

# Current Treatment Protocols for Adult Survivors of Severe Parental Alienation A Scoping Review Alyse Price Tobler August 17 2022 final

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## Abstract

This study aimed to review the academic peer-reviewed and grey literature pertaining to current treatment protocols for mental health practitioners working therapeutically with adult survivors of severe parental alienation. The academic databases searched were Medline (Web of Science), PsycNET (APA), and Psychiatry Online. Grey literature searches were conducted through Google, professional websites, published books and Facebook. No peer-reviewed articles matching the inclusion criteria were located. However, four pertinent grey literature resources were discovered. It was found that there is a dearth of ethical standards and professional practice guidelines that include a comprehensive treatment protocol for mental health practitioners who work with adult survivors of severe parental alienation and more research needs to be undertaken. Also, to understand the degree, acuity, complexity, and severity of the developmental and ongoing acute trauma of severe parental alienation, a treatment protocol must be developed as well as a gold standard for competence, training, and ongoing professional development for mental health practitioners working with adult survivors.

Current Treatment Protocols for Adult Survivors of Severe Parental Alienation: A Scoping Review.

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## Abstract

This study aimed to review the academic peer-reviewed and grey literature pertaining to current treatment protocols for mental health practitioners working therapeutically with adult survivors of severe parental alienation. The academic databases searched were Medline (Web of Science), PsycNET (APA), and Psychiatry Online. Grey literature searches were conducted through Google, professional websites, published books and Facebook. No peer-reviewed articles matching the inclusion criteria were located. However, four pertinent grey literature resources were discovered.

It was found that ethical standards and professional practice guidelines that include a comprehensive treatment protocol for mental health practitioners who work with adult survivors of severe parental alienation do not exist and need to be developed. Also, to understand the degree, acuity, complexity, and severity of the developmental and ongoing acute trauma of severe parental alienation, gold standards for competence,

training, and ongoing professional development for mental health practitioners working with adult survivors must be determined.

*Keywords for academic peer-reviewed article and grey literature search: parental alienation\* parental conflict\* adult\* adult children\* child abuse\* depression\* anxiety\* mental health practitioners\* therapists\* and adverse childhood experiences\*.*

*Keywords for the grey literature review were parental alienation\* child\* treatment program\* and reunification program\*. However, these keywords evolved and changed as the review developed. Differing keyword clusters that produced results generated in searches 2, 3 and 4 are listed in appendix 1, page 28.*

## Current Treatment Protocols for Adult Survivors of Severe Parental Alienation: A Scoping Review

### Background

The term parental alienation (PA) is used to explain the outcome of a process involving one parent (the alienating parent) teaching their child to reject the other parent (the targeted parent); to experience fear in the absence of real threat when they are near the targeted parent; and to avoid contact with them (Templer, Matthewson, Haines, & Cox, 2016). For example, PA can occur during post-divorce custody arrangements when the alienating parent successfully manipulates the child to turn against the targeted parent (Baker, 2007; Gardner, 1998). In cases of severe parental alienation (SPA), children report that they are frightened of and despise their targeted parent, steadfastly refusing to have any relationship with them. This review will focus on adult survivors exposed to the most extreme form of PA as children, SPA, and the mental health practitioners who work with them therapeutically.

To understand SPA properly, it is important to appreciate the nature of parental alienating behaviours (PABs) that cause SPA. PABs are considered a form of family violence and child abuse because coercive control is at their heart (Haines et al., 2020; . A comprehensive review of these behaviours can be seen in Harman and Matthewson (2020). The adverse psychological effects of being exposed to PABs in childhood include posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, depression, low self-esteem, guilt, lack of trust, increased suicide risk and substance abuse (Baker, 2007; Verhaar, Matthewson, & Bentley, 2022).

The detrimental effects PABs have on the child, and adult survivors of SPA can present as extensive academic, physical, psychological, emotional, and social difficulties . For example, adults exposed to abuse, maltreatment and family dysfunction in childhood have lived without secure attachment, nurturance, guidance, and encouragement. (Ellis, Gold, Courtois, Araujo, & Quinones, 2019). The impact on adult survivors of SPA is incredibly profound because they have experienced a cascade of losses that other childhood abuse survivors have not been exposed to. These include loss of identity, loss of a ‘good enough’ parent they cannot grieve, loss of community and all that was once familiar . The trauma and loss history of adult survivors of SPA poses particular challenges for mental health practitioners working with them. These challenges include building trusting rapport with survivors who have difficulty trusting others; and treating a poorly understood form of trauma .

During a therapeutic session, mental health practitioners need to be aware of the wide range of co-occurring trauma experiences the adult survivors may present with. For example, memories as a child of feeling rejected, unloved, criticised, threatened, subordinate, and alone may follow the child into adulthood. These memories, feelings and experiences can result in internalised models of uncertainty about the world and themselves combined with various defensive and submissive behaviours (Verrocchio, Marchetti, Carrozzino, Compare, & Fulcheri, 2019).

To date, research has focused on children and adolescents of divorce and related custody issues, not adult survivors of divorce. Until now, there has been little written about outcomes or treatment protocols for mental health practitioners who work with adult survivors of divorce, adult survivors of PA, and adult survivors of SPA. Lack of knowledge and an absence of best practice guidelines to treat this complex presentation are the reasons for below standard management, recognition, and identification of SPA symptoms in mental

health care . Practitioners who work with families and children of SPA can often feel daunted, overwhelmed, and helpless due to a lack of clear published guidelines (Haines, et al., 2020). This may also be the case for practitioners working with adult survivors of SPA.

Morgan and colleagues (2020) highlight the lack of evidence present in academic reports, commentary papers and publications regarding interventions for PA (Morgan et al., 2020). Further, previous research focuses on interventions for children and families. Given the lack of research and understanding of SPA and the experiences of adult survivors of SPA, this study has reviewed the academic peer-reviewed and grey literature to identify evidence-based best practices used by mental health practitioners working with adult survivors of SPA. This scoping review aims to offer recommendations for best practices in this field and highlight areas for future research.

## Method

### Design

This study employed the preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses protocol (PRISMA-P; Moher et al., 2015; Page et al., 2021) for searching peer-reviewed academic literature. A broad scoping review of the grey literature was undertaken. A decision to include data on both children and adults involved in intervention or treatment programs for mild to severe parental alienation was chosen to present a complete picture of current data. The Arksey and O'Malley (2003) framework was applied to the review. The grey literature component of the scoping review was guided by the question, 'what interventions and treatment protocols are currently used with children and adult survivors of mild to severe parental alienation?' The grey literature review was conducted on January 11, 2022, and built upon the framework outlined by Pham et al. (2014). The databases selected were chosen because they were comprehensive and covered a range of disciplines pertaining to PA.

The scoping review was approached in four multiple, objective steps: (1) Identify the research question, (2) Conduct a relevant search from the grey literature for interventions and treatment protocols available for child and adult survivors of mild to severe PA within the books, databases, websites, blogs and Facebook, (3) Map out the characteristics and range of interventions and treatment protocols, (4) Report challenges and limitations of the interventions and treatment protocols (Pham et al., 2014).

### Procedure and Search Strategy

The peer-reviewed academic literature searches were conducted using Medline (Web of Science), PsycNET (APA), and Psychiatry Online electronic databases. Keyword searches (see page 2) within each database were conducted on March 23, 2022. In addition, the grey literature scoping review examined which current interventions, treatment protocols, and reunification hotels/camps are available for child and adult survivors of SPA. Also, the Researcher recorded information available about SPA course curriculums, the cost associated with the therapy or treatment program for survivors, the qualifications of the person/people administering the therapy and what training, case consultation, and associated costs are available for practitioners.

The grey literature search was designed to integrate four differing search strategies: (1) grey literature books on PA and SPA available in Australia, (2) grey literature databases, (3) Grey literature Google searches, and (4) targeted websites, blogs and Facebook. In contrast to the peer-reviewed search on adult survivors of SPA, the strategies presented in the grey literature search are distinctly different and described in detail, allowing them to be replicated for future research. Given that search engines and databases use unique algorithms to produce their relevant rating schemes, it was decided that using a combination of these sources was likely to lead to a broader reach of articles (Godin, et al., 2015). As with any review, documentation of each part of the grey literature search procedure is essential to demonstrate comprehensiveness and transparency . Therefore, all decisions, assumptions, and challenges throughout the grey literature scoping review were recorded (see Appendix 2, page 29).

The first grey literature database keyword search was developed from the Australian Government website, The Australian Institute of Family Studies . The first keywords entered for the database search were: parental alienation\* child\* treatment program\* and reunification program\*. This search produced thirteen results; however, none were on parental alienation or listed keywords.

The second grey literature database search was developed from the Australian Government website, The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare . This database keyword search repeated the keywords in the first search. This search did not return any results. The following message was displayed on the screen- Sorry, we could not find any results matching "parental alienation\* child\* treatment program\* and reunification program\* .

The third grey literature database search was developed from the University of the Sunshine Coast Library, named 'Emerald Insight'. This database keyword search repeated the exact keywords as the first and second database searches. This search returned five results, none of which pertained to the keywords. The five articles were about child maltreatment and neglect, child protection cases, US Immigration Policy, employment and crime, and diversity management .

The fourth grey literature database search was developed from the University of the Sunshine Coast Library from the 'All Newspapers' option, which then directed the Researcher to the ProQuest database. This database keyword search was repeated. This search returned two results. One article was written in the Toronto Star Newspaper and contained the keywords parental alienation, child, treatment (not program), reunification (not program) and another on Movies about the North Sports final.

### **Study Inclusion Criteria for Academic Peer-Reviewed Articles**

1. Peer-reviewed in English from 2010 to 2022. This extended number of years (as opposed to the usual five) was chosen due to a dearth in the literature on PA and SPA.
2. Articles mentioning adult survivors of severe parental alienation (SPA).
3. Articles that included treatment protocols currently being used by mental health practitioners working with adult survivors of SPA.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

Articles that focused on children who have experienced PA.

Articles that did not mention adults, parental conflict, divorce, PA, or SPA.

### **Study Inclusion Criteria for Grey Literature**

Grey literature articles from books available in Australia, databases, websites, blogs, and Facebook (only about adults) printed/written in English relating to psychological interventions for mild to severe parental alienation (no dates applied).

Grey literature articles or information about program interventions and treatment protocols for children and adult survivors of mild to severe PA.

### **Exclusion Criteria**

1. Articles that are academic and/or peer-reviewed.
2. Articles that did not mention parental alienation or parental conflict, SPA, child, adult, treatment, therapy, intervention, custody, or divorce.
3. Articles describing hypothetical examples or directly related to divorce with no reference to children or adults who have experienced mild to severe PA.
4. Articles that mention treatment for children experiencing PA and child sexual abuse sent to De-programming Camps, Boarding Schools, Boot Camps, Wilderness Camps, or Residential Treatment Centres.

## Peer-Reviewed Literature Results

The peer-reviewed academic literature search was conducted within Medline (Web of Science), Psychiatry Online, and PsycNET (APA) databases resulting in 3922 articles. All articles published earlier than 2010 were then excluded, resulting in 597 articles. The articles within each database search were reviewed, and all duplicates were further excluded. These duplicates occurred when additional search terms were added to the original "Parental Alienation" search term. For example, "Parental Alienation" and "Adult Children". After removing duplicated results, 154 articles remained. The articles duplicated across the three databases were removed based on the database with the least complete information. Of the 154 articles, only four were duplicated across the three databases, leaving a total of 150 articles screened for inclusion. One hundred fifty full-text articles were excluded. Therefore, no articles were included in the peer-reviewed academic articles literature review. The breakdown of the database searches is recorded as follows.

The first search in the Medline (Web of Science) database using Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) terms showed 78 results under the keyword 'parental alienation' and 'parental alienation,' and subsequent keyword combinations (refer to page 2). However, within those 78 results, none of the articles pertained to adult survivors of severe parental alienation or the mental health practitioners who work with them.

The second search in Psychiatry Online showed 58 results under the keywords 'parental alienation' and 'parental alienation' and consequent keyword combinations. However, within those 58 results, none of the articles pertained to adult survivors of severe parental alienation or the mental health practitioners who work with them.

Results from the third search in PsycNET (APA) showed 14 results under the keywords 'parental alienation' and 'parental alienation,' and subsequent keyword combinations (refer to page 2). However, within those 14 results, none of the articles pertained to adult survivors of severe parental alienation or the mental health practitioners who work with them.

A second search of PsycNET (APA), including APA PsycInfo, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycBooks, APA PsycTests, APA, and PsycExtra, showed three results. However, none of the articles pertained to adult survivors of severe parental alienation or the mental health practitioners who work with them. Due to the Researcher not achieving any results at the upper levels within the three original databases and the additional databases within PsycNET (APA), the study concluded that more searching would not create more relevant data, so the data collection was finalised.

In conclusion, the scoping review of the peer-reviewed literature has analysed the currently available research data on the thesis topic, "Working with Adult Survivors of Severe Parental Alienation: Survivors and Mental Health Practitioners Perspectives - A Qualitative Study." The Researcher has determined that there are no articles on treatment protocols for mental health practitioners who work with adult survivors of severe parental alienation from the chosen keywords within the peer-reviewed academic databases available.

Results Figure 1 PRISMA Flowchart of Peer-Reviewed Academic Articles .

## Grey Literature Results

The combined first keyword search of the grey literature on Google, namely websites, and website blogs, identified 19,787,999 records on the 'Google page results'. Only the articles that specifically mentioned the study keywords were included in these results. A reduced total of 49 records that included the relevant keywords were identified within the first three Google pages and screened for inclusion, leaving a total of not relevant results of (n=19,787,950).

Following the Google search, two 'recommended to researcher' websites and one 'recommended to researcher' Facebook page and 24 books that mentioned 'children, adults, PA and SPA' were also located and screened for inclusion (a total of 27). Twenty-three full electronic articles were assessed for final eligibility, plus two books, one 'recommended to researcher' website and a 'recommended to researcher' Facebook page.

Four final results were found from within the combined grey literature sources. The first grey literature book result was ‘Restoring Family Connections’ by Baker et al. (2020). The second result was a book called ‘An Attachment-Based Model of Parental Alienation - Foundations’ by Childress (2015). The third resource was a website by Childress (2020), offering free treatment protocol resources, ethical standards and professional practice guidelines for mental health professionals. Also, a six-monthly program (service fee) for clinical consultations for mental health practitioners who work with the child and adult survivors of mild to severe PA or in Childress’ language, ‘Attachment-based PA’ (ABPA) internationally, was offered. Finally, therapeutic consultations offered explicitly for adult children of ABPA were also advertised monthly on Dr Childress’ Facebook page (Childress, 2022).

Results Figure 2

PRISMA Flowchart of Grey Literature Scoping Review .

## Peer-Reviewed Articles Reporting on Family Therapy Programmes

No peer-reviewed articles reporting on treatments available to mental health practitioners who work with adult survivors of SPA were identified in this review.

## Grey Literature Books

The first search included grey literature books currently available to purchase in Australia. The grey literature book search produced two results out of twenty-four written for mental health practitioners. The book by Baker, Fine and Lacheen-Baker (2020) offers a how-to guide manual recommended for licensed mental health professionals who work with targeted parents and their adult children of PA. Baker is a developmental psychologist and researcher, Fine is a licensed clinical social worker, and Lacheen-Baker is a licensed practical nurse.

Baker et al. (2020) also explain that treatments are available elsewhere for families affected by PA but are not readily available. However, these references did not explain the treatments or where they could be found. The program described by Baker et al. (2020) includes “theoretical principles of PA”, “Restoring Family Connections Pre-program Sessions”, and ‘In and Out of Session Activities’ . Testimonials were sourced from professionals with a specialist understanding of PA. The essence of these professional testimonials is to recommend this book to therapists who may need support and guidance when working with alienated adult children. There were no testimonials recorded from older children or targeted parents who had been through the programme, and no costs were mentioned for programmes that practitioners might design for themselves from the book.

The second book was written by Childress (2015). Childress is a licensed clinical psychologist in California, America. In his book called “An Attachment-Based Model of Parental Alienation (ABPA): Foundations”, Childress presents a model of PA using existing frameworks such as family systems, attachment systems and personality. In addition, Childress discusses issues faced by mental health professionals, including diagnosis, treatment, and professional competence required when working with SPA clients. The cost of training for mental health practitioners is not mentioned in this book.

## Grey Literature Database Search

In the second grey literature database search, no results were produced.

## Google Search

The grey literature Google search found articles on interventions for children experiencing PA and SPA but not about adult survivors of PA or SPA. Therefore, the below table has ranked programs according to their

position within the Google directory.

Google website search results.	Synopsis of websites.
Turning Points for Families (Texas, USA) is Run by Loretta Maase (MA, LPC-S) and associates .	Advertises an intensive four-day treatment for families experiencing SPA. No examples of the curriculum, protocol, or interventions were available to read, nor were any costs mentioned.
Friedlander and Walters' Multimodal Family Intervention	A reunification therapy with varying interventions for parental alignment, enmeshment, alienation, and estrangement. No costs were mentioned.
Sullivan's Overcoming Barriers Family Camp (Sullivan et al., 2010).	The Overcoming Barriers article advertised a "combination of psycho-educational and clinical intervention within an environment of milieu therapy" .
The Family Forward Reunification Therapy and Counselling Program is a reunification therapy and counselling program.	This website is run by Jones (a child and family therapist) and Associates (2022). This program advertises that they offer a unique program that is given referrals by the Court system to establish "appropriate, healthy child-parent relationships"
The Stable Paths program.	This program uses the treatment model created by Transitioning Families and is advertised as an outpatient approach to therapy for moderate to severely alienated children in California . No costs were mentioned.

## Websites and Blogs Recommended to Researcher

The search of websites and blogs recommended to the Researcher is listed in the order in which they were undertaken.

Recommended websites and blogs.	Synopsis of recommended websites and blogs.
PASG is an international, not-for-profit corporation . The Family Separation Clinic advertises that they specialise in working with children who may potentially reject a relationship with their loving parent .	No treatment protocols for adult survivors of SPA were found on the PASG website or blogs. Training of PA Practitioners who work with children and their families is offered. However, no training for practitioners who work with adults who have experienced mild to severe PA was mentioned. No examples of the curriculum, protocol, or interventions were available to read, nor were any costs mentioned. No treatment protocols for adult survivors of SPA were found.
Resetting The Family website .	This website advertises that they "help your family <i>create a new family model</i> by using both a series of intensive educational programs. Programs are not offered to train mental health practitioners. No treatment protocols for adult survivors of SPA were found. No costs were mentioned.

Recommended websites and blogs.	Synopsis of recommended websites and blogs.
The Conscious Co-Parenting Institute advertises the ‘High Road to Reunification Program’ run by Pruter (CCPI CEO/Founder).	The blog states that the method used in this program is known as the ‘Custody Resolution Method’. . Adult survivors of SPA were not mentioned. Costs were not mentioned.
Dr Craig Childress advertises working with mental health practitioners who work with PA and SPA. Dr Childress also works with adult children of ABPA.	Childress also offers a Clinical Case Consultation Group for mental health professionals for a six-month block for 90-minutes once per month. The cost is \$450 (USD) for six months . Treatment-related essays for children were included . Childress also works therapeutically with adult survivors of mild to severe parental alienation (Childress, 2022).

## Discussion

This study aimed to review the academic peer-reviewed and grey literature to identify current evidence-based best practices used by mental health practitioners working therapeutically with adult survivors of SPA. Based on the first aim, the second aim was to offer recommendations for therapeutic skills required to achieve effective intervention strategies and effectual outcomes on how mental health practitioners can assist adult survivors of SPA. The third aim (see page 19) is based on the first and second aim results and highlights areas for future research.

The study revealed that the essential ingredients for interventions for adult survivors of SPA include building trust and rapport with adult survivors who have difficulty trusting others . Mental health practitioners need to consider that these clients may have childhood memories of feeling unloved, rejected, threatened, criticised, alone, and subordinate well into adulthood . Mental health practitioners also need to be aware that they treat a poorly understood form of trauma .

The scoping review has revealed substantial gaps supporting empirically-based and researched interventions and treatment protocols for adult survivors of SPA. In addition, the review has identified that ethical standards and professional practice guidelines that include a comprehensive treatment protocol for mental health practitioners who work with adult survivors of severe parental alienation do not exist and need to be developed. Also, to understand the degree, acuity, complexity, and severity of the developmental and ongoing acute trauma of severe parental alienation, gold standards for competence, training, and ongoing professional development for mental health practitioners working with adult survivors must be determined.

Currently, finding this level of support and training has been very difficult for practitioners working with adult survivors of SPA.

The third aim of the study identifies that trauma-informed training and education for mental health practitioners who work with child and adult survivors of SPA is where future research and training needs to focus. For example, it is imperative that mental health professionals understand a “disorder that centrally involves the child’s attachment system and must possess professional expertise in the nature and functioning of the attachment system, both foundationally and as expressed at differing developmental periods, including adulthood, as well as trans generationally” .

## Challenges and Limitations of the Interventions and Treatment Protocols

The grey literature search found a range of programs and interventions related to family reunifications and therapies designed for children. Of note was the paper by Templer et al. (2017), where several therapeutic programmes, each specialising in forms of systemic family therapy, were identified. These programmes aimed



to protect children experiencing parental alienation from further harm; improve the child's psychological well being; strengthen the child's critical thinking skills; challenge the child's distorted thinking; prepare the alienating parent for improvements within the condition of the targeted parent, and child relationship; promote healthy boundaries; and strengthen communication within the family . Psychoeducation for all family members regarding the effect and treatment of parental alienation was also recommended . With regard to the general public, awareness campaigns on parental alienation and the promotion of engagement in support networks for targeted parents may be advantageous . The study addresses the importance of mental health practitioners being trained and cognisant of the underlying attachment and systems theories when working with adult survivors. Understanding the probable mechanisms that explain the link between intergenerational cycles of family and domestic violence and SPA within this unique population is vital. However, the gap in the literature regarding interventions and treatment protocols for adult survivors of SPA available to assist mental health practitioners was profound. Adult survivors of SPA also face challenges finding practitioners who offer professional help for SPA. Also, developing best practices in response to SPA is required to ensure that practitioners are adequately trained and equipped to respond to the needs of adult survivors of SPA upon presentation.

## Conclu sion

In conclusion, this scoping review offers new insights leading to behavioural and relational interventions for researchers and practitioners who work with trauma and violence. The adverse effects of PA and SPA have been continually noted regarding children of prolonged, high conflict custody and visitation disputes. For example, "much is known about how exposure to PABs harms children. Now is the time to apply that knowledge to protect children from experiencing this pernicious form of childhood maltreatment".

The insidious impact of PABs on adult survivors of PA in childhood demonstrates the need for valid, research-informed interventions for adults exposed to PABs . Also, the adverse effects and accompanying treatment protocols that address the complex cross-sectionality of distressing events that adult survivors of SPA may have been exposed to as children have been neglected. This emerging area needs an urgent light shone upon it to break the cycle of intergenerational trauma, support the adult survivors, and train mental health practitioners to achieve the confidence and professional competence needed to work with this vulnerable population.

## Appendix 1 Grey Literature Review Keyword Search List

Search 2- parental alienation\* parental conflict\* children\* adult\* and treatment\*.

Search 3- parental alienation\* child\* treatment program\* and reunification program\*.

Search 4- reunification camp\*.

## Appendix 2 Grey Literature Database Keyword Search Strategy

The first grey literature database keyword search was developed from the Australian Government website, The Australian Institute of Family Studies . The first keywords entered for the database search were: parental alienation\* child\* treatment program\* and reunification program\*. This search produced thirteen results; however, none were on parental alienation or listed keywords.

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