



I41 Parental Alienation: Misinformation and Fake News

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Learning Overview: After attending this session, attendees will understand that widely distributed misinformation presents a threat to the integrity of forensic sciences. Parental Alienation (PA) will be used as an example, to show that misinformation regarding that topic has appeared in the popular press, presentations at conferences, journal articles, and books published by professional organizations.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by improving the evaluation of forensic clients (e.g., child custody evaluations) and improve the training of forensic psychiatrists (regarding PA).

Misinformation sometimes arises in the context of forensic psychology and psychiatry. In recent years, misinformation regarding the topic of PA has been expressed in peer-reviewed journal articles, presentations at scientific meetings, and books intended for mental health and legal professionals. PA is a mental condition in which a child—usually one whose parents are engaged in a high-conflict separation or divorce—allies himself strongly with one parent (the preferred parent or alienating parent) and rejects a relationship with the other parent (the target parent) without legitimate justification. The child's rejection of the target parent must be without justification for the child to be considered alienated; if a parent has been abusive or severely neglectful, the child's rejection of that parent is understandable and does not constitute PA. This presentation addresses and refutes three false statements that have been stated repeatedly.

The meme that "PAS is junk science" has taken on a life of its own. An influential psychiatrist, Paul J. Fink, stated in 2003 that Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) constitutes "junk science," and he repeated that opinion many times. In 2010, he reiterated—in his column in *Clinical Psychiatry News*—that PAS was "junk science invented by a psychiatrist."¹ After receiving letters objecting to Fink's statements, the management of *Clinical Psychiatry News* arranged for him to issue an apology and a clarification. Fink then said, "I do not deny that parental alienation occurs and that a lot of people are hurt when there is an alienator."

A common false allegation is that "Parental alienation has not been recognized by professional associations." In fact, mainline professional organizations have acknowledged the reality of PA through their publications, national and international meetings, and educational programs for their members. For example, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry (AACAP), the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC), the American Psychological Association (APA), the American Academy of Pediatrics, and the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) have published documents that explicitly recognize the reality and importance of PA.

Many critics of PA have alleged, "Parental alienation is not admissible in court under *Daubert* and *Frye* standards." Is PA admissible under *Frye v. United States*?² This rule merely requires that admissible expert opinion must be based on a scientific technique that is generally accepted as reliable in the relevant scientific community. Based on the information in this presentation, it can easily be shown that the concept of PA has been endorsed or accepted by numerous professional organizations. Is PA admissible under *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals*?³ The factors to consider include: whether the theory or technique employed by the expert is generally accepted in the scientific community (explained previously in this presentation); whether the theory or technique has been subjected to peer review and publication (bibliographies and data bases include hundreds of articles from peer-reviewed journals); and whether the theory or technique can be and has been tested (has been accomplished in quantitative research).

While the clear majority of mental health and legal professionals who work with divorced families agree with the reality of PA, a small number of detractors of PA have generated a great deal of misinformation and fake news. Fake news appears to be endemic in Western and democratic societies, where a free press and online media encourage the transmission of both truth and falsehood.

Reference(s):

1. Fink, Paul J. Fink! Still at Large. *Clinical Psychiatry News*, 2010.
2. *Frye v. United States*, 293 F. 1013 (D.C. Cir. 1923).
3. *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharmaceuticals*. US Supreme Court 509.U.S.579,113S.Ct.2786, 125L. Ed.2d 469. 1993.

Parental Alienation, Child Custody Evaluations, Child Psychiatry