

Received: September 8, 2023

Accepted: October 13, 2023

<http://dergipark.org.tr/rep>

e-ISSN: 2602-3733

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October 2023 ♦ 7 (Special Issue 2) ♦ 362-383

Research Article

<https://doi.org/10.54535/rep.1357379>

## Examining Parental Alienation Syndrome Behaviors in Divorce, Custody and Personal Relationship Cases

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### Abstract

In this study, the objective was to conduct an analysis of behaviors associated with Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) within the context of divorce, custody disputes, and personal relationship with children. The present inquiry employed the document/text analysis method, one of the qualitative research methodologies. The reports prepared by psychologists, social workers, and pedagogues (psychological counsellors), including the researcher, in the cases held by Ankara 10th Family Court were included in the study. 27 selected files were descriptively analyzed with respect to PAS behaviors and alienation strategies. Answers were sought to the questions about PAS behaviors toward mother, father and relatives, and what PAS behaviors are in court processes and relations with the child. Results showed that parental alienation behaviors toward parents and relatives are common in divorce, custody, and personal relationship with the child cases. It was found that divorce, custody, and personal relationship with the child cases negatively affect the relationship between the mother, the father, and the child. The research findings, PAS behaviors put all the parties in a difficult situation in the legal process. Therefore, providing psychosocial services to the families, raising the awareness of court experts about PAS, and conducting more research on this issue are important.

### Key Words

Custody • Divorce • Parental alienation syndrome • Personal relationship

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**Citation:** Nalbant, A. (2023). Examining parental alienation syndrome behaviors in divorce, custody and personal relationship cases. *Research on Education and Psychology (REP)*, 7(Special Issue 2), 362-383.

## Concepts

Family is the system that constitutes the basis of society and is important for children. It is an environment in which the natural needs of children such as love, affection, care, and protection are met. As a result of the inability to solve the problems that emerge in the family, integrity of the family could be disrupted, and couples get divorced. The marriage contract established between a man and woman based on laws might be terminated by court order within the framework of laws. [Yörükoğlu \(2023\)](#) defines divorce as a complicated procedure that emerges as a result of the termination of marriage contract, leads to the psychological breakup of the family bond, and affect all members of the family. The incidence of divorce in Turkey has witnessed a notable upsurge over the past decade. According to statistics compiled by the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), a total of 180.592 divorce cases were recorded in 2022. As a result of final verdicts of divorce cases, it is seen that custody decision was given for 180,592 children ([TUIK, 2022](#)). In these cases, the custody of 75.7% of the children were given to the mother, and 24.3% were given to the father.

In Turkey, while civilian courts of first instance were in charge of divorce cases until 2003, these cases started to be handled by specialized courts with the Law on Family Courts numbered 4787. In the civilian courts of first instance, when a need arose, social workers, pedagogues, psychologists, or psychiatrists used to be appointed as experts ([Nalbant, 2017](#)). With the establishment of family courts, psychologists, social workers, and pedagogues have started to be employed within the court. Consequently, an opportunity has arisen to engage in interdisciplinary investigations and comprehensive inquiries concerning the challenges confronted by families and to create potential avenues for resolution. The assessment reports written by court-appointed experts yield considerable influence on important decisions affecting families, including matters pertaining to divorce, custody arrangements, and the establishment of personal relationships with the child. These reports are an important source in terms of identifying the problems experienced in families before and after the divorce.

[Türkarslan \(2007\)](#) argued that the potential for conflict and disharmony is natural in the family formed by two separate individuals. The disrupted family relations as a result of mismanagement of this potential may result in the couple's decision to get divorced. A divorce brings along both positive and negative outcomes for the child. The meaning that the parents attribute to divorce, their continuation of the conflict, and turning the process into a reckoning in the divorce process determine the size of the problems. Resolving intrafamilial conflicts, fostering a healthy single-parent family unit, improving relationships with the parent who has departed the familial residence, or separating the parent with problems from the family posing difficulties, hold the potential to engender favorable outcomes for children. However, many factors such as problems experienced in the divorce process, the effects of the extended family on the marriage union, personality characteristics of the parents, and their methods of problem-solving, communication, and anger management affect the divorce process and afterwards negatively.

Problems experienced in the family and divorce process lead to many problems in the children in the long and short term. In the beginning, children experience emotions such as confusion, sadness, distress, anxiety, fear, astonishment, and distrust, and following the divorce, they go through a crisis period that lasts at least two years ([Kelly & Emery, 2003](#), [Rogers, 2004](#)). In this period, children are confronted with many changes, especially when

they are not adequately informed by their parents about separation and divorce, the uncertainties they experience force them more.

The issues on which the parents experience the most conflict in divorce cases are about who will have the custody of the child and how the personal relationship will be established with the separated parent. Custody and personal relationship can be reorganized even after divorce and until the child reaches the age of 18. Therefore, conflicts may continue for years, and the parties may file new lawsuits and carry their conflicts to a court of law.

Lampel (1996) states that in divorce and custody cases, parents may form an alliance with their child. As a result of this alliance, the child may refuse to see the targeted parent and develop unjust and hate-laden behaviors, emotions, and cognitions toward that parent. In contested divorce cases, by giving negative feedback to the child, parents may try to control the child's relationship with the other parent and turn the case to their favor by influencing the child's emotions and thoughts. Benedek and Brown (1997) underscore that when parents exhibit such orientations and form alliances, it may lead the child to cultivate negative sentiments and cognitive attitudes toward the parent who is the target of such behavior. Consequently, the child may abstain from engaging in any form of communication with that parent.

Conflicts experienced between parents and parents' negative attitudes toward each other can affect children's perception of the targeted parent (Mone & Biringen, 2012). One of the parents can guide the child negatively by denigrating the other parent with their words, behaviors, or attitudes (Kelly & Johnston, 2001). In such situations, the child may prefer one of the parents and refuse to establish a relationship with the other parent, may not want to see the parent and may not accept personal relationship arrangements established in the court process (Kayma Güneş, 2007; Koçyıldırım, 2010). The child alienated from the parent can completely cut his/her communication with the mother or the father for a long time and can exclude the mother or the father from his/her life. The child's growth by being deprived of the mother or the father and having strict and negative thoughts and emotions toward the parents is a situation that rather forces the child and threatens his/her healthy development (Benedek & Brown, 1997). The use of children as a tool for manipulation in the context of parental conflicts, the disparagement of one parent and/or their extended family, and the dissemination of inaccurate information to the child regarding that parent and their relatives can likewise be considered as instances of emotional abuse (Demirbaş, 2018; p. 165).

Wallerstein and Kelly (1976) have defined the child's rejection of a parent or not wanting to see the parent after divorce with the concept of pathological alienation. Later in the 1980s, based on his studies with the families in the divorce process and afterwards, Richard Gardner used the term "parental alienation syndrome" in order to explain the behaviors that emerge in the child as a result of one parent slandering the other parent in such contested divorce cases. Gardner (1985) defined PAS as one parent's brainwashing the child against the other parent consciously or unconsciously, the child's denigration of the parent, and alienation from the parent. Gardner states that "parental alienation" and "parental alienation syndrome" are not the same concepts. While parental alienation is a more general definition, parental alienation syndrome covers a situation that emerges in the determination process of the child's custody as a result of the child's being programmed by either the mother or the father.

Gardner (2002, 2002a) mentions eight primary symptoms of parental alienation. These are:

1. Denigration campaign against the targeted parent,
2. Guiding the child into an inconsistent, irrational, weak, and nonsensical reasoning in order for him/her to reject the targeted parent,
3. Producing inconsistent statements, terms, and scenarios related to the child's life and developmental process,
4. Lack of the child's ambivalent emotions toward his/her parents,
5. The claim that the decision to refuse the targeted parent was made by the child,
6. The child's unconditional and automatic support of the alienating parent,
7. Absence of an evident feeling of guilt in the child,
8. Feelings of grudge and hatred spreading to the extended family of the targeted parent (Cartwright, 1993).

Gardner (2002) states that PAS has three levels, which are mild, moderate, and severe. In mild-level PAS, the alienating parent influences the child regarding her/his being a better parent through verbal and nonverbal ways. In this level, communication between the alienated parent and the child continues to exist. In the moderate-level PAS, in which the child displays destructive behaviors against the alienated parent, negative feelings such as anger and hatred toward the alienated parent develop in the child. The parent experiences difficulty in communicating with the child. In severe-level PAS, an intense level of alienation is exhibited. The child supports the slandering campaign of the alienating parent. In this level, no communication can be established between the child and the alienated parent.

Goldin and Salani (2020) examined the behaviors and attitudes of children exposed to PAS and determined the descriptors of PAS. Accordingly, in the process of high-conflict separation and divorce in children, the formation of a strong alliance with the alienating parent, alienation from the rejected parent, the use of the child as a tool to harm the targeted parent, the child's refusal to establish a relationship and spend time with the alienated parent without a legitimate reason, lack of ambivalent feelings, They emphasized the absence of guilt or remorse, the assertion that one's feelings, thoughts and attitudes toward the parent are not influenced by anyone else (independent thinker phenomenon), the presence of untrue stories, the child's unconditional and automatic support for the alienating parent, and the feeling of hostility toward the extended family of the rejected parent. Additional features included the presence of made up narratives, the child's unconditional and reflexive support for the alienating parent, and the propagation of animosity extending to the extended family members of the rejected parent. Maltreatment of the child by the rejected parent is not evaluated within the scope of PAS.

Baker and Fine (2008) state that 17 different alienation strategies are used in order to harm the relationship between the child and the targeted parent. These are badmouthing, limiting contact and interfering with communication, withdrawal of love, forcing the child to choose, telling the child that the targeted parent does not love him/her, creating doubt in the child, forcing the child to reject the targeted parent, telling the child that the targeted parent is dangerous, asking the child to spy on the targeted parent, creating suspicion in the child, asking the child to keep secrets from the targeted parent, referring to the targeted parent by his/her first name, alienating parent's introducing the potential new spouse as mother/father to the child, changing the name and surname of the

child, withholding medical, academic, and other important information of the child from the targeted parent, and cultivating dependency on the alienating parent. Another situation that is significant in the alienation process is that the child frequently uses words such as “we”, “us”, and “our” while narrating an event (Farkas, 2011). Torun (2017) points out that the extended family of the alienating parent also plays a role in the alienation process and provide significant support to the brainwashing campaign. As a result, the child is not only alienated from the targeted parent but also rejects to see his/her grandmother or grandfather and other relatives (Cartwright, 1993).

In the studies which conducted with families, parents expressed their claims of child abuse in order to get the custody of the child, that these claims were mostly unfounded and used to punish the targeted parent. In divorce, custody, or personal relationship cases, parents intentionally bring up child abuse allegations in order to restrict or completely eliminate the relationship of the targeted parent with the child (Gardner, 1999). Gardner (2002) states that the child’s alienation from a parent who sexually, physically, or emotionally abuses the child is an expected situation, and in this case, PAS is not valid.

Children are negatively affected by the alienation behaviors they are exposed to and experience problems according to their age and developmental characteristics. It is seen that children exposed to such behaviors experience numerous psychosocial problems such as anger, sadness, disappointment, fear, low self-respect, bonding and separation anxiety, anxiety disorders, depression, sleep problems, eating and elimination problems, academic issues, and disrupted peer relations (Baker, 2005; Baker, 2006; Baker & Verrocchio, 2013; Lowenstein, 1998; Sher, 2015; Torun, 2017; Verrocchio, et al., 2019). These problems vary according to the severity and duration of PAS. Raso (2004) states that as the level of parental alienation increases, the child’s internal and external problems become more serious, that these problems continue for years, and that they could reflect them onto their own children. In a study conducted by Vassiliou and Cartwright (2001), as the frequency of the visitation of the separated parent with the child increased, alienation was determined to have significantly decreased.

In Turkey, studies which examined divorce, custody, and personal relationship with the child cases, where parental alienation is experienced the most intensely, are limited. Erdoğan (2020) examined the reports prepared in custody cases, emphasized that the reports focused on allegations made about the targeted parents, and that emotional abuse applied to children could be ignored. He also stated that the custody of the child was not given to the targeted parents without making detailed evaluation regarding parental alienation.

In the study conducted by Yurdakul (2022), in which PAS was evaluated from the perspective of mothers, fathers, children, and social service experts, it was found that the alienated parent could not see the child after divorce, could not communicate with the child, and was encountered with the barrier created by the parent who had the custody of the child. It was also emphasized that the extended family exacerbated the severity of PAS, and that children accepted the authority of the mother and father of the parent who had the custody of the child. It was observed that children were exposed to degrading discourses of the parent they lived with about the other parent, and that they felt angry about the alienated parent. The most significant factor that affects children’s psychology is being caught between two sides. In the study conducted by Ulutürk (2019) examining PAS and behavior problems in children, it was determined that behavioral and emotional problems were seen in children exposed to PAS. The

purpose of this study was to analyze PAS behaviors experienced in cases filed in family courts for divorce, custody, and arrangement of personal relationship with the child.

## Method

### Research Model

In the present study, one of the qualitative research methods, document/text analysis was used. In document/text analysis, printed material including the subject examined are screened in detail, and a new integrity of information is created from this information (Creswell, 2007; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2016). In the present study, a descriptive analysis of the evaluation reports prepared by experts in divorce, custody, and personal relationship cases was performed.

### Data Sources

The reports prepared by psychologists, social workers, and pedagogues (psychological counsellor), including the researcher, in the cases held by Ankara 10th Family Court were included in the study. PAS symptoms criteria (Gardner, 2002) and alienation strategies in the literature were considered. The reports were screened by the experts according to PAS behaviors, and the ones that fit Gardner's moderate and severe level PAS symptoms were selected. 27 files were chosen for the study. 9 of these files were divorce, 8 were custody, and 10 were the files of the cases opened for the arrangement of personal relationship with the child. The cases and the persons who opened the cases are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Information about the cases opened*

	Mother	Father	Grandmother/Grandfather
Divorce Case	5	4	
Custody Case	4	4	
Personal Relation Case	4	2	4

Table 2

*Information about the mean age, education, and employment status of the mothers, fathers, and grandmothers/grandfathers*

	Mother	Father	Grandmother/Grandfather
<b>Mean Age</b>	37	41	62
<b>Education Status</b>			
Illiterate			1
Primary School	7	6	5
Secondary School	2	3	2
High School	9	9	
University	9	9	
<b>Work Status</b>			
Employed	13	26	3
Unemployed	14		3
Retired			2

It was determined in the study that 38 children in total (16 girls and 22 boys) were interviewed, the average number of children of the families was 1.4, and the mean age of the children was 9 years.

#### **Data Analysis**

After the reports on divorce, custody, and personal relationship cases were determined, they were descriptively analyzed. It was determined that the data obtained in the descriptive analysis were collected under four themes. These themes include the following:

1. PAS behaviors aimed at parents
2. PAS behaviors aimed at relatives
3. PAS behaviors displayed by the parents in the court process
4. Behaviors seen in alienated children

In this context, statements extracted from the reports were determined as analysis units, and every sentence in the reports was read and presented with the themes created according to the responses given.

## Results

### Results of PAS behaviors aimed at the parents

As a result of the descriptive analysis of the reports, it was found that 6 mothers displayed PAS behaviors. It was also determined 16 mothers alienated their children from their fathers, while 4 mothers alienated the children from their grandmothers and grandfathers. Alienation behaviors started in the marriage union, continued in the court process and afterwards with increasing intensity, and were used to gain various advantages in the cases. Alienation behaviors of mothers, fathers, and relatives are presented in Table 3

Table 3

*PAS behaviors of mothers, fathers, and relatives*

	Mother	Father	Relative(M)	Relative(F)
The child' addressing the parents with words used by grown-ups such as that woman for the mother and that man for the father	9	5	10	7
Guiding the child by negatively speaking about the parent	14	7	14	7
Getting the child to witness events in the marriage union	10	7	11	7
Telling the child that alienated parent applies violence to the mother	8	2	8	2
Telling the child that the parent is cheating	5	3	8	3
By meeting all demands of the child to ensure s/he prefers him/her	9	7	14	7
Getting the child to spy on the separated parent	12	7	15	5
Withholding the child's information such as health, circumcision, school, etc.	9	6	10	3
Orientation that harms the relationship between the child and the parent	16	7	12	7
Getting the young child to call the grandmother as mother		4		4
Undermining the authority of the alienated parent over the child	13	7	16	5
Getting the child to take sides in the events between the mother and the father	11	5	14	6
The parent showing himself/herself as the victim and reflecting the need to be protected by the child	10	2	13	2
Allegations aimed at the alienated parent such as cheating, abandoning, etc.	11	6	9	6
Allegations that the alienated parent expose the child to neglect and abuse (verbal, physical, and sexual)	7	3	9	3
Not informing the child about the deceased father	4		4	
Getting the child to address the newly married man as father	2		2	

As seen in Table 3, it was determined that mothers, fathers, and relatives displayed alienation behaviors in order to influence the child such as badmouthing about the other party, slanders, getting them to witness events experienced, victimizing the self, and wanting the child to take sides. It was found that the children were made to call grandmothers or newly married individuals as mother or father instead of their biological mothers and fathers, and thus, it was aimed to get the children to forget their mothers and fathers. In addition, alienating parents claimed that the alienated parent applied physical, verbal, and sexual violence to the children, that they did not look after the children and neglected them. However, they did not display any behaviors so as to prove these allegations in the court process. The four personal relationship cases opened by grandmothers and grandfathers, the mothers did not give much information to their children about their fathers. In two of these cases, it was determined that the mothers had the child call the man they newly married as father, and the children knew the new spouse as their biological father.

**Results of PAS behaviors aimed at relatives**

Expert reports showed that in their PAS behaviors, mothers, fathers, and relatives targeted the relatives of the other party. It was determined that the parties reflected their hostile feelings regarding the relatives and blamed the relatives for the problems experienced in the marriage. Alienating behaviors aimed at relatives are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

*PAS behaviors aimed at the relatives*

	Mother	Father	Relative(M)	Relative(F)
Reflection of hostile feelings onto the relatives of the alienated parent	14	7	11	7
Negative expressions about grandmothers/fathers, aunts, etc.	16	5	16	5
Stating the problems experienced in the marriage were caused by relatives	13	4	17	7
Claiming that marriage union was disrupted by relatives	10	3	17	7
Claiming that relatives slander the parents	6	1	8	3
Not introducing the child with the mother and father of the deceased spouse	4		3	
Transmitting hostile thoughts and feelings about the relatives of the deceased spouse	4		3	

In the study, it was observed that mothers did not provide information about the mothers, fathers, and other relatives of their deceased spouses. In one of these cases, the mother confessed that she hid her address so that the grandparents could not find her, but she could not give a solid rationale for this behavior.

**Results of PAS behaviors displayed by the parents during the case**

When descriptive analysis was performed, it was seen that parental alienation was used in order to involve the child in the case process and to gain advantages. The parental alienation behaviors displayed by the parents are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

*PAS behaviors in the case process*

	Mother	Father	Relative(M)	Relative(F)
Applying pressure on the children to be preferred for custody	13	7	17	7
Bringing the children to the hearings and getting them to witness the problems experienced with the parent	9	4	10	3
Getting the children to read the case files or telling them about what happened in the hearings	8	6	4	4
Using the child in order to gain the upper hand in the case	12	4	8	4
Threatening the child that if s/he chooses the other side, s/he cannot see the other parent	8	6	12	5

As seen in the table, it was determined that in order to denigrate the targeted parent in the case process, children were brought to the hearings, they were made to read the case proceedings, parents applied pressure on the children to choose them and threatened the children that they would not see each other again if they choose the other parent.

Another issue encountered in the case process is related with the problems experienced in the personal relationship established between the child and the separated parent. In divorce, custody, and personal relationship cases, a personal relationship arrangement is made by considering the age of the child and the conditions of the separated parent. The reports showed that many PAS behaviors were displayed in order to restrict or prevent the child and the separated parent from seeing each other (Table 6).

Table 6

*PAS behaviors displayed in the personal relationship established between the child and the separated parent in the cases*

	Mother	Father	Relative (M)	Relative (F)
Demanding delivery of the child through enforcement	9	5	13	5
Intervening in who could be present during the delivery of the child	15	9	5	5
Applying pressure and violence to the other parent during the delivery of the child by having the relatives present	11	4	11	4
Trying to determine who could see the child.	13	5	16	6
Putting limits to the places where the child could be taken and the relatives	13	6	9	5
Having non-stop phone calls with the child on the days of personal relationship, thus interfering with the relationship	11	3	3	2
Asking the child to provide information about the separated parent	16	5	13	6
Not allowing any communication on the days other than personal relationship day	13	5	10	5
Not allowing to see the child in places such as school, course etc. other than personal relationship days	13	7	7	5
Making the child not want to go	11	5	11	5
On the days of personal relationship, not being at home and preventing the relationship with excuses such as illness, etc.	9	4	5	4
Making the child not want to go on personal relationship days by organizing various activities	9	4	7	4
Preventing the personal relationship and claiming that the separated parent did not want to come	8	3	11	3
Displaying a strict attitude regarding the receiving and delivery times of the child	13	7	5	4
Not showing the child to the mother, father, and relatives of the deceased spouse			4	3

As seen in Table 6, alienating parents wanted the personal relationship to be held with enforcement officers, they wanted to determine the people to be present during the delivery of the child, they brought their relatives during the reception of the child from the parent to make things difficult, and they tried to prevent personal relationships through various excuses. They did not obey court orders, they wanted to prevent the relationship between the separated parent and the child, they tried to prevent communication on the days other than personal relationship days, they interfered with the duration of the personal relationships, they did not want the separated parent to see the child in places such as school, course, etc., they forced the managers of such institutions in this regard, they tried to convince the child that the separated parents did not want to see him/her, and they were strict about the time of taking and bringing back the child home.

**Results of the behaviors observed in the alienated children**

Descriptive analyses of the interviews held with the children are presented in Table 3.5. It was seen that the children were prepared when they came for the interview, and that from the first moment on, they said they did not want to see their mother or father and tried to tell about the negative events which they claimed to have experienced. The children behaved in a fictitious way, that they went back to the beginning when a question conflicting the fiction was asked, and that they said “First of all, I want to tell that he beats my mother and applies violence to us” and wanted to finish what they aimed to tell quickly.

Table 7

*Behaviors observed in the children exposed to PAS*

	Child
Children narrated the events in a certain fiction	22
Their moods were not in parallel with the event while narrating it, they did not exhibit any symptoms of anxiety, fear, or anger and acted in a relaxed way	30
They did not feel any regrets regarding the events about the separated parent	23
The language they used was not compatible with their developmental levels	27
They could not explain the events they narrated with concrete examples	23
They narrated exaggerated stories of the parent	28
While narrating the events, they used pronouns such as we, us, our	33
They said they themselves did not want to see the separated parent	27
Children’s negative behaviors decreased and they wanted to continue the relationship when personal relationship was established with the separated parent under the supervision of an expert	38
	16

When they enjoyed the time they spent with the separated parent, they avoided telling this to the parent they lived with	17
Although they wanted to take it, they tried not to take a gift from the separated parent	28
While the child was being taken from the parent s/he lived with under the supervision of and expert, s/he displayed exaggerated behaviors (crying, retching, screaming, etc.), but behaviors changed as they moved away from the house	8
In detailed interviews, they expressed that they wanted their parents to live together despite all negativities	10
They did not want to go to the house of the separated parent's family, and they expressed negative thoughts and feelings about them	27

The children narrated the events told by their parents as if they experienced or witnessed them. However, it was observed that their moods did not match the events they narrated and they could not give concrete examples. The children copied what their parents told them, that the language they used was not compatible with their developmental periods, that they indicated that they themselves did not want to see the separated parent, that they did not feel any guilt regarding the separated parent, that when they spent good time with their parent during personal relationship time, they hesitated to tell about this to the parent they lived with, and that they did not want to get the gifts given by the separated parent.

Analyzing of ten reports showed that visitations were organized under the supervision of an expert in order to observe the relationship between the children and their separated parent and to re-establish the relationship between the children and the separated parents who did not see each other for a long time. It was observed that while the children were taken from the home of the parent s/he lived with and delivered to the separated parent, they exhibited exaggerated behaviors such as crying, retching, and screaming and yelling. It was also observed that such behaviors disappeared as they were moved away from the house. In the relationship between the parent and the child organized under the supervision of an expert, a certain improvement was achieved in a short time, and the child's attitude toward seeing the parent softened. In studies conducted in this framework, the personal relationship between the child and the separated parent could be maintained with some consensus in 8 cases. However, it was also found that the relationships did not improve in most of the cases and that conflicts continued to exist in the case process and its aftermath. Considering the problems experienced, five parents were sent for psychiatric evaluation. In addition, it was determined in the reports that interlocutory injunction against the families were ordered, and in this context, 23 parents were directed to the institutions to get counselling about child education, communication, and child raising (within the framework of Article 6/c Protective and Preventive Social Precautions of Family Courts Law). Family counselling was recommended to 5 mothers and fathers. In addition, the court experts indicated that following psychiatric evaluations and family counselling, custody and personal relationship should be re-evaluated. However, it was determined that the families did not receive such counselling, and the courts did not apply any sanctions in this

regard. In the descriptive analyses, it was also found that attention was drawn to custody and personal relationship abuses, and it was reported that custodies should be restored.

### **Discussion, Conclusion & Suggestions**

Detailed reports prepared by appointed psychologists, social workers, and pedagogues in courts are an important source of information in determining intrafamily problems, conflicts, and problems experienced in the parent-child relationship. In this study, the reports prepared in a total of 27 divorce, custody and personal relationship cases with the child were examined. The expert reports examined in this study. It was found that PAS was applied by the mothers the most. While he expressed in his early studies that PAS was applied by women the most, Gardner (2001, 2002) later stated that both parents applied it. In a study conducted by Machuca (2005), it was determined that tendency toward alienation was higher in women compared to men. It was also found that mothers exhibited more alienation behaviors in comparison to fathers (Altuntaş & Ziyalar, 2018; Baker & Darnell, 2006; Erdoğan, 2020). Mothers and fathers, first degree relatives such as grandfathers, grandmothers, aunts, etc. were effective in alienation behaviors. It is thought that this situation is a result of the continuation of extended family relations in the Turkish family structure, importance and closeness of relative relationships, the high effect of first degree relatives in marriage rituals, and the inability of the spouses to put a limit to these relationships in the marriage union and divorce process. Women may have to live dependently on their families in the period after the divorce due to experiencing economic and social problems. This situation may cause the relatives to be more easily involved in the divorce process. In the study conducted by Aktaş Akoğlu and Küçükkaragöz (2018) on the reasons of divorce and problems experienced in its aftermath, factors such as economic distress, difficulty to move to a separate house, and involvement of the relatives in the problems were found to be effective. In light of this information, it would be significant to research how the first degree relatives affect PAS process.

In the descriptive analyses, it was determined that the parents and relatives expressed degrading words about the other parent in order to influence the child, got the child to witness the problems experienced, showed themselves as the victims, and wanted the child to take sides. Another significant finding regarding alienation behaviors was that children were made to call grandparents or newly married persons as mother or father instead of their biological mother and father and to forget the targeted mother or father. Moreover, it was found that it was claimed that the alienated parent applied physical and sexual violence to the child, but that there were no behaviors in the court process in order to prove such allegations.

Slanders such as cheating, abandoning, violence, child abuse aimed at the alienated parent, telling the child that the cause of the divorce is the alienated parent, the child's ascribing inappropriate nicknames to the mother or father, getting the child to witness events, and influencing the child by meeting his/her excessive demands are some of the examples of alienation behaviors displayed. It was also found that a perception that the alienating parent was victimized and needed the protection of the child was created in the child. These findings are consistent with Gardner's (1999, 2001, 2002) eight primary PAS symptoms. Gardner (1999, 2002) stated that parents claim that the targeted parent maltreats the child in order to get the custody of the child, that these were mostly unfounded and were used to punish the targeted parent.

It was determined that the behavior styles of mothers, fathers, and relatives that cause PAS to develop involved Baker and Fine's (2008) alienation strategies that are used in harming the relationship of the child with the targeted parent. Similar to Baker and Fine's (2008) alienation strategies, it was found that the parents displayed alienation behaviors such as badmouthing, restricting, preventing, and totally cutting off communication, withdrawal of love, forcing the child to choose, claiming that the targeted parent did not want the child, getting the child to reject the targeted parent, claiming that the targeted parent was dangerous, the alienating parent's introducing the new spouse as mother/father to the child, and withholding the child's medical, academic, and other important information from the targeted parent. Not allowing to visit the child at the school, not sharing the child's information about education, and trying to get the managers and teachers to take sides in this process were also among the alienation behaviors. In the literature, it has been stated that behaviors such as denigration campaign against the targeted parent, influencing the child, forcing the child to choose, telling the child that the separated parent does not want to see him/her, and trying to gain advantage in the hearings are displayed (Baker & Darnall, 2006; Erdoğan, 2020; Waldron & Joanis, 1996). The findings obtained in the present study support the results of these studies.

In this study, it was determined that one of the Gardner's (2002) eight PAS criteria, negative emotions, thoughts, and guidance aimed at relatives were performed. It was seen that hostile feelings toward the first degree relatives of the targeted parent were induced in the child, the child's communication with them was restricted or cut off, and it was claimed that the cause of the problems experienced in the marriage and divorce was the relatives. These findings are consistent with the alienation behaviors aimed at relatives such as slanders, not allowing the child to see the relatives, and hostile attitudes found in the literature (Baker & Darnall, 2006; Baker & Fine, 2008; Waldron & Joanis, 1996).

It was found that PAS behaviors displayed by mothers, fathers, and relatives intensified more in the case process. It was seen that children were brought to the hearings in order to denigrate the targeted parent, they were made to read the case proceedings, pressure was applied on children to choose them in the determination of the custody, and children were threatened that s/he would not see them if s/he chose the other parent. These findings are similar to the findings obtained in PAS research such as the study by Şen (2014) on parents with divorce experience, the study by Yurdakul (2022) with the field experts, and the study by Ulutürk (2019) on divorced and unseparated parents. All these findings support Gardner's (1985) view that parents display PAS behaviors in order to gain advantage in the court cases.

It was also determined that another problem encountered in the case process was related with the personal relationships established between the child and the separated parent. When the expert evaluation reports were descriptively analyzed, many PAS behaviors that aimed to restrict or prevent the child from seeing the separated parent were determined. It was found that in the divorce, custody, and personal relationship cases, problems were created regarding the establishment of personal relationship between the child and the separated parent, they tried to get the child through enforcement, the child was forced to not want to leave, parents tried to control with whom, where, and how personal relationship would be established, and personal relationship was tried to be prevented or the process was interfered with. The finding of this study that the relationship between the child and the separated parent

was harmed in the case process supports the study results in the literature. It has been stated that such alienation attempts by parents could cause the child to develop hostile thoughts and feelings against the targeted parent (Mone & Biringen, 2012), and to refuse to maintain all types of communication (Benedek & Brown, 1997).

Conflicts experienced between parents and the negative attitudes of the parents toward each other can affect the perceptions of children regarding that parent and cause the child to sever his/her relations with the parent and grow being deprived of that parent (Benedek & Brown, 1997; Kelly & Johnston 2001; Mone & Bringen, 2012). Negative behaviors aimed at the targeted parent in the court process can cause the child to refuse to establish a relationship with the parent, not to want to see him/her, and not to accept the personal relationship arrangement (Kayma Güneş, 2007; Koçyıldırım, 2010). The alienated child may cut his/her communication with the mother or father and remove the targeted parent totally from his/her life. This situation forces the child psychologically and traumatizes him/her. Researchers have reported that alienated child's problems continue for years and they transfer these problems to their own children (Raso, 2004).

In addition to the psychosocial consequences of preventing the child's relationship with his/her parent, it is seen that the child's right to establish a relationship with his/her parents and relatives protected by national and international regulations was denied and their rights were abused. European Contract on the Establishment of Personal Relationship with the Child emphasizes the importance of maintaining the personal relationship of the child with his/her parents and relatives. The contract stipulates that personal relationship cannot be restricted unless the child's best interest necessitates it, and that in potential conflicts, necessary mediations should be made and other measures should be taken. In addition, the European Convention on the Exercise of Children's Rights recommends that the child should be represented by a separate counsellor at court in the case where the child's rights could not be protected by the parents due to various conflicts of interest. It is believed that in such cases, considering the best interest of the child, it would be useful for the child to be represented by a counsel other than the parents.

One of the issues that was emphasized in this study was the reactions of the children exposed to PAS behaviors. It was observed that the children were prepared while coming to the hearings, they narrated the events in a certain fiction, they did not display any fear, anxiety, sadness, or anger symptoms while narrating the events, the language they used in narrating the events did not match the developmental stage they were in, especially in younger children, they could not support their words with concrete examples, and they exhibited anger and anxiety when they could not narrate the events as they wished. It was determined that the children used exaggerated expressions, they used pronouns such as we and us, they insisted that they themselves preferred not to see the targeted parent, their behaviors changed in the visitations held with experts, they were confused, and they felt guilty about the good times spent with the separated parent. These findings overlap with the behaviors in alienated children determined by Gardner (2001, 2002), Baker and Darnall, (2006), and Waldron and Joanis (1996). The children's use of pronouns such as we and us while narrating the events supports the findings of Farkas (2011).

It is thought that PAS behaviors which they are exposed to negatively affect children's psychosocial development. It has been emphasized in the literature that in children exposed to PAS, emotional and behavioral problems are experienced (Johnston et al., 2005; Ulutürk, 2019), and they display low self-confidence, addiction,

smoking and alcohol use, and risky sexual behaviors (Kruk, 2018), lack of self-confidence and social anxiety (Baker, 2005), low self-esteem, sleep disorders, anxiety, and depression (Baker & Ben-Ami, 2011; Baker & Verrocchio 2013; Lowenstein, 1998, Sher, 2015; Torun, 2017; Verrocchio et al., 2019).

In light of all findings obtained in this study, it is seen that PAS behaviors harm the relationship established between the child and the parents and relatives, and that the child is negatively affected in the process. Therefore, the issue must be handled in detail by the experts and judges in the case process. In cases where parental alienation is not recognized, the alienating parent can affect case processes (Erdoğan, 2020; Torun, 2017). Lowenstein (1998) argues that the allegations against the alienated parents should be investigated in detail.

PAS is a type of emotional abuse. In this study, it was seen that there were physical and sexual abuse claims. Gardner (2002) states that such behaviors may emerge, in which case the child's alienation from the parent can be expected. Therefore, it is a must that court experts be informed and aware of PAS in order to distinguish PAS from physical, sexual, and other abuses. In terms of protecting the child and the family, it is important that experts who evaluate the case should be knowledgeable about parental alienation and these situations should be evaluated regarding the arrangements to be made for the child. It is important for court professionals to know that PAS behavior is an abuse of custody and of the personal relationship with the child. As a result, it is thought that, if necessary, custody and personal relationship with the child decisions can be changed in favor of the alienated parent.

In this study, it was seen that some families were directed toward psychiatric evaluation, child education, counselling on child raising, and family counselling. It was, however, determined that families did not obey these orders. Lack of sanctions by the court in this regard causes families to maintain their arbitrary behaviors regarding the solution of the problems.

### **Suggestions**

-Families and their children are confronted with serious problems in the case process and afterwards. Systematic psychosocial services should be developed for families and their children.

-The study findings showed that academic information of children was withheld from the separated parent. In this context, it is important in terms of preemptive works that in addition to court experts, school psychological guidance experts should be informed about PAS.

-In Turkey, there are studies on PAS in the form of compilation studies and case presentations. However, court reports in which problems experienced in cases such as divorce, custody, etc. are evaluated provide detailed information about PAS. Hence, more research on PAS is needed.

-In order to understand the process better, the effect of the relatives in the development of PAS behaviors should also be analyzed.

-Increase in the number of studies on PAS will serve to the diversification and applicability of the programs to be developed. It is believed that the current study will contribute substantial insights to the existing body of literature.

### **Ethic**

In this study, scientific, ethical and citation rules were followed; It has been committed that no falsification has been made on the collected data, and that all responsibility belongs to the authors for all ethical violations to be encountered.

### **Funding**

No financial support was received from any institution in this study.

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