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Review

# Losses experienced by children alienated from a parent

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### Highlights

- Parental alienating behaviors are related to a child's rejection of a parent for unjustified reasons.
- Children who have been alienated from a parent experience substantial losses across many areas of their lives.
- The alienated child's loss of the parent-child relationship is often compounded by the loss of important social supports.

Abstract

FEEDBACK 

Parental alienation occurs when a child aligns with one parent and unjustifiably rejects the other as a result of parental alienating behaviors. This article provides an overview of current research and theory regarding the losses alienated children endure. Parental alienating behaviors alter the child's beliefs, perceptions, and memories of the alienated parent, triggering a cascade of profound losses for the child. These losses include loss of individual self, childhood experiences, extended family, community, and activities and relationships essential for healthy development. Consequently, alienated children often experience ongoing and ambiguous losses and thereby suffer disenfranchised grief in isolation.



## Keywords

Parental alienation; Parental alienating behaviors; Grief; Loss; Isolation

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## Introduction

*Being alienated from my mum affected every aspect of my life. I've experienced the grief of many losses. I lost my mum. I lost contact with my mum's side of the family. My dad moved me interstate and overseas, so I lost everything familiar. I felt I had no direction. I couldn't see myself in the future and I didn't know where I fitted into this world...I had ongoing emotional pain, not knowing where it was coming from...[I later lost] my mum to suicide, then later in life I was alienated from my own children. The most difficult part was no one around me understood what I was going through.*

Amanda Sillars (personal communication, April 8, 2021)

Parental alienation (PA) is a family dynamic in which a child aligns with one parent (the alienating parent) and unjustifiably rejects the other (the alienated parent) [1]. As illustrated in the opening quote, alienated children experience significant losses across many areas of their life. Exposure to parental alienation behaviors (PABs) and subsequent losses are associated with a host of negative outcomes for children that last well into adulthood [2], including low self-esteem, difficulties trusting others and becoming self-sufficient, substance abuse issues, depression, and anxiety [3].

Over three decades of scientific evidence has documented factors and outcomes associated with PA, leading to a “blossoming” of this field of study [4]. While PA profoundly and negatively affects members of the entire family system [5], this review focuses specifically on theory and research related to the losses that children experience. Several theoretical frameworks will be offered as relevant for understanding how PABs result in these losses.

## Parental alienation versus estrangement

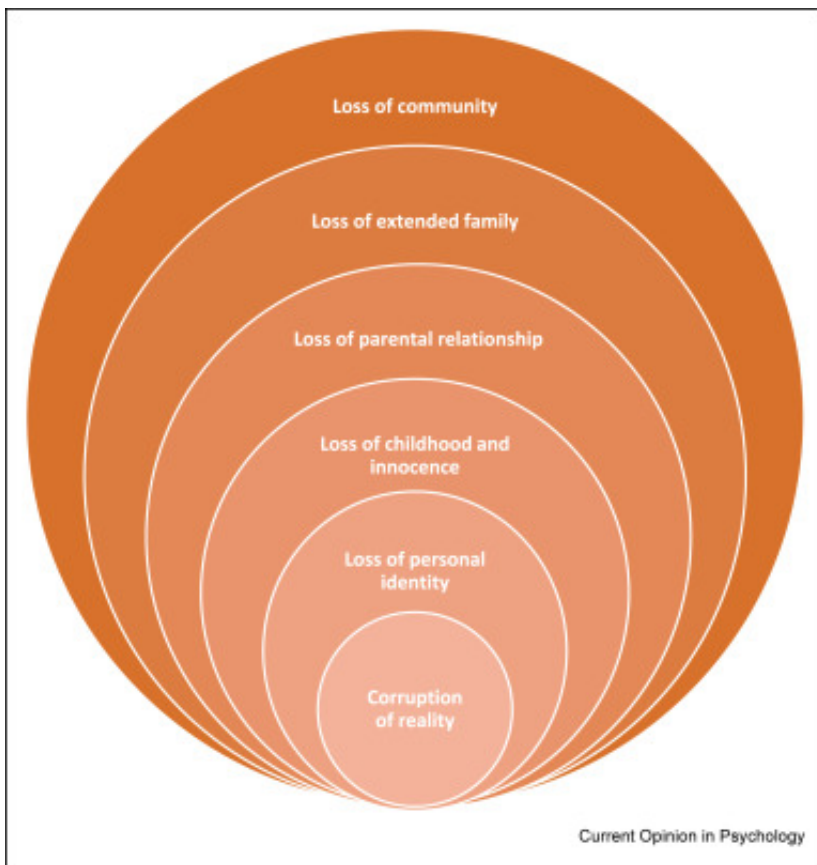
PA is different than estrangement, which refers to a child's justified rejection of a parent (due to maltreatment or significantly deficient parenting). Estrangement is actually uncommon because even children who have been abused by a parent tend to engage in attachment-enhancing behaviors (e.g., proximity seeking) rather than attachment-destructive behaviors (e.g., rejection) [6]. Thus, an alienated child's rejection of the alienated parent (absent a legitimate reason) is inconsistent with the innate need for children to maintain relationships with their caregivers [7].

## Parental alienating behaviors

The number and frequency of PABs (e.g., badmouthing, gatekeeping) create distance and conflict in the child's relationship with the other parent and are associated with greater degrees of a child's rejection of that parent [8, 9, 10,12]. Research examining these connections builds on rich descriptions from clinicians as well as those personally affected by PA [11]. Alienating parents are more likely to have substantiated findings of other forms of maltreatment (e.g., neglect) against them than alienated parents [13]. Moreover, the use of PABs can be considered a form of family violence because of how significant the negative impact is on the entire family system [14].

## Corruption of reality

Parental alienating behaviors alter the child's beliefs, perceptions, and memories of the alienated parent [15, 16, 17]. This corruption of reality is accomplished through systematic reframing of the other parent's intentions such that even innocuous behaviors are recast as indicators of untrustworthiness. Because there is often a grain of truth, the child does not feel manipulated. Gradually, the alienating parent erodes the child's critical thinking skills and ability to trust themselves, which results in internal working models of the self and others as unsafe and unloving [18] and leads to feelings of disconnection from internal and external experiences [19]. The child's sense of disconnection and inauthentic reality are reinforced when alienated parents repeat their false narratives to third parties as part of their alienation campaign [20]. It is the corruption of the child's reality that triggers a cascade of profound losses the child then experiences, as illustrated in [Figure 1](#).



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Figure 1. Losses experienced by the alienated child.

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## Cascade of losses

### Loss of individual self

Because the alienated parent is presented as unsafe, unloving, and unavailable, the child feels compelled to reject any association with that parent, including aspects of their own self. Simultaneously, the alienating parent uses emotional manipulation strategies to create an unhealthy cohesion between themselves and the child [22], which produces an “us” (alienated parent-child relationship) against “them” (alienated parent and associated parties) mentality [23]. These PABs include making the child feel guilty for expressing positive feelings toward the alienated parent [21,22], and alliance-building strategies designed to cultivate dependence on the alienating parent [2]. Consequently, the child becomes unable to express personal initiative and loses the opportunity to develop an autonomous identity [22,24].

### Loss of childhood and innocence

Adults alienated as children describe experiencing a loss of childhood because they lost

experiences necessary for adaptive psychosocial development [15,19,25] due to spending excessive time and energy focusing on and prioritizing the alienating parent's needs [26]. Through processes such as adultification and parentification [20], the alienating parent provides the child with inappropriate adult information (e.g., court matters) [27] and encourages the child to feel entitled to make adult decisions (e.g., the parenting schedule) [21]. Likewise, infantilization occurs when the alienating parent treats the child as though they are much younger than they are [20] by preventing them from engaging in experiences that foster autonomy and self-sufficiency, such as playing with same-aged peers and focusing on educational and recreational activities. Adults who later perceive the alienating parent as being responsible for the loss of their childhood also experience a loss of innocence about the nature of that relationship [19].

### Loss of a “good enough” parent

By manipulating the child to believe the alienated parent never loved or wanted them, abandoned them, or is dangerous, the alienated parent corrupts the child's previously healthy attachment to the alienated parent [23]. Over time, the child internalizes these negative beliefs and harbors feelings of hurt, anger, and resentment [23]. The child comes to deny any positive feelings they previously had toward the alienated parent and perceives them as being “all bad” compared with the alienating parent as being “all good” [28,29]. Eventually they resist and/or refuse contact with the alienated parent, who was by definition “good enough” [1].

### Loss of extended family

Extended family members provide children with love, acceptance, nurturance, and other forms of psychosocial support throughout their lives [20] and provide human capital in the form of skills and knowledge that help the child act in new and productive ways as an adult. Extended family also provide social connections, knowledge, and emotional and social investments [30,31]. Alienated children often lose these important relationships due to PABs (such as preventing grandparent visits), which can reverberate throughout their lives [5,20]. They lose opportunities for learning skills and life perspectives that contribute to their future success, and social connections that provide resources outside of the immediate family.

### Loss of community

Relocating to a new neighborhood, state or country is a PAB that severs or minimizes contact between the child and alienated parent [20,22]. The child is propelled into an unfamiliar environment away from their friends, school, and neighbors, compounding the alienated child's loss. Children relocated internationally are also removed from familiar cultural and social norms that are part of their identity [32]. These losses occur during a time when the child is indefinitely isolated from their social support system [32] and hence forced to manage their multitude of losses alone.

## Interconnectedness of loss

The loss of the parent-child relationship illustrates how complex and interactive these different losses are. Parents play many roles in the child's life to provide resources and opportunities, consistent with Maslow's hierarchy of needs [33] as shown in Table 1. There is no upper limit a child can receive in each area—even if one parent provides opportunities and connections, the child still benefits from those provided by the other parent. Moreover, the absence of a parent has meaning over and above the absence of opportunities and resources, particularly when the child is manipulated to falsely believe that a parent is unloving, unsafe, and unavailable. When the child feels they are damaged by their association and thereby symbolically dissociate from the alienated parent, this action negatively impacts their self-esteem [34] and they suppress their memories of love and affection regarding the alienated parent [35]. When the child loses connection with their own truth and sense of self, this creates anxiety and depression [3] and can make the child less amenable to remaining connected with the alienated parent. By losing the alienated parent-child relationship, the child becomes completely dependent on the alienating parent, which makes them more vulnerable to sacrificing their own needs for the alienating parent and they lose their own identity, childhood, and extended family connections in the process.

Table 1. Impact of losses on the needs of the child.

<b>Need</b>	<b>Parental role in meeting child's needs</b>	<b>Examples of impacts on the child due to parental alienation</b>
Physiological	Buying food, clothing, housing, medicine.	Fewer people to help with the procurement of food, clothing, housing, and medicine for the child.
Safety	Providing a clean and safe home with a predictable schedule of routines and caretaking.	Fewer people to teach the child how to be safe, how to do chores, how to protect him/herself, and to protect the child from danger.
Love and belonging	Touching the child in a loving and affectionate manner, affirming the child's acceptance and belonging to the extended family and community.	Fewer people to touch the child in a loving and affectionate manner, affirming the child's acceptance and belonging to the extended family and community.
Esteem	Creating opportunities for the child to make decisions and share his/her perspective which is valued.	Fewer people to provide opportunities for the child to make decisions and share his/her perspective, which is valued.

Self-actualization	Providing the child with opportunities to make choices, express him or herself, explore sports and arts, develop skills, values, tastes, styles, and talents.	Fewer people to provide the child with opportunities to make choices, express him or herself, explore sports and arts, develop skills, values, tastes, styles, and talents. These opportunities may not be sufficient but are necessary to promote self-actualization.
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Note. These categorical needs are based on Maslow's [33] hierarchy of needs.

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## Theoretical applications

Many theories are useful for understanding PA and how it creates such devastating losses for children, including attachment theory. Infants seek comfort and proximity to an attachment figure because their attachment provides survival benefits when activated by unsafe situations (e.g., being alone) [36]. When parents respond to their children's bid for comfort in a predictable and loving manner, children develop the experience of the parent as safe, loving, and available. Alienating parents undermine this attachment by convincing a child that the opposite is true about their other parent [19] which affects how the child feels about themselves, the other parent, and relationships more generally.

Identity fusion theory [37] helps explain why alienated children strenuously support and defend the alienating parent, join that parent in denigrating the alienated parent, make false allegations of abuse, and pressure siblings to do the same [21,23,38]. Identity fusion is characterized by pervasive feelings of oneness within a group that blurs boundaries between the individual and others, and PABs create this type of fused identity. Consequently, group members, particularly genetically related kin, are motivated to do as much for the group as for themselves, feel obliged to help and defend each other, and will endorse and enact extreme pro-group behaviors [39].

Uncertainty reduction theory can also help explain why children participate in unjustified parental rejection. When people lack confidence in a relationship's future, they engage in behaviors to reduce uncertainty and unpredictability [40], such as looking for information to explain the deterioration of a relationship [41]. Alienated children look for any reason (often trivial) to justify their rejection of the alienated parent and will use ineffective strategies to reduce their uncertainty and cope with the loss induced by the alienating parent, such as preemptive obstruction (ending the relationship) [8,42].

These losses are forms of ambiguous loss because they occur without certainty or resolution [43]. Ambiguous loss appears in two forms: (1) when a loved one is physically present but psychologically absent; and (2) when a loved one is physically absent but psychologically present [43]. For alienated children, the alienated parent is often physically absent but psychologically present, while the alienating parent is physically present, but psychologically absent because they are often preoccupied with their own psychological needs instead of the child's [19,44]. This

ambiguous loss gives rise to disenfranchised grief, which is an experience of loss that cannot be publicly mourned and is unacknowledged or unaccepted by others [45]. Alienated children are not allowed to experience nor express their pervasive sense of loss of the alienated parent-child relationship [19,46]. Although it may appear the alienated child has chosen to reject their parent, the rejection is not their choice, but rather a consequence of the alienating parent's PABs [38]. Consequently, adults who were alienated from a parent during childhood describe a deep sense of grief, particularly regarding time lost with the alienated parent [19,25].

## Conclusions

Alienated children experience not just the loss of a parent-child relationship—they experience a corruption of reality that creates a loss of identity, childhood and innocence, as well as connections to their extended family and communities. Across these losses, the child is deprived of a multitude of supports and affordances that foster healthy development. Much is known about how exposure to PABs harm children. Now is the time to apply that knowledge to protect future generations of children from experiencing this pernicious form of childhood maltreatment.

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## Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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- This paper collected data from mental health providers who worked with severely abused children and had them report on the children's behaviors and attitudes toward their abusive parents. This study is important, as it found that abused children did not engage in rejection behaviors toward their abusers—rather, the professionals indicated that the vast majority of abused children engaged in attachment-enhancing behaviors. These results indicate that when there is a justified reason for rejecting a parent, such as with severe child physical abuse, children do not engage in such behaviors.
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[Google Scholar](#)

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Three samples selected to be representative of the U.S. and Canadian populations were collected to assess prevalence of parental alienating behavior exposure and outcomes. Using different measures, the authors determined that approximately 22 million American adults are the unreciprocating targets of parental alienating behaviors, and over 4 million children are moderately to severely alienated from a parent. Alienated parents also reported high levels of depression and trauma symptoms, and nearly half had considered

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