

Senate Bill 25

MACA supports with amendments (FWA)

Written Testimony for Maryland House Legislation – SB 25

Submitted by: Rael LaPenta, Mothers Against Child Abuse (MACA)

Dear Respected Legislator,

My name is Rael LaPenta, and I am writing as a representative of Mothers Against Child Abuse (MACA), a national organization dedicated to advocating for victims of child abuse and protecting children from all forms of maltreatment. On behalf of MACA, I respectfully submit this testimony to support Senate Bill 25, with amendments (FWA), and urge the legislature to address critical concerns surrounding psychological maltreatment and Parent-Child Contact Problems, including Parental Alienation in custody evaluations.

Key Concerns and Recommendations

1. Urgent Need to Address Psychological Maltreatment in Maryland

Psychological abuse, as identified by the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2012, is the most challenging and prevalent form of child abuse¹. According to the 2020 Domestic Violence Hotline data², 95% of contacts reported experiencing emotional abuse. Emotional and psychological abuse often leads to long-term trauma, including anxiety, chronic depression, and PTSD, as documented in studies published by the American Psychological Association.

Maryland's child welfare data³ highlights the alarming disregard of psychological maltreatment, demonstrating the need for enhanced training and assessments in custody evaluations. As a step forward, MACA strongly recommends the inclusion of Parent-Child Contact Problems as a required area of expertise for custody evaluators, alongside mandatory referrals for specialized evaluations when such issues arise.

2. The Problem of Parental Alienation

Parental alienation, where a child unjustifiably rejects one parent, affects an estimated 19% of families in the U.S. and over 3.9 million children, according to the Parental Alienation Study Group⁴. Alienating behaviors are

¹ FROM THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS|CLINICAL REPORT| AUGUST 01 2012 **Psychological Maltreatment** the Committee on Child Abuse and Neglect and AMERICAN ACADEMY OF CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRY, Child Maltreatment and Violence Committee; *Pediatrics* (2012) 130 (2): 372–378. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2012-1552>

² <https://www.thehotline.org/wp-content/uploads/media/2021/06/Hotline-EOY-Impact-Report-2020.pdf>

³ <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/state-level-data-for-understanding-child-welfare-in-the-united-states>

⁴ The Not-Forgotten Child: Alienated Adult Children's Experience of Parental Alienation. June 2020. [American Journal of Family Therapy](#) 48(2):1-21

a form of emotional abuse with devastating consequences, including anger, low self-esteem, and long-term mental health issues. Research shows that children exposed to parental alienating behaviors⁵ in childhood experience anxiety disorders, emotional pain, addiction, and suicidal ideation in adulthood.⁶

Misdiagnosis of parental alienation further complicates custody cases. Studies (e.g., Warshak, 2002⁷⁸) reveal that **failure to accurately identify alienation—or mistaking genuine abuse for alienation—can cause significant harm to children.** This underscores the need for custody evaluators to have specialized training to understand the nuanced behaviors and dynamics at play.

3. Recommendations for Legislative Action

MACA applauds the intent of HB 152 to improve custody evaluator qualifications by requiring training in family conflict dynamics and child development. However, to comprehensively address these issues, we recommend the following amendments:

- **Mandate Specific Training in Parent-Child Contact Problems: This includes education on parental alienation, psychological maltreatment, and related family dynamics.**

- **Expand Assessments to Include Parent-Child Contact Issues: Cases involving suspected alienation or psychological maltreatment should undergo specific evaluations, similar to those conducted for mental health, home studies, and substance abuse.⁹**

- **Adopt Evidence-Based Models: Leverage nationwide guidance, such as training programs offered by the Association of Family & Conciliation Courts (AFCC), to ensure custody evaluators are well-equipped to handle complex family dynamics.**

DOI:[10.1080/01926187.2020.1775531](https://doi.org/10.1080/01926187.2020.1775531)

⁵ The Devastating Effects of Parental Alienation: Anger, guilt, grief, disconnection, and low self-esteem. January 8, 2024
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/head-games/202112/the-devastating-effects-of-parental-alienation>

⁶ Children (Basel). 2022 Mar 30;9(4):475. doi: [10.3390/children9040475](https://doi.org/10.3390/children9040475) The Impact of Parental Alienating Behaviours on the Mental Health of Adults Alienated in Childhood (qualitative study) <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9026878/>

⁷ Warshak, R. A. (2002). Misdiagnosis of parental alienation syndrome. *American Journal of Forensic Psychology*, 20(2), 31–52.
<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2002-02595-002>

⁸ “When evaluators get it wrong: False positive IDs and parental alienation. Richard A Warshak. *Psychology, public policy, and law* 26 (1), 54, 2020
<https://psycnet.apa.org/buy/2019-64868-001>.

PDF

 **Warshak-CR76 When Evaluators Get It Wrong- False Positive IDs and Parental Alienatio...**

⁹ <https://www.courts.state.md.us/video/courthelp/mental-health-home-studies>

Support from Research and Professional Organizations

•AFCC & NCJFJ Joint Problem Statement (2022): The Association of Family & Conciliation Courts and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Judges stress the importance of addressing parent-child contact problems through specialized training and structured, evidence-based screening processes.¹⁰

•AFCC Training Resources: AFCC's 28-hour online parenting plan evaluation program exemplifies the type of comprehensive training Maryland could adopt to enhance evaluator competency.¹¹

The High Stakes for Maryland Families

By including parent-child contact problems in HB 152, Maryland has the opportunity to set a national standard in child custody evaluations. Missteps in custody decisions can have lifelong consequences for children and families. **Evaluators must possess the expertise to distinguish between genuine abuse, alienating behaviors, and other dynamics to protect children's well-being.** Maryland recommends this training as aligning with current requirements and considered 'best practices,' adding this to the law would ensure best practices are required for children.¹²

MACA believes that children's futures are too valuable to risk on inadequately informed custody evaluations. We ask that you seriously consider our proposed amendments to ensure Maryland's custody courts provide the safest outcomes for children.

We are available to meet, discuss further, and provide additional resources or clarification regarding this testimony. Thank you for your attention to this critical matter and for your dedication to Maryland's children and families.

We thank you for your dedication and tireless work in protecting children, and thank you for this opportunity to share our concerns!

Respectfully,

Rael LaPenta

Mothers Against Child Abuse (MACA)

¹⁰ <https://www.afccnet.org/Portals/0/Committees/AFCC%20NCJFCJ%20Joint%20Statement.pdf?ver=L-vPDsr8pJiqRiVqbsVdDg%3d%3d>

¹¹ <https://www.afccnet.org/Conferences-Training/AFCC-Training>
https://www.afccnet.org/Portals/20/AFCC-PPE-Brochure-2025-12-13-24.pdf?ver=bxSLtQa94bQW0bW2fB_2Qw%3d%3d

¹² <https://www.courts.state.md.us/legalhelp/family/custodyandvisitation>