

## CHILDREN'S ALIGNMENT WITH PARENTS IN HIGHLY CONFLICTED CUSTODY CASES

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*In one of two samples discussed in the article, 41% of 24 consecutively referred latency-age children were aligned with one parent in a divorce. In a separate sample of 20 families, both parents of aligned children were more rigid, naively defended, and less emotive than were parents of nonaligned children. Aligned children preferred the more emotive, problem solving and outgoing of the two parents. Aligned children were less adept at conceptualizing complex problems than were nonaligned children, but they were more self-confident.*

After divorce, many children, especially those in highly conflicted custody cases, develop alignments with a parent (Johnston & Campbell, 1988; Johnston, Campbell, & Tall, 1985; Lampel, 1986; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). These alignments, or strong preferences for one parent over another, can lead to a continuum of children's behaviors in the postdivorce family, from a secretly held longing to be with the preferred parent to visitation refusal. At the farthest end of the spectrum, alienated children not only refuse visitation but also have a rigidly held set of behaviors, affects, and cognitions about the nonpreferred parent that include grossly unjustified criticism and hatred (Gardner, 1987, 1989; Garrity and Baris, 1994; Turkat, 1994). Johnston and Campbell (1988), who studied 80 highly conflicted postdivorce families, found between 35% and 40% of children between the ages of 7 and 14 years involved in parental alignment. Of these, 16% were so aligned with a parent that they refused to visit the nonpreferred parent and were otherwise alienated from that parent.

Johnston (1994), Johnston and Campbell (1988), Gardner (1987, 1989), and Garrity and Baris (1994) viewed the aligned children as caught in an intolerable loyalty conflict between the parents that the children resolved, through the lens of their developmental and cognitive skills, by aligning. However, the authors differed in their assessment of the factors leading to alignment, and none except Johnston and Campbell (1988) provided data to support their hypotheses.

Johnston and Campbell (1988) described the child as aligned with the parent whom the child felt provided more empathy and understood the child's age-specific concerns. The preferred parent was not always more capricious and less stable than the nonpreferred parent, and the preferred parent was not necessarily overtly or covertly manipulative of the child. Fathers were as likely to be preferred parents as were mothers.

Gardner (1987, 1989) and Turkat (1994) perceived the preferred parent, usually the mother, as the primary agent in causing the alignment through overt and covert means such as brainwashing, lying about the nonpreferred parent, and establishing a subtle threat of abandonment if the child did not ally with her. Garrity and Baris (1994) proposed further that preferred parents lacked empathy, were inflexible, and had little or no insight into the effect of

their behavior on the child. Although the case studies suggested that the nonpreferred parent sometimes engaged in behaviors that only intensified the alignment (e.g., substance abuse), the nonpreferred parent was generally the victim of the preferred parent, who was the more disturbed of the pair.

The authors cited here noted marked differences in descriptions of preferred parents and nonpreferred parent. For the purposes of this study, the approach of Johnston and Campbell (1988) provided an empathy-driven model for understanding alignment, whereas those of Gardner (1987, 1989), Garrity and Baris (1994), and Turkat (1994) provided a manipulation-driven model.

The two studies presented here examine the alignment patterns of latency-age children and the personality and parenting characteristics of their parents. The first study assesses the rate of alignment in a population of families referred for psychological assessment as part of the legal process of determining custody. The second study compares a second set of aligned children to nonaligned children, compares the preferred and nonpreferred parents on standardized measures, and compares parents of aligned and nonaligned children.

The hypothesis for Study 1 was that alignment rates would be similar to those reported by Johnston and Campbell (1988). For Study 2, the hypotheses were (a) that the preferred parents would demonstrate more rigidity, poorer parenting practices, and more clinical disturbance than would the nonpreferred parents; (b) that parents of aligned children would be more disturbed on different measures than would parents of nonaligned children; and (c) that aligned children would be more disturbed than nonaligned children.

## STUDY 1

### METHOD

#### *Participants.*

The participants were 24 consecutively referred boys and girls who were the children of parents in custody litigation. Requirements for inclusion were that the child's entire family had been referred for a child custody evaluation under evidence code 730 by a California superior court during 1989 and 1990. All the parents and children were advised of the purposes of the evaluation, and parents signed releases of information allowing test data to be used for research purposes. Each child selected was either the only or the oldest child of the family. Among the participants, 10 were boys and 14 were girls. They ranged in age from 7 years 4 months to 14 years 0 months ( $M = 10$  years 0 months,  $SD = 26.5$  months). One child was Latino, and the remainder were Caucasian.

#### *Measures.*

The Family Relations Test (FRT, Bene & Anthony, 1985) provides a child, ages 4 through 14 years, with mild and strong positive and mild and strong negative statements, written on small

cards, which the test administrator reads to the child. The child then “delivers” the cards to boxes with line drawings of human figures on them, selected by the child to represent family members including, but not limited to, parents, siblings, stepparents, and grandparents. The statements are grouped into positive feelings from the child to the person, positive feelings from the person to the child, negative feelings from the child to the person, negative feelings from the person to the child, and dependent feelings. The statements are primarily affective in tone such as “This is the person I most like to take walks with,” “This person is always grouchy,” and “I like to have this person hug me.” The affect associated with each person is assessed based on the number of positive and negative cards placed in each box.

The revised Slosson Intelligence Test (SIT; Slosson, Nicholson, & Hibpshman, 1991) is an individually administered brief intelligence test with good correlations to other, more lengthy intelligence assessments. The test is designed for children and adults.

#### *Procedure.*

An M.A.-level psychological assistant administered the SIT and FRT to each child as part of the standard evaluation procedure for the court-ordered psychological evaluation. The children took other tests as well; some are described further in Study 2. The assistant scored the tests, which were reviewed for accuracy by a licensed psychologist.

## **RESULTS**

The FRT results for each child were reported in terms of total positive and total negative messages given to mother, father, and any other identified important other (e.g., grandparents). For purposes of data analysis, all messages were weighted as 1; positive messages were given a positive weight, and negative messages were given a negative weight.

The relationship was considered positive if the sum was above 0 and negative if the sum was at or below 0. The relationship with the parent was labeled “aligned” if the sum was above 0 for one parent (the preferred parent) and at or below 0 for the other parent (the nonpreferred parent).

Of the 24 children, 11 (45.8%) were nonaligned, with positive scores for both parents. In addition, 3 children had scores of 0 for both parents but positive scores for other family members, typically grandparents.

Among the children, 10 (41.7%) had positive scores for mother and negative scores for father and were aligned. None had positive scores for father and negative scores for mother. A further analysis of the 10 children for whom mother was the preferred parent shows that the children had not given the father any positive messages.

All children were of average intellectual functioning as measured by the SIT. They had a mean IQ of 106 (SD = 15.5)

## STUDY 2

### METHOD

#### *Participants.*

The participants were 20 sets of parents and children in custody litigation, referred by a California county superior court for an evidence code 730 evaluation between 1991 and 1993. No Study 1 families participated in Study 2. The purpose of the evaluation was explained to all parents and children; the parents signed releases of information allowing test results on themselves and their children to be used for research purposes.

Each child was either the only or the oldest child of the family. The children ranged in age from 7 years 2 months to 14 years 3 months ( $M = 10$  years 2 months,  $SD = 25$  months). Among the participants, 10 children (6 boys and 4 girls) were identified as aligned using the criteria of Study 1 (a positive total score for one parent and a negative total score for the other parent on the FRT); of these, 2 were Latino, 1 was African American, and 7 were Caucasian. In addition, 10 children (6 boys and 4 girls) were identified as nonaligned based on positive total scores for both parents on the FRT, of these, 1 was Latino and 9 were Caucasian.

Parents were then identified as parents of aligned children and parents of nonaligned children, with 10 mothers and 10 fathers in each group. Parents of aligned children were further identified as either the preferred or the nonpreferred parent based on the parent's rating on the FRT. No significant age differences among groups existed; the parents' ethnic and racial backgrounds were distributed similarly to those of the children.

#### *Measures.*

All children were given the FRT described in Study 1. In addition, all children were given the Roberts Apperception Test for Children (RATC; McArthur & Roberts, 1982). The RATC is a standardized projective test for children from 5 to 14 years of age. The child tells stories about 16 different contemporary cards depicting, in line drawings, interactions between children, interactions between children and adults, and situations in which children are alone. Scoring guidelines for the resulting stories permit objective analysis of the responses on 12 scales. Of these, 6 measure adaptive functioning, with higher scores generally indicative of better functioning, and 6 are clinical scales measuring anxiety, aggression, depression, feelings of rejection, and inability to resolve conflict, with higher scores indicating poorer functioning.  $t$  scores can be obtained for all scales;  $t$  scores above 60 or below 40 are clinically significant.

All parents completed the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2; Butcher, Dahlstrom, Graham, Tellegen, & Kaemmer, 1989). This standardized, objective, self-report measure of personality provides an assessment of defensiveness and responses on 10 clinical scales.

The parents completed the Mother-Child Relationship Evaluation (MCRE; Roth, 1961), a Likert-style instrument assessing parental acceptance of children, overprotective and

overindulgent attitudes, and parental rejection of children. Scores are based on percentile ranking against the standardizing sample. The parents also completed the Parent Stress Index (PSI; Abidin, 1983), measuring global stress in the parent-child interaction by assessing the stressors that the child and the parent separately bring to the relationship. The test yields a total stress score, a child domain stress score, and a parent domain stress score. Scores are based on percentile ranking against the standardized population. Scores above 85% are considered significant; scores below 20% may be defensive.

#### *Procedure.*

The parent tests all were self-administered under appropriate supervision. The MMPI was scored using a computer program; all other tests were hand scored. Among the participants, 14 children were tested by an M.A.-level psychology assistant and 6 were tested by a licensed Ph.D. psychologist. Parents and children had additional tests as part of the assessment procedure. In all instances, test batteries were reviewed for scoring accuracy.

## **RESULTS**

An alpha level of .05 was used for all tests. Some statistically nonsignificant results were reported because of their possible value for further research. Unless otherwise noted, chi-square analyses were used on the data.

### **The Children**

#### *Aligned children.*

On the FRTS completed by aligned children, preferred parents and nonpreferred parents differed significantly ( $r = -.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ), preferred parents received an average of 14.1 positive statements ( $SD = 5.4$ ) and 1.1 negative statements ( $SD = 0.9$ ), and nonpreferred parents received an average of 2.1 positive statements ( $SD = 1.9$ ) and 7.9 negative statements ( $SD = 6.8$ ). In this population of aligned children, 6 identified the father as the preferred parent and 4 identified the mother. Aligned children had above-average IQs (see Table 1). On the RATC (again, see Table 1), they demonstrated above-average ability in verbal analysis, a lack of defensiveness, and a capacity to view others in complex, dynamic interactions (Prob) (Roberts, 1994). However, they also showed an inability to solve problems and cope with their feelings (Unresol). (For purposes of simplicity, only the unresolved problem scores, and not the resolved problem scores, were given.) They were also less likely than the average child to portray others as giving assistance, emotional support, or material objects (Sup-o) or to portray the protagonist in the story as seeking assistance from others in handling a problem (Rel). They portrayed adults as marginally adequate in setting appropriate limits (Lim).

#### *Nonaligned children.*

Nonaligned children gave positive statements and almost no negative statements to mothers, (mother positive  $M = 14.8$ ,  $SD = 3.3$ ; mother negative  $M = 0.8$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ) and fathers (father positive  $M = 10.1$ ,  $SD = 5.7$ ; father negative  $M = 0.9$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ). Positive mother and father

statements were significantly correlated ( $r = .43, p = .05$ ), but mothers were preferred to fathers ( $p < .02$ ).

Nonaligned children had above-average IQs (Table 1). On the RATC (Table 1), they demonstrated above-average ability in verbal analysis (Prob) coupled with an inability to solve problems and cope with feelings (Unresol). They had difficulty portraying others giving assistance, emotional support, or material objects (Sup-o) and described adults as not setting appropriate limits (Lim).

*Differences between aligned and nonaligned children.*

As noted in Table 1, the children did not differ in intelligence. Aligned children had a nonsignificant trend toward more aggressive responses than did nonaligned children on the RATC (Agg); however, they also offered more statements showing general positive feelings and self-confidence (Sup-c). Nonaligned children identified more problems (Prob), suggesting that they conceptualized better than did aligned children.

**Table 1**  
*Comparison of Aligned and Nonaligned Children (means and standard deviations)*

	Aligned (n =10)	Nonaligned (n =10)	<i>p</i>
Roberts Apperception Test for Children			
Rel	39.0(6.9)	41.8 (8.2)	n.s.
Sup-c	47.4 (6.4)	43.3 (7.0)	.06
Sup-o	32.3 (5.7)	29.5 (5.2)	n.s.
Lim	39.6 (9.3)	38.5 (8.7)	n.s.
Prob	66.1 (11.7)	73.6 (8.3)	.03
Anx	40.2 (6.8)	41.7 (9.6)	n.s.
Agg	53.7 (13.0)	47.0 (9.6)	.07
Dep	51.6 (13.4)	54.8 (11.6)	n.s.
Rej	51.9 (10.1)	55.7 (8.9)	n.s.
Unresol	73.9 (11.7)	77.8 (10.0)	n.s.
Slosson Intelligence Test			
	116.6 (15.5)	114.7 (17.5)	n.s.

*Note:* Standard deviations are in parentheses.

**Table 2**  
*Comparison of Parents of Aligned Children to Parents of Nonaligned Children*  
*(means and standard deviations)*

	Aligned (n =20)	Nonaligned (n =20)	<i>p</i>
MMPI Lie scale	64.2 (10.1)	58.3 (9.8)	.06
MMPI scale 3	51.9 (3.7)	56.9 (8.3)	.02
MMPI scale 8	46.6 (6.2)	50.6 (6.4)	.05
PSI Parent	20.5 (13.2)	30.7 (15.4)	.03
MCRE Acceptance	60.9 (7.0)	55.4 (8.5)	.04

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses. MMPI = Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2; PSI = Parent Stress Index; MCRE = Mother-Child Relationship Evaluation.

### The Parents

#### *Differences between nonpreferred and preferred parents.*

When nonpreferred and preferred parents of aligned children were compared, preferred parents scored higher on the MMPI's K scale, which measures a combination of clinical defensiveness and ego strength (Graham, 1990) (preferred K, M= 65.9, SD = 6.6; nonpreferred K, M = 63.6, SD = 5.0;  $p = .03$ ). When nonpreferred parents were compared to all preferred parents, including the parents of nonaligned children (who qualified as preferred parents by the definitions of the study), all preferred parents tended to have higher K scores on the MMPI (all preferred parent K, M = 63.6, SD = 7.1; nonpreferred parent K, M = 58.0, SD = 5.0;  $p = .07$ ). Preferred parents of aligned children did not differ significantly from preferred parents (mothers) of nonaligned children in positive scores on the FRT.

The more preferred mothers were then compared to the less preferred fathers of the nonaligned children. The differences on the MMPI's scale 5, measuring stereotypically masculine and feminine interests and attitudes, in fact suggested that these mothers and fathers both tend toward slightly more "masculine" attitudes (mothers M= 53.5, SD = 6.0; fathers M= 46.5, SD = 9.0;  $p = .001$ ). On the MMPI's scale 0, measuring social introversion, both mothers and fathers were extroverted, but mothers were relatively more extroverted (mothers M= 38.8, SD = 4.3; fathers M= 44.1, SD = 8.0;  $p = .02$ ). None of these results places these parents in a "clinical" population.

#### *Differences between parents of aligned children and parents of nonaligned children.*

A pattern of significant differences exists between parents of aligned children and parents of nonaligned children (Table 2). Parents of aligned children had nearly clinically significant scores on the MMPI's Lie scale (L), associated with individuals who are defensive, denying, and

repressing and who have little awareness of the consequences to other people of their behavior (Graham, 1990, p. 24). Aligned children's parents also had lower scores on both Scale 3 (Hysteria), indicating conventionality and restrained affect, and Scale 8 (Schizophrenia), suggesting conformity. Parents of aligned children felt less stress in parenting than did parents of nonaligned children (PSI) and were more accepting of children (MCRE).

## DISCUSSION

The rate of alignment of these children and families fell very close to that given by Johnston and Campbell (1988), at about 40% of the children in contested custody situations. In addition, about 16% of the children showed little attachment to either parent, on the measures used here, and seemed to indicate their emotional support lay elsewhere — with grandparents or even siblings. Even though 44% of the children maintained a positive bond, at least on paper, with both parents, fully 56% of these children did not. What characteristics of the preferred parent, the nonpreferred parent, and the children might have contributed to this finding?

All preferred parents, whether the parent of an aligned child or of a nonaligned child, were different from nonpreferred parents on some measures used here, but not in the direction of more clinical disturbance. Parent gender also did not predict preference; on balance, both mothers and fathers had the role of preferred parent, consistent with the findings of Johnston and Campbell (1988). Preferred parents were more self-confident, problem solving, enthusiastic, and outgoing (Graham, 1990). These findings offer some support for the empathy-driven model of parental alignment and did not support the hypothesis that preferred parents were more disturbed than nonpreferred parents.

Parents of aligned children were different from parents of nonaligned children in ways that were both statistically significant and clinically thought provoking. Parents of aligned children were more naively defensive. They were more repressed, lacking insight into themselves and the effect of their behavior on others, both in their self-assessments and in their assessments of their competencies as parents. Although parents of aligned children overtly struggled with the stress of visitation refusal and other difficult behaviors in their children, they assessed themselves as less stressed and more accepting of their children than did parents of nonaligned children. Although Garrity and Baris (1994) focused on the preferred parent's dynamics and less on the shared parental dynamics for aligned children, their proposal that child alignment emerges from a closed and defensive parental system received some support from these findings. These results did support the hypothesis that parents of aligned children were more disturbed, at least on some measures, than were parents of nonaligned children.

The aligned children tested as different from the nonaligned children in ways that implicated somewhat poorer adjustment. They were angrier and less able to conceptualize complex situations. However, associated with this, they reported greater self-confidence feelings than did nonaligned children. Johnston and Campbell's (1988) observation that aligned children seemed less anxious than nonaligned children received support from these data, as did the hypothesis that aligned children were more disturbed than nonaligned children. Although alignment solved part of the problem children have with divided loyalty in a conflicted custody situation, there seemed to be an emotional price to pay.



The complex family dynamics suggested by these studies are that a closed parent system, in which both parents are defensive and remain in conflict, led the child to align with the more problem solving, capable, and outgoing of the two parents. The empathy-driven model was more supported by the present studies than was the manipulation-driven model. The gender bias of the manipulation-driven model was not supported. In practice, the dynamic leading to parental alignment should be addressed in a sensitive fashion designed to understand the child's dilemma and the fashion by which the child's emotional choices are made.

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