

The Psychology of High Conflict Parents

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High Conflict Custody and Access: Avoiding the Perfect Storm

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HIGH CONFLICT PARENTS

Having one or more high conflict individuals in a divorce proceeding prolongs litigation, drains the energy of the Courts and the lawyers (Neff & Cooper, 2004) and most importantly it damages the children. It has been repeatedly indicated that high conflict cases are seriously detrimental to the children's emotional well-being, development and even ability to function as an adult. Additionally, both the intensity and length of conflict between parents increases the difficulties the children can experience. (e.g., Grych, 2005; McIsaac & Finn 1999; Ayoub, Deutsch & Maraganore 1999; Bacon & McKenzie 2004). Understanding the high conflict parent can assist in seeing through issues and allegations and working towards a parenting plan that minimizes the opportunity for conflict. This paper examines different classification systems for high conflict.

Key features of high conflict custody cases include mistrust between parents, escalated anger and willingness to repeatedly return to court. High conflict can stem from one or both parents, overly aggressive attorneys, mental health professionals who entrench or escalate the conflict or even the court system due to its adversarial nature and procedural delays. Parents involved in a dysfunctional relationship, having mental health problems, who engage in substance abuse or illegal activities as well as the presence of abuse allegations can further escalate conflict (AFCC, 2001).

A disproportionately small number of divorcing/separating parents monopolize a majority of the court's time and resources (Coates, Deutsch, Starnes, Sullivan & Sydlik, 2004; Neff & Cooper, 2004, Kirkland & Kirkland, 2006). Understanding the nature and behaviour of these conflicted individuals can assist in expediting appropriate remedial activities.

Neff and Cooper (2004) identify reasons for parents to engage in extended custody battles to be (p. 100):

- a) clients being mired in unresolved grief, especially anger,
- b) the adversarial nature of the Western court system,
- c) connection between parenting time in child support,
- d) our highly litigious culture,
- e) simple ignorance of how the children are being affected.

ASSESSMENT AND CLASSIFICATION

Externalizing versus Internalizing

At the most simplistic level, the dichotomy of internalizing versus externalizing behaviours can be used (Reynolds & Kamphaus, 1992). High conflict parents with externalizing problems are those that act out through arguing, rule breaking, bullying (including stalking and harassing) or to behave in other overtly threatening manners. A characteristic of individuals with externalizing problems is that of a short fuse and a shorter memory. Such parents are quick to anger and then often appear puzzled to the point of acting as if they are the victim when others including the