

Children Who Resist Contact with a Parent: Why do they do that and what can be done?

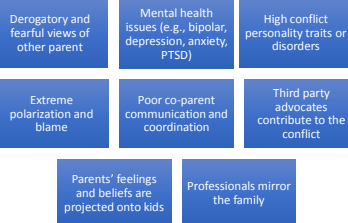
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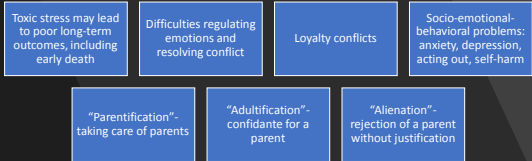
Predictors of Positive Outcomes for Children of Divorce

- **High quality parenting**
 - Warmth/Support/Guidance
 - Structure/Demands/Expectations
- **Protection from parental conflict**
- **Positive involvement of both parents**
- **Economic security**

Characteristics of Intractable High Conflict Cases

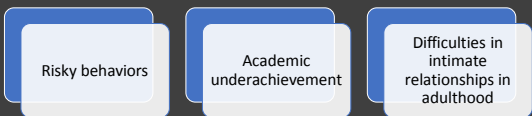


Risks for Children Raised in High Conflict



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More risks...



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Why Do Some Children Resist or Refuse Contact with a Parent?

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Continuum of Contact Problems

Affinity for favored parent: shared interests, temperament, familiarity, hx of caregiving

Alliance with favored parent: siding with a parent and aligning with them

Justified rejection of targeted parent: abuse, neglect cases

Child Alienation: child's rejection is disproportionate to actual experience with rejected parent and stems from other parent's actions/behaviors

Mixed or hybrid cases: "perfect storm cases"

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"The Perfect Storm"

- Alienating behavior and attitudes by favored parent
- Inept/insensitive/poor parenting by rejected parent
- Enmeshed parent-child relationship
- Counter-rejecting behaviors by rejected parent
- Domestic violence/child abuse or neglect
- Chronic conflict/litigation
- Sibling dynamics and pressures
- A vulnerable child (temperament, developmental factors, coping skills, reality testing)
- Lack of a functional co-parenting relationship

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Alienating Behavior is Not all the Same

- **Naïve Alienators:** failure to support other parent's relationship
- **Active Alienators:** lashing out or leaking anger at the other parent thereby damaging other's parents' relationship with child
- **Obsessed Alienators:** on a mission to destroy the child's relationship with the other parent

Darnel, 1998

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The Favored Parent

- Cogent description of the parent-child contact problem?
- All-or-nothing thinking about the other parent?
- Fears realistic/unrealistic?
- Has access been restricted? Why/why not?
- Intrusive behavior by the favored parent?
- Age-appropriate expectations and boundaries?

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The Non-Favored Parent

- Cogent explanation of the cause/history of the strained parent-child relationship?
- Detailed description of an involved parent-child relationship?
- Able to self-reflect regarding cause/solutions to the contact problem?
- Age appropriate expectations/ boundaries?
- All-or-nothing thinking about the other parent?
- Fears realistic/unrealistic?

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The Child

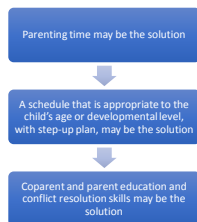
- Cogent description of parent-child relationship problems?
- Child's memories of parental relationship?
- Rationality of complaints?
- Age-appropriate thinking, behavior and self-regulation?
- Indications of enmeshment?
- Evidence of vulnerabilities?

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What Can Be Done about Parenting Time Resistance/Refusal?

In Mild Cases of Affinities, Alignments and Enmeshments



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Realistic Estrangement/Justified Rejection (Child Abuse/Neglect)

- ▲ Safety first
- ⚙️ Treat trauma first
- ⚙️ Treatment/Education/Coaching for offending parent
- 👤 Supervised parenting time
- 🗣️ Therapeutically assisted parenting time
- 🔒 Limited parenting time
- 👤 Parenting Coordinator
- 👤 Family therapy

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Parenting Time Refusal/Alienation Cases

- Progress from less intense intervention to more intense (coercive) interventions
- Change of primary residential parent may be warranted
- Temporary suspension of parenting time may be necessary for treatment to have a chance to work
- Unsuccessful cases usually involve
 - Severe MH problems
 - DV
 - Severe, pathological alienation
 - Significant vulnerabilities in the child

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The Dilemma

Harm to child of staying in severely alienating environment with risks to emotional and cognitive development
vs.
Risk of change of custody to the rejected parent

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Early Intervention is Critical!

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure

Time is an enemy in resist/refusal cases

Interventions should match the needs of the family

Clear and detailed stipulations/orders are necessary

Non-compliance with orders must be handled swiftly

Court-ordered family therapy may be necessary

Nexus between the Court and treatment is critical in severe cases

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Successful Family Therapy:

- Begins early
- Is structured, clear, & defined from outset
- All family members are involved
- Facilitates progress toward court-ordered parenting time goal
- Fosters a functional, parallel co-parenting relationship
- Facilitates the child's developmental progress-mastery of cognitive, emotional and behavioral skills
- Provides therapeutic feedback, not parenting time recommendations
- Strong court presence
 - Detailed orders
 - Monitors progress, as needed

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Not "Regular" Therapy

- Does not resemble supportive therapy
 - Quicker pace
 - Longer sessions
 - More frequent sessions (at beginning)
 - Therapist is directive
- Cognitive-behavioral techniques emphasized
- Goals set for each family member
- Short-term distress is common-- anxiety, fear, sadness, guilt, acting out
- Progress & compliance reported to lawyers, court, evaluators
 - Confidentiality waived
- Not any therapist will do
 - Specialized knowledge, skills and training are necessary

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What Happens in Family Therapy



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Challenges

- There is a scarcity of qualified therapists
- It's very demanding work
 - Resistance is high- at least ½ the family doesn't want to be there
 - Effort to push family therapist out is not uncommon
 - Many therapists are not interested in court-involved work
- Court-involved therapy requires coordination/support from court
- Judicial officers may not be inclined to monitor cases
- Cost is a barrier

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Summary

Why do they do that and what can be done?

Children resist or refuse parenting time for a wide range of reasons

There is usually a "perfect storm" of multiple factors

Early intervention is critical

Interventions should match the problem

Legal and mental health interventions need to be synchronized

Specialized family therapy is available but scarce

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