

## **Understanding Parental Alienation: Learning to Cope, Helping to Heal**

By Karen Woodall and Nick Woodall. Springfield, IL: Charles C Thomas Publisher, Ltd. 231 pp. \$39.95.

Reviewed by Amanda Square, MD

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*Understanding Parental Alienation: Learning to Cope, Helping to Heal* provides a framework to assist parents in understanding the process whereby a child becomes aligned with one parent and rejects the other, whether by a deliberate campaign by one parent or a dynamic between the parents, following separation or divorce. Parental alienation also presents challenging situations, both personally and in the legal arena. The book provides information through a combination of academic material, author insights, and vignettes. The strength of this style is that it provides a clinical and theoretical underpinning to the authors' tangible experience and then solidifies understanding through real-world illustration. While not the primary focus, the book also elucidates the importance of "alienation-aware court professionals" (p 218).

The book, composed of nine chapters, is divided into three sections: Understanding, Coping, and Healing. The opening section of the book, Understanding, provides a historical overview, pertinent terminology, a system to identify the severity of alienation and categorize alienation, and an approach to understand the different power and control dynamics in postseparation families. Furthermore, it provides a construct, the transition bridge, to help parents understand the emotional and psychological tasks undertaken by children of separated families to maintain a relationship with both parents (pp 71–91). In the second section, Coping, the focus shifts to helping rejected and alienated parents understand and cope with the impact of alienation. Material in this section aids parents in understanding the dynamics contributing to a child's alienation reaction and offers insights

into what must change for the alienation to lift and strategies to achieve such change. This part of the book also shares recommendations and guidance for parents opting to present an alienation case in court. For example, the authors suggest that parents maintain a chronology of events and use succinct and concise language when conveying information to the court system. The final section, Healing, emphasizes recovery and the task of reunification, whether spontaneous, assisted, or forced, with the previously rejected parent.

Parents seeking deeper insight into parental alienation or needing practical advice in approaching this emotional and psychological quandary through an accessible text will find valuable content within this text. For professionals, the book offers perspectives and elicits considerations that could prove useful for those working in family court clinics or in psychotherapeutic settings. Topics that are briefly touched upon include court report writers' awareness of negative preconceptions, gender stereotypes, and the trend of "overly relying on children's wishes and feelings" in guiding recommendations (p 190). The authors caution report writers against that trend. Other areas that are lightly broached include the controversy surrounding the topic of parental alienation, the absence of parental alienation as a clinically recognized syndrome in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, and concepts such as the "transgenerational transmission of trauma and alienation" (p 53–57). The last examines how past traumatic events, such as sudden deaths, estrangements, and divorce, are passed down the generational line and become part of the family narrative, ultimately contributing to a child's alienated position.

Some of the book's subject matter and conclusions may raise disagreement among certain clinicians. For example, the authors put forward the premise that a child's stated wishes and feelings may be unreliable in cases of parental alienation (p 179). The authors also assert that pure parental alienation should be regarded as child abuse and considered a child-protection concern (p 41). Finally, the authors state that approaching the alienated family "as a dynamic system where everyone holds responsibility for the outcomes" is "disastrous" as "it leads to an endless round of examination of the dynamics between the whole family, instead of focusing on the dysfunctional behavior of the alienating parent" (p 133).

Drawing on their research and years of work at the Family Separation Clinic, Karen Woodall and Nick Woodall have produced a well-written and readily

digestible book. While this book is clearly intended for parents facing alienation, professionals interested in becoming “alienation-aware” will find this book edifying. Further, family therapists, general psychiatrists, child and adolescent psychiatrists, and forensic clinicians stand to benefit from this book’s unique perspective, the authors’ practical experience, and the invitation to explore stereotypes and subjective judgments that affect family relationships. The references cited also can serve as a guide to general study of the subject. Forensic clinicians seeking detailed protocols and extensive evidence-based research will need to access resources beyond this book. With that said, clinicians will benefit from reading this book for exposure to the concept of parental alienation and for the authors’ insights in the developing field.

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## Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich: Sexual Assault Survivors and the Justice System

Directed by Lisa Bryant. Original Release Date: May 27, 2020 on Netflix. Based on *Filthy Rich: A Powerful Billionaire, the Sex Scandal that Undid Him, and All the Justice that Money Can Buy: The Shocking Story of Jeffrey Epstein*, by James Patterson, John Connolly, and Tim Malloy. New York: Penguin Random House; 2016.

Reviewed by Karen B. Rosenbaum, MD, Joshua B. Friedman, MD, PhD, and Susan Hatters Friedman, MD

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**Key words:** survivors; sex trafficking; pedophilia; grooming; sexual assault

*Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich*, a four-episode miniseries available on Netflix, is based on the true-crime story by best-selling author James Patterson (of *Along Came a Spider* fame), co-written by John Connolly and Tim Malloy. The series describes the shocking story of a charismatic billionaire who was able to quietly create a sex-trafficking pyramid scheme to indulge in his predilection for sexual activity with underage girls. The series also attempts to explain how the

enigmatic Epstein became so wealthy in the first place. James Patterson had been Epstein’s neighbor in Palm Beach, Florida, and became interested in researching his story after he saw Epstein walking carefree in Manhattan with two beautiful young women on his arm about a decade after being convicted of soliciting prostitution and procuring a minor for prostitution in Palm Beach. The coincidence of a best-selling crime fiction author brushing up against a notorious criminal is reminiscent of true-crime writer Ann Rule’s best-seller, *The Stranger Beside Me*, about Ted Bundy, who had been Rule’s co-worker at one time.

Since Epstein’s mysterious death in Manhattan’s Metropolitan Correctional Center (a federal detention facility) in August 2019, there have been various television and podcast portrayals of Epstein’s sexual and legal history. *Jeffrey Epstein: Filthy Rich* takes a unique approach by describing in depth many of his survivors’ stories and also examines the ways the law consistently worked in his favor because of his excessive wealth.

After an appropriate warning to the audience, the first episode begins with a videotape of a seemingly confident Jeffrey Epstein being interviewed during a 2012 deposition. He was residing on the Virgin Islands at the time but maintained several other homes. During the deposition clip, Epstein invoked his Fifth Amendment right multiple times, declining to answer questions of any value to the plaintiff’s case.

In 2003, Vicky Ward wrote a piece for *Vanity Fair*, *The Talented Mr. Epstein*, a play on words of Patricia Highsmith’s *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, a story about a charming psychopath who gets away with everything.<sup>1</sup> Ward was tasked by her editor to write a “society piece” uncovering the mystery around Epstein’s wealth and business relationship with Mr. Leslie Wexner, owner of The Limited and Victoria’s Secret. In *Filthy Rich*, Vicky Ward explained that at that point, Jeffrey Epstein was tied to major public figures, including Prince Andrew, Donald Trump, Bill Clinton, defense attorney Alan Dershowitz, and British heiress Ghislaine Maxwell (whom he had dated). In her research, Ward inadvertently learned about Epstein sexually abusing underage girls. She describes that she was not allowed to publish this content because the allegations were adamantly denied by Epstein and he had not yet been convicted of any crimes.

Several survivors told their stories in the series. It became apparent that some of them were “imperfect victims” (as many victims are), meaning that they