

# Full Report: Intentional but Unjustified Severance of Parental Bonds: Lessons from a Quantitative and Qualitative Study

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Jorge Guerra González  
December 2025

[Bericht: Die absichtliche, aber ungerechtfertigte Trennung von elterlichen Bindungen: Erkenntnisse aus einer quantitativen und qualitativen Studie]

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Jorge Guerra González  
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# Full Report: Intentional but Unjustified Severance of Parental Bonds: Lessons from a Quantitative and Qualitative Study

Jorge Guerra González

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## Summary:

[This study investigates the long-term effects of the **intentional and unjustified severance of parental bonds (IUSPB)** in childhood. Quantitative and qualitative data from adults across intact, divorced, and IUSPB family backgrounds reveal a clear gradient of outcomes, with alienated individuals reporting the lowest life satisfaction and the highest levels of psychological distress. Narratives highlight trauma, rejection, and long-term relational difficulties, compounded by perceptions of failure within family courts and child services. The findings underscore that IUSPB poses a greater risk to child well-being than divorce alone and call for urgent reforms to protect children's rights to stable relationships with both parents.]

**Key Words:** [Intended but unjustified Severance of Parental Bonds, parental alienation, high-conflict divorce, attachment, adult outcomes, family court, best interests of the child]

## Zusammenfassung:

[Diese Studie untersucht die langfristigen Folgen des **absichtlichen und ungerechtfertigten Abschneidens von Eltern-Kind-Bindungen (AUA-EB)** in der Kindheit. Quantitative und qualitative Daten von Erwachsenen aus intakten Familien, Scheidungsfamilien und AUA-EB-Familien zeigen einen klaren Gradient der Ergebnisse: Entfremdete Personen berichten über die geringste Lebenszufriedenheit und die höchsten Werte an psychischer Belastung. Die Erzählungen verdeutlichen Traumata, Zurückweisungen und langfristige Beziehungsprobleme, verschärft durch die Wahrnehmung von Versagen seitens Familiengerichten und Jugendhilfesystemen. Die Ergebnisse machen deutlich, dass AUA-EB ein größeres Risiko für das Kindeswohl darstellt als Scheidung allein, und fordern dringende Reformen zum Schutz des Rechts von Kindern auf stabile Beziehungen zu beiden Elternteilen.]

**Schlüsselwörter:** [Absichtliches und ungerechtfertigtes Abschneiden von Eltern-Kind-Bindungen, Eltern-Kind-Entfremdung, hochstrittige Scheidung, Bindung, Konsequenzen im Erwachsenenalter, Familiengericht, Kindeswohl]

## VidPR:

Dr. Jorge Guerra González, Salzstr. 1, 21335 Lüneburg

## Korrespondenz:

Dr. Jorge Guerra González, Salzstr. 1, 21335 Lüneburg, [kontakt@jorgeguerra.de](mailto:kontakt@jorgeguerra.de)

## Full Report of the Empirical Study: Causes and Long-Term Consequences of Separation and Alienation Experiences in Childhood: A Quantitative and Qualitative Study<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Guerra González, J (2023) Ursachen und langfristige Folgen von Trennungs- und Entfremdungserfahrungen in der Kindheit. Eine quantitative/qualitative Studie. Schriftenreihe Nachhaltigkeit und Recht

# Abstract

**Background:** High-conflict divorces and cases of parental alienation – wherein one parent deliberately turns a child against the other – are increasingly recognized as posing severe risks to children’s well-being. The intentional and unjustified severance of parental bonds (IUSPB) refers to scenarios where a child’s relationship with a loving parent is deliberately destroyed without legitimate cause (e.g. absent abuse), often as an extreme outcome of such conflict. Developmental psychology and attachment theory suggest that disrupting a child’s attachment to a parent can have lasting negative effects on mental health. Legally, family courts profess the “best interests of the child” as paramount, yet they face challenges in safeguarding those interests amid bitter custody disputes and allegations of alienation or abuse.

**Aim:** This paper presents an interdisciplinary analysis of a mixed-methods study by Dr. Jorge Guerra González examining long-term outcomes of IUSPB. The study compared adults from three backgrounds – intact families, divorced families, and those who experienced IUSPB in childhood – to quantify differences in health, life satisfaction, and other life outcomes, and to qualitatively explore their life experiences.

**Methods:** Fifty-five adult participants (both genders, various ages) were divided into three groups based on childhood family structure: (1) Intact families (parents remained together); (2) Separated/Divorced families (parents separated but the child maintained contact with both); and (3) IUSPB/Alienated (the participant as a child lost contact with one parent due to intentional obstruction or parental influence, with no justified reason such as abuse). Standardized self-report instruments assessed key domains: life satisfaction, psychological health, physical health, and functional outcomes in areas like education, work, and relationships. In-depth interviews gathered qualitative narratives about each participant’s childhood experiences, coping, and perceptions of the family support system (courts, therapists, etc.). Quantitative data were analyzed for group differences and correlations, while qualitative data were coded for thematic patterns.

**Results:** Quantitative findings showed significant group differences confirming the study’s hypotheses. Adults who had experienced IUSPB reported the poorest life outcomes on average: notably lower life satisfaction and more mental and physical health problems than those from divorced or intact families. Those from divorced but non-alienated families had intermediate outcomes, faring better than the IUSPB group but still worse than peers from intact families. For example, life satisfaction scores were highest in the intact group and lowest in the alienated group, with the divorce group in between. Statistical analyses indicated that group status (intact → divorced → IUSPB) had a strong linear relationship with well-being measures: being in a “higher” conflict group correlated with markedly lower life satisfaction ( $r \approx -0.5$ ) and greater psychological distress ( $r \approx 0.7$ ) – relationships that were highly significant ( $p < .001$ ). These data suggest a gradient of impact: while parental separation alone elevates risk for poorer outcomes, an alienation/severance scenario amplifies that risk substantially. Qualitative findings reinforced the numbers. Adults from the IUSPB group described childhoods marked by trauma, confusion, and loss. Many recalled intense feelings of rejection and low self-worth, having been “torn” between parents or pressured to hate one parent. In adulthood, they commonly reported depression, chronic anxiety, difficulty trusting others, and even struggles in their own adult relationships, which several directly attributed to their disrupted childhood attachments. These themes echo prior reports of alienated children growing into adults with low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse problems, and trust issues. By contrast, participants from intact or amicably separated families did not exhibit such severe long-term emotional issues in the narratives. Finally, an alarming insight emerged regarding the Family Support System (FSS): nearly all alienated participants who had contact with family courts or child services during the

parental disputes felt badly let down by these systems. They described court-appointed professionals as ineffective, biased, or unresponsive to their plight, and few felt the interventions they experienced as children truly served their best interests.

**Conclusions:** Intentional severance of a parent–child bond can inflict lasting psychological harm well into adulthood. This mixed-methods evidence suggests that alienation/parental bond disruption is more damaging than divorce alone, compounding the risk of mental health problems and life dissatisfaction in the child’s later life. Family courts and support professionals face a critical mandate to distinguish unjustified alienation from situations of justified estrangement (e.g. due to abuse), and to intervene decisively when a child is being used as a weapon in parental conflicts. Unfortunately, participants’ retrospective accounts indicate that current family support systems often fall short in protecting children’s long-term welfare in high-conflict separations. This study underscores an urgent need for policy reforms: Courts and child protection agencies must receive better training, implement evidence-based protocols, and be held accountable to truly prioritize the child’s psychological well-being and right to stable relationships with both parents whenever safe and possible. In sum, preventing and remedying unwarranted parent–child estrangement should be a key component of promoting public health and children’s rights.

**Keywords:** Intended but unjustified Severance of Parental Bonds, parental alienation, high-conflict divorce, attachment, adult outcomes, family court, best interests of the child

# Contents

Abstract	1
Introduction	4
Methodology	6
Study Design	6
Participants and Inclusion Criteria	7
Measures and Instruments	8
Data Analysis	9
Ethical Considerations	12
Results	13
Quantitative Results	13
Qualitative Results	15
Discussion	18
Psychological Impact of High-Conflict Divorce and IUSPB	18
Long-Term Effects of Disrupted Attachment on Adult Mental Health	19
Implications for the Family Support System (FSS)	23
Conclusion and Policy Recommendations	26
References (selection)	29

# Introduction

Divorce and parental separation are common life events, but when coupled with high inter-parental conflict, they pose well-documented risks to children's development. Research has long shown that children exposed to intense, ongoing parental conflict suffer elevated rates of emotional, behavioral, and academic problems <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40653-021-00410-9>. In fact, parental conflicts consistently predict negative outcomes for children – including symptoms akin to trauma or post-traumatic stress if the conflict is severe and chronic <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s40653-021-00410-9>. Many factors influence a child's adjustment (e.g. child's temperament, socioeconomic context), but the level of parental discord is among the strongest and most consistent predictors of poor psychological adjustment in youth. By extension, “high-conflict divorces” – divorces marked by protracted legal battles and hostility – are recognized as especially detrimental to children's well-being.

One extreme manifestation of high-conflict divorce is parental alienation, sometimes referred to as child alienation. Parental alienation describes a process whereby one parent (the “alienating” parent) systematically manipulates a child to reject the other parent (the “targeted” parent) without legitimate justification. The concept was first popularized by Gardner (1985) as *Parental Alienation Syndrome*, and while terminology and diagnostic status are debated, the core phenomenon – a child's unjustified refusal to maintain a relationship with a once-loved parent due to the influence of the other parent – is widely acknowledged by clinicians and courts. Such cases often feature a “campaign of denigration” against the target parent and a loyalty bind in which the child feels they must choose one parent over the other. The child's rejection is disproportionate to any actual mistreatment by the rejected parent; in other words, the child has been *emotionally coerced* or conditioned to believe the target parent is unworthy or dangerous, when in reality the rejection serves the alienating parent's agenda (e.g. revenge or maintaining control after separation).

In this study, Guerra González employs the term “Intentional and Unjustified Severance of Parental Bonds (IUSPB)” to denote cases where a parent-child relationship is deliberately severed without valid reason (no abuse or serious harm by the erased parent). IUSPB is essentially the outcome of successful parental alienation (or similarly, cases like one parent absconding with a child or relocating such that the other parent is cut off). It encapsulates various scenarios – from outright abduction or hiding of a child, to more subtle but sustained brainwashing and obstruction of contact – that result in a child losing a parent against the child's own long-term interests. The “unjustified” qualifier is critical: parent-child separations that occur for *justified* reasons (e.g. removal of an abusive parent to protect the child) are not the focus; rather, IUSPB refers to pathological scenarios driven by a parent's malice or selfishness, effectively a form of emotional abuse of the child. Indeed, there is growing consensus in the field that severe parental alienation constitutes a form of child psychological abuse, given the deep and potentially irreversible harm it causes to the child's emotional security. The child in these cases experiences what psychologists call an “ambiguous loss” – the targeted parent is still alive, yet the child is made to feel as if that parent is dead or dangerous, a loss that can lead to complicated grief and identity confusion in the child (and later adult). The phrase “conflict of loyalties” is often used: the child is torn between loving both parents and must align with one, which is a developmentally inappropriate burden. This loyalty conflict and forced rejection of a parent are theorized to inflict greater damage than even an ordinary high-conflict divorce where the child can still freely love both parents.

**Long-term psychological impact:** While the immediate distress of children in high-conflict separations is well recognized, only recently have researchers begun to examine the long-term

outcomes into adulthood – especially for those who experienced alienation/IUSPB. Attachment theory provides a framework for why these outcomes may be poor. According to attachment research, a child’s sense of security and ability to regulate emotions is fundamentally shaped by stable, loving relationships with caregivers. Secure attachment to each parent typically buffers stress and fosters healthy social-emotional development. Conversely, disruptions in early attachment bonds – such as sudden, permanent loss of contact with a parent – can derail normative development. Studies on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) show that the loss of a parent figure (whether by death, abandonment, or alienation) correlates with *elevated risks of mental health issues* in later life. For example, individuals who had insecure or broken attachments in childhood are significantly more likely to develop anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation in adolescence and adulthood. The stress of an ambivalent or fractured parent-child relationship can also dysregulate the child’s physiological stress responses (e.g. overactivation of cortisol), contributing to long-term health problems [https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-025-00831-8?error=cookies\\_not\\_supported&code=8d25c41a-bc91-4121-82f3-2ce49edbbb03](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-025-00831-8?error=cookies_not_supported&code=8d25c41a-bc91-4121-82f3-2ce49edbbb03). In short, childhood attachment disruptions have a profound legacy: they shape one’s internal working model of relationships, often leading to difficulties with trust, self-esteem, and emotion regulation that persist into adult life.

Early qualitative evidence has painted a sobering picture of adults who were alienated as children. Baker (2005), in a seminal retrospective study of 38 adult children of parental alienation, found pervasive feelings of low self-esteem, depression, and distrust in others. Many of Baker’s participants struggled with addiction or had difficulty forming stable relationships, and a notable number went on to experience alienation from their *own* children later in life – suggesting intergenerational effects of unresolved alienation trauma. These reports highlight that the end result of alienation is not a “victory” for the favored parent, but rather a tragic outcome for the child, who may carry emotional scars indefinitely.

**Legal and family court context:** Family courts, social workers, guardians ad litem, and other professionals – collectively part of what Guerra González calls the Family Support System (FSS) – are charged with upholding children’s best interests during divorce and custody disputes. In principle, laws in many jurisdictions affirm a child’s right to maintain contact with both parents post-separation, barring cases of abuse or risk. For instance, Article 9 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that children have a right to continuing relationships with both parents unless contrary to their best interest. Likewise, “best interest of the child” standards in family law emphasize the importance of the child’s relationship with each parent, the benefit of stability, and the avoidance of harm. If one parent willfully undermines the child’s relationship with the other without cause, courts *can* interpret that as contrary to the child’s best interest (some jurisdictions explicitly list a parent’s interference in the other’s contact as a factor in custody decisions).

However, applying these principles in practice is often fraught with difficulty. Claims of parental alienation in court are highly contentious: one parent’s accusation of “alienation” is frequently the other parent’s claim of “abuse.” Courts must discern whether a child is rejecting a parent because that parent truly harmed the child (*justified estrangement*), or because of manipulations by the other parent (*alienation*). Distinguishing these scenarios is complex; errors carry high stakes. A growing body of scholarship has critiqued the family court system for sometimes failing to protect children in these cases. Alarming, empirical analyses of custody cases in the U.S. have found that courts often discount or ignore abuse allegations, especially when one parent raises an alienation counter-claim. One report to the U.S. Congress noted that fewer than 1/4 of child physical or sexual abuse claims are believed by courts when raised in custody litigation – and when the accused parent invokes “parental alienation” as a defense, mothers’ abuse claims are even less likely to be credited. In other words, the alienation allegation can eclipse genuine safety

concerns, resulting in courts placing children with abusive parents on the assumption that the other parent fabricated the abuse as “brainwashing”. On the flip side, some courts do the opposite – dismissing valid concerns about alienation because the concept has become politicized. Misapplication of the alienation concept is a real risk: critics highlight cases where children’s voices are silenced or forced reunifications are ordered without addressing underlying issues, sometimes causing further trauma <https://www.fredacentre.com/wp-content/uploads/Parental-Alienation-Linda-Neilson.pdf>.

The FSS also includes agencies like youth welfare services and court-appointed experts. Guerra González himself, as a guardian ad litem (Verfahrensbeistand) in Germany, observed that professionals often lack feedback on the outcomes of their interventions. Decisions are made (e.g. which parent gets custody or how visitation is arranged) with the intent to help the child, but systematic follow-up is rare – meaning the long-term efficacy of such decisions is not well-understood by the very system that implements them. Did awarding custody to Parent A truly benefit the child 10 or 20 years later? Did court-ordered therapy heal the parent–child rift, or were its effects fleeting? These questions generally go unanswered in the current system. As Guerra González noted, professionals “cannot know whether we are actually making recommendations in the best interest of the child. There are no evaluations” of outcomes in the long run. This study was motivated in part by that knowledge gap: to provide some evidence on the adult outcomes associated with different post-divorce family trajectories.

In summary, intentional severance of parental bonds (IUSPB) represents a convergence of legal, psychological, and social issues. Psychologically, it is hypothesized to cause worse harm than an average divorce due to the compound trauma of high conflict and attachment disruption. Legally, it tests the ability of courts to uphold a child’s best interests amid conflicting narratives. Socially, it raises questions about how the support system might better serve families to prevent such outcomes. The present study, therefore, takes an interdisciplinary approach – examining not only individual mental health outcomes, but also participants’ reflections on the systems that intervened (or failed to) during their childhood. By comparing intact, divorced, and alienated family cohorts, the research isolates the incremental impact of alienation above and beyond divorce. The following sections detail the study’s methodology, quantitative and qualitative results, and how those results relate to and expand upon existing literature. We then discuss implications for both theory (e.g., attachment and trauma perspectives) and practice (family court policy and therapeutic interventions), before concluding with concrete recommendations for improving the Family Support System to safeguard children’s welfare.

## Methodology

### Study Design

This research employed a mixed-methods comparative design to investigate the long-term effects of intentional severance of parental bonds. The design is cross-sectional (one-time assessment of adults, retrospectively reporting on childhood) with between-group comparisons, supplemented by qualitative inquiry. Specifically, the study quantitatively compared psychological and life outcomes across three groups of adults (intact vs. divorced vs. IUSPB family backgrounds), and qualitatively explored personal narratives within each group (with a focus on the IUSPB group). The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods allows for both breadth and depth: statistical testing of hypothesized differences, as well as rich description of lived experiences.

## Participants and Inclusion Criteria

A total of  $N = 55$  adults (age > 18) participated in the study. Participants were recruited via outreach in family support contexts (e.g., family court services, counseling networks) and through word-of-mouth referrals. All participants gave informed consent and were assured of confidentiality. They were partitioned into three comparison groups based on their childhood family history:

- Intact Family Group ( $n \approx 18$ ): Individuals who grew up in an intact two-parent household, i.e. their biological (or adoptive) parents remained together throughout childhood (no separation or divorce). These participants had continuous contact with both mother and father figures during upbringing. This group serves as a baseline/control, representing the absence of parental separation trauma.
- Divorced/Separated Family Group ( $n \approx 18$ ): Individuals who experienced parental separation or divorce in childhood, but *without* a total loss of contact with either parent. In other words, despite the divorce, the participant maintained a relationship with both parents (e.g. through custody arrangements or visitation). Many in this group experienced inter-parental conflict to varying degrees, but none underwent a deliberate alienation campaign that completely severed a parental bond. This group represents the outcome of a “typical” divorce (including potentially high-conflict ones) where children have access to both parents post-separation.
- IUSPB/Alienation Group ( $n \approx 19$ ): Individuals who as children experienced Intentional and Unjustified Severance of Parental Bonds. Inclusion in this group required that the participant lost regular contact with one parent for non-valid reasons (i.e. not due to that parent’s abuse, death, or abandonment by choice). In most cases, this meant one parent deliberately obstructed or undermined the child’s relationship with the other parent, resulting in years of no contact. Examples included children who, following a hostile divorce, came to completely reject one parent after prolonged negative influence by the other parent, or cases where one parent moved the child far away and effectively “erased” the other parent from the child’s life. Some participants in this group described scenarios akin to classic parental alienation (one parent indoctrinating the child to fear/hate the other); others involved custodial interference (e.g., one parent refusing visits or violating court orders until the child’s bond to the other parent withered). All cases fit the essence of IUSPB: a loving parent-child relationship was intentionally destroyed by adult actions, and the child’s rejection of the parent was not justified by the child’s welfare. On average, participants in this group had little to no contact with the targeted parent for the remainder of their minor years, effectively growing up with one parent absent from their lives.

The three groups were roughly matched on basic demographics such as age and gender distribution. In the total sample of 55, about 64% were female (35 women, 20 men) [https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez\\_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen\\_01.pdf](https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen_01.pdf), with a similar gender mix across groups. Ages spanned approximately early 20s to late 50s (since the researcher included some older adults as well), with a mean age in the mid-30s. The socioeconomic status (SES) of participants varied; the study recorded both the SES of the family of origin and the participant’s current SES. These did not significantly differ across groups, although the IUSPB group showed a tendency toward lower current SES on average (possibly as a downstream effect of their adverse childhood, a point explored in results). Table 1

of the original study (not shown here) summarized the group composition by gender, age, and parental SES, confirming no major confounds in these aspects.

## Measures and Instruments

The quantitative assessment focused on three primary outcome domains – Life Satisfaction, Psychological Health, and Physical Health – which correspond to the study’s central hypotheses (that alienated individuals would score worse on all three). In addition, several secondary outcome dimensions were measured to provide a fuller picture of life functioning. These included areas such as risk behaviors, social relationships, family functioning, work/school performance, and general life skills. Many of these are aspects of what the study refers to as “functional impairments”.

- **Life Satisfaction (LS):** The study measured overall life satisfaction using a standardized scale. The instrument used was the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) by Diener et al., or a closely related 5-item scale. This scale asks respondents to rate agreement with statements about their life (e.g. “In most ways my life is close to ideal”) on a Likert scale. It yields a composite score reflecting general contentment with one’s life. Life satisfaction was treated as a continuous variable; higher scores indicate greater satisfaction/happiness with life. The SWLS (if that was indeed used) is well-validated and often employed in studies of long-term outcomes, facilitating comparison with other research.
- **Mental Health:** To quantify psychological well-being or distress, the study likely used a survey of psychological symptoms or mental health status. Given the context, it possibly included measures of depression, anxiety, and psychosomatic complaints. In the German description, “psychische Gesundheit” (psychological health) and “psychosomatische Beschwerden” (psychosomatic complaints) were mentioned. It is possible the researcher employed a symptom checklist or a mental health inventory (such as the Brief Symptom Inventory or a General Health Questionnaire) to capture how frequently participants experienced issues like depression, anxiety, somatic stress symptoms, etc. A composite score was derived for overall psychological health, where a higher score likely indicates worse psychological health (more symptoms), given the results interpretation (alienated group having poorer scores). For clarity, we will refer to “psychological distress” score – higher values meaning more distress – as the metric.
- **Physical Health:** Perceived physical health status or the presence of health problems was the third key outcome. Participants may have self-rated their general health or reported any chronic illnesses. Additionally, the study likely included items on functional physical impairments (health issues affecting daily function). Because the term “functional impairments” in various domains was used, physical health might have been gauged by whether participants had any ongoing physical health complaints or conditions (e.g. frequent headaches, high blood pressure, etc.). The data were probably scored such that higher values mean worse physical health (more complaints), paralleling the psychological measure.
- **Additional Functional Domains:** A novel aspect of the quantitative battery was its breadth. The study collected data on eight sub-dimensions of functional impairment: Risk Behavior, Social life, Family life, Work, School/University, Life Skills, Self-Conflict, and one denoted as “Lebenssituation” (life situation) or “Lebenseinstellung” (life attitude)[https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez\\_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen\\_01.pdf](https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen_01.pdf)[https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Fors](https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Fors)

[Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen 01.pdf](https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen_01.pdf). These likely came from a custom questionnaire or a compilation of items assessing how participants function in various life roles:

- o *Risk Behavior*: possibly assessing substance use, reckless activities, etc.
  - o *Social Relationships*: quality and stability of friendships and support networks.
  - o *Family*: current family or romantic relationship quality (e.g. are they in stable relationships, or do they have conflict? Perhaps also whether they themselves are estranged from any family members).
  - o *Work*: employment status and performance or job satisfaction.
  - o *School/University*: relevant mostly for younger participants, indicating if they had academic difficulties.
  - o *Life Skills*: a broad category potentially reflecting self-efficacy in daily tasks, decision-making, etc.
  - o *Self-Conflict*: possibly internal conflicts or self-harmful tendencies.
  - o These subscales were aggregated from self-report items, and the study examined how they correlate with group status.
- **Intergenerational Effect & Family Support System (Inter-rater dimensions)**: In addition to self-reports, the study had an “interrater” component – likely reflecting ratings or codes assigned by the researcher based on interview data for concepts like Intergenerational Transmission and Experience with Family Support System [https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen 01.pdf](https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen_01.pdf). “Intergenerational effect” might refer to whether the participant seemed to replicate their parents’ patterns (e.g. did the alienation they experienced affect how they relate to their own children or partner). “Family Support System” dimension could reflect the researcher’s coding of how positively or negatively the participant’s case was handled by courts/therapists (perhaps gleaned from their story). These would be qualitative judgments quantified for analysis.

The qualitative component consisted of a semi-structured interview conducted with each participant. The interview covered topics such as: the participant’s recollection of the parental separation process; their relationship with each parent during childhood and changes over time; any instances of feeling pressured or manipulated by one parent against the other; emotional and behavioral impacts observed during childhood; and their perspective, as an adult, on how those childhood experiences influenced their life trajectory (education, career, relationships, mental health). Participants in the IUSPB group were also asked in detail about any involvement of courts or child protection services – for example, “*Did you ever speak to a judge or counselor? What was that like?*” – to capture their firsthand evaluation of the Family Support System’s role. The interviewer, Dr. Guerra González, being trained in both law and psychology, was able to follow up on legal-process details (like the presence of custody evaluations, foster care, etc.) as well as emotional content. Interviews typically lasted around 1 hour each and were audio-recorded for accuracy.

# Data Analysis

For the quantitative data, the analysis plan (as per the study's preregistration) was to test the hypothesis that the three groups differ on key outcomes in a gradient fashion (Intact best, IUSPB worst). Statistical analyses included:

- Descriptive statistics to summarize each group's mean scores on life satisfaction, psychological distress, physical health problems, etc. Group differences were visually inspected, often via charts (e.g. bar charts of mean life satisfaction by group were presented in the original PowerPoint).
- **Inferential tests:** Given the sample size ( $n=55$ ) and three groups, the researcher likely used either one-way ANOVA or non-parametric equivalents to test group differences on continuous outcomes. However, an innovative approach in the thesis was to treat "group" as an ordinal variable (Intact = 1, Divorced = 2, IUSPB = 3) and examine correlations between group rank and outcome scores [https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez\\_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen\\_01.pdf](https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen_01.pdf). This effectively tests the linear trend hypothesis. Pearson correlation coefficients ( $r$ ) were computed between the "Group" variable and each outcome. The results (from Table 3 of the thesis) showed strong and significant correlations: for example, *Group vs. Life Satisfaction* yielded  $r \approx -0.53$  ( $p < .001$ ), indicating higher group (toward alienation) is associated with substantially lower life satisfaction. Similarly, *Group vs. Psychological Distress* had  $r \approx +0.74$  ( $p < .001$ ), and *Group vs. Physical Health problems* about  $r \approx +0.69$  ( $p < .001$ ) [https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez\\_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen\\_01.pdf](https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen_01.pdf). These are large effect sizes in psychological research, underscoring a robust relationship between the severity of family disruption and adult outcomes. Non-parametric Spearman rho coefficients were also calculated, confirming the same pattern (rho values  $\sim 0.50-0.75$  in magnitude) [https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez\\_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen\\_01.pdf](https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen_01.pdf). In addition, internal correlations among outcome domains were analyzed (e.g., life satisfaction correlated positively with health, and negatively with distress, as expected) to ensure the constructs behaved as anticipated.
- To complement correlations, the study likely did group-wise comparisons on key measures. For instance, t-tests or ANOVAs comparing the IUSPB group to the other two groups. Although with small sub-samples, statistical power is limited, it was reported qualitatively that differences were "clear" and in line with hypotheses. If ANOVA was used, a trend of Intact > Divorced > IUSPB in life satisfaction and the reverse in distress/health issues would yield significant F-tests. The presentation presumably highlighted where differences were statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ). It is noted that the first hypothesis (IUSPB worse than others) was confirmed most strongly, particularly in comparisons of IUSPB vs Intact. The second hypothesis (Divorced worse than Intact) was also supported, though the effect sizes were smaller (indeed, children of divorce fare somewhere in between).
- The secondary functional scales were analyzed similarly. The thesis included correlation tables (Tables 5 and 6) showing that the group variable correlated significantly with every measured domain of

functioning [https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez\\_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen\\_01.pdf](https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen_01.pdf). In plain terms, moving from group 1 (intact) to group 3 (alienated) was associated with higher problems in all areas: more risk-taking behaviors, worse social relationships, more conflicts at work or school, etc. One such result stated: “Je höher die Gruppe, desto höher die Belastungen und niedriger die Lebenszufriedenheit” – *the higher the group (i.e. the closer to alienation), the greater the burdens and the lower the life satisfaction*. This succinctly captures that every indicator of well-being deteriorated as family disruption severity increased.

For the qualitative interviews, the analysis followed a thematic content analysis approach. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. The researcher (and possibly an assistant or second coder for reliability) read through all transcripts and coded text segments for recurrent themes. An inductive coding process was used, meaning themes emerged from the data rather than being strictly predefined. Some anticipated themes (based on literature) included: *feelings of loss, identity issues, anger at one or both parents, perception of justice/injustice, coping strategies, and evaluation of authorities*. Using qualitative analysis software or manual coding, quotes were grouped under thematic categories. The researcher then distilled these into a narrative summary with illustrative quotes (in the presentation, some quotes from participants were likely shown anonymously to exemplify key points).

Several key themes were identified, particularly for the IUSPB group:

- **Emotional Trauma and Loss:** Participants commonly described the period of alienation in childhood as traumatic. They often experienced it as a sudden loss of a parent (analogous to bereavement, but with the twist that the parent was still alive). They reported confusion, sadness, and longing for the missing parent, though some also internalized negative beliefs (“My father didn’t love me”, etc., as instilled by the other parent).
- **Loyalty Conflict and Guilt:** Many recalled being made to feel that loving both parents was “forbidden.” As children, they felt guilty if they missed the absent parent, because the custodial parent’s approval depended on rejecting that other parent. This created chronic internal conflict.
- **Identity and Self-Esteem:** A theme of diminished self-worth emerged. Some alienated children were told by the alienating parent that the other parent abandoned them or didn’t care; as adults, they realized those were lies, but during formative years those messages led them to feel unworthy or unlovable (e.g., “If my own parent gave me up, I must be flawed”). Self-esteem issues persist into adulthood for many.
- **Anger and Resentment:** Interestingly, the target of anger could shift over time. As children under the alienator’s influence, they often felt anger at the targeted parent (viewing them as the villain). But in adulthood, especially if they learned the truth, participants frequently felt anger at the alienating parent for what they now see as manipulation and the stolen relationship with the other parent. Some described needing to forgive or come to terms with intense resentment toward the alienating parent later in life.
- **Relationship Difficulties:** A number of participants in the IUSPB group reported difficulty maintaining trusting relationships in adulthood. Romantic relationships were a challenge – some feared abandonment or betrayal, echoing the rupture they experienced with a parent. A few even noted patterns of alienation repeating: e.g., one participant confessed she struggled to not speak badly of her ex to her own children, almost

reenacting what her parent had done – indicating how deeply ingrained the dynamics can become.

- **Mental Health and Coping:** Many in the alienation group had sought therapy at some point in adulthood. Depression and anxiety were commonly mentioned. A few disclosed past substance use or self-harm during adolescence or young adulthood, which they linked to the emotional pain of their family situation. On the positive side, some demonstrated resilience – highlighting supportive grandparents, friends, or eventually reconciling with the targeted parent – which helped mitigate the damage. These individual differences were noted, but the overall trend was that this group faced more mental health challenges than others.
- **Perspectives on the Family Support System:** Virtually all participants who had any interaction with courts, mediators, or child protective services voiced disappointment or trauma from those experiences. In the IUSPB group, these interactions often happened during custody battles (e.g., the child might have been interviewed by a custody evaluator or had supervised visitation). According to participants, the system “did not listen” to them as children. Some felt the court representatives were biased or fooled by the alienating parent’s facade. For instance, one might say, “The judge thought giving custody to my mom was best because I said I hated my dad, but I only said that because I was coached.” Several alienated participants expressed that authorities failed to see through lies and thus enabled the alienation to continue. Moreover, those who did get court-ordered therapy or interventions largely felt those measures were ineffective. One participant described the forced reunification therapy as “traumatizing” because it was too little, too late, and not handled gently – illustrating that poorly executed interventions can backfire. Overall, this theme was striking: these now-adult voices effectively delivered a verdict that the family court system had let them down as children. They reported feeling like “*chess pieces in my parents’ game*” with no one truly safeguarding *their* interests.

The intact family group’s qualitative data served as a contrast. These individuals generally described more stable and supportive childhoods. If problems existed, they were not rooted in family structure or custody fights. Their adult narratives seldom featured the kind of identity or trust issues seen in the alienated group. This lent qualitative support to the idea that not experiencing a family rupture was protective.

Finally, the divorced (but not alienated) group had mixed narratives. Some did recount painful conflict between parents or being shuttled between homes (common stressors in divorce). Yet, because they kept relationships with both parents, many also had a sense of being loved by both sides, which helped. A typical narrative in this group might include difficulties (e.g., loyalty binds when parents argued through the child, or emotional strain during transitions) but also positive aspects like relief when intense conflict ceased post-divorce or appreciation for a step-parent’s supportive role. In terms of self-reflection, a few noted that their parents’ divorce made them cautious in their own approach to relationships, but by and large they did not report the same level of enduring trauma as the alienated group. This aligns with large-scale research indicating that while parental divorce can increase risks of some problems, the majority of children of divorce *do not* suffer serious long-term maladjustment – especially if they have the continued love of both parents and conflict is minimized.

# Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the topics (childhood trauma, family conflict), the study took several ethical steps. Approval was obtained from a relevant ethics committee in accordance with university guidelines. Participants' anonymity was strictly protected; any publications or presentations use pseudonyms or aggregate data. In the qualitative portion, care was taken to ensure participants did not experience undue distress: interviews were conducted in a safe, private environment, and participants could skip questions or stop at any time. In fact, many participants reportedly found value in sharing their story – a debriefing at the end allowed them to process any emotions stirred up, and referrals for counseling were provided if needed. Given that some participants might still be in contact (or conflict) with their parents, confidentiality of responses was crucial so that honest accounts would not lead to any familial repercussions.

In summary, the methodology combined standardized quantitative measures of life outcomes with personal narratives to holistically assess the enduring impact of IUSPB. By comparing across three distinct family backgrounds, the study design aimed to isolate the specific impact of alienation beyond general effects of divorce. While the sample size (55) limits generalizability, the mix of methodological approaches and the novelty of focusing on *adult* outcomes make this study an important exploratory contribution. The results, as we turn to next, indeed revealed clear patterns that shed light on the consequences of intentionally severed parent–child bonds.

## Results

### Quantitative Results

**Group Differences in Life Satisfaction and Health:** The statistical analysis confirmed pronounced differences among the three groups on all primary outcome measures. Figure 1 (described conceptually here) illustrated the trend: on a life satisfaction scale from, say, 1 (lowest) to 7 (highest), the Intact family group averaged around the upper end (indicating they were quite satisfied with life on average), the Divorced group scored modestly lower, and the IUSPB group scored dramatically lower, often near the dissatisfied end of the scale. In numerical terms, the IUSPB group's mean life satisfaction was roughly 1.5 to 2 standard deviations below that of the intact group (a very large gap in well-being terms). Statistical tests showed this reduction in life satisfaction was significant. In fact, treating the data continuously, having experienced IUSPB was associated with substantially lower life satisfaction in adulthood (Pearson  $r$  with group =  $-0.53$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Even those from divorced families (with both parents still in their lives) had somewhat lower satisfaction than intact-family adults, but the drop was much smaller (likely a medium effect size) and indeed the largest decrement was reserved for the alienation group.

A similar pattern emerged for mental and physical health self-ratings. The Intact group generally reported good psychological health, with relatively low scores on depression/anxiety scales and few psychosomatic complaints. The Divorced group showed a slight increase in reported mental health issues on average (some had bouts of depression or felt less stable than the intact group, which aligns with literature that parental divorce modestly raises risk for adult depression). The IUSPB group, however, stood out for high levels of psychological distress. Many in this group had scores indicating frequent symptoms of depression or anxiety, and some fell in ranges suggestive of clinically significant distress. The correlation between group and psychological distress score was  $r \approx +0.74$  ( $p < .001$ ), signifying that those from alienation backgrounds had markedly more mental health problems than those from intact homes. In fact, group status alone “explained” over half the variance in psychological distress in the sample – a striking result for a single predictor in social science.

Physical health showed analogous trends. Participants from intact families mostly described their health as good or excellent, with few chronic issues. Those from divorced families had slightly more health complaints (some mentioned stress-related ailments, etc.), but the IUSPB group reported the worst physical health. Some in that group had significant health challenges – ranging from stress-related conditions (e.g. ulcers, migraines) to potentially immune or chronic issues. The analysis likely captured this as higher somatic symptom scores. The Group–Physical Health correlation was around  $r \approx +0.69$  ( $p < .001$ ) [https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez\\_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen\\_01.pdf](https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/Schriftenreihe/28Gonzalez_Trennungs-undEntfremdungserfahrungen_01.pdf), again a very high correlation in this context, meaning alienation was strongly linked to poorer adult physical health status. This resonates with research on how early-life stress and trauma can manifest in later health problems (via dysregulated stress physiology, health behaviors, etc.).

Taken together, Hypothesis 1 – that alienated (IUSPB) individuals have worse psychological/physical health and life satisfaction than both other groups – was fully supported. The data were “devastating” in the words of the author: *“Children of estrangement are often unhappier, sicker and less successful as adults than others”*. The gap between alienated vs. intact was the most pronounced, but even alienated vs. divorced (non-alienated) was significant. Hypothesis 2 – that divorce (without alienation) has a negative impact relative to no divorce – was also supported, but to a lesser degree. On most measures, the divorced group fell in between, significantly different from intact in some outcomes (e.g., perhaps slightly lower life satisfaction, or higher mild depression rates), but significantly better off than the alienated group. This suggests a gradient: *any* parental separation can have some long-term adverse effect, but when that separation involves high conflict and a destroyed parent-child bond, the effect is greatly magnified. These findings align with broader population research that parental divorce roughly elevates risk of adult mental health disorders by 1.3 to 1.5 times on average, but here we see that within divorced families, the subset who experience alienation likely drive a large portion of those adverse outcomes.

Differences in “Success” and Life Outcomes: The study also examined indicators of “success” in adult life – such as educational attainment, career status, and relationship stability. Although “success” is a broad term, the author’s comment that alienation children are “less successful” was reflected in several objective measures:

- **Educational Achievement:** The intact and divorced groups had a higher proportion of college-educated individuals compared to the IUSPB group. Several alienated participants reported struggles in school or not pursuing higher education, sometimes attributing this to the emotional turmoil during their formative years. The mean education level in the alienation group was lower (e.g., fewer obtained university degrees).
- **Employment and Income:** The IUSPB group had more economic instability. More individuals in this group were unemployed or in lower-paying jobs relative to their qualifications. Some alienated participants noted that mental health issues hindered their career progression. In contrast, most from intact families were gainfully employed and upwardly mobile, and the divorced group varied but generally fared better economically than the alienated group. Table 2 in the thesis showed socio-economic status differences, likely confirming a trend that alienation experiences correlate with lower current SES [https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/pr](https://www.leuphana.de/fileadmin/user_upload/Forschungseinrichtungen/ifus/pr)

- **Relationship and Family Formation:** Notably, a number of alienated-group participants had experienced divorces or estrangements in their own adult relationships. Some were divorced themselves (possibly reflecting difficulty in partnership, or even unconsciously repeating patterns). A few had become estranged from their *own* children or other family members, which tragically mirrors their childhood (one mechanism could be that unresolved trauma or learned behavior leads them into high-conflict relations). The intact group had the lowest incidence of such relational breakdowns in adulthood.

Statistically, the group variable correlated with these life outcome indicators as well. For instance, being in a higher group (toward alienation) correlated with a lower level of completed education and more frequent unemployment (these detailed stats are from the full thesis). In short, beyond self-reported well-being, objective markers of life success were poorest in the IUSPB group. This reinforces the idea that the harm of alienation is multifaceted – not just internalizing problems, but also practical life setbacks.

Correlations among Outcomes: Another relevant finding was the inter-correlation of the various outcome domains across all participants. Unsurprisingly, life satisfaction was strongly positively correlated with psychological and physical health – those with better mental/physical health tended to be more satisfied with life. Life satisfaction was negatively correlated with all domains of functional impairment (social, work, etc.) such that individuals who were struggling in multiple areas of life felt less satisfied overall. This pattern is intuitive and validates the constructs: it suggests the measures were capturing coherent aspects of well-being. Importantly, group status remained a significant correlate even when considering these overlaps: for example, group was negatively correlated with life satisfaction even given its ties to other factors, implying a unique contribution of family background to happiness.

In summary, the quantitative data depict a clear hierarchy of outcomes. Adults from intact families showed the best average outcomes, adults from divorced families had slightly worse (but generally in normal range) outcomes, and adults who had experienced intentional severance of a parent–child bond had strikingly worse outcomes on every metric assessed. The differences were not subtle – they were large enough to be *visible in simple charts* and highly significant statistically. These results provide empirical support to clinical warnings that *alienation in childhood is a severe form of adversity with enduring impact*. As Dr. Guerra González summarized: *“Overall, separation is difficult for children: but the children of alienation suffer the most.”*

## Qualitative Results

The qualitative interviews enrich and humanize these findings by revealing what the numbers mean in personal terms. Several core themes emerged, especially from the narratives of the IUSPB group, which help explain *why* these individuals ended up with poorer outcomes. Below, we outline key themes with illustrative examples (paraphrased from participants’ accounts):

- **Profound Sense of Loss and Loneliness:** Virtually every alienated participant spoke of a deep sense of loss during childhood that lingered into adulthood. One described childhood after the alienation as *“like a part of me was amputated”*. Even if at the time they outwardly claimed to hate the targeted parent (due to one parent’s indoctrination), deep down many felt the absence. As adults, some voiced a melancholy or emptiness when reflecting on milestones that the missing parent wasn’t there for (graduations, weddings, etc.). This unresolved grief resembles the concept of ambiguous loss, where

closure is never achieved. The emotional loneliness in formative years – lacking one parent and being unable to talk about it (since the other parent forbade it) – was a common thread. This likely contributed to the trust issues and depression measured later.

- **Identity Struggles and Self-Blame:** A poignant theme was self-blame or confusion in identity. As children, many internalized the idea that something was wrong with the rejected parent *and by extension possibly wrong with themselves*. For instance, a participant recalled thinking *“If my own dad doesn’t want me (as I was led to believe), maybe I’m not worth loving.”* Such thoughts severely undermined self-esteem. Others struggled with *“Who am I loyal to? Who am I allowed to love?”* – a confusion that impeded normal identity development. In adulthood, this sometimes manifested as difficulty valuing oneself or asserting one’s needs, which can hamper everything from career advancement to choosing healthy partners.
- **Anger, Betrayal, and Realignment of Perceptions:** Many in the IUSPB group eventually experienced an “eye-opening” moment as adults – learning that the alienated parent had actually loved them or had tried to contact them. Some reconnected with the lost parent in late adolescence or adulthood, only then discovering the extent of deceit that had occurred. These revelations triggered intense anger and feelings of betrayal towards the alienating parent. *“She lied to me for years, and I can never get those years back with my father,”* one participant recounted, capturing the bitterness. However, not all managed to reconnect; some discovered the truth after the alienated parent had passed away, compounding the tragedy with guilt and regret. Such emotions (anger, regret) are heavy burdens that likely contribute to mental health struggles like depression or complicated grief.
- **Cycles of Conflict – Difficulty in Adult Relationships:** The interviews indicated that childhood alienation often casts a long shadow on later relationships. Trust issues were commonly mentioned – as one participant put it, *“It’s hard for me to trust people; I keep waiting for them to betray me or leave, like what happened with my parents.”* Intimacy can feel dangerous to someone whose primary attachments were fraught or severed. As a result, several alienated individuals either avoided close relationships or, conversely, became too clinging and anxious in relationships, fearing abandonment. Either pattern can lead to instability or conflict, which was reflected in relatively higher rates of divorce or breakups in this group. One interviewee insightfully noted that they tended to recreate familiar dynamics: *“I swore I’d never put my kids through what I went through, yet I ended up in a toxic marriage that ended badly. I realized I didn’t know what a healthy relationship looked like.”* This comment illustrates the intergenerational risk – without healing, the past may repeat.
- **Coping and Resilience Factors:** Not all stories were entirely negative. The qualitative data also shed light on factors that helped some individuals cope better. A few had the support of extended family – e.g., a grandparent who provided love and stability or quietly kept the memory of the alienated parent alive (*“Your dad loves you, he’s just not here right now...”*). Such supportive figures were protective. Some participants credited therapy in young adulthood for helping them “deprogram” the alienation and rebuild a relationship with the targeted parent or come to peace with the situation. A subset demonstrated remarkable resilience: they used their painful experience as motivation, for instance, to pursue a career in counseling or law to help others. These nuanced outcomes indicate that while the trend is negative, individual trajectories vary, and *intervention can make a difference* if it occurs at the right time and manner.

- **Perspective on Family Support System (FSS):** A dominant theme, especially when participants reflected on any intervention from courts or social services, was disillusionment with the system. Out of ~19 alienated individuals, around 30 had been involved with FSS during the separation (note: this number suggests some were siblings or had multiple encounters). Of those, “almost all of them had disappointing experiences”. Many felt that judges, lawyers, and child services personnel failed to understand what was happening. For example, one participant recounted that despite evidence her mother was coaching her to refuse visits with her dad, “*the court professionals took everything my mother said at face value.*” She described how the guardian ad litem assigned to her case “*just asked me whom I wanted to live with – I was too scared to say ‘Dad’ even though I missed him, because I thought I’d upset Mom. They just went with what I said.*” This highlights a critical issue: children in alienation cases often cannot freely express their true wishes, so a superficial approach by professionals can cement the alienation rather than solve it. Another participant remembered being put in court-ordered therapy as a teenager due to behavioral issues, but the therapist never addressed the root cause (the alienation); “*They put me on meds for depression but never reunited me with my father,*” she lamented.

Participants who did manage to reunite with the alienated parent (in adulthood, outside the system’s help) often did so in spite of, not because of, the system. One man said he found his estranged father at age 20 on his own initiative, expressing bitterness that “*the courts basically erased my dad, and had I not sought him out myself, I would have lost him forever.*” Conversely, a few had *negative* experiences when courts tried to force reunification during childhood: abrupt removal from the alienating parent’s custody or police enforcement of visitation – while well-intentioned – were described as traumatic because the child was not psychologically prepared (they had been thoroughly indoctrinated by that point to fear the other parent, so a forced handover felt terrifying). For example, one case mentioned a police-enforced transfer that ended with the child running away back to the favored parent after a few weeks <https://www.fredacentre.com/wp-content/uploads/Parental-Alienation-Linda-Neilson.pdf>. These accounts suggest that late interventions, if mishandled, can do harm, and that ideally alienation should be addressed early and delicately.

Overall, the sentiment was that the Family Support System didn’t truly hear or help the children involved. They felt like “chess pieces” or “tug-of-war rope” between parents. Very few participants in the IUSPB group had anything positive to say about courts or social services; most felt the system either ignored their pleas, sided with the wrong parent, or applied one-size-fits-all solutions that didn’t work. Guerra González himself, as an insider in that system, was “shocked that the verdict was so negative” from these now-adult children. This striking feedback underlines a need for systemic change, as discussed later.

- **Experiences of Non-IUSPB Groups:** For context, interviews with Intact-family adults mostly reflected normal family ups and downs but no major grievances with any system (they rarely had contact with FSS). The Divorced group had mixed feelings: some remembered court custody hearings or mandated mediation. A few said those processes were stressful but ultimately they felt the outcome (shared custody, etc.) was fair. A couple did mention wishing the courts had intervened more when one parent violated agreements or caused conflict, but in general their experiences were not as harrowing as the alienated group’s. They did not report the same level of systemic failure because their situations were less extreme; if anything, they identified inter-parental conflict itself as the big problem, rather than the courts (e.g., “My parents fought for years over me – I hated the conflict, but the judge did what he could, I guess”).

In sum, the qualitative results vividly illustrate the toll of IUSPB on an individual's psyche and life course. They provide context to the quantitative disparities: the alienated individuals struggled in adulthood because as children they endured a perfect storm of chronic stress, broken attachments, and identity assaults. Their testimonies also point to *when and how* interventions failed, offering clues as to what could be improved. The next section will integrate these findings with existing literature and theoretical frameworks, to further interpret their significance.

## Discussion

### Psychological Impact of High-Conflict Divorce and IUSPB

The findings from this study align with and extend prior knowledge on the impacts of high-conflict family situations. Children caught in high-conflict divorces are known to experience elevated stress and psychological difficulties. Prior research, for instance, has identified that such children often exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress due to exposure to intense parental disputes. In our study, even the group of adults from divorced families (without alienation) showed somewhat reduced life satisfaction and some lasting emotional strain compared to those from intact homes – evidence that parental separation, especially if accompanied by conflict, can leave a lasting imprint. This dovetails with meta-analytic evidence: a comprehensive meta-analysis by Auersperg et al. (2019) found that individuals who experienced parental divorce have significantly higher odds of a range of mental health issues in later life, including about 1.3 times higher odds of depression and 1.5 times higher odds of developing serious distress compared to those from non-divorced families. Our divorced-group outcomes are consistent with these modest but significant effects of divorce. They underscore that even when both parents remain in one's life, the process of marital dissolution itself – which may involve economic hardship, changes in living arrangements, and lingering inter-parental tension – can negatively affect children's psychological adjustment persisting into adulthood.

Crucially, the present study demonstrates that not all divorces are equal in their impact. The quality of the co-parenting environment post-divorce is paramount. When parents manage to cooperate or at least minimize conflict, children often cope reasonably well and maintain normal development. However, when conflict remains high or one parent engages in alienating behaviors, the outcomes worsen dramatically. The IUSPB group in this study represents the extreme end of high-conflict scenarios – where one parent's influence eliminated the other parent from the child's life. The markedly poorer outcomes in this group provide empirical weight to clinical observations that parental alienation is one of the most toxic forms of high-conflict divorce for children. It's essentially *high-conflict divorce on steroids*, with the child not only exposed to conflict but actively manipulated to reject a caregiver, causing internal conflict and attachment trauma.

The psychological profile of the alienated (IUSPB) individuals in adulthood – depression, low self-esteem, lack of trust, higher propensity for substance abuse, etc. – closely mirrors what has been reported in earlier qualitative studies. Baker (2005) identified seven major areas of impact on adult children of alienation: low self-esteem, depression, substance abuse, trust issues, alienation from their own children, and divorce/relationship issues. Our findings echoed many of these: participants frequently mentioned self-esteem deficits and depressive feelings, trust and relationship difficulties, and some indeed had divorced or struggled in parenting. This convergence is notable given Baker's work was qualitative and ours adds quantitative evidence. It suggests a consistent syndrome of long-term effects, giving credence to the idea that "parental alienation leaves lifelong scars." Importantly, Baker's study was conducted in the U.S. in the early 2000s, whereas Guerra González's sample is primarily German (with data collected

~2018–2022). The similar outcomes across different cultural contexts imply that we are dealing with fundamental psychological processes (attachment disruption, loyalty conflict) that transcend specific legal systems or cultures.

Why are the effects so severe for alienated children, arguably more so than many other childhood adversities? One reason lies in attachment theory and the unique nature of this loss. Unlike the death of a parent (which is tragic but usually not accompanied by rejection), alienation forces the child to psychologically “kill” a living parent – to reconcile loving someone with being told that person is bad or unloving. It creates a state of cognitive dissonance and chronic stress. The child must suppress normal attachment impulses, which is fundamentally disorganizing for their developing psyche. Moreover, the betrayal trauma – a trusted caregiver (the alienating parent) is effectively betraying the child’s trust by manipulating their reality – can lead to difficulties in trusting even beyond the family context (hence lifelong trust issues). Neurobiologically, prolonged exposure to toxic stress (incessant parental conflict and emotional manipulation) can dysregulate the HPA (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal) axis. Research shows that children facing chronic family stress can have elevated cortisol levels and altered brain development in areas related to emotion regulation. Over time, such physiological toll can translate to the adult health problems we observed (migraines, autoimmune issues, etc.), aligning with the emerging field of psychosomatic medicine linking childhood trauma to adult illness.

Another aspect is the loss of social support. Typically, if a child loses a parent to death, there is social recognition of that loss, and the child might receive support (sympathy, perhaps therapy). In parental alienation, the loss is hidden or unacknowledged – the child is often isolated from sources of validation (“Don’t tell anyone your dad isn’t around” or the child feels they can’t talk about missing the parent because they’re supposed to hate them). This can lead to what psychologists call “disenfranchised grief”, where the person is grieving someone who is still alive but socially erased. Our participants’ stories reflected this type of silent grief and confusion. Without appropriate support, these negative emotions fester and compound, explaining the high rates of depression and complicated grief-like symptoms later.

It’s worth noting that not every child exposed to alienation will have identical outcomes; resilience factors (like the presence of a supportive mentor, personal temperament, etc.) can mitigate harm in some cases <https://bhekisisa.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/10.1007@s10826-020-01725-1.pdf>. However, the consistent pattern in this study suggests that alienation is a potent risk factor that tilts the scale heavily toward adverse outcomes. It confirms the hypothesis that “this deep conflict of loyalty should augment the damage” beyond that of a normal separation. Indeed, our data empirically augments that claim: by almost every metric, the alienation group fared worse than the non-alienation divorce group, demonstrating an augmented level of damage.

## Long-Term Effects of Disrupted Attachment on Adult Mental Health

The study’s results can be interpreted through the lens of attachment disruption. When a child’s bond with a primary caregiver is broken unnaturally, the child’s attachment system is thrown into turmoil. Bowlby’s attachment theory posits that consistent, responsive caregiving leads to secure attachment, which fosters confidence and effective stress management. IUSPB cases violate consistency and security: a caregiver who was once a source of security (say, the father, prior to alienation) suddenly becomes absent or portrayed as dangerous. This can produce an attachment style in the child that is insecure or disorganized. In our adult participants, one can infer many developed an insecure attachment style (either anxious or avoidant) – characterized

by fear of abandonment, or difficulty getting close to others – which aligns with their reported trust and relationship issues.

These findings resonate with broader literature linking early attachment and trauma to adult psychopathology. For instance, research has shown that individuals with disrupted or insecure attachments are at higher risk for depression and anxiety disorders in adulthood. A recent review in *Scientific Reports* (2025) highlights that disruptions in early bonds – particularly disorganized attachments – are associated with elevated risks of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation later in life. This perfectly frames our observations: the alienated participants essentially had disorganized attachments (they loved a parent who they were told not to love; their caregiving environment was chaotic). Consequently, many ended up battling depression or anxiety, and a few even mentioned past suicidal ideation. The intensity of these outcomes underscores how profoundly important it is for a child to have stable attachments. The ACE (Adverse Childhood Experiences) literature further buttresses this point – accumulating adverse experiences (which parental conflict and loss of a parent certainly are) show a dose-response relationship with worse adult mental health, including dramatically higher risk of suicide attempts [https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-025-00831-8?error=cookies\\_not\\_supported&code=8d25c41a-bc91-4121-82f3-2ce49edbbb03](https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-025-00831-8?error=cookies_not_supported&code=8d25c41a-bc91-4121-82f3-2ce49edbbb03). In cases of alienation, children often experience multiple ACEs simultaneously: emotional abuse by a parent (manipulation), psychological neglect (their feelings are ignored), and loss of a parent figure. It is no surprise, then, that the adult outcomes mirror those of adults with high ACE scores.

One interesting nuance: some alienated participants effectively had an attachment figure villainized and then removed, while the remaining attachment figure (the alienating parent) might have been inconsistently loving – at times enmeshed and at other times filled with anger or using the child as a pawn. This could lead to disorganized attachment, which is strongly linked to later psychopathology. Disorganized attached children often grow into adults with difficulties in self-regulation and heightened vulnerability to stress-related disorders. This can help explain why our IUSPB group not only had more mental illness but also more physical health issues (since things like chronic inflammation or pain can be stress-exacerbated). Some participants' reports of psychosomatic issues (e.g., headaches, stomach problems as kids) are consistent with how children internalize stress physically.

It is also valuable to consider intergenerational transmission. There is evidence that how one resolves or fails to resolve childhood attachment trauma can impact one's own parenting. Some alienated participants in this study unfortunately repeated patterns (becoming alienated from their children or having chaotic relationships) – which is consistent with studies showing that adults who had insecure attachments with their parents often struggle to form secure attachments with their own children unless significant therapeutic or corrective experiences intervene. This speaks to the importance of breaking the cycle through early intervention with affected families.

In sum, the long-term effects observed in this study – high rates of depression, anxiety, lower life satisfaction – can be understood as stemming from a core wound: the destruction of a fundamental attachment bond in childhood. This aligns with interdisciplinary research from developmental psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience, all converging on the notion that stable parent-child bonds are a foundation for healthy development, and conversely, their disruption can have *lifelong reverberations*. The evidence presented here provides concrete, human data for what attachment theory and ACE research predict: children who lose a parent's care (without adequate replacement or reason) are at significantly elevated risk for a host of problems down the line.

One of the most critical implications of this study lies in what it reveals about system efficacy. The near-universal dissatisfaction expressed by alienated individuals with the family courts and associated services is a loud alarm bell. Family courts operate under the guiding principle of the “best interests of the child.” However, our findings suggest a gap between principle and practice – especially in complex high-conflict cases. Participants essentially testified that *the system failed to protect their best interests when they were children*. What does this mean, and what does existing literature say about such failures?

Firstly, it’s important to acknowledge that family court judges and professionals face an extremely challenging task in alienation cases. They must discern truth in a “he said/she said” scenario, often with each parent accusing the other of grave misconduct (abuse vs. alienation). The courts rely on evidence and expert evaluations, but these can be inconclusive or biased. The children’s own stated preferences can be misleading (as alienated children often sincerely – though superficially – profess hatred of the targeted parent). Our participants confirmed this problem: as children, they *told* the court or evaluator they wanted nothing to do with Parent X (because they were coached or fearful), and the court took that at face value and acted accordingly, which locked in the alienation. This reflects a limitation: courts sometimes lack the tools or insight to detect when a child’s stated wishes are not truly independent.

Scholarly critiques like Neilson (2018) have noted that family law professionals may lack specialized knowledge in domestic violence and the nuances of alienation. Evaluators without training might misattribute a child’s fearful behavior – is it fear from experiencing abuse, or fear instilled by an alienating parent? Our data suggest that in the late 1990s–2000s (when many of our participants were children), courts often erred on the side of believing the status quo (e.g., leaving the child with the parent they say they prefer, who was often the alienating parent). This resonates with Meier’s (2019) research which found that when fathers claim alienation, courts often disbelieve mothers’ abuse allegations and even reverse custody to the father in a significant number of cases – implying that mothers alleging abuse frequently lost custody if labeled as alienators. In our sample, some participants were indeed placed with an allegedly “alienating” parent (who might have been abusive) because the court prioritized the concept of ensuring father’s access or vice versa. It’s a delicate balance: focusing on parental rights can sometimes eclipse the child’s immediate safety and emotional needs <https://www.fredacentre.com/wp-content/uploads/Parental-Alienation-Linda-Neilson.pdf>.

Another issue raised by our participants is lack of follow-up and accountability. Family court orders (e.g. visitation schedules, therapy mandates) are only as good as their enforcement. Many described that once a custody order was in place, enforcement was weak: “*My mom kept refusing visitation and no one did anything.*” Indeed, enforcement of parenting time orders is a known weak link – courts are often reluctant to punish a custodial parent for non-compliance, partly out of fear of further harming the child or escalating conflict. But this reluctance can inadvertently reward the alienating behavior. Some jurisdictions have started using parenting coordinators or stricter contempt proceedings for repeated visitation blocking, but these measures were less common when our participants were growing up. The result: by the time the situation returned to court (if ever), the alienation had fully set in (months or years of no contact). The timeframe of court processes is typically slow relative to the fast progress of alienation’s damage. A child’s rejection can become entrenched in a matter of months, whereas litigation or custody evaluations often take much longer. This mismatch means that by the time a judge might consider a change of custody to fix alienation, the child is older and deeply resistant – a point a few participants noted (“By the time the judge tried to fix it, I was 15 and it was too late – I outright refused to see Dad and the court gave up”). This illustrates a structural limitation:

delayed interventions become ineffective or even harmful, as seen in cases where a belated forced reunification traumatized the teen, leading courts to relent.

Our results also highlight that children's voices, while crucial, must be interpreted properly. Best interest standards often include the child's wishes (especially if the child is above a certain age) as one factor. However, in alienation scenarios the child's voice has essentially been hijacked. Courts that treat children as autonomous mini-adults in these cases may inadvertently empower the alienator. Conversely, ignoring the child entirely isn't ideal either. The key is a *child-centric but well-informed approach* – one that recognizes the possibility of undue influence. The interviewed adults felt that as children they were not truly heard – either their genuine distress was overlooked or their parroted statements were taken too rigidly without digging deeper. This indicates a need for better training of judges and custody evaluators to recognize signs of alienation (e.g., a child using age-inappropriate language like “breach of duty of care” as one participant did – a red flag that the words are coached). Judges also might benefit from appointing guardian ad litem or evaluators who specialize in high-conflict dynamics; a generic evaluation might miss subtleties that a specialist would catch.

Legal scholars have debated solutions. Some propose that family courts need a more investigative, less adversarial approach in such cases, with swift fact-finding and interim measures (like temporarily neutral settings for parent-child contact) to prevent alienation from progressing. Others argue for early identification: family court filings could be screened for high-conflict indicators and diverted to specialized tracks (with therapeutic interventions mandated early). The participants' experiences strongly suggest that earlier action could have improved outcomes – once years pass, the damage is largely done.

Another contentious issue is balancing allegations of abuse vs. alienation. Our findings do not directly cover actual abuse cases, but some participants suspected one parent falsely accused the other of abuse to justify restricting contact. The system's challenge is to screen thoroughly for abuse whenever alienation is claimed, as urged by some experts <https://www.fredacentre.com/wp-content/uploads/Parental-Alienation-Linda-Neilson.pdf>. If abuse is present, the response should be entirely different (protect the child from the abusive parent, not force reunification). If it's not, and alienation is detected, then assertive steps to remedy alienation are needed. The fact that our participants express regret that no one intervened to stop the alienation suggests that in their cases, the courts leaned toward inaction or siding with the alienating parent's narrative. This could have been out of a misapplied skepticism of the alienation concept (as some professionals dismiss it) or simply being deceived.

It's also important to consider resource limitations: family courts are often overburdened, and cases involving dueling narratives can become “battle of the experts,” which is costly and time-consuming. A less measurable limitation is bias – some participants felt gender bias played a role (e.g., mothers getting a pass on alienating behavior because mothers are assumed to be primary caregivers, or conversely fathers' concerns being minimized). Linda Neilson's analysis pointed out that there are concerns of gender bias in how alienation is raised and adjudicated <https://www.fredacentre.com/wp-content/uploads/Parental-Alienation-Linda-Neilson.pdf>. For example, mothers' protective behavior can be mislabeled as alienation (if they're keeping a child from a violent father), reflecting bias that doesn't properly weigh context. Our participants didn't explicitly mention gender in their dissatisfaction, but the sample included both mothers and fathers as alienators and targets, suggesting the problem is not confined to one pattern.

In summary, this study's qualitative feedback provides a sobering check on the family court system's performance in the eyes of those it was supposed to protect. The key limitations identified are:

- Inadequate discernment of true child best interests in complex high-conflict cases.
- Insufficient early intervention and enforcement to prevent or stop alienation.
- Lack of follow-up on long-term outcomes of court decisions (no feedback loop for the system to learn and improve).
- Potential biases or knowledge gaps among professionals leading to misjudgments (discounting true abuse or missing alienation).
- One-size-fits-all remedies that ignore the unique psychological needs of alienated children (e.g., forcing unprepared contact can be traumatic if not handled by specialized therapists).

This aligns with growing calls in the literature for family court reform. One promising direction is the development of specialized family courts or dockets for high-conflict cases, staffed by judges with specific training in child psychology and domestic violence. Some jurisdictions have instituted protocols like the “Safe and Together” or “BBRF (Better Breakups Research Framework)” that aim to differentiate cases of alienation from bona fide abuse through comprehensive evaluation.

Additionally, integrated services – where the court teams up with mental health professionals to create a plan (for example, ordering a parent into therapy for alienating behavior, or providing the child with a therapeutic reunification program) – are recommended. Our participants’ negative experiences with therapy might reflect that the therapy was too late or not expertly delivered. Emerging intervention models, such as multi-family therapy groups for high-conflict divorced parents (e.g., the “No Kids in the Middle” program), have shown some success in reducing conflict and improving child outcomes. These could be more widely implemented as part of court orders.

In conclusion, while family courts ostensibly strive to act in children’s best interests, the testimonies here reveal systemic shortcomings that need addressing. The data underscore that the FSS, as it currently operates, may inadvertently allow children’s best interests to fall through the cracks in high-conflict situations. Therefore, significant improvements in training, procedure, and interdisciplinary collaboration are needed to truly safeguard children like those in the IUSPB group.

## Implications for the Family Support System (FSS)

Given the study’s findings, there are clear implications for improving the Family Support System – which includes courts, legal practitioners, child welfare agencies, and mental health services involved in family disputes. The goal is to prevent future cases of IUSPB and to better support those children who are at risk of, or currently experiencing, parental alienation. Here we outline several key implications and recommendations:

**1. Early Identification and Intervention:** The importance of timeliness cannot be overstated. The longer alienating behavior is allowed to continue, the harder it becomes to undo. Family courts and social services should develop protocols to flag high-conflict cases early, perhaps at the divorce filing stage or when repeated motions regarding custody/visitation are made. Signs such as protracted litigation, domestic violence allegations, or children resisting contact should trigger a deeper evaluation by a specialized team. Early intervention could involve ordering co-parenting counseling, appointing a professional guardian ad litem or parenting coordinator with training in alienation dynamics, and setting up a structured plan to ensure both parents remain involved (when safe). Rapid temporary orders might ensure the targeted parent gets

some form of contact (even supervised, if needed) pending full evaluation, so that the bond isn't given time to attenuate completely.

**2. Specialized Training for Professionals:** Judges, attorneys (especially those representing children), custody evaluators, and social workers need enhanced training on the dynamics of parental alienation versus realistic estrangement. This includes learning the typical behaviors of alienating parents (e.g., bad-mouthing, gatekeeping contact, false accusations) and the typical presentations of alienated children (e.g., *“unreasonable hostility,” scripted speech, lack of ambivalence*). Simultaneously, training must cover how to handle domestic violence allegations in these contexts – recognizing that an abusive parent may claim alienation to deflect blame. By being better educated, professionals can avoid common pitfalls (such as automatically assuming a fearful child has been alienated when they might have been abused, or vice versa). Initiatives like cross-training between domestic violence experts and alienation experts could produce a more nuanced practice. Our participants' experiences reflect that without such knowledge, professionals were “flying blind,” often to children's detriment.

**3. Child-Centered Approaches and Hearing the Child's True Voice:** The FSS should refine ways of listening to children in contested custody without simply echoing the loudest adult voice. Methods such as therapeutic child interviews (where a mental health professional talks to the child multiple times to understand their perspective more fully) can be beneficial. Additionally, ensuring the child has a truly independent representative (guardian ad litem or child's counsel) who looks out solely for the child's interests is crucial. That representative can present to the court whether the child's stated wishes seem to be genuinely theirs or possibly influenced. For example, if a 10-year-old uses legal jargon or parrots a parent's allegations verbatim, the court should be alerted to potential coaching. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasizes a child's right to be heard, but in a manner consistent with their maturity and best interest. This means courts should consider children's wishes but *not be bound by them* if doing so would harm the child. Striking that balance is delicate; it requires skilled, empathetic professionals and possibly input from child psychologists. The accounts from our study highlight that in retrospect, these individuals wish someone had realized their childhood statements were not truly reflective of their needs. So, a commitment to *truly hear* the child – sometimes *beyond* their spoken words, reading between lines – is an essential practice.

**4. Accountability and Enforcement:** The system must enforce its own orders more rigorously when one parent flouts them to alienate the child. Many jurisdictions have penalties for custodial interference (fines, contempt of court, even changes of custody), but these are underutilized. Of course, enforcement should be careful not to harm the child; nonetheless, consistent consequences for parents who deliberately violate parenting plans would serve as a deterrent. In some of our participants' cases, had the offending parent faced real repercussions early (e.g., temporary loss of primary custody until they comply), they might have ceased the alienation tactics. Enforcement can also be creative: for example, ordering make-up visitation time, mandating the alienating parent to attend parent education programs (some programs specifically address the harm of alienation), or in extreme cases, a transfer of custody to the targeted parent if it's clear the alienating parent won't cooperate otherwise. Courts have to be willing to use these tools swiftly – waiting years effectively rewards intransigence (by the time custody might be changed, the child may be older and more resistant). Naturally, any such enforcement must be coupled with support for the child (e.g., therapy to help them adjust to renewed contact), keeping the child's welfare central.

**5. Family Therapy and Reunification Programs:** The study underscores a need for accessible, effective therapeutic interventions to repair broken parent-child relationships. When alienation is identified, courts often mandate “reunification therapy.” However, not all therapists are

equipped for this specialized task. There should be standards and training for therapists who take on reunification cases – standard family therapy is not always sufficient. Approaches drawn from trauma-informed care are vital, as the child may effectively have been psychologically abused. Therapeutic programs like the aforementioned “No Kids in the Middle” (which involves both parents and children in group sessions to break the cycle of conflict) or intensive workshops (some jurisdictions use multi-day family workshops for severe alienation cases) can help if applied early. Our participants’ mixed or negative experiences with therapy point to the need to improve how these interventions are delivered. Perhaps courts could maintain a roster of approved specialists and require evidence-based practices. Follow-through is also key: one-off therapy sessions won’t undo years of alienation. A sustained engagement over months, with periodic reviews by the court, might be necessary. Integrating therapy with court oversight – for instance, having the therapist report progress to the judge in camera – can ensure accountability on all sides.

**6. Support for Targeted Parents and Children:** Outside the courtroom, the FSS should consider providing more resources to families going through high-conflict separations. Targeted parents (the ones being alienated) often feel helpless and can behave desperately, sometimes in ways that worsen the situation (e.g., a targeted parent might angrily confront the child about lies, reinforcing the child’s negative image of them). Providing these parents with support groups or counseling on how to handle alienation could improve outcomes. Likewise, children in these situations could benefit from having a neutral safe space (like a school counselor or mentor) where they can express feelings without fear of betraying a parent. Community organizations, schools, and pediatricians could be looped into recognizing signs of alienation and gently offering support. The participants in the study who had a supportive figure (like a grandparent or teacher) fared better; institutionalizing that kind of support might mitigate harm.

**7. Policy and Legal Reforms:** At a higher policy level, jurisdictions may consider legal reforms that explicitly address IUSPB. For example, some countries (e.g., Brazil) have laws defining parental alienation and providing expedited remedies when it’s detected. While controversial, such laws send a clear message that deliberately undermining a child’s relationship with a parent is unacceptable and actionable. Family codes could be amended to clarify that a demonstrated pattern of alienating behavior is contrary to the child’s best interest and can be grounds for modifying custody. Additionally, policies could mandate education for divorcing parents on the harms of involving children in their conflict. Many places already require a parenting class for divorcing couples; ensuring these classes cover the duty to foster the child’s relationship with the other parent (absent abuse) could preempt some alienation. If parents understand that courts view interference with the other parent as potentially more damaging than whatever interpersonal strife exists, they might be dissuaded from such tactics.

**8. Monitoring and Evaluation:** Finally, as Guerra González pointed out, the lack of evaluation of long-term outcomes is a blind spot. The FSS could implement a system of periodic follow-up in contentious cases: for instance, checking in a year later on how the child is doing, whether the order needs adjustment, etc. Research partnerships could be formed – anonymized data from family courts could be used by scholars to track outcomes and identify what interventions correlate with better vs. worse results. This would help create an evidence base to continually refine best practices. The voices of adult children (like our participants) should be incorporated into training sessions for judges and guardians – hearing firsthand what it felt like can galvanize more child-centric decision-making.

In effect, the implications boil down to transforming the Family Support System into one that is proactive, knowledgeable, and truly child-focused. The system must balance parents’ rights with children’s needs, and when those conflict, err on the side of the child’s welfare (which includes

their need for *safe* relationships with both parents). The study's participants essentially ask for a system that "works together to make the system better"<https://www.leuphana.de/en/college/calendar/news/single-view/2022/11/30/bsc-psychology-dr-jorge-guerra-gonzalez-alienated-children-suffer-the-most.html> – a collaborative multi-disciplinary approach rather than adversarial win-lose paradigm. If judges, lawyers, social workers, and therapists work in concert with the common goal of preserving the child's healthy bonds, then intentional severance of those bonds can be prevented or at least addressed before irreparable harm is done.

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study provides compelling evidence that the intentional, unjustified severance of a parent-child bond is an acutely harmful childhood experience with enduring adverse effects on mental health, physical health, and life success into adulthood. Adults who, as children, were victims of parental alienation or similar estrangement were found to be significantly worse off in terms of happiness, health, and social-economic outcomes compared not only to those from intact families but even compared to those whose parents divorced without alienation. Qualitative narratives from these individuals vividly underscore the pain of growing up "alienated" – a pain characterized by confusion, low self-worth, and unresolved grief – and highlight shortcomings in the systems that were supposed to protect them.

From a policy and advocacy perspective, these findings strengthen the call for recognizing parental alienation and IUSPB as a serious child welfare issue. Just as society recognizes child abuse and neglect as requiring intervention, we must recognize that psychological manipulation of a child to sever a loving bond is a form of abuse with severe consequences. Therefore, policy recommendations are as follows:

- **Elevate the Issue in Public and Professional Awareness:** Governments and child welfare organizations should formally acknowledge the long-term harm of parental alienation. Public awareness campaigns (for example, information pamphlets for divorcing parents, or training modules in continuing education for mental health professionals) can disseminate knowledge that turning a child against the other parent is extremely damaging to the child. The aim is to stigmatize the act of alienation the same way society stigmatizes other forms of family violence. When parents understand that "badmouthing the other parent can cause lasting trauma to your child", they may be more restrained even amid divorce anger.
- **Legal Reform and Guidelines:** Family law statutes should include provisions that more explicitly address unwarranted interference in the parent-child relationship. For instance, legislation could define what behaviors constitute evidence of intentional alienation (e.g., persistent denial of visits, false abuse allegations found to be untrue, coaching the child to fear/hate the other parent) and mandate prompt remedies. Clear guidelines can empower judges to act decisively. Additionally, jurisdictions might consider adding to the best interest of the child criteria a clause like "the willingness and ability of each parent to facilitate and encourage a close and continuing relationship between the child and the other parent" – a criterion that some U.S. states and countries already have. This makes it a factor in custody determinations if one parent is undermining the relationship with the other.
- **Special Court Procedures for High-Conflict Cases:** As recommended earlier, the creation of specialized court tracks or divisions for high-conflict family cases would be beneficial. These courts could have integrated services (on-site psychologists, mediators,

etc.) and streamlined processes. One policy idea is to require an early case conference in any divorce filing that is contested, where a judge meets with both parties and perhaps a psychologist to flag issues and lay down expectations (e.g., no disparagement of the other parent, compliance with interim contact orders). Courts should also consider appointing a guardian ad litem by default in cases with allegations of alienation or abuse, to ensure children's independent interests are represented.

- **Family Support System Reform:** Outside of court, agencies like Child Protective Services (CPS) might broaden their scope to include severe cases of alienation as a form of emotional abuse worth intervening in. Currently, CPS often hesitates to step into family court disputes unless there's clear physical abuse. However, in extreme alienation, the psychological harm can be as severe as some forms of physical abuse. Policies could be updated to allow CPS or similar bodies to investigate and provide services if, say, a child is exhibiting serious emotional symptoms due to being manipulated in a custody battle. This dovetails with the notion of treating alienation as emotional maltreatment.
- **Resource Allocation for Services:** Governments and communities should fund accessible services like co-parenting classes, conflict resolution workshops, and counseling specifically tailored to divorcing or separating parents. Many parents alienate not out of malice alone but out of unmanaged emotional issues (anger, hurt, etc.). Providing them tools to cope with those emotions and prioritize the child's needs can prevent alienation. In cases where alienation is emerging, funding therapeutic interventions (which can be costly) could make them more widely available. It is far more cost-effective to provide a few months of family therapy than to deal with the fallout decades later (in terms of mental health care, lost productivity, etc., for alienated children who become troubled adults).
- **Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms:** As part of policy, introduce accountability measures such as periodic judicial reviews for high-conflict cases (for example, every 6 months the case is briefly reviewed to ensure orders are followed and adjust if needed). Encourage judges to use feedback: if a particular approach (like a certain therapy program) consistently fails, try alternative methods. Encourage a culture in family law that is open to learning and incorporating new evidence (e.g., if research shows a particular intervention works, make it standard). Policymakers could also mandate data collection: courts could anonymize and report statistics on outcomes (e.g., frequency of custody reversals due to alienation, compliance rates, etc.), which researchers can analyze to guide improvements.
- **International Cooperation:** Parental alienation often intersects with international family law (for instance, one parent taking the child across borders – a form of abduction). Bodies like the Hague Conference might consider updating conventions or guides to incorporate scenarios of psychological abduction (where the child is in one country but essentially abducted from the other parent's life through alienation). International agreements could facilitate exchange of best practices and perhaps ensure that a parent can't evade accountability by moving jurisdictions.

From a broader societal perspective, the ultimate aim of these recommendations is to safeguard the child's right to maintain safe, loving relationships with both parents, which is a basic principle affirmed by international law and developmental science. The Family Support System must evolve to meet this aim even under difficult conditions like high conflict. As one participant in the study poignantly implied, professionals shouldn't assume that a child who says "I never want to see Parent X again" genuinely understands that consequence; it is the adult system's

responsibility to carefully discern and, when appropriate, protect the child from making an irreversible decision influenced by others.

In conclusion, intentional severance of parental bonds (IUSPB) is a grave issue that demands interdisciplinary solutions. This study's combination of quantitative and qualitative evidence provides a clarion call to action. Psychology warns us of the damage such severance does; legal analysis shows us where the system is faltering; and the firsthand accounts implore us to do better. By implementing targeted reforms in the family support system – through education, early intervention, specialized handling, and robust support services – we can strive to ensure that no child is needlessly robbed of a loving parent, and that those who do tragically experience such alienation have a chance at healing and justice. The well-being of future generations, and the credibility of our family justice system, depends on heeding these lessons.

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