

STATEMENT FOR TASMANIAN FAMILY AND
SEXUAL VIOLENCE SPECIALIST PRACTITIONERS

CIRCULATION OF DISCREDITED 'PARENTAL ALIENATION' THEORIES



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Summary

- There are ongoing reports of the discredited theory of 'Parental Alienation' ('PA') (also referred to as 'Parental Alienation Behaviours' or 'Parental Alienation Syndrome') being promoted online and within certain practices and institutions.
- PA is widely criticised in Australia and overseas for its methodological weakness, lack of empirical foundation, and weaponisation by people who use violence.
- PA has been found to delegitimise women's accounts of violence, silence children's disclosures of abuse, and reinforce harmful gendered norms about family violence and parental custody.
- The main source of information promoting PA in Australia is Parental Alienation Limited, which operates a website under the name of the 'Eeny Meeny Miney Mo Foundation'; organises 'Parental Alienation Awareness Day' (12 October); and has sponsored an online petition calling for legislative recognition of PA.
- Some key proponents of PA, including directors of Parental Alienation Limited, are based in Tasmania.
- PA may be used against people who are victim-survivors of family and sexual violence, particularly in family court matters.
- Some victim-survivors may have been misled by online sources to frame their experiences as PA, when in fact they are experiencing ongoing family violence.
- ***Practitioners are encouraged to monitor and counter the promotion of PA, using the information set out below, and request further information from Engender Equality if required.***

What is Parental Alienation (PA)?

The term 'parental alienation' derives from 'parental alienation syndrome', which was coined by discredited US psychiatrist Richard Gardner in the 1987¹. Gardner claimed that children could be brainwashed by a vindictive parent (usually their mother) into suffering the mental disorder of 'parental alienation syndrome' and rejecting the other parent (usually the father).²

Gardner's views have been widely condemned for pathologising the protective parent and ignoring the gendered nature of intimate partner violence. Gardner's theory has also been discredited because it lacked empirical evidence, relied heavily on anecdotal observations, and used circular reasoning (e.g. a child's rejection was treated as proof of alienation)³.

Gardner also held widely condemned views on child sexuality, including claims that children can be sexually provocative and that adult-child sexual contact is not always harmful⁴. These views have been denounced by child protection experts, legal scholars, and mental health professionals for minimising and rationalising child sexual abuse.

However, 'parental alienation syndrome' was subsequently reframed as 'parental alienation' by its proponents, and over the last 10 years in particular has increasingly featured in Family Court matters, despite little scientific or evidential basis.⁵ It has been actively promulgated by groups such as Parental Alienation Limited, including via its Eeny Meeny Miney Mo Foundation website and social media channels, and the work of associated PA 'experts', including as witnesses and reporters in Family Court matters.

In response, published research⁶, public inquiries⁷ and victim-survivor testimony⁸ have found that the impact on both adult and child victims and survivors of so-called 'parental alienation' claims made by parents who use violence can be devastating, with children being intentionally removed from their primary carers (usually mothers) to facilitate the establishment a relationship with the parent using violence (usually male) who often seek to portray themselves as victims, thereby distorting the reality of abuse and further traumatising their victim⁹.

Parental alienation: a globally discredited concept

The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has discouraged states and parties from using the term¹⁰ 'parental alienation'.

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women has recommended a prohibition on the use of so-called 'parental' alienation to the United Nations Human Rights Council¹².

The European Parliament has adopted a resolution condemning the term and calling on members to prohibit use of the term in court proceedings¹¹.

A recent (2023) report by the government-appointed Domestic Abuse Commissioner for England and Wales¹³ was scathing about the use of PA in family court matters.

The Commissioner:

- found that "so-called 'parental' alienation is a term with no generally accepted scientific or legal foundation"
- highlighted "the damaging use...of so-called 'parental' alienation...and the chilling effect it is having on victims and survivor's ability to raise domestic abuse"
- directed that "protective parenting...must not be conflated with so-called 'parental' alienation in instances of domestic abuse..."
- expressed concern about the "significant increase in the utilisation of so-called 'parental' alienation which has led to unsafe contact"
- cited the UK Ministry of Justice's 2020 Harm Panel report¹⁴, which found that "fears of false allegations of parental alienation are clearly a barrier to victims of abuse telling the courts about their experiences" and confirmed "this aligns fully with accounts that the Commissioner hears repeatedly from victims and survivors"
- noted that "perpetrators of domestic abuse may make allegations of so-called 'parental' alienation in response to allegations of domestic abuse to further control and abuse a victim" and that "perpetrators of domestic abuse may also make allegations of so-called 'parental' alienation to continue abuse post-separation"
- observed that "the overarching effect of allegations of so-called 'parental' alienation, is therefore seen in the voice of the child being minimised or silenced entirely."

Some key points for practitioners about so-called 'parental alienation' ('PA')

PA undermines evidence-based family and sexual violence practice

PA is incompatible with specialist family violence frameworks that prioritise safety; trauma-informed practice; and children's rights in custody determinations.

Proponents of PA often frame it as a 'stand-alone' issue, disconnected from ongoing patterns of coercive control. This framing conflicts with established evidence and understandings of the broader context of gendered violence and abuse within intimate relationships.

As outlined above, PA is not supported by psychological and legal research^{15 16} and has been widely condemned by international expert bodies on gendered violence. However, while widely debunked, it has enduring take up in legal settings, undermining evidence-based practices.

A form of systems abuse

The consequences of biased custody decisions can be detrimental and irreversible to children and victim-survivors of family and sexual violence, leading to a continuum of violence before and after separation. Despite these grave consequences, 'parental alienation' and related pseudo concepts are embedded and endorsed in legal systems across different jurisdictions, including amongst evaluators tasked with reporting to family courts on the best interest of the child.^{17 18}

Harm to children

Psychologist reports that use the discredited PA concept influence Family Court orders resulting in children being forced to have contact with an abusive parent¹⁹. Forced contact with the unsafe parent can subject children to emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

Victim-Blaming

PA is used in Court to shift focus from the abusive behaviour of the parent using violence, to alleged

misconduct by the protective parent. PA is used as a deliberate strategy to undermine women's credibility, minimise family violence, and force contact between children and abusive fathers.

Silencing Children

Where a child experiences the direct or indirect effects of family violence²⁰, a self-protective measure may manifest in the child exhibiting reluctance, resistance or refusal of contact with the abusive parent. Children's disclosures of abuse are reframed by PA as signs of manipulation rather than taken seriously despite evidence that children do not make false allegations^{21 22}.

Secondary victimisation and underreporting of violence

Mothers who seek to protect their children risk being labelled as 'alienating' and may lose custody or access. This leads to women underreporting the abuse they have experienced to reduce the risk of them being perceived as someone who is using PA.

Obscures ongoing family violence

In efforts to falsely claim PA is 'not gendered', PA is often deliberately conflated with ongoing gendered violence. It is not uncommon for people who use violence to employ tactics such as turning family (including children) against a victim or survivor as part of a pattern of abuse either during the relationship or as part of post-separation abuse, and this is harmful to children, victims and survivors²³. However, this clearly falls within existing definitions of family violence, and is not so-called 'parental alienation'.

Collusion with Perpetrators

Through the lens of PA, individuals who perpetrate abuse are supported by some lawyers, psychologists and court officials to position themselves as victims, thereby reinforcing their power over the actual victims - both the ex-partner and the children. This collusive dynamic perpetuates cycles of abuse and hinders the delivery of justice.

Endnotes

- 1 Gardner, R. A. (1987). The parental alienation syndrome and the differentiation between fabricated and genuine child sex abuse. Cresskill, NJ: Creative Therapeutics.
- 2 Domestic Abuse Commissioner of England and Wales. (2023). The family court and domestic abuse: Achieving cultural change. Domestic Abuse Commissioner.
- 3 See for example, Meier, J. (2009). A historical perspective on parental alienation syndrome and parental alienation. *Journal of Child Custody*, 6(3–4), 232–257.
- 4 See for example, Leadership Council on Child Abuse and Interpersonal Violence. (n.d.). Richard Gardner's opinions. Retrieved August 29, 2025, from <https://leadershipcouncil.org/richard-gardners-opinions/>
- 5 Domestic Abuse Commissioner of England and Wales (2023), op. cit.
- 6 For example, Neilson, L. C. (2018). Parental alienation empirical analysis: Child best interests or parental rights? Vancouver: FREDA Centre for Research on Violence Against Women and Children; and Nicholson-Pallett, P. (2024). 'Is it a syndrome? Who cares?' A critical discourse analysis of parental alienation in relevant England and Wales policy debates. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*. Advance online publication.
- 7 For example, UK Ministry of Justice. (2020). Assessing risk of harm to children and parents in private law children cases: Final report. Ministry of Justice.
- 8 For example, Channel 4 Dispatches. (2021). Torn apart: Family courts uncovered. Channel 4 Television.
- 9 Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2023), Op. cit.
- 10 CEDAW. (2016). Concluding observations on the combined seventh and eighth periodic reports of Spain (CEDAW/C/ESP/CO/7-8); Concluding observations on the combined eighth and ninth periodic reports of Canada (CEDAW/C/CAN/CO/8-9). United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.
- 11 European Parliament. (2021). The impact of intimate partner violence and custody rights on women and children. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0415_EN.html
- 12 Alsalem, R. (2023). Custody, violence against women and violence against children: Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences. United Nations Human Rights Council. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/thematic-reports/ahrc5336-custody-violence-against-women-and-violence-against-children>
- 13 Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2023), op. cit.
- 14 UK Ministry of Justice. (2020). Op. cit
- 15 Rathus, Z. (2013). Parental alienation: Inappropriate, unconvincing and dangerous. Women's Legal Services Australia. https://www.wlsa.org.au/files/Zoe_Rathus_Parental_Alienation_Paper.pdf
- 16 Rathus, Z. (2020). A history of the use of the concept of parental alienation in the Australian family law system: Contradictions, collisions and their consequences. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 42(1), 5–17.
- 17 Women's Agenda. (2019, September 9). 'Parental alienation': The debunked theory that women lie about violence is still used in court. <https://womensagenda.com.au/latest/parental-alienation-the-debunked-theory-that-women-lie-about-violence-is-still-used-in-court/>
- 18 Alsalem, R. (2023). Op. cit.
- 19 ABC News. (2023, June 30). Erin told a family court report writer her father abused her. She was not believed. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-30/family-court-expert-witness-report-writer-regulation-ahpra/102535394>
- 20 Duluth Model (2013), accessed from <https://www.theduluthmodel.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Using-Children-Wheel.pdf>
- 21 London, K., Bruck, M., Ceci, S. J., & Shuman, D. W. (2005). Disclosure of child sexual abuse: What does the research tell us about the ways that children tell? *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 11(1)
- 22 Parkinson, P., & Cashmore, J. (2008). The voice of a child in family law disputes. Oxford University Press.
- 23 Domestic Abuse Commissioner (2023), Op. cit.

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