

Dear Paul

Firstly, we would like to thank you and the committee's continued work and support on the Domestic Abuse Bill. Our reason for contacting is to express our concern that parental alienation (and variations) has made its way into the Domestic Abuse Bill and the draft Statutory Guidance.

'Parental alienation' is commonly perceived to involve one parent turning a child against the other parent and the child then rejects this parent, yet as a concept it remains undefined, complex and contested and its scale is unclear. Recognition that there is a 'syndrome' of parental alienation is also highly disputed, and such a syndrome has not been recognised by the World Health Organisation or within family proceedings in our jurisdiction.

Moreover, parental alienation has considerable empirical and practical problems particularly around the potential to divert the focus from a child's welfare as the paramount consideration in contested contact cases and to disregard children's views and associated participation rights.

Indeed research conducted in England which identified that parental alienation (in their terms, parents who were implacably hostile) was a factor in "very few" contact enforcement cases (4%), in contrast to those where child protection concerns (31%) or the child's wishes not to have contact (21%) were relevant (Trinder et al, 2013).

In relation to Domestic Abuse, Women's Aid in Wales has noted that 'parental alienation' is being used by perpetrators to discredit allegations of domestic abuse made by mothers and to explain a child's anxiety and fear about contact with that parent, often despite the presence of welfare concerns which are far more likely to be the reasons for the child's reaction.

We are justifiably concerned that during family proceedings, more weight would be given parental alienation than to domestic abuse itself, because of the incorrect assumption made by some professionals that once a relationship has ended, the abuse has also ended.

Research by Women's Aid Federation England with Queen Mary University London evidences that family justice professionals increasingly accept 'parental alienation' as a credible and common 'syndrome' in the absence of scientific validity. In some cases, this research shows, women who raised domestic abuse as a safety concern in relation to child contact were accused by their abusive partner of 'parental alienation' and of making up the experiences of domestic and child abuse, and women lost residency and contact with their children as a result.

I am sure you will agree that to ensure the best interests of children and young people and their safety, parental alienation is removed from the Bill and Guidance. We look forward very much to hearing from you.

Kind regards

Ellen

[Ellen Finlay](#)
Policy Officer

Children in Northern Ireland
Unit 9, 40 Montgomery Road
Belfast
BT6 9HL