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[Alienating behaviours in separated mothers and fathers in the UK

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Contents

Acknowledgements	3
Executive Summary	4
Key Findings	5
Recommendations	6
Full Report	7
Aims, Objectives, Research Questions and Outcomes	8
Aims	8
Objectives	8
Research Questions	8
Anticipated Outcomes	8
Background	9
Method	10
Sample	10
Contextual Information	10
Measures	12
Parental Alienation and Parental Alienating Behaviours	12
Self-Report	12
The Five-Factor Model	12
Domestic Abuse	14
Legal and Administrative Abuse	14
Mental Health	15
Procedure	15
Results	16
Prevalence of PABs	16
Mental Health Outcomes	17
Relationships to other forms of abuse	17
Manifestations in Children	17
The Five Factor Model	17
Discussion	18
Implications	18
Limitations	19
Future Research Directions	19
Conclusion	20
References	21

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Executive Summary

Parental Alienating Behaviours (PABs) are the actions taken when one parent tries to harm the relationship between their child and the other parent. This problem is gaining increasing awareness amongst a variety of professionals. To understand it better, we conducted a large survey of over 1,000 separated and/or divorced parents to see how common PABs are and how they impact families.

We found that when asked directly, about 39.2% of people said they had experienced PABs. However, when we measured this using specific examples of behaviours, up to 59.1% seemed to have faced PABs. This difference shows that PABs can be hard to identify just by asking people about them, but that they are **widespread**.

We also found that those affected by PABs show greater signs of **serious mental stress, like PTSD symptoms, depression, and thoughts of suicide**. The way we identify PABs can change these effects, making it crucial to have a full understanding. Participants experiencing PABs also talked about facing more domestic violence, which reflects recent studies from the U.S. and Canada.

Considering all this, a two-fold plan is needed. First, we need to **boost mental health support** by training professionals, creating support groups, and offering counselling to families. It is also key to get schools and the legal system involved. Second, we need to make the **public more aware of PABs** through large-scale awareness campaigns, which will help society stand against these harmful behaviours. And, of course, we need better research tools to fully understand PABs.

In short, **PABs are a real and pressing issue**. We need a complete response, mixing practical help with improved research.

Key Findings

- 1. How Common PABs Are:** Around four in ten people (39.2%) felt their ex-partner tried to turn their child against them. When we used a standard questionnaire about more specific behaviours, this number jumped to 59.1%. When looking at parents who didn't engage in the same behaviours in return, the rate was 36.5%.
- 2. Differences in Reporting:** There was a clear difference between what people say about experiencing alienating behaviours and what specific measures show, with both methods only agreeing about 40% of the time.
- 3. Impact on Mental Health:** Those who felt they were on the receiving end of PABs showed higher signs of PTSD, depression, and suicidal thoughts, no matter how it was measured.
- 4. Ties to Other Forms of Abuse:** People who were identified as being alienated also reported higher levels of domestic violence from their ex-partner. And those who both gave and received PABs faced different legal and administrative problems than those who only received PABs.
- 5. The Effects on Children:** Within our study, participants did not report many manifestations of alienation in children (as measured by the new Five-Factor Model). However, this does not mean that children are not influenced by these behaviours, and it is difficult to judge based solely on reports from the alienated parents. More research on this is clearly needed.

Put simply, PABs are widespread, and they are complex. They deeply affect mental health and often co-occur with other harmful behaviours. Our study highlights the need for careful methods and a detailed approach to really understand and tackle the problem of parents being alienated from their children.

Recommendations

1. Comprehensive Education and Awareness Campaigns:

- Design and implement public awareness campaigns to inform communities about PABs, their implications, and avenues for support. These campaigns can be facilitated through schools, community centres, and media.
- Educate individuals involved in family court proceedings, such as judges and lawyers, on the intricacies of PABs. Regular workshops can be organised to keep them updated on the latest research and best practices in this area.

2. Mental Health and Support Services:

- Mental health professionals should receive specialised training in recognising and treating the psychological effects of PABs.
- Develop support groups and counselling services specifically for parents and children affected by PABs. Collaboration between therapists, legal systems, and educational institutions can provide a comprehensive support system for those affected.

3. Enhanced Research Methodologies and Instruments:

- Given the discrepancies between self-reported and behaviourally indicated PABs, future research should focus on refining the methodologies and tools used to measure and evaluate PABs. Combining qualitative and quantitative measures can provide a more holistic picture.
- Studies should delve deeper into the reasons behind these discrepancies, which may be rooted in cognitive biases, lack of awareness, or even societal perceptions.

Full Report



Aims, Objectives, Research Questions and Outcomes

1. Aims

- To establish the prevalence of abusive behaviours targeting the parent-child relationship, otherwise known as Parental Alienating Behaviours (PABs) in the UK
- To highlight the impact of such behaviours on the mental health of UK's divorced parents

2. Objectives

- To create and administer a comprehensive questionnaire to a representative sample of separated/divorced UK adults
- To analyse results for prevalence rates, group differences, and predictive relationships
- To directly disseminate project findings to stakeholders, policymakers, and service providers

3. Research Questions

- How many UK parents experience abusive behaviour targeting the parent-child relationship following separation and divorce?
- What are the impacts of these behaviours on parents' mental health?
- How frequently are these behaviours accompanied by accusations of child abuse/neglect and/or intimate partner violence?
- How do these behaviours correlate with parents' own abusive behaviour (if present)?
- Are there any demographic groups (i.e., mothers versus fathers) which experience the above behaviours/issues to a greater or lesser extent?

4. Outcomes

- Improved understanding as to the prevalence of experience of abusive behaviours targeting the parent-child relationship
- Improved understanding as to the relationship between these behaviours and mental health
- Identification of groups potentially more vulnerable to these behaviours
- A robust, UK evidence base as to the prevalence and impact of these behaviours, with implications for: the commissioning of support mechanisms for parents and children, improved legal practice, and enactment of intervention opportunities.

Background

Abusive behaviour has been widely documented in the context of separation. Studies on both separated women (Spearman et al., 2022; Spearman et al., 2023) and men (Bates, 2019), including as mothers (Hay et al., 2021) and fathers (Hine & Roy, 2023) have revealed the strategies employed by abusive ex-partners following the end of a relationship (Francia et al., 2019). These behaviours include emotional/psychological abuse, coercive and controlling behaviours, stalking and harassment and, although less frequently, physical abuse (Bates, 2019; Spearman et al., 2022; Spearman et al., 2023).

Parents have also specifically reported the use of children as a conduit for abuse, as the child presents a (if not *the*) reason for ongoing contact between ex-partners. Indeed, both mothers (Monk & Bowen, 2021) and fathers (Bates & Hine, 2023) have reported how their ex-partners have targeted their relationship with the child as a form of abuse, for example, by threatening to remove or disrupt contact, or by denigrating the 'targeted' parent. These behaviours, known as parental alienating behaviours (PABs) are coercively controlling forms of abuse (Harman & Matthewson, 2020) that can result in what is known as 'parental alienation' (PA), defined as "one type of contact refusal when a child— typically whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce— allies strongly with one parent and resists and rejects contact and/or a relationship (i.e., contact refusal) with the other parent without legitimate justification" (Bernet et al., 2022, p. 5). In other words, PA refers to the actions and attitudes manifested by the child when there is a coercively controlling abusive dynamic in the family system.

Research on PA has expanded rapidly over the last decade, with 40% of empirical research on this topic published since 2016 (Harman et al., 2022). There is now a robust evidence base detailing many aspects of PA, including how it is enacted (i.e., the identification of PABs), its impact on both alienated parents and children (and its manifestation therein), and pathways to intervention (Harman et al., 2022). This research has been expounded upon in a recent text by Hine (2023), which clearly outlines the extensive impact it has on alienated parents (Lee-Maturana et al., 2022), children (Miralles et al., 2021), and other family members (Bounds & Matthewson, 2022), as well as its complex application in legal disputes on custody and child contact (Harman & Lorandos, 2021).

One recent critical development in this scientific field is how PA can be characterised as a form of family violence in and of itself (Harman et al., 2018; Kruk, 2018). This conceptualisation has linked PA to several specific frameworks, such as coercive control, psychological abuse, post-separation abuse, and even child abuse. In some instances, the alienating parent may exploit legal and social services to further marginalise the targeted parent, thus situating PA within discussions around so-called legal and administrative abuse (Tilbrook et al., 2010). These academic positionings are supported by the testimony of alienated parents themselves who describe PA as a form of violence, and who describe PA as taking place as part of a broader pattern of abuse (Bates & Hine, 2023; Lee-Maturana et al., 2022). Moreover, evidence from both self-report studies in the United States (Rowlands et al., 2023) and legal case reviews in Canada (Sharples et al., 2023) show high levels of co-occurrence between PA and other forms of intimate partner violence (IPV). The complexities of PA and its overlap with other forms of abuse not only demonstrate its severity, but also the necessity of robust responses and interventions from legal and social systems.

So far, accurately assessing the prevalence of PA has proven difficult for several reasons. One significant hindrance has been the historical lack of consensus around its precise definition, making the identification and measurement of behaviours characteristic of PA inconsistent (though as demonstrated above, this has improved as the scientific field has evolved). Moreover, given the covert nature of this complex phenomenon, it frequently remains unreported or unrecognised by those enduring its effects. However, according to conservative estimates, around 10-15% of divorces involving children endure some form of this issue. Research conducted in North America suggests an even higher incidence rate, indicating that approximately one in three separated parents (32-39%) have reported being the target of PABs, and at least 1.3% of the U.S. population having been moderately to severely alienated from a child (Harman et al., 2016, 2019). Such statistics underscore the widespread nature of this issue, marking it as a significant area of concern for both parents and professionals engaged in family welfare and dispute resolution.

Given the initial context provided by North American research, there is now a compelling case for replicating such research in the UK (and indeed around the world). Specifically, if the findings from the above research were replicated in the UK at their lower estimate, this would equate to over 768,000 families and potentially 1.1 million UK children (8.5% of UK child population) having experiencing parental alienating behaviours during separation (Department for Work & Pensions, 2020). Figures of this magnitude would clearly represent an urgent and critical public health crisis which is currently invisible to both society and the institutions designed to help separating families. The current project is therefore desperately needed to provide the impetus for policymakers to take meaningful action on this topic.

The present study therefore utilised newer measurement tools for PA, alongside other established measures of violence and abuse, and related issues (such as financial difficulties, and mental health) to conduct the first ever UK study on the prevalence of PABs and PA. Using a specialist research panel service, a representative sample of 1,000 divorced parents in the UK were surveyed and asked questions used in previous prevalence research on this topic (Harman et al., 2016, 2019), to create directly comparable UK data. This method provided the only and most comprehensive assessment of the scale of this issue within the UK to date.

Method

Sample

Participants were 1,005 residents of the UK, all aged over 18 years old, and who had separated or divorced from a partner with whom they had had at least one child. The average age for the sample was 45.18 years ($SD = 14.91$), with 36 between 18-24, 246 between 25-34, 318 between 35-44, 152 between 45-54, 125 between 55-64, 94 between 65-74, and 47 over 75 years old¹. 436 (43.4%) of the sample identified as male, with 949 (94.4%) identifying as heterosexual (3.1% Bisexual, 1.8% Lesbian/Gay, 0.7% Other). The majority of the sample identified as White (85.3%), with 7.8% identifying as Asian/Asian British, 5.7% as Black/Black British, 1.8% as Mixed or Multiple, and 0.5% as Other. The most common household income bracket was £20,001-£30,000, followed by £30,001-£40,000, £10,001-£20,000, and then £40,001-£50,000 (61.1% of sample). 24.8% of the sample had secondary school qualifications as their highest qualification, with a further 22.4% and 29.9% having A-level/equivalent and bachelor's degrees as theirs respectively (77.1% of sample). 44.2% of the sample were currently married or in a civil partnership, with the next highest categories being divorced (17.2%), single (12.4%), and cohabiting (11.3%). Based on available national figures for gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity distributions, this sample can be classified as representative of the UK population.

Contextual Information

On average, it had been around 12 years since the relationship with the ex-partner with whom they had children had ended ($M = 11.79$, $SD = 11.78$). When in this relationship, 89.1% of the sample lived with their partner, with most in a single-family home (61.6%) or apartment (17.8%). 66.1% of the sample had owned that residence. When the relationship ended, 56.4% of the sample remained in the home, whilst 29.1% reported their ex-partner remained, and 13.6% reported both moving out. Interestingly, a Chi Square analysis demonstrated that mothers were more likely to report remaining in the home than fathers, with the opposite effect true for likelihood of the ex-partner remaining, $\chi^2(3, 895) = 36.02$, $p < 0.001$ (See Table 1).

Table 1. Frequencies and percentages for living location of mothers and fathers after separation

	I remained in the home	My ex remained in the home	We both moved out of the home
Male	183 (48.2%)	151 (39.7%)	46 (12.1%)
Female	322 (63.5%)	109 (21.5%)	76 (15.0%)

The average age of the first child at the time of separation was just over 7-years-old ($M = 7.25$, $SD = 7.19$). Most participants reported at least some post-separation conflict (see Table 2).

Table 2. Level of conflict between ex-partners

Level of Conflict	Frequency	Percentage
A great deal	204	20.3
A lot	229	22.8
A moderate amount	249	24.8
A little	138	13.7
None at all	185	18.4

¹ Note – these frequencies sum to 1,018 not 1,005. This may be due to some participants accidentally selecting more than one option.

In relation to custody arrangements, just under 40% of parents reported having 100% parenting time and decision-making (39.2%). 23.1% reported equal parenting time, 14.1% reported having the majority (with the other parent having around a third contact time), with 8% reporting the opposite. Twelve percent of the sample reported their ex-partner having the majority of parenting time. A gender effect was again found, with mothers much more likely to report sole parental contact than fathers, and fathers more likely to report that mothers had sole contact (See Table 3). Mothers were also more likely to report they had the majority of contact with their ex-partner having 30%, with the opposite effect for fathers. There was a roughly equal reporting rate for shared parenting, but this was higher for fathers than mothers.

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages for contact arrangements by parent gender

	Sole contact (Them)	Sole contact (Ex-partner)	50:50 Contact	Majority Contact (Them)	Majority Contact (Ex-partner)
Male	112 (26.5%)	85 (20.1%)	131 (31.0%)	27 (6.4%)	68 (16.1%)
Female	282 (51.2%)	41 (7.4%)	101 (18.3%)	115 (20.9%)	12 (2.2%)

Measures

Parental Alienation and Parental Alienating Behaviours

Self-Report

Three questions were asked more directly assessed participants self-reported experiences of PABs and PA. Specifically, they were asked:

- Do you feel that the other parent has engaged in parental alienating behaviours towards you to harm or damage your relationship with your child(ren)?
- On a scale to 1 to 3, where 1 is mild, 2 is moderate, and 3 is severe, how would you rate the alienating behaviours you are facing (or faced in the past)?
- Do you feel that you have been alienated from one or more of your children by the other parent? In other words, have the alienating behaviours of the other parent been successful in harming your relationship with your child(ren)?

The Five-Factor Model

One of the most important recent developments that may aid assessments of prevalence has been in the effective measurement of PA, with the introduction of the five-factor model (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022). This model outlines how five factors must be identified in order for PA to be determined, as opposed to other forms of contact refusal, such as justified estrangement (i.e., where a child rejects a parent for justified reasons such as abuse or extreme neglect), or parental gate-keeping (i.e., where a parent discourages parental contact due to wishes to protect the child from negative parental behaviour). The development of the Five-Factor Model, along with other robust empirical measures of PABs (such as the PARQ; Rowlands, 2019, 2020), has now provided researchers with robust tools for assessing the presence of these behaviours.

The Five-Factor Model is based on an examination of five integral areas: the child's behaviours, the alienating parent's behaviours, the targeted parent's behaviours, the child's relationship with the targeted parent, and the overall family context. This model has not yet been translated into a quantitative measure, so this project serves as the first attempt to do so.

Factor 1, Contact Resistance or Refusal, involves the child's refusal or resistance to having a relationship with the rejected parent, a common feature of PA. Understanding the causes of this refusal is crucial in determining if it stems from PA. In this study, this was assessed via one question, as to whether there is presence of contact refusal (yes or no).

Factor 2, Child's Relationship with Targeted Parent, assesses the child's relationship with the targeted parent before the onset of alienation. It considers the quality of the parent-child bond and any evidence of a loving and secure attachment. In this study, this was measured by a question asking about the quality of the relationship before contact refusal began, on a scale of 1 (Extremely Bad) to 5 (Extremely Good).

Factor 3, Targeted Parent's Behaviours, recognises the role the targeted parent might play in their own rejection. Evaluating their actions, including any history of neglect, abuse, or poor parenting practices, helps distinguish between justified parental estrangement and PA. In this study, this was ascertained by asking participants whether they a) had been a claim of domestic violence and abuse (DVA) made against them (yes or no), and then b) whether this had been substantiated in court (yes or no).

Factor 4, Alienating Parent's Behaviours (PABs), pertains to the actions of the alienating parent that contribute to the child's alienation. These may include denigrating the targeted parent, interfering with communication, making false allegations of abuse, and encouraging the child's rejection of the targeted parent. Baker & Darnall (2006) identified 17 common alienating behaviours that may be seen in high-conflict divorce situations, all of which were asked in this study. Crucially, participants were asked about these as both recipients and perpetrators to establish a group of non-reciprocally alienated parents (NRAPs). Cronbach's alpha for reporting receipt of these behaviours was 0.93, and for perpetration this was 0.93 also, both suggesting excellent reliability.

Factor 5, Child's Behaviours, emphasises the child's behaviours and attitudes towards the rejected parent. Bernet has proposed eight specific behavioural manifestations of PA in children that may help professionals identify PA (Bernet & Greenhill, 2022). In this study, these were assessed using the Rowlands Parental Alienation Questionnaire (RPAQ); an extensive tool used to measure the occurrence and severity of parental alienation, a process where a child becomes estranged from a parent due to the psychological manipulation of another parent. Developed by Gena Rowlands (2019, 2020), the RPAQ significantly builds upon previous parental alienation scales by offering a more detailed analysis of both overt and covert alienating behaviours. The questionnaire comprises 42 items, each falling under one of five categories: Poisonous Messages, Active Undermining, Denigration, Emotional Manipulation, and Withdrawal of Love. Each item captures the frequency of specific behaviours over the past year on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Very Often). The RPAQ's focus on both subtle and blatant alienating tactics provides a more nuanced understanding of the multifaceted dynamics of PA. The Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.97, demonstrating excellent reliability.

Across these five factors, parents were only designated as having been alienated from their child if they:

- Factor 1: Answered Yes for Factor 1.
- Factor 2: Answered 'Neither Good or Bad' or better for Factor 2.
- Factor 3: Answered No to the first question and/or No to the second question.
- Had been the non-reciprocal recipient of PABs based on RPAQ Scores
- Had reported any level of manifestations of alienation in the child (i.e., had a mean of above 1).

Domestic Abuse

The Conflict Tactics Scale 2 (CTS2) is a comprehensive instrument used to measure the occurrence of various conflict resolution tactics within relationships, including negotiation, psychological aggression, physical assault, injury, and sexual coercion. Developed by Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, and Sugarman (1996), CTS2 significantly improves on its predecessor (CTS1) by expanding the scale to cover a broader range of behaviours and incorporating a focus on both self and partner behaviour. Seventy-eight items are grouped into five main categories: Negotiation, Psychological Aggression, Physical Assault, Sexual Coercion, and Injury. Each item measures the frequency of specific behaviour within the past year on a seven-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (Never) to 6 (More than 20 times). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.99, demonstrating excellent reliability.

Participants were also asked 'When thinking about the relationship with your ex-partner, do you consider yourself to be a victim or survivor of domestic abuse?'

Legal and Administrative Abuse

The Legal and Administrative Aggression Scale is a twelve-item measure developed by Hines et al., (2015). It includes a six-item sub-scale assessing "threatened legal and administrative aggression" and a six-item sub-scale assessing "actual legal and administrative aggression." The "threatened LA" sub-scale asked participants to indicate how often they and their partner threatened each of the following acts: (1) make false accusations to authorities that the partner physically or sexually abused the other; (2) make false accusations to authorities that the partner physically or sexually abused the children; (3) leave and take the children away; (4) leave and take all the money and possessions; (5) ruin the partner's reputation at work; and (6) ruin the partner's reputation in the community. Participants indicated on a scale from 0 to 7 how many times they experienced each of the acts, 0 = never; 1 = 1 time in previous year; 2 = 2 times in previous year; 3 = 3–5 times in previous year; 4 = 6–10 times in previous year; 5 = 11–20 times in previous year; 6 = more than 20 times in previous year; 7 = did not happen in the previous year, but has happened in the past. In order to obtain an approximate count of the number of times each act occurred in the previous year, the original items were re-coded in the following way: 0 = 0 acts in previous year (includes never and did not happen in the past year but has happened before); 1 = 1 act in the previous year; 2 = 2 acts in the previous year; 3 = 4 acts in the previous year; 4 = 8 acts in the previous year; 5 = 16 acts in the previous year; 6 = 25 acts in the previous year. We also recoded each item according to whether it ever happened during the course of the relationship, where 0 = no, and 1 through 7 = yes. The "actual LA aggression" sub-scale was a set of six dichotomous yes/no questions asked after the "threatened" items and assessed whether the participant and/or his partner actually ever engaged in any of the six acts we outlined in the "threatened LA aggression" sub-scale. The scale was scored by counting the number of "actual" acts of LA aggression the participant and his partner engaged in and indicating whether the participant and/or his partner engaged in any of the six acts listed (1 = yes, 0 = no). In the present study, the Cronbach's alpha for this scale was 0.85, demonstrating excellent reliability.

Mental Health

We assessed post-traumatic stress symptoms using a shortened version of the PTSD Checklist (Weathers et al., 1993). Seven problems were selected from the original item list of 17 due to concerns about survey fatigue, and respondents were asked to indicate how much each of the seven problems had bothered them in the last month (using a 5-point scale with not at all and extremely serving as anchors). The items formed a reliable scale ($\alpha = 0.95$), and they were averaged together.

We also administered a 20-item depression screening tool published by the Centre for Epidemiological Studies (Radloff, 1977) to assess depressive symptoms. Respondents rated how often in the last week they have felt certain ways (e.g., I was bothered by things that usually don't bother me), and respondents answered with rarely or none of the time (less than a day), some or a little of the time (1–2 days), occasionally or a moderate amount of time (3–4 days), and most or all of the time (5–7 days). The scoring of the measure is a summed score across the 20 items (4 of which are reverse scored) so that the range of scores is between 0 and 60, with higher scores indicating greater levels of depression. The reliability of this scale was high ($\alpha = 0.90$).

We assessed suicidality by asking respondents whether and how often they have thought about suicide in the last year (never, rarely [1 time], sometimes [2 times], often [3–4 times] and very often [5 or more times]). For those participants who did not answer “never” for whether they have thought about suicide in the last year, we then asked whether their thinking about suicide in the last year was related to conflict around their child custody situation with their ex (using a 5-point scale with *strongly disagree* and *strongly agree* as endpoints). Finally, we asked participants who had contemplated suicide in the last year whether they knew anyone who committed suicide due to child custody issues with their ex-partners (Yes, No, I don't know/Don't care to say).

Procedure

The study was conducted through an online, mixed-methods survey, facilitated by Atomik Research—an independent creative market research agency accredited with Market Research Society (MRS)-certification and adherence to the MRS code. It was carried out over a two-week span from the 30th of May to the 12th of June 2023. Participants for this study were recruited from an online consumer panel known as the ‘Power of Opinions’. They were chosen based on specific criteria: being adults over 18 years old, residing in the UK, willing to consent to the study requirements, and having one or more children from a previous broken relationship.

The sample was drawn using a probability sampling methodology, and a total of 1,005 respondents participated in the survey. It is important to note that there were no hard quotas, and the sociodemographic composition was a natural fallout within this subgroup of the general population. However, as previously mentioned, based on available national figures for gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity distributions, this sample can be classified as representative of the UK population.

The data collection process entailed the use of self-report questionnaires administered online. These questionnaires were divided into multiple sections, such as qualification, social demographic, and sections related to harmful and abusive behaviours. Upon completion of the study, qualified respondents were rewarded with a £5 incentive for their participation. Throughout the research, strict adherence to ethical guidelines was maintained, thereby ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants' responses.

Results

Prevalence of PABs

When asking participants outright whether they felt that the other parent has engaged in alienating behaviours towards them to harm or damage the relationship with their children (hereby Group A), **394 (39.2%)** replied yes. Of those, 98 described this as mild, 227 as moderate, and 69 as severe. Over a quarter (269 or 26.8%) of the sample said that these behaviours had then resulted in harm to their parent-child relationship. When calculating PAB receipt based solely on the behaviour of the ex-partner (hereby Group B), **594 (59.1%)** of participants reported receiving PABs.

When categorising participants based on both their and their ex-partners behaviours, we used the following process similar to Harman et al. (2019). Specifically, we tallied the total number of behaviours for self and other parent to create an index of numbers of PABs were reported to be enacted by both parties. We then created dummy codes for participants based on how many alienating behaviours they reported the other parent as having done and on how many they admitted to doing themselves. If the parent stated that neither they nor the other parent did any of them, they did not receive a code. If they reported doing twice as many or more than the other parent, they were given a “1” and were labelled “alienating parent.” If the parent reported being the target of PABs more than twice the number that they admitted to doing, they were coded “2” and labelled “targeted parent.” If the parent reported that both they and the other parent did alienating behaviours to a similar degree (less than twice as much as the other), they were coded “3” and labelled “reciprocating parent.”

Using these categories, 30.8% reported no PABs at all. 25.3% were categorised as non-reciprocal **targeted** parents (hereby Group C), **16.0%** were categorised as non-reciprocal **alienating** parents, and **27.9%** were categorised as reciprocal alienating parents. Excluding the 30.8% that reported no PABs, these percentages change to **36.5%, 23.2%, and 40.3%** respectively. This first figure is only slightly smaller to what was reported in the U.S. by Harman and colleagues (2019; 39.1% of their sample). All three of these calculations reveal an extremely high level of receipt of PABs within the sample.

When comparing those in Groups A and B, 71% of participants were aligned (348, 35% Yes, and 365, 36% No). However, there were some participants who reported being a recipient of behaviours, but who did not report these on our specific measure (46, 5%), and almost a quarter of participants who self-reported as not receiving alienating behaviours but did report behaviours on our specific measure (246, 24%). Harman et al. (2019) found similar discrepancies, indicating that there may be misunderstandings among the general public as to what PA and PABs are.

When comparing the overlap between participant self-reports and their formal classification (i.e., Groups A and C), only 40.1% of participants identified as experiencing PABs and were classified as non-reciprocal alienated parents (See Table 4). This suggests that participants understanding of their role in abusive behaviour may vary greatly.

Table 3. Frequencies and percentages for contact arrangements by parent gender

		Classification			
		None	Non-Reciprocal Alienating Parent	Non-Reciprocal Alienated Parent	Reciprocal Alienation
Self-Report	Yes	85 (20.1%)	131 (31.0%)	27 (6.4%)	68 (16.1%)
	No	41 (7.4%)	101 (18.3%)	115 (20.9%)	12 (2.2%)

Prevalence did not differ between any of the key sociodemographic groups including gender, age, or income.

Mental Health Outcomes

When comparing the mental health outcomes of those who reported PABs (in any group) and those who did not, there were significant differences, but this varied depending on the way PAB receipt was calculated. For example, all groups had significantly higher levels of PTSD symptoms, depression, and lifetime suicide ideation than those who did not report PABs, but effects were much greater for Groups A ($p < 0.001$) and B ($p < 0.001$) than Group C ($p = < 0.05$). For future suicide ideation, ideation in the past year, and the relationship of this ideation to custody proceedings, only Group A ($p < 0.001$) and B ($p < 0.001$) had significantly higher reporting than non-PAB recipients.

Relationships to other forms of abuse

Similar to mental health outcomes, those who identified as alienated (in any group) had significantly higher CTS2 scores, indicating a higher level of domestically violent experiences with their ex-partner. Again, this effect was larger for groups A ($p < 0.001$) and B ($p < 0.001$) than C ($P < 0.05$). Interestingly, for legal and administrative abuse, differences were only found for groups A ($p < 0.001$) and B ($p < 0.001$), not C.

Manifestations in Children

Across the entire sample, the average rating for children's manifestation of alienating behaviour across all questions was 2.04 (2 = 'Rarely'). This was higher for the Groups A (2.43) and B (2.32) than C (2.03). However, it should be noted that this is one of the hardest elements of PA to assess, as alienated parents may not have sufficient contact with their children to report on their behaviours.

The Five-Factor Model

When assessing PA using our new quantitative adaptation of the Five-Factor Model, the number of parents that are classified as ultimately alienated from their child(ren) decreased. For Factor 1, contact resistance or refusal, 228 participants (22.7%) reported that this occurred. For Factor 2, 164 of 228 participants (71.9%, 16.3% of total sample) reported that their previous relationship with their child prior to contact refusal had been 'OK/Average', 'Good', or 'Extremely Good'. For Factor 3, 77 (47.0%, 7.6% of total sample) had never been accused of domestic abuse. Of those who had been accused, 74 (85.1%, 3.9% of total sample) self-reported that they were found guilty of those accusations. This left a total of 86 participants, who had not been accused or found guilty of domestic violence. For Factor 4, we examined how many of the 86 participants left had perpetrated PABs and been the recipient. Just above a third (32, 37.2%) reported not performing any PABs, whilst the rest had perpetrated at least one. Conversely, 19 participants (22.1%) said they had not been the recipient of any such behaviours. The number of participants who were categorised as non-reciprocal targeted parents within this group was 31 (36.0%; 3.5% of total sample). For Factor 5, 30 participants had an average score of above 1 (i.e., demonstrating that some manifestation of alienation within the child had occurred). This means the total number of parents classified as alienated according to the Five-Factor Model, as 30 or 2.9% of the total sample.

Discussion

In a concerted effort to understand the complex dynamics of parent-child relationships following divorce, this study delved into the prevalence and consequences of PABs, situated within the broader context of other abusive behaviours. Surveying a diverse pool of participants intended to be representative of the UK general population, the research uncovered a significant correlation between exposure to PABs and adverse mental health outcomes. This is the first study in the UK to examine the prevalence of PABs and their outcomes.

Prevalence of abusive behaviours targeting the parent-child relationship: Our study found that 39.2% of the sample felt the other parent engaged in PABs that harmed their parent-child relationship. This mirrors research from North America where 32-39% of separated parents reported experiencing representative behaviours of parental alienation (PA) (Harman et al., 2016, 2019). This underscores the global nature of this issue, and our data significantly advances prior studies, offering a robust UK-centric perspective. Specifically, these findings suggest that hundreds of thousands of families, and over 1 million UK may have experiencing parental alienating behaviours during separation (Department for Work & Pensions, 2020). Based on divorce estimates for 2020, these figures equate to over 44,000 adults and 22,000 children per year.

Impact on parents' mental health: Our findings demonstrate a strong correlation between experiencing PABs and adverse mental health outcomes, including PTSD symptoms, depression, and lifetime suicide ideation. This aligns with the substantial evidence base that details the profound effects of PA on parents (Lee-Maturana et al., 2022) and further supports the contention that PABs, by definition, are psychologically distressing and can have far-reaching consequences on mental health.

Connection with other abusive behaviours: The prevalence of intimate partner violence among those who identified as alienated supports the understanding of PA as a continuation of coercive and controlling behaviours post-separation (Francia et al., 2019; Spearman et al., 2022).

Prevalence among demographic groups: Similar to some prior research, our study found no significant differences in the experience of PABs across demographic groups like gender, age, or income, emphasising that PA can affect a wide range of individuals.

Implications

- 1. Conceptual understanding of PA:** This study reinforces the conceptualisation of PA as a distinct form of family violence (Harman et al., 2018). As such, understanding PA within the broader spectrum of family violence can inform targeted interventions.
- 2. Legal and policy implications:** Given the profound impact on mental health and the interlinkages with other forms of abuse, there is an urgent need for UK policymakers and legal systems to address PABs systematically. Our results can serve as a catalyst for designing interventions, drafting guidelines, and crafting policies targeting these behaviours.
- 3. Clinical Implications:** Mental health professionals should be informed about the implications of PA on parents' mental well-being, given its association with serious conditions like PTSD and depression.

Limitations

There are several limitations worth noting in this study:

- 1. Self-Report Bias:** The data is based on self-reports, which can sometimes be influenced by memory biases or the desire to present oneself in a particular light. The accuracy and reliability of self-reported data can vary, especially when discussing sensitive topics such as abusive behaviours. This bias is the reason we asked about PABs in multiple ways (e.g., beliefs, behaviours).
- 2. Lack of Longitudinal Data:** The study is cross-sectional, capturing data at one point in time. Without longitudinal data, it is challenging to understand the evolution and dynamics of parentchild relationships and the impact of abusive behaviours over time.
- 3. Causality Limitations:** As with the study of other forms of family violence, it is unethical to employ an experimental design. Therefore, while the current study can highlight correlations or associations, it cannot determine causality.
- 4. Underreporting:** Given the covert nature of PABs and the associated stigma, it is plausible that some instances might be underreported.
- 5. Cultural and Socioeconomic Considerations:** While demographic factors like gender, age, and income were considered, deeper cultural and socioeconomic variables might play a role in shaping parental behaviours and children's responses that were not delved into.

Future Research Directions

Given the significant intersection of PABs with other forms of abuse, future research should explore these relationships in depth. It would also be beneficial to examine the experiences of children directly, aiming to understand the long-term impacts on their mental health and relationship dynamics. Moreover, as the five-factor model and other tools for PA assessment become more refined, it would be beneficial to revisit prevalence rates and deepen our understanding of PA's nuances.

Conclusions

In conclusion, our research underscores the **pervasive** nature of Parental Alienating Behaviours (PABs) in the UK, highlighting their **profound mental health outcomes and their association with broader forms of abuse**. This data serves as a testament to the urgency of the situation, suggesting that if estimates from prior research are accurate, **millions of UK adults and children in separated families** may be suffering from post-separation abuse targeting the parent-child bond.

Our findings not only promote **greater societal awareness of PA** but also illuminate the path for significant policy change. The visibility of the issue ensures that affected parents and children are empowered to **vocalise their experiences and seek the support they need**. Consequently, it becomes challenging for legislators to neglect this significant population.

Recognising the **scale of the problem** demands a multipronged approach: **a) fostering increased community support for separating couples, b) instigating legislative amendments concerning parental responsibilities, and c) initiating system reforms that allow for the identification of this type of abuse and the necessary safeguarding measures**. Furthermore, the insights from this research will lay the foundation for training service providers and the judiciary. Such training will enhance the survivor experience and ensure that this pressing issue gets the attention it warrants.

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