

Frequently asked questions about Associate Professor Jennifer Harman's research into parental alienation

Associate Professor Jennifer Harman answers frequently asked questions about her most recent research into parental alienation. Media seeking more information on any of these topics can visit her [faculty profile](#) or contact the Colorado State University communications team [by email](#).

ABOUT ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR HARMAN

What are your areas of expertise and research background? What are your qualifications to comment on this topic?

I am a scientist who has focused exclusively on studying parental alienation for more than a decade. I regularly collaborate with mental health and legal professionals in my research, and I train graduate students and mental health professionals to work with families affected by family violence. I have several graduate degrees, including two master's degrees in psychological counseling and a Ph.D. – all of which I continue to use to inform my research. [You can view my full CV online.](#)

Additionally, I have also served as the president of the International Council on Shared Parenting, where I worked with interdisciplinary leaders in the family sciences from across the world to disseminate research and best practices for intervention with families to policy- and decision-makers. I also currently serve on the board of directors for the Parental Alienation Study Group, a large international organization of scientists, legal and mental health professionals, and advocates who are dedicated to communicating accurate scientific information about parental alienation to the public.

I have been an expert witness in almost 50 family and criminal court cases across 18 states and in Canada where parental alienation had been raised as a concern in the case. In this capacity, I served as a blind witness, meaning that my role was only to educate the court about scientific evidence regarding parental alienation and best practices in scientific literature for intervention. Blind experts are often used in legal cases to provide educational information to the judiciary so that they can make informed decisions after reviewing the totality of evidence in the case. I do not provide recommendations to the court regarding child custody. Only licensed mental health providers appointed as neutral parties to the case are able to make those recommendations.

What is your interest in this topic? How did you arrive at it after doing your Ph.D. around HIV risk behavior?

I have always studied public health problems across my career – from maternal health to HIV risk behaviors and family violence. My study of parental alienation is just another domain where relationship dynamics affect the mental health and wellbeing of the family system.

My interest in parental alienation arose when I witnessed it occurring to some people close to me. These individuals reached out to me for advice because of my expertise in the study of intimate relationships, and I had no good answers for them. I had not been taught about parental alienation in my graduate studies, and it was not yet widely recognized in the scientific

community. The more I read about what had been published about the problem, the stronger I felt about lending my skills and expertise to studying the phenomenon.

ABOUT CURRENT RESEARCH

What are your most recent findings?

My colleagues and I recently published a study named “Gender and child custody outcomes across 16 years of judicial decisions regarding abuse and parental alienation” in ScienceDirect. You can [read the full study here](#).

Why is this most recent paper important? What are its major findings?

Our [study results](#) reported in the ScienceDirect paper are important because legislation and public policies are being created and implemented based on a [2019 internet archived paper](#) that was not peer-reviewed. That paper states mothers lost custody of children at “alarming rates” when they claimed abuse in family court and the father claims to have been alienated.

[The unreviewed study](#) aligns with some opinions that there is a gender bias against mothers in court cases where claims of parental alienation are raised, meaning that there is a belief that fathers are abusive to both children and mothers and they claim that the mother alienates them from their child as a perpetuated form of additional abuse and leverage to maintain control over the child in custody disputes.

The authors claim that parental alienation is a legal defense used by abusive fathers to continue abusing their children and their mother.

In 2021, my colleagues and I attempted to replicate the study and [published findings in this paper](#) by reviewing 967 appellate level cases in the U.S. We found no support for the findings reported in the unreviewed study.

Our most [recent published research](#) in DirectScience is the second attempted replication study, using 500 trial level family court cases from Canada where parental alienation was found to have occurred. We again found no empirical support for the conclusions reported in the unreviewed study.

Our findings are directly at odds with legislation that has been pushed by some advocacy groups, such as Kayden’s Law. We found that:

1. Gender of the alienating parent was not a good predictor of child custody outcomes. In one test where we did find gender differences, the effects were too small to be meaningful. In other words, factors other than gender better explained how child custody was allocated, such as severity of alienating behaviors of a parent.
2. Less than half of cases involving a finding of parental alienation had any other allegation of abuse made against the alienating parent.

3. The courts and administrative agencies such as police and child protective services took allegations of abuse very seriously.
4. Of the 500 trial-level cases from Canada in our sample – which spanned a 16-year timeframe, only 7% had any finding of abuse made against the alienating parent (a very low base rate), and most of those abusive parents were mothers, not fathers.
5. The involvement of a custody evaluator or guardian ad litem affected child custody outcomes differentially for alienating mothers or fathers.

How do the results of this paper change the landscape for parental alienation research?

This paper serves to solidify what has already been well documented in research on parental alienation: that as a form of family violence it does not discriminate by gender. Parental alienation is an outcome of coercively controlling abuse, and this study aligns with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention data and hundreds of studies on partner abuse (see <https://domesticviolenceresearch.org/>) in showing that men and fathers are as likely to be victims of this form of abuse as women.

Are there policy implications? If so, what are they?

There are strong policy implications of this research. In two replication studies we have **not** found widespread gender bias in courts' handling of abuse claims. Administrative services such as child protective services took allegations of abuse very seriously.

Even after thorough investigation, only 10% of allegations made were substantiated or found to be true. As we mention in our new paper, this means that 90% of abuse allegations in cases of parental alienation were determined to be untrue or otherwise unsubstantiated. More than 30% of allegations we reviewed were made directly after a court decision or action (e.g., filing a motion to modify custody), presumably out of retaliation.

The impact of these allegations on those wrongly accused of abuse is devastating, and many law enforcement and child protective service workers are unaware of this widespread violation of justice. Policies regarding how claims of abuse are investigated, training for legal and mental health professionals, and legislation need to be based on the full body of evidence-based, scientifically peer-reviewed research.

ABOUT PARENTAL ALIENATION

What is parental alienation? Where does the theory come from originally? Who is Richard Gardner?

Parental alienation is an outcome of coercively controlling abuse within a family. When there is an abusive parent in the family, they often use children as weapons against the other parent.

Weaponization of a child can involve a variety of behaviors, such as gaslighting, coercing the child to spy on the other parent, manipulating the child into believing the other parent never loved or cared about them, inducing loyalty to them, and gatekeeping behaviors to prevent quality time with the abused/alienated parent.

Research finds all genders perpetrate parental alienation, just as research on domestic violence fails to find gender differences in perpetration.

These psychologically abusive behaviors influence many children to align with the abusive parent and turn against the abused parent who they come to believe never loved them or abandoned them. These children then become alienated from the abused parent. Not all children exposed to parental alienating behaviors become alienated, but when they do, early intervention is important to prevent severe long-term effects of this abuse.

Parental alienation has been documented in case law for over 200 years, and over 200 studies on the subject have been published in nine languages through 2020 – 40% of which have been published since 2016. Mental health providers in the early part of the 20th century documented this phenomenon in divorce cases, but it was not until the mid-1980s that a child psychiatrist named Richard Gardner coined the phrase “parental alienation syndrome” to describe symptoms in the child. At the same time, there were other clinicians (e.g., Leona Kopetski) who were writing about the same types of cases that Gardner was documenting from his practice. Gardner did not invent parental alienation or parental alienation syndrome. He is just one of the first to put a label on it.

What are a few of the potential negative effects of parental alienation on children?

The effects of parental alienation are no different than other types of child abuse. Alienated children can experience a host of short- and long-term effects, such as anxiety, PTSD symptoms, depression, peer- and intimate-relationship problems, suicidality, ADHD, academic decline, etc. Some children can appear to be doing fine, yet underneath they are not. Careful assessment of the child is necessary, particularly in different contexts, such as when they are with the alienating and alienated parent separately.

Is parental alienation recognized by relevant medical groups?

Parental alienation has been recognized by many professional organizations or within publications of such organizations. The list includes the American Bar Association, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the Italian Society of Child and Adolescent Neuropsychiatry, and the Spanish Association for Multidisciplinary Research on Parental Interference.

My research on parental alienation has been published in some of the highest-ranking publications of the American Psychological Association and Association for Psychological Science.

What is your position on reunification programs as remedies or treatments?

Reunification programs have demonstrated effectiveness across several important peer-reviewed studies for severely alienated children. Like other forms of child abuse, interventions are not a one-size-fits-all approach. More intensive interventions are needed, the more severe the abuse has become. Further questions on this subject should be asked of the clinical directors that manage those programs.

What questions can care providers, the legal community and other advocates for children ask to help sort out complex situations involving potential abusive parents and parental alienation?

There are many forms of family conflict that affect children negatively, such as abuse that leads to estrangement, loyalty conflicts and parental alienation. Each of these conflicts has very different power and family dynamics, and interventions for them are also very different.

There are tools to help legal and mental health providers differentiate these cases from each other, including the recent five-factor model created by Amy Baker and William Bernet. This model has been validated and is a reliable method for identification. When it is combined with other evidence gathered about the family and presented in court, the model can help effectively diagnose the issues in the family.

Researchers and mental health professionals continue to develop tools and strategies to understand and address parental alienation.

What are two public advocacy or informational groups you would suggest contacting for information on this topic?

The [Parental Alienation Study Group](#) and the [National Parents Organization](#).

What are three published scientific articles that you have been involved in that you would recommend for people to learn more?

- Harman, J. J., Giancarlo, C., Lorandos, D., & Ludmer, B. (2023). Gender and child custody across 16 years of judicial decisions regarding abuse and parental alienation. *Children & Youth Services Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107187>
- Harman, J. J., Warshak, R. A., Lorandos, D., & Florian, M. J. (2022). Developmental psychology and the scientific status of parental alienation. *Developmental Psychology*, 58(10), 1887–1911. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0001404>
- Harman, J. J., Kruk, E., & Hines, D. (2018). Parental alienating behaviors: An unacknowledged form of family violence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 144(12), 1275-1299. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/bul0000175>