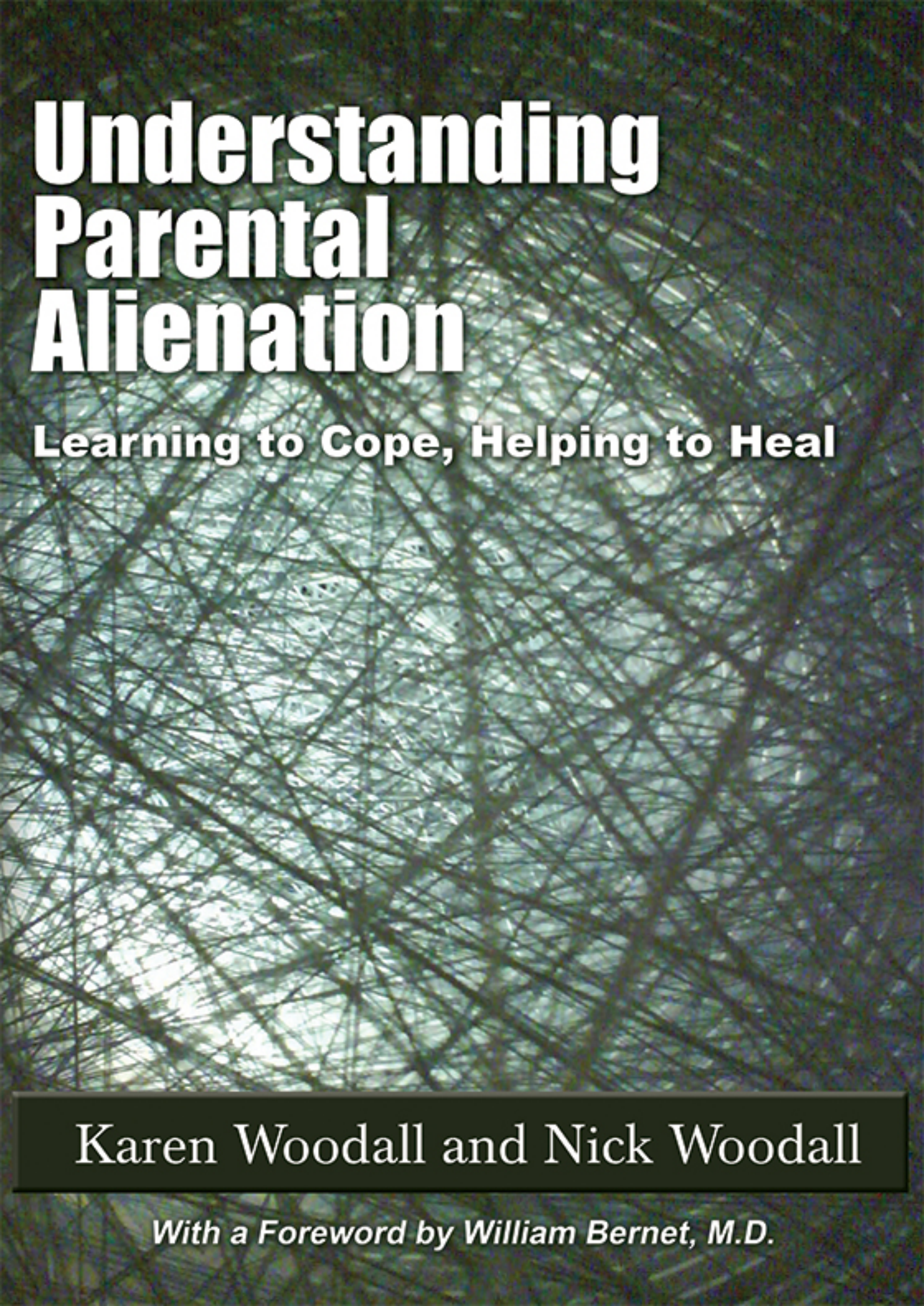

Understanding Parental Alienation
Learning to Cope, Helping to Heal
Karen Woodall and Nick Woodall
With a Foreword by William Bernet, M.D.

# UNDERSTANDING PARENTAL ALIENATION

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Karen Woodall is a highly experienced psychotherapist who has worked with divorced and separated families since 1991. She has specialized in developing new ways of working with alienated children and their families since 2006 and is now widely regarded as one of the foremost experts in the field. Using internationally accepted standards and protocols, she provides both assessment and treatment routes through the family courts. Her influential blog has a worldwide readership.

Nick Woodall has worked with separated families since 1999 and co-founded the Family Separation Clinic with Karen in 2010. In addition to his therapeutic work with alienated families, Nick is an expert witness in the United Kingdom family courts. He has worked extensively on family policy, developing new services for the UK Government. A former BBC Online parenting expert, Nick has written widely on family separation and divorce.

Karen and Nick began working together in 1999 and were married in 2006. They are the co-authors of *The Guide for Separated Parents: Putting Children First* (Piatkus, 2007) and live and work in London.

# UNDERSTANDING PARENTAL ALIENATION

## Learning to Cope, Helping to Heal

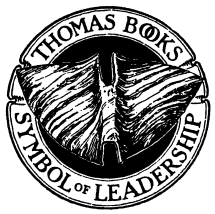
*By*

**KAREN WOODALL**

*and*

**NICK WOODALL**

*Family Separation Clinic*
*London, England*

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*This book is dedicated to all the children and families,*
*around the world, who are affected by parental alienation.*

*With thanks to our publisher, Charles C Thomas,*
*and to all the pioneers who have gone before us*
*in this notoriously difficult field.*

# FOREWORD

When a new patient consults with a physician, psychiatrist, or psychologist, the doctor usually knows much more about the differential diagnosis and prognosis than the patient. The doctor, of course, examines the patient and educates the individual about their condition. When a new client consults with a lawyer and explains his situation, the lawyer usually knows much more about the legal nuances of the case than the client. However, the tables may be turned when the case involves parental alienation: In those circumstances, the patient or client may know more about the diagnosis and possible interventions for his condition than the relevant professionals, the psychiatrist, and the lawyer.

The concept of parental alienation–through various alternative terms and definitions–has been discussed in British legal literature since the early 19th century. The notion of parental alienation has been described in mental health literature since the 1940s. Nevertheless, the typical mental health or legal practitioner was not taught anything about parental alienation during the course of their professional education. Since entering into their line of work, they may have heard about some features of parental alienation from colleagues, in continuing education programs, and, indeed, from their patients and clients. In many instances, the practitioner and their new client may need to study together and educate each other about the manifestations, the causes, the legal strategies, and the therapeutic interventions in cases of parental alienation. This book, *Understanding Parental Alienation* by Karen Woodall and Nick Woodall, may be their textbook and study guide as they learn about this serious mental condition and challenging legal situation.

*Understanding Parental Alienation* provides a balance of scholarship and practical, hands-on experience. The opening sections of this book–an overview of the history of parental alienation, the generally accepted definitions, the criteria for the level of severity of alienation, the differentiation between alienation and other important conditions–are scholarly. There are sufficient citations and references to assure the reader that the authors' opinions are not idiosyncratic but are grounded in the professional literature of psychia-

try, psychology, and related disciplines. The authors summarize multiple theories regarding the causes of parental alienation. Readers who desire a deeper understanding can look up those references for additional reading. The latter sections of *Understanding Parental Alienation,* however, contain fewer references. Those sections rely much more on the wisdom and vast clinical experience of Karen Woodall and Nick Woodall, especially in their work at the Family Separation Clinic.

For example, the authors introduce the concept of *the transition bridge,* which may have several levels of meaning. In its most literal and concrete usage, the transition bridge refers to the child's movements or transitions between two households. In my mind, the bridge conveys the image of a helpful linkage between two desirable locations, as well as protection from a somewhat perilous chasm or torrent below. On a more abstract level, the transition bridge encompasses "the emotional and psychological tasks that children must undertake in order to maintain the critical attachment relationships that family separation threatens" (p. 71). It may be frightening for the unaccompanied child to journey across the transition bridge between their separated parents. The authors also introduce a new term, the *tipping point,* for a phenomenon that is familiar to most mental health and legal professionals who work with alienated children. That is, there may be an extended period, perhaps several months, during which the child is traveling between two households; although, it is a painful and conflicted journey as the child struggles to maintain friendly relations with Mom and Dad, who are hateful toward each other. Then, over a few days' time, the child resolves the painful state of dissonance by totally moving his allegiance to one parent and totally rejecting the other parent. As the authors say, the tipping point refers to a time "which children in transition between two parents sometimes reach, where they can no longer tolerate movement between parents and fully withdraw from a relationship with one parent as a coping mechanism" and "describes the point at which alienation reactions set in" (p. 12). As another example of the authors' reliance on their own clinical experience, they employ the vivid metaphor of *the family dance,* that is, an invisible dance in which "the adults dance together, sometimes in time and sometimes in a disjointed way as conflict arises" (p. 131). They point out that, when the family separates, the dance becomes fractured and fails to respond to each individual's changing routines.

An important issue in the study of the children of high-conflict divorce is the difference between a loyalty conflict and parental alienation. A loyalty conflict occurs in a child when she tries to maintain affection toward each parent, even though the parents are angry and hostile toward each other. A child may experience a high level of divided loyalty if parental conflicts are

obvious and long-lasting. Children frequently develop physical and psychological symptoms when they experience high levels of loyalty conflict stress. It is psychologically uncomfortable to feel the stress of a loyalty conflict every day so it is understandable that the child would try to find a way out of that situation. One solution is to get out of the stressful situation by tipping from the loyalty conflict state of mind ("I want to love both Mom and Dad, who are fighting with each other") to the parental alienation state of mind ("I totally support this parent and totally reject the other parent"). Even though the child has taken a drastic step in removing one parent from her life, she may find relief in the short term by getting herself out of the parental battleground.

The most original parts of *Understanding Parental Alienation* are the sections on presenting one's case in court and on strategies for healing. The authors provide specific, practical advice for preparing for court. They explain how to develop a useful chronology of events and how to prepare a written submission for court, even down to choosing a writing style that the judge is most likely to read prior to the hearing or trial. They address the thorny issue of how the child's stated wishes should be heard but not necessarily taken literally, as the child has been unduly influenced by outside forces. As the authors explain, healing can take many forms. In some families, healing may take the form of accepting that the child will not be coming home any time soon. In that context, acceptance "is a fully conscious, informed, and active process that allows you to find rest and recovery of your own self and your own health and well-being" (p. 208). On a more hopeful note, the authors give specific guidance on how to help alienated children heal through reunification, whether it be spontaneous, assisted reunification, or forced reunification due to a court order.

*Understanding Parental Alienation* is organized in the traditional method for books that address a psychosocial topic, that is, a scholarly explication of material in a readable, engaging manner interspersed with interesting case vignettes. There is another type of book regarding parental alienation that some readers may want to explore–books written by alienated parents about their own personal experiences. I have found about 35 such books from around the world, including the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, France, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and Norway. The range of countries demonstrates the international scope of parental alienation, with the basic pattern of a disturbed family dynamic remaining about the same, although there are regional and cultural variations in the details. Some of these books are heartbreaking; some of them are satisfying and emotionally enriching; some have happy endings. One of the saddest is *A Kidnapped Mind,* by Pamela Richardson, about the story of a teenager who ultimately died due to parental alien-

ation. An account written by a father is *A Family's Heartbreak,* by Michael Jeffries, which illustrates the process of the 'tipping point,' in which the child switched from a loving to a hateful child over a few days. A book about child abduction and alienation was *They Are My Children, Too,* by Lady Catherine Meyer. Finally, *Familles éclatées, enfants manipulés: L'aliénation parentale or Broken Family, Manipulated Children: Parental Alienation,* by Jean-Pierre Cambefort, is a detailed case study of one family presented by a psychologist. Readers may identify with these dramatic accounts, but books about the struggles of individual families do not replace the systematic explanation of the topic found in *Understanding Parental Alienation.*

This book, *Understanding Parental Alienation,* is unique, in that it is intended for parents who are living through a nightmare, the loss of their relationship with a child, which seems impossible to understand and extremely frustrating to turn around. Karen Woodall and Nick Woodall do not guarantee that everything will work out nicely in the future, but they do provide a hopeful and supportive framework for positive action. Many years of experience have shaped their understanding of the causes of parental alienation, the manifestations of this serious mental condition, and interventions that are likely to be helpful in the short term and the long term. I hope many parents find these words helpful as they struggle with the sorrow of parental alienation.

WILLIAM BERNET, M.D.
Nashville, Tennessee
December 2016

*About the Foreword Author:* William Bernet, M.D., a graduate of Harvard Medical School, is a Professor Emeritus of Psychiatry & Behavioral Sciences at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee. An expert in forensic psychiatry, he has a particular interest in the effects of divorce, child custody disputes, parental alienation, child maltreatment, and the genomics of violence. Among other publications, he is the author of *Parental Alienation, DSM-5, and ICD-11* (2010), and the co-author of *Parental Alienation: The Handbook for Mental Health and Legal Professionals* (2013), both published by Charles C Thomas.

# INTRODUCTION

While parental alienation is a much more widely recognized phenomenon than it once was, it remains a controversial subject. However, what is incontrovertible is that, for some children, the dynamics around the separation of their parents are so disturbing that they respond by aligning with one and completely rejecting the other. This is not only a bewildering and frightening experience for a rejected parent, but it also can cause significant and lasting harm to a child.

While a child's vehement rejection of a parent may appear to be fixed and rooted in something the rejected parent has done, it is, in fact, a coping mechanism that the child unconsciously employs to protect themselves from the psychological dissonance they experience as they try to make sense of the post-separation world. Children who find the psychological pressures too great, as their family fractures and reorganizes, can find it impossible to maintain the warm, enduring bonds of attachment and connectedness to each of their parents. This causes them to split off half of who they are and leaves them unable to maintain a balanced experience of the world around them.

For a child to reject a relationship with a loved and loving parent is the most unnatural thing for them to do. And yet, for too many families, this is a reality that accompanies divorce or separation. Left untreated, children affected by alienation face a lifetime of guilt, shame, and an inability to form stable, healthy relationships. However, children who are helped to restore balance and perspective can emerge from an alienation reaction very quickly and, with support, become happy and healthy once again. This book has been written to help you find ways to restore your child to health and fulfill all their potential in life.

Very often, parental alienation is viewed as a parental rights issue. And, of course, parents caught in the vortex of alienation experience huge amounts of distress and anxiety. However, we approach parental alienation from a mental health perspective. Our work, as professionals working with the problem, is about restoring children and parents to health. Our work is about examining the underlying dynamics that have caused the problem and then finding ways to put things right.

We believe children have a right to an unconscious experience of their childhood, meaning that they should be free to enjoy healthy attachment relationships, have the emotional and psychological space to be spontaneous and creative, and to explore the world around them. Parental alienation, when it strikes, causes all these things to be shut down. Children become fearful and guarded, lose their spontaneity and creativity, and learn relationship models that are unhealthy and dysfunctional. We aim to give children back their childhood.

There are many books now to assist professionals who wish to develop their own practice in this arena, as well as academic explorations of the phenomenon. While these books are rich in clinical and theoretical content, they do not always offer parents the insights they need to be able to deal with the problem. While we believe this book offers some new concepts that will add to the academic understanding of the problem and some insights that will help practitioners deal with alienation more effectively, *Understanding Parental Alienation* has been written specifically for parents, with the intention of putting as much power into your hands as possible.

Our work at the Family Separation Clinic is built on international research and best practice from around the world. We have developed our own protocols and frameworks that are based on the evidence and that we have demonstrated–through our day-to-day work with families both inside and outside the court arena–liberate children from the problem of alienation. This book is intended to translate that theory and practice into something you can use to help you understand what is happening, to cope better and find practical ways that you can deal with the problem and ultimately learn ways to heal both yourself and your child from the damage that alienation can bring.

Through exploring children's experiences, family dynamics, and transgenerational patterns of estrangement, this book will provide you with a deeper understanding of how alienation occurs and how it has manifested itself in your family. It also will provide you with practical information and tools to help you determine the best approach for dealing with the problem. And, finally, it will give you the insights you will need to heal the harm that has been caused. Ultimately, this book aims to help you shift your perspective so that, rather than feeling that you are powerless in the face of the other parent's actions, you experience yourself as being your child's best hope for a healthy and happy future and of having the capacity to bring about change to protect your child and restore your relationship with them.

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Disclaimer:
While the information in this book is based on our work with clients around the world and offers information that may be applied in many different contexts, each country, state, region, or territory has its own unique laws, conventions, and practices, and nothing written herein should be accepted as, nor is it intended to be, legal advice. You should not rely on any information provided in this book as an alternative to legal advice from a fully qualified legal professional regulated by the appropriate authorities. We strongly advise you to take professional legal advice from a fully qualified legal professional regulated by the appropriate authorities in your own country, state, region, or territory.

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# UNDERSTANDING PARENTAL ALIENATION

# Part One

# UNDERSTANDING

*Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.*
–Søren Kierkegaard

# Chapter 1

# ABOUT PARENTAL ALIENATION

*When alienation took hold of him, he turned from being the boy whom I brought into the world, the boy whom I nurtured, loved, and took care of day and night, into an almost feral child; vicious in his rejection of me and astounding in the things he said that I had done to him. My beautiful, wonderful, lovely little boy, turned overnight into a monster and I was helpless in the face of that.*
Charlotte, mother of Jack, alienated from her since the age of 8.

## A Very Brief History of Parental Alienation

There has long been a recognition that some divorcing parents will undermine a child's relationship with their other parent as an act of revenge or as a way of defending themselves against *narcissist injury.*[1] However, it was Richard Gardner in 1985, who was the first proponent of what he termed *parental alienation syndrome.* He states that there are three types of alienation: *severe, moderate,* and *mild,* but in Gardner's model, the cause is always the same. There is one parent (usually the mother) who causes it and one parent who is blameless.[2] Later developments by psychologists Joan Kelly and Janet Johnston,[3] and Steven Friedlander and Marjorie Gans Walters,[4] challenged Gardner's belief that the phenomenon always involves one hostile parent and one innocent parent, and developed a more nuanced way of understanding the issue in terms of the conflict in the relationship *between* parents.

This led to a development of two different strands, or schools, of thought in the parental alienation world–that which followed Gardner and his original concept, and that which followed the idea of the more nuanced approach. In Canada, Barbara Fidler, Nicholas Bala, and Michael Saini[5] developed an approach to understanding parental alienation, which separates alienation into three different categories: *pure, hybrid,* and *justified rejection.* Then in America, psychologists such as Amy Baker have developed

sophisticated clinical assessment routes to understanding and treating the problem.[6]

Elsewhere in the United States, prominent clinical and research psychologist, Richard Warshak, has continued to develop a strategic approach to reunification of alienated children with their parents through his Family Bridges program[7] and Amy Baker, has published her study of adults[8] who were alienated as children which has contributed to the understanding of the impact of alienation on children over their lifetime. In the United States, however, the debate rages on around whether parental alienation is a *syndrome* that should be included in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (compiled by the American Psychiatric Association and, as such, is the bible for mental health professionals). While it is not currently included, William Bernet, an expert in forensic psychiatry, has argued that the spirit of alienation is present in the *DSM-5,* even if the words are not.[9]

Recently, clinical psychologist Craig Childress has coined the term *attachment based parental alienation* (AB-PA)[10] and has argued that by grouping three existing DSM-5–listed diagnostic indicators, it is possible for mental health professionals to identify what he calls *pathogenic parenting.* Although presented in a novel way, the three indicators he highlights have been used by professionals for many years in identifying alienation.

## Understanding Parental Alienation in a Social Context

For many years, the issue of family separation in many countries has largely been dealt with by ignoring it, treating it as a problem of child poverty, or preventing discussion about it in case it stigmatizes those parents who are bringing up children on their own. The way in which family separation has affected children has mostly, therefore, remained unspoken about in our society, with the overriding assumption being that children are adaptable and will somehow simply cope with it and move on. Far from moving on, however, many children are, in fact, deeply affected by their parents' separation and for some, this is a lifelong problem with which they find themselves struggling to cope.

The silence that surrounds family separation in family services and the family courts means that the impact on children is rarely dealt with in any meaningful way. This leads to a lack of awareness of the difficulties that face children as they experience family breakdown. It also leads to a gross lack of understanding and skills in the services configured around families and an inability to effectively support families affected by the problem. For many decades now, the psychological realities facing children in separated families have simply been ignored or downplayed, leaving children to cope with the

changes imposed on them, often in almost impossible circumstances. These are the conditions in which parental alienation is able to flourish freely.

In this book, we will discuss the different ways children become alienated. We also will discuss the different ways children who are affected can be helped. We will do this from the perspective that, however the problem arose in the first place, an alienation reaction in a child is a serious problem that must be addressed. We also will discuss the difficulties you might encounter as a parent when facing this problem in your child and the lack of awareness among professionals, which creates a further risk to the child. We will show you how to address the problem directly as well as how to get the help you need. We will do this because we know that the problem of alienation is not universally understood, is considered to be controversial by many professionals, and that this combination can create serious harm to the health of both you and your child.

A child who is withdrawn from one parent and aligned completely with the other, seeing the rejected parent as wholly bad and the other as wholly good, is in a precarious place emotionally and psychologically. This is because the split in thinking, which is caused by such a withdrawal, can remain in place for many years, causing not only the loss of a parent but also of their wider family and friends, and significantly, the loss of half the child's own identity. A child who splits off half their identity and projects fear and hatred toward it, is a child who is storing up serious psychological problems for the future. As shown in Amy Baker's 2007 study, adults who rejected a parent as a child have a lack of self-esteem, guilt, shame, and anxiety, which are only a few of the problems that have to be faced. The others are located in the interpersonal relationships that the child will seek in the future. These can be catastrophic for the adult who was an alienated child, in terms of the way in which their expectations of other people remain split into wholly good or wholly bad. The rigidity of thought that comes with this kind of splitting means that maintaining happy relationships is difficult for those who have developed split thinking because they lack an understanding that other people are both good *and* bad and that people can do bad things without it meaning they are bad people.

Intolerance in relationships is a common problem for adults who were alienated as children, as is the tendency to put people on pedestals until they disappoint and are then knocked down again, only to be rejected. Life as an adult, after being a child affected by alienation, can be incredibly difficult, and it is, therefore, imperative that however the alienation is caused, the problem is treated.