active participation in your child's life but is sometimes overcome with bitterness, hurt, or frustration with you that is expressed in a way that causes bad feelings between the target child and you. Option 3 = S/he has a mission to destroy the relationship between the target child and you). These three options correspond to the naïve, active, and obsessed alienators described by Darnall (1998). The final question in this section of the survey asked the respondent to describe the degree to which the target child was affected by the alienation. The following three choices were provided (derived from Gardner, 1998): 1 = Your child has some negative feelings towards you that seem to be induced by the other parent but, in general, your relationship is positive and intact; 2 = Your child has considerable negative feelings towards you that seem to be induced by the other parent. There is resistance to spending time with you but there is visitation; and 3 = Your child professes to want nothing to do with you. Visitation is minimal, if at all. These three choices reflect the mild, moderate, and severe levels of PAS described by Gardner (1998). It is important to note that neither the type of alienator (naïve, active, or obsessed) nor the level of PAS (mild, moderate, or severe) was independently verified in this study. In all cases, these descriptors represent the beliefs of the survey respondents and not independent diagnoses or assessments.

The last section of the survey asked the respondents to list in their own words the specific strategies used by the other parent. The following directions were provided: (1) Please list below in your own words every TYPE of activity that the other parent has ever done that you believe is intended to damage your relationship with the target child. (2) Please do not tell stories or give detailed examples but be as specific as possible in your



list. For example, instead of listing “badmouthing” as one item on your list you may want to specify different types of badmouthing such as “telling my children I do not love them,” “telling my children I am dangerous” and “telling my children I am a bad person.” (3) Please do not list all of the faults of the other parent such as “is selfish” “is a bad parent.” (4) Only list behaviors that the other parent engages in that you believe are designed to turn the target child against you.

### *Coding of the Strategies*

A coding system was developed by the first author based on the list of strategies identified in Baker (in press) and an initial examination of the data. The coding system entailed 8 general categories (badmouthing, interfering/limiting visitation, interfering/limiting phone and mail contact, interfering/limiting symbolic contact, interfering with information, emotional manipulation, unhealthy alliance, and miscellaneous). Within each of these broad categories there were between 4 and 11 specific behaviors. For example, within the badmouthing category, one specific behavior was saying that the targeted parent was a bad person and another specific behavior was saying that the targeted parent was dangerous and sick. The first and second author independently coded all of the items for the first 50 survey participants (613 items) and attained an inter-rater reliability of .78 for specific behaviors and .88 for general category. The first author completed the coding of the last half of the items. Although the respondents were asked not to duplicate responses, a few did. In preparation for data entry it was decided that only one of any specific behavior would be used per respondent. That is, if a respondent listed “says bad things about me to the child” which was coded as general badmouthing as well as “tells the child I am a bad person” also coded as general badmouthing, only one of these two items would be entered into the database. In that way, the sum of the responses for each item would represent the proportion of the respondents listing each strategy.

## **RESULTS**

The first research question pertained to the proportion of participants who mentioned each of the strategies. These data are presented in Table 2 and described below with examples of specific items to provide richness and specificity to the numbers.

TABLE 2. Frequency Distribution of Each Strategy

	N	%
<b>Badmouthing</b>		
Badmouthing General	71	74.0
Creating impression targeted parent is dangerous or sick	60	62.5
Saying targeted parent doesn't love child	43	44.8
Confiding in child about marriage	28	29.2
Confiding in child about court case and child support issues	44	45.8
Telling child someone else is his/her parent	09	09.4
Referring to targeted parent in front of child by first name	06	06.3
Badmouthing targeted parent's new family/extended family	26	27.1
Belittling targeted parent in front of child	16	16.7
Belittling targeted parent's hobbies and values	04	04.2
Other badmouthing	14	14.6
At least 1 of above	91	94.8
<b>Limiting/interfering with visitation/parenting time/contact</b>		
Moving away/hiding child	14	14.6
Limiting visitation	28	29.2
Arranging fun activities on parenting time	17	17.7
Letting child choose whether to visit	11	11.5
Asking school to limit contact	01	01.0
Not letting child see targeted parent at targeted parent's extended family's home	01	01.0
Calling or visiting during parenting time	10	10.4
Early pick-ups and drop-offs	03	03.1
Not letting child alone with targeted parent	01	01.0
Limiting child's contact with targeted parent's extended family	08	08.3
Other	22	22.9
At least 1 of above	61	63.5
<b>Limiting/interfering with mail and phone contact</b>		
Blocking number, turning off phone	09	09.4
Intercepting calls and messages	22	22.9
Monitoring calls and e-mails	05	05.2
Throwing out letters	03	03.1
Other	07	07.3
At least 1 of above	36	37.5
<b>Limiting/interfering with symbolic contact</b>		
Limiting mention and photographs of targeted parent	07	07.3
Having alienating parent's family limit mention of targeted parent	01	01.0
Not allowing child to bring items from targeted parent's home to alienating parent's home	02	02.1
Throwing out gifts for child from targeted parent	11	11.5
Having child call someone else "Dad" or "Mom"	09	09.4

TABLE 2 (continued)

	N	%
Changing child's name	10	10.4
Rewriting past to minimize/distort child's relationship with targeted parent	11	11.5
Other	06	06.3
At least 1 of above	36	37.5
Interfering with information		
Not providing targeted parent with school, medical, activity information	18	18.8
Not providing targeted parent's contact information to others	05	05.2
Refusing to communicate	06	06.3
Using child as messenger	03	03.1
Other	08	08.3
At least 1 of above	33	33.3
Emotional manipulation		
Withdrawing love if child positive about targeted parent	08	08.3
Making child feel guilty about relationship with targeted parent	14	14.6
Interrogating child after visit with targeted parent	05	05.2
Forcing child to choose/express loyalty	09	09.4
Forcing child to reject targeted parent	26	27.1
Rewarding child for rejecting targeted parent	08	08.3
Other	19	19.8
At least 1 of above	51	53.1
Unhealthy alliance		
Cultivating child's dependence	04	04.2
Having child spy on targeted parent	12	12.5
Having secret signals with child	04	04.2
Having child keep secrets from targeted parent	11	11.5
Other	01	01.0
At least 1 of above	28	29.2
Miscellaneous		
Beating targeted parent in front of child	04	04.2
Telling targeted parent child doesn't love him/her	01	01.0
Making it appear as if targeted parent were rejecting child	14	14.6
Creating conflict between child and targeted parent	10	10.4
Badmouthing targeted parent to friends, teachers, doctors	19	19.8
Badmouthing targeted parent to authorities	30	31.3
Having step parent refer to self as "mom" or "dad" to teachers, doctors, friends	02	02.1
Undermining targeted parent's authority	26	27.1
Interfering with child's counseling	08	08.3
Not allowing child to bring to targeted parent's home items from Alienating parent's home	11	11.5
Preventing targeted parent from parenting functions	03	03.1
Other	17	17.7
At least 1 of above	74	77.1

### ***Badmouthing***

Almost all of the parents reported that the alienating parent engaged in some form of badmouthing behaviors (94.8%). General badmouthing, telling the child that the targeted parent was a bad person was the most frequently mentioned form of badmouthing (74%). Almost as frequent was badmouthing designed to create the impression that the targeted parent was a dangerous and/or sick person (62.5%). Statements included, "Tells the children I am mentally ill," "Says I am dangerous and will kill them," "Tells the children I plan to kidnap them." Badmouthing that entailed confiding in the child about court cases and or child support conflicts was described by 45.8% of the sample. Examples included, "Daddy doesn't give us any money so we can't buy cat food. The cat might die because daddy is so selfish" and "Constantly telling my child that all financial and related problems were taking place because of me and that I did not pay support although this was not true."

About the same proportion of the targeted parents mentioned badmouthing in which the child was told that the targeted parent did not love him/her. Examples shared by the targeted parent included, "Telling my children that I must not love them because once they shared a seatbelt in my truck," "My son is told that I don't love him because he is fat. He is a little on the heavy side but I would never say that about my child," "I travel a lot for work so I send my children all the free giveaways I get at conventions and conferences and my ex told the children that this shows how little I care for them, that they are only worth free stuff that I can get," and "Telling the kids that if I loved them I would work harder at getting a house so they could each have their own room."

About one-third of the sample reported badmouthing that involved confiding in the child about the marital relationship. Examples included statements such as "She told my children the divorce is all my fault and it is what I wanted. It is not her fault, she did nothing wrong and it is not what she wanted. I broke up the family and she wanted us to be together." and "She told the children I had an affair. She told them this when they were 9 and 6 years old and continues to remind them about it and how they can't trust me because of it." Equally as common was badmouthing the targeted parent's extended family and/or new family, a strategy described by 27.1% of the survey respondents. Examples of statements included, "Told my child that my mother was crazy and neurotic," "Told my child not to get close to her half-brother, my son," and "Told my kids that my family threatened to kill him." Another example, seemingly petty was, "When shown by my wife how to use dental floss,

she told them they could not use it until she showed them the right way to use it.”

Another form of badmouthing was belittling the targeted parent in front of the child. Here, the negative statements were directed to the targeted parent in the child's presence as opposed to the other badmouthing strategies which entailed the negative statements being made about the targeted parent to the child (whether or not in presence of the targeted parent). This strategy was cited by 16% of the survey respondents. Examples included, “Telling my children in front of me that I am not even a custodian and her boyfriend is more of a father than I will ever be.” “Reminds me of my shortcomings as a father in front of them.” and “Took pleasure in telling me that my son did not want me cheering for him at his soccer game, in my son's presence.”

Telling the child someone else is his/her mother/father was mentioned by 9% of the targeted parents. One such statement was “She told my son that I was not his biological father, showed him a false blood test, and introduced him to the man she claims is his natural father.” The alienating parent referring to the targeted parent by first name in front of the child is another form of badmouthing, reported by 6% of the survey respondents (as it implies that the targeted parent is unworthy of the endearment “Mom” or “Dad”). A few (4.2%) also described the other parent as belittling their hobbies, values, and interests. Forms of badmouthing that were coded in the “other” category were reported by almost 15% of the survey respondents, including letting children overhear the alienating parent denigrate the targeted parent, encouraging the extended family of the alienating parent to put down the targeted parent, and yelling at and/or challenging the targeted parent in front of the children.

### ***Interfering with Parenting Time/Visitation and Contact***

Almost two-thirds of the sample reported some form of interference with parenting time and contact. Disturbingly, 14.6% of the survey respondents reported that the alienating parent moved away or hid the child from them. The most commonly cited form of parenting time interference was general statement about not following through on planned visits (29.2%). “My child was not allowed to spend the night (against court order),” “Denies visitation,” and “Is not there when I go to pick them up for a visit.”

Almost 18% of the targeted parents described the alienating parent as arranging fun activities during planned visits to entice the children away from the targeted parent. This strategy forces the child to choose be-

tween spending parenting time with the targeted parent and rejecting the alienating parent's fun activity. Examples of parent's statements about how the alienating parent schedules competing activities include, "Conveniently makes plans when I was supposed to visit," "Would schedule events (trips, overnight or weekend get-togethers, parties, etc.) on my parenting weekends, tells the children that she doubted whether I would let them go because I was mean and didn't really love them and then when I didn't want to lose what little parenting time I did have with them, they hated me." "ALWAYS plans fun activities—birthday parties, friends, spending the night, going to grandma's house, buying a pool (bigger than dad's!) etc., etc., etc." "Makes major plans for the girls on my weekends with them and does not tell me until the day before I pick them up and if I voice any issue with this she tells the girls that if I really loved them I would not interfere with their plans."

A variation of this strategy was letting the child decide whether or not to visit (contrary to court orders), a strategy mentioned by 11.5% of the survey respondents. Frequent contact with the child during the targeted parent's visitation/parenting time was mentioned by 10.4% of the respondents. Examples of such statements included, "Badgers her with phone calls when she is with me." "Calls five times per day when they visit to see if they are ok." "Acts concerned and calls frequently when my child is with me."

Telling the school to limit the child's contact with the targeted parent, not allowing the child to see the targeted parent even while visiting that parent's own extended family, and late drop-offs and early pick-ups were strategies described by a few survey respondents. Twenty-two percent of the survey respondents also listed some "other" form of interference with contact and parenting time. These included, instructing grandparents to forbid contact between child and targeted parent, attempting to have targeted parent arrested for attending school functions, informing targeted parent at the last minute about visitation, and "No flexibility in visitation schedules, except when in his own favor. When I ask for extra days he says no yet he will keep them from me and send them when it's more convenient for him."

### ***Limiting/Interfering with Mail and Phone Contact***

One-third of the targeted parents reported interference with mail and phone contact. Doing so by intercepting calls, e-mails, and phone messages was reported to be a problem by 22.9% of the targeted parents. "During the last phone conversation I had with my son, the phone was

snatched from him,” “Has repeatedly instructed my son not to speak with me on the telephone while he is at her house. Repeatedly hastens my child off the phone, or makes excuses why he cannot speak with me.” “My ex refuses to allow me to speak to my boys when I call them—demanding that I ‘respect her time.’ ” “He says I am harassing him if I use his e-mail address.”

Eliminating phone and mail contact altogether (not providing address, turning off the phone, blocking calls) was described by 9.4% of the parents. “Changing the phone number so I can’t call.” “Won’t let me call the house—I am only allowed to call her personal cell phone and leave a message. Changes home phone number if she thinks I may have it,” and 5.2% described a variation of the above, which was monitoring calls, letters, and other forms of contact. “Refuses to let the children speak to me on the other phone without him on the other line.” “Refuses to allow the children to have a private phone conversation with me.” And “monitors our telephone conversations or has his parents do it.” Throwing out letters was mentioned by 3.1% of the targeted parents. “Cards, letters, and gifts NEVER arrive.” “Tears up things I send to my son.”

Seven percent of the survey respondents reported some “other” form of interference with mail and phone contact. These included, “Refuses to permit me to write to my child at their home or post office box and refuses to permit me to call my child at home. All communication has to go through the court-appointed advocate or our family therapist.” “Tells the girls they do not have to talk to me on the phone.” “Gave as a reason for not allowing us to e-mail that he did not think it was good that my son have access to the internet; but in the same e-mail said it was ok as long as I paid for the internet service and bought our son a new computer.” “Gave my child a cell phone but did not give me the cell phone number.”

### *Limiting/Interfering with Symbolic Contact*

Eight varieties of limiting/interfering with symbolic contact were described. At least one was described by one-third of the sample, including throwing out gifts from the targeted parent to the child (11.5%). “Sends back my Christmas and birthday presents.” “Returns to the store gifts I sent to the children.” “Every gift I have given him seems to disappear. He is constantly told I am trying to buy his love,” and “When I give gifts to the children they either go missing, get broken or they’re conveniently misplaced.”

The same proportion of parents described the alienating parent as re-writing the past to distort and/or minimize the targeted parent's role in the child's life. Typical examples are, "Telling her lies about when she was a baby—i.e., your first word was 'daddy.'" "Created false memories in her mind including memories of abusive behavior in the remote past." "Tells my kids I wasn't at their birth." Ten percent of the sample reported that the alienating parent changed the child's name (to exclude the targeted parent). "Encourages child to use boyfriend's last name." "Changing child's surname at school." Another form of symbolic contact interference was having the child refer to someone else as mom or dad. This behavior was reported by 9.4% of the targeted parents. "Telling my son that I am no longer his mommy, that his new wife is his mom now." "Told her to call his girlfriend, 'Mom'." "Having her boyfriend move in 2 days after I left and in 3 weeks they were calling him 'Papa'." Several targeted parents (7.3%) also reported that the alienating parent limited any mention and photographs of them. "I am not talked about." "My children have no photos of me." "I was removed from the family tree assignment at school." Forms of interference with symbolic contact cited by just a few targeted parents included the extended family of the alienating parent, limiting mention of the targeted parent and not allowing the child to bring items associated with the targeted parent into the alienating parent's home.

### ***Interfering with Information***

One-third of the targeted parents reported interference with information. Not providing the targeted parent with information from the school, doctors, and social activities was the most common (18.8%). Examples of statements coded in this category include "Will not allow me to or keep me updated on our daughter's school work, medical conditions, dental, etc." "Denied me access to school records. Upon obtaining the school records, through subpoena, I discovered that she had placed orders that information was not to be released to any person without her permission." "Refusal to communicate issues related to access and schooling activities." "Not allowing me access to children's medical information (me having to contact College of Physicians and Surgeons with my court order.)" Targeted parents also described three variations of this theme including not providing access to school and doctor information (5.2%), refusing to communicate (6.3%), and using the child as a messenger (3.1%). In addition, 8.3% of the sample reported some "other" form of interference with information. "Tells the



doctors that they are not to give me information; he is a juvenile diabetic and I need information; the court order does not prevent me from obtaining medical information, but the doctors don't cooperate." "My ex does not keep me informed about our son's health. He admitted our son to a psychiatric institute and did not tell me. He also informed the center I was to have no contact with our son."

### ***Emotional Manipulation***

A little over half the sample reported that the alienating parent was emotionally manipulating the target child as a way to effectuate the alienation. The most common was forcing the child to reject the targeted parent (27.1%). "Told my child to refer to me as 'Old bag'." "Tells them to accuse me of having sex with them." "Made my children write me an e-mail saying, 'We don't want to see you.'" "Told my son to hang up on me when I called him at the house." "Forced my child to testify in court against me at a divorce trial." "My son is forbidden to acknowledge me when we see each other because 'We don't yell.' We live directly across the street from each other and see each other every day." "Convinced my child to write a letter to the judge telling the judge I am an alcoholic and unfit parent with no basis in fact." "My children are not allowed to approach me, make eye contact, or wave."

A related form of emotional manipulation reported by 14.6% entailed making the child feel guilty about the relationship with the targeted parent. "Uses guilt on my daughter if she has fun with me . . . tells her he misses her and will show her a better time when she returns." "Making child feel guilty for visiting me because dad was lonely." "Guilted my son into spending Christmas Eve with her (which was my holiday access time) by telling him 'Your father is making you spend Christmas Eve with his new wife's family, who isn't even your true family. You can't even spend Christmas Eve with your own mother?' Even though they would be spending Christmas day with her." "She makes my children feel guilty if they want to see me more by reminding them that then they would be seeing her less and that would make her sad." "Telling my daughter that he needed her and loved her more than I did and that's why she should live with him instead of me." "She has made them feel guilty for having fun when they are with me (parenting time and vacations) by making comments such as 'Don't you miss me when you are there? I hate it when you're over there. Mommy misses you so much. Don't you miss Mommy? I wish you didn't have to go there.'" "Forcing the child to choose or express loyalty was also reported by the targeted

parents (9.4%). “Puts the child under constant pressure to choose between her parents without the option to enjoy both.” “Tells the children it is not ok to love me.” “Tells the children they can’t love me and her both. At least that is what the youngest understands her to be saying.”

About the same proportion reported withdrawal of love/getting angry if child visits or is positive towards targeted parent (8.3%). “Gets angry when the children speak with me.” “Has told the children he won’t love them if they don’t live with him.” “Berating the children for having a good time with their father and step family.” “When the kids tell them about something fun they did with me and/or my fiancé, he becomes sullen and the kids pick up on it right away and lose their enthusiasm in the conversation.” “My older daughter was punished and told to pack her bags right away after having a birthday party with Dad.” An equal proportion of targeted parents mentioned the alienating parent rewarding the child for rejecting the targeted parent. Examples included, “She has told the children she has gifts that will make them not want to come back and see me.” “Spoiling the boys with materialistic toys and equipment at their home—enticing them to stay at home.” “Told my son that when he gets to live there it will be a whole lot more fun.” “Rewarding the children with trips to Hawaii and cars if they have no contact with me.” A few targeted parents also described the alienating parent as interrogating the child after parenting time. “Asks my son every time he left our house whether he was hurt by us.”

Twenty percent of the survey respondents also described behaviors that fell into the “other” category of emotional manipulation. Examples included, “My child is rescued emotionally when no threat is present.” “Tells them if they get sick at my house they can’t visit anymore.” “Tells the children if I win my case to stop her from moving away . . . that I will take them away from her and she won’t ever see them again.” “Tells the girls if I loved them I wouldn’t make them spend weekends with me.”

### *Unhealthy Alliance*

Twenty-nine percent of the targeted parents reported some form of an unhealthy alliance between the targeted child and the alienating parent, including having the child spy on the targeted parent (12.5%). “Had him act as a spy and report everything that goes on in my house.” “Had my child spy on me and my family while staying over on my parenting weekend and interrogate me in our e-mails and instant messenger before the hearing in order to obtain information the lawyer could (and

did) use against me.” “My daughter has been told to monitor me and my husband when she visits and to call her dad every day if need be.” About the same proportion reported secret phone calls and messages between the alienating parent and the target child. “He taught the children a code to use over the telephone when my son was in my care to answer questions without having me know what they were talking about.” A few targeted parents also mentioned that the alienating parent cultivated the child’s dependency (a strategy that was implied in several additional statements coded in other categories) and having secrets means of communicating with the child, was cited by four parents. “Says, ‘I’m going to buy you a cell phone (for an 8 year old) so that you can hide it under your pillow and you can call me if you have nightmares when you’re at daddy’s house.’ ”

### *Miscellaneous*

Eleven additional alienation strategies were described which did not readily fall into one of the major categories, 6 of which were reported by at least 10% of the sample. These included: making it appear as if the targeted parent rejected the child (14.6%), creating conflict between the child and the targeted parent (10.4%), badmouthing targeted parent to friends, teachers, and doctors (19.8%), badmouthing targeted parents to the authorities (30.2%), undermining targeted parent’s authority (27.1%), and not allowing the child to bring items from alienating parent’s home when having parenting time with the targeted parent (11.5%).

Seventeen parents also described behaviors that could not readily be classified. These included, “Puts our fights on speaker phone and has child listen.” “Had our son break up with his girlfriend after being seen talking to me.” “Sends empty boxes at Christmas time as gifts from the kids.” “Cuts ties with anyone they know will show support for me.” “She claims to have sole custody to the school, the medical providers, and anyone who will listen.” “We went to the mediator and ex and I agree to 2-4 extended visits half in one state and half in the other. We agreed to take our children to breakfast and apologize to them for the last 8 months. At breakfast I apologize and my ex says nothing.” “Tells younger children, ‘Daddies don’t go to school and can’t see homework.’ ” “Refuses to take the children to an agreed upon neutral meeting place, forcing me to come and fetch them in front of hostile witnesses.”

Thus, 8 general categories and over 60 specific forms of alienating behaviors were described. Frequencies ranged from 1 to 74 percent, and

11 strategies were reported by at least 20% of the sample: general badmouthing (n = 74.0%), badmouthing by saying targeted parent is dangerous/sick (62.5%), badmouthing by saying targeted parent doesn't love child (44.8%), confiding in child about marriage (29.2%), confiding in child about court case/child support (45.8%), badmouthing targeted parent's new/extended family (27.1%), limiting visits (29.2%), intercepting calls (22.9%), forcing child to reject targeted parent (27.1%), undermining targeted parent's authority (27.1%), and badmouthing targeted parent to authorities (30.2%).

Because parents could describe more than one strategy (and most did) it was also of interest to examine the frequency of strategies described by the survey respondents. These data are presented in Table 3.

As can be seen, the range was 1 to 21 with a mean of over 8 strategies. Thus, the vast majority of survey respondents described the alienating parent as using a number of strategies in their campaign of parental alienation.

It was also the aim of this study to determine whether targeted parents identified the same strategies that were identified by adult children of

TABLE 3. Frequency Distribution of Total Number of Strategies per Parent

Number	N	%
1	01	01.0
2	04	04.2
3	04	04.2
4	06	06.3
5	06	06.3
6	09	09.4
7	10	10.4
8	08	08.3
9	13	13.5
10	07	07.3
11	05	05.2
12	05	05.2
13	08	08.3
14	03	03.1
17	02	02.1
20	03	03.1
21	02	02.1

Mean = 8.82, SD = 4.4

parental alienation (Baker, 2005). In that study, adult children were interviewed about the strategies that their alienating parents had utilized when the interviewees were younger. This resulted in a list of 32 strategies. A comparison of the strategies mentioned by the adult children and those identified by the targeted parents in this study revealed considerable overlap but also a few areas of difference. Specifically, all of the strategies mentioned by the adult children were also described by the targeted parents except for four: (1) accusing the child of being too close to the targeted parent, (2) telling siblings they have to stick together meaning if one child didn't want to visit, none could, (3) threatening to take the child away from the targeted parent, and (4) not letting child spend time alone with the targeted parent (insisting on being with them). Thus, for the most part the targeted parents were aware of the strategies that adult children were aware of. However, the reverse was not true. The targeted parents described several strategies that the adult children did not, including (1) badmouthing extended family, (2) letting child choose when to visit, (3) asking school to limit contact, (4) not letting the child see the targeted parent at targeted parent's extended family's home, (5) calling or visiting during parenting time, (6) early pick ups and drop offs, (7) blocking number/turning off phone, (8) intercepting calls, (9) throwing out gifts and letters from targeted parent, (10) not providing targeted parent with information, (11) not providing others with information about the targeted parent, (12) refusing to communicate, (13) using child as messenger, (14) rewarding children for rejecting targeted parent, (15) badmouthing targeted parent to others, (16) badmouthing targeted parent to authorities, (17) having step parents call themselves mom or dad to others, (18) rewriting past to distort or minimize relationship between targeted parent and child, (19) not allowing child to bring to targeted parent's home items from alienating parent's home, (20) preventing targeted parent from attending parenting functions, (21) undermining targeted parent's values and hobbies. Four of the twenty-one strategies were actually described by the adult children but not by the alienating parent: badmouthing extended family, asking school to limit contact, blocking phone, and throwing out gifts and letters. Thus, there were 17 strategies described by the targeted parents not mentioned by a separate sample of adult children.

The second research question addressed in this study was whether gender of the targeted parent or gender of the target child was associated with the number and type of strategies. Gender differences in the targeted parent might reflect differences in practice between alienating mothers and alienating fathers or differences between targeted mother's

and targeted father's awareness of alienating strategies. To address this issue, we began with three multivariate analyses of variance. In the first, effects of gender were examined on all 66 specific variables (66 categorical variables), the variables of interest were the number of strategies within each of the categories (number of badmouthing strategies, number of interfering with visitation strategies and so forth, thus there were 8 continuous variables), and in the final the variables of interest were the presence/absence of each category (8 categorical variables). In each case, the effects of gender were not statistically significant. [ $F(1,64) = 1.52, p < .11$ ;  $F(1,8) = 1.31, p < .25$ , and  $F(1,8) = 1.11, p < .36$ ]. The same three analyses were repeated with gender of the target child. Again, none of the analyses were statistically significant [ $F(1,64) = 0.61, p < .94$ ,  $F(1,8) = .74, p < .66$ , and  $F(1,8) = 1.11, p < .38$ ]. And, finally two independent t-tests were conducted examining gender differences in total number of strategies. In the first, targeted mothers and fathers were compared on total number of strategies described. Targeted mothers mentioned on average 8 different strategies ( $M = 8.2, SD = 3.9$ ), while targeted fathers mentioned on average 9 ( $M = 9.2, SD = 4.6$ ), a difference that was not statistically significant [ $t(94) = 1.04, p < .31$ ]. In the second t-test, the number of strategies was compared by gender of the target child. Targeted parents of girls mentioned on average 8 strategies ( $M = 8.5, SD = 4.2$ ) while targeted parents of boys mentioned on average 9 strategies ( $M = 9.2, SD = 4.7$ ), a difference that was not statistically significant [ $t(90) = .66, p < .51$ ].

The final set of analyses in this study was conducted to explore which of five possible variables were associated with level of PAS of the target child (mild, moderate, severe), as described by the targeted parent. Examined were gender of targeted parent, gender of target child, age of target child, number of strategies, and type of alienator (active or obsessed). Results revealed that gender of targeted parent was not related to level of PAS but gender of the target child was, with girls being more likely to be perceived as severely alienated (55.6%) than boys (32.6%), chi-square (2, 91) = 6.15,  $p < .046$ . Age of target child was also statistically associated with level of PAS. A post-hoc analysis revealed that target children who were perceived to be severely alienated were older ( $M = 14.43$ ) than the target children who were perceived to be mildly alienated ( $M = 10.39$ ),  $F(2,90) = 4.63, p < .012$ . There were no differences in levels of PAS by number of strategies, but there was a trend for obsessed alienators to have severely as opposed to mild or moderately alienated children (as perceived by the targeted parent). Specifically, 47% of the parents who rated the alienating parent as obsessed rated

their target child as severely alienated while only 11.7% of the targeted parents who rated the other parent as an active alienator rated the target child as severely alienated. Interestingly, of the 88 obsessed parents, 19 of the target children were coded as mildly alienated, 26 were coded as moderately alienated, and 41 were coded as severely alienated (2 youth were missing level of alienation ratings).

### *DISCUSSION*

This study was undertaken to identify the range of strategies utilized by alienating parents, from the perspective of the targeted parents. The data were collected from 97 parents who experienced themselves as being alienated from their children due in large measure to the behaviors of the other parent. The first notable finding is that that 40% of the survey respondents were mothers who reported being alienated from their children by the fathers. Initially, PAS was identified as primarily the purview of mothers fearing the loss of custody when the “tender years” doctrine was replaced by the “best interest of the child” policy (Gardner, 1998). However, even Gardner recognized that over time the gender imbalance would likely dissipate as more fathers attempted to gain or retain custody via PAS. The distribution of survey respondents in this study suggests that the gender imbalance may be decreasing (although it is also possible that targeted mothers are more likely to complete an internet survey than targeted fathers). At a minimum these data suggest that there are some mothers who believe that they are victims of PAS.

The first research question pertained to the frequency of the strategies as described by the targeted parents. An examination of the types of strategies revealed sixty-six different behaviors/actions, highlighting the range of strategies available to parents who aim to alienate their children from the other parent. This extensive repertoire demonstrates that no single act signifies parental alienation and parents who alienate vary in the number and type of behaviors they exhibit. There appear to be endless permutations and combinations of alienating behaviors. Looked at from this perspective, it is clear that parental alienation syndrome is more a goal or an outcome rather than a specific set of behaviors or actions on the part of the alienating parent. For example, all but a few parents reported badmouthing, but none reported just that one strategy. Thus, it can be concluded that in many cases badmouthing is a core feature of parental alienation but that parents who do that (and successfully

alienate the child from the targeted parent) also engage in additional alienation strategies as well. As a result, combating parental alienation requires both persistence and ingenuity. It also means that there is no single magic formula for countering it because the specific behaviors vary from case to case (although there are certainly common themes across the surveys).

One common theme, for example was the extent to which the children were placed at the center of the conflict between the two parents. Rather than the conflict occurring outside of the child's awareness, PAS places the child in the heart of the conflict. Negative comments about the targeted parent are made directly to the child, intimate aspects of the marital relationship and financial matters are openly discussed with the child, and children are forced to choose between their parents rather than be allowed to love them both. These are just the kinds of scenarios associated with poor child outcomes in the post divorce literature. That is, studies have consistently documented that post divorce conflict—regardless of custody agreement—is associated with subsequent negative outcomes for children (Amato, 1994; Clawar & Rivlin, 1991; Ellis, 2000; Long, Slater, Forehand, & Fauber, 1988). Another disturbing aspect of many of the strategies described was that they entailed active participation of the child (asking the child to choose whether to visit, asking the child to spy and/or keep secrets from the other parent, and so forth). Engaging the child in the betrayal and rejection of the targeted parent might be particularly effective because it could result in guilt and shame that the child will want to ward off through justification of the rejection and avoidance of the targeted parent—furthering the estrangement and negative feelings about the targeted parent. Another common theme was that many of the strategies entailed a degree of deceitfulness and deception. The alienating parents were able to create situations in which the targeted parent appeared to do nothing right. They were continually being set up by the alienating parent to look bad in the eyes of their children.

In light of the complexity of the phenomenon, an important next step for the field is to develop intervention programs for families affected by parental alienation. These should entail therapeutic interventions for both parents as well as dyadic interventions for the child and targeted parent in order to assist in the reparations of that relationship.

In particular, interventions need to provide guidance to targeted parents about how to establish and/or maintain a secure and loving relationship with their child in the face of the alienation campaign. For example, how should targeted parents balance their need to explain their



side (which may lead to arguments and bad feelings) with the goal of establishing warm and loving moments that could help build towards a more positive relationship. Strategies for maintaining contact during non-parenting time should also be identified in order to help the parent and child manage the separation. For example, under what conditions is it advisable for targeted parents to send cards, make phone calls, attend social and sporting events in order to demonstrate interest and care? Are there situations in which targeted parents should assume a less active role? In the absence of tested interventions, Gardner (1998), Warshak (2001), and Darnall's (1998) suggestions should be considered as the best the field has to offer at this time. Additionally, we recommend that targeted parents identify the alienation strategies that they believe the other parent is utilizing in order to try to reduce their impact. For example, if there is reason to believe that gifts sent to the house will be thrown out, the targeted parent could deliver gifts directly to the child (if there is contact) or to the child by a third party. No single solution will work for every case, but anticipating the strategies and trying to minimize their effectiveness is worth considering.

A second notable finding from these data is that the targeted parents in general knew more about the alienating parent's strategies than adult children (Baker, in press). Although there was considerable overlap between the strategies described by the adult children and those derived from the surveys with the targeted parent, there were some areas of divergence as well. In addition, there were several "other" types of alienation strategies mentioned by the targeted parents but not by the adult children. This suggests that although the adult children have insight into their felt experience, they are not necessarily aware of the full battery of strategies that alienating parents use to effectuate the alienation. Although they are the targets of the alienation, the process partially takes place outside of their awareness. This finding has implications for assessment and intervention. For example, custody evaluations and mental health interventions with children likely to be experiencing PAS need to include both parents in addition to the child. As Gardner (1998) pointed out, although individual therapy with children can be helpful in some situations, when PAS is an issue, it will be important for the therapist to unwittingly support the PAS by taking at face value the negative statements and feelings expressed by the child client.

One strategy in particular bears further mention. An allegation of physical or sexual abuse is currently a controversial issue in the courts. Often, it is not known whether the allegations are true or false. That is the same dilemma that is faced in this study. Knowing if the allegation is

true or false is something that cannot be assessed for the purpose of this study. Of the 97 parents, 29 specifically alleged that the alienating parent had “badmouthed” them to the authorities (22 fathers and 7 mothers). Of this number, 14 specifically used the term false allegation of abuse (not specifying whether it was physical and/or sexual) while the other half referred to false allegations of domestic violence or referred to being badmouthed to the authorities without additional information to know what the allegation referred to. Differentiating between true and false allegations of abuse will continue to be a problem for the evaluator until a standardized and valid protocol is developed.

Another notable finding was that neither the number nor type of strategy was related to the gender of the target child or of the targeted parent. The alienation strategies described by the survey respondents were employed across the board by parents who wanted to turn their children against the other parent. They appear to be universal strategies that can be used by either mother or father.

Also noteworthy was the finding that not all children were equally affected by the PAS strategies. While the vast majority of the respondents reported that the other parent was an obsessed (as opposed to naïve or active) alienator, not all target children were perceived to be equally affected by obsessed alienators. Of the 88 obsessed parents, 19 of the children were reported to be mildly alienated, 26 were reported to be moderately alienated, and 41 were reported to be severely alienated (with two cases un-coded on level of alienation). Exploratory analyses were conducted to examine possible correlates of level of PAS. Two of the five examined variables were statistically significant. Specifically, girls and older children were more likely to be rated as severely alienated compared to boys and younger children. The age effect might be attributable to the fact that the older the child the longer the alienating parent had been “at it.” This would suggest a cumulative effect of alienation strategies. It is also possible that older children are given more leeway by their parents to choose visitation and hence, more pressured by the alienating parents to choose. There is less recourse in the courts once children are teens and perhaps alienating parents are aware of that. In addition, teens typically have more freedom and are easier to access (cell phones, instant messaging, text messaging, and so forth). Alienating parents probably have greater opportunities at their disposal to contact the target child outside the supervision of the targeted parent. In this way, the alienating parent can implement the program of alienation with greater frequency than with younger children. And finally, older children may be more susceptible to appeals to their independence and,

hence, may be more easily manipulated into “exercising their independent thinking,” along the lines of Gardner’s independent thinker phenomenon. For all these reasons, targeted parents with teens who are not yet severely alienated should be alerted to the possibility that the alienation could still progress. It may not be wise to assume that if the child has not advanced to the severe level yet s/he never will. It is possible that adolescence could mark the beginning of a new offensive in both the alienating parent’s efforts and their impact.

Nonetheless, these data cannot fully shed light on what factors account for why some children become mildly alienated while others are moderately or severely so. This is an important direction for future research. The more that can be learned about factors associated with the level of PAS, the more effective intervention and prevention will be. Areas for future attention include identifying variables that may influence the severity, duration, prognosis, and effective reunification therapy. Another facet worthy of exploration is the role of memory, suggestibility, and personality that may make some children differentially vulnerable to the alienating parent’s propaganda. Understanding these variables can assist therapists working towards reunification. Similarly, the role of the targeted parent needs to be better understood. Specifically, what is the most effective response to the alienated child and the alienating parent, and what role if any do targeted parents play in perpetuating the alienation. While striving to avoid blaming the victim, it is important to note that in some cases the targeted parent may play a role in the alienation, either by having negative parenting attributes, retaliating with their own alienating behavior, and/or by not being an active and involved parent, and hence providing the alienating parent with ready ammunition in the campaign.

Several additional avenues for future research suggest themselves. First, validating level of PAS and type of alienator would bring consensus to the field and allow for uniform coding and categorization of key constructs. Second, identifying the familial contexts within which PAS is most likely to occur (i.e., disputed custody cases, families with narcissistic parents) would allow for preventive interventions to be offered to high-risk families. Third, understanding the factors that transform parental alienating strategies (parent behaviors) into parental alienation syndrome (resulting alienation from the targeted parent) would help determine under what conditions children exposed to alienating strategies become alienated. Most likely there is a combination of factors including the personality characteristics of the alienating parent, constellation of the family (role of siblings and extended family), responses

of the targeted parent, and characteristics of the child (ability to withstand brainwashing and manipulations) as well as other as yet unidentified factors.

### **LIMITATIONS**

And, finally, the limitations of the study need to be noted. First, a retrospective design was utilized that did not allow for a determination of causality. That is, although the survey respondents described the strategies used from their perspective, it cannot be known whether in fact such strategies led to the alienation. The possibility that estrangement could account for or explain the parent/child problem was not assessed in this study. Another limitation is that the timing of the alienation was not consistent. Thus, for some the experience of the alienation was relatively fresh while for others it was much less so. It is possible that some of the participants did not remember all of the strategies used because too much time had elapsed. In that respect, the findings may under-represent the frequency of the strategies. Self-selection and the self-report nature of the survey may have resulted in additional biases that can only be addressed in studies in which random sampling and independent observations are utilized.

### **NOTE**

1. Exact dates were not provided for the date alienation began and for the date the child first seemed alienated.

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