

Parental alienation and its implications for child health: an integrative review

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Abstract

Aim: to analyze in the scientific literature, the implications of parental alienation on children's health. Methods: integrative literature review, with primary studies published from 2010 to 2019, carried out in the electronic databases BVS and MEDLINE, between May and June 2020. The searches were obtained by crossing the following descriptors: social alienation, divorce, child custody, child. Results: 17 articles were included. The analysis indicated that the available studies show the consequences of parental alienation on the child's health, the practice of alienation for the legal purpose of obtaining custody and the implications of parental alienation in adult life. Conclusion: parental alienation has severe implications for the child's physical and psychological health and may even have repercussions throughout life. Knowing such implications is the first step to care to avoid adverse effects on health and quality of life.

Keywords: Social alienation. Divorce. Child custody. Child.

Alienação parental e suas implicações na saúde da criança: uma revisão integrativa

Resumo

Objetivo: analisar na literatura científica, as implicações da alienação parental na saúde da criança. Método: revisão integrativa da literatura, com busca de estudos primários publicados de 2010 a 2019, realizada nas bases de dados eletrônicas BVS e MEDLINE, nos meses de maio e junho de 2020. As buscas foram obtidas pelo cruzamento dos seguintes descritores: alienação social, divórcio, custódia da criança, criança. Resultados: Foram incluídos 17 artigos. A análise indicou que os estudos disponíveis mostram as consequências da alienação parental na saúde da criança, a prática da alienação com a finalidade jurídica para a obtenção da guarda e implicações da alienação parental para vida adulta. Conclusões: a alienação parental traz implicações sérias à saúde física e psicológica da criança, podendo inclusive repercutir ao longo da vida. Conhecer tais implicações é o primeiro passo para que o cuidado seja realizado de maneira a evitar os efeitos negativos sobre a saúde e a qualidade de vida.

Palavras chave: Alienação social. Divórcio. Custódia da criança. Criança.

La alienación de los padres y sus implicaciones para la salud infantil: una revisión integradora

Resumen

Objetivo: analizar en la literatura científica las implicaciones de la alienación parental en la salud de los niños. Método: revisión integradora de la literatura, buscando estudios primarios publicados de 2010 a 2019, realizados en las bases de datos electrónicas BVS y MEDLINE, en los meses de mayo y junio de 2020. Las búsquedas se obtuvieron cruzando los siguientes descriptores: alienación social, divorcio, custodia de menores, niño. Resultados: se incluyeron 17 artículos. El análisis indicó que los estudios disponibles muestran las consecuencias de la alienación parental en la salud del niño, la práctica de la alienación con el fin legal de obtener la custodia y las implicaciones de la alienación parental para la vida adulta. Conclusión: La alienación de los padres tiene serias implicaciones para la salud física y psicológica del niño, e incluso puede tener repercusiones a lo largo de la vida. Conocer tales implicaciones es el primer paso de la atención a realizar para evitar los efectos negativos sobre la salud y la calidad de vida.

Palabras clave: Alienación social. Divorcio. Custodia del niño. Niño.

Introduction

Parental alienation (PA) is a phenomenon that arises in the context of family relationships, being more common in divorce situations.^{1,2} Although research on the topic is incipient, the scenario has been gaining prominence in Brazil, due to the significant divorces' increase in recent years. According to data released by the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*, 385,246 divorces were granted in 2018.³

When a couple with children separates, custody ends up being granted to one of the parents; at the same time, it is allowed the individual who has been deprived of this custody to have the right to participate in the development and care of the child.^{4,6}

With the emergence of custody disputes involving the suspicion or confirmation of parental alienation, Law No. 12,318, of August 26, 2010, was created for legal and child protection purposes. The Law defines as parental alienation the interference in the psychological formation of the child or adolescent promoted or induced by one of the parents, by the grandparents or even by other people who have authority over the minor, so that the latter rejects the other parent or even so that the maintenance or the establishment of links between them is impaired.⁷

Still, in its article 2, it defines as forms of parental alienation: to carry out a campaign of conducts' disqualification of the parent in the paternity or maternity exercise; hinder the use of parental authority; make it difficult for a child or teenager to have contact with a parent; impede the practice of the regulated right to family life.⁷

The Law aims to ensure the right contained in Article 5 of the *Estatuto da Criança e do Adolescente*, which is to protect minors from negligence, discrimination, exploitation, violence, cruelty and oppression, punishing any attack, by action or omission, on their fundamental rights. Also, reinforces the right of the child enshrined in the Federal Constitution in Articles 227 and 229. Thus, this Law not only officially marks the existence of the Parental Alienation Syndrome, but also causes a significant legal-cultural impact.^{8,9}

Therefore, it is a complex and increasingly recurring theme today. Consequently, without specialized intervention, parental alienation can produce sequelae capable of lasting throughout child growth and development, thus impacting the victim's quality of life.¹⁰ Hence, it is essential to research the theme, enabling health professionals to identify this type of violence and its implications for children's health.

Thus, this study aimed to analyze, in scientific literature, the implications of parental alienation on children's health.

Methods

This is an integrative literature review guided by the research question: what are the implications of parental alienation on children's health?

The data production comprised the search in the electronic databases Latin American and Caribbean Literature in Health Sciences (LILACS) and Medical Literature and Retrieval System Online (MEDLINE), via PubMed, accessed via the CAPES portal. Descriptors were searched with DeCS (Descri-

tores em Ciências da Saúde) and MeSH (Medical Subject Headings). The search strategy at LILACS included "*alienação social*" OR "*divórcio*" [words] OR "*custódia da criança*" AND "*criança*" [subject descriptor]. For MEDLINE, "social alienation" [All Fields] OR "divorce" [All Fields] OR "child custody" [All Fields] AND "child" [Mesh Terms] were used.

The search strategy for studies identification followed the steps recommended in the PRISMA flowchart, namely, identification, selection, eligibility, and inclusion.¹¹

Inclusion criteria considered all productions that addressed the proposed theme answered the research question and were available in full online and free of charge, in Portuguese, English and Spanish. The time frame from 2010 was adopted, due to Law no. 12,318 of August 26, 2010. The studies' survey took place between May and June 2020. Initially, 46 records were found in LILACS database and 5,969 files in MEDLINE database, totaling 6,771 records.

Two reviewers were responsible for study selection, one main and one secondary. The reviewers, individually, selected the studies according to the established criteria; later, when comparing studies, possible divergences about the papers' inclusion were evidenced, and a consensus was determined about the selected productions.

Pre-established steps were followed in the selection, inclusion, and exclusion process for productions. Initially, the titles and abstracts were read, and later productions that met the inclusion criteria were included, totaling 17 articles (Figure 1).

For the analysis of selected studies, synthesis and comparisons about the main results were performed, highlighting the differences and similarities between the studies. Thus, the analysis and results synthesis of this integrative review was based on the data that answered the review question.

There was no need to submit this project to the Research Ethics Committee, as it is a literature review. However, it is noteworthy that the authors' original ideas were kept in the process of synthesizing their research.

Results

Among the characteristics of the 17 articles included, nine (53.0%) were from Brazil. The United States held six productions (35.3%) and Chile, two productions (11.7%).

Regarding the period, studies published between 2016 and 2017 predominated, respectively, with five articles. Concerning the knowledge sub-areas, eight studies belonged to psychology (47.1%), 7 to medicine (41.2%) and 2 to Law (11.7%).

The studies available in the literature report the consequences for the child's health regarding the use of parental alienation, the practice of alienation for the legal purpose of obtaining custody and the implications of alienation for adult life. The results are described in Table 1.

The practice of alienation for the legal purpose of obtaining custody

Data manipulation and false allegations of child sexual abuse for legal purposes have appeared in studies associated with parental alienation. According to these studies, many

alienators use this argument as a way of moving away from living with the child, involving them in a network of lies, as well as feeding them false beliefs about the other parent.^{12,13}

Amid a hostile environment, barriers are imposed, such as non-existent diseases that are invented or the appearance of unforeseen events, to hinder the coexistence between the other parent and the child, which is used as an instrument of revenge. Many of these obstacles arise from feelings such as selfishness, or persistent resentment among the old couple.¹⁴

The child starts to reproduce thoughts and even report situations that did not occur, influenced by one of the parents, producing over time what was called by the authors of implanting false memories and, in more severe cases, "erasing" real memories related to good times lived.¹⁵

To understand how this would directly affect the child, we analyzed the case of a family where the parents' separation of a 2-year-old girl occurred. Soon after the facts, the father reveals to the mother that he has started a new relationship and the mother, out of revenge, accuses the father of sexual abuse committed against his daughter. After the accusation, the girl had to go through several examinations, and nothing was proven. Despite this, the mother continued with the allegations and, from that moment on, started to provide several false addresses to the courts.¹⁶

Over the years, the child grew up afraid to leave the house, claiming that she feared meeting with the father or the police, and eventually revealed that the mother had told her to lie to accuse the father. At the age of 8, the girl was diagnosed with a Severe Phobic Disorder, stopped attending school and lost any contact with the rest of the family, being considered, with her mother, a fugitive from the police.¹⁶

Parental alienation can also serve as a basis for false reports of child sexual abuse, which is directed against the alienated parent. In situations of litigious divorces, the chances of the alienator accusing the other of sexual abuse are further increased. Besides, it becomes suspicious for judges and lawyers when the allegations are made for the first time during the process. In these cases, the child's perception and facts interpretation may be manipulated by one of the parents.¹⁶

In a study by Maida, Herskovic and Prado,¹⁶ which described the epidemiology of false allegations cases of child sexual abuse, studied by social service professionals, referred the existence of false intentional denunciation in about 6% of the cases of child sexual abuse charges. None of which came from the child, but mainly from those who have custody of the child.

Precisely because parental alienation is a subject that still needs further studies regarding its diagnosis, in a study published by Mendes et al.,¹² attention is drawn to the attitude of immediately discarding the existence of sexual abuse, when there is a certainty of parental alienation. Such conduct could lead the child to a high risk of suffering sexual abuse, just considering that the report was false without further elaboration of the case.

False allegations of sexual abuse referred against the alienated parent have the intention of obtaining procedural gains, revenge, breaking the child's contact with the other, obtaining custody, among other legal reasons. In the process, it is observed the argument that such abuse is the cause for the child to carry out a demoralization campaign against the other, in

which the alienating parent denies that he is inducing any speech expressed by the child.¹³

Consequences of parental alienation on children's health

Divorce represents a prolonged transition in the lives of parents and children, making it particularly difficult for children, due to the parents' parental abilities being diminished in many of its dimensions, such as.

Divorce represents a prolonged transition in the lives of parents and children, making it particularly difficult for children, due to the parents' parental abilities being diminished in many of its dimensions, such as discipline, time for activities with the children and support emotional.⁹

When parents split up, children face a crisis that has multiple implications. There are changes in the lives of all individuals, but for young children, these changes are accompanied by a set of feelings, such as anger, fear, depression and guilt, which generally last until about a year after the separation, when tension reduction and a growing sense of well-being start to emerge.¹⁷

The consequences for children are diverse; they are related to the feeling of loss, abandonment, absence, rejection, and guilt.¹⁸⁻²⁰ The reports include consequences for the child's mental health, such as the onset of mental disorders such as chronic depression, anxiety, conduct disorders and suicidal ideation.¹⁷

The child, victim of the rupture in the affective coexistence of one of the parents, due to parental alienation, grows with a feeling of absence and emptiness due to the lack of a father or mother figure, becoming a person with fear, insecurity and difficulties in the evolution personal.²¹ Maida et al,¹⁶ refer that in some situations the child ends up suffering reprisals or even threat from the alienating parent, for not wanting to collaborate with the invented stories, being pointed out as a "traitor" amid all the problems. For this reason, it is deprived of the coexistence of its own family.

In documentary research presented by Fermann et al.,²² who analyzed psychological reports, children who were victims of parental alienation showed insecurity when being in the presence of a parent. The behaviour was highlighted in most of the reports, being manifested by the ambiguity of feelings, sometimes verbalized by a speech of aversion to the parent who does not have his guard, sometimes complaining about the absence of contact, demonstrating an enormous emotional overload. The fear of leaving home and having contact with friends and colleagues was also pointed out in the study.²²

Forcing a child to comply with such a plot can immediately affect him, making him withdrawn, insecure, with difficulty in creating affective and trusting bonds, away from the coexistence of his family and friends.⁹ Children who are victims of this practice are more likely to develop psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression, nervousness for no apparent reason, panic, feelings of rejection or exclusion, and identity or psychiatric disorders that may last for the rest of their lives.²¹

Implications of parental alienation in adulthood

Although studies on the long-term repercussions of parental alienation are scarce, the main implications of parental alienation in adulthood are self-esteem problems, self-depreciation, depression, substance abuse such as alcohol and other drugs, risk of suicide.^{19,23-24} The implications arise throughout the life

cycle as an escape from guilt and pain, when individuals become aware that they were victims of parental alienation, being complicit in acts of humiliation against the alienated parent who loved him and did not abandon him.¹⁸

The feeling of guilt may arise with maturity, along with the understanding of parental alienation, favouring the rebellion against the alienating parent and bringing biopsychosocial losses, depending on the coping mechanisms used to deal with the stressful situation.²⁵ As pointed out by Maida, Herskovic and Prado,¹⁶ the psychotic condition and the attempted suicide/suicide are the most feared cases. The main problems of adulthood repercussions found in the study are eating disorders, conduct and changes in sleep patterns.

Mendes et al.¹² reinforce the scarcity of studies focused on the implications of parental alienation in adulthood, pointing to the possibility of developing identity disorder, antisocial behavior, and the outbreak of psychosomatic diseases.

Behavioral changes may not pose a significant threat to the child in the short term if they are observed early at the same time they are treated. However, in many cases, the story takes place in a way that affects the individual's physical and mental health in adolescence and adulthood. Thus, the consequences of parental alienation for the child's health are numerous, since the suffering caused can have repercussions in other phases of

the life cycle, with high chances of developing mental disorders and a tendency to abuse or drug dependence.

Conclusion

The present work sought to gather in an integrative review the knowledge about the implications of parental alienation for the child's health and for better understanding of the theme, which is configured as a current form of violence against children. The limitations of the study are related to the number of studies available in the literature, according to the search strategy used. Despite the limited, the present study advances from the summary of the results regarding the attention to parental alienation on children's health.

The limited number of studies on parental alienation in the nursing field stands out, perhaps due to the specificity of the theme. However, caring for children violence situations is a great challenge to be faced by professionals, due to the repercussions in adult life, as pointed out in the literature. Thus, the contribution of this study is to explore the theme for professionals who will face children in this situation.

Parental alienation does not refer only to psychological manifestations, but to conditions worthy of living. A child who suffers from reprimands and limitations is deprived of his fundamental rights, affecting human development.

Figure 1. Flowchart of the article selection process for integrative review (2020)

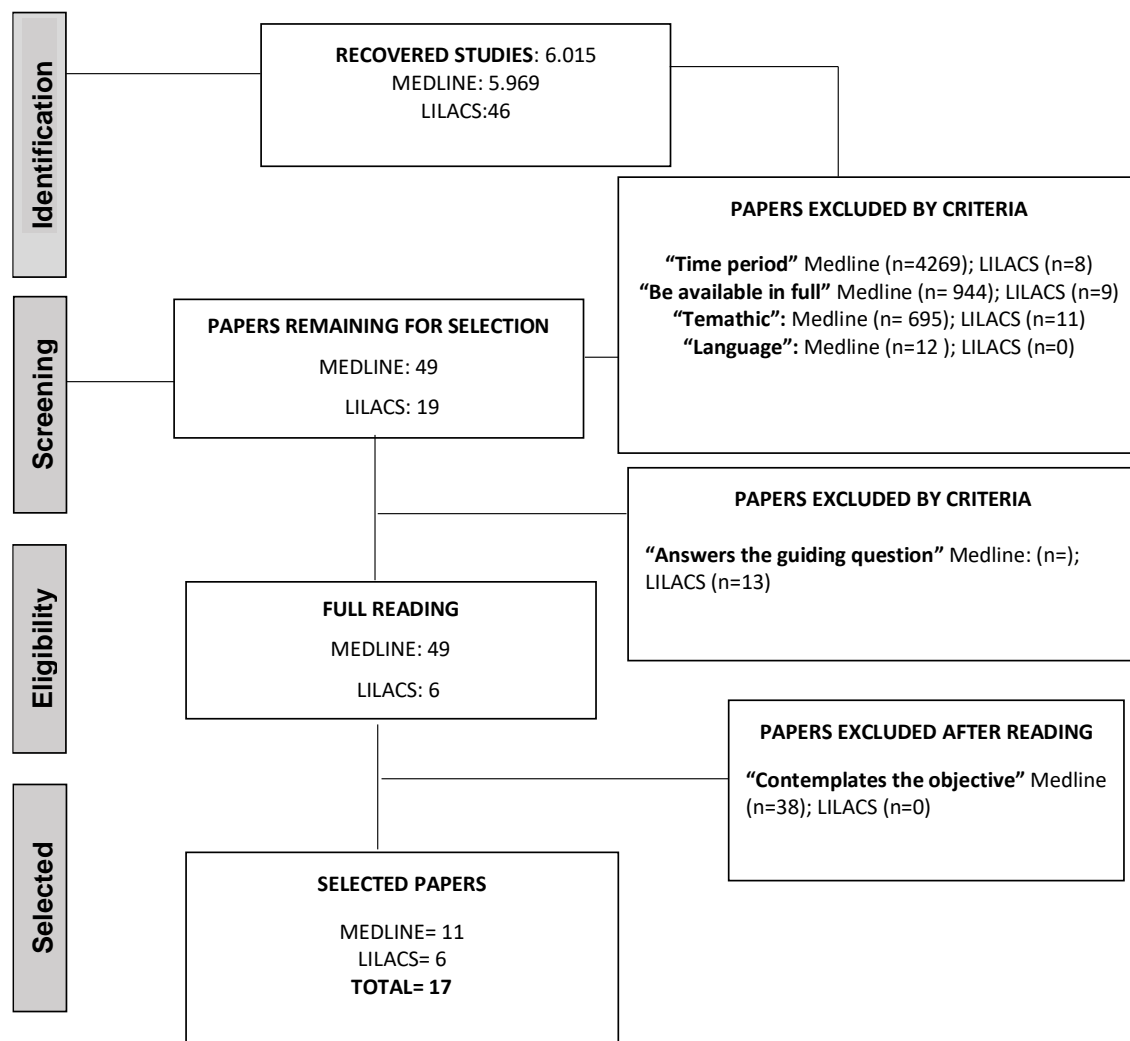


Table 1. Summary of studies/papers. Porto Alegre, RS – Brazil

Authors/year/Country	Title	Content
Mendes, Bucher-Maluschke Brazil 2016	Destructive Divorce in the Family Life Cycle and its Implications: Criticisms of Parental Alienation	Parental alienation legal purpose
Montezuma, Pereira, Melo Brazil 2017	<i>Abordagens da alienação parental: proteção e/ou violência?</i>	Adult life implications
Sarmet Brazil 2017	<i>Os filhos de Medeia e a Síndrome da Alienação Parental</i>	Parental alienation legal purpose
Fermann, Chambart, Fosciera, Bordini Brazil 2017	<i>Perícias Psicológicas em Processos Judiciais Envolvendo Suspeita de Alienação Parental</i>	Childs' health consequences
Brockhausen Brazil 2011	<i>Falsas alegações de abuso sexual infantil: o contexto do trabalho do psicólogo brasileiro</i>	Parental alienation legal purpose
Maida, Herskovic, Prado Chile 2011	<i>Síndrome de alienación parental</i>	Parental alienation legal purpose
Oliveira, Russo Brazil 2017	<i>Abuso sexual infantil em laudos psicológicos: as "duas psicologias"</i>	Parental alienation legal purpose
Jesus, Cotta Brazil 2016	Alienação parental e relações escolares: a atuação do psicólogo.	Childs' health consequences
Ferandes, Cardone Brazil 2016	<i>Alienação parental e o dano moral na relação familiar</i>	Childs' health consequences
Roizblatt, Leiva, Maida Chile 2018	Separación o divorcio de los padres. Consecuencias en los hijos y recomendaciones a los padres y pediatras	Childs' health consequences
Harp, Oser USA 2018	A Longitudinal Analysis of the Impact of Child Custody Loss on Drug Use and crime among a Sample of African American Mothers	Adult life implications
Neto, Canato Brazil 2019	<i>Saúde psíquica infanto-juvenil em casos de alienação parental: uma reflexão jurídica e psicológica</i>	Childs' health consequences
Bernet, Baker, Verrocchio USA 2015	Symptom Checklist-90-Revised Scores in Adult Children Exposed to Alienating Behaviors: An Italian Sample	Adult life implications
Hou, Kim, Wang USA 2016	Parental Acculturative Stressors and Adolescent Adjustment Through Interparental and Parent-Child Relationships in Chinese American Families	Adult life implications
Kim, Hou, González USA 2017	Language Brokering and Depressive Symptoms in Mexican American Adolescents: Parent-Child Alienation and Resilience as Moderators	Adult life implications
D'onofrio, Emery USA 2019	Parental divorce or separation and children's mental health	Childs' health consequences
Cohen, Weitzman USA 2016	Helping Children and Families Deal with Divorce and Separation	Adult life implications

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