

## **Parent Child Contact Problems: Tangled Webs and Complex Resolutions**

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*Robin Deutsch, PhD, ABPP, Leslie Drozd, PhD, Peggie Ward, PhD*

Cases with Parent-child contact problems (PCCPs) are among the most challenging we face as professionals. PCCPs are some of the most complex and difficult issues for family law professionals. They involve a web of emotional, psychological, and relational factors including high interparental conflict, the child's vulnerabilities, potential influence by one parent, and the need to balance the child's best interests with safety concerns. Navigating these dynamics requires careful assessment, multi-disciplinary collaboration, and tailored interventions to address both the family's unique challenges and the long-term impact on the child.

These complexities can be described as pieces of challenging puzzles. Here are ten pieces of one such puzzle.

1. **Know what's in the name.** Parent-child contact problems are an umbrella term that refers to family dynamics that result in a child resisting or refusing access to a parent. Issues may include a child exposed to intimate partner violence, child maltreatment or neglect, harsh or compromised parenting, untreated mental illness, substance abuse, threats of harm or abduction, and/or parent alienating behaviors.
2. **PCCP cases have multiple causes and multiple solutions.** Each case is unique and requires holding multiple perspectives with early assessment and interventions designed to address specific problems. An ecological model is a useful way to look at the family, considering the individuals, relationships, and external influences. We consider the ontogenetic factors, such as the child's temperament or parents' mental health; the microsystem: relationships such as coparenting dynamics, interparental conflict, parent-child relationships, friends, neighbors, extended family; the mesosystem: interactions between school and family, professionals and family members; extended family and immediate family members; the exosystem: available mental health and legal resources, access to resources, social media; and the macrosystem: cultural and societal values and beliefs, the courts and laws, and other institutions and policies that affect the family.
3. **Don't go it alone.** These cases usually involve a team of professionals working together. The family therapist and a liaison to the court (e.g., parent coordinator, minor's counsel, GAL) are the minimum team. The team may also include as needed parent coaches, child therapists, trauma therapists.

4. **Maintain boundaries and objectivity.** There are polarized dynamics in the families and sometimes among the professionals. Beware you, as a professional, don't get pulled into one point of view. It is very easy to be influenced by an attorney, align with one parent's therapist, or to reject anything a biased therapist has to say. Ongoing communication amongst and between team members is essential to maintain balanced perspectives (and sanity).
5. **Unholy alliances can exacerbate these cases.** Those alliances tend to be from influences external to the family (extended family, litigation, polarized professionals, social media). These cases involve a balance between safety and connection. As a lawyer, judge or mental health professional, it is paramount that there's an ongoing assessment of risk and maintenance of safety while protecting from an undermining of the family system.
6. **Whereas it is the child's best interest to have a voice, many factors need to be considered to determine the weight to be given to the child having a choice.** Children's' desire to have a voice and children's desire to make a choice need to be carefully assessed and addressed in terms of level of maturity, risk factors and external influences. The calculus always focuses on a child's best interests.
7. **Successful outcomes have many pieces.** Successful resolution of PCCPs begins with the parents' ability to put themselves in the child's shoes. Successful outcomes vary from reintegration of family members, ongoing sustained parent-child contact, healthy coparent communication and boundaries, acceptance of limited parent-child and/or parent-parent relationships, forgiveness, and/or a ritualized goodbye. Also to be considered are the weight to be given to short, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. The ongoing management of each family member's expectations is also critical.
8. **It's critical to know what we know and what we don't know.** There is insufficient empirically validated evidence about definitions and treatment. We have all seen child abuse, child neglect, intimate partner violence, and alienating behaviors even if definitions may vary. However, there are well researched and evidence informed treatments that can be applied to treatment of the specific issues present in a case.
9. **Treatment interventions.** Appropriate intervention is a combination of assessment and screening, identifying the multiple factors at play, getting buy-in from all family members, and proceeding in a stepwise manner. Understanding the context of concerns and level of severity of behaviors is essential. Acceptance of responsibility and accountability for one's behavior, facilitation of apologies, anxiety desensitization, cognitive behavioral interventions, all within a family systems approach are components of successful interventions.

10. **The court stays involved.** Legal interventions include monitoring and providing accountability measures. The courts keep the focus on the best interests of the child while enforcing orders. The court provides a formalized process within which interventions for parent child contact problems can be resolved. However, the court has a relatively narrow toolbox for addressing these complex family issues. Appropriate, informed intervention by knowledgeable professionals can often resolve these cases by reducing conflict between parents, increasing overall well-being of children, and forming lasting agreements to provide stability and predictability for families.

**Want to know more?** Sign up for the [Advanced Issues in Family Law: Parent-Child Contact Problems](#) online training program taking place January 13-16, 2024!



**Robin M. Deutsch, PhD, ABPP** is a Board-certified psychologist in Couple and Family Psychology (ABCFP) and a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (APA). She developed and was the director of the Center of Excellence for Children, Families and the Law at William James College where she was a Professor of Clinical Psychology. Previously she was an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology at Harvard Medical School and Director of Training in the Children and the Law Program, Department of Psychology at Massachusetts General Hospital. She has published extensively on issues related to attachment, alienation, co-parenting after divorce, high conflict divorce, parent-child contact problems, parenting plans, and parenting coordination. Dr. Deutsch has served on numerous AFCC and APA task forces. She is also a former president of AFCC.



**Leslie M. Drozd, PhD** is a psychologist with 36 years of practice in forensic and clinical psychology in California, Washington, and Hawaii. She has conducted parenting plan evaluations in addition to serving as a forensic consultant and as a testifying and didactic expert. Leslie has co-authored professional guidelines for conducting evaluations and co-edited books, chapters, and articles on conducting evaluations, domestic violence, substance misuse, trauma, alienation, gatekeeping, step-up parenting plans, relocation, psychological testing, child sexual abuse, parenting coordination, and family therapy with families with parent-child contact problems. She served on the American Psychological Association's Ethics Committee and on numerous boards of directors including AFCC's.



**Peggie Ward, PhD** is a clinical-forensic psychologist who has specialized in the areas of child abuse, alcohol abuse, and parent child contact problems for 35 years. Her independent practice focuses on complex parent child and family interactions where family conflict is a dominant factor. Dr. Ward has held appointments at Tufts Medical School and Harvard Medical School. She has served on the AFCC MA Board of Directors and FLAFCC Board of Directors where she is currently Vice President. She has published articles on parental alienation. She contributed several chapters to the edited book, *Overcoming Parent Child Contact Problems: Family-based Interventions for Resistance, Rejection, and Alienation* (2015). Dr. Ward has created courses for William James College on Interventions for Parent Child Contact Problems.