

## **Influence of intrafamilial abuse in children's change of values towards their parents**

**Miguel Clemente<sup>1</sup> and Dolores Padilla-Racero<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> Department of Psychology, Universidade da Coruña (Spain)

Address correspondence to: Miguel Clemente, Universide da Coruña (Spain), Psychology Department, Elviña's Campus, 15071 A Coruña, Spain. Email: miguel.clemente@udc.es

### **Abstract**

The socialization that parents and society exercise on children instills in them a set of values towards parents. Some of these values are not lying, feeling affection for the parents, and wanting to have contact with them. In this work, we attempt to determine whether these values change in the face of intrafamilial abuse. To that end, an incidental sample was used, consisting of 2730 minors aged between 6 to 18 years, who had never suffered abuse. They were asked to put themselves in the place of the main character of a story. The story varied depending on the conditions to be studied: observation and direct suffering or account of the abuse by another, type of abuse (physical or psychological), who perpetrated the abuse (custodian or non-custodial), and who received it (the other custodian or the minor). The results show that, as a rule, children lie to conceal both parents' abusive behavior; they love their parents and want to have contact with them, even in the presence of abuse. Notwithstanding that in the presence of abuse by one of their parents, children still love them and want to have contact with both parents, a significant number of children, however, stop loving them or want to have contact with the abusive parent. These results undermine what is defended by theories like PAS with no scientific evidence, and underline the need to use scientific procedures to test the reliability of minors' testimony based on the idea that children tell the truth.

**Key words:** child protection, parental alienation, parental alienation syndrome, socialization, values



## 1. Introduction

Parents are responsible for their children's socialization, such that they shape their children's minds, instilling in them a set of values or principles. These values have been little researched, but values are what permits social coexistence. In this work, we refer to some of them with regard to their involvement with police and judicial testimony of children in cases of alleged abuses; we are referring to the values of not lying (particularly to the parents), feeling affection for the parents, and wanting to be in contact with them.

The studies on the bond between parents and children, as well as on the relationships between them, prevailed during the 1980s and 1990s, under the notion of the social need for male parents to be more involved in childrearing (Bretherton, Lambert & Golby 2005).

Studies dealing with issues such as the similarities and differences in father-mother-child relationships, the role of arguments between the members of the couple, and—from a more psychological point of view—the role of affection in attachment relationships, the importance of instilling self-control in children, etc., started to emerge. In this regard, we consider very useful the classification established by Gracia, Lila and Musitu (2005), which reflects Rohner's (1975) idea that intercultural research identifies two dimensions of parents' behavior toward their children: acceptance and rejection. Thus, according to Rohner, parents' behavior can be defined as a continuum; at one end are parents who express love and affection towards their children, both verbally and physically; and at the other end are parents with aversive feelings toward their children, and whose practices may be severe and abusive. Rohner defines parental rejection as the absence or the significant withdrawal of warmth, affection, or love towards their children.

Rohner's (Rohner 1975, 1984, 1986, 1998; Rohner & Brothers 1999) research proposes three dimensions of parental rejection: hostility and aggression, indifference and neglect, and undifferentiated rejection.

A long tradition of research has proven that parenting styles characterized by anger, aggressiveness, and rejection are related to mental health issues in children (Gracia, Lila & Musitu 2005).

Gracia, Lila, and Musitu (2005) compared families with dysfunctional parent-child relationships with other groups of families considered normal. The results showed that rejected children were psychologically and socially different from children who maintained an appropriate relationship with their parents (characterized by the parents' expressed acceptance). The rejected children, when compared with the children of the control group, showed significantly more problems. These problematic children's personality was characterized by dependence, low self-esteem, and self-adjustment, emotional instability, and a negative view of the world. These authors' study showed that children's perceived rejection by either the mother or the father or both had a negative impact on their psychological and social adjustment.

The fact that children may easily be influenced to lie cannot be empirically proven. The work by Talwar, Arruda, and Yachison (2015) used both internal (being happy about oneself) and external motivators (others would be happy if the minor tells the truth) to influence children to tell the truth after having committed a reprehensible act. External motivators barely influenced children's truth-telling, but internal motivators did. Most of the children told the truth because they thought that was the way it was meant to be, and they

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said they felt happy doing so. This implies that it is very difficult for adults to easily persuade their children to lie. Clemente and Padilla-Racero (2015a, 2015b) have already shown in an empirical study that children, as a rule, do not lie and cannot be easily manipulated. With a sample of 300 children, aged between 6 and 12 years, these authors verified that almost all the children truthfully reported the troublesome facts they witnessed, and moreover, their reports were not influenced by external pressures and mediations.

Emotional expressiveness is a key factor in children's internalization of the main values, and it is transmitted by parents. It consists of what is called affection or, generally, love, the fact of loving one's parents. Accordingly, Barry and Kochanska (2010) reported that parents' emotional expressiveness toward their children is highest early in the child's development, and declines thereafter, whereas children's emotional expressiveness grows increasingly from 15 months old on. Children who express a greater level of positive emotions interact better with other people and inspire greater affection from others.

Whereas emotional expressiveness or affection is an important variable that parents demand and instill in their children, it is subject to cultural variations (Fischer, Harvey & Driscoll 2009).

It is relevant to examine the opposite case, that is, the use of the so-called instrumental lying by parents to promote their children's behavioral compliance. Adults, while instilling in their children the notion that one must never lie, systematically take advantage of lie-telling to manage them (Heyman et al. 2013). This line of research, comparing the possible lie-telling by parents and children, was also studied by Perkins and Turiel (2007), using a sample of 128 adolescents. The findings, similar to those in previous works, show how the acceptance of deception grows increasingly as the minors grow older, but all of them reject lie-telling. Moreover, the most rejected type of lie-telling is that which conceals a crime or breaks the law, and the main reason for telling the truth is moral, the internalization that one must always tell the truth.

As previously pointed out, there is much research in line with the idea that children, as a rule, do not lie. Authors such as Clemente and Padilla-Racero (2015a), Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Finnbogadottir, and Smari (2006), or Perkins and Turiel (2007) report that minors, as a rule, do not lie.

Socialization produced in a normalized family instills in the children a series of a priori ideas regarding the parent-children relationship. Three of the main instilled ideas are:

- From a behavioral perspective: not to lie.
- From an emotional perspective: to have positive feelings toward both parents, and even to equally express love for both. That is; to love both of them,
- And also, from a behavioral perspective: to express the desire to maintain contact with both parents, that is: not to cease having contact with both of them.

These three aspects are resistant to change, such that if a parent does not act appropriately toward a child, the child initially tends to maintain a positive feeling toward both parents and will defend the idea of maintaining contact with them. Furthermore, if a minor is asked about a parent's behavior, the minor will tend to tell the truth.

Nevertheless, family dynamics are complex, and, under certain circumstances in family life, these broadly instilled values in children may be altered. Within these family dynamics, parents' separation or divorce deserves special mention because of its great incidence and repercussion in children's lives. If the divorce puts an end to a coexistence in

which there was no intrafamilial violence, after a period of children's adjustment to the new situation, the aforementioned social values of telling the truth and loving and wanting to maintain contact with both parents should not be altered. Unfortunately, some divorces occur in contexts of violence, where one parent abuses the other parent or the children. When this happens, how do the social values instilled in the children change? Will the children tell the truth about the abuse? And will they still love their parents and want to maintain contact with both parents? These aspects are essential to determine the children's custody and communication with their parents after separation or divorce.

In order to determine the parent with whom the minors are going to live and the children's visiting schedule with the other parent (except when there is alternating custody), many judges base their decisions on that subject of psychodynamic theories that asserts that both traditional parental figures—that is, both the mother and the father—are necessary for the child's optimal psychological and social development (Clemente et al. 2015). Within these psychodynamic theories, a crucial concept emerges, whose repercussion are perceptible, like no other, in the proceedings that regulate family separations or divorces: the Parental Alienation Syndrome (hereafter, PAS).

The concept of PAS first appeared in literature in 1985, introduced by the American psychiatrist Richard Gardner, who defined it as *"a child disorder that arises primarily in the context of child-custody disputes. Its primary manifestation is the child's campaign of denigration against a parent, a campaign that has no justification"* (Gardner 1985: 3). According to Gardner, the minor's testimony is false, the result of his or her campaign of vilification or offences against a parent. Therefore, a child's testimony should not be taken into account (as it is considered a falsehood) or it should be interpreted contrarily to what is stated (Clemente 2013; Clemente & Padilla-Racero 2015a, 2015b, 2016; Padilla-Racero 2013, 2016).

The roots, concepts, or assumptions underlying PAS and its implications have been widely studied (Clemente 2013; Clemente & Padilla-Racero 2015a, 2015b, 2016; Clemente et al. 2015; Erard 2016; O'Donohue, Benuto & Bennett 2016; Padilla-Racero 2013, 2015, 2016; Saunders & Oglesby 2016; Shaw 2016). This so-called syndrome has neither been proven nor scientifically acknowledged (Escudero 2008; Escudero, Aguilar & De la Cruz 2008; Escudero et al. 2010; Emery 2005; Emery, Otto & O'Donohue 2005; Nichols 2014). However, due to its widespread outreach (Clemente & Padilla-Racero 2015b), it is granted validity and diagnosed by the court system (Nichols 2014; O'Donohue, Benuto & Bennett 2016). The acceptance of PAS concepts by the judicial system leads to the fact that, in its reports and sentences, a minors' testimony is not granted any credibility (Clemente 2013; Clemente & Padilla-Racero 2015a; Kleinman & Kaplan 2016; Padilla-Racero 2013, 2016; Rozanski 2013; Shaw 2016).

PAS opposes the values instilled in children through socialization—not to lie and to want to maintain contact with both parents (Gardner 1985, 1991a, 1991b, 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b). According to this theory, the child is manipulated by the custodial parent, who instills in the child a hatred toward the non-custodial parent, such that the minor states that she/he hates (emotional aspect) and does not want to have any contact (behavioral aspect) with that parent.

This work attempts to verify whether or not a minor, in a situation of severe abuse or a lesser offense, would report it appropriately, would want to maintain contact with both

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parents, and would express that s/he loves both of them. That is, when a situation of abuse breaks down the three aforementioned elements instilled in the children by socialization. To that end, four questions will be posed in cases in which one parent has allegedly abused the other parent or the minor: whether the children indeed report the abuse in either case; that is, when the abuse is exerted by the father or by the mother (principle of truth-telling), whether the children express affection for both their parents (principle of expressing affection for parents), and whether they want to maintain contact with both parents (principle of trying to be always in contact with them). It is hypothesized that children will preserve the value of truth-telling when they have to report abuse by one of their parents; that children will give up the values of loving and wanting to maintain contact with both parents when one of them physically or psychologically abuses the other parent or the child him/herself; that children will preserve the values of loving and wanting to maintain contact with both parents if one of the parents tells them about the aggressions (physical or psychological) more so than if they witnessed or suffered those aggressions themselves; that children will preserve the values of loving and wanting to maintain contact with both parents when they (the children) are the target of the abuse less so than when the other parent is the target; also that these principles will be preserved more in the face of a psychological aggression than in the face of a physical one; that when the one who causes the abuse is the custodial parent (usually, the mother), these principles will be more preserved than when it is the non-custodial parent (the father). That is, the results obtained will be quite the opposite of the predictions of the concepts derived from PAS.

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Participants

The participants were 2730 minors aged between 6 and 18 years ( $M = 12.45$  years,  $SD = 2.91$ ). The male-to-female ratio was equal (50%), respecting this proportion for all the age groups (set up in blocks of two years). The children had never suffered abuse (according to their reports). The sampling was incidental; hence we used the classrooms in the schools whose directors agreed to collaborate.

### 2.2 Instruments

After gathering the minor's sociodemographic variables, an *ad hoc* questionnaire was designed, divided into two parts:

First, the participants were asked to rate on a four-point Likert scale (*totally disagree*, *disagree*, *agree* and *totally agree*) four values that might characterize their relationship with their parents. The values were: "One must tell the truth to everyone," "One must love one's parents," and "One must tell the truth to one's parents." These four items were disguised within a broader set, that is, a total number of eight items were presented. Thus,

we intended to determine the extent to which the children expressed these basic principles.

Afterwards, they were told a story. For the male participants, the story happened to a male, and for the females, the main character was a female. Then they were told that the child in the story had to testify before the judge the following day, and they were asked to put themselves in that child's place to answer the questions.

The description of the children's relationship with their fathers or mothers was manipulated according to the independent variables mentioned in the Procedure section. After reading the story, each minor had to answer four questions (dependent variables).

### 2.3 Procedure

Four independent variables were manipulated:

A) The minor him/herself witnessing and suffering abuse, or abuse being reported by the custodial or the non-custodial parent, without the minor's knowledge of such abuses. Thus, this variable had two levels: a<sub>1</sub>, the minor witnesses and suffers the abuse; a<sub>2</sub>, the minor is informed about the alleged aggressions by the custodial or the non-custodial parent, but has never witnessed them (she/he is being convinced by the informing parent). This latter level permits verifying whether or not children are easily manipulated, a basic concept in PAS.

B) Type of abuse. This also had two levels: b<sub>1</sub>, verbal and psychological abuse (insults, contempt, and humiliations); and b<sub>2</sub>, physical (physical abuse).

C) Emitter of the abuse. Again, this variable had two levels: c<sub>1</sub> (the custodial parent, in our case, female); and c<sub>2</sub> (the non-custodial parent, in our case, male).

D) Recipient of the abuse. Also with two levels: d<sub>1</sub> (the other parent) and d<sub>2</sub> (the minor).

A text concerning the possibility a<sub>1</sub>b<sub>1</sub>c<sub>1</sub>d<sub>1</sub> is presented as a sample below, in this case, to a male respondent:

*Manuel lived with his father and his mother. However, his parents have separated, and now he lives only with his mother. He can see his father on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, and moreover, he can spend a weekend every fortnight with him. Today, Manuel is going to be interviewed so he can tell the Court how his parents treat him, and the possibility of having more or less contact with his parents will depend on the interview. When Manuel lived with his father and his mother, the mother insulted his father, swore at him, did not appreciate his efforts, and constantly ridiculed him before other people.*

The children were subsequently asked four questions (dependent variables), the first two related to telling the truth (one about how the father treated the mother, and vice versa): "How does your father treat or used to treat your mother?" (with two response alternatives: *well* or *badly*) and "How does your mother treat or used to treat your father?" (with the same response alternatives as the previous question, *well* or *badly*); the third question was about loving the parents: Who do you love the most? (with three response alternatives: *my mother*, *my father*, *both*); and the fourth question referred to maintaining contact with both parents: "Do you want to see both parents even if you only live with one of them?" (with three response alternatives: *No, I only want to see my mother*; *No, I only want to see my father*; *Yes, I want to see both of them*).

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The design was factorial A x B x C x D, 2 x 2 x 2 x 2, non-repeated measures, and post-only measurement. The data were analyzed using the IBM SPSS-22 statistical package. To determine the importance of each basic principle, the mean and the standard deviation were calculated. And to determine the influence of the four independent variables on the dependent ones, a nominal ANOVA was calculated, determining the percentages and their level of significance through a C-test. The level of significance was always 95%.

In the schools whose directors agreed to take part of the study, a letter was sent to the parents through the pupils, asking them to sign an informed consent form for their children to participate in the research. No parent or child refused to collaborate. This research was previously approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of A Coruña (Spain), ref. 31/17.

### 3. Results

The results obtained will be explained considering the importance that children give to each of the values or basic principles inherent in socialization. The fact of telling the truth to the parents was preceded by a question about telling the truth to everyone. The mean value on a 1 to 4 scale for this first question was 3.16 ( $SD = .880$ ). Regarding telling the truth to the parents, the mean score increased to 3.45 ( $SD = .740$ ). With regard to loving the parents, the mean score was 3.67 ( $SD = .610$ ). Finally, for wanting to maintain contact with the parents, the mean was 3.55 ( $SD = 6.53$ ). All the items obtained a score close to 4 (*totally agree*); therefore, it can be stated that all the participants were socialized in the values under study.

Regarding the influence of the four independent variables on the dependent variables or values, the results of the C-test indicated significance at  $p < .05$  in all cases.

The results of the influence of the four independent variables on the dependent variables studied are presented in the Table 1. It has been agreed upon that it is not necessary to present in the text each of the data already included in the Table, since each data will be discussed in the "Conclusions and Discussion" section.

*Table 1:* Influence of the observation of the aggression, of the type of violence, of who emits the violence and of who it emits it in the desire of contact of the minors in the values

		a1 him/herself witnessing and suffering abuse							
		B Type of abuse							
		b1 Psychological				b2 Physical			
		C Emitter of the abuse				C Emitter of the abuse			
		c1 Custodial		c2 Non custodial		c1 Custodial		c2 Non custodial	
		D Recipient of the abuse		D Recipient of the abuse		D Recipient of the abuse		D Recipient of the abuse	
		d1 The other parent	d2 The minor	d1 The other parent	d2 The minor	d1 The other parent	d2 The minor	d1 The other parent	d2 The minor
Treatment father to mother	Well	8%	32.52%	88.35%	80.25%	22.22%	48.85%	90.42%	66.67%
	Badly	5.52%	67.48%	11.65%	19.75%	77.78%	51.15%	9.58%	33.33%
Treatment mother to father	Well	90.30%	83.26%	27.18%	41.56%	83.41%	78.08%	18.39%	37.30%
	Badly	9.70%	16.74%	72.82%	58.44%	16.59%	21.92%	81.61%	62.70%
Loving the parents	Mother	23.67%	8.91%	28.15%	56.79%	6.25%	6.87%	41.38%	41.27%
	Father	18.33%	34.82%	5.82%	2.47%	21.87%	37.40%	3.06%	1.26%
	Both	58.00%	56.28%	66.03%	40.74%	71.88%	54.97%	55.56%	5.75%
Contact with	Mother	2.67%	7.52%	21.36%	41.15%	0.89%	3.46%	29.51%	28.57%
	Father	9%	5.16%	4.85%	0.83%	10.67%	29.61%	4.21%	6.35%
	Both	88.34%	77.32%	73.79%	58.02%	88.44%	66.93%	66.28%	65.08%

  

		a2 abuse being reported by a parent							
		B Type of abuse							
		b1 Psychological				b2 Physical			
		C Emitter of the abuse				C Emitter of the abuse			
		c1 Custodial		c2 Non custodial		c1 Custodial		c2 Non custodial	
		D Recipient of the abuse		D Recipient of the abuse		D Recipient of the abuse		D Recipient of the abuse	
		d1 The other parent	d2 The minor	d1 The other parent	d2 The minor	d1 The other parent	d2 The minor	d1 The other parent	d2 The minor
Treatment father to mother	Well	58.40%	86.87%	89.39%	78.70%	58.82%	77.97%	82.14%	61.47%
	Badly	41.60%	13.13%	10.61%	21.30%	41.18%	22.03%	17.86%	38.53%
Treatment mother to father	Well	86.4%	79.80%	78.79%	50.93%	89.08%	71.79%	47.86%	48.36%
	Badly	13.6%	20.20%	21.21%	49.07%	10.92%	28.21%	52.14%	51.64%
Loving the parents	Mother	22%	22%	18.32%	21.30%	10.09%	15.25%	20%	20.49%
	Father	19%	9%	6.11%	6.48%	7.56%	15.25%	3.57%	6.56%
	Both	83%	69%	75.57%	72.22%	82.35%	69.50%	76.43%	72.95%
Contact with	Mother	15.32%	9%	9.92%	5.55%	2.52%	6.78%	.86%	10.66%
	Father	7.26%	3%	.87%	3.70%	1.68%	6.78%	1.43%	3.28%
	Both	77.42%	88%	83.21%	90.75%	95.80%	86.44%	90.71%	86.06%



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#### 4. Conclusion and discussion

The basic values of socialization in children—telling the truth, loving both parents, and wanting to maintain contact with both parents—are deeply rooted and instilled in practically all the minors.

Regarding the influence of the four independent variables in the socialization values of children toward their parents, we can conclude, firstly, that even though children are socialized to tell the truth, when this truth implies reporting the psychological or physical abuse perpetrated by either one of the parents, this principle is broken in a great majority of cases. The value in children of telling the truth is broken for the sake of concealing the abuse by one of their parents. This occurs both when children witness the abuse by one parent toward the other and when they are informed about the abuse by one of their parents. Conversely to the PAS ideas defended and spread, children tend to conceal their parents' hostile behavior.

Most children, when they experience a parent's psychological abuse toward the other parent or themselves, state that they love both parents. In these cases, the value of loving both parents is still confirmed. However, when children are psychologically abused by the father, they usually state that they love their mother more than they love both parents. This reactive emotional response would be interpreted by PAS as pathological.

Even though children still love both parents in a higher proportion, in the cases of physical abuse by the fathers toward the mothers or the children, a high percentage of children, almost one half, state that they love their mothers more. As previously specified, in the case of psychological abuse, and according to PAS criteria, this emotional response would be interpreted as pathological.

The value of loving both parents is not altered by parents' physical or psychological aggressions when the children did not witness or cannot remember the aggressions. This value is clearly more influenced and altered by psychological or physical aggressions that the children did witness or can remember; therefore, the essential PAS idea about the ease with which mothers manipulate children to make them hate their fathers is refuted. Affective parent-child attachments are not influenced by the physical or psychological aggressions parents may report to the children if they did not witness them or cannot remember them.

Affective mother-child attachment is more difficult to break than father-child attachment when psychological or physical abuse occurs, like the cases described in this study. For all the cases reported, the number of children who stated they love the mother more when she was the aggressor was higher than the number of children who stated they love the father more when he was the aggressor.

The value of wanting to have contact with both parents is maintained even in the face of a parent's psychological abuse of the other parent or the child. However, when the psychological violence is exerted by the father against the child or against the mother, this value is reduced in a very significant percentage. If the violence is exerted by the father against the child, almost half the children want to maintain contact with the mother exclusively, but not with both parents. When the mother is the victim of the father's psychological violence, about one fourth of the children want to maintain contact only with the mother. This behavioral reaction, analyzed and evaluated from the PAS viewpoint, would

be interpreted against the children, presuming them to be alienated or disturbed by the mother so that they do not want to visit the father.

Also, in cases of a parent's physical abuse of the other parent or of the child, the value of wanting to maintain contact with both parents still prevails. However, it must be noted that almost one third of the children want to maintain contact with only one of their parents (and not with both) if the mother abuses the child or the father abuses the mother or the child. Children's rejection of violence against themselves (no matter which parent exerts it), as well as their rejection of physical abuse of the mother by the father, is clear. According to PAS doctrines, these children would be separated from the parent with whom they prefer to maintain contact and assigned to the abusive parent.

In both the cases of psychological and physical violence, either unwitnessed or suffered (but not remembered) by the child, exerted by one of the parents and reported to the child by the other parent, the children's decision about maintaining contact with both parents would not be affected by these reports. Children are not easily manipulated by their parents into rejecting contact with the other parent, quite the contrary.

In the face of the same facts, whether psychological or physical violence, witnessed or informed, except for the case of the mother's psychological violence against the father and for all the cases of physical violence witnessed or suffered directly by the children, a greater number of children choose to maintain contact with the mother exclusively when she is the aggressor than the children who choose to maintain with the father exclusively when he is the aggressor.

For most of the case studies posed, a larger number of children state that they want to maintain contact exclusively with the mother than those who state they want to maintain contact exclusively with the father. Only in one case did the children state they want to maintain contact with both parents to the same degree. The value of wanting to maintain contact with only one of the parents (in which case, the children are not socialized) prevails with regard to the mothers more than it does regarding the fathers.

The results of this research refute the hypothesis that children will preserve the value of truth-telling in which they are socialized when they must report abuse by one of their parents. The hypothesis, that children's values of loving and wanting to maintain contact with both parents are preserved more frequently in cases of psychological violence than in physical violence, is also refuted. In fact, the opposite is verified in some of the cases posed. We verified that, in the face of situations of psychological or physical abuse by one parent against the child or the other parent, children will stop loving and wanting to maintain contact with both parents, although both values (affection and wanting to maintain contact with both parents) are deeply rooted. We verified the hypothesis that when children witness the aggression of one parent against the other or when they are the victims of the aggression, they will love and want to maintain contact with both parents less frequently than when they are informed about such aggressions. We verified that children love and want to maintain contact with both parents to a lesser extent when they are the direct victims of abuse by one of the parents than when the victim is the other parent. And lastly, we verified that the values of wanting contact and of loving both parents are sometimes more preserved when the mother is the aggressor, and other times when the father is the aggressor.

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PAS determines that when a minor rejects a parent and refuses to maintain contact with that parent, it is due to the other parent's manipulation (Clemente 2013; Clemente & Padilla-Racero 2015a, 2015b; Padilla-Racero 2013, 2016). To support this premise, Gardner asserts that children are unscrupulous liars, capable of persisting in a lie just to harm a third party and that, moreover, they can be easily manipulated.

The data of this research shows that practically all children are socialized to tell the truth. This value of always telling the truth is broken down when they must report abuse by one of their parents. Acting against their normal behavior (telling the truth), children lie in order to conceal a parent's hostile behavior. These results are consistent with those of Popliger, Talwar, and Crossman (2011), who reported that children, rather than hurting a person, choose to tell a lie. This fact runs counter to PAS's main idea (present in its definition) that children lie to denigrate a parent. PAS also states that children feel no remorse or guilt when vilifying a parent (see Padilla-Racero 2013: 56). The data gathered in this study show that is very difficult for a child to report family maltreatment. Therefore, when the child does so, the justice system should take the child's account or testimony into account, thus avoiding the assimilation of PAS ideas in its regular proceedings.

Studies such as those by Finnbogadottir and Smari (2006) and Perkins and Turiel (2007) show that, as a rule, minors do not lie. Another study by Clemente and Padilla-Racero (2015a) found that almost all children tell the truth when they witness a troublesome fact and are asked about it. The data of this research, however, show that when one of the parents is the protagonist of the disturbing fact (the one who abuses in the family unit), children tend to conceal this reality. Thus, minors' behavior is quite the contrary to the behaviors that PAS attributes to them.

Furthermore, this research clearly shows that children are not easy to manipulate by either parent, not even to make them refuse to maintain contact with the other parent. According to our data, for a child to express this rejection (of affection and contact), he or she must directly witness or suffer abuse by one of the parents. This data outright refutes the idea supported by PAS about how easily the mother manipulates children to make them hate the father, which has already been refuted through the empirical study carried out by Clemente and Padilla-Racero (2015a). In this line, the study of Talwar, Arruda, and Yachison (2015) proves that minors tell the truth, in order to feel good about themselves, even though it may lead to negative consequences for them, a fact that implies that it is difficult to convince children to lie.

Unlike the idea of maternal manipulation as Gardner's only reason for children's rejection of a parent (Escudero, Aguilar & De La Cruz 2008), the data show that, in the face of situations of psychological or physical abuse, the values of loving and wanting to maintain contact with both parents, which are usually so strongly instilled, may break down in a large number of these situations. Psychological or physical abuse can explain children's rejection.

In 1991, Gardner introduced the exception clause (Escudero, Aguilar & De la Cruz 2008), adding to his definition of PAS that when there is abuse, PAS is not applicable (Gardner 1991a, 1991b, 1998, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b), but the fact remains that the evaluators who assess issues related to child custody and visitation are very cautious when determining possible abuse, and in most cases, they determine that when considering a minor's allegations of abuse by a parent, what underlies this is PAS. This is decided without

applying a scientific protocol that can determine whether there is actually any kind of abuse (Clemente & Padilla-Racero 2015b).

Children show a stronger bond with their mothers, probably because the mothers are the ones who, to a greater degree, still nurture the children. The results of studies by Bretherton, Lambert, and Golby (2005) advise fathers to become more involved in child care.

PAS, which is a psychodynamic theory, states that children need both traditional parental figures for their appropriate psychological and social development. Children's contact with both parents prevails over the interest of protecting them from abuse by one of the parents (Clemente et al. 2015). However, research has since shown that parenting styles based on anger, aggressiveness, or rejection are related to children's mental health issues or psychosocial adjustment (Gracia, Lila & Musitu 2005).

We note that this research has a huge limitation. That is, the participants had not suffered abuse, but they assumed the role of other children, one of whose parents had maltreated the other parent or the child. It would never have been possible to obtain such a large group in a clinical sample. But results indicate that children, as a rule, do not lie, that most of them accept a series of basic rules in which their parents socialize them (not to lie, to love their parents, and to want to maintain contact with them), and also that maltreatment does break down those values. This shows that, when children state that they do not want to have contact with one of their parents, they must have experienced very serious events. Despite this, children always try to justify their parents, and it is very difficult for them to admit the existence of abuse.

Another of the limitations that we want to highlight is that for the realization of this study we have used a design selecting four independent variables and four dependent variables, so we consider that future studies should study the influence of other variables and expand the number of studies. . On the other hand, it is necessary to complement the results of this research with investigations of another methodological nature; on the one hand, with qualitative work, and on the other, with studies that allow the data to be analyzed using multivariate statistical techniques. In the future, we intend to investigate following these guidelines.

Children's willingness to stand up for their parents is completely inconsistent with the ideas formulated by PAS, which assert that children are manipulated by their mothers and therefore, they lie. Our data completely refutes such a possibility. Thus, non-evidence-based theories, such as PAS, must be banished from the judicial forensic framework.

This investigation allows us to answer the questions about the change of values that minors may experience, but not about what age it should be considered appropriate for a minor to be questioned by the justice system. Previous research has shown that children can and should express their opinion from the moment they have adequate verbal fluency, which is usually from 3-4 years, but their statements must be collected by specialized psychologists in legal psychology who deal with children (Clemente & Padilla-Racero 2015a). Even more difficult to answer is the possible question regarding the existence of an age for a minor to be interrogated in the courtroom itself. We believe that those authors who claim that a child should not face a statement in the courtroom are the most appropriate, since the emotional impact that such an appearance can imply can be very strong (Clemente & Padilla-Racero 2015a; Clemente et al. 2015).

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This work has also important practical implications. It is necessary to delve deeper into the statement taking of minors and into the training both of the professionals who evaluate the minors (basically, health professionals) and those in charge of the development of the judiciary process (judges and attorneys), so that they will reject non-scientific practices of evidence verification, and ensure that the assessment techniques fulfill the pertaining requirements of scientificity. Any theory that is based on the concept that minors lie to unjustifiably vilify a parent should be banished, and furthermore, this concept prejudices both the minor and one of the parents, leaving them in a situation of judicial helplessness. Undoubtedly, the use of theories and evaluation techniques based on scientific evidence will lead to a more appropriate protection of the minor, and a struggle against injustice.

### **Compliance with ethical standards**

- Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.
- Research involving Human Participants: The procedures performed in this study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional Ethic Committee of the University of A Coruña (Spain) and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. This article does not contain any studies with animals performed by any of the authors
- Informed consent: Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.
- The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.
- All authors have contributed equally to the development of this research and to the elaboration of the manuscript. All authors agree with the final version of this manuscript and assume responsibility for it.
- There are no financial disclosures from any authors.
- As part of the encouragement of open research practices by the International Association of Relationships Research (IARR), the authors have provided the following information: This research was not pre-registered.
- The data used in the research are available. The data can be obtained via email. The materials used in the research are available. The materials can be obtained via email.

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## Information in German

### Deutscher Titel

Der Einfluss von innerfamiliärem Missbrauch auf den Wertewandel von Kindern gegenüber ihren Eltern

### Zusammenfassung

Die von Eltern und Gesellschaft initiierten Sozialisationsprozesse erziehen Kindern eine Reihe von Werten im Umgang mit ihren Eltern an. Einige dieser Werte sind beispielsweise: nicht zu lügen, eine Zuneigung zu den Eltern zu verspüren und Kontakt zu ihnen haben zu wollen. In dieser wissenschaftlichen Arbeit wird versucht zu untersuchen, ob sich diese Werte bei innerfamiliärem Missbrauch verändern. Zu diesem Zweck wurde eine Stichprobe von 2730 Minderjährigen im Alter zwischen 6 und 18 Jahren, die noch nie missbraucht wurden, herangezogen. Sie wurden gebeten, sich in die Hauptfigur einer Geschichte hineinzusetzen. Die Geschichte variierte je nach den zu untersuchenden Bedingungen: Beobachtung und direktes Erleiden oder Erzählung des Missbrauchs durch andere, Art des Missbrauchs (physisch oder psychisch), wer den Missbrauch begangen hat (erziehungsberechtigter oder nicht erziehungsberechtigter Elternteil) und wer dem Missbrauch ausgesetzt war (der andere Elternteil oder das Kind). Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Kinder in der Regel lügen, wenn es darum geht das missbräuchliche Verhalten von einem der beiden Elternteile zu verbergen. Sie lieben ihre Eltern und möchten Kontakt zu ihnen haben, selbst im Falle von Missbrauch. Ungeachtet dessen, dass einige Kinder bei Misshandlung durch einen ihrer Elternteile, beide Eltern immer noch lieben und Kontakt zu ihnen haben wollen, hört eine signifikante Anzahl von Kindern auf, den missbrauchenden Elternteil zu lieben oder Kontakt zu ihm haben zu wollen. Diese Ergebnisse falsifizieren, was von Theorien wie PAS ohne wissenschaftliche Beweise behauptet wird und unterstreichen die Notwendigkeit der Verwendung wissenschaftlicher Verfahren, die auf der Idee fußen, dass Kinder die Wahrheit sagen, zur zuverlässigen Untersuchung der Zeugnisaussagen von Kindern.

**Schlagwörter:** Kinderschutz, Eltern-Kind-Entfremdung, elterliches Entfremdungssyndrom, Sozialisation, Werte

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