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Ask the Experts: 10 Tips for Working with Parent-Child Contact Problems as a Solo Practitioner

Terry Singh, PhD, ABPP



Much ink has been spilled on the topic of children resisting or refusing contact with a parent following divorce or separation, and with good reason. The political and legislative landscapes related to what are now commonly referred to as “parent-child contact problems” continue to shift and evolve, developments which only add to the complexity of these already challenging family situations.

For the mental health practitioner tasked with assisting a family that is experiencing a parent-child contact problem, consulting the relevant professional literature may lead to the impression that a team approach, with a different therapist assigned to each family member, is the optimal strategy for addressing these cases. Indeed, some authors appear to be of the view that a single therapist cannot effectively work with families struggling with a parent-child contact problem. With this perspective in mind, the natural starting point is clear: Adopt a collaborative treatment approach utilizing multiple coordinated therapists to assist such families.

But what are you to do if a team approach is not possible? [Continue Reading](#).

AFCC 62nd Annual Conference

Bridging Perspectives: Pioneering Solutions in Family Law
May 28-31, 2025 | New Orleans, Louisiana

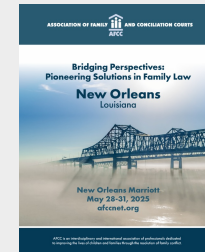
Early-bird registration ending soon! [Register now](#) for the best rates!

Join AFCC in New Orleans as we convene the world's leading experts to build bridges that span the gaps between professional approaches and priorities.

February 2025
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AFCC 62nd Annual Conference

May 28-31, 2025
New Orleans, LA



AFCC-AAML 2025

September 18-20, 2025
San Francisco, CA



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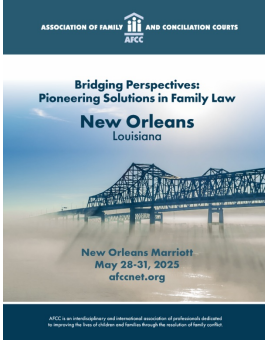
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See the [conference portal](#) for more detailed information on the keynote, plenary session, institutes, and 80 diverse engaging workshops!

[Early-Bird Registration](#)

Video: AFCC Conversation Corner with Barbara Fidler and Shely Polak



In this compelling interview, AFCC's co-chair of the professional development committee, Shely Polak, sat down with Barbara Fidler, one of the great influencers in her own career, to chat about the many ways an experienced expert can mentor and support new professionals in the field. Barbara shares wisdom gained from years in the field, offering practical advice on overcoming challenges, developing expertise, and navigating professional growth. Whether you're just starting out or looking to elevate your success, this interview is packed with valuable takeaways you won't want to miss! The video and transcript are [available here](#).

AFCC Webinars!

Effective Collaboration Between Attorneys and Parenting Coordinators in Custody Cases

Bettina Thomsen, LCSW & Jenifer J. Foley, JD
March 4, 2025

Every Person Has a Story: The Importance of Narrative in Native American Culture (DE&I Series)

Hon. Abby Abinanti
April 10, 2025

Authenticity and Weight when Including Children's Voices in Court Processes



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AFCC Online Training Programs

Fundamentals of Conducting Parenting Plan Evaluations

March 10-13 and
March 17-19, 2025

AFCC Chapter Conferences

AFCC Alberta
Annual Conference
March 13-14, 2025
Edmonton, AB, Canada

AFCC North Carolina

Lorri Yasenik, PhD & Jon Graham, LLB, BA
April 16, 2025

How We Think as Evaluators and Clinicians: Update on Clinical Judgement Research

Jeffrey P. Wittmann, PhD
May 6, 2025

Using Mediation/Arbitration to Resolve Parenting Disputes: Benefits, Challenges & Other Considerations

Barbara Fidler, PhD, CPsych
June 24, 2025



Registration

Members: \$15
Non-Members: \$50

Certificate of Attendance

Members: \$15
Non-Members: \$20

Annual Conference

March 21, 2025
Chapel Hill, NC

AFCC Massachusetts Annual Conference

March 21, 2025
Waltham, MA

AFCC Washington Annual Conference

April 25-26, 2025
Seattle, WA

AFCC Colorado Spring Conference

April 25, 2025
Save the Date

AFCC Fall 2025 Virtual Conference

November 12-14 and 17-18, 2025



Family law is constantly evolving, with overburdened courts, more self-represented litigants, and limited access to expert services. A shortage of professionals and the seemingly increase in polarization make creativity and adaptability essential. As the saying goes, necessity is the mother of invention. This year, AFCC is expanding access to education with a virtual conference—an opportunity for professionals to engage with a diverse offering of innovative programs and interventions while staying close to family and office obligations. Join us online as we explore fresh approaches to familiar challenges in family law.

All proposals are due by midnight, Pacific Time, April 27, 2025. Please use the [online form](#) to submit your proposal.

AFCC Chapter News



AFCC president, Michael Saini, kicked off the Arizona Chapter's 42nd Annual Conference in Sedona with an opening keynote address. Congratulations to the AFCC Arizona Chapter on a fantastic Conference! The dedication and hard work of the chapter's leaders resulted in a thoughtfully planned program filled with insightful discussions and valuable connections.

Likewise, the California Chapter hosted its 2025 Annual Conference, which was equally outstanding!

Wondering if you have an upcoming local AFCC event? Check out your state or surrounding states' [upcoming events](#)!

Board of Directors Nominations

The AFCC Nominating Committee is seeking nominations for individuals to serve on the AFCC Board of Directors. Recommended individuals must be AFCC members and have an interest in and knowledge of AFCC and its work. Nominations must be received by February

28, 2025, to be considered by the committee prior to the election at the AFCC 62nd Annual Conference. The term is three years, beginning July 1, 2025, and concluding June 30, 2028. If you or a member you know is interested, please send your/their contact information, resume, and a letter of interest to the AFCC Nominating Committee via email to afcc@afccnet.org.

Award Nominations

AFCC will be acknowledging the accomplishments of leaders in family law by presenting awards at the AFCC 62nd Annual Conference. We encourage you to recognize your colleagues by submitting a nomination. Nominations for the awards listed below will be accepted online through **March 18, 2025**.

John E. VanDuzer Distinguished Service Award recognizes outstanding contributions and/or achievements by AFCC members. **Nominate a colleague!**

Stanley Cohen Distinguished Research Award recognizes outstanding research and/or research achievements in the field of family and divorce. **Submit your nomination now!**

Irwin Cantor Innovative Program Award recognizes innovation in court-connected or court-related programs created by AFCC members. **Nominate a program!**

AFCC eNEWS

The *AFCC eNEWS* is the monthly e-newsletter of the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts. The *eNEWS* provides up-to-date information for professionals including practice tips, international news, and the latest initiatives in family law and conflict resolution. The *AFCC eNEWS* is provided at no charge to you; anyone can [subscribe](#).

AFCC members are free to share eNEWS content.

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Ask the Experts: 10 Tips for Working with Parent-Child Contact Problems as a Solo Practitioner

February 2025

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Terry Singh, PhD, ABPP

Much ink has been spilled on the topic of children resisting or refusing contact with a parent following divorce or separation, and with good reason. The political and legislative landscapes related to what are now commonly referred to as “parent-child contact problems” continue to shift and evolve, developments which only add to the complexity of these already challenging family situations.

For the mental health practitioner tasked with assisting a family that is experiencing a parent-child contact problem, consulting the relevant professional literature may lead to the impression that a team approach, with a different therapist assigned to each family member, is the optimal strategy for addressing these cases. Indeed, some authors appear to be of the view that a single therapist cannot effectively work with families struggling with a parent-child contact problem. With this perspective in mind, the natural starting point is clear: Adopt a collaborative treatment approach utilizing multiple coordinated therapists to assist such families.

But what are you to do if a team approach is not possible?

Many families experiencing parent-child contact problems are limited in terms of time and/or finances; agreeing to work with even one therapist may already be a strain in these regards. Similarly, some practitioners do not work in urban centres or treatment settings which permit such collaborative approaches. These practitioners may be without suitable colleagues to collaborate on such cases or may not yet have developed the professional network necessary to corral an effective treatment team. The family may only speak a language other than English, reducing the pool of appropriate professionals. The children may be very young or have particular special needs. In short, there are myriad reasons why a single practitioner’s best available option may be to attempt to assist the family on their own.

It is with these practical limitations and our own historical clinical experiences in mind that my colleague Joel Mader and I recently published an article detailing a single therapist approach to working with parent-child contact problems¹, which will be greatly expanded upon in a practical, practice-oriented fashion at [AFCC’s upcoming 62nd Annual](#)

¹ Singh, T., & Mader, J. (2025). Reunification reconsidered: Presenting an integrative, single-therapist framework for resolving parent-child contact problems. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 51, e12745. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12745>

Conference in New Orleans, Louisiana, over the course of a day-length pre-conference institute titled *Resolving Parent-Child Contact Problems: An Integrative Single-Therapist Framework*².

Below is a bite-sized preview of this upcoming institute via the following 10 tips for working with parent-child contact problems (“PCCPs”) as a solo practitioner:

1. **Know what you are getting into (1).** An important component to the optimal setup for treatment providers is a clear and specific court order detailing a brief rationale for the intervention and specific goals for treatment. The clinician will also want to ensure that there is clarity regarding how information may be shared between family members, and whether or not the intervention will be concluded with the production of an oral or written report.
2. **Screen for family violence early, and continuously.** The presence of a court order directing that contact resume between a parent and a child does not absolve a therapist from themselves ensuring that such resumption of contact is advisable. Sometimes, children may resist contact with a parent for very good reasons, such as the ongoing danger of abuse or neglect. The presence of historical and ongoing family violence is an important consideration as to how or even whether to proceed with treatment³. It is important to recognize your limits, and some cases may simply not be appropriate for a solo practitioner to take on without adequate support.
3. **Involve the entire family.** Is it technically possible to address a parent-child contact problem therapeutically when only one parent is involved in the process? Yes. Is it technically possible to drive a car with your feet instead of your hands? Also, yes. However, neither are particularly good ideas and you should avoid such situations whenever possible.
4. **Cast a broad net.** One typical challenge inherent to solo practice is a lack of awareness of our own blind spots. For this reason, it is important to ensure that you consider a wide variety of factors that may be potentially contributing to the PCCP. As one example, Garber (2024) has proposed a system⁴ for evaluating immediate, individual, dyadic, systemic, and extra-systemic variables that may be contributing to the relational challenges.

² Presenting alongside Mr. Mader and myself will be our esteemed colleagues Janine Copeland, Tanya Hutchinson, Rachel Jose, and Keltie Pratt, all of whom have experienced the challenges of working with such families.

³ For one helpful screening tool, see the Battered Women’s Justice Project’s *Intimate Partner Violence Screening Guide*, located here: <https://www.bwjp.org/assets/ipv-screening-guide-3-28-17.pdf>

⁴ Garber, B. D. (2024). A structured rubric for evaluating the many systemic variables that can contribute to parent-child contact problems (PCCP). *Family Court Review*, 62(2), 343–358. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fcre.12785>

5. **Know what you are getting into (2).** Even otherwise experienced therapists who find themselves confronted with a family struggling with a PCCP would do well to review relevant literature before they begin rolling up their sleeves and diving into such a case. Gaining an understanding of the history of the development of this area of practice, including the reasons why terms such as “parental alienation syndrome” and “resist/refuse dynamics” were popularized and subsequently fell out of favour will provide valuable insights as to helpful and less helpful ways of thinking about how best to treat these issues.
6. **Consider the supports that you do have.** An absence of therapeutic support does not necessarily mean an absence of support entirely. For some cases, such as when a parent or child appears reluctant to engage in treatment as directed, the court’s authority may need to be relied upon either directly or indirectly in order to achieve the family’s participation and the possibility of progress.
7. **Carefully sequence appointments.** A single therapist conducting a whole-family intervention must bear in mind the importance of maintaining a balanced process so as not to inadvertently introduce bias into their understanding of the family system while also simultaneously considering in what order each family member’s work should be prioritized, and the therapeutic rationale behind this sequencing. Do not make the mistake of simply scheduling appointments in order of convenience.
8. **Consider what goes on immediately outside of your office during appointments.** It is not uncommon for a parent transporting multiple children to a therapist’s office to request that the children’s appointments be scheduled in immediate succession for the sake of efficiency. In such situations, the lone practitioner must consider: Where are the family members not in my office seated? Can they hear what is being said inside my office and, if so, how is that likely to impact those family members? As a solo practitioner, can I even ensure that the family members seated outside my office will remain there, and not move freely about the rest of my workplace?
9. **Consider what goes on immediately outside of your office before and after appointments.** As your work with the family progresses, you will gain an understanding of their preferred arrangements with respect to which parent and/or alternate caregivers are transporting the children to their appointments, as well as the parents’ desired level of interaction with each other before and after these appointments. Part of your work with these families may eventually include challenging these preferences as part of treatment, perhaps gradually increasing the level of parental interaction or interaction between the child and the resistant

parent that is required as the intervention progresses. In this way, the structure of treatment appointments can constitute a part of the treatment itself and contribute to productive shifts in the family system.

10. **Know what you are getting into (3).** Should the above not scare you off, and in fact you find yourself drawn to this work...Permit me to be the first to welcome you as a colleague! And, to remind you that responsible professionals who seek to regularly work with PCCPs will seek specialized training and skill development. As one starting point, consider reviewing in full [AFCC's Practice Guidelines for Court Involved Therapy](#)⁵.



Terry Singh, PhD, ABPP is a clinical and forensic psychologist whose areas of special interest include working with high-conflict families of divorce and separation, child custody evaluation, consideration of cultural factors in assessment and treatment, and the treatment of severe and persistent psychopathology. While his clinical practice is largely focused on working with children and families in his home province, he has also assisted in national and international relocation matters, including Hague Convention applications. He is a regular presenter and trainer at AFCC and other international conferences and has authored articles on issues regarding child and family forensic psychology. He is a board member of AFCC and the Alberta Chapter of AFCC, and currently chairs the Alberta Chapter's Programming Committee. Lastly, Terry serves on to AFCC's Continuing Education committee.

⁵ Found here:

<https://www.afccnet.org/Portals/0/PDF/Guidelines%20for%20Court%20Involved%20Therapy%20AFCC.pdf>