

Parental Alienation International

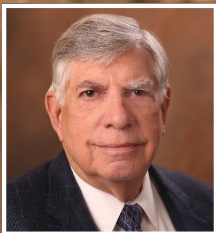
Advancing worldwide understanding in the field of parental alienation



January 2025

Parental Alienation Study Group

Volume 10 • Issue 1



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The Case of the Overprotective Parent: Differentiating Genuine Fear from Dysregulated Fear in Alienated Children

Shawn A. Wygant, MA

ONE OF THE SITUATIONAL FACTORS in some cases of parental alienation is a young child who exhibits fear during parenting time exchanges. Signs of fear are frequently reported by the alienating parent as justification for withholding access and parenting time. The challenge is in determining whether the fear is genuine or dysregulated. Dysregulated fear refers to high levels of distress in low level threat situations such that the child exhibits deficits in adapting their fear response to the actual threat level of the eliciting context.¹ A common pathway for the induction of dysregulated fear in a young child is an overprotective parent. Minuchin et al. (1978) recognized overprotective parents in their model for the psychosomatic family.² In describing such parents, these researchers noted that the overprotective parent constantly elicited and supplied nurturing and protective responses, were hypersensitive to signs of distress and emotionally cued their child to what the parent felt was a dangerous situation.³ Overprotective parents tailor their emotional regulation strategies to *their* perceptions of the child's distress levels.⁴ In cases where an overprotective parent is afraid of their child being in the custody of the other parent for unwarranted reasons, they often fail to recognize that the child's displays of fear are the product of the child's responses to the overprotective parent. The relevant science provides some insight into this dynamic. For example, In a 2020 study, researchers examined how children acquired conditioned fear from observing their parent and found that "children acquire fear vicariously."⁵ Noel et al. (2015) made similar findings suggesting that "parents who perceive a high degree of threat [real or imagined] upon observing their child in pain are more likely to experience distress and behave in ways that signal threat to and evoke fear in their child."⁶

Differentiating genuine fear from dysregulated fear requires reliable observational data from the child's interactions with each parent outside of the context of parenting time exchanges. A recent case involving a 7 year old girl, E. H., shows how observational data obtained from the child custody evaluator was successful in helping the court determine the etiology of E.H.'s reported fear of having contact with her father. The evaluator made the following observations in her report to the court:

"It is clear that E.H. has struggled with her parents' separation but has adjusted to transitioning between father and mother. Mother reported that E.H. often resists going to her father when there is a direct drop off between the parents. Mother suggests that E.H. does not have a close attachment with her father and desires to stay with her mother much of the time. Despite this claim it has been observed

¹ Buss et al. (2018). Dysregulated fear, social inhibition and RSA: A replication and extension. *Child Development*, 89(3), e214-e228.

² Minuchin, S., Baker, L., & Rosman, B. (1978). The psychosomatic family. In *Psychosomatic families: Anorexia nervosa in context* (pp. 23-50). Harvard University Press.

³ Id. at 31.

⁴ Keil et al. (2020). Maternal comforting behavior, toddlers' dysregulated fear, and toddlers' emotion regulatory behaviors. *Emotion*, 20(5), 793-803

⁵ Marin et al. (2020). Vicarious conditioned fear acquisition and extinction in child-parent dyads. *Scientific Reports*, 10, 1-10. *Id.* at 1.

⁶ Noel et al. (2015). Remembering pain after surgery: A longitudinal examination of the role of pain catastrophizing in children's and parents' recall. *Pain*, 156(5), 800-808. Page 1.

that when E.H. is picked up by her father at her daycare she is often excited to see her father. There is no indication that E.H. is uncomfortable or anything less than secure in the father's presence, just that, at times, E.H. has difficulty transitioning from her mother to her father. E.H. demonstrated feeling comfortable and secure in both her father and mother's homes."

These observations made it clear that E.H. was well bonded and attached to her father at a time when the mother was reporting to the court evaluator that he was not. When an anxious ridden parent holds a mistaken belief that the other parent is not bonded or emotionally attached to their child, the anxious parent will often resort to projecting *their* mistaken belief into the child. One of the primary vehicles utilized to accomplish this is enmeshment such that the emotional state of the anxious parent eventually shows up in the child as anxiousness surrounding whatever dysregulated fears are projected by mother concerning the father (i.e., "it is not safe at your father's house"). Once the dysregulated fears of the mother are induced in the child, the child displays separation anxiety only during parenting time transitions that involve the mother and the father. Separation from the mother in other situations excluding the father does not result in anxious symptoms in the child. Separation anxiety is defined as a developmentally inappropriate and excessive fear or anxiety concerning separation from those to whom the individual is attached.⁷ The anxiety exceeds what is expected for the person's developmental level. According to a 2014 study, "childhood separation anxiety arises in the context of anxious parenting."⁸ An anxious parent's maladaptive pattern of overprotectiveness has been shown to reinforce a young child's vulnerability to anxiety by "increasing the child's perception of threat, reducing the child's perceived control over threat, and ultimately increasing the child's avoidance of threat."⁹ Thus, an anxious mother's own anxiety is an important factor in determining the degree to which she becomes over-involved or in this case overprotective. Anxious parents often exhibit a cognitive bias toward threat.¹⁰ The anxious parent is more likely to engage in overprotective behavior of their child due to a maladaptive perception of danger and increased sensitivity to the child's distress in response to the mother's anxiousness.¹¹

The case of E.H. highlights the need for evaluators to gather enough observational data whenever there arises a concern over the etiology of a child's reported fear of contact with a parent. This helps with differential diagnosis and hypothesis testing. Overprotectiveness seems to be a common theme that appears in the behavior of many alienating parents. Often the alienating parent is unaware of their overprotective behaviors. When examined carefully, their overprotectiveness seems to be a product of self-deception. Self-deception serves as a way of translating negative feelings about the target parent into what they consider as justifiable righteous indignation. Understanding this common theme in alienating parents can be helpful when evaluating these kinds of cases. ■

⁷ DSM-5. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders fifth edition*. American Psychiatric Association. Page 190.

⁸ Milrod et al. (2014). Childhood separation anxiety and the pathogenesis and treatment of adult anxiety. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 171, 34-43.

⁹ Hudson, J. L., & Rapee, R. M. (2002). Parent-Child Interactions in Clinically Anxious Children and Their Siblings. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*, 31(4), 548-555.

¹⁰ Hersen et al. (1991). Anxiety disorders in children and their families. *Arch. Gen. Psychiatry*, 48, 928-934.

¹¹ Marin et al. (2020). Vicarious conditioned fear acquisition and extinction in child-parent dyads. *Scientific Reports*, 10, 1-10.

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About the Parental Alienation Study Group

Parental Alienation Study Group, Inc. (PASG) is an international, not-for-profit corporation. PASG has 937 members—mostly mental health and legal professionals—from 65 countries. The members of PASG are interested in educating the general public, mental health clinicians, forensic practitioners, attorneys, and judges regarding parental alienation. PASG members are also interested in developing and promoting research on the causes, prevention, evaluation, and treatment of parental alienation.

About *Parental Alienation International*

Parental Alienation International (PAI) is published bimonthly by PASG. PAI seeks to lead and promote the scholarly discussion and debate concerning parental alienation practice, research, prevention, education, and advocacy to promote development of informed practice and policy in this field.

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