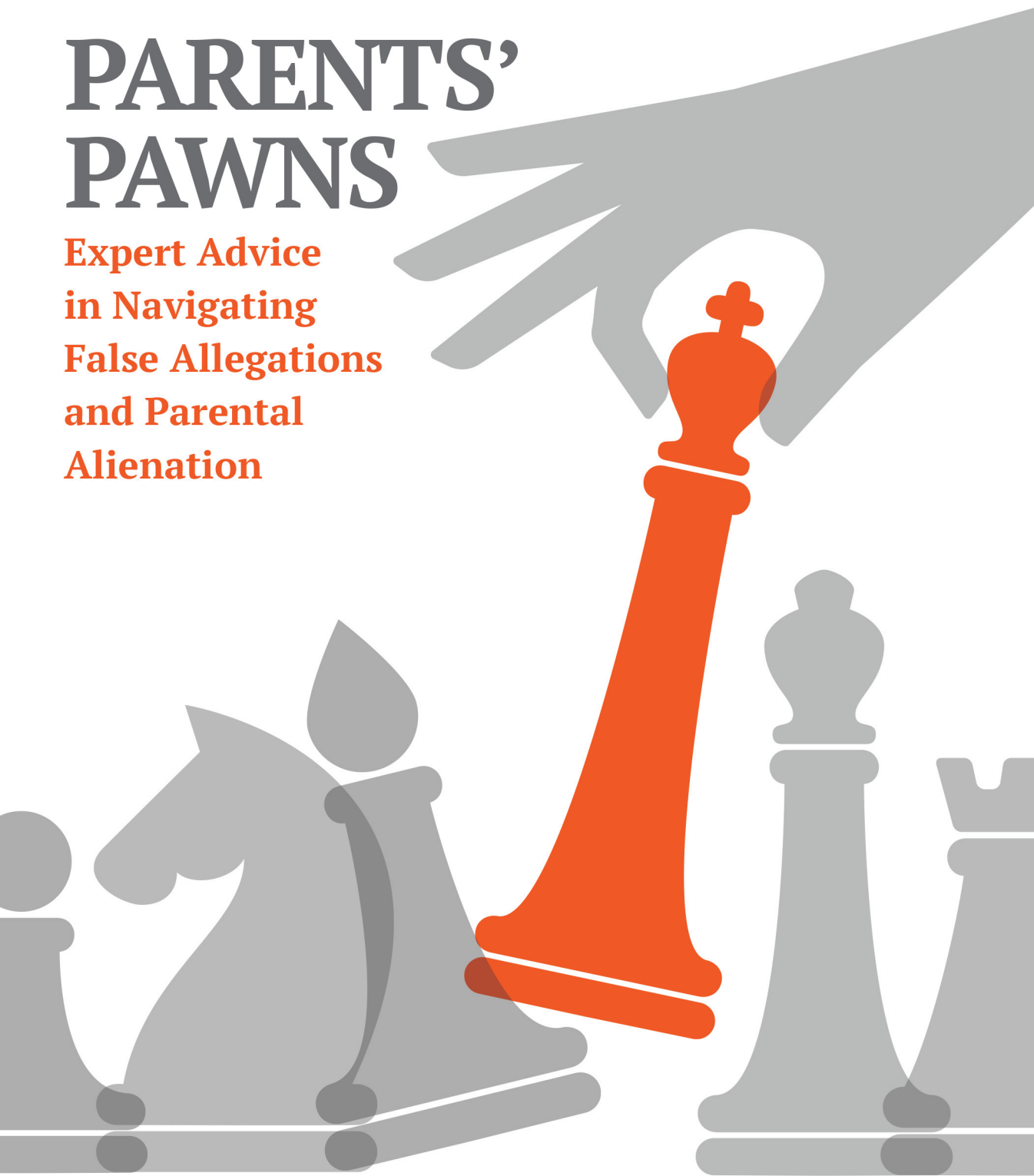


PARENTS' PAWNS

**Expert Advice
in Navigating
False Allegations
and Parental
Alienation**



**ALAN D. BLOTCKY, PhD
DEAN TONG, MSc**

PARENTS' PAWNS

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Alan D. Blotcky, PhD, is a clinical and forensic psychologist in private practice in Birmingham, Alabama. He is also Clinical Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, The University of Alabama at Birmingham. Blotcky is on the Board of Directors of the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) and is co-editor of *Parental Alienation International*, a bimonthly newsletter. His first book with Dr. William Bernet was *Parental Alienation for Families and Practitioners: Q&A*. Blotcky is a frequent court-appointed and retained expert on parental alienation and false allegations of abuse in both family and criminal courts throughout the country. He can be reached at alanblotcky@att.net.

Dean Tong, MSc, RCFI is a nationally certified child forensic interviewer, forensic trial consultant, expert witness, and author. He has over 30 years of experience in over 1000 high-conflict and litigious child abuse and child custody cases in all courts across the country. Tong has appeared on Dr. Phil, Court TV, Fox News Channel, MSNBC, and CBS 48 Hours in some of the country's highest profile cases. He can be reached at DeanTong@aol.com.

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By

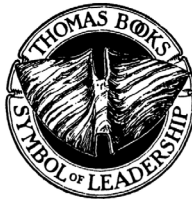
ALAN D. BLOTCKY, PhD

*Private Practice
Birmingham, Alabama*

and

DEAN TONG, MSc

*Forensic Trial Consultant
Port Richey, Florida*



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We are indebted to many mental health and legal professionals who have guided us with their outstanding research and clinical work in the field. We are especially thankful to the Parental Alienation Study Group (PASG) for its mission of scholarship and leadership in the field. We appreciate the many families we have worked with over the years, often at highly stressful and anguished times. We love our own families for their constant support and encouragement of our work.

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT THIS BOOK

“With so much disinformation being disseminated about parental alienation, this book is a welcome evidence-based resource for parents and practitioners who are grappling with allegations of all kinds of abuse (e.g., physical, sexual, parental alienation). Abusive parents, regardless of gender, often accuse others of being abusive as a strategy to gain an advantage, such as in custody matters. In today’s world, many U.S. forensic jurisdictions now consider accusations alone sufficient to restrict a parent’s custodial rights, an inversion of justice and a violation of due process rights. Without evidence-based recommendations for how to handle allegations of abuse to determine their veracity and implications for child custody, children are at risk of remaining in the custody of an abusive parent who is claiming to be otherwise. This book serves as a valuable tool for anyone in such a situation.”

Jennifer J. Harman, PhD

Associate Professor of Psychology, Colorado State University

“Clinical and forensic Psychologist Alan Blotcky and forensic consultant Dean Tong have created an expert guide to navigating false allegations of abuse and parental alienation within families. Misinformation and junk science permeate law enforcement and courts’ attempts at determining true vs. false allegations of child abuse. Here, two nationally renowned experts on parental alienation make decades of scientifically reliable and valid research understandable to parents, social scientists, and legal professionals. Using case vignettes to illustrate key points and themes, the authors offer a roadmap for navigating false-allegation cases, drawing on both science and accumulated clinical knowledge. A valuable and practical resource for all.”

Demosthenes Lorandos, PhD, JD

Editor-in-Chief: *The Litigators Handbook of Forensic Medicine, Psychiatry and Psychology*

“Blotcky and Tong offer an expert guide on false allegations of abuse and parental alienation in high-conflict divorces. Many professionals in this area are lacking a comprehensive, practical knowledge of parental alienation dynamics and are unaware of the rampant misinformation in the field. This book will enlighten readers as to the many pitfalls in these cases and is a must-read for all those working in family law cases where severe child contact problems exist. These authors tackle a very important problem that is often misunderstood and poorly addressed.”

Robert A. Evans, PhD

President, The National Association of Parental Alienation Specialists
(NAOPAS)

“Weaponized false allegations in high-conflict family litigation are all too common. It puts the innocent, targeted parent on the defensive and distracts from examining the true needs of the children. This book will make a major contribution to understanding how weaponized false allegations can distort a process intended to determine the best interests of children. The authors are national experts in the field, and this book will be valuable on the bookshelves of parents, lawyers, mental health practitioners, forensic investigators, and therapists in this fraught, difficult arena.”

Brian A. Ludmer, LLB

Founding Principal of LudmerLaw

Co-Author of *The High Conflict Custody Battle*

“*Parents' Pawns* is a rigorous, courageous, and deeply necessary contribution to one of the most misunderstood areas of family law and mental health. Grounded in empirical research and extensive clinical and forensic experience, Blotcky and Tong confront the realities of false allegations and parental alienation without ideological distortion. Their book offers clarity where confusion often reigns, and practical guidance where families and practitioners most need it. An essential resource for parents, practitioners, and policymakers navigating high-conflict cases.”

Ben Hine, PhD

Professor of Applied Psychology, University of West London

Author of *Parental Alienation: A Contemporary Guide* and

Current Issues Facing Men and Boys: A Case for Urgent Change

FOREWORD

It is an honor to write this foreword to this important book, which is undoubtedly going to be helpful to legions of legal and mental health professionals (and litigants) who are involved with family court cases wherein allegations of parental alienation are made. As a family law practitioner, I have a niche practice: I focus and specialize in litigating cases involving family violence, of which parental alienation is but one facet. I have been privileged to counsel and represent individuals – parents, children, grandparents – in family courts across the country, and internationally.

History of Parental Alienation

Although the term “parental alienation” is relatively new, it is not a new psychological phenomenon. In 1949, psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich wrote about certain divorced parents who, because of their personality types, defended themselves from narcissistic injury by weaponizing the child against the other parent and sabotaging the other parent’s relationship with the child. In the 1980s, Wallerstein and Kelly wrote of the “unholy alliance between a narcissistically enraged parent” and the vulnerable child, who together waged war to hurt and punish the other parent. In 1985, the late Richard Gardner, a child and forensic psychiatrist, introduced the term “Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS)” into the annals of legal and mental health literature, wherein PAS was defined as a mental disorder. In the late 1990s, Douglas Darnall distinguished PAS from Parental Alienation, noting that the former focused on the *child’s* behavior or reaction while the latter focused on the favored or alienating *parent’s* actions or omissions. In the 2000s, Richard Warshak identified key components that must be present for a genuine case of parental alienation: (1) persistent, not occasional, campaign of denigration of a parent; (2) an unjustified or irrational rejection of the parent by the child; and (3) alienating parent’s behaviors or influence, which resulted in the rejection of the parent by the child. Finally, in 2016, William Bernet, along with two of his colleagues, wrote about a new condition, “child affected by parental relationship distress” (CAPRD), which was introduced

in the DSM-5. A relational problem, CAPRD, could manifest in a child who is exposed to unfair disparagement of one parent by another — a well-recognized form of alienating behavior in both the legal and mental health literatures. The concept of parental alienation has evolved over the years and continues to evolve as more empirical research mounts going forward.

Critics of Parental Alienation

Despite a blossoming of peer-reviewed (and non-peer-reviewed) scientific literature on parental alienation on a systematic and consistent basis over the past several decades, there are detractors who have propagated misinformation and disinformation about the concept (and the term) of parental alienation. These detractors turn a blind eye to the progress made in the field of social sciences, pooh-poooh qualitative and quantitative research studies on parental alienation, dismiss a plethora of judicial findings from various jurisdictions, and bury their heads in the sand, all the while challenging the very concept of parental alienation. They obsess over and fixate upon the decades-old theory of “syndrome,” outdated research, false and inflammatory gender-based rhetoric, and wild exaggerations or oversimplifications of the alienation family dynamics and behaviors. Creating and demolishing strawman arguments with a fanatical zeal, these detractors argue that the concept of parental alienation is simply a “hoax” or “junk science,” and should be banished from the American family courtrooms.

Thankfully, while some case outcomes unfortunately get compromised in court and in therapy due to these detractors’ propaganda of misinformation and disinformation, family courts have, for the most part, been able to separate the wheat from the chaff.

Courts Recognize Parental Alienation

A comprehensive review of case law and decisions from family courts across the country have exposed the myth of the much-dreaded *Woozles* — the honey-stealing villains, living in cold, snowy places that Winnie-the-Pooh has long warned us about. The myth that the phenomenon of parental alienation does not exist or has no underpinning in science or is simply an ideology masquerading as science in the gender war over children has so often been repeated that some people might assume it to be true. But, no more. A review of legal opinions from the family courts in the past few decades, together with the scientific literature, debunks this myth. Family-court judges have held that not only “there is no doubt that parental alienation exists,” but that it is “not a new phenomenon,” and that “[a]nybody old enough to drink coffee knows that embittered parties to divorce can and do manipulate their children.” *J.F. v. D.F.*, 61 Misc.3d 1226(A), 2018 N.Y. Slip Op. 51829(U), *8 (2018).

Hacking away at the cobwebs of needless psychobabble, family courts have determined that “whether or not a psychological ‘syndrome’ exists, parental alienation clearly does.” *Id.* Judges—the triers of facts in domestic relations litigation—have found that it is far more important and effective to focus on a parent’s *behavior* rather than to go down the rabbit hole chasing esoteric theories of a “syndrome” that may or may not exist. The devil is in the details, and “there is no reasonable dispute that high-conflict custody disputes frequently involve acts by one parent designed to obstruct or sabotage the opposing parent’s relationship with the child.” *Martin v. Martin*, Michigan Court of Appeals No. 349261 (January 28, 2020), FN 2.

What is Parental Alienation?

Experts have used different terms to describe parental alienation. In their book, *Children Held Hostage*, published by the ABA Section of Family Law, Stanley Clawar, a sociologist, and Brynne Rivlin, a social worker, used the terms “programming,” “brainwashing,” and “indoctrination” when describing the behaviors that cause the children to reject a parent without a legitimate justification. There are two key features of the phenomenon of parental alienation. First, it can be conceptualized as a mental condition present in the *child*, i.e., the child has a distorted or false belief that the rejected or disfavored parent is “evil,” “dangerous,” or somehow unworthy of love or affection. Second, the child’s rejection of the alienated or target parent is *without legitimate justification*. And this is the key distinction: If there is documented history of the rejected parent being abusive or severely neglectful, the child’s rejection of that parent could be legitimate and if so, it would not be a classic or pure case of parental alienation.

As to how parental alienation takes place, the research conducted by Dr. Amy Baker and her colleagues describing the 17 alienating strategies is widely used and accepted by the courts and the mental health community. They include badmouthing, limiting contact, confiding in the child, asking the child to spy on the target parent, referring to the target parent by first name, withholding important information from the target parent, and undermining the authority of the target parent. Take, for instance, the behavior of a father who was found to have engaged in severe parental alienation. His *modus operandi* included sending text messages to his son telling him that he had “a right to be ugly to [his] [Mother],” the mother was “mentally ill” and “can’t help the way [she] [was] born and created by God,” that he had to visit his mother “because the law forces you to go,” and that he “will never like her. Nobody likes her. It is impossible.” *McClain v. McClain*, 539 S.W.3d 170, 194–195 (Tenn.Ct.App. 2017). Subjected to such indoctrination, children may turn on the targeted parents, vilify them, reject them, and show no ambivalence or guilt in treating them in a most cruel fashion. The trauma

is suffered not just by the rejected parent; the brainwashed children too are robbed of “a normal childhood, normal sibling relationships, and a normal relationship with [the] [targeted] [parent].” *Matter of Marriage of Reichert*, 2 Wash.App.2d 1063, *2 (2018).

False allegations of abuse are a part of parental alienation dynamics. Alienating parents sometimes lodge false allegations to gain leverage in their divorce and child custody proceedings by casting the targeted parents as dangerous, unlovable, and unworthy. And what better way to accomplish that mission than to accuse them of the heinous act of sexual or physical abuse? We now know through science and clinical experience that false allegations of abuse are common in parental alienation cases and must be navigated successfully as part of the overall litigation process.

It should not come as a surprise that courts have agreed that parental alienation “is a form of emotional abuse that should not be tolerated.” *McClain v. McClain*, *supra*, at 200. And to remedy such abuse, they have realized that it is necessary to jettison the “conservative” approach of taking baby steps and ordering traditional psychotherapy while keeping the abused child in the custody of the alienator. To do so will only result in a litigious “merry-go-round” that has neither worked in the past, nor will it work in the future. *Id.* In moderate to severe cases involving alienation, courts have increasingly taken seemingly drastic but ultimately necessary steps of changing custody, ordering psycho-educational counseling for the alienating parent, ordering a specialized reunification program for the targeted parent and the child, together with financial sanctions, reallocation of attorney fees and litigation costs, and in most severe cases, incarceration for repeated violation of court orders.

Perhaps realizing how time is the enemy in cases involving alienation, family courts have increasingly begun to stay away and not get drawn into adjudicating controversies surrounding the “parental alienation syndrome,” or to opine on esoteric, abstract, academic debates on the scientific underpinning (or the alleged lack thereof) of the phenomenon of parental alienation. Instead, the courts have focused on what they can observe, document, and hopefully, check and modify where necessary, all in a timely manner: Behaviors. It is this focus on the behaviors that led the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (AFCC) and the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) to recently issue a Joint Statement on Parent-Child Contact Problems wherein they acknowledged, *inter alia*, the reality of “parental alienating behaviors” and recommended that family law professionals obtain the necessary training related to this topic. It is also this focus on the parental alienating behaviors that has led some courts to declare that they can make a finding of alienation based upon an analysis of the facts alone without expert evidence. *Malhotra v. Henhoeffler*, 2018 ONSC 6472. As a Pennsylvania family court opined, “Expert testimony is not needed

to establish that [Parent A] engaged in behavior designed to alienate [the] children from [Parent B].” *B.L. v. L.S.*, 304 A.3d 755 (Pa. Super. Ct. 2023).

Parental Alienation is an International Phenomenon

The unfortunate phenomenon of parental alienation is by no means unique to the United States. Parental alienation has been described, discussed, and debated in the legal and scientific literature by numerous writers worldwide. It is addressed in thousands of court rulings in Canada, United Kingdom, Brazil, Mexico, Israel, France, Spain, India, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, the European Court of Human Rights, and other jurisdictions around the world. This is not surprising as it is an expression of human behavior, albeit pathological, which occurs worldwide with similar patterns. A parent who violates the boundaries by treating the child as a weapon in a divorce or custody litigation undoubtedly causes his or her child serious emotional harm. In lamenting such sad behavior in a case involving toxic family dysfunction, England’s Lord Justice Wall aptly quoted the first four lines of Philip Larkin’s poem, “This be the Verse:”

They f-k you up, your mum and dad.
They may not mean to, but they do.
They fill you with the faults they had
And add some extra, just for you.

This Book’s Value

Alan Blotcky and Dean Tong, both stalwarts in the field of parental alienation and false allegations, have presented us with a remarkable book. It has much to offer whether the reader is a novice or a professional well-versed in PA dynamics. I hope anyone who is involved with the family court system, or just curious to learn more about the phenomenon of parental alienation and false allegations, will digest and utilize this important book.

Ashish Joshi, LLM

Attorney and Litigator

Author of *Litigating Parental Alienation: Evaluating and Presenting an Effective Case in Court*

INTRODUCTION

It is a widespread quest in our country to eliminate all sexual and physical abuse of our most cherished citizens: our children. Abuse of children must never be tolerated. Perpetrators of childhood abuse must be held accountable without exception.

Research on physical and sexual abuse of children has yielded important trends. About 90% of abusers are people the children know. About 30% of the abusers are family members but not necessarily a parent. Another 60% of the abusers are people outside the family whom the children know and trust. Unfortunately, many cases of child abuse go unreported—a staggering and upsetting fact.

False Allegations by Children Have Been Studied

False allegations of abuse by children have been studied for decades because not all claims of child abuse by a child and his or her parents are true. Children and teenagers tell falsehoods for a variety of reasons: to garner attention, to express anger and vindictiveness, to blame someone for their own inappropriate sexual activity or other misbehavior, to gain stature with peers, as a symptom of a mental health disorder, or to prove their loyalty and allegiance to a parent who is encouraging a false claim as part of an unhealthy family dynamic. These are the most common reasons for false allegations within families, although this is not an exhaustive list.

False Allegations and Parental Alienation

The idea that false allegations of abuse can be weaponized in a divorce proceeding was described in 1987 in the Sexual Allegations in Divorce syndrome (SAID). Other terms for this phenomenon have been used over the years: “Nuclear Option,” “Silver Bullet Method,” “Weaponized Divorce.” When a divorce or child custody matter is pending or ongoing, allegations of child abuse by the child and/or parent against the other parent must be considered carefully, methodically, and with an appropriate level of suspicion. Because we know that in high-conflict divorce and child custody

proceedings, false allegations of abuse are commonly lodged by one parent against the other parent. This scenario occurs in parental alienation (PA), where one parent tries to sabotage and even sever a child's relationship with the other parent due to vindictiveness, fear, enmeshment, or other illegitimate reasons.

Lodging false allegations of abuse against a targeted parent is a particularly poisonous way to extricate that parent from a child's life. Children who are subjected to PA by a parent can become witting or unwitting participants in a false allegation against the targeted parent by being cajoled, swayed, pressured, bribed, coached, or indoctrinated by the alienating parent. The process of PA results in a child who is aligned with the favored parent and is manipulated to implicate the targeted parent in a false allegation. In essence, these children become pawns of the favored parent against the other parent. This PA phenomenon is considered toxic, abusive, and psychologically damaging to the child in the short-term and long-term. The alienating parent—who is the real culprit in a PA scenario—wants total control over the child and the rejected parent, even if it can damage the child for life.

Child advocacy groups, domestic violence (DV) experts, and some mental health and legal practitioners are often focused on actual cases of child abuse, with little or no recognition of false allegations of abuse or PA. In fact, some advocacy groups and DV experts inaccurately disavow false allegations of abuse and PA because they want to maintain an unfettered condemnation of abusive men. They do not accept the cutting-edge science that indicates that both men and women engage in PA and DV. Neither is a gender-specific phenomenon. To assert that only men are perpetrators in PA and DV is misleading and wrong. We know that both mothers and fathers engage in PA and weaponize false allegations of abuse with the witting or unwitting participation of their children to banish the other parent from their children's lives. It is possible to embrace two different truths at the same time: that abusive men must be identified and stopped at all costs, and that both men and women can be perpetrators of DV and PA. Both statements are true. To blatantly defy science in this area is to adopt an ideology that is misinformed and counterproductive.

Children are Suggestible and Do Lie in Court

The notion that children do not lie is patently false. Research shows that children begin to lie as early as two years old, and that more sophisticated lie-telling behavior develops during childhood and adolescence. Children and teenagers lie in court cases, especially when they are explicitly or implicitly encouraged to do so by parents, evaluators, investigators, and other authority figures. An important fact is that parents and even trained experts are very poor at deciphering whether a child is telling the truth or

lying. So, taking what a child says at face value can be a slippery slope, with unfortunate results for decision-making in therapeutic settings and in court proceedings.

We also know from research that children and teenagers are highly suggestible to the influence of parents and other authority figures. Children and teenagers can be swayed, cajoled, pressured, bribed, manipulated, coached, and indoctrinated by parents and others. Suggestibility is not a vague construct—it is a process that has been studied empirically for years. Suggestibility is an age-related dimension that has nothing to do with a child's intelligence or seeming maturity. A child or teenager's suggestibility must be kept in mind when considering an allegation of abuse within the family, especially when PA dynamics are evident.

Children naturally and instinctively want to love both of their parents without interference. We know that childhood development progresses normally when a child has both parents to love completely and freely. The use of a child as a pawn by a parent is severely detrimental to the child, which leads to anxiety, depression, eating disorder, substance abuse, poor school performance, conflict in relationships, and a tendency to engage in PA as adults.

Our Goal in this Book

Parents' Pawns: Expert Advice in Navigating False Allegations and Parental Alienation is a unique, one-of-a-kind book because of its focus on a complex topic (false allegations as part of PA) and our goal of providing concrete, practical, and easily relatable information for victim parents and the practitioners who help them. We offer a roadmap for navigating cases of false allegations and PA that is based on both science and accumulated clinical knowledge. We use case vignettes to illustrate important points and themes. The vignettes are not actual families but are made-up scenarios that may be an amalgamation of several family situations. Each chapter concludes with a recommended reading list of key articles, chapters, and books for in-depth exploration of the topic.

This book is organized into chapters that address critical issues regarding PA and false allegations of abuse. Chapter 1 describes the influence parents have on their children. We know a great deal about healthy families and normal parent-child relationships. We also know about unhealthy parent-child dynamics that can escalate in severity as the family struggles with life events, such as divorce and stress. Chapter 2 summarizes our knowledge of when and how children develop the ability to lie. We know that children will lie in court cases under certain circumstances. We also know that parents and other adults are very poor at determining if a child is telling the truth or is lying. Chapter 3 explains the basic tenets of PA as it unfolds

in response to separation, divorce, or post-divorce. Chapter 4 discusses our understanding of alienating parents. Chapter 5 describes the weaponization of false allegations of abuse by a parent in PA. Chapters 6 and 7 explain the negative consequences of false allegations and PA on children and their rejected parents. Chapter 8 presents treatment protocols for three levels of PA severity. Chapter 9 examines the roles of mental health experts in these cases. Chapter 10 explains the usefulness of documentation and timelines in navigating cases. Chapter 11 describes the use of risk assessments to help refute false allegations against an accused parent. Chapter 12 addresses the steps and missteps of therapists. Chapter 13 focuses on how attorneys help and hurt in handling PA cases. Chapter 14 addresses how to maneuver within three different court systems. Chapter 15 describes the tragically sad consequences of PA and false allegations. Chapter 16 presents a case that was successfully navigated and resolved. Finally, Chapter 17 focuses on the possibilities of prevention.

Some parents create and promulgate false allegations of abuse within PA by using children as pawns. As such, the title of this book—*Parents' Pawns*—is an apt description of the problem. Sadly, millions of children and their targeted parents are victimized by PA and false allegations every day. We hope our book serves as an expert roadmap for navigating the nuances and intricacies of this vexing problem.

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PARENTS' PAWNS

Chapter 1

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS: NORMALITY TO DYSFUNCTION

This chapter focuses on our knowledge regarding normality and dysfunction in parent-child relationships. Parents and the family play critical roles for children. The healthy qualities in normal parent-child relationships are important to acknowledge and appreciate as a backdrop to understanding dysfunction in those relationships. The transition from normality to dysfunction is the focus of this chapter.

Attachment between Parents and Children is Foundational

Attachment between children and their parents has been corroborated in decades of scientific research. A young child instinctively behaves in ways that bring his or her parents closer—by crying when attention is needed and by establishing social bonds through eye contact and smiling. At the same time, parents have an inherent biological proclivity to respond to their child's cues and offer them care. Parents interact with their infants by holding, stroking, talking, singing, playing, feeding, changing diapers, soothing, and so forth. Primary caregivers who are available and responsive to an infant's needs help the child develop a sense of security. The infant learns that the caregivers are dependable, which creates a secure base for the child to then explore the world.

Children who are *securely attached* as infants tend to develop stronger self-esteem and better self-reliance as they grow older. These children tend to be more independent, perform better in school, have satisfying social relationships, and experience less anxiety and depression. An *insecure attachment* between children and parents forecasts developmental and adjustment problems. A child who was insecurely attached

in infancy is more likely to have poor self-esteem, manifest psychiatric disorders, be impulsive and even reckless, have unsatisfying social relationships, and lack curiosity and motivation in school.

Whether a child is securely or insecurely attached does not alter the fact that children and their primary caregivers have an instinctive, biological drive to emotionally connect in ways that foster the child's development. As such, parents—both mothers and fathers—are critically important for children at every stage of their development.

Boundaries in Healthy Families

Healthy boundaries are a basic characteristic that sets well-functioning families apart. Boundaries refer to limits we set with other people. They indicate what we find acceptable and unacceptable in others' behavior toward us. Boundaries help define who we are. They are not walls to keep others out; they are guidelines that help us express our needs and expectations clearly and assertively. Within healthy families, firm yet flexible boundaries are maintained between parents and their children so there is no confusion between their roles and expectations. Parents are parents; children are children. Parents must establish and maintain a strong coalition with one another and avoid crossing boundaries by forging inappropriate alliances with a child. If that happens, the misalignment in the family can cause great individual and systemic problems among family members. In other words, *unhealthy boundaries* can set the stage for both individual and family dysfunction.

Lance is 14 years old and a star football player on his school team. His father is extremely proud of his son, since his father was not athletic at all as a youngster. Lance is underperforming in school because of his emphasis on football. Lance asked his father to do his homework for him, since no one would know. Lance's father refused the request and set some firm rules and expectations for his son: he must make A's and B's in all his school subjects, or he will have to quit the football team.

Normal Parent-Child Relationships

It is axiomatic that children naturally and instinctively want to love both of their parents freely and equally without interference or impediment by anyone. We know that a child's ability to love both parents sets the stage for normal, healthy development. Children and teenagers are at high risk for the development of mental health disorders

when they lose a parent to death or to extrication for another reason. A child's short-term and long-term adjustment depends on having close, loving relationships with both parents.

Based on research and clinical experience, we know that *normal parent-child relationships* are close, loving, warm, and supportive. They spend quality time together. There is open communication. There is humor. They engage in shared tasks and fun activities. They have firm but permeable boundaries. They share values and expectations.

Contrary to popular belief, healthy parent-child relationships are not fraught with anger, tension, and prolonged ruptures in their connectedness. As with all close relationships, there are times of disagreement, minor conflict, and disappointment among parents and their children. But it is the resolution of these disagreements, minor conflicts, and disappointments that promote mastery, problem-solving, and empathy in children. And that is exactly what happens in normal, healthy parent-child relationships. Adolescents, too, typically have positive and sustaining relationships with their parents that do not include severe conflict or ruptures. Normal teenagers navigate their physical, cognitive, and emotional changes with the loving support of their parents.

Michael is 17 years old and has many friends. He and his father disagreed about his curfew on Friday and Saturday nights. Michael wanted 1 am, while his father insisted on 11 pm. After much discussion, Michael and his father agreed on a curfew of midnight. This disagreement between father and son did not involve heated words, accusations, or falsehoods, nor did it rupture their relationship.

Beginning Signs of Parent-Child Dysfunction

Healthy families under stress can develop certain dynamics that are problematic and may set the stage for more serious family dysfunction. These family dynamics are called loyalty conflict, gatekeeping, parentification, adultification, and infantilization. Stress can include events such as illness, loss of a job, substance abuse, an arrest, failing out of school, an affair, marital separation, divorce, and many more. The family dynamics in response to stress can be mild, transitory, and even adaptive if they are short-lived and helpful in combating the stress at hand. On the other hand, these dynamics are diagnosable as pathological conditions if they become moderate to severe, entrenched, and have a negative impact on a parent or a child.

Loyalty conflict is when one parent attempts to enlist a child's affection and support in direct opposition to the other parent. When children are caught in the middle of a battleground between two parents, they initially try to maintain good relationships with both parents. This is likely to create an uncomfortable state of cognitive dissonance for children. Children with loyalty conflict often feel torn, tense, sad, and misunderstood. Loyalty conflict is an unhealthy phenomenon that can lead to more serious forms of misalignment and dysfunction.

Paul is a 10-year-old whose mother complains to him about his father, who is a workaholic and seldom at home. Paul loves his father and tries to stay connected with him. At the same time, he feels protective and aligned with his mother. Paul's loyalty conflict is chipping away at his self-esteem and confidence. He loves both of his parents and cannot figure out how to feel or behave with either of them. Paul's loyalty conflict is taking a notable toll: his grades in school are dropping, he has withdrawn from all school activities, and he rarely sees his friends.

Gatekeeping refers to when a parent becomes overly controlling of a child, making all decisions about their daily life. A gatekeeping parent views the other parent as a helper rather than an equal partner. When they ask the other parent for help, they often provide explicit instructions on how to accomplish the task. A gatekeeping parent organizes, delegates, plans, and schedules everything for the child. This parent may see his or her mission as one of protecting the child, but, in truth, gatekeeping reflects a breakdown in boundaries, indicative of enmeshment.

Mary is an 8-year-old whose father manages her life by using a spreadsheet to plan and track all her daily activities. Her life is structured, regimented, and controlled. Mary's relationship with her mother has been disrupted by her father's all-encompassing gatekeeping. Mary is beginning to show signs of rebelliousness and depression.

Parentification refers to the "promotion" of a child to caretaker status of one or both parents and of the siblings. The child is expected to fulfill practical and emotional responsibilities in the family that are inappropriate and burdensome for an ill-equipped youngster. Cooking, cleaning, making appointments, making plans with outside adults, soothing a parent, doing homework for a sibling, and much more are examples of parentification. The child

can begin to feel that they are the decider and ruler in the home, with a sense of power that is not healthy for a child or a teenager.

Steve is a 13-year-old who has been put in charge of his two younger siblings at home. Steve is expected to make sure his siblings get bathed, do their homework, get in bed at the proper time, and are entertained at night and on weekends. At first, Steve felt empowered by his enhanced status in the family. His sense of powerfulness manifested itself in obvious problems: a sense of entitlement, rebelliousness against rules, conflict with teachers, refusal to go to church, and more.

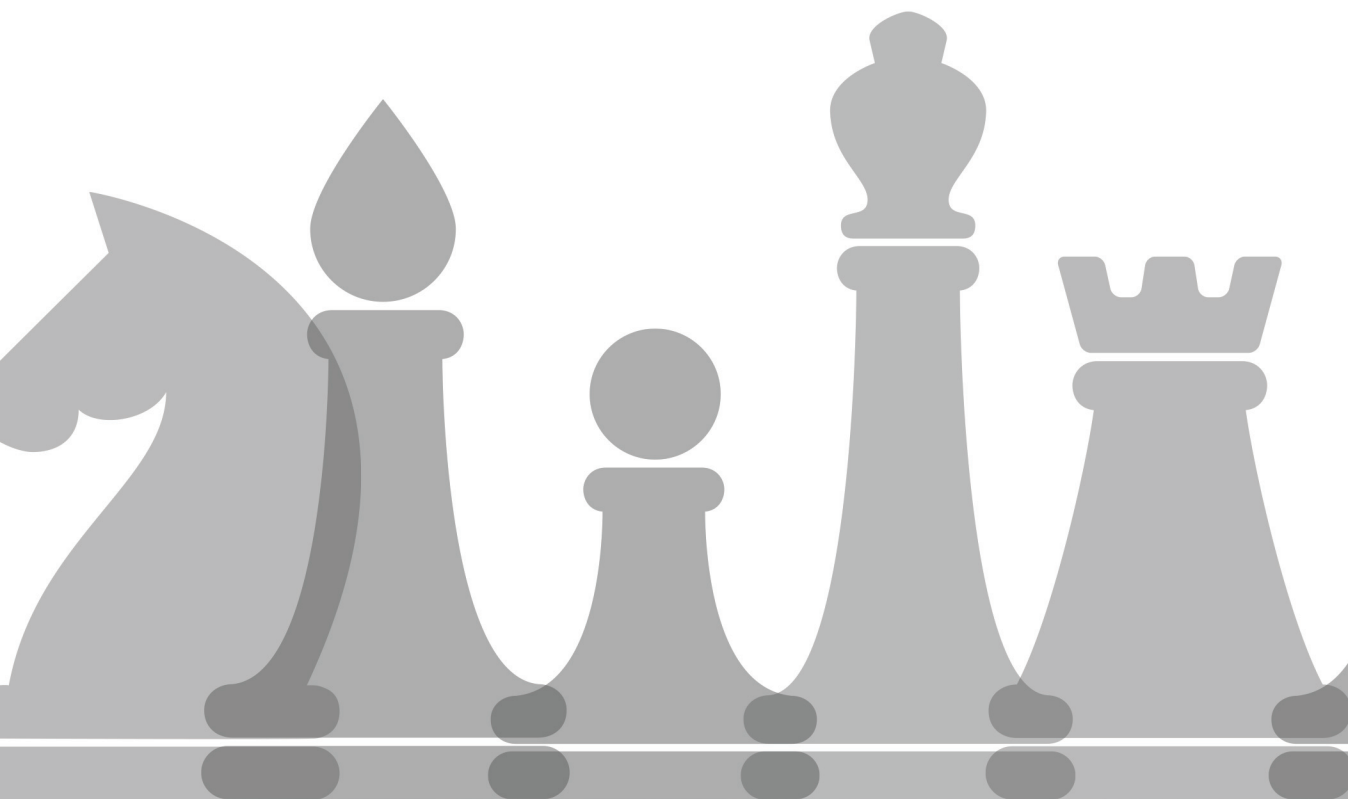
Adultification occurs when a parent enlists a child as an ally, peer, friend, or even emotional partner. The child is bestowed with adult status and may seemingly enjoy the special attention it brings. It can make a child or teenager feel prematurely grown-up and independent when, in fact, they are not. Promoting a child to the role of friend or ally means exposing them to information or situations beyond their emotional development to handle. Adultification of a child or teenager is a burden—not a prize to boast about.

Judy is 17 years old and a confidante of her mother. They go out to eat together several times each week to discuss adult matters. Judy and her mother now have the same best friend. Judy stopped having a relationship with her father. She disobeyed all his requests, expectations, and rules. She thought she was the “queen bee” among her siblings. Judy began engaging in unhealthy behaviors for a teenager: smoking cigarettes and marijuana, breaking curfew, having sex, and planning to drop out of school.

Infantilization is when a parent acts to inhibit a child’s otherwise age-appropriate movement toward independence. It is an attempt to keep a child dependent on the parent and available to meet the parent’s needs. This parent will discourage the child from academic success, social relationships, hobbies and activities, and even daily self-care skills. Infantilization results in a loss of motivation and extreme psychological inertia in the child.

Allison is 13 years old, a budding teenager. Her mother discourages her from all teenage activities, such as talking on the phone, going to movies, going to slumber parties, and playing soccer. Her mother dresses her every morning. Allison became a different child: her grades in school plummeted, she stopped communicating with

False allegations and parental alienation (PA) are misunderstood and mistreated in families who are grappling with divorce and child custody matters. During these stressful times, alienating parents aim to turn their children against the targeted parents for non-legitimate reasons to gain leverage in their court proceedings. These parents use their children as pawns to achieve their vindictive and selfish goals, contrary to what is in the children's best interests. Navigating these questionable situations is the focus of this book, *Parents' Pawns*. Each chapter addresses a specific topic, and case vignettes illustrate central points and themes. *Parents' Pawns* is intended as a guide for parents and mental health and legal practitioners seeking to understand and overcome PA and its pernicious false allegations.



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