

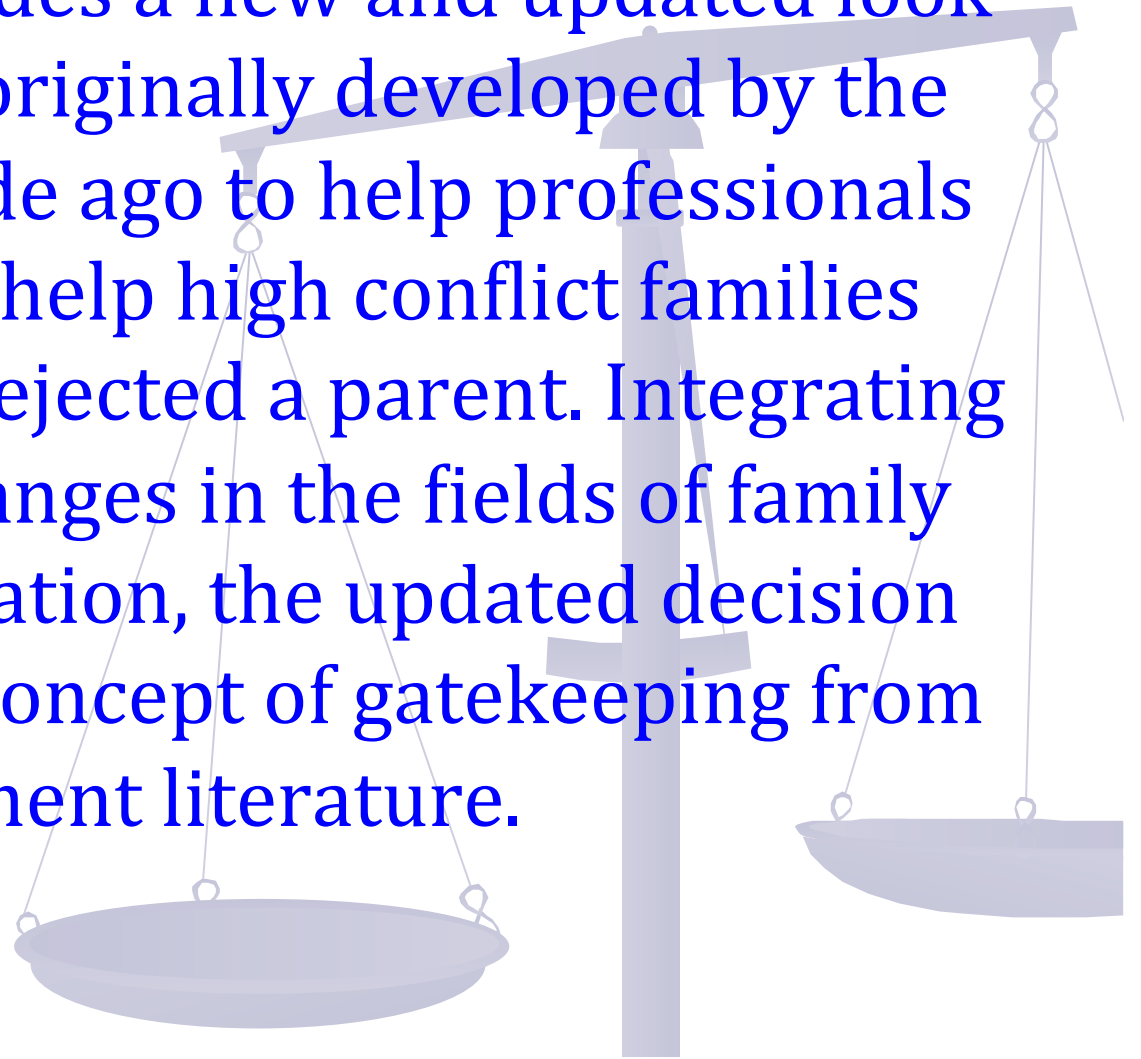
Rethinking the Evaluation of Abuse and Alienation with Gatekeeping in Mind



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Nancy W. Olesen, Ph.D.**

Overview

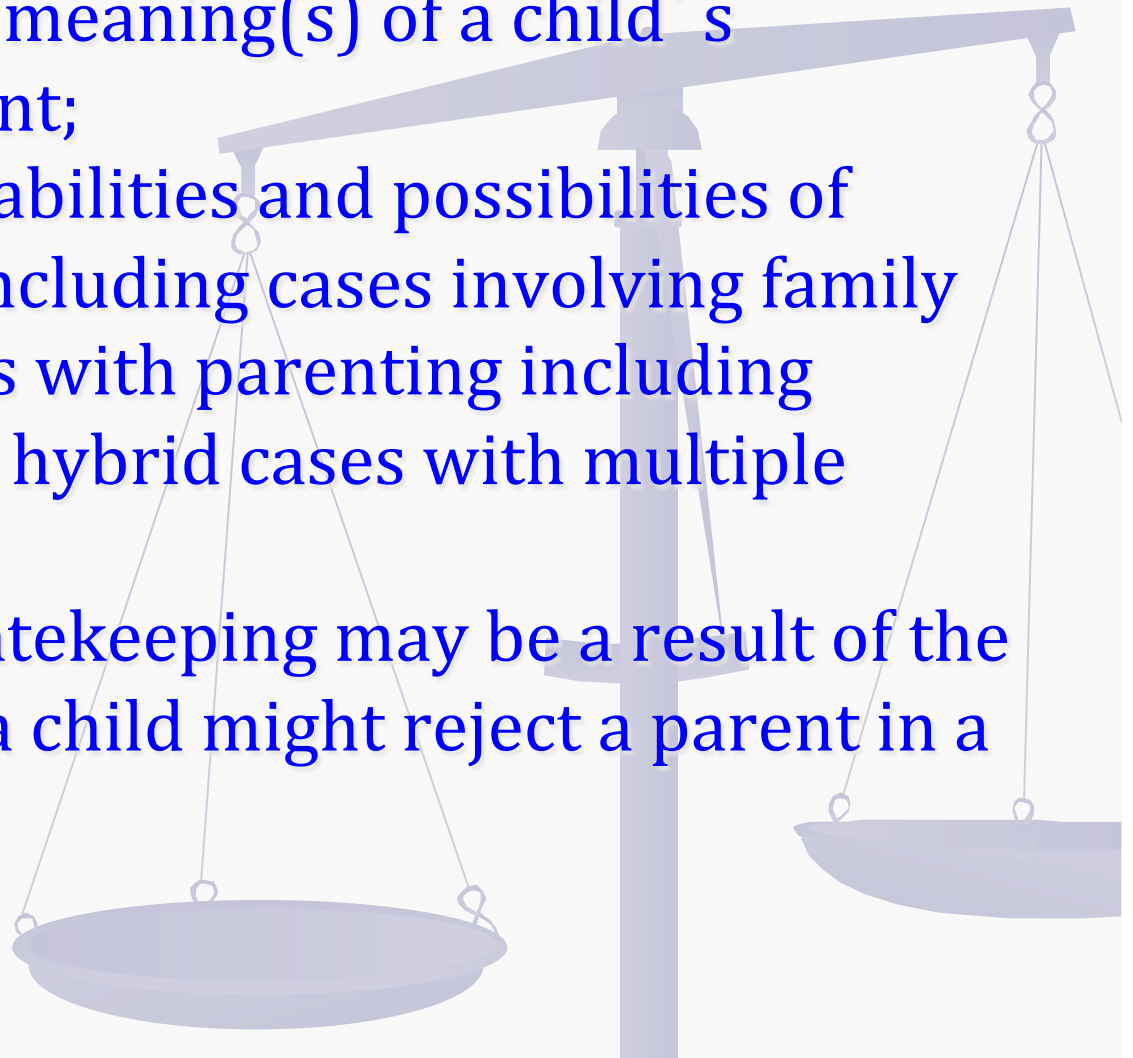
This session provides a new and updated look at a decision tree originally developed by the presenters a decade ago to help professionals determine how to help high conflict families when a child has rejected a parent. Integrating the plethora of changes in the fields of family violence and alienation, the updated decision tree employs the concept of gatekeeping from the child development literature.



Learning Objectives-1

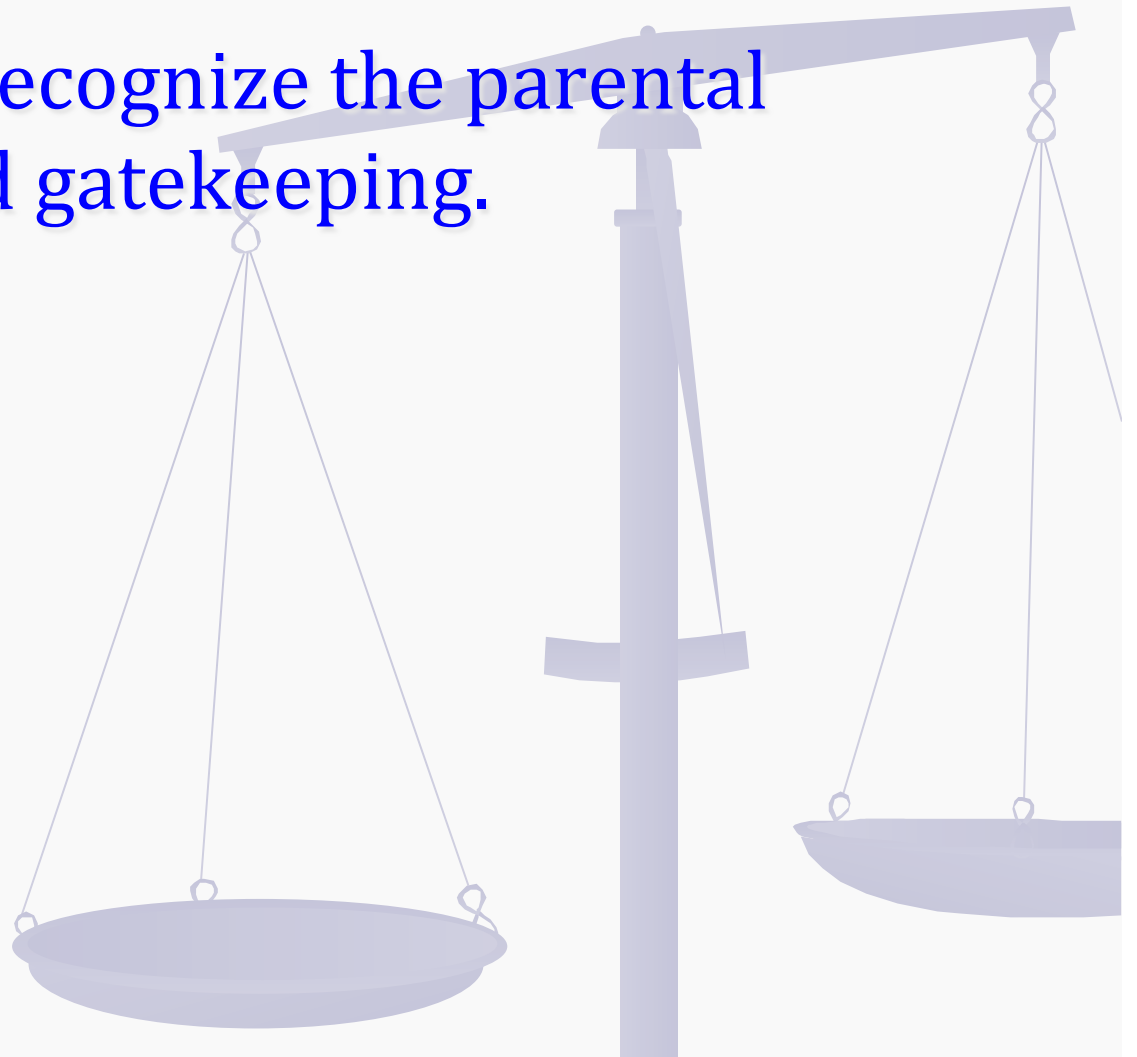
1. Use the Decision Tree to:

- a) think through the meaning(s) of a child's rejection of a parent;
- b) examine the probabilities and possibilities of different causes, including cases involving family violence, problems with parenting including alienation, and/or hybrid cases with multiple causes;
- c) how the type of gatekeeping may be a result of the different reasons a child might reject a parent in a high conflict case



Learning Objectives-2

2. Describe and recognize the parental behavior called gatekeeping.



Learning Objectives-3

3. Apply the concept of gatekeeping to

- a) hypothetical cases and experienced cases in which a child is rejecting a parent;
- b) assist in the development of interventions for these families

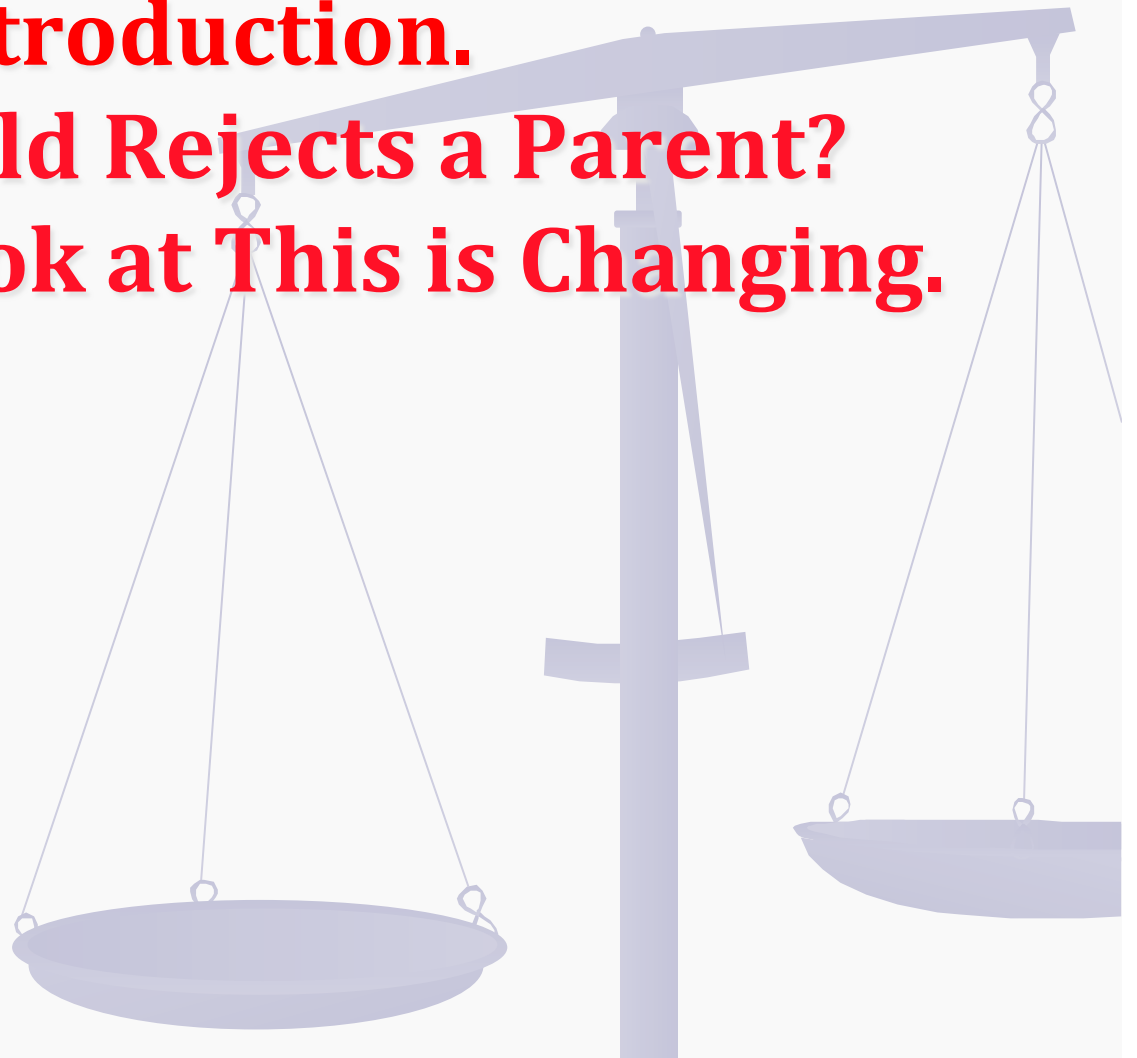


Outline

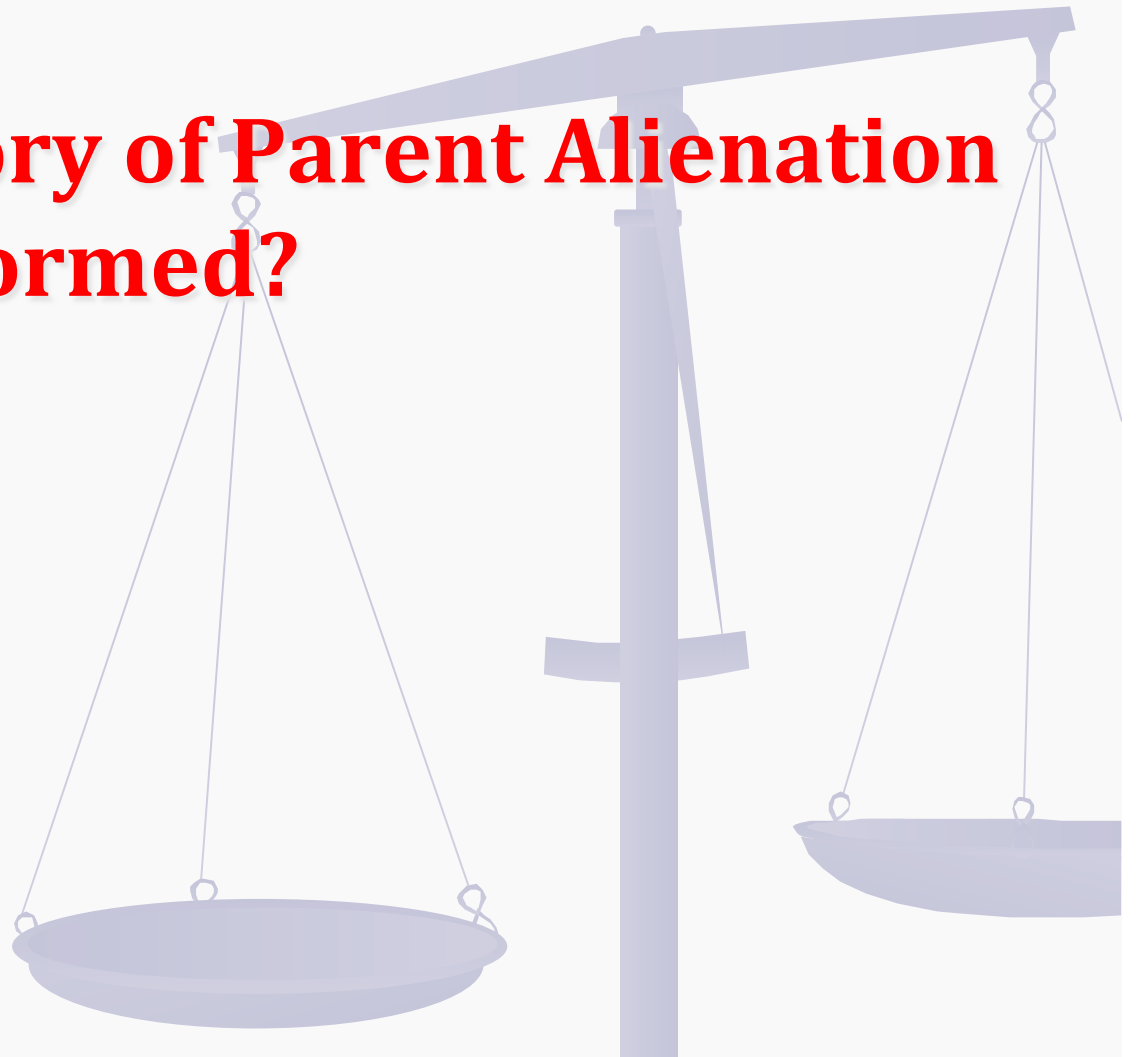
- I. Introduction: Why a Child Rejects a Parent? How We Look at This is Changing.
- II. New Decision Tree: Abuse, alienation, & more
- III. Gatekeeping
- IV. Connection between gatekeeping and abuse, alienation, & other parenting behaviors
- V. Case studies
- VI. Questions and Panel Discussion



I. Introduction.
Why a Child Rejects a Parent?
How We Look at This is Changing.



- **Has the Theory of Parent Alienation
Been Transformed?**



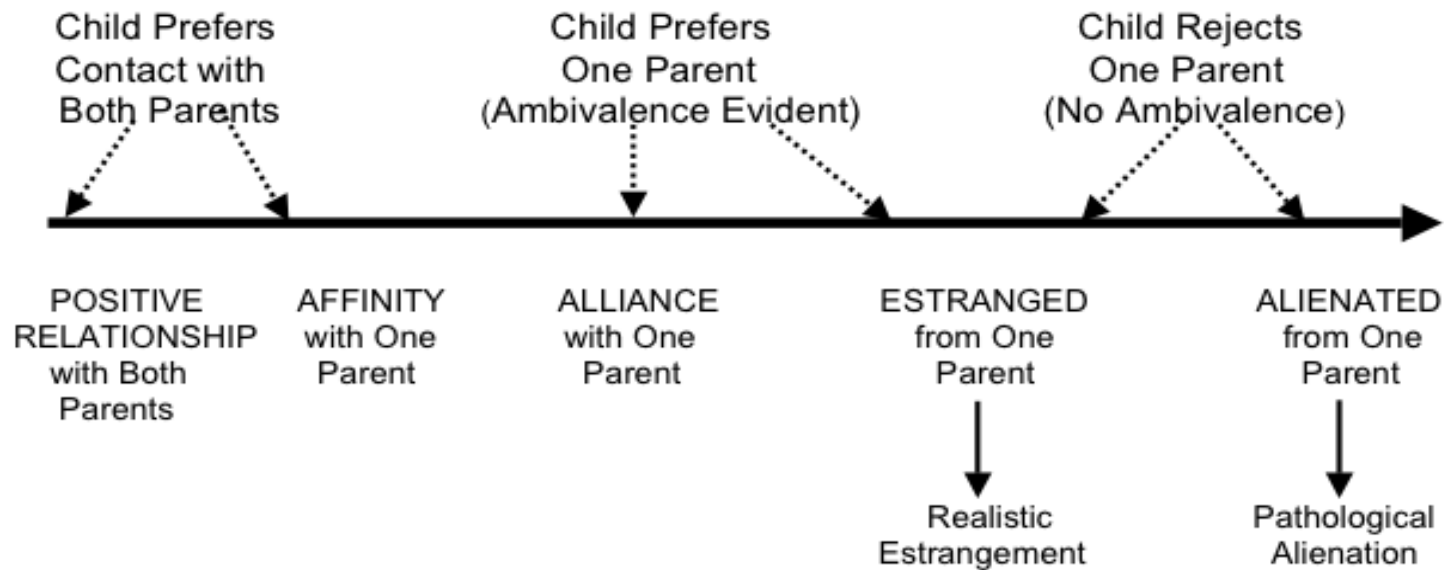
Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS) did not explain what those working with families post-divorce were seeing

- ✓ Simply put, what is found in Family Court is more complex than what Gardner saw and wrote about.
- ✓ This led to the Reformulation of Parental Alienation (July 2001, Family Court Review) -- There are many reasons beyond alienation that could cause a child to resist contact with or reject a parent:
 - ❑ Poor parenting
 - ❑ Exposure to parent conflict
 - ❑ Exposure to domestic violence
 - ❑ Child physical or sexual abuse

(A reformulation by Kelly and Johnston, 2001)

A Continuum of Children's Relationships with Parents After Separation and Divorce

A Continuum of Children's Relationships with Parents after Separation and Divorce



Alienation Has Many Dimensions

Hypothesis

2

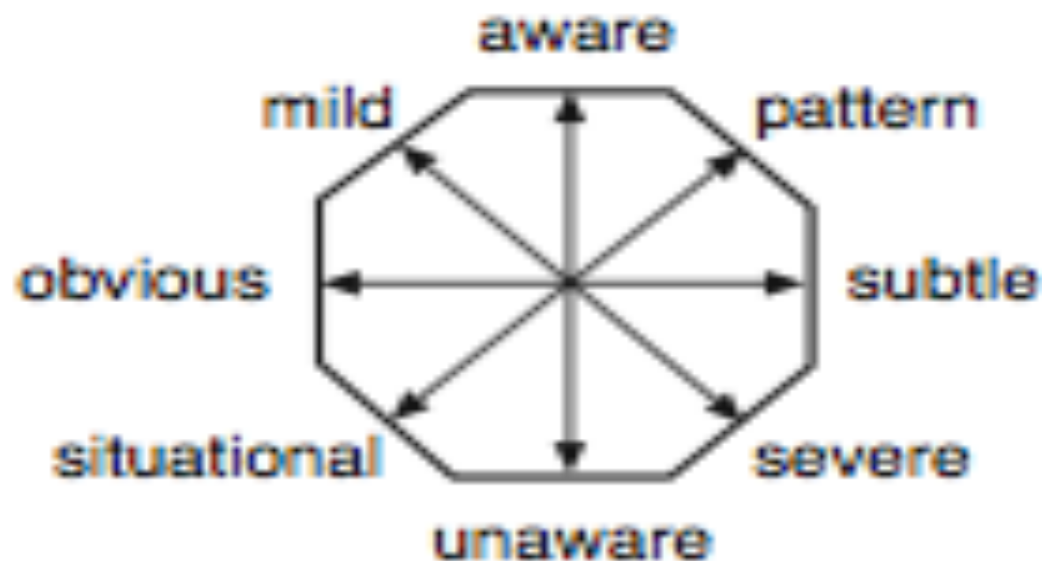
Drozdz & Olesen 2004

2001

**Poor
Parenting**

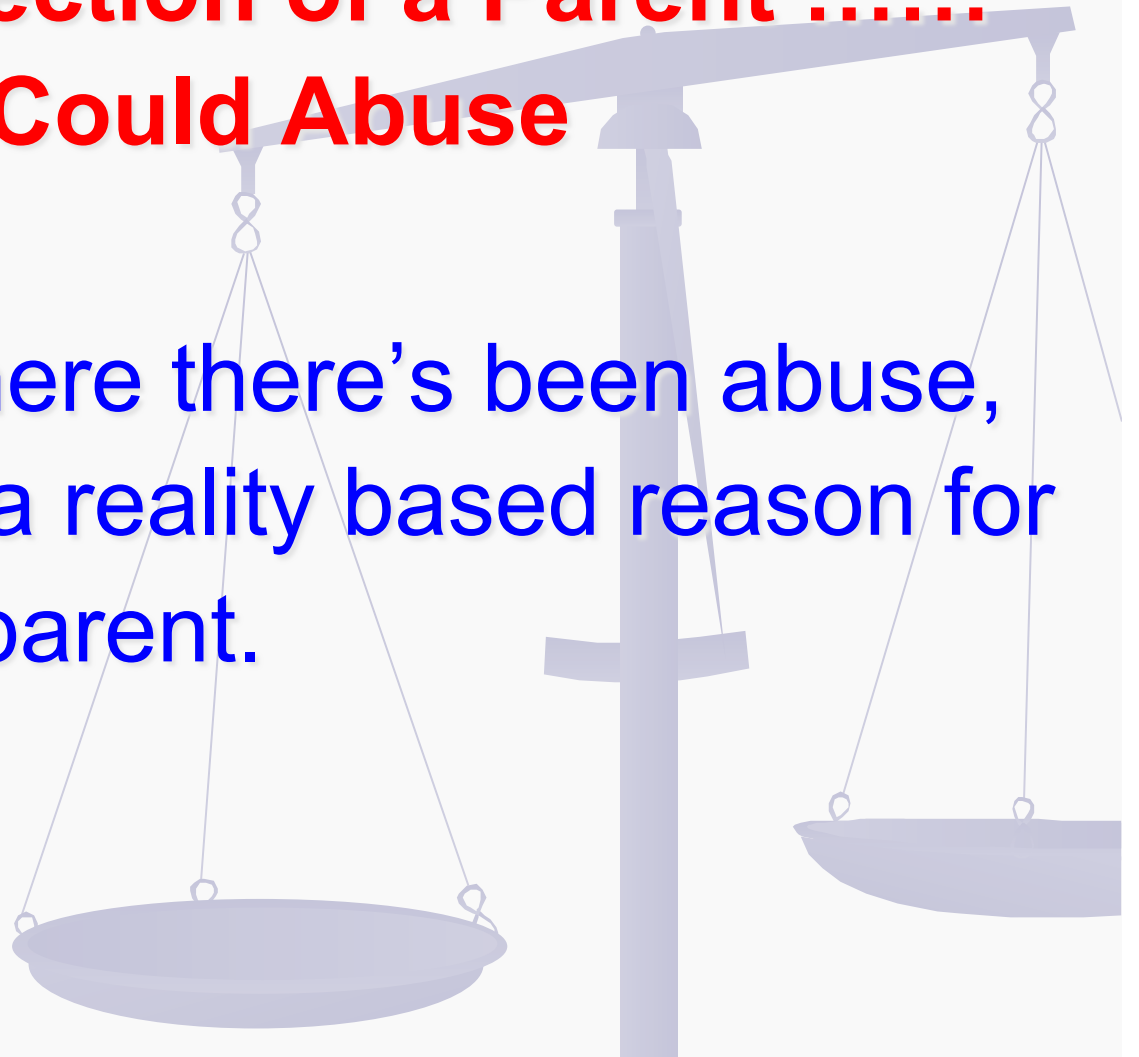
Alienating

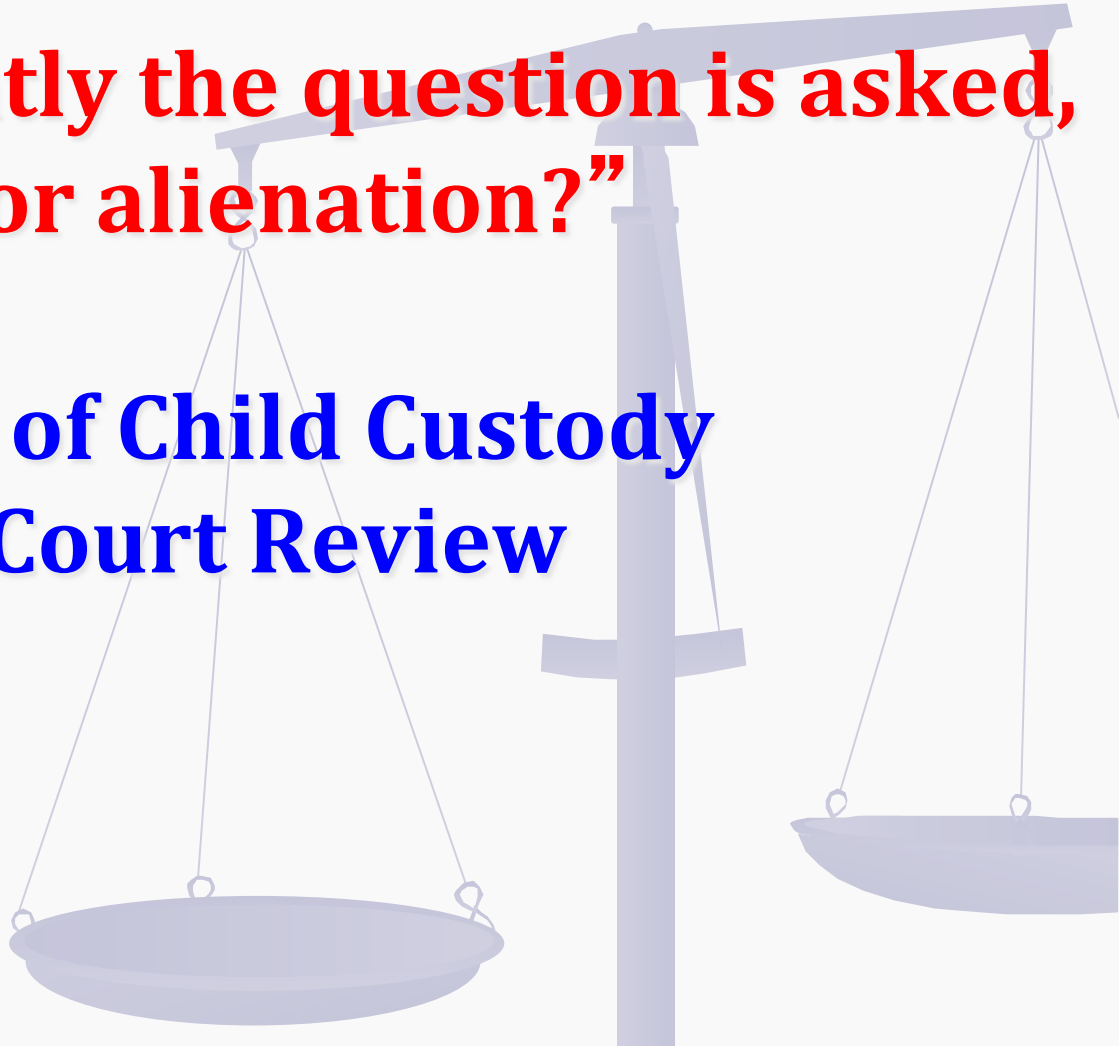
Dimensions of Alienating Behaviors



Not Only Might Alienation Lead to a Child's Rejection of a Parent So Could Abuse

In situations where there's been abuse,
the child has a reality based reason for
rejecting the parent.

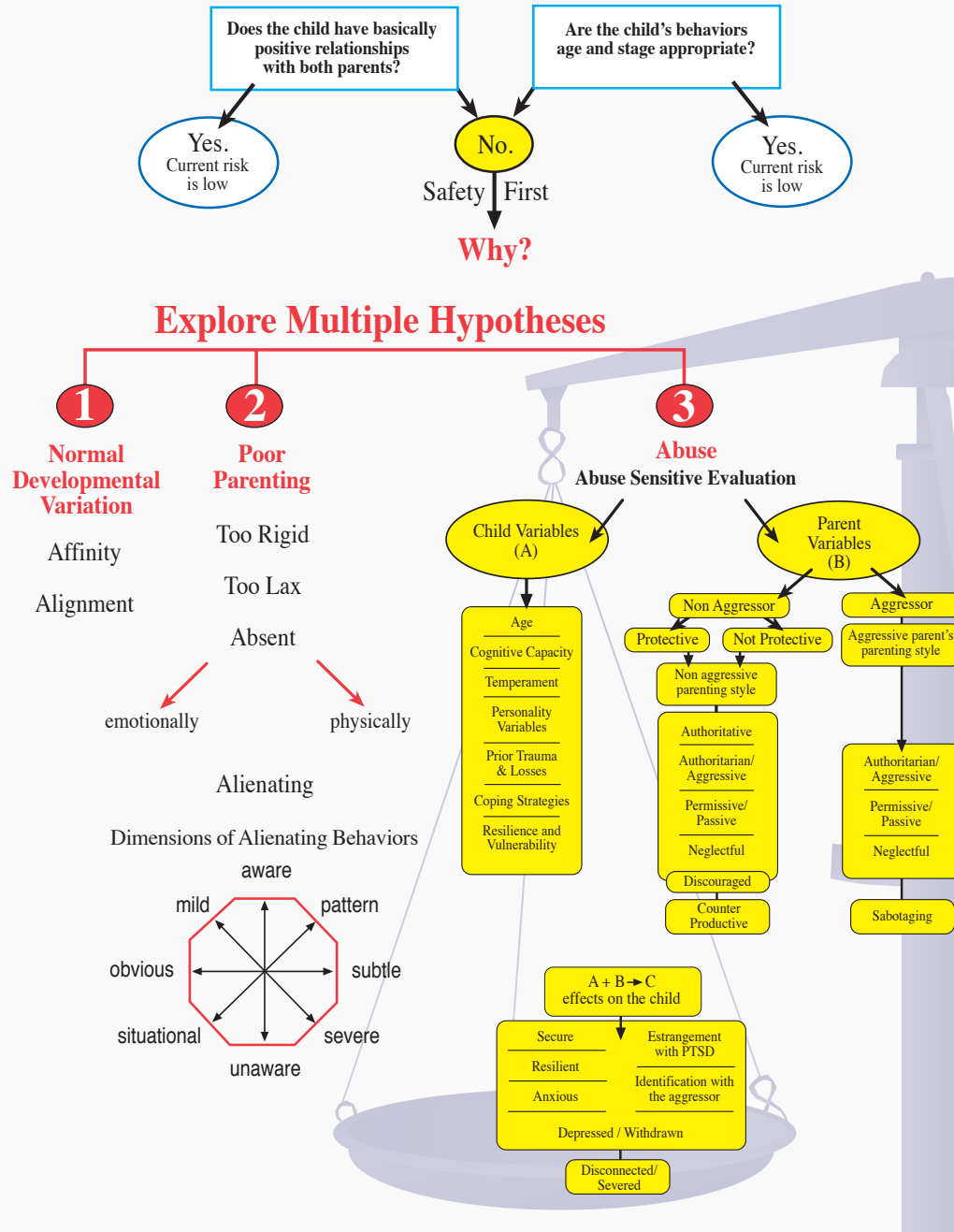




**All so frequently the question is asked,
“Is it abuse or alienation?”**

**2004, Journal of Child Custody
2010, Family Court Review**

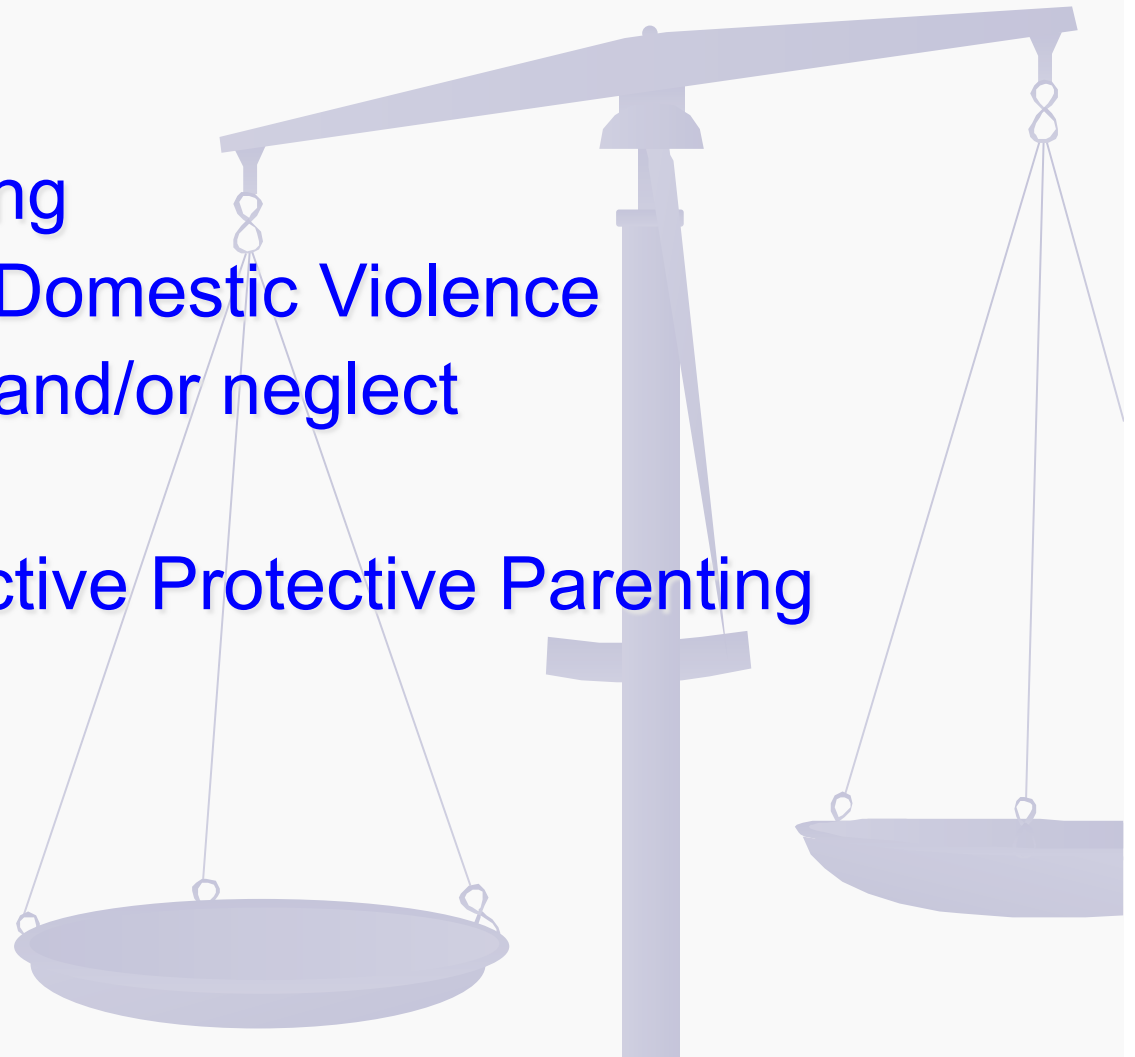
Decision Tree: Abuse, Alienation, and/or Estrangement?



**Drozd & Olesen (2004),
Journal of
Child Custody
I (3)**

Concepts That are Associated with the Further Reformulation of the Reasons a Child May Resist Contact With a Parent

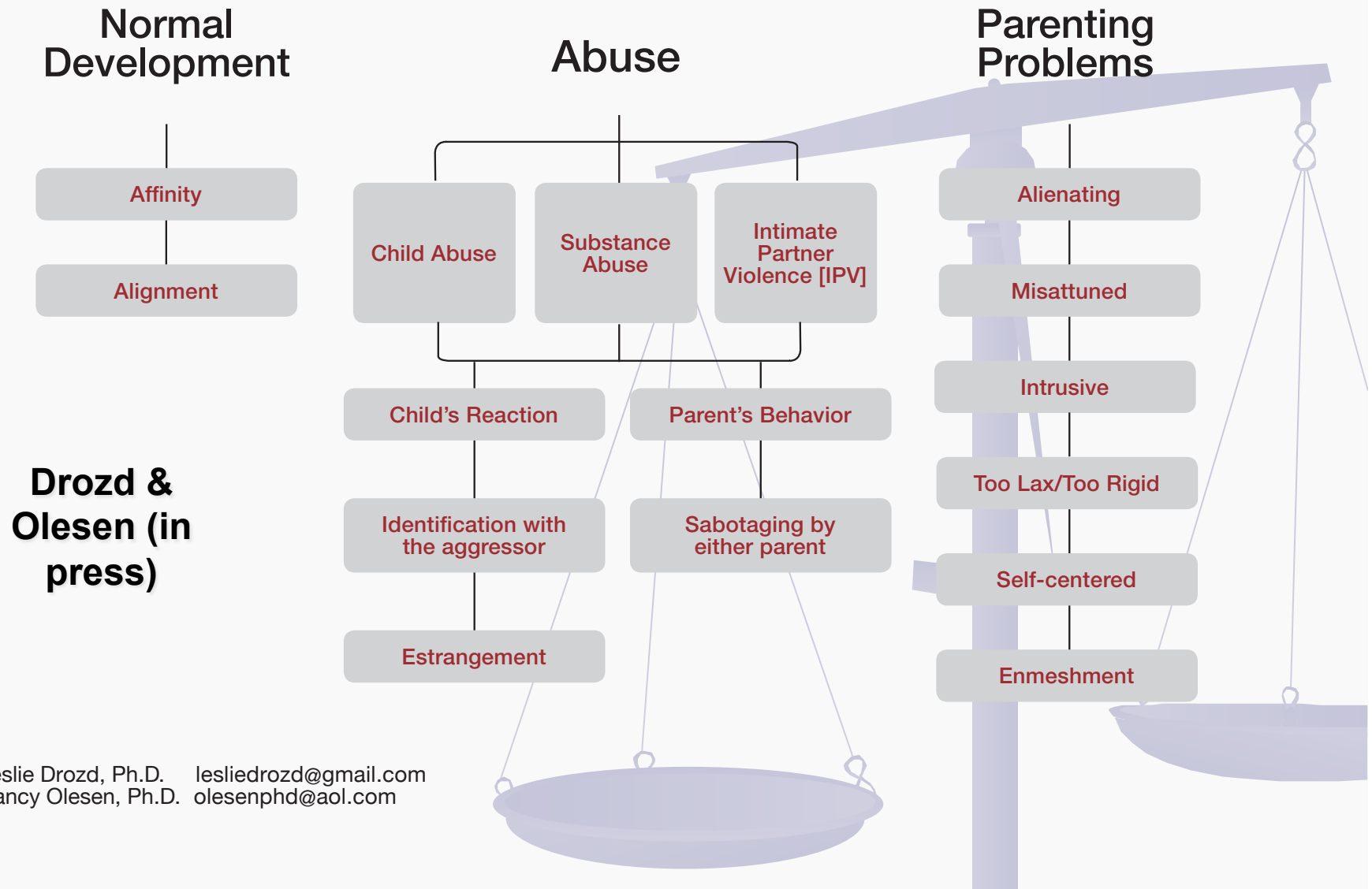
- Alienation
- Estrangement
 - Poor Parenting
 - Exposure to Domestic Violence
 - Child Abuse and/or neglect
- Sabotaging
- Counter-Productive Protective Parenting
- Enmeshment
- Gate keeping



II. A New Decision Tree: Abuse, Alienation, & More



What Causes a Child to Reject a Parent?



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**There are Both Parent's Behaviors
and Child's Reactions
That Affect the
Parent-Child Relationship**

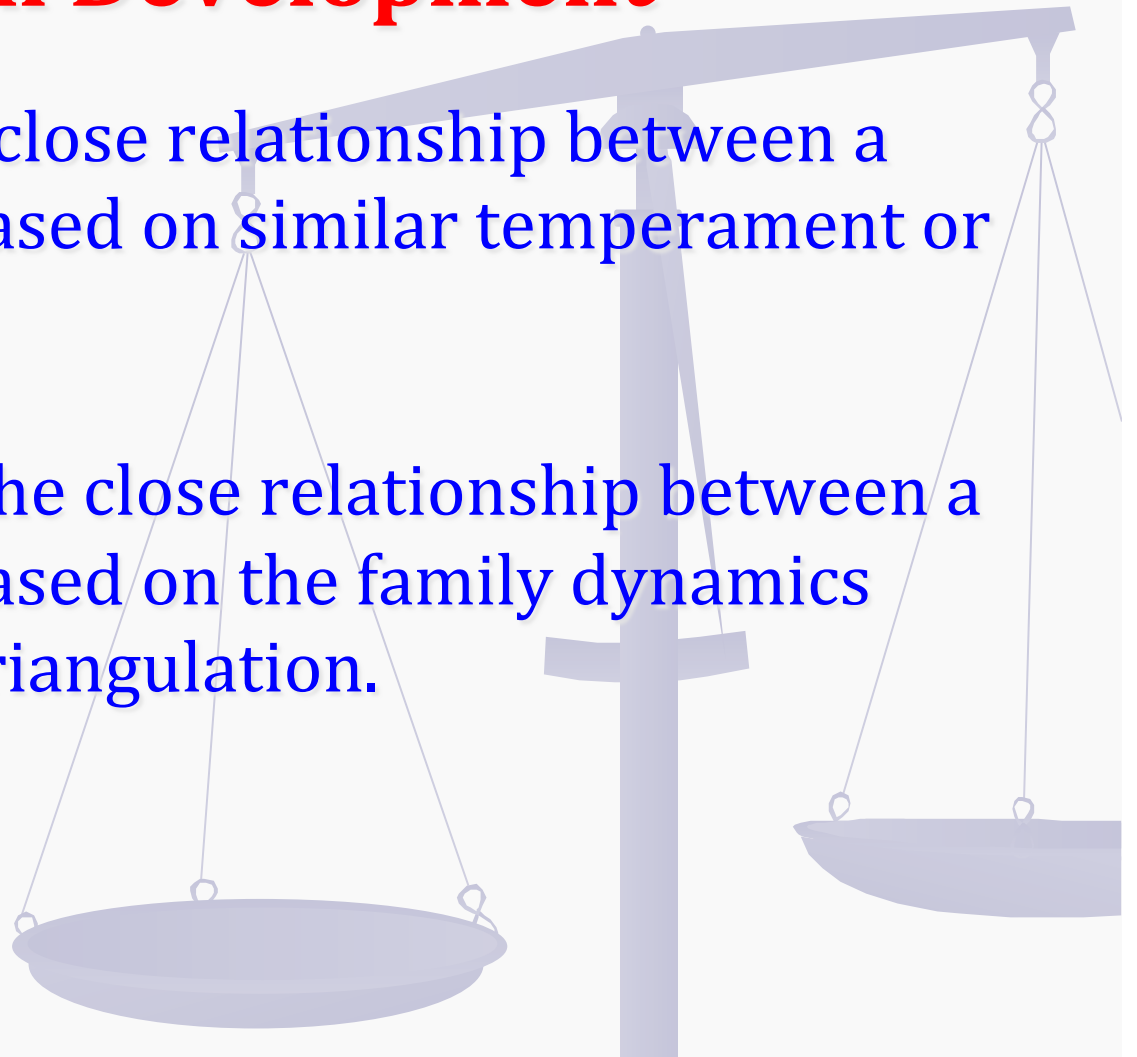
**Parent's Behaviors
Child's Reactions**



Hypothesis One. The child's relationship with his or her parent is a part of Normal Development

Affinity refers to the close relationship between a parent and child based on similar temperament or interests

Alignment refers to the close relationship between a parent and child based on the family dynamics that have caused triangulation.



Hypothesis Two. The child's resistance to spend time with or rejection of a parent is related to the parent's abusive behavior.....

Kinds of Abuse

- Child Abuse
- Substance Abuse
- Intimate Partner Violence

Result in

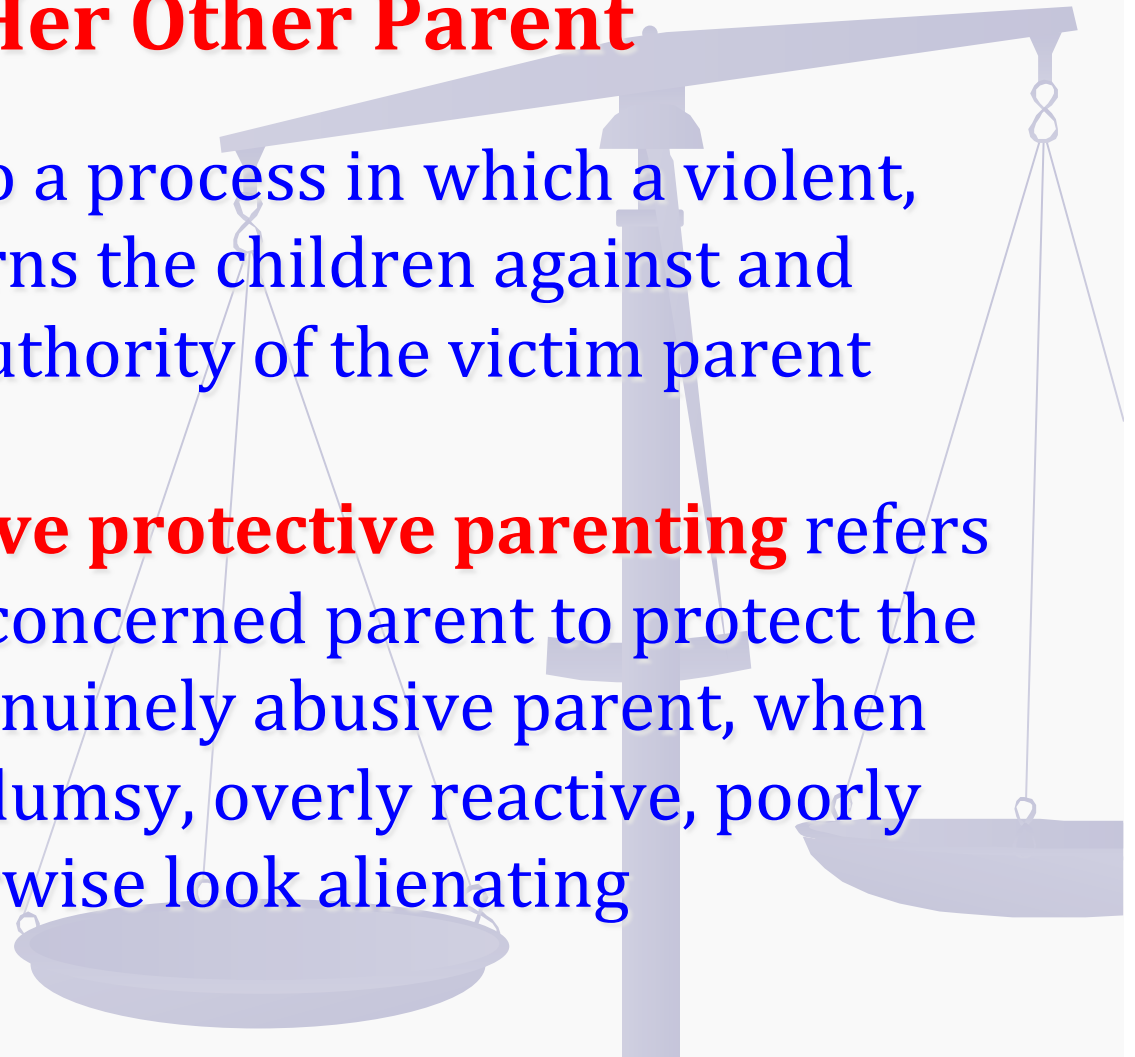
- Parent's Behaviors
- Child's Reactions



When There's Been Abuse.....

A Parent's Behaviors That Can Result in a Child's Resistance to Spend Time with His or Her Other Parent

- **Sabotage** refers to a process in which a violent, abusive parent turns the children against and undermines the authority of the victim parent
- **Counterproductive protective parenting** refers to the efforts of a concerned parent to protect the children from a genuinely abusive parent, when those efforts are clumsy, overly reactive, poorly regulated or otherwise look alienating



Child's Reactions to a Parent's Abusive and Other Behaviors



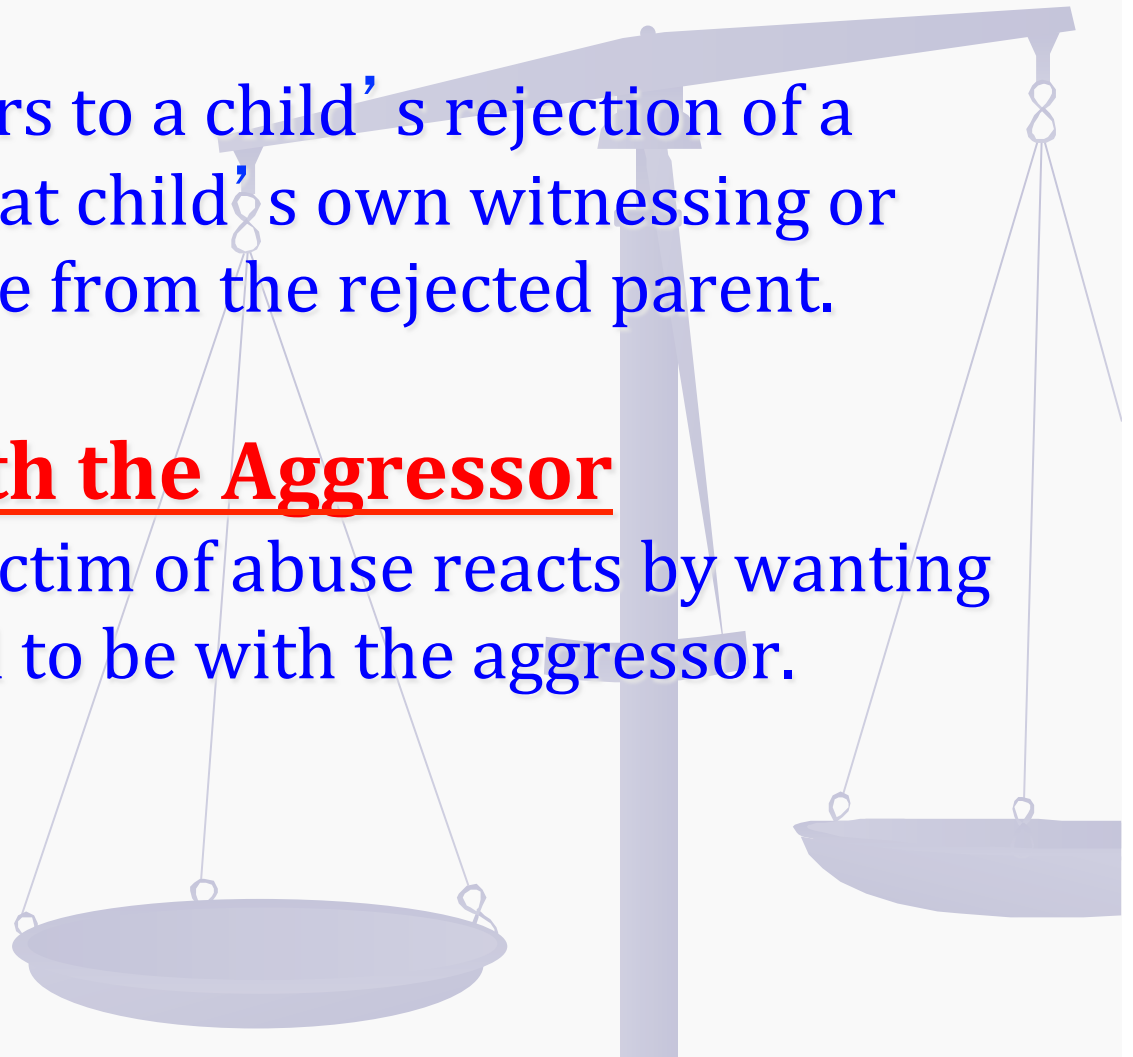
Children's Reactions to Abuse

Estrangement

- Estrangement refers to a child's rejection of a parent based on that child's own witnessing or experience of abuse from the rejected parent.

Identification with the Aggressor

- This is when the victim of abuse reacts by wanting to be most like and to be with the aggressor.



What is an Alienated Child?

"An alienated child is defined as one who persistently expresses strong, negative feelings (such as anger, hatred, contempt, and fear) and beliefs about his or her parent that are unreasonable and significantly disproportionate to the child's actual experience with that rejected parent.

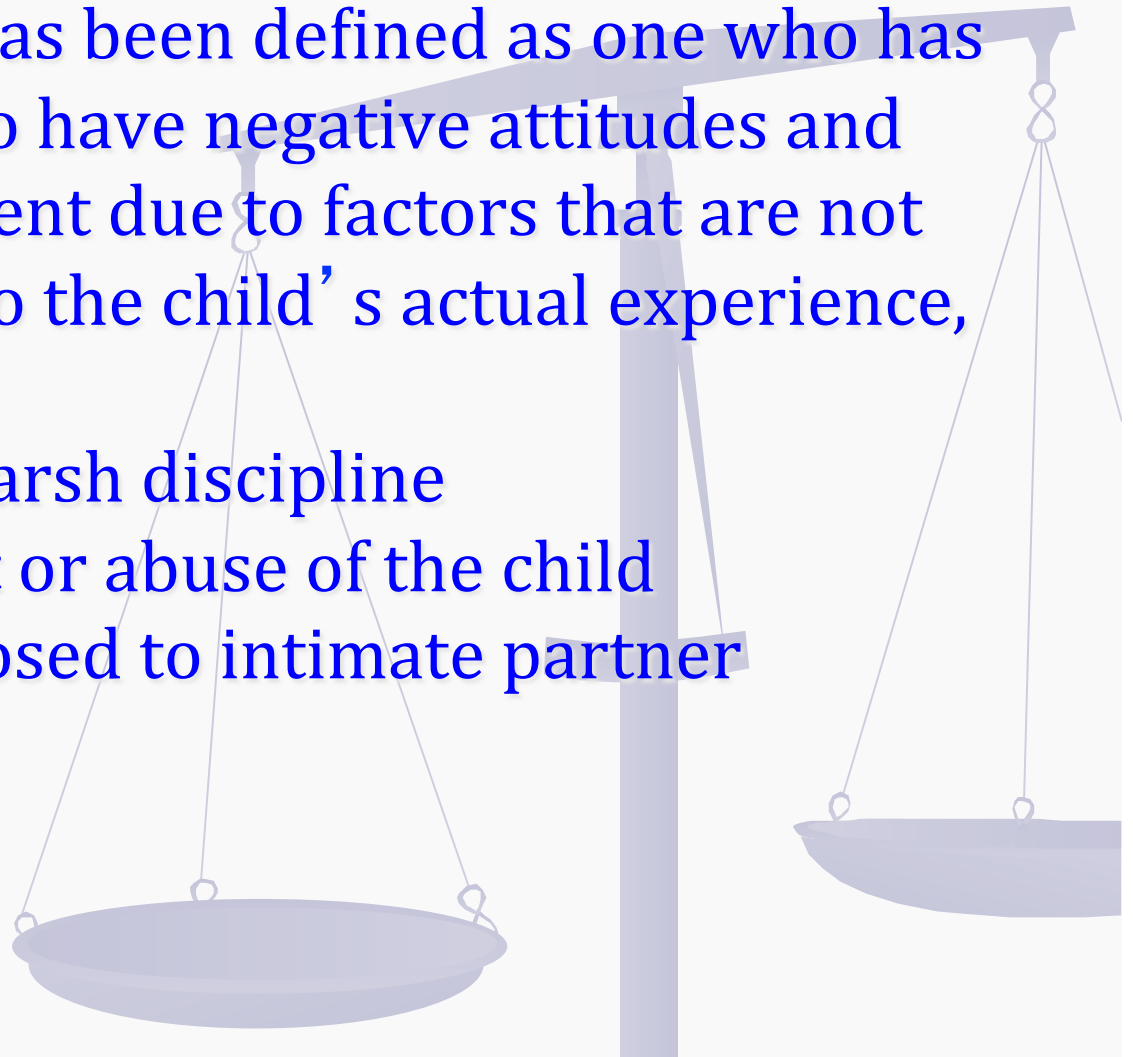
- Their beliefs are typically irrational, distorted, or exaggerated.
- Many alienated children reject a parent and resist contact or refuse to have any contact with that parent.
- Their feelings, beliefs, and angry behaviors may range from mild to extreme.

(Joan Kelly, 2009)

What is an Estranged Child?

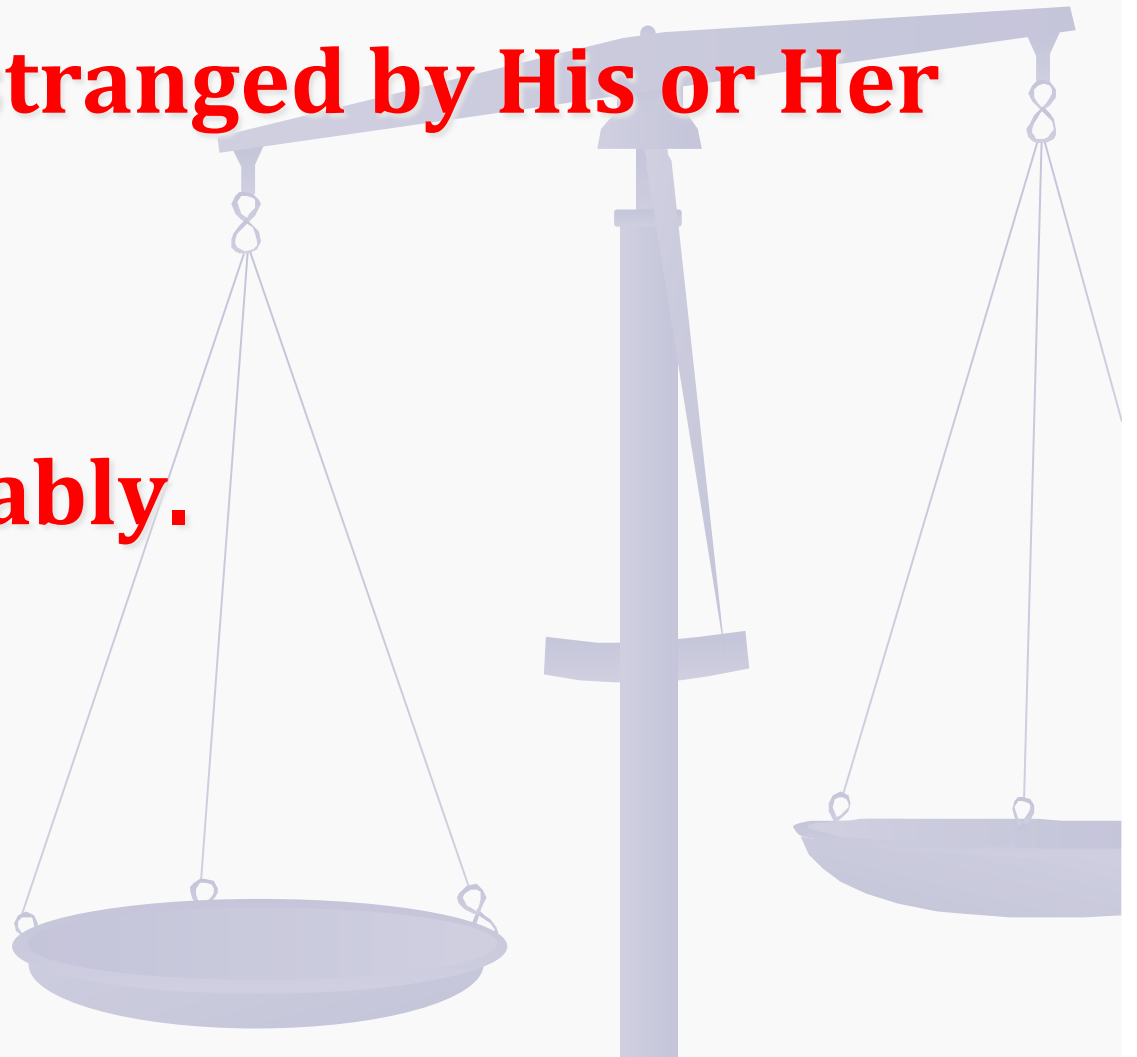
An Estranged Child has been defined as one who has *reasonable* cause to have negative attitudes and beliefs about a parent due to factors that are not disproportionate to the child's actual experience, such as:

- Unreasonably harsh discipline
- Parental neglect or abuse of the child
- Child being exposed to intimate partner violence



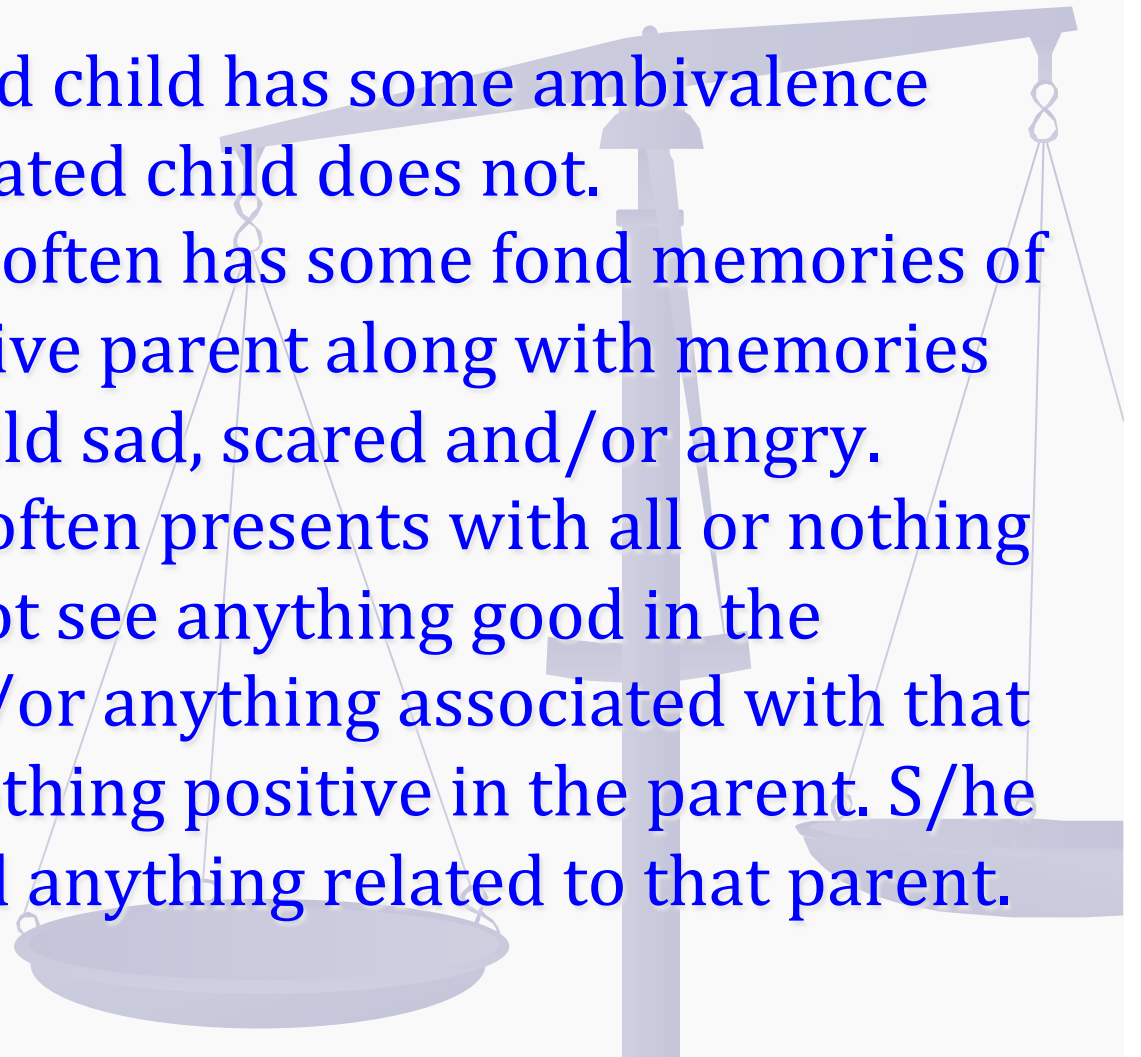
**Question: Can You Tell if a Child is
Alienated or Estranged by His or Her
Behavior?**

Answer: Not reliably.



❑ There are indeed differences between the purely estranged and the purely alienated child.

- The purely estranged child has some ambivalence and the purely alienated child does not.
- The estranged child often has some fond memories of the rejected or abusive parent along with memories that have left the child sad, scared and/or angry.
- The alienated child often presents with all or nothing thinking. S/he cannot see anything good in the rejected parent and/or anything associated with that parent. S/he sees nothing positive in the parent. S/he hates the parent and anything related to that parent.



- ❑ Yet at times there are similarities between estranged and alienated children.
- ❑ This may be because quite often what we see are hybrids.

(Saini, Johnston, Fidler, & Bala, in press; Drozd, 2011)



Children can become “Estranged” in response to severe parental deficiencies, including and beyond abuse

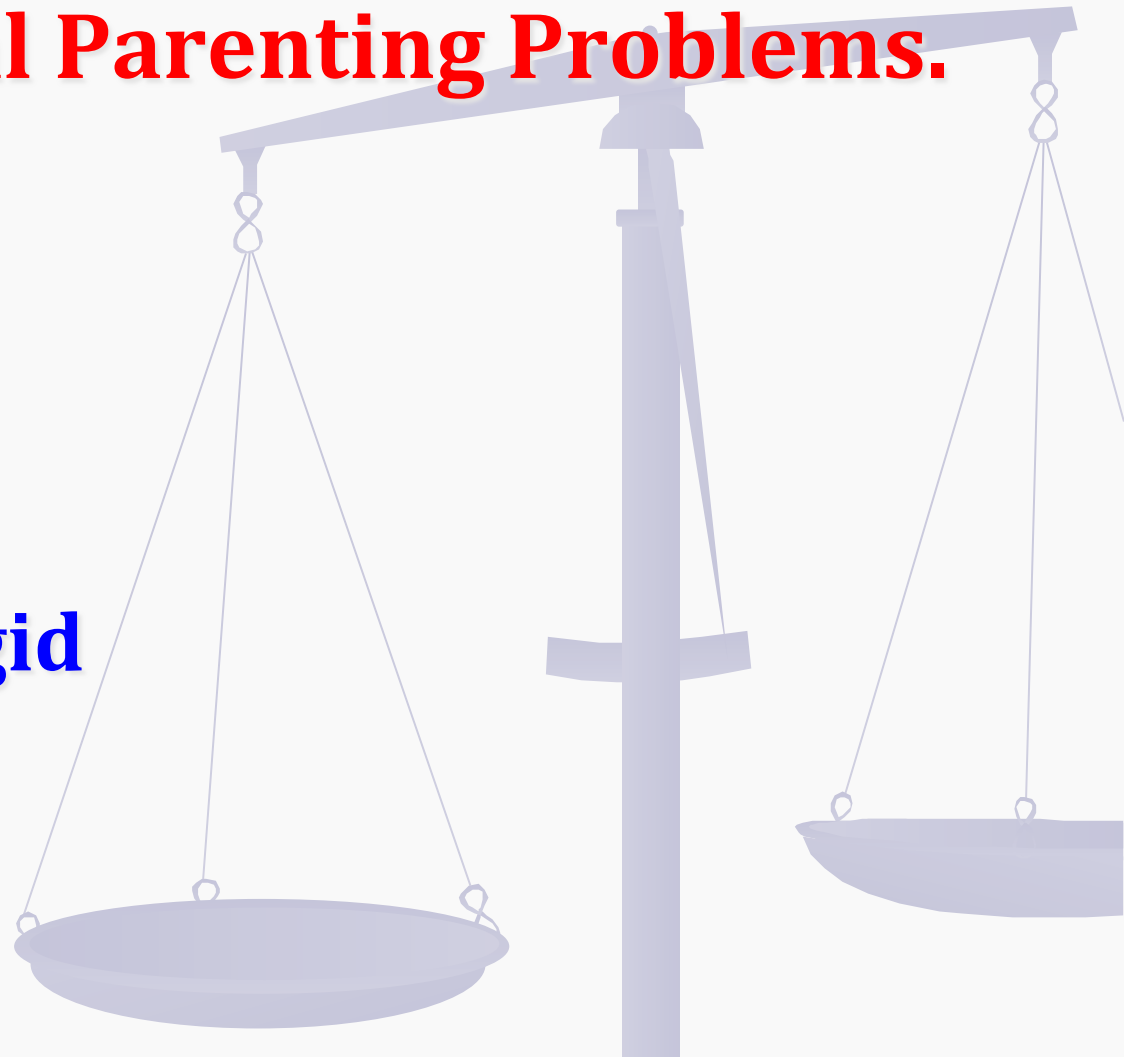
- ❑ Abuse (of the child and/or of the other parent including emotional, physical, and/or sexual abuse and substance abuse)
- ❑ Persistent immature and self-centered behaviors
- ❑ Characterological angry, rigid, and restrictive parenting styles
- ❑ Psychiatric disturbances that grossly interfere with parenting capacities and family functioning

(Kelly and Johnson, 2001)



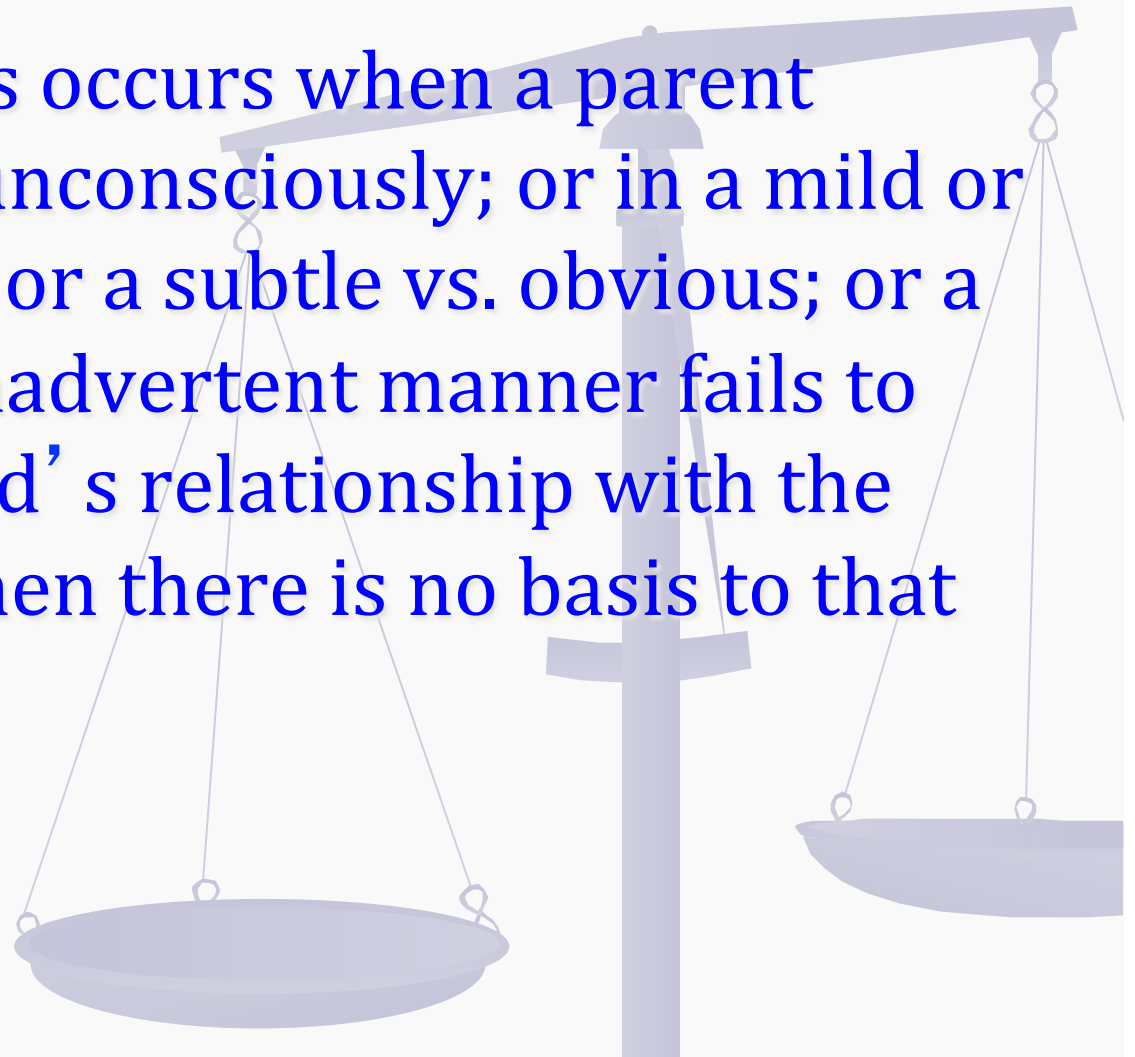
Hypothesis Three. The child's resistance to spending time with his or her parent is the result of one or more of several Parenting Problems.

- **Alienating**
- **Misattuned**
- **Intrusive**
- **Enmeshed**
- **Too lax/too rigid**
- **Self-centered**



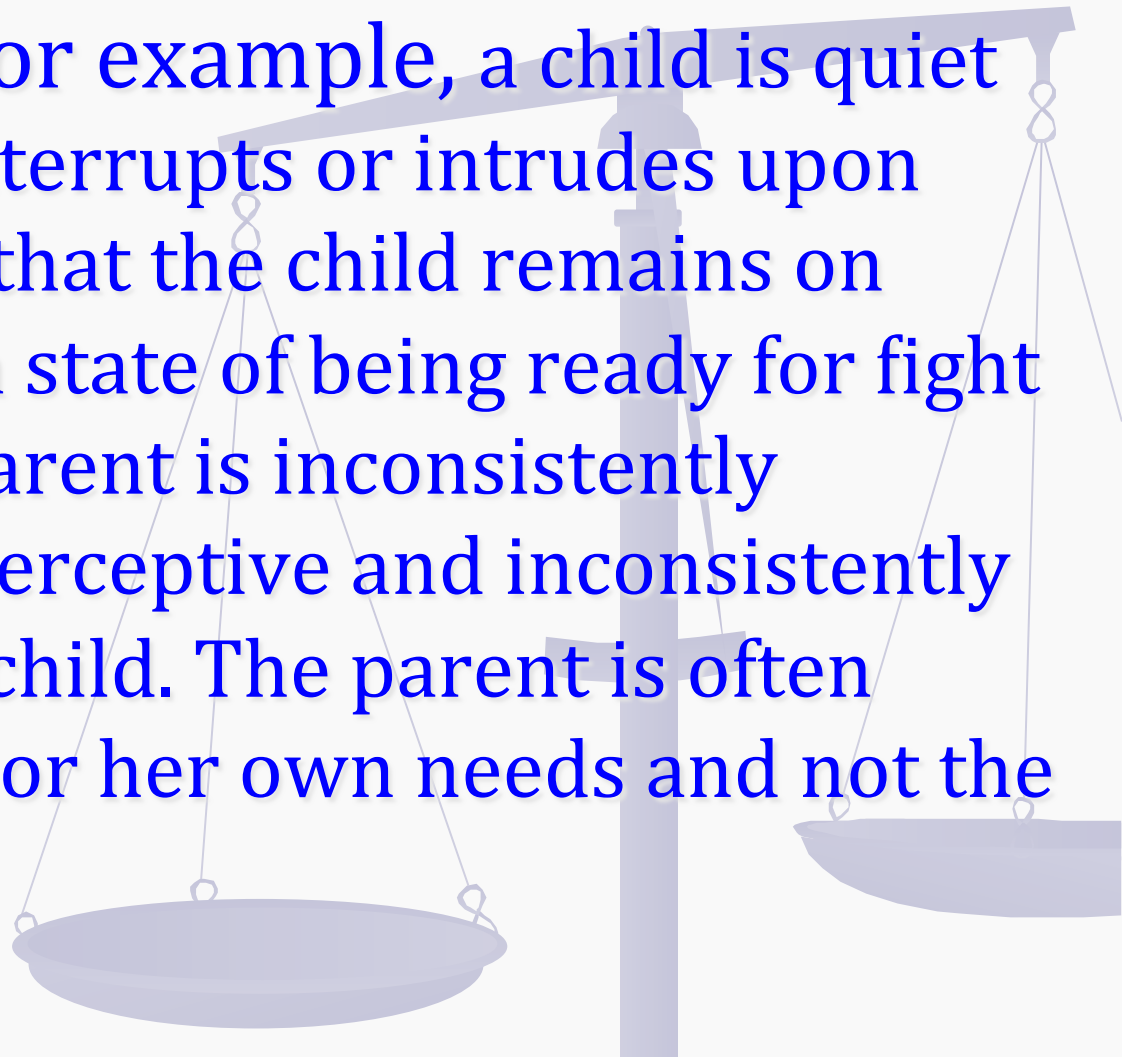
Parenting Problems-1

- **Alienating.** This occurs when a parent consciously or unconsciously; or in a mild or severe manner; or a subtle vs. obvious; or a purposeful or inadvertent manner fails to support the child's relationship with the other parent when there is no basis to that in reality.



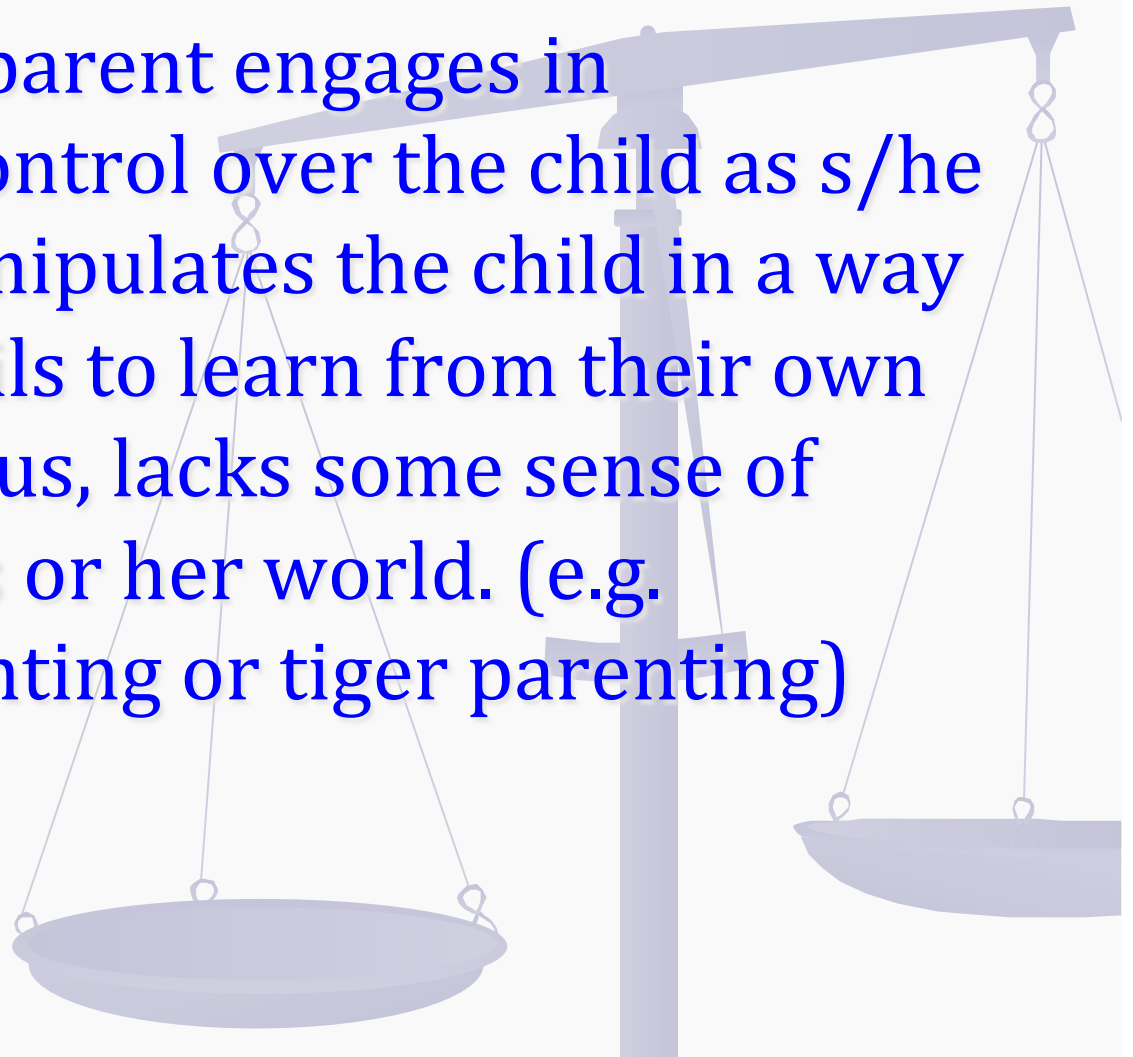
Parenting Problems-2

- **Misattuned.** For example, a child is quiet and a parent interrupts or intrudes upon that time such that the child remains on active alert in a state of being ready for fight or flight. The parent is inconsistently sensitive and perceptive and inconsistently attuned to the child. The parent is often involved in his or her own needs and not the child's.



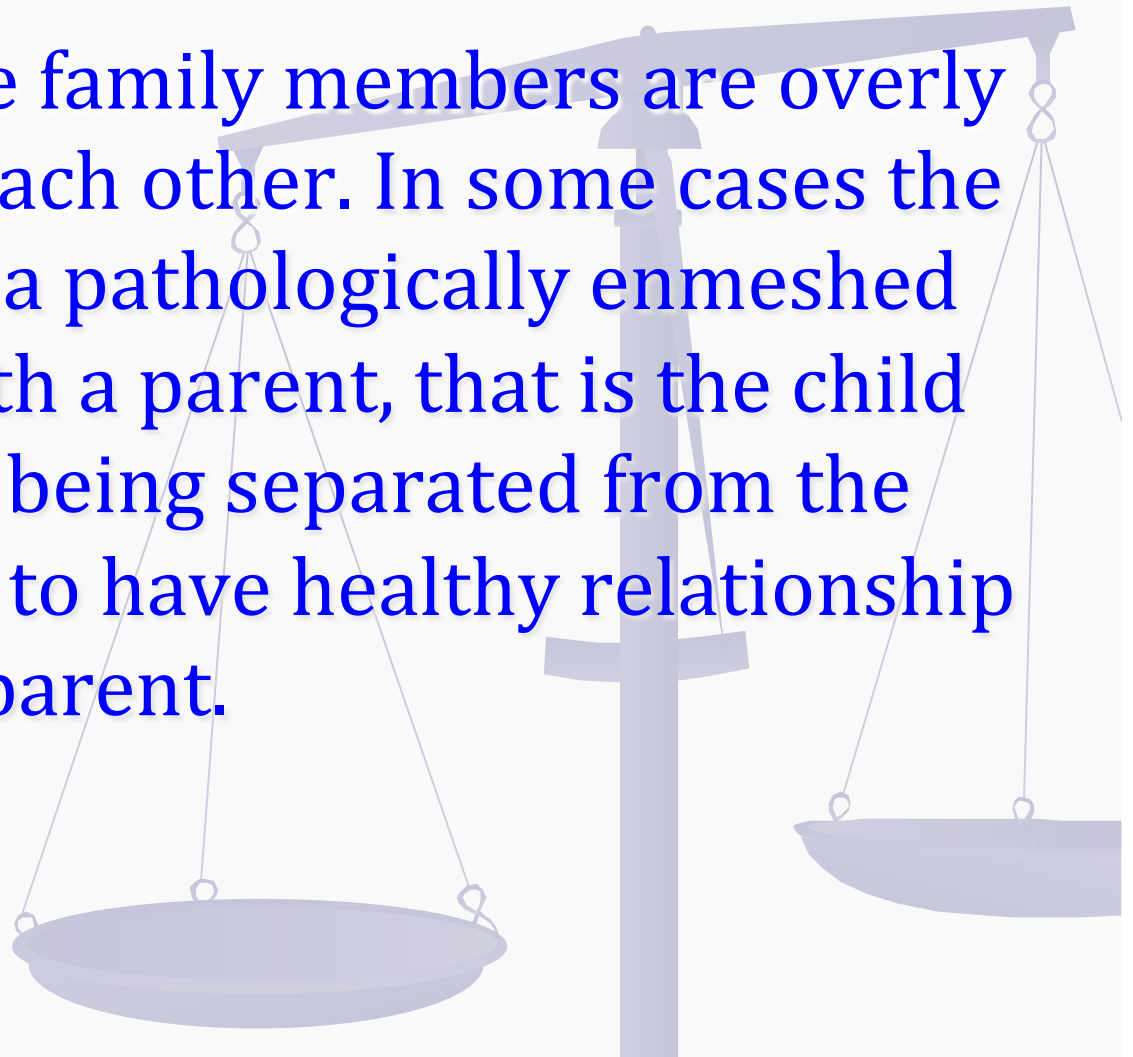
Parenting Problems⁻³

- **Intrusive**. The parent engages in psychological control over the child as s/he inhibits and manipulates the child in a way that the child fails to learn from their own mistakes and thus, lacks some sense of efficacy over his or her world. (e.g. helicopter parenting or tiger parenting)



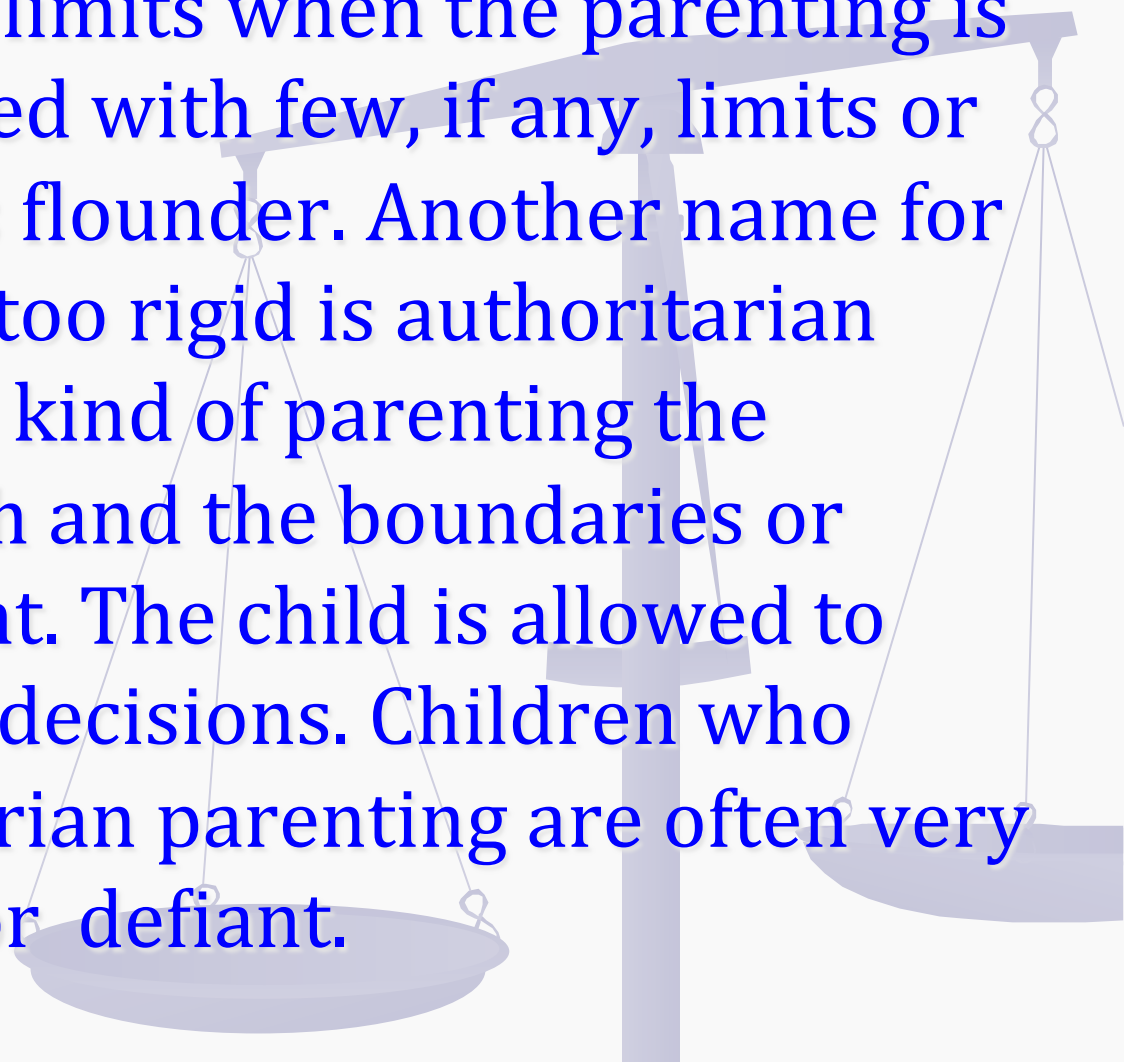
Parenting Problems⁻⁴

- **Enmeshed.** The family members are overly dependent on each other. In some cases the child may be in a pathologically enmeshed relationship with a parent, that is the child cannot tolerate being separated from the parent in order to have healthy relationship with the other parent.



Parenting Problems⁻⁵

- **Too lax/too rigid.** There are few, if any, rules or boundaries or limits when the parenting is lax. Children raised with few, if any, limits or rules, often times flounder. Another name for parenting that is too rigid is authoritarian parenting. In this kind of parenting the discipline is harsh and the boundaries or limits are too tight. The child is allowed to make few, if any, decisions. Children who endure authoritarian parenting are often very dependent and/or defiant.



Parenting Problems-6

- **Self-centered.** Concerned solely or chiefly with one's own interests, welfare, etc.; engrossed in *self*; selfish; egotistical. This is as opposed to child-centered.

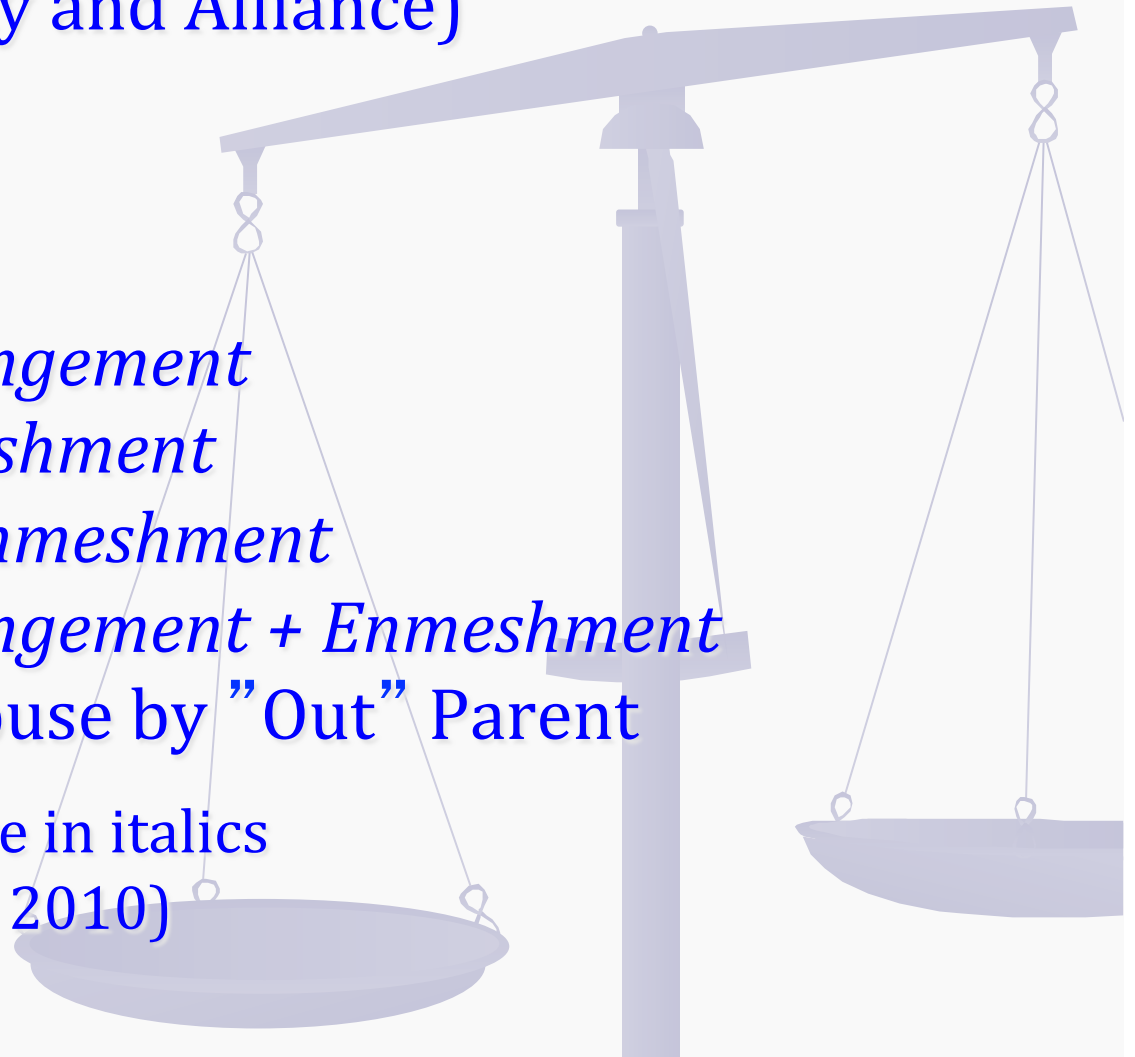


Hybrid Cases

Typology of Cases in Which a Child Resists or Refuses Contact With a Parent

- ❑ Alignment (Affinity and Alliance)
- ❑ Alienation
- ❑ Estrangement
- ❑ Enmeshment
- ❑ *Alienation + Estrangement*
- ❑ *Alienation + Enmeshment*
- ❑ *Estrangement + Enmeshment*
- ❑ *Alienation + Estrangement + Enmeshment*
- ❑ Neglect and/or Abuse by "Out" Parent

Note: "Hybrid" types are in italics
(Walters & Friedlander, 2010)



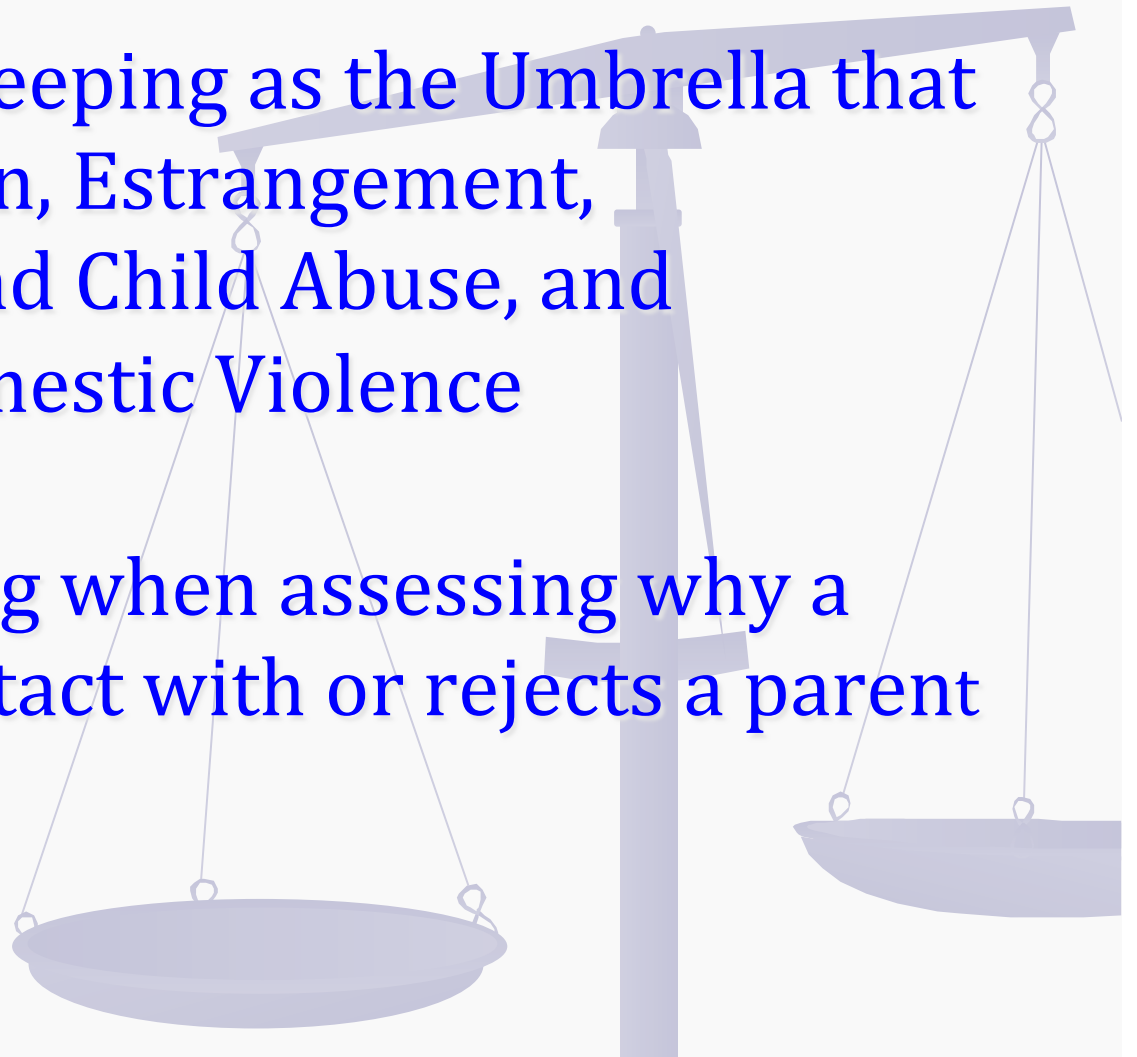
III. Gatekeeping



Objective

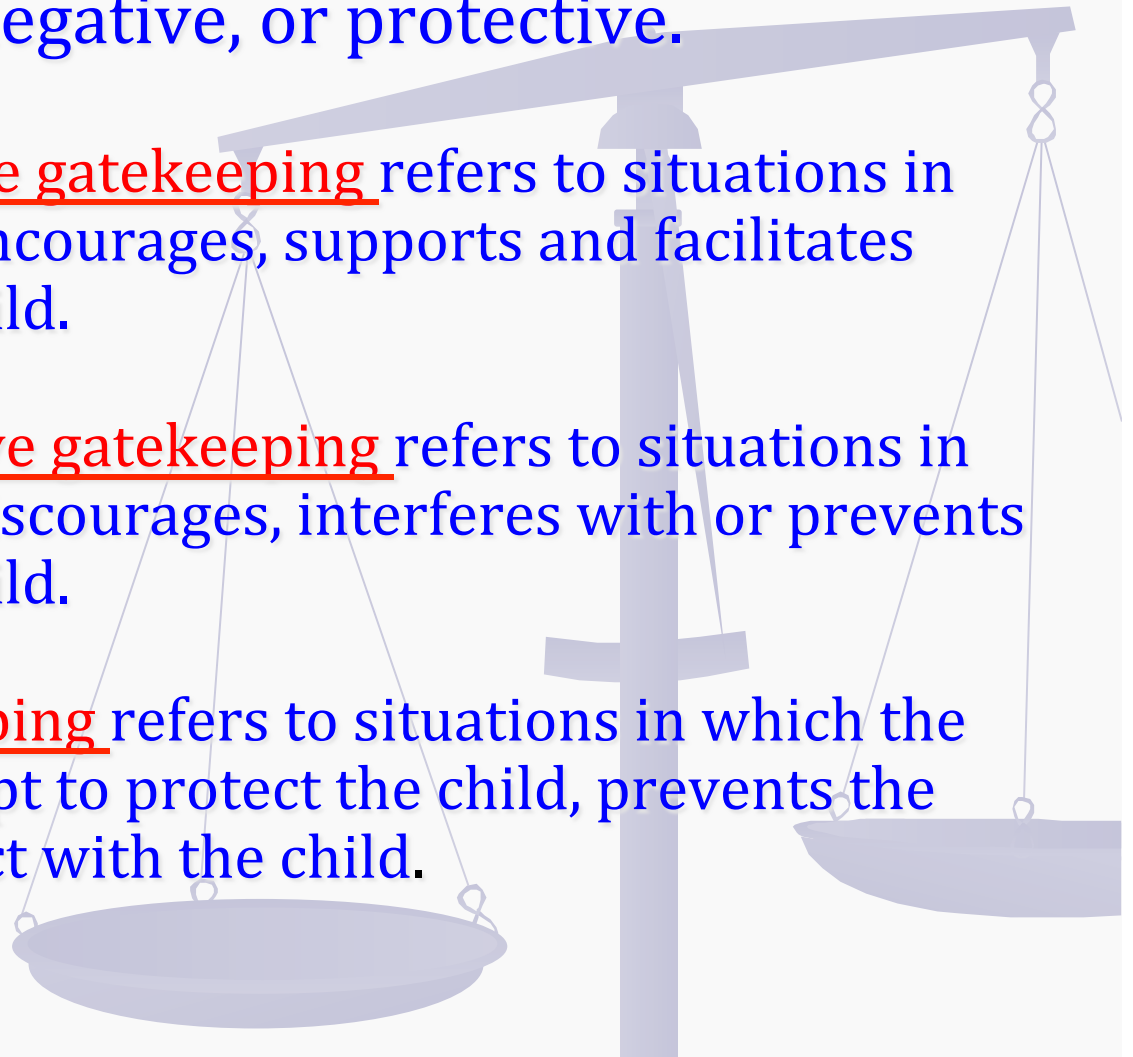
To consider Gatekeeping as the Umbrella that covers Alienation, Estrangement, Enmeshment, and Child Abuse, and Exposure to Domestic Violence

To use Gatekeeping when assessing why a child resists contact with or rejects a parent



What is Gatekeeping?

- The common behavior of parents of young children in which they decide and control access to the child. It can be positive, negative, or protective.
- Facilitative/Positive gatekeeping refers to situations in which the parent encourages, supports and facilitates contact with the child.
- Restrictive/Negative gatekeeping refers to situations in which the parent discourages, interferes with or prevents contact with the child.
- Protective gatekeeping refers to situations in which the parent, in an attempt to protect the child, prevents the other parent contact with the child.



Cognitive Components of Gatekeeping

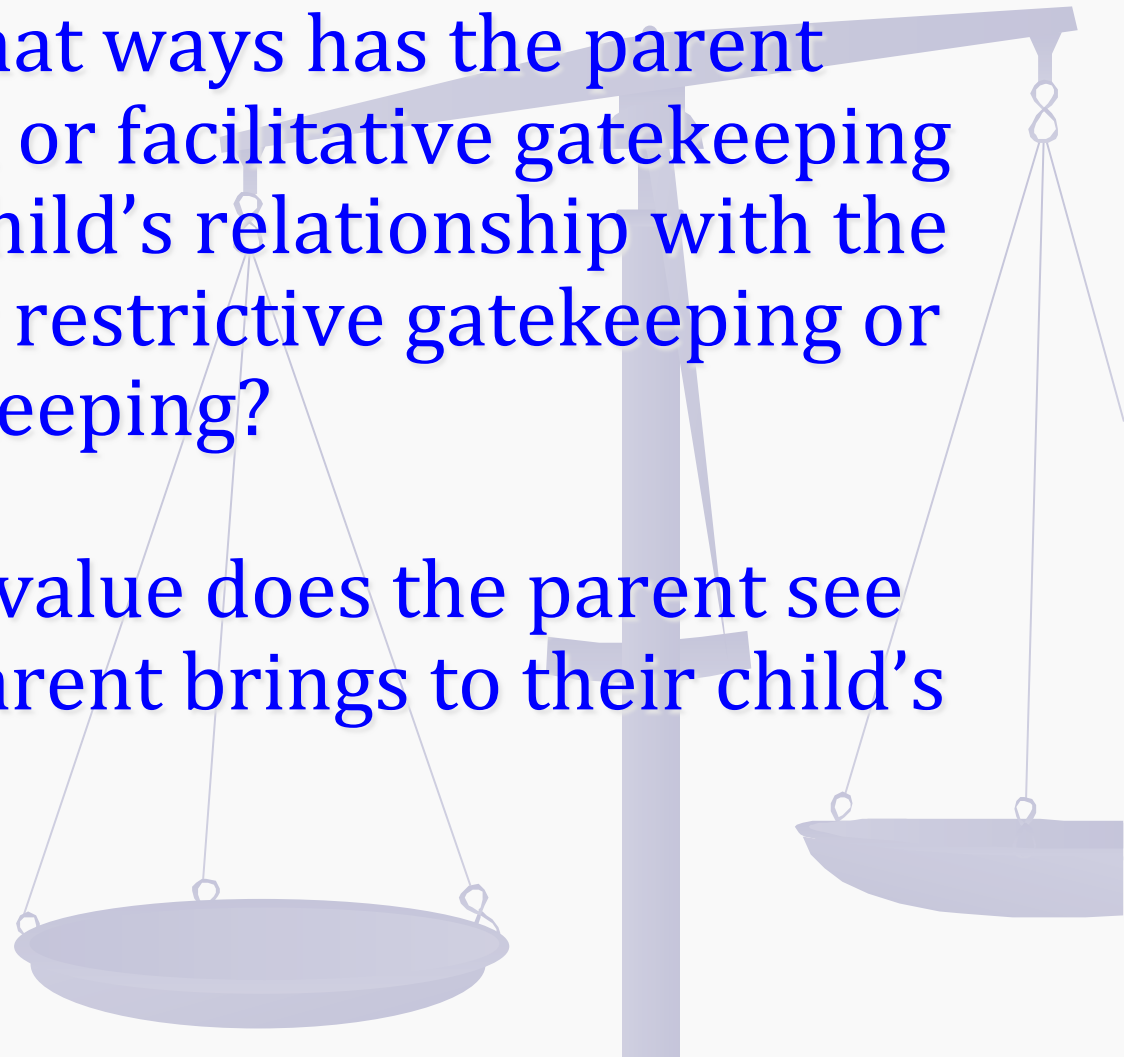
- ❑ Maternal preference and beliefs about the importance of father involvement
- ❑ Satisfaction with father involvement
- ❑ Valuation of father's competence

(Pruett, Arthur, & Ebling, 2007, p 123)



The Measurement of Gatekeeping

- ❑ Behaviors. In what ways has the parent engaged in open or facilitative gatekeeping (promotes the child's relationship with the other parent) or restrictive gatekeeping or protective gatekeeping?
- ❑ Attitudes. What value does the parent see that the other parent brings to their child's life?



IV. Connection between gatekeeping and abuse, alienation, and other parenting behaviors

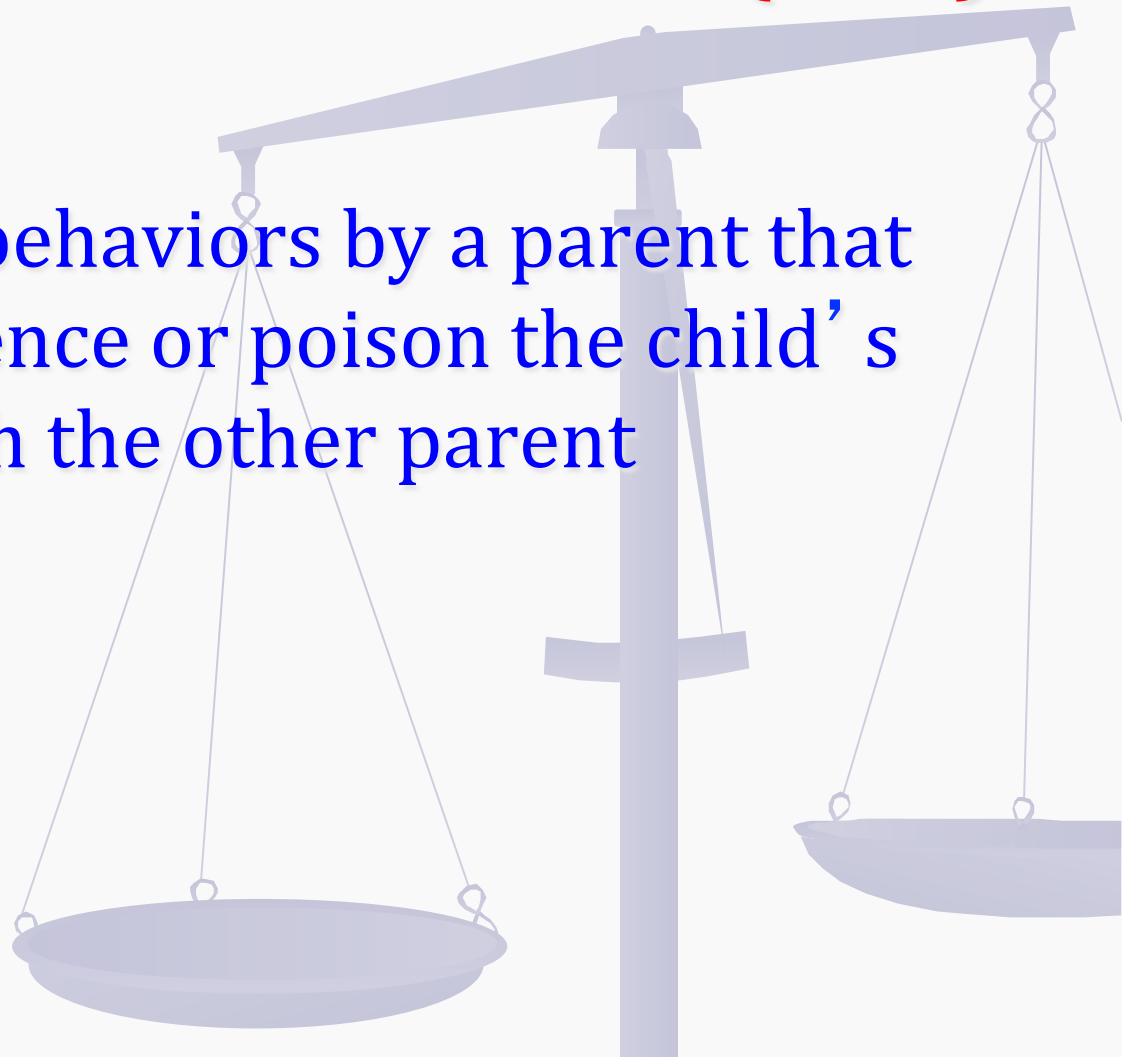


**Hypothesis: Parent Alienation is a kind of
Restrictive Gatekeeping**



“Parent Alienation Behaviors” (PAB)

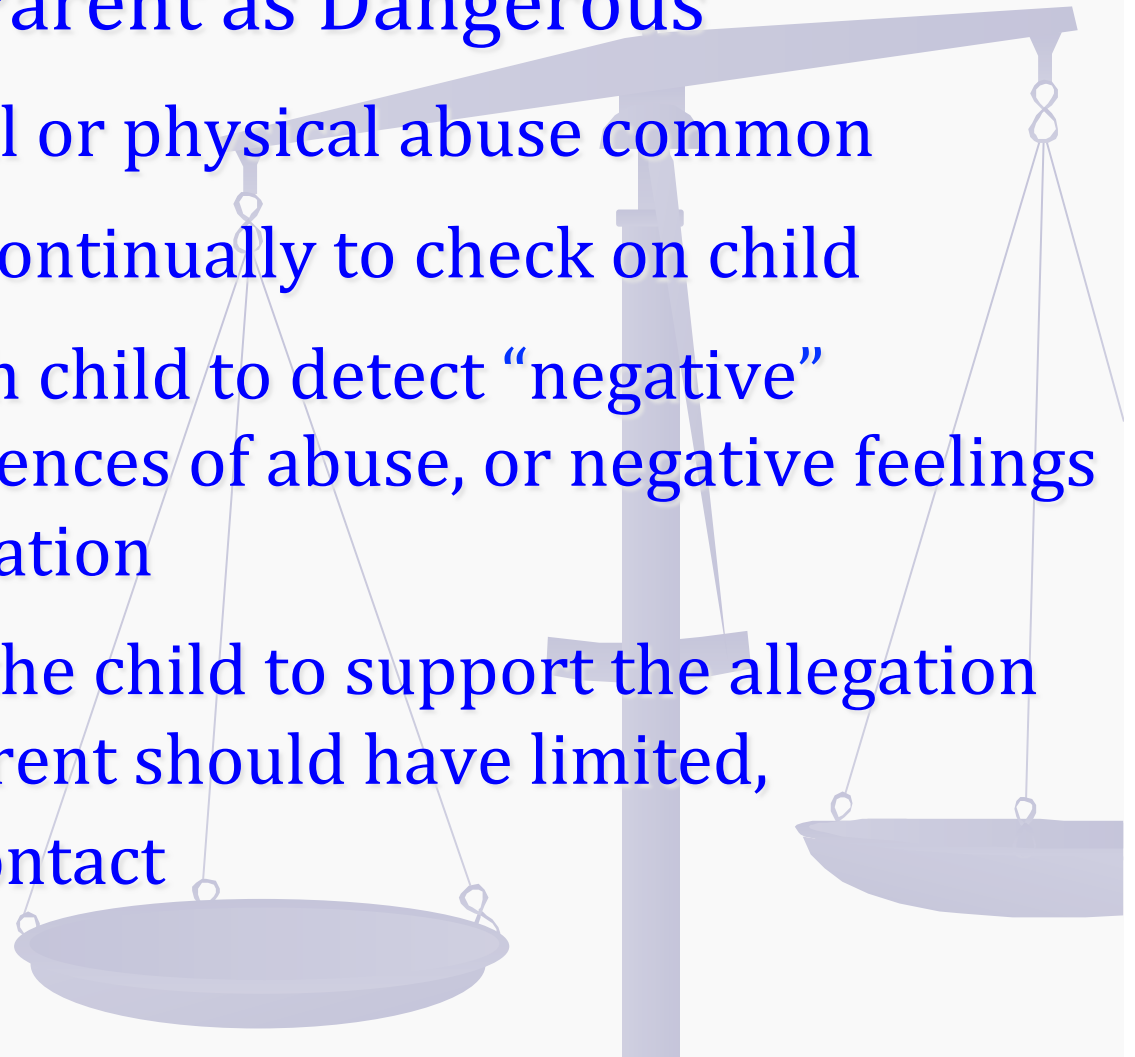
Refers to those behaviors by a parent that negatively influence or poison the child's relationship with the other parent



Restrictive Gatekeeping and Parent's Alienating Behaviors (PAB)

Portrays Rejected Parent as Dangerous

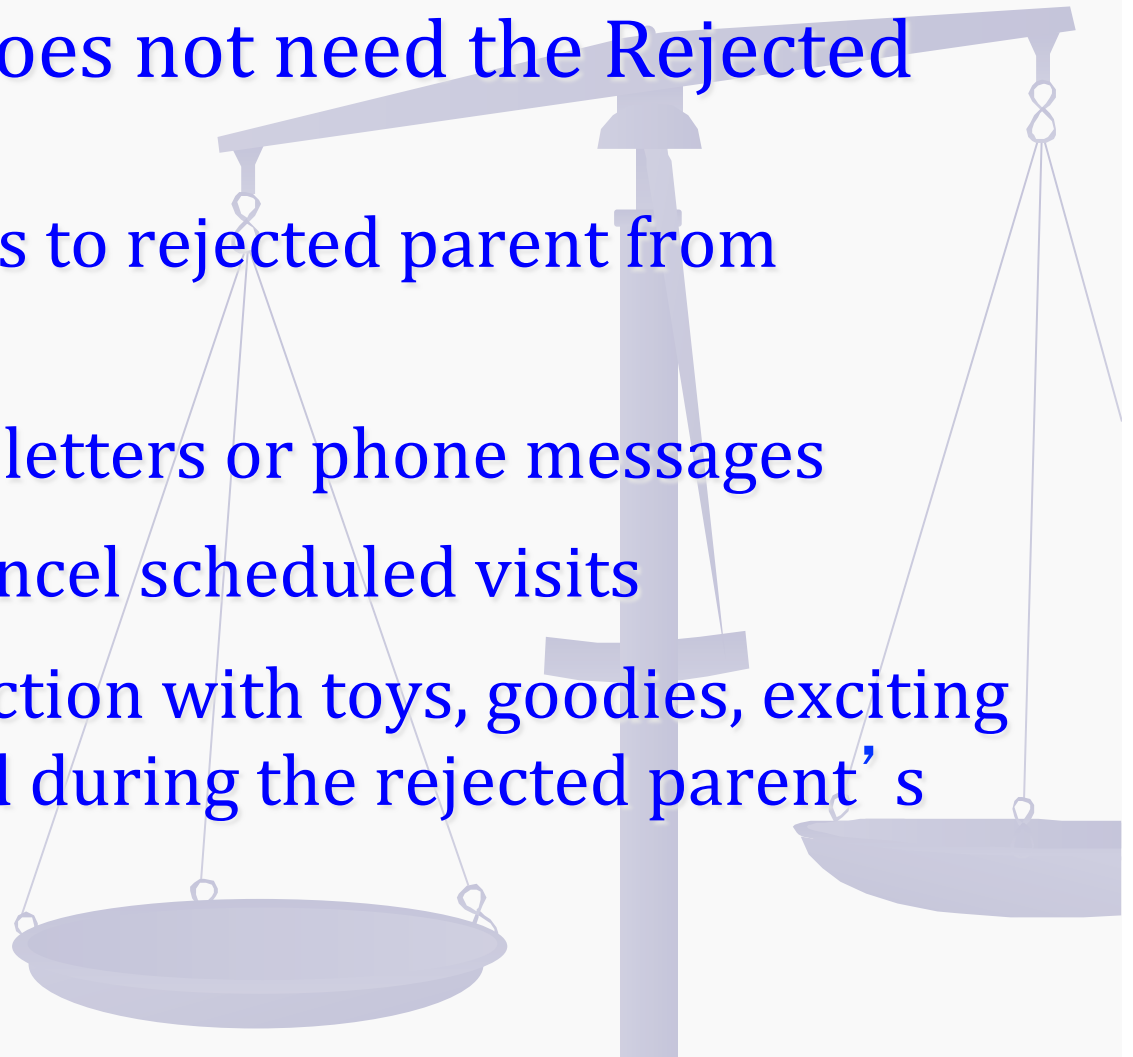
- Allegations of sexual or physical abuse common
- During visits, calls continually to check on child
- Discusses visits with child to detect “negative” occurrences, occurrences of abuse, or negative feelings to stop or limit visitation
- Finds therapist for the child to support the allegation that the rejected parent should have limited, supervised, or no contact



Restrictive Gatekeeping: Parent's Alienating Behaviors₋₂

Asserts the Child does not need the Rejected Parent

- Removes references to rejected parent from the home
- Does not give child letters or phone messages
- Finds excuses to cancel scheduled visits
- Intrusion and seduction with toys, goodies, exciting activities scheduled during the rejected parent's custodial time



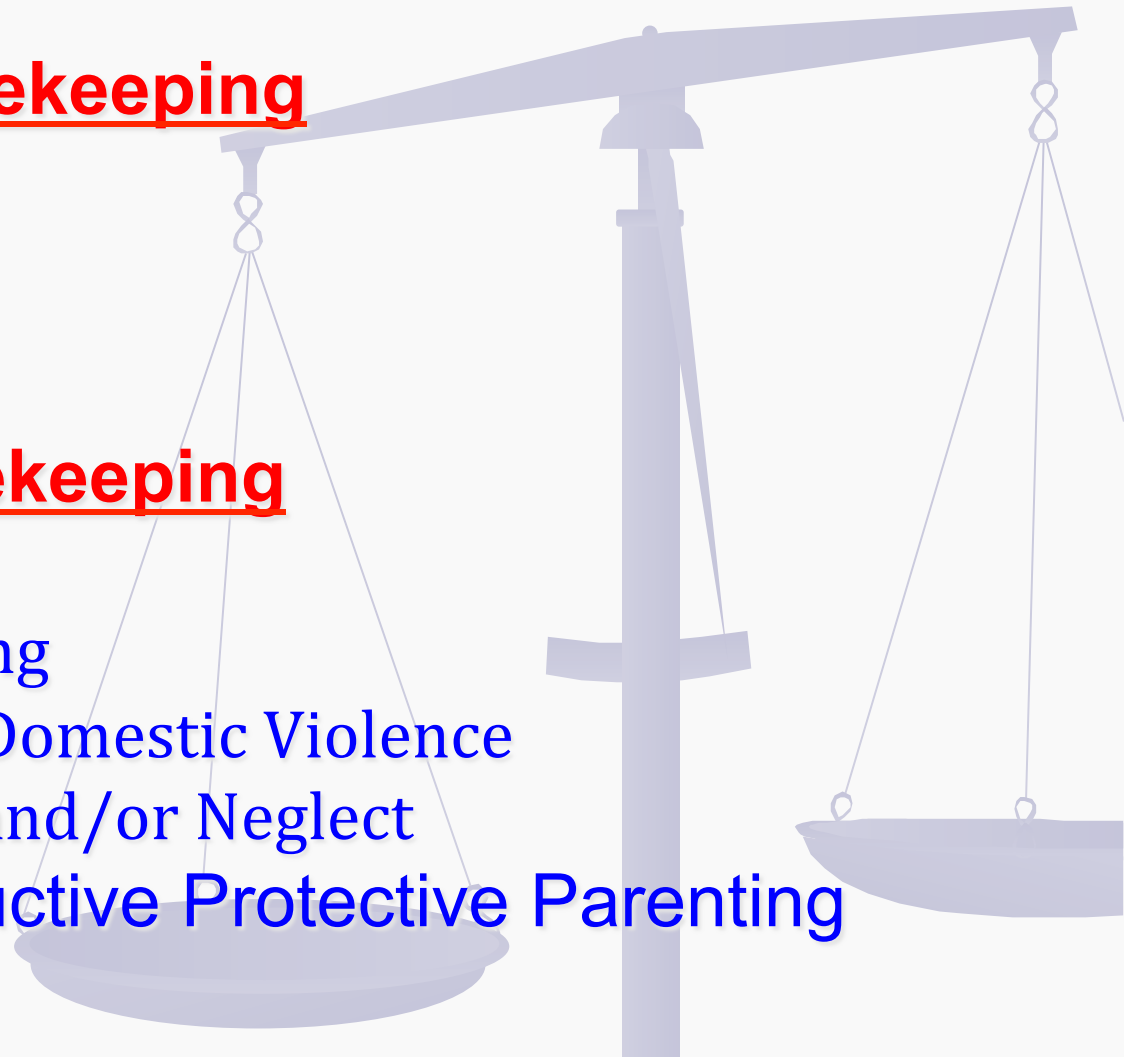
Concepts that are associated with the Reformulation of the reasons a child may resist contact with a parent and the relationship of Gatekeeping include

Restrictive Gatekeeping

- Alienation
- Enmeshment
- Sabotaging

Protective Gatekeeping

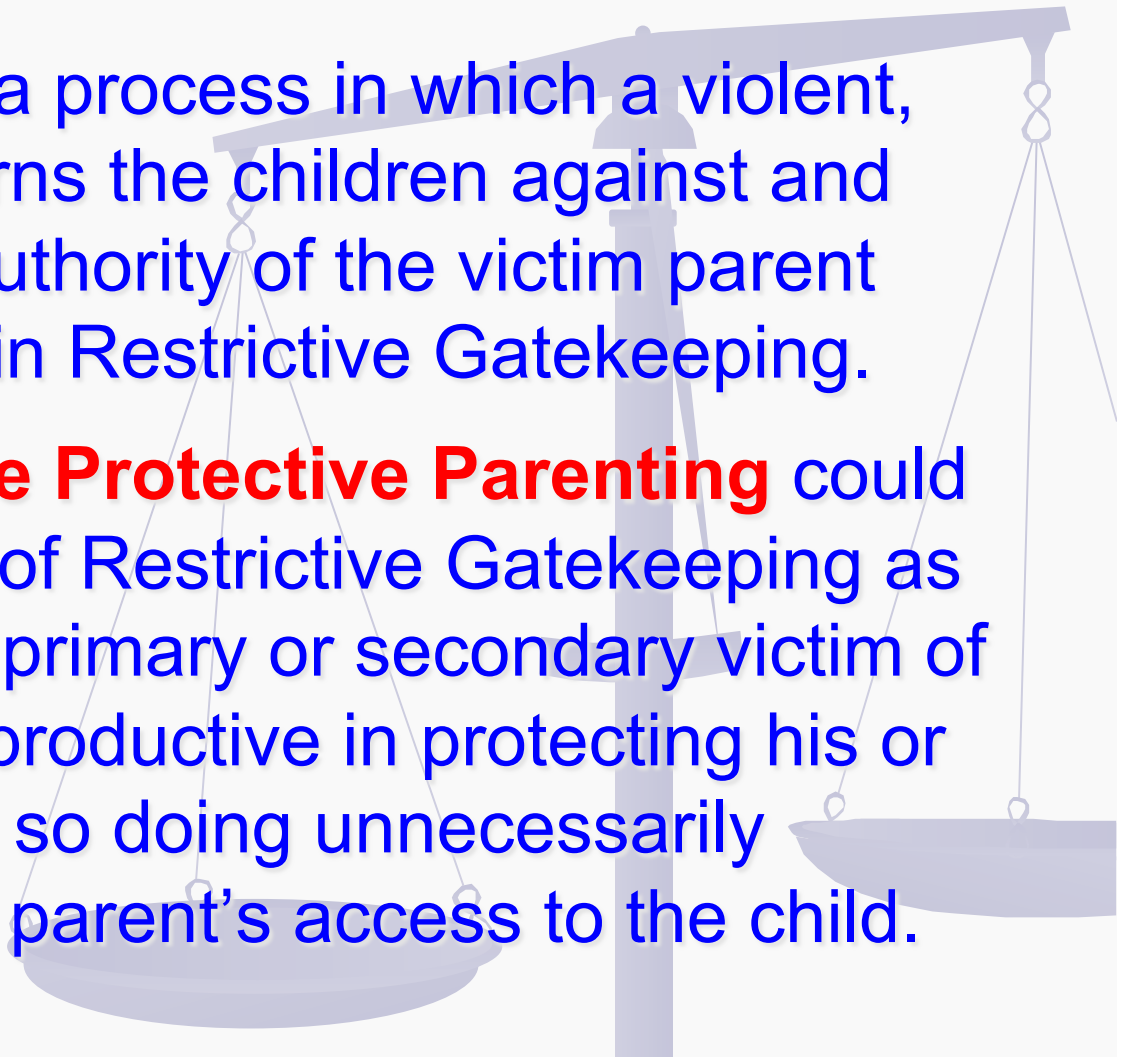
- Estrangement
 - Poor Parenting
 - Exposure to Domestic Violence
 - Child Abuse and/or Neglect
- Counter-Productive Protective Parenting



Sabotage & Counter Productive Protective Parenting as Kinds of Restrictive Gatekeeping

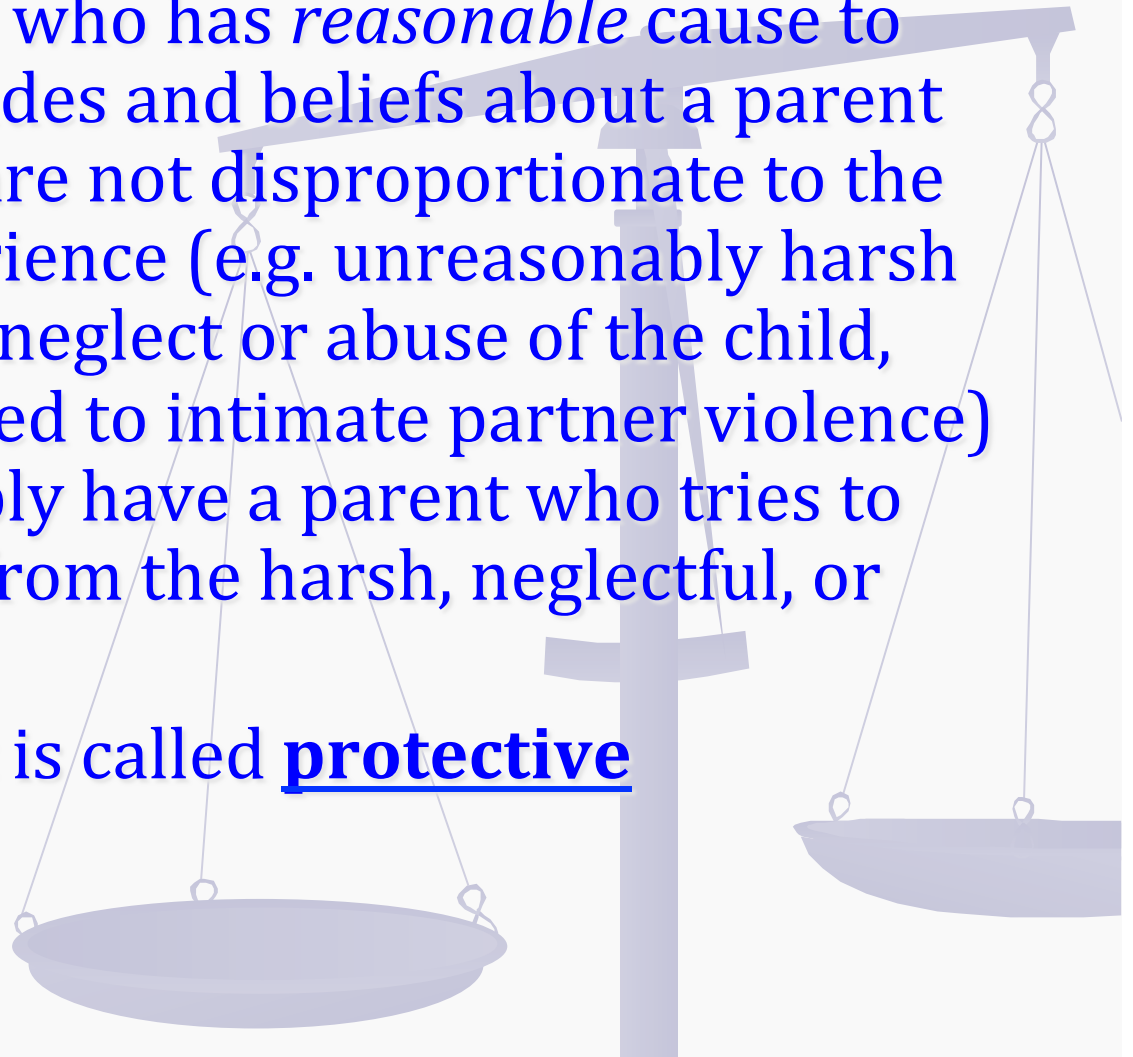
Sabotage refers to a process in which a violent, abusive parent turns the children against and undermines the authority of the victim parent and may engage in Restrictive Gatekeeping.

Counter Productive Protective Parenting could appear as a form of Restrictive Gatekeeping as a parent who is a primary or secondary victim of abuse is counter productive in protecting his or her child....and in so doing unnecessarily restricts the other parent's access to the child.



Why is it Reasonable For a Parent To Engage in Protective Gatekeeping?

- ✓ An Estranged Child, who has *reasonable* cause to have negative attitudes and beliefs about a parent due to factors that are not disproportionate to the child's actual experience (e.g. unreasonably harsh discipline, parental neglect or abuse of the child, and/or being exposed to intimate partner violence) could understandably have a parent who tries to protect him or her from the harsh, neglectful, or abusive parent.
- ✓ This would be what is called protective gatekeeping.



Enmeshment/Boundary Diffusion and Restrictive Gatekeeping⁻¹

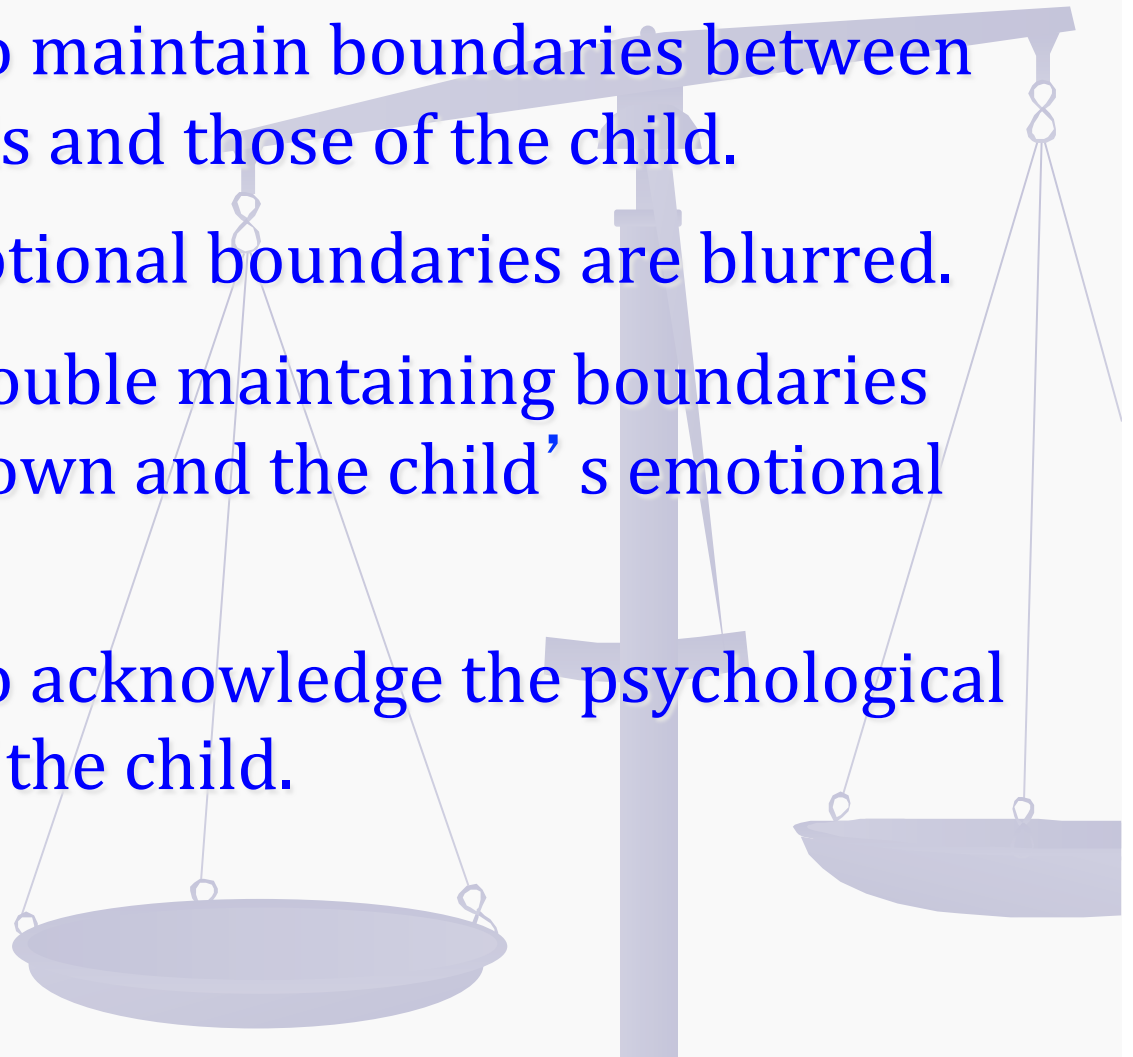
- ✓ The child may be in a pathologically enmeshed relationship with a parent.
- ✓ An enmeshed parent-child relationship can contribute to Restrictive Gatekeeping.

(Johnston, 1990; Kerig, 2005)



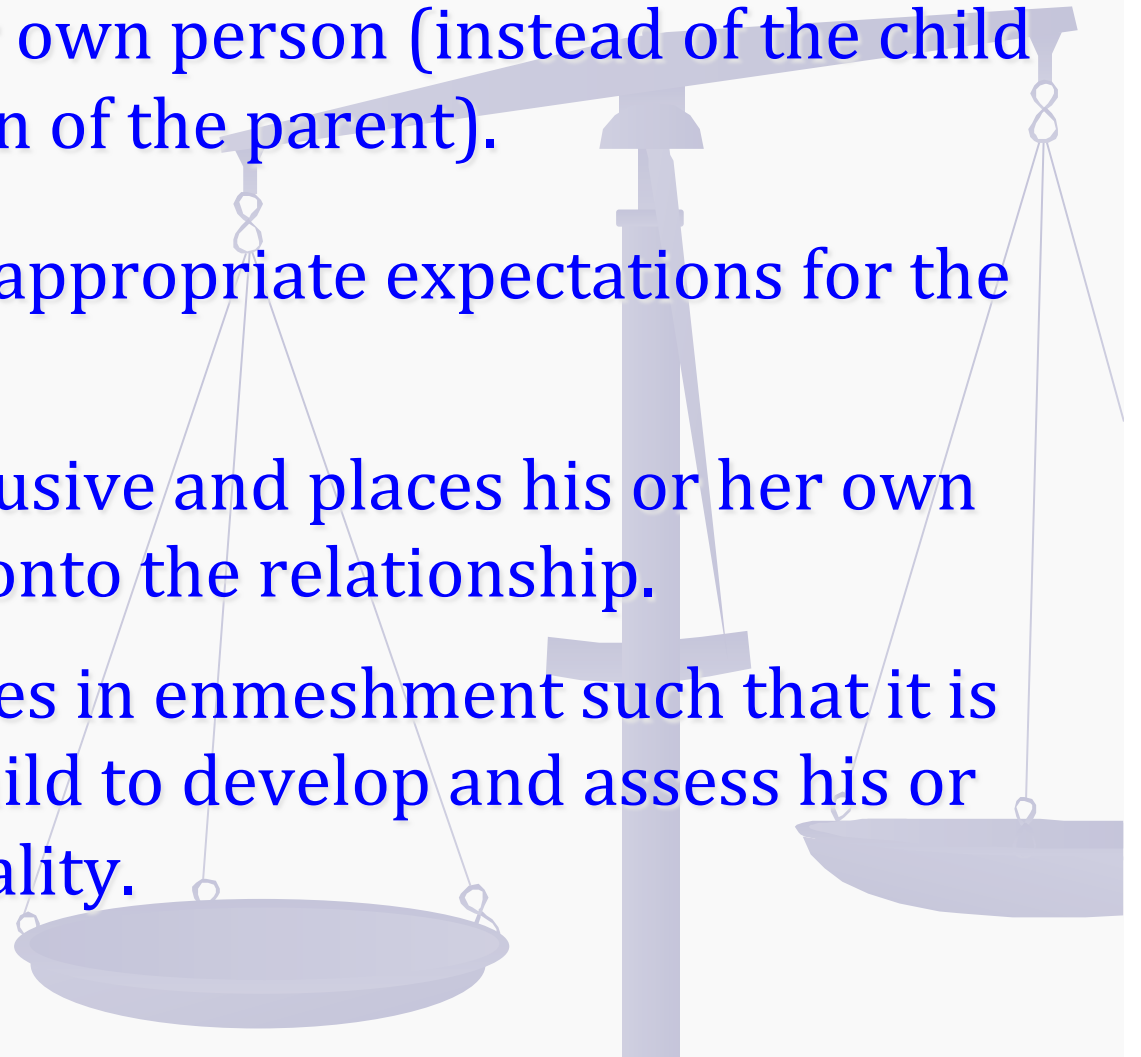
Enmeshment/Boundary Diffusion and Restrictive Gatekeeping²

- ❑ The parent fails to maintain boundaries between his/her own needs and those of the child.
- ❑ The parent's emotional boundaries are blurred.
- ❑ The parent has trouble maintaining boundaries between his/her own and the child's emotional experiences.
- ❑ The parent fails to acknowledge the psychological distinctiveness of the child.



Enmeshment/Boundary Diffusion and Restrictive Gatekeeping⁻³

- ❑ The parent is unable or unwilling to perceive the child as his or her own person (instead of the child being an extension of the parent).
- ❑ The parent has inappropriate expectations for the child.
- ❑ The parent is intrusive and places his or her own emotional needs onto the relationship.
- ❑ The parent engages in enmeshment such that it is difficult for the child to develop and assess his or her own individuality.



- How is the ongoing transformation of the concept of alienation related to Restrictive Gatekeeping?



Complexity

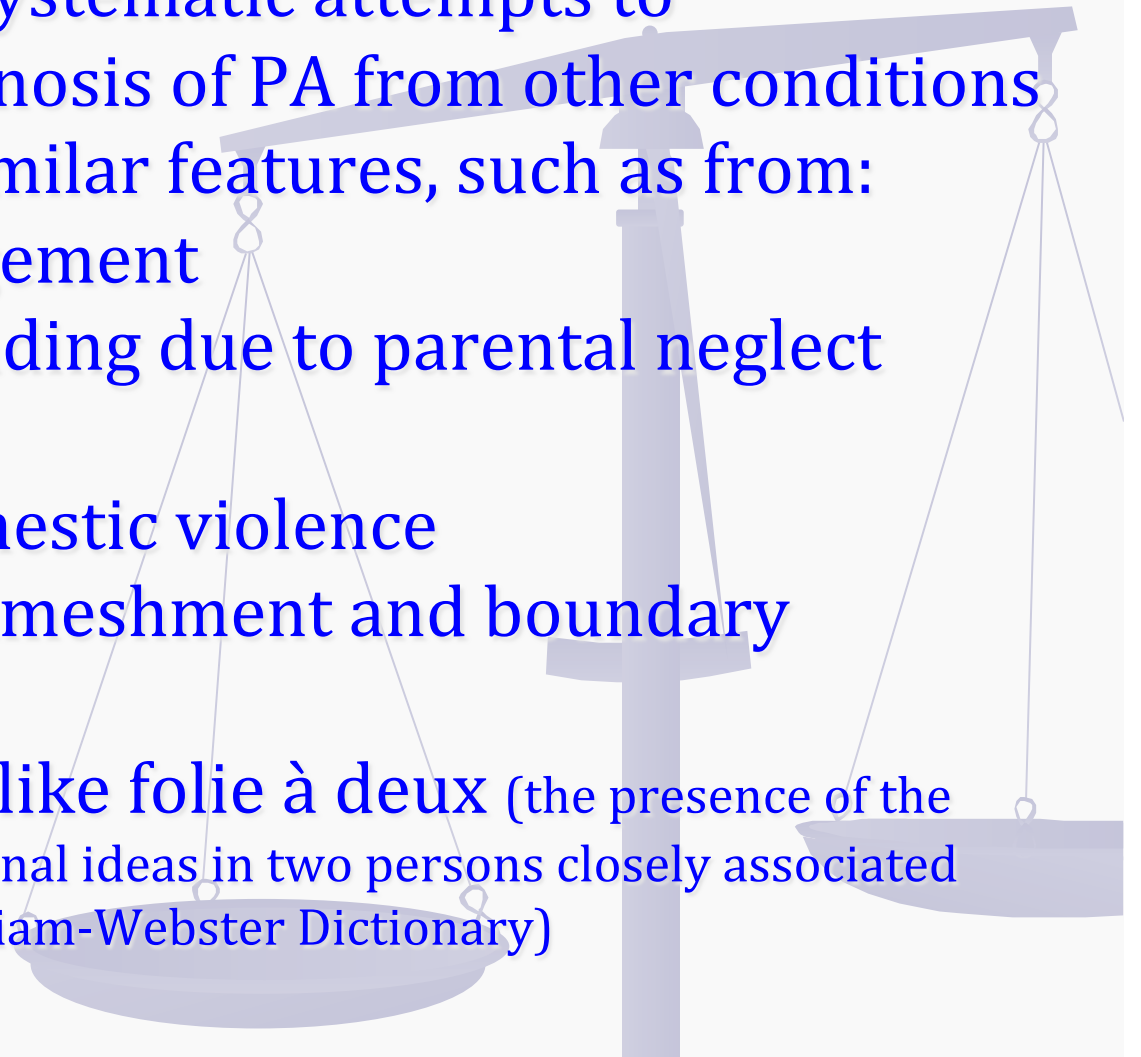
- ✓ Presently, complex interactions of causes for children rejecting parents have been hypothesized in contrast to solely focusing on the concept of alienation and as a result Gatekeeping must be re-evaluated
- ✓ Children's rejection of a parent may be the result of alienating behavior by the favored or aligned parent, but their rejection may also include other causes and the gatekeeping that occurs may be restrictive such as:
 - ❑ Poor parenting
 - ❑ Exposure to parent conflict
 - ❑ Exposure to domestic violence
 - ❑ Child physical or sexual abuse

(theory of PA reformulation by Kelly and Johnston, 2001)

Further research is needed to distinguish alienation from other types of strained parent-child relationships

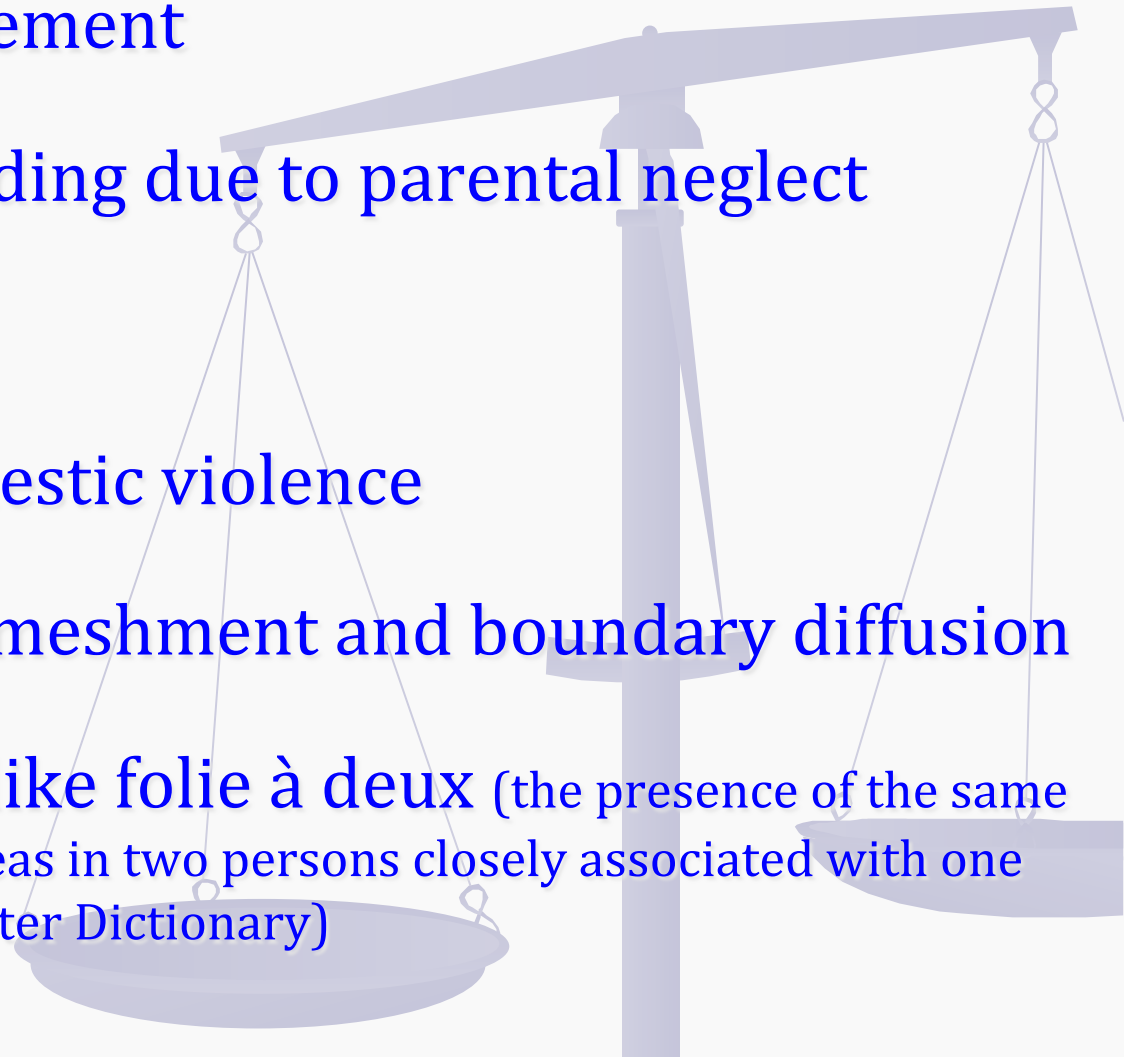
There have been no systematic attempts to differentiate a diagnosis of PA from other conditions that might share similar features, such as from:

- ❑ Realistic estrangement
- ❑ Pathological bonding due to parental neglect
- ❑ Child abuse
- ❑ Exposure to domestic violence
- ❑ Psychological enmeshment and boundary diffusion
- ❑ psychotic states like folie à deux (the presence of the same or similar delusional ideas in two persons closely associated with one another-Merriam-Webster Dictionary)



Is it possible that the research will show that parent's behaviors to the following can best be explained by the concept of Gatekeeping?

- ❑ Realistic estrangement
- ❑ Pathological bonding due to parental neglect
- ❑ Child abuse
- ❑ Exposure to domestic violence
- ❑ Psychological enmeshment and boundary diffusion
- ❑ Psychotic states like folie à deux (the presence of the same or similar delusional ideas in two persons closely associated with one another-Merriam-Webster Dictionary)



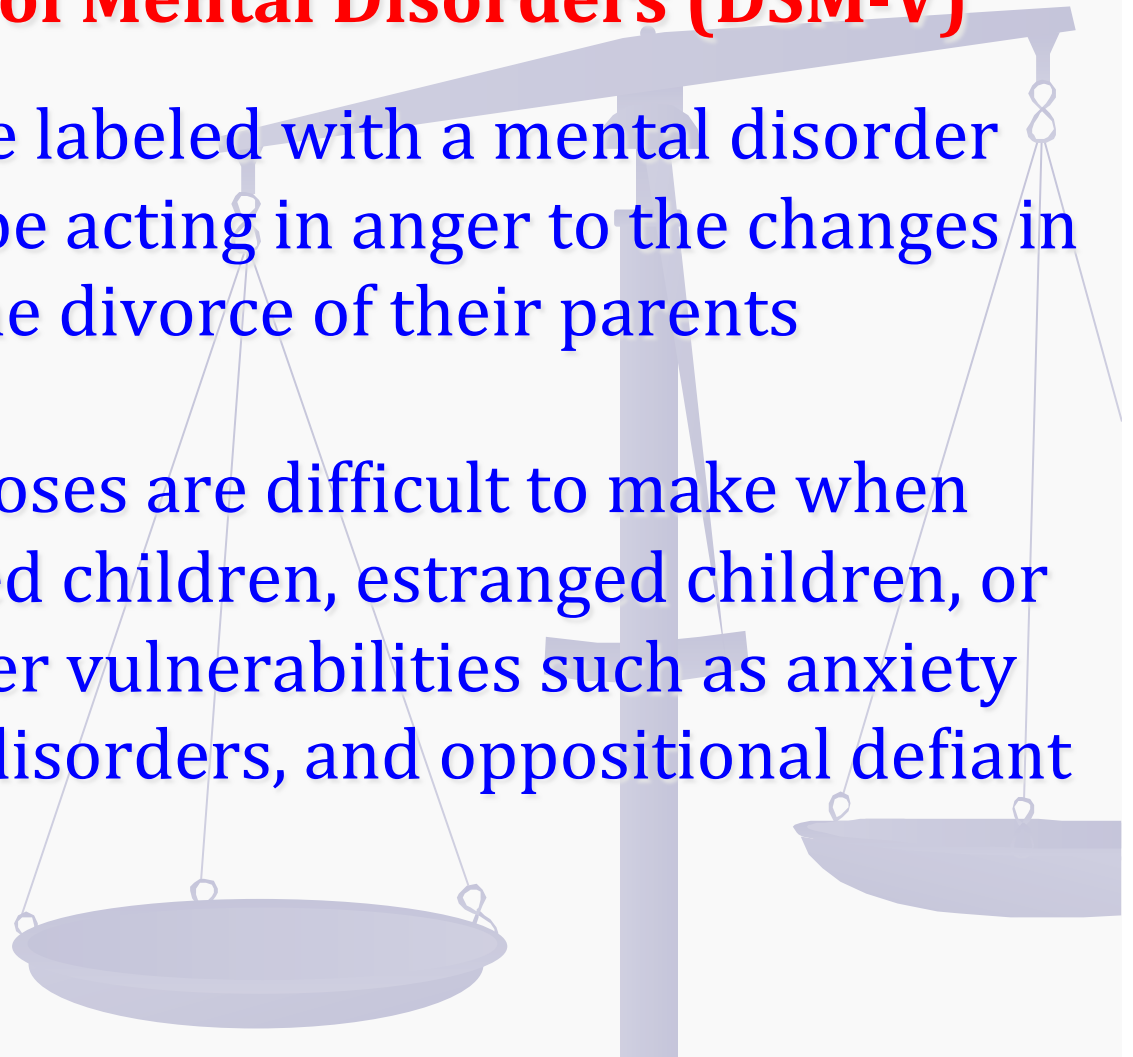
There is considerable controversy in the field and inadequate research regarding:

- ❑ the extent to which child abuse and domestic violence cases are wrongfully judged in family courts to be alienation cases or vice versa
- ❑ whether estrangement as a consequence of abuse co-occurs with alienation
- ❑ the likelihood that allegations of abuse are false when they are associated with or precede alienation

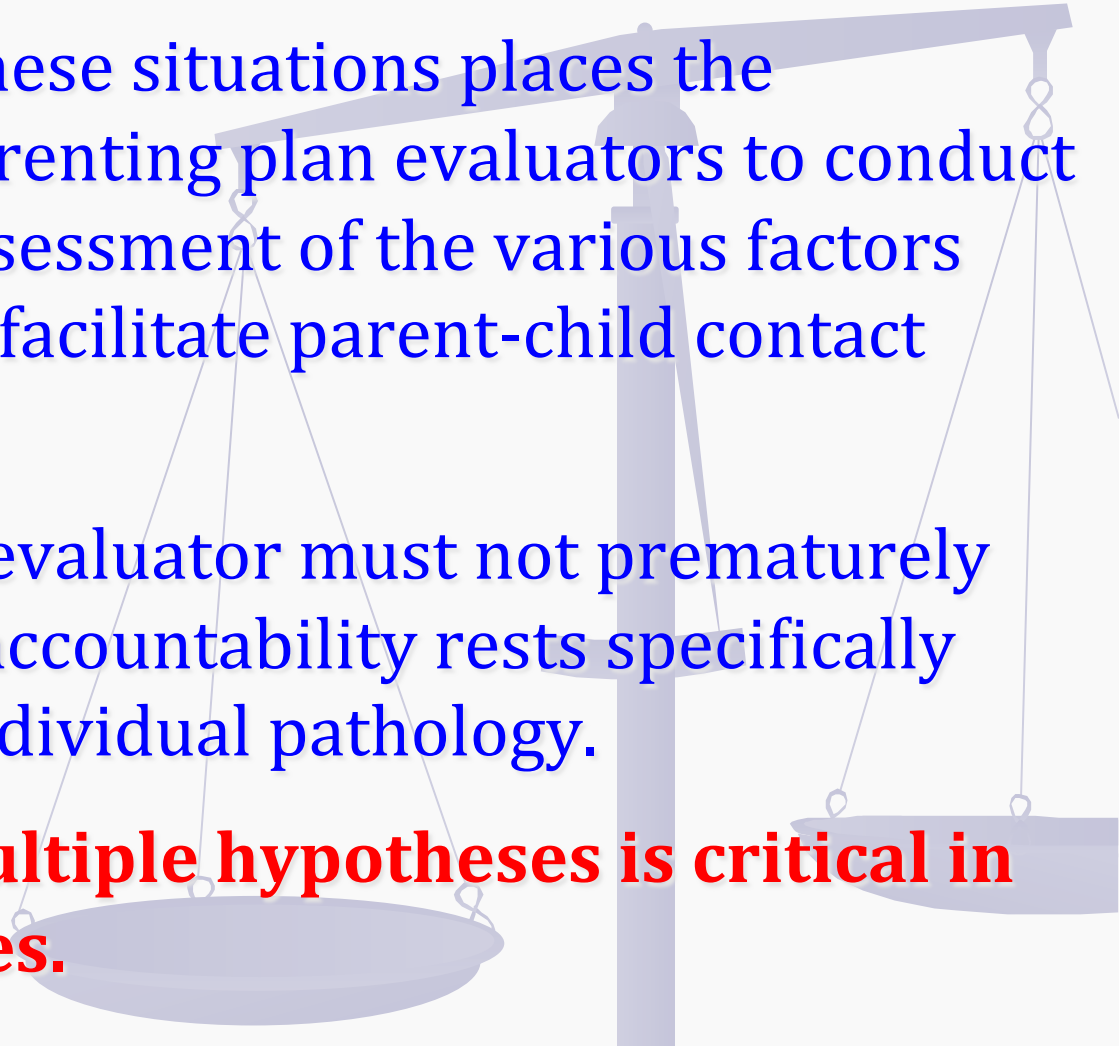


And Without Research to Support It There is a Proposal to include “Parent Alienation Disorder (PAD)” in the next edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)

- ❑ Children would be labeled with a mental disorder who may simply be acting in anger to the changes in their lives from the divorce of their parents
- ❑ Differential diagnoses are difficult to make when assessing alienated children, estranged children, or children with other vulnerabilities such as anxiety disorders, mood disorders, and oppositional defiant disorders



These Complex Cases Call For a Comprehensive Assessment by Parenting Plan Evaluators

- ✓ The complexity of these situations places the responsibility on parenting plan evaluators to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the various factors that may impede or facilitate parent-child contact problems.
 - ✓ The parenting plan evaluator must not prematurely determine that the accountability rests specifically with one parent's individual pathology.
 - ✓ **Thus, the use of multiple hypotheses is critical in these complex cases.**
- 

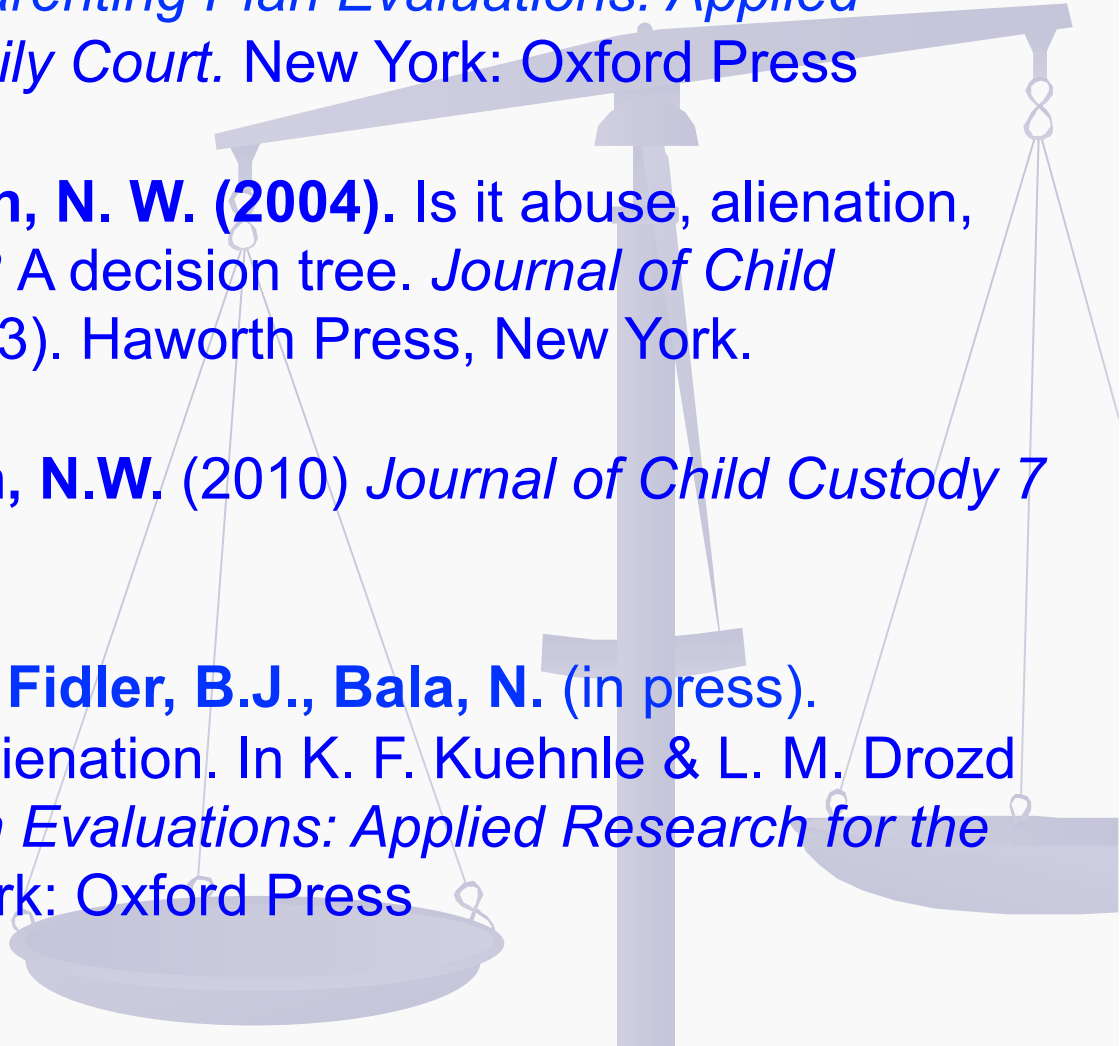
V. Case studies



VI. Questions and Panel Discussion



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